



## The Landed Classes and The Question of Land Control of Banaras in the 18th Century

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the transformation of land control, agrarian relations, and political authority in the Banaras region during the eighteenth century, a period marked by the decline of Mughal power, the rise of regional elites, and early British intervention. Land formed the central basis of wealth, power, and legitimacy, and its control shaped social hierarchy and rural life. The agrarian structure of Banaras was characterized by layered and overlapping rights involving peasants, zamindars, jagirdars, religious institutions, and revenue officials. While peasants held customary and hereditary cultivation rights, effective control increasingly shifted to intermediaries who extracted surplus through fiscal, judicial, and coercive means. The weakening of Mughal authority enabled zamindars to transform from revenue collectors into powerful territorial figures, while jagirdars and revenue officials intensified short-term extraction. Religious endowments further complicated landholding patterns by concentrating revenue-free land in institutional hands. These developments heightened fiscal pressure on cultivators, leading to widespread indebtedness, erosion of customary protections, and growing social stratification within villages. Early British involvement introduced legal codification, standardized revenue assessments, and administrative rationalization. Although initially gradual, colonial policies redefined land as a fiscal asset, strengthened intermediary authority, and reduced peasant security. Fixed revenue demands increased agrarian stress and tied cultivators more firmly to debt and dependency. Overall, the study argues that eighteenth-century Banaras witnessed a transition from a negotiated agrarian order to a more coercive and extractive system. These changes laid the institutional and social foundations for later colonial land settlements and long-term socioeconomic transformation in the region.

**KEYWORDS:** Zamindars, Jagirdars, Banaras, Land Control, The Landed Classes, Peasants etc.

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the critically examines how land management and the role of landed classes changed in Banaras during the eighteenth century in order to comprehend how the bases of agrarian power and socioeconomic relations changed. Wealth, power, and political legitimacy were primarily derived from land, and changes in its ownership mirrored larger transitions in government from Mughal rule to regional domination and early British interference. Through an examination of the landholding system, the roles played by revenue officials, zamindars, and jagirdars, the waning of Mughal power, and the early British engagement in land management, this chapter charts the transformation of agrarian relations throughout this period of transition. The chapter goes on to assess how these developments affected peasants and agricultural society, emphasizing how changing land laws and power structures changed rural life and prepared the way for long-term socioeconomic transformation in the Banaras region.

### 1.2. STRUCTURE OF LANDHOLDING IN THE BANARAS REGION

The Banaras region's eighteenth-century landholding structure served as the tangible basis for social hierarchy, political power, and economic ties. Land was more than just a resource for farming; it was a symbol of authority, pride, and social control. The ownership and control of land dictated the balance between the state, middlemen, and farmers in an area where agrarian produce supported urban centers, places of worship, and administrative apparatus. Instead of exclusive ownership, Banaras' landholding system was distinguished by its intricacy, variety of claims, and layered rights. Examining ownership patterns, institutional control, customary rights, and the slow change in agrarian relations over the eighteenth century, this part explores the nature of landholding in the Banaras region.

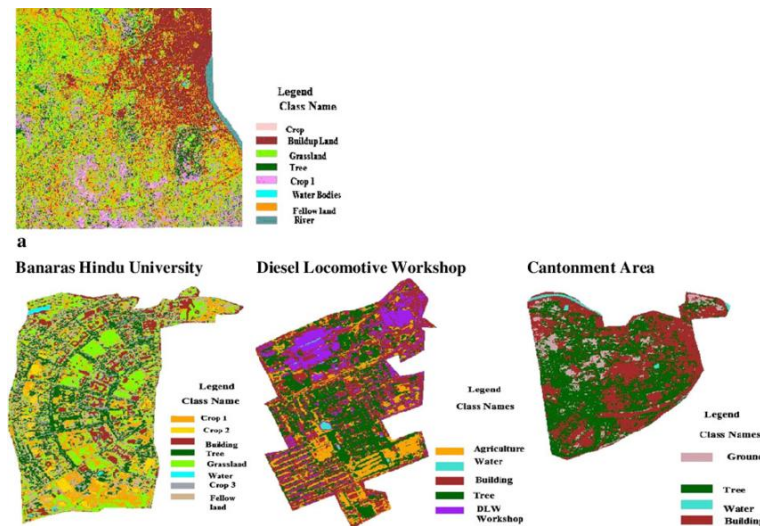


Figure 1.1: Classified image of Varanasi city (a), Banaras Hindu University (b), diesel locomotive workshop (c), and cantonment area (d)

- **Agrarian Landscape of the Banaras Region**

The rich Middle Ganga plain included the Banaras region, which was centered on Banaras. Intensive agriculture was made possible by the alluvial soil, consistent riverine irrigation, and favourable weather. The fundamental units of agrarian organization were villages, and peasant households tended to cultivate using conventional methods. The people, temples, marketplaces, and government buildings of the city were all supported by agricultural surplus from the countryside.

