



**SIR THOMAS MUNRO: ACQUISITIONS OF ESTATE AND
IMPLEMENTATION OF RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN THE ESTATE OF
MADRAS PRESIDENCY, 1821-1827**

Dr.I.Elangovan, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D

Assistant Professor in History
Sri S.R.N.M College
Sattur, Virudhunagar District
Tamilnadu (India)

The Ryotwari Settlement was introduced in all *circar* lands in Madurai District and in the estates that were assumed for arrears. In fact, the permanent or zamindari settlement was there in existence in the twelve estates and fourteen *palayams* of Dindigul, ten *palayams* of Madurai, six *palayams* of Manaparai and in Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai zamindari. In the rest of the lands in the district, the ryotwari system came into operation from 1821. The system was adopted in all the estates whenever they were attached for arrears and later on extended to the estates that the Government purchased when they came up for sales on account of default.

Acquisitions of Estate and Change

Proposals for the purchase of permanently settled and their change into ryotwari tenure have been made from time to time, almost from the beginning of the nineteenth century. On several occasions that policy has been advocated, propounded and pursued, as being the only means of realizing the public revenue with regularity and what was more important, of improving the condition of the ryots. On several other occasions, on the other hand, that policy has not been countenanced either because of some practical difficulties which were found to exist or because of a desire to preserve intact the ancient nobility of the country. On almost all occasions, however, its various implications have been fully discussed.¹ In several instances they followed the former course; but in many instances they were compelled to have recourse to the latter course. Indeed, the districts were no longer enamored of the permanent settlement, whether it was to be made with the ancient zamindars, *mittadars* or village headmen, - a class of persons with whom both the Board of Revenue and the Government were then seriously thinking of making permanent settlements. They were convinced that their interests were best only under the ryotwari system, a system which had been with so much success introduced in the Baramahal and Ceded districts by Col. Read and Col. Munro.² They, therefore, ordered that no more



permanent settlements should be concluded and that in all the districts, lately acquired from the Nawab of Arcot, the ryotwari settlements should be introduced. The Court of Directors formulated a definite policy which was considered as a landmark governing the relations between the Government and the zamindars. They advocated the purchase of estates by the Government whenever they were brought to sale on account of arrears and ordered the introduction of ryotwari system in all such estates at the earliest practicable moment.³

These instructions were communicated to the Board of Revenue. The Board informed the Government that several estates had been advertised for sale and desired to know the principles which should guide the Collectors in bidding for them; that is, whether all the estates put up for sale were to be purchased and, if so, whether collectors should outbid all others or whether they were to bid only to the extent of the arrears. As to the extent of bidding, they remarked that the object of the Court of Directors being the better management of the estates, it was felt to be advisable to bid even beyond the extent of arrears; but they doubted whether that could be done, seeing that the Regulations authorised the sale of only such portion of the estate as would be adequate to realise the arrears.⁴

Reports of Sir Thomas Munro

For all other details the Board of Revenue referred the Collectors to its minute on 5 January 1818, on the ryotwari system and to the several reports of Sir Thomas Munro explaining the survey and settlement he had made in the Ceded Districts and Salem. The Board also stated to undertake gradually and in case of any difficulty the Collector of the Ceded Districts where proper survey had already been made were to be approached for assistance.⁵ In these instructions there were some principles which cannot be called ryotwari; such as the basing of the assessment on an average of the past collections alone and the system of joint responsibility of the ryots. The Government realised that owing to the scarcity of experienced resumed estates could not be undertaken with expedition. They were at the same time, eager to introduce the ryotwari system. They, therefore, directed that, where a survey and classification were impracticable, the assessment were to be based upon the average of past collections.⁶ Actually it was only in some estates in the Northern Circars that the surveys were not undertaken. In the reverted estates in Chingleput regular surveys were gradually conducted and the assessment was based only on the classification of soils.⁷ In the reverted estates in Salem, the assessment was based both on the survey and classification which had already been carefully made by Col.Read and Col.Munro. As regards joint responsibility, though it was intended by the Board and the Government as a security for the public revenue and adopted in some cases, it was soon abandoned as unjust at the instance of the Court of Directors. It should also be mentioned that there were some instances in which it was found impossible to



settle for a money assessment with the ryots individually or collectively. In such cases the Government was compelled to keep the villages under what was called the *amani* management, to collect the Government share of the produce in kind from ryots and to dispose of it in the best manner possible. This system which had several serious drawbacks was however, adopted only in the last resort to be replaced by the ryotwari system at the earliest opportunity.⁸

