

**AGRARIAN RELATIONS : A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BENGAL**

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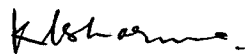
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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled " Agrarian Relations: A Sociological Study with Special Reference to Bengal" by Pranab Kumar Chatterjee for the Degree of Master of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. We recommend that this Dissertation should be placed before the examiners for their consideration for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy.

  
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## P R E F A C E

The objective behind the present study is to analyse the dynamics of agrarian relations in India in general and Bengal in particular. Our basic premise is to show how the dynamics of a society in any context should be understood with a diachronic analysis of its structural process in the given historical conditions. It is premised that the structural relations of every society should have some features which may be typically of its own. And such historical conditions may have a considerable bearing on the various extraneous as well as intraneous forces which may generate through time and vice-versa. Thus the resultant of such interactions need not produce universally identical results. But of course, it is not to suggest exclusive typification of every social milieu for its study but to take serious count on its particular historicity.

Thus to understand the dynamics of agrarian relations, in the present study effort has been made to discuss various approaches and their relevance to the study of class and agrarian relations in India in general and Bengal in particular. The approaches for such a study may broadly be divided into the following : Functionalist ( non-Marxist), Radical ( Marxist) and a kind of mix approach taking both Functional and Radical components in it. The Functionalists have viewed class and the agrarian class relations as a functional necessity without viewing it in a

dialectical process. For that, they consider status, power, functional necessity, etc. as their basic premise. The Radicals on the other hand view them as a specific stage of development in a dialectical process. That process is conditioned primarily by the economic forces. Therefore, the basic premises of the radical approaches are to see contradiction, mode of production, relations of production with class, class formation and alienation etc. in a dialectical process. Even among the Radicals some are not fully in accordance with the economic deterministic approach in its totality. They observe a kind of influence of the cultural matrix along with the economic forces.

Following this, it has been observed that, there are differentiation of views in regard to the concept of peasantry and the differentiation within it. Our effort has been to observe agrarian relations in India with the nature of differentiation as existing in the peasantry through time. To that mission, rural Bengal particularly in colonial period of India's history has been highlighted as a social formation to view it as a part of the wider social formation. Such an approach may help to understand various stages of changes in agrarian relations. Therefore, this study on agrarian relations has been dealt with broadly under specific dimensions to identify various changes and the dynamics of contradictions arising at different times and at different levels, viz. agrarian inequality and

differentiation in the peasantry, the changing trend of various external as well as internal forces, etc. These have been followed by an eventuation i.e. a sense of deprivation and protest under the given system of production.

But it has not been possible to attempt any field work for this dissertation. However, whatever data and materials could be gathered about India, in general and Bengal in particular, have been analysed. This may facilitate further the planning of field work for Doctoral Thesis.

I am grateful to Dr. K.L.Sharma for his careful guidance to this dissertation. He not only supervised the whole work, but also carried the lion's share in solving the problems that arose during the course of work, without which it would not have been possible to materialize this work to that extent.

I also tender my thanks to the Centre for the Study of Social System, Jawaharlal Nehru University and to all who have contributed their timeworthy cooperation to this work.

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CHAPTER I

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CLASS STRUCTURE

## APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CLASS STRUCTURE

Agrarian relations cannot be grasped without its having inextricable relationship with the agrarian class and the concept of peasantry. Therefore, the two concepts class and peasantry necessitate to have some elucidation for the better apprehension of the problem. This is, however, not to suggest an exclusive treatment to both these terms but to have a closer observation on both, with a view to derive a sociologically meaningful understanding of these concepts : "Peasant" and "Class". Both these terms 'peasant' and 'class' have been a major foci of debate among the scholars of various social sciences.

Before probing into the concept of class, it may be of necessity to start with an enquiry, as to why class is so important for the analysis of any society. Karl. Marx views that the population is an abstraction, if we leave out for example 'class' of which it constitutes. These classes ( e.g. bourgeois and proletariat) again are but an empty world unless we know what are the elements on which they are based e.g. wages, labour, capital, etc. which in turn imply exchange, division of labour, prices, etc.<sup>1</sup> Thus we find, though with reservation, that the phenomenon of 'class', with its various

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1. K.Marx, Grundrisse, tr. by Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973, p.100.



paraphernalia like division of labour, wage, exchanges, etc. embraces almost all the social relationships.

The term 'class', which is being extensively used by various scholars, does not have an unanimity with regard to its exhaustiveness and to its distinct conceptual formulation. Views differ at the subjective and objective planes for its analysis.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'class' is inextricably related to Marx who offered the analytical configuration of class more or less to its totality. Various debates centring around the concept of class may broadly be categorized into two - Marxist and non-Marxist. But such distinction is also heuristic, for, among the Marxists as well as among the non-Marxists there is no unanimity of views with regard to the concept class.

Although there has been a lot of controversies regarding the Marxist notion of class, Surprisingly enough, the definition of class has not been clearly provided in the works of Marx and his life time associate Engles. But it may also be argued that Marxian definition of class is very much self-evident in almost all his writings.

#### Marxian Notion of Class

It is evident that Marxian sociology stems from the premise that the primary function of the social organisation

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2. To maintain the brevity of the discussion, the contributions of very specific scholars have been taken up to derive more or less an encompassing picture.

is the satisfaction of basic human needs viz, food, clothing and shelter. Productive system, thus, is the nucleus around which the elements of society are organised.<sup>3</sup>

To Marx, class is determined by man's relation to the means of production and is expressed by his sense of belonging to a particular class with shared economic interests.

Marxian notion of class, as a dialectical process, emerged as a theoretical analysis which has been used as a tool by very many champions of Marxism in the world, namely, Lenin and Mao. Lenin, for instance, viewed that

" the classes are large groups of people who differ from each other by the place they occupy in historically determined system of social production, by their relations in the modes of production, by the relations in the social organisation of labour and consequently by the dimensions and methods of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose." 4

But such a definition falls short of the sense in which Marx and Engles have used the term 'class' which is clearly delineated in terms of economic criteria accompanied by some psychological criteria i.e. 'class consciousness'. To Marx, when an aggregate of people that satisfies the economic criteria of social class, that is,

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3. S.M.Lipset, on 'class' in 'International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences', (ed.) David, L.Sils, The Mc Millan & Co. & the Free Press, 1968, pp. 296-315.

4. V.I.Lenin, Collected Works , Vol.II, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1947, p.492.

"class in itself", the members in it do not understand their class position, the control over them and their true class interests. That stage becomes 'class' in the fullest sense of the term i.e. "class for itself"; when the class members are linked together with a sense of common class belongingness with a common economic interest and psychological bond of class antagonism. These two stages have determinant roles to play in the history of class struggle which is the ultimate analysis of Marxian ideology. In the former, the class conflict will be weak owing to their lack of reinforcement, but in the latter it is reinforced by the psychological criteria.<sup>5</sup> Lipset and Bendix also, following Marx, attribute to social class 'a condition of group life' fostered by the organisation of production.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, another important point of Marxian notion of class in this regard needs to be referred. That is, classes, and their roles. Though Marxian formulation holds that there are three major economic classes in modern society - landlords, capitalists and wage workers, yet Marx realised that there is differentiation, even within each of these

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5. Marx & Engels, The German Ideology, Marxist Leninist Library, Vol. XVII, Lawrence & Wishart, 1940, pp. 48-49  
See also K. Marx The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, pp. 109-11.
  6. S. Lipset & R. Bendix, 'Marx's Theory of Social Class' in "Class, Status and Power", (ed.) Lipset & Bendix, Free Press, New York, 1953, pp. 7-9.

basic categories and their future alignments etc. For that again, his formulations of 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' may be referred to where in the ultimate stage, people would be aligned with either of the two classes 'bourgeois' or 'proletariat'<sup>7</sup>. His followers like Lenin and Mao have found in their class analysis, the role of 'peasant class' as a formidable part in the context of class struggle.

#### Non-Marxian Approaches to Class

Although a good number of sociologists have disagreed with such economic-deterministic approach to the analysis of class, yet most of such critiques have emerged as a reaction to Marxian notion of class.

Max Weber, for instance, suggests that the economic interests should be seen as a 'special class' of the larger category of values, which include many things that are not economic interests in the ordinary sense of the term. Therefore, 'economic class' as a part of such broader whole, is being determined by varied 'life chances' in the market situation. In other words, class is composed of the people having common life chances as determined by their power to dispose of goods and skills for the sake of income. Class, thus, is formed with the

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7. Although Marxian idea of intermediary classes is not very pronounced, yet in the German Ideology ( pp. 24-26) the above views have been referred to.

persons having common economic position, which Weber calls 'life chances', common attitudes of ideology of self-consciousness and class position separated by a sense of antagonism towards such other groups. But unlike Marx, to Weber, owing to the possibility of varied life chances, it is also likely that there may be multiple classes, and the possibility of class antagonism may be directed against the immediate class interest as contradictory to Marxian class antagonism into bi-partite opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Thus what we find is that the Weberian notion of class, i.e. 'economic class' also speaks of economic determinism, but unlike Marx, for Weber class is not the basic determinant of the dynamics of social stratification, so to say and parallel to that are 'status' and 'power'.

R.Dahrendorf's analysis of class is more of an assimilation of Marxian and Weberian ideas, but he applies the Weberian methodology to view social inequality and class in particular. It may be substantiated from his idea of inequality which is as follows: the origin of social inequality lies neither in human nature nor in a historically dubious conception of private property but in

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8. H.H. Gerth & C.W.Mills, From Max Weber, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1949, pp. 180-184.

certain features of the society, being affected by the sanctioning of social behaviour, in terms of normative expectations. Because there are norms and because the sanctions are necessary to impose conformity of human conduct there has to be inequality of ranking among men.<sup>9</sup> And class is always a category for the purpose of analysis of the dynamics of social conflict at its structural roots.

Gurvitch observes that social classes exist only in contemporary societies, where economic activities predominate and where industrialization progressively transforms the totality of existence, unlike traditional Marxists who find social class in all societies in terms of economic determinism, He argues that out of many factors responsible for the growth of social class, the dominant factor varies from one society to another.<sup>10</sup>

#### Socio- Psychological Approach

Most of the studies on social class in U.S.A.<sup>11</sup> have laid stress on the socio- psychological phenomenon of 'deference' which is an expression of respect and honour associated with the sentiments of inequality or inferiority and

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9. R.Dahrendorf, ' Nature and Types of social Inequality' in Beteille, (ed) "Social Inequality", Penguin, 1969, pp. 34-36. See also R.Dahrendorf, Class & Class Conflict in Industrial Society, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1963,

10.Referred by R.Aron, 'Two Definitions of Class' in A.Beteille (ed) "Social Inequality", 1969, p.70.

11.R.Centres, The Psychology of Social Class, Russel & Russel, New York, 1961; W.L.Warner, 'Social class in America', Harper & Bros, New York, 1960.

that constitutes the characteristic trait of the 'ensemble' which is called 'class'. Richard Centres distinguishes between 'social stratum' and 'social class'. The former is characterised by the objective dimension of ranking, whereas the latter is determined by a kind of psychological criteria, namely, 'class consciousness' which is essentially subjective in character.<sup>12</sup>

Raymond Aron observes that the American concept of class is not a real ensemble but an agglomeration of individuals who are differentiated from each other by 'multiple criteria', and social status or class is only one among several factors determined essentially by psychological phenomena. One's position into the class is imposed by the idea which others have about the position he occupies, and one's status (position) is determined by the esteem of ~~the~~ others. But the serious flaw of this view lies in the fact that the consciousness that each has of his status, vis-a-vis of others, does not always correspond uniformly.<sup>13</sup>

The orthodox Marxist concept of class, on the other, broadly considers 'class' as the real ensemble defined both by material facts and collective consciousness. And the essence of class is a historical reality with collective consciousness.