In this area, land was often divided into four categories: revenue-free land, gifted land connected to philanthropic or religious organizations, uncultivated or wasteland, and cultivated land. Because land rights are multi-layered, each category had distinct fiscal and social ramifications.

- **Customary Rights and Multiple Claims over Land**

In contrast to contemporary ideas of private property, customary rights and shared claims dominated landholding in the Banaras region. The ultimate ownership of property was asserted by the sovereign authority, initially the Mughal state, mainly through the ability to levy taxes. Nonetheless, this assertion coexisted with zamindars' inherited rights, growers' occupancy rights, and intermediaries' administrative control.

As long as revenue commitments were fulfilled, peasants were allowed to work the land under customary cultivation rights, which were frequently inherited. Although they did not often produce land personally, zamindars maintained order and collected

taxes to exert control over the area. The agrarian structure was further complicated by the fact that religious groups held land through endowments, which were sometimes exempt from revenue responsibilities.

Despite this diversity of rights promoted stability, it also opened the door for conflict, especially when the eighteenth century saw an increase in demands for revenue.

- **Zamindari Holdings and Village Control**

Zamindars served as an essential conduit between the peasantry and the government. Zamindari privileges in the Banaras region were ingrained in local social structures and were passed down via families. Zamindars ruled over groups of villages and had power over local government, revenue collection, and conflict settlement.

Zamindars were not absolute owners, but they were able to amass riches and power because of their efficient land management. Zamindars' intermediary function evolved into one of territorial supremacy throughout the eighteenth century as Mughal authority waned and they increasingly claimed independent control over land and revenue.

- **Religious Endowments and Institutional Landholding**

In the Banaras region, one of the most important groups of landowners was religious institutions. Land was given to temples, monasteries, and religious trusts by royal gifts, patron donations, and pilgrimage income. Religious organizations were guaranteed a consistent income because these estates were



frequently designated as revenue-free or enjoyed concessional rates.

Temple officials used agents and tenant farmers to administer the property, earning money from produce or rent. Institutional landholding connected spiritual authority with material riches and strengthened the economic dominance of religious elites. Administrative decentralization was facilitated by the concentration of land in religious hands, which also diminished the state's financial power.

- **Jagirs and Revenue Assignments**

The landholding structure included jagirs as well as zamindari holdings. In lieu of salary, administrators, aristocrats, or military leaders received revenue allocations known as jagirs. Jagirdars had considerable control over the extraction of revenue even if they did not directly possess any property. In the Banaras region, existing zamindari and religious landholdings frequently overlapped with jagirdar arrangements, resulting in conflicting claims

to the same area. As several authorities attempted to optimize revenue, this overlap resulted in disagreements and increased pressure on growers.

- **Village Communities and Communal Land**

Village communities had a significant impact on local land management. The communities used common lands including forests, water bodies, and grazing grounds together. These shared resources were necessary to maintain livestock-based activities and agricultural life.

However, communal land rights started to deteriorate during the seventeenth century due to rising tax demands and privatization tendencies. Village commons were invaded by zamindars and revenue authorities, making peasants more vulnerable and limiting their access to necessary resources.

**Table 1: Major Categories of Landholding in the Banaras Region (18th Century)**

Category of Land	Controlling Authority	Economic Significance
Cultivated land	Peasants under zamindari control	Primary agricultural production
Zamindari land	Hereditary zamindars	Revenue extraction and local power
Religious endowments	Temples and monasteries	Stable institutional income
Jagir lands	Revenue assignees	Administrative and military support
Village commons	Village communities	Subsistence and sustainability

- **Revenue Assessment and Fiscal Pressure**

Land control was based on revenue assessment. The ability of the land to produce income was the state's main interest. Although the Mughal system acknowledged customary rights, it placed a greater emphasis on routine evaluation and collection.

Due to political unrest and dwindling imperial resources, income demands increased during the eighteenth century. This burden was transferred to farmers by zamindars and revenue authorities, which increased exploitation. As a result, the landholding arrangement became a means of transferring financial strain from the government to the peasantry.

- **Fragmentation and Concentration of Land Control**

The simultaneous concentration of land control and fragmentation of land ownership was a characteristic of the Banaras landholding structure. Although there were several different parties with conflicting ownership claims, strong zamindars, religious leaders, and revenue assignees came to have a growing amount of effective control.

As central authority declined, there was less supervision and enforcement of customary protections, which made this concentration easier. By seizing village holdings, falsifying revenue records, and claiming hereditary rights, powerful landowners increased their power.

**Table 2: Distribution of Land Control and Authority**

Actor	Nature of Control	Degree of Power
Mughal state	Revenue sovereignty	Declining
Zamindars	Revenue collection, coercion	High
Religious institutions	Endowed land management	High
Jagirdars	Temporary revenue rights	Moderate
Peasants	Cultivation rights	Low



- **Implications for Agrarian Society**

The Banaras region's landholding pattern has profound effects on rural society. While landholding elites consolidated wealth and power, peasants took the brunt of income extraction. Limited protection was offered by customary rights, but these were progressively compromised by administrative manipulation and financial pressure.

