

Decadence of a Society

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LAND, LANDLORDS AND THE BRITISH RAJ: NORTHERN INDIA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by Thomas R. Metcalf

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Thomas Metcalf's scholarly work describes the process by which the taluqdars of Oudh were transformed from rulers of men into modern rentier landlords. He has a small chapter on the origin of the Rajput clans — how they were superimposed on the local cultivating community through conquest and inter-clan rivalry. On this issue, however, he has little to add to Richard Fox's excellent work, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule*. It is in the later sections, particularly those relating to the taluqdars of Oudh on whom the book focusses throughout, except for the hundred-odd pages on the North-Western Pro-

vinces, that Metcalf has much to add to our knowledge.

As the affairs of the Kingdom of Oudh came increasingly under the control of the British Resident, the Court became more and more superfluous, with the King of Oudh having little say in crucial matters. Here Metcalf turns a popular orthodoxy concerning the decadence of the Oudh Court on its head. The orthodoxy has it that it was the frivolous, luxurious and artistic (as opposed to firm and martial) disposition of the later kings of Oudh which led to a neglect of the affairs of state on their part and to financial bankruptcy. What Metcalf has to say makes a great deal of sense: it was the increasing control of State affairs by the British — who were an inexorable force since they represented a technologically advanced civilisation — which led the later Nawabs to take their minds away from important matters of state. Metcalf thus reverses the cause-effect relationship on the issue.

When the British occupied Oudh they dispossessed the taluqdars and settled with the holders below them. How far this was a pragmatic step and how far it was the effect of the Lawrence School or Utilitarian influence is not clear. But when the Revolt broke out — within eighteen months of the annexation — the taluqdars

became the centre of disaffection; and they were supported by the primary zamindars who had apparently gained by the British Settlement operations. This angered the British and hardened their attitude toward sub-settlement claimants in subsequent settlement operations.

What led the taluqdars to revolt? While the chief reason remains the threat of social revolution which the British revenue settlements impended, the nature of the problem is complex. Some of the most inveterately hostile taluqdars had lost no land; and some of those who had, like Raja Hanwant Singh of Kalakankar, supported the British. Clan rivalries and a calculus of political profit and loss were also important determinants of the taluqdar's attitude. Moreover, almost invariably during the course of the Revolt the taluqdars followed rather than led the sepoys and the ex-royal Court of Oudh into active hostilities against the British. In part, therefore, their participation may have been prompted by pressure from below, for the sepoys, the bulk of them Oudh residents, had close ties of caste and kinship with the most influential among the taluqdars' tenantry, the underproprietary village zamindars. This perhaps explains why the subordinate proprietors, though they gained from the revenue settlement, were not averse to joining in the revolt. Metcalf's findings thus tend to corroborate the recent reinterpretation of the Mutiny as a peasant revolt.

The British, like the Nawab's government before them, had never penetrated the countryside beyond the outskirts of the capital where the power of the taluqdars, ensconced in their mud forts, was unquestioned. These mud forts became the centre of resistance during the Mutiny. After the Mutiny while the British appeased the

taluqdars by recognising their superior land rights by the grant of sanads they also systematically destroyed the taluqdars' bases of power by pulling down the forts and disbanding the armed retainers. The British presence in the countryside was strengthened by the building of roads and railways and the cutting down of jungles.

It is in this process that the central thesis — if this rambling work can be said to have one — of Thomas Metcalf's work, which provides it with unity, lies. The thesis is not an original one; it was advanced by Peter Reeves in his doctoral dissertation in 1963. But Metcalf's account of the process is much more comprehensive and much better researched. The implications of the process of the transformation of the Oudh taluqdars from rulers of men to landlords cannot be too strongly emphasized. There was a curious dialectic at work: the British forged the taluqdari alliance because the Mutiny had convinced them that the landed aristocrats were the natural leaders of rural society. To prevent further intransigence however, the British systematically demolished their old structure of power on which this natural leadership, their paternal authority, was based. Without real power, the taluqdars were incapable of fulfilling their "traditional" role in society. This was the basic contradiction of the Oudh policy. This process I think explains why the Nationalists were able to win the peasants over relatively easily. There is no limit to the extent to which economic hardships can be tolerated, particularly by the fatalistic peasant; it is the perception of these hardships which make a world of difference; or to use Beteille's phrase, converts a harmonic system into a disharmonic one. The transformation in rural consciousness is clear: whereas in 1857 the peasants were willing to go along with the taluqdars

against the British encroachers, by the 1930's they had gone over to the Congress, opposing both the taluqdars and the British who had moved very close to each other. But there is yet another reason for the Congress winning the peasantry over so easily. In describing the destruction of the taluqdars' bases of power, Metcalf has to my mind somewhat overemphasized their replacement by 'the British presence,' which, as British officials time and again admitted, was limited in the countryside, with local structures of power acquiring many of the functions of the State. These structures of power, as Metcalf suggests in his conclusion, may have joined the Congress.

Did the taluqdar-British alliance give the former unlimited power in the countryside? Not quite. The presence of under-proprietors and the Estate Staff limited this power. The underproprietors enjoyed privileged rents, Sir and nankar land and, the small minority who proved their status, sub-settlements. The subduing of the subordinate village proprietors had begun before the British decided to ignore their claims and settle with the taluqdars. While the struggle between the subordinate village proprietors and the taluqdars was never wholly one-sided or irreversible (as Fox has shown so well) in late Nawabi rule the latter had begun afresh the task of breaking these subordinate proprietors. They were helped in this by the exactions of Nawabi officials, like the chakladar, who drove these proprietors to seek the protection of taluqdars. The latter thus enlarged their taluqas on the eve of the British conquest. At this point, however, Metcalf makes an uncharacteristically dubious generalisation (based almost entirely on Sleeman's account it would seem) that the strengthening of taluqdari tenure

benefited the cultivating raiyats, the Kurmis, Kachhis, Lodhs, etc.

