

**THE ECONOMIC
LIFE OF A BENGAL
DISTRICT: A STUDY**

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The Economic Life of a Bengal District: A Study by J. C. Jack

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BY

J. C. JACK

OF THE INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE
AND TEMPORARILY OF THE ROYAL FIELD ARTILLERY

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TO THE
SECRETARY

L. G.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

FOREWORD

I FEEL that some apology is necessary for the production of a book of economic statistics at such a time as this. The origin of the work is to be found in an opportunity which offered itself many years ago. The statistics were collected between the years 1906 and 1910, but took much time and labour to tabulate. The author was then full of zeal and enthusiasm; but when the tabulation had been finished his energy had slackened and he was no longer in close touch with the locality to which the statistics refer. For these reasons the statistics remained buried treasure waiting to be revealed. The war has brought matters to a crisis. The author is about to go to the front; as there is neither collaborator nor substitute in official life in India, no other can undertake the revelation. Hence it has become necessary to crowd into a leave of five short days the introduction of these statistics to the world, or to risk their entire loss. I could not hope in so short a time to do justice to the figures, still less to make their dry bones live, but I was loath to let them perish utterly. They were collected with very great labour by many hands with much devotion; it is but fair that such labour should not be altogether fruitless. Further, I believe them to be unique, as no similar enquiries have ever been made in India or elsewhere over so large a tract of country and

FOREWORD

so large a population, or by an agency so well adapted to the work. Lastly, I venture to hope that they are a contribution of some little value to aid judgement of British rule in India. That rule has been much attacked of late on the economic side. Its most powerful defence must lie in statistics such as these, which reveal in detail and yet comprehensively the resources of the people and the burden which taxation lays upon them. The work of the British in India has only one counterpart in recorded history, the Roman Empire, upon which historians have agreed to lay the blame that it sucked the orange of its provinces dry and left only the rind to its subjects. This book will not be written in vain if it proves that, in one corner of India at least, no such charge can be laid against the British Empire.

A few words ought to be said about the origin of the investigations with which these pages deal. The Government of India undertook more than twenty years ago to prepare for the great Indian province of Bengal, which then contained eighty million inhabitants, of whom sixty millions tilled the soil, a record of rights, so that each cultivator might learn accurately and authoritatively the size of his holding, the amount of his rent and the conditions of his tenure. This great document has been prepared gradually for each district, or county as we say in England, in turn. It is a gigantic labour preceded by an accurate and detailed survey of every acre in the county and of the boundaries of every field and carried out by investigations in three successive years, in which each landlord

and each peasant are separately consulted and cross-examined.

When the work of investigation is complete, a map is printed of every village and a copy given to each peasant and each landlord, while a paper is prepared, printed and similarly distributed, in which are described the fields in the holding of each peasant and the conditions under which he holds them. This record of rights was prepared in the district of Faridpur between the years of 1906 and 1910, although it was finally completed and published only in the present year. Faridpur contains over two million inhabitants and an area larger than Devonshire; and the record-of-rights when completed was contained in 4,000 volumes with a total of nearly two million pages. These figures are mentioned merely to show the monumental nature of the work which the Government of India had undertaken.

It was no part of the intention of that Government to convert the preparation of this record-of-rights into a means of obtaining information concerning the income and resources of the people; but the staff by which the record-of-rights was prepared in the district of Faridpur, consisting almost entirely of young and eager graduates of the universities, was well fitted to supplement its task by such economic investigations. Each of these young graduates spent several months at one spot in the course of duties which engaged him in enquiries into the holdings of all the cultivators, into the capability of the soil and into the relations of tenants, both legal and customary, with their landlords. He obtained a vast amount of information concerning

all the families of the village and frequently saw all the villagers and made many visits to their homesteads; he could collect the villagers together and without offending them discuss with each the amount of his income and the way in which he spent it. It was decided, therefore, to add an enquiry into income to the work already done by this staff and to tabulate the result in the form of a series of figures showing the amount earned by every family in every variety of occupation. The basis of the investigation was the family, because the unit of economic life in India is the family and not the individual. Each of these graduates also collected information of the expenditure of typical families and drew up normal budgets for families in varying circumstances. For easy comprehension of the mass of figures four classes were adopted, representing varying material conditions between comfort and actual want, to one of which every family was allocated. The classification was not made upon figures of income or expenditure, but always upon an inspection of the family and the family circumstances in its own homestead. Only such families as were well-housed, well-fed, well-clothed according to the evidence of the eye were permitted to be classified as living in comfort. By such a safeguard it was intended that the method of enquiry should be thoroughly practical, avoiding anything academic or mechanical, but ensuring accuracy by concomitant statistical investigation.

After the investigation was completed and the statistics were ready, there remained the question of

the form in which they should be presented to the public. The statistics in themselves, however detailed or however condensed, if published without commentary or explanation, would be unintelligible to any reader except one closely connected with the district of Faridpur, and not easily intelligible even to him. On the other hand, if an explanation or commentary were to be supplied, it was necessary to decide whether it should be such as would serve to give the statistics a meaning to those who had never been in India, or as would satisfy those who already had some knowledge of the Indian world. It is only too clear to the author that his public will be very small, if indeed it prove to exist at all; yet the home of serious economic enquiry is in Europe, and he has therefore decided to attempt to explain the statistics in such a manner as to enable any one, whether acquainted with India or ignorant of it, to understand them. This decision involved the writing of a much longer book than would have otherwise been necessary; but the additional labour will not perhaps have been spent in vain if this book comes into the hands of a single serious enquirer outside of India.

I have already said that the information upon which this study is based has been collected by many helpers, who have obtained no other reward for their labours than the thanks of the author. His thanks are given to them from a full heart, for he knows too well what unending toil and irritation they underwent in the collection of the information. It is not right that their names should be unrecorded; but I have