COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN INDIA

Impact of Colonial Rule on Land Relations

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • October 22, 2026 • 34 min read

Land was the main source of wealth, status and state income in India, and the British made it the centre of their rule. After the Company obtained the diwani of Bengal in 1765, it had to decide who would pay the land revenue, how much, and with what rights. Over the next hundred years, three main systems were created: the Permanent Settlement with zamindars, the Ryotwari settlement with cultivators and the Mahalwari settlement with village bodies. Each defined rights in land in new ways, and together they changed rural society.

This note explains the meaning of land relations, the main features of colonial land policy, the three settlements, the laws on tenancy and land transfer, the social effects, and the views of historians. It belongs to Core V, Colonialism and Nationalism in India, and should be read with the notes on agriculture, forests, industry and ecology.

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1. Meaning and definitions of land relations

Scholar	Work	Idea in substance
Ranajit Guha	A Rule of Property for Bengal (1963)	The Permanent Settlement was an experiment based on British ideas of property and rent
Eric Stokes	The English Utilitarians and India (1959)	Land revenue policy reflected British theories of rent and reform
Irfan Habib	The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1963)	The earlier state took a share of produce, and the colonial state turned rights into property
A. R. Desai	Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948)	Colonial land policy created new classes of landlords and moneylenders
Sirajul Islam	The Permanent Settlement in Bengal (1979)	The Settlement had mixed results for zamindars and peasants
Thomas Metcalf	Land, Landlords and the British Raj (1979)	The state built alliances with landed elites, as with the taluqdars of Awadh
Dharma Kumar	Land and Caste in South India (1965)	Land and caste shaped agrarian labour and rights in the south

Scholar-wise definitions

Ranajit Guha. Guha, in his study of Bengal, describes land relations as a system of rights and duties between state, landlord and cultivator, which the Permanent Settlement changed by making the zamindar a property owner. He argues that the idea came from British thought on property and not from Indian practice. His book is the standard text on the Permanent Settlement, and it is often named in NET questions.

Eric Stokes. Stokes holds that British land policy was shaped by theories of rent and by the Utilitarian wish to reform society through law. The system of Ryotwari in particular reflects the idea that the state should deal directly with the cultivator. A student can use Stokes to show the link between ideas and land policy.

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Irfan Habib. Habib studied the Mughal agrarian system and showed that earlier rights in land were layered, and that the state took a share of the crop. He holds that the colonial system changed the nature of these rights by treating land as a commodity and by taking a larger share. His work gives the base for comparing the two periods.

A. R. Desai. Desai, a Marxist sociologist, argues that colonial land policy created new classes, such as landlords, moneylenders and tenants, which became part of the structure of colonial rule. His account links land relations with the growth of nationalism and is often used in political science courses.

Sirajul Islam. Islam studied the working of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal and showed that the effects on zamindars and peasants varied by district and time. His work is useful as a corrective to simple accounts.

Thomas Metcalf. Metcalf studied Awadh and the United Provinces. He shows how the British, after 1857, relied on large landholders as supports of the Raj and gave them privileges. His book is the best source on the taluqdars.

Dharma Kumar. Kumar studied South India and described the role of caste in rights over land and labour, including agricultural slavery. Her work shows that land relations differed in the south from those in the north.

Note to the student

The definitions above are given in substance and should be checked against the books before they are quoted in a thesis or paper. In an examination, give the idea with the name of the scholar and the title. The terms zamindar, ryot, mahal, settlement and tenancy should be explained in your own words.

What the definitions share

All these writers agree that colonial rule changed the nature of rights in land and the way revenue was collected. They differ on the causes and the effects. Guha and Stokes stress ideas, Habib and Desai stress classes and exploitation, Metcalf stresses political alliance,

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and Islam and Kumar stress local variation. A good answer states the common ground first and then the differences.

2. Characteristics of colonial land relations

Land revenue as the main state income. The land revenue gave the colonial state about half of its income for much of the nineteenth century. The state therefore designed its land policy to secure revenue, and not only to improve farming. For example, the Permanent Settlement aimed first at a fixed and sure income for the Company. In an answer, give this as the root of the system.

Conversion of rights into private property. Before the British, rights in land were held in layers, and the state, zamindar and cultivator each had a claim. Colonial law gave one party a clear title, which could be bought, sold or mortgaged. In Bengal it was the zamindar, in Madras and Bombay it was the ryot. This change made land a commodity. It is the main change in the legal sense.

Three main systems. The Permanent Settlement covered Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and parts of Madras and Benares. The Ryotwari system covered Madras, Bombay and parts of Assam. The Mahalwari system covered the North-West Provinces, the Punjab and the Central Provinces. Roughly a fifth of British India was under the first, half under the second and the rest under the third. A student should know the three with their regions.

