PREFACE

As the industrial revolution grew to maturity, Britain's dominance in the West and in the world at large was, by the mid-nineteenth century, an acknowledged fact amply reflected in its factories, its ports, and the increasing number of its colonial possessions abroad. Amongst these, India stood pre-eminent by reason of its vastness, the density of its population, and the seemingly immeasurable extent of its natural wealth. The history of British interests in India had up to this time epitomised an era of commercial aggrandizement—but with one significant difference at least which marked it off from contemporary colonial pursuits of other European powers. The dignity of monopoly by the greatest trading concern of the time, the East India Company, had seen to it that the foundations of formal government by law, according to the dictates of civilized rule, had been securely laid. By the 1850s, however, the Company's narrowness and inefficiency had become an increasingly irksome frustration to the furtherance of the political and economic interests of its supervisor-partner, the Crown, and an obstacle in the way of the expansionist zeal of a wide range of newly formed joint-stock companies with an eye to East India prospects. Events in the last years of that decade followed rapidly in a logical succession: the annexation of Oudh, the "Mutiny" uprising, its suppression by the British Indian army, and the formal substitution of Crown for Company rule as a guarantee henceforth of peace, security, and constructive administration. The experience of the preceding century and, in particular, of the last fifty years was in no way to be jettisoned. It was instead to be consolidated on a grander scale, the range of its achievements widened and the pace of administrative activity intensified by an unprecedented application of "Saxon energy and British capital." In their awareness meanwhile of great temporal power and from a conviction of the rightness of Britain's self-appointed role to create a model amongst empires, spokesmen for Crown Government stressed the responsibility inherent
in the task of enlarging upon its inheritance: not to supplant the existing social order, but to shepherd it firmly towards modernity.

Enterprise under the Crown was, as it had been under the Company, a strictly practical concern. The dominant aim was nowhere to make a desert blossom, but to stimulate the lagging productivity of traditional agriculture into realizing a greater and greater share of its potential wealth, within the shortest space of time and in areas where the investment necessary to achieve this aim might be assured of a generous as well as rapid return. Society, it was assumed with confidence, must inevitably share in the benefits which modernization necessarily implied. The North-Western Provinces and Oudh were drawn by their very geography into the forefront of the grand design. Canals were dug to divert water from the Ganges and Jumna into an irrigation network to expand the productive capacity of the great Doab plains. Railways and roads linked the Ganges valley with the agricultural hinterland, and ensured a passage from Bengal through the Doab to Delhi and Punjab. At the same time, the machinery of Government itself was subject to constant review. The Company's fiscal system, upon which Government and the law which it formulated very largely depended, was revised in accordance with modern standards not merely of equity but also of scientific assessment of the productivity of the land. The radical revision of revenue settlements (fixed, in the Provinces, for a duration of thirty years under Company regulations) which was implemented, district by district, from the mid-1850s brought Government into direct and constant contact with society, the rights and interests of which were redefined, equitably, in terms of quantifiable territorial assets in land. This task was greatly complicated, not merely by the uncooperative nature of the greater part of the available vernacular records and the minute and conflicting complexity of claims but also by the abrupt dislocation which the upper ranks of society—especially in Oudh and the eastern districts of the North-Western Provinces—had undergone following annexation and the "Mutiny" uprising. Their indigenous political figurehead had been removed, the outward expression of their incoherence had been summarily suppressed, and the opportunities for court and military service which the Nawabi and the East India Company militia had regularly offered had suddenly disappeared. Within society, meanwhile, the modernized property laws of landlord and tenant raised new obstructions in the way of the upper classes' exertion of local authority and aided in diverting the force of new economic
pressures to which zamindaris and talukdaris alike were subject on to
the lesser elements of society beyond the confines of the law. In the
circumstances, Government was powerless to provide significant relief,
that is, alternative avenues of employment. The constriction of rural
society from top to bottom became in consequence increasingly
evident—above all, in the form of a near universal rural indebtedness.
The law, which aimed theoretically at the release of proprietary title
at least from the encumbrance of debt and its conversion into the
desired instrument for secure economic advancement, was hindered
by the lawmakers', Government’s, need also to observe the cautions
dictated by political expediency. Out and out alienation, as a result
of the logical working of the debt laws, of the property of large sections
(probably the majority) of the zamindari and talukdari classes would
have created a social change so revolutionary as to be inconceivable,
given the demands of Government’s situation. Compromise saw to
it that a system of legal reliefs grew up alongside the debt and alienation
laws to rescue the indebted proprietor from perdition.