Introduction of Ryotwari Settlement

The ryotwari system was introduced also in some of the estates attached and managed by the Collectors or placed under the Court of Wards. It was not considered necessary to elaborate this point further than by giving a few examples. In 1823 the Board of Revenue ordered the introduction of the ryotwari settlement into the attached estates of Palconda, Madgole, Belgaum, Kurupam and Merangai. In 1820, the Board had asked the Collector of Vizagapatam to adopt the ryotwari system in the Vizianagaram estate when it was under his management. The Collector had replied that the zamindar was very anxious to continue the renting system and the Board had, therefore, very reluctantly agreed to continue that system.⁹ Regarding the estates under the Court of Wards, that Court, for instance, ordered in 1820 the introduction of the ryotwari settlement into the estates of Nuzvid, Bezwada and Devarakota. They adopted any system it thought best for the welfare of its wards and the interests of ryots. And it would seem that ryotwari settlements were made in these estates, except in certain hill villages. It must not; however, be imagined that all estates under the court of Ward were managed under the ryotwari system. Where the estates were under the court only for a short period, it was not considered worthwhile to adopt this system and the existing system was continued with such modifications as were deemed necessary.¹⁰

Thomas Munro and Entail Regulation

On the other side the Government was out to purchase all estates on the plea of arrears with the object of converting them into ryotwari. They tried, as far as possible, to preserve the ancient estates from disintegration. This was evidenced by their taking up temporarily under the Collector's management several ancient estates which were in embarrassed circumstances, instead of allowing them to be in liquidation of private, debts or arrears of revenue. This was also evidenced by a proposal made by Sir Thomas Munro in 1821 to introduce an Entail Regulation, the forerunner of the Impartible Estates Land Act of 1904.¹¹ He proposed that no ancient zamindari should be sold for arrears of public revenue or private debts; that every such zamindari according to its ancient usage should descend to a single heir, whether by descent or adoption; that no ancient zamindar should be arrested for his private debts; that every such zamindar should make provision for the maintenance of the relations of his family according

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to usage; that the Government alone could order the division of such zamindaries under special circumstances or decide all questions respecting succession or provision for relations.

It was not his intention to make this regulation compulsory; but to leave it to the option of the ancient zamindars.¹² The Regulation was, however, not passed into law partly because some of the ancient zamindars were against it, but mainly because Munro himself very soon changed his views regarding the zamindari system. He saw no remedy for the evils of the system or for the salvation of the ryots, except that of purchasing the estates, wherever possible, on account of the Government and converting them into ryotwari.¹³ As a result of this a large number of estates in arrears were put up for sale and purchased by the Government in the various districts. Some estates were also voluntarily surrendered to the Government by their proprietor, owing to their inability to pay their *peshkush*.¹⁴ Upon a tour of Northern Circars greatly struck by the agrarian discontent and poverty of the people, Sir Thomas Munro recorded his impressions and suggestion in an important minute on 7 January 1823 as follows:

On the whole it appears to me that, in order to render the local administration of the circars gradually more efficient, it will be advisable to restore no lands which have once reverted to Government.....

This portion of the minute relating to the acquisition of estates was circulated by the Board of Revenue to the Collectors of the Northern Circars.

Sir Thomas Munro's Minute

On 31 December 1824, Sir Thomas Munro again recorded another valuable minute on the condition of the country, in which he once more referred to the unsatisfactory state of the Northern Circars and the impossibility of protecting the rights of the ryots in those parts unless and until the estates reverted to the Government. Although Munro held such strong views regarding the evils of the permanent settlement, he was by no means for abolishing that system by a stroke of the pen.¹⁵ He did not consider that the circumstances at that time demanded the adoption of such a drastic measure. What he wanted was that, whenever opportunities occurred, the estates should be acquired and annexed to the Government lands. That such were his views was clear from the attitude he adopted towards a proposal for the wholesale acquisition of estates, which was shortly afterwards received from one of the collectors. This bold proposal emanated from Roberts, the Collector of Masulipatam. In a letter dated on 3 October 1824, he suggested to the Board of Revenue that the best remedy for the evils of the zamindari system was that of taking over all the estates in his district and prisoning off the zamindars.¹⁶ He explained how, under the permanent settlement it was impossible either to realize the public revenue punctually or to protect the ryots against the exactions of the zamindars. With his fields overrun "by a crowd of

