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Land Acquisition, Landlessness, and the Building of New Delhi

As architects and high officials debated the symbolic relationship of architecture to empire and as town planners worked out the final details of their town plan, land acquisition officers from the Government of India began the tedious process of assessing and acquiring lands for the new capital on a monumental scale. With the aid of the Delhi District's Land Revenue Office, town planners designated approximately 40,000 sq. acres to the south-west of the existing city of Delhi. The proceedings represented a moment when British abstract notions about imperial legitimacy, about the architectural aesthetics of empire, and, indeed, about the contribution of the British Empire to India's progress ran up against material reality. This chapter examines the manner in which New Delhi's *abstract* imperial vision was played out against and made possible by *real* people on the ground. In particular, it focuses on the colonial mechanisms of domination and subordination inscribed in New Delhi at its most basic level – namely, the land upon which the city itself was actually built. It does so by looking at the enclosing of lands and the removal of Indian communities for the building of New Delhi. Most dispossessed agriculturalists were given cash awards for their Delhi lands and offered the opportunity to purchase new lands in the neighbouring Punjab districts of Karnal and Rohtak or farther away in the new canal colonies of the Punjab's Lower Bari Doab.

The colonial government's acquisition of lands for the new capital sheds light on the growing divide between Britain's new, more progressive vision of empire and the potentially harsh consequences of its free market principles at the turn of the century. This disconnect between opportunity and disruption points to the limitations, or possibly the logical endpoint, of the colonial project, reformed or otherwise. One of the greatest of New Delhi's many ironies was the manner in which a city

designed to silence Indian criticism of British rule actually highlighted systemic problems in Britain's political economy and, subsequently, its approach to colonial land policy in India. In short, the colonial government's construction of its progressive vision at Delhi required the exploitation of the very people it claimed to protect and advance.

The permanent land settlement and Britain's political economy in India

The enclosing of land for the building of New Delhi took on characteristics similar to but also quite different from earlier land enclosure movements. Unlike powerful English landowners who privatized common lands in England to increase their personal wealth, the Government of India enclosed lands near Delhi as part of the process of reinterpreting the meaning of empire in twentieth-century India. New Delhi was not meant to enrich private individuals but to reinvigorate, collectively, the British imperial project in India. Britain's enclosing of land for the building of New Delhi followed land policies long used in British-India. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894, which gave the British government the authority to enclose private lands for public purposes, had its antecedents in an earlier East India Company land law, the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. Passed in 1793 under Lord Cornwallis's government, this Land Act 'settled permanently the revenue to be paid by landlords to the state, giving them immunity against revenue increase in addition to security of ownership'.¹ According to Ranajit Guha, the ideas and values behind the settlement drew on French and British enlightened economic thinking, particularly regarding free trade and the perceived social and economic benefits brought by securing individual property ownership.² The latter ineluctably led to the improvement of lands according to Philip Francis, an influential author of the Bengal settlement.³ Individual property ownership, and thus a direct stake in the land's productive potential, created, in theory, a more stable, satisfied, and wealthy rural India. However, as Thomas Metcalf long ago showed, rather than improving their private property, as Francis argued they would, many Indian landowners became burdened by crushing debt as they sought loans from local *baniyas* (bankers), merchants, or wealthy neighbours to meet their land revenue obligations, their family responsibilities, or simply to purchase the following year's agricultural necessities such as seed.⁴ One problem, for many agriculturalists, was that the East India Company initially set a high revenue demand on permanently settled lands to ensure that the company received the

highest revenues the lands could bear in perpetuity. Another problem concerned introducing the free market to the rural economy. Whether agriculturalists or not, Indians with investment capital accumulated land while many cultivators became tenant farmers. This connection between land and capital created precisely what Francis wished to avoid in his enlightened and progressive land reforms, a feudal-like agricultural economy.⁵ Though later Land Alienation Acts were passed by the British to impede the transfer of land from agriculturalists to non-agriculturalists, 'the result ... was that the moneylending business was taken over by the wealthier agriculturalists, who stepped into the *baniyas'* shoes'.⁶

The Permanent Settlement was repeated throughout British India via periodic settlement reports drawn up by local District Collectors and their staffs. These reports and the occasional District Gazetteer, which attempted to draw a general picture of a district's social and cultural life, exemplified the state's simplification of complex rural communities. Local colonial governments measured only what was of interest to the colonial state's revenue streams, the most important of which was land tenure which determined who would bear the burden of taxation. Often relying on the fieldwork of Indians who worked in his office, the District Collector drafted reports based on static aggregates that grouped people in ways that allowed 'collective assessment', as James Scott has shown for other communities.⁷ His primary administrative goal was to 'measure, codify, and simplify land tenure', a process of 'heroic simplification of individual freehold tenure'.⁸ The British Raj's simplification of the relationship between the land and the people who worked it gave the state access to what Scott calls 'synoptic facts' that made taxation more efficient and predictable into the future.⁹ In the case of land acquisition for the new capital, the land acquisition office remapped and reassessed Delhi's rural land holdings, considering 'only the dimensions of the land and its value as a productive asset or as a commodity for sale'.¹⁰ As such, the land acquisition officer followed long-held protocols concerning land tenure in India, namely that 'each holding be held in full proprietary title by a single owner', as Metcalf claims.¹¹

