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Land Revenue Policies and Peasant Resistance in Colonial India

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Abstract

Land revenue lay at the heart of British colonial administration in India. It provided the state with a major source of income, but it also reshaped older relationships among cultivators, landlords, village communities, creditors and the state. This paper examines the relationship between colonial land revenue policies and peasant resistance from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Rather than treating the Permanent Settlement, ryotwari and mahalwari systems simply as administrative arrangements, the study considers how they reorganised property rights, strengthened particular intermediaries, expanded the importance of cash payments and legal enforcement, and exposed cultivators to new forms of economic insecurity. The paper adopts a qualitative, historical and comparative research design based entirely on secondary scholarship and selected published primary materials. Particular attention is given to the Santal rebellion, Indigo Revolt, Pabna agrarian movement, Deccan Riots, Kheda Satyagraha and Bardoli Satyagraha. The analysis shows that peasant resistance cannot be explained by revenue rates alone. Revenue demands became politically explosive when combined with indebtedness, rent enhancement, commercialisation, crop failure, coercive contracts, insecure tenancies and unequal access to colonial courts. Resistance consequently took diverse forms—from armed rebellion and attacks on creditors to litigation, rent strikes and disciplined refusal to pay revenue. By the twentieth century, local agrarian grievances were increasingly connected with organised nationalism. The paper argues that colonial land policy was therefore not merely a fiscal mechanism: it became one of the principal arenas in which authority, property and rural political rights were contested in colonial India.

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Introduction

Agriculture supported the majority of the population of colonial India, and control over agricultural surplus was therefore fundamental to British rule. After the East India Company acquired extensive revenue-collecting powers in eastern India during the second half of the eighteenth century, the organisation of land revenue became more than an administrative question. It was tied to the larger problem of how colonial authority would define property, identify those responsible for paying the state and create institutions through which rural resources could be assessed and collected. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was the most famous early experiment. It fixed the government demand on zamindars in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in perpetuity and recognised them as proprietors responsible for revenue payment. Later arrangements differed considerably. Ryotwari settlement in much of Madras and Bombay attempted to establish a direct fiscal relationship between the state and individual cultivators, whereas mahalwari arrangements in the North-Western Provinces placed revenue responsibility upon village bodies or groups of co-sharers (Guha, 1963; Roy, 2026; Washbrook, 1981). The systems were institutionally different, but each translated complex agrarian relationships into categories that could be surveyed, recorded, taxed and defended through colonial law.

The problem is that the consequences of these arrangements cannot be understood solely from their formal rules. A permanently fixed government demand did not mean a permanently fixed burden on Bengal's tenants. Nor did direct settlement with a ryot necessarily give an ordinary cultivator meaningful economic security. Revenue demands had to be met within rural economies exposed to harvest uncertainty, changing commodity prices and widespread dependence on credit. Colonial courts, written contracts and legally enforceable debt claims also changed the balance of power among cultivators, landlords and moneylenders. The fiscal system thus interacted with tenancy, commercialisation, caste, local authority and the credit market.

Much historical writing has examined individual revenue systems or particular peasant rebellions in considerable detail. Yet separating fiscal policy from agrarian protest can obscure an important historical connection: resistance usually emerged not from a tax demand in isolation but from the way that revenue administration reordered relationships between the cultivator and other holders of rural power. Recent scholarship has further complicated older narratives by showing that colonial property regimes emerged through processes of experimentation, information gathering and institutional negotiation rather than through the simple application of a single British blueprint (Roy, 2026).

Against this background, the present paper has four closely related objectives: to examine the institutional character of the principal colonial land revenue systems; to identify the mechanisms through which revenue collection affected agrarian relations and indebtedness; to compare the causes and forms of peasant resistance across different regions and periods; and to assess how local agrarian protest became connected with organised anti-colonial politics. These objectives raise four questions. How did colonial land settlements redistribute rights and obligations in rural India? Under what circumstances did fiscal pressure become collective resistance? Why did some movements attack landlords or creditors while others directly challenged the colonial state? Finally, how did the repertoire of peasant politics change between the nineteenth-century rebellion and the twentieth-century no-revenue campaign?

