



**Impact of british colonial rule on agrarian relations in north odisha
during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries**

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ABSTRACT

The agrarian structure of north Odisha has witnessed a number of changes during the 19th and 20th centuries owing to the colonization of the region by the Britishers. Before the period of colonization, the agrarian economy of the north Odisha region operated through the traditional systems of land ownership, community-based farming practices, and dependence of tribals on forest and nature. The setting up of British rule in the region has led to a number of land revenue policies that resulted in strengthening the role of zamindars and made land a source of private taxable property. This resulted in the weakening of the existing agrarian organizations, indebtedness of the peasantry, and alienation of land. The forest policy followed by the British further aggravated the position of the tribes by limiting their access to forest and practicing shifting cultivation. This exploitative system of agrarian relations created conditions of poverty, inequality, and uncertainty for the villagers, especially during the period of famine and agricultural depression. Gradually, agrarian unrest was integrated into the national struggle of India and played an important role in developing rural political awareness in the region of Odisha. The research explores how the British colonization affected agrarian relations in the North Odisha region.

Keywords: British Colonial Rule, Agrarian Relations, North Odisha, Permanent Settlement, Zamindari System, Peasant Movements, Tribal Communities, Colonial Land Revenue Policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main economic and social activity of Odisha was agriculture even before the advent of colonialism and after that too. Agriculture, forests, and occupations were the basis of North Odisha consisting of districts like Balasore, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and other adjacent regions. The system of agrarian activities prevailing in Odisha before British rule was based on traditions, custom, tribal organization, and the rule of local kings and chieftains. The concept of land was not just limited to personal property, rather it was linked to social and cultural life. Forests provided sustenance to tribes through shifting agriculture and collection of minor forest products while agricultural activities were mainly for self-sustenance by peasants.



Figure 1: Traditional Agrarian Farming System in North Odisha during the British Colonial Period

The emergence of the British colonial administration in Odisha in the 19th Century witnessed several changes in the economy and the agrarian system of the region. The introduction of new revenue systems by the colonial administration had the main goal of maximizing income and controlling agricultural resources of the region. Land reforms like the Permanent Settlement helped strengthen the position of zamindars by giving them proprietorship of land, while the peasants were made tenants without any security for their lands. Besides the changes caused in the economic structure of the rural community due to economic policies of the colonial regime that helped commercialize agriculture, the farmers had to focus on producing crops for exports rather than producing crops for subsistence.

These interventions in the colonial period affected the existing agrarian set-up in North Odisha, thereby causing various economic and social effects. The peasantry was subjected to heavy taxes, rent collection, and indebtedness, while the tribals were facing problems of land alienation and denial of forest rights. Rural disparity was widening due to the acquisition of economic power by the rich in contrast to cultivators and laborers. These agrarian problems led to various peasant agitations, tribal struggles, and anti-colonial movements in the region. In such a background, the current research work attempts to look into the impact of colonial rule, especially the British colonial period, on agrarian structure in North Odisha, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Acharya (2023) analyzed the impact of the colonial history of British domination on the evolution of agriculture in India, claiming that the colonial policy concerning the land revenue had been primarily aimed at gaining maximum profit from economic exploitation and not agricultural welfare. Specifically, the paper pointed out how the British policies affected agriculture by damaging its system, exploiting peasants, and creating an unequal landowning regime.



Furthermore, the author mentioned that these structural problems remained relevant after the colonial period in independent India.

Ghosh and Deodhar (2025) examined the history and colonial aspects of land management and land struggle in India, especially in relation to the idea of eminent domain. The paper described how the colonial land policy turned land into a legal and economic object under the state control. It was mentioned that during the time of British rule, private property right was developed and reinforced, and the role of landlords and intermediaries became important, leading to alienation of land among peasants and tribals.

Khawas (2024) analyzed the effect of intervention by the British colonial power on the state of agriculture in Kalimpong from 1865 to 1936. According to the findings of the analysis, the economic policy of the colonial power led to changes in traditional methods of cultivation and in rural society itself. It was noted by the author that commercial farming and colonial control made the economic situation for the farmers worse and diminished their independence. The results of the study also indicated that the peasants faced adverse socioeconomic circumstances under colonial rule due to exploitation.