The decision to build a new capital gave the colonial government an opportunity to further modernize property relations in the Delhi District, but the colonial government's firm commitment to free market principles, which shaped its land acquisition laws, made landlessness for many Delhi farmers a near certainty. Additionally, Britain's reluctance to forego free market principles even during moments of natural disaster, such as droughts, not only failed to slow the financial ruin

of many Delhi agriculturalists but also, in many ways, hastened it in the years just prior to the building of New Delhi. Though the colonial government was committed to offering fair compensation and resettlement to Indians who lost their property for the building of the new capital, it was also faithful to official land policies. Certainly, larger Delhi landowners with disposable capital or deep connections with the British government were able to leverage the process of land enclosure for economic benefit. But Britain's political economy, which above all valued property, made no allowances during the land acquisition proceedings for the rights of those without title to the land. The land acquisition office's static picture of private property ownership ignored local customs regarding labour and its compensation. In so doing, land acquisition officers chose not to recognize that 'customs are better understood as a living, negotiated tissue of practices which are continually being adapted to new ecological and social circumstances', as Scott claims.¹² Even after a century of British rule in the area, Delhi's adaptable rural environs allowed a complex reciprocal relationship to develop between landowners and non-landowners where they had 'no difficulty in grasping its subtleties and using its flexible provisions for their own purposes'.¹³ But the government's acquisition of land for the new capital, based on a myopic view much like a cadastral map, led to a compensation system that left both landowners and non-landowners alike in vulnerable positions. Thus, the colonial state set adrift many rural residents who did not own land near Delhi but worked for the dispossessed residents that did. Many Delhi agriculturalist, who had lost either their lands or their livelihoods for the building of New Delhi, were swept away by British land policies that privileged private property and the free market over community and social cohesion.

An understanding of the influence that Britain's political economy had on the process of land acquisition and its impact on Delhi's rural communities is more important than ever in light of an emerging trend in scholarship on the British Empire. Several recent studies have attempted to re-examine the benefits brought by British colonial rule. Most notably, Niall Ferguson has argued that British imperialism introduced liberal economic theories to the colonial world, making it better prepared for the modern global economy.¹⁴ Pushing the point even further, Michael Mandelbaum has argued that the spreading of the free market to undeveloped or developing parts of the world is the first step toward their democratization.¹⁵ He finds India a particularly interesting test case for his theory, arguing that Britain's long inculcation of free market thinking during the colonial period created a remarkably stable

democracy in independent India.¹⁶ Certainly, both Mandelbaum and Ferguson would concede that British colonialism caused tremendous damage in some areas of colonial life, but both conclude that the British Empire brought more good than harm.

John Gray provides a far more convincing approach that counters Ferguson and Mandelbaum's arguments. He posits that 'democracy and the free market are rivals, not allies'.¹⁷ The free market, for Gray, must end in what he calls a 'politics of insecurity' for an overwhelming majority of people.¹⁸ Contrary to what many of its proponents claim, the free market does not arise from natural economic conditions – the invisible hand as Adam Smith would proclaim – and it is most certainly not encouraged by deregulation. In fact, according to Gray, 'free markets are creatures of state power, and persist only so long as the state is able to prevent human needs for security and the control of economic risk from finding political expression'.¹⁹ In the case of India, colonial officials rigidly held to free market economic principles that led to some of the greatest failures of British rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the following examination of land acquisition shows, Delhi's rural communities were well down the road of agricultural ruin when George V declared his desire to build a new capital in the district. A similar free market philosophy that stayed the hands of the colonial government to ease the economic stress caused by late nineteenth-century droughts now would be employed to dispossess Delhi farmers of their land and to resettle them in potentially higher revenue yielding canal colonies in the Punjab.

Physical geography and social make-up of the Delhi District

What did the area in and around Delhi look like just prior to the transfer of the capital? What were its settlement patterns and how did these patterns influence relations between Indians and British administrators as well as relations between Indian landowning agriculturalists and Indian village proprietors? What was the quality of the soil and how much land was irrigated by wells or canals for these were the two most important criteria for determining land value in the relatively arid district? By knowing what the Delhi area physically and socially looked like before land acquisition began, we gain a better sense of the material and cultural transformations that took place in consequence of the decision to transfer the capital.

Demographically, the Delhi District was characterized by one large city amidst many dozens of small agricultural villages averaging 1,100 acres.

The average village population was 900, and village revenue payments yielded Rs 1,500 per year on average.²⁰ According to the *Third Regular Settlement, 1906–1910*, 67 per cent of the district's land was cultivated, 18 per cent was culturable waste used for grazing, and 15 per cent was unculturable waste often occupied by non-agricultural industries such as brick kilns.²¹ As Thomas Metcalf has shown for the neighbouring lands of the United Provinces, which shared similar soils, climate, and rainfall patterns, the Delhi District was characterized by low agricultural yields.²² Consequently, there were few rich and powerful land magnates in the Delhi District because the soil could not support them. Instead, the average farm was only 2.2 acres.²³

The agricultural quality of the land, and thus the revenue due the Government of India, was determined primarily by irrigation improvements and secondarily by the basic composition of the soil and the nature of the substrata.²⁴ As David Ludden argues, 'Everywhere (except at very high altitudes), the calendar and the rhythms of farming in South Asia [were] pegged not to temperature but rather to moisture.'²⁵ Hence, the local government was responsible for two agricultural improvements: bands and canals. Located on hills, bands were artificially flattened areas of cultivation made possible by building down-slope retaining walls that trapped rain water during the monsoon and winter rains. Approximately 2,400 acres of hill country in the Delhi District were irrigated by bands, or less than one per cent of the cultivated area.²⁶ Much more significant were two canals, the Agra and Western Yamuna, which ran through the west and south-west portions of the district. Dating back to the Mughal period, the two canals irrigated 98,519 acres, about 18 per cent of the cultivated area of the district.²⁷ The most common and most economic land improvement, however, was the building of wells at the landowner's expense. In the Delhi District, 105,976 acres, or 19.5 per cent, were irrigated by wells.²⁸ This left over half of the district's rural lands dependent on the summer monsoons, a fact that made the district prone to agricultural crises during drought years.

