Rehabilitation of Peasantry and of Agriculture:
Congress Addresses and Resolutions.

In the traditional land system of India, before British rule, the land belonged to the peasantry and the Government received a proportion of the produce. "The soil in India belonged to the tribe or its sub-division, the village community, the clan or the brotherhood, who settled in the village," observed Radha K. Mukherjee in his economic study of the land problem of India and he further added in the same narrative that "land was never considered as the property of the king". 1

The British conquest of India led to a revolution in the existing land system. The new revenue system introduced by the British in India, superseded the traditional right of the village community over the village land, and created two forms of proprietary rights in land; landlordism in some parts of the country, and the individual peasant proprietorship in others. The first step in the economic revolution was marked in the system of new assessments and the introduction of a foreign system of land-tenure, in which English economic and legal conceptions were superimposed on an archaic traditional Indian land system, purely indigenous. The traditional Indian land-tax, popularly known as 'King's share', was previously arranged by the ruler in

1. Land Problems of India, By R.K. Mukherjee, P 16.
agreement with the peasant population and self-governing village community, and in proportion to the produce of the annual harvests. This was suddenly changed with the advent of the British and a rigid system of fixed money payments was forced upon the ryots. It left little room for personal human considerations or sympathetic feelings between the landlords and the peasantry. All that was required was a fixed annual rent irrespective of good or bad harvests. It increased vehemently the burden on the peasantry.

By this transformation, the British conquerors assumed in practice, the ultimate possession of the land, making the peasantry the equivalent of tenants— at will, who could be ejected any time for failure of payments. In a word, the previous self-governing village community was stripped of its economic function as barely as of its administrative role.

The purpose of the permanent zamindari settlement, as introduced by the British under Lord Cornwallis in 1793, was to create the social bulwark of the English rule in India.

Sir Richard Temple reflected, that Lord Cornwallis's permanent settlement was a measure which was effected to naturalise the landed institutions of England among the natives of Bengal.

1. Men and events of my time in India, By Sir Richard Temple, P. 30.
Lord William Bentinck, as the Governor-General emphasised the immediate purpose served by the settlement as against recurring revolutions.

"If security was wanting against extensive popular tumult or revolutions" narrated Lord Bentinck in one of his official speeches, I should say that the permanent settlement, though a failure in many other respects and in most important essentials, has this great advantage at least, of having created a vast body of rich landed proprietors deeply interested in the continuance of the British Dominion and having complete command over the mass of the people. 1

To facilitate land arrangements, the new land settlements of temporary nature were most extensively introduced by the Govt.

The permanent Zamindari settlement prevailed in Bengal, Bihar and sections of Northern Madras and covered an area of about 20% of lands of British India.

The temporary new settlement, better came to be known

as Ryotwari settlement, introduced individual peasant proprietorship.

A Ryotwari settlement i.e. a settlement of the land revenue with the cultivators of the soil was introduced by Captain Head in the districts of Boramahal, when the East India Company first acquired those districts in 1792.

The first assessments were severe and oppressive. The state demanded about one-half the estimated produce of the fields, a demand which was more than the whole economic rental of the country. ¹

The Revenue Collectors themselves witnessed the universal misery of the peasantry suffered under the oppressive rental tithes. Some extracts from the official reports illustrated the wretched conditions of the prevailing miseries of the ryots.

The Collector from the North Arcot district of Madras, reported the following message to the Board of Revenue:

"The Ryots are in worse condition than they were at the beginning of the century ........." ²

¹ India in the Victorian age. Romesh Dutt. P. 67.
The Madras Ryot Report, compiled under the Public works commission was published in 1855 which further revealed the chronic poverty of the cultivators.

In effect, these were the early results of a policy which had ignored totally the existence of the village communities, and had prescribed the collection of an impossible and exorbitant land revenue directly from each petty tenant.

It is gathered from these Ryot reports that the use of torture was almost universal for the prompt realisation of the assessed revenue from the miserable cultivators.

Rumours of this baneful practice reached in England in 1854 and Mr. Blackett M.P. for the town of New Castle brought on a debate upon a motion for sending a commission to enquire into the land system in India and specially that hideous practice prevailing in Madras. He described the land system, introduced by the British, as the vilest that could be devised, and asserted that the exorbitant revenue demand could only be procured by torture.

John Bright too vigorously challenged the unfair dealing and roused popular indignation.

