

Decline of the Zamindaris

The Zamindari system introduced by the East India Company had been operative for a long time. Zamindars conducted Zamindaris (estates) for roughly about 158 years with both credit and crises. Though there were various contributions of Zamindars in the socio-economic development of the country, their inhuman exploitation and torture upon their tenants during their tenure have tainted the pages of the history of this sub-continent.

Tenants also started various opposition movements. As a result of such movements not only Zamindars but also their masters i.e. the British Government were gradually compelled to accept their demands and passed various reformative laws. Common tenants reestablished their lost rights upon their land through struggle. But that was the end of the drama of the exploitation and torture of the Zamindars compelled the common tenants to organise protests for the abolition of the Zamindari (land lordship). At last exploited, deprived and tortured tenants became victorious and the Zamindari system was abolished.

If the causes of abolition of the Zamindari system are analysed, it may be found that the Zamindari was not abolished for a single cause. There were different causes behind it. Many Zamindaris were damaged by family quarrel and conflict, which may be the internal crises or factors while others declined because of the British policy and the protest movements of the peasants. The second one may be treated as the external factors.

Among the internal factors the most important were the family feuds leading to court cases and intervention of the legal authorities of India. Law suits were filed in the law courts against one another and thus the financial burden was to be borne by the estate treasury. Beside these the Zamindars spent money extravagantly for luxury and comfort. As a result many Zamindars had to lose their Zamindaris (estates) and depended on the charity of others. Here the condition of Puthia Raj family may be cited as an example. One may experience here how in the absence of Vairabendra, the Raja of Puthia Raj family, the members of his family had to depend on the monthly grant and charity of the Raja of Dighapatia and Saratsundari,¹ one of the partners of the Puthia Raj family. This was not at all a good sign for the prospect of the Zamindari concerned.

Because of the family conflict of the Raja of Natore, Ramkanta and Rani Bhavani had lost their estate and Deviprasad possessed it as a consequence.² Deviprasad occupied all the property of the said Rani. Ramkanta and Rani Bhavani went to Murshidabad empty handed. Again when Ramkanta and Rani Bhavani regained the Zamindari (estate), Deviprasad had to leave the house of the Raja and the estate. It may be said that huge loss was sustained by the estate on account of the transfer of power. This is because the employees of Deviprasad did not go empty handed while they left the Zamindar house. It is assumed that they took away all the money and movable assets which had been saved by Ramkanta and Rani Bhavani over the ages. Again after regaining the estate, Rani Bhavani had to face different problems. She could spend money to help her subjects during the famine if she had sufficient means in her hand. Again on the other hand Deviprasad and his inheritors lost the estate.

Due to the conflict among themselves, there were law suits and huge amount of money was to be spent from the treasury. As a result every Zamindari (estate) had to fall in crises and later on this caused their decline and downfall.

Situation changed when East India Company got Dewani (stewardship) of Bengal in 1765 from Shah Alam, the emperor of Delhi. They fixed revenue at a high rate and leased out estates to Zamindars. Zamindars also began to collect revenue from tenants at an increased rate. Fakirs (muslim saints) and Sanyasis (Hindu saints) were the first to protest against the collection of revenue fixed and collected on high rate. They could not admit the domination of the British too. Fakirs and Sanyasis attacked Zamindars because they helped the British. Hastings, the Governor General was the first man to name this peasant revolt as "Sanyasi Revolt"³ This revolt or uprising as is now known is said to have started roughly in 1763 against the misrule and exploitation of the East India Company, their agents namely the Zamindars and money lenders. This protest continued from 1763 to 1800.⁴ In 1659 during the regime of Shah Suja, the Subahdar (Provincial Governor) of Bengal. Fakirs (saints) were given special privileges and they got fallow land at various places as gift and had the privilege to cultivate lands. Though their profession was cultivation, their dress as well as their behaviour were as like Fakirs or Sanyasis⁵. They revolted when they were deprived of their rights and privileges during the reign of the company. They organised in a group and began to plunder the food grains hoarded in the store houses by Zamindars and money lenders who collaborated with the British. As a result there was alarming deterioration of law and order in the region. On the other hand because of the exploitation and oppression of Zamindari and money lenders and also the stepmotherly policy and attitude of the employees of the British, a terrible

famine broke out in Bengal. This famine killed one third of the total population of Bengal.⁶ As a result of the famine tenants, poor people and others suffered terribly but they had to pay revenue entirely and they were not exempted from paying current and arrear revenue and nothing remained unpaid.⁷