Two harvest periods, the *kharif* (October–January) and the *rabi* (April–May), defined rural life. Both were determined by two wet periods – the more predictable summer monsoon between July and August and sporadic winter rains.²⁹ Dry weather prevailed between these two wet periods, creating a season of cultivation during the monsoons and a season of circulation during dry weather. Crops during the season of circulation, according to Ludden, 'take new life' by assuming 'new material forms as moveable measures and piled-up stores of grain, fruit, pulses, and vegetables, in stocks, carts, trucks, bags, head loads,

and shops'.³⁰ In short, they became commodities to be priced, traded, and speculated. Hence, the trader of agricultural goods was just as important to the health of the agricultural system as the farmer scraping a living from the soil. 'Agrarian wealth [arose],' claims Ludden, 'from the social powers that articulate[d] these two great seasons – of cultivation and circulation – in the life of agricultural produce.'³¹

Almost the entire rural population depended on agriculture in one way or another.³² Seasonal labourers often belonged to traditionally non-agricultural castes. Two of the most common were *chamars* (leather workers) and *chuhras* (sweepers). Other villagers who seasonally worked in the fields or were closely tied to landowners were *khatīs* (carpenters), *lohars* (blacksmiths), *kumhars* (potters), *dhobīs* (washers), and *sakkas*, *jhinwars* and *kahars* (all three water carriers). Lastly, nomadic peoples such as *Kanjars* or *Saperas* were sometimes used as agricultural workers during the harvest. In the Delhi District, much like the neighbouring districts across the Yamuna, village tradesmen were often cultivators as well.³³ Seasonal labourers regularly asked to be paid in kind rather than in cash, especially during the *rabi* when wheat was grown and when food stores were less predictable due to the sporadic nature of winter rain. Small land holders, whose lands did not produce enough food to feed the family a whole year, also often asked to be paid in kind when hiring themselves out to wealthier neighbours. The amount of grain paid to agricultural workers was typically four *pulis* (sheaves) of wheat. The Settlement Officer for Delhi estimated that nomadic peoples earned from 2 to 8 per cent of the harvest in lieu of cash wages.³⁴

Land tenure and land occupancy in the Delhi District, as in much of India, could be difficult to gauge precisely though Government of India District Collectors made committed efforts to penetrate the haze. In general, rural lands in the Delhi District fell under three occupancy categories: owners, tenants, and tenants-at-will (see Table 8.1). Lands often

Table 8.1 Land tenures in the Delhi District, 1911³⁵

Land tenures	Percentage of district
Occupied by owners	56
Occupancy tenants:	
Free of rent	2
Cash rents	9.25
In-kind rents	0.25
Occupied by tenants-at-will	
Cash rents	25
In-kind rents	7.5

were held by individuals or by *Bhaiacharya*, a system of tenure in which a group of men, often brothers, owned a single unit of land. Occupancy tenants and tenants-at-will, both of which averaged less than two acres per holding, either paid no rent to a *zamindar* (landowner) or paid rents in cash or kind.³⁶ Cash rents were by far the most common. Individuals who fell within the two forms of tenancy were in a strong occupancy position and their rents to landowners were often low because they were determined by long-standing custom or traditional rights. More importantly, landowners tended to avoid demanding higher rents from their tenants because it meant recourse to the courts. Much like other regions of India, it was in the best interest of landowners to keep the true nature of their land holdings vague in order to protect themselves from the demands of British revenue officers. As P. J. Marshall has argued, 'To set all [property] down on paper would make all vulnerable.'³⁷ *Ryots* (peasants) and *zamindars* 'had more confidence in their own powers of concealment and evasion than in the good intentions of government and the working of the courts'.³⁸ Vague land tenures were particularly important for rural residents living in a district where the average landholding was a bare two acres and where it was often difficult to determine who was a *ryot* and who was a *zamindar*. Thus, the Delhi District's land tenure structure reflected the difficulties the colonial state faced when attempting to codify and simplify its understanding of the relationship between individuals and land. In the Delhi District, as Scott claims for other cities, 'the actual practices of customary land tenure were frequently so varied and intricate as to defy any one-to-one equation of taxpayer and taxable property'.³⁹ Delhi's rural residents had resisted to some degree the incursions of the District Collector and his staff because many of them would be damaged by 'the unified and transparent set of property relations desired by the state's fiscal agents'.⁴⁰

The rural lands around Delhi had been extensively farmed for many generations. This is made clear by comparing the *Regular Settlement Reports* from 1880 and 1910. The area under cultivation in 1880 was 519,417 acres; in 1910 the cultivated area had risen to 544,055.⁴¹ This represented a relatively small 4.6 per cent increase over a 30-year period suggesting that the district's arable land had been settled at near maximum capacity since at least 1880. The rural villages around Delhi were relatively small with the landowner at the centre of a complex labour and social system. Community members were bound not only by cash wages but also by payments in kind during certain times of the year. There was certainly a considerable flow of people in and out of the village, particularly during harvests, but there was also a great sense

of reciprocity between, say, the ploughman and the *zamindar* or the *zamindar* and the *chumar* (sweeper). 'Social commitments within families, communities, sects, castes, and other groups ... enable[d] farmers to acquire what they need[ed] to plough and plant' and subsequently survive from one year to the next, according to Ludden.⁴²

After several generations of detailed Settlement Reports that exhaustively mapped land ownership for revenue purposes, the local colonial government still failed to fully appreciate the social makeup of village life in the Delhi District. The problem was not due to any lack of information. Indeed, Delhi's Deputy Commissioner, Major H. C. Beadon, had just written a detailed Gazetteer on the district that examined social and geographical features as diverse as marital rites to soil types. Aided by a cadre of local Indian civil servants, Beadon knew a great deal about rural communities in the Delhi District. The problem was that this cultural and social information was irrelevant to the needs of a state whose primary concern was revenue. Minutia like the fact that the village barber oversaw weddings in some communities, and was thus an important agent for social cohesion, was inherently interesting to an anthropologist perhaps but not of overriding significance to the District Collector's revenue accounts. The rich texture and diversity of traditions that brought people and the land together in a sustainable and productive way were 'reduced to a convenient, if partly fictional, shorthand' that gave the local government a better sense of land holdings in the district.⁴³ Subsequently, the state's focus on property holdings and assessments erased the complexity of village social life and ignored the glue that held people together. These village communities, bound by ties of reciprocity between individuals and loosely held together by vague rights to the land, were difficult to recreate elsewhere.

