

Landlord and Peasant in an Indian District

A Study of the Tenancy Problem

in North Kanara

by

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This Book is Dedicated

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to

The Hon'ble Sir Reginald Maxwell, K.C.S.I., I.C.S.

Home Member, Executive Council of the Viceroy

and Governor General of India,

who, as Survey Settlement Officer and the Assistant

Collector of North Kanara,

characterised the allegations, made by non-officials that the tenantry of Kanara was rack-rented, as "loose"; and observed: "it is highly improbable that the rents really and habitually represent an undue proportion of the yield."

And also Dedicated

(without permission)

to

Sit. Morarji R. Desai

former Revenue Minister to the Government of Bombay,

who, on the Floor of the Legislative Assembly,

asserted that:

"It would be absurd for any person to believe that the income of a tenant can be only Rs.1-4-0 or a rupee per month, because it is obvious that in that case the tenant cannot live."

with the hope

that the Ex-Minister may realise that the tenantry of Kanara can contrive to live on a per capita income of

15 annas per month.

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Introduction

Land problems have recently aroused increasing public interest in the Bombay Province as well as in other parts of the country. The question of tenancy in particular has come to the forefront. A Tenancy Act was passed in Bombay in 1939. It cannot, therefore, be denied that a study of the rural problem, describing the condition of the tenant class and also showing the extent to which the new legislation in Bombay would remedy the various evils of tenancy, may prove useful. The method of such a study may very well take the form of a close enquiry into the circumstances of a particular tract or district. By the use of this method, can be obtained a much more intimate acquaintance with the actual conditions of tenant life than by any other method. An attempt is, therefore, made in the following pages to undertake an intensive survey of the tenancy problem in the district of North Kanara.

There is reason to believe that, as far as the condition of the actual cultivator of the soil is concerned, what is true of this district is more or less applicable to all the rice-growing regions in India, particularly the districts lying along the West Coast, where the system of tenancy preponderates. It is, however, true that land tenures differ from region to region; and therefore sufficient allowance must be made for this diversity. In Bengal and Behar, for instance, a large number of tenure-holders intervene

in the conditions obtaining in different rice-growing regions of India. This does not, however, mean that conditions are exactly the same. What we mean is that they are very similar, although they may not be identical.

The more prominent features of Indian agrarian system with special reference to tenancy may now be set forth in a summary form.

The extreme poverty of the average Indian peasant is a fact recognized by all including the Government. A statement exhibiting the moral and material progress and condition of India, published under the authority of His Majesty's Stationary Office, describes the tenantry as "poor, helpless, discontented men, bound down to a state of extreme depression and misery" and as "the poorest and most wretched class we find in the country." (1) Turning from this official admission to the writings of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, we come across the following significant words: "India today," he says, "is a poor and dismal sight behind all the splendours of the Imperial frontage. There is a great deal of patch work and superficiality, and behind it the unhappy petty bourgeoisie, crushed more and more by modern conditions. Further back come the workers, living miserably in grinding poverty, and then the peasant, that Symbol of India, whose lot is to be 'born to Endless Night.'" (2) Lastly,

(1) Fifth Decennial Report, 1913, pp. 378-79.

(2) Nehru; An Autobiography, p. 438.

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turning our eyes to the Colonial Thesis of the Sixth World Congress of the Third International, we find the following observations. "In India, China and Indonesia," declares the Congress, "the pauperisation of the peasantry has reached such a height that at the present time the most characteristic feature in the villages is the poor peasant almost or entirely deprived of the land and not infrequently suffering from starvation." Thus the spokesmen of British imperialism, of Indian nationalism and of international communism - all these, irrespective of their being wedded to contradictory ^tdoctrines, entirely agree in recognising the fact of utter destitution to which India's teeming millions are condemned.

But unfortunately, the exact intensity of this privation and misery with all its attendant evils is not often realised in full even by those who are holding responsible positions in the administration of this country - be they Indians or Europeans. For instance, it was only in September 1939 that the Revenue Minister to the Government of Bombay refused to accept a statement made by member of the Legislative Assembly on the floor of the house to the effect that the average income of a tenant in the province of Bombay was only 20 annas a month. "It would be absurd," thundered the Honourable Minister, "for any person to believe that the income of a tenant can be only Rs.1-4-0 or a rupee per month, because it is obvious that in that case the

the tenant cannot live." (1) Of course, the Minister did not bring in any evidence in refuting the statement. It was only a bald declaration of faith. The tragedy of the situation was that no attempt was made by the Minister to get at facts with a view to ascertaining the actual condition of the tenantry. In spite of some admirable investigations carried on by Indian and foreign scholars, many aspects of the social and economic structure of India are still but partially revealed. This is particularly true in regard to agrarian conditions. The inevitable result is that the intensity of poverty and suffering of certain sections of our population is not fully known. The Simon Commission was right in their observation that "the depth of the poverty, the pervading presence of which cannot escape notice, is not so easily realised." (2)

