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# UNIT 5 AGRARIAN POLICY AND LAND RIGHTS\*

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Agrarian policy comprises all the actions of government towards agriculture. It includes policies relating to land revenue, surveying and records; to land ownership, tenancy and rural labour; to agricultural production and trade; and to the science and development of cultivation. It is complex and its detail may seem dull. But it is very important. It affects, among other things, the following:

- **politics** – how power is exercised in the countryside; how the state tries to gain support; what interests it represents;
- **government** – what it can and cannot do, and what it is for; the state's income and how it is spent;
- **economy** – the terms on which societies organise the production of food and the exchange of goods; the comparative importance of cultivation, processing, industry and services; a country's or a region's standing among others;
- **well-being** – the social distribution of food, work and wealth; levels of health and population;
- **culture** – attitudes towards property, employment, family and inheritance; other social and moral values, such as the significance and purpose of cultivation; how people think about socio-economic classes and 'rights'.

For a foreign government, agrarian policy therefore provided what is arguably the most important point of influence upon the subject people and territory. In India the British, though so few and distant from the majority of people, could use agrarian policy to change the nature of landholding, the availability of land, and the capacity of people to move from one place or one job to another. They could use it to influence the kinds of crop that were grown, the manner in which credit was provided to cultivators, and the ways crops were marketed. They could use it to affect the patterns of consumption, the basis of prestige, and the terms on which some Indians gained dominance over others. They could use it to control and reward favoured classes, and to transform India's internal and international economy.

Or, more precisely, as we should not think of any government as being all-powerful and all-knowing, they could introduce policies for a variety of motives, and find that they produced a range of intended and unintended effects.

With hindsight, we can see that agrarian policies led to a kind of revolution in India. Though agrarian legacies and continuities were important, the picture of an India of unchanging villages was never true. But the picture became even less accurate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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## 5.2 MOTIVES AND CONTEXTS OF LAND POLICIES

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This discussion will concern itself with only one aspect of colonial agrarian policy, the large aspect related to land rights. There are two main contexts, relating to the motives lying behind the policies.

First is the motive of *control*. Land policies are partly about ensuring that there is order in the countryside, and that revenue is readily relinquished to the state. This does not mean that land policies were merely a form of coercion. Just as important, they offered a means of persuasion. The British wanted to support or create classes which would have an interest in collaborating with them, and which would be able to curb those who tried to resist or avoid the state's authority. The British also intended (though they did not succeed) to ensure basic levels of well-being in the population as a whole, so as to avoid the costs and dislocation of famine, disease and desertion, and thus protect future state revenues.

Second, there is the question of *trade*. In the eighteenth century British trade with India centred on exchanging India's manufactured cotton-goods for bullion (silver and gold). This was partly because there was little market in India for British produce, but also because silver and gold were not simply money but commodities wanted by India that Europe could supply relatively cheaply. Even cheaper for the British East India Company, however, was to make its purchases in India using revenues from Indian territories, and profits from the sale of products in which the Company established a monopoly, such as salt and opium. Such strategies also implied land policies.

Later, from the mid-nineteenth century, this not very efficient or profitable system gave way to one that sought to draw on a much wider range of products, and to involve a much bigger proportion of Indian consumers. This meant that land policies became even more important. Overseas land and labour resources were now beginning to support and enrich the population and the capitalists of Britain, as its industrialisation progressed. At first, slave plantations, north American development, and newer colonies of settlement played a larger part in this process than India. But India soon became a source of raw materials (cotton, jute, indigo) and of some foods and drugs (opium, tea, coffee, wheat), and also a market for British manufactures. The surpluses earned by India's foreign trade (except with Britain) helped Britain to finance its own deficits in trade with some other countries. India was also a vital site for British employment, services and investment.

Contrary to what is sometimes thought, colonial land policies were not exactly calculated to achieve these effects, which were the outcome of countless individual economic decisions and not of any far-seeing state plan. But certainly Indian land policies were expected to help or at least not to hinder British economic interests, which were also supported by the economic theories of those days. The success of the policies can be seen in the extent to which India's countryside *did* perform the roles required of it by British industrialists, merchants and consumers.

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## 5.3 REVENUE SETTLEMENTS

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The basis of land policy was the revenue settlement, meaning the decision as to how much would be paid to the state for land, who would pay it, and on what terms and conditions.