Meanwhile, the development of communications and, from the
mid-1870s, the rapid expansion of the export trade in food grains
strained further the economic circumstances of agrarian society, whilst
untoward physical changes manifested themselves over vast areas of
the low-lying tracts of the Doab and the eastern uplands, where
deforestation, the obstruction of natural drainage by public works
embankments, together with lateral seepage and flush irrigation from
canals exacerbated natural geological tendencies towards the accu-
mulation of toxic quantities of alkali salts in the upper layers of the soil.
A depressed peasantry laboured in a distorted environment. Govern-
ment, bound to the inexorable pattern of precedent and hampered
continually by the constraints of an increasingly inadequate budget,
could do little more than concentrate its available resources on areas
(especialy to the north-west) which by reason of their superior
resources managed to weather most storms and, for the rest, to observe.
Official records compiled with dedication and an astonishing attention
to detail by generations of overworked European officers presiding
over a host of underpaid “native” subordinates constitute collectively
a chronicle of what, from month to month and year to year, the great
imperial drive for modernization in the late nineteenth century meant
in terms of routine administration for the agrarian society and its
environment, over which it was so vigorously superimposed. It is this
history of transformation allied with preservation which has given
modern agrarian conditions in northern India their peculiar stamp. From this period, the modern institutional framework—from public works to the fiscal system, the property law, and the machinery of justice and local government—derives its immediate origin. It is in order to clarify the circumstances of that origin and hence the nature of modern agrarian problems in embryo that this book has been written.

In their combination of a rare diversity of natural conditions on the one hand with a recent history of induced ecological distortion on the other, the North-Western Provinces and Oudh stand as a laboratory which is perhaps unique in Asia, and the world. Conditions there have been observed and recorded, frequently with meticulous technical accuracy, for over one hundred years. This ecological history is accompanied by a similarly comprehensive documentation of parallel institutional developments. The elements of innovation, from the railways, roads, and canals to the enactment of statutes, are readily distinguishable from the environment into which they were introduced by their definably foreign origin—an origin known in detail from an abundant contemporary literature on the engineering techniques and the political and legal institutions of nineteenth-century Britain. The initial point of contact may be established with chronological precision. The story has also its economic counterpart, in the grafting of new, and datable, economic institutions and incentives onto an intricate pattern of old, local relationships, once flexible but, by the mid-nineteenth century, increasingly subject to constriction.

This book can do little more than explore the periphery of such a wealth of data and provide thus an introduction to further use of the technical records of Government. In order to achieve this with clarity, references both to policy and theory which provided the rationalization for much of Government’s activity have been cut to a minimum. Relevant monographs are cited only where it seemed necessary to draw attention to a major theoretical issue. The emphasis throughout has been placed on action, and on the routine. Here a caveat must be added. The excellence of regular nineteenth-century technical observation, particularly in the natural and mechanical sciences and in law, is not matched by the official statistical collections. Statistical methods developed by mathematicians in Britain were seldom put into routine administrative use. More often than not, quantification of Government’s business was recorded in the monthly and annual statements compiled in the districts in obedience to directives sent
down from the upper reaches of the Secretariat. The directives themselves paid scant regard to the complexity of local issues—alienations of landed property, for example, where not one but three systems of formal law (revenue, civil, and personal), each with their own internal inconsistencies, conflicted in turn with one another whilst extra-legal complications went unheeded by the processes of registration. Government's need for information backed by at least an estimate of magnitude was such, moreover, as to compel a disregard for the difficulties which stood in the way of its collection. As a result, the completed statements—running into hundreds of appendix pages in the annual reports of the provincial revenue administrations—were traceable for the most part to the “village accountant and record-keeper,” the patwari, and reflected only too often his slender regard for truth, as Government understood it to be. In the course of this book, therefore, figures are given where their source can be analysed—and where the margin of error appears least sensational. Elsewhere, explanations for the lack of precise quantification are offered.