The utter privation to which the mass of Indian peasantry is subjected must be mainly ascribed to the fact of India being in the position of a colonial country exploited by an imperialist nation. It is the advent of British imperialism in India that almost completely destroyed its village handicrafts, thus divorcing agriculture from industry, bringing about the pauperisation of the peasants, and increasing the pressure of population on the soil to an extra-ordinary

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(1) See Bombay Assembly Debates, September 26, 1939, p.144
 (2) Report of Simon Commission, Vol I, p.

degree. The combined effect of all this has been the impoverishment of the cultivator. Other causes also contributed their share in no small measure to make the situation still worse. One such principal cause is the defective system of land tenure, a system which is entirely feudal in several parts of the country. It is this land system that lowered agricultural production, hinders the extension of cultivation, and saps the vitality of the peasant population. The fact is that the Indian cultivator is suffering from indigenous feudalism as well as from foreign capitalism, from a crisis of under-production at home and from a crisis of over-production abroad.

Unfortunately, the ill-effects of our land system with all its implications are not sufficiently realized by many. They deny that the existing land system is an obstacle in the path of agricultural progress. They think that the institution of absentee landlordism forms a desirable feature of the rural economy. They assent with all the force at their command, as Dr. Radhakumud Kookerjee did, that "the ills of the peasantry are due to causes and circumstances of which the existing land system is not responsible;" and they would seriously doubt whether any change in that system, "however radical or even revolutionary, can effect a material change in the lot of the peasantry and make it better."

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(1) See "Note of Dissent" by Dr. Radha Kumud Kookerjee in Food Commission Report, Vol. I, p. 211

They would wholeheartedly support the landlord system and would do everything in their power to safeguard its maintenance in its present form. It is absolutely necessary under these circumstances to point out all the implications and evils of this system in the light of facts and figures and to demonstrate how its abolition alone could improve substantially the condition of the peasantry and also increase agricultural production, thus benefitting the community as a whole.

It is well to remember that landlordism in its present form, as all authorities on the subject agree, was an innovation introduced in this country during the administration of the East India Company. It was considered politically expedient to foster a class of absentee rent-receivers on whose support and loyalty the Government could always count. In order to achieve this end in view all sorts of frauds were perpetrated against the peasantry, the Government being either a direct party to such frauds or conniving at them from behind. That this was so is amply borne out by the various documents quoted in the course of this study. It was no less a person than Mr. Justice Cunningham of the Calcutta High Court who asserted that "illegalities in which the executive has more or less acquiesced have contributed to a great part" of the degraded condition of the peasantry.

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 (1) Cunningham: British India and its Rulers, p.303.

Furthermore, the problem of landlord versus tenant was practically absent in India prior to British rule. This was primarily due to the fact that the proprietary rights of landlords wherever they existed were neither absolute nor so well defined as they are today. The position of the landlord was not so strong as at present when he is being aided by the legal system of the British. The tenants in pre-British days enjoyed security of tenure, and rents were governed by custom and not by competition. The landlord took interest in the process of cultivation and carried on agricultural improvements. All this has been replaced today by a system which, as truly remarked by Mr. H. N. Brailsford, breeds a class of "most rapacious parasites to be found in any contemporary social system."

Land in the zamindari areas which comprises 49 per cent. of the total is mostly under tenancy, while about half the remaining 51 per cent of the land in the rayatsari tracts is cultivated through tenants. Thus, roughly speaking, at least two-thirds of the entire soil under tillage is cultivated by those who do not own it. The proportion of land under tenancy can be gauged in another way by the number of peasant proprietors and cultivating tenants. The number of cultivating owners or peasant proprietors including those following subsidiary occupations is 23 million, while the corresponding number of cultivating tenants is 36 million. This means

that nearly 56 per cent of the peasantry, excluding agricultural labourers, form the tenant class. The proportion is really greater than what these figures indicate because in some provinces a considerable proportion of cultivating tenants was included in the category of cultivating owners. In Bengal, for instance, "if the cultivator had a permanent title to the possession of his land he was regarded as the cultivating owner and returned as cultivator with permanent rights, even if at law he was not entitled to the privileges of a permanent or settled rayat under the Bengal Tenancy Act." (1) By the adoption of this defective definition a large body of tenantry has been wrongly described as cultivating owners. Similarly, all "occupancy tenants" and "absolute occupancy tenants" in the Central Provinces were classed as cultivating owners. (2) It may, therefore, be ~~concluded~~ concluded that at least 60 per cent. of the cultivators in India constitute the tenant class. They, in fact, form the largest section of the entire population engaged in cultivation, even exceeding the number of agricultural labourers who number 33 million. This preponderance of tenants over peasant proprietors and over agricultural labourers makes the problem of tenancy of the utmost importance in the agrarian system of India.

(1) Census of India, 1931, Vol V, Part I, pp.269-70
 (2) Census of India, 1931, Vol XII, Part I, p. 235.

