

CHAPTER VIII

RENTS, WAGES AND PRICES

RENTS

The district being unsettled, the rents payable by the raiyats to the zamindar or to the intermediate landlord, the mustajar, are determined simply by custom and not by any exact principles, and the custom varies widely in different parts of the district. The Madras Estates Land Act prohibits the enhancement of rent except at intervals of twenty years on good cause shown by the landlord in a suit before the Revenue Court and also empowers the Court to fix a fair rent in certain cases where disputes have arisen. But so little use has been made of the Act that it may be said that there are no authoritative findings of the Courts as to what is a fair rent or on what basis the rent ought to be assessed in any part of the district. Nor is any exact information available regarding the varieties of customary methods of assessing rents.

The general rule is that in areas where rice is largely cultivated the rent is calculated on the seed capacity of the land. In the Nowrangpur, Jeypore and Malkanagiri taluks it is paid in grain and in the Rayaghada subdivision in cash. An experimental survey of some twenty villages in the Boipariguda thana was conducted by the Settlement Department in the season 1939-40, and it was there found that the average rental per acre worked out to between 12 and 14 annas. This is however a comparatively backward area, and rents in other parts of the district, particularly in the Rayaghada subdivision, are frequently much higher than this.

In areas where dry crops are chiefly grown, namely the 3,000-foot plateau and some backward parts of Malkanagiri taluk and the Rayaghada subdivision, the rent is fixed on the 'plough' and the 'hoe'. The raiyat pays rent on the number of ploughs and hoes which he uses for cultivation, irrespective of the amount of land he actually tills. In these parts the land is not regularly cultivated but left to lie fallow for considerable periods, shifting cultivation being practised, and it is not possible to identify the holding of a raiyat with any accuracy. The rate of rent levied varies from Rs. 2 to Rs. 6 a plough and from annas 4 to annas 8 a hoe, according to the quality of the soil and the accessibility of the village.

Land is nearly always either cultivated by the tenant himself or let out to others on the sharing system. The practice of subletting land, which is so common in more highly-developed areas, is rare in Koraput, and so it cannot be said that such a thing as an economic rate of rent exists. The market price of good wet land in the most fertile areas does not rise above Rs. 200 an acre.

Agricultural labour is usually carried out by *gothis* and *kambaris* engaged on a system described in a later paragraph of this chapter and it is the exception rather than the rule to hire labourers by the day for this kind of work. When day labourers are employed they are usually paid in grain at the rate of $1\frac{1}{2}$ *kunchams* of paddy in the smaller so-called *gothi* measure, which is equivalent to 3 *addas* or three-quarters of a *kuncham* in the larger measure. The cash wage is 2 annas a day. In both cases the day is one of six hours, from 8 A.M. to 2 P.M. Males are generally employed on ploughing, sowing and threshing, and females on the other agricultural operations, the rate of wage for both sexes being the same. In unskilled non-agricultural work, such as earthwork and work on roads and buildings, the daily wage for a male labourer varies between 3 and 4 annas and for a female between 2 and 3 annas. The same applies to labour in factories. The practice of paying annual remuneration to village artisans is not common in the district. In general each villager is his own carpenter, barber and washerman. Blacksmiths are paid an annual remuneration in grain for each plough used by a raiyat. The amount varies between 10 *kunchams* and a *putti* in the small measure, or from 5 to 10 *kunchams* in the ordinary measure.

Prices of food-grains generally run higher in the Rayaghada subdivision, where the plains markets are less remote than in Koraput and are also accessible by railway. At Gunupur the price of rice (unboiled) in recent years has ranged between 11 and $12\frac{1}{2}$ seers to the rupee and at Rayaghada between $9\frac{1}{2}$ and 10 seers to the rupee, whereas at Jeypore it has varied from 14 to 16 seers to the rupee. In Nowrangpur rice can be obtained for between 17 and 20 seers to the rupee and in Malkanagiri the price falls as low as 26 seers to the rupee. On the other hand the prices of imported commodities vary in inverse ratio to those of the home-grown food-stuffs. Salt is sold at Gunupur at the rate of Rs. 2-5-0 or Rs. 2-6-0 an imperial maund. In Jeypore the price is Rs. 2-14-0 to Rs. 3 and in Malkanagiri it rises as high as Rs. 5. Thus whereas in Gunupur a measure of rice sells for 50 per cent more than a measure of salt, in Malkanagiri a measure of salt can be exchanged for more than three measures of rice.