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ephemeral sabbandi” squatting upon his land and preying upon his purse the ryot had little hope of improving his fortune. At the same time, the state had no guarantee for its public revenue. He pointed out that even in a season of signal advantages several of the zamindars had fallen into arrears. And this was chiefly because they had diverted the collections to feed their vanity and extravagance. Indeed, he could see no better prospects so long as the Government perpetuated the zamindari system by undertaking to manage the estates for realizing arrears. This method of bolstering up the zamindaris frustrated, in his opinion, the very objects which it was intended to avoid by the permanent settlement, viz. the relief to the Government from direct management and the certainty of collection of revenue. The Board, however, was sanguine that, as the zamindars gradually realised the beneficial effects of a moderate assessment in the estates which had reverted to the Government, they would be induced to moderate their own demands upon the ryots and to contribute to the prosperity of their estates. The Board likewise relied upon Regulation V of 1822 which had just then been passed, and which, the Board conceived, put it with the power of the Collector to compel the zamindars to issue *pattah* limiting and defining their demands upon the ryots, by making distraint illegal, unless *pattah* had been tendered.¹⁷

But the Government, at this time presided over by Munro, did not entertain the extreme views of the Board they however, agreed with the Board that Robert’s scheme was “rashly formed and wholly unfit to be acted upon” under the prevailing circumstances. They also agreed that the zamindari rights were entitled to the same regard as the other rights of private property. But they observed;

All such rights, indeed, are liable to be modified by legislative enactments for the general good. But they ought not to be interfered with except upon very sure grounds of policy and upon occasions where interference with them is necessary the greatest care should be taken to render to the parties substantial justice”.¹⁸

From this it is evident that, far from accepting the view that the permanent settlement could never be altered, the Government held that they had an undoubted right to change it for the general good of the country. Although it was considered unwise to acquire estates wholesale in the manner suggested by Roberts, the Government was often compelled to acquire a large number of estates on account of arrears. For, maladministration and accumulation of arrears were by no means confined to the Masulipatam estates about which he had remarked. They were equally common; indeed, they existed in a more aggravated form, in the estates of the adjoining districts of Rajamundry and Guntur.¹⁹

Under this system the government made a direct settlement of revenue with the cultivators of the lands. Intermediaries were excluded and the government received its dues in the form of money for lands under cultivation. Munro expressed with a sense of satisfaction that the land in most of the areas under



the Madras Province was occupied by a vast mass of small proprietors of ryots. The Ryotwari system greatly expanded the powers of the revenue servants, for they were empowered to decide the quality of the land and rate of assessment. A moderate assessment mostly depended upon the ability of the ryots to have the favour of the public officials such as the corrupt *karnam* and the tahsildar. No matter whether the season was good or bad and whether the ryot cultivated the entire field or not, the administrators had collected harshly from the cultivators. It resulted in the miseries of the ryots such as oppression, torture and forced labour. Finally, they were deprived of their possessions. Besides, the system paved the way for the agricultural indebtedness. The ryots demanded money to buy seeds to cultivate the fields and to remit taxes. Therefore, they approached moneylenders and borrowed money even at a high rate of interest. They were given no remission even during adverse seasons. The debt-ridden and poverty stricken ryots fell victims to the oppression of the Government.²⁰

Modern Ryotwari System

The different experiment in revenue administration gradually led the permanent settlement to its decline. Considering Ryotwari settlement as the substitute for permanent settlement, the Government embarked upon its further progress. Nevertheless, its inherent defect reminded the government to effect change in it. The implementation of one system of revenue in the midst of the permanent settlement brought the latter's gradual decline. The overall decline took place by 1827 with the end of the Governorship of Thomas Munro since he carried out the implementation of ryotwari settlement in the non-permanently settled areas vigorously. After Munro, the ryotwari settlement so concluded continued unchanged till the introduction of the modern survey and settlement in 1885. The improved system known as the Modern Ryotwari System continued to operate till date.²¹

