

Origin of Mirasdari System in Cachar with special reference to the Mirasdars of Panchama land in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: *Mirasdar was an important landed class in Eastern India. It was a pre colonial revenue collecting officer which has patronised by the colonial state too. In time it emerged to be a very powerful agency both for the colonial administration as well as a basis of emerging middle class. This article basically tries to evaluate the origin of the concept of this class. In this article I have mentioned various primary sources to evaluate the concept of Mirasdar as social component in general and Surma valley district of colonial Assam in particular.*

Key words: *miras, Mukhtar, mazumdar, talookdar, kharida miras, tapadar, bhuswami, ryotwari, pariahs, meer.*

The term Mirasdar was used much more earlier than the British rule in Cachar. It has been discussed in the roots of emergence of Mirasdar in Cachar under Dimacha rule. In the pre-colonial days Cachar passed through the administration of medieval kingship. King was at that time the fountain head of all administration. Agriculture was the main source of their income. Compared to other parts of India British rule consolidated in Cachar in the late phase of Company's domination. There was gulf of differences between Pre-colonial administration and Colonial administration in Cachar. Under Dimachas, population of Cachar was small and scanty. Kachari kings invited Bengalees including Brahmins to settle in Cachar and in the subsequent days they became the leaders of the society. Land was sufficient and

as a result few powerful officials under the domain of the king gradually become the owner of huge land property. After annexation, land was gradually distributed to the large number of population due to the folk of newcomers under new administration. In the last phase of Dimacha rule large number of people fled away due to the fearful atrocities of the raids of Manipuris and Burmese which slack down, economy also. So in this hopeless atmosphere compelled the people to search new land for their safety and security. However, British annexation again had created new atmosphere and hope in the minds of the people of the neighboring parts of Cachar. Circular was issued to the neighbouring parts of Cachar like Sylhet, Decca, Mymensingh, Kumilla, Tripura to settle in this valley. They were easily granted lands and fortune seeker begun to come in Cachar for employment. Bengali was the official language. In the language of Fisher, 'The entire instruction in this district is to convey in the Bengali language.'¹ Another statement of Maulana Rashid Ali is that 'As for the Cachar people, these people have not migrated from the Assam Valley, they have not migrated from the hills, they have not dropped from heaven. The Cachar people are descendants of Sylhet'.²

After the immediate annexation the British Government did not alter the existing system. Similar system was adopted after the annexation of Assam. Naturally they were organized their administration with the hope of new outlook. It is learnt from the book of Ratna Dey, Land revenue administration in Cachar 1832- 1900 that "As is evident from different sources, between 1800-1830 one of the important events in Cachar was 'large scale deputation'." About 2.5 lakhs of people abounded Cachar under the period.³ However when people ensured security, the people who had escaped away to Sylhet begun to come back to Cachar and the population thus increased gradually. In 1850-51, the population of Cachar swelled to about 85,522. In 1857, the population of the valley was 1, 37,000. In 1872 census, at 2, 93,738. In 1901, the population of Cachar was 4, 14,781. The number of Manipuri and Naga settlers also considerably increased.⁴

To quote Ratna Dey

"The country of has been permanently annexed to the British dominion,

that the tax there will be fixed at the rates analogous to such as have been adopted in recent assessment that they may good jungle lands rent free for 1000 days at the end of which a settlement will be concluded for the portion brought under cultivation to which the holder will acquire proprietary right as a Talookdar or Zamindar and that where an outlay was made for draining and filling marshes, clearing forests, the period during which the land will be allowed to remain rent free would be extended to five years etc."⁵

With the gradual process of changes of British administration Mirasdar gradually become powerful and the British Government ' gave them priority and excluded them from other officials like Mukhtar to perform the smooth administration without hampering the existing system of administration. Thus on the recommendation of the commissioner the Government decided to make a new settlement on easier terms with the Mirasdars. Thus the inflow of the people from the neighboring regions imbued among the Mirasdars the spirit of competition to increase the number of subtenant and Raiyots. Thus Cachar become a land of Mirasdars and this process of medieval royalism made an indent into the society. The British also favoured this aristocracy.⁶

Meaning of Miras

The word Miras means land held under hereditary title; the right of hereditary occupation. Miras-Ijara means base or settlement of land to be enjoyed hereditary.⁷

In another way Mir, Meer means leader chief (Arbi). The word Miras, derived from Arbi, Farshi word which means hereditary possession.⁸ So the word Mirasdar comes from Miras which means hereditary possession of land. Another meaning of Meer means sea, drink of sima mountain special, title of the Muslims.⁹ So it is clearly stated that Mirasdar used as title of a land holder and who possessed hereditary land. The word Miras was already invauge during the time of Dimacha king in Cachar. They signed an agreement with the people like Talukar Miras and Kharida Miras. During the time of raja Govinda Chandra (1813-30), raja appointed Sonaram Sharma as the Deshmukhya of Udharbond in terms of "Sabek Maurase

Pargona". This word also used in the official seal of the Dimacha king in Cachar.¹⁰

