

## CHAPTER X.

## RENTS, WAGES AND PRICES.

CASH rents are paid for practically all the land under cultivation Esars in Hooghly, but rents in kind are paid for lessees of gardens and fishery rights, and also occasionally for lands newly brought under cultivation and for *char* lands. The system called *bādy* or *sanjā*, by which tenants pay a portion of the produce of their rice lands as rent, is almost unknown. Tenants wishing to sublet their lands frequently demand produce rents, but the undertenants rarely accept lessees on such terms. The general level of cash rents is high owing to the keen competition for land and the value of the land itself, the cultivators getting good prices for their produce and thus being able to hold out for a high rent for their unoccupied lands. Detailed statistics of rent rates are not available, as there has been no general settlement since the Permanent Settlement of 1793. The following figures, which are abstracted from Collectors' reports, though not applicable to the whole district, may, however, be quoted for the purposes of comparison.

YEAR.	SRI Class.			SARJ Class.			Sagar- char.
	I	II	III	I	II	III	
	Rs. A.	Rs. A.	Rs. A.	Rs. A.	Rs. A.	Rs. A.	Rs.
1798 ...	8 0	2 4	1 6	8 0	2 4	1 8	..
1837 ...	2 0	1 12	1 4	8 0	2 8	2 0	2 to 4
1850 ...	2 4	2 0	1 8	7 8	2 12	2 8	..
1870 ...	7 8	6 0	4 8	12 0	6 0	4 8	..
1870 ...	12 0	9 0	6 0	18 0	9 0	6 12	12 to 24
			(Inferior.)			(Mulberry and tobacco)	
1901 ...	10 8	6 4 to 8 12		Rs. 12 to	Rs. 30.		12 to 24
	to 18 0						

From the above table it will be apparent that there was no appreciable rise in rents for nearly half a century after the Permanent Settlement. The country was subject to floods; the means of communication had not been improved, and there was no great demand for more land on the part of cultivators. After 1837 came a period of prosperity. Roads and railways were opened; the land was protected against floods by continuous lines of embankments; a keen demand for land grew up; and, with the increase in the price of food-grains, the rates of rent began to rise. By the middle of the 19th century the rents of rice lands had been quadrupled, and the rents of lands bearing special crops had increased four to six times. A sudden check to agricultural progress was, however, caused by the virulent epidemics of Burdwan fever. Hundreds of villages were decimated or left with weak and emaciated cultivators. Local labour became scarce; and in the affected villages hundreds of acres of cultivable lands lay untilled. A better knowledge of the rent laws among the ryots also helped to prevent undue enhancements of rents, and the combined result was to hinder a rise in rentals. The people have now recovered from the effects of the Burdwan fever, and within the last 25 years the rise in the price of food-grains and of jute, and greater facilities for disposing of agricultural produce, have led to an increase of rent rates. The increase has been most noticeable in the case of jute lands owing to the growing demand for this fibre, and, to a smaller extent, in the case of other lands bearing special crops, such as potatoes, vegetables and tobacco. There has been no great increase in the rental of rice lands, and the rental of some inferior lands has even decreased.

WAGES.  
Towns.

In the tract on the right bank of the Hooghly, from Bally to Tribeni, urban conditions prevail; and behind it lies a semi-urban area 3 to 8 miles in width. In these portions of the district the rates of wages differ from those common in the more rural thanas, the wages of men-servants being Rs. 3 to Rs. 5 a month, of maid-servants Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 and of cooks Rs. 6 to Rs. 7, besides food and clothing. Barbers usually charge one to two pice for shaving and two to four pice for hair-cutting; while a washerman's charge is Rs. 3 to Rs. 3-8 per hundred articles. The monthly wages of a syce or cooly average Rs. 7, of a common mason or carpenter Rs. 15, and of a common blacksmith Rs. 15 to Rs. 20.

Mofussil.

In the mofussil wages are naturally a little lower. Among agricultural labourers, *Krisdams*, or permanent servants, get Rs. 1-8 to Rs. 2-8 monthly, besides food and clothing; while

*majors* or labourers employed temporarily during the weeding and reaping seasons get 4 to 5 annas a day, besides a light meal at midday. The wages of carpenters or blacksmiths are 20 to 25 per cent. less than in the towns. Thatchers get 5 to 6 annas per diem in addition to their midday meal; barbers charge a pice per head; washermen are few in number, the women generally washing the clothes of the family. Aboriginal field-labourers get less than local labourers, being paid a half to three-fourths of the usual rate. The payment of wages in kind, *e.g.*, grain or vegetables, is disappearing and now survives only in out-of-the-way villages and in the Arambagh subdivision. In rural tracts, however, watchmen are often paid in bundles of paddy for watching the crops.

