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## Poverty under the colonial rule and peasantry in Orissa

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### Abstract

Poverty under the colonial government and popular perception towards it has undergone a sea change in the post-independence era. In the post-1857 phase, many nationalists thought and believed that the British rule was productive of considerable benefits to the people of India. The benefits acclaimed most often were peace, law and order, western education, centralised administration, political unification of the country and the consequent growth of a feeling of nationality, railways, telegraphs, hospitals etc. However, with the passage of time and as a result of increasing political activity and consciousness doubts began to arise about the value and material content of such benefits, though the positive aspects of the legal, constitutional and other non-material consequences of British impact were recognised and acknowledged by a section of the Indian national leadership almost to the end of the colonial rule in India.

This paper tries to trace the evolution of this false consciousness of the subjugated Indians and tries to carry further the debate as to whether colonial subjugation was harmful for the Indian as a whole. The paper also tries to broadly address the question of peasant movement against the Colonial government in Orissa.

**Keywords:** Kisan Sangha, tenurial, zamindar, ryot, impoverishment, denunciation, meli, vidroha

### Introduction

In the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 a whole generation of emerging nationalist leadership in India believed that the British rule was productive of considerable benefits to the people of India. The benefits acclaimed most often were peace, law and order, western education, centralised administration, political unification of the country and the consequent growth of a feeling of nationality, railways, telegraphs, hospitals etc. However, with the passage of time and as a result of increasing political activity and consciousness <sup>[1]</sup> doubts began to arise about the value and material content of such benefits, though the positive aspects of the legal, constitutional and other non-material consequences of British impact were recognised and acknowledged by a section of the Indian national leadership almost to the end of the colonial rule in India.

Many were under the impression that the rulers back in England and the British public were unaware of the real condition in India <sup>[2]</sup>. Hence they went for a thorough investigation of the true state of affairs with a view to enlighten the British public, parliament, administrators and to force the gravity of the problem on their attention <sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, they believed that the urgency of the existing economic situation should be perceived and assessed correctly, recognised and projected to the rulers so that they could devise means of improving it <sup>[4]</sup>.

The problem of poverty, in a sense, occupied the centre stage of the Indian politics in the formative period of the Indian nationalism. But the approach of the British rulers and the emerging Indian leaders greatly varied on the issue. Secretary of State, George Hamilton said, "I admit that if it could be shown that India has retrograded in material prosperity under our rule we stand self-condemned, and we ought no longer to be trusted with the control of the country." <sup>[5]</sup> Were the representatives of the Crown in India equally genuine? Perhaps not. In contrast, almost every Indian leader of any substance of the day wrote articles or books on the economic situation believing that there was a pressing need for disseminating the deep-seated cause of the poverty of the Indian people. Dadabhai Naoroji described it as "the one rock, the one thing, the one test, which in its settlements will either make Britain a blessing to India or Heaven knows what distress it may bring forth <sup>[6]</sup>.

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In 1901, Bipin Chandra Pal, one of the spokesmen of the extremist party wrote in the very first issue of his militant weekly, *New India*, "Of all the perplexing problems that confront *New India*, the economic problem seems to our mind, the most pressing and important [7]. R C Dutt in the same year wrote, 'I do not think there is a question of graver import connected with any part of the British empire than the present condition of India [8]. Thus, poverty was one of the few subjects of interest in which a greater gulf separated the views of the rulers and the ruled in India. It also aroused lot of criticism, anger and violent denunciation.

With poverty, a very closely associated question was 'Was India poor?' M L Darling wrote, "The most arresting fact about India is that her soil is rich and her people poor" [9]. The other equally disturbing fact was the question of wealth of India for which it remained a perpetual target of invasion throughout the various periods of its history. In between these twin problems of wealth and poverty remained the most crucial issue of political order or the colonial state in India [10].

Barring a few diehard critics, almost everyone accepted the fact that India was blessed with natural resources exceptionally favourable for a high degree of prosperity for its population through a combination of agricultural and industrial development. It also goes without saying that prior to the British rule the Indian economic development stood well to the forefront in the world scale. India was famous for its fabulous wealth (some prefer to call it as proverbial). Of course, there is bound to be a difference of opinion on the issue of the accumulation and distribution of wealth. When Robert Clive entered Murshidabad, the old capital of Bengal in 1757, he wrote, "This city is as extensive, populous as the city of London, with this difference that there were individuals in the first possessing infinitely greater property than in the last city [11]. Many travellers to India in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century frequently reported a general prosperity even in the villages which contrasts with the existing conditions these days [12].

Travernier, in his account of journeys in 17<sup>th</sup> century India virtually echoed Clive's views when he observed that "...even in the smallest villages rice, flour, butter, milk, beans and other vegetables, sugar and other sweetmeats, dry and liquid, can be procured in abundance [13]. The Indian Industrial Commission Report of 1916-18 opened its report with the statement:

"At a time when the west of Europe, the birth place of the modern industrial system, was inhabited by uncivilised tribes, India was famous for the wealth of her rulers and for the high artistic skill of its craftsmen. And even at a much later period, when merchant adventurers from the west made their first appearance in India, the industrial development of the country was at any rate not inferior to that of the more advanced European nations [14].