Fixed money assessment. Revenue was fixed in cash for a term, or in Bengal for ever. It did not change with price or yield during that term. In years of low prices, the burden became heavy, and farmers or zamindars had to borrow. This feature ties the land system to rural debt.

Creation of intermediaries. In Bengal, the zamindar became a landlord, and beneath him came a chain of tenure-holders, such as patnidars and darpatnidars. In the Ryotwari areas, the moneylender and trader became a power. These intermediaries stood between the state and the cultivator and took a share of the produce. The result was a long chain of claims on the same land.

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Sale of land for arrears. If revenue was not paid on the due date, the land could be sold by auction. This rule, called the sunset law in Bengal, caused many old zamindars to lose estates in the first decades. Land passed to merchants and officials. In exams, link the rule with the change in the landed class.

Weak protection for tenants. The Settlement of 1793 did little for the cultivator, and rents rose over time. Laws such as the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 and the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 gave some protection, but only after long unrest. Tenants remained at the mercy of landlords in many areas.

Survey and record of rights. The state measured fields, recorded owners and fixed revenue by survey and settlement. Village officers such as the patwari and the kanungo kept the records. The records gave the state knowledge and control. They also gave rise to disputes and litigation.

Role of courts and law. Disputes over land were taken to courts, which applied written law and formal proof. Litigation became costly and long. The rich and the educated gained, while the poor and the illiterate lost. A student should note this effect.

Support to loyal landed classes. After 1857, the British treated large landholders, such as the taluqdars of Awadh and the princes, as supports of rule. They received titles, estates and local power. This policy shaped the politics of landholding in the United Provinces.

Land alienation to moneylenders. In the Ryotwari and Mahalwari areas, debt led to the loss of land to non-cultivating owners. The Deccan riots and the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 respond to this. The feature joins land relations with credit.

Growing differences among cultivators. A class of rich peasants, a class of small peasants and tenants, and a class of landless labourers took shape. Share-cropping and bonded labour spread in some regions. This differentiation is important for the study of peasant movements.

3. Diagram at a glance

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Three colonial land settlements compared

	Permanent, 1793	Ryotwari, 1820	Mahalwari, 1822 and 1833
Region	Bengal, Bihar, Orissa	Madras, Bombay	North India, Punjab
Pays revenue	The zamindar	The ryot, directly	The village body
Assessment	Fixed for ever	Revised every 30 years	Revised periodically
Planned by	Cornwallis, Shore	Read, Munro	Mackenzie, Bird
Share of area	About 19 per cent	About 51 per cent	About 30 per cent

Shares of area are rough figures from standard textbooks.

Read down each column: the three settlements differ in who paid the revenue and how long the assessment lasted.

4. Land relations before colonial rule

To see what changed, a student should know the earlier arrangements and the first steps of the Company.

Layers of rights. Under the Mughals and regional rulers, several parties had claims on land. The cultivator had a hereditary right to till, the village community had common rights, the zamindar had the right to collect the revenue and keep a share, and the state took a share of the crop. No one held land as a private owner who could freely sell it. Irfan Habib has described this system in detail. In an answer, give the idea of layered rights as the starting point.

The Mughal revenue system. The state assessed the revenue as a share of the crop, commonly one-third to one-half, based on measurement in the system associated with Todar Mal and on local rates. Mansabdars held assignments, called jagirs, which gave them the right to collect revenue. Zamindars were intermediaries with local power, often with armed followers. A student can note that the zamindar was a tax collector with hereditary claims, not a landowner in the modern sense.

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Variation by region. In the Deccan and the south, Maratha and other rulers dealt more directly with village headmen and cultivators. In Bengal, the zamindar was strong. The British met a variety of systems and tried to place them under a single scheme. This created misunderstanding, since terms had different meanings in different places.

The Company and the diwani. In 1765, the Company received the diwani, the right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It first used existing officials and then tried new experiments. In 1772, Warren Hastings introduced a five-year settlement by auction, and in 1777 he changed to a yearly one. Revenue rose, but the farmers of revenue were often speculators, and the peasantry suffered. The famine of 1770 made the crisis worse.

The debate on policy. Officials such as Philip Francis argued for a settlement with zamindars, others for settlement with cultivators. The decision depended on ideas about property, on the need for a steady income, and on political calculation. This debate ended in the decision of Cornwallis in 1793.

British ideas on land. Whig thinkers believed that property in land produced stability and improvement. Physiocratic ideas held that land was the source of wealth. Later, Ricardo’s theory of rent shaped the view that the state was entitled to the surplus rent. These ideas guided the three settlements. In exams, link settlements with ideas, as Stokes does.

Period	Arrangement	Key point
Mughal and regional rule	Layered rights; share of crop	No private ownership in the modern sense
1765	Company receives the diwani	Right to collect revenue
1772 to 1777	Five-year and annual settlements	Auction to farmers of revenue
1790 to 1793	Decennial, then Permanent Settlement	Fixed demand, property to zamindars

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5. The Permanent Settlement

The Permanent Settlement is the most asked topic in this section. A student should know its aims, terms and effects.