The paper approaches these questions through the concepts of colonial political economy and peasant agency. Revenue policy is treated not as an automatic cause of rebellion but as part of an institutional environment that structured opportunities, vulnerabilities and conflicts. Peasants, equally, are not represented as an undifferentiated class. Cultivators varied by caste, landholding, tenancy status, access to credit and connections with local elites. This distinction matters because agrarian resistance was often selective: peasants could oppose a moneylender while appealing to the government, invoke colonial law against a landlord, or later use refusal of state revenue as an explicitly anti-colonial weapon.

Literature Review

The historiography of colonial agrarian India has moved considerably beyond the once-common practice of evaluating revenue settlements mainly in terms of administrative efficiency. Ranajit Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* remains fundamental because it examined the intellectual assumptions behind the Permanent Settlement rather than treating it simply as a defective tax arrangement. Guha (1963) argued that colonial officials attempted to construct a particular conception of landed property through the settlement. More recent work has returned to the question while questioning overly linear accounts of institutional change. Roy (2026), for example, places the Bengal land debate within the larger formation of a colonial fiscal state and emphasises the problems of political authority and information that confronted Company officials. Together, these works demonstrate that land settlement was simultaneously fiscal, political and ideological.

Eric Stokes shifted attention more directly towards agrarian society and rebellion. His essays in *The Peasant and the Raj* showed that rural participation in protest could only be understood by reconstructing local social structures rather than assuming a uniform peasant response to colonialism (Stokes, 1978). Washbrook (1981) added another important dimension by examining how colonial law altered agrarian society. Property rights, contracts, civil courts and revenue administration interacted in ways that strengthened some social claims and weakened others. The significance of this approach lies in its refusal to treat either "tradition" or "colonial modernity" as internally coherent categories.

Studies of western India have produced a particularly useful debate. Kumar (1965) associated the Deccan Riots of 1875 with major changes in relations between cultivating peasants and moneylenders under British rule. Charlesworth (1972), however, warned against turning the riots into evidence for an overly general theory of rural dispossession. His later study of the Bombay Presidency emphasised regional variation, credit relationships and the uneven effects of commercialisation (Charlesworth, 1985). The disagreement is valuable because it demonstrates that indebtedness alone cannot explain when or where collective violence occurred. The identity of creditors, village solidarities, fluctuations in agricultural markets and the legal machinery for debt recovery all mattered.

Research on Bengal similarly complicates simple explanations. Ray (2004) reassessed the indigo industry by examining its commercial development as well as its social costs, while Roy (2011) examined indigo through the interaction between commerce and colonial law. Such work helps explain why the Indigo Revolt cannot be reduced to a straightforward dispute over land tax. Advances, contracts, coercion and planter power created a distinctive agrarian relationship in which cultivators had difficulty withdrawing from an unprofitable crop.

A different historiographical direction emerged from Subaltern Studies. Guha (1983) challenged histories that explained peasant action principally through elite political leadership. His analysis insisted that insurgency possessed its own languages of solidarity, authority and resistance. That intervention remains useful, although regional studies show the need to distinguish among armed rebellion, legal mobilisation, rent refusal and nationalist satyagraha. The Pabna movement, for example, relied extensively upon organised and legalistic forms of resistance to landlord demands, illustrating that rural agency did not necessarily take insurgent or violent form (Sengupta, 1974).

For the twentieth century, Dhanagare (1983) and Hardiman (1981) demonstrate how agrarian conflicts became entangled with nationalist mobilisation. Hardiman’s study of Kheda is especially important because it shows that Gandhian mobilisation worked through pre-existing social relations and local political networks rather than simply descending upon an otherwise politically inactive countryside. The gap that remains, and which this paper addresses comparatively, lies in connecting these different bodies of scholarship. Revenue settlement, rural credit, property law and peasant politics need to be read as interconnected processes whose significance changed over time.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative, historical, analytical and comparative study. It is entirely secondary-data based and does not claim to use interviews, surveys, questionnaires or original field research. The spatial scope is colonial British India, although detailed analysis necessarily concentrates on selected regions where the relationship between agrarian policy and collective resistance can be reconstructed with reasonable confidence: Bengal and the Santal areas of eastern India, the Bombay Deccan, and Gujarat.

