CHAPTER X

AGRARIAN CONDITIONS IN AWADH ON THE EVE OF ANNEXATION

(i) The impact of British Intervention:

The kingdom of Awadh was placed in a peculiar situation during the first half of the 19th century. The excessive interference of the British Resident in day-to-day administration had considerably diminished the authority of the king and his officials. The separate establishment of the Resident was practically as 'alternative seat of power'. According to an authoritative observer (no other than Henry Lawrence), "At Lucknow for years the Resident held public durbar where the grandee attended and pleaded against their own sovereign or his servants. Thus were the monarch and his subjects arranged against each other, thus was the sovereign degraded in his own capital."  

Many of the evils besetting Awadh and the consequent disruption of local agrarian life during the first half of the 19th century arose as a result of British presence (and interference) in the administrative, military and economic spheres of the kingdom though this might not be the only explanation for the distress and miseries to which the peasants in Awadh kingdom were subjected to.

The administrative machinery of the Awadh kingdom was so thoroughly controlled by the British officials as to leave little discretion with its rulers. To quote Colonel Southland, "there is no state in India with whose government we have interfered so systematically and so uselessly as with that of Oude ----- This interference has been more in favour of men than in favour of measures." Sa'adat Ali, whom even the English recognised as an extremely able and intelligent ruler, suffered from gross interference. The 'dirty hands' of the British were said to be employed against him in the disguise of reforms. After such an 'active surveillance' of the Resident and his constant 'advice' for the improvement of the administration things deteriorated to such an extent that by 1836 Donald Butter was speaking of a virtual collapse of the entire set-up.

The basis of the political and economic structure of the kingdom was the land revenue. It was therefore natural for the British to suggest a number of reforms in this sphere from time to time. Such measures were tried by the successive rulers of the dynasty with little or no success.

2. Ibid., pp. 385-6.
Surprisingly enough the experiments were always short lived and seldom lasted for more than a year or so.¹

The resultant instability in agrarian conditions is well portrayed by Lalji, in a section of his work, the Mīrāt-ul Auza.² He gives a vivid description for the reasons of the lawlessness and anarchy in the realm. The cruelty and arbitrary manners of the 'āmils and the mustājirs and the neglect of their duties by the state officials, were said to be the twin causes of the evils. The chief fault is laid at the faulty nature of the revenue system. The settlement of the revenue upon those who pay it was not made in accordance with their actual portions and shares. Even if it was distributed by the officials between the parties with their mutual consent, the 'āmils and the mustājirs never respected the agreement. This naturally resulted in violent protest and reprisals. It so happened that one of two brothers who was the zamindār of a ta'alluqa submitted the qubuliyyat for the land-revenue before the 'āmil and the other brother was denied his legal share. The latter began to ravage the estate.² Peace would have come, "if the 'āmil had given the half share to the rebel brother---³."

² Lalji, Mīrāt-ul-Auza, ff. 11b-12b.
³ Ibid., f. 13a.
The revenue officials such as the 'āmils and the chakledārs had the tendency to demand a higher amount of revenue from the zamindārs and the ta'allugādārs. The latter, unable or unwilling to pay the enhanced amount, used to make summary levy and after collecting their retainers and adherents took flight to the neighbouring jungles and offered resistance to the forces commanded by the 'āmils or chakledār. Sleeman's diary of his tour is full of such instances (see our Chapter V). Such a policy brought havoc and misery to the rural people. In 1830 Maddlock observed, "the 'āmils or his officers finding a yearly decrease of revenue are naturally urged to further exactions until, at length, the kingdom has arrived at such a crisis that hundreds of villages have gone to ruin, the former cultivation is now a waste and the hamlets once occupied are now deserted." With zamindārs or ta'allugādārs fleeing to the jungles with their retainers, the wrath of the revenue officials generally fell on the unarmed peasantry. Butter comments, "Whenever the chakledar pitches his tent, the work of plunder and devastation commences with the uprooting of the neighbouring villages to supply temporary huts for his troops; the zamindars and their immediate adherents at the same time flying to the jungles, when they ascertain an intention on the chakledār's

1. CR, 1845 (111), p.388.
part to increase their burden." Such a situation forced the zamindārs to be always on alert. They used to maintain substantial private armies and fire arms.

