

Land Revenue and Colonial Governance: State Formation and Rural Transformation in Bengal and Madras

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Abstract: The relationship between land revenue systems and colonial governance in Bengal and Madras, highlighting their role in state formation and rural transformation under British rule. It explores how the Permanent Settlement in Bengal and the Ryotwari system in Madras became key instruments for consolidating colonial authority, restructuring agrarian relations, and expanding administrative control. The study analyses the ways these revenue arrangements altered patterns of landownership, weakened older customary rights, and integrated rural society into a wider colonial economy. In Bengal, the creation of a zamindari-based system strengthened intermediary interests, while in Madras direct settlement with cultivators reshaped the state-peasant relationship. Despite their structural differences, both systems facilitated extraction, surveillance, and political domination, producing deep social and economic changes in the countryside. That land revenue policy was central not only to colonial governance but also to the transformation of rural society in southern and eastern India.

Keywords: Land Revenue, Colonial Governance, State Formation, Rural Transformation, Bengal and Madras.



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1. Introduction

In colonial India, land revenue meant far more than a tax collected from land or agricultural produce. It became the fiscal backbone of British rule and one of the most powerful mechanisms through which colonial authority entered everyday rural life. Revenue collection financed administration, policing, courts, and imperial expansion, while also allowing the colonial state to classify land, define rights, and regulate agrarian society. In this sense, land revenue was deeply tied to colonial governance: it was not only an economic measure but also a political technology through which power was organized and exercised (Bayly, 1988; Stein, 1985; Travers, 2004; Chaudhry, 2016). Bengal and Madras are especially important in British administrative history because they became the sites of two major experiments in agrarian rule. Bengal was shaped by the Permanent Settlement, which strengthened zamindari authority under a fixed state demand,

while Madras became closely associated with the ryotwari system, where the state claimed to deal more directly with cultivators. These two regions therefore reveal how different revenue arrangements could serve the same imperial goal of consolidating control over territory, people, and resources (Stein, 1989; Mustafa, 2007; Raman, 2018). Revenue policy also transformed rural society in lasting ways. In Bengal, the fixation of revenue and the elevation of zamindars reshaped agrarian hierarchy, intensified rent extraction, and widened the distance between cultivators and the state. In Madras, although ryotwari appeared more direct, it depended on surveys, record-keeping, assessment, and intrusive bureaucratic oversight, thereby extending state penetration into the village. In both presidencies, revenue extraction altered relations among peasants, landlords, village elites, moneylenders, and officials, producing new forms of dependency, inequality, and social conflict. A comparison of Bengal and Madras is therefore historically valuable because it shows both continuity and contrast in colonial governance: continuity in the centrality of agrarian revenue to imperial rule, and contrast in the institutional forms through which the British pursued control. The objective of this study is to examine how land revenue functioned as an instrument of state formation and how it reshaped rural society in two major regions of British India. Its scope includes administrative policy, property relations, agrarian restructuring, and the wider social consequences of colonial rule (Bose, 1993; Gidwani, 1992; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Saravanan, 2006; Roy, 2014; Caum-Julio, 2024).

2. Historical Background

Pre-colonial agrarian structure in Bengal.

Before British rule, Bengal's agrarian order was neither a world of fully private landed property nor a simple village commons. It was a layered system in which cultivating peasants, local magnates, zamindars, and the state all possessed different kinds of claims over land and produce. Control over agrarian surplus depended as much on political authority, customary entitlement, and fiscal rights as on actual cultivation. Bengal's riverine ecology, expanding cultivation frontiers, and local power networks produced a flexible but unequal rural structure in which peasant production remained central, while superior claims over revenue rested with landed and administrative intermediaries (McLane, 1993; Roy, 2021; Travers, 2007).

Pre-colonial agrarian structure in Madras.

In the region later organized as the Madras Presidency, agrarian relations were even more regionally varied. South India contained different combinations of mirasi rights, village-level corporate claims, local chiefs, poligars, and revenue-paying landholders. Rights over land were therefore distributed across multiple actors rather than concentrated in one uniform proprietary class. In many areas, control over land was inseparable from control over irrigation, military power, caste hierarchy, and local jurisdiction, making agrarian authority deeply embedded in regional political society (Ludden, 1999; Raman, 2018; Stein, 1989).

Mughal influence on revenue administration in Bengal.

Bengal entered the colonial period with a strong legacy of Mughal fiscal administration. The Mughal state did not simply tax land; it organized territory through assessment, record keeping, and ranked intermediaries. Revenue demand, local authority, and political legitimacy were tied together through institutions that classified territory and assigned responsibility for payment. This Mughal inheritance mattered enormously because the East India Company did not create Bengal's revenue state from nothing; it appropriated and reworked an already existing fiscal order, translating Mughal practices into colonial forms of rule (Bayly, 1988; Roy, 2021; Travers, 2007).