Cornwallis and the aims. Lord Cornwallis, Governor-General from 1786 to 1793, introduced the Settlement in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1793, after a ten-year settlement from 1790. The aims were a fixed and certain income for the Company, a class of improving landlords who would invest in land, and a loyal group that would support British rule. John Shore, who prepared the plan, and others argued the case. In an answer, give the three aims.

Terms of the Settlement. The revenue demand of each zamindar was fixed for ever. About ten-elevenths of the rental was to go to the state and one-eleventh was left to the zamindar, though the share was in practice somewhat different. The zamindar became the owner of the estate, with the right to inherit and sell. If he did not pay by the due date, the estate was sold. Cultivators were left to the zamindar’s mercy, with few rights written into the law.

The sunset law. Under the rule, revenue had to be paid by sunset on the due date, or the estate went to auction. This law meant that old zamindars who failed to pay in the first years lost their estates. A large share of the estates in Bengal changed hands within the first decades. The new purchasers included merchants and officials from Calcutta. A student can note that the Settlement caused a change in the landed class.

Gains for the state. The Company obtained a steady revenue and was freed of the work of repeated assessment. With the revenue fixed, the state could not share in the later rise in rents and prices, so in the long run the state lost relative income. This is a common critical point.

Effects on zamindars. Some zamindars prospered when rents rose, and many lived as absentee landlords in Calcutta. Others fell into debt. The system also led to a chain of subordinate tenure-holders, called patnidars after the Patni regulation of 1819, who took a

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share and paid the zamindar. This growth of sub-infeudation made the burden heavy on the cultivator.

Effects on cultivators. The cultivator paid rent, and often illegal dues called abwabs. With limited legal rights, he could be evicted or have rent raised. Rich peasants known as jotedars in northern Bengal gained power and sometimes held land from the zamindar on better terms, and below them were sharecroppers, called bargadars. This is an area where the debate is rich, and the student should name jotedars.

The extension of the Settlement. The system was extended to the Benares region in 1795 and to some districts in the north of Madras. It covered about a fifth of British India. In the rest of the country, other systems were applied.

Later laws and abolition. The Bengal Rent Act of 1859 and the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 limited rent increases and gave occupancy rights to tenants of long standing. After independence, West Bengal passed the Estates Acquisition Act of 1953, and other states abolished zamindari in the 1950s. The system thus lasted for more than a century and a half.

Assessment of the Settlement. Defenders such as Rammohan Roy saw the Settlement as a source of security. Critics, such as Ranajit Guha and the nationalists, saw it as a gift to a class of landlords at the cost of the cultivator and of the state. Sirajul Islam and Ratnalekha Ray show that results varied. A balanced answer gives these views.

Feature	Detail
Year	1793, after the Decennial Settlement of 1790
Introduced by	Cornwallis, with John Shore
Region	Bengal, Bihar, Orissa; extended to Benares
Who paid revenue	The zamindar
Assessment	Fixed for ever
Main effects	Landlord class, sunset law, sub-infeudation, weak tenants

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6. The Ryotwari settlement

The Ryotwari system dealt directly with the cultivator. A student should know its origins, regions and effects.

Origins in the south. Captain Alexander Read, in the Baramahal in the 1790s, and then Thomas Munro, who served in Madras and became Governor from 1820 to 1827, shaped the system. They believed that the ryot was the true owner of the soil and that zamindars were an unnecessary layer. Munro had seen the village communities of the south and wished to preserve them. The system was introduced in Madras in 1820.

Terms of the system. The state dealt directly with each cultivator, who held the field as a registered owner, called pattadar, and paid revenue in cash. The assessment was based on the estimated net produce and was revised every thirty years. Cultivators could keep or give up fields each year. In theory, the cultivator had security as long as he paid.

High assessment. In the early years, revenue was set at about half of the net produce, which was too high. Later revisions reduced the share, but it remained heavy for the poor. Rigid collection in bad years caused hardship and debt. A student should link this with the revenue pressure noted in the note on agriculture.

The Bombay system. In the Bombay Presidency, Mountstuart Elphinstone and, later, Pringle and others carried out surveys. The survey of Wingate and Goldsmid from 1836 classified fields by soil and fixed rates for thirty years. The system was set out in the Bombay Land Revenue Code of 1879. Revenue was somewhat lower than in Madras, but the cash demand was still heavy.

The Deccan riots as an effect. The fall in cotton prices after the American Civil War, together with fixed revenue, brought the peasants of the Deccan into debt. The riots of 1875 followed. The case shows how the Ryotwari system led to indebtedness.

Moneylenders and land transfer. Because land was a private property that could be mortgaged, moneylenders took land in repayment of debt. In some districts, a large share of the land passed to non-cultivators. The state passed the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of

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1879 in response.