Land enclosure under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894

Tracing the various processes by which Britain enclosed lands underscores the ambiguities of the symbolism posed by New Delhi. The gap between the harsh realities of land acquisition and the rhetoric of reform damaged the new imperial vision Britain worked so hard to create in its new capital. Two important impulses shaped land acquisitions for the building of New Delhi: the need to keep costs down and the desire to take possession of Indian lands under the rule of law. Both impulses worked toward the same ultimate goal, enclosing Indian lands for British imperial purposes. The acquisitions would have to be carefully handled since the Government of India wished to avoid creating

hostility over the acquisition of land for a building project meant to silence Indian agitation. Yet, in the end, Britain's new imperial vision, built on a foundation of shattered rural communities, collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions.

The Government of India turned to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 to reapportion property rights from the private sector (controlled by Indians) to the public sector (controlled by the colonial government). It authorized the colonial government to take control of lands deemed necessary for public purposes, in this case a new capital, and to compensate dispossessed individuals. The Act provided various descriptions of interested parties, listed the appropriate procedures for assessment and acquisition, described the rights of the dispossessed, and offered terms of compensation. The Act also set the price of land at its value on the day that its acquisition was announced in one of the official government gazettes of British-India. In the case of acquiring lands for New Delhi, this notice was issued in the *Punjab Gazette* on 21 December 1911, just nine days after the king's proclamation to transfer the capital from Calcutta to Delhi.⁴⁴ This ensured that land acquisition officers purchased lands at prices that had not been driven up by speculation, as many feared in Parliament.

The enclosing of lands for New Delhi required a special establishment drawn from the district's Land Revenue Office, which had the most detailed knowledge of the Delhi District's agricultural communities. H. C. Beadon and later J. Addison were selected to run the new land acquisition establishment. Indian members, however, were far more essential to the process of land acquisition since they were more intimate with the district's farmers than their British officers. An Assistant Commissioner and two Extra Assistant Commissioners worked closely with their British superiors in the Land Acquisition Office. Four *naib tahsildars* (revenue deputies in charge of district subdivisions), fourteen *patwaris* (keepers of revenue accounts), and seven field *kanungos* (field assessors) made up the rest of the Land Acquisition Office. Field *kanungos* and *patwaris* did most of the measurements on the notified lands and had the greatest interaction with landowners. Additionally, a Special Indian Pleader, who acted as a liaison between the Government and local residents, was essential to the process of land acquisition. The need for an Indian pleader was a good example of just how alien the British land tenure model still seemed to many local Indians, even after years of dealing with the British revenue system and the District Collector. As Scott claims, 'What was simplifying to an official was mystifying to most cultivators.'⁴⁵ Rai Sahib Lala Mool Chand, who held this

position, worked hard to minimize Indian discontent and to encourage them to accept the government's compensation.

In the final land acquisition report, J. Addison, who took over as the head of the Land Acquisition Office in late 1912, spoke glowingly of his Indian staff singling out the two Extra Assistant Commissioners, Rai Bahadur Lala Daswandhi Ram and M. Khazan Singh; the *naib tahsildars*, M. Amir Singh, M. Raghbir Singh, and M. Mohamad Saddiq; and the *kanungos*, M. Fazal Din, M. Arjan Singh, P. Tej Kishan, and L. Kali Ram. Addison wrote that the arduous work of acquisition required 'delicate and tactful handling' and that 'success was only possible with the loyal help of all the staff'.⁴⁶ British officials may have held the highest offices, but Indian civil servants made the acquisitions possible.

The Land Acquisition Office divided the designated area for New Delhi into five main blocks.⁴⁷ Block A, the military cantonment, was an area to the south-west of where New Delhi would eventually be built. The cantonment also included the areas of high ground demanded by the military. Block B, where the government buildings would arise, lay adjacent to old Delhi.⁴⁸ Blocks C, D and E represented future imperial city extensions and were important for controlling the city's growth. Using the guidelines of the Land Acquisition Act, lands to be acquired were measured, valued, and acquired on a village-by-village basis within these five blocks (see Table 8.2).

The average cost per acre of enclosed lands shows the government's wisdom in selecting a largely agricultural rather than urbanized area for the building of New Delhi. The average price for privately owned agricultural land acquired for the imperial city, its future extensions, and the cantonment was a little over Rs 156 per acre. This rate included the compulsory acquisition fee of 15 per cent of the assessed value of the land. In comparison, urban lands averaged a little over Rs 7,903 per acre. The lands closest to Delhi generally cost more to acquire

Table 8.2 Total expenditure for all lands acquired (in rupees)⁴⁹

	Awards	Misc.	Court increases	Total
Land acquired for Imperial Delhi	3,399,524	3,729	8,209	3,411,462
Land acquired for cantonments	1,263,490		474	1,263,964
Land acquired for New Delhi Railway Terminal Station	151,220			151,220
TOTAL	4,814,234	3,729	8,683	4,826,646

since farmers in this area often produced cash crops for local markets, which were assessed at higher amounts. The villages of Khandrat Kalan, Banskoli, Jurbagh, and Narhola, for example, averaged between Rs 271 and 473 per acre because of their proximity to Delhi whereas the villages of Alipur Pijanji and Malcha, because of their long distance from Delhi, cost between Rs 44 and 55 per acre.