South Indian regional patterns of land control before British rule.

Before British consolidation, South India was marked by overlapping claims rather than singular ownership. Land rights were connected to service obligations, irrigation management, customary

usage, and local political authority. In many districts, rights to collect revenue, to manage cultivation, and to occupy or improve land did not belong to the same person. This is why later colonial attempts to define a single taxpayer or proprietor in Madras generated both administrative difficulty and political conflict: British officials were trying to simplify a field of rights that had historically been plural, negotiated, and regionally distinct (Ludden, 1999; Raman, 2018; Stein, 1989).

East India Company's political expansion.

The Company's transformation from a commercial corporation into a territorial power was gradual but decisive. In Bengal, military victories and political alliances after Plassey and Buxar allowed the Company to turn commercial influence into fiscal sovereignty. In Madras, its power expanded through war, treaty, and administrative reorganization across the Carnatic, Mysore frontier, and other southern regions. In both cases, the crucial change was that political rule came to depend on controlling agrarian revenue at scale (Bayly, 1988; Bowen, 1991; Stein, 1989).

Acquisition of Diwani in Bengal.

The grant of Diwani in 1765 was a turning point because it gave the Company the right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. With that shift, the Company ceased to be merely a trader protected by local rulers and became a revenue-collecting sovereign power. The importance of Diwani lay not only in money; it provided the fiscal base from which the Company could maintain armies, expand administration, and claim political authority over territory and population (Bowen, 1991; Travers, 2007).

British consolidation in Madras Presidency.

British rule in Madras was consolidated through military conquest, suppression of local armed authority, negotiated incorporation of regional elites, and the spread of district administration. This process was closely linked to experiments in land revenue, because the colonial state in the south sought to identify who could be made responsible for payment, who counted as a legitimate landholder, and how local rights could be subordinated to a new sovereign order. Madras thus became a crucial arena in which the colonial state tested more direct and survey-based forms of agrarian governance (Raman, 2018; Stein, 1989; Wilson, 2011).

Need for stable revenue as the basis of colonial rule.

The need for a regular and predictable flow of land revenue lay at the heart of colonial expansion. Revenue financed military campaigns, paid civil officials, secured credit, and underwrote the Company's claims to legitimate government. This explains why revenue policy became one of the earliest and most intense fields of institutional experimentation in both Bengal and Madras. Stable revenue was not a technical objective alone; it was the material foundation of colonial state formation (Bayly, 1988; Bowen, 1991; Wilson, 2011).

3. Conceptual Framework

Colonial governance in India may be understood as the attempt to convert political conquest into durable administrative power. That process required more than coercion. It required knowledge about villages, soils, people, rights, and taxable capacity. Agrarian control was therefore central to colonial governance because rural society was the principal source of revenue and the principal field through which the state made itself present in everyday life. In this sense, colonial governance was simultaneously fiscal, legal, and spatial (Bhattacharya, 2018; Wilson, 2011).

State formation under colonialism can be analyzed through revenue settlements because these settlements were not just methods of tax collection; they were instruments for defining authority, classifying property, and reordering social relations. In Bengal, the state tried to stabilize rule through zamindari property and a permanently fixed demand. In much of Madras, colonial

governance moved toward direct settlement with cultivators or local holders under ryotwari principles. In both cases, property rights were inseparable from power: to decide who owned, paid, inherited, or could be dispossessed was to shape the political architecture of empire (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Chaudhry, 2016; Raman, 2018).

Agrarian transformation under colonial intervention refers to the restructuring of rural life through new laws, fiscal pressures, market linkages, and documentation practices. Rural society became a site of state penetration because peasants, landlords, moneylenders, and village functionaries were drawn into new legal and revenue regimes. This helps distinguish mere extraction from administration. Extraction implies taking surplus; administration implies building institutions that regularize and reproduce that extraction over time. Colonial land revenue policy did both: it appropriated surplus and remade the countryside into a more legible and governable domain (Bagchi, 1992; Bose, 1993; Lee, 2019; Ratnoo, 2024).

4. Objectives of the Study

Modern scholarship shows that colonial land tenure systems affected inequality, administrative reach, and long-term rural outcomes. A comparison between Bengal and Madras is therefore useful not only for reconstructing the past but also for understanding how different forms of colonial rule produced different social consequences (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Lee, 2019; Ratnoo, 2024).

1. To examine the nature of colonial land revenue policies. This objective seeks to understand land revenue not as a narrow fiscal device but as a governing strategy through which empire organized territory, rights, and obligations.
2. To evaluate their impact on rural transformation. This means tracing changes in class relations, tenancy, credit dependence, commercialization, and village power.

