

The State Irrigation works in India

By Nihal Chand.

— PREFACE. —

WATER IS LIFE.—The existence of animals, plants, and all other beings depends on water and hence it is not taxable, like other commodities. The construction of irrigation works like wells, tanks, reservoirs and canals was always recognised by the Indians to be their first duty and the best form of charity. Wherever you will go in this hot season, you will find arrangements made for the distribution of water gratis to the people. At a very early date Raja Bhagirath was advised by a saint to bring down Ganges water to the desolate plains of Hastinapur in the Meerut District and so the river was called Ganga Bhagirathi after his name.

In the Deccan and Rajputana, magnificent old irrigation works are the living testimony of what was accomplished in the past in this respect.

Later on, the Muhamaden rulers also did not neglect this part of their duty and opened the Junna Canals. It was the old irrigation works that gave an incentive to the British rulers in India for constructing new canals and repairing the old ones, as admitted by the Irrigation Commission of 1901:—“ para 41—“ India therefore in a great measure owes to her former rulers

the first inception of the present unrivalled systems of state irrigation works.”

The boon conferred by the British Government upon the people by the extension of irrigation works is beyond calculation and I am second to none in acknowledging their value. But every thing has some defects and stands in need of improvement. Being a landlord myself some grievances were brought to my notice which drew my special attention to the subject and to which I will make a short reference here :—

(1) In 1874 the owner's rate was imposed on canal irrigated lands in addition to the water-rate. It was levied on those lands that were dry and assessed as such at the time of the last settlement, with the object of taking a share in the enhanced produce caused by canal irrigation and was nothing else but land revenue bearing another name. It was evidently very unjust to impose such a tax on land during the term of a settlement and at the instance of the Zamindars of Muzaffarnagar District I submitted a memorial to the Local Government of these Provinces to remit this tax, but it was summarily rejected on the advice of the Board of Revenue.

This order of the Local Government was appealed to the Governor General of India on the 2nd March, 1892, and I am glad to say that the prayer was granted and the rules for the imposition of this tax were modified.

(2) In 1891 the scale of waters was revised and the rates were enhanced by 1/3rd of the then existing rates. It was bitterly felt by the tenants and a memorial was submitted by the Zamindar Association of Muzaffarnagar to the Local Government on the 5th September 1896. It was rejected on the 5th April, 1897. The Chief Secretary to the Government said:— "I am to say that the decision to enhance the occupier's rate was arrived at after a prolonged correspondence between this Government and the Government of India and on full consideration of facts, and to express regret that the question of reverting to the old rates cannot be reopened."

As there was no hope of success no further steps were taken to have the grievance redressed.

(3) Formerly the Ganges Canal terminated at Cawnpur, but a few years ago it was extended further into the Districts of Fatehpur and Allahabad. The water supply in the river Ganges was the same as before and nearly the same quantity of water was to be distributed on the whole irrigated area on both the old and the new canals. The consequence was that the tenants on the old canals were deprived of a portion of water they used to get for their crops. No doubt the Government Revenue was much enhanced by the extension of the canals and some dry area on the new branches was irrigated but the produce of land on the old canals was much diminished for want

of sufficient water and yet the water rates on the old canals were not reduced at all.

(4) On the contrary, the rates on wheat and sugarcane, the chief valuable crops in these Provinces were immensely enhanced; the former at the rate of 77 per cent and the latter at 100 per cent, when compared with the rates in force till 1891..

I thought that the interests of the landholding classes would be better served if the whole question of water rates were discussed exhaustively by some eminent person and with this object I intended to offer a handsome prize for the best essay on the subject. However for some reason or other proper arrangements could not be made and I had to content myself by writing these lines. I am fully aware that I could not deal with this question as thoroughly as the importance and nature of it requires, but I have tried to put before my readers what information I could collect together with my own views and I respectfully pray that the Government and the well-wishers of the country will take up the question in right earnest and give it a thorough consideration. As suggested by the Irrigation Commission of 1901, the Government is extending irrigation works and is investing large amounts of money thereon and therefore the earlier due attention is paid to the subject the better for the poor people, because if the rates are not moderate the benefits from irrigated works will be minimized.

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I am glad to see that I have been able to write these lines at a time when His Excellency Lord Minto, P. C. G. M. S. J., G. M. J. E., G. C. M. G. is the Viceroy and Governør General of India and I hope that His Excellency will be graciously pleased to take the same interest in this important subject as was taken by his illustrious ancestor, the Earl of Minto in 1810.

MUZAFFARNAGAR, }
The 21st March, 1906. } NIHAL CHAND.

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