The figures in the following table, which shows the daily wages entered in the accounts of an estate at Tarakeswar, are of interest as showing the rise which took place between 1845 and 1872.

YEAR.	Thatchers.	Carpenters and blacksmiths.	<i>Krisdams</i> or field-labourers (exclusive of food and clothing).	Reapers and other day-labourers	
				As. P.	As. P.
1845	2 0	3 0	0 6	1 3	
1854	2 6	3 6	0 7½	1 6	
1859	3 0	4 0	0 10½	1 10½	
1864	3 3	4 6	1 0	2 0	
1869	5 3	6 3	1 4	2 0	
1872	6 6	6 6	1 4	2 6	

The slack season for labour extends from April to the middle of June, when, the *raji* crops being off the fields, very little labour is required except for ploughing or looking after sugarcane and *tera* paddy. In the towns too there is less demand for labour in mills, factories and other industrial concerns. During the rains sowing and weeding require a large labour force, but the real working season begins, towards their close, with the cutting and threshing of jute and the reaping of *des* paddy. Work of all kinds is in full swing in the winter months (October-March). In the towns there is a constant demand for labour at this time, not only in the mills and factories, but also for brick-making, while in the rural tracts the reaping of the winter rice and *raji* crops, as well as work in gardens and orchards, provides employment for the surplus labour available.

Supply of labour.

Generally speaking, the indigenous day-labourers work in the fields, while the operatives in mills are mostly Oriyas or men from up-country. There is very little emigration, but immigrants are numerous, forming, indeed, a larger proportion of the population than in any regulation district of Bengal outside Howrah and the 24-Parganas. Maid-servants come from Bānkurā, cooks from Bānkurā, Midnapore and Orissa, servants from Bānkurā, Orissa and up-country, coolies from up-country and Orissa, agricultural and earth-work labourers from up-country, Chotā Nagpur and the Santāl Parganas. There is a general complaint of the insufficiency of the supply of labour. During the winter months, the labour question often becomes acute, and instances have been known of crops rotting on the fields and looms stopping for want of workers. The difficulties caused by the deficiency of labour are further aggravated by epidemics of malarial fever that break out from November to February, reducing the number of workers and diminishing the working capacity of those who survive. This scarcity of labour is no new feature in the economic history of the district. Even in the early part of the 19th century labour could not be had for work on roads and embankments, except at exorbitant rates. The superintendents of these works were loud in their complaints on this score, and were somewhat indignant with the district authorities for not forcing people to work for them at their own rates.

Prices.  
Food-  
Grains.

The main crop is *aman* or winter paddy, which is reaped and threshed from December to the middle of February; consequently, rice is cheapest in February. Then its price rises, slowly or rapidly according to the culture of the harvest, the state of the market, etc., until the maximum is reached in the rainy months of July and August. With the harvesting of *aman* paddy, the price of rice falls, to rise again before the reaping of the *aman* crop, the rise being brisk if the *aman* harvest is expected to be bad, and slow if a good crop is expected. From November prices decline until the minimum is reached in February. Pulses, the chief *rahi* crops, are harvested between January and March, and are consequently cheapest in February and March. Of these, *Khesari* (*Lathyrus sativus*) is the cheapest, but is little used except by the poorest classes. The pulse commonly consumed in this district, and, in fact, throughout the whole of the Burdwan Division, is *kaldi* (*Phaseolus Roxburghii*), which being harvested in January, is cheapest in February. Wheat is grown on a small scale and is mostly imported. Its price, therefore, depends on the rates prevailing elsewhere; as a rule, it sells at a cheap rate in March and April.

The vegetables commonly consumed are potatoes, brinjals, *Miscellanea* plantains (unripe), and *potato*. Potatoes are gathered in February-March, and prices are lowest in March. Brinjals are cheap throughout the winter months, and *Kach-kach* (unripe plantains) appear in the rainy season; *potals* (*Trichosanthes dioica*) appear in the market in March, becoming cheaper and cheaper till June. Among fruits, mangoes are most popular owing to their quantity and wide distribution, and are eaten by all classes, both rich and poor. The season extends from the middle of April to the middle of June, the cheapest month being May. Of other articles, molasses and mustard oil are cheapest from February to April, though the price of the former is materially affected by imports from Java. The price of salt is generally uniform throughout the year; and so is that of *ghee* or clarified butter, but its price is often enhanced during marriage seasons, especially in the summer. The table below will give a sufficient indication of the rise in the prices of food-grains and salt (the prices being shown in *seers* per rupee) during the period for which figures are available. Changes in prices.