The Indian Govt., slow to move in the path of reform, was forced to take some action after this parliamentary debate. A commission was appointed to take direct evidence, and an act was passed to enable the commission to proceed with their task. Elliot, a Judge of the Madras Small Cause Court, Horton, a Madras Barrister and Stokes, a pronounced supporter of the Ryotwari system were appointed commissioners.

A commission, so constituted, submitted a minute report. They found, that the practice of torture for the realisation of the Government revenue existed in the province; and they also found that injured parties could not obtain any redress. 1

The kinds of torture which were most common, as quoted in the commission's report, were:

"Keeping a man in the sun, preventing his going to meals; preventing his cattle from going to pasture, the use of a kittee Amundal i.e. tying a man down in a bent position; squeezing the crossed fingers; pinches slaps blows with fist or whip, running up and down; twisting the ears, making a man sit with bricks behind his knees, putting a low caste man

on his back, striking two defaulters' heads or tying them by
the back hair, tying by the hair to a donkey's or a buffalo's
tail; placing a necklace of bones or other degrading or disgust-
ing materials round the necks; and occasionally, though
rarely, more severe discipline. 1

One thing came out convincingly out of this enquiry
that land was severely assessed and the cases of torture were
frequent.

Madras officials still adhered to this system and even
extended it, from time to time, as permanently settled estates
were sold up for inability to pay the revenue. 2

The system was rapidly spreading, through new Hukum-
namas, in the middle of the 19th century, and sometimes even
they were forced by unfair means. To quote a contemporary
official:

"Meet a Ryotwadi Collector ............... he will
admit that the sale of a great Zamindari which he had just
achieved was brought about by dexterous management; that the
owner had been purposely permitted to get into the meshes of
the Collector's net beyond his power of extrication." 3

Thus the evils of the Ryotwari settlement attended by over-assessment of the soil prevailed in wide areas and were enforced most oppressively.

The harmful effects of the rigid land revenue system were further aggravated by the high amount of land revenue.

At the time of the political transfer of India from the East India Company to the British Crown, the land revenue of the whole of India was £15.3 million. By 1900-1 it rose to £17.5 million, and jumped to £20 million within a decade.¹

In Madras, Bombay and the United Provinces, in particular assessments went up by leaps and bounds.²

"Such a large increase of land revenue coupled with its commutation in cash and its collection at harvest time"; remarked Radhakamal Mukherjee, "has worked very unfavourably on the economic condition of cultivators of uneconomic holdings who form the majority in these provinces."³

Excessive land revenue in the conditions of the growth of uneconomic holdings due to the extreme sub-division and

¹ Social background of Indian Nationalism, by Desai. P. 48.
² Land Problems in India - Radhakamal Mukherjee.
³ Ibid. P. 45.
fragmentation of optimum land plots has been the root cause of the total impoverishment and pauperism of the Indian agriculturists in the earlier stages of British rule.

With the introduction of the new system of land holdings, under the Ryotwari system, private proprietorship in land and the individual right to its free disposal was introduced, which had disintegrating effect on the hitherto jointly held holdings.

The effect was disastrous, as witnessed by the Congress Agrarian Enquiry Committee Report:

"This process of fragmentation of holding has steadily continued for the past so many years. It is difficult to estimate the number of peasants who own plots of land from a hundredth to a four hundredth of a bigha, but it is fairly large."

Another factor which contributed to the process of subdivision of land was, the hitherto unknown, but now the rapidly growing practice among the landholders and even tenants to rent or sub-rent lands. The holding, already too small was reduced to still smaller strips.

This became an unsurmountable impediment to the development and spread of large-scale scientific agriculture.

This to a great extent enhanced the misery of the peasant population and saddled them to outmoded technique of production.

"Even the plough may not be used on many small farms", reported Radhakamal Mukherjee. "As with greater fractionalization of holdings, the supply of agricultural labour increases, the use of spade and hoe becomes more common".

As consequence, this led to a steady decline of the yield per acre of cultivated land.

The revenue-capacity of each holding (which is not optimum) could not cope with the huge revenue liability to the Govt. As a result, the peasants ran into debts to meet state demands and, in the long run, fell into the grips of terrible famines which recurred so often.

The Deccan Commission on the working of the Agriculturists' Relief Act, 1892, critically observed the situation, and did not at all approve the alien Govt's apathetic detachment of the whole evil. "The transfer of the land in an agricultural country to a body of rack-senting aliens, who do nothing for the improvement of the land............" appeared to be the most strange thing to this group of Relief workers.