The evidence consists of established historical monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, bibliographic and archival scholarship, and selected published primary material such as the Bengal Permanent Settlement provisions, the findings associated with inquiries into the Deccan and Bardoli disputes, and contemporary parliamentary discussion of the Bardoli revenue campaign. The study uses comparison by historical mechanism rather than statistical comparison. Five mechanisms guide the analysis: the definition of property rights, the level and method of revenue assessment, dependence on cash and credit, the legal enforceability of agrarian obligations, and the organisation of collective resistance.

The selected movements are not treated as a representative statistical sample of all peasant protest in colonial India. They are historically significant cases that allow contrasts among different agrarian structures and forms of mobilisation. The approach also recognises limitations in the historical record. Colonial documentation frequently described resistance through administrative categories such as "disturbance", "riot" or "outbreak", categories that reflected official concerns as much as peasant intentions. Moreover, revenue policy cannot always be separated neatly from rent, debt, commercial agriculture or religious and caste relationships. These limitations make causal caution essential: the study seeks to identify connections and mechanisms rather than claim that land revenue by itself caused each movement.

Analysis and Discussion

Colonial Revenue Settlements and the Reconstruction of Rural Authority

The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was intended to provide predictable state revenue while creating a body of recognised landed proprietors. Zamindars were responsible for paying a permanently fixed government assessment and obtained greatly strengthened proprietary status. The arrangement therefore stabilised one aspect of the state's fiscal claim, but it did not freeze the obligations of the cultivators beneath the zamindar. The distinction is crucial. Peasant discontent in permanently settled Bengal often emerged over rents, illegal cesses, occupancy rights and landlord control rather than over direct payment of government land revenue (Guha, 1963; Sengupta, 1974).

Ryotwari settlement rested on a different institutional principle. In large parts of Madras and Bombay, the colonial state sought to settle directly with the individual cultivator or recognised holder. In theory, the absence of a zamindari intermediary could appear to protect the ryot. In practice, direct fiscal liability exposed cultivators to periodic assessment and the obligation to find cash with which to meet state demands. The importance of this system was particularly visible in the Bombay Presidency, where agriculture, land revenue, credit and later commodity-market fluctuations became tightly interconnected (Charlesworth, 1985).

Mahalwari arrangements, developed during the early nineteenth century, made the village or estate the unit of settlement and imposed joint fiscal responsibility on its recognised co-sharers or representatives. This system became especially important in the North-Western Provinces. It differed from the Permanent Settlement because assessments could be revised and from ryotwari because responsibility was organised around a collective fiscal unit. The diversity of these regimes cautions against speaking of a single British "land system". What united them was the colonial state's continuing effort to turn locally complex claims over land and produce into recordable rights, assessed obligations and legally enforceable payments. Contemporary scholarship confirms that ryotwari became extensive in Madras and Bombay while village or mahalwari settlement became especially associated with north India (Roy, 2026).

Revenue arrangement	Principal fiscal unit	Major regions	Important agrarian tension
Permanent Settlement	Zamindar/estate	Bengal, Bihar and parts of eastern India	Rent enhancement, landlord power and insecure tenant claims
Ryotwari	Individual recognised cultivator/holder	Large parts of Madras and Bombay	Direct state assessment, revenue pressure and dependence on credit
Mahalwari	Village/mahal or body of co-sharers	North-Western Provinces and other northern areas	Collective liability and periodically revised assessment

The table summarises institutional differences; it should not be read as implying uniform social outcomes within each region.

Revenue, Credit and Commercialisation

The connection between taxation and resistance becomes clearer when land revenue is placed within the everyday economy of cultivation. Agricultural income was seasonal and uncertain. Revenue obligations, however, were institutionally defined and had to be met according to administrative schedules. When harvests failed or commodity prices fell, borrowing could bridge the gap between agricultural production and fiscal payment. Credit was therefore not external to the revenue system; for many cultivators it helped make that system function.