Mahata (2024) focused on exploring the inner contradictions that arise within caste movements and the growth of capitalist and working classes in colonial agrarian societies of India during the twentieth century. The analysis was based on the role played by the colonial agrarian policies in bringing about alterations in the social hierarchies, labor dynamics, and class composition in the rural sector. It became evident from the observations made by the author that the growth of capitalism as an economic system during the colonial period has brought about inequality among various sections of the society.

Mohanty (2018) examined the issue of agrarian transition in Western India by considering both the benefits and disadvantages that accompanied agrarian changes in terms of their economic and social impacts. In this respect, the study showed that while agrarian transition led to increased productivity and market participation in specific areas, it resulted in the creation of social disparity, eviction of people, and economic insecurity among small farmers and rural laborers. It is noted that during the process of agrarian transition, wealthier land owners and capitalistic classes gain much at the expense of poorer rural communities. Moreover, historical and geographical reasons have significantly contributed to agrarian problems in rural communities.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AGRARIAN STRUCTURE IN NORTH ODISHA

Before the introduction of British rule, the agrarian system of North Odisha revolved around traditional systems of ownership of land and community-based agriculture. Rural society worked through traditional structures where the village community played an important role in managing issues of farming, irrigation, grazing, and natural resource allocation. The connection between agriculture and social-cultural practices was very much there, and land was not seen merely from the angle of profit-making but as a collective means of earning one's livelihood. Tribal

communities in many parts of Odisha, especially in the forest and hilly terrain, practised shifting cultivation and had great dependence on forests as a source of food, medicines, fuel, and other necessities of life. They led a self-reliant existence in tune with nature. There is an inseparable link between traditional agricultural practice and tribal wisdom in Odisha.



Figure 2: Traditional Rice Cultivation Practices in Rural North Odisha during the Agrarian Season

The pre-colonial agrarian economy of North Odisha primarily had a subsistence character. The primary crop in the region was rice, whereas crops like pulses, oilseeds, millets, and native grains were grown depending upon climatic conditions of the region. Rainfall played an important role in farming along with traditional methods of farming which depended on human labor and animal power. The communities living in villages often indulged in mixed farming, and they had a high degree of interdependence between agriculture, forest, and ecology. In case of tribal farmers, shifting cultivation, growing of millet crops, and usage of indigenous seeds was also done in the traditional way. There was some flexibility in land revenue collection by local rulers and chiefs, and this revenue system used the principle of customary obligation and productivity between farmers and local authorities.

The occupation of Odisha by the British in 1803 saw the start of significant change in the administration and economy of the region. Policies were implemented to ensure that revenues from the land were maximized by the government as well as the integration of the agricultural sector into the colonial system. Zamindari settlements meant recognizing landlords as proprietors of land who would pay fixed revenues to the colonial government. There was a radical reorientation of the existing agricultural society as the traditional land ownership patterns were weakened while power to the zamindars and intermediaries was strengthened to enable payment of revenue by the colonizers. Land became a taxable as well as a commercial commodity in the process causing more economic stress on both peasants and the tribal communities. The traditional rural organizations became less important as agrarian relations were now defined by economic factors, regulation and revenue considerations.

4. COLONIAL LAND REVENUE POLICIES AND AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION

The British colonial policy on land revenue led to significant changes in the agrarian structure of North Odisha in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was through Permanent Settlement, commercialization of agriculture, and changes in property rights that colonialism changed the rural social structure and led to greater exploitation of the peasants.

