

COMMUNICATIONS

Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies*

Dear Sir:

May I make some remarks on Dr. B. B. Misra's book, *The Central Administration of the East India Company, 1773-1834*, on which there is a review article by Mr. Morris David Morris in the November 1960 number of your journal. Not being familiar with the source material on each aspect of the subject, I am not competent to assess the book with anything like the comprehensiveness which your reviewer commands. I shall therefore confine my comments to the section on land revenue policy in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces (pp. 200-219).

My principal criticism of Dr. Misra is his uncritical and inadequate treatment of source material. Examples of this are his statements on the amount of the assessment (p. 203). The figure at which the land revenue of the territories ceded by the Nawab of Oudh was valued was exaggerated, says the author, because the Nawab's government wished to make the British believe they had gained more than in fact they had. This argument presupposes a degree of independence on the part of the Nawab and a degree of non-involvement in the revenue administration of his territories on the part of the Company which it is very doubtful existed at the time. Moreover, evidence to suggest that, in terms of what the Company got out of the existing rent-roll, the figure at which the land revenue was reckoned at the time of transfer, if such figures can at all be taken at their face value, represented an under-statement rather than an over-statement. For, one of the initial acts of the new government was to remove the great rent-farmers of the Nawab's government and to appropriate these profits, the amount of which had not been included in the original figure (c.f. India Office Library: *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 235; *Board's Collections*, Vols. 128 and 162). The author does not merely fail to take this evidence into account; he gives as his sole reference, and without mentioning its date, a settlement report

written in 1848, that is, more than seventy years after the time of which he is speaking. This report was on the settlement of a single district, Cawnpore, and in it the author, F. N. Wright, quoted from a memoir on Cawnpore written in 1848 by R. Montgomery. The phrase which Dr. Misra quotes is in fact part of the latter quotation, but this we do not learn either from his text or his footnotes. Indeed, he takes the quotation out of its context and without any further comment or corroborative evidence, applies it to the provinces as a whole.

Having said that the British authorities were led, somewhat innocently, into accepting too high a figure at the time of transfer, Dr. Misra has difficulty in squaring his argument with the fact that they themselves imposed a still higher assessment and continued to do so even though the collections repeatedly fell short of the assessment. He then rounds off his case with the startling remark that it was all due to ignorance, as he says, "due to general want of circumstantial information respecting the internal resources of the country."

This, surely, is an over-simplification. For although the British did not at this time possess that knowledge of the conditions of the land which they acquired in the course of the next thirty years or so, over-assessment in the early years can scarcely be attributed to simple ignorance. As evidence, I refer to a well-known source, and one which Dr. Misra himself cites elsewhere: The Report of Commissioners Cox and Tucker, April 13, 1808. The authors here (pars. 11-14) declared quite candidly that they knew the land revenue in these provinces to be excessive, but that in the absence of any alternative source of revenue the government had no option but to uphold the high assessment.

Dr. Misra, apparently, is too preoccupied with justifying the actions of the Company's government to face the evidence squarely. He seems all too ready to accept the motives and principles of policy at their face value as they appear in official declarations, and is not concerned with noting how far operative policy

diverged from formal declarations. This indeed would seem to be an essential weakness of this method. We are told that his main concern is with the growth of the machinery of administration and that this is related to the problems of land revenue administration. But these problems must be located first and foremost in the districts where the settlement and collection of revenue took place, and, it is this level of the administration with which the author appears to be surprisingly unfamiliar. What he does most of the time is to summarize the correspondence of the Court of Directors and the Governors General, together with references to and extracts from the Bengal Regulations. These sources are invariably formulations of policy and do not enlighten us on the way in which that policy was applied, a distinction of which Dr. Misra scarcely seems aware. Conversely, he nowhere relates the development of

the administrative structure to the living problems of revenue administration. His references to the districts are taken mostly from Sir John Kaye's *The Administration of the East India Company*, and his own general statements and use of terms suggest that he knows very little about local conditions and developments. The result is, not merely do we not get the "clear, analytical study of development" which he seems to promise us in his introduction, but there are numerous factual inaccuracies in these twenty pages. They do not inspire confidence in the author's judgment, least of all where we may not ourselves be acquainted with the sources.

Yours faithfully,
ASIYA SIDDIQI

*Somerville College
Oxford, England
March 3, 1961*