

## CHAPTER VII

## RENT, WAGES AND PRICES

## RENTS

IN the early days of our rule the relation between landlord and tenant in the district seems to have been anything but satisfactory. The zamindar generally let out his estates in small parcels to farmers and, while these were under engagement for the revenue to their landlord, they had themselves no similar agreements with the tenants. In a letter to the Board of Revenue, dated June 1788, the Collector (Mr. Kinloch) remarks : "But I must observe that in this extensive district not more than one-fourth of the ryots are in possession of *pattahs* and these have been granted by the farmers or their *gumashtas*." He goes on to particularise the several classes of tenants. "The first, he says, are the *Khoad Kasht*, or aborigines, being ryots of inferior caste, who pay house rent and a greater revenue for the lands they cultivate than the *Pykhast* who are ryots of a superior rank, that neither pay rent for their dwelling house nor do they pay so high a revenue for their lands, these last are again distinguished by the application of the *Niz Gong Pykasht*, who cultivate the lands of their own village, and the *Baza Gong Pykasht*, who pay a still lower rate of rent. Besides these are the *Muttariffa* ryots who do not cultivate lands but have shops and carry on a profession, and pay a high house rent, to all the above ryots." The permanent settlement does not seem to have improved matters much and in a letter from the Judge and Magistrate, dated the 9th of March 1802, the confusion and fraud which permeated the relations of landlords, farmers, and tenants is very vividly described.

"The interchange of engagements between the parties, with few exceptions, extends no farther than to the

zamindar's farmer who is here termed the *Sudder* farmer and to those amongst whom he subdivides his farm, in portions. An engagement between the latter and the cultivators or heads of a village, is scarcely known, except the general one, mutually understood to receive and pay, agreeably to past and preceding years ; and for ascertaining this the accounts of the farm are no guide.

"The zamindar himself seeing that no confidence is to be placed in the accounts rendered him of the rent-roll of the farm from the practice, which has so long prevailed, of fabrication and false accounts, never attempts to call for them at the expiration of the lease ; and instead of applying a correction of the evil, increases it, by farming out the lands literally by auction ; and the same mode is adopted in almost every subdivision of the farm. The consequence of such a system must be obvious ; needy rapacious farmers and fraudulent tenants become friends, and collusively agree, at the expiration of the lease, to defraud the succeeding farmer. A trifling *douceur* for the ryot, or the ryots of a whole village, is sufficient to procure a fabrication of the accounts, and a receipt to correspond with them for a sum much below that actually paid in the revenue demand for the year ; and these are the valid and incontrovertible vouchers, held out to the successor in farm for his guide.

"The practice is, however, too universal and too well-known to deceive him ; but he is without an alternative, and acts his predecessor's part, in the repetition of it, for it honestly disposed (which is rarely the case) he has not time to have recourse to a measurement for ascertaining the quantity and quality of lands in the occupancy of the cultivators, with a view to a fair and equitable assessment : and the ryots finding their benefit in the confusion, and despairing of honest dealing towards them while the present system exists, would oppose it, so as to make him a sufferer for the attempt."

The creation of *patni* tenures did much to remove these abuses by securing some permanence of tenure to the farmer ; written leases between tenure holder and tenant are

now practically universal, and most of the tenants possess occupancy rights; but in a great many cases they are not the actual cultivators, the holdings being let out to sub-tenants for produce rents. No settlement of rents has yet been carried out in the district, but it is reported that the average rent per acre paid by the actual cultivator to his immediate landlord is approximately Rs. 6. For the inferior class of rice land in the neighbourhood of Raniganj and Asansol the rent is considerably less but on the other hand rice lands which are favourably situated, *diara* lands, and lands growing cane, potatoes or similar special crops demand a much higher rate. The latest survey and settlement in the district of any size was that of the Khas Mahals of the Burdwan Raj. The statistics collected from this show that the assessment per acre for the low land varied from Rs. 15 to Rs. 3 with an average assessment of Rs. 9, while the assessment for high land varied from Rs. 6 to annas 12 per acre with an average assessment of Rs. 3-6. The average area of the tenant's holdings as ascertained from the records of this settlement was 4 acres. As has already been noticed, a tenant usually pays rent in cash, but in many cases he does not actually cultivate the whole of his holding himself but sub-lets portions of it to under-tenants who pay rent in kind. Under this system the actual cultivator tills the land at his own cost, reaps the crop in the presence of the superior tenant or his agent, and carries it to the threshing floor where the grain and straw are divided in equal shares.

