

The first summary settlement of 1856 and the revolt of 1857 in Awadh

Nisha Rathore

Post Graduate Department of History, Agra College, Dr. B. R. A. University, Agra (U. P.) -282002, India
Email - nisurathor@yahoo.in

ABSTRACT

The annexation of Awadh took place on February 7, 1856. After capturing the province through troops a regular administration was quickly set up in Nawab's capital of Lucknow. Soon the government carried out a three year summary settlement. It is known as the first Summary Settlement. This Settlement contributed a lot to the revolt of 1857 in Awadh. In Awadh the taluqdars, zamindars and peasants fought against the colonial rule during the revolt.

HISTORICAL FACTS

The first Summary Settlement was made on the guidelines of Lord Dalhousie (the then Governor General) in 1856, soon after the annexation of Awadh. The main purpose of this Settlement was to consolidate the British power in Awadh. It was not in favor of the taluqdars. In this Settlement Lord Dalhousie gave priority to village zamindars over the taluqdars of Awadh. This was done to undermine the power and position of taluqdars. Dalhousie's letter to the settlement officers reveals this. He wrote, instructing them:

To bear in mind, as a leading principle that the desire and intention of the Government is to deal with the actual occupants of the soil, that is, with village zamindars, or with the proprietary coparcenaries, which are believed to exist in Oude, and not to suffer the interposition of middlemen, as Tlookdars, Farmers of the revenue, and such like. The claims of these, if they have any tenable claims, may be more conveniently considered at a future period, or brought judicially before the courts competent to investigate and decide upon them.¹

It is the tone and the spirit behind the letter which is more important than the actual result of the Settlement. Dalhousie's letter clearly humiliates the taluqdars by calling them "farmers of the revenue" and by giving priority to zamindars over them. The Settlement was to be made with the zamindars, and if there was any left – over it could be settled with the taluqdars at "a future period" after studying their claims.

Taluqdars treated themselves as rajas having their forts with all kinds of soldiers and retainers. They were not just "the farmers of revenue" as Dalhousie called them. The relation between them and the cultivators of the soil was that which exists between a raja and his praja. Referring to the relation between the taluqdars and their cultivators before annexation, Metcalf points out that 'Their states have been called "little kingdoms", and the taluqdars, as little "kings" or rajas, were not owners of land but rulers of men.'² Dalhousie wished the taluqdarsto realize that they were not "the rulers of men"; they were not even the owners of land. All land belonged to the Company; the taluqdars were only the revenue collectors for the areas of land allotted to them. And as revenue collectors they were inferior to the zamindars in the eyes of the British. They had asecondary status.

By having direct settlement with the zamindars, the British were killing two birds with one stone. The ego of zamindars was inflated, they were "mini – taluqdars", though

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without forts and retainers. The taluqdars on their own turn were nothing but “bigzamindars”. Neither taluqdars nor zamindars were rulers of men, they were simply holders of land. “Taluqdars” and “zamindars” were mere titles for collecting rents from the tenants and paying revenue to the Company. Zamindars were not given any kingly powers of which the taluqdars were deprived.

Though the British were against the taluqdars, direct confrontation with them at initial stage would not have been wise. So they decided to attack their financial resources. They snatched parts of their estates and settled them directly with the zamindars. In the first Settlement the taluqdars lost some 9,900 villages out of 23,500 villages which they held at the time of annexation.³ This was a very peculiar kind of arrangement. If all 23,500 villages had been directly settled with the zamindars, then this would have led the British to have direct confrontation with the taluqdars, for which they were not prepared at this stage. Without confronting the taluqdars their power was to be weakened. Though a large number of villages were left with the taluqdars, what they got was only a left – over, left over after the settlement with the zamindars. A class of landholders was created which will not bow down before the taluqdars. Perhaps the British thought that this newly created class of landholders would side with them against the taluqdars. They created this class to use it at a proper time in the future.

Dalhousie’s scheme misfired. The first Summary Settlement lasted for only fifteen months, from the time of annexation to June 1857 when the Revolt started. Taluqdars, who had all the reasons to participate in the Revolt against the British, took active part, carrying the zamindars (new gentry, new landholders, village proprietors) with them. The British had direct settlement with the zamindars, thinking that they would side with them against the taluqdars. But at the time of Revolt they sided with the taluqdars, which meant the same as rising for the Independence of the country against the foreign rule. Of course there were exceptions. But such exceptions have always existed, and will continue exist so long as human civilization exists.