Colonial law changed the consequences of borrowing. Written bonds and civil courts gave creditors institutional mechanisms through which debts could be enforced. Washbrook (1981) showed more broadly that the legal order established by colonial rule reshaped agrarian relations rather than simply providing a neutral framework within which pre-existing relations continued. A cultivator’s vulnerability could therefore arise from the interaction of revenue assessment with a debt originally contracted for cultivation, household expenditure or previous tax payments.

Commercialisation intensified the uncertainty. Cultivation for markets could offer opportunities during favourable price cycles, but it also exposed cultivators to changes far beyond the village. This became strikingly visible in the western Indian cotton economy during and after the American Civil War. Rising demand had encouraged credit and cotton cultivation; when the exceptional conditions ended, cultivators entered a much less favourable price and credit environment. Historians disagree about how far this produced widespread land alienation, but they agree that the interaction of debt, markets and legal enforcement is essential for understanding the Deccan crisis (Charlesworth, 1972, 1985; Kumar, 1965).

This evidence also challenges a mechanically deterministic interpretation. Heavy revenue did not produce rebellion everywhere, and indebted peasants did not invariably attack creditors. Protest required collective organisation, shared interpretations of injustice and targets against whom action appeared meaningful. Fiscal pressure created vulnerability; politics determined how that vulnerability was expressed.

Eastern India: From the Santal Hul to Indigo and Pabna

The Santal rebellion of 1855–1856 illustrates the difficulty of separating colonial taxation from the wider transformation of rural society. Santal communities had expanded cultivation in the eastern frontier, but their incorporation into colonial structures brought them increasingly into contact with landlords, moneylenders, traders, police and revenue institutions. Debt, land alienation and the intrusion of outsiders became sources of intense resentment. Led prominently by Sidhu and Kanhu, the rebellion attacked figures identified with this oppressive order and ultimately confronted Company authority itself (Datta, 1940; Guha, 1983). The Hul therefore cannot be described adequately as a simple anti-tax revolt. Agrarian exploitation, ethnicity, religious mobilisation and opposition to colonial authority overlapped. Scholarship continues to debate the relative weight that should be assigned to its class, tribal and religious dimensions, which itself warns against reducing the rebellion to a single economic cause.

The Indigo Revolt of 1859–1860 emerged from a different agrarian setting. Indigo cultivation in Bengal operated through advances and contracts linking cultivators to European factories and planters. Because indigo often offered cultivators poor returns relative to alternative crops, the advance system could leave them tied to production that they increasingly sought to avoid. Planter power was reinforced in places by physical coercion and resort to legal mechanisms. Resistance centred increasingly on refusing to sow indigo, thereby attacking the productive basis of the plantation system rather than merely protesting after the crop had been cultivated (Ray, 2004; Roy, 2011). Research on Bengal's indigo economy confirms that coercive relations surrounding advances and production were central to the conflict.

The Pabna agrarian disturbances beginning in 1873 demonstrate yet another political repertoire. Here, ryots organised against landlord attempts to enhance rents and undermine occupancy claims. Agrarian leagues, collective mobilisation and litigation became important weapons. Sengupta (1974) emphasises the organised and largely legalistic character of the movement. Instead of rejecting every aspect of colonial authority, peasants could invoke legal rights and make use of colonial institutions against landlords whose claims they considered illegitimate. The movement consequently reveals an important contradiction of the colonial agrarian order: the same legal system that strengthened property claims could create a language through which cultivators defended occupancy and challenged rent enhancement.

Taken together, the Santal, Indigo and Pabna movements make a broader point. Permanent Settlement did not generate one predictable kind of protest. Its longer agrarian environment included conflict over land alienation, commercial crop coercion, rents and tenancy. Peasant politics ranged from armed rebellion to crop refusal and legal organisation.

The Deccan Riots of 1875: Revenue, Debt and the Moneylender

The Deccan Riots offer perhaps the clearest demonstration of why revenue and credit need to be analysed together. The disturbances began at Supa in Poona district in May 1875 and spread through parts of Poona and Ahmednagar. The principal targets were moneylenders, particularly Gujarati and Marwari creditors. Peasants sought debt bonds and account records and, in several places, destroyed documentary evidence through which creditors could enforce their claims. Contemporary and later interpretations consequently focused heavily on rural indebtedness.