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12. R. Centres, *ibid*, p.70.

13. R. Aron, *op: cit*, pp. 67-69.

### Functionalist Notion of Class

Being sharply differentiated from the Marxist or radical notion of class, the 'functionalist' approach to class views social class not as an intervening variable in the process of social change, rather as a set of institutions that provide some of the conditions, necessary for the operation of complex class society.<sup>14</sup>

K.Davis and W.Moore observe that the functional necessity explains the existence of unequal placement of individuals in the social structure. Under the functional mechanism of society, individual members, with differential roles and positions are induced to perform their roles and duties. And class is a product of such differential attributes of people along with their correspondingly differential rewards.<sup>15</sup>

### Synthetic Approach to Class

Finally, there is a synthetic approach to class. The views of G.Lenski and S.Ossowski may be referred to. The former offered a synthesis between functionalist ( what he calls conservative approach) and Marxist ( radical approach). He views class system and the distributive system

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14. K.Davis & W.Moore, 'Some Principles on Stratification' in S.M.Lipset & R.Bendix (ed) op:cit, pp.47-53; T.Parsons, 'A Revised Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification' in Lipset and Bendix (ed.) ibid, .

15. K.Davis & W.Moore, ibid, pp. 47-53 .



and their resultant influence upon the polity ( e.g. power, privilege and prestige). To him thus, power <sup>16</sup> rests on various foundations which are not always reducible to some common denominator. Thus one is to think in terms of a series of class hierarchies.

Ossowski has offered certain criteria of class and three such criteria need mention : i) vertical order of social class status which provides privilege based on wealth and power ; ii) permanence of class interest and , iii) class consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, we find a divergence of views on the concept of class of which two trends may broadly be noticed; a category of thinkers view social class as an essential for the functioning of the social system; whereas the other considers the very existence of social class as a product of a definite stage of history through conflicting relationships. Of course, there is yet another trend which takes both the above trends into account. Thus, from such a divergence of views on the concept of class, it is very difficult, if not impossible to formulate an all embracing definition of class not only because of ideological diversity but also because of diverse life situations. Now the question is whether class is a component of the system of

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16. To him, 'power-class' is the best denominator for observing social inequality especially in a society with significant surplus. For detail see G.E. Lenski, Power and Privilege: A Theory of Stratification, McGraw Hills, INC, U.S.A., 1966.

17. S.Ossowski, Class structure in the Social consciousness, tr. from Polish by Sheila Pattersons, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963.

stratification or its dialectical process. For a given historical reality every society has some particularistic dimensions. Therefore, no solution to this terminological confusion in regard to class, like a pannaacea will fit into every social situation for analysis. Any attempt to offer such a pannaacea would only add further to this confusion. Even then, with due reservation, it may be said that the confusion and divergence of views regarding the concept of class is not simply a matter of emphasis, various criteria considered as the basis of various notions, e.g. wealth or material possession, status, power, coercion of norms, functional necessity, etc. are not mutually exclusive, nor does it mean that they are perennial in nature.

### Peasantry

After the requisite elucidation on the term 'class' it may be mentioned that class structure of any society speaks of a very broad and generalised picture. But the present study is concerned with the understanding of agrarian class structure. In such a study of agrarian classes peasants occupy the central place. Therefore, the term 'peasant' needs to have some elucidation.

Like the term 'class', the term 'peasant' also has varied connotations. Hardly it needs be saying that even though no universal criteria of peasants can be claimed or assembled, <sup>yet</sup> certain traits may be mentioned which are

universalistic in nature, namely, peasants by virtue of the term are attached to land, but the legal relationship of the peasant to the land might vary from one society to another; he may be a owner cultivator, a share-cropper or an agricultural labourer. Secondly, peasants generally occupy a lower socio-economic position in most of the societies, which is quite evident from the history of their exploitation, oppression and deprivation in most of <sup>the</sup> agricultural countries, particularly that of third world.

#### Marxist View

Marxian view of peasantry owes its root to the role of the peasantry in the history of 'class struggle'. The diversified role of the peasantry within its diversified structure has been the chief concern of the Marxist scholars. Of course, some neo-Marxists have given more attention to the understanding of the relationship between worker and peasantry, especially after the successful peasant mobilizations and movements in the countries like Russia, China, Vietnam etc. But Marx himself has not paid much attention to this category i.e., 'peasantry', except making some references to the role of the 'French Peasantry'.<sup>18</sup>

But this lack of attention, on the part of Marx, on the role of the peasantry has to be understood in its

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18. K. Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, op: cit, In it Marx also viewed peasants like 'potatoes in a sack of potatoes' and hence was at great pains in his terminology to consider French Peasantry' as a class.

given context i.e. in the light of his general theory of social change and his specific interest in the transformation of capitalism into socialism. Lenin's attitude towards peasantry was manifestly different, for, he viewed Russia as his central focus, where there was a massive peasant population. Thus the historical conditions necessitated Lenin, or Mao in China to take serious and rigorous note of the role of the peasantry.

Daniel Thorner observes that the term 'peasant' may be used in a broader or narrower sense. In the former, peasants are all those who live by working on the land including share-croppers and agricultural labourers. While in the latter, it is confined to small land holders who live by cultivating the land which they themselves own or control.<sup>19</sup>

Marxists usually have adopted the latter and to most of the Marxist scholars landless agricultural labourer, who lives by selling his labour power against wage, does not fall within the category of peasant. Erich Wolf, for instance, confines the term peasant to those cultivators who are existentially involved in cultivation and take autonomous decisions regarding the operation of production, and for that matter he includes owner-operators, tenants, and share-croppers. But according to Marx, agricultural labourer

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19. D.Thorner, 'Peasantry' in International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, 1968, pp. 503-11,

falls out of the fold of the term peasant.<sup>20</sup>

From sociological point of view the great merit of Lenin goes to his viewing peasants within their internal diversity. Thus, the sub-divisions of Russian peasantry into three; rich peasant, middle peasant and poor peasant<sup>21</sup> have given an analytical rigor to the study of peasantry.

Mao extended such three-tier model to a five-tier model for analysing peasantry, embracing further fragmentations among the peasantry. Both Lenin and Mao have discreetly viewed these various strata of the peasantry in terms of certain broad criteria which may be referred to as follows : who possess and who do not ; who work and who do not ; who employ hired labourers and who do not, etc. It is also viewed that the revolutionary response also varied at different layers of peasantry.<sup>22</sup>

#### Non- Marxian View

R.Redfield in his pioneering work states that peasants are small producers for subsistence having their own rights to the land they cultivate, and to that extent they are economically independent. They make a living and have a way of life through cultivation of the land. But he confines the term 'peasants' to those small producers for subsistence and the term 'farmers' refers those who produce

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20. E.Wolf, 'Peasant War of 20th Century ; Faber & Faber, London, 1971, pp.XV- XVIII.

21. Lenin, 'Selected Works, Vol.XII, International Publishers, 1943.

22. Mao-Tse- Tung, 'Analysis of the Class in Chinese Society,'

for the market.<sup>23</sup>

But the above formulation seems to have certain discrepancies, while viewed in the context of India. First of all, in India there is no reason to distinguish between 'farmers' and 'peasants'. Secondly, the peasants need not always have a control and to that extent be economically independent, for, the share-croppers in West Bengal having varied relationships, are not necessarily economically independent. Thus evidently Redfield's urge for caution in the formulation of the definition of the peasant looms large; that a definition of peasant in the light of European experience would not reveal Indian reality.

Shanin considers 'peasantry' as a process i.e. in regard to changes and the regional variances among peasants. It reflects to a large extent, their diverse histories. Towards such historical analysis he offers a typology of peasantry having four characteristic traits :-

- (a) peasant family farm as the basic multidimensional social organisation;
- (b) land husbandry as the basic means of livelihood providing directly the major part of consumption needs;
- (c) specific traditional culture related to the way of life of small communities, and

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Selected Works, Vol.I, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1967, pp. 435-440, and V.I. Lenin, "The Development of Capitalism in Russia," Collected works, Vol.III, Moscow, 1972, pp.71-90.

23. R.Redfield, Peasant Society and Culture, University of Chicago Press, 1956, pp. 19-21.

(d) finally, the underdog position- the domination of peasantry by outsiders.<sup>24</sup>

Such characterisation also suffers from certain anomalies. The second and the third characteristics need a different observation. As it has been noted by Beteille that the term peasant, in terms of the part played by the family on the farm, is to be examined with care and actual organisation of work. Hence when extra- economic cultural values debar men or women or a particular community from direct manual work in the field which is quite pronounced in various parts in India, it need not be always justified to call them as peasants.<sup>25</sup> Regarding the underdog situation of the peasant, as Beteille notices that it gives a different perspective from that of Redfield and is more towards Lenin's perspective of peasantry. But both Redfield and Shanin essentially talk about the undifferentiated or homogeneous community of peasants. But what may be learnt from the various village studies in India is that the Indian peasant society or the village India is generally differentiated and stratified not only in terms of caste, but also in terms of ownership, control and the use of land.<sup>26</sup>

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24. T. Shanin, 'Peasantry as a political factor,' in Shanin, (ed) "Peasant and Peasant Societies", Penguin, 1971, pp. 14-15.
25. A. Beteille, Six Essays in Comparative Sociology, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 48-57.
26. A. Beteille, op:cit.

The preeminence of differentiation has led to further confusions as to include the various categories under the term 'peasant'. Raymond Firth includes in the term 'peasant' all those who live by various forms of labour which are associated with a community of tillers.<sup>27</sup> While Thorner besides owner-cultivators, includes share-croppers as well as agricultural labourers.<sup>28</sup> But Beteille virtually contradicts to extend the blanket term peasant over the non-cultivating landowners alongwith share-croppers and landless agricultural labourers who may not have any fixed occupancy rights on the land they cultivate. To him, peasants are the primary producers and may be with tiny holding.<sup>29</sup> Shagir Ahmed also sticks to the view that peasants are primarily agriculturists, but the criteria of definition must be structural and relational and not mere occupational. For, in most peasant societies, it is not what peasants produce that is significant, it is how and to whom they dispose of what they produce that counts. He substantiates that with the study in a village in Punjab, where the artisans have a relationship of service with the cultivators with their respective skills and services. Henceforth, they occupy a distinctive position in the modes of production with an equal distinctive relations of production.<sup>30</sup>

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27. R.Firth, 'Malaxy Fisherman : Their Peasant Economy'  
Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1946.

28. D.Thorner, "Peasantry" in "International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences", 1968.

29. A.Betielle, 1974, op: cit, p. 25.

30. S.Ahmed, "Peasant class in Pakisthan" in K.Gough and H.P.Sharma (ed) "Imparrialism and Revolution in South East Asia",  
Monthly Review Press, 1973, pp. 211-12.