In these circumstances Fakirs and Sanyasis revolted and starvation forced them to plunder the houses of Zamindars and money lenders. In this plundering the local farmers helped them. Their number increased up to fifty thousands.⁸

Fakirs attacked the *kuthi* (office-cum-residence of the English) of Rampur Boalia (Rajshahi), kidnapped Mr. Renet an officer of the *Kuthi* and later on killed him. Next year in 1764, they plundered the *kuthi* of Rampur Boalia. Within a few days Fakirs spread their influence over the whole of North Bengal.⁹

In 1780 Shah Majnu demanded Rs. 50,000.00 from Sri Krishna Choudhury, the Zamindar of Karai of the district of Bogra and they declared that if they were paid the demanded money, Fakirs would commit robbery in their house. Out of fear Sri Krishna Choudhury, the Zamindar fled away to the eastern side of the river Brahmaputra with his family.¹⁰ In January, 1772, the rebels, under the leadership of Majnu, plundered the wealth of the Zamindar, the tyrant rich people and the followers of the British of Natore region and punished the collaborators of the British.¹¹

Though this rebellion was unsuccessful, yet it may be considered as the first organised protest against the exploitation of the British Raj and its agents of India. This protest no doubt encourage the after generation for fight against the colonial Government in the subsequent period.

In 1772, Mounshio Luis Bornad, a French merchant first started indigo cultivation in this country. On 1 November, 1788, Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General declared in London that indigo of Bengal would be able to meet the demand of that item in the European market. Plenty of plants producing blue colour grew in the Indian subcontinent including Bengal and this blue colour (i.e. indigo) was exported to different parts of the world like England, France, Germany, Greece and Rome.¹²

The indigo of Bengal had sufficient demand in the world market.¹³ Since the demand of indigo increased in England, many Europeans came to this country to deal in indigo. Even the high officials of the company resigned their service and started indigo business. For the extensive business of indigo, the Europeans began to give advance to the farmers for the cultivation of this commodity. As a result of taking advance the farmers suffered serious economic loss. The indigo planters would give a small amount of advance money to farmers and compelled them to sign a deed of contract written according to the will of the indigo planters. According to this, he would have to cultivate indigo for them until his death. According to the 'Deed of Contract' farmers had to repay the advance money from the money out of his production and sale. But the conditions of the contract were so unfavorable that in almost all cases farmers could never repay their loans. And according to the conditions of the contract farmers were bound to cultivate indigo for the subsequent years. If the loan was not paid off, farmers had to cultivate indigo in their best land hereditarily. Advance taking farmers had to sell their indigo to the indigo planters at a price dictated by them.¹⁴

As a result of cultivating indigo the financial condition of farmers turned bad to worse. The wives and daughters of farmers from had to work at

Neelkuthi for the whole night. The disobedient farmers were brought to the *Neelkuthi* and were tortured inhumanly. They were beaten with “*Shyamchand*” (a cane covered with cow-skin).¹⁵ The rape of women was a very common feature in the *Neelkuthi*.¹⁶

Farmers could not tolerate the torture of the European indigo planters and revolted in 1859-60 which is known as the Indigo Revolt in Indian History.¹⁷

Another spontaneous outburst against the British Government and their agents can, however, be experienced in the Peasant Protest Movement of Pabna which started in 1873 against the excessive imposition of land taxes on the peasants of that region.¹⁸ This revolt was so terrible that Zamindars left their houses and took shelter at Pabna town. The houses of the Zamindars and their supporters were plundered and burnt to ashes. In the light of the gravity of this incident, it appears that the protest of the peasant of this stature was a dangerous move and the crises of Bengal Zamindari system was being fairly exposed.

It may be noted that the Government passed the Tenancy Act of 1885¹⁹ and it was partially a recognition of the rights of the tenants. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 had given enough power and rights to the Bengal Zamindars. But it was the first time in history when by virtue of such a movement, the Government was compelled to the Zamindars to reduce the tax rate and submitted to the demands of the peasants. The impact of this Pabna Movement on the Zamindars of Rajshahi in general that they brought down the amount of payable taxes and the excess imposition became out of question. There were law suits and in many cases the tenants got the verdict

in their favour. The net result from the interest of the Zamindars was that their image and dignity got stunted and the tenants in general lost confidence on them. The most significant result was that it became one of the factors that accelerated the process of the decline of the Zamindaris of Rajshahi.