Average of years.	Rice (Common).	Wheat.	Gram.	Salt.
	Se.	Se.	Se.	Se.
1793-1812 (21 years)	40-00	50-50	50-50	...
1861-1865 (5 years)	21-00	21-4	22-71	10-60
1866-1870 (ditto)	20-84	21-85	17-14	9-82
1871-1875 (ditto)	16-94	14-64	18-74	8-73
1876-1880 (ditto)	14-40	13-89	15-48	9-00
1881-1885 (ditto)	16-59	15-57	18-37	12-43
1886-1890 (ditto)	14-86	13-95	17-16	10-75
1891-1895 (ditto)	11-86	12-93	15-08	10-59
1896-1900 (ditto)	10-25	10-27	12-63	9-97
1901-1905 (ditto)	9-25	10-54	12-84	12-16
1906-1907 (2 years)	7-40	6-50	9-45	10-17

These figures show that during the last half century, prices have been enhanced threefold. If further proof be needed of the change which has taken place, it will be sufficient to mention that after the famine of 1866, in which the average price of rice for the year rose to 12-86 *seers* per rupee, the Collector reported that if the price of ordinary rice were to rise as high as 12 *seers* per rupee soon after the winter harvest, it should be considered as a warning of approaching famine; and in his opinion, Government relief operations would become necessary when the price of inferior rice rose beyond 12 *seers* a rupee. During 1906 and 1907, however, the average price of common rice was less than 7½ *seers* per rupee, without any relief measures being deemed necessary.

There has been a similar rise in the price of other articles such as *gohi*, oil, fish, meat (goats), vegetables, and fruits, also cloths, kerosene oil, wood, bamboos, straw, brick and lime. There has been, however, a fall in the prices of salt, sugar and tea. The cheapening of salt is mainly due to changes in the duty levied by Government. In 1882 the rate of duty was reduced from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 2, was raised again to Rs. 2-8 in 1888, but was again brought down to Rs. 2 in 1903. Since then the tax was reduced to Rs. 1-8 in 1905 and to Rs. 1 in 1907, which lowered the retail prices still further. The fall in the price of sugar is largely due to importation of foreign sugar and of Java molasses, and the cheapening of tea is attributed to over-production.

**MATERIAL**  
**CONDI-**  
**TION.** The rural portion of the district has long been famous for its fertility. Towards the close of the 18th century the Burdwan zamindari within which it was then included, was described by Mr. (Sarishtadar) J. Grant as "the rich zamindari," "the enlarged, compact and fertile zamindari," "a garden in a desert, deemed wonderfully productive in the beginning of the present century," etc. These remarks were echoed by Mr. W. Hamilton, according to whom it had "thriven so prosperously, that in proportion to its dimensions, it may be reckoned the most productive territory in India."\* After the lapse of a century, in spite of the ravages of fever and the damage caused by floods, the district continues to be one of the most prosperous in Bengal. The cultivators, who are mainly Kaibaritas, Sadgops and Sheikhs, rank among the best cultivators in Bengal, being hard-working, thrifty and fairly intelligent. Utilizing every bit of available land, sowing a wide diversity of crops, selling their produce with a shrewd knowledge of the current rates, they make the best of their resources. They further add to their income by working in the mills during the slack months, by catching fish, by raising fruit trees, vegetables and herbs on homestead lands, and so forth. Their women, too, assist by husking paddy and cleaning rice, by helping in fishing, etc.

The reports of the local officers confirm this impression of material well-being. As far back as 1848 the Magistrate remarked that during a tour in the district he had not met with a single patch of uncultivated land, and added that the number of brick buildings in every village, the comfortable appearance of the dwellings, and the many articles of foreign manufacture which the inhabitants possessed, were sufficient evidence of their

\* Description of Hindoostan, 1820.

