

One of the enduring themes in the history of India is the transformation of rural society under British colonial rule. The subject attracts the historian not only because of the vast extent of India's thickly settled agricultural lands, but because the patterns of landholding and the distribution of power in rural India have never fitted easily into the categories of Western thought. From the time of Charles Metcalfe and Henry Maine, colonial administrators—and academic scholars after them—have sought, with varying degrees of success, to comprehend the essential ties which bound Indians to the land and to each other. With the traditional social order so little understood, it is hardly surprising that the effects of British rule on this society during the nineteenth century have been a matter of continuing debate. The views of observers who perceived a "revolution in property rights," as Holt Mackenzie did in 1819, have little in common with those of historians who find the underlying structures of power undisturbed after decades of colonial rule.¹ The mutiny of the sepoy army during 1857, and the uprising in rural North India which accompanied it, reflect as well the dislocations associated with colonialism, and so compel the attention of historians of rural India.