1. Social background of Indian Nationalism, By Desai. P. 45.
2. India To-day, R.P.Dutt. P. 241.
The dreadful indebtedness of the Indian peasantry was taking an enormous shape.

"One third of the land-holding classes are deeply and inextricably in debt, and at least an equal proportion are in debt .............." ran the report of the Famine Commission in 1880.

"The position to-day", wrote economist Ahmed, "is that over 80% (per cent) of the peasants with their present holdings can never pay up their debts".

Due to increasing debts of the agriculturists, large scale transfer of land was taking place from the peasant properties to the non-cultivating owners, who were most commonly money-lenders or merchants, under the ryotwari system of landholding.

This gradual expropriation of the lands of the peasant proprietors appeared as a menace to the stability of the agrarian society.

At this juncture of Congress stepped in with new proposals of reforms to the Govt. to stem the tide of agrarian discontent and revolt.

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2. Social background of Indian Nationalism, By Desai. P.27.
The demand, on which the Congress was most keen and persistent, was the immediate introduction of the permanent settlement of land tenure in Madras, Bombay and other provinces, where ryotwari settlement prevailed. This no doubt is the influence in the Congress of landed majority, whose interest they wanted to uphold.

Wedderburn in 1839 took up the Indian peasantry question and fought to eradicate all the existing evils.

In the sixth session of the Calcutta Congress Sri Pherczeshah Mehta most elaborately dwelt upon this proposal and through resolution VI submitted to the Govt. the following petition:

"That this Congress respectfully submits that the Govt. of India to take up this question of permanent settlement and introduce permanent settlement to all temporary settled tracts, without further delay."

Babu Baikuntha Nath Sen dealt with the question of Permanent settlement in 1889 and pointed out that a famine in 1860 had led to a commission which reported in favour of permanent settlement and this was approved of by the Secretary of State in a despatch in 1862.

1. Fourth session of the I.N. Congress, Allahabad 1888
2. Congress Annual Report 1889. Resolution XIV.
3. The Report of the Sixth N. Congress, President's address.
The Congress, in all its subsequent demands, referred back to this Govt. despatch of 1862 and urgently pressed for permanent settlement of land tenures.

The Congress, through its resolution, put forward to the Govt. in most compassionate terms the sinking condition of the Indian peasantry.

The resolution repeated with same fervour and persuasion the long existing grievances of the agricultural population.

The Resolution VIII contained the following extract:

"That this Congress concerning in the views set forth in previous Congresses affirms:

"That fully fifty millions of the population, a number yearly increasing, are dragging out a miserable existence on the verge of starvation and that in every decade, several millions actually perish by starvation.

And humbly urges, once more, that immediate steps be taken to remedy this calamitous state of affairs.

1. 1892 Congress - Resolution VIII.
In 1892, the Congress leaders suggested the establishment of Agricultural Banks to offer loans and facilitate agricultural production. 1

Each year Congress pleaded against over-assessments of land and actually, in 1903 the Congress boldly demanded judicial and legislative restrictions on over-assessments. 2

Finally, the Congress charged the Govt. for these havoc making famines which devastated the land and the people.

The Congress pressed the Govt. to redeem its pledges and to constitute a Famine insurance fund. 3

After this, a Famine commission was appointed. Meanwhile generous famine aids were being supplied by Gt. Britain and U. S. A. to the Congress fund and a sum of £1,000 was installed to the Lord Mayor of London and was acknowledged with gratitude by Congress organisation in London. 4

1. The history of the Congress. By P.B. Sitaramayya, P. 38.
2. Ibid.
3. The Congress resolutions.
But, the Congress never lost sight of the real grievances of the agricultural population, and insisted that the Govt. by curtailing its military expenditures and other unnecessary public expenditure of the like nature, should encourage the growth of indigenous industries both large and small, and thereby stop the overcrowding of labour on agriculture and thus help to remove the existing pressure on land and on the Indian peasantry.

Aurobindo Ghosh, in his Pallisamiti Resolution at Kishoregange, laid all emphasis on the immediate need of village reconstruction work and reforms.

"Unless we organise the united life of the villages," said Aurobindo "we cannot bridge over the gulf between the educated and the masses. It's the work of ours to make the masses feel 'Swaraj' in the village, Swaraj in the group of villages, Swaraj in the district, Swaraj in the nation." 1

1. Aurobindo's Kishoregange Pallisamiti speech.