Disruption, compensation, and the failures of the free market

Under the Land Acquisition Act, the Government of India had a variety of ways to compensate dispossessed landowners. It could offer single cash payments or revenue remissions on properties not acquired by the government. The government could also offer lands of equal value in exchange for acquired lands. Government discussions about compensation for lands acquired for New Delhi began as early as December 1912. Hoping to avoid any controversy that might undermine his plans for New Delhi, Hardinge encouraged Geoffrey deMontmorency, the interim president of the Imperial Delhi Committee, to seek the most equitable compensation for dispossessed Delhi landowners. A heated debate began over which form of compensation – land, cash, or revenue remission – would be most satisfactory for dispossessed Delhi landowners. Yet in many ways, the debate was not about compensating Indians but about the relationship between the rule of law, land, and the free market.

In March 1912, deMontmorency sent a memo to both the Home Department and the Revenue and Agriculture Department suggesting that Delhi's dispossessed landowners should be compensated in lands located as close as possible to Delhi and suggested that they also receive small sums for restarting their farms on new lands. As deMontmorency claimed in his memo, 'His Excellency [Hardinge] is anxious that the foundation of the new Capital at Delhi should not lead to any feelings of soreness or fancied injustice among those who are expropriated.'⁵⁰ Reminiscent of earlier debates concerning the permanent land settlement, ill feelings would be reduced by giving good farmland to people who knew how to use and improve it.⁵¹

However, deMontmorency's initial estimates tremendously underestimated the amount of land needed to compensate dispossessed Delhi landowners. In his original design for compensation, deMontmorency determined that only Indians who lost all their property for the building of New Delhi would be entitled to land awards. Large landowners,

in contrast, would be compensated either in cash or through revenue remissions. Believing that there were greater numbers of large landowners in the district, and thus far fewer landowners requiring compensation in land, deMontmorency wrongly estimated that about 8 square miles of land in the Delhi and nearby Rohtak and Karnal Districts would satisfy the compensation needs of land acquisition. By June 1912, however, land acquisition officers realized that dispossessed Delhi farmers would require much more land than was available for resettlement in the Delhi, Karnal and Rohtak Districts.⁵² In the end, the British government turned to the Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony for nearly two-thirds of its resettlement needs. Five thousand acres were set aside in the Rohtak and Karnal Districts, and the rest was found in the Lower Bari Doab.⁵³ Few dispossessed farmers were resettled in the Delhi District due to the unavailability of land.

The Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony posed a new problem for resettling Delhi's dispossessed landowners. As noted earlier, land acquisition officers assessed Delhi lands at Rs 156 per acre on average and sometimes far less. In contrast, land in the Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony cost a little over Rs 400 per acre on average between 1912 and 1927⁵⁴. As H. J. Maynard, an official of the Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony, made clear, '...some of the Delhi claimants are entitled to only a few hundred rupees a piece; and I do not see what they are to do with an acre or so of land on the Lower Bari Doab Canal'.⁵⁵ Recognizing this predicament and still desiring to keep hostility to a minimum, deMontmorency claimed that Delhi's dispossessed landowners should receive land compensations that were in excess of the lands they lost. It was 'hard on the farmer', he claimed, 'to go halfway across the province [for] 4/5 of an acre of canal land in a strange country, to which we know [they] are disinclined to go in any case, for the same money'.⁵⁶ Consequently, deMontmorency drafted a land transfer scale in which dispossessed Delhi farmers received liberal amounts of canal acreage for their relatively poor Delhi lands.⁵⁷ As deMontmorency claimed, 'We do not want an outcry that we have pared down the awards to the lowest possible figure, while the charge for the new land is assessed at an extravagantly high figure', deMontmorency argued.⁵⁸

Other officials, however, had a different view about compensating Delhi farmers for their loss of lands. H. B. Holmes, for example, argued that deMontmorency's plan set an extremely bad precedent. Delhi's dispossessed landowners, according to him, should not receive any preference because it would open the doors to further demands by Indians who had had their lands acquired by the British government for other

building projects. 'It is of the greatest importance', argued Holmes, 'to emphasize that ex-proprietors of land required for Delhi should not be more favourably dealt with than the ordinary ex-proprietors whose land is acquired under the Land Acquisition Act'.⁵⁹ He continued, 'If we were once to admit that the 15% given under the Act was not really adequate compensation for the compulsory nature of the acquisition under the Act, we should lay ourselves open to claims for further consideration in every case of acquisition under the Act.'⁶⁰ Holmes realized the uniqueness of the situation – that the land acquisitions were intended for a new capital meant to silence Indian disapproval of British rule – but that it was of the utmost importance to follow to the letter the policies of the Land Acquisition Act. Dispossessed Delhi landowners should be treated like typical Indian farmers seeking to purchase new lands for agricultural purposes. Holmes ended his response to deMontmorency's resettlement plans by stating, 'Personally, I have grave doubts about the wisdom of attempting to find land for anyone in these circumstances ... It is better to give them their money and let them do the best they can with it.'⁶¹

In the end, Holmes' argument won the day because it was rooted in what British colonial officials believed was their firm commitment to the unbending principles of the rule of law, which, according to many of them, made the British Empire unique in the history of India.⁶² Britain's rule of law, which had been shaped by enlightened reason and maintained by indifferent colonial officials, had given India stability because it supposedly made no distinction between colonial subjects. In contrast, the Indian empires of the past were characterized by fluid, unpredictable, and arbitrary systems of justice since the rule of law was in essence the will of the emperor. Thus, the rule of law was shaped and reshaped with each successive imperial rule. DeMontmorency's liberal compensation plan, though certainly more compassionate, simply reflected the wrong imperial tradition in India. The supposedly inflexible rule of law as set forth in the Land Acquisition Act would be arced in favour of Delhi's dispossessed farmers by deMontmorency's preferential treatment. It was simply dishonest and contrary to the spirit of the law to say that an acre of Delhi land was equal to an acre of canal land.