being a prosperous and industrious race. Forty years later, (in 1888), after a special enquiry regarding the condition of the lower classes, the then Collector, Mr. Toynebe, remarked:—"The general result of the enquiries made is to show conclusively that in this district all classes of the peasantry eat twice a day and enjoy a full meal on each occasion. Here and there a poor widow or beggar may be found who does not always get two meals a day, but as a rule even they, the poorest of the poor, do so. No single instance of emaciation or disease due to want of food came to light during any of the enquiries. As regards clothing, the wants of the poorer classes are very limited and are sufficiently provided for. In the cold weather, no doubt, a little extra and warmer clothing would be acceptable, specially to their children, but as soon as the sun is up, they bask in its rays and are content. Few, if any, of the agricultural classes have any idea of thrift or of saving money for a rainy day, and they are most of them in debt to their *wakifan*; but this impecuniosity and indebtedness are due not to their poverty, but to their extravagance and imprudence. They spend far more on social and religious ceremonies than they can afford, and think little of a life-long debt so long as they can secure the gratification of the moment. Labour is abundant and wages are high, and if any man, woman or child does not get all material wants fully satisfied, it is their own fault.

"Perhaps the poorest class in the district is the weaver class, whose trade has suffered so severely from the competition of Manchester goods. Mr. Duke, the Subdivisional Officer of Serampore, says of them that they "eat twice a day pretty regularly, but in some cases with considerable difficulty." The chief effect on them seems to be that they have to eat a coarser kind of rice than they used to eat and that they are more hopelessly indebted to their *wakifans* than before, in fact, they are "little more than half as well off as they used to be." Many of them find work in the European jute mills in the Serampore subdivision, and there earn high wages, but the majority are too fond of their homes to leave them and seek employment elsewhere; they struggle on and exist, and are therewith content. The enquiries made in the jail by the Civil Surgeon support the general result of the local mofussil enquiries, the conclusion arrived at being that the physical condition of the artisan group was the worst, while the general health of cultivators and labourers appeared about equal.

"The condition of the poorer classes in this district, compared with that of the same classes in England, may unhesitatingly



be described as superior in every respect. There is no such thing as want or starvation among them and not one individual who does not know when he rises in the morning how or where he will procure food for the day. Their wants are few and easily satisfied; the climate in which they live and all their surroundings are enervating and to our view demoralizing; ambition they have none, beyond the immediate wants or wishes of the day; but, judged from their own point of view and by their own standard, they are prosperous and contented, and I doubt not that there are thousands upon thousands of the English poor who would gladly change places with them. I have not considered it necessary to give any figures in support of a conclusion which is so potent to every observer, and which has year by year impressed itself more and more on my mind since I came to the district nearly five years ago."

During a special enquiry about the prevalence of liquor-drinking in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah in 1888, Mr. Westmacott came to nearly the same conclusion. The twenty years which have since elapsed have produced little change, the Board of Revenue remarking in their Administration Report for 1907-08, that "in the districts of Hooghly, Howrah and other portions of Burdwan, the high wages earned in mills and factories, as well as the fertility of the soil and greater facilities for communication, enable the people to maintain a high standard of comfort." In one respect there has been an improvement. The recent movement in favour of country-made goods has given a stimulus to the weaving industry, so that the condition of the hitherto depressed class of weavers has improved.

Indebted-  
ness.

It appears too that the indebtedness of the peasantry is not so great as elsewhere. Statistics of the mortgages or loans of cultivators are not available; but in addition to cultivation, they find so many avenues of employment, and are mostly so thrifty, that the percentage of indebted ryots is believed to be lower than in other districts of Bengal outside Howrah. Among the Kshatriyas and Sadgops loans and mortgages among fellow caste-men are common, but by this arrangement the payment of exorbitant interest is avoided, and reasonable time is allowed for the repayment of interest and capital. In other cases loans are taken from petty shopkeepers, but most tenants, thanks to the good prices they obtain for their produce and the transferability of their rights in land, get good credit from them. Landlords, too, generally avoid litigation with their tenants on account of the provisions of the Bengal Tenancy Act, VIII of 1885, which are well known to the principal

cultivators. Indeed, the landlords, who come from the middle classes and are more or less merely rent-receivers, borrow more and are comparatively more indebted than the *jeth-raiyats*.

There is, however, a reverse side to this bright picture. As Colonel Crawford has remarked:—"If the district, as a whole, is rich and prosperous, it is a prosperity which is purchased with human lives. The inhabitants are essentially, like the conies, a feeble folk. The fat and fertile soil, which grows great crops of rice in abundance, is not the kind of country which breeds a race of strong men. . . . Fever is almost universal. The fertile rice lands grow not rice alone, but breed malaria with equal success. . . . The death-rate is considerably higher than the birth-rate, and if it were not for the constant stream of immigration of a more sturdy population from more healthy tracts elsewhere, the inhabitants would, in course of time, gradually die out."