CHAPTER VIII

BUNDELKHAND AGRICULTURE - A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The various rock-inscriptions and patchy historical records of Bundelkhand do not bear testimony to the fact that this region was ever systematically populated prior to the emergence of Bundela Rajputs in the later part of 13th or beginning of 14th century A.D., except in a few isolated patches by certain tribes such as Gonds, Kachhwahas and Chandels. These were found chiefly in forest clearings and at strategic places.

Nevertheless the ruins of ancient settlements along R. Chambal and Yamuna provide sufficient evidence of the riverine culture developed by a section of regional population later on. These people practised crude type of farming on the ancient flood plains of the streams.

As the population of the region was not only scanty but also migratory, there was plenty of land for cultivation, but this was not fully utilized for that purpose. Consequently, fields were larger and cheaply available; labour was entirely indigenous.
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**Ancient period**

From the period of Great Guptas to the beginning of 13th century very little is known about the agricultural condition of the region. Politically Guptas claimed a kind of suzerainty over the country between R. Yamuna and Narmada and realised various kinds of taxes from the local chiefs. Roughly 1/6 to 1/4 of the farm-produce was given to the government. Records of remissions of land-revenue during famines and scarcities point out the sympathetic attitude adopted by the Hindu kings towards their royats i.e. peasants. 'Villages were normally prosperous and peasants lived a frugal life.' (1) During this period, 'the discernable forms of property in land were those of collective property. Land was held in common by the village community and the families cultivated the soil in common. Individual rights to land were also in existence.' (2)

Bundelas 'appear to have first settled at Mau and then took Kalinjhar and Kalpi in the 14th century. Prithiraj, one of the Bundela Rajputs, regulated the distribution of land and established the religious rites and customs to be observed by the tribe.' (3) But as the local chiefs assumed power,

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(1) Gosh, N.N., Early History of India '1951' Indian Press, Allahabad, p. 145


(3) North-West Provinces Gazetteer Vol. I Part I (Bundelkhand 1874-86 p. 20
they began to fight each other. From the records of numerous conflicts and political dissensions, which were so common among various regional tribes, it can be safely inferred that agriculture was largely neglected. Production eventually suffered from lack of security and manpower.

Moghal Period

Fiscal policy of Moghals in Bundelkhand before the reign of Akbar the Great, is only known in rough, but plentiful literature exists covering the period of Akbar (from 1556 to 1605). During this period northern part of Bundelkhand formed an integral part of Akbar's empire, but the southern part continued to be governed by the local Rajput chiefs who had accepted Emperor's suzerainty. However, the 'precise information is wanting regarding the fiscal relations subsisting between Akbar and these chiefs who retained their jurisdiction over their domain. It is possible that the revenue was claimed at least from some of them in the form of stipulated annual tribute as had been the practice at earlier periods.'(1) If a chief defaulted, the result was ordinarily a punitive expedition. This meant either his displacement or a revision of the terms previously in force.

(1) Haig, W.; The Cambridge History of India, Vol. IV. S.Chand Co., Delhi, 1957 p. 464
So far as the northern part of Bundelkhand is concerned, the Moghals first turned their attention in the beginning of 17th century when Emperor Akbar arranged his empire into fiscal units. Broadly speaking, northern Bundelkhand was divided into Irichh, Kalpi and Kalinjhar sarkars (districts).\(^2\)

It is during this period that the land was first properly surveyed and rates of revenue assessment were framed by Raja Todermal, the famous finance minister of Akbar.

In the scheme of assessment of land revenue, agricultural land was classified into four major categories.\(^2\)

1. Polaj i.e. fertile land. Roughly 1/3 of its produce went to the government.

2. Patti or fallow land left for less than 3 years.

3. Chachar or fallow land left for more than three years.

4. Banjar or infertile land.

From the point of view of land management there were, generally speaking, three categories :-

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(1) Moreland, W.H.: 'From Akbar to Aurangzebe' Mac. 1923 p. 247

(2) Tripathi, R.P. 'Some aspects of Muslim Administration Central Book Depot, Allahabad, 1959. p. 321
1. Khalsa which was under the direct control and management of the crown.