Based on Holmes' thinking, the Government of India authorized the Land Acquisition Office to offer cash awards as full compensation for lands acquired for the building of the new capital. No lands would be given in compensation. Instead, lands would be *reserved for purchase* in the Karnal, Rohtak, and Lower Bari Doab. The Land Acquisition Office advised dispossessed residents to bank their cash awards and

to report on a specified date to the courts of Deputy Commissioners where resettlement lands were located. The Land Acquisition Office kept a register of awards and informed Deputy Commissioners in the Karnal, Rohtak and especially Lower Bari Doab, of when to expect a new resident and how much land should be reserved for them. Their Delhi cash compensations became, in a sense, irrelevant. 'As there will be no obligatory payment of purchase money in such cases,' wrote the Land Acquisition Office, 'it will not be necessary to arrange that the value of the land given should bear any strict correspondence with the sum allotted as compensation for the Delhi lands.'⁶³ Instead, dispossessed Delhi residents would be required to purchase new lands in a new District, and their Delhi awards could be used to offset these costs. If these were insufficient, as most were, they would be eligible for agricultural loans.

A brief examination of a typical compensation case serves as an example of the Land Acquisition Office's process of compensation and resettlement. Bhola, a farmer from the village of Mubarikpur Reti, owned 0.20 acres of Delhi land assessed and compensated at a little over Rs 25.⁶⁴ Like other agriculturalist seeking lands in the Lower Bari Doab, he needed around Rs 10,000 to purchase one rectangle (25 acres) of canal land, the average size of an allotment.⁶⁵ Clearly, he was in no financial position to purchase canal lands outright with his Delhi compensation. However, this did not necessarily mean that Bhola could not be resettled here. With Bhola's approval, shown by a thumbprint, the Land Acquisition Office asked for and received one rectangle of land from the canal colony officer. What seems like a tremendously liberal compensation by the British – 25 acres of arable canal land for 0.20 acres of poor Delhi land – was actually a smart long-term, low-cost investment in the raw potential of an Indian farmer. The land was not given to Bhola as compensation. It was reserved for his immediate agricultural use, and he would pay for this land in future instalments 'on such terms as may be generally prescribed' by the British government.⁶⁶

The process of resettling Delhi farmers in the Lower Bari Doab Canal Colony had mixed results. For the most part, the few large Delhi landholders who lost all their lands chose to resettle in the canal colony. Larger landowners, typically, were connected to or on intimate terms with the Government of India before resettlement. Some large landowners had worked for the colonial government, using their incomes to expand their family's landholdings. Other landowners held *muafis* (lands free of revenue) or *jagirs* (lands where the revenue went to the owner rather than the government) in the Delhi District. The British,

as had the Mughals before them, gave these special land grants to individuals for meritorious service to the colonial government.⁶⁷ Still others, much like elsewhere in India, understood how to leverage for their benefit the conditions of the permanent land settlement. They recognized that the more arable lands of the canal colony combined with their existing capital and connections to the British offered tremendous financial advantages in the Lower Bari Doab. As Scott suggests, 'Those in the colonies who first plumbed the mysteries of the new tenure administration enjoyed unique opportunities.'⁶⁸ A significant problem, however, was that those with the deepest understanding of these legal codes were not agriculturalist but merchants or bankers, those urban rather than rural individuals who had had the longest interaction with the British.⁶⁹ Thus, in many ways the system rewarded and empowered the wrong people and hindered those who it was designed to benefit.

Peasant farmers, in contrast, faced a much greater dilemma. For some, their Delhi cash awards were too small even to finance the move from the Delhi District to the Lower Bari Doab let alone meet the costs of cultivating a new farm.⁷⁰ Others were reluctant to resettle in the Lower Bari Doab because of its distance from the Delhi District. These Indian agriculturalists were deeply concerned about the social impact resettlement would have on their families, particularly when it came to arranging marriages. As Ramji Lal and 33 other dispossessed farmers from the village of Mauza Manglapuri claimed in a memorial to government, '[we] will be socially ruined owing to the fact that we shall be unable to marry our children ... because our relations and brotherhood ... refuse to give their daughters in marriage owing to [the] great distance, and already since the acquirement [of land], the betrothals and engagements of the children ... have been dissolved'.⁷¹ Equating the importance of marriage to other agricultural cycles in South Asia's rural communities, David Ludden suggests, 'Agrarian history unfolds in the seasons of everyday life in agricultural societies. Farming moves to the rhythm of holiday seasons, wedding seasons, rainy seasons, and seasons of fruit.'⁷² For Ramji Lal, resettlement in the Karnal District was too far to maintain basic agrarian social structures like marriage, which not only sealed relations between families but also helped ensure supplies of labour and subsequently agricultural productivity in the future. Shifting to the Lower Bari Doab, even farther away, simply was unthinkable.

Indian peasants also were concerned about the economics of resettlement. Some dispossessed Delhi residents, such as Bhola above, may have been willing to take on long-term debt that lasted generations, but most peasant farmers were not willing to take such risks. For example,

only 7 out of 48 peasant farmers accepted reserved lands in the canal colony based on one resettlement report from August 1914.⁷³ Three years later, only 29 out of 160 peasant farmers accepted the offer.⁷⁴

Nonetheless, some Indian farmers showed remarkable acumen during negotiations with the Land Acquisition Office over their compensations. Sensing British concerns about public opinion, dispossessed farmers pressed for and often received larger reservations of canal land. *Ryots* consistently asked for 5–20 rectangles of land (125–500 acres) instead of the one rectangle authorized for peasants. In most cases, Indian farmers who requested larger reserved lands planned to farm part of the acreage and to rent the remainder, essentially making themselves *zamindars*.⁷⁵ For well-organized villagers who could draw upon claims of a special relationship with the British, such as the Sikh community of Rikabganj, their bargaining position was incredibly powerful.⁷⁶ This community not only received 750 acres of reserved land in the Lower Bari Doab but also saved a Gurdwara, located immediately next to New Delhi's main government buildings, from destruction by British town planners.⁷⁷ In memorial after memorial, Sikhs from this village reminded colonial authorities that their fathers and grandfathers had fought alongside the British in 1857.⁷⁸ Some Delhi farmers refused resettlement in the Lower Bari Doab when the Land Acquisition Office failed to meet the demand for more canal land.⁷⁹ This was something the British clearly dreaded because resettlement was their primary shield against Indian criticism.

