

Gosaba Zamindari: A Model of Zamindari System in Rural India

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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 Sundarbans, 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. There was an ancient civilization, according to popular beliefs, called '*Gangaridi Civilisation*' prior to the formation of Sundarbans. As the cartography prepared by Mr. Renell 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 analyzing 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 increasing the collection of revenue. Gradually the system of zamindari kicked off flourishing. This paper takes into account one of those systems of zamindari which may be marked as a '*Model*.'

The zamindari system I am concerned about is hailed as Gosaba zamindari which is relatively new and on whose head sat a Scottish, whose name was Sir Daniel Machinon Hamilton. He was the chief of Machinon Maekenji company in the then Calcutta and it is he who started this Gosaba zamindari in the three derelict deltas called Gosaba, Rangabelia and Saatjelia, which Mr. Hamilton took on lease from the government for a period of forty years on 13 April, 1903. The total area of the region was then 2514 bigha.¹ The cartographical boundary shown in the map prepared by the Commissioner of Sundarbans was like this – towards the North was part of the River Vidyadhari, two small canals towards the South, in the East was lot no. 149 and another part of the Vidyadhari River towards the West.

On 13 April, 1903 Hamilton initiated the cleansing of jungle for cultivation. 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 Machinon Maekenji Company.² 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 *Gosaba zamindari* in parts of Sundarbans on some conditions. His aim was socio-economic development of the region and the welfare of the poor, for which he took up various programmes.

As per the lease 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. 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 from outside the Sundarbans.

As there was dense jungle towards the south and the process of delta formation was still going on, there was no fixed boundary towards the southern part of the land. It is to be noted that there was no system of permanent settlement in the Sundarbans region, for which the question remains whether it was the property of the state or any Zaminder.³ 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 Sundarbans 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 Sundarbans, 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. Hamilton started the cleansing process of the land allocated to him slowly but steadily, and after the rain water had washed away the salt of the land cultivation gradually began. But initially the produce was minimal. 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, out of which some were coolies, and they together cleaned 3000 acres of land.

Under the zamindari system of contemporary India common people were variously oppressed and the arrival of Hamilton in this situation was an important event in history. After acquiring the land on lease Hamilton spent almost 24 rupees per acre to clean the land, but the income was almost nil at that time.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, grocery shop, etc. He arranged for training for cultivation of paddy as the land was promising ground for it, experimented with various forms of cultivation collecting information for each type of planting, distributed 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 of the region. It was decided then 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. In this context it may be pertinent to refer Indian Finance Patrick Report-1938.⁵ Through this marvelous step common people, farmers and debtors became much benefited 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 Co-operative 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 Gosaba 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. But the farmers were up to the task, and thus 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 11830 rupees. 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. There was no long term loan scheme.⁶

Inspired by the success of Co-Operative Banking system, he then initiated the concept of Co-operative consumerism, and in 1918 established a *Consumer 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. 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 facilitating the local farmers Hamilton in 1923 established *Co-Operative Paddy Sale Society* through which produce by the local farmers was taken to the far-off market, and for transportation boats were bought. 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.

To dispose of the poverty which was still lurking 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* at Gosaba. Whose aim 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, to research on various types of seeds. As a result, there came a kind of social revolution, which further smoothened the process of establishment and flourish of small scale industry.

As a 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,

etc. were conducted. Hamilton also set up schools for human resource development. For example, among various educational enterprises, “For adult education, Night classes were organized 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 *Rural Reconstruction Institute* where two courses, senior and junior, could be done. In agriculture, senior course was of two years’ duration. 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. Scarcity of currency in contemporary economy with the additional paucity of low denomination notes created problem for transaction. 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 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 was able to establish habitable houses three years after the lease agreement and he could set up Estate. *Board 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 could control 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 monthly meeting 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.

Mr. Hamilton willed that after his death all his property would be in the name of Lady Margaret Elizabeth Hamilton, his wife, and Elizabeth declared that after her death her two cousins – Mr. Daniel Machinon Hamilton and Mr. James Hamilton – would be legal heirs. 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 Director Dr. Gopinath Barman and Manager 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 Barman almost 8000 acre land of the zamindari were turned into *khas* land according to the *Estate Acquisition Act-1953*. 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. His worldview even influenced Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhiji sent his aide Mahadeb Desai to Gosaba, Rabindranath himself visited Gosaba in 1932.

Although Hamilton had an honest entrepreneurial mindset in rural reformation of Gosaba and its surroundings, 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. This aspect caused some worry to Revenue Officers who went to visit Gosaba during 1930s. 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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