### 5.3.1 The Permanent Settlement

The tendency in India was for strong states to reach down as near as possible to the actual cultivators for information about agriculture and land-holding, and in order to fix

responsibility for the payment of land revenue. No pre-colonial states managed to do without local intermediaries – lords, record-keepers, headmen, and so on – but many kept careful records relating to land-holding and revenue payment. The most celebrated survey was that ordered by Todar Mal, finance minister of the Mughal emperor, Akbar. During much of the seventeenth century, this and further surveys permitted a system of regulated revenue settlement based on assessments of agricultural output.

In the eighteenth century, however, there was an ever-increasing demand for revenue. This was attributable to a number of factors: the growth of stronger regional states, the cost of warfare, investment in production and trade, tributes paid to others (especially the Marathas and the British East India Company), and loss of income to intermediaries or to the powerful, again including the European trading companies, which generally avoided local tolls and taxes. This need for money led to agreements between local rulers and either the powerful elites (a few *zamindars*, then meaning the territorial lords and official revenue- collectors) or efficient ‘fixers’, so-called revenue-farmers or *ijaradars* chosen by auction. In general these arrangements implied short-term increases in revenue in return for a reduction of central control.

In 1765 the British East India Company gained control over the revenues of Bengal and Bihar. At first the Company worked through deputies who also served the Nawab of Bengal; and, even when it took control directly at the behest of the Governor, Warren Hastings, in 1772, it still awarded the revenue-collecting right to the highest bidders for terms of one or more years. But the Company was gaining information through access to the revenue records (moved to Calcutta), the experience of some European collectors, and also a commission of inquiry in the districts. Strong theoretical and practical arguments were advanced, notably by Council-member, Philip Francis, that short-term revenue-farming was unwise.

In 1789, therefore, a ten-year settlement was declared by the acting Governor, Sir John Shore. In 1793, under the new Governor, Lord Cornwallis, this was superseded by a settlement that was declared permanent: that is, the rate of tax was fixed for ever. The settlement was to be made by local arrangements using the existing records (without survey) and with what were thought to be (but in many instances were not) hereditary landed interests, the *zamindars*.

Many considerations lay behind this system, which was ordered from Britain. It provided a means of running India through general rules, set out in a long list of Regulations enforceable by the courts. Such minimal direct government was favoured by the political theories of the day. The system was also thought suited to Indian expectations and to conditions in Bengal, where the self-seeking servants of an imperfectly organised commercial company were now in possession of an empire. Making the settlement with *zamindars* would secure, or if necessary create, an indigenous rural aristocracy. Permanence would place a clear and fixed limit to the government’s share of production, and thus encourage investment, higher productivity and trade, which then would increase the government’s income indirectly.

To some extent these goals were achieved, though the Company soon turned against the Bengal system. The cultivated area increased, and more crops were grown for local and international markets, adding to an already commercialised agriculture, and to established means for the reclamation of land. *Zamindars*, despite pockets of resistance, gave up their broader military and political roles, and became adjuncts to a new political order and subjects of the Company’s government. Gradually, from the early years when land could barely be sold at any price, a valuable land market grew, along with population, giving meaning to the rights created in and after 1793. New landlords, at first often resisted by local communities, were able to call on state force to ensure their possession. A tendency in favour of separate rather than shared landholding led to partitions under official scrutiny, so that the number of *zamindars* increased markedly, especially in some districts. Land became a reliable security for borrowing and mortgages, but also, therefore, a means whereby traders and moneylenders could extract agrarian produce at lower cost and somewhat reduced risk to themselves.

The permanent settlement attached possession to revenue-payment. In the past, non-payers could be punished in their person – by imprisonment or torture, for example. Now their property was at risk. Some great *zamindars* lost out, as the revenue demand was often set at rates that were initially very high (a notional 90 per cent of income). But new regulations were introduced to help the remainder, over the next few decades, by giving them near-absolute powers over their tenants and over tenants' property, including standing crops.