It seems that by the time of the Annexation the chakledār had come to possess greater liberty in using cannon and fire arms against the defaulting villages. "During the reign of Sa'adat Ali, a single cannon shot could not be fired by a chakledār without being followed by immediate enquiry from Lucknow, as to its causes - now a chakledār may continue firing for a month without question." Henry Lawrance once personally witnessed an armed operation by the chakledār and speaks of "the village being carried by storm; 7 or 8 of the inhabitants were killed and wounded, and all the rest were taken captive by the amils." This should not be considered as an isolated case, as such occurrences were quite frequent. "We observe in the daily papers a detailed account of the death in battle of the amil of Burailah, and of the victorians ta'alluqadar having in consequence taken to the bush, to be a felon probably for life or at least until he pays the blood money to the court. 'In this process several large land-holders were temporarily declared 'outlaws.'

2. Ibid., p.101.
The rise of the banditry was an indirect result of the administrative system established with the help and advice of the British Resident. The main body of the bandits comprised peasants who had suffered because of the inequities of the Chakledārs, the unemployed soldiers, or those whose pay was in arrears. Bishop Heber, while he was coming from Kanpur to Lucknow met with what had all the appearances of a state of siege at the very entrance of Lucknow, "because large sum of money, said to be 30,000 rupees, on its way to the treasury at Lucknow, had attracted a number of neighbouring peasants, who were assembled outside the walls with their weapons, waiting for the departure of the treasure.\(^1\) "The sense of insecurity had developed so much among the people, that to Heber's surprise,"all or nearly all the remaining population were as much loaded with arms as the inhabitants of the country but I should apprehended that Lucknow offered at this moment a more warlike exterior than our own metropolis ever did during its most embroiled and troublesome period.\(^2\)" Lālji informs us that "because of the prevalence of the acts of depredations throughout the kingdom of Oude, it was necessary for the inhabitants to keep themselves armed,

\(^1\) Bishop Heber, op. cit., p. 46. \\
\(^2\) Ibid.
hence every inhabitant carried arms with him even if he had to go outside the house to attend a call of nature. Some places had become quite notorious for the activities of these outlaws. Sarangpur, 10 miles south of Tanda, "has a population of 9000 Hindu thieves, dacoits and thugs, whose depredations extended as far as Lucknow, Gorakhpur and Benares." Still Heber was not ready to think that the people of Oudh were 'habitually ferocious or blood thirsty.'

Apart from the political and military implications of the suppression of law and the consequent rise of the banditry, the entire range of economic activity was dislocated. When the 'amils and chakledārs failed to collect the stipulated amount of the land revenue from the defaulting zamindārs and ta'alluqqādārs, they tried to squeeze the money from the rich merchants and bankers, the latter were forced to "make advances and take, as security for repayment, the receipt of the zamindār who was a ruined man, and at the moment a prisoner in the chakledār's camp." Precisely for these reasons many bankers of Rae Bareli district having substantial capital worth upto four lakh rupees left the place and migrated to

1. Lalji, op.cit., f.75a.
4. Butter, p. 86.
the neighbouring British districts such as Kanpur, Gorakhpur, Forrukhabad and Benares. On the other hand, the ta'alluqadārs and the zamindārs when they fell into arrears in payment of land-revenue and apprehended an intention on the part of the chakledār or 'āmil to invade their estates, tried to extort money from the family bankers on easy rates to make the payment and thus to effect their escape from the wrath of the government revenue officials. C.A. Elliott has described the machin of Rao of Dundekhera against the family banker Chundan Lal and the way in which the latter was forced to change his masters overnight. The banker had carried on his business very well and prospered in such a way that in 1810 he was the owner of only three villages in different parts of the district, in 1825, "his estate has risen to $2\frac{1}{2}$ lac and it continued to fluctuate between this amount and a minimum of $1\frac{1}{2}$ lac till 1850 A.D." But his prosperity soon attracted the greedy eyes of the chakledār, who thought him to be a, "squeezeable man and required him to pay more by 1/2 a lac than he had done last year (1850)." The banker, foreseeing such an eventuality, had thought it quite expedient