5. Sources of the Study

A study of land revenue and colonial governance must rely first on official land revenue reports, East India Company proceedings, parliamentary papers, settlement manuals, district records, gazetteers, and census materials. These sources are indispensable because they show how colonial officials described land, classified rights, justified settlements, and measured agrarian society. They also reveal the administrative language through which the state turned local complexity into taxable categories. Yet these documents must be read critically, because they present rural life from the viewpoint of governance and often treat social conflict as an administrative problem rather than a historical reality (Bhattacharya, 2018; Wilson, 2011).

The study must also use contemporary writings of colonial administrators, peasant petitions, local records, nationalist critiques, and modern historical scholarship. These materials help recover voices and experiences that official records mute or distort. Petitions and local documentation expose dispute, negotiation, and resistance; nationalist critiques reveal how colonial revenue policies were interpreted as exploitative; and modern historians provide the conceptual tools needed to connect legal change, agrarian structure, and state formation. A balanced analysis depends on reading state archives alongside social history and critical historiography (Bose, 1993; Chaudhry, 2016; Travers, 2007).

6. Land Revenue as the Foundation of Colonial Rule

Land revenue was the main pillar of colonial income in the early phase of British rule. The Company's armies, civil establishment, and territorial ambitions depended heavily on agrarian surplus. This is why fiscal policy cannot be separated from imperial expansion: revenue collected from the countryside financed the machinery that conquered, policed, and administered that

countryside. Colonial rule in India was therefore built not simply on trade or military force, but on the institutionalization of agrarian taxation (Bayly, 1988; Bowen, 1991; Roy, 2021).

Revenue administration also produced bureaucratic growth. To collect land tax efficiently, the colonial state had to create districts, appoint collectors, standardize paperwork, monitor defaults, and build a hierarchy of offices capable of supervising local society. Mapping, surveys, settlement operations, and record keeping were not neutral administrative improvements; they were political technologies that made the countryside legible to the state. Through these practices, villages became units of assessment, cultivators became taxable subjects, and land became an object of measurement, classification, and intervention (Bhattacharya, 2018; Wilson, 2011).

Revenue collection also functioned as a form of territorial control. In Bengal, the colonial state sought legitimacy by fixing revenue and empowering zamindars as landed allies. In Madras, officials increasingly tried to bypass entrenched intermediaries and establish a more direct fiscal relationship with local holders or cultivators. These different strategies reflected different political calculations, but both were aimed at the same end: turning agrarian society into a stable base of colonial authority. Land policy thus stood at the intersection of extraction, administration, and legitimacy (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Chaudhry, 2016; Raman, 2018; Stein, 1989).

7. Permanent Settlement in Bengal

The Permanent Settlement, introduced in 1793 under Lord Cornwallis, was one of the most consequential agrarian measures in colonial India. Its central principle was the permanent fixation of land revenue demand, accompanied by the recognition of zamindars as proprietors responsible for paying that demand to the state. The settlement attempted to convert fiscal intermediaries into a landed class with legally defined rights, thereby giving colonial rule a stable social base in the countryside (Bayly, 1988; Chaudhry, 2016; Travers, 2007).

Colonial policymakers expected several benefits from this arrangement. A fixed demand was supposed to create fiscal certainty for the state, reduce administrative complexity, and encourage zamindars to invest in agricultural improvement because they would retain gains above the state's demand. Politically, the settlement was designed to create a dependable landed elite tied to British interests. In other words, the Permanent Settlement was both an economic theory of improvement and a political strategy of alliance-building (Bowen, 1991; Chaudhry, 2016; Travers, 2007).

The settlement generated severe pressures. Revenue demand remained rigid, defaults were punished harshly, and estates could be sold when zamindars failed to pay on time. Sale laws and auctions transferred landed rights to new purchasers, often urban or absentee interests, and widened the gap between those who controlled revenue rights and those who actually lived in the villages. Instead of producing a uniformly improving landed class, the system contributed to instability in estate ownership, the growth of absentee landlordism, and intensified pressure on subordinate tenure holders and peasants (Bagchi, 1992; Bhattacharya, 2018; Bose, 1993).

8. Agrarian Structure in Bengal under Permanent Settlement

Under the Permanent Settlement, zamindars occupied the highest recognized position in the agrarian hierarchy, but their effective control was often mediated by a growing chain of subordinate right-holders. The system encouraged the rise of intermediary tenure holders, including patnidars and other layers of assignees, who inserted themselves between zamindars and the actual cultivators. This process of subinfeudation multiplied claims over rent and widened the distance between revenue demand at the top and agrarian production at the bottom. As a result, Bengal's rural order became more stratified, more legally complex, and more exploitative (Bhattacharya, 2018; Bose, 1986; Bose, 1993).