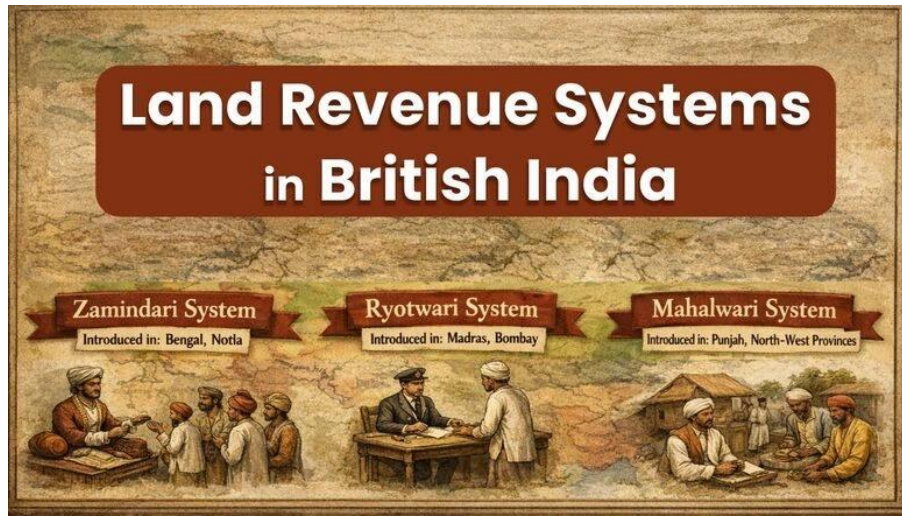


Figure 3: Land Revenue System in British India

✚ Introduction of the Permanent Settlement

The policies related to land revenue by the British colonial government caused drastic changes in the agrarian system of North Odisha. One of the most significant policies introduced by the British was that of the Permanent Settlement, whereby the zamindars were declared as the proprietors of the land. The British colonial government set an exact sum of revenue that was expected from the landlords at regular intervals. This policy was meant to ensure that a steady supply of revenue came to the colonial government. With time, the traditional methods of owning the land started deteriorating.

✚ Growth of Zamindari Exploitation and Peasant Indebtedness

There was a lot of pressure exerted on cultivators due to the zamindars' efforts to extract higher rents from the peasants in order to meet the colonial revenue demands as well as to make profits for themselves. The peasants were stripped of all their traditional guarantees and turned into tenant farmers with no rights over the land that they tilled. Taxation, poor harvests, and lack of agricultural productivity made many farmers turn to local moneylenders for loans. Due to high-interest rates and debts, several peasant households fell into economic distress and thus rural poverty increased.

✚ Commercialization of Agriculture under Colonial Rule

The colonial economic policies brought in a system of commercialized agriculture in North Odisha. Farmers were encouraged to grow cash crops like indigo, jute, tobacco and oilseeds to



serve the needs of the colonial trade and export market. Production began to move from subsistence towards market-oriented farming. While commercialization increased trade networks and brought rural areas into contact with larger markets, it also brought economic instability to cultivators. Farmers were forced to rely on the market for their earnings and some regions experienced a fall in food crop output, thus making them more vulnerable to food shortages and agrarian distress in times of economic crisis.

✚ Land Alienation and Changes in Rural Society

The colonial government enacted legal procedures which allowed land transfer and increased private ownership rights. These measures led to the creation of absentee landlords, and allowed wealthier groups and moneylenders to buy land from debt-peasants. Debt and exploitation to others and ignorance among poor cultivators and tribal communities of the law were especially harmful in alienating land. Colonial forest policies at the same time limited the use of forests and traditional resources by tribes, thus interfering with their socio-economic activities. These changes created a social stratification in rural North Odisha, making it more unequal, and thereby undermining the traditional village institutions which used to moderate agrarian relations.

5. IMPACT ON PEASANTS, TRIBAL COMMUNITIES, AND RURAL SOCIETY

The consequences of the British agrarian policies were serious on the other hand in North Odisha for the peasants and tribal communities. Cultivators' economic condition deteriorated due to high rent, revenue demands and indebtedness. A significant number of peasants, losing their property, became agricultural workers.

Colonial forest policies had the greatest impact on tribal communities. Restriction on forest use and changes in agriculture to cultivation resulted in their less economic independence and caused displacement of many tribes from their traditional lands. Forest control by colonial officials violated the rights of indigenous communities and led to conflicts between them and the state.

Expansion of moneylending practices led to more rural indebtedness. Often the peasants would borrow money and pledged or sold their land to pay back the loans. This led to the concentration of land holdings in the hands of zamindars and rich families. The gap in social inequality grew and the problem of rural poverty worsened.

Key Impacts of Colonial Agrarian Policies

- **Increase in Rural Poverty and Economic Exploitation:** Heavy taxes were levied on cultivators whether they produced or not, or if they suffered natural calamity. These demands were frequently not met by peasants, as a result of poor harvests and unstable agricultural conditions. Because of this, numerous farming families slipped into chronic poverty and relied economically on landlords and land lender/moneylenders for survival.
- **Land Alienation among Peasants and Tribal Communities:** Over time, the traditional rights of land owners were eroded by the colonial land policies and legal structures in North Odisha. The lack of awareness, forced land transfers and unpaid debts often led the tribal communities



and small peasants to lose their land ownership rights. This resulted in the breakup of agrarian life and land-grabbing by the zamindars and rich groups.