2. Jagir land which was assigned to jagirdars or big zamindars.

3. Sayuraghal land which was freely distributed to the cultivators because of its low fertility.

In the village, the headman was incharge of distributing land to the efficient cultivators. Ejections were seldom done but not completely ruled out. It is said that agriculture was in good condition. Peasants enjoyed the fruits of their labour and were looked upon with sympathy, specially when bad seasons occurred. Government by lifting 'Zazia' tax and occasionally remitting the land revenue, tried to improve their condition. Productions were normally good. The only defect was that the tenure was legally valid for shorter duration but in practice it was indefinite or even hereditary. (1)

Contemporary authorities furnish very little information regarding revenue system and agricultural condition for the period between Akbar and Aurangzeb. It is, however,

through Bernier and Tavernier (1) that information has come to us regarding the deterioration of agricultural condition in Bundelkhand, indeed throughout the empire, during the reign of Aurangzeb.

According to Bernier even considerable productive land remained untilled for want of labour. The peasants were meted out bad treatment by their rapacious lords (governors) who deprived them with their only means of subsistence and bereft of their children who were carried away and turned slaves. Consequently peasantry, driven to despair by so 'execrable tyranny, abandoned the country and sought refuge into the territories of local Hindu chiefs, because they found them more tolerant.

On the basis of the same authority we learn, "the ground is seldom tilled except under compulsion, and no person is willing or able to repair the ditches and canals, the whole country is badly cultivated and a great part is rendered unproductive for want of irrigation."

Travernier, who travelled in India between 1640 and 1650 testifies the same condition of agriculture.

(1) Adapted from Moreland; 'From Akbar to Aurangzeb'
These phases in the condition of the peasants and their main stay of life i.e. agriculture have been ascribed to the following facts:

1. The liability of the peasants had been raised from 1/3 to 1/2 of his gross produce. It was 1/4 to 1/3 during the reign of Akbar.

2. Peasants were actually required to pay at this rate for more land than they could cultivate effectively, so that they would actually pay more than half of their produce.

3. The probability of additional levies was substantially increased by the administrative changes.

These conditions, together with uncertainty of irrigation from ruined canals, left no margin for the peasants to meet losses at the time of unfavourable seasons. It brought them almost to the stage of starvation. The condition of agriculture in the territories of the Hindu chief was only slightly better, if not satisfactory. Condition here also deteriorated in the later part of 18th century. It was a period of frequent warfare when every male of the full age was obliged to become a soldier in order to help his chieftain. Agriculture was badly neglected; population dwindled and many villages were completely depopulated and irrigation works ruined to fall into disuse.
It is thus clear that before the British came to
govern Bundelkhand, the condition of agriculture and peasantry
was in a state of general decadence. Large tracts of good
soil were lying unused. Actually even during the period from
Akbar to Aurangzeb, the competition for productive land did
not exist and in most places land was waiting for exploita-
tion by the farmers. (1)

Ownership of Land

It is, however, note-worthy that since the earliest
times the ownership of land remained unchanged. 'Throughout
the Hindu period, the system of land tenure in India was that
of 'Peasant-Proprietorship', under which the cultivator had
the absolute ownership over the land he cultivated and held.
There were kings, sub-kings, tributary-chiefs and others, but
their right was strictly limited to only a portion of the
produce of the soil as remuneration for the protection they
afforded to the cultivators. (2)

It is further striking to note that the Muslim theory
of the system of land tenure, conforms to a degree with that
of the Hindu kings. The Muslim kings also never regarded
themselves as the proprietor of land but merely received land

(2) Bhargava, B.K.: 'Indian Peasant Proprietorship' Taraporewala
Co., Bombay, 1936 p. 15
revenue. 'Records of actual cases of the Moghal Emperor paying for the land purchased for their own use strengthen this view.' (1)

British Period

Mr. J.D. Erskine, who was appointed the first collector of Board of Revenue for Bundelkhand in 1809 had left the following description (2) of the tenure system and organisation of the village economy. According to him the proprietors of a village in this area held their land by hereditary succession. They consisted of a number of brotheren, each cultivating a distinct portion of the land and contributing a proportionate share of the land revenue assessed upon the whole village. Each share of land was called as 'Beri' each of which was superintended by a headman called 'Beriwars'. Large villages were divided into 'Thoks' or 'Pattis' each of which was subdivided into 'Beris'. Big beriwars were called as 'Pattidars' and pattidars who attended the officers of the government were called 'mukhiyas'.

