THE PROBLEMS
OF
LAND REVENUE
ADMINISTRATION
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The British inherited a system of land revenue administration which had become extremely extortionate during the declining days of the Marathas. In the beginning the Government did not introduce any major change in the prevailing system. Short term settlement with lease system of collection, at first for a single year, and then three quinquennial settlements, were made in the Sagar district. It means that the Government gave their immediate attention to reform the land revenue administration of Sagar district in order to place it on a satisfactory footing. But "the principles were faulty" with the result that the British administration during its first year did not appear to be any more considerate than its predecessor. J.B. Fuller observed that "owing to an exaggerated idea of the benefits which were to result from British rule, the old Maratha assessment were not only maintained but

1. Fraser C. Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sauror District, for the twenty years, 1834-35 to 1853-54, Nagpur, 1876, P. 4.

enhanced, with deplorable results. In fact, the period of experiment in short term settlements in Sagar district was a failure.

Therefore, according to the recommendations of Robert Marting Bird; member of the Sudder Board of Revenue, North-west Provinces, who visited this territory and submitted his report on 3rd October, 1834, twenty years' settlement (1834-35 to 1853-54) was carried out and brought into operation but no right of property in land was recognised. Moreover, the lack of the indication about the existence of tenants rights and later on their status in the society created a major problem which the Government had to face. It was for the first time that the thirty years' settlement specified the status of land holders. It conferred proprietary rights on malguzars, who, in the result "were converted into landlords from being revenue farmers or Managers." The thirty years' settlement also safeguarded the interests of tenants. Care

3. Fuller J.B.  Review of the Progress of Central Provinces during the past thirty years and of the present and past condition of the people, Nagpur, 1892, P. 34.

4. Fuller J.B.  Review of the Progress of Central Provinces during the past thirty years and of the present and past condition of the people, Nagpur, 1892, P. 34.
was taken to protect the cultivators, according to the interests they held in land, resulting in the evolution of a series of different tenancy tenures such as land held by pust proprietors in Proprietary Rights (malik mukbuza), Absolute Occupancy Tenancy right and superior ordinary tenancy right. Moreover, this conferment of proprietary rights was far from unrestricted in another way also as the Government reserved its right to all mines and quarries and to all large forests containing useful timber and where large tracts of uncultivated land exist, the Government reserves a right to dispose of them as it thinks proper. But the thirty years' settlement was only a beginning of a new trend to help the tenants and much could not be done.

The Tenancy Act of 1863, as pointed out earlier, for the first time defined the rights and liabilities of the then existing classes of tenants. Further the Act converted the tenants—st-will into ordinary tenants with a defined status and protection from arbitrary ejectment. The rent of an ordinary tenant was, however, left to be fixed by him and his landlord, but

if the tenant refused to accept an enhancement and the landlord had recourse to a revenue officer, the increased rent fixed by the latter could not be again raised within seven years. In the Act of 1885 in place of twelve years continuous occupation, the rights of purchasing occupancy right by the payment of a premium equal to two and a half years rental was substituted. At the same time, ordinary tenants were given the power of claiming compensation for disturbance and were protected from ejectment for non-appearance of rental enhancement until such compensation was paid.

But this Act also does not solve the problem Fuller J.B. expressed that, "the effect of the Act has been to bar the expansion of the occupancy tenant class, which may be regarded as the backbone of the country. The accrual of occupancy rights by prescription has been regressed, while little or no use has been made of the substituted privilege of purchase. Ordinary tenants are, as a class, as much in their landlord's power as they were before the Tenancy Act was passed, and seldom dream

of going into Court against him.... the large class of ordinary tenants were left unprotected, and the Tenancy Act has come too late to counteract a custom under which the malguzar regards an ordinary ryot as completely dependent upon him."