According to Ratna Dey, "The concept of Mirasdar is clearly associated with lands as the word 'Miras' is equivalent to estate or land and therefore the owner of the land is so called."¹¹ Prior to British annexation 'khel' or 'Miras' formed the very essential features of the land revenue system in Cachar.¹²

To Quote J. N. Das, "Mirasdar are petty peasant proprietors of lands either permanently settled or temporarily settled and personally cultivated by themselves. They are found in the district of cachar, particularly in Karimganj. They are 'peasants' because they cultivate their own lands as contrasted to the large Zamindars or Talukdars who do not do so but only sublet their lands to others. They are also 'proprietors' in the popular sense because they enjoyed permanent heritable and transferable rights, even when their estates are temporarily settled. In the eye of law, they are really land holders when they own temporarily settled estates, but surely 'proprietors' - when their estates, however small, are by law, permanently settled."¹³ Again to Quote R. Dey, "Another noteworthy features of the society in the days of the Dimasa Raj was the prevalence of the Mirasdars. One who possessed land (Miras) was known as Mirasdar, who belonged to the privileged section of the then society of cachar.

Although with the introduction of the British rule some changes took place in the stratum of the social order of Barak Valley. Yet it could not change its traditional system. The Mirasdars by virtue of their age old status continued to occupy a privileged social position in Barak Valley.¹⁴

About Mirasdar, Mr. Arthur Phillips wrote in his book "The law relating to the land tenures of lower Bengal that, 'The Khoodkashto class of Raiyats appears to have been the same as the class of Mirasadars in Southern India (called also alcudies in Tanjore) who existed is very early times, and were anciently called Caniatchy ryots in Malabar'.¹⁵ In this book the term Ajdadi Miras is used also.¹⁶ There are two types of Mirasdar found in Cachar, viz, indigenous and non-indigenous. Another definition opined that

the concept of Mirasdar which is clearly stated in the book Of Ratna Dey, I quote her "A huge number of time expired labourers during the tenure of service or afterwards occupied large areas of Government khas land or unused tea-garden land or Miras and gradually came to be designated as Mirasdar. They are called non-indigenous group of Mirasdar.¹⁷

In Cachar, Permanent Settlement was not extended but periodical settlements were made with individual holders and few Mirasdars were assigned large estates. A large number of these Mirasdars were from outside the district, including some Hindi speaking North- Indians, who originally came to the town as traders and then invested a part of their capital on land in rural areas.¹⁸

In other way, Mirasdars or Talukdars are called superior raiyat or middlemen.¹⁹ However, greater part of the erstwhile Cachar district was under kachari ruler prior to the British annexation, 1830. Land was absolute property of the rulers; the heritable and transferable rights granted to the occupants over their holdings were conditional and were liable to be overridden at any time by the supreme rights of the sovereign. The practice of communal ownership of land (known as Mirasdari tenure) was fairly common and it peristed until the settlement of 1900. Under this tenure, the right of holding land was delegated to a group of persons known as 'Miras' and its members were collectively responsible for the payment of revenue Every Miras also had to supply labour, food and other necessaries to the Raja."²⁰ This practice of taking up land and of holding land jointly on what is called Mirasdari tenure was common in the district until the settlement of 1900.²¹

Dr. Herbert, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar reported in 1900, "the Mirasdars as a rule are well conducted and the raiyots are well treated".²² At the same time, the nature of social relation between Mirasdar's and raiyots coincided with the zamindar of Bengal.²³

It is true that most of the titles at the time originally came from landed aristocracy. Mazumdar, Bhuswami, Talukdar, Tapadar, Zamindar and Choudhury were all these title oriented groups mainly involved with land. Their efficiency believed upon their nature of jobs. They were mainly per-

formed a role in between the raiyots and their superiors like sultans, Raja & finally the British. They were also possessing the right of ownership of land though they paid taxes to the government according to their rank and position, otherwise they become defaulters. Mirasdar, Mazumder are also Persian word which means all in all. All these titles were mediaeval phenomenon to designate the position of the officials.²⁴ Under British rule these similar process more or less existed in a different forms and manners.

In the beginning of the British rule, the title of Choudhury was also slightly conferred but after the Dassana Bandobasthu, the system of conferring titles gradually becomes disappeared. The Choudhuries at this time designated the most privileged class of the society. Many high class Brahmins were also designated them as Choudhuries. During the time of Nawab's regime many other reputed titles oriented group were also seen. They were namely Sikdar, Kanungo, Purkayastha and these titles were heredited from their ancestors generation wise. Generally Choudhuries were in large scale landlords. Beside this other groups of landlords were Tapadar and Talukdar. Though they were possessing small lands than Choudhuries. In practice those who were paid above five hundred coins as tax to the government was called Zaminders and those who are paid above 50 coins as tax to the government was called Mirasdar. And below this level of tax payers were called Tapadar or Talukdar. So it is clear from the above fact that the definition of this class in the society at that time invariably depended upon the payment of taxes and in return they earned social position and categorised them into different social ranks²⁵ So the word Mirasdar originated from the word Maurasi which means hereditary.²⁶

