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# UNIT 28 THE LANDLORDS\*

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## 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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The livelihood of an overwhelming number of Indians depended throughout solely on agriculture, and consequently on the agricultural use of land. Land being thus the basis of life and life-style in India, the management of its cultivation, cultivators and beneficiaries was found to be the matter of paramount importance in the country's political economy. Since the users benefitted from the use of land, or its produce, and land belonged to the state, the Government had a right to make some demand on the benefits of land and extract revenue or tax from its users. As the land revenue – the Government's earning from land – was the major source to finance the state's functioning, it had to be apportioned on all the users carefully and justifiably, and collected from them regularly and efficiently. Fixing and enumerating the tax demand on a plot with the help of revenue officials for a specified period were not easy at all, but enforcing the collection every year within a stipulated time had always been immensely difficult. In this Unit, you will learn about a group of landholders which flourished under the colonial rule.

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## 28.2 PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

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The collection of the taxed amount was generally found to be convenient through a system of assignment, by which the assignees were contracted for collecting and depositing the tax in time to the Government treasury in lieu of grants of land. The administration of land in India was, therefore, run with the help of revenue officials and the collectors, appointed and assigned, respectively, by the Government. In the pre-colonial period the revenue officials were the *Patwaris*, *Chaudharies* and *Quanungos*, as well as *Patels*, *Deshmukhs*, *Deshpandes* and others, backed up by the administrative hands like the *Faujders*. The most conspicuous among the assignees were the *Zamindars* or the small *rajahs* and chieftains, exercising authority over large tracts of territories and their inhabitants in return of the payment annually to the Government the fixed amount of tax from the land-users or cultivators. The other assignees of significance were the

*Jagirdars* who received grants of land from the State (*jagirs*) for their services to the authorities, usually of military nature, on condition of collecting yearly tax for the Government from those cultivating within their domains. The Government also farmed out the responsibilities for tax collection to the *Talukdars* and *Ijaradars* of *taluks* (a good number of villages) or parts of *Parganas* in their respective regions, by allowing them, of course, to retain a certain percentage of the collection for themselves as fees. There were also *Muqaddams* or village headmen who acted as *Talukdars*' agents for collecting the tax in a village and enjoyed some compensation for their exertions. Apart from the percentage of collection they received from the Government, the collectors of each category gained from the difference between what they pulled out of the peasants and what they actually deposited to the treasury, representing their profit or rent. The rent-receivers or the landlords set their own demands for collection so high as to squeeze the maximum out of the cultivators or the *raiya*s, and leave them "not enough for survival". (Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Moghul India, 1556-1707*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 367.) The lure of rent from land or the income they hardly had earned by working on it, was so great and utterly irresistible that every category which had a link with its administration (apart from perhaps the *Zamindars* and *Jagirdars* who had more than enough on their plates), be it the *Talukdars*, *Ijardars*, *Kanamdars*, *Mirasdars* and *Muqaddams* (who had their own plots or *Khud-Kashta* to be tilled by agricultural wage-earners), or the *Patwais*, *Patels*, *Quanungos*, *Deshmukhs* etc. – all went for a mad rush to acquire for themselves as much land as possible. The scramble resulted in an amorphous growth of variegated landlordism in India, led by the big landlords and followed by the medium, the small and even the tiny ones. Land under this feudal system was neglected, irrigation suffered, production fell and cultivators fleeced, over and above their being ruefully dependent on the landlords for tenure, family welfare and social security. Such landlordist economic and social exploitation that grew rapidly in the pre-colonial days continued unabated throughout the colonial rule over India.

At the beginning of the colonial period the British were oblivious of how landlordism and landlords had been functioning in India and with what effects. They seemed to be happy, as were the later Moghuls ahead of them, to find their coffers being filled up with the revenue collections by the intermediaries – those high or not so high rentiers of land between them and the *raiya*s. Their viewing the agrarian scenario did not vary much from 1765, when they secured the *Diwani* rights over the imperial (Mughal) revenue, till 1793 – the time the Permanent Settlement of land was introduced by them in large part of the country, i.e. the Bengal Presidency. For the first time the Company raj appeared in 1793 to have been concerned about the unsatisfactory state of affairs in Indian agriculture – the main source of its income. Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement had not aimed at destabilising the arrangement of intermediary, but systematising it and rendering it congenial for agricultural advancement. By entering into a settlement with the *Zamindars* or the big landlords for good on a modest state demand, and by conferring them the property rights over their *Zamindaris*, provided they did not fail to pay their taxes, Cornwallis made the *Zamindari*, or landlordism at the apex, to be attractive on the British aristocratic line of his time for investment in land, and therefore, for taking good care of it to get increasingly profitable returns. Consequently, the *Zamindari* Settlement, since the Permanent Settlement was meant to be made only with the *Zamindars*, lured a large number of merchants

and business magnates to buy *Zamindari* estates from those existing *Zamindars* who had been encumbered with the mounting cost of luxurious living, as well as of unpaid Government taxes. The new *Zamindars* thus bought their *Zamindaris* in some kind of distress sales at a permanently low tax rate, and were in a position – being masters of the domains – to squeeze out high rent from the tenants (*raiyyats*) and dispossess and replace them at will for extracting irregular levies of all imaginable kinds.