After a few successive amendments, the Tenancy Act of 1883 was finally replaced by a new Act of 1898 under which, among others, the settlement officer was authorised to fix all rents. At about this time, a clause was inserted in the wajib-ul-aziz which bound the malguzars in their dealings with the tenants to abide by the provisions of the Tenancy Act. This was done with a view to enabling the Government to interpose executively in cases of oppression instead of having to leave it to the tenants to put the malguzar into court. But this proved only a step further. Actually the Government remained unable to meet the problem throughout the nineteenth century, a fact that substantiates the complex and profound nature

7. Fuller J.B.:Review of the Progress of the Central Provinces during the past thirty years and of the present and past condition of the people, Nagpur, 1892, pp 38-397

of the problem. In 1917, the Government made another attempt by introducing the Central Provinces Land Revenue Act of 1917 (II of 1917) but it left much to be improved.

Secondly, the decrease in the number of patwari circles gradually at the settlements affected adversely a chronic problem to the land revenue administration of the district. On the one hand the Government tried to equalise the area of patwari circles and their remunerations and attached a great importance to the preparation and maintenance of land records and on the other hand the number of the patwari circles was reduced from 385 to 312, while the area of the district remained the same. This went against the general interest of the agricultural community and the improvement of the tenants. It was impracticable to cover the big area of the district with the reduced number of patwaris, particularly in the changed circumstances of the district. Had the patwari circles been increased instead of decrease it would have been easy to tackle routine problems of land revenue administration.

expeditiously.

The third problem which revenue administration had to face was that of indebtedness. Malguzars and tenants both had benefited from the growth of the general prosperity of the district but their newly found affluence accustomed them to a style of life that tended to run them into heavy debts. The extent to which their rights were being alienated through the civil courts was a matter of some concern to the government.

The general indebtedness was primarily caused by the unthrifty habits and customs of the bulk of the people, but had been aggravated by a number of bad harvests. Moreover, the extravagance in marriage expenditure and in feeding hosts of dependents had also increased it. A contributive cause had been the gambling spirit which led to litigation. John Neill, late Judicial Commissioner, and one of the most experienced officers of Central Provinces writes "the wealthy classes hardly know what to do with their wealth."

10. Quoted in the Review of the Progress of Central Provinces during the past thirty years' end of the present and past condition of the people, Nagpur, 1892, pp. 37-38.
and the chief means of disposing of it is by keeping troops of useless servants, feeding Brahmins, spending largely on marriage and other ceremonies by building, temples, pilgrim ages rest houses, bathing ghats and so forth."

During the settlement of 1887-1897, Debrett B.A., Settlement Officer found that Beniss, "the chief money lending caste has acquired much property under our rule, and at present time some of the finest estates in the district are held by its members."

The position of the money lender cum melguzar was further consolidated during the famines of 1897 and 1900, when in no less than 45% of the villages of the district, the settlement proprietors were wholly or partially ousted, the new comers being generally business men. This phenomenon was particularly marked in the Khurai tahsil which was the stronghold of the money lenders for quite a long time. At the settlement


of 1911-1916 out of 548 villages of this tahsil, shares in as many as 189 villages were found to be held between five big money lenders. One among whom held as many as 84 villages. Over and above this, some other malguzars also often supplemented the profits of agriculture with a grain and money lending business. The Settlement Officer, observed that, "the habit of borrowing is deeply ingrained in the people and the inability to pay over debt carries with it no moral stigma." The habit perhaps became deep-rooted owing to the succession of a year of famines that afflicted the district and in the absence of a stigma became a malady so widespread that it could not carry with it any obloquy of individual improvidence. The settlement officer also sided that it was as much the custom of the tenants to borrow seed for sowing as it was recognised privilege of the malgazar to lend it. The grain debts were nearly always expected to be repaid in kind, but


valued at the whole sale rate which was then current.

Indebtedness was so prevalent that during the settlement of 1911-1916, the agricultural families of the district were divided into six following categories on the basis of their credit and indebtedness:

A. Well to do malguzars and money lenders, and big farmers who were really of malguzar status, though usually holding no proprietary right.

B. Substantial cultivators of not less than two ploughs, who had not overdrawn fair agricultural credit, and well-to-do graziers.

C. (a) Small cultivators of one plough not indebted beyond their means.

(b) A few bigger men who had strained their credit too far to be put in class R, but were not seriously embarrassed.

D. (I) Tenants who were crippled by debt of lack of credit.

(II) The hopelessly indebted.

