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Agriculture under British Rule: Structural Transformations, Policy Impacts, and Socioeconomic Consequences

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ABSTRACT
Agricultural advancement is crucial for the economic progress of any emerging nation in any period. Colonial policies in India significantly affected the agricultural sector and associated compensation over an extended duration. The British government altered the land revenue system in India. Following the imposition of British colonial governance, Indian agrarians were compelled to raise cash crops for British manufacturers. The primary mechanisms by which British colonial activities influenced the economy include market integration into imperial and global systems, modifications in outputs and production technology, and changes in tenure patterns and property rights. Agrarian reforms during British rule extend beyond agricultural activities to encompass a broad range of linked structures, including societal and scientific dimensions.
Keywords: Agriculture, Raiyat, Zamindar, British Rule, Cash crop, Commercialization.

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INTRODUCTION
Agriculture forms the foundation of economies and societies throughout history. Since the prehistoric time agriculture is the prime occupation of Indian citizen. In general, access to land and other productive assets serves as a fundamental asset or entry point for citizens of a nation (Das et al., 2022). Colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent took many forms, from formal empires to informal subjugations, and not all were detrimental to local agriculture. The agricultural framework established during the colonial period moulded production incentives, allocation of risk, and land distribution. These influences are linked to food security outcomes in contemporary India and are corroborated by historical data enabling causal inferences (Kumar et al., 2014). The pre-colonial agricultural systems in the region offered a vast variety of products, including cereals, textiles, and handicrafts, allowing citizens to vary their meals, avoid mono-crop dependency, and adapt to climatic fluctuations. In India, the primary objective of the British was to establish political dominance, mostly facilitated via the exploitation of the nation's commercial and economic conditions (Kumar, 2016).
Following permanent settlement, the British implemented a new land revenue collection program termed the Ryotwari System. The system was initiated by the Governor of Madras in 1820 and was mostly executed in Madras, Bombay, and Assam (Bhanu, 2021). The First World War impacted the state of Indian agriculture extremely. During this period, the cost of agricultural food grains escalated. The plight of the impoverished individuals became exceedingly dire. The elevated agricultural taxes adversely impacted the impoverished peasantry of the nation. Throughout the wartime, the overall cultivated area remained relatively unchanged; nevertheless, agricultural productivity diminished due to governmental pressure on peasants to grow cash crops (Rothermund, 1988). Despite the introduction of lucrative and high-value products into the global marketplace, pricing information remained often inaccessible. This resulted from the superior monopsony influence wielded by British export monopolies over colonial output compared to domestic production bases.

Historical background and coercive foundations of agrarian life
The agricultural revenue collection system originated in India during the Mahajanapada era, coinciding with the rise of Magadha and other republics. However, during this era, no consistent income collection pattern is observed (Habib, 2007). The Mughal economy was also agriculture- based economy and

depends on cultivation of grain and cotton (Tiwari and Sharma, 2023). Upon the British East India Company's acquisition of geographical dominion in India after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764), it inherited a subcontinent characterized by a primarily agrarian economy. The British rule can be categorized into two periods: the governance of the East India Company from 1757 to 1858, and the administration of the British Government in India from 1858 to 1947 (Mulage, 2017). Agriculture constituted over 70 percent of the national GDP and employed more than three-quarters of the people (Shinde, 2011). Land revenue constituted the primary source of governmental income during the Mughal and British administrations. Nonetheless, the Company's administrative and ideological framework redefined the conventional concept of land income collection into a rationalized and contractual system consistent with western principles of property, capitalism, and state financing (Klein, 2008). The East India Company invaded the country with the intent to maximize profits, primarily targeting the agricultural sector to extract substantial tax revenues (Bhanu, 2021). Prior to colonial governance, the Mughals extracted fifty percent of the average yield as revenue. The British government imposed a 2% levy on peasants who asserted ownership of cultivated land (Tiwari and Sharma, 2023). The British government did not promote agricultural production, leading to the marginalization of food crops. On the contrary they had promote cultivation of cash crop. The colonial administration exported numerous revenue crops, including indigo, opium, cotton, and silk (Tomlinson, 1993).