The outcome of the conflict between the talukdars and the under-proprietors was to give neither side a clear-cut victory, though the taluqdars had the upper hand. But here Metcalf makes one of his few careless, because unsubstantiated, generalisations: while the underproprietors were hard hit in the struggle with the zamindars, so too could they benefit from the growth of cash-cropping. Metcalf gives us no evidence to suggest that the peasant entrepreneurs emerged basically from the high-caste privileged underproprietary section — as opposed to the underprivileged cultivating castes, Kurmis, Kachhis, etc., as the Settlement Reports suggest.

What lies at the root of both the careless generalisations referred to above is Metcalf's persistent neglect of peasant society (save for the struggle between the taluqdars and the inferior proprietors). To what extent can landlord society — or for that matter any class — be studied without a study of the social groups with which they enter into relations of subordination or control — indeed, in relationship with which it itself develops? If the historical process after the Mutiny was, as Metcalf seems to imply, one in which landlord hegemony and control was weakening—a process accelerated after the war—there must have been a parallel process of strengthening elsewhere. Metcalf's neglect of peasant society and indeed other social groups like moneylenders, renders the reader impervious to some crucial processes at work in rural society which tended to weaken landlord control *and* were an express of this weakening: the logic of the growth of the market, cash-cropping, the rise of peasant entrepre-

neers, the rise in manorial dues — most notably nazrana — and rents and coercive processes. For all this we have to turn to the works of Majid Siddiqi and Whitcombe.

Estate personnel constituted the other major limitation on landlord control over rural society. Metcalf provides us with some interesting information — derived largely from interviews and Estate Records — on estate structure, management and personnel, a relatively obscure aspect of rural history. The higher echelons of estate staff derived largely from the same social stratum — usually less affluent friends and relatives, but also outsiders who entrenched themselves for generations on the Estate — as the taluqdars. But Metcalf has little, and nothing new, to add, no doubt on account of paucity of material, to our knowledge of junior estate personnel, notorious for corruption. Metcalf attempts to qualify the Frykenberg orthodoxy, applied by Musgrave to Oudh, that superior powerholders, like their British overlords, were little more than puppets in the hands of their underlings. But the qualification is unconvincing. An enterprising landlord, he tells us, had open to him at all times a number of ways of asserting his mastery over the estate. But Metcalf's own evidence suggests that such landlords were few, thereby confirming Peter Reeves' observation that shirking work and responsibility was a part of taluqdari style. Moreover Metcalf gives us a number of instances in which the taluqdar deliberately ignored charges of corruption against such people. Metcalf is thus forced to admit that they constituted real and palpable limits to the taluqdars', as indeed government's control of the resources of the countryside. This must not be lost sight of when engaged in the easy talk of labelling these oppressors

of the peasantry. This is indeed an interesting line of argument. But what percentage of the actual proceeds these officials embezzled is not at all — and very likely will never be — clear since they were themselves the source of our information.

Metcalf has written a rambling book interspersed with many interesting details. He tells us, for instance, that the taluqdars provided much of the finances of the religious revival and sectarian movements that swept northern India during the latter decades of the twentieth century. He also makes an interesting observation about the nature of banditry in these areas: it was neither a form of peasant protest (Hobsbawm) nor was it confined to what the British called the 'criminal' castes! Banditry in this case was an affair of the local ruling class — the taluqdars — who took to the jungles when their rights were threatened by central authority. If the central authority tried to replace them or collect revenue directly, they threatened the villagers.

But the most fascinating of these details relate to the taluqdari style of life. Though the taluqdars tried to retain the culture of the Mughal Court, their lifestyle was in fact a much attenuated form of this culture, what Low has called a "husk culture." It was quite distinct from both the old Nawabi style as well as from their landed English contemporaries. Their lordly style of living was cramped because they were no longer rulers of men like the old Nawabs or the pre-mutiny taluqdars. And unlike the British gentry they took little interest in magisterial and policing duties or in agriculture. Their sycophancy, the constant grovelling before their British masters, was another distinctive feature of their life style. So was the obsession with status and hierarchy.

Fawning upon the British for titles, squandering money in senseless litigation, patronage of temples, hospitals and other charitable purposes, were all arenas in which the taluqdars tried to score over each other and establish their status in taluqdari hierarchy.

The taluqdari style of life had all the constituents — though Metcalf does not say so; indeed, he seems to suggest that their behaviour was not perverse given their standing in colonial society — of a decadent aristocracy: they shirked work; fawned upon the British for titles; oppressed their tenants; squandered huge amounts of money to establish their status in taluqdari society; were literary snobs, polygamous, held ostentatious durbars, dressed extravagantly, constructed costly palaces, spent lavishly on rituals and ceremonies; were arrogant, eccentric and self-indulgent to a degree. It is indeed difficult to be charitable in one's assessment of the taluqdari style. To assert that they could not have chosen to be different is I think carrying the doctrine of determinism too far.

Altogether, Metcalf has produced an excellent, scholarly work based on careful research and cautious generalisations. The narrative is never oppressive — unlike sections of his last work on the Revolt — the book is very readable and contains a number of good pictures. It is one of the few books written on the social history — though of a class which is now extinct — of modern India. It is, moreover, a major addition to the relatively large number of works on the U.P. To the best of my knowledge he is the only scholar to have gone beyond official archival sources and consulted Estate Records to reconstruct the past of this province, Oudh in particular.

The Book Review