SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF
LAND REVENUE SETTLEMENTS
AND ADMINISTRATION
Socio-economic Effects of Land Revenue
Settlements and Administration.

On the eve of British occupation and administration the socio-economic conditions of Sagar District could be described as sad. The soil and the society had seen the Marathas plunderers, Pindari adventurers, or an advance of Thug clans. All of them thrived on the land and society. Not only this but they tried to devise one scheme or the other of making profit, which ultimately affected the society and its economy. The administration of the pre-British days did little to encourage socio-economic development and the district was in the grip of uncertainty. Land, which was the most important source of income and livelihood, had been visibly neglected during the closing days of the Maratha administration. Large tracts of cultivable land had either been deserted or kept under insufficient cultivation because of the attitude of the Marathas. As pointed out by R.M. Bird, "Under that system a composition was made for one, two, or more years; but if the year proved productive, an addition
to the settled demand was always enforced, and in later times when Ameer Khan or any other free-booter was pleased to levy an imposition, that also was raised by appropriate cess on all the villages.1 As a result most of the people did not have the confidence nor the zeal to produce; for there was no certainty as to who would reap the benefits.

Apparently the British rule came upon the confusion and ruin, caused by centuries of such changes, as a happy event. But unfortunately during the period of short term settlements, introduced by the Government in the beginning, the agricultural community as a whole suffered the worst. The margin of profit from agriculture fell to the lowest point, socio-economically the district was shattered and system of the land revenue administration was far from satisfactory.

These rapid settlements were attended upon with none to happy consequences and reduced a good portion of the cultivable land desolate. Due to the uncertainty associated with the short term settlements


people did not take sufficient interest in land and agriculture. As a result, the general economic life of the district was bound to suffer. The shorter was the settlement the greater was the attempt of the land holder to extort, but the lesser was his desire to invest for the improvement of land.

The Government did not indicate immediate benefits for the people. The British were primarily a commercial group and their main interest was to expand their commercial interests. It was obvious that their industrial and commercial projects were directly linked with their agricultural and land revenue policies, and they had realised that unless the agricultural policy was adjusted, their commercial programme was not to be successful.

With this in view, they adopted a policy in land revenue administration which destroyed the native industries in whatever form or degree they had been existing in the district. Other non-agricultural occupations such as spinning, weaving and dyeing were destroyed. Cloth was woven and dyed to some extent
in a large number of villages all over the district, but the chief centres were Rehli, Deori, Gaurjhanwar and Garhakota. As late as in 1850, the last place was described as the chief cotton-mart of the district. Sagar was famous for its dyeing industry and had a large inland trade with other places in India. But it declined gradually, and vanished altogether in due course of time. Among other industries—coarse blanket industry of Khurei, gold and silver work of Sagar, bell-metal industry of Sagar, Tigara Jeasinagar, Rahetgarh, Deori, Khurei, Khimsaa, Malthone and other places, brass-working industries of Sagar, Khurei, Etawa, Garhakota and Rehli, iron-works of Deori and Hirapur, shoe-making and bamboo work industry of Sagar and Rahetgarh were most notable. These industries had made the agriculturists, most of whom were artisans also in their spare time, economically well off. But by the middle of the 19th century it was a rare sight to meet a person weaving, working on gold and silver ornaments and even preparing decent clothes. As a result, people were forced to divert themselves and all the capital they had to land.
Land, which was relatively not much in demand, received an impetus. It became the exclusive basis of economy under the British administration for the local people. The sudden impact on land, added with the procedural difficulties, put the people of the district in a difficult situation because the unaccustomed profits of the wheat-boom-day had encouraged expenditure beyond the means of the smallermen, and reckless extravagance amongst the well-to-do. At the same time the land became the most attractive investment for capital. The value of land rose and land attained the status of valuable property and possession.

This trend in the structure of the landed society and the price level of land was of profound importance. Therefore, a new class of parasites, i.e., money lenders grew up which held under its control the available land and dictated its price without any direct interest in production. They were not content to finance agriculture, but they were playing to suit their clients. Therefore, they allowed long accounts; due to which the position of the actual landlords became pre-
carious. Transfers of land became inevitable. Table 'E' makes the position clear. Land became the monopoly of the rich and the rest of the society became mere tenants depending on the terms of the malguzars i.e. money lenders. This sort of affairs crippled the agricultural community as a whole.

These money lenders provided the field for the existence of a number of absentee malguzars, who worsened the situation. The absentee malguzars took no interest in the land or the people of the estates and left the management to subordinate officers who collected the maximum possible, leaving as little to the people. Table 'S' clearly gives cosewise details of the absentee or non-resident malguzars.

The Government tried to improve the socio-economic condition of the people as well as the land revenue administration through land revenue settlements. But the assessment of land revenue was raised from settlement to settlement and the Government left little scope for the people to represent their views.


4. Ibid., P. 72.
and difficulties. The table 'T' shows how the assessment of land was increased gradually. As the assessment of land revenue was increased by the Government, the malguzars, in their turn increased the collections from the tenants. More often than not, they collected much more in proportion to what they paid to the Government because the Government, in spite of serious efforts, failed to play an effective role to help the real tillers of the soil and even could not put the system of land revenue on a correct footing.