The Agricultural Framework under British Rule

The agricultural framework established during the colonial period moulded production incentives, allocation of risk, and land distribution. British land-revenue systems between 1793 and 1947 reshaped Indian agrarian structures in profound and regionally heterogeneous ways (Shinde, 2011). These influences are linked to food security outcomes in contemporary India and are corroborated by historical data enabling causal inferences (Kumar et al., 2014). British administration implemented the term "land tenure" refers to the rules governing access to land, taking the form of contracts or legal arrangements. Keepers of the land who do not cultivate it are described as rentiers. The system under which rentiers collect revenue from cultivators, who either rent or own the land, constitutes a rentier system. A revenue system obtains when landowners are subject to taxation at the level of production or sales. Indian mahajans and zamindars assisted the government in consolidating its grip over output (Tiwari and Sharma, 2023). Zamindari and ryotwari refer to major systems of land tenure that prevailed in India under British rule. The increase in the number of intermediaries, namely the government, creditors, and zamindars, rendered the farmers the final victims (Kumar, 2016). The zamindars' interest is only in upholding British regulation and in opposing the nationalized organization (Gohit Kumar, 2007). Colonial cash crops, such as jute, cotton, and oilseeds, were cultivated for export. Under a favourable price regime for cash crops, peasants tend to shift from subsistence crops to cash crops, intensifying investment in the former and risking transition to monoculture. Beginning in 1860, the Ganga-Yamuna Doab emerged as a significant cash crop region due to the cultivation of indigo and sugarcane, predominantly owned by zamindars (Roy, 2006). Commercialization of agriculture implies the introduction of market principles and monetization through the incorporation of accounts that feed into input-output decisions. The zamindari and ryotwari systems consisted of arrangements under which revenue was collected from peasants either through intermediaries or directly. In the zamindari system, the zamindar fixed the rents, while in the ryotwari system, no agents were involved. Zamindars tended to extract high rents, particularly during good years. In ryotwari also, various forms of rents were imposed. To avoid pressures under zamindari, peasants at times preferred to shift to ryotwari.

Rentier and Revenue Systems

During the 19th and 20th centuries, British agricultural policy during colonial authority had a significant impact on the organization of land tenure and production control. The hazards and benefits of farming, as well as the proportion of land planted to cash crops versus traditional commodities, were greatly influenced by this framework. These long-term adjustments continue to have an impact on the food security of modern India (Behera et al., 2016). British colonial authorities established land tenure regimes that prioritized revenue extraction via intermediaries-zamindars or village headmen- rather than direct evaluations of peasant output. The selection between zamindari and ryotwari regimes influenced revenue demand patterns and led to distortionary taxation by extending the fiscal cascades that separated the colonial state from the final peasant (Husain and Sarwar, 2012). As a result, zamindari territories underwent significant, politically contentious dispossession, whilst ryotwari portions retained more robust, albeit tenuous, rights. The latter continued post-independence, influencing contemporary access to agricultural resources. The British colonial administration also encouraged the cultivation of cash crops like opium, jute, and indigo in specific regions, which continued throughout the century, remain crucial in modern markets, and became associated with increased susceptibility to food security crises.

Land Tenure, Settlement Policies, and Peasant Struggles

British agrarian policies influenced tenants' rights, settlement procedures, and land tenure frameworks, resulting in significant disparities in land ownership distribution, tenure security, and income collection arrangements throughout India. The British established distinct land tenure systems that generated long-term incentives for various rentier systems, resulting in unequal land access and divergent peasant strategies; facilitated the rise of alternative high-margin cash crops at the expense of traditional food staples; and provided varying levels of certainty concerning periodic famine—a critical aspect of food security (Sharma, 2005). Colonial administration significantly alters land tenure and property regimes, transforming agrarian systems and affecting livelihoods. British agricultural initiatives create new statutory tenure systems and legal land titles that replace customary tenure (Martin, 2023). The colonial government impacted both the peasants' land and that of the tribes (Tiwari and Sharma, 2023). Systematic land surveys delineate ownership and define borders; land records chronicle property transfers through contracts, mortgage claims, and the issuance of new titles. The colonial state delineates land rights via diverse legal instruments: contracts, leases, permits, and licenses signify limited tenure, however freehold, ownership, and perpetual lease confer enhanced security. Statutory titles and instruments signify a deviation from traditional norms, govern access, and delineate certain rights. By the conclusion of colonial governance, several critical factors of the agricultural system were established; yet, their individual and collective impacts on the trajectories of agrarian and food-system development remain largely unexamined. Access to agricultural land is a crucial resource in any economy. Historical data indicate that over fifty percent of households in nations like Nigeria, India, and Colombia are landless, exacerbating food-system vulnerability. Peasant land tenure systems demonstrate significant variation globally. In specific rentier systems, land is monopolized by non-productive landlords; consequently, two critical elements of the political economy of land significantly influence current policy: historical land-ownership distribution patterns and the ensuing trajectory of tenants' rights to secured loans for agricultural investments (Behera et al., 2016).

