

Hamilton's Zamindari System: An Analytical Review

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Sir Daniel Machinon Hamilton was a Scottish, born on 6th. December 1860 in a small island of Scotland called Arran. He was a Scottish businessman who made Bengal his second home. He got involved in looking after family business at a mere age of twelve and at a slightly upper age of twenty he embarked to Calcutta as chief of Mackinnon Mackenzie Company. Who started this Gosaba zamindari in the three derelict deltas called Gosaba, Rangabelia and Saatjelia about 9000 acres land, which Mr. Hamilton took on lease from the government for a period of forty years on 13 April, 1903, where he experimented with programmes of rural & social upliftment.¹

When Daniel Machinon Hamilton, a British by origin, took on lease a sizeable portion of land in the largest delta region of the world on 13 April, 1903, a new chapter began in the history of Gosaba in particular and the Sundarban region in general. Unlike any other native Zamindars in India and any other British Officials employed in India who tried very often to oppress and suppress the poor people, Mr. Hamilton was almost completely guided by the worldview of welfare of the tenants through adoption of various measures such as cleansing of jungle, turning the land into arable ground, setting up of Co-operative society, banks, schools, health clinics, etc., He wanted to all round development of his zamindari. Although there emerged some problems regarding inheritance of his zamindari. This zamindari could still be analysed as a model against the backdrop of contemporary rural India, a task which this paper takes up.

At the basin of the river Ganges is formed the largest delta region of the world, comprising many small and large deltas collectively known as the Sundarban, which is now marked as one of the World Heritage Sites. The process of delta formation is still continuing as nature is playing its freaks. The region has a history fraught with various incidents. Although not ratified by history, there was an ancient civilization, according to popular beliefs, called '*Gagnaridi Civilization*' prior to the formation of Sundarban. As the cartography prepared by Mr. Renel in the year 1772 shows, the two third of the entire region were covered with jungles. I want to focus on a particular delta with a view to analyse it from a different angle.

According to various sources the process of turning the region into a habitable land by clearing off jungles started from the mid-18th century when the British govt. started distributing the land in portions on lease with a view to increase collection of revenue. Gradually the system of zamindari kicked off flourishing. He was deeply shocked by the plight of the poor in India living under rule of the British Raj and began to figure out a utopian world free of oppression. To materialize his utopian plan Hamilton introduced a zamindari called Gosaba zamindari. His aim was socio-economic development of the region and the welfare of the poor, for which he took up various programmes.

According to that lease agreement Hamilton took the land on 13 April, 1903. As per the agreement, there was to be no revenue on 1/4 portion of the land taken, and also there was to be no revenue in the rest of the land for ten years. According to the Large Capital Rule - 1879, revenue was to be imposed from the subsequent years. Furthermore, it was referred in the agreement that within five years 1/8 portion of the land should have to be turned into arable land, failing which the agreement would stand as cancelled and new agreement would be considered with someone else. River bank would have to be built very high and the jungle would have to be cleaned by the people belonging from outside the Sundarban.

It is to be noted that there was no system of permanent settlement in the Sundarban region, for which the question remains whether it was the property of the state or any Zamindar. "The forest was the property of the State and was not included in the Permanent Settlement; but its extent could not be defined during the early period, and indeed; the Southern boundaries of Zamindars asserted to the forest were decided and confusion dissipated."² Generally the land which was not allocated for lease was considered to be the property of the state. On 20 December, 1873 Mr. Tilman Henkel, magistrate of Jessore, wrote to Governor General Hastings for considering whether the jungle portion of the Sundarban could be given on lease. For that cleansing of jungle started. Before 1877 there was no fixed law as such for revenue collection and from this very year a proper revenue collection system was started, although unused land was kept out

of revenue jurisdiction. Mr. Gomes, the then Commissioner of Sundarban, was directed by the Board of Revenue to chalk out a draft of law, which later came to be known as Large Capital Rules 1879.³

According to the above law Hamilton was allocated three blocks on 13 April, 1903 -- a) Gosaba, of 830 acres, b) 3200 acres of lot no.143 and c) 4850 acres of lot no 149. In 1909 he was allocated another 5120 acres of lot no. 148. But a problem arose when the Large Capital Rules 1879 was adjourned. Hamilton started the cleansing process of the land allocated to him slowly but steadily. Human habitation was invited after the cleansing process was done, although people were afraid to shift to a different zamindari because of oppression. According to a census report of 1910, only 900 tenants lived at that time. He was deeply shocked by the plight of the poor in India living under rule of the British Raj.

Under the zamindari system of contemporary India common people were variously oppressed, which created a social scar in rural India. The arrival of Hamilton in this situation was an important event in history. After acquiring the land on lease Hamilton spent, he spent huge money but income was almost nil. "Sir Daniel had, by now, incurred a huge expenditure on account of reclamation which was to the tune of Rs. 24 per acre but no income could be generated."⁴

Despite that he took utmost care for the welfare of the poor through adoption of various measures such as digging of pond, establishment of primary health clinic, post office, primary school, training centre for cultivation, grocery shop, etc. For fulfillment of his objectives, he arranged for training for cultivation of paddy as the land was promising ground for it. He experimented with various forms of cultivation collecting information for each type of planting. He also used to distribute paddy seeds free of cost. He planned large scale coconut plantation, but it proved to be not so profitable.