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Census figures further reveal that there are 4,100,000 landlords in the whole of India receiving rent in money or in kind. This landlord class, standing as it does at the top of the agrarian structure and constituting a very small proportion of the total population, owns all the rented land. In other words, a very small proportion, i.e. 1.2 per cent., of the entire population owns as much as nearly 65 per cent. of the total cultivated area in the country. This clearly indicates the extent to which the ownership of landed property is concentrated in the hands of a negligible fraction of ^{the} its people. These landlords, taking no interest in agriculture, are mere drones to the society. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru observes, they are a "great hindrance to production and general progress." (1) They only desire to keep up, as far as they possibly can, a status of land monopoly which is the basis of their exploitation. In the eyes of the British Government ruling over India, they are almost indispensable as they are instrumental in "maintaining peace and order" and in making India safe for imperialistic exploitation.

Below this superstructure come the peasant proprietors or cultivating owners who number 23 million. Of these a majority are small holders, cultivating their tiny bits of ground with the labour of their families.

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(1) Nehru: An Autobiography, p. 534.

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The position of many such peasants is that each of them possesses a small patch of land on which can be grown a few bushels of corn. He is a proprietor all the same but only from a juridical point of view. In the eyes of an economic student he is a pure proletarian subject to the economic laws regulating the conditions of the landless tenant class to which he really belongs. Unfortunately, Census Reports do not give the number of this class of cultivators who are part-owners and part-tenants. But the fact that they are very considerable in number cannot be denied. "Many cultivators," remarks Mr. Sedgwick in the Bombay Census Report of 1921, "have about 50 per cent. of their own land and 50 per cent. of rented land."

Under the peasant proprietors and cultivating part-owners come the vast mass of the landless tenantry. The status of these tenants is not uniform. At one end of the scale are peasants who enjoy some security against eviction and enhancement in rent. But their number is very small. At the other end of it are the great majority of peasants who hold at will, pay a rent fixed from year to year or from time to time and are liable to be increased at the landlords' pleasure, and can be summarily dispossessed without compensation. In not a few cases these tenants-at-will are actually required by their tenure to perform free labour services which recall the conditions obtaining in feudal times. Most of them

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are suffering from excessive rack-renting which does not leave them even a living wage. Their condition in certain areas is so degrading that they are no better than serfs. The various disabilities under which they labour are so revolting and oppressive that they make life miserable. Here is a list of disabilities supplied by no less an official authority than a Director of Land Records and Surveys: "Obtaining labour at less than the market rate from tenants and from debtors," writes the Director, "binding debtors to work as serfs in payment of the interest on debts which they are never given the opportunity to repay, and the deliberate ruining of "refractory" tenants by means of litigation criminal and civil, often supported by forged documents and false evidence, are common and everyday practices also of those in power on the land, and it is hard for the actual cultivators of the soil to gain that security, freedom and economic independence which are so necessary for improvements in husbandry." (1)

However hard this lot of the tenantry might be, it is not the worst: below them is another social stratum, a servile rabble, with whom the struggle for existence is still more severe. They are the 33 million agrarian proletariats of India, the majority of whom belong to the untouchable castes. They are remunerated at the daily rate of a small measure of the coarsest

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 (1) See Royal Commission on Agriculture in India Vol. III, Evidence, p. 282.

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grain or of a few pieces. And even this wretched employment is not to be procurable all the year round. "How - underfed and almost underclothed as they are - they contrive to live," asks an official, "through the cold nights of winter, which they often spend in field - watching to keep off thieves, human and others, is a standing marvel." (1) A considerable number of these are agrarian serfs who, as described in a census report of 1921, are "Freemen de jure, but serfs or slaves de facto."

It must be borne in mind that a large number of tenants, particularly those paying produce rents, are so excessively rack-rented that they are in no way better than agricultural labourers. In such cases, the tenant merges into the position of the labourer, both of them dragging on their miserable life at a starvation level only compatible with continued existence. As this study is confined to the cultivating tenant class, agricultural labourers are excluded from its scope. This should not be interpreted to mean that the problem of labourers is undeserving of attention. The problem is doubtless of vital importance. But to enter into its examination would require a separate volume.

A common charge that is often levelled against those who speak for the underdog in society - be they

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 (1) See Cunningham: *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.

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peasants or industrial workers - is that they indulge in exaggerating the poverty of the masses and in making unwarranted statements. Lest the same charge should be brought against us special care has been taken to base every statement that occurs in these pages on facts and figures contained in official publications. Non-official information bearing on the subject has been scrupulously avoided. No one has, in fact, been more helpful than Government officials in writing these pages. Official letters written by Collectors down from Major Munro in 1800, settlement reports drawn by experienced revenue officers from time to time, authoritative pronouncements made by various committees appointed by Government, speeches and writings of highly placed officials: these are the foundations on which this study is based. "The true philosophy of capitalism in practice," writes Harold J. Laski, "has been more frankly revealed by men unwedded to alternative doctrine, not seldom, indeed, unconscious that they were criticizing its foundations, than has ever been done by its opponents." Similarly, all the evils inherent in the system of tenancy under unbridled landlordism as obtaining in the district under investigation have been more frankly revealed by the representatives of the bureaucratic Government itself, a Government which has all along been fostering absentee landlordism under its wings, than has ever been done by the so-called "trouble-makers" and "agitators" among the peasantry. That this is so will be seen by the reader by going through the pages that follow.

Landlord and Peasant in an Indian District.