LAND ALIENATION POLICY OF SIR CHARLES NAPIER

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The British invaded Sind at the height of their power and fame, after having secured victory over almost the whole of South Asian subcontinent. Initially, a series of treaties was imposed on the Talpur rulers of Hyderabad with a view to strengthening their imperialist designs. Finally, with the appointment of Sir Charles Napier as the Commander of the British forces in Sind, in September 1842, a new treaty which virtually destroyed the independence of Talpurs was thrust on them. With a sense of indignation, Sirai Baluch of the area surrounded the British Residency at Hyderabad. Later, the British columns advanced and after two battles at Miani and Dubbo–one against the rulers of Hyderabad and the other against that of Mirpur on 17th February and 26th March, 1843, respectively–annexed whole of their country, excluding Khairpur whose potentate, Mir Ali Murad, had sworn fealty to the British at the opportune time.

The far superior, better-equipped and well-trained regular army predestined the British success over the divided, disunited rulers of Sind who had neither a regular army nor mass support. The encounters in Sind, in the opinion of Sir Charles Napier, proved beyond doubt "the superiority of musket and bayonet over the sword and shield and matchlock."[1] He opined, "the battle of Meeanee is among those of which history will speak as proving the superiority of discipline over numbers."[2] As for the moral justification for the British conquest of Sind, Napier's prejudgement of his own projected action, as recorded in his journal, was: "We have no right to seize Scinde; yet we shall do so, and a very advantageous, useful, humane piece of rascality it would be."[3]

Notwithstanding his "rascality," there is no doubt that Napier was the ablest administrator to be assigned to Sind when it became a British colony. The prime objectives of his regime were to pacify resistance, quell revolt and make the British rule palatable. In conformity with these objectives, he was entrusted with martial-law powers in contrast to civilian rule prevailing throughout British India. A review of his regime shows that he did everything that was necessary to achieve the above mentioned objectives and, at least in the early period, he was backed by the Central Government in all his efforts to consolidate and strengthen British power.

The former rulers of Sind were tribal and feudal. They administered Sind as their fiefdom and that, too, in an outmoded form. Hence, their interest in the welfare of their subjects and improvement of their property Sind was casual. As against that, Napier, the new ruler of Sind, represented a capitalist society which had not only learned how best to utilise and exploit the resources and people of new colonies but was also somewhat radical, apparently influenced by the French Revolution and Chartist Movement of England. He was therefore, conscious of the fact that the decaying and degenerated feudal class, which had failed to safeguard their own independence, could not be relied upon as a sole stronghold of imperialism. Napier's was a conscious exploitation. He sought to combine the English East India Company's interest with the so-called 'public good'.

Napier's prime objective was consolidation of British rule in Sind. He feared uprisings from the Baluch elite. The Baluch were, however, a tribal community. Their inter-tribal rivalries prevented them from forging a broad-based national unity and manifesting allegiance to the former rulers, for their elitist pride in tribal prejudices transcended their loyalty to Sind and to its people as a whole. Napier manoeuvred to win over Baluch chieftains by involving their interests to the continuance of British rule in Sind. He did this by letting them retain the jagirs which they held from the former rulers. On the 20th May 1843, he proclaimed:

> "You Belooch Sirdars are required to present yourselves before the Governor, and made your salams to him and your jagheers and other property will be confirmed to you by the British Government and no diminution will take place in your rank."[4]

On the 24th May 1844, all the Jagirdars, nearly two thousand, who offered alegiance were confirmed in their estates. It was declared that "the jagheers which were, without dispute or litigation, in your possession before 17th February 1843, are again conferred on you by the English Government."[5] Thus, the 19 lakh bighas (about 4 lakh hectares) land in jagir was confirmed to title holders.[6] To conciliate the ex-rulers, Napier granted them cash pensions amounting in agregate to about 3.72 lakhs of rupees nearly, and also permitted them to hold land in jagir.[7] A newspaper, commenting in 1854, stated that by adopting this policy

> "all anxiety on the part of the holders of them (lands) terminated, and the increased value of their lands as property, reconciled the owners in a great degree to the loss of the political power that before attached to them, the sovereign was changed, but the possessors of estates under feudal tenure remained in undisturbed possession."[8]

The feudal lords, whose rights of ownership had been guaranteed, were now required to play a subservient role to the colonial apparatus, the civil and military

bureaucracy. They were to help the collection of revenue and the 'law-enforcing' efforts of the alien masters.

Napier's search for a coadjutor class was, however, not unqualified. He also preferred to deal directly with occupants of land, and was in favour of Ryotwari system. His general policy was to discourage the intervention of Zemindars.[9] The latter, in his opinion, were not the real aristocracy of Sind. Although the term Zemindar literally meant landholder, the Zemindars in Sind were not owners of the land having any personal right to the soil in the modern sense of proprietorship. Technically speaking, they were more or less *'Muqatedars'* who held land on lease either from Government or Jagirdars. The Zemindars, unlike *'Maqatedars'*, had, however, significant authority and influence over the cultivators and inhabitants of area. They collected revenue on behalf of the rulers and also exacted their own personal due, called *'lapo'*, often termed *Haq Zemindari* (overlord's fee), which varied from region to region.