Hamilton became worried as there was least economic development of the poor and to cast away the fear of the poor people he called for a meeting between the creditor and the debtor, realizing the hard fact that it was these usurers who posed blocks to the economic development to the region. After much discussion, it was decided that all the loans to the Zamindar incurred by the farmers would be meted out by Hamilton and in turn farmers should repay the loan on a long term basis. Through this marvelous step common people, farmers, debtors became much benefited as their economic progress was noticeable, and later when the area of the entire region increased to 22000 acres out of which 17000 acres were inhabited by the tenants, each farmer family was allocated 30 bigha of arable land. Thus Hamilton initiated what came to be known as cooperative system, which, he believed, would provide satisfactory service to all.

Hamilton imported the idea of Co-operative system from Scotland where it succeeded, but in his zamindari the success was not up to the expectation. Perhaps he sort of failed to make the farmers understand the system in a positive way. However, Mr. Hamilton established a Cooperative Lending Society in 1915. Initially the total members were 15 and the capital was mere 500 rupees. But within a few years the Society started expanding as many small economic establishments started functioning together. In 1924 Hamilton gathered all those small financial institutions and formed in 1933 Gosaba Central Co-operative Bank, which began functioning with 628 members of 19 small Societies and with a total capital of rupees 11830. There were other money lending institutions, but their lending scheme was complex and the interest was pretty high too. These institutions preferred to lend money on only short term basis, very often four times or five times a year, generally during the month of May or September, and the repayment conditions were linked to agricultural produce. Almost there was no long term loan scheme. "Long term loan were rarely granted. Short term loans were issued generally five times in the year- during the months of May to September- and the purpose of these loans chiefly related to cultivation, Purchase of cattle, maintenance and other unavoidable expense. Recovery was affected from the crops and more in kind than in actual cash."⁵ Thus Hamilton had realized that people gradually began to come to terms with the Co-operative system. Co-operative movement started from a small zamindari like Gosaba. He once opined "If Co-operation fails, there will fail the best hope of rural India." His worldview even influenced Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi.

Going a step further, he then initiated the concept of Co-operative consumerism, and in 1918 established a Consumers' Co-operative Society where various goods available in city market were sold in rural market on the demand of the local people and at a comparatively cheaper price. In this way local people were benefited in two ways – goods which were costlier in city market could be bought at a cheaper price and the profit incurred through this was equally divided among the local people.

The local produce was taken to the city market by the businessmen and the city produce was brought to the rural market by the same lot of businessmen to be sold at a cheaper price. But it became increasingly necessary to set up a local market where farmers could sell their own produce. With a view to facilitate the local farmers Hamilton in 1923 established *Co-operative Paddy Sell Society* through which produce by the local farmers was taken to the far-off market and for transportation boats were bought.

“...Pooling the supplies of members and disposing of the same in the best market. The Society purchased boats for the transport of paddy to Ultadanga which was the most important paddy mart of Calcutta.”⁶ Besides Ultadanga, there were other markets. However, this Paddy Sell Society played a great role in facilitating greater value to the farmers for their produce. To process rice locally on a large scale Mr. Hamilton also set up in 1927 *Jamini Rice Mill*. Actually Hamilton wanted to eradicate all those middle-players so that farmers could get the share of profit directly for their own produce, but the role of those middle-players could not be absolutely abolished as there was close nexus between farmers and Mill owners on one hand and the Mill owners and the customers on the other.

Even after adopting all these measures Hamilton was not happy because there still remained poverty. To dispose of the poverty of the farmers he then started pondering upon small scale industry, where male members of families would work in their leisure time. With this view in mind he established in 1919 *Central Model Farm* in his zamindari. The aim of this Farm was to look for developed variety of paddy seed, and the findings of this research were analyzed in local schools. Thus Hamilton’s enterprise surpassed that of contemporary government, and to keep such enterprise active officers were employed at various posts. Those officers worked to research on various types of seeds. As a result of this, there came a kind of social revolution, which further smoothened the process of establishment and flourish of small scale industry. As part of cottage industry, *Central Weaving Institute* was established and from 1928 various training programmes such as cutting of string, weaving of silk, cleaning, drying and dyeing of cloth, mixing of colours were conducted. Thus this cottage industry flourished.

Hamilton also attended to the development of human resource. For that purpose, he set up schools of various levels – *lower primary, upper primary, adult education centre, night school* and *English medium school*. English medium school was at the centre of village. “For adult education, Night classes were organised in the village schools, supplemented by a Circulating library. In the Census of 1941, the Estate recorded a population of 15000 with literacy percentage of 25 excluding the areas which were reclaimed in the thirties.”⁷ For higher education Hamilton established *Gosaba Rural Reconstruction Institute* where two courses, senior and junior, could be done. In agriculture, senior course was of two years’ duration and it was given in two fields – theoretical and practical. The junior course was of four years’ duration. Besides, various vocational training programmes such as sewing, accountancy, milk preservation, poultry, etc. could also be done. After successful completion of senior course students could either take up farming or join any service.