Social structure in the south. Dharma Kumar has shown that in Madras many landless labourers, often from low castes, worked on land held by upper-caste ryots. The system of private property in land did not remove these relations. Instead, it fixed them in law.

Assessment of Ryotwari. The system was praised as a way to protect the cultivator against intermediaries. Critics point to the high demand and the legal power it gave to rich owners and creditors. Burton Stein's study of Munro treats the system as a mixture of conviction and expedience.

Feature	Detail
Origin	Read in the Baramahal; Munro in Madras
Year	1820 in Madras; surveys in Bombay from 1830s
Region	Madras, Bombay, parts of Assam
Who paid revenue	The ryot, directly
Assessment	Revised every thirty years
Main effects	High demand, debt, land transfer

7. The Mahalwari settlement and the taluqdars of Awadh

The Mahalwari system rested on the village. A student should know its origin, its terms and the special case of Awadh.

Origins. After the British gained the Ceded and Conquered Provinces in the early nineteenth century, they first made settlements with zamindars. Holt Mackenzie's Minute of 1819 found that in many villages the village body held the land jointly. Regulation VII of 1822 made provision for settlement with the village, called the mahal. A student should note that the system arose from a study of north Indian villages.

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Terms of the system. The revenue was fixed for the whole village, and the village body was jointly liable for payment. Each owner paid his share. The Regulation of 1822 fixed the state's share at about two-thirds of the net rental, which proved too high. The revenue was revised for a term of twenty to thirty years.

Bird's reform of 1833. Regulation IX of 1833, associated with Robert Merttins Bird, reduced the state's share to about half of the rental and set up a system of survey and records. Bird's settlement of the North-Western Provinces is regarded as the model for the Mahalwari system. In exams, link Bird with the lowering of the demand.

Extension to the Punjab and the Central Provinces. After the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, the Lawrence brothers and the Board of Administration created settlements which dealt with the village community and with cultivators in large part. The Central Provinces also adopted this system. In the Punjab, revenue was moderate, and relations between the state and the peasant-proprietors were relatively close, which is one reason why the province became a main recruiting ground.

Role of the patwari. A paid village accountant, the patwari, kept the records of fields and rights. His power grew with the importance of land records. Peasants depended on him for entries and certificates. This feature shows how land relations created a class of petty officials.

Awadh and the taluqdars. Awadh was annexed in 1856. The British first made a summary settlement with village owners and ignored the taluqdars, who were large landholders with strong local power. Many taluqdars lost land, and they joined the revolt of 1857. Thomas Metcalf has described this in Land, Landlords and the British Raj.

After the revolt. Governor-General Canning announced in 1858 that the lands of the rebels would be confiscated, and then the policy changed. The taluqdars were restored and given sanads, which confirmed their rights, and many received more land than before. The British India Association of Oudh was formed in 1861. The taluqdars became the main supports of the Raj in Awadh. This is a central point in a question on how the British dealt with landlords after 1857.

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Effects on peasants in Awadh. The restoration strengthened the power of the taluqdars over tenants. Rent rose and evictions were common. The Oudh Rent Act of 1886 gave some protection. In 1920 to 1922, the peasants of Awadh organised themselves in the Eka and Kisan Sabha movements. The student should link these with the earlier policy.

Feature	Detail
Origin	Holt Mackenzie’s Minute, 1819; Regulation VII, 1822
Reform	Regulation IX of 1833 under Bird
Region	North-Western Provinces, Punjab, Central Provinces
Who paid revenue	The village body, jointly
Special case	Awadh taluqdars restored after 1857
Main effects	Village records, patwari, landlord support in Awadh

8. Tenancy law and land transfer

The state passed laws on tenancy and on land transfer in response to unrest. A student should know the main laws in order.

The Bengal Rent Act of 1859. Act X of 1859 gave occupancy rights to tenants who had held land for twelve years and protected them from arbitrary rent increases. It was the first major tenancy law. Zamindars resisted, and the courts often favoured them. The Act was weak in practice, but it began the idea of tenant rights.

The Pabna agrarian leagues. In Pabna in eastern Bengal, tenants formed leagues in 1873 and refused to pay rents above the legal rate. Leaders such as Isan Chandra Roy and Keshab Chandra Roy led the movement. It was largely a legal protest, and it avoided violence. The movement helped to bring about the tenancy law of 1885.

The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. This Act defined classes of tenants, gave occupancy rights to those who held land for twelve years, set limits on rent increases and allowed tenants to transfer holdings in some cases. It was a compromise between landlords and

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tenants. A student should name the Act and the occupancy right.

Other provincial tenancy laws. The Oudh Rent Act of 1886, the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1887, the Madras Estates Land Act of 1908 and the Bombay Tenancy Act of 1939 followed. They gave some protection to tenants and set procedures for rent disputes. The laws differed by province and reflected local conflicts.