Being conscious of influence and wickedness of the Zemindars, he intended to hit them hard. Terming them as unnecessary interlopers and parasites, Napier informed his Collectors that he was

> "very averse to maintain the Zemindar system, for the Zemindar appear to me, to be nearly the 'middleman' of Ireland, that is to say a man who is very injurious to the people, for he diminishes the wages of the poor and robs the rich. I believe, in India, that the Zemindar robs the Jagheerdar. and the Ryot."[10]

He thought it a good policy to "look on the Zemindar system as altogether very objectionable."[11] In his opinion, such 'middlemen' were "the curse of every country."[12] He observed that the Zemindar

> "hires large tracts of land from government or from Jagheerdars, and while he cheats his landlord he starves the ryot-as far as men can be starved who live in a country full of game and wild fruits."[13]

Napier lent support to Jagirdars, whom he saw as the real aristocracy, without allowing them any special position and wished to see them adopt the ryotwari system in their jagirs. This, he thought, would "make Zemindars of Jagheerdars."[14]

Having restored the Jagirdars to their position of privilege, Napier was concerned about Jagirdari system in terms of its tendency to alienate the masses from the Government and to make the collection of revenue difficult. If pragmatism dictated the conversion of the local Jagirdar class into the major prop of alien rule,

it also demanded that the masses of peasants should not have an unfavourable perception of the Government and that the system should not result in the loss of revenue to the Government. Furthermore, growth of the economic privilege of the Jagirdar into a significant political power would have constituted a renewed threat to the foreign rulers. Therefore, it was important to keep Jagirdars in their size, once the initial purpose of winning their confidence had been achieved and as long as their basic interests were secure. Being an astute representative of the colonialists, he realised the need for counter-measures against the Jagirdars no sooner had he guaranteed their social position and economic privilege. A series of gradual measures aimed at fulfilling the contradictory needs of the alien rulers were thus introduced. The following main measures were adopted by Napier in this regard:

i) The heirs of the deceased Jagirdars were granted the jagirs on the condition that they paid one-forth of the produce to the Government.[15] In order to prevent fraud, this share was later computed at a rate of two annas (one-eight of a rupee) per bigha of both cultivated and uncultivated land.[16]

ii) As a later modification to the above, the fixed assessment at the rate of two annas per bigha was required to be paid on the cultivated land, while the uncultivated land was to be fully resumed.[17]

iii) In order to get their jagir grants renewed, the Jagirdars were required to surrender the waste land in their possession.[18]

iv) Jagir grants for specific offices which were no longer in existence were to be resumed on the death of the jagir-holders.[19]

v) All land held by the Jagirdars in excess of that shown in the *'sanads'* was to be resumed.[20]

vi) Jagirs were to be confirmed only to the lineal male heirs.[21] The jagirs were however, granted to grandsons.[22]

vii) If a succeeding Jagirdar had not made his 'salam' to the British Governor of Sind, his land was to revert to the Government.

viii) Lands of those deceased Jagirdars (rather the sharers of a jagir) was also resumed, who had not made 'salam' to the Governor but who were given the jagirs because of the 'salam' presentation of their chief Jagirdar. Their heirs were not entitled to jagirs.[23]

ix) Jagirdars' powers to impose death penalties, imprisonment and taxes were curtailed, if not altogether abolished.[24]

x) The land resumed by virtue of the above measures was intended to be divided into small leaseholdings of 5 to 75 acres in general and not exceeding 250 acres in any case.[25]

xi) Small Jagirdars, holding land up to 20 bighas, were granted land in perpetuity if they did not have any other land and if they actually cultivated the jagir land with their own hands, provided that such land was not located in the centre of other jagirs.[26]

xii) 'Tacavi' loans were advanced to the needy tenants.[27] They were also given land rent-free, for two years, on condition of clearing jungle.

Napier's policy seemed to be directed towards:

(a) Eliminating the traditional class of Zemindar middlemen and transferring the function of Zemindars to Jagirdars.

(b) Streamlining the method of land revenue collection and maximising the revenue.

(c) Creating a class of small landholders who could counterbalance the possible growth of the political power of the Jagirdar class.

(d) Mitigating the hardships of the tillers in order to win their loyalty, without changing the social relationship of production.

(e) While imposing checks on the privileges of the Jagirdars and taking measures against the resurgence of their political power, preserving and protecting the class interests of the Jagirdars in a relatively sophisticated manner.

Napier's land policy, if it had been faithfully implemented by the succeeding Bombay Government, could have produced farreaching changes in the socio-economic system and in the balance of political forces in Sind. Granted that Napier firmly believed in reliance on the aristocratic class of Jagirdars, his pragmatism and liberal sense of Justice compelled him to promote the ryotwari system. Extension of the ryotwari system to any significant degree, under the circumstances, would have contributed towards improvement in the living conditions of a section of the peasantry, even if it could not eliminate the conditions of their exploitation and foreclose the possibility of renewed oppression, but soon after the departure of Napier the succeeding Bombay Government found it expedient to give a new lease of life to

the Zemindar class in Sind. Consequently, under the official patronage, they became eventually the virtual masters of the destinies of the toiling masses of rural areas.

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