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### 28.3 OTHER FORMS OF LAND ADMINISTRATION

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The predicament of the tenants (*raiyyats*) and their helplessness under the *Zamindari* system was bound sooner or later to become too conspicuous in the eyes of the Company raj. And so was to loom disconcertingly very high the disadvantage of having intermediaries between the Government and the tenants, and of not having any direct touch with the *raiyyat* cultivators. In fact the disadvantage seemed to the authorities to be steadily outweighing the advantage of their enjoying the loyalist *Zamindari* support, and of course, some relief from the rigours and strains of tax collection. The alternative was to give up henceforth all the intermediaries altogether, and undertake the meticulous process of collecting revenue in the hard way, i.e. directly from the *raiyyats* – the tillers of the soil. The method that came to be known as the *Raiyatwari* Settlement, based on a plot-wise survey of land, settled for a certain period and revised thereafter, was introduced in the non-*Zamindari* areas of the Madras and the Bombay Presidencies during the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coinciding with the Industrial Revolution, and falling under the spell of the rising industrial bourgeoisie in Britain, the Company raj at this point appeared to have started disliking the feudal conditions that prevailed in India and taking increasingly an anti-landlordist stand. This trend, apparent between the 1830s and the 1850s, was discernible in the North-Western Provinces and Bombay-Deccan, or the areas that remained outside the pale of both the *Zamindari* and the *Raiyatwari* settlements. In these areas was nurtured the *Mahalwari* or the village community-based Settlements, cutting severely down the *Jagirdari* and *Talukdari* dominance, throwing overboard other existing intermediaries (various kinds of *sanad*-holders, *Muafidars*, *Bisedars*, *Lakhirajdars* etc.), settling land directly with the cultivators for a fixed period, pending revision, and collecting tax with the help of the community and village heads.

It was when the *Mahalwari* Settlement started taking shape in the northern and central parts of the country, and the *Raiyatwari* Settlement being revised in the Bombay-Deccan, between the mid-1820s and the mid-1850s, that landlordism was treated most contemptuously by the Company raj. The aftermath of the Industrial Revolution also saw the rise of the bourgeoisie to power in Britain and the emphatic expression of their hostility towards the British aristocracy. Bred in an emerging industrial society and fed with the liberalist Utilitarian denunciation of feudalism, the new arrivals among the Company raj's high officials were openly hostile against the landlords, and they fondly hoped for displacing landlordism to make room for bourgeois developments in India, initially in its agriculture. Their onslaught on the landlords was concentrated mainly on the legitimacy of their rights over the domains they so unhesitatingly lorded, and also on the regularity with which they were required to collect revenue from their estates and pass it unflinchingly to the Government. If the *Zamindari*, *Jagirdari* and the *Talukdari* titles were not found to be in order, the *sanads* for their claims not

substantiated and the revenue payment to the treasury not regular, the Government took the landlords to the courts of law, cancelled their deeds and resumed or appropriated their estates for settlement with others. There were scorching enquiries into the claims for the *Badshahi*, *Nawabi* and even early Company raj's land-grants to *Lakhirajdars*, *Maufudars*, *Inamdars* and other *sanad*-holders, and also such revenue collectors as the *Malguzars*, *Patwaris*, *Lambardars* etc. Many who could not justify jurisdiction over land in their possession lost either the whole or parts of it. Those who lost the whole were summarily pensioned off, and those who managed to save a part or parts were deprived much of their usurped domains. Raja of Mainpuri, for example, lost *Talukdari* rights over 116 out of 158 villages in the 1840s, and so did Raja Moorsun in Aligarh over 138 of 216 villages. "Lapsed" succession and questionable adoption were also used as pleas by the Company raj, especially under Lord Dalhousie, for the forfeiture of numerous landlords' lands.