Laws on land alienation. The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 limited the right of moneylenders to seize land. The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 restricted sales of land by agricultural tribes to others. The Bundelkhand Alienation of Land Act of 1903 had a similar aim. These laws tried to keep land in the hands of cultivators.

Survey, settlement and records. The state kept detailed records through the revenue survey, the record of rights and the village registers. These records fixed claims in writing, and disputes were decided by them. The system gave the state knowledge of the countryside. It also gave an advantage to those who could use documents.

Litigation. Disputes over land, rent and debt filled the courts. Court fees, lawyers and delays made justice costly. The rich could use the law to prolong cases. Peasants complained that the courts worked against them. This point is important in a discussion of colonial law.

Limits of the laws. Tenancy laws did not stop rack-renting, eviction and illegal dues in many places. Enforcement was weak. It took the pressure of movements and later the legislatures of the 1930s to bring change.

Law	Year	Main provision
Bengal Rent Act	1859	Occupancy rights after twelve years
Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act	1879	Limits on seizure of land for debt
Bengal Tenancy Act	1885	Classes of tenants; limits on rent increases
Oudh Rent Act	1886	Protection of tenants in Awadh

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Punjab Land Alienation Act	1900	Land not to pass to non-agricultural tribes
Madras Estates Land Act	1908	Rights of ryots in estates

9. Social effects and agrarian protest

The new land relations changed rural society and led to protest. A student should link each class with its position.

Rise of the landlord. The zamindars, taluqdars and large owners became a powerful class. Many lived in towns and let their estates to managers and tenure-holders. They supported the colonial state and gained titles and honours. This class formed the base of organisations such as the British Indian Association of 1851.

The moneylender and trader. The creditor became a leading power in the village, especially in Ryotwari and Mahalwari areas. He often belonged to a different community from the farmers, and so debt could carry a communal colour. The anger against him appears in the Deccan riots.

Tenants, sharecroppers and labourers. Below the owners came tenants with limited rights, sharecroppers who gave up half the crop, and landless labourers. Their number grew as land passed to others and holdings divided. In Bengal, the bargadars of the north held land for half the produce, and the Tebhaga movement of 1946 demanded two-thirds.

Absentee landlordism and sub-infeudation. Landlords who lived in cities, and layers of middlemen between the owner and the farmer, took a share of the produce without contributing to farming. This reduced investment in the land. Many scholars see it as a reason for low productivity.

Early agrarian revolts. The Santhal Hul of 1855 to 1856 was against moneylenders and landlords. The Indigo revolt of 1859 to 1860 was against planters. The Pabna leagues of 1873 were against rent increases. The Deccan riots of 1875 were against debt. Each had its own cause but all arose from the new land relations.

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Twentieth-century movements. The Champaran satyagraha of 1917, the Kheda satyagraha of 1918, the Eka movement of 1921 to 1922, the Moplah rebellion of 1921 in Malabar and the Bardoli satyagraha of 1928 show the growth of organised peasant protest, often linked to the Congress. Gandhi’s leadership tied peasant demands to the national movement.

Kisan Sabhas and the left. The All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936 under Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, with leaders such as N. G. Ranga and, later, communists and socialists. It demanded abolition of zamindari, relief of debt and a fair rent. The Tebhaga movement of 1946 to 1947 in Bengal and the Telangana rising of 1946 to 1951 were its high points.

The Congress and land reform. The Congress resolutions at Karachi in 1931 and the Faizpur session of 1936 spoke of rent reduction and relief of debt. After the provincial governments of 1937, some tenancy laws were passed. After independence, the zamindari abolition acts of the 1950s ended the system of intermediaries. The student should connect the colonial system with later land reform.

Group	Position	Typical grievance
Landlords	Owners of estates, supports of the Raj	Revenue demand, tenant laws
Moneylenders	Creditors with legal power	Resentment of debtors
Occupancy tenants	Some rights, rising rents	Rent increases, eviction
Sharecroppers	Half the crop to the owner	Share of the produce
Landless labourers	No land, low wages	Wages, bondage

10. Scholarly interpretations and critiques

Historians differ on the aims and effects of colonial land policy. A student should know the main positions.

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Ideas and policy. Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha stress the part of British ideas about property, rent and improvement in shaping the settlements. Guha argues that the Permanent Settlement rested on a belief that landlords would invest. Their work links land policy with intellectual history.

Marxist view. A. R. Desai, R. P. Dutt and Bipan Chandra argue that the settlements created classes useful to colonial rule and that the burden fell on the peasantry. They treat land relations as a base of colonial exploitation and of the agrarian crisis.

Continuity and change. Irfan Habib stresses that the Mughal system also took a heavy share of produce, but he holds that the colonial system changed rights by treating land as saleable property and by raising the burden. The question of how much was new and how much old is a main point of debate.