The British rule gave a death below to the fundamental Hindu doctrine of peasants proprietors which the nation inherited from time immemorial and was culminated in 1793 with perpetual transfer of vast tract of land under the 'Permanent Settlement Act' of Bengal by a class of intermediaries known as Zamindars, with whom property of land was vested in opposition to the long established tradition. It was extended upto Karimganj of Sylhet district which was very near to Cachar. So Zamindari System remains upto the area of this part of Karimganj. There was no such Zamindars those were

held position as Zamindar of Cachar. Similarly in Cachar land revenue system was based on Ryotwari System. Accordingly Ryotwari Settlement did not have any Zamindari System. Ryotwari Settlement means the land revenue made by the government with actual cultivators without any intermediary.²⁷ It was indicated that the Mirasdar of Cachar although possessing vast tract of land but they were not denoting the similar status of Zamindars of Bengal. In practice Mirasdari means a revenue estate under Zamindar. Though Cachar had no Zamindars, similarly Mirasdar was virtually the landlords of Cachar and possessing an equivalent position but which was varied from Zamindars of Bengal. Thus Mirasdar played their role as a regional component of land owners in Cachar.

Some Thoughts about the Mirasdars of Panchama land in Tamil Nadu

Man's attachment to the land has been very strong from time immemorial during the Pastoral stage. In Indian context, due to the peculiar social stratification of the society based on caste differentiation, the indigenous people particularly the Panchamas (the so-called untouchables) were denied ownership of land. However the Panchamas were deliberately kept at the subsistence level, or even below that level, and were forced to eke out a most miserable living totally dependent on and subservient to the upper caste landlords and were treated as slaves from time immemorial. This same pathetic situation continued for more than 2000 years and one sees the same conditions prevailing in the second half of the 20th century of the British missionaries submitted a memorandum to the governor of Madras presidency listing the pathetic conditions of Pariahs. Though the government claimed that slavery was illegal, they were living in Practical slavery. Mirasdar's have induced Pariahs to sign documents surrounding their own liberty as well as that of their children, thereby becoming actual slaves. The district Munsifs courts decided against the Pariah and the power of eviction thus bestowed place the Pariah more completely in the hands of the Mirasdars. The court often pronounced against them. When they could not pay the costs, documents were written the cost was treated as debts due to the Mirasdars. The existing state of laws relating to waste lands and the opposition of village officials, mirasdars and the higher castes generally made their efforts to obtain and hold such lands directly from the govern-

ment costly and futile and their efforts to gain an independent footing as Pattadars were vigorously resented. In many villages, the Mirasdars claimed as their own, the sites on which the homes of the Pariahs were built and this claim made intimidation easy and served to irritate and suppress the Pariahs. The mirasdars systematically opposed the establishment of schools for the education of Pariah children. The memorialists quoted the Indian Education Commission's recommendations for Pariah village schools and forbid Mirasdars and others from hindering their establishment by intimidation or oppression and to make provisions of a special nature in the grant-in-Aid code for the encouragement of running such schools for Pariahs when the question was raised in the House of Commons enquiring about Tremenheere's report on the conditions of Pariahs in Chingleput district and about the measures adopted by the government of Madras to ameliorate their condition and whether the low-caste population could acquire waste land for cultivation like the caste Mirasdars or the caste Hindu lease-holders, the government was forced to act.

Tremenheere rightly pointed out that it was not possible for the low caste to obtain and cultivate available waste-lands. Tremenheere stated: "It is doubtful what meaning should be attached to the word practice. If the statement means that a Pariah can intact obtain wastelands as freely as other classes, it is incorrect. He may apply for it but he has to run the gauntlet of first, the mirasdars and secondly, the non-mirasi Pattadars, both of which classes abhor the thought of Pariahs acquiring land."

It is further stipulated that "All classes in which the mirasdars may attempt to eject their tenants or form labourers from their present house sites on the plea that the mirasi body is the owner of the village site, should be immediately reported to the Board in view the right being tested in the court."

But the moment a Pariah applied, the mirasdars acted jointly and used all their powers to prevent his application and often they succeeded in keeping the helpless Pariah applicant at bay. The mirasdars and the landed aristocracy had a very powerful influence over the legal institutions and the influence of these classes with the official world can hardly be exagger-

ated. From 1920, land distribution slowly spread from Thanjavur to the other districts. Acquisition of land by the government faced certain hurdles. The mirasdars filed civil cases to stop the government's acquisition but in a majority of the cases, the sub-judges gave judgments in favour of the government. The revenue officials attributed this to the fact that they brought in lands were worthless in nature and the Pariahs had no bullocks or no money to start cultivating independently and in some cases, the mirasdars dissuaded them from taking up lands. The fear of losing what little they had and their indebtedness to mirasdars also contributed to the Pariahs not utilising the assigned lands effectively.²⁸

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