E. Labouring castes, still partly dependent on casual labour.

The position of indebtedness of these categories
of families as it stood then, was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number indebted</th>
<th>Cash (Rs)</th>
<th>Debt grain (mais)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>1,73,566</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6,099</td>
<td>9,17,244</td>
<td>9,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>14,058</td>
<td>15,17,384</td>
<td>20,905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI</td>
<td>4,542</td>
<td>7,25,985</td>
<td>9,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DII</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>59,295</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>933</td>
<td>50,648</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>26,098</strong></td>
<td><strong>34,44,122</strong></td>
<td><strong>40,951</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As far as the rate of interest was concerned it was proving that money lenders, "eat like a canker into the prosperity of a village." The traditional interest on seed loans which were practically limited to rabi crops, was 25% for the period between sowing time and harvest. To provide against possible fall in prices at harvest some money lenders stipulated for

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repayment according to the value of the grain at the sowing time. If prices rose, the stipulation was waived. Short term cash loans to graziers were often recoverable in ghī, valued at two thirds or three quarters of the current market rate, that is, with interest at 50% or 33%. Loans for subsistence, again were repayable in kind at harvest with interest at 25%. But this forestalling of crops was unusual. Moreover, the rates of interest on cash loans advanced by bankers was 6% to 9% on pledge of jewels, 12% on mortgage of land or loans to substantial proprietors and 18% to 24% on loans to small proprietors and tenants. Frequently in the case of cash loans one anna in the rupee use to be deducted by the lender in advance of giving the loan and this transaction used to be written in the deed. As a rule bonds or deeds were written for the loans but they were dispensed with if the borrowers deposited a pledge in the shape of jewels. If the borrower was a substantial and reliable men loans were also made without a document and an attested entry in the lenders book was
considered sufficient.

The result was that land was passing out of the hands of those on whom it was bestowed at the thirty years' settlement and that it was falling into the hands of bankers and moneylenders. It also resulted in numerous transfers. No less than 75% mahals, or 34% of the district total, have changed hands by private sale or civil decree. In Khursi, which suffered most 231 mahals or 41% of the tahsil total had been transferred. The Dubey of Sager had been stripped of their ill-gotten estates by their Benia gomshets. The chief lessers well small farmers who had ever drawn their credit during the wheat-boom of the eighties and could not stand the strain which followed.

Another result was that the district suffered more from lack of credit and lack of capital than indebtedness because it was found by the money lenders


that land is the best security. It was considered as the natural security for money borrowed. Next the character was considered and the probability of easy recovery. Jewellery was seldom offered as security and when accepted, it scarcely affected the rate of interest. Only due to this reason it was found that an extraordinary amount of melik makbuja, absolute occupancy, occupancy and even ordinary holdings were pledged as security for borrowed money. In 1912, on the compilation of the Registration Office statistics it was found that 8,000 acres of melik makbuja land, and 23,000 acres of absolute occupancy land had been mortgaged in the preceding ten years. In the same period 2,000 acres of melik makbuja land and 4,000 acres of absolute occupancy land actually passed to non-agriculturists.

The people of the district seemed to subscribe fully to the dictum of Cicero that "of all occupations from which gain is secured, there is


21. Ibid., p. 36.
none better than agriculture, nothing more productive, nothing sweeter, nothing more worthy of a free man."
Agriculture, the main-stay of the people of Sagar district provided subsistence to a large bulk of the population of the district, including cultivators of land whether owned or unowned, cultivating labourers and agricultural rentiers. The Census of 1911 recorded that 3,75,345 persons or about 70% of the total population and 80% of the rural population derived their livelihood from animal husbandry and agriculture as actual workers or their dependents. Not only this but the occupation of the remainder was also, more or less ancillary to agriculture.