The condition of the raiyats was deeply precarious in the early phase of the settlement. Although peasants remained the actual producers, they enjoyed weak legal protection against rent

enhancement and arbitrary exactions. The state's main concern was the punctual realization of revenue, not the security of cultivators. Over time, pressure moved downward through the agrarian chain, and rent became the field in which landlords and intermediaries compensated themselves for revenue burdens, indebtedness, and competition. Later debates over tenant right emerged precisely because the earlier system had left peasant occupancy insecure and vulnerable to landlord power (Bagchi, 1992; Bose, 1993; Chaudhry, 2016).

This environment also strengthened the position of moneylenders and mahajans. As rent burdens rose and cash obligations intensified, peasants were pushed toward credit dependence. Commercialization of agriculture expanded, but it did not produce uniformly beneficial capitalist growth. Instead, greater integration into markets often meant that peasant households faced new risks tied to price fluctuations, debt, and the need to meet cash payments on time. In many areas, commercialization deepened social differentiation rather than reducing it, because better-placed groups could capture the gains while poorer cultivators carried the risks (Bose, 1986; Bhattacharya, 2018; Roy, 2020).

The cumulative outcome was the fragmentation of village society. The Permanent Settlement did not simply create landlords and tenants; it produced a layered countryside of zamindars, intermediary holders, jotedars, creditors, and insecure raiyats. Social relations within the village became increasingly marked by differentiated access to land, rent, credit, and legal protection. Seen in a wider comparative frame, this helps explain why Bengal's landlord-centered trajectory differed from the more direct revenue arrangements that shaped much of Madras. Later scholarship has shown that colonial land tenure institutions left long-run effects on inequality, public goods, and rural development, which makes the Bengal experience crucial for understanding the deeper social legacy of colonial governance (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Lee, 2019; Ratnoo, 2024).

9. Rural Transformation in Bengal

In Bengal, colonial land policy did not merely reorganize revenue collection; it fundamentally altered the social meaning of land. Under the Permanent Settlement, land increasingly came to be treated as alienable and marketable property, and this legal transformation strengthened a new landed elite whose authority rested on recognized revenue rights rather than only on older customary claims. Zamindars, tenure-holders, jotedars, and subordinate intermediaries acquired greater power within the countryside, while cultivators faced growing insecurity as rent demands intensified and customary protections were weakened or reinterpreted through colonial law. The pressure of rent, arrears, and debt deepened peasant dependence on credit networks, and commercialization expanded unevenly through the spread of export-oriented cultivation in selected tracts rather than across Bengal as a whole. As a result, rural Bengal witnessed sharper stratification, class differentiation, and repeated agrarian tensions, since the colonial state sought stable revenue, zamindars sought enhanced rental extraction, and cultivators struggled to preserve subsistence and occupancy. The long-term effect was not a uniformly modernized agriculture, but an agrarian order marked by legal complexity, social hierarchy, periodic unrest, and uneven productive outcomes (Bose, 1993; Chakrabarti, 2018; Guha, 1996; Bandyopadhyay, 1993; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

10. Ryotwari Settlement in Madras

The Ryotwari system in Madras emerged as a distinctive colonial alternative to the Bengal model. Associated especially with Thomas Munro and other Company administrators, it was based on a direct fiscal relationship between the state and the cultivator, with the individual ryot recognized as the immediate revenue payer. In principle, this system rejected a broad zamindari framework across much of the Madras Presidency and instead relied on extensive survey, field measurement, classification of soils, and estimated productivity in order to assess demand. Yet the apparent

logic of peasant proprietorship concealed the deeper reality of colonial control: assessments were periodically revised, the state retained superior claims over land, and the revenue burden often remained severe even without a large intermediary landlord standing between state and cultivator. Ryotwari thus combined the language of direct settlement and rational administration with a highly interventionist structure of fiscal governance that expanded official presence into village life (Stein, 1989; Washbrook, 2004; Mustafa, 2007; Chaudhry, 2016).

11. Agrarian Structure in Madras under Ryotwari

Under Ryotwari, the ryot was often described as a proprietor, but in practice that proprietorship was limited, conditional, and vulnerable. Direct contact with the state did reduce the formal role of large zamindars in many districts, yet it also intensified the dependence of cultivators on a bureaucratic regime of assessment, record-keeping, and collection. Village officials remained indispensable as mediators of information, measurement, customary practice, and everyday administration, showing that colonial “directness” still depended on local structures of authority. Small cultivators were especially exposed to the burden of revised assessments, crop failure, and fluctuating prices, which pushed many toward moneylenders and informal credit. In periods of distress, land transfer and alienation became more common, even where the language of peasant right persisted. At the same time, local customs, mirasi claims, and inherited social arrangements did not disappear; instead, they survived in altered form alongside official policy, producing an agrarian order that was both bureaucratically regulated and socially hybrid (Stein, 1989; Mustafa, 2007; Ramesh, 2017; Chaudhry, 2016).