But with such analysis we may find that the artisans by virtue of their intrinsic attachment to agriculture, may be a part of the peasant economy, but being a part itself, may not attribute it to be inclusive of peasant class as such. It is because when such artisans, being entrenched <sup>from</sup> their traditional occupation, enjoin agriculture even as landless labourers, are very much the part and parcel of the peasant class. Even though such statement seemingly contradicts Beteille's view who excludes non-cultivating landlords and agricultural labourers from the peasant class.

For such an argument Desai's view may be mentioned. Desai observes that defining 'peasant' irrespective of the context, whether they belong to the Asiatic, Feudal, Colonial, Capitalist or non-Capitalist societies, would not be of any help. Following Desai, a discussion on agrarian relations, specifically in the context of colonial period, where agricultural capitalism could not emerge in India, peasant class per se comprises owner-cultivators, share-croppers along with agricultural labourers.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, as a logical sequence to the above discussion, the question comes to one's mind that, do peasants become a class like working class? Though it cannot be very discretely answered, yet one could say that the working class or industrial proletariat are relatively less diversified than

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31. A.R.Desai, in Desai (ed) Peasant Struggle in India Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1979, pp. XXI-XXIV.

the peasants, and their nature of work situation is more conducive to the formation of class. But it must be granted that the successful peasant mobilization in China was possible because of the identification of the various sections of the peasantry and their roles. At the same time, it also needs to be mentioned that given the historical conditions such identification of peasantry may not be universal. Thus Lenin or Mao's model of peasant class, though gives a better insight in identifying and analysing the various layers of the peasantry, yet the structural variants of the given society should not be ignored while attempting an understanding of the formation of peasant as a class and class consciousness among the peasants.

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CHAPTER II

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AGRARIAN  
CLASS STRUCTURE IN INDIA

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AGRARIAN  
CLASS STRUCTURE IN INDIA

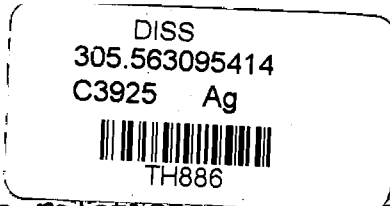
In the previous chapter, the overwhelming importance of the phenomenon of class, towards the understanding of social relationships, has been purported. It is also important to note that the term class encompasses a holistic configuration of the social relationships. With contextual precision of the discussion, it may be observed that 'agrarian relationships' form a part of a sub-system of the total social system of relationships. Thus class in the analysis of such sub-system i.e. agrarian social structure has been the core of this study. Henceforth the term class should be conceived by and large in the context of agrarian class structure.

The studies of 'agrarian class structure' or the 'agrarian class relations' as such has not gained its due share in various sociological and social anthropological researches in our country, because of the overwhelming influence of caste, which has suppressed the paradigms concerning class, interest groups, consciousness etc. Such studies, though not scarce, could not come out of the framework of caste. It is only in the recent past scholars like Mencher and Beteille have raised the issue.<sup>1</sup>

But it is also admitted that in the context of Indian reality, caste and class cannot be viewed independent of each other or in their mutual exclusiveness. Rather it should

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1. J.P.Mencher, 'Problems of Analysing Rural Class Structure', in "Economic & Political Weekly", (EPW) Vol.IX, No.35, 1974 also A.Beteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure ('Ideas and Interest' and 'case of Jotedars') Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1974.



be viewed as 'class-like relations in the caste and caste-like relations in the class'<sup>2</sup>.

Before saying something on the approaches to the study of class, or agrarian class structure in particular, an understanding of the nature of the Indian village society and its structural relationships may not be out of context.

Nature of Indian Village :

There has been a divergence of views as to account for the Indian village in the past. Historians are often irked by the tendency among the sociologists and social anthropologists to look upon the past Indian village as undifferentiated and unchanging entity. The responsibility for such misconception lies more on the part of the western scholars who were mostly colonial administrators. Readily one can remember for that matter the names of Baden- Powell<sup>3</sup> and Henry S. Maine<sup>4</sup> and others. Marx also in his early writings, while talking about 'Asiatic Societies', branded the traditional village India as its classic exemple. To him, the simplicity in the organisation of production in these self-sufficient communities, that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form and when accidentally destroyed spring up again on the spot and with the same name and such simplicity is primarily responsible to

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2. K.L.Sharma, Essays in Social Stratification, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1980, p.xiv.
  3. H.S.Mainie, Village- Communities in the East and West London, 1980.
  4. B.Baden- Powell, The origin and growth of village communities, London, 1908.



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maintain the unchangeable structure of Asiatic societies.<sup>5</sup>

But through a closer observation it may be said that the so-called "ideal typical village" was an overlooked impression on the part of the western scholars who possibly centred around the periphery than the core. It is not to disclaim the self-sufficient ideal-typical village indeed but the impression of its being undifferentiated and unchangeable is subject to vehement criticism. It may be said that even within the supposed 'Ideal-typical' village there were differentiations at all levels, namely, economic, political and cultural.

Till to-date, probing as deeper as the social historian's insight (in Indian society) has extended so far, into the past of the Indian social system, the fallacies of 'Static India' hypothesis looms large. Historians like Kosambi<sup>6</sup>, Thapar<sup>7</sup>, Habib<sup>8</sup> and sociologist like A.R.Desai<sup>9</sup> have reiterated the existence of class in a dialectical process through the history of Indian Society dating as back as Aryan period.

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5. Referred by D.Thornar, 'Marx on India and the Asiatic Modes of Production', "Contribution to Indian Sociology", Paris, No.IX, Dec 1966, pp. 33-66.

6. D.D.Kasambi, An Introduction to the study of Indian History, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1956, pp. 86-87.

7. Romila Thapar, 'Social Mobility in Ancient Indian Society' in R.S.Sharma, (ed) "Indian Society: Historical Probings", Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 95-125.

8. Irfan Habib, 'The Social Distribution of Landed property in Pre-British India', in R.S.Sharma, *ibid*, pp. 264-316.

9. A.R.Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Popular, Bombay, 1966.

Historians like H.B.Lamb<sup>10</sup>, B.Stein<sup>11</sup> and others, though have not viewed such dialectical existence of class like that of Marxists, yet they have observed class relations as existing in a crystal form as early as 600 B.C. in India. And such relations have been evolved through medieval down to modern period. And in actual fact the position of ar many castes, has altered over time in which wealth and property have been at crucial importance in achieving an improved status.<sup>12</sup>

To purport the actual socio- economic structure of village India, Beteille observes :

" The gradation in Indian villages rested thus on a combination of economic inequalities and inequalities of status that found their concrete expression in the institution of caste. It would be wrong to believe that each caste was economically homogeneous or that all the castes in a village could be placed in a linear order, or that no changes took place in the mutual positions of the families of the same caste or even of different castes. It would be equally wrong to ignore the extent to which the population of the village was divided and subdivided and the distinctive manner in which the institution of caste protected the boundaries between these divisions and sub-divisions."<sup>13</sup>

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10. H.B. Lamb, 'The Indian Merchant', in M.Singer, (ed) "Traditional India, Structure and Change," Rawat Publication, 1975, pp. 25-34.

11. B.Stein, 'Social Mobility and Medieval South Indian Sects', in J.Silverberg (ed) "Social Mobility in Caste System in India" , Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1968.

12. H.B.Lamb, ibid - p.30.

13. A.Beteille, 'The Indian village Past and Present', in E.J. Hobsbawm (ed) "Peasants in History", Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1980 , pp. 112-13.

The central point which attracted to those scholars, who talked about the ideal typical village in self-sufficient as well as non-competitive economic entity, was the institution of 'jajmani'. Wiser, in his study of Karimpur, stresses the interdependence involved in the system but with gradation in both the services and payments.<sup>14</sup> Srinivas drew attention to a bit different aspect i.e. vertical ties between landlord and tenant, master and servant and so on, with a partially conflicting relationships. And the patron-client relationship served to bridge the cleavages between castes. But patrons belonging to the same caste ( or the same economic level) might be rivals, in which case they would use the ties with their respective clients for establishing their dominance over the masses. Patrons depended on their clients for their power as well as prestige ; clients might in their turn count on the support of their patrons in difficulty or distress.<sup>15</sup> Thus, what follows from above is that the archaic, self-sufficient, homogeneous, noncompetitive projection of traditional Indian village society was not enough to project the reality.

Naturally the question comes as to how and to what extent the economic relations were linked with the cultural or the value system. G.Myrdal has very much stressed on this

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14. W.H.Wiser, The Hindu Jajmani System , Lucknow, Publishing House, Lucknow, 1936.

15. M.N. Srinivas, 'The Social System of Mysore Village,' in M.Marriott, (ed) "Village India", Chicago Press, 1955.



aspect viewing that poverty and relatively unchanging way of life are associated incommensurably with high degree of inequality in the social, political and economic sphere. And such value rationality for agrarian inequality may have been somewhat a common feature in many parts of south East Asia.<sup>16</sup> Traditional Hindu society, for that matter, is the classic example through its elaborate hierarchial structure of caste. And that provided most powerful ideological justification for social inequality along with economic inequality.

A veritable feature of the traditional hierarchy based on land ownership and control may be traced through the phenomena of ownership of land and the nature of agricultural labour. Labour itself might have been hierarchically graded, with more the onerous form of labour was, the lower the social status it had and vice-versa. Beteille gives a very substantial reason for such status grading. " In regard to labour also the caste system helped to sharpen the distinction between those who worked and those for whom others worked."<sup>17</sup> Thus the value system and economic inequality coupled with divergent economic interests at different levels was very pronounced in the agrarian social structure of India. Viewing retrospectively, through a number of studies, it may be found that the socio-economic location of different strata within the social matrix were mostly defined<sup>18</sup>

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16. G. Myradal, Asian Drama ; an Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations, Vol.1, Penguin, Harmonds Worth, 1966, pp. 1-3.

17. A. Beteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1974, p. 67.

18. R. Mukherjee, Dynamics of a Rural Society, Akademik Verlag, Berlin, 1974; F.G. Baily, Caste and Economic Frontier, English Language Book, London, 1972; A. Beteille, Caste, Class and Power, University of California Press, Los Angels, 1965.

All these scholars converged on one point that in the traditional setting the lower the position of a man in the economic hierarchy, correspondingly he was closer to that status in the social hierarchy.

E. Leach disagrees with such alignment between caste and class. For that matter, he makes a distinction between caste and class and is at pains to admit that the landless labourers in agriculture generally hold a lower position in the status hierarchy, and are the victims of extreme economic insecurity. Thus to him, their lower socio-economic status has not much to do with caste values and their underdog position is due to the existing conditions which have made them to become lowliest of the lowest.<sup>19</sup> But such view of Leach does not explain as to why caste members even being economically poor do not touch the plough and why the members of lower castes take the pain of carrying out menial works. Thus though, caste has been viewed primarily as a harmonic non-exploitative mechanism, yet if viewed from a different angle it would be an effective system of exploitation, suppression, and inequalities for those who occupy lower positions in the caste system.<sup>20</sup>

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D.B.Miller, From Hierarchy to Stratification, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1975 ; D.Thorner, The Agrarian Prospect in India, Delhi University Press, Delhi, 1956:

19. E.R.Leach, 'caste, Class and Slavery: The Taxonomic Problem,' in A. De. Rank & J.Knight (ed) "Caste and Race", London, 1963; and see also 'What should we mean by caste' in E.R.Leach (ed) "Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan", Cambridge University Press, London, 1960, pp. 1-10.
20. J.P.Mencher, 'The Caste System upside down on the Not So Mysterious East', in "Current Anthropology," Vol. 15, No.4 1974, p. 469.