1. Butter, p. 86.
2. Elliot, pp. 135-7.
3. Ibid., p. 139.
4. Ibid.
to have "built a house and good deal of landed property in Cownpoor district," he could claim protection as a British subject though residing in Oudh. The general feeling of insecurity and mistrust prevailing among the bankers and merchants has been aptly described by Lalji. "The bankers and the merchants of (Oudh Kingdom) do not keep their capital at one place due to the fear of the depredations of the ta'alluqadars and the zamindârs ----- the illegal revenue demands of the 'âmils and the tehsildârs ----- there are many who are the owners of property worth two lakh of rupees and have purchased zamindâris and the villages in the British domains. (They) keep their cash and other valuable items at the houses built in (the British) dominions and on getting any idea of the disturbances, send their families to these (houses)." This flow of capital from Oudh to the adjacent British territories must surely have been a drain on the resources of Oudh.

The drain was not the only economic impact of the British preserve, but a number of other spheres could be pointed out where the dictates of the Resident undermined the authority of the king in his own kingdom. The Oudh rulers in succession advanced loans to or placed deposits with the

1. Elliot, pp. 141-3.
2. Lalji, op.cit., ff. 80b-81a.
East India Company. The interest occurring at the rate of 4% or 4% per annum was always earmarked for certain specific charitable purposes. This amount was remitted directly to the beneficiaries and spent on the specified purposes by the Resident himself, who was accountable to none. A number of deeds of such deposits and loans have survived to show who the beneficiaries actually were.¹ The 'bond business carried out by the East India Company, too, implied similar objectives. These bonds carried 5% per annum interest. Sleeman estimated that the people of Oudh had approximately invested 3 crores of rupees in these bonds, and 'many middle class families were entirely depended on the interest of these bonds.'² The financial as well as the political implications of these transactions were manifold; a large sum of money was drained out of the kingdom, and the payment of annual interest by the Resident to the beneficiaries and to the religious as well as charitable institutions made a large sections of people dependent on British favour.³

The merchants of Oudh kingdom who carried their business in the adjacent British districts as well, enjoyed the privilege

¹ Aitchinson, Vol.II, Treaty Nos. XLIV, XLVII, XLIX, and L.
² P.D.Reeves, Introduction.
³ Ibid.
of seeking the help of the Resident in redress of their grievances, through the magistrates of the concerned districts. Chundan Lal, to whom we have referred above was assessed for higher amount of revenue by Kasheeparsad Tewaree, the chakledär of Poorwa. On his refusal the chakledär attached and killed his brother and plundered property worth Rs. 25,000. The matter was brought to the prime minister Ali Naqi Khan, who did nothing to punish the culprits. Thereafter Chundan Lal applied to the magistrate of Cownpoor claiming "protection as a British subject though residing in Oudh." The matter was referred to Sleeman who immediately took up the case and pleaded for justice. At this the king got annoyed with Chundan Lal for defying his authority and ordered his banishment, but through the constant pressure of the Resident, Kashiparasad Tewaree "was dismissed from chakledärship, ordered to repay 25,000, banished from the kingdom for two years and (was) declared incapable of entering the "government service again."

But it seems that such a course was insisted upon by Sleeman primarily not with a view to seeming justice, but to interfering with the affairs of king. Elliot says that within 8 years of the action the British officials had pardoned Kashiprashad Tewaree and made him an honorary Commissioner.

1. Elliot, op. cit., p.
The erosion of the king's authority during the second quarter of 19th century by a series of systematic acts of omission and commission by the Resident was an important factor for the decline of Oudh. It so happened that some of the notorious and proclaimed criminals found their way into the Residency or to the British cantonment. Similarly, the tenure of the appointment of many high officials of the king depended on the likes and dislikes of the Resident and on occasion the king was forced to dismiss and banish competent officials precisely for this reason. Masihuddin Ahmad, the plenipotentiary of the deposed Wajid Ali Shah to the Queen, cited the instances in some detail --- Raja Hunwunt Singh, the ta'alluqādar of Dharwapoort and Kalakankar, constantly evaded the payment of the Government dues and put to defiance the authority of the king. But he found his way to the Residency on invitation by the Resident.\(^1\) The remonstrances made by the king were of no avail. His helplessness is depicted when he speaks of "offenders being allowed to find protection in my dominions, without my having the power to bring them to justice."\(^2\) It was also pleaded that if such landholders got protection from the English, others would get

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1. The passengers travelling in such carriges could not be detained by the officials of the state. The privilege, was misused, hence the king strongly protested and also threatened that such carriges would be subjected to checks. MMA, op.cit., pp. 140-1.