Colonial Cash Crops and Agricultural Monopoly

During the colonial period, British agricultural policy promoted the cultivation of cash commodities including jute, cotton, indigo, tea, and sugarcane via a comprehensive system of price and output regulation within specific geographic regions. These rules converted India into an exporter of economically significant commodities while limiting input-output options regarding food grains throughout extensive regions of the subcontinent. Due to price controls and extensive state procurement of cash crops, landholders in regions under colonial agricultural monopoly secured stable revenues, leading to a focus on cash crops that starkly contrasted with typical input-output practices observed in other parts of India (Behera et al., 2016). Colonial agrarian policies play a significant role in shaping contemporary food security challenges in Indian states. A colonial emphasis on cash crops disrupted peasant practices and increased vulnerability to price fluctuations, forming a crucial food system linkage to patterns of mainstream commodity dependence (Kumar et al., 2014). The Botanical Survey of India and the Royal Botanical Gardens were established to acclimatize commercially significant alien crops to Indian conditions, alongside other unsuccessful endeavours to develop the long-stapled American cotton variety in this region (Sarkar, 1983). The enduring consequences of these agreements significantly influenced the factors affecting food security throughout the colonial era and persist in impacting food systems and vulnerability in the region now.

Disruptions of Traditional Agrarian Practices

In British India, colonial officials frequently aimed to undermine indigenous agricultural methods and communal rural frameworks to increase fiscal income and the production of commercial crops. The implementation of diverse income systems, alongside the endorsement of the zamindari system and a commercialized philosophy, established a unique agrarian framework that impacted later rural developments. The colonial administration impacted Indian agriculture by deforestation (Tiwari and Sharma, 2023). They indiscriminately clearing forests and allocating the land to peasants for the cultivation of cash crops. An analysis of net cultivated area across several decades indicates significant changes in cropping patterns and the introduction of new revenue crops during colonial control. Moreover, colonial agrarian policy transformed risk profiles for smallholders by modifying taxation systems, institutionalizing famine relief, and incorporating markets (Singh and Kadian, 2022). An examination at the provincial level of famine occurrences indicates that regions subjected to such interventions had heightened risk. Although colonial authorities developed certain infrastructure that facilitated agricultural commercialization, the overall impact of agrarian policy was to foster commodity specialization, distort cropping decisions, and promote production patterns unfavourable to food grains. The subsequent reliance on a limited variety of crops heightened vulnerability to price fluctuations, exacerbated the transmission of negative shocks, and weakened the resilience of the food system (Mitra, 2010; Narayan Behera et al., 2016).

Food crisis due to Commercialization of Agriculture

The unique colonial agricultural system established in British India by state mechanisms of coerced rent collection and taxation highlights a significant distinction, with agricultural institutions examined within their wider ergonomic, climatic, and infrastructural contexts. An analysis of agricultural consolidation and tax systems in various regions of the Indian subcontinent demonstrates a notable correlation between imperial policies and current food security conditions. Longitudinal study reveals a series of transformations in crop portfolios, commercialization incentives, and the localization of cultivation corridors regulated by various revenue systems, zamindari or ryotwari tenancy frameworks, and colonial monopolies on cash crops. These parameters identified as essential determinants influencing risk exposure and adaptive ability at the regional level, intricately connected to current food security concerns (Siddiqui, 2015). In undernourished economies characterized by significant multi-dimensional food insecurity and heightened susceptibility to climate change, agricultural crops are fundamental to national livelihoods, necessitating a thorough evaluation of their evolution over the past century and a half (Carletto et al., 2017).

Impact on Economy, Famine, and Relief Measures

The British established a class of landlords to assign accountability for land revenue, while allowing the determination of rent to be governed by market forces (Mulage, 2017). The new land system as well as commercial agriculture resulted in extensive exploitation of the Indian peasantry, leading to recurrent famines in the country. The commercialization of agriculture denotes the cultivation of crops for sale instead of for familial consumption. The analysis of food production during British colonial authority focuses on the Great Bengal Famine of 1770, the Bengal Famine of 1943, and the Deccan Famine of 1876-77, including both regional and chronological dimensions. Historical distributional challenges, analogous to current issues, especially amid agricultural crisis, are evidenced through state-level comparisons. Characteristic coping mechanisms, such as the liquidation of productive assets and the implementation of riskier, less profitable arrangements, are delineated with respect to Punjab and Western Orissa. An analysis of food-security dimensions in the 1950s and 1990s underscores the impact of colonial policies on postcolonial agricultural and commerce systems and their distributional consequences.

