

## PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF POST- ZAMINDARI ABOLITION IN MADRAS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

**Dr.K.Madhusudharsanan,**  
Head, Department of History  
Chikkaiah Naicker College  
Erode Tamilnadu India.  
sudharsancnc@gmail.com

In Madras province 70% of the population depended on agriculture for their livelihood at the time of independence of the country. During the days of anti-colonial struggles, the Indian National Congress which spearheaded the agitation had committed itself to a number of radical agrarian reforms. The abolition of zamindari system, a ceiling for possession of land by an individual and family, provision of cheap credit facilities and grant of subsidies to farmers were some of the promises held out by the Congress in the pre-independence days.

The country gained independence in 1947, but a planned economy was introduced only from 1952. Since then the Congress as a ruling party both at the centre and the state had chalked out and implemented Five Year Plans until 1967. Though the Abolition Act of Zamindari System had been introduced as early as 1947, in view of the litigations in the Supreme Court, the Act came into effect only in 1952 after effecting two amendments to the Constitution

### **Zamindari Abolition**

The ancient system of Zamindari system was continued even after independence. The rents collected were very high and the irrigation works were not properly maintained. The Indian National Congress laid great emphasis on land reforms, improvement of agrarian relations and the abolition of zamindari system as soon as the country became independence.<sup>17</sup>

In order to introduce necessary reforms in the country, the Indian National Congress appointed a committee under the chairmanship of J. C. Kumarappa. The committee submitted its reports in 1948 and based on its recommendations, the state government passed Zamindari Abolition Act, to abolish Zamindari system. The Zamindars were assured compensation for their land<sup>18</sup>. This act provided for payment of gradual compensation which was a function of two variables – annual net income of the estate and a – multiplying factor. The annual net income was defined as  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the gross annual Ryotwari demand less than 5 percent of the same representing the cost of maintenance of irrigation works which had been incurred by the Zamindars. All the Zamindari estates were classified in six categories.<sup>19</sup> In view of the discontent among

the tenants in Zamindari tracts, the Madras government considered that the Zamindari system had outlived its usefulness. Accordingly, the Madras Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1948 which came into force in April 1949 was passed. Out of 4,764 estates to which this Act applied 4,722 estates had been taken over by the state under the Act. The remaining 34 were Inam estates. The estates taken over were surveyed and settled in Ryotwari principles and these operations were expected to complete in 3 or 4 years. The Estate Abolition Act did not apply to whole Inam villages where both land and land revenue had been granted as Inam. There were 1,580 such villages and the question of abolition of this tenure was under consideration.<sup>20</sup>

But the Zamindars were earning huge sums of money by exploiting the tenants and labourers. They acted as social parasites lived for themselves and perpetuating their own privileged position of revenue collectors working on large margins without any physical work on the field. They did not like the abolition move. They opposed it tooth and nail. They united together and challenged the land reform laws and fought up to the Supreme Court to preserve their rights over land.<sup>21</sup> The Government, put to a great test, was bent upon introducing certain radical reforms to put a stop to further exploitation and oppression of the rural poor. It went to the extent of making additions and amendments in the Constitution to abolish Zamindari system. The constitutional amendments added two new arts 31- A and 31- B in the year 1952 to validate the Zamindari abolition law.<sup>22</sup>

### **Criticism**

Even though the Government passed the Zamindari Abolition Act and was taken over the Zamindari tracts, the maintenance of the irrigation tanks was neglected. It can be seen from the speeches of Ramesan, member of the State Legislative Assembly during the general discussion on the budget for the year 1952-53. He argued that the Zamindari Abolition Act was passed in 1948 and actually the estates were taken over on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1949, and ever since, the Government have totally neglected even the minimum annual repairs which were formerly being taken up by the Zamindars. The zamindars in anticipation of this legislation neglected repairs even prior to 1948. The Government neglected the repairs after taking over those estates. Even silt clearance was not undertaken. On the other hand, the imposition of surcharge was going on. As a result, the burden was heavier and the peasants suffered much. Therefore, he demanded that there should be no surcharge until all the irrigation works were atleast completely repaired in the Zamindari areas.<sup>23</sup>

The rate of compensation was very liberal. As a result of the abolition of intermediaries, the occupants had been brought into direct contact with the state and uncultivated lands, forests; etc had been acquired and administered directly by the

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states through the village Panchayats. The total compensation including rehabilitation grant and interest was estimated at Rs.640 crores at the national level.<sup>24</sup> However, in Madras State the rate of compensation was not paid quickly and adequately to the aggrieved. Raja Muthiah Chettiyar of Chettinad in the State Assembly highlighted this: ‘It is not necessary to dwell now on the subject of the abolition of zamindars because the abolition has become a *fait accompli*. I am glad that provision has been made for the payment of compensation. But the compensation amount has not yet been disbursed and the process is going on very slowly. For estates acquired in August or September even interim payments have not been made’.<sup>25</sup>

In the State Legislative Assembly Venkateswarlu said, “In the village where the zamindari system had been abolished, the condition of the peasants had not at all improved. They have no house sites for building houses as most of the lands which stood in the name of the zamindars had been sold out. The agricultural labourers and the poor peasant have no place for building houses. The Government must come forward and take over lands which are fit for house sites and hand them over to the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. In many villages there were no wells for supply of drinking water, not merely for Harijans but also for the ordinary peasants as well. There were villages where there were no wells at all particularly in the Zamindari areas”.<sup>26</sup>

### **Shortcomings of the Act**

Through writs in the High Courts or stay orders the Zamindars had been able to evade the provisions of the act for about 4 years. The provision regarding the private lands of the Zamindar was abused. This provision was exploited to claim three fourths of the land in certain villages as ‘private lands’. With the help of Karnams the lands, which should have gone to the ryots under the Zamindari Abolition Act, were shown as private lands and appropriated by the Zamindars.<sup>27</sup>

### **Notes and References**

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5. *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Assembly Debates*, vol. 2, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1952, p. 478. Hereafter it is noted as *PMLA*.



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