2. Ibid.
encouragement and they too would evade the payment of the revenues. Such a course would ultimately, set forth "misgovernment, give rise to innumerable evils, and lead to confusion and anarchy." But inspite of such pleas being made nothing was done by the Residents to rectify the course they had adopted.

Another incident, cited by Masihuddin Ahmad shows that Sleeman constantly meddled with the authority of the king, disregarded the decisions of the highest native courts of law as well as of the king himself. One Wusee Wlly Khan, under-Secretary to the prime minister, was supposed to be a very competent and efficient official of the Oudh kingdom. Unfortunately Sleeman had developed a prejudice against him. He asked the king to order his banishment from Lucknow as a seditious person. The king declined to act without getting any proof of his 'alleged seditions', as this was likely to "cause considerable disorder in my kingdom." But still Sleeman insisted and bluntly declared, "there is no necessity to prove his guilt, as the appointment imposed upon him is not his jagir or hereditary property." Wussy Uly Khan was continued to be passed by Sleeman on one pretext or another.

2. Ibid., p. 81.
3. Ibid.
even after he had proved his fidelity and devotion to the 
nawab's government. Sleeman's disrespect towards the estab-
lished norms of the period and his contemptuous disregard of 
the authority of the king and his highest officials showed 
them that the "king—(won) a mere cipher, the resident 
accounted all in all—a real mayor of the palace and 
the kingly authority feel into utter contempt."

(ii) Bengal Army Sepoys as a factor in agrarian instability:

The Sepoys formed an important element in the agrarian 
society of Oudh kingdom. They were generally recruited from 
a number of powerful Rajput clans and were attached to various 
British regiments, including those posted in the kingdom of 
Oudh. It was estimated by a British official in 1845 that, 
"three-fourths of Bengal's native infantry came from Oudh."
The Bengal army, comprised of the bulk of the company's forces 
and if the estimates were accurate, the number of sepoys from 
Oudh must have been considerable. The people from Oudh were 
supposed to furnish the best disciplined infantry in India. 
For these reasons recruiting parties used to come here from 
far as Bombay. In round figures, there were some 50,000 
the Oudh men serving with East India Company's forces.

1. MMA, op. cit., p. 84.
3. Ibid.
An important privilege enjoyed by the sepoys was that, while serving in any part of the country, they could seek the intercession of the British Resident at the Court of Oudh to settle their local disputes. Even if their family members or any of their relatives had some grievance, they too could approach the Resident. In the prevalent conditions of lawlessness such a privilege could be considered very important. The Resident was obliged to take up all pleas of the sepoys with the limitation that civil cases were not to be over 6 years old and criminal cases 3 years old.

It was this privilege that made many Oudh people to join the company's services as sepoys. An Oudh soldier was entitled to a monthly pay of Rs.5/- or 5 1/2 only while a trooper in the British regiment (recruited from jaded and compured provinces) would get Rs.7/- per month. Similarly the Oudh sepoy had no pension benefits and could claim no extra allowance while on march; only they were entitled to avail of one month's leave. The East India Company sepoys posted to the Oudh Kingdom enjoyed much greater privileges. Beside being close to home, they got fuel and fodder and often food. Their baggage was always carried for them at public cost. However, these gains were made often at the expense of their fellow peasants and zamindārs. As Sleeman says, "they (sepoys) were the privileged class who gave much trouble and
annoyance and were often terror for their non-privileged neighbours and co-sharers in the land.¹

The grievances of the sepoys for which they sought redress from the Resident varied in nature and dimensions. There were cases when the near relatives of any sepoy were killed by bandits; or they were robbed of their belongings by dacoits. If the family of the victim was denied justice by the local authorities or the victims were not satisfied with the particular judgment delivered upon a case, the aggrieved family or relatives of the sepoys could approach the Resident. The Resident could order a fresh investigation into the whole matter. Since every individual sepoy could have had no direct access to the Residency, it is quite possible that the petitions were submitted through the Commandant of the concerned regiment. The tour made by W.H. Sleeman in the kingdom provided ample opportunities to every sepoy to approach him directly with a petition.² He says, "I have every day scores of petitions delivered to me with quivering lip and tearful eye by the persons who have been plundered of all they possessed, had their dearest relatives murdered or tortured to death and their habitations burnt to the ground by