The systematic setting aside of landlords of various sizes – big and small – was carried out by the Company raj mostly at the instances of such outstanding devotees of the principles of bourgeois-liberal political economy as Holt Mackenzie, Bird, Thomason and Thornton in the North-Western Provinces and Wingate and Goldsmith in the Bombay-Deccan. They received the support of the Company raj's high-priests (Governors General) of the time between Bentinck and Dalhousie from 1828 to 1856. The landlords on their part did try to withstand the Government's offensive by fighting litigations in the law-courts, petitioning the Governors and Governors General, appealing pathetically to the Court of Directors and Board of Control in London, and even forming in Calcutta in 1839 the Landholders' Society to organise collective resistance. Nothing, however, seemed to be working in their favour, and the Government's campaign generally against feudalism, and particularly against the landlords' usurpation of land, and their living on unearned income and flaunting it all-around, continued unabated – without breaks. The landlords clearly were losing their battle with the Company raj in the vast Indian countryside because of the juridical and moral weakness of their position, but more, and primarily on account of their overbearing oligarchic isolation from the rural populace, including the peasant masses – those poverty-stricken, faceless millions whose enormous number in itself was of some unrecognisable strength. Although heavily dependent on the landlords and habitually respectful to them, the peasantry and others could not but be apathetic towards, if not openly resentful of, the landlords, because of their economic and social exploitation of the entire rural society. Their support base having thus been shrunk into a handful of relatives, dependants, courtiers (*musahibs*) and retainers, the landlords were hardly in a position to stand up to the Company raj's aggression.

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## 28.4 LANDLORDS AFTER THE REVOLT OF 1857

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The landlords' falling into a state of helplessness would have gone on much further had there not been a significant change creeping into the Company raj's fortunes in the agricultural sector. While embarking on anti-landlordism, the British authorities thought of revising the method of land assessment in such a way as to render their revenue demand more equitable for both the *rai-yats* and the State, and thereby also favourable for agricultural improvement. They decided to do this on the basis of the Ricardian Theory of Rent in the West, by taxing the "net" produce of land rather than its "gross" produce. In the maze of detailed

land surveys and assessment procedures for finding out the “net” produce (by deducting from the “gross”, the cost of cultivation and labour, as well as some margin of profit), the Company raj’s revenue mandarins lost their way. They eventually ended up by imposing an exorbitant rate of land tax on the cultivators and enforcing its strict collection from them. The over-assessment between the 1820s and the 1850s increased at the least by 20 per cent (in Hissar and Rohtak), some time even by 70 per cent (in Delhi and the neighbourhood) and on an average by 46 per cent (in Bundelkhand). Its severe collection without any remission resulted in the mounting of arrears of rent and peasant indebtedness, auction sales of land and desertions of field, jacqueries and suicides. Subjected to harsh over-assessment, and consequently to economic distress, the peasants were intensely aggrieved with the Government, and poised for standing up against it. The time of their unrest reached a flash-point in 1857, an ignition provided by the British-Indian army’s mutinous sepoys – many of whom came from among them. The revolt of 1857 could not have become the Great Revolt, which threatened the Company raj’s very existence, without the widespread participation of the peasants and other sections of the civil population, including of course the disgruntled aristocrats and landlords.

The great revolt of 1857-58 proved to be the turning point in the history of the landlords and feudal elements in India, both for their stakes in current situation as well as for their progress in the future. The existing situation offered the opportunity to take on their tormentor – the Company raj – frontally in conjunction with an aroused rural society. This joining of hands of the landlords and the cultivators catapulted the socially overbearing landlords to the position of leadership in the popular anti-imperialist tumult. Following a few dispossessed princes and chiefs operating at the helm of the revolt, some *Zamindars*, *Jagirdars*, *Talukdars* and the like also supplied its leadership at the local level. It was not the number of the participants (not many actively participated in the rising) but the antipathy they generally felt towards the Company raj, and the discontent they shared among themselves as a class, actually mattered the most. Despite the social contradiction with the landlords and persons of their ilk, the rebellious commonalty (peasants in the main) had little alternative to accepting them – even if reluctantly – as leaders of the struggle against the British in 1857-58. Since the common man, woman and the mass of the people were not in a position at that semi-medieval circumstances to throw up a vibrant leadership of their own (the capability for which they did reveal once in a while during the great revolt), and also as the forward-looking, dynamic and ideologically-motivated middle class had not yet emerged, they had to do with, or make the best use of what was available to them – the traditional, status-quoist landlord leadership. Had the rebels succeeded in overthrowing the Company raj under their customary aristocratic leaders – and it could by no means be ruled out – would Hindustan then have been relapsed to the later Mughal days, from colonialism back to feudalism? It did not happen that way, and the British succeeded in winning India once again to themselves, subjecting the defeated rebels to terrible repressions and treating the commoners with utmost racial abuses. Ironically, out of all rebel reverses, and amidst the ashes of destruction and death, rose up again the irrepressible princes, *rajās* and landlords who returned to their domineering exploitative ways in the countryside. They, however, survived not really on their own, but on account primarily of a dramatic change in the over-all British perception of them, and also of the governance of India. The change was