The several settlement conducted by the Government gradually increased the cultivated area which increased the production and its cost. But careful enquiries have shown that though the cost of production increased very largely, its rise was not equal to the rise in prices. It meant deterioration of the general economic condition of the people with old and profitable vocations lost. Industries decayed and agriculture was in the process decadence.

As regards its impact on society, there was practically no attempt to improve the social conditions of the people in Sagar District during the first phase.

5. Fuller J.B. : Review of the Progress of Central Provinces during the last thirty years and of the present and past condition of the people, Nagpur, 1892, P. 16.
of British administration. The Government found itself engaged in one place or the other of their empire in more important problems of war, peace and consolidating the possessions.

Since land was the most important support of life; the condition of the cultivators was intimately connected with the rise and fall of land revenue collections. Moreover, land being the most important economic resource in the rural sector, the possession of it or otherwise determined to a very large extent the socio-economic status of a community. At this time, on the basis of the available records agriculturists were divisible into three general grades: the malguzars, the tenants and agricultural labourers. As regards malguzars, they were created into a new class by the Government. Before the thirty years' settlement the tenant's rights were not classified either by law or tradition. It was only presumed that certain rights were in existence. This fact was also observed by the Government of India. Letter addressed to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces; dated 22 December, 1864 reveals that, "His Excellency-in-Council believes that such rights did exist, and

6. Correspondence between chief Commissioner, Central Provinces and Government of India, quoted in Introduction to the Land Revenue and Settlement System of the Central Provinces; P. 48.
were recognised, though often over borne and violated. No doubt there was no law, or any varying rule, whereby such rights could be maintained, but neither was there any such law or custom upholding even proprietary rights. The will of the ruler of the day, as long as he could enforce it, was the only law of the land. The malguzar, that is, the party who engaged to pay the Government revenue on the land, did very much what he liked with all the tenures on the land, so far as he had the power to do so." But the thirty years' settlement introduced a system of general conferment of a proprietary right on the malguzar, which seems a natural expression for the interest held by a landlord when that interest is not the entire 'bundle of rights' but only part of them, the remainder being enjoyed by other persons. In view of J.N. Sil, "the conferment of the proprietary rights marked a great epoch in the history of the land revenue administration." Moreover, with the grant of proprietary rights to malguzars a change came in the status


of the cultivators from village ryots into malguzars
tenants following as a necessary consequence and
thereafter the cultivators relations with the malgu-
zars became those of a tenant with a landlord.

In the initial stages malguzar's word was law
and they devised rules to extract as much return as
possible from the tenants. The tenant had right to
land till he enjoyed the pleasure of a malguzer. He
could be evicted summarily, his produce attached
and sold if he ran into displeasure of the landlord.
However, in due course the traditionally rich and
well-to-do malguzars became lethargic and dependent
on their 'munims' and 'khandas' and there was a gra-
dual economic fall in these classes culminating in
not unusual auction of the village or part for reco-
very of land revenue. Considering the position and
status as well as the circumstances of the time malg-
uzars may be divided into three categories, (i) the
large landowners with estates consisting of many
villages, (ii) the small landowners who had estates
consisting of one or two villages each, and (iii) the
small landowners who were themselves farmers. The

emnt, of the Saugor District, 1887-
-1897, Nagpur, 1902, p. 43.
condition of these malguzars was described by Cleveland in these words, "the grant of transferable rights in village and the moderate assessments of land settlement conferred great advantages on all classes of malguzars. The extension of cultivation and the increase in village assets have also benefited all alike. There are few villages in which, the malguzars some can not realize a good deal more than they have to pay to the Government with a little trouble and some interest. The malguzars of class (i) have generally grown in prosperity and their standard of comfort has risen enormously. They can afford, many of them, to manage their estates through brokers and agents. The malguzars of class (ii) have not prospered as well as they ought to have done. They are often the sons of men of class (iii) who have grown beyond the frugal and industrious habits of their forefathers. They collect in towns, and do nothing for their living. As their families grow larger and the number of co-sharers increases, their circumstances deteriorate, and they get into debt. Malguzars of class (iii) are generally hardworking, industrious farmers. Many of them have fallen victims to the lines of the money lender and
have on occasions made a great deal of display and spent a lot of money, which they borrow and which forms a nucleus for a good deal of debt."

The tenants were comparatively poor and their means of livelihood were limited. The tenantry was usually mixed. Mr. C. R. Cleveland, who inspected the great majority of the villages of the district, observed that, "the tenants of all sections of society were not alike, and some of them, though they are a small minority, have always practised thrift and frugality, and now are reaping the whole benefit of the rise in prices." In fact the tenants who were of better caste (Brahmins, Thakurs, Banias etc.) could assert themselves but the majority of low caste persons lived altogether on the mercy of the landlords.