Some agrarian classes had their pre-existing rights recognised. This qualified those given to *zamindars*. In some areas intermediary landholders (*jotedars*) gained most from the permanent settlement, through directly managing production. On the whole, however, the legal position of cultivators was weakened. For most of the nineteenth century, until changes in the law and in official attitudes, they did not share in the benefits as incomes from agriculture improved. Even in the eighteenth century, dispossessed and opportunist people had formed criminal gangs (as dacoits) in the countryside. In the nineteenth century, armed or concerted resistance broke out, expressing various mixtures of religious, social and economic grievances. Disease, scarcity and famine worsened in rural communities, partly because of the gradual spread of the effect of these changes in property law.

### 5.3.2 The Temporary Settlements

Very soon after the introduction of the permanent settlement in north east India, it was challenged by Company officials, especially Thomas Munro, who held that it was inappropriate to the areas they knew. In Munro's case this meant parts of the Madras presidency, where (despite a permanent settlement along the Andhra coast) he claimed that either there were no identifiable landlords, or the local chiefs threatened British rule and should be removed not revived. More generally he argued that a *zamindari* settlement was contrary to Indian understandings of landholding and revenue-obligations. A little later, around 1812, these conservative arguments were allied with the reformist and anti-aristocratic tendencies of Utilitarian thinkers and political economists, such as James Mill, who now controlled the London administration of the Company. This alliance ensured that no further settlements would be permanent.

It was argued that landlords did not generally contribute to prosperity, and were not doing so in Bengal; and that production would be best increased by giving property rights to those responsible for tilling the soil. It was claimed that Indians did not understand or were abusing the elaborate legal system that had been set up in Bengal, and that they would be better served by rulers who combined executive and judicial functions.

In future, therefore, most settlements were '*raiayatwari*', that is made with the *raiayats* (those regarded as 'actual cultivators') rather than with landlords. Such settlements were introduced in southern and western India. Similar but modified versions were later devised for 'village communities' (*mahalwari* settlements) based around co-sharers (*pattidari* or *bhaiachara*), in parts of north India, especially the Punjab.

Broadly speaking, these temporary settlements relied on close surveys of the countryside, and on regularly revised records. Revenue-rates for each cultivated plot were set for a limited period, commonly thirty years. Actual payments depended on annual reports on the use of that plot. Temporary settlements therefore implied close and personal rather than distant and legalistic government. They nevertheless standardised the categories of landholding, and replaced systems based on shares or collective liabilities with ones based on individual title.

The surveys were always elaborate, and became more time-consuming and 'scientific' during the nineteenth century, separating measurement and the drawing of plans from the recording of landholders and from economic, social and historical assessments of the conditions in every village and in regions (called *circles*) of similar character. Revenue rates were increasingly set at levels related to the supposed capacity of the soil (not current output), in order to discourage idleness. They were calculated in accordance with the definition of rent by the classical economist, David Ricardo – namely, that it was merely the unearned extra produce from better land, compared with that from the least favourable land, and therefore both measurable and safe to tax. When this (in fact very

imprecise) calculation led to overly high revenue demands, these were modified by more subjective assessments of what areas could afford to pay.

The Punjab in particular, in the later nineteenth century, advocated a peasant-proprietary model of agrarian policy, and turned the survey and settlement report into an expensive intellectual exercise, one of the founts of today's anthropology and development studies. By contrast, the United Provinces saw a resurgence of belief in aristocratic land-control, especially in Awadh following the rebellion of 1857-8. There, a settlement was made with superior landlords (*taluqdars*) in replacement of a village-level settlement introduced immediately after the British annexation. It was debated whether this and other settlements should be made permanent. In the event they remained temporary, even where superior revenue-collectors were again recognised, for example in central India as well as in Awadh.

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## 5.4 SUBSEQUENT ADJUSTMENTS

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The systems introduced between 1770 and the 1850s did not remain unchanged. New ideas and perceived problems prompted adjustments, which continued up to and after the end of British rule.

### 5.4.1 Preserving Property

Many measures were taken to preserve property. On larger estates the British encouraged primogeniture, so as to avoid the risk of subdivision upon inheritance. In the twentieth century too many, though less effectual, efforts were made to halt the fragmentation of plots of cultivation, and to facilitate land-swaps that would consolidate scattered holdings.

Legislation was passed to ease the burden on 'encumbered estates' whose survival was threatened by bad management or misfortune. The Court of Wards, first introduced into Bengal in 1790 and 1793, provided for the temporary administration of an estate by the Board of Revenue, where necessary or requested, in the stead of an 'incapable *zamindar*' (a description often held to include women).