#### WAGES

Wages both for skilled and unskilled labour are fairly high. The monthly wages paid, in the factories during 1908 were as follows, the variations depending on the class of work required, e.g., whether for brick-works, potteries, iron works or paper mills/Blacksmiths Rs. 12 to Rs. 17; potters Rs. 13-12-6 to Rs. 20; carpenters Rs. 14 to Rs. 20; brick-layers Rs. 11; engine drivers Rs. 11 to Rs. 16; potters Rs. 15; moulders Rs. 14-6 to Rs. 16-6; boiler-men Rs. 10 to Rs. 23; fire-men Rs. 8 to Rs. 10. For unskilled labour

the wages were Rs. 6 to Rs. 9 and for a woman Rs. 4 to Rs. 5; durwans and messengers Rs. 8; jamadar durwan Rs. 13. The Chinese carpenters employed in the Bengal Paper Mills, however, are paid as much as Rs. 60 month. In the town of Burdwan itself wages are considerably higher; an ordinary carpenter or mason gets Rs. 22-8 a month while a skilled carpenter or mason gets Rs. 30; an ordinary labourer is paid Rs. 11-4 and a woman Rs. 8-14 a month; a *ghorami* gets Rs. 15-8. Miners are usually paid from five annas six pies to seven annas a tub. Of late there has been a considerable rise in the price of both skilled and unskilled labour—a result doubtless of the general rise in prices which has been so marked a feature of recent years. In 1900 the average monthly wage of an able-bodied agricultural labourer was Rs. 7. It is now over Rs. 9, and in the years 1903-1905 rose so high as Rs. 11-4. During the same period the wages of a common mason, carpenter or blacksmith rose from Rs. 15 to Rs. 16-8.

#### VILLAGE LABOURERS

Landlords and large farmers with holdings of more than 5 or 6 acres usually engage farm servants to assist them in the cultivation of their lands. Those employed temporarily, at seasons when extra assistance is required, are usually paid and engaged by the day, and are known as *majurs* (i.e., labourers, from *majuri* a wage). Generally, however, one or more permanent servants are also kept. These are known as *krishans* (i.e., cultivators, from *krisha* to cultivate) and are paid and engaged by the month. Their wages are usually Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 a month besides food and clothing or a little over Rs. 10 a month altogether. The monthly labourer is generally secured by the advance of a loan which is not paid off and for the recovery of which a suit would be filed if the labourer worked for any one else. A similar custom exists in Patna where such a labourer is known as a *kamia* but in that district the failure of the employer to maintain his *kamia* involves the breaking up of the contract, and no further action is taken to recover the original debt. In Burdwan the debtor, though his service ceases for the

time, returns to his master when required for fear of being sued for his debt. A daily labourer gets annas four to annas five a day during the cultivating season, and annas three to annas four during the harvest besides food for two meals daily and tiffin (*jalpan*). When not engaged in actual agricultural operations such labourers find occupation in excavating tanks and embankments, in repairing the ridges of earth between the rice fields (*ails*), levelling and manuring fields, thatching, brick making, etc. The women who get much the same wages if paid in cash, are chiefly employed in husking rice and catching fish.

### PRICES

The steady rise in prices, which has been so marked a feature of the recent economic history of India, is reflected in the figures reported for the district. Common rice, the staple crop of the district, sold at Burdwan on the 30th of June 1890 for Rs. 2-9 per maund. The average price for the five years ending 1894 was Rs. 2-15. In 1899 this had risen to Rs. 3-1-5, in 1904 to Rs. 3-5-8, and the average price for the five years ending with 1899 was Rs. 4-11-7. It is interesting to note that on the 18th of April 1788 the Collector reported that rice sold at Burdwan at 25-28 pucca *seers* a rupee, at Mandalkote (*sic*) at 20-24 pucca *seers*, and at Sheogarh at 25 pucca *seers*. Similarly the price of gram and *arhar*, the cheapest of the pulses, rose from Rs. 2-1-6 and Rs. 2-0-9 per maund on the 30th of June 1890 to Rs. 3-6 and Rs. 4-12-6, respectively. The price of other articles has also risen in much the same proportion. The price of rice and other food stuffs reached its highest point in 1907-08, when the price of ordinary common rice rose to over Rs. 5. Prices remained almost stationary till the end of 1908-09. They have fallen considerably since, but it is improbable that they will ever again fall to the level at which they stood before the recent rise.

### MATERIAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE

Sir William Hunter in his statistical account gives a somewhat gloomy account of the material condition of the

people of Burdwan. But in 1874, when this account was written, the district had only recently experienced two famines, and was still suffering from the epidemic fever which in 1867-69 had almost entirely depopulated many of the smaller villages. The recovery from the effects of these disastrous years was surprisingly rapid. Fourteen years later the Collector reports that even the poorest cultivators and field labourers were much more prosperous than was generally supposed; they were able to procure and did procure a sufficiency of wholesome food for themselves, and their wives, children and dependents; and besides this they had a surplus to bestow in charity, to expend on festivals and celebrations and to enable them to meet at least the approaches of a time of scarcity.

“Twenty years ago as said, though probably thirty years were meant (and whatever the period, it was one within the memory of the people), the rate used to be for a reaper or ordinary field labourer his food and four *seers* of *dhan* each day. The rates are now his food and five *seers* of *dhan* per diem. The price of *dhan* has nearly doubled in the period. Moreover, in the height of the field season, from August to December, labour is at a premium and special rates have to be given. The disappearance of indebtedness, which was general in 1872, is a remarkable circumstance. The rural *mahajans*, to whom the poor cultivators and labourers were practically bound as serfs, have also disappeared. The present class of *mahajans* obly deal with the middle class on the security of landed property, which is nearly always rent-free. Most of the people whom I questioned owed nothing at all; others owed a rupee or two to a fellow labourer, or a rupee or two to their permanent employer. These employers still retain their field labourers by lending grain to them in the slack season without interest. These transactions are not regarded as loans, still less as *mahajani*. The only women and children whom I found employed on out-door labour for hire belonged to the poor relation and semi-dependant class widows and orphans. The poorest Bauri labourer did not let his wife work for any one but himself.”

Nor was this increase in prosperity Confined to these classes. "The average income of the ordinary village artisans, such as the carpenters, blacksmiths or potters is higher far than those of the labourers, and if sometimes they are not really so well-off, it is solely because their standard and status are higher. The labour of the coal mine coolies is always at a premium and though their circumstances and surroundings look squalid and wretched in the extreme, their bodies are invariably well nourished, and they get quite enough to eat and far more than enough to drink. The other special labourers engaged at molasses manufacture, at railway yards and grain stores, in driving carts, as boatmen, and in piece work of all kinds are all men of exceptional physique ; their average earnings are not less than Rs. 8 a month and for some months are much higher.

"The material surroundings of the poorer classes, their houses, cloths, utensils and ornaments often indicate a very different position from that in which an examination into their incomes shows them to be. The plainest case is that of the colliery coolies whose earnings are the highest of any ordinary labourers, and whose huts, clothes, and surroundings are sordid in the extreme. The state of these externals much depends on the race to which the people belong, and the social position which they hold and feel themselves bound to maintain. The Bauris and Santals care for brass ornaments only. Brass utensils are everywhere now in use, and the adoption of the umbrella even by coolies is as universal."<sup>1</sup>

#### GENERAL CONDITIONS

The improvement has gone on steadily in the past twenty years and is now noticeable in every class of the community. The peasant, the artizan, and the labourer are infinitely better off than their predecessors of two or three generations back. Evidence of this meets the eye on every side in the shape

1. Report on the condition of the lower classes of population in Bengal, Calcutta, 1888.

of better houses, richer food and dress, and a more liberal expenditure on ornaments, brass eating vessels and luxuries. The rise in the price of rice and other crops has made the cultivating classes practically independent of the money-lenders, and has put them in possession of an amount of ready money which they never possessed before. The discovery of coal and iron and the consequent development of industry has filled the Asansol subdivision with a throng of busy and prosperous artizans and miners, whose wages are high and whose labour is in constant demand. The standard of comfort is gradually rising, and the people are no longer content with the bare necessities of life. All classes are well fed and indulge in a display of clothing and jewellery which their fathers never dreamed of. Articles of food which were formerly considered luxuries are now in common use, and better houses, better appliances, and better clothing are becoming general. The following is a brief sketch of the material condition of the different classes of the community.

