

TRACING COMMERCIALISATION OF INDIAN AGRICULTURE

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The British rule had a pronounced and a profound economic impact on India. Various economic policies followed by the British led to the rapid transformation of India's economy into a colonial economy whose nature and structure were determined by needs of the British economy. One of the important aspects of British economic policy was commercialisation of agriculture.

Commercialisation of agriculture simply implies that the agricultural crops and goods are produced by the peasants for sale in the market and not for their own consumption. Commercialisation of agriculture in India began during the British rule and took place not to feed the industries of India because India was far behind in industrial development as compared to Britain, France, Belgium and many other European countries of the eighteenth century.

Commercialisation of Indian Agriculture was done primarily to feed the British industries. For example, several efforts were made to increase the production of cotton in India to provide raw and good quality cotton to the cotton-textile industries of Britain which were growing fast after the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Therefore, cotton growing area increased in India and its production increased manifold with gradual lapse of time. Indigo and more than that, tea and coffee plantation were encouraged in India because these could get commercial market abroad.

Most of the plantations for commercial crops were controlled by the English. Jute was another product that received attention of the English company because jute made products got a ready market in America and Europe. Commercialisation of agriculture was initiated in India by the British through their direct and indirect policies and activities.

Firstly, the new land tenure system introduced in the form of permanent settlement and Ryotwari Settlement had made agricultural land a freely exchangeable commodity. The Permanent settlement by giving ownership right to the zamindars created a class of wealthy landlords; they could make use of this ownership right by sale or purchase of land. Further, the agriculture which had been a way of life rather than a business enterprise now began to be practiced for sale in national and international market.

Moreover, crops like cotton, jute, sugarcane, ground nuts, tobacco etc. which had a high demand in the market were increasingly cultivated. The beginning of the plantation crops like Tea, coffee, rubber, indigo etc heralded a new era in agricultural practices in India. These were essentially meant for markets and thus commercialisation of agriculture took to new heights with the expansion of the British rule.

A large number of factors encouraged and facilitated commercialisation of Indian agriculture. The political unity established by the British and the resultant rise of the unified national market was an important factor. Further, the spread of money replaced the barter and agricultural goods became market items.

Also, the replacement of custom and tradition by competition and contract led to the commercialisation of Indian agriculture, which was also aided by the expansion of means of transportation and communication. The laying of railway lines and expansion of rail and road transport enabled the transportation of agricultural products from production centers to markets.

Another boosting factor for commercialisation of agriculture in India was the gaining of speed of Industrial Revolution in England. This led to factor in commercialisation as more and more agricultural goods were produced to satisfy the demand for raw materials by the British industries. The enlargement and expansion of international trade and the entry of British finance capital also belted commercialisation of agriculture.

This was especially so in cotton as the civil war disrupted the supplies of cotton from America and thereby increased demand for Indian cotton. Further, the British policy of one way free trade also acted as sufficient encouraging factor for commercialisation



as the manufactured items in textile, jute etc could find free entry in Indian markets, where as the manufactured goods did not have similar free access to European markets.

Commercialisation of agriculture was a forced and artificial process for the majority of Indian peasants. It was introduced under coercion of the British and not out of the incentive of peasantry at large. The peasantry went for cultivation of commercial crops under duress.

The peasants had to pay the land revenue to the British government in time. Moreover, they had to grow commercial crop on a specified track of their land under the oppression of planters. The peasants also went in for growing commercial crops to pay back the interests to money lenders in time.

Commercialisation of Indian agriculture started post 1813 when the industrial revolution in England gained pace. Commercialisation of agriculture had many results. It was beneficial to the British planters, traders and manufacturers, who were provided with opportunity to make huge profits by getting the commercialised agricultural products at, throw away prices. Commercialisation of Indian agriculture also partly benefited Indian traders and money lenders who made huge profits by working as middlemen for the British.

In this regard they acted as conduits delivering the products from peasants to the British company from where it was taken abroad. Moreover, Indian money lenders advanced cash advances to the farmers to cultivate the commercial crops and if the peasants failed to pay him back in time, the land of peasants came under ownership of moneylenders.

However, most of the Indian people suffered miserably due to the British policy of commercialisation of Indian agriculture. It resulted in reduced area under cultivation of food crops. The net result of this change was that Indian failed to produce even that much food crops which could provide even two square meals a day to its population.

The misery was further enhanced because the population of India was increasing every year, fragmentation of land was taking place because of the increasing pressure on land and modern techniques of agricultural production were not introduced in India.

It affected adversely the poor people of India; it became difficult for them to get even sufficient food. This becomes ample from the fact that till 1880 India had a surplus of foodstuffs to the extent of five million tonnes and by 1945 it had a deficit of 10 million tonnes.

The consumption of food was then estimated at one and a half lb per individual and in 1945 it was 1 lb. Nearly thirty percent of the Indian population was estimated to be suffering from chronic malnutrition and under nutrition. Thus, commercialisation of agriculture in India by the British was also one of the important causes of the impoverishment of the Indian people.

The poor peasant was forced to sell his produce just after harvest at whatever prices he could get as he had to meet in time the demands of the government, the landlord, the money lender and his family members' requirements. This placed him at the mercy of the grain merchant, who was in a position to dictate terms and who purchased his produce at much less than the market price. Thus, a large share of the benefit of the growing trade in agricultural products was reaped by the merchant, who was very often also the village money lender.

The net result of commercialisation of Indian agriculture was that most of Indian farmers failed to produce even that much food crops which could provide them even two square meals a day. Most importantly the life of the Indian peasant was tied to the highly fluctuating national and international market.

He was no longer a deciding factor in agricultural practices. Further, by making agricultural land a tradable commodity, the peasant lost his secure feeling. High land revenue demand forced him to take loan from the money lender at high interest rates. Failure to pay debt in time meant loss of land to the money lender at high interest rates. It led to land alienation and increase in the number of agricultural labourers whose conditions especially in plantation industry was pathetic.

The commercialisation of agriculture was a new phenomenon in Indian agricultural scene introduced by the British. While the upper class and British industries benefited from it, the Indian peasants' life was tied to remote international market. The worst effect of commercialisation was the oppression of Indian peasants at hands of European. This found expression in the famous Indigo revolt in 1859. Moreover, commercialisation of Indian agriculture got manifested in series of famines which took a heavy toll of life.

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