12. Rural Transformation in Madras

Rural transformation in Madras under Ryotwari was driven by the individualization of land rights and the expansion of state surveillance into agrarian life. Since revenue had to be paid in cash, cultivators were increasingly drawn into markets, not always by choice but often by fiscal necessity. This intensified indebtedness, encouraged land transfers, and contributed to fluctuations in cultivation, including abandonment in times of ecological stress or excessive assessment. Commercialization expanded, particularly in parts of the dry south, but it did not bring a simple or universal prosperity; instead, it often sharpened divisions between stronger peasants, local magnates, tenants, and laboring groups. Older social categories such as mirasidars survived but were reconstituted within a colonial framework shaped by measurement, irrigation disputes, legal codification, and revised claims over land and water. Ecological constraints and irrigation policy also became central to agrarian change, demonstrating that the colonial state’s intervention went beyond taxation to the wider regulation of productive resources. Resistance to revenue pressure therefore remained a recurring feature of rural society in Madras, even within a system advertised as more just than zamindari (Washbrook, 1994, 2004; Mustafa, 2007; Ramesh, 2017).

13. Comparative Analysis of Bengal and Madras

The contrast between Bengal and Madras reveals two different colonial strategies built around a common objective of extraction. Bengal’s Permanent Settlement rested on fixed state demand and indirect rule through zamindars, thereby consolidating a strong intermediary class and making peasant insecurity largely a matter of rent pressure, landlord power, and layered tenure. Madras Ryotwari, by contrast, aimed at direct state-peasant settlement, rejected large-scale zamindari in many areas, and brought deeper bureaucratic penetration into the village through survey, registration, and periodic reassessment. Bengal’s structure therefore produced insecurity through landlord domination and subinfeudation, while Madras produced insecurity through state assessment, administrative intrusion, and the vulnerability of nominal proprietors to arrears and credit dependence. Yet the two regions were also linked by important similarities: both subordinated agrarian society to colonial fiscal needs, both increased rural indebtedness, both reworked customary rights into legal categories legible to the state, and both generated agrarian

distress within regionally varied settings. The difference lay less in colonial purpose than in the form through which colonial rule was institutionalized (Guha, 1996; Chaudhry, 2016; Ludden, 1999; Washbrook, 2004; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

14. Land Revenue and Colonial State Formation

Land revenue policy was central to colonial state formation because it linked territory, law, administration, and coercion into a single governing framework. Through revenue settlements, the colonial regime defined who held rights in land, who owed payment, how villages would be recorded, and by what authority disputes would be adjudicated. This required the creation and expansion of district administration, the use of surveys and statistical documentation, and the standardization of procedures that made local society increasingly legible to the state. Property was not simply discovered; it was codified through legal and administrative practices that transformed agrarian relations into governable categories. In this sense, revenue demand became one of the foundations of territorial authority and fiscal-military consolidation. By integrating villages into routines of measurement, petition, classification, and collection, the colonial state deepened its presence in rural society and made agrarian control a basic instrument of governance (Stein, 1989; Chaudhry, 2016; Chakrabarti, 2018; Mustafa, 2007).

15. Social Consequences of Revenue Policies

The social consequences of colonial revenue policies were profound and enduring. In both Bengal and Madras, new rural elites rose through their command over land, rent, records, or credit, while older customary authorities were weakened, displaced, or absorbed into colonial structures. Peasant impoverishment became more visible as tenancy, sub-tenancy, and labor dependence expanded, producing sharper lines of class division within village society. These changes also affected caste power, since access to land, official recognition, and credit increasingly shaped social authority in new ways. Moneylending groups gained influence as cash payments became indispensable, and rural households became more exposed to markets for both survival and production. Mobility, dispossession, and social tension followed from this restructuring, as cultivators confronted mounting pressure from landlords, officials, creditors, and ecological uncertainty. Colonial agrarian policy thus did not simply change institutions; it reordered the everyday social balance of the countryside (Prakash, 1985; Bandyopadhyay, 1993; Bose, 1993; Washbrook, 1994; Ramesh, 2017).

16. Economic Consequences

Economically, colonial land revenue systems imposed a persistent pressure for cash payment that accelerated commercialization but weakened subsistence security. In many areas, cultivators were pushed toward market-oriented production not because agricultural conditions had become more favorable, but because revenue obligations had to be met regardless of seasonal uncertainty. This often increased indebtedness, reduced resilience during crises, and contributed to recurring agrarian instability. Investment in agricultural improvement remained limited and uneven, since the institutional structure of colonial rule prioritized extraction over broad rural development. In landlord-dominated zones, incentives for long-term investment were often weak or fragmented, while in directly settled regions heavy assessments could still discourage accumulation among cultivators. The result was an uneven agrarian economy marked by surplus transfer to the colonial state, vulnerability to famine and crop failure, and distortions in long-term development. Later quantitative work has reinforced the broader historical argument by showing that colonial land-tenure arrangements had durable consequences for productivity, public investment, poverty, and rural inequality well beyond the colonial period (Ludden, 1999; Washbrook, 1994; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Ratnoo, 2024).