#### LANDLORDS

During the last century almost the whole of the vast estates of the Maharaja of Burdwan were parcelled out into tenures known as "*patni taluks*" the grantees of which not only gave him a high premium, but covenanted to pay an annual rental in perpetuity, which, in every case, largely exceeded the Government revenue. The system was recognized by law in 1819 and a power of sale precisely similar to that possessed by Government was given to the landlord. The system has developed on the same lines ; the *patnidars* and tenure holders under them have again and again sublet on the same terms, until estates are continually found with three or four or even more families introduced as middlemen between the landlord and the actual cultivator. The results of such a system of subinfeudation are obvious. The landlords and intermediate tenure-holders have become mere annuitants upon the land, taking but little interest in their nominal estates beyond ensuring the payment of their rent, and practically indifferent to their improvement, or the

condition of the cultivators from whom their income is drawn. Embankments, drainage channels, tanks for irrigation or water-supply and other works of public utility constructed by the generosity of former landlords, are allowed to fall into disrepair; it is no one's business to repair them. And the landlords have no incitement to undertake any fresh work of improvement as they can hope for no pecuniary benefit from it. Generally speaking the *patnidars* and *dar-patnidars* are as a body far wealthier than the landlords from whom they hold their leases. The district is also sprinkled with numerous *aimma* tenures, relics of the Muhammadan occupation, but the *aimmadars* are for the most part in needy circumstances.

#### PROFESSIONAL CLASSES

The professional classes are few in number and cannot with the exception of those in the legal profession be said to be prosperous. Even at the bar success is the exception, and although large fortunes have been made by pleaders and barristers, and the Burdwan bar is famous as one of the strongest in the province, the lawyer who is undistinguished by influence finds it hard enough to make a living. Properly qualified medical men are scarce and these in asansol, Raniganj and Burdwan do fairly well, but among the professional classes and those who work as clerks in Government or private employ, the struggle for existence has grown harder. Their incomes or salaries have not increased with the increase in prices, and they are prevented by custom and tradition from engaging in other labour.

#### TRADING CLASSES.

The commercial and industrial classes, who form but a very small proportion of the population, have shared largely in the general increase in prosperity. The rise of prices, the increased demand for imported articles and luxuries, and the development of communications have given a great stimulus to trade. Silk and cotton weaving has again become a profitable industry as the result of the Swadeshi movement,

and a brisk trade is now carried on, the goods being exported to Calcutta and even to Madras and Bombay. Brass and bellmetal ware and cutlery are manufactured on a fairly large scale and find a ready market. Sweetmeat makers are numerous and the district is famed for its sweetmeats of which the best known are the *khaja* and *ola*. Grocers and small shopkeeper are to be found in every village, and in Raniganj and Burdwan there are a large number of very wealthy Marwari merchants engaged in banking and money-lending, the sale of cloth, and the manufacture of oil and oil-cake, and flour.

#### CULTIVATORS.

The average cultivator in Burdwan is on the whole fairly prosperous. The increase in prosperity of late years is due partly to the introduction of more profitable crops such as jute and potatoes, but mainly to the steady rise in the price of rice which alone represents nearly four-fifths of the total agricultural produce of the district. The annual budget of the ordinary cultivator as estimated in 1892 was as follows<sup>1</sup> :

"The average area held is five acres, and the total annual value of the produce Rs. 252.8. The females husk rice for their wealthier neighbours, thus earning Rs. 12 per annum. They never work in the fields, but assist in such operations as threshing and winnowing if carried on in the dwelling-house yard. The total income of a cultivator of this class will therefore be Rs. 264.8. His outgoings are food, including fuel, pulse, oil, and salt, Rs. 120. The ordinary scale of diet is 2 lbs. of rice per adult male, 1½ lb. per female, and 1 lb. per child. This is boiled and eaten with two ounces of boiled pulse and condiments, in two meals taken at midday and sunset. Breakfast consists of a little parched rice only. Clothing Rs. 15. This, in the case of males, consists of a *Dhuti* or waist-cloth, generally of European make, a *gamcha* or scarf, which also serves as turban, costing 12 annas and

1. (Memorandum on the Material Condition of the Lower Orders in Bengal, by F.H.B. Skrine, 1892).