brought about by the fearful British experience of facing a massive upsurge of people with a feudal lining on its crest. They had come to realise the grave danger that the disaffected multitudes could pose to their authority, and therefore, they began living in constant fear of fresh popular outbreaks. The only way out of this alarmist psychotic situation, they felt, was to show the white flag to the feudal elements, or those whom the rebellious peasantry seemed habitually to be following, despite the conflict of interests. Discarding the anti-feudalism of the recent past, and befriending the Indian Chiefs and landlords of diverse denominations by restoring them to their vantage position, were believed together to be the British empire's greatest guarantee against internal insecurities, and also the surest way to keep the traditional India under full control. The drastic change of the British mind in respect of their Indian possessions was put into great effect without any loss of time, and had been solemnly affirmed in the Queen Empress's Proclamation of 1 November 1858.

Consequent to the crisis of 1857-58, when the British authorities decided to take over the entire administration of India into their hands from those of the East India Company, it was incumbent on them to state publicly the basic changes that such momentous development must give effect to. The statement was contained in Queen (Empress for India) Victoria's Proclamation, and it emphasized upon the British resolve hereafter to compromise with the feudal forces in India, to commit themselves to safeguarding and furtherance of interests of the landed aristocracy and landlords of various varieties. "We know and respect the feelings of attachment with which the natives of India regarded the land inherited from their ancestors", the Proclamation announced, and then ran on to pledge the Government solemnly "to protect them in all rights connected therewith", and to pay "due regard to the ancient rights, usages and customs in India". It clearly signified the Government's giving up the Utilitarian stand against feudalism, as well as the liberalist dream of setting India on the capitalist path. Instead it showed the British willingness to share India's total social surplus with the feudal and landlordist contingent (limiting disproportionately of course, the latter's share) and buy some sense of internal security.

Landlordism not only was resuscitated in India by the Proclamation of 1858, it actually flourished under the British Raj's protection almost unobtrusively – without much opposition – till at least 1920. The landlords in effect turned out to be the junior partners of the imperialists in India between 1858 and 1920, and exercised mastery over the rural sector with their elaborate economic and social leverages, and a certain decisive presence in the corridors of power. The landlord-dominated British Indian Association (1851-1876), for example, was accorded by the British a vital share in the governance of the country through the nomination of its leaders to the Viceroy's Council and to the Bengal Legislative Council. The numerical strength of landlords also increased in leaps and bounds, and a considerable number was being continually added to their variegated rank over the vast stretches of the *Zamindari* territories, such as the whole of Bengal Presidency and part of the Madras Presidency, as well as in the *Jagirdari* and *Talukdari* regions of the North-Western Provinces, and in the enormous areas under the *Raiyatwari* and *Mahalwari* systems like most of the Madras and whole of the Bombay Presidencies, practically all of the North-Western Provinces and Punjab (under the village proprietary arrangement). The substantial and well-to-do tenants in all these places went very aggressively over the years for the

acquisition of land, in addition to the originally assigned plots of their own. It was more a kind of land-grabbing than land acquiring, and it had been effected through various questionable means like surreptitiously bringing waste and forest lands into cultivation, encroaching into the village common lands (say, for grazing, holding fairs, celebrating communitarian religious and socio-cultural occasions etc.), exercising pressure on the poor *raiya*s and buying their lands from distress sales, manipulating land records with the help of the *Patwaris* and forcing the poor peasants to part with the land they had mortgaged to their rich neighbours for obtaining ready loans in cash and crops. The neo-landlords in the non-*Zamindari* parts of the country had in fact been offering loans to the needy cultivators and acting as their supplementary rural credit suppliers, over and above the main providers – the professional moneylenders or *mahajans*. It was the *mahajans* or *sahukars* who created havoc in the Bombay-Deccan by taking full advantage there of the rural indebtedness, charging excessive interest on the peasant-borrowing, falsifying records of loans and mortgages, and enforcing the sale of debtors' land and property for re-payment. All these led eventually in 1875 to violent outbursts of peasant protests, widespread attacks on the moneylenders' person and property and destruction of their court papers and land records.

