

Land Monopoly at its Grimmiest

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THAT WIDESPREAD economic and chattel slavery of the cruelest kind is still to be found in the world today is made startlingly and shockingly clear in a report on Afghanistan by Peter Willey published in July by the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights.

The report* deals first with the economic and social conditions of the landless in Afghanistan, who, whether the term slave is in every case technically correct or not, live lives which make any distinction irrelevant, their rent to their overlords often being paid with their bodies as well as with their produce.

Mr. Willey then goes on to describe the increasing growth of narcotic production as the basis for Afghanistan's economy and reveals the widespread misery this engenders as it spreads its evil tentacles in all directions.

Says Mr. Willey: "The vastly increased world demand for opium derivatives and hashish has boosted production enormously, and I would suggest that Afghanistan is the principal supplier. The landlords have taken full advantage of the situation, but the need for security both in the growing of narcotics and their transportation has made the lot of the tenant even harsher. So much is at stake that the landlords have been forced to become even more ruthless, to safeguard their profits as well as their skins, though they have little to fear from the government."

Although conditions vary in different parts of the country, the general picture of ruthless landlordism emerges from the report.

"The treatment of tenants by landlords," says the author, "is exactly that of chattels or cattle. In law the slave is both a thing and a person. As a thing he can be owned, sold, hired, given away or bequeathed. He may belong to two or more owners at the same time and "held

in common." The law also lays down the reward for the return of the runaway slave."

The oppression stems from an unholy alliance between religious establishments, the landlords and the Government. There is a deeply entrenched opposition to any change in religious or social structures of the State and the landlords are determined not to have their privileges eroded by such reforms as have been instigated in Iran and they fight fiercely against any proposals for land reform.

"The alliance of mullah and landlord has effectively blocked any Bill presented to Parliament to introduce reforms. In the country districts the mullahs hold undisputed sway together with the landlords.

"An American who taught at Kabul University for two years, spent some time in the Hazara area and told a member of my mission that the Hazara are "organised" by the Pashtoons—the ruling class in modern Afghanistan. The Pashto landlords live in fortified areas in the villages and force the Hazara to grow grain for them for fifteen afs a sere. This is then sold for 30-40 afs a sere in Kabul. The Hazara may not sell wheat to anyone else, and hate and fear their landlords. The Pashtos moved into the area about 50 years ago and have also forcibly transferred Hazara families to the areas around Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif as well as to Badakhshan (all these are opium growing areas).

"This situation was confirmed to me in three conversations in Kabul with Europeans and Afghans, and is no secret. The Hazaras are whipped, tortured and even branded if they do not obey their masters. On some estates they are shackled and their diet is at starvation level. I have visited Hazara villages myself and confirm that the general picture is one of misery and squalor."

The excuse of the economic vicious circle—hungry soil, hungry plants, hungry people cannot be invoked,

says the author. "Some of the valleys of the Hindu Kush and Badakhshan, for example, are rich in corn, fruit and vegetable crops of all kinds. There is water in abundance and a labour force which, if properly educated, equipped, directed and treated, would be capable of making the area the granary of the whole country. . . .

"In order to protect accumulated hereditary wealth, land ownership is kept within a small exclusive club of landowners. Probably no more than five or six great landlords control each province. The landlords appoint the headmen of the villages and have absolute control of their tenants. Hereditary wealth and privilege still remain the basis for all positions in this feudal society, and summary justice is often administered before a case ever reaches the courts. The tenant is told exactly what crops to grow (wheat, fruit, opium, etc.). He cannot move to another village without the permission of the landowner or his representative, and if he does he will be unable to gain further employment for himself or his family, and runs the real risk of starvation. The landlord makes an agreement with the tenant as to how the crops shall be shared. The portion which the landlord allots to the tenant constitutes the sole income of the tenant.

The tenants have no effective protection in law although in theory they have recourse to the courts. No tenant would dream of taking this action, says the report. "First, because he does not know how to set about it, secondly, because of the cost of litigation involved, and thirdly, because of fear of reprisals on himself and his family by the aggrieved landowner. In any event, he would almost certainly lose his case and his savings would have been swallowed up in the process. The thralldom of hereditary debt is probably worse in Afghanistan than anywhere else in Central Asia. In the South and West of the country some landlords keep their own private armies for the protection of their estates."

As Henry George said, it is the conditions of land tenure which ultimately determine the economic, social and moral conditions of a people.

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