Sagar district was and still is a district of mixed farming. The system of leases, betha or partnership, sonjias, galiyas were prevalent. Agriculture was subject not only to the uncertainty of rainfall but to the other vagaries of nature also. In the more elevated tracts the cold of the winter months prohibited altogether crops which were susceptible to frost. And even the hardier varieties suffered
sometimes from the bitterwinds or 'tusu' and 'hail storm' coming with provokeg regularity in autumn and the spring and destroying in their path the ripening crops. The disease of 'rust' and the problem of 'soil erosion' were also of considerable magnitude. Soil erosion was on the increase due to reckless and unscientific exploitation of forests by the landlords.

Certain steps were taken from time to time by the Government to solve the aforesaid problems and improve the lot of the agriculturists, the revenue payer. In order to improve the position of "agriculturists" who "are the linch pin of the world for they support all others who can not till the land", the Government continued a system of Tassavi, a system of rural financing under which Government advance loans at a fair rate of interest to owners of occupiers of cultivable land for relief of distress, purchase of seed and cattle, improvement of land and for any other purpose connected with agricultural objects. Its origin is obscure, but the following extract from the Report of the Royal

Commission on Agriculture shows that the system of taccavi had been in existence, in some shape or form, from pre-British days; "In normal times, the village money lenders seemed to have met the normal needs, but in times of severe drought or widespread calamity, his resource proved unequal to the strain upon them and, long before the British acquired control the rulers of the day were accustomed to grant loans to the cultivators of the soil."

In 1793, various regulations were issued providing for taccavi advances to proprietors, farmers, subordinate tenants and ryots for embankments, tanks, water-courses etc. In 1863 'Land Improvement Loans Act' came as a rescue under which the loans were intended to encourage the improvement of agricultural land and were not in principle to be restricted either to the poorer cultivators or to times of distress.

In 1884 'Agriculturists Loans Act' was enforced under which the loans were intended primarily to relieve distress or to assist the poorer cultivators in

financing their agricultural operations. They were not granted with the intention of replacing the local money-lenders or of providing a cheap form of credit for substantial agriculturists. In fact, "the former Act provided loans" for the construction and repair of village tanks and the embankment of wheat fields while the later advances for the purchase of plough, cattle and seed.

These Acts generally followed the recommendations of the famine Commission of 1880. Between 1891 and 1895 large advances were made under the later Act, the total amounting to Rs. 4 Lakh of which Rs. 3½ Lakh were borrowed in 1894-95. From 1896 to 1901 a further sum of merely Rs. 3 Lakh was given out, and Rs. 96,000 more between 1901 and 1903, the total advances of agricultural loans since 1871 thus amounting to 8.13 Lakh.

It was then not the policy of Government to finance agricultural operations on a large scale in


normal times. The economic life of the village was left undisturbed. The result of this policy was that the money lender continued to play his part in financing agriculture without any serious restrictions.

Certain limitations on transfer of occupancy and ordinary holdings were imposed by the Tenancy Act of 1898 which contracted credit and raised the rate of interest. Other things being equal, the interest demanded on mortgage was Rs. 1/- per mensem but on note of hand Rs. 2/- per mensem. When credit was unimpeachable, the rate of interest on the security of land may fall to 12 annas per mensem or even lower. The Act of 1898 was necessary to check at once extravagance and land grabbing. But in a district like Sagar, limitation on transfer was becoming an anachronism.

By this time action was also taken to protect the backward tribes of the district from rapacity of the money lending classes. With this end in view, the Central Provinces Land Alienation Act of 1916 (II of 1916), which had been enacted to place restriction on the transfer of agricultural land held in proprietary

rights from aboriginal to non-aboriginal classes, was made applicable in 1918 to the Rehli, Banda and Khurei tahsils.

A few restrictions were also imposed by the 'Usurious Loans Act' (X of 1918), the object of which was to prevent civil court for being a tool of enforcement of harsh loans which carried interest at exorbitant rates. It was intended to deal more with rural indebtedness than with the advancing of money to agriculture.

It was also felt that credit can be strengthened and outside capital be attracted by Co-Operation. In Sagar, a promising field for Co-Operative movement, a Central Bank was established at Sagar in the autumn of 1911 and in 1916 there were sixty nine rural societies, mainly in the Sagar tahsil, with a membership of 1,172. Loans distributed through the rural societies amounted to Rs. 1,80,000.