Especially after riots in the Deccan in 1875, a host of more general measures sought to protect landholders in the temporarily-settled areas against moneylenders who, supposedly, were snapping up land-rights and disturbing the time-honoured political and social equilibrium of the countryside. Various laws qualified the advantage given to creditors by the increased security of landed property, including tenancies, and by the operation of the laws of contract. The most extreme of these was the Punjab Alienation Land Act of 1900, which tried to restrict land transfer (and hence mortgages on rural land) to recognised agriculturists, members of the 'tribes and castes' listed in a schedule to the Act.

### 5.4.2 Tenancy Reform

Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century the government sought mainly to ensure that revenue was paid promptly, in the second half it became more concerned with agricultural development. This matched the demands of British industry for raw materials and markets, but also responded to worries about rural unrest and about the condition and vulnerability of the poor. Such concerns had become important to policy and to political debate from the late 1830s onwards. One consequence was an attempt once again to use property rights as a means of securing political and economic goals. Gradually the idea of state-enforced rights was applied further and further down the tenurial and social scale.

Various Tenancy Acts set out both to protect superior land-owning interests and to provide a measure of security to the cultivators. In the second half of the nineteenth century these enactments began to give some rights to those who held land from landlords rather than directly or indirectly from the state. In Bengal, the Rent Act of 1859, while purporting to help *zamindars* collect rents, also recorded as settled or occupancy tenants those who had held land for twelve years. It placed restrictions on the enhancement of rents. It also sought to improve landlord-tenant relations, and the more effective resolution of agrarian disputes.

Defects in this legislation, and more radical impulses for reform in the aftermath of further famine and rural unrest, led to the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which added two major points. Firstly, there were more elaborate classifications of tenants and gradations of rights, with a presumption of occupancy status in a village for all those holding any land in that village. In many areas this status now applied to large majorities of first-tier tenants (that is, excluding those who were the tenants of other tenants). Secondly, there was provision for survey and settlement, to establish and record rights, holdings and rents, by analogy with the procedures in temporarily-settled areas. These had the effect, as operations proceeded, of establishing tenant rights and familiarising people with them.

Indian legislation was influenced by the ideas of fair and fixed rents and secure tenure that had been popularised during tenancy debates in Ireland, where they took on a populist and nationalist hue. More important, however, was that the 1885 Act extended the Punjab peasant-proprietary model. The occupancy tenants of Bengal and Bihar (the latter region being the immediate focus of attention, in view of the poverty of the region) were being ensured a kind of property in their land-holdings, in order to encourage them to invest in agriculture – to make them, in short, rich peasants.

The trend after 1885 was for the principles of the Bengal Act to be extended elsewhere, such as to the Central Provinces in 1895. But it was overtaken by measures designed to regulate all aspects of agrarian relations. Other regions had also had tenancy legislation, but the needs were different where numerous cultivators rather than landlords were the ostensible revenue-payers. In the twentieth century, too, further measures were taken in Bengal and Bihar (as elsewhere) to afford some legal protection to sub-tenants, share-croppers and labourers. None of these, strictly, related to property. Rather they built on arguments about equity (also heard during the debates over the 1885 Act).

The role of government was being extended. It was no longer content merely to frame the agrarian structure (that is, establish and define landed property) in the hope of promoting commercial expansion and securing its revenue. It now placed a new emphasis on investigation and statistics, on agricultural experiments and credit-provision, and even on direct intervention (committees for particular crops, price-fixing, and finally development planning), as part of broader social and economic strategies.

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## 5.5 NEW KINDS OF LAND RIGHTS

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Agrarian policy towards land rights, considered in isolation, thus retained an echo of the minimal government favoured in the eighteenth century and by *laissez-faire* doctrines in the nineteenth. This does not mean it was not radically different from what had gone before. Colonial policy introduced new ideas about land use and types of land control. These ideas were common to the different kinds of agrarian policy.