2. It was alleged that Sleeman during the tour of Oudh kingdom, "has been encouraging applications and the receipts of petition from all quarters." Perry Erskine, Birds-eye view of India, p.174 Cf. M.Masihuddin Ahmad, op.cit., p. 84.
the gangs of ruffians under landlords of high birth and pretensions whom they had never wronged or offended.1"

The impact of such a privileged class could not but cause bitterness locally behind a facade of submission. The big landholders tried their best to get the sepoys satisfied so as to avoid any unwarranted interference in their affairs. But probably they were never fully satisfied. A British official observed, "the zamindar throughout the country will buy, beg, borrow or steal in the name of a British sepoy, in the hope of thus gaining attention to their petty claims. We are indeed of the opinion that much (of) the Oudh government is molested and degraded by sepoys' claims, true or false, the men themselves are rarely benefited by the resident's interference. Litigation is promoted; hopes are excited and eventually the party who would, if left to his own resources and the practices of the country, have arranged or compromised his quarrel, is led on to his ruin.2"

However, it should not be supposed that the sepoys were deliberate victims of any sort of official harrassment or that they were the chief sufferers in the kingdom. The period itself was marked by a general deterioration of the law-and-order situation. In midst of such conditions, the

sepoys use to create further problems for the local administration by insisting on their privileges, and by invoking Resident's intercession all the time. Often enough, the hollowness of their claims and complaints were exposed and quite known to the British officials themselves. Even Sleeman observed that, "the wrongs of which they (sepoys) complain, are of course such as all men of their class in Oudh are liable to suffer; but no other men in Oude are so prone to exaggerate the circumstances attending them to bring forward prominently all that is favourable to their own side and keep back all that is otherwise; and to conceal the difficulties which must attend the enforcement of an award when made."

Most often the sepoys preferred their claims against those who had well garrisoned forts and large bands of armed followers. It was practically impossible to subdue them without the help of a large and well equipped British force. Sleeman notes that on an occasion, "thirty lives were lost in attempting to enforce an ansed in favour of a sipahee of our army."

One case cited by Sleeman may well be characteristic. Shaikh Mehboob Ali was a retired subedar major. He acquired the possession of a village from his powerful neighbour's state, in addition to the lands already held by him by invoking the aid of the Resident in his land disputes. But he

2. Sleeman, op.-cit.
3. Ibid.
found it difficult to have the cultivators till the land. Taxed for reasons, he alleged the hostility of his neighbour which prevented the peasants from cultivating that particular village. Such deep rooted hostility existed because of the fact that with Resident's help he had evicted a person who had been the zamindār of the village for the last 30 or 35 years. There was no specific statement of the time of the event, nor did the Resident try to ascertain the facts before proceeding with the case. The resulting judgment by the Resident on behalf of the sepoys involved, "the risk of the loss of so many lives, first in obtaining possession and then keeping you (sepoys) in it." It should not be considered as the only instance of the miscarriage of justice as Sleeman himself admits that "cases of this kind are very numerous."  

Apart from the big landlords and the Local chieftains, the rural population itself was directly subjected to the high handedness of the sepoys. They perpetuated all sort of atrocities over the peasants under the shadow of British protection; wherever the sepoys went all the stocks of grain of the peasants were forcibly taken out by them. While

2. Ibid.
Sleeman himself was passing through the district of Sandeelah Bangar and encamped in the village Sakin, the sepoys of his camp had looted all the stock of straw (bhoosa) kept by the peasants for the use of their own cattle. The matter was reported to Sleeman by some daring cultivators. On enquiry he was informed that this was the established practice of the day that, "all villages near the road, along which the troops and establishment more are plundered of bhoosa and all those, within ten miles of the place where they may be detained for a week or fortnight, are plundered in the same way." Even sometimes the gross-sheds (chappar) were removed from the huts of the poor peasants by the sepoys in order to meet the lamp requirements. Sometimes the peasants were duty bound to provide the foodgrains and other necessities to the encamping army of the sepoys. Similarly the army of the state, when on march, used to subject the peasants to the same hardships.