Along with the emergence of the neo-landlords, another important category of substantial landlordist tenants were making their presence strongly felt during 1858-1920 in many parts of the country, especially in the *Zamindari* areas. Such substantial tenants (*Jotedars*) would persuade the landlords to giving them more land over and above their own, if necessary on lease, and arrange for cultivating these through the age-old sharecropping system. Under the yearly sharecropping arrangement the cultivator (*adhiar*) – a sub-tenant or under-tenant – was called upon to raise crops on his own in the *Jotedar's* additionally tenanted land and share the harvested crops, usually in two equal halves with the *Jotedar* or the tenant-landlord, paying him thus a clear 50 per cent produce-rent. Apart from obtaining such high extraction of rent (perhaps the highest), the *Jotedar* enjoyed the privilege of changing or throwing out his *adhiar* if another cultivator offered in the following year more *nazarana* to replace him. These ejections were common in respect not only of the under-tenants, but also of the tenants-at-will or those tenants who lacked occupational rights over their assigned plots. The *Zamindars*, *Talukdars* and all other emergent neo-landlords (including *Deshmukhs*, *Deshpandes*, *Mirasdars* etc.) all over the country periodically evicted *raiya*s from their fields for extracting higher amount of either *nazarana* or rent from them. Over and above these regular evictions, the landlords unfailingly subjected the cultivating peasants to all kinds of irregular forced levies, such as their contributing to the landlords on the occasions of births, deaths, marriages and various other social and religious family functions. The levying of the landlords' irregular imposts were reported to have been of about 25 to 30 kinds, but none had been more demanding and distractingly damaging (especially during the agricultural seasons) than the systematic extraction of forced labour (*begaar*) from the peasants and their dependents. Enforced labour without payment for working in the landlord's field, his household and in any of his pet private projects, be it digging a pond, renovating a temple, repairing a road within the estate, or constructing the living quarters, was rampant and included even the poor peasant women's putting up with his sexual advances.

## 28.5 LANDLORDS AND EARLY NATIONALISTS

The landlords' economic and social exploitation of the *raiya*s was not only condoned by the Colonial State, but also strongly backed up by all its agencies, reducing the peasantry as a whole to a state of utter helplessness. The agencies were the local and village officials, the police in the localities and the sub-divisional and district courts, standing protectively behind the landlords, who manipulated records, refused rent-receipts to tenants and used *lathials* against them at will and at random. Although the Western educated Indian middle classes – the widely awakened future leaders of the country – did take note of the prevailing plights of the *raiya*s and sympathise with their hard and sad lot, they were reluctant altogether to go against the landlords, or to curb landlordism in any way. Despite the early nationalists like G.V. Joshi's concern for the distress that landlordism had caused to the *raiya*s in the *Zamindari* area, and causing simultaneously to them in the *Raiyatwari* areas, the pioneer leaders of the Indian National Congress not only not opposed the landlords, but actually went to the extent of extolling their questionable operations. R.C. Dutt, for example, was convinced that the Bengal *Zamindars* had charged "fair and moderate rent", and that they had succeeded in securing "the prosperity and happiness" of the people of the Bengal Presidency. The Congress's reluctance to oppose the Indian landlords was perhaps on account of its looking up to them for financial and political support, apart from a few of its leaders' having strong landlordist connections. As a very rich section of Indian society, in addition to the growing category of business and industrial magnates, the landlords could facilitate the onward march of the Congress with their position of local power and monetary contribution. There were promoters of the Congress among the landlords, and some of them also distinguished themselves as public men – as connoisseurs of arts and literatures, patrons of social and educational endeavours – without of course, going hardly ever against the grain of their exploitative, extortionist class character. A public-spirited and enlightened *Zamindar* like Joykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara, Bengal, had always been under his skin a ruthless landlord, involved in money-lending, grain-trading and purchasing of encumbered estates. (Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 49). With the British Raj thus standing solidly behind the landlords, and the nationalists failing to offer a protective hand, the peasantry had meekly suffered, and resisted when it became absolutely insufferable. Since they were unorganised, bereft of any formation of their own, largely leaderless, and also rudderless because of their not imbibing any ideology, the peasant resistance to landlordism was bound to be sporadic, spasmodic and spontaneous. Spontaneity could hardly be any guarantee of success, and the occasional outbursts between 1858 and 1920 failed to make any significant headway.

Among the such notable peasant unrest over the *Zamindari* extractions and ejections were the peasant movements in Serajganj (Pabna), Bengal, in 1872-73, the Moplah peasants' rising in Malabar against the oppressions of landlords (*Jenmis*)-officials-*mahajans* combine in 1873 (but lingeringly till 1896), the tribal peasants' (including the Rumpas', Santals' and Mundas') risings in the hills against the exploitative landlords and *Dikus* (*mahajans* and traders) and the ham-handed British authorities in Visakhapatnam Agency, western Bengal and southern Bihar intermittently between 1871 and 1900. There were also the Bogra, Mymensing, Dacca and Hooghly kisans' agitation against the steep *Zamindari* rent enhancements

in Bengal by fits and starts from 1870 to 1885; the anti-*Jotedari* agitation of the sharecroppers in Bagerhat (Khulna), Bengal, in 1907 and the indigo cultivators' rising against the landlordist oppression of the planters under British cover in 1908 in Champaran, Bihar. Numerous other similarly unfinished landlord-*raiyat* conflicts were strewn over the northern, southern, central and western parts of the country.

