

A Study into the *Abwabs* as in practice in Hill Tipperah and the attached Zamindaries in Chakla Roshanabad (Tripura)

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Abwabs were the customary cesses, imposts or charges levied under the native government in addition to the regular assessment on the land and some other revenue matters. Miscellaneous cesses, impost and charges imposed by the zamindars and their revenue collectors also came under its ambit. *Abwabs* were variously designated either after the rulers or the zamindars by whom they were ordered or from the pretext on which they were raised. If the *Abwab Kasim Ali Khan*, taxes of Mir Kasim, Nawab of Bengal, constitute the example of the first kind, the *Abwab Mehmani* a cess levied on the inhabitants of a village to defray the expenses of the zaminder on his paying it an occasional visit, characterises the second.

While the collection of some of the *abwabs* was, as a rule, accounted for, the *abwabs* as locally levied and extracted by the petty ingenious collectors, could scarcely find their entries in the account book. The latter kind mostly came in the realm of personal gratification. And those unwritten perks tend to suggest something like incentives to the collectors on the one hand, and the compensation paid for their very low wages on the other. Of course all these were done at the expense of the tenants. The study of the *abwabs* will provide us an inkling of our socio-economic past, particularly of the nature and extent of the economic exploitation characterising the *abwab* system in the princely state of Tripura and its attached zamindaries in Chakla Roshanabad.

Glimpses of the *Abwabs*

Landgrants, sanads, royal orders issued and land enactments passed by the Rajas of Hill Tipperah (Tripura preferred by us) as also the *Adarsha Samgraha* (an anthology of model land and other documents) published under the authority of the *Durbar* furnish some information on the *abwabs* as were in vogue in the native state of Tripura and in its Chakla Roshanabad zamin-

daries.¹ The *abwabs* that may one encounter from the land documents often refer to *bhet*, *begar*, *pancha/pacha/panchak*, *birsingha* and occasionally to *mathot*. Road cess was too realised from all classes of tenants. The *abwabs* in the transaction of forest produce and timber wood are also in evidence. *Devater britti* and *muthi* or *tahuri* may be referred to this kind.² Kailash C. Singh in his *Rajamala* and J. G. Cumming in his report have made mention of some *abwabs*, namely *batta*, *ratib godara*, *naukabhara*, *Kharach*, *multan*, *tahuri* and *uttarayan* as were in use in Chakla Roshanabad.³ *Taithung* and *bahar* which resemble *abwabs* in kind were exclusively demanded from the hill people of the State. Hunter in his *A Statiistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VI (1876) has compiled comprehensive lists of *abwabs* in use separately for the British districts of Tipperah, Noakhali and Chittagong on the basis of reports prepared by the District Collectors and Magistrates. On close examination one may discover certain similarities, not only in name but also in purport, among these *abwabs* prevalent in different districts. It is imortant to note that many of those *abwabs* do not find their mention in the monumental work of H. H. Wilson on the *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms* (1855). Hunter and Cumming have however, annotated them as temporarily occuring in the local context.

Classification of the *abwabs*

The *abwabs* as were in practice in the native state of Tripura and its zamindaries may be classified into five broad categories, namely, (a) personal, (b) social, (c) religious, (d) managerial and (e) utilitarian, with respect to the occasion on which they were levied or the purpose for which they were raised.⁴

Nature and extent of exploitation

Under the personal category of the *abwabs*, *nazar* or *nazarang*, or *salami* paid to the zamindar or his *naib* (principal agent) constituted the first and foremost item of cess. The zamindar's occasional visit to his estate or the ryots appearance before the zamindar or his agent in the cutcherry were some of the usual occasions for levy. In the chakla zamindaries (Jajiara region) a *nazar* was required to be paid by the ryots to the zamindar for the privilege of digging or re-digging a tank.⁵ Any transfer or sale of *rai-yati* rights attracted varying scales of *nazar*. The change of such rights by direct succession demanded one year's rent as *nazar* which stood doubled in case of inheritance by the indirect line. Three year's rent as *nazar* was fixed for the purchaser of the rights of *jote* or