And it may be very much the truth that caste obligations insulated the class interests through its mechanisms of internalization of caste values. In reality, caste has had always implied a class character which is evident through various caste conflicts, in which economic interest is invariably the mainspring. K.L.Sharma holds view, in this regard that, caste and class are organically related, hence any attempt to distinguish between the two for grasping Indian reality is simply heuristic - for, in India caste is just not a system of rituals; and class is not merely a system of economic relations.<sup>21</sup>

Ramkrishna Mukherjee has very rightly commented :

" In order to appraise the complementary aspects of agrarian relations, one cannot therefore, ignore caste or class contradictions or take the two into account compartmentally ..... castes are distinguished on a purity- pollution scale, the classes with respect to production and property relations emerging from a mode of production in accordance with the state of development of the productive forces." 22

But the whole interrelational aspect is subject to regional variance regarding its nature and impact. Generally, the following corresponding relationships between caste and class has been worked out :

|              |   |  |
|--------------|---|--|
| Upper caste  | - | non-cultivating land owner                       |
| Middle caste | - | farmer or share-cropper                          |
| Lower caste  | - | agricultural labourers and other menial workers. |

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21. K.L.Sharma, 1980, op:cit, pp. 17-19.

22. R.Mukherjee, 'Realities of Agrarian Relations in India', in E.P.W., Vol. XVI, No.4, Jan 24, 1981, p.112.

But such a projection does not seem exhaustive, if it is probed at the micro-level. The argument goes as follows, that within a particular category of caste, say middle or lower, there may be a good number of sub-castes who are ranked within their respective socio-economic exclusiveness in a somewhat hierarchic order. Therefore, the alignment between caste and class cannot always be sufficient to grasp that situation. Even then, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the agrarian social structure in India is inextricably related with its cultural or value matrix.

The approach to the study of agrarian relations may be broadly categorised into i) the Marxist approaches ; and ii) the non-Marxist approaches. It may be noted that though Indian sociology has a fairly long tradition of Marxist sociologists, yet its application to rigorous empirical study has been relatively of recent origin. Marxist approach in India is also characterized by its distinctive features; treating social structure as the product of definite historical stage, in a dialectical process.

#### Marxist Approach

According to Daniel Thorner agrarian class structure is after all not an external framework within which various classes function, rather it is the sum total of the ways in which each group operates in relation to other groups. He used the classes of Malik ( landowner ), Tenant ( Kisan) and Mazdur ( labourer ) in his attempt to understand such relational milieux.<sup>23</sup> Kotovsky prefers to use the categories

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23. D.Thorner, The Agrarian Prospects in India (2nd edition with a new introduction written in 1973) Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1956

like capitalist type landowner, rich peasants, land poor or landless peasantry and agricultural labourers and their nature of changes mainly through institutional changes like land reforms etc.<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Gough also finds the rural people of Tanjore as divided into five classes, as that of Mao, in a rank order in terms of their position into the relations of production.<sup>25</sup> Alavi disagrees with such rank orders and according to him the middle peasants for instance, who depend primarily on family labourer, do not stand between rich and poor. Hence they belong to a different sector of rural economy in terms of exploitation. Thus they neither exploit nor are being exploited. Alavi clusters landlords, share-croppers and poor peasants into one sector, middle peasant on the other, and still another sector comprises capitalist farmer (rich peasant) and wage labourer.<sup>26</sup> But such separation of landlords and capitalist farmer into two different classes equating latter with rich peasants seems to be over-simplistic and may create both theoretical and methodological problems.<sup>27</sup>

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24. G.Kotovskiy, Agrarian Reforms in India, P.P.H. Bombay, 1964.

25. K.Gough, 'Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India,' in A.R.Desai, (ed), "Peasant struggle in India", Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1979, pp. 720-22.

26. H.Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution' in Desai, (ed) ibid, pp. 672-75.

27. For instance, if a person cultivates a part of his land by share croppers and another with wage labourer, following this formulation, a single person falls in two opposite sectors.

There have been several other sociological applications of the Marxian approach to the study of agrarian class relations at various levels : village and regional. At the village level the use of primary data in the Marxist framework of mode of production, periphery- metropolis linkages, class in relation to the infrastructure based on production relations and exploitations have been observed by Djurfeldt and Lindberg.<sup>28</sup> But as P.K.Bose argues that the four- tier differentiation of peasant class by Djurfeldt and Lindberg in terms of purely economically determined factors like financial earning distribution, etc. lack sociological relevance. For, they do not take account of composite hierarchy of social, political and economic differences.<sup>29</sup>

Katheleen Gough needs specific mention for her Marxian approach to study agrarian class relations in Tanjore village. In her approach, there is a distinct confluence between historical- evolutionary approach and the anthropological approach ( with emphasis on field observation). She observes the role of caste and kinship in the analysis of class within

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28. G.Djurfeldt & J. Lindberg, Behind Poverty, the social formation and Tamil village, Scandanavian Inst. of Asian Studies, Curgon Press, London, 1975. With similar orientation study has been undertaken by P.K.Bose at the village level, 'Agrarian Structure, Peasant Society and Social Change, a study of selected regions of W.B. ( Ph. D. thesis), School of Social Sciences, J.N.U, New Delhi, 1979.

29. P.K.Bose, ibid, pp. 41-42.

the framework of evolving modes of production with their corresponding structural relationships.<sup>30</sup>

A somewhat different approach from that of the orthodox Marxism may be noticed, where the influence of the factors other than strictly economic has been attempted in their correlation in a dialectical relationship. Omvedt, for instance, views the inter-linkages between caste and class structures and their roles in evolutionary historical phases of Indian society.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the Marxian sociologists, scholars from other disciplines have also extended their interests to the analyses of agrarian relations notably the economists and the economic historians. There have been scholastic debate centring around the nature of the differentiation in peasantry in Indian agriculture and the mode of production in agriculture. The basic idea behind such approach is to understand the nature of contradictions through the stages of development.<sup>32</sup>

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30. K.Gough, 'Modes of production in Southern India' in "E.P.W." vol.xv, Nos. 5,6 & 7, Feb, 1981 Also 'Colonial Economics, in South East India' in "E.P.W." , vol.XII, No.13, March 26, 1977.

31. G.Omvedt, 'Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflict,' in "Sociological Bulletin" vol,29, No.2, Sept., 1980. Similar dimensions like caste, class conflict, exploitation and their emerging contradictions in agrarian class structure has also been taken up by J.P.Menchar, 'The caste system upside Down on not so Mysterious East, op:cit., 1974 .

32. D.Thorner, 'Capitalist Farming in India, "E.P.W." , Vol.iv, No. 52, Dec. 27, 1969, pp. 211-212.

According to Gunder Frank, since the colonial period Indian agriculture has entered into capitalistic economy under the sway of world capitalism, through the emergence of cash crop, capitalistic market economy and the like forces. Therefore, the class structure in Indian agriculture should be viewed in the context of world capitalistic system.<sup>33</sup>

Contrast to Frank's view, Amit Bhaduri considers the mode of production in agriculture in Eastern India as 'semi-feudalistic' on the basis of certain traits which neither give clearly the impression of feudalism nor of capitalism. The traits are as follows : a) extensive non-legalised share-cropping system, b) perpetual indebtedness of the small tenants, c) exploitation through usury and property rights, and d) involuntary role in the market situation by small peasants.<sup>34</sup>

A. Rudra observes that the theory of 'Semi-feudalism' does not rule out the emergence of capitalistic tendencies among certain farmers, through their involvement into cash crop, capitalist farming, etc. And in the case of such emergence, following Marxian ideology it is implied to have

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33. G. Frank, Capitalism and under Development in Latin America, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1969 ; see also Capitalist under Development, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1975.

34. A. Bhaduri, 'An Analysis of Semi Feudalism' in "Frontier", 29th Sept. 1973, pp. 11-15.

Charles Bettelheim also reiterates that the mode of production of Indian agriculture as semi-feudal. For detail see C. Bettelheim, 'India Independent', tr. by W.A. Caswell, Macgibbon & Kee, 1968, pp. 19, 23-24.



an implicit contradiction of interests between the class of semifeudal landlords and the emerging farmers with capitalistic tendencies. But this view finds at pains to analyse the class character of the farmers belonging neither to landlords nor to the tenants but those who cultivate land with family labourer.<sup>35</sup>

Paresh Chattopadhyay's view is one step further from the earlier view as he considers that the capitalistic developments have already set in motion in India. From the colonial period onwards, to him, there was the beginning of the commodity production and use of free labourer in Indian agriculture. This he considers as a positive sign of capitalist development in Indian agriculture.<sup>36</sup>

Utsa Patnaik quite explicitly differs in two respects from those a) who see, through development a strong tendency towards capitalist transformation of the mode of production, and b) those who discount the significance of such developments and views the continuance of pre-capitalist relationship to dominate.

She disagrees with the view of Chattopadhyay and holds that, free rural wage labourers in Indian agriculture are indeed free to the extent that they are not tied to a particular piece of land. But owing to the lack of job

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35. A. Rudra, 'Class Relations in Indian Agriculture' in three parts in EPW, 3rd, 10th and 17th June, 1978.

36. P. Chattopadhyay, 'On the Question of Modes of Production in Indian Agriculture', in EPW, vol. vii, No. 3, March 25, 1972, pp. 39-46.

opportunities, they are very much tied to agriculture. Thus the absence of alternative employment imposes constraints similar to the earlier bondedness to land.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, Chattopadhyay's view that capitalism had already had a firm grip even during the colonial period in India has also been attacked by Utsa Patnaik. She argues that capitalism was imposed from outside through a process of colonial exploitation. Imperialism did not in fact imply an automatic development of capitalistic relations of production in agriculture. That led to an inordinate development of capitalism in the sphere of exchange and prolonged disintegration of the pre-capitalistic mode without its replacement on a capitalistic basis. The result was the lop-sided capitalistic development with the feudal hang-over.<sup>38</sup> For that matter Patnaik refers to Lenin's distinction between 'moment' and 'trend'. The prior refers to tracing the principal contradiction at a given moment of time while the latter refers to the dynamic changes. Thus she observes that in agrarian social structure during colonial phase the principal contradiction was between the landlords and the peasantry as a whole. During the post-colonial era, after the emergence of

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37. U.Patnaik, 'Capitalist Development in Agriculture' in two parts, "EPW", vol.vi, No. 52, Dec. 25 1971, also. 'On Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture: A Reply' in "EPW", vol.vii, No.40, Sept 30, 1972.