It used to be thought that British laws created land-ownership in India, but it is now plain that this depends on what is meant by the term. In some senses there was private property in land in India from the earliest historical times. Religious notions of renunciation depended on it, as did payments and grants to kings, temples, elites, co-sharers, workers and artisans. Over time, different states found sophisticated ways of measuring and defining land rights, including surveys, records and title-deeds. Land-rights could be sold and inherited; and there were stories and theories about their ultimate origins, and about the proper behaviour of landholders. The holders would enjoy one or more of very many specific kinds of tenure. Of course land-rights were not absolute – they never are – and they could be lost by force or usurpation. They would be qualified by obligations to pay land taxes and/or to supply materials and manpower. They were subject to communal and joint-family obligations, and generally to the rights of others, both superiors and inferiors. All these things also applied to land rights under the British.

What colonial laws and policies did to land rights was more subtle, in theory and also increasingly in practice. They reduced the number of different types of right to those only

which the law specified. They made each type's benefits and obligations more definite – by legal definitions, by more precise measurement through scientific surveys, by more exact records, and by the decisions of a hierarchy of courts. They applied uniform concepts to all land: that is, they tried to deny the existence of land of doubtful or shared ownership. There were no sacred groves or shrines that did not belong to a temple or a *mahant*; no forest or flood-plain without owners; no house, well, *ghat* or *bazaar* without a proprietor. The owner did not need to be an individual, of course. The owner could be a family, a village, a corporation, or the state. But for all that, only one kind of 'ownership' was to be recognised, the kind established in the state's law.

Many local variants and distinctions, and some pragmatic responses to circumstance, were ignored or overridden, for example, between kinds of co-sharers, between resident and non-resident landholders, or between high and low castes. Other pre-existing types were reinforced and generalised, at least in the law, as new categories of landlords, intermediary tenure-holders, tenants and sub-tenants, and later of settled and occupancy tenants or tenants-at-will.

Now, the characteristics or 'incidents' of property were always spelled out. A *zamindar* in Mughal times had any of a range of possible rights, but in particular he had the duty to collect revenue for the state, retaining a proportion for himself (supposedly ten per cent). His revenue-collecting (*malguzari*) right derived from Mughal authority; in regulation districts even the amounts of the collections were theoretically specified by surveys and rules. In addition the *zamindar* might have chiefly powers, derived from his local socio-political standing: his character, caste or lineage, and his command of retainers. These powers carried some obligations to the community, and certainly produced further income, for example through tolls, control over markets, payments for credit, use of forced labour, and further shares of produce. There would have also been others occupying and using *the same land*, who might similarly have had effective rights over it, for example a right to cultivate, or to reside in a village and exploit village resources. Such rights too fell into particular categories and had specific names, and, just like *zamindari* rights, they could be derived from license, or custom, or power. Pre-colonial rights therefore could be of different types and degrees, and could overlap in relation to the same plot of land.

Within British territory (that is, leaving aside the Indian states), all landowning became in one sense identical, as a complete collection of rights to land, unless some legal provision said otherwise. Landlords were given exclusive titles to specified areas, with qualifications made by law reserving certain other rights for the state, for sub-proprietors or for privileged tenants. All these rights derived from the state and its laws, while any unspecified sub-rights derived only from the landlord. The *khudkasht raiyat* – a cultivator with superior, residence rights in a locality – was turned into a 'tenant', for example. And if he was not provided for in the state's regulations, he could legally gain the right to use land only by *contract* – that is, through an agreement he made with the landlord. He might have privileges or he might have no security of tenure; and in theory this was decided by law not force.

Several provisions turned land into a commodity that could be readily bought and sold, firstly because it could not be arbitrarily seized by the powerful, not even by the state itself, and secondly because it was largely free from encumbrances (that is, subordinate rights that would reduce its value).

One consequence was that 'rent' and hence '*abwabs*' (illegal cesses) also changed their meaning. Payments of various kinds had always been made to social and political superiors, on different pretexts, sanctioned partly by the state and partly by custom, and according to what was thought fair or affordable, or what could be extorted given the relative power of the parties involved. Now, there was merely 'rent', meaning a contractual payment for the use of land. Anything beyond 'rent' became illegal. In the absence of formal leases, and given colonial expressions of respect for Indian 'custom', it took a long time before this legal distinction meant anything much in reality. But ultimately rents became more regulated, and 'illegal' cesses and dues became much harder to exact. These changes placed pressure upon landlords, and forced them to devise new ways of securing their

incomes. Some left the land to better-resourced managers (including European planters) or more skilful agriculturists. Others improved their own management, or cultivated more on their own account, or hardened the terms offered to bonded labour and share-croppers.