4 annas respectively ; so much is obligatory in all classes. But a cultivator of the upper rank will also indulge in a *piran* or shirt costing Re.1-6, and a Manchester *chadar* (sheet) worn toga-wise, eight annas, a pair of leather shoes worth Re. 1-2, and an English umbrella Re. 1-4. The total equipment on the former scale stands a ryot in only Re. 1, and he need have but two 'suits' a year. The latter, which is also the garb of the lower middle class, will cost less than Rs. 4 annually. A female of this class, wears a long strip of Manchester or mill-made cloth, named a *sari*, wrapped round her person from head to foot. Its price is Re. 1 to Re. 1-8. Rent of land Rs. 17-8. Rents are very high in this district, a fact due in some measure to the extensive sub-infeudation that prevails. Land which in the northern districts would not be charged more than 3-12 per acre here fetches Rs. 4-8. Wages of labourers employed in emergent seasons such as reaping time, Rs. 5. The present rates are 10 lbs. of paddy, equivalent to rather more than 6 lbs. of cleaned rice, and worth four annas per diem, *plus* food. Repairs of implements, purchase of bullocks (four are kept, price Rs. 10 each), social and religious ceremonies, Rs. 25. Total outgoings, Rs. 182-8. A ryot of this class should therefore have a surplus of Rs. 82 at the year's end, but unfavourable seasons, litigation, and extravagant expenditure on ceremonies leave him very little. At the same time it must be observed that the cultivators of this division are not serfs of the money-lenders, as too many are in the central districts. Money-lenders, exist, but their clients are people of a higher stratum, the large middle-class with interests on land to dispose of. The disappearance of the money-lender was noticed by Sir W. Hunter in his monumental Gazetteer published 20 years ago : and it is still more complete at the present day."

Since that estimate was made the price of rice, the main source of income, has nearly doubled, while the expenditure has not increased to anything like the same extent, and there is little doubt that the cultivators are now much better off than they were thirty years ago.

#### ARTIZANS

The artizans may be divided into the ordinary artizans, such as carpenters, blacksmiths and potters who are necessary for every community, and the artizans engaged in special industries, such as the weavers and braziers, or workers at other hardware in the district. The ordinary village artizans were formerly paid in kind, but this system is dying out and money wages are becoming the rule. These have risen, but it is doubtful whether they have risen proportionately to the increase in prices, and although the average income of this class is considerably higher than that of the ordinary labourer their standard and status are also higher, and they are frequently not so well off. As to the special handicraftsmen it is difficult to obtain definite information. When their trade is brisk they flourish, when it is slack they suffer, and suffer the more because they cling to it notwithstanding its decay, and refuse to seek the more remunerative occupations open to them. At present the Swadeshi movement has led to a considerable increase in the demand for country-made cloth and other articles, and the silk and cotton weaving which was formerly such an important industry is reviving. The skilled artizans employed in the mines and factories receive much higher wages.

#### LABOURERS

In this district it is impossible to draw a sharp distinction between the poorer cultivators and the agricultural labourers. There are very few cultivators holding less than 4 acres who do not supplement their income by working as labourers, and there are scarcely any agricultural labourers who do not hold some land from a garden patch of ten *kathas* to a share in rice fields. Even the non-agricultural labourers very often hold patches of cultivation. Agricultural labourers are usually paid in grain, and the increase in the price of food-stuffs has practically doubled the money value of their wage. The increase, however, is more apparent than real as the labourer requires much of the grain which he receives for his own consumption. It is doubtful therefore



whether this class has increased much in material prosperity of recent years, though their circumstances are often much better off than might be supposed. In the factories and mines most of the bands earn much higher wages than they could get at home. At Raniganj the labourers are mostly Bauris who will not as a rule work more than half the month. Though they could easily cut two tubs a day, they are usually content with cutting one, and they take frequent holidays. In Barakar Santals form the majority of the miners. The rate of payment has risen of recent years and in 1906 varied between 5 annas and 6 pies and 7 annas a tub as compared with 3 annas in 1891 and 4 annas in 1895. The miners are usually a strong and merry lot, and for their status in life, very prosperous.

#### BEGGARS

The condition of no class, varies so much as that of the mendicants. The professional beggars and religious mendicants such as *fakirs*, *vaishnavas*, and *sanyasis* are often very well off. But there are a large number of homeless beggars, nearly all cripples or diseased persons, who derive a bare subsistence from charity and who have suffered very greatly from the recent rise in prices.