38. U.Patnaik, 1971 ibid,

certain exogeneous factors, namely, land reforms, capitalistic measures etc. there has been a tendency towards capitalist growth. But such tendency is extremely narrow as the fact is that landlordism has been abolished statutorily but in effect it has been at best partially modified. The trend is also uneven due to variance to crop-wise distribution, resulting into pronounced capitalistic development in some regions while it lacked in the other.<sup>39</sup>

Hamza Alavi has joined the debate with the idea that, neither the idea of feudalism in Indian economy nor the contemporary phenomenon of rural capitalism, can be grasped in regard to its all implications, except specifically in the context of worldwide structure of imperialism, into which it is articulated. The situation can best be called as 'colonial mode of production'. He criticises vehemently the idea of coexistence of different modes. He considers that Marxian conception always postulates the contradiction between coexisting modes of production, with ascendance of the dominant mode and the descendance of the other.<sup>40</sup>

Rudra is a bit critical about this view. To him, Alavi, though rejects the fetish of necessary contradiction between the two modes, yet he himself makes the fetish of it -

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39. e.g. there was pronounced capitalistic farming in agriculture since and after Green Revolution in the areas like Punjab and Haryana. Whereas such tendencies are extremely limited in the rice growing areas of eastern India namely West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. ref. U.Patnaik, 'Class Differentiation within the peasantry: An Approach to the Analysis of Indian Agriculture', in "EPW" Vol.XI, No.39, Sept-25, 1974.

40. H.Alavi, 'On the Colonial Modes of Production' in "EPW" Special No. Vol.X, Nos. 33-35, 1975 ; Such 'colonial mode approach' has also been reiterated by J.Banaji; for detail

when he views that the Brazilian reality, like that of the other countries of the Third World, is that of feudal mode of production in agriculture and is precisely at the service of imperialism rather than antagonistically in contradiction with it. Thus he himself takes the same doctrinaire position that, such coexistence calls for the formulation of an altogether new mode.<sup>41</sup>

Ashok Rudra further argues that Marx himself has not given a very discreet understanding of modes of production. Marx views that, broadly speaking on the one hand there are landlords, whether feudal or capitalistically-oriented, who depend on appropriation of the labour and on the other, there is a large chunk of agricultural labourers who are being exploited by them.<sup>42</sup> The economic status of the sharecropper with tiny operational holding does not have a status better than an agricultural labourer. He may be clubbed for analytical purpose with agricultural labourers. Thus Rudra finds only two classes in Indian agriculture : (i) the class of big landlords and (ii) the class of agricultural labourers. These are antagonistic to each other and the contradiction between the two constitutes the principle contradiction in the rural society.<sup>43</sup>

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See ' For a theory of Colonial Mode of Production' in "EPW", Dec. 23, 1972.

41. A.Rudra, 1976, op: cit.

42. ibid.

43. ibid.

This postulation of the agrarian class structure into two divisions, essentially carries the idea of a capitalistic situation. But Rudra is perhaps partially correct to have thought it in the context of India, where in fact, there has been some amount of capitalistic development along with its peculiar feudal hangover and complex class divisions.

As has been stated earlier that though such approaches are useful to understand the objective class situation in Indian agriculture, yet sociologically speaking, unwillingly the dimension of caste- class matrix of both complementarity and contradictions has been missed. Joshi rightly views<sup>N</sup> that such studies on changing agrarian nature offers more an insight into the aspects as to what is happening being devoid of, why it is happening, and what were and are its institutional transformations.<sup>44</sup>

#### Non-Marxist Approach

Some scholars have used analytical typologies or a set of conceptual categories in their studies. Beteille, for example, takes 'caste', 'class' and 'power' and their relationships in the context of change. His understanding of class gives a tone of Marxian notion when he views class as a category of persons occupying a specific position

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44. P.C.Joshi, Land Reforms in India, Allied Publications Ltd, New Delhi, p.58.

in the system of production. But this is not substantiated when Beteille considers classes as categories rather than groups.<sup>45</sup> Sharma while criticising Beteille's approach argues that Weberian impact forces Beteille to think of caste, class or power as three different systems, hence 'caste free' areas. British functionalism forces him to find out interrelations and interdependence between caste, class and power, hence confusing and ambiguous.<sup>46</sup>

K.C.Alexander following Parsonian Model of stratification observes class in terms of functional attributes and rewards along with some geographical factors which mediate through culture, especially evaluative norms like that of caste.<sup>47</sup> However, it may be observed that such correlation between geographical location and cultural norms fails to analyse how the upper caste people gained economic stronghold over the land and became upper class.

D'Souza finds a distinction between class and caste, the former being an objective result of rating, while the units ranked in the latter are groups. He observes that, on the basis of certain attributes of 'rigidity- fluidity' scale which means

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45. A.Beteille, Caste, Class and Power, University of California Press, Berkley, 1965, p.3 ; Similar Study has been made by Anil Bhat, Caste, Class and Politics, Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, 1975.

46. K.L.Sharma, op: cit . p.12 .

47. K.C.Alexander, 'Some characteristics of the Agrarian Social Structure in T.N.' in "EPW", April, 19, 1975, pp.664-672.

that class is replacing caste and the individual is replacing the group.<sup>48</sup> But here again, it does not take an account of class-caste matrix in an inseparable form which seems only but heuristic.

#### Mixed Approach

Finally some scholars have made an attempt to combine the attributional ( functional) and interactional ( Marxian) approaches in their studies of social stratification.<sup>49</sup> R.Mukherjee, while viewing the dynamics of agrarian class relationships in Bengal finds out a functional interrelationship between class and caste. For that, he puts various occupational strata on a class scale and at the same time, finds out the positions of these classes in the traditional system of social stratification.<sup>50</sup> Saith and Tanakha have also used a similar approach to understand the transition and differentiation among the peasants of some villages in West Uttar Pradesh ( U.P.)<sup>51</sup>

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48. V. D'Souza, 'Caste and Class : A reinterpretation', in "Journal of Asian and African Studies" Vol.2, Nos. 3,4, pp. 192-211, 1967.

49. For detail about 'attributional and 'interactional' approach see M.Mariatte, 'Interactional and Attributional Approaches' in "Man in India", Vol.34, No.2, 1959, pp. 92-109.

50. Ramakrishna Mukherjee, op:cit.

51. A.Saith & A.Tanakha, 'Agrarian Tension and the Differentiation of the Peasantry' ; A study of West U.P. villages, in "EPW" vol.vii, No.14, 1972, pp. 712-23. P.K.Bose found a common absence in both the studies of Mukherjee and Saith and Tanakha, i.e. employment of hired labourer relative to family labour. To him this should be considered as an important dimension to know who hires out and who hires in thereby to determine agrarian class ( P.K.Bose, op:cit., pp. 37-38) ; U.Patnaik considers the importance of such a dimension in class differentiation in the Peasantry: 'An Analytical Approach to the Analysis of Indian Agriculture, in "EPW" , special No.1976, pp. A-82-101.

But a specific limitation to such an approach may be pointed out. In India, employment of hired labourer does not  
contd..

As stated above, from the nature of agrarian class relation in India and the various approaches applied thereon , it become clear that the social relationships comprise a ' conformity' aspect at a point of time as well as a ' contradictory' aspect over a period of time.<sup>52</sup> These two phenomena of ' conformity' and ' contradiction' may have been unilaterally stressed on the basis of one's ideological construct, to find out the reality. But in the context of India, it would not project the reality in its totality if one of these two approaches is applied to a given situation of agrarian class relations. Therefore, it would be perhaps essential to work out a combined approach which have the elements of both.

Thus for the analysis of the phenomena like agrarian class relations in India, it needs to be something holistic with both conformity and contradiction, the scheme which would encompass the functional relationships between caste, agrarian categories, patron- client relationship, land tenure system, changing mode of production with

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necessarily depend upon economic necessity but also on cultural factors that prohibit certain caste members to refrain from practicing cultivation. For detail see A. Beteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure; op: cit: also D & A. Thorner, Land and Labour in India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962.

52. For detail on ' conformity' and ' contradiction' see R. Mukherjee, 1980, Op: cit. pp. 109-116.



corresponding societal change and its value structure.  
And it is only by such broader interrelationships  
can such studies be better conceived.

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CHAPTER III

AGRARIAN RELATIONS : A MACROSCOPIC SURVEY

## AGRARIAN RELATIONS : A MACROSCOPIC SURVEY

We have studied agrarian relations broadly in two phases - the first is the colonial phase and the second is the post colonial phase, earmarked by legislative measures and changes in the traditional system.

### The Colonial Phase

The Colonial phase has been the most important phase in shaping and remoulding the institutional framework of agrarian social structure in India. The erstwhile agrarian social structure with its intricate caste-class matrix faced a sudden setback with the onslaught of colonial rule with its new economic forces. Under the dominant forces of colonial economy, the age-old feudal features were not allowed to disintegrate thoroughly even with the emergence of new institutional set-up in agrarian relations i.e. 'neo - landlordism.'<sup>1</sup>

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1. It may be called neo-landlordism, reason being that, even before the Britishers came, landlordism existed but with a different form. Although structurally speaking there was considerable divergence between the erstwhile and the neo-landlordism, yet the common factor in both the situations was that the possessing class or the landed gentry comprised mostly of upper caste Hindus. This has led some authors to view that the new economic forces, brought by British, only succeeded to alter the nature of the class circulation which was confined to the upper castes only. But it did not alter its social base ( Y.Singh, 'Sociology of Social Stratification' in "A Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology" ICSSR, Vol.1, 1974, p.341 ). See also R.E.Frykenberg, (ed) Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History, Manohar, Delhi, 1970.

British introduced two basic types of land tenure system viz. 'Zamindari' and 'Raiyatwari'<sup>2</sup>. In the former the rights of the property on land were conferred upon native tax-gatherers. And such rights were valid permanently so long as the Government's fixed revenues were regularly paid. These tax-gatherers were known as 'Zamindars', who did not have any direct interest to the soil i.e. actual tillage. In the latter, there was no intermediary proprietor and the actual tillers of the soil were vested with a heritable and transferable right of property against their payment of governmental revenues regularly.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact, that the mode of payments of revenue to the colonial ruler were different yet both the systems generated a very identical class interests on land. The supreme right on land, under both the systems, remained with the colonial ruler who had the power to auction the lands of the proprietor, in the case of default to pay the requisite

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2. 'Mahalwari' or 'Gramwari', though not a representative phenomenon in India, was yet another variety. Under that, Government collected a fixed amount of a 'joint-rent' from each village. For details see J.Sarkar Economics of British India, M.C.Sarkar & Sons, Calcutta, 1917, pp. 118-120, See also N.Mukherjee & R.E.Frykenberg 'The Ryotwari System and Social Organisation in the Madras Presidency', in Frykenberg (ed) op.cit. pp. 238-239,
  3. For detail on British land tenure system, see Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History, R.E.Frykenberg (ed) op.cit.; H.H.Mann, The Social Framework of Agriculture: India, Middle East and England, Bombay, 1966; C.W.Neale, Economic change in Rural India, New Haven, 1962; R.K.Mukherjee, (ed) Economic Problems in Modern India, London, 1941 and J.Sarkar, Economics of British India, 1917, op. cit.

amount of revenue, within the scheduled time. This often led to the transfer of lands from the traditional nobility to the emerging class of rapacious money-lenders, speculators, merchants and urban elites, who belonged mostly to upper and middle castes.<sup>4</sup>

The new wave of land tenure system generated a network of intermediary proprietors between the actual cultivator of the soil and the state, especially under the Zamindari system. This further, through a process of sub-infeudation, gave birth to a hierarchy of non-cultivating interests on land. The outcome was very fatal, especially to the actual peasants for whom was left the barest subsistence. This caused a very adverse effect to the actual tillers who were increasingly falling into the clutches of the money-lenders. It was because the peasants, with lesser economic potentialities and opportunities, fell into the vicious circle of debt i.e. to loan for the repayment of loans. This precipitated a massive alienation of lands from the peasants. In the due course such alienated lands were passed into the hands of non-agriculturist people e.g. money lenders, traders, etc. Naturally, this resulted into an increase in both the bulk of landless agricultural labourers as well as the non-agriculturist interests on land.