Yet the causes remain contested. Kumar (1965) placed considerable emphasis on the transformations created by colonial administration and the deteriorating position of cultivators in relation to moneylenders. Charlesworth (1972) challenged an interpretation that treated the riots as straightforward evidence of a general agrarian collapse. He observed, among other things, that violence was selective: not every creditor was treated in the same way, and outsiders were particularly vulnerable. The dispute is analytically useful because both interpretations move attention away from a monocausal explanation.

A plausible reading is that several pressures converged. Cultivators required credit, agricultural markets had been destabilised after the Civil War cotton boom, debt relations had become embedded within a stronger structure of contractual enforcement, and land-revenue obligations continued to place claims upon agricultural income. When credit relationships deteriorated, peasants attacked the actors through whom their immediate dependence was experienced—the moneylenders—rather than necessarily attacking revenue offices. The Deccan case thus demonstrates the mediated character of colonial extraction. State policy could contribute to conditions of vulnerability even where the immediate object of protest was a private creditor.

The official reaction is also revealing. The disturbances encouraged inquiries into agricultural indebtedness and contributed to legislation intended to offer agricultural debtors some protection, including the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879. The wider significance was not that colonial government abandoned revenue collection but that rural protest forced it to recognise that unrestrained operation of courts and credit relations could itself threaten agrarian stability.

From Local Agrarian Grievance to No-Revenue Politics: Kheda and Bardoli

By the early twentieth century, resistance to land revenue increasingly intersected with organised nationalism. The transition did not erase local agrarian interests. Rather, nationalist organisations supplied networks, publicity, legal knowledge and leadership through which grievances could be converted into coordinated political action.

The Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 is an important example. Poor agricultural conditions and crop failure generated demands for suspension or remission of revenue. When the colonial administration did not grant the relief demanded by cultivators and their supporters, activists developed a campaign of revenue refusal associated with Gandhi and a group of Gujarati organisers, among them Vallabhbhai Patel. Government of India historical material likewise identifies crop failure, revenue demands and the no-revenue campaign as central elements of the episode. Hardiman's (1981) detailed reconstruction of Kheda, however, prevents the movement from being reduced to a story of famous nationalist leaders. Local political networks and socially influential cultivating groups played a central part in mobilisation.

Bardoli in 1928 developed the strategy more systematically. Resistance followed a substantial revision of land-revenue assessments in Bardoli taluka of the Bombay Presidency. Peasants demanded reconsideration and an impartial inquiry; under Vallabhbhai Patel's leadership they organised collective refusal to pay the disputed assessment. Colonial authorities used attachment and forfeiture of property to enforce payment, but the campaign maintained extensive participation and eventually secured an inquiry and reconsideration of the assessment. Parliamentary records from 1928 confirm both the refusal to accept the revised land assessments and the large scale of official forfeiture proceedings.

Bardoli differed sharply from the Deccan violence of 1875. Bonds were not seized and destroyed; disciplined non-payment became the principal weapon. Yet there was continuity beneath the difference in tactics. Both episodes centred on the cultivator's claim that legally enforceable obligations had become socially unjust. What changed was the political environment. By 1928, newspapers, Congress organisation, local committees, lawyers and nationalist networks allowed a revenue dispute to be publicised as a wider test of colonial legitimacy.

The contrast also shows why it is misleading to imagine nationalism simply replacing agrarian politics. Successful mobilisation still depended upon rural social structures. Hardiman (1981) and Charlesworth (1980) caution that different strata of the peasantry possessed unequal capacities for prolonged resistance. Cultivators with some control over land, resources and village networks were often better able to sustain tax refusal than the poorest labourers or insecure tenants. A movement could therefore be genuinely anti-colonial while simultaneously reflecting inequalities within the rural population.