With their simple manner of life, which is complicated by few material wants, with an unfailling rainfall and an abundant supply of timber and firewood, as well as a rate of land assessment which is lenient in comparison with those in force in the plains, the lot of the raiyats in Koraput district is by no means unenviable. The hillman is generally a cheerful and well-nourished person who can afford to dress his womankind in bright clothes and load them with brass ornaments, keep up to the local standard of comfort without undue effort, and every spring take a clear month's holiday enlivened by songs, dances, hunting, copious strong drink and deep draughts of other pleasures of the flesh.

The picture is unfortunately not without its darker side. The opening up of the country and its settlement by people

with an entirely different economy of life has given rise to a number of problems, the solution of some of which is still to be found. The new-comers to the country have a legitimate aspiration to acquire land and by industrious tillage to make the best use of its capacities. The hillman is generally willing, if not eager, to part with his land for a cash sum which, though it may seem great wealth to him, is probably much less than its actual value to the purchaser. The temptation to mortgage his land is even harder to resist, for the hill raiyat cannot learn by experience that a mortgage, once executed, is hardly ever redeemed. The disastrous consequences of this fatal thriftlessness, which was turning numbers of hillmen into a landless proletariat, disinclined to work for daily wages and with no resort but to bind themselves as bond slaves to a rich man or to get what they could by *podu* cultivation in the forests, were fortunately realized by the Madras Government before it was too late; and the Agency Tracts Land Interest Transfer Act, enacted in 1917, now prevents men of the aboriginal tribes from parting with their lands to non-hillmen. This Act has also done a good deal to prevent indebtedness among hillmen, since they are prohibited from raising money on the security of their lands, generally their only possessions which have any cash value, and money-lenders will now only grant them small loans on the security of their crops or, under the system which is described below, on a pledging of their services for a period of years.

**Debt
slavery**

The practice of debt slavery, known in Koraput as the *gothi* and in the Rayaghada subdivision as the *kambari* system, is by no means confined to this district, but it probably has more unfortunate results here than elsewhere. It is a time-honoured custom which in its original form was no doubt unobjectionable enough. A raiyat binds himself in return for a lump sum of money to serve another for a period of years as his debt-servant or *gothi*. He receives a maintenance allowance—usually twelve *puttis* of paddy and a cloth every year—as well as some presents of grain at the more important festivals and the right to collect gleanings from the threshing-floor. Every year a portion of the capital amount of the loan—generally about five rupees—is considered to have been worked off; this annual deduction is known as *chidni*. A loan of Rs. 30 would thus be liquidated in six years. When the lender, like the borrower, was a member of one of the hill tribes the yoke of the *gothi* would be an easy one. The loan would generally have been incurred in order to pay the expenses of a marriage, and the lender would as often as not be the borrower's own father-in-law or another close relative. The *gothi* would be treated as an equal in his master's house, would have leisure to carry on cultivation on his own account and be allowed frequent holidays. But when, as often happens nowadays, a hillman pledges his services to an immigrant from the plains the result is a much less harmonious relationship. The plainsman, who has invested money in a servant, tries to exact as much as he can from his investment in the shape of labour. The hillman dislikes being driven and is accustomed to quit work for

days at a time when he finds something more attractive to do; and he regards it as unfair that his creditor should make deductions from his subsistence grant on account of these absences, or even, as he sometimes does, make an addition to the capital of the loan that has to be worked off. In many cases unhappily the attitude of the immigrant who employs a *gothi* is purely one of exploitation, and incorrect accounts of the debt are kept and the *gothi* compelled to work on long after he has repaid the amount borrowed.