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4. P.C.Joshi, 'Land Reforms in India', in A.R.Desai, (ed) "Rural Sociology in India", Popular Prkashan , Bombay, 1969, pp. 444-48; B.S.Cohn, 'structural change in Rural Society,' in Frykenberg ( ed) op.cit. pp. 71-75.

In Eastern U.P. between 1795-1850 Bhumihars, Baniyas and Kayasthas, who were connected primarily with non-agricultural occupations, emerged as the new group of purchaser of the transferred lands. It has been observed that about 40% of the transferred lands were purchased by the families practicing money-lending and other non-agricultural occupations. Amongst them again people with commerce and money-lending as primary occupation, formed about 24% of the total buyers. In all, these, people grabbed about 55% of the total transferred lands.<sup>5</sup>

In Eastern India also there emerged a similar class of land-purchaser having either trade or money-lending as their primary occupation.<sup>6</sup>

The repercussion of such transfers was also prominent in the tribal areas. In Chhotnagpur for instance, the tribal chiefs or the land grantees were replaced by the nontribal landlords by the end of 19th century. The old Munda or Oraon chiefs were largely being replaced by the Hindu farmers, e.g. in Palamau district of Bihar towards the close of 19th century, Rajput Jagirdars<sup>7</sup> loomed large.

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5. B.S.Cohn, cp. cit.

6. B.Chowdhury, 'Land Market in Eastern India' ( 1793-1940) in "The Indian Economic & Social History Review", vol.II, No.1, 1975.

7. Land Grantees or the village zamindars of Rajasthan. For detail on Jagirdars see B.S.Cohn, cp.cit. p.64.

The alienated tribals finally migrated mostly to Northern part of Bengal as agricultural and plantation labourers.<sup>8</sup>

Bombay Land Revenue Administrations' reports also have similar story to tell. It is observed that for the year 1926-27 and 1936-37, 20% of the lands, held by the owner-cultivators slipped into the hands of money lenders.<sup>9</sup> Under such developments presumably, the worst sufferers<sup>er</sup> were rent-paying small tenants whose lands were mortgaged and eventually reclaimed by the money-lenders.

Thus from above, one thing gets very prominent that under the colonial system of land tenures the process of depeasantization was founded and mastered through its intricate politico-jural rules of the system.

The situation was further coupled with the growth of trade in raw materials, i.e. the growth of cash-crop in India and inundation of native market with finished products from Britain. This produced two far reaching effects. On the one hand, it grossly altered the basic foundation of economy i.e. village economy, with a more or less self-sufficient infra-structure. The indigeneous handicrafts and artisan communities of both villages and the cities faced a great disruption. On the other, the growing

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8. S.K. Singh, 'The Tribal Land Organization in Chotnagpur and its Developments', ref. in S.Sen, 'Agrarian Relations in India'; Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, p.12. 1979.

9. S.Sen, op. cit. p. 19.

penetration of commodity economy resulted into the development of certain objective conditions for the growth of capitalistic production. And to that extent the commodity market for capitalism and the bankruptcy of large number of peasants, artisans, and handicraftsmen created a labour market.<sup>10</sup> But such commodity market, coming as a result of ruthless deindustrialization, instead of becoming an internal market for national industry became a lopsided growth and an appendage to the internal market of western capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

It may be observed that differentiation in the peasantry in India is a phenomenon of time immemorial. But the nature of differentiation through time, though, developed gradually into complexity under the given colonial set up, yet it found a sudden accentuation under the rigorous moneyed economy, through market forces.

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10. For detail see A.K.Baghchi, 'Foreign Capital and Economic Development in India : A schematic view' in K.Gough and H.P.Sharma (ed), "Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia", Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973, D.Thomer, 'Deindustrialization in India' in D & A. Thomer (ed) "Land and Labour in India", Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, R.C.Dutt, "The Economic History of India under British Rule", Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963 and C.Bettelheim, "India Independent" tr. by W.A.Caswell, McGibbon & Kee, 1968, B.Sen, "Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India", P.P.H., New Delhi, 1962; D.Rothermund, "Government, landlord and Peasants in India : Agrarian Relations under British Rule, 1865-1935", Wiesbaden, 1978.

11. P.C.Joshi, 1969, op.cit. p. 445.



As has been referred earlier that, under the two basic systems of land tenure, ( alongwith other colonial policies) the socio- economic positions of the upper class, as well as castes, remained by and large unaltered.

This led P.C.Joshi to observe :

" The high ranking castes traditionally dissociated from cultivation and direct management of land remained as land owners and continued to appropriate rental incomes from land. The cultivating peasant castes and the depressed and untouchable castes, standing at the bottom of the social ladder constantly scrolled the ranks of tenants, share-croppers and farm servants." 12

Besides, a few cases of land transfers of large zamindars, the land transfer on the plea of defaulting to pay up revenues, made the small farmers its worst victim. There is hardly any evidence that under the stream of changes the people at the lower rung, with lower socio-economic status, could really make any better fortune, other than swelling the bulk of agricultural labourers, tenants-at-will or the industrial labourers. The lion's share of the gains was shared by non-cultivating class of landlords and non-agriculturist class comprising money- lenders and other urban elites, who were mostly from the upper and middle rung of the caste hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

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12. P.C.Joshi, ibid, p.446.

13. B.S.Cohn, cp. cit. and P.C.Joshi, 1969, op.cit.

Agrarian relations under the given structure thus found a complex network, in terms of differential economic interest, with the emergence of land as a commodity. This was pronounced at every stage and despite the fact that, the 'Raitwari' system was aimed more to avoid the emergence of intermediaries through infeudation, yet it could not be checked. But it is granted that the number of such sub-infeudation and intermediaries found its height under the zamindari system. <sup>14</sup>

The elaborate hierarchy of intermediaries, on the basis of respective interests on lands, was accentuated with the coming of market forces. For instance, the relatively prosperous section of the peasantry were linked with market as the seller of the produce on their lands. And gradually they emerged as the better-off section of the peasantry. Contrast to that, a large section of occupancy-tenants merged with the tenants- at-will through rack-renting, usury and so forth. In a nutshell development of commodity economy, under colonial rule, instead of paying the way for the growth of agricultural capitalism, served to ossify the depressive framework of landlordism. The process was activated by means of economic surplus from agricultural sector which was extracted and appropriated by a network of

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14. For detail about the categories of intermediaries in Zamindari areas see S.Roy Bharater Krishak Bidroha O Ganatrantric Sangram ( Beng. ), D.N.B.A. Brs, Calcutta, 1972. See also, K.Mukherjee, Land Reforms, H.Chatterjee & Co., Calcutta, 1952, p.9.

rentiers, merchants and usurers. The utilization of such economic surplus was not meant for economic growth. Because, the beneficiaries under such a process were involved more in conspicuous consumption, and retrograding capital investment through usuary. This in no way could yield the growth of agricultural capitalism in India.<sup>15</sup>

The dynamics of exploitation and relegation of the poor and middle peasants was a negative consequence of the ruthless colonial policy aiming at surplus maximisation only. Hence the period between 1900-1947, which witnessed economic constraints like two world wars, economic depression of 30s etc., there should be no doubt that the miseries of agrarian economy was mounted high with its virtual stagnation. During the said period it has been estimated that, the growth rate of food out-put remained stationary, whereas the growth rate of cash-crops shot up by 59.3%.<sup>16</sup>

The growth in the number of tenants-at-will or the rent paying tenants in terms of produce rents, showed a gradual increase since the close of 19th and early 20th century. It was mainly due to multiple factors. One of such

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15. A.K.Baghchi, op.cit.

16. A.K.Baghchi, ibid, pp. 95-98.

factors is indebtedness of owner- cultivator, "

" the increase in Barga lands and Khasa lands of proprietors and tenure holders is largely due to the indebtedness of the ryot .... many of the landlords.... lend money to these ryots.... and gradually acquired holdings keeping them in their own possession of letting them out on barga<sup>17</sup> ( cultivation in terms of produce rent).

Such system of produce rent encouraged the newly emerged agriculturist owners of the land, who found it more profitable than cash rent.

In raitwari<sup>18</sup> areas also large tracts of land were cultivated by tenants on produce- share basis. B.B.Chowdhury has observed that towards the end of 19th century the process of depeasantization was very pronounced especially during 1885-95 and 1923-1935. And there is little doubt that

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17. B.B.Chowdhury, 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar', ( 1885-1947)', in "Indian Historical Review", Vol.II, No.1, 1975, pp. 105-165.

Daniel Thorner also observes that as the income of the peasant became more and more dependent upon the scale of cash crop, they needed regular surplus of credit. Rural credit, which was casual before British, became a permanent phenomenon of the rural economy and its volume also gradually increased. The resultant was the alienation of land and the growth of tenants-at-will or agriculture labourer, Thorner : 1962, op.cit, pp. 55- 188.

18. Reports of the Madras Banking Committee says that, subletting was rarely on a money rental. It was commonly on a sharing system, the land lord getting 40:60 ratio or even 80% of the yield, ref. in 'India today' R.P.Dutt, 1970, p. 242.

the peasants, having been pushed out of their land either joined the crowd of agricultural labourers or became share-croppers.<sup>19</sup> The collector of Champaran wrote, on usufructory rights on land during 1913-19, that the creditor could either cultivate the land himself or as was more usual he let it out to the former raiyat (revenue paying tenant) at an exorbitant produce rent.<sup>20</sup> Karuna Mukherjee very rightly views, the increase in the number of crop-sharing as a distinct indication of relegation of hereditary raiyats. And such tenants, besides their being fallen into the vicious clutch of the money-lenders, hardly could confront their landlords on equal terms without being violent.<sup>21</sup>

Keeping pace with the increase in the bulk of share-croppers, the number of agricultural labourers also showed a gradual increase since mid 19th century. The number had a sudden jump since early 20th century. It has been stated earlier that, the early British policy of deindustrialization pushed out a bulk of artisan communities only to find agricultural labour or to work as tenant-at-will for their livelihood.

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19. B.B.Chawdhury, op.cit.

20. Survey Settlement Report Champaran (1913-19)  
ref.in S.Sen, op. cit., p.31.

21. K.Mukherjee, op. cit. p.9.

S.S.Patel in his study found that in India during the year 1931, share-croppers formed 24.3% of the total agricultural population in India, while agricultural labourers formed 37.8% of that total.<sup>22</sup>

The agricultural labourers, as has been noted earlier, were the worst sufferers of the total system having to share multiple economic as well as extra economic constraints, e.g. low wage, chronic indebtedness and above all feudal expropriation in the form of free labour.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the economic factors being increasingly responsible for such an acute underdog situation of the peasants, the agrarian inequality was already pinned in the existing value structure i.e. the principles of caste. And the agricultural serfdom owed its strong root to the value system which internalised the agrarian inequality. The Dublas (the weak) and Halis of Bombay region, Puleyans and Holiyas of Madras region, Kanis, and Mushahar of Bihar may be cited, who were literally agricultural 'slaves'. The hierarchy of agrarian classes continued to a large extent with that of the caste hierarchy. The British rule in India not only contributed to this coincidence but also strengthened it further by some of its policies and programmes including the new land tenure systems.