Peasant Agency and the Changing Repertoire of Resistance

Across these cases, no single line runs mechanically from high revenue to revolt. Instead, colonial revenue policy created arenas of conflict whose expression depended on local agrarian structure. Where landlord authority was central, resistance often focused on rent and tenancy. Where revenue was assessed more directly on cultivators, the state could become an immediate target. Where peasants depended heavily on credit, hostility might be directed at creditors even though fiscal and legal institutions formed part of the background.

The repertoire of resistance was equally varied. Santals took up arms; Bengal cultivators refused indigo cultivation; Pabna tenants formed associations and pursued collective legal strategies; Deccan peasants attacked moneylenders and debt documents; and Kheda and Bardoli cultivators withheld revenue. Guha's (1983) insistence on peasant political agency remains important precisely because these actions cannot be dismissed as irrational reactions to hardship. Targets were selected, solidarities were constructed, and particular understandings of legitimate authority informed action.

At the same time, resistance was never socially neutral. Caste, religion, tenancy and class influenced both participation and leadership. Nor did agrarian movements necessarily seek the abolition of every existing hierarchy. Many demanded protection of customary rights, lower or suspended assessments, fairer rent or restraints on creditors. Their historical significance lies not in whether every movement possessed a revolutionary programme but in the repeated assertion that state-sanctioned property and revenue claims were open to moral and political challenge.

A final development is especially important. Over the nineteenth century, rural protests generally remained regionally bounded even when they posed serious challenges to authority. In the twentieth century, nationalist organisation could connect a local revenue dispute to a much wider critique of colonial government. Revenue refusal therefore acquired a double meaning: it defended the economic interests of cultivators while simultaneously questioning the right of an alien state to determine and enforce those obligations.

Conclusion

The history of land revenue and peasant resistance in colonial India cannot be reduced to a simple sequence in which oppressive taxation automatically generated rebellion. Permanent, ryotwari and mahalwari settlements differed substantially in institutional design, but all participated in a wider colonial transformation of property, fiscal responsibility and legal authority. Their effects reached cultivators through different channels—landlords and rents in one region, direct assessments in another, collective village responsibility elsewhere, and, across many regions, through credit and the civil law.

The first research question concerned the redistribution of agrarian rights and obligations. The evidence shows that colonial settlements strengthened formally recognised property and fiscal claims while frequently leaving cultivators dependent upon landlords, revenue officials, moneylenders or uncertain markets. The second concerned the transformation of pressure into resistance. Revenue burdens became particularly contentious when they converged with poor harvests, falling commodity prices, debt, coercive commercial arrangements or threats to established rights. Economic stress alone was insufficient; collective organisation and a shared sense of illegitimate extraction were also necessary.

The third question asked why targets and methods differed. The answer lies in the institutional route through which power was experienced. Santals confronted a wider structure of outsiders and colonial authority; indigo cultivators resisted planter coercion; Pabna tenants challenged landlords; Deccan peasants attacked creditors; and Kheda and Bardoli cultivators withheld payments directly associated with government revenue. Peasant resistance was therefore shaped by local agrarian relationships rather than by an abstract opposition between "peasants" and "the British".

Finally, the comparison reveals a significant political transformation. By the early twentieth century, organised nationalism provided agrarian protest with wider networks and a language through which disputes over assessment could become challenges to colonial legitimacy. Kheda and Bardoli did not erase earlier traditions of rural resistance, but they reorganised them through disciplined collective action and no-revenue strategies.

The broader significance of these findings lies in recognising revenue policy as part of the political history of colonialism. Land settlements were not merely mechanisms for financing government. They helped define who possessed land, who owed what to whom, which claims the courts would enforce and how cultivators encountered the colonial state. Peasant resistance, in turn, exposed the limits of those arrangements and occasionally compelled administrative or legislative response.

The study is limited by its reliance on published and secondary material and by the regional selectivity necessary for comparative analysis. Further research could profitably examine lesser-known district-level movements, women's participation, differences among tenants, smallholders and landless labourers, and the relationship between environmental shocks and revenue politics. Such work would deepen an already clear conclusion: the countryside was not a passive fiscal base of empire but one of the central arenas in which colonial authority was negotiated, resisted and ultimately politicised.

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