Local studies. Sirajul Islam and Ratnalekha Ray on Bengal, Dharma Kumar on Madras, Ravinder Kumar on western India and Thomas Metcalf on Awadh show variation. They find that the Permanent Settlement did not ruin all zamindars or enrich all, that Ryotwari did not mean a free peasant everywhere, and that the taluqdars regained power. These studies caution against broad claims.

Cambridge and custom. David Washbrook, in his work on law and agrarian society, argues that colonial law made custom into written rules and thereby changed it. Bernard Cohn and others make a similar point about colonial knowledge. The idea is that the British did not just record custom but created it.

Peasant studies. Hamza Alavi on peasants and revolution, Ranajit Guha on peasant insurgency and Sugata Bose on rural Bengal show how land relations shaped class and protest. They stress peasant agency and the role of rich peasants as leaders.

Critiques. Some writers say that the stress on colonial change underrates earlier inequalities and that the evidence on rents and prices is thin. A balanced answer should give the strong claims and then their limits.

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Position	Main writers	Reading
Ideas and policy	Stokes, R. Guha	Settlements shaped by British theories
Marxist	Desai, R. P. Dutt, Chandra	New classes as props of rule
Continuity and change	Habib	Heavier burden, saleable property
Local studies	Islam, Ray, Kumar, Metcalf	Variation by region
Law and custom	Washbrook, Cohn	Custom made into written law
Peasant studies	Alavi, R. Guha, Bose	Class and protest

11. Importance and limitations of the study of colonial land relations

Importance

Explains the base of colonial finance. Land revenue funded the Army, the civil service and public works. The study shows why the state wished to secure a steady revenue and how this shaped each settlement. In exams, use it to open an answer on colonial economic policy.

Shows how property in land was made. The settlements changed layered rights into private property that could be sold. This was a basic legal and social change. A student who understands it can follow later debates on land titles and reform.

Links ideas and policy. The Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems reflect Whig, Utilitarian and Ricardian ideas about rent and property. The study therefore ties land policy to intellectual history, as in the work of Stokes and Guha.

Explains the structure of rural classes. Landlords, rich peasants, tenants, sharecroppers, moneylenders and labourers took shape under these laws. Knowing them helps to understand the politics of the countryside.

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Explains rural debt and land transfer. The sale of land for arrears and the mortgage of land to moneylenders show the link with the note on agriculture. The Deccan riots and the alienation laws are examples.

Throws light on agrarian protest. The Pabna leagues, the Eka movement, Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga and Telangana grew from conflicts over rent, revenue and tenure. The study helps a student to explain their causes.

Explains the British alliance with landed elites. The restoration of the taluqdars after 1857 and the support to princes and landlords show how the colonial state found local allies. This is a main point for questions on the social base of the Raj.

Gives the background to land reform. The abolition of zamindari in the 1950s, tenancy reform and ceilings on holdings were responses to the colonial structure. A student can link the past with the planning of independent India.

Shows regional variety. Bengal, Madras, Bombay, the Punjab and Awadh each had a different pattern. The study trains a student to avoid general claims and to use regional cases.

Teaches reading of law and records. Settlement reports, rent laws and survey records are rich sources. The topic shows how legal texts shape social life and how they must be read with care.

Limitations

Risk of treating the systems as fixed types. In practice, the three systems overlapped, and local variations were many. Zamindari, Ryotwari and Mahalwari were not pure forms. A student should note exceptions.

Dependence on official records. Settlement reports and revenue records were written by officers. They give the view of the state and say little about the actual practice of rent and custom. Scholars must read them with caution.

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Doubts about the effect of the Permanent Settlement. Historians differ on whether it ruined old zamindars, created a new class or left much unchanged. Local studies give mixed results. A student should not give a single answer.

Hard to separate causes. Rural distress arose from revenue, prices, debt, climate and social structure. It is hard to isolate the effect of land laws alone.

Colonial construction of custom. If law shaped custom, then records of custom may reflect colonial ideas. This makes it hard to know what earlier practice was.

Uneven attention to regions. Bengal, Madras and the Punjab have been studied more than Assam, Orissa or the princely states. General claims may not suit the whole country.

Limited voice of the poor. Tenants, sharecroppers and women appear little in the records. Their view must be drawn from protest, songs and oral sources.

Debate on continuity. The extent of change from Mughal times is disputed. Claims of a sharp break may undervalue continuity.

Present-day sensitivity. Land reform and land titles remain live issues. A student must keep the study of the past separate from present argument.

Changing scholarship. New work on law, caste and credit keeps revising earlier views. Reading more than one author is the best protection.