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22. S.S.Patel, 'Agricultural labourers in Modern India,' ref. in S.Sen, op. cit. p.37.

23. B.S.Cohn, op.cit., pp. 108, 110. He also refers that 'abhwab' or forced labour in the form of feudal expropriation was very common in U.P.

Apart from other factors for the growth in number of agricultural labourers, Bhowani Sen attributed more to the economic depression, which took its shape since 1922 and culminated in early 1930s. B.Sen, op.cit. 1962, p.147.

At the same time one could observe a major contradiction in regard to agrarian relations. The peasants were alienated from their lands. The source of livelihood of artisans and handicraftsmen was grossly alienated from their traditional occupations, and pushed them to the 'labour market' which resulted into their pauprization.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the whole socio-economic system under the colonial rule strengthened and nourished the semi-bondage conditions for direct producers, as it served the interests of the colonial power in mopping up the surplus from the colony to the colonial masters.

#### Legislative Measures and Change in Agrarian Relations

This section may be an epilogue to the understanding of the changing character of Indian agrarian social structure. One of the methods to observe this is to assess the role of legislation related to agriculture and agrarian relations.

It has already been observed that under the British landed property system there were significant juridical and other types of differences between the zamindari and Raiyatwari systems, yet the pattern of land relations was characterised by semi-feudal land ownership obstructing the growth of development

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24. It was because there was no corresponding industrial growth which otherwise would have absorbed those alienated mass. See A.R.Desai, 1948; op.cit., P.C.Joshi, 1969, op.cit. D.Thorner, 1962, op.cit., R.C.Dutt, op.cit., R.P.Dutt, op.cit.

and productive forces in agriculture. Consequently, the agrarian structure which was handed over to Independent India, has been branded as 'built-in-depressor' by Thorner.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the basic aim behind the agrarian policy in the post-colonial era centred around the abolition of intermediaries and to bring the tenant under the direct governmental control. This was the central issue as manifested in various All India Congress Committee resolutions since 1929.<sup>26</sup>

Since Independence, attempts were made to alter the erstwhile agrarian social structure. The first step to such an end was to abolish the zamindari system and eliminate the non-cultivating intermediary tenants who were nothing more than parasites. The next considerable step consisted of steps seeking to ensure security of the tenants and to enforce ceiling on individual holdings, through different plan periods and to redistribute them among the landless and small peasants.

The first and second Five year Plans aimed at reducing the agrarian inequality in terms of ownership holding and by improving the conditions of tenancy. Both the plans made provisions for land reforms through ceiling on landholding and ensuring the rights of the tenants on the land vis-a-vis non-cultivating land-owners.

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25. D.Thorner, 1956, op. cit., p.13.

26. U.P.Kissan Conference, 50th and 57th Session of All India Congress Committee, (AICC) etc.



P.C.Joshi observes : 'instead of the slogan of "land to the tiller" for all the classes of tenants being implemented, conditions were created only for certain special classes of tenants to enjoy security and proprietary rights over their lands.' <sup>27</sup> The special provision for personal cultivation and legal sanction to entrepreneurial and supervisory role paved the way for the emergence of capitalist farmers from among the ex-landlords and upper strata of peasants.

The provision for ceiling and its exemption also gave way to its malfunctioning all over India. Eviction of tenants and massive paper transfer of lands to evade ceiling could not disturb the status-quo to any considerable extent in the agrarian social structure. The time-span between the formulation of the policy and its execution gave ample "breathing space" to the large landowners to make the best use of various surreptitious means to dodge the land ceiling. This can well be substantiated by citing a few examples. In Punjab where according to 1956 ownership pattern, nearly 4,00,000 acres of land should have been declared surplus but under the new law only 1,50,000 acres of land could be recovered.<sup>28</sup> In Andhra, the ceiling legislation came into practice in 1964 and the estimated recovery was 73,692 acres of land of which

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27. P.C.Joshi, 1969, op.cit, p.465 .

28. P.C.Joshi, ibid, p.471 .

till 1970, only 191 acres could be recovered. In U.P. of the 2,38,000 acres of surplus by 1971, only 1,99,000 acres could be acquired.<sup>29</sup> The third, fourth and fifth five year plans, apart from ceiling specially highlighted the security of tenure. But the very status of the tenant was not uniform and was unequalitarian in nature. In some states, namely, U.P., Bihar and Bengal, the share-croppers were omitted from the status of tenant. The special provisions for security of tenure were extended to the raiyats. But such provisions deprived the share-croppers from having any permanent right on lands.

Under the conditions of security of tenure and land ceiling, paradoxically there has been a decline in the number of tenants since the introduction of land reforms. But, Dharam Narain and P.C. Joshi expressed doubts on such developments. They observe :

" to say that the weight of the tenancy in the country , as a whole, seems to have assumed a moderate dimension, is neither to suggest that its weight does not continue to be high in specific regions of the country nor indeed to imply that the process has not occurred in a perverse manner."<sup>30</sup>

P.S. Appu, draws attention to often misconceived and underweighted notion that, tenancy holds the small portion of the total cultivable land, and is, therefore, not a problem of greater importance, 1971 census also gives considerable support

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29. S. Banerjee, In the Wake of Naxalbari, Subarnarekha, Calcutta 1980, pp. 10-13.

30. P.C. Joshi & D. Narain, 'Magnitude of Agricultural Tenancy' in "EPW", vol. iv, No. 39, 1969, p. A-140.

stating that, about 91.53 % of the operational holdings in the country accounting for 21.10% of the cultivated area, are wholly own-operated. Whereas the rented holdings account for only 2.44% of the total cultivated areas and partly owned and partly-rented area account for 6.08% of the total area. Such data are primarily based on village records which are insufficient. Because as a general practice it may be noticed that most of the tenancies are oral and informal, which are very difficult to be measured. Thus, official accounts cannot be a true measure of the real situation.<sup>31</sup>

It is true that :

" the law itself made certain compromises with the existing social order when for instance it refused to exclude from its definition of cultivator, those who did not actually till the soil on the ground that such work was repugnant to the traditional status of life of certain castes, e.g. Brahmin, Rajputs."32

Whereas the law was very discreet by excluding the share-cropper from the status of tenants.

Thus, in a nutshell, it may be observed that land reforms have failed to reduce most of the basic inequalities; though paradoxically, it succeeded to abolish the rights of the superior intermediaries and partially reduce the area operated under the traditional tenancy systems. But it has failed to reduce considerably the concentration of the ownership

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31. P.S.Appu, 'Tenancy Reforms in India' in "EPW", special No. vol.x, Nos. 33-35, 1975.

32. A.Beteille, 1974, op. cit, p.84 .

of landholding as well as to improve the conditions of poor tenants especially who hold lands on oral contract and on share-cropping basis.

Whatever may be the success or failure of the land reform legislations, it has been able to make a considerable structural reorganisation in the agrarian structure. Daniel Thorner may have very correctly opined that, under the land reform laws the small minority have had wit and resource enough to get around these laws in which in any event, the loopholes were so large as to give them ample ground for manouvering. By passing themselves off whether legally or illegally as tillers and cultivators, the village oligarchs have gone on running India's rural life. The forces of the depressor continue to operate strongly in the country side.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most important dimensions in the analysis of structural change is the 'ownership holding.' Land is the most important asset for farmers in India. A change in the land holding status reflects more accurately than any other index, the relative changes in the agrarian class structure, in terms of prosperity or destitution. Because, in the agrarian arena in India the importance of land is still predominant in which the political power and economic hegemony owe its roots.

The following table may give a diachronic understanding of the nature of changes in regard to land ownership and inequality of landholdings in the agrarian social structure in India.

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33. D.Thorner, 1956, op. cit. p.79.

TABLE- 3.1

DISTRIBUTION OF LAND OWNERSHIP - ALL INDIA

| Sl. No. | Category     | Size-class    | Number of house-holds (1000) |                   | Area owned ( in <sup>1000</sup> acres) |                   |
|---------|--------------|---------------|------------------------------|-------------------|--|-------------------|
|         |              |               | 1953-54                      | 1971-72           | 1953-54                                | 1971-72           |
| 1       | 2            | 3             | 4                            | 5                 | 6                                      | 7                 |
| 1.      | Landless     | 0.00          | 14,444<br>(22.00)            | 7,558<br>(9.64)   | -                                      | -                 |
| 2.      | Marginal     | 0.00- 0.99    | 13,346<br>(24.89)            | 27,609<br>(35.23) | 4,275<br>(1.38)                        | 6,106<br>(2.27)   |
| 3.      | Small        | 1.00- 4.99    | 18,083<br>(27.53)            | 26,046<br>(33.34) | 47,681<br>(15.39)                      | 66,087<br>(22.37) |
| 4.      | Medium       | 5.00- 9.99    | 8,453<br>(12.87)             | 9,359<br>(11.94)  | 59,550<br>(19.22)                      | 64,766<br>(21.92) |
| 5.      | Big          | 10.00-24.99   | 6,045<br>(9.21)              | 6,138<br>(7.83)   | 92,132<br>(29.74)                      | 90,846<br>(30.73) |
| 6.      | Large        | 25.00 & above | 2,288<br>(3.50)              | 1,660<br>(2.12)   | 106,212<br>(34.27)                     | 67,995<br>(22.91) |
| 7.      | ALL CLASSES  |               | 65,659<br>(100)              | 78,370<br>(100)   | 309,850<br>(100)                       | 295,800<br>(100)  |
| 8.      | GINI INDEX : |               | 1953-54 = 0.727              |                   | 1971-72 = 0.687                        |                   |

Notes : Gini Indices are calculated with the help of the formula

$$G = \left| \frac{\sum X_j Y_{j+1} - \sum X_{j+1} Y_j}{\hat{X}_j \hat{Y}_j} \right|$$

where  $X_j$  and  $Y_j$  represent cumulative percentage of 'number of households' and 'owned area' respectively. and  $\hat{X}_j = \hat{Y}_j = 100$ .

Figures in the parenthesis are percentages :

Sources : 1) N.S.S. Report No.66 : 1953-54  
2) N.S.S. Report No.215: 1971-72

For analytical purpose the above N.S.S. data have been compiled into five classes of landholdings in the following order : landless, marginal, small, medium, big and large land owners. From the given table certain facts involving the nature of inequality, land reforms and their outcome may be derived.

During the year 1953-54, 22% of the total households were landless. Whereas 3.56 % of the households holding 25 acres and above, controlled 37.25% of the total cultivable lands. During the year 1971-72, strikingly the number of landless households have reduced by 12.36% . But the large landowning households did not reduce very significantly, as 2.12% of the total households owned 22.91% of the total lands.

Only medium and big landowners showed a relative decline in the total number of households, yet their average of ownership has increased. By putting the first three categories together it may be observed that during 1953-54, 74.42% of the total house holds owned upto 5 acres of land or less which amounted to 16.27% of the total lands.

In the year 1971-72, 78.28% of the total households held 24.44% of the total cultivable area. But the increase in the total area in these categories is not very remarkable as there has been simultaneous increase in the number of households by more than 4%.