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## 28.6 LANDLORDS AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT DURING THE 1920s AND 1930s

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The landlords' luck in weathering the storm of peasant protest, of course with the British backing, seemed to be running out from 1920-22 when there was a dramatic turn towards vibrant mass politics. It was in 1920-22 that Gandhiji succeeded in bringing the Congress out of its elitist confines, and steering it to lead the people at large in the Non-Cooperation movement against the British authorities. Peasants naturally were enlisted in this massive anti-imperialist joint front and played a significant role in the national struggle for independence. Once aroused to battle for freedom from the colonial rule, they felt encouraged to fight for freeing themselves from the landlordist clutches. The peasantry waged simultaneously the anti-British and the anti-landlord struggles and combined the "no-tax" slogan with the "no-rent" clarion call. The "no-tax" agitation, initiated by Gandhiji himself as early as 1917 in Champaran (Bihar) and in Kaira (Gujarat), was exemplified explosively in Bardoli (Gujarat) in 1922, in Guntur (in Madras Presidency) in the early 1920s and in Tipperah, Mymensingh, Rajsahi and Dinajpur (Bengal), at the Wahabi instance, in 1920-22. Additionally the Koya peasants under Alluri Sitaram Raju fought for their forest rights in Madras Presidency in 1922, and the tenantry opposed unitedly the imposition of *Chowkidari* tax in north Bihar in 1920-21, against the collection of Union Board tax in Contai, Midnapore (Bengal), in 1921 and against a rise in revenue rates in East and West Godavari (Madras Presidency) in 1927. The instances of anti-imperialist "no-tax" activities coincided with the opening of the floodgates of anti-landlordist "no-rent" campaigns throughout the 1920s, i.e. of the *adhikars* against the *Jotedars* in Jalpaiguri and the 24 Parganas (Bengal) in 1920, of the Muslim Moplah peasants against the Brahmin *Jenmis* (Malabar) in 1921, of the tenants against the extortionist landlords in Cossimbazar, Tamruk and Contai (Bengal) in 1921, against the Midnapore *Zamindari* Company (Bengal) in 1922. To add to these examples, one must include the peasants' resolute "no-rent" confrontation with "the barons of Oudh" (the United Provinces) under Baba Ram Chandra and an young Jawaharlal Nehru in 1921, and its spreading like wild-fire to Rae Bareilly, Fyzabad and Sultanpur, and the extension thereafter to Hardoi, Barabanki, Lucknow and Sitapur (Eka movement) in 1921-22.

Infinitely more than the Government's discomfiture over the "no-tax", the landlords' nervousness in the face of "no-rent" in the early 1920s bordered almost on panic. The landlords found it difficult to control the peasant "no-renters", and they were able somehow to save their skin with the help of the lathi-wielding retainers, the use of the police force, the strong support of the local bureaucracy and the sympathetic hearing of the lower courts of law, who went by the gospel of rent-receipts (often forgotten wilfully to be issued to the tenants). But what reassured the landlords most was the Congress ambivalence towards the "no-rent" campaigns, and its apparent landlord-friendly disposition throughout the

1920s and early 1930s, despite the anti-landlordism of some young Congress activists like Jawaharlal. As early as February 1922 when the “no-tax” move in Bardoli taluka (Gujarat) against the Government was being made, the Congress Working Committee under the Gandhian leadership warned the *raiyats* that “withholding rent payment to the Zamindars is contrary to the Congress resolution and injurious to the best interests of the country” (Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p.33). The principle of the resolution was scrupulously observed in the famous Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 against the payment of revenue to the Government. It also dissuaded hundreds of the Congress followers of Jawaharlal Nehru and Baba Ram Chandra from turning the anti-Government “no-tax” campaign in the U.P. into an anti-landlord “no-rent” campaign in 1930. Gandhiji disapproved of the peasant militancy against the landlords and their non-payment of rent, and in his manifesto to the *kisans* issued in May 1931 he asked the tenant “to pay as early as possible all the rent he can” and expected him and his depressed counterparts to be “treated liberally by the landlords” (Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh*, pp. 104-5). However, despite the discouragement of the Congress High Command and the unleashing of Government repression (both Jawaharlal and Baba Ram Chandra were arrested), the payment of rent to the landlords came practically to a standstill by the end of 1931 in Rae Bareilly, Etawah, Kanpur, Unnao and Allahabad. The younger radical elements in the national movement throughout the 1930s were becoming increasingly aware of the parasitical, exploitative character of the landlords, and turning resolutely against them. The left Congressites, who organised themselves into a Congress Socialist party in 1934, were joined in their opposition to the landlords by the Communist Party of India – already in existence from the mid-1920s. Together they started upholding the cause of the peasant masses, demanding land to the tiller, and advocating even the abolition of landlordism. However, the leftists had not been able in the mid-1930s to persuade the Congress leadership to endorse their anti-landlordism, and had failed to get such slogans as “land to the tiller” or “abolish Zamindari” included in the agrarian programme that the Congress adopted in its Faizpur session in December 1936. The landlords did thus escape in all parts of the country in the late 1930s, especially in the Congress-ruled provinces under Provincial Autonomy, the direct threat to their very existence. But they could not avoid hereafter from facing the persistent Congress demand for substantial curtailment of their dominance through the reduction of rent, abolition of irregular levies and forced labour, annulment of arrears of rent and fixity of tenure of all tenants.