Scarcity of currency in contemporary economy with the additional paucity of low denomination notes created problem for transaction. After the commencement of this zamindari system the problem only deepened. To meet the low denomination currency deficit Hamilton after obtaining permission from the central government launched in 1936 a new *One Rupee Paper note* which was valid only within the jurisdiction of his zamindari and farmers could exchange this paper note with silver coins in case of use outside the zamindari jurisdiction. Farmers could take loans from banks in two currencies – paper note and silver coin. This new paper note greatly facilitated the business. But farmers did not get the entire amount of loan in cash. They got that much amount of cash which was necessary to dispense wages, the rest of the loan amount was dispensed through goods and supplies such as manure, seeds, etc.

Generally loan was given between May and September to be repaid in December. Farmers could send the harvested crops to the Rice Mill and by selling the reaped crops loan amount was repaid, and the surplus money was returned to the farmers. Money collected as tax from the farmers was spent for developmental works. Hamilton thus could use large human resource to fruitful effect and the same he tried to communicate to Indian government.

Mr. Hamilton willed that after his death (6th December 1939) all his property would be in the name of Lady Margaret Elizabeth Hamilton, his wife, and the deed was registered on 13 December 1939 in the Books of the Lords of the Council. Besides, Hamilton’s two cousins – Mr. Daniel Machinon Hamilton and Mr. James Hamilton – were declared as the legal heirs. On the death of the Hamilton’s wife all property earlier belonging to Mr. Hamilton became the joint property of Anglican Church, Scottish Church and the London Missionary Society of India, who were to perpetuate the mission of Mr. Hamilton. Besides, the Managers of Imperial Bank and Gosaba Estate would act as Directors. One important part of the Will is, “The Trustee will be very careful to see that the embankments of Gosaba are always kept in first class order, And it is my wish that the properties should be worked on the same lines as now, and that any profit should be utilised for the establishment of similarly worked properties in the other part of India.”⁸ On the death of Hamilton’s wife Gosaba zamindari turned into government’s property under the charge of Hamilton’s two cousins – Mr. Daniel Machinon Hamilton and Mr. James Hamilton. But in 1969 after the death of James’s wife, the last legal

heir to the property, there emerged a problem. Ultimately the charge of the property was given to Dr. Gopinath Barman and Dr. Subodh Kumar Basu in 1970.

But the institutions established by Sir Daniel began to lose their good reputation and people also lost their faith. As per the recommendation of Dr. Gopinath Burman almost 8000 acre land of the zamindari turned into *khas* land according to the Estate Acquisition Act-1953. Mr. Hamilton, a generous Zamindar unlike his other British counterparts, had a completely different worldview altogether. Whereas other Zamindars exercised their power to oppress and suppress the tenants, often bordering on tyranny, Hamilton's aim was welfare of the state and its people. He inaugurated the services of Co-operative society, bank, agricultural loans, seed research centre, supply of seeds, manure, pesticides, Rice Mill, free schools, primary health care centre and many other such stuff.

Mr. Hamilton was able to establish habitable houses three years after the lease agreement and he could set up Estate. Boards of Directors of all Co-operative Banks looked after the village administration and welfare of the people following the laws laid down by the High Court which also administered six Central Banks. The High Court also in emergency controlled the storehouses of the villages. The over-all condition of the tenants was satisfactory. There was not a single criminal case in long thirty to thirty-five years. There used to be a meeting once in every month and the resolutions taken in the meeting were forwarded to General Welfare Committee. Also in every village there used to be Panchayat where five members out of 50 to 70 candidates were elected. They were responsible for peace and justice.

In the year 1930 Hamilton's Gosaba project neared completion he invited both Nobel laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi to visit it. Rabindranath Tagore came in December 1932 Mr. Hamilton exchanged several letters on the need for village reconstruction and cooperative societies with Rabindranath Tagore.⁹ M.k. Gandhi sent his secretary, Mahadev Desai, in his place. Desai spent a week with Hamilton at Gosaba and wrote about the visit in a four –part series in Harijan, the Gandhian weekly.¹⁰

Hamilton's initiatives which played effective role in rural reformation were successful enough. Although Hamilton had an honest entrepreneurial mindset in rural reformation of Gosaba region, we have to bear it in mind that he was after all a British. Perhaps that's why his plans and initiatives were not absolutely free of colonial project. Many farmers still continued to remain in debt and still many others lost the ownership of land becoming only share-croppers. Such facts were administratively handled. This aspect caused some worry to Revenue Officers who went to visit Gosaba during 1930s.¹¹ In final analysis my observation is that despite some faults and drawbacks Gosaba zamindari could well stand out as a model among existing zamindari systems in contemporary rural India

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