As a result, land became the main focal point of economic exploitation, political power, and social inequality. The eighteenth-century change in landholding arrangements signalled a clear move toward increased stratification and prepared the way for colonial involvement in land management.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the Banaras region's landholding structure was intricate, multi-layered, and ever-changing. It represented the larger shift from imperial rule to regional and local control and was typified by competing claims, institutional supremacy, and waning official oversight. While peasants continued to face growing financial and social pressures, zamindars, religious organizations, and revenue assignees became the dominant landowners.

Analyzing later changes in land control, colonial involvement, and agrarian change requires an understanding of this framework. Long into the colonial era, the patterns formed during this time outlined the parameters of agrarian interactions and influenced the course of Banaras' socioeconomic evolution.

### 1.3. ZAMINDARS, JAGIRDARS, AND REVENUE OFFICIALS

In the Banaras region's agrarian hierarchy, zamindars held a pivotal role. They were in charge of collecting land income on behalf of the state and upholding law and order within their territorial jurisdiction. Historically, they were acknowledged as hereditary intermediates. Customary rights, claims based on ancestry, and state acknowledgment served as the foundation for their authority. Zamindars often made money through revenue extraction and other customary dues imposed on growers rather than cultivating land themselves.

Zamindars in the Banaras region had amassed significant authority by the seventeenth century. They were able to exercise more autonomy as imperial authority weakened, frequently using revenue rights as *de facto* ownership. They intensified demands on peasants, usurped commons, and extended their claims over village lands. Theoretically, zamindars were elites who extracted rent; their power came from force, local legitimacy,

and budgetary control, not from contributions to the economy.

- **Political Economy of Zamindari Power**

Zamindari power in Banaras serves as an example of how administrative authority may be transformed into landed control from a political economy standpoint. Zamindars used their role as middlemen to bolster social hierarchy, amass wealth, and carry out local police and judicial duties. They were able to affect labor utilization, tenancy, and agriculture patterns since they controlled the land revenue.

As a result, excess was taken through extra-economic mechanisms like customary obligations, forced labor, and punitive exactions, the zamindari system demonstrated semi-feudal traits. Although they still had no legal rights to cultivate, peasants were still reliant on zamindars for safety and land access. As zamindars sided more and more with emergent colonial authorities or regional forces, this reliance grew.

- **Jagirdars and Revenue Assignments**

In the Banaras area, Jagirdars were yet another important group of land-related authorities. In lieu of salary, administrators, aristocrats, or military leaders received revenue allocations known as jagirs. Jagirdars, in contrast to zamindars, lacked inherited land claims; instead, their rights were based on service commitments and were transient and movable.

In reality, jagirdars arrangements made agrarian relations unstable. Knowing that their jobs were only transitory, Jagirdars put short-term revenue maximization ahead of long-term agricultural sustainability. They frequently placed unreasonable demands on farmers, which caused problems for farmers. Jagirdars claims often overlapped with zamindari or institutional holdings in Banaras, leading to numerous layers of extraction and challenged control.

- **Revenue Officials and Administrative Machinery**

The backbone of land administration bureaucracy was comprised of revenue officials. Enforcement, record-keeping, and income assessment were the responsibilities of officials like patwaris, qanungos, and amils. Despite being state agents in theory, these officials frequently worked closely with zamindars and jagirdars.

Revenue officials possessed a great deal of discretion, especially during times when central authority was weak. Collusion with local elites, arbitrary evaluations, and the manipulation of land



records were all frequent occurrences. Peasant protections were undermined by this administrative culture, which strengthened the influence of middlemen. As a result, revenue officers actively participated in excess extraction rather than just acting as impartial administrators.

- **Interaction between Zamindars, Jagirdars, and Officials**

Zamindars, jagirdars, and revenue officials interacted in a complicated way to run Banaras' agrarian system. These organizations established overlapping networks of authority rather than functioning as independent entities. While jagirdars relied on local middlemen to enforce income collection, zamindars relied on revenue authorities to validate assessments. Peasants were subject to pressure from several sources due to the multi-tiered control structure that resulted from this interdependence. Because there was insufficient supervision, these organizations were able to divide authority among themselves, frequently at the expense of growers. These arrangements are an example of what agrarian theorists refer to as intermediary dominance, in which layered authority, as opposed to direct state control, mediates surplus extraction.

- **Social Authority and Judicial Functions**

- **Revenue Collection Practices and Peasant Dependency**

In Banaras, revenue collecting methods were more onerous in the eighteenth century. To secure cooperation, zamindars and jagirdars used coercive tactics, demanded advance payments, and imposed additional cesses. In order to meet tax demands, peasants often turned to borrowing, which resulted in chronic debt.