Untimely Death of Munro

Munro hoped that the support of the Government would foster the growth of indigenous schools and thought that the influential classes would be benefitted by it. He also hoped that these would serve as models to native schools. Munro's untimely death came as a serve below to the cause of education. Though no Governor of Madras came to the office with such a thorough knowledge of the country, few, if any, before or since, have made as extensive and prolonged tours throughout the Presidency as Munro did. In the course of frequent tours he visited every District in the Presidency, and even in the hottest seasons of the year have set an example to district officers when in times of famine or other difficulties the presence of the head of the Government was likely to inspire zeal on the part of officials and confidence in the hearts of the people. In the autumn of 1822 he made a tour which lasted three months,

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through Nellore and the Northern Circars, i.e. from Madras to the Gumsul Hills in Ganjam, and left on record a long and most interesting minute describing his tour and his interviews with the zamindars, the Rajas of Vizagapatam, Venkatagiri and Kalahasti. Embodying in it the result of his observations and views, many of which have been rendered additionally interesting by incidents that have occurred in recent years in the places they visited the Baramahal, 'both for the purpose of seeing the inhabitants and making some inquiries into the state of the country, and of revisiting scenes where above thirty years before he had spent seven very happy years'.²²

In 1823 he made a tour through the Ceded Districts; he was glad to get away from Cuddapah. In 1826 he renewed his application to be relieved of the Governorship and looked forward to the arrival of his successor early in the following year. Lady Munro, however, was obliged to leave for Europe before he could accompany her, as the illness of their second son, Campbell Munro, who had been born in September 1823, rendered an immediate departure from India the sole chance of saving the child's life. Lady Munro left Madras in March 1826, but they never met again, it being the fate of Munro, like that of many Anglo-Indian, to be buried in the land to which he had given the best part of his life within a twelve month of the time when he hoped to return to the country of his birth. In the autumn of 1826 Munro made a tour through the Districts of Chingleput, South Arcot, Tanjore, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Coimbatore, and thence up to the Nilgiris. To Munro's great disappointment a delay occurred in the appointment of his successor, and as he could not be relieved before October, he decided on paying a farewell visit to the Ceded Districts, and set out from Madras towards the end of May 1827. After halting some time at Anantapur, the Governor and his party reached Goody on 4 July 1827. Here several sepoys were carried off by cholera; on the following morning the camp was moved, and on the 6th the party reached Pattikonda, in the Kurnool District, twenty-two miles from Gooty. A few hours after their arrival, Munro himself was attacked with cholera; the symptoms were at first not alarming, and in the middle of the day hopes were entertained of his recovery. During one of his rallies he exclaimed, in a tone of peculiar selectness, that it was 'almost worthwhile to be ill in order to be so kindly nursed. In the evening he grew worse, and at about half-past nine on the night of 6 July, 1827, he calmly passed away. Notwithstanding considerable and growing discomfort, Munro spent the next morning at business and only when his symptoms became very distressing did he suspend that and ordered all from his tent to leave so as to prevent further contagion. By nightfall his health worsened and died.'²³

Three days after Sir Thomas Munro's death, Captain Macleod, who commanded the escort, fell a victim to cholera. At sunset on the evening previous to his decease, that gentleman sent his native officers and assuring them that he could not recover, enjoined them to take great care of the men, he then

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minutely inquired whether all their accounts were settled; and being answered in the affirmative, he raised his hand with difficulty to his forehead and made them a salam. Shortly afterwards, he colluded to their march on the following morning and besought Col. Carfare, who was present, “that he would allow a small party to remain and see him decently interned”. He was informed that in the event of any such melancholy service becoming necessary, his body would be sent back to Gooty. “No, No” exclaimed the dying man, “I am perfectly satisfied, it is too much honour for me to be buried near Sir Thomas Munro”. The news of Munro’s death was received in Madras with feelings of deep regret by all classes. The Government issued a Gazette Extraordinary on 9 July 1827 with the following passage:

His sound and vigorous understanding, his transcendent talents, his indefatigable application, his varied stores of knowledge, his attainments as an oriental scholar, his intimate acquaintance with the habits and feelings of the native soldiers and inhabitants generally, his patience, temper, facility of access, and kindness of manner, would have ensured him distinction in any line of employment. These qualities were admirably adapted to the duties which he had to perform in organizing the resources and establishing the tranquillity of those provinces where his latest breath has been drawn, and where he had long been known by the appellation of the Father of the People.