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## 28.7 CONGRESS, THE LEFT AND THE POSITION OF LANDLORDS

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Encouraged by the Congress agrarian programme, guided by the left forces – who combined the various locally grown kisan organisations (Andhra Zamindari Ryot Association, Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, Karshaka Sangham, Kisan Sangh, Workers and Peasants Party, Krishak Samiti etc.) into a nation-wide All India Kisan Sabha in 1936 – and forced by the mounting post-Depression economic pressure, a series of anti-landlord disturbances broke out all over India. They included agitations of farm-hands against the *Mirasdars* in Tanjore (1938); of bonded labourers and sharecroppers against the *Istimrardars* in Ajmer-Merwara, Rajasthan, and Haris against the *Jagirdars* in Sind (1938-39); of *Bargadars* against the *Jotedars* in Bengal (1939); of tenants-at-will against the

*Zamindari* evictions in Ghalla Dher, Mardan, N.W.F.P. (1938); of *Asami-Shikmidars* over *Sir* lands in the U.P. (1938); of *Bakasht* peasants against the landlords in Bihar (1937-39); of all tenants against the *Biswedars* in Patiala and *Khotears* in Maharashtra (1939). There were also anti-landlord agitations in Malabar and Kasargad (1939), as well as in Nellore and Visakhapatnam (1938-39) and at Munagala in Krishna district (1939). Even then, the worsening of their existential crisis had not pushed the landlords to the brink of total collapse mainly because of the extraneous circumstances, namely, the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-45), and India's being dragged into it in favour of the British-led Allied Powers. Since the war meant a state of emergency, and emergency called for sterner governance, the British Raj withheld all traces of constitutionalism and started ruling India through the draconian Defence of India Rules. The illegalisation of public protest and agitation under the D.I.R. came to the rescue of the landlords, and so did the numbing effect of the nationalist controversy over supporting or opposing Britain in the war. The outcome was the combative "Quit India" movement against the Raj on the one hand and the supportive "People's War" line on the other, both contributing to the restraint on the *kisan's* rising temper in the country between 1939 and 1945. The breathing space the war situation thus provided for the landlords went further in their favour when the Government launched a War Fund for meeting its military expenses. The Fund enabled the landed magnates to contribute richly to the British war-efforts and curry their protectors' favour. But, despite all this, the landlords were practically under siege during the war period and the anti-landlord peasant resentment expressed itself sporadically throughout. Its intensity could hardly be guessed without some reference to such agitations as the anti-*Dhaniama* in Surat and Broach (South Gujarat), 1940; anti-*Mirasdar* in Trichinopoly (Madras), 1940; anti-*Malik* in Purnea (Bihar), 1940-41; anti-*Jotedar* in most parts of Bengal, 1940-44; anti-landlordist crop-sharing in Patiala (Punjab), early 1940s; anti-eviction (*Sir* lands) in Gorakhpur and Benares (the U.P.), 1940-41; anti-ejectment (*Bakasht* lands) in most of Bihar, 1941-45; anti-*Zamindari* in Durg (C.P. and Berar) and Surma Valley (Assam), 1940; and also in Ganjam (Orissa), Krishna district and Visakhapatnam (Andhra, Madras) 1940, in North Malabar, 1940-41, and in Thana, Nasik and Kolaba (Maharashtra), 1941.