Peasant autonomy was diminished and social inequity was strengthened by this reliance. As a result, landholding arrangements were used to perpetuate economic subjugation for future generations.

Zamindars and local officials performed judicial and law enforcement duties in addition to collecting taxes. They upheld local order, resolved conflicts, and enforced customs. They were able to control peasant behavior and maintain their social domination thanks to this authority.

Rather than following the law, judicial power was frequently used arbitrarily, reflecting societal hierarchies. Peasants and lower social groups were further marginalized because access to justice was contingent on social rank and sponsorship. The status of landed elites in Banaras was reinforced by the combination of social, judicial, and fiscal authority.

- **Transformation during Mughal Decline**

The responsibilities of zamindars and jagirdars underwent a sea change in the eighteenth century with the fall of Mughal power. These middlemen became more independent as imperial power waned. Zamindars started to deal directly with local monarchs, keep private armed retainers, and protect their lands.

As Jagirdari authority grew further dispersed, revenue officials began to support local authorities. Agrarian relations changed from controlled extraction to coercive dominance as a result of this fragmentation, which also hastened the localization of power.

- **Theoretical Interpretation**

According to agrarian theory, revenue officials, zamindars, and jagirdars constituted a class of middlemen whose authority came from their place in the revenue system. Their hegemony is a reflection of an agrarian system that existed before capitalism and was defined by the extraction of surplus through political authority as opposed to market relations.

The Banaras case serves as an example of how, throughout times of state decline, intermediary control grew more intense, paving the way for subsequent colonial intrusion. These intermediary roles would later be formalized by British administrators, who would turn customary authority into legally recognized property rights.

**Table 3: Categories of Land Intermediaries in the Banaras Region**

Category	Nature of Authority	Basis of Power	Impact on Peasants
Zamindars	Hereditary intermediaries	Customary rights, coercion	High revenue pressure
Jagirdars	Temporary assignees	Service-based grants	Short-term exploitation
Revenue officials	Administrative agents	Record control, discretion	Arbitrary assessments



**Table 4: Functions and Powers of Agrarian Intermediaries**

Function	Zamindars	Jagirdars	Revenue Officials
Revenue collection	Primary	Secondary	Supervisory
Land control	De facto	Temporary	Indirect
Judicial authority	Extensive	Limited	Administrative
Relationship with state	Semi-autonomous	Service-based	Dependent

In the Banaras region during the eighteenth century, land control and agrarian relations were significantly shaped by zamindars, jagirdars, and revenue authorities. They had jurisdiction over territory, social regulation, and the judiciary in addition to income collection. These middlemen were able to consolidate power, increase surplus extraction, and marginalize cultivators as Mughal authority declined. Analyzing later changes in agricultural society, such as the emergence of regional authorities and the early British land interventions, requires an understanding of the roles played by these groups. Thus, Banaras' intermediary-dominated agricultural organization served as a crucial conduit between imperial land management and premodern governance.

#### 1.4. DECLINE OF MUGHAL AUTHORITY AND RISE OF REGIONAL POWERS

North India's political history saw a significant shift in the eighteenth century when regional powers began to establish their independence and the Mughal Empire's strength began to erode. The region of Banaras was significantly impacted by this change. Banaras subsequently underwent a transition toward localized rule after being included into a centralized imperial administration that operated primarily through revenue extraction. Instead of an administrative collapse, the fall of Mughal power led to a reorganization of power as zamindars, local chiefs, and newly formed political elites took on more influence over land, income, and government. In this section, the reasons and effects of the Mughal fall are examined, along with the rise of regional powers in the eighteenth-century Banaras region.

- **Nature of Mughal Authority in the Banaras Region**

In the past, Mughal rule in the Banaras region was accommodating and indirect. The collecting of land income and the acceptance of regional middlemen were the main ways the imperial state demonstrated its sovereignty. Provincial authorities handled administrative control, while zamindars, revenue officers, and religious leaders continued to be in charge of day-to-day governance. Although this paradigm provided some stability, it was highly

dependent on efficient central government and fiscal restraint.

This equilibrium started to shift by the end of the seventeenth century. The Mughal state had to deal with growing military costs, ineffective administration, and succession issues. The central government's capacity to control revenue collection and impose discipline on local officials deteriorated dramatically as imperial resources decreased.

- **Structural Causes of Mughal Decline**

Mughal power declined over time as a result of structural flaws rather than a single incident. The imperial treasury was stretched by ongoing fighting, and the lack of revenue-producing assignments made the jagirdari system more and more unmanageable. State capability was further weakened by inefficiencies and corruption in the administrative apparatus.

These structural issues showed up as inconsistent revenue flows and less imperial oversight in the Banaras region. Provincial officials frequently relied on local middlemen for enforcement since they found it difficult to hold onto power. This reliance gave revenue officials and zamindars more authority, and they progressively transformed administrative functions into sources of independent authority.