From times immemorial these proprietors, better classified as intermediaries harassed the tenants to a very great extent. Tenants were put to all types of hardships as being subject to the caprice of the proprietors. Their benevolence which was rare extended

10. Quoted in the Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sagar District, 1887-1897, Nagpur, 1902, P. 44.

to few tenants. The majority of them lead tortured lives in order to please the local officials. The Britishers did not pay attention to this side of things because they found it expedient to keep in brawn the real levers of social power. At several places there were better feelings but at some places the malguzars were immensely unpopular. The provisions of consent money, naujibs and several exclusive rights over village forests, grassland, air, house sites made the landlords feel like monarchs. The majority of the tenants were afraid of them since the treatment meted out to them was extremely harsh. The local authorities including the police were inclined to side with the malguzars and the tenants had a very bad time. Even the native officials, in general, were not keen to deal with the problems of the oppressed tenants seriously because they themselves were interested only in safeguarding the interests of the Crown. The Britishers however once on a secure ground were more amenable to the promptings of their natural love for the rule of law and were willing to redress the balance of social power tipped heavily in favour of the landlord. But what with their inadequate appre-
existence of the mammoth inequity of the Indian society and with their strong Anglo-Saxon sense of properly their attempts to relieve the distress of the tenantry proved far too insufficient and left the social underclass pretty much in the same position in which they found them.

The condition of the tenantry their distress unrelieved, worsened with the passage of time and became prejudicial to the interests even of the rulers.

The money lending malguzars deliberately refrained from rent enhancement. They cast wide the net of their money-lending operations and reduced their tenants to the position of 'galliye' a term used locally to denote those cultivators who handed over the whole of their produce 'galle' of their land to the landlord in satisfaction of debt. With the entire produce of land funneling into their coffers they were unwilling to make new additions to rent roll by enhancement because at the time of resettlement they would incur extra liability for all such additions. They therefore, kept their rent-roll as low as possible, entered all payments of money or grain by the cultivators as made in satisfaction of
their landedas and put down as small a sum as possible
in the patwari papers under the head of rent recoveries.
They could then argue and reasonably so at the face of
it that their revenue assessment was severe, while
at the same time they made a larger profit than it
was ever intended that they should make.

In the aforesaid circumstances, the relations
between landlords and tenants were outwardly cordial.
There appeared no undue gain or loss to any one and
haggling was avoided amongst friends and neighbours.
A Settlement officer writes that, "I have seen written
leases of land on whatever rent the Settlement officer
may fix. This practice was promoting good relations
between them and shifting on to Government the onus
and edum of rent enhancement. Settlement Officer,
G.L. Carbett, L. C. S., observed that, "the majority of
the landlords can hardly be distinguished socially
from their tenants, with whom they lived in friendly
intimacy. The old Thakur landholders are regarded
with almost feudal reverence by their tenantry. The

12. Debrett E.A. : Report on the Land Revenue
Settlement of the Seugar District,
1887-1897, Nagpur, 1902, P. 42.

Land Revenue Settlement of the
Seugar District, 1911-1916, Nagpur
P. 41.
Bundela or the Lodhi is as clannish as an eighteenth century highland. The descendants of the old Maratha rulers, who reside on their estates, are generally respected. They money lending landlords of whatever caste, is not unpopular as such. The keen management of the business men, if just and straightforward, is not resented. But the speculative dog in the manager, who will neither cultivate good land himself or lease it to others, is deservedly hated, and it is perhaps fortunate for the Sethji that he seldom visits his estates. One or two others are reputed to be harsh and avaricious, but the fate of the notorious Dubey was warning that the Saugor cultivator will not stand 14.

But the growing enlightenment of the tenants and their consequent awakening from their traditional outlook of patient fatalism led to the increasing assertion, from time to time, of their rights against the privileged position of their landlords. On the other hand the uprising of labour was regarded by the cultivating

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castes particularly by malguzars as mischievous in itself and as an encroachment on their freemasonry. Exorbitant rents were often demanded to deter a permanent tenancy. A petition from the Rehli tahsil prayed that the holdings of all labouring castes should be confiscated and divided amongst the Brahmins. Before the finalization of the settlement of 1911-1916, the attitude towards labour had been embittered by the claims of the chamars to the hides of dead animals. Due to the rise in the value of hides the chamars had begun to realise their importance in the economy of the community. There have bitter disputes, litigations and some strikes, the settlement officer had to intervene as arbitrator. As a result, an agreement was recorded in the wajib-ul-azl that an owner who permits the chamars i.e. harijans, to skin or remove the carcass, will be bound by an implicit contract to admit the chamar's claim to their share of the skin. But in fact, such sort of arbitration was not conducive to the peace of society. There was

an increased in litigation i.e. the number of suits filed by the landlords for rental arrears and ejection of tenants began to increase. This position supplemented the Government in following the policy of 'divide and rule', as they could not try to remove the gulf between these two, honestly.

The Government was however not oblivious of its duty to diffuse social tension on the issue. The Government tried to improve the relations of malguzars and tenants but all the attempts, by way of Settlements and Acts were futile. Some blamed the Government for excessive collection and callous attitude towards the general welfare of society. On the other hand, the Government considered the people as apathetic and careless cultivators. This attitude did not help the people of the district nor did it improve their socio-economic conditions.