In constructing this account of day-to-day empire from the wide variety of documentation, it has been a guiding principle that comments, where they are offered, should be those of the contemporary observers themselves: *dor dor ve’dorashav*—“every generation has its interpreters.” This has been done out of respect both for their positive contribution to scientific knowledge and for the refreshing candour of their criticism.

The research for this book was carried out in London from October 1965 to January 1968, financed by scholarships from the School of Oriental and African Studies and from the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. The examination of technicalities of irrigation and drainage was made possible by a grant for microfilm and photocopying from the University’s Central Research Fund. That the book was completed within the scheduled time is due largely to the generosity of Miss H. J. Stocks.

The India Office Library and Records provided the greater part of the research material. My thanks are due to the Librarian and his staff for much assistance. Invidious though it may seem to single out the few for special mention where many have contributed, my appreciation to Mr. Charles Flasket (now deceased) for locating many obscure items should not go unrecorded, nor to Mrs. V. C. Weston...
who proved both skilful and indefatigable in the pursuit of technicalia, from agricultural implements to the niceties of property law. Mrs. P. Sanders completed the task of reducing the manuscript to professional order admirably and without complaint. I must also thank the editorial staff of the University of California Press for their understanding and, above all, the patience with which they have brought about many improvements on the original presentation.

This book has benefited greatly at various points during its compilation from discussions with specialists. Dr. K. N. Chaudhuri, my supervisor, and Professor W. H. Morris-Jones drew attention on a number of occasions to the need for clarifying details of the argument. Professor R. P. Dore gave a salutary warning of the dangers of lapsing into an unnecessarily Weberian syntax; the obscurities which remain in spite of this testify to a regrettably immutable obstinacy. Meetings at the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, at the School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex, and at the South-Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, proved a great source of stimulus, especially in developing some of the implications inherent in draft chapters on law and government. On economic and political details, discussion with Dr. P. D. Reeves, Professor B. D. Graham, and Mr. P. K. Choudhuri, of the University of Sussex, helped materially. Dr. C. L. Mehrotra, Agricultural Chemist to Government, Uttar Pradesh, and Dr. J. S. Kanwar, Deputy Director-General, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, were kind enough to read through the second chapter. Dr. Dieter Conrad, University of Heidelberg, scrutinized Chapter Five for my benefit. On more general questions of presentation, many friends proved willing and helpful critics. Mr. Yigal Wagner pointed out ambiguities and inadequacies in the original draft; for the defects still present, he is in no way accountable. Mr. Myles Burnyeat and Dr. Nancy Gayer emphasized inter alia the need for introductory passages which would summarize the argument.

To Amiya and Jasodhara Bagchi this book owes much, in terms of information, criticism, and an unfailing encouragement first to complete it and then to develop its implications. Daniel and Alice Thorner sifted innumerable outlines and drafts with all warmth and enthusiasm, and enabled some coherence and clarity to emerge step by step from much that was piecemeal and obscure; my debt to their joint interest and their generosity is inevitably beyond expression. It is to Alice, moreover, that I owe the suggestion to confine the
study to the United Provinces, which have proved so fruitful an area for exploration. This book has raised many questions, analysed in a few brief passages each. If others will take these up and develop them, something of my debt for this initial suggestion would be repaid in the manner it so well deserves.

The argument on which the book is based grew in the course of discussions with Dr. Solomon Trone. To him I owe the lessons of a lifetime of more than ninety years—the distilled experience of a training in German science at the turn of the century and thereafter of events, encounters, and above all practical action in Russia, America, Europe, and the East. This analysis of agrarian problems of modern India from the standpoint of their immediate past reiterates his most fundamental lesson, which is also India’s, that lasting solutions for such problems must be sought in the combination of rigorous technical dissection with a proportionate awareness of the intricacies, and the demands, of social relationships. To his memory and to his wife, whose hospitality and understanding enriched all our discussions, this book is dedicated in gratitude for an incomparable companionship.

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