- **Political Fragmentation and Declining Central Control**

Political division became more noticeable as Mughal power declined. It was challenging for imperial officials to impose consistent policies in far-flung areas. Imperial sovereignty continued to exist in Banaras in theory but not in practice. Local governments increasingly withheld surplus, and revenue returns grew erratic.

Regional forces quickly took advantage of the political void left by the breakdown of central authority. By claiming control over land and income, local chiefs, zamindars, and military leaders increased their sphere of influence. With this change, imperial rule gave way to regional domination.

- **Rise of Regional Powers in the Banaras Region**



The rise of regional authorities that possessed de facto sovereignty over Banaras and its environs was made possible by the loss of Mughal authority. At first, these powers functioned within the established framework while claiming autonomy in budgetary and administrative affairs rather than attempting to completely destroy imperial authority.

Control over land revenue was a major source of legitimacy for regional rulers. They created stable power structures by winning the allegiance of zamindars and middlemen. This strategy changed the balance of power between the state and rural community in Banaras and bolstered local elites.

- **Transformation of Zamindars into Regional Power Brokers**

Zamindars' shift from revenue collectors to regional power brokers was one of the most important effects of the Mughal fall. Zamindars had more authority over land, justice, and military resources when imperial oversight was lessened. To uphold authority and defend territory, many kept private armed retainers.

A larger theoretical pattern in which intermediate elites consolidate power during times of state decline is reflected in this transformation. Bypassing imperial channels, zamindars in Banaras engaged in direct negotiations with local leaders. Instead of acting as administrative agents, their power began to approximate that of territorial lords.

- **Fiscal Autonomy and Revenue Retention**

The conversion of zamindars from revenue collectors to regional power brokers was one of the most important effects of the Mughal fall. Zamindars ruled over land, justice, and military resources more effectively when imperial oversight was lessened. To uphold authority and defend territory, many kept private, armed retainers.

This change is indicative of a larger theoretical trend wherein elites in the middle of a state's downfall solidify their control. Zamindars in Banaras avoided using imperial channels by negotiating directly with local leaders. Their power began to resemble that of territory lords more than that of administrative agents.

- **Administrative Reorientation under Regional Regimes**

Administrative procedures were more individualized and specialized under regional authority. Partnerships with zamindars, revenue authorities, and religious leaders were crucial to governance. Although this system brought stability, it also decreased responsibility and reinforced inequality.

The relative consistency of Mughal administration was replaced by fractured power due to regional variations in legal and fiscal norms. Regional governance in Banaras prioritized political allegiance and revenue maximization over the welfare of the rural population.

**Table 5: Factors Contributing to the Decline of Mughal Authority**

Factor	Nature	Impact on Banaras Region
Military expenditure	Continuous warfare	Fiscal strain
Jagirdari crisis	Revenue shortage	Administrative instability
Weak central control	Declining oversight	Empowerment of intermediaries
Corruption	Bureaucratic decay	Irregular revenue collection

- **Impact on Agrarian Relations**

Agrarian society was significantly impacted by the rise of regional authority. Local elites and zamindars increased revenue extraction in order to back the new administrations. As economic pressures mounted, traditional safeguards for farmers eroded.

Coercive tactics and conflicting assertions made peasants more insecure. Agrarian relations were thus directly altered by the shift in political power, paving the way for additional colonial interference.

- **Theoretical Interpretation: State Decline and Regionalization**

The Banaras experience serves as an example of how state decline results in the regionalization of power from a theoretical perspective. Local elites seize administrative responsibilities and turn them into sources of autonomy as central authority wanes. A transitory political regime marked by increased exploitation and divided sovereignty is produced by this process.

Since conflicting authority threaten stability, such circumstances frequently call for outside intervention. Early British participation in land administration in Banaras was made possible by the



political climate that was generated by the emergence of regional rulers.

**Table 6: Shifts in Political Authority in the Banaras Region (18th Century)**

Phase	Dominant Authority	Nature of Control
Late Mughal	Imperial state	Indirect, declining
Transitional	Zamindars & chiefs	Localized
Regional dominance	Regional rulers	Fiscal and military
Pre-colonial	Fragmented power	Competitive

The Banaras region's political and agricultural landscape was drastically altered by the fall of Mughal control and the emergence of regional powers. Localized control replaced imperial sovereignty, allowing zamindars and other provincial elites to amass wealth and influence. Although this change brought stability in the short term, it increased exploitation and undermined traditional safeguards for farmers.

The institutional circumstances that made Banaras susceptible to colonial interference were established during this time of political change. Analyzing later developments in land management, peasant relations, and the incorporation of Banaras into the colonial political economy thus requires an understanding of the dynamics of Mughal collapse and regional ascendancy.