A third group of rural Delhi residents went largely unnoticed, 'Cultivator proprietors', as Metcalf has called them.⁸⁰ This group consisted of, for example, carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, or sweepers who did not own farmland but relied on part-time agricultural work to supplement their livelihoods in the Delhi District. Because the British only recognized landowners as deserving compensation, no protection was offered to this semi-agricultural group, which made up a considerable portion of the dispossessed population. These cultivator proprietors, often the most impoverished and most dependent of all rural Delhi residents, were set adrift by the process of land acquisition which broke their connections to even the poorest landowners who might offer seasonal work.

Land acquisitions in the Delhi District reflected an interesting tension between the government's desire to balance the district's land revenues and its land needs for the capital. As the local district government lost lands to the building project, it also lost important land revenues. In response to this potential loss of revenue and its disruption to district administration, Reginald H. Craddock, Home

Department Secretary for the Government of India, encouraged the Land Acquisition Office to allow *zamindars* and *ryots* to continue living on lands acquired by the government under the Land Acquisition Act as long as the lands were not immediately required for building purposes.⁸¹ Lands would then be rented to Indian farmers who were now government tenants holding terminable leases.⁸² As an incentive the government offered moderate rents and assured residents that they would be given a one-year notice of termination of their government lease.⁸³ Many residents were thus allowed to stay on their land, to maintain their way of life, and subsequently to continue paying their land revenues to the Delhi District government. The system worked well for the imperial government. Initial land acquisition expenditures were offset by rents and the retention of the land revenue. According to Craddock, 'Under this method it would probably be possible to show that the money expended in buying out rights without interfering with the occupation of the land would yield government a certain 5 or 6 per cent per annum.'⁸⁴ As Craddock understood, most agriculturalists, who did not want to be set adrift, fell in line with the policy. Through the process of land acquisition, the Government of India became the largest landholder in the Delhi District, now doubly benefitting by receiving both rent payments and the traditional land revenue. Delhi's murky land tenure structure, which had favoured Indian farmers by making revenue assessments difficult, was made more transparent and measurable.

The process of land acquisition for the building of New Delhi also benefitted the British land revenue system in another important way. Dispossessed Delhi agriculturalists could be used as settlers in the higher revenue-yielding canal colonies of the Punjab. The Punjab government wanted colonists for its newest irrigation project in the Lower Bari Doab and dispossessed Delhi landowners offered a supply of farmers who readily could begin working the land and paying land revenues. It perhaps would be an overstatement to argue that the British government purposely created a landless peasantry to recolonize an area that offered better agricultural output and thus higher revenues than could be obtained in the Delhi area. But the policy does point to the harsh realities of the colonial system's political economy, which shaped British policies concerning lands and revenues. Canal colonies, like railroads, promised high returns but required extremely large capital investments. The quicker the Government of India found settlers for the Lower Bari Doab, the sooner it would start seeing returns on its investment. Britain's political economy in India worked to advance

British and Indian financial interests at the cost of those at the bottom of Indian society.

A capital rises from agricultural ruin

The major land acquisition proceedings lasted until 1919. Though hundreds of Indians were dispossessed of their lands, few sought appeal in the courts. The Government of India was so pleased with the outcome of the land acquisition proceedings that it awarded Addison, the land acquisition officer who oversaw most of the compensations, an accommodation for the 'great accuracy and fairness which [he] has brought to bear on his work'.⁸⁵ What made the Government of India particularly happy with Addison was that he carried out the process 'expeditiously' and with what they saw as great moderation in terms of compensation. 'Feelings of soreness which is aroused by wide acquisition of ancestral properties,' claimed William Malcolm Hailey, Chief Commissioner of the Delhi District, 'had been mitigated by the fairness and impartiality of Addison's land acquisition staff'.⁸⁶

On closer inspection, however, the reasons for Addison's success in completing the land acquisition proceedings with minimal litigation had little to do with his personal administrative abilities or the fairness of British colonial rule as represented by the Land Acquisition Act. The harsh bureaucratic machinery of the Act and a long series of droughts were far more important for limiting the complaints of dispossessed landowners. First, Indians could not appeal the loss of their lands under the Land Acquisition Act; they could only appeal the amount of their compensation for these losses once the machinery of the Land Acquisition Act was set in motion. Those who chose to appeal their compensation were also taking considerable financial risk. When a family from the village of Chitli Kabar lost their appeal, they were forced to pay legal fees totalling Rs 3,200, which was deducted from their original compensation of Rs 7,647.⁸⁷ Second, a series of droughts throughout northern India had crippled Delhi's agriculturalists. Since the mid-1890s, the district had suffered repeated and severe droughts that devastated the productivity of the district's soil and the economic conditions of its farmers.⁸⁸ The situation became so dire, that land revenues actually were suspended twice in the district during the years 1899–1900 and 1907–1908.⁸⁹ The area was particularly hard hit during the period between 1905 and 1909 when the monsoon and winter rains either ended early or failed completely.⁹⁰ Prolonged drought of this nature had devastating results in a district where over

half the agricultural acreage was dependent solely on the monsoon for its water supply.