Bernier, the French traveller, who visited India in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Around 1660, he visited Bengal twice) also gives a similar opinion about the economic condition of the people. A little before the break-up of the Mughal Empire, he wrote, "The knowledge I have acquired in Bengal in two visits inclines me to believe that it is richer than Egypt. It exports in abundance cottons and silks, rice, sugar and butter. It produces amply for its own consumption of wheat, vegetables, grains, fowls ducks and geese. It has immense herds of pigs and flocks of sheep and goats, Fish of every kind it has in profusion. From *Rajmahal* to the sea

(there) is an endless number of canals, cut in bygone ages from the Ganges by immense labour for navigation and irrigation [15].

The wealth and poverty of India remained a contentious issue for both the British rulers and the emerging Indian leadership. It became a virtual propaganda battle. For the British, the question of acceptance of the existence of poverty or the fact that India was getting poorer would have meant not only self-condemnation but would have led to serious political repercussions. Lord George Hamilton, the Secretary of State admitted this fact when he declared on 3 February 1902, "I have more than once stated my opinion that our main claim, our only claim, to rule India is the belief that we can improve the material prosperity of those who live within its borders [16].

For the Indians, it was a painstaking effort hammering again and again on the theme that not only was India poor, but that she was growing poorer day by day. Gopal Krishna Gokhale made this the keynote of his famous budget speech of 1902 and after analysing the issue from all angles, concluded that the material condition of the mass of the people in India was "steadily deteriorating" and that the phenomenon was 'the saddest day in the whole range of the economic history of the world [17]. The nationalist press was vehement in its denunciation of 'daily growing' poverty, which it said had become a 'palpable' and an 'established' fact [18].

The British on the other hand kept on maintaining that 'under the British regime the material well being of the people was constantly improving, and that not only was the increasing impoverishment theory baseless and completely delusory, but the future was full of hope and promise as India was already starting on the high road to prosperity [19]. To the national leadership, famines were clear proofs of India's poverty, and their ever-increasing frequency, intensity extent and mortality was an infallible index of the growing impoverishment of the country [20].

However, here, a fact which needs to be kept in mind is that whether the rule of the British colonial masters made the country economically impoverished or it was something which they had inherited. There are different views on whether such underdevelopment is caused by colonial rule in the past. Several scholars have emphasized factors such as excessive exploitation of colonies, drain of resources or the growth of a "dependency" complex to argue that colonial rule has long-term negative effects on development (see Frank 1978, or Bagchi 1982). On the other hand, there is the view that resource endowments or area characteristics are the major determining forces of long-term outcomes, and that colonial rule plays only a minor part (e.g. Herbst 2000, on Africa, or Roy 2002, on India) [21].

In trying to evaluate the long-term impact of colonialism, a distinction needs to be made between the direct and the indirect impact. In this sense, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to answer the question of what outcomes would have been had European countries never established vast overseas empires. Even if we want to answer the more limited question of whether the direct impact of colonialism is different from the indirect effect, we are faced with the problem of selection: are some countries poor today because they were colonies in the past, or is it because they were "inherently" poor that they were ill-defended and easily conquered by colonial powers? It is difficult to think of a way to separate out this selection effect from the causal effect of colonialism in cross country data [22]. Can one

effectively distinguish between a positive causal impact of British rule? (perhaps due to introduction of better technology or prior investments during the Colonial period itself).

It would be purely hypothetical at this point to hazard a guess as to whether India would have been much better off if it had not directly come under the colonial exploitative rule of the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries! Since we have more or less accepted the fact that the British rule in India progressively deteriorated the economic situation in the country, we have more or less reasons to believe that it was the policies of the colonial government which played a crucial role in shaping the economic history of the country during the period under survey.

### British policies in Orissa

Since agriculture formed the backbone of the Indian economy this paper would be touching upon the British policies towards agriculture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The British government was least interested in introducing agrarian legislation to foster 'economic planning' but they carried out such legislations in order to 'forestall political unrest' [23]. The foundations of agrarian legislation that the colonial authorities laid down continued, though with significant changes, even after independence. The issue that becomes uppermost here is whether Tenancy legislations served the interests of the tenant. What were its limitations and compulsions? And did the agrarian reforms attempted by the Congress Ministry in the 1930s change the condition of the peasantry?

The main elements of agrarian structure were the village community, the system of land holding and land tenures, and the ubiquitous caste system. The system of land tenure comprised a complex set of relations including those between the states on the one hand and the agriculturists on the other, and the interrelations between the different categories of agricultural population in several tenurial forms [24].