17. Peasant Resistance and Agrarian Protest

Peasant discontent against rent and revenue burden

Peasant resistance in Bengal and Madras emerged from a shared structural problem: colonial rule treated land revenue as the foundation of governance, while the risks of cultivation were left to rural society. In Bengal, the state secured its income through zamindars, who often passed pressure downward through higher rents, cesses, and coercive collection. In Madras, ryotwari claimed to establish a more direct relation between state and cultivator, but in practice that directness often meant that the burden of assessment fell more immediately on the ryot. Thus, whether the intermediary was a zamindar or the revenue official, the cultivator remained the most vulnerable figure in the agrarian order (Bayly, 1988; Bose, 1993; Roy, 2013).

Resistance to zamindars in Bengal

In Bengal, peasant protest frequently took shape as resistance to zamindari authority rather than as a purely abstract opposition to the colonial state. This was because the state's fiscal claims were mediated through landlords whose legal position had been strengthened under colonial rule. Peasants protested rent enhancement, illegal exactions, and threats of eviction; they also challenged the moral legitimacy of landlord power itself. Over time, especially in the later nineteenth century, protest in Bengal increasingly drew upon the language of rights, tenancy, and occupancy, showing that agrarian conflict was not simply a spontaneous outburst but also a struggle over law, recognition, and social dignity (Bose, 1993; van Schendel, 2020; Basu, 2008).

Opposition to state demand in Madras

In Madras, the rhetoric of ryotwari suggested peasant proprietorship and freedom from oppressive intermediaries, yet this promise was limited by high or unstable assessment, official arbitrariness, and the expanded reach of revenue administration. The system's direct connection between government and cultivator did not remove coercion; it relocated it. Evidence from the Northern Division of Arcot shows that ryotwari settlements generated peasant resistance precisely because assessment could be excessive and because officials prioritized fiscal extraction. What looked administratively rational from above often appeared as insecurity and pressure from below (Reddy, 1988; Wilson, 2011; Mizushima, 2002).

Localized revolts and agrarian unrest

Many agrarian protests were localized, rooted in particular districts, tenures, and social tensions. Their local character, however, should not be mistaken for political weakness. Rather, it shows that colonial governance was experienced in highly uneven ways across rural society. In Bengal, anti-landlord mobilizations such as the Pabna-type pattern of protest revealed organized collective action around rent and tenure. In Madras, resistance often clustered around assessment disputes, remission demands, and the conduct of local officials. These struggles reveal that the countryside was never passive; it was a field of continual negotiation and conflict (van Schendel, 2020; Bose, 1993; Reddy, 1988).

Legal petitions and everyday forms of resistance

Peasant resistance did not always take the form of open rebellion. It also appeared through petitions, memorials, court cases, collective complaints, strategic delay, partial non-payment, concealment of produce, and other everyday acts that tried to reduce the pressure of revenue demand. In Bengal especially, petitioning around land and taxation became an important political language, linking older claim-making practices with new colonial institutions. Such actions demonstrate that peasants engaged the state not only through violence or riot but also through documentation, procedure, and the tactical use of law (Travers, 2022; Jaffe, 2015; Bose, 1993).

Refusal to pay revenue in times of hardship

Refusal or inability to pay in times of scarcity was one of the clearest forms of agrarian protest because it exposed the contradiction between subsistence needs and imperial fiscal rigidity. When crops failed or local conditions worsened, peasants sought remissions, postponements, or simply withheld payment. Such refusal was not always an ideological rejection of the state; often it was a survival strategy. Yet survival itself became political in a regime that insisted on assessment first and relief later. Colonial governance therefore turned rural distress into a recurring arena of confrontation (Reddy, 1988; Bose, 1993; Tomlinson, 2013).

Colonial responses to peasant protest

Colonial responses mixed coercion with limited concession. Officials might order remission, inquiry, or legal reform when unrest became difficult to contain, but such measures were usually designed to restore order rather than transform agrarian relations. The state's aim was not to empower cultivators in any fundamental way; it was to preserve revenue while reducing the danger of disorder. This is why agrarian protest repeatedly returned: the symptoms were acknowledged, but the underlying structure remained (Chaudhry, 2016; Roy, 2019; Lee, 2019).

Agrarian conflict as a critique of colonial governance

Taken together, peasant protest in Bengal and Madras amounted to a practical critique of colonial governance. It showed that imperial rule was not judged in the countryside by its legal language or its claims of reform, but by the everyday experience of rent, tax, debt, and insecurity. Agrarian conflict revealed the real measure of colonial governance: not improvement, but extraction; not protection, but fiscal discipline; not rural justice, but the management of rural subjects in the interest of state formation (Roy, 2013; Roy, 2019; Bose, 1993).