Illustrations

Illustration	Event or text	What it shows
Property for zamindars	Permanent Settlement, 1793	Fixed demand, saleable estates
Land for sale	The sunset law	Change in the landed class
Direct dealing with the ryot	Munro, Madras, 1820	Ryotwari system
Village responsibility	Regulation IX, 1833	Mahalwari settlement
Alliance with landlords	Taluqdars of Awadh after 1857	Landed support for the Raj

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Tenant protection	Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885	Occupancy rights
Debt and land	Deccan riots, 1875	Land passing to moneylenders
Peasant organisation	Kisan Sabha, 1936	Demand to end zamindari

12. Using this topic in examinations

What examiners expect

Question type	What to do	Key points to include
Define land relations	Define, give a scholar and an example	Rights between state, landlord, cultivator
Compare the three settlements	Use a table or parallel points	Region, payer, term, effect
Discuss the Permanent Settlement	Give aims, terms, effects	Cornwallis, sunset law, jotedars
Examine tenancy laws	Give laws in order	1859, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1908
Critically examine	Give views and critics	Guha; Stokes; Habib; Metcalf; Washbrook
Short note	One idea with a date	Taluqdars; sunset law; Bird’s settlement

Practice questions

1. Explain the meaning of land relations and describe the system before colonial rule.
2. Discuss the aims and effects of the Permanent Settlement.
3. Compare the Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems.
4. How did the British deal with the taluqdars of Awadh after 1857?
5. Examine the main tenancy laws of the nineteenth century.
6. Critically assess the debate on the effects of colonial land policy.

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7. Write short notes on: (a) the sunset law, (b) Regulation IX of 1833, (c) the Pabna leagues.

Structured outline for a long answer

Introduction. Define land relations, state that land revenue was the base of colonial finance, and name the three settlements.

Body. Describe the earlier system, the three settlements, the tenancy and alienation laws, the social effects and the protests. Add the scholarly debate with named authors.

Conclusion. State that colonial rule turned layered rights into private property, created new classes and left a legacy of inequality and unrest that independent India tried to address.

Sample answer (about 200 words)

Question: Discuss the Permanent Settlement and its effects.

Introduction. The Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. It fixed the land revenue for ever and made the zamindar the owner of the estate.

Body. Its aims were a steady income for the Company, a class of improving landlords and a base of political support. The zamindar paid a fixed sum and kept the rest of the rent. If he failed to pay by the due date, the estate was sold, which was known as the sunset law. Many old zamindars lost estates, and merchants and officials bought them. The state could not share in later rises in rent and prices. The cultivator had few legal rights, and a chain of tenure-holders grew between the zamindar and the farmer. Rents rose, and jotedars and sharecroppers emerged in some districts. The Bengal Rent Act of 1859 and the Tenancy Act of 1885 gave some protection to tenants. Historians such as Ranajit Guha criticise the Settlement, while Sirajul Islam and Ratnalekha Ray show mixed results.

Conclusion. The Settlement gave the state security and created a landlord class, but it left cultivators weak and the state with fixed revenue. It was abolished by the zamindari abolition laws of the 1950s.

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Quick check

1. Who introduced the Permanent Settlement? (Lord Cornwallis, 1793)
2. Which system dealt directly with the cultivator? (The Ryotwari system)
3. Which Regulation of 1833 reformed the Mahalwari system? (Regulation IX)
4. Which landholders were restored in Awadh after 1857? (The taluqdars)
5. Who wrote A Rule of Property for Bengal? (Ranajit Guha)

Common mistakes

Mixing the regions. The Permanent Settlement was in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Ryotwari in Madras and Bombay, and Mahalwari in the north.

Saying the zamindar paid nothing. He paid a fixed sum to the state and kept the rest.

Confusing the sunset law with the Settlement. The sunset law was a rule about payment on a fixed date.

Ignoring tenants. A good answer covers tenants, sharecroppers and labourers as well as landlords.

Giving no scholars. Add at least two named writers to each analytical answer.

13. Critical analysis

Property and power. The settlements gave legal property to some and took customary rights from others. Who gained depended on who was named as owner. This shows that law distributed power and was not only a record of rights.

Revenue and improvement. The aim of improvement by landlords did not work as planned in Bengal, where many landlords did not invest. The Ryotwari system’s aim of a free peasantry gave way to high assessment and debt. The gap between aim and result is a main point.

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Ideas and practice. British ideas of rent, property and improvement shaped the settlements, but local pressures and revenue needs changed them. Stokes stresses ideas, while Metcalf and local studies stress practice. A student can show both.

New classes and old. The settlements created landlord, moneylender and tenant classes, but they also built on old elites. In Awadh, the old taluqdars were restored. The system used the old order and changed it.

Law and custom. Colonial courts turned custom into written rules. Washbrook and Cohn hold that this changed custom, while others say that custom changed less. This debate shows the limits of the evidence.

The state's share. The fixed demand of Bengal lost value as prices rose, and the high demand of Ryotwari areas was hard to pay. The system thus failed both the state and the farmer in different ways.

Class and community. Debt and land transfer gave a communal colour to some disputes when creditors and debtors belonged to different communities. This point links land relations with the politics of identity.