The rent Act of 1859 forms the backdrop against which all subsequent changes were made in Orissa. It provided for the first time a definition of the right of occupancy over land both for the *zamindars* and the tenants [25]. Subsequent reform measures to bring about changes were the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and Orissa Tenancy Act of 1913. Apart from codifying various interests on the land, the Orissa Tenancy Act defined the tenancy rights recognised the rights of the tenants to transfer their holdings without the consent of the proprietors [26]. However; it did not help to reduce the rent burden on the peasants. Like the Bengal Tenancy Act, it also favoured concentration of large holdings and promoted large landlordism, especially, absentee landlordism. There were attempts to bring about amendments in the Orissa Tenancy Act by the Oriya members of the Bihar and Orissa Legislative council. These amendments were not considered because the government did not feel it to be wise to tamper with the Act. Moreover, it was a colonial policy of not jeopardizing the loyalty of the propertied class towards the British Raj [27].

The formation of Orissa as a separate province in 1936 was followed by the formation of a popular Congress Ministry in the state. The Ministry favoured agrarian reforms like the Madras Estate Land (Amendment) Bill, Orissa Tenancy amendment Bill, Orissa Moneylenders Bill etc. Other than the Madras Tenancy Amendment Bill all bills were passed.

Though the Ministry achieved limited success in introducing radical change, it succeeded in articulating peasants' grievances and in exposing the exploitative nature of the colonial government.

Another related issue with the agrarian policies and change was the peasant unrest which kept on assuming greater proportions as the national movement progressed. This was primarily a result of the disintegration and dissolution of the village community as a consequence of the British Revenue and Administrative system [28]. It was also closely related to the pathetic conditions in which the peasants were placed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [29]. Some of the likely reasons which contributed towards this low status of the peasantry were: a). Land and population ratio, b). Small holdings, c). absence of any improved/advanced farming options, d). Sale and re-sale of land, e). Exploitation of the money lender, f). increased land revenue, g). Illiteracy, and natural calamities like floods and droughts [30].

Speaking about the low condition of the Indian peasants, Manu Subadar had stated, "I shall only complete this dark picture by sounding a note of warning that progressive deterioration in the agricultural districts might bring about, particularly in a bad year, socio-economic consequences of a dangerous character. The most potent forces of disorder and anarchy in the world have emanated not merely from bread riots or from urban unemployed, but from agrarian distress carried to the point of desperation" [31].

Popular resistance to colonial rule during the 19<sup>th</sup> century took the form of localised revolts which occurred in the different parts of Orissa and were commonly called as '*meli*' or '*vidroha*' [32]. However, the first major peasant agitation which drew the attention of the colonial masters and involved the emerging political leadership in the state was the Kanika agitation of 1921-22. It generated lot of mass interest in politics [33]. It has to be kept in mind that with the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920, politically Orissa virtually merged with the nationalist main stream of political agitation and organised and institutionalised forms of protest become visible in Orissa.

Apart from the Salt Satyagraha, the most significant development in the 1930s was the formation of peasant organisations in the state. Although Congress had been taking up the stray cases of peasant unrest in the state, there was no organised peasant movement in the state. The Congress Socialist Party which championed the cause of the peasantry was formed around this period [34]. A close observation of the activities of the *Kisan Sangha* and the provincial Congress would reveal that both initially fought for a common goal of uniting the peasant masses and then to involve them in anti-colonial political agitation. The peasant leaders also tried to win over the support of the townsmen for the cause of the peasants. Resolutions were unanimously passed for the abolition of the *Zamindari* system, mutation fees, and demands were placed for appointment of experts to train people in better methods of cultivation, construction of strong embankments, reduction of water rates, better irrigation facilities, rights over trees, amendments in forest rules and tenancy laws, abolition of *bethi*, non-payment of illegal taxes etc [35].

Peasant Conferences held at various places in the province and the visit of Gandhi in 1934 helped in extending the mass base of the Congress as well as pushing forward the demands of the peasantry. The biggest obstacle in way of

redressing the peasants' grievances was, however, the colonial government which provided the Congress Ministry in the province with limited autonomy. The fulfilment of the aspirations of the peasants could be attained only after a long-drawn anti-colonial struggle when India became independent in 1947.

Another aspect that has to be kept in mind is that the peasants formed a vast mass of the Indian society and as such were pinched as severely as the other sections of the Indian society under the oppressive rule of the British. They were the faceless and the voice-less crowd in the Gandhian mass movements who had to face untold miseries in braving the brutal colonial machinery and in compelling the British to quit India.

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30. Ibid. 127-130.
31. Indian Central banking Enquiry Committee, Minority Report, cited in Ibid, 131, 16.
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33. Some view it as a political agitation led by the Congress to experiment with the non-cooperation method and to take revenge against the Raja who fully supported the colonial government and openly criticized the Non-Cooperation Movement. Others glorify it as a chapter of the national movement. However, it would be incorrect to brand it as a purely political agitation because the discontent of the peasantry was mostly agrarian in nature.
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