### 1.5. EARLY BRITISH INTERVENTION IN LAND ADMINISTRATION

The Banaras region's agrarian and political history saw a significant sea change with the early British involvement in land administration. British engagement brought new administrative rationalities centered on legal codification, income maximization, and centralized oversight, in contrast to previous regimes that wielded authority primarily through negotiated control and customary practices. The loss of Mughal power, the volatility of regional administrations, and the growing power of the British East India Company all influenced the gradual evolution of these interventions, which did not happen suddenly or evenly. With a focus on how colonial interference changed land from a socio-political resource to a regulated fiscal asset, this section explores the nature, goals, and effects of early British land policies in Banaras.

- **Context of British Entry into the Banaras Region**

The larger framework of political division in north India must be taken into consideration when analyzing British activity in Banaras. The British East India Company was able to increase its influence

through alliances, diplomacy, and administrative intervention as a result of the decline of Mughal authority and the emergence of other regional powers. Because of its strategic location, wealth, and symbolic significance, Banaras caught the British attention as a region in need of budgetary restraint and political stability.

At first, existing power structures were not completely replaced by British authority. Rather, company representatives tried to work with zamindars, revenue middlemen, and local elites. By using an indirect strategy, the British were able to maintain revenue streams without directly challenging long-standing social and religious institutions. Yet, even at this early stage, British engagement brought new ideas about administration, revenue, and land that would eventually change the nature of agrarian relations.

- **Colonial Perceptions of Land and Property**

The conceptual change in how land was understood was one of the distinguishing characteristics of British land administration. In pre-colonial systems, the state, middlemen, and farmers all had multiple rights over land, which was entwined with social interactions. In contrast, British administrators used a legalistic approach to land, emphasizing contractual duties, fixed ownership, and quantifiable productivity.

Instead of viewing land as a socially embedded resource, this colonial perspective saw it mainly as a source of income. British officials aimed to create dependable revenue sources, standardize assessments, and identify unambiguous proprietors. European ideas of political economy and private property, which were very different from native landholding customs, had a significant impact on these presumptions. Tension and structural change resulted from the attempt to force these concepts on the Banaras region.

- **Early Revenue Experiments and Administrative Measures**



Instead of enacting extensive reform, British officials concentrated on stabilizing income collection during the first phase of the intervention. The income structures that were in place were kept in place, but British oversight brought regularized processes and tougher enforcement. The documentation of land assessments increased, and the accuracy of revenue demands was improved.

The power dynamics in the agrarian system were changed by these actions. Some zamindars were penalized or forced to relocate, while those who could ensure steady income were given preference. The locus of administrative loyalty was shifted when revenue officials were answerable to colonial administrators instead of local rulers. Despite their seeming modestness, these adjustments signalled the start of a more significant shift in land management.

- **Legal Codification and the Transformation of Customary Rights**

The progressive definition of land rights was one of the most important features of early British intervention. Through colonial legal frameworks, customs that had governed landholding for generations were increasingly recorded, classified, and reinterpreted. This procedure converted negotiated rights into inflexible legal categories and diminished the flexibility inherent in customary systems.

This change proved especially significant for farmers. Although customary occupancy rights had previously offered some protection, these rights were frequently reduced to tax duties as a result of colonial codification. Peasants were redefined as tenants or labourers, while zamindars, who were acknowledged as landowners or revenue proprietors, were given more legal power. Landed elites benefited from this categorization, which changed the balance of power in agriculture.

- **Strengthening of Intermediary Authority**

In contrast to the notion that traditional elites were undermined by British rule, early colonial land policies frequently strengthened the power of zamindars and middlemen. British administrators made intermediaries foundations of colonial

governance by acknowledging them as revenue proprietors in charge of fixed payments.

The consequences of this program were extensive in the Banaras region. Land and labor were consolidated by zamindars who collaborated with the British, while ineffective or resistive middlemen were pushed to the side. This selective reinforcement produced a class of landed elites whose power was now supported by colonial law as opposed to just customary legitimacy. Agrarian society was altered by colonial objectives aligning with local elites, which furthered social inequality.

- **Fiscal Pressure and Agrarian Stress**

Predictability and stability of revenue were given top priority by the British land administration. Regardless of the state of agriculture, fixed revenue obligations put producers under more financial strain. Peasants were responsible for fulfilling income responsibilities during years of low harvest or environmental stress, frequently by borrowing money or selling their produce and land in despair.

Compared to previous systems that permitted negotiation and change, this budgetary rigidity was a stark contrast. Peasant debt and land alienation increased as a result. Thus, even before official settlement structures were fully established, early British policies increased agrarian stress.

- **Administrative Rationalization and Surveillance**

British participation, new administrative rationalization techniques were adopted, such as statistical analysis, mapping, and systematic record-keeping. Administrative reports, income registrations, and land surveys were essential tools of governance. These actions decreased the sovereignty of local institutions while increasing governmental monitoring over rural communities.