rai-yati rights.⁶ The rates of nazar for mutation of names and amalgamation and exclusion of lands varied from Rs. 1- to Rs. 2/- for the direct and indirect succession as also for the new purchase.⁷ A *nazar* amounting to one year's revenue was fixed for tea lands.⁷ A score of *abwabs* under the denomination of *tahuri* or writing charges was also extracted from the tenants on inconceivable pretexts. These were variously designated as *amla*, *tahasildar's tahuri*, *tahasil's kharach*, *tahuri*, *challan-navisi*, *poddari*, *patwari kharach*, *muhurir anna*, *mamuli*, *piyada's roz*, *piyada's anna* etc in the neighbouring British districts of Tipperah, Noakhali and Chittagong.⁸ These kinds of unwritten perks were meticulously collected by the rapacious zamindari officials practically on all transactions of the ryots on the land settlements and revenue payments. In the Rajah's zamindaries *tahuri* was raised by members of the collecting establishments at 2 pice to one *anna* per rupee.⁹ This payment of *tahuri* came in the form of personal gratification and therefore was not accounted for. This was, in fact, the management cost of zamindari in a different garb, realised from the pockets of the ryots in order to make good for the singularly low-paid wages to the revenue-Collectors of the zamindari estates. In the matter of collection of rent by the zamindar the usual practice was to serve on the defaulting tenant a *dastak* (memorandum) exhibiting the amount due through the *piyada* (peon). He extracted the *tala-bani*, a process at the rate of *annas* four a day for causing service upon the defaulter.¹⁰ In case of the tenant's inability to pay, the *piyada* demanded something in excess of his fee and managed the situation in favour of the tenant. In other words, it was a gratification for contrivance. Ultimately, when the tenant was forced to come in, he was required to pay the usual *tahuri* to the rapacious members of the collecting establishments. Without attempting payment for usual *tahuri*, the tenant could hardly straighten his account in the catcherry. All this tends to show how the zamindar's agents squeezed money from the tenant with his direct or implied connivance.

The other *abwabs* in the personal category include *bhet* (presents) and *begar* (forced labour) which may be called *abwabs* in kind. *Bhet* had somewhat its parallel to *Sidha* (customary present of food material to the zamindar) and *hadis* (presents to the tahsildar) in the district of Chittagong.¹¹

On the social category of cesses one may find *abwabs* imposed on the occasion of important social ceremonies (marriage or obsequial) in the zamindar's family, requiring large expenses. Unlike

kriya Kharach (funeral or obsequial) and *sadi kharach* as in vogue in the district of Chittagong, sometime *mathot* was extracted in the Rajah's zamindaries for similar social ceremonies, although its introduction was not rare in the zamindaries to cover the deficiency of revenue. *Marcha* or *marucha*, the most obnoxious *abwab* of the social category levied as marriage fee upon the ryots on the marriage of their sons and daughters in the district of Noakhali, had its parallel in the *kajiana*, a fee of rupees one and half payable to the state by the Muslim subjects for every kind of marriage solemnised within the territorial jurisdiction of Tripura State.¹² *Punyah-kharach* (a charge for sweetmeats given to the ryots on settling their rent) and *Uttarayan* (contribution made by the ryot on the occasion of the *Uttarayan sankranti*, the last day of *paus* towards the cost of sweetmeats for distribution among the zamindar's employees, sometime at the rate of one pice per rupee of rent) were other two important *abwabs* in vogue in the state and its attached zamindaries. *Bhet* was possibly the commonest form of contribution in kind.

Distinctive religious ring is discernable in the levy of some *abwabs* like *dasahara parba* (present or payment made at the time of Durga puja), *Jagadhatri*, *Shyama puja* (charge for the worship of goddess Jagadhatri and Kali), *Kali Holi* (contribution for the religious ceremonies of Kali and Holi performed by the zamindar) as were in force in the neighbouring British districts of Noakhali and Tipperah. And their application in the Rajah's zamindaries in Chakla Roshanabad (Tripperah) was hardly ruled out. *Ratib* (worship of a deity) in the Rajah's zamindaries or *Devatar britti* (cess extracted from the traders of forest produce and timber wood in support of a temple or an idol) of Hill Tipperah certainly speaks of religious overtone in the cess structure. *Muthi* (similar small collection) also points to it.¹³