In the assessment of share of revenue no consideration was given to the quality of land as usually each share had a proportionate quality of land of each description. 'Mazkuri'

(1) Bhargava, B.K. 'Indian Peasant Proprietorship'. Taraporewala Co., Bombay, 1936. p. 21

land was held in common for the general benefit of all. The 'bhaia-chara-bigha' was the popular method of measuring land. This was not a standard measurement and hence assessment also remained undefined which caused frequent source of contention among the share-holders.

An attempt to remove the evils of tenure, based on various local traditions, was made by Warren Hastings, but it failed and the scheme of permanent settlement, which provided the right and ownership of land to a certain section of zamindars, was finally withdrawn as it was just an antithesis of the hereditary rule of 'peasant-proprietorship'. The so-called 'permanent settlement' was designed to create a beneficent landlord capitalistic system only. This went against the famous proclamation of Her Imperial Majesty Victoria Queen in the year 1784. Immediately on assuming the charge of the government of India, she proclaimed "We know and respect the feelings of attachment with which the natives (Ryots) of India regard the lands inherited by them from their ancestors and we desire to protect them in all rights connected therewith; and we desire that in framing and administering law, due regard be paid to the ancient rights, usages and customs of India."(1) Besides these considerations, the revenue

liability of the cultivator was also not precisely defined but envisaged in a 'rough and ready manner without any survey of landed rights and the productive capacity of different classes of soils. Again, till 1859 no attempts were made to grant protection to the cultivator by means of any legislation. (1) These were granted only after 1859 (2), but these unfortunately, adversely affected the cultivators in the region.

As an alternative to the scheme of permanent settlement, three known systems of land tenure emerged. These are:

1. Mahalwari i.e. joint ownership of village area by village community.

2. Royatwari i.e. individual ownership of land by the cultivator.

3. Zamindari i.e. the system of intermediaries who distributed land to and collected revenue from the peasants and deposited it in the government treasury after deducting their fixed share (i.e. 1/11th part).

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(2) Special mention may be made to (i) Land Alienation Act of 1900, (ii) Agra Provinces Act II of 1901 (iii) Bundelkhand Land Alienation Act of 1903.
Of all these forms, zamindari was the most popular system in Bundelkhand and at the time of Independence, roughly 55% of the area in Jhansi, 47% in Banda, 22% in Jalaun and 35% in Hamirpur was under one or the other form of sub-infeudation. This system proved very harmful throughout Bundelkhand. 'Cultivators suffered from rack-renting, enhancement of rents, constant fear of ejection. It created a large army of tenant-at-will farmers.'

But subsequent steps taken by the British Government gradually showed improvement in the condition of the farms and the farmers. Various legislations for different systems of land tenure were passed and implemented for protecting the interests of the peasant class. Certain positive measures such as the introduction of canal irrigation, distribution of seeds and fertilisers, opening of veterinary services at important centres, establishment of credit societies and co-operative banks had a healing touch and gradually brought cultivation on a sounder basis than ever before.

Special efforts were made to save every life in the region during severe droughts, scarcities and famines. As a result of short term and long term relief measures adopted by

(1) Final Settlement Reports of Jhansi, Jalaun, Hamirpur and Banda

(2) Mamoria, C.B. : 'Agricultural Problems of India' 1963
Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, p. 357

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the government, most of the farmers returned to their land as soon as the calamities were over. The value of land increased under these protective measures and production also showed marked rise.