After the Pabna Movement and its effects on the Zamindars of the Rajshahi region, a new phase started with the prominence of a few Muslim leaders who took up the cause of the Muslim peasants of the region. It may be noted that these leaders had to take steps against the Hindu Zamindars who are said to have exploited the Muslim peasants over the ages. It is a fact that the region under consideration had about 80% of the peasants from the Muslim community while most of the Zamindars belonged to the Hindu community.²⁰

But the protest of the Muslim leaders for the cause of the peasants, particularly of the Muslim peasants could not come to the limelight of Indian History before the beginning of the 20th Century. The name of A.K.M.Fazlul Haque in this respect is worthy of mention. It is a fact that the *Praja Andolan* (Peasant Movement) was organised against the exploitation of the Zamindar of Barisal. Incidentally, the Zamindar of Chougram had purchased a Zamindari of Sahabajpur of Barisal. It is likely that there was a movement against the exploitation of this type of Zamindar who might have tortured the Peasants like other fellow Zamindars of Bengal. Since the voice of the protest was same it is probable that A.K.M.Fazlul Haque and his followers took the cause of the peasants against the Zamindars of Barisal.²¹

Although no specific event or movement can be located for the decline of the Zamindars of Rajshahi, it is probable that before the passing of the Land Acquisition and Tenant Act of 1951, there were certain issues and

movement organised by the peasants which not only drew the attention of the colonial Government but also convinced them to consider the demands of the peasants. From the outbursts of the Faraizis, down to the *Tebhaga* Movement of 1946-47 the protest history of the Bengal peasants speaks the same story of Indian history. There was nothing but a protest against the oppression and torture of the zamindars and the issues of the peasants ignited all the victims under the circumstances. The appointment of the Flood Commission in 1940 was a measure to look after and consider the demands of the peasants of Bengal and the sufferers of the Rajshahi region must have a voice of protest along with their fellowmen. Since all peasants without any distinction of caste and religion united together against victimisation, the days and time of the Bengal Zamindars were sealed and their dominance ended in 1951 with the Land Acquisition and Tenant Act. The Rajshahi Zamindars who had some common crises and allegations, we have stated above seem to have no alternative but to respond to the call of the destiny in the long run.

Notes and references

- 1 Bimola Charan Moitra, *Puthia Rajbangsha*, Calcutta, 1357, BS p. 198.
- 2 Moksudur Rahman, *Natorer Maharani Bhavani*, Rajshahi, 1988, pp. 43, 44.
- 3 Suprakash Ray, *Bharater Krishak Bidraha O Gamatantrik Sangram*, Calcutta, 1980, p. 21.
- 4 Mesbahul Haque, *Plassey Juddhottar Muslim Samaj O Nilbidraha*, Dhaka, 1987, pp. 110-111.
- 5 Masbahul Haque. op cit., p. 21.
- 6 Moksudur Rahman, op cit., pp. 100-101.
- 7 W. W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Dacca, 1969 (Retranslated in Bengali by Osmangoni), p. 352.
- 8 Nurul Islam Khan, (ed). *Bangladesh Zela Gazetteer, Brihattar Rajshahi Zela*, Dhaka, 1991, p. 53.
- 9 M. A. Rahim, *Banglar Musalmander Itihas (1757-1947)*, Dhaka, 1994, p. 63.
- 10 Loc. cit.
- 11 Nurul Islam Khan, (ed) *Bangladesh Zela Gazetteer, Brihattar Rajshahi Zela*, Dhaka, 1991, p. 54.
- 12 Shahriyar Iqbal, *Nil Bidhraha*, Dhaka, 1985, p. 9.
- 13 Ibne Golam Samad, *Rajshir Itibritra*, Rajshahi, 1999, p. 29.
- 14 Shahriyar Iqbal, op cit., p.36; Sunil Sen, *Bharater Krishak Andalan (1855-1978)*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 18.
- 15 Samachand is a trype of stick which covered by Lather.
- 16 Ibne Golam Samad, op cit., p. 29.

- 17 Sunilsen, op cit., p. 17; Ibne Golam Samad, op cit., p. 29.
18. Sunil Sen, op.cit, p.21, Nurul H. Choudhury, *peasant Radicalism in Nineteenth Century in Bengal the Faraizi, Indigo, Pubna Movement*, Dacca, 2001, p.117.
19. Suprakash Ray, op cit., p. 416; Nurul Islam Khan (ed.) *Bangladesh Zela Gazetteer, Pabna, Dhaka 1990, p. 49; Badaruddin Umar, Chirasthaee Bondobasta O Banglar Krishak*, Dhaka, 1998 (4th ed.) p. 31.
20. Enamul Haque, *Bharater Musalmander Sathinatha Andalan*, Dhaka, 1993, p. 226.
21. Siraj Uddin Ahmeed, *Sher-E-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Haque* Dhaka, 1997 (2nd ed), p. 63.