Like the taluqdars and zamindars the peasants of Awadh also contributed a lot to the Revolt of 1857. Referring to the peasant participation in Awadh Professor Irfan Habib says, ‘they all so tended to rise at the call of the traditional landed elements, the zamindars and taluqdars.’⁴ The peasants fought for their lords, the taluqdars. The situation of Revolt in Awadh was very different from the situation in the rest of the United Provinces and other parts of the country. According to Rudrangshu Mukherjee ‘the people of Awadh had fought the British.’⁵ By people he means the rural mass, the peasantry. Concerning the weapons of the peasant army Mukherjee has collected evidence that ‘by the beginning of February 1859 there had been collected 29,941 spears, 427,932 swords and 129,414 firearms. Bows and arrows were counted at 6,418. Firearms could be recovered even from the house of an ordinary peasant.’⁶ An ordinary peasant had firearms for the reason that the taluqdars’ sowars, foot – soldiers came from the ordinary peasant families. Even the Nawab’s army was rural.

Raja Jailal Singh was an important figure in the Revolt of 1857. In the new Government of Begum Hazrathmahal, Raja Jailal Singh was made the Minister of War and the Collector of Revenue.⁷ According to Rudrangshu Mukherjee, ‘Raja Jailal Singh seems to have been the most important and powerful figure on both bodies. He also acted as the link between these bodies and Begum.’⁸ The bodies in question were “military cell” and” “court officials”. All the members of his family, his brothers, Beni Madho, the Raja of Atraulia, Raghubar Dayal and his son-in-law, Jai Ram Singh, participated and perished in the Revolt of 1857. Raja Jailal Singh was executed by the British on October 1, 1859 at Lucknow.⁹ Tenants

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in general and kurmis in particular participated in the Revolt of 1857. For Jailal Singh was a kurmi, his grandfather was an ordinary kurmi cultivator. Kurmi cultivators, who according to Badan- Powell, formed “a considerable part of tenantry”, jumped into the fire of revolt because the man of their caste held the highest position of honour in the Government of Begum Hazrat Mahal.¹⁰

Even if one hesitates in calling the revolt of 1857 as the first war of Indian Independence, it was certainly the first war of Oudh Independence. Rudrangshu Mukherjee quotes Lord Canning, the then Viceroy, admitting that ‘the rising against our authority in Oude (Awadh/Oudh) has been general almost universal.’¹¹ It is the participation of tenantry in the Revolt that has given it its universal character. As a matter of fact only the peasants were fighting throughout the territories of Awadh, for ‘the sepoys were really peasants in uniform.’¹² The strength of the Revolt came from the non-uniformed sepoys and the uniformed peasants. Peasants of Awadh were not fighting for their material gains; they were fighting for the honour of their king, Nawab.

The Revolt of 1857 proved that it was a futile attempt on the part of the British either to abolish the old gentry (taluqdars) or to create a new gentry (zamindars). The British decided that it was not the new gentry but the old established gentry that must be backed up. After recapturing power the British made second Summary Settlement in 1858.¹³ They wished to avoid the mistakes committed by them in the first Summary Settlement. Sir James Outram, the Chief Commissioner of Awadh, wrote on 5th January 1858 ‘I see no prospects of returning tranquility except by having recourse for the next few years to the old taluqdari system... Taluqdars have both powers and influence to exercise for or against us. The village proprietors have neither.’¹⁴ It was only with the loyalty of the taluqdars that the British rule in Awadh was possible. Thus a new policy was evolved, a policy that would endure the British rule in Awadh. Under the new policy it was decided that the settlement should be taluqdari – oriented, and not the zamindari – oriented.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the first Summary Settlement of 1856 made by the British led to revolt of 1857, therefore, it was rejected. The second Summary Settlement was made with the expectation that the taluqdars would assist the British Government in bringing peace and tranquility to Awadh. This Settlement gives expression to the new policy, the policy which was followed by the British in Awadh till they ultimately left India in 1947.

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3. T. R. Metcalf, Land, Landlords and the British Raj : Northern India in the Nineteenth Century, Delhi, 1979, p.170.
4. Irfan Habib, ‘History from below’, p. 17 in Frontline Magazine, June 29, 2007.
5. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858, Delhi, 1984, p. 166.
6. Ibid. Mukherjee further records ‘three fourths of the adult male population of Awadh, had been in Rebellion.
7. S. N. Qanungo, ‘Raja Jai Lal Singh – the “War Minister” of Begum Hazrat Mahal,’ special issue on Raja Jailal Singh, bulletin of the Martyrs Memorial Society, Pramod Kumar Gangwar (ed.) Lucknow, 1986.

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8. Mukherjee, Awadh in Revolt, p. 138.
9. Qanungo, 'Raja Jai Lal Singh.'
10. Ibid.
11. Mukherjee, Awadh in Revolt, p. 170.
12. Ibid.
13. To give them formal recognition the taluqdars were given Sanads At Lucknow Darbar, presided over by Lord Canning on 26th October 1859. These Sanads were legal documents giving formal Recognition to the taluqdars as the holders of their land.
14. Cited in A. A. Siddiqi, Origin and Development of Land Tenures In U.P. (1800 – 1930), Aligarh, 1976, p. 69.