**Independence and After**

The objects set by the Congress Agrarian Reform Committee headed by J.C. Kumarappa in 1951 were:

1. To provide an opportunity for the development of farmer's personality.

2. To end exploitation of farmers in one or the other form, and

3. To effect maximum production.

In pursuance of the aforesaid declared policy of the congress government, the provincial governments were also instructed to enact legislations for bringing about speedy measures of land reforms.

**(1) Abolition of Intermediaries**

The first step taken by U.P. and M.P. governments, in order to insure proper use of land, was the abolition of the age-old institution of Intermediaries - zamindars and malguzars and establish direct contact with the cultivators. They were removed on payment of compensation to them. Whereas it
was fixed in M.P. Bundelkhand as 'a multiple of net income from intermediary right' it was decided according to the 'net assets' in U.P. Bundelkhand. This multiple was 8 for U.P. and 10 for M.P., but it actually varied from area to area. Despite certain defects in its implementation and much delay, it may be considered as a revolutionary step in the agriculture of Bundelkhand.

(2) Tenancy Reforms
The second step was to effect tenancy reforms which were not uniform even within a State. These measures were concerned with 3 F's i.e. 'Fixity of Tenure', 'Fair Rent' and 'Free Transferability'. It was felt that rents should be regularised, tenures secured and more and more tenants should be enrolled as owners of land. In U.P. Bundelkhand tenants were made 'Bhoomidars' by depositing 10 times the annual rent paid by them to their land-lords. Others, who could not do it immediately, were permitted to deposit the same in instalments and thus their ownership of land was legally conferred on them.

(3) Fixation of Ceiling on Holdings
Last 'Bhoomidars' may ultimately become new zamindars, it was thought imperative to fix the ceiling of land holdings in Bundelkhand (indeed in all the provinces) in order
to 'bring about reduction in disparities, and also to provide
land for distribution to the land- less peasants'. But while
deciding the ceiling limit it was well thought out that it
should not be so small as to retard production and lower the
peasant's income below the minimum limit. In other words,
it should not be uneconomic. In U.P. Bundelkhand it was fixed
at between 20 and 40 acres and in M.P. 28 standard acres.

(4) Consolidation of Holdings

Since throughout M.P. and U.P. the average size
of holding was very small and as these holdings were highly
fragmented, it was envisaged to consolidate them into compact
economic holdings for increasing operational efficiency, so
that co-operative or joint farming may be applied to them in
pursuance with the Nagpur Resolution on Land Reforms (Jan.,
1959). As such, States enacted various legislations to
implement consolidation. Holdings in many districts of U.P.
and M.P. have now been consolidated but the work of consoli-
dation has not yet begun in Bundelkhand districts of either
U.P. or M.P. The scheme is likely to be taken up in near
future. Decidedly this is going to throw some small cultiva-
tors out of their land. This problem will loom large till
its final solution. It may be partially solved by 'Bhoomi
dan' and 'Gram dan' movements of Acharya Vinoba Bhave. The
land so obtained would be distributed among landless labourers.
(5) Community Development Projects

Despite all these measures of improvement, it was thought desirable to reconstruct the village and its economy from below, in order to regain it its past glory. Subsequently a new programme (C.D.P.) was introduced in Bundelkhand. 'It embraces all aspects of Government activity in the field, the improvement of agriculture, the combating of soil erosion, the development of water supplies, the promotion of co-operation and better marketing, live-stock and forestry etc. It also concerns with the development of education, health, clubs and community activities. The entire region of Bundelkhand as such has been divided into these blocks and work is going on satisfactorily.

It may, therefore, be remarked that since 1947, there was feverish activity on the part of the Government to improve the condition of rural Bundelkhand by various legislations and their implementation. The condition of the farmer, as a whole, has improved. Productions have generally increased by extension of irrigation, soil conservation, supply and use of chemical fertilizers and other measures. Unhappily the unprecedented growth of population has eaten away a greater share of per capita profits accruing from these measures as applied in the villages. Although to the much disconcomitant of the urban dwellers, the soaring prices of agricultural
commodities have greatly helped the peasants to consolidate their monetary status. They now look forward to educating their children, purchasing better implements for agricultural operations, constructing pukka houses and leading a better and happier life.