Infrastructure and Market Integration

Colonial authorities made substantial investments in transport and communications infrastructure, promoting market integration and fostering the creation of a modern food system. From 1900 to 1947, the entire length of railway track expanded from 21,000 to 42,000 miles, and milk transportation escalated from minimal quantities to over 600 million litters annually (Parwez, 2013). By the early twentieth century, communities with railway access had considerably greater crop variety than those without, and the production of commercial crops and rice greatly surpassed millet cultivation due to enhanced transport connectivity. The growth of the rail network enabled the proliferation of commodity-specific markets, resulting in significantly differing pricing trends between non-rail and rail-connected regions. The Industrial Revolution in Europe necessitated the intensification of commercial agriculture, facilitated by the establishment of an extensive railway network in India post-1850. The railways connected the country's interior with ports, harbours, and urban marketing centers, enabling Indian agriculture to cater to global markets. Large quantities of wheat from Punjab, jute from Bengal and cotton from Bombay poured in for export to England (Mulage, 2017). British laws, however, restricted the growth of a fully integrated commodities market, hindering the transmission of price signals crucial for efficient resource allocation and eventually impeding the advancement of contemporary food systems.

The agrarian policies implemented from 1880 to 1947 significantly altered rural society throughout much of British India. British colonization produced significant transformations in the agrarian framework and agricultural practices of the Indian subcontinent. A diverse array of coercive policies, property rights reforms, price-support and input-supply initiatives, infrastructural projects, and the promotion of commercial crops generated economic shocks and responses that persisted for decades, influencing income levels, livelihood strategies, agricultural production, and investment behaviour. This study's historical evidence demonstrates the intricate relationships between agriculture, agrarian organization, policy decisions, and rural socioeconomic conditions in the Indian subcontinent. The most prominent result was the formation of new social strata and changes in the bohemian and rural classes. The programs modified peasant rights and reorganized the agrarian economy's structure, consequently exerting a lasting impact on land tenure, agricultural policy, and rural lifestyles post-independence. Significant agrarian reforms in reaction to peasant discontent have transpired multiple times across various regions of British India. Agrarian policy change during British colonialism occurred within a varied geographic and political context, resulting in significant differences in agrarian organization and socio-economic outcomes. The initial major agrarian uprising transpired in the United Provinces from 1918 to 1920, provoked by the tenancy legislation enacted in 1918 and preceding measures aimed at enhancing agricultural practices. By the 1930s, analogous insurrections proliferated in Punjab and Bengal. In 1935, significant alterations to the land revenue collection system, along with revenue reductions and the introduction of greater regional autonomy permitting provincial governments to impose supplementary agricultural taxes, exacerbated agrarian dissatisfaction. Colonial farming methods also altered the ecosystem and exerted considerable ecological effects in India. The expansion of forest areas during the colonial period was driven primarily by revenue generation. The Himalayan environment was physically altered by colonial agrisilvicultural activities, including the large-scale plantation of Sal, Teak, and Cinchona, which modified native ecology and disrupted traditional subsistence patterns. The homogenization of sub-Himalayan Bengal forests was facilitated by European investment and enabled by railway connectivity that allowed exports to overseas markets (Ghosh and Ghosal, 2019). The British departed from India, leaving it in a lamentable state characterized by stagnant land holdings and overburdened agriculture; hence, the primary objective of Indian policy makers post-independence was to enhance the agricultural framework.

CONCLUSION

The British revenue policies were exploitative towards the peasants; the government's tax demands were rigid, and the collectors of the British East India Company denied any concessions during periods of drought, flood, or other natural disasters, resulting in the dispossession of land and rendering the peasants landless. British colonial governance altered the nature and framework of India's economic system. Actual agrarian reform was of little concern to the British, whose primary objective was to plunder India's agricultural sector for the raw materials that would power their Industrial Revolution. Agriculture of India got a commercial orientation during the British rule. Though markets and trade in agricultural goods existed in quite organized forms and on a large scale in the pre-British period but the market expansion in the British period marked a qualitative and quantitative break.

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