This leads on to another important point, that the British related ownership to *use*. Like most other states, they favoured settled agriculture over all other modes of land-utilisation, though they also created reserved forests (as the Mughals did hunting tracts). They deliberately set land-revenue rates – and designed the systems and chose the revenue payers – in order to maximise commercial production, though oddly they chose to do this while thinking they were conserving an old order, and while trying to make land tenure more secure.

Moreover, land which was not in regular use the British defined as ‘waste’. Much of such ‘waste’ they denied to landholders and communities who had informal shared control over it; they resumed it for the state or allocated it to private owners. Moreover, they greatly reduced the areas that were revenue-free (*inam* or *lakhiraj*). Earlier regimes had left vast amounts of land and its produce in the hands of others, to pay for public services and goods (officials, armies, temples, mosques, schools), and had drawn much government income from their own state lands (*khalisa*). The colonial government was not eager to manage lands directly or to look to state land as a major source of income. And they recognised revenue-free lands only where they could not avoid doing so. Because they wanted to ensure the validity of titles to land, they had to respect specific, unimpeachable, written revenue-free rights, whether from before or after British rule. But for their own part, even when they needed to show particular marks of favour by making land-grants, for example to soldiers in the Punjab, they very seldom awarded them revenue-free. They preferred to encourage marketing and to collect cash into the treasuries, and then to govern through employees who were paid in money.

What all this implies is a particular idea of the purpose of land: above all, it was to be cultivated, to produce crops that could be sold. The land had to pay, to its owner and then to the state. This was not wholly new of course, as all states and for that matter all settled cultivators had always had much the same idea about land. Exploitation of land resources and the human shaping of landscape certainly long preceded colonial rule in India, and one should not imagine that there was some kind of pre-colonial ecological harmony between man and soil.

But the commercial use of land did become, in British rhetoric, almost the only, the hegemonic idea of what land was for, and this undoubtedly reduced the grip of alternative views: for example, of land as a place of ritual, in such activities as ploughing, sowing and harvesting; of land as sacred and as the basis of the political order; of land as patrimony, or a common good for kin or community; of land as a public store of wealth to be drawn on as necessary; of land as a means of expressing and enforcing social customs and distinctions.

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## 5.6 CONSEQUENCES

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Did it all matter? We return briefly to a couple of the issues raised at the beginning. Other conclusions would also be possible, in regard to all the issues raised then.

### 5.6.1 Differentiation

One consequence of all colonial agrarian policy was the firming up of social classes, and the hardening of divisions between them. With regard to landholdings the evidence is unequivocal. There was a tendency for larger holdings to become relatively more profitable, to preserve their integrity (as seen in statistics of average number and size), and to maintain or even increase their share of total cultivated area. There was also a tendency for the number of smaller holdings to increase, and for their size and share to diminish. These related tendencies had different starting-points and took different forms in different places; and there were differences between permanently and temporarily-settled tracts, and



between irrigated and dry lands. But, broadly, these same two features can be seen everywhere, among and between holdings with many different kinds of title, in lands dominated by large land-owners, and in lands under peasant-proprietors.

There had always been many landless in India, and migrant populations of many kinds. Under colonial rule (and since) the pressure increased for people to settle on land and cultivate it, but larger proportions than ever were unable to subsist from the land in their possession. The growing numbers in cities and in factories were too small proportionately to compensate for this change, especially as population and average life-expectancy rose. Micro-holdings – and share-cropping, and food from landlords' home farms – often became devices to lower cash wages. There was an impoverishment of large sections of India's population. Many factors contributed to this, but an important contribution was made by the very large increase in the numbers of people who could not live by their land alone but had to rely on employment by others.

## 5.6.2 Politics and Civic Character

The property laws and agrarian policies of the colonial state were related to a number of different ideas, of political economy in particular; for example: property rights, landlordism and village community. These ideas were influential, partly because exemplified in real measures of government and law. Thus Mahatma Gandhi had a vision of an India of self-regulating, self-sufficient communities which was in some respects indistinguishable from the ideal advanced by European anti-materialists and moralists, and also by some colonial policy-makers. The latter believed the 'village republic' to be the original Indian way. They tried to recreate it not only in the Punjab but also elsewhere, as a basis for tenancy and commercial production (Bengal in 1885) and even for local policing (the dream of a village watch supported by a local community).