18. Critiques of Colonial Revenue Systems

Criticism by nationalist thinkers

Nationalist criticism of colonial land revenue systems argued that agrarian taxation impoverished cultivators and weakened the rural economy. Later historians note that figures such as Romesh Dutt treated land revenue not as a neutral administrative device but as a major source of peasant distress and famine vulnerability. In this view, colonial policy drained agrarian surplus without building the protective institutions necessary for rural stability. The criticism was powerful because it connected land revenue to a larger indictment of empire as economically exploitative (Bose, 1993; Roy, 2019).

Criticism by later economic historians

Later economic historians sharpened this critique by showing that colonial land-tenure institutions had durable consequences beyond the colonial period itself. Research comparing landlord and non-landlord areas has found that regions where proprietary rights were historically vested in landlords tended to show weaker later outcomes in agricultural investment, productivity, health, and education. More recent village-level work has similarly emphasized the persistence of these institutional effects. Such scholarship does not merely repeat nationalist criticism; it recasts it in empirical terms, demonstrating that colonial agrarian structures shaped long-term rural inequality and development (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Lee, 2019; Ratnoo, 2024).

Question of over-assessment

One of the strongest critiques of both Bengal and Madras revenue policy concerns over-assessment. In Madras, ryotwari was often associated with excessive or unsustainable assessment, despite official claims of rational survey and direct settlement. In Bengal, even where the state demand appeared fixed at the zamindar level, pressure was transmitted downward through rents

and other extractions. The issue, therefore, was not simply the nominal structure of settlement, but the cumulative burden placed on cultivators whose subsistence was continually subordinated to revenue claims (Reddy, 1988; Bose, 1993; Tomlinson, 2013).

Failure to protect cultivators

A further criticism is that colonial governance failed to protect the actual cultivator. In Bengal, legal strengthening of zamindari rights did not translate into security for the raiyat; in Madras, the state's direct relation with the ryot did not shield him from bureaucratic pressure. The official language of order, legality, and improvement therefore masked a deeper failure: the state recognized agrarian claims mainly when they were legible to revenue administration, not when they reflected vulnerability, custom, or dependence (Chaudhry, 2016; Travers, 2022; Wilson, 2011).

Myth of improvement through private property

Colonial revenue theory often assumed that clearly defined property rights would encourage improvement, investment, and agricultural progress. Later scholarship has challenged this assumption by showing that the colonial "rule of property" was marked by a persistent gap between theory and practice. Private property did not automatically create prosperous agriculture; instead, it often hardened inequalities, intensified disputes, and strengthened those already better positioned to mediate between state and village. The promise of improvement through property was therefore less a rural reality than an administrative ideology (Chaudhry, 2016; Mizushima, 2002; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

Contradiction between administrative theory and rural reality

The contradiction between administrative theory and rural reality lay at the heart of colonial agrarian governance. Bengal's Permanent Settlement promised stability; Madras ryotwari promised fairness through directness. Yet both systems operated in agrarian environments marked by unequal power, ecological uncertainty, debt, and social hierarchy. What the state described as orderly property and rational taxation frequently produced insecurity and dispute at the village level. Colonial theory simplified agrarian life in order to tax it; rural reality resisted that simplification (Bayly, 1988; Chaudhry, 2016; Roy, 2019).

Revenue policy as exploitative rather than developmental

For these reasons, revenue policy is more convincingly understood as exploitative than developmental. The colonial state's interest in agriculture was strongest where agriculture yielded revenue, social order, or exportable surplus. It was much weaker where rural development required long-term protection, investment, or redistribution. The fiscal state did not ignore agriculture, but it engaged agriculture from above, through extraction and control, rather than through sustained cultivator-centered development (Roy, 2013; Roy, 2019; Tomlinson, 2013).

Colonial governance as extractive statecraft

Seen in this wider perspective, colonial governance in Bengal and Madras appears as a form of extractive statecraft. State formation and agrarian policy were inseparable: taxable land supported political power, and political power remade agrarian relations so that taxation could continue more securely. Revenue was not merely one department of government; it was the core around which law, property, administration, and coercion were reorganized (Roy, 2013; Lee, 2019; Travers, 2022).

19. Continuity and Change in Rural Governance

Continuity of revenue as the central function of the state

The deepest continuity across Bengal and Madras was the centrality of revenue. Whatever the differences in settlement form, the colonial state defined rural governance primarily through the capacity to assess, record, collect, and enforce claims on land. In that sense, rural administration was less about representative governance and more about fiscal reach. Even when reformist language entered official discourse, the structure of governance remained anchored in agrarian extraction (Roy, 2013; Roy, 2019; Lee, 2019).