The nature of agrarian inequality, even after the land reforms, does not seem very distinct in the above table. In an attempt to be more discreet to project inequality in landholding

the Gini ratio has been calculated as follows. If the value of gini Ratio ( G.R.) equals to 1, it implies complete inequality, whereas if the G.R. equals to 0 it implies a complete equality. Thus the scale varies within a range of 1 to 0. And if the G.R. tends towards 1 it shows a greater degree of inequality. If the G.R. tends towards 0 it shows a tendency towards equality.

The G.R. for the year 1953-54 was 0.727 which reduced to 0.687 in the year 1971-72 . Nevertheless the interesting fact is that the inequality in terms of landholding has reduced in numerical terms, yet it is not significant , as it still projects the existence of high degree of inequality even during 1971-72.

Finally, the most striking feature of the transfer of lands due to land reform measures need not always lead one to believe that there has been a decline in the large ownership of lands because of alleged fake partition or 'benami-transfers.'

The pattern of inequality among agrarian class in India could be seen further from the following table regarding the rural asset- holdings. The table has been compiled from 1971 Report of the Rural Debt and Investment Survey conducted by the Reserve Bank of India.

TABLE- 3.2

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS  
OF ALL RURAL HOUSEHOLDS- ALL INDIA

| S. No. | Asset Group<br>( in Rupees) | Percentage share in<br>total household | Percentage share in<br>total assets. |
|--------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1      | 2                           | 3                                      | 4                                    |
| 1.     | Upto 1,000                  | 19.73                                  | 0.76                                 |
| 2.     | 1,000- 10,000               | 49.69                                  | 19.10                                |
| 3.     | 10,000-20,000               | 16.40                                  | 19.12                                |
| 4.     | 20,000-50,000               | 11.07                                  | 29.62                                |
| 5.     | 50,000-1,00,000             | 2.94                                   | 17.55                                |
| 6.     | 1,00,000 and above          | 0.96                                   | 13.87                                |

Source - Report of the Rural Debt and  
Investment Survey :

Vol.I, pp. 26-27, 30th June, 1971.



The above table shows that out of the six groups the last three groups constitute only about 15% of the households, but own above 61% of the total assets. The group having assets between <sup>Rs</sup> 10,000 to <sup>Rs</sup> 20,000 constitute about 15% of the households and own about 19% of the assets. The lowest two groups comprising mostly marginal and landless peasants constitute about 70% of the households but own only about 20% of the assets.

It has been noted that all the peasants do not have the same status. The process of change under the transformation of the peasantry in various parts of the country as well as within different states has been of uneven nature. This is partly due to differential land tenure systems such as Zamindari, Raiyatwari, etc. And it is partly due to the differential implementation of land reform measures and the corresponding responses thereof.

Khusro's study of land reforms shows that the implementation of tenancy legislation largely depends upon the degree of consciousness among the peasantry.<sup>34</sup> Mencher observes that in Kerala the land reform measures found better grounding owing to its long uphill struggles, whereas in other states it was more of a lip-service.<sup>35</sup> Dandekar, G.Parthasarathi and B.P.Rao have also observed that divergence in socio-economic and political factors as constraints to implementation of

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34. A.M.Khusro, Economic and Social effects of Jagirdari Abolition and Land Reforms, in Hyderabad, Hyderabad, 1958.

35. J.P.Mancher, 'Conflicts and Contradictions in the Green Revolution : The case of Tamil Nadu', in "EPW", vol.ix, Nos. 6,7,8, Annual No. 1974, p.311.

tenancy reforms.<sup>36</sup> Thus, such uneven results and their impact on structural changes have led P.C.Joshi to comment that instead of viewing the agrarian social structure in India as a monolithic structure it should be divided into regional typologies in terms of its administrative system, nature and growth of peasant consciousness, middle class and their dissociation from landownership etc.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, it may be surmised that, the studies of agrarian social structure in India, with its differential nature are to be studied through regional typologies. And such study needs to be diachronic in the light of specific historicity. At the same time it is also granted that at this juncture such studies are yet to be undertaken with appropriate method and more authentic data.

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36. V.M.Dandekar, 'Working of Bombay Tenancy Act, 1948: Report of Investigation,' ref. in Joshi, 1975, op.cit. p. 95 ; G.Parthasarathy & B.P.Rao, Implementation of Land Reforms in Andhra Pradesh, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta, p.330.

37. P.C.Joshi, 1975, op.cit. pp. 96-103.

CHAPTER IV  
DYNAMICS OF AGRARIAN RELATIONS  
OF BENGAL

## DYNAMICS OF AGRARIAN RELATIONS OF BENGAL

Through the earlier chapters it has been observed that social structural relations form the core of the society. And the nature of the socio-economic structure cannot be conceived by segregating the emphasis on economic or social relations alone, e.g. technology of production, sheer economic activities, segregation of the people into smaller units in terms of occupational homogeneity, and the segregational observation in terms of ethnicity, status, commensality and so on. Thus, the socio-economic structure for its function and sustenance depends on the intricate network of the aforesaid economic as well as social parameters.

In the dynamics of agrarian social structure, the relations of production possibly form the core, around which the values, status and other seemingly extra-economic factors exist. It has already been observed that such paradigms, may paradoxically appear to be complementary or contradictory through times. And it is such conformity and conflict through which the societal dynamics keep running.<sup>1</sup>

This 'conformity-conflict matrix' may better be analysed through a historic analytical study so as to arrive at a better generalization.

## PRE-BRITISH MODE OF AGRICULTURE IN BENGAL

In the earlier chapter the myth of the self-sufficient unchangeable village India has been elaborately dealt with. In the context of Bengal, following the nature of Indian village,

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1. For the functional inter-relationships of the 'conformity' - conflict' matrix, please see chapter II, p.40.

it may be observed through time that, agriculture was the principal occupation of the village and complementary to that were the different occupations of artisans, e.g. weavers, potterers, goldsmith, etc. It was only during fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era that a self-sufficient economic unit of the village was in operation.<sup>2</sup> It has already been observed how unjust it was to characterize the ideal village India during the pre-British era, in terms of changelessness. Nevertheless a kind of cohesiveness centring around agriculture, did exist even in Bengal villages, through an elaborate and informal structure of rights and obligations which was highly conditioned by religious or value matrix. And that found expression, by and large, through a kind of village community system. Under that the village panchayat had a very significant say towards the use and transfer of lands. Moreover, such economic factors were largely conditioned through the extra-economic values of sanctions, such as caste and caste-like values. The individual holdings on land were more in terms of possession than ownership, as it was meant primarily for subsistence, with self cultivating and possessing types of cultivators. Thus, the relations of production were also quite different, having little scope for the development of relationships between landlord, share-cropper and agriculture labourer.<sup>3</sup>

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2. R. Mukherjee, Dynamics of a Rural Society, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1957, p.17.

3. ibid, pp.15-25.

Therefore, the relationship between the raiyat (revenue farmer according to the condition of the term of pre-British days) and Zamindar ( landlord) formed the basis of production relations in agriculture. It may further be noted that inspite of the existence of such self-sufficient village, the conditions were very much amenable to changes with inequality as well as differentiation at various levels. Historical evidences suggest that though the villages were self-sufficient in nature yet the selling of surplus did exist, <sup>That was</sup> not in the form of commodity, but where peasants had little or no connection with the open market. The peasants were usually compelled to sell a part of their products on contracted terms to their creditors. The immediate need for cash to meet revenue and keep themselves alive, forced the peasants to sell their products to their creditors.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, such an agrarian system of production did not yield a relation of production with a distinct class of landlords as that of British era in Bengal. But this cohesive agrarian social structure faced a radical change through (i) the introduction of private property in land, (ii) the conversion of erstwhile tribute receivers or revenue farmers into landlords and (iii) attribution of commodity value to the lands as well as to its products. Such alterations found way through the intervention of European power which finally

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4. Irfan Habib, Agricultural Systems of Mughal India, Bombay, 1963, pp.77-79. See also, 'The Social Distribution of landed Property in Pre- British India' in R.S.Sharma, (ed) "Indian Society Historical Probings", PPH, New Delhi, 1974, pp.95-125 .

culminated to the settled British hegemony over the economy of Bengal and later over the rest of India.

PERMANENT SETTLEMENT IN OPERATION

Britishers introduced permanent settlement in the year 1793. This was the most important single act by the British rule in Bengal, in their early, stages, which alone moulded and determined the course of economy of east India for the future two centuries to come.

Since the time limit of the discussion has been confined primarily to the colonial period, it would not be possible to go into the discussion of the genesis of erstwhile land tenure system. Yet in order to conceive the essence of permanent settlement a few words may be necessary. Eversince the East India Company acquired unquestioned power to deal with revenue, specifically in Bengal, the lands were being settled for specific periods with the zamindars, who were by and large the erstwhile revenue collectors or rent receivers on the lands under Muslim rule.

In the earlier stages the revenue collecting landlords in case of defaulting to pay the requisite amount of revenue on the scheduled date, used to loose the right on lands. The resultant was recurrent changes in land rights putting the system into increasing complications. And the revenue payable to the government, often fluctuated with no standardization of payments. Hence the extortionate collection of heavy revenues by the zamindars yielded acute economic crisis for the peasants.

This hastened further complications in the system of revenue collection.<sup>5</sup>

Enough has been said with regard to the aims and objectives of Permanent Settlement through various literatures. Yet it is of necessity to recall briefly the basic lofty aims behind it, which fell flat, and the derived aims underneath, which responded to the expectations of the colonial rulers. Therefore, a new relation of production in agrarian social structure of Bengal was consequent upon all such basic and derived aims. Such aims may be as follows :-

Basic Aims :

- (a) Cheapest, safest and most convenient method of collection of revenue, which was necessary to maintain the army on the ports by the East India Company, having formidable enemies around;
- (b) Secured collection of revenues;
- (c) To avoid the difficulties to have direct contact with the cultivator for the collection of revenue;
- (d) To create a class with European pattern of estate owners, who as was supposed, would have had a gradual profit oriented bent in agriculture

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5. N.K.Sinha, 'Administrative, Economic and Social History (1757- 1793)', in N.K.Sinha (ed), The History of Bengal (1757-1905). See also, R.K.Mukherjee, Land Problems in India, Longman, Green and Co., London, 1933.



and would bring forth further transformation into capitalistic agriculture.

Derived Aims

The following derived aims, or the undercurrents beneath the Settlement Act, are of greater sociological relevance on the basis of which the agricultural class relations till date may well be understood.

(a) This is an extension of the last basic aim as referred above, that in order to protect and secure the interests of the British, it was to the exigency that a class was to be formed who would have identical interests with British and would therefore have unquestioned loyalty to the colonial rule.<sup>6</sup>

(b) From above, it follows further that, such class, by virtue of having a steady flow of earning from land, would not virtually go in for any change of the system. It is evident from the fact that since mid-18th century, after the occurrences like famine and mounting deprivation among the small peasants, the chances of peasant insurrections were looming large. Thus, the newly created landed gentry would act as a viable buffer to quell such possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

(c) Thus it may be no wrong to deduce that, above all, there was a real colonial class interest on the part of the

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6. R.P.Dutt, India Today, op.cit. pp 217-218.

7. R.K.Mukherjee, 1933, op.cit, p.35.

colonial ruler. It is a fact that by establishing a secured and permanent individual ownership over land, the returns ( revenue ) got perpetually limited. Nevertheless that had been able to divert successfully the interests of the contemporary moneyed class to concentrate their interests on land, in lieu of industrial entrepreneurship