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Source: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 40 (1979), pp. 914-917

Published by: Indian History Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44142048>

Accessed: 08-04-2020 02:50 UTC

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N.P. Singh

From 1793 to 1858 a momentous change occurred in the agrarian history of Northern India. The Sun Set laws, after 1793 ruined many old Zamindars.¹ Richards argues logically enough in his speech before the Commons in 1813 that some estates were assessed heavily and others lightly. In 1856 the Oudh Taluqdars were dispossessed by the settlement "village by village with the parties actually in possession".² Sir James Outram, the first Chief Commissioner of Oudh wrote in his Minute of 5 June 1858, "The system of settlement with so-called village proprietors will not answer at present, if ever in Oudh".³ The settlement with the Taluqdars (in 1858) was preceded by a proclamation issued by Canning, threatening that their estates would be confiscated if they proved disloyal.

From the English point of view this policy succeeded well enough. But the propriety of the measure was certainly questionable from the point of view of the ryots. Canning wanted to safeguard the interests of the ryots. But Charles Wingfield, the new Chief Commissioner of Oudh, ignored the rights of the ryots. Lord Elgin asked for an explanation from Wingfield as to why he was keeping out the customary rights of the ryots from being mentioned in the settlement records. But Elgin died soon and it was left to Sir John Lawrence to vindicate the rights of Oudh ryots. He said: "The rights of ryots shall be recognised and recorded". This statement reflects the new attitude of the English towards ryots. Act X of 1859 laid down that a tenant holding the same land for 12 years was to be deemed occupancy ryot. But this Act "professed to give the ryot a right which he would not prove and the landlord one which he could not enforce".⁴ Act XI of 1859 also restored to the ryots some privileges they had lost by Act XII of 1841. It provided that the purchaser of an entire estate in permanently settled areas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa sold for

arrears of revenue, could not eject the under-tenants, such as holders of Istimarari and Mukarari tenures.

Lawrence tried to extend these privileges to the ryots of Oudh. The first Oudh Rent Act was passed in 1861 which gave fixity of tenure to expropriatory ryots. Lawrence also secured the tenant rights of the Punja ryots by the Act 1868. This Act also protected the ryots against rent enhancement.

The Bengal Tenancy Legislation of 1859 applied also to the North West Provinces. The Land Revenue Act of 1873 replaced the old methods of survey by a cadastal survey and the rental of each estate was revised.

In the Central Provinces (created in 1861) a 20 year settlement had been concluded causing great hardship to the ryots from whom the highest possible rent was screwed out. On the proposal of Colonel Baird Smith a settlement of Central Provinces was made between 1863 and 1867. The settlement recognised the proprietary rights of Malguzars. In the 1880 the Government tried to secure the tenant rights to the ryots. R.C. Dutt remarks : "No more useful legislation was ever undertaken by the British Government in India...the legislation of these years respected the great and protected the weak".⁵

After the outbreak of the agrarian disorder in Bengal a Commission of Enquiry was appointed in 1879. Lord Ripon took up the matter in right earnest. In 1885, the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed. The Act extended the right of occupancy to settled cultivators and the protection to non-occupancy ryots.⁶

In the North-Western Provinces rules were issued in 1887 with a view to substituting as the basis of assessment the actual rental in place of estimated rental.

The actual cash rental in the Agra Province had been increased in 1892. In the Punjab, the Government committed blunder by reducing the term of settlement from 30 to 20 years in 1875. The Act of 1901 restricted the right of transfer and thereby decreased the value of land.

In the Central Provinces Colonel Keatinge, the Chief Commissioner from 1871 made a plea for brushing aside the *malguzari* system and substituting it with a *ryot-wari* settlement with the cultivators. But the Commissioner of Nagpur Division raised objection to this proposal and the principles of 1863 settlement were retained. But in the district of Sambalpur a *ryotwari* settlement of 12 years was concluded in 1876. A Tenancy Act for the Central Provinces was passed in 1883. This Act reduced the *Malguzars* to a position of dependence on the settlement authorities. The Rent Act of 1898 restricted the alienation of home farm lands by landlords and transfer of their rights by occupancy and ordinary tenants.

Contrasting the position of Bengal with other provinces R.C. Dutt remarks : "The beneficial results of the permanent settlement of 1793...are obvious in every part of Bengal at the present day... The rents are light, the cultivators are not under the thralldom of moneylenders; and British administrators can view with a just pride a province where their moderation has insured agricultural prosperity to a nation".⁷ But we can not accept this remark as correct. It may be admitted that some cultivators of Bengal and Bihar were somewhat better off than the cultivators of Madras or Gujrat. But it will be too much to say that the Bengal and Bihar cultivators were a prosperous class. They were also not quite free from the thralldom of Zamindars and moneylenders. The Royal Commission on Agriculture remarked in 1928 : "The cultivator of Bengal can produce unaided and with a very moderate degree of work sufficient fund to support himself and a surplus which will enable him to purchase the few articles not produced at home".⁸ The Report said that half of the cultivators were living in comforts, about 28% below comfort, 18% just below want and the remaining 4% thoroughly indigent. However, the Report admitted that indebtedness was a problem of the cultivators of the whole of India. The Zamindari system impoverished the *ryots* of Bengal, but the lot of other *ryots* was equally deplorable,

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4. A.C. Guha, *Land System in Bengal and Bihar*, 1915, pp. 141-42.
5. R.C. Dutt, *Economic History of India in the Victorian Age*, p. 269.
6. Ibid., p. 270.
7. Ibid., p. 461.
8. *Agricultural Cammission's Report, Vol. IV*, 1928, pp. 167-68.