On the managerial category, miscellaneous *abwabs* were levied for the zamindar's expenses on various account under a general *tahasil kharach*, *dak kharach*, *jarip kharach*, *ain* and *tax kharach*, *tahasil kharach* etc may be instanced in point. The zamindar, extracted all these fees from the ryots for the payment of his income tax and postal charges, for the measurement of land and for the payment of the lawyers. *Nankabhara* (boat hire), *godara* (ferry charges), *multan* (the contribution for the supply of provision, boats for the passing of troops through the estate), *birsingh*¹⁴ (cess payable at the time of battle or at the time of movements of troops), *batta* (also known as *kami ojan batta*) were other broad charges in

vogue on the management cost of the zamindar in Chakla Roshanabad. It needs be mentioned that the *abwab multan* was charged at annas 2-6 per rupee while one per cent over the rent was required to be paid by the talukdars as *batta* to his superior zamindar because of their usual settlement of rents in sicca rupees.¹⁵

As *abwabs* relate to the settled cultivation, it is obvious that the hill people living on jhuming would be exempted from their extraction. But this is far from being true. *Taithung* (acting as a porter and guide for officials on tour in the interior of the state) and *lahar* (maintenance of jungle track and couriership) which resemble *abwabs* in kind were exclusively demanded from the hill people of Tripura in excess of the house tax for Jhuming.¹⁶ *Taithung* was later required to be remunerated by an administrative order issued in 1901. But this order was hardly executed in letters and spirits.¹⁷ *Lahar* was of administrative necessity for the landlocked hilly territory and *begar* is its only parallel.

The utilitarian category included such *abwabs* as *katao* (digging or re-digging of tank), *pacha/pancha/panchak* (panchayati cess), *purtabartma kar* (road and public works cess), as existed in the native state of Tripura and its attached zamindaries. Even this kind of public-spirited or charitable work, the *abwabs* were often levied more than the whole cost of work, and thus the landlord made a handsome profit as well as a display of liberality. Hardly any benefit of road and public works had been experienced by the ryots in their localities either in the zamindaries or in the Rajah's own territory. In Chakla Roshanabad (Jajjara) the *abwab katao* was levied at *anna* per rupee. The payment of *nazar* was also in vogue in Hill Tipperah itself and its remission was allowed in those areas where the facilities for drinking water were chronically absent.¹⁸ The cess-payers were generally required to pay one anna for every rupee of the annual jama (rent) of lands in possession as *purta-bartma kar* in Hill Tipperah.¹⁹

Impact of the *abwab* system

From the above discussion it may be noted that *abwabs*, in some form or other, were a first charge on the tenant and particularly the *abwab tahuri* or *kharach* was universal in its application. The zamindars introduced *abwabs* by degrees, often at intervals of years and rarely attempted them for two or three years successively. Cesses too varied in amount in different estates or taluks and they were never all extracted by one zamindar. While the principal beneficiaries of the *abwab* system was the ill-paid *amlas*

and *gomastas* and *naibas*, *abwabs* proved still a most profitable source of income to the zamindar, apart from special and extra extractions on inconceivable pretexts. Although the interests of ryots suffered a lot and their exploitation was much pronounced, yet they could hardly think out to put up a strong resistance unless the burden became too heavy and unbearable. The 'artifice' of the ryots, namely the possession of more lands than they were rated for in the village registers or reduced rates paid in collusion with the zamindar's ingenious employees or grants of land obtained in the reduced terms of wasteland, hardly helped coalescence into a united opposition to the zamindar, except sporadically. Instances may not be wanting when the revival of *tahuri* or *uttarayan* officially in disuse, was demanded by the ryots in preference to the remission of interest accruing upon the annual rent in arrear.⁰

The realisation of *abwabs* in moderation was generally accepted by the ryots with a long tradition behind them of subseivence. The penal provisions under the Government's Regulation VIII of 1793 (Section 50) and the Section 75 of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 on the *abwabs* and other legal clauses hardly proved deterrent.²¹ and the feudal system of *abwabs* die hard till their total discontinuance by the abolition of zamindary system in the post independence era.

Notes & References

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