- **Rural Indebtedness:** The moneylending activities spread as an important aspect of the colonial rural economy. Farmers took loans to meet land revenue, or to buy seeds or to meet their expenses in times of failure of crops. Peasants were stuck in vicious cycles of debt and many of them pledged or sold their farm land and became landless labourers due to high interest rates.
- **Tribal Disruption of Livelihoods and Forest Dependence:** Colonial Forest legislation curtailed the ability of tribes to access their forests, grazing grounds and shifting cultivation practices. These restrictions reduced the economic autonomy of the tribes and pushed many tribes away from their lands, as they relied heavily on the forests for their food, fuel and living conditions. This led to conflicts between the tribes and the colonial government.
- **Promoting Social Inequality and Rural Distress:** Imperial agrarian policies further enhanced the presence of zamindars, middlemen and rich landlords and the economic status of peasants and labourers was made worse. Wealth and resources became focused in the hands of a small minority of rural people and social inequalities grew rapidly. North Odisha had been further afflicted with frequent occurrences of famines, food shortages and poor colonial relief efforts that worsened the situation of farmers.

Women in agrarian households also faced adverse consequences because of economic insecurity and higher workloads. The colonial agrarian system was further revealed to be fragile because of the frequent famines and food shortages. During crises, the colonial government usually did not provide appropriate relief measures.

6. PEASANT RESISTANCE AND AGRARIAN MOVEMENTS IN NORTH ODISHA

Several peasant and tribal resistance movements started in North Odisha during nineteenth and twentieth centuries against the exploitative policies of British colonial agrarian system. The zamindars exploited land owners, alienated land and forced people to work on huge land holdings, leading to the people's discontent. Peasants and tribal peoples slowly started to organised protests and collective action to protect their economic rights and traditional livelihoods. These were expressions of the discontent over the colonial economic policies and the unequal agrarian system which was being forced upon them by the British government.

Tribal rebellion gained special importance in the forests and hilly areas of North Odisha where the tribal people relied heavily on forests and shifting cultivation for their livelihood. Colonial laws have limited access to natural resources and undermined customary rights to land and forests. Tribal communities responded to colonial incursions by a number of local rebellions, non-compliance to forest laws and by organizing protests against landlords and revenue officials. These resistance movements were not just economic but also a struggle to maintain one's own identity, culture and autonomy from foreign influence.



Peasant uprisings also broke out in agricultural areas where the rent collectors were being harsh and the debt load was growing. The farmers led collective resistance against the zamindars, did not pay the excessive taxes and resisted the authority of the colonial officials. In many parts of the country, agrarian unrest grew up on the basis of unfair tenancy practices, failure of crops and exploitation by money-lenders. These protests slowly led to rural political awareness and helped to create unity among the peasantry who were at the same economic level.

In the 20th century, the agrarian discontent in North Odisha began to coalesce with the larger Indian nationalist campaign. Nationalist leaders and social reformers stimulated the peasant and tribal mass movements against the British and for anti-colonial struggles. Land rights, economic exploitation, and political independence were all interlinked and rural protests became an important facet of the freedom movement. The peasant and tribal resistance to the colonial rule was a precursor to the discussions on land reforms, tribal welfare and rural justice, which came in the post-colonial era in Odisha.

7. CONCLUSION

This study finds that British colonialism led to a deep change in the agrarian relations of North Odisha during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by introducing land revenue systems that exploited the people, commercialization of agriculture and restrictive forest policy. The Permanent Settlement further consolidated zamindari power and the decline of the tradition of peasant and tribal rights to land. The impact of colonial policies on the rural society included an increase in rural indebtedness, land alienation, social inequality and economic exploitation, all of which had a negative impact on the livelihood and stability of the rural community. Tribal people lost their lands and forest rights, were displaced, and were heavily taxed; peasants were impoverished and were ensnared by landlords and moneylenders. The study also finds that such policies of exploitation fostered peasant resistance and tribal rebellions which were later identified with the Indian nationalist movement. The long-term effects of colonial rule continued to affect the socio-economic situation of the North Odisha even after independence, although it had changed the agrarian economy in favour of British interests in the economy. Hence, a grasp of the colonial evolution of agrarian relations is crucial to understanding the historical origins of the current situation of rural inequality, agrarian distress and marginalisation of tribes in Odisha.



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