Protest and reform. Peasant movements forced the state to pass tenancy and debt laws, and later the Congress took up land reform. This shows that colonial policy changed through conflict.

Legacy. The abolition of intermediaries, tenancy reform and ceilings in the 1950s and after sought to correct the colonial structure. Its partial success shows the depth of the inheritance.

Model concluding paragraph

Colonial land policy changed the nature of rights in land in India. Through the Permanent Settlement, the Ryotwari system and the Mahalwari system, it turned layered claims into saleable property, set a cash demand on the land and created new classes of landlords, moneylenders, tenants and labourers. The state gained revenue and allies, but it left

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cultivators weak and rural society unequal. Stokes and Guha stress the role of ideas, Marxist writers stress class and exploitation, Habib stresses the change from earlier practice, and local studies show variety. A balanced view sees colonial land relations as a system that served the needs of the state, shaped rural society for long, and gave rise to protest and later to reform.

14. UGC NET: key authors and books

Author	Book	Year	Relevance
A. R. Desai	Social Background of Indian Nationalism	1948	Classes created by colonial rule
Eric Stokes	The English Utilitarians and India	1959	Ideas behind land policy
Ranajit Guha	A Rule of Property for Bengal	1963	The Permanent Settlement
Irfan Habib	The Agrarian System of Mughal India	1963	Earlier land system
Dharma Kumar	Land and Caste in South India	1965	Land and labour in the south
Ravinder Kumar	Western India in the Nineteenth Century	1968	Bombay land revenue and society
Eric Stokes	The Peasant and the Raj	1978	Peasants and rebellion
Thomas Metcalf	Land, Landlords and the British Raj	1979	Awadh and the taluqdars
Sirajul Islam	The Permanent Settlement in Bengal	1979	Working of the Settlement
Ratnalekha Ray	Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760 to 1850	1979	Landholders and tenants
Burton Stein	Thomas Munro	1989	Origin of Ryotwari
Sugata Bose	Agrarian Bengal	1986	Rural society in Bengal
Ranajit Guha	Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India	1983	Peasant protest

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Revision tip. Make a timeline from 1765 to 1950s with the diwani of 1765, the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the Ryotwari of 1820, Regulation IX of 1833, the Rent Act of 1859, the Tenancy Act of 1885, the Land Alienation Act of 1900 and the zamindari abolition laws, and add a writer for each stage.

15. Key takeaways, sources and further reading

Key takeaways

- Land revenue was the main income of the colonial state, and land policy was built around it.
- Three systems were created: Permanent (Bengal), Ryotwari (Madras, Bombay) and Mahalwari (north India, Punjab).
- The settlements turned layered rights into private, saleable property and fixed revenue in cash.
- The Permanent Settlement created a landlord class and weak tenants, and the sunset law changed ownership.
- After 1857 the British restored the taluqdars of Awadh and relied on landed elites.
- Tenancy laws, such as those of 1859 and 1885, and alienation laws, such as those of 1879 and 1900, gave limited protection.
- Agrarian protest grew from Pabna and the Deccan to Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga and Telangana.
- Historians differ on the role of ideas, class, continuity and local variation.

Official sources

- Department of Land Resources, Government of India
- Ministry of Rural Development
- Census of India
- National Archives of India

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- eGyanKosh, IGNOU digital repository

Twenty books for further reading

1. Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*.
2. Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*.
3. Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*.
4. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556 to 1707*.
5. Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy, 1858 to 1914*.
6. A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*.
7. Thomas Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century*.
8. Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of its Operation, 1790 to 1819* .
9. Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760 to 1850*.
10. Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*.
11. Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire*.
12. Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth Century*.
13. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919 to 1947*.
14. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.
15. Daniel Thorner and Alice Thorner, *Land and Labour in India*.
16. Neil Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule*.
17. Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 2*.
18. Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*.
19. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885 to 1947*.

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20. Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India, 1857 to 2010*.

Editorial note

These notes are prepared for study and revision. Readers should check facts, dates and quotations against the original sources before citing them. For corrections or suggestions, please use the contact page. See also the disclaimer.

Frequently asked questions

What was the Permanent Settlement? It was the arrangement of 1793 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa that fixed the land revenue for ever and made the zamindar the owner of the estate.

What is the Ryotwari system? It was a settlement made directly with the cultivator, who paid revenue to the state, in force in Madras and Bombay.

What is the Mahalwari system? It was a settlement made with the village body, called the mahal, which was jointly liable for revenue in north India and the Punjab.

Who were the taluqdars of Awadh? They were large landholders who lost land at annexation, joined the revolt of 1857 and were restored to power afterwards as supports of the Raj.

What did the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 do? It gave occupancy rights to tenants of long standing and limited rent increases.

How do historians differ on colonial land policy? Stokes and Guha stress ideas, Marxist writers stress class, Habib stresses change from earlier practice, and local studies show variety.

Category: Colonialism and Nationalism in India

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