Colonial officials were able to better monitor land productivity, revenue flows, and compliance in Banaras thanks to these techniques. Although this rationalization increased administrative effectiveness from a colonial standpoint, it also strained social ties and limited the room for local discussion.

**Table 7: Key Features of Pre-Colonial and Early British Land Administration**

Aspect	Pre-Colonial System	Early British Intervention
Nature of land rights	Layered and customary	Legalized and codified
Revenue assessment	Flexible, negotiable	Fixed and standardized
Role of intermediaries	Socially embedded	Legally empowered
Peasant security	Customary protection	Contractual dependency



- **Banaras as a Transitional Administrative Space**

Banaras's religious significance and intricate social structure gave it a special place in early British land policy. Colonial officials chose to intervene gradually rather than enacting significant changes. Nonetheless, land administration was gradually changed by the fundamental reasoning of colonial rule.

A transitional agrarian order marked by conflict and contradiction resulted from the juxtaposition of colonial regulation and customary practices. Although the structure of traditional institutions remained the same, colonial goals progressively influenced their operations. More extensive land settlements in the nineteenth century were anticipated by this hybrid arrangement.

- **Theoretical Interpretation: Colonial Political Economy**

Theoretically, the early British intervention in Banaras symbolizes the shift from an agrarian pre-modern regime to a colonial political economy. Within a contractual framework, land was reinterpreted as a taxable commodity, intermediaries as revenue proprietors, and peasants as tenants. This change is consistent with colonial extraction theories that highlight the transition of social relationships into financial tools.

The British deliberately adopted and reorganized pre-existing systems to suit their colonial objectives rather than completely dismantling them. This procedure maintained superficial continuity while enabling Banaras' long-term assimilation into the imperial economy.

**Table 8: Consequences of Early British Land Intervention in Banaras**

Domain	Immediate Effect	Long-Term Implication
Revenue system	Stabilization	Increased extraction
Zamindars	Legal empowerment	Class consolidation
Peasants	Rising obligations	Indebtedness
Administration	Rationalization	Colonial control

The agrarian organization of the Banaras region was significantly changed by early British involvement in land administration. Colonial authorities converted land from a socially integrated resource to a regulated fiscal asset through administrative rationalization, revenue fixing, and legal codification. Agrarian relations were altered, peasant exploitation increased, and intermediaries were strengthened.

British engagement, however cautious and incremental at first, established the institutional framework for subsequent colonial land settlements. Analyzing the more profound socioeconomic changes that took place during full colonial authority requires an understanding of this early stage. Therefore, the experience of Banaras demonstrates how colonial power transformed agrarian life through methodical administrative intervention rather than through sudden disruption.

### 1.6. IMPACT ON PEASANTS AND AGRARIAN SOCIETY

The Banaras region's peasantry and agrarian society were most severely impacted by the changes in land administration and political power during the eighteenth century. These dynamics most closely converged at the peasantry level, while previous sections have looked at changes in landholding arrangements, intermediary dominance, regional power shifts, and early British intervention. The

agrarian economy's productive core was made up of peasants, yet they had the least influence over land, surplus, and decision-making. The rights, livelihoods, social interactions, and village institutions of peasants were all impacted by shifting land ownership regimes, which fundamentally altered agricultural society.

#### 1.6.1. Peasants within the Pre-Colonial Agrarian Order

In the Banaras region's pre-eighteenth-century agrarian structure, peasants were neither completely dispossessed nor landowners in the contemporary legal sense. Because they possessed both customary and inherited rights to their land, cultivators were able to pass these rights down through the generations. Local customs, not official contracts, governed these rights, which were ingrained in village communities.

The main forms of peasant duties were customary dues and income payments. Even while these expectations could be onerous, they were typically resolved through compromise and discussion, especially during harvest-poor years. Local intermediaries, caste councils, and village communities all had a part in controlling responsibilities and settling conflicts. As a result, agrarian society managed to maintain unequal power



relations while striking a balance between duty and protection.

- **Intensification of Revenue Pressure**

This balance was drastically upset by the fall of Mughal hegemony and the emergence of regional powers. To make up for waning imperial oversight and heightened fiscal competitiveness, zamindars, jagirdars, and revenue officials stepped up their income extraction efforts as political power shifted. Peasants had to deal with arbitrary exactions, more cesses, and increased tax demands.

This strain was exacerbated by early British intervention, which fixed revenue demands with little leeway. Colonial administration placed a higher priority on consistent and predictable revenue than previous systems that permitted bargaining based on agricultural conditions. Peasants were more vulnerable during droughts, floods, or crop failure since they were expected to fulfill their responsibilities regardless of environmental fluctuations.

- **Indebtedness and Loss of Economic Autonomy**

Peasant debt rise was one of the most important effects of growing revenue pressure. Peasants often borrowed from moneylenders, merchants, or even zamindars to meet their income demands. Produce, cattle, or cultivation rights were lost if loans were not repaid; these loans were frequently taken out at exorbitant interest rates.