Steps were taken to make agriculture more productive. Thus there was jeans-eradication, importance

of manure was recognised for field as well as garden crops. Seed improvement was also given due weight. The recorded attempts at the introduction of exotic strains of wheat and barley date back to the year 1866, when about two mds. of seeds was procured from England. Efforts were made to popularize the use of scientific methods of agriculture. An area measuring 161.17 acres was acquired in 1917-18 of which 30 acres was cultivated in the same years with the assistance of hired labour. Construction of buildings commenced in 1918-19. In the beginning the area was occupied by the Government Dairy Farm, Ratara. Irrigation was also given importance but actually the work was confined to investigations of probable irrigation schemes. Six irrigation tank schemes were surveyed in detail and estimates were prepared namely of Gadola, tehsil Khurai, Tila, tehsil Sagar; Rajewar Budhona, tehsil Sagar, Goolei Lohara, tehsil Khurai, Khwaja Khor, tehsil Khurai and Pagara tehsil Sagar. One of the first


29. Ibid., P. 156.
Irrigation works that were completed in the district was that of Narayanpur tank. The project was commenced in 1913 and completed in 1916.

But the results were not very encouraging; there was little increase either in the cropped area or in the use of agricultural implements. The following figures bear witness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1867</th>
<th>1898</th>
<th>1911-16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Occupied Area (acres)</td>
<td>8,98,573.39</td>
<td>1,221,594.15</td>
<td>1,227,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cropped Area (acres)</td>
<td>6,69,999.63</td>
<td>996,883.30</td>
<td>986,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cultivated Area (acres)</td>
<td>1,020,660.37</td>
<td>1,089,815.59</td>
<td>1,046,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tanks</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Wells</td>
<td>3301</td>
<td>3,654</td>
<td>3,622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Plough+Cattle</td>
<td>112,864</td>
<td>115,629</td>
<td>132,948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Plough</td>
<td>47,589</td>
<td>52,085</td>
<td>62,337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agricultural development could not make any ground in the district partly because of the negligence of the Government. The department was notoriously hampered by shortage of staff and money and it was inevi-

30. Krisham V.K.: Madhya Pradesh District Gazetters District Sagar, Bhopal, 1967, p. 120.
The above mentioned problems and attempts at their solution the Government also tried to gear up the administration. It realised the difficulty of obtaining information on the condition of affairs in the interior of producing any real effect upon the mass of the people and of making their influence felt in remote and scattered localities. It thought that a partial remedy at least would be supplied when it would have a native on the spot, not only in every tract of the country but almost in every village, who would have some acquaintance with its administration, some interest in its success and some responsibilities for its failure. Therefore, the teashilders or local revenue officers were invested with Sub-ordinate Magistral powers.

Though they had their aims achieved they over-


looked the basic idea of administration that it operates in the context of the society of which it is a part. To them the idea of public relation; "As the business of gaining and maintaining public understanding and support," carried no meaning. Therefore, they no longer showed that courtesy towards the middle and upper class people and that kindness towards the humble which had characterised the officers of their own day and the Indian officers had in most cases sympathies entirely foreign; they found themselves closer to the ruling tribe and in effect were inconsiderate and insolent the result was a lack of opportunity for the development of personality. It became the well-marked feature of the Government which had no roots in the soil and no sense of obligation towards the people.

In short, inspite of the above mentioned efforts, conferment of proprietary rights, absentee land lords, money lenders, indebtedness, increasing litigation.

uncared for agriculture and the attitude of the officers were posing a big problem to the administration as well as to the society because actually they neither added to the abundance of those who had much nor did they provide enough for those who had too little. In consequence Sagar continued to be one of the backward districts of the Central Provinces. Much could have been done to bring the district at par with other relatively developed district. Total area under forest in Sagar was 1,155 square miles or 29% of the district area. Therefore, the district had immense scope for development of forest and agrobased industries. Land being fertile, added irrigational and fertilization facilities would have given a boost to agricultural production which is the base of revenue administration. If attention could have been paid to the development of these sectors other sectors of economy would have naturally flourished. In fact what the district needed was honest human efforts as could set in motion the forces of progress.