Famine relief works similar to the poor laws in Britain were started in earnest by the district government in 1897, the primary work being stone breaking and earth work for the Delhi-Agra Chord Railway, the Ghaziabad-Moradabad Railway, and the Municipal Pumping Station which supplied water to Delhi.⁹¹ This relief work, as Mike Davis has shown, often simply prolonged the misery of impoverished Indians who received food rations that were far short of daily caloric requirements.⁹² Famine relief based on the building of railways, again as Davis argues, ironically forced Indians to help build infrastructure that allowed British and Indian speculators to more easily transfer food away from rural to commercial centres where crops were stored, and often hoarded to drive up prices, before shipment to other parts of the world.⁹³ Adding to the morbidity of droughts in India, Indians weakened by malnutrition more easily succumbed to devastating epidemics that often killed more people than starvation from famine.⁹⁴

Many local landowners in the Delhi District chose to take out loans or to sell farmland during the crisis. The Delhi District government gave Land Improvement Loans and Agriculturalist's Loans, which were often used for the purchase of seed, livestock, and farm implements, with 'unstinted freedom' during the droughts.⁹⁵ However, cash-strapped farmers, as in other parts of India, were more likely to seek loans from local *bantias* than the government since Indians who received government moneys exposed themselves to property assessments that might just lead to higher revenue demands in the future.⁹⁶ Figure 8.1 shows that the selling of land was usually an act of desperation as can be clearly seen by the lower number of sales, which never surpassed 500 per year in the four decades examined. The figure also shows that farmers were coming under increasingly greater financial stress and thus selling or more often mortgaging their lands as the droughts persisted. To be clear, the Delhi District's steady agricultural decline was not simply due to drought but the failure of the colonial government to effectively protect district farmers from its consequences. As Mike Davis has argued, drought inexorably led to famine precisely because British infrastructural development had more deeply incorporated Indian agriculture into the global free market.⁹⁷ Left with few options in an agricultural system shaped by free market principles, landowners were consistently forced to mortgage smaller and smaller pieces of land to obtain money to purchase their basic needs. In some instances, Indian farmers redeemed their loans. The amount of

redeemed land closely paralleled mortgaged land but there was one important difference. When quality lands were mortgaged, they usually stayed that way because Indian farmers suffering from repeated droughts rarely raised enough surplus capital to redeem the most expensive loans on their most productive lands. As Metcalf claims, 'Once in debt a peasant was usually unable to extricate himself.'⁹⁸ During moments of rare fluidity, they could redeem certain lands but because their financial situation was so precarious these redemptions often concerned the most inexpensive, lowest quality lands. Because of the long duration of the drought period, around 15 years, many local landowners found themselves under a considerable weight of debt. Thus, many landowners in the Delhi area were more inclined to accept the British government's land compensation and to begin life anew as farmers in the Lower Bari Doab or less commonly in the Karnal and Rohtak Districts. Many landowners refused to leave the district and simply took their cash awards and blended into the old city of Delhi or resettled amongst kin groups in lands to the east of the Yamuna River.⁹⁹

Britain's colonial land and revenue policies impacted Indians differently depending on their position in colonial society. The Land Acquisition Act, shaped by Britain's political economy, continued to reward those Indians who previously had done well under British rule.

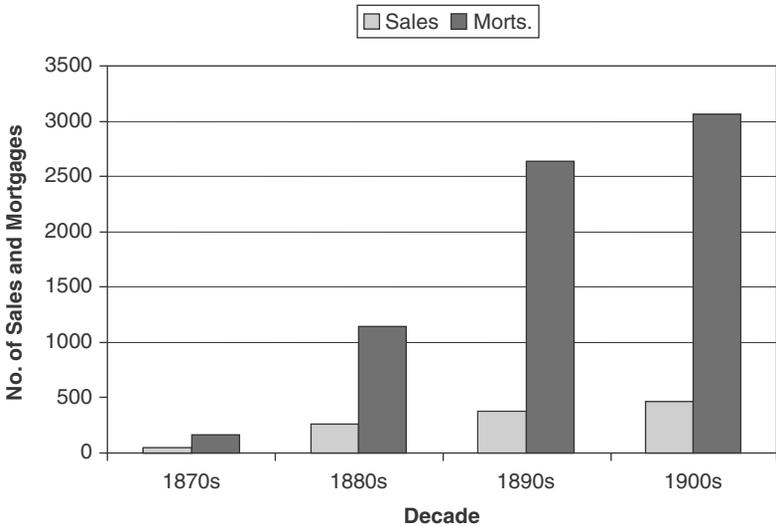


Figure 8.1 Sales and mortgages in the Delhi area¹⁰⁰

The few large landowners who had their lands acquired for the building of the new capital leveraged their Delhi lands for better canal lands in the Lower Bari Doab. Dispossessed *ryots* who accepted resettlement in the canal colony could also improve their economic and social standing; however, resettlement meant taking on long-term government debt far beyond anything most Delhi farmers had ever known. For many, the colonial government's offer of compensation and resettlement was an empty gesture; they were far too financially ruined by years of drought to contemplate restarting life on lands set aside for resettlement. Lastly, the Land Acquisition Act made no allowances for the rights of Indians who did not own land but who were still intimately tied to the village through a complex agricultural labour system. These landless villagers, such as menials or small craftsmen, were set adrift when the village landowners left. Thus, a colonial Land Act shaped by the hard-edged values of the free market tended to destroy the economically weakest members of rural Delhi society. Without property, they had no rights to compensation and little to no chance of starting a farm, even if they chose to do so, in the Lower Bari Doab.

Though more and more colonial officials, like Hardinge, had become convinced that British colonial policy should encourage Indian involvement in colonial government, they continued to undermine their colonial reforms by holding firm to the political economy that had shaped the colonial system itself. In the case of land acquisitions in the Delhi District, the British argued that they were offering Indians greater agricultural opportunities in the canal colony for poorer Delhi lands. Yet the underlying assumptions, preferences, and discriminations of the Land Acquisition Act created tremendous social dislocation and distress. The Delhi awards, assessed at market value, were typically too low to be used for anything but the most basic resettlement purposes. Resettled Delhi farmers, consequently, became bound to the colonial government even more closely through debt. This indebtedness in turn encouraged farmers to produce cash crops for a global market centred in London, weakening rural India's economic health when world demand for its products declined.