Indebtedness bound cultivators closer to local elites and weakened peasant autonomy. Debt commitments frequently pushed peasants into permanent dependency, turning them into tenants or sharecroppers on land they had previously farmed on their own. This trend resulted in a progressive loss of customary rights and a rise in economic instability.

### 1.6.2. Transformation of Village Social Relations

Village social relations changed as a result of adjustments to tax management and land control.

When colonial officials and zamindars became more involved in agricultural matters, the power of village institutions declined. Customary practices were superseded by legal and administrative procedures, making traditional dispute resolution and group decision-making methods obsolete.

Within communities, social inequality becomes increasingly apparent. Peasants who had access to credit or patronage, as well as those who were wealthier, were better equipped to withstand rising financial strain. In contrast, marginal farmers and labourers without land were more vulnerable. Thus, internal difference occurred in agrarian society, leading to widening gaps in social position, income, and security.

### 1.6.3. Labour Relations and Agrarian Dependence

Agrarian labor was also impacted by the change in land relations. Dependency on wage labor grew as peasants lost ownership over their land. Poor farmers and landless labourers were forced to work in unfavourable conditions for zamindars or wealthy landowners.

Both contracts and coercion affected labor relations. Labor mobility was restricted by extra-economic factors such as debt, social hierarchy, and customary duties. As a result, agrarian society shifted away from reciprocal commitment and toward a structure of dependency and subordination.

### 1.6.4. Impact on Subsistence and Food Security

Increased commercialization and revenue extraction had an impact on the subsistence patterns of peasants. Revenue-producing crops were encouraged or forced to take precedence over subsistence farming. Peasants were exposed to market swings as a result of this change, which also decreased household food security.

Peasants lacked reserves to deal with crises, making periods of scarcity harsher. Subsistence alternatives were further limited by the degradation of community commons, including forest resources and pasture land. Thus, agrarian vulnerability rose even when there was no widespread hunger.

**Table 9: Major Agrarian Changes Affecting Peasants in the 18th Century**

Aspect	Earlier Agrarian Order	18th-Century Transformation
Revenue demand	Negotiable, flexible	Fixed, rigid
Cultivation rights	Customary, hereditary	Conditional, insecure
Debt	Limited	Widespread
Village autonomy	Strong	Weakened



- **Cultural and Psychological Impact on Peasant Society**

Agrarian reform had an impact on peasant consciousness and cultural life that went beyond tangible effects. A feeling of dependence and insecurity resulted from the lack of customary protections. Festivals, rituals, and collective labor agreements continued, but as economic pressures increased, their social value diminished.

Instead, then using organized insurrection, peasant resistance frequently took the shape of commonplace actions like migration, negotiation, or evasion. These answers demonstrated the limitations imposed by hierarchies of power as well as the ability of rural communities to adapt to harsh circumstances.

- **Gender and Household Dynamics**

Household and gender dynamics were also impacted by shifts in agrarian relations. Peasant households experienced increased labor demands due to increased economic hardship, which frequently put more strain on women. Despite their increased involvement in family production, animal care, and

agricultural labor, women's access to resources and decision-making remained restricted.

Household survival tactics, such migration or labor diversification, changed societal roles and family arrangements. These modifications show how changes at the macro level in land administration affected social interactions on a daily basis.

- **Peasants in the Early Colonial Political Economy**

Peasants were incorporated into a colonial political economy focused on revenue stability and extraction through early British land administration. Instead of being viewed as members of a moral agrarian order, cultivators were more viewed as economic entities tasked with carrying out contractual responsibilities.

Due to this change, there was less room for bargaining and more exposure to market pressures. Peasants became central to colonial revenue systems yet remained marginalized in decision-making processes. The imbalance that resulted set the stage for persistent agricultural hardship during colonial control.

**Table 10: Impact of Political and Administrative Change on Agrarian Society**

Domain	Effect on Peasants	Social Outcome
Revenue administration	Increased burden	Insecurity
Land rights	Erosion of customs	Dependency
Credit system	Expansion of debt	Stratification
Labour relations	Loss of autonomy	Subordination

The governmental and administrative changes of the eighteenth century had a significant and long-lasting effect on Banaras' agrarian society and peasants. The balance between duty and protection that had traditionally governed agrarian life was changed by the fall of imperial authority, the emergence of regional powers, and early British intervention. Peasants had to contend with escalating revenue demands, mounting debt, diminished customary rights, and heightened social stratification.

Instead of collapsing, agrarian civilization underwent a significant transformation. Inequalities widened, new types of dependency appeared, and established institutions deteriorated. Due to these modifications, peasants became more vulnerable members of a new political-economic system rather than comparatively independent farmers. Analyzing the broader socioeconomic changes in Banaras during the eighteenth century and the underlying principles of colonial agrarian policy requires an understanding of this influence.

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