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## LAND REVENUE AND LAND PRICES IN BENGAL IN THE ERA OF THE PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

SHAMITA SARKAR \*

- 0.1 Distress sales of estates of defaulting zamindars due to the high pitch of revenue demand and unprecedented rigour in collection, has been a favourite theme of nationalist and post-nationalist scholars in analysing the effects of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal.
- 0.2 Here, an attempt is made to survey random land sale documents of the Pre-Permanent Settlement period to study two major aspects of the problem namely, revenue realization in real terms by computing the price-revenue ratio; and also to examine the nature of the growth of a land market in Bengal.

### I

- 1.1 It is generally held that until 1793 auction sale of estates was not a common method to stop defaulting from revenue payment; and it was only with the Permanent Settlement that an increase in the market value of landed property occurred, which made sale of estates, a possible device for the East India Company to safeguard its revenues.<sup>1</sup> The documents here studied appear to militate against this thesis.
- 1.2 Distress sales obviously included private transactions and transfers of *mehals* the results of secret mortgaging, which might originally be incurred due to conspicuous

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expenditures. But such documents hardly survived except as parts of private archives,<sup>2</sup> where however, the information is naturally rather incomplete and one-sided.

- 1.3 The documents analysed here<sup>3</sup> are copies of deeds of possession granted by the Board of Revenue with the approval of the Governor-General-in Council to the purchasers of *parganas* and *taluks* sold for arrears of revenue from 20th April 1789 to 22nd April 1793.
- 1.4 The documents explored cover the districts of Nadia, Burdwan, Medinipur (Madinapur/ Midnapur) Twenty four (*Bist-o-Chahar*) Parganas, Dhaka and Munger. The places concerned also covers the modern day districts, of Murshidabad, Hooghly in West Bengal, Jaleswar (Jalasure) in Orissa and Munger in Bihar.

## II

- 2.1 The documents show the amount of the arrears of revenue (*bagaya jama'*) due, the price at which the lot was auctioned, and the date of auction according to Christian and Bengali era. In most of the documents, the names of the defaulting owners and the names of the purchasers are also mentioned. In some documents the conditions of auction (*shert-i-nilam*), the *iqrar* or agreement to pay to regular *qistabandi* (instalments), the actual rights to be invested with the purchaser and the signature of the purchaser in Bengali acknowledging that he had received the original *bai'nama* or possession deed, are also found.
- 2.2 To the East India Company Officials, it was always a matter of some difficulty to identify the actual portion of the surplus siphoned off by zamindars or other rural intermediaries. The *jama'* or the revenue officially recorded did not in reality correspond to the actual collection in Mughal times. During the time of Mir Qasim a more inflated rent-roll had been made. When the British acquired the right of land revenue collection they attributed the shortfalls in collection as due to incompetence and negligence of, and embezzlement by the *zamindars*. So they introduced strict rigidity and exactness in the collection, which made it extremely burdensome for the *zamindars*.
- 2.3 What resulted from this pressure can be seen in our documents, whose evidence is now set out, district-wise:
- 2.4 Dhaka: Only one document<sup>4</sup> is available, belonging to Chakla Jahangir Nagar *Qismat pargana* Selimabad. The *pargana* is not mentioned by Hunter in his list of fiscal divisions, but Jahangirnagar is the name given to Dhaka under Jahangir, and 'Salimabad' must also have been named after Jahangir (his name as Prince being Salim). The price of the land in the *pargana* at the auction was 61.86% of the recorded *Jama*.<sup>5</sup>
- 2.5 Nadia: Two documents belonging to this district are available, of which *pargana* Palasi is entered by Hunter under Nadia. The other document<sup>6</sup> belongs to *Pargana* Rajpur, *dih* Kalopur which was the property of the defaulter Sambhu Chand Roy identified as the step brother of the then Rajah of Nadia and younger son of Raja Krishna Chandra. The Price-revenue ratio shows an erratic swing from 16.60% of

the *jama'* in case of land in pargana Rajpur (which incidentally was purchased by Tejchand Roy the Zamindar Burdwan), to 280.10% of the *jama'* in the case of the property in pargana Palasy.