At Pattikonda government caused a grove of trees to be planted and a well or tank with stone steps to be constructed near the spot where he died; and at Gooty a similar well and a large choultry or rest-house for native travellers were constructed, and for several years food was distributed gratuitously in his honour at it; within the ‘Munro Choultry’ is hung a copy of the large full-length portrait of Munro by Sir Martin Shee, copies of which also adorn the walls of the cutcherry at Bellary and other public buildings in the Ceded Districts and the Revenue Board Office, Madras. It was not till 1839 that the equestrian statue of Munro by Sir Francis Chantrey arrived at Madras, on October 23 of that year it was exposed to public view with all due ceremony, after having been erected in one of the most conspicuous sites in Madras.

The period between 1821 and 1827 may be considered a period of the worst experience for Tamilnadu of the Colonial land revenue policies of the English. The same could be said of the rural policy of the early English administrators like Sir Thomas Munro since he first carried out the implementation of Ryowari Settlement in the non-permanently settled areas vigorously. The ryotwari settlement had reached a stage at which ‘subject to the payment of a stated proportion of the produce... the proprietary right of the ryot in the soil of his holdings was absolute and complete. The ryotwari system did produce a lot of suffering and economic consequences; but it took time for the intermediary rent collecting zamindar to be abolished.



End Notes:

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3. Court of Directors, 6 June 1814, letter to Madras Council, R.D.F.E., Vol.3, para.109.
4. Board of Revenue, 6 January 1817, General Report to Governor-in-Council, Vo.8, paras.954-959.
5. Board of Revenue, 18 April 1822, letter to Madras Council, Salem Collectorate Records, Vol.115, p.25.
6. Ibid., 5 Jan.1818, General Report to Governor-in-Council, Vol.9, paras.334-335.
7. Ibid., 5 January 1824, General Report to Governor-in-Council, Vol.12, para.367.
8. Court of Directors, 12 December 1821, Letter to Madras Council, R.D.F.E., paras.4-6.
9. Board of Revenue, 24 April 1820, Proceedings, Revenue Consultation, (hereinafter referred to as R.C.), No.24, paras.8-10.
10. Ibid., 12 October 1820, Proceedings, R.C., No.17, paras.6-7.
11. Ibid., 24 January 1833, General Report to Governor-in-Council, Vol.20, paras.51-52.
12. Ibid., 28 February 1823, Proceedings, R.C., Vol.288, p.651.
13. Baliga, B.S., *op.cit.*, pp.53-54.
14. Board of Revenue, 25 July 1836, General Report to Governor-in-Council, Vol.13, para-514.
15. Munros Minute, 31 December 1824, in the Selection of Papers from the Records at the East India House, Vol.III, para.36.
16. Board of Revenue, 8 November 1824, Proceedings, R.C., Vol.1001, p.9705.
17. Ibid., 14 April 1825, Letter to Madras Council, Masulipatam Collectorate Records (hereinafter referred to as M.C.R.), Vol.4074, p.184-187.
18. Ibid., 17 May 1825, Letter to Madras Council, M.C.R., Vol.4074, pp.255-256.
19. Ibid., 17 June 1844, Proceedings, R.C., Vol.1919, p.8163.
20. Mukherjee, N., *The Ryotwari System in Madras, 1792-1827*, Madras, 1962, p.70.
21. History of Land Revenue Settlement and Abolition of Intermediary Tenures in Tamilnadu, para.65, p.52.
22. John Bradshaw, *Sir Thomas Munro*, New Delhi, 1894, pp.207-208.
23. History of Land Revenue Settlement and Abolition of Intermediary Tenures in Tamilnadu, para.65, p.63.