Change in forms of property and authority

What changed significantly, however, were the forms through which authority over land was organized. In Bengal, landlord rights were formalized in ways that elevated zamindars as legally privileged figures within the colonial order. In Madras, the state sought to recognize and deal with individual cultivators or pattadars more directly, though in practice older social hierarchies and local influence remained powerful. Thus, colonial rule did not abolish rural authority; it redistributed and reclassified it through new legal categories (Chaudhry, 2016; Mizushima, 2002; Bose, 1993).

Transition from customary rights to legal ownership

Another major change was the transition from layered customary claims to more rigid legal ownership. Colonial governance translated complex agrarian relationships into documentary forms that were easier to tax and adjudicate. This process did not fully eliminate older rights, but it redefined which rights counted officially. As a result, the village became a legal field of titles, tenures, and recorded claims, and those best able to navigate this regime gained power over those whose rights had rested more on practice than on paper (Travers, 2022; Chaudhry, 2016; Mizushima, 2002).

Increased state intervention in agrarian society

Colonial rule also marked a substantial increase in state intervention. Survey, settlement, record-making, adjudication, and revenue enforcement brought the state more deeply into agrarian life than before. In Bengal, the legal reconstruction of taxation and landed right widened the state's presence even when collection was mediated through landlords. In Madras, the promise of direct settlement carried an even more intimate official reach into the field, the holding, and the cultivating household (Travers, 2022; Wilson, 2011; Lee, 2019).

Continuity of peasant dependence

Yet one striking continuity remained: peasant dependence did not disappear. The identity of the dominant intermediary could change—from zamindar to moneylender, from mirasidar to pattadar, from local notable to revenue official—but the cultivator's insecurity persisted. Colonial legal reform altered the language of power, but not the basic fragility of small cultivation under pressure from rent, debt, tax, and fluctuating markets. This is why resistance continued even when institutions changed (Bose, 1993; Tomlinson, 2013; Ratnoo, 2024).

Change in social hierarchy and rural leadership

At the same time, colonial rural governance reshaped hierarchy and leadership. In Bengal, stronger landlordism and tenancy differentiation produced new fractures among peasants, tenants, and local elites. In Madras, the transformation from mirasidar to pattadar and the changing role of village headmen, accountants, and revenue intermediaries reworked older balances of authority. Colonial rule therefore did not simply preserve village society; it reordered leadership around the

demands of record, property, and fiscal administration (Mizushima, 2002; Bose, 1993; Jaffe, 2015).

Colonial reordering of village institutions

Village institutions too were reimagined under colonialism. Administrative discourse often romanticized the village as ancient, organic, and self-regulating, yet colonial governance selectively reshaped local bodies and customs to fit new legal and fiscal purposes. Panchayats, headmen, and other institutions were neither untouched survivals nor simple colonial inventions; they were reordered within a new architecture of law and state power. In this sense, rural governance in Bengal and Madras combined continuity of social forms with change in political meaning (Jaffe, 2015; Wilson, 2011; Roy, 2013).

Conclusion to the section

The history of rural governance in Bengal and Madras is therefore best understood as a mixture of continuity and change. Revenue remained the core logic of the colonial state, but property, authority, and institutional life were reorganized around that fiscal imperative. Colonialism did not merely govern an existing countryside; it produced a new rural order—legally sharper, administratively deeper, and socially more unequal—while leaving intact the basic dependence of the cultivator whose labour sustained the entire structure (Roy, 2019; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Ratnoo, 2024).

20. Conclusion

Land revenue was the very foundation of colonial governance in India, and its operation in Bengal and Madras reveals how deeply agrarian policy shaped the structure of British rule. The colonial state did not merely collect taxes from agriculture; it used land revenue to establish administrative authority, secure political control, and reorganize rural society in accordance with imperial interests. In this sense, revenue policy became one of the principal instruments of colonial state formation. Bengal and Madras represented two distinct models of agrarian administration. In Bengal, the Permanent Settlement created a landlord-centered system in which zamindars were recognized as proprietors and intermediaries of the colonial state. This arrangement strengthened a class of landed elites whose interests became closely tied to colonial authority. In Madras, the Ryotwari system sought to establish direct relations between the state and the cultivator. Although this appeared more individualistic and less dependent on intermediaries, it in fact expanded the reach of the colonial state into village life through detailed surveys, assessments, and frequent intervention. Despite their structural differences, both systems served the same wider purpose: the consolidation of colonial governance. Each contributed to the formation of a powerful revenue state that penetrated the countryside and subordinated agrarian life to imperial priorities. At the same time, both systems transformed rural society and economy in profound ways. They encouraged commercialization, monetization, and new patterns of property, but they also generated inequality, indebtedness, dispossession, and social tension. Thus, colonial land policy was not simply an economic mechanism; it was a major historical force that reshaped agrarian India. The comparative study of Bengal and Madras is therefore crucial for understanding the nature of colonial rule, revealing both regional variation and the common logic of imperial domination in rural India.

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