- 2.6 Midnapur (Medinipur/Midnapur): The documents from this district belong to *parganas* Shivpur (Chakla Jaleswar, not entered by Hunter, but Shivpur itself is mentioned under Medinipur), Bhuniarnuta and Tarkachaur. (Tarkachaur entered under Midnapur, but in the document only Chakla Jaleswar is mentioned), *mauza* Jotrobi (*Pargana* not mentioned but *chakla* Jaleswar is mentioned),<sup>7</sup> *Pargana* Pratapbhan, *pargana* Kutubpur, *pargana* Narajol, *Qismat pargana Kasijora* (taluk Kolaghat and *pargana* Khalna (not mentioned by Hunter but a prosperous cash crop growing area in modern Howrah District, contiguous to Midnapur).
- 2.7 The price-revenue ratio shows a wide range 157.89% of the *jama'* for the sale<sup>8</sup> of a taluk in Kolaghat (*pargana* Pratapbhan) to only 4.3% of the *jama'* for the sale of *Qismat pargana* Qutubpur. It is interesting to note that lots belonging to the eminent zamindari estates of Narajol and Kasijora, which went under the auctioneer's hammer on 20th March 1789, fetched a price equal to 71.5% and 53.8% of the *jama'*. Assuming that the bidders were aware of the conditions prevailing in the lots, and there was active competition, the *jama'* appears to be quite high in relation to the actual net income expected by buyers, which should have determined the (capitalised) price they were willing to pay. The Collector of Midnapur, while analysing the statistics of sale from the item of the Permanent Settlement found that in case of largest zamindaris like Kasijora, the average price of lands appear to have been little more than half of the *jama'*.<sup>9</sup> Prof. Benoy Chowdhuri attributes this to the "imperfection of the land market" in the sense of restricted intercourse between buyer and seller, regular transfer of possessory right for cash was not common. Moreover, though sale of estates due to default increased, effective demand for land as secure form of investment was largely a post-permanent settlement phenomenon. The almost static price of land in Kasijora and otherwise prosperous and fertile area, from 1789 to 1802 (little more than half of the *jama'*) in 1789 it was 53.8% of the *jama'* offers support to this finding.
- 2.8 Burdwan: Among the six documents pertaining to district Burdwan (in some documents and older fiscal division' the *chakla* is mentioned) three documents belong to *pargana* Bishanpur (Bishnupur) which was one of the oldest and virtually autonomous zamindaris of Bengal, dismantled due to default and protracted legal battle among the descendants during the British period.

### III

- 3.1 In the letters received from the Collector of Birbhum since 1789 the revenue-defaults of the Raja' of Bishanpur are repeatedly mentioned.<sup>10</sup> Many a time, settlement was made with other members of the family in order to fulfill the collection. *Pargana* Barohazari (Hunter mentioned it as a *pargana* of Hooghly district near Pandua) which was situated in a fertile tract, was sold at a meagre 17.67% of the *jama'*. The buyer incidentally was Maharajdhiraj Tej Chand Bahadur, the zamindar of Burdwan. While talking about distress sale, scholars have to be careful to note that distress sale by one old landed family may lead to the enlargement of the zamindari of

another. Two other documents of note belonged to *pargana* Mandalghat (Mangalghat). The *pargana* was owned Tej Chand Bahadur the *zamindar* of Burdwan. It had massive *jama'* of sicca rupees 2,10,749,13 gondas, 2 cowries.<sup>11</sup> It went on sale on 15th of June 1789 when it was collectively purchased by Gurudas Sen, Jagmohan Marr, Raja Ganapat Ghosh, Haracharan Ray and Thakurdas Marr, at the relatively low price of rupees 66,200 only, the price being not more than 31.91% of the *jama'*. The same lot again was auctioned due to default on 3rd July 1791 and was sold for just Rs. 5,200, i.e. at only 2.47% of the *jama*. This is the lowest price-revenue ratio recorded among the random collection of documents surveyed here. Incidentally this time one of the former collective owners, Raja Ganapat purchased the whole lot. Perhaps, some underhand arrangement worked here.

- 3.2 Benoy Chowdhuri has an interesting proposition on this issue.<sup>12</sup> Mandalghat *pargana* was highly assessed, but the yield was low as production used to suffer due to regular inundations. So Maharaja Tej Chand, the Raja of Burdwan allowed it to fall in to arrears by withholding the payment of *qist*-instalments. Whatever he had acquired from the *pargana* was invested in buying more prosperous *mahals* or lots. The *pargana* frequently changed hands and as such the price of land in *pargana* in relation to the annual revenue demand became critically low.
- 3.3 It thus appears that the local landed aristocracy had the intricate knowledge of the actual resources, and hence they could manipulate the land market.
- 3.4 Bist-o-chahar (24) Pargana: Most of the documents of this series actually belong to 24 Parganas, but some of the places are in modern Hooghly district of West Bengal or in Jessore (Jashohar) in Bangladesh. (Hunter enters Parganah Bharchee in Jessore). The documents cover numerous *parganas* including Sahapur (Shahpur), Magura, Azimabad Mahakali (not in Hunter), Kharpur, Kismat Madhogarh<sup>13</sup> (net identified). Hatiagarh' Kolkatta and Panchawan (Panchannagram = 55 villages). Among the documents the auction sale in *pargana* Kharpur of Mauja Raipur.<sup>14</sup> indicates the highest price in relation to the *jama'*. A plot of 5 bigha, 6 biswa land whose *jama'* was 9 rupees 8 anna 10 gonda, was sold by auction on 12 December 1791 for Rs. 51, i.e. at 566.6% of the *jama'*. Tarafe Dewanganj in Pargana Hatiagarh<sup>15</sup> was also sold on 29 August 1791 at 457.25% of the *jama'* being the property of Raja Narsing Deo Rai (Narasingha Dev Ray) zamindar of Bharchee. Tarafe Gahrpur in Hatiagarh *pargana*<sup>16</sup> and tarafe Sirampur in Magura<sup>17</sup> also fetched prices which were 103.4% and 157.45% of the were carried in the National respectively. Tarafe Kodalia in Pargana Bharchee<sup>18</sup> also fetched 133.40% of the *jama'.* Another high priced transaction were the sale of Hadda Madhopur in *pargana* Azimabad<sup>19</sup> where the price was 80.87% of the *jama* and Mouza Sarjukhali in the same *pargana* which fetched 95.25% of the *jama'*. The sales in these Pargana occurred in between August 1791 and July 1792, when the settlement of lands permanently with owners had already come to be taken for granted, one can view these sales as showing a rising trend in the movement of land prices.
- 3.5 However, no particular territorial pattern of price trend can be established. A reason can be that the collection of documents is highly randomized. More over information about the comparative production of different villages put to the dock could not be collected out of the sporadic date about the *parganas* available to us. It needs to be noted that many factors not necessarily economic are involved in the prices

