

IS THE NEW BETTER THAN THE
OLD ?

(For the Review.)

BY THE LATE J. H. WELLS.

William Robertson, 1791, in his "Historical Disquisition concerning India," says: "There were four original castes:

- First, priests and teachers.
- Second, soldiers and rulers.
- Third, farmers and merchants.
- Fourth, servants and laborers.

The ascent from an inferior to a higher caste was absolutely impossible.

The sacred rights of the Brahmans opposed a barrier against the encroachments of regal power. Nor were the benefits of these restraints upon the power of the sovereign confined wholly to the two superior orders in the State; they extended, in some degree, to the third class employed in agriculture. The labors of that numerous and useful body of men are so essential to the preservation and happiness of society, that the greatest attention was paid to render their condition secure and comfortable. According to the ideas which prevailed among the natives of India, as we are informed by the first European who visited their country, the sovereign is considered as the sole universal proprietor of all the land in his dominions, and from him is derived every species of tenure by which his subjects can hold it. These lands were let out to the farmers who cultivated them, at a stipulated rent, amounting usually to a fourth part of their annual produce paid in kind. In a country where the labor of cultivation is inconsiderable, the earth yielding its productions almost spontaneously, where few clothes are needed, and houses are built and furnished at little expense, this rate cannot be deemed exorbitant or oppressive. As long as one paid the established rent, he retained possession of the farm, which descended, like property, from father to son. This arrangement has been maintained in all the provinces subject either to Mohammedans or Europeans. In a more remote period, before the original institutions of India were subverted by foreign invaders, the industry of the husbandman, on which every member of the community depended for subsistence, was as secure as the tenure by which he held his lands was equitable. Even war did not interrupt his labors or endanger his property.

These maxims and regulations of the ancient legislators of India have a near resemblance to the system of those ingenious speculators on political economy in modern times, who represent the produce of land as the sole source of wealth in every country; and who consider the discovery of this principle, according to which they contend that the government of nations should be con-

ducted, as one of the greatest efforts of human wisdom. Under a form of government which paid such attention to all the different orders of which the society is composed, particularly the cultivators of the earth, it is not wonderful that the ancients should describe the Indians as a most happy race of men; and that the most intelligent modern observers should celebrate the equity, the humanity, and the mildness of the Indian policy. A Hindoo Rajah, as I have been informed by persons well acquainted with the state of India, resembles more a father presiding over a numerous family of his own children, than a sovereign ruling over inferiors, subject to his dominion. There were established among the Indians three distinct classes of officers, one of which had it in charge to inspect agriculture, and every kind of country work. They measured the portions of land allotted to each renter. They had the custody of the tanks, or public reservoirs of water, without a regular distribution of which the fields in a torrid climate cannot be rendered fertile, and they measured and marked out the course of the highways. To a second class of officer was committed the inspection of the police, and the third class superintended the military department. Towards the middle of the sixteenth century, Akbar, the sixth in descent from Tamerlane, mounted the throne of Hindostan. He is called both the Great and the Good. Although of Mohammedan race, he protected everyone in the free exercise and enjoyment of his own religion. A general and regular assessment of revenue in Bengal was begun in his reign. From the reign of Akbar unto Jaffeer Ali Cawn, in 1757, the annual amount of revenue, and the modes of levying it, continued with little variation. But in order to raise the sum which he had stipulated to pay the English on his elevation, he departed from the wise arrangements of Akbar; many new modes of assessment were introduced, and exactions multiplied.

Here bodily health and comfortable subsistence were assumed and taken for granted without comment. Such a thing as a famine, or a plague, or a pestilence, was not so much as mentioned. Here was practically common ownership of land, tenure from the sovereign; here was practically a Single Tax for revenue, in proportion to land value, or productiveness, and the result appears so far to have been beneficent. If there was a hindrance to equity in distribution it was in the separation of castes. The Scotch historian a hundred years ago had already shown that the result of comparison between old and new was unfavorable to the English. If that be so, what shall we say of a comparison with the conditions in the twentieth century? Charles Edward Russell, 1906, in *Everybody's Magazine* for June, says:

"The four great divisions were originally

- 1 The Brahmans or priests.
- 2 The warriors.
- 3 The farmers and traders.
- 4 The Sudras, who were serfs and laborers.