Once the war ended in 1945, and the Government's iron grip relaxed a bit, the landlords' vulnerability *vis-a-vis* the tenants and their mobilisers, increased manifold. The left-wing *kisan* agitators, who had always been challenging feudalism – the epitome rural expropriation and oppression – now readied themselves for dealing a death blow to the landlordist system. In the winter of 1945 the All India Kisan Sabha demanded the abolition of landlordism, and wanted it to be done – contrary to the prevailing nationalist opinion – “without compensation”. About this time the Congress also veered round the leftist position on the issue, but favoured abolition “with compensation” in its Election Manifesto of 1946. Whether it was “with” or “without” compensation – the making up of the landlords' loss of land, or refusing to do so to even up their age-old malpractices – the fate of the landlords seemed to have been sealed on the eve of the country's independence and in its aftermath. It could not have been otherwise in the light of the explosive situation that had rapidly been developing in the Indian countryside. Peasant militancy against the landlord-Government alliance started taking violent forms, notably in Mannargudi (Tanjore), 1944-45; in the peasants' clashing with the landlords over the tilling of lands in Shovana *Zamindari* (Khulna), 1945; in the peasants' forcibly cultivating and harvesting

*Bakasht* lands in many parts of Bihar, 1945-46; in the Worli peasants' fighting the joint front of moneylenders, landlords and police in Thana, 1945-46; in the *Punam* cultivators' arming themselves against the landlord-friendly Malabar Special Police in North Malabar, 1946-47.

A very high level of peasant militancy was making its distinctive presence felt even in 1946 when the landless went the proletarian insurrectionary way in Travancore (Punnapra-Vayalar). It was followed in the *Tebhaga* movement (Bengal) in 1947 by the *Bargadars'* seizing the crop-shares of the *Jotedars*, breaking open the landlords' granaries and snatching away their stocks of grains. The rebellious peasants' seizing of the landlords' crops soon graduated to their seizure of the landlords' lands in Telengana in 1947-48 and to the highest stage of peasant struggle – the distribution of the seized lands among the landless. Time in fact was running out for the Congress leaders who were to monopolise governance in the newly independent India, and who had either to take urgent steps for the abolition of landlordism or to confront widespread peasant risings all over the country – to the utter detriment of its independence and development. Although the Bihar *Zamindari* legislation was introduced in the provincial legislature as early as 1947, the model piece of anti-*Zamindari* legislation was fashioned only after the U.P. *Zamindari* Abolition Committee Report of 1948. A number of provincial Governments (including Bihar who redrafted its Bill) such as those of Madras, Assam, Bombay and the C.P. and Berar, over and above Bihar and the U.P., adopted a similar pattern in their respective legislative exercise in 1949. The landlords in all parts of the country in response waged a last-ditch battle for their very existence in the courts of law, harping on the Government's violation of their fundamental right to property, and on the authorities' incumbency to provide them with "adequate" compensation. Since they were not doing too badly on the legal front (the Patna High Court apparently upheld their position in 1950), the Congress Government at the centre had to pass consecutive constitutional amendments in 1951 and 1954, by which the charge of flouting any fundamental right or of offering "insufficient" compensation (in respect of the *Zamindari* abolition) were not permitted to be brought before the courts. This enabled most of the states to circumvent the arduous legal proceedings and to carry out the *Zamindari* abolition with compensation (as recommended by the state legislatures) by 1956. With the abolition of *Zamindari*, certainly on the surface, a very prolonged phase of history had ended which had meant the unearned profiteering and parasitic prodigality, and exploitation, repression and injustice. The landlords thus seemed dramatically to have exited from the agrarian scene of the country, but landlordism somehow surreptitiously survived, squeezed out its own sustenance and continued to remain a debilitating burden on the Indian people.

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## 28.8 SUMMARY

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The landlords were a force to be reckoned with until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, despite the attempts by the colonial administration to undermine their powers. The failure of the revolt of 1857, however, dramatically changed their position. Although no longer independently powerful vis-à-vis the state, the landlords gained enormously as the colonial government decided to prop them as a bulwark against peasant rebellions. Over the period, the landlords served as one of the most important support of the colonial state.

The nationalist movement maintained an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the landlords. On the one hand, it opposed their exploitation and oppression of the peasants. On the other hand, it did not wish to antagonise them in supposedly larger interests of the nation. Nevertheless, some of its leaders led significant peasant movements in various parts of the country. The intensifying peasant movements all over the country against the landlords were being led by the left, the nationalists and independent peasant leaders. This seriously undermined their position and convinced all the concerned forces that landlordism should be abolished with or without compensation.

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## **28.9 EXERCISES**

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- 1) How did the failure of the Revolt of 1857 transform the position of the landlords?
- 2) Discuss the relationship between the nationalists and the landlords during the 1920s and 1930s.
- 3) In what ways did the militant peasant movements help in undermining the position of the landlords?

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