quoted in the nascent land market. Topographical and climatic reasons of the particular localities also shaped the mind of the auction purchasers. People interested in land purchase were not only men of wealth, but of a calculative nature, whether they were old landed magnates like the zamindar of Burdwan or rising Kaivarta (cultivator) zamindars like the Marr of Janbazar Zamindari who had intricate knowledge of the localities. For outsiders, keen to divert mercantile or usurious profit into landed possession, status could be a major consideration, for being a zamindar implied upward social mobility. Yet they were astute businessmen who understood that the sale deed did not always imply effective possession, while failure to collect and pay revenue would imply the loss of the right. The price trends we can only say reflected the rather indecisive mood of the purchasers, just as it also reflected the imperfections of the nascent land market. Both Benoy Chowdhuri<sup>20</sup> and Dr. Ratnalekha Ray<sup>21</sup> have provided details of local manipulative influences on the land market which worked successfully till the mid nineteenth century.

- 3.6 What then were the causes of the growth of the land market even with all these imperfections involved? The insistence on the part of the government of sales of defaulting zamindars' estates as a device for ensuring full flow of revenue, and the inability of the zamindars under the circumstances to cope with the demand which, had almost doubled itself between 1765 and 1793<sup>22</sup> were the obvious factors behind the sales. The willingness of moneyed persons to acquire land and old landed interests to increase the extent of their estates provided the buyers. But since the latter did not expect large net incomes compared to the revenue (*jama*'), even a 1:1 ratio price : revenue seems to have been rare.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. B.B Chwoudhuri, 'The composition of the landed society as affected by the growth of a land market', Cambridge Economic History of India (CEHI), II, pp.93-94.
2. Private acquisition of lands by the Sarkars of Sarul has been dealt with by the present author in the article 'Compradore to Zamindar the making of Srul Raj', *PIHC*, 53rd Session, 1992-93, pp. 429-35.
3. *Persian Sanad Registrar*, (PSR) XXI. West Bengal State Archives. I am grateful to Mr. Habibullah, Persian Instructor, CAS History AMU, for his help in translating the documents.
4. PSR, f.106.
5. Op. cit., f.190.
6. Op. cit., f. 205. Palang in modern day Murshidabad was the site of the historic battle between Nawab Siraj-ud daulah and the English East India Company.
7. Jaleswar in modern Orissa is mentioned by Grant in his *Analysis of the Finances of Bengal* as part of the Midnapur zila. It is situated in the modern state of Orissa and is contiguous with Midnapur.
8. Op. cit., f. 77. Hunter says that Pratapbhan was famous for its rice and sugarcane which may indicate high auction price. W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Accounts of Bengal*, III, pp. 189 ff. But another document regarding the sale of a *taluka* in the same parganna shows that the price was only 62.20% of the *jama*.

*Shamita Sarkar: Land Revenue & Land Prices in Bengal*

9. Parliamentary Papers 1811-12, IX, p. 341, Answers by the Collector of Midnapur, 24th Feb. 1802.
10. Ashok Mitra, ed., *West Bengal District Records (New Series) Birbhum*, Letters received. Bishnapur is here recorded as part of the Burdwan district.
11. Op.cit., f. 103. Mandalghat is part of Hooghly district, but entered by Hunter also in Burdwan.
12. Benoj Bhushan Chowdhuri: "Agricultural Productivity in Bengal since 1757" In Rudolf, Desai et. al (ed.) *Land and Society in South Asia*, Oxford 1992.
13. Op.cit., P.S.R., folio no. not stated.
14. Op.cit., ff. 217-8.
15. Op.cit., f.no. 199-201.
16. Ibid., f.no. 202-203.
17. Ibid., f.no. 253-255.
18. Ibid., f.no. 142-43.
19. Ibid., f.no. 235.
20. Benoy Bhushan Chowdhuri, 'Land Market in Eastern India', Part I & II in *IESHR* 1975, 12. *passim* and the slightly revised version in *CEHI*, II.
21. Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, Delhi, 1982, Case Studies of Burdwan, Midnapur, *passim*.
22. B.B. Chowdhuri, op. cit., *IESHR*, 12/1975, pp.8, ff.