No person born in one of these classes can by any possibility raise himself to a higher class. As he was born, so he remains. Wherever this system exists is no progress, no enterprise, no improvement. The English government, instead of trying to obliterate caste, sedulously upholds it as a bulwark of its own supremacy.

"The one hundred and fifty years of British rule in India have seen twenty-three great Indian famines. Famines grow worse and come oftener. The primary cause is the land and tax systems. The immediate cause is the failure of the rainfall. Water may readily be had by digging, and where there is water there is no famine. Every day the wind blows ten to fifteen miles an hour, but I traveled 2,000 miles and saw only two wind-mill pumps. Gasoline is cheap, but I have never seen or heard of a gasoline pump anywhere in India, and I have never heard that the Government took enough interest in the matter to introduce such things. The famines are absolutely unnecessary. The farmer of India is the most heavily-taxed person in the world. The tax that he pays is equivalent to an income tax of 50 to 55 per cent. In some regions it is even more. He is literally taxed into famine. The Indian cultivator lives in a state that no American farmer would tolerate for his hogs. Sometimes the Indian farmer is a peasant proprietor, owning the land he tills. Many of these have been sold out for defaulting in their taxes. He is never able to accumulate even the smallest reserve, and at the best he must live from hand to month. But instead of digging canals for irrigation, the Government is spending its revenue in restoring old tombs. In the famine's wake epidemics follow. Famine slays its millions, and the diseases that are famine's children slay their tens of millions."

Mr. Russell further describes the condition of the Sudras, or common laborers, as being even worse than that of the farmers. But as Mr. Robertson, for whatever reason, scarcely more than mentions them, I have not included them in my comparison. In respect to land tenure, taxation and irrigation, as determining general conditions, the contrast is clear. Who can say that the new is better than the old? Who can say that it is not now much worse? Is not a Hindoo Rajah who will feed us, better than an English Lord Viceroy who will starve us? Mr. Robertson indeed acknowledges that progress was impossible, and Mr. Russell admits that although the Hindoo and Mohomedan rulers had the power to collect the same taxes, they never exercised

the right to the limit, up to a century and a half ago.

The late Ernest Crosby's article in a recent number of THE REVIEW furnished me the occasion for writing this, and I am free to acknowledge that he has given me a new point of view. Though he is speaking of Japan, I could apply his contention equally to Peru or to India. It has enabled me to see what I did not see before—that the picture of the Hindoo Rajah presiding over his children implied not only the kindness of the ruler, but the absolute and childlike subserviency of the people; that it was "the peace which reigned in Warsaw," the most abject submission to the most irresponsible tyranny. He has diminished for me the painful contrast between the new and the old, but as it yet seems to me not so much by showing that the new is better, but rather by proving that the old was worse than I had thought. I believe that the profitableness to Single Taxers of a knowledge of the history of ancient nations is that it may enable us to avoid their errors and to improve on their successes. I believe that the land tenure, the tax system and the irrigation methods of ancient India were good, because they promoted freedom. I believe the caste system was evil because it destroyed freedom. I agree with Mr. Crosby that individual freedom should be fought for always and maintained at whatever necessary cost. I believe the general welfare of all is best promoted when the freedom of every individual is greatest. Henry George has most clearly shown that association in equality is the law of progress; that modern civilization owes its superiority to the growth of equality with the growth of association; but that in our time, as in times before, insidious forces have entered, and by producing inequality, destroyed liberty. "Where liberty sinks, there virtue fades, wealth diminishes, knowledge is forgotten, invention ceases, and empires once mighty become a helpless prey."

THE SINGLE TAX IS THE AUTOMATIC EQUILIBRIUM.

One part of the world raises an incessant cry for more labor. The Western States need harvest hands, the South wants more cotton pickers and laborers generally, the Panama Canal Zone cannot get enough diggers, South Africa quarrels over a few Chinese, Cuba seeks plantation hands to handle its sugar crops, the Hawaiian Islands report a never ending labor famine, our Pacific Coast States are in a chronic condition of under supply of workmen in all enterprises, New England is worried over its servant problem. Another part of the world has so many laborers that they starve in heaps. An automatic equilibrium in human energy does not exist, and possibly one never will.—*Springfield Republican*.