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Q3(b)

## **Do you think that new economic reforms of British rule have disrupted the old economic system of India? Substantiate your answer with suitable examples**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Rural and Agrarian Social Structure

Rural and Agrarian Social Structure: The idea of Indian village and village studies; Agrarian social structure - evolution of land tenure system, land reforms.

### **Core demand of the question**

- State the pre-colonial economic pattern in outline (agrarian, artisan, village-town nexus)
- **Show British reforms:** land settlements, free trade, railways, drain, deindustrialisation
- Use Dadabhai Naoroji, R. C. Dutt, **A. R. Desai**, D. R. Gadgil / Dharma Kumar debates with care
- Give examples (textiles, indigo, opium, railways) and social effects on caste-occupation

### **Revision summary**

The old economy combined peasant agriculture, artisan castes and layered trade, not a frozen idyll.

Land settlements monetised revenue and strengthened landlord or state claims on the peasant.

Nationalists argued deindustrialisation and drain; revisionists note regional survival and later mills.

Socially, craft castes and towns lost patronage and many entered labour markets.

- **Disruption is the right word:** the old articulation of field and craft was broken even if not every loom stopped.

### **Introduction**

Pre-colonial India was not an unchanging village republic, but it did have an **old economic system**: peasant agriculture, artisan castes, local exchange, and long-distance trade in cloth, spices and metals. British **new economic reforms**-permanent and other land settlements, one-way free trade, railways, and a gold-standard drain-did **disrupt** that system. The debate is about depth and regional variation, not about whether a shock occurred.

### **Body**

#### **Land and surplus**

**Permanent Settlement** (Bengal, 1793), **ryotwari** and **mahalwari** turned revenue into a rigid claim. Zamindars and the colonial state captured surplus that had been negotiated in a more layered agrarian order. Peasants faced **cash rent, debt and eviction**. Commercial crops-indigo, opium, cotton, jute-tied the field to Manchester and China. **A. R. Desai** treated this as the making of a colonial social formation: agriculture subordinated to metropolitan industry.

## Craft, town and drain

**Deindustrialisation** of handloom and urban craft is the classic thesis of **R. C. Dutt** and **nationalist historians: Lancashire cloth, tariffs, and the destruction of courtly demand hollowed artisan towns. Revisionists note some regional weaving survival and later mill growth in Bombay and Ahmedabad. The sociological truth sits in between: occupational castes** of weavers, spinners and metal workers lost secure patronage; many became agricultural labour or slum labour. Railways moved grain to ports in famine years (a **Dadabhai Naoroji** / later **Mike Davis** point about Victorian holocausts) even as they integrated markets.

The **drain of wealth (unrequited exports, Home Charges)** is a macro story with micro effects: **thinner local demand for artisans, a new comprador and professional middle class**, and a peasantry that met the world market without industrial absorption at home. Famine codes and grain exports in bad years made the new market morally visible to nationalists.

Disruption was not total erasure. Jajmani-like ties, village moneylenders, and caste-based crafts adapted. **Dharma Kumar** and later **Tirthankar Roy** warned against a golden-age village and stressed regional variation, credit, and some craft dynamism. That caution is useful. It does not cancel **A. R. Desai's** point that the colonial state re-gearred surplus toward the metropolis. Socially, **weaving jatis**, salt and forest communities, and tribal shifting cultivators met the Forest Act as an economic reform by another name.

Still, the **direction** of reform-private landed property, free trade in manufactures, forest enclosure-broke the old articulation of field, craft and little kingdom. A mill proletariat appeared in Bombay and Kanpur; it was too small to absorb those pushed off the loom and the occupancy holding.

## Flow diagram

Land settlements -> Cash surplus to state / zamindar  
Free trade and mills -> Artisan displacement  
Railways and drain -> Cash surplus to state / zamindar  
Artisan displacement -> Peasant and urban labour

## Conclusion

British economic reforms did disrupt India's old agrarian-artisan system by monetising land, opening the market on unequal terms, and draining surplus. Mills and some crafts survived in spots; the social structure of occupation and village still bears the scar.

## Facts & figures

### Permanent Settlement 1793

Fixed land revenue in Bengal Presidency; created a landlord class oriented to colonial revenue.

### Drain theory

Dadabhai Naoroji's account of unrequited transfers to Britain as a structural leak from Indian income.

**A. R. Desai**

Marxist sociology of colonial India: economy and class as the base of social transformation.

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