Independent India sought *zamindari* abolition and land ceilings partly because of these colonial debates about the best means of securing economic progress and social equity. This was another victory for the peasant-proprietary school, but also (in the event) for the subterfuge, pragmatism and compromise that had none the less preserved the wealth and power of many landed families.

Many groups identified themselves through class interests that also drew on these debates, and the broader European discourse to which they had been indebted. The *zamindars* came first, with societies defending their political interests and seeking to reduce their liabilities. In Bengal in the 1870s and 1880s both additional local taxation and tenancy laws were resisted as a 'confiscation of property'. On the other hand, as a defence of property, land revenue was repeatedly reduced as a proportion of incomes and of total tax during the colonial period, and rural taxation has remained comparatively low since independence.

Later, each formation of a *kisan sabha* (peasant society), for example, also reflected a complex indigenous and colonial inheritance. Where a society was active, there were usually more successful agriculturists operating within a market economy, and new rivalries as a result of that upward mobility. There were often religious and social movements drawing on older texts and (especially Vaishnava) traditions, and making claims to status within an increasingly generalised *varna* hierarchy. And there were always claims about fair tenancy and enjoyment of property, concepts that had been imbedded in colonial laws, and transmitted through administration, courts, surveys and settlements.

In short, influences from these agrarian policies can be seen in assumptions that nowadays are scarcely questioned. More than that, they may be traced in the very fabric of society. Take the case of Calcutta. It has long been dominated by upper-caste literate service and professional elites, the *bhadralok*. These were not the direct descendants of the mixed bag of landed magnates, merchants, bankers and office-holders that ran the eighteenth-century city. They were the product of a society made in large part by the permanent *zamindari* settlement.

After an upheaval in which some great families were dispossessed, the settlement permitted the emergence of secure and increasingly wealthy landed classes. It allowed them to live

away from the land in the city; to build houses, temples, schools and hospitals; and to sponsor societies, printing, and other civic goods. True, it created many smaller and subordinate landed interests that were less secure, indeed insufficient. But, on the other hand, it demanded a range of lesser employees, the managers, agents, and clerks that worked the system in practice, plus a host of professionals, especially lawyers.

The permanent settlement was based on regulation and then on statute, implying top-heavy and centralised private and public bureaucracies, regulated by the law-courts, rather than dispersed day-to-day hands-on administration by landholder and state. Calcutta's concentration of writers and literate workers was the result, and they in turn required and manned Calcutta's offices, schools, newspapers and associations.

Other kinds of revenue settlement encouraged other kinds of government and society – too many to be detailed here. Colonial Calcutta and Bengal might be contrasted with Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), the administrative, commercial and industrial centres of regions with temporary *raiayatwari* settlements. They might also be compared with colonial Lahore and Punjab. The priorities of military recruitment as reflected in revenue and land policy, the emphasis on peasant proprietorship (of the so-called agricultural castes), the preservation of some great landed families, and in general a paternalist government defending its personalised rule and customary law: these agrarian policies help explain much of the Punjab's twentieth-century political history, before and after partition, and once again remind us of the formative influence of agrarian policies.

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## 5.7 SUMMARY

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Agrarian policies were crucial to the consolidation of British power in India. Through their agrarian policies the British sought to establish order in the countryside, create a social basis of support, and develop a system of production that could supply the colonial demand for agrarian commodities. In 1789, a ten-year settlement was introduced. In 1793 this was superseded by a permanent settlement by which the rate of tax was fixed forever. By the early nineteenth century this revenue system was criticized by officials and questioned by *zamindars*. This Unit looks at the many pressures that shaped these settlements and also analyses the tenancy reforms that were introduced after the mid-nineteenth century. It discusses how these policies led to changes in land rights and transformation of rural society.

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## 5.8 EXERCISES

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- 1) Analyse the chief characteristics of British Indian government's land policy.
- 2) Discuss the reasons behind the introduction of the Permanent Settlement. What were its socio-economic impacts?
- 3) What accounts for the shift from Permanent Settlement to the temporary settlements?
- 4) Critically examine the tenancy reforms by the British Indian government.
- 5) To what extent did British agrarian policy deepen the differentiation within the rural society?

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## 5.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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