Mr. H. D. Taylor, then manager of the Jeypore estate, came across a case in 1892 where a raiyat had borrowed Rs. 20 from a Sundi fifty years back, repaid Rs. 50 at intervals and worked for the whole of his life and died in harness; for the same debt the *sowcar* claimed the services of his son, and he too died in bondage leaving two small sons aged 13 and 9, whose services were also claimed for an alleged arrear of Rs. 30 on the original debt. Such gross oppression as this is probably uncommon to-day, but in 1927 Mr. L. E. Saunders, District Superintendent of Police, collected a mass of statistics which showed that *gothis* were frequently compelled to labour for years, working off their original debts at the rate of only two or three rupees a year and that such debts were held binding on the children of *gothis* who had died in service. These terms were embodied in written contracts. The following is a translation of a specimen taken at random from the collection made by Mr. Saunders:—

'Contract executed by Dolai Pubya Chaitan Kirsani, his son Dolai Pubya Sonya Kirsani, of Padwa, on the 26th August 1926, in favour of Uttarakavatam Suranna of Padwa.

'According to the document executed by Dolai Pubya Sonya Kirsani on the 1st February 1925 an amount of Rs. 61-8-0 is outstanding. For this amount we have agreed that one of us will work in your house for you and attend to whatever work you may require of us without disobeying you. You must give us 10 *kunchams* of paddy a month for our meals, 4 annas a month for salt and chillies and Rs. 1-8-0 a year for clothing. You will deduct Rs. 7 every year from the amount lent, as long as we work, and if you do so we shall work for nine years at your house, without going elsewhere to pay off your debt. After we complete our nine years' service under you, you must pay us the balance of Rs. 1-8-0. For these nine years we shall work without absenting ourselves without leave.'

As a result of this system many hillmen have grown up practically as serfs and spend their lives in a condition of poverty which is embittered by constant bad relations with their employers. Even if a *gothi* does succeed in working off his debt he is often unable to stand on his own legs and finds no alternative but to pledge his services again. Nothing has been done by way of legislation to abolish or modify this system, though its rigours have frequently been lessened by Government officers bringing about an equitable compromise where the terms of agreement have been found in particular cases to be unduly

severe on the *gothi*. Naturally, the *sowcars* are not able to enforce the full terms of their bonds in the Courts, but *gothis* usually have no alternative means of livelihood and must perforce accept their masters' terms. Of late, emigration to Assam has begun to afford the *gothi* a means of escaping from an over-exacting employer, and creditors, realizing this, are tending to become more reasonable.

A quite unobjectionable variation of the *gothi* system exists in towns and the larger villages, whereby a man pledges his services for a period of one year only for a lump sum of twenty to thirty rupees paid in advance. Under this system the *gothi* does not receive any subsistence allowance from his employer in addition to the advance.

Forced
labour

Another practice, which is native to the soil of the Agency tracts and though unobjectionable and even useful in its original form is, like *gothi*, liable to abuse, is the system of *bethi* or forced labour. The raiyat of the hill tracts will not condescend to labour for a daily wage. In fact in the greater part of the district there is no such thing as a labouring class, in the sense of a class of people who voluntarily offer to work for wages. Hillmen have however always recognized as reasonable the demand that they should do certain customary services for those who have authority over them, namely the Maharaja or their local landlord and the Government. Various duties, such as the thatching of rest-houses and other public buildings and the carrying of *tappals* to certain officers in their camps, have been attached to particular villages and are performed regularly and without complaint and duly paid for at a fixed rate. The naiks and raiyats would probably welcome an extension of this system to the execution of works on roads, as they would prefer to have the work directly delegated to the naik than entrusted to a contractor who cannot always be depended on to pay his labourers properly, and has in any case to enlist official influence in order to get the men to work. The trouble comes in when subordinate officials employ *bethi* labour for their private ends, or having engaged it for purposes ostensibly connected with the affairs of the estate or the Government omit to pay for it at the proper rates. Perhaps the form of compulsory labour for which the hillman has the greatest aversion is domestic service in the houses of subordinates in certain out-of-the-way stations, where servants cannot be hired locally and imported servants cannot be induced to stay. But until people of the servant class can be persuaded to settle in these places or the hillmen to change their views regarding working for wages it is difficult to see how the system can be entirely abolished. In the execution of public works a judicious application of the *bethi* system, besides solving the problem of labour scarcity, is likely to encourage a feeling of responsibility among the naiks and help towards the establishment of a system of administration whereby use can be made of the influence of the acknowledged tribal authorities for carrying out the manifold duties of the Government towards the people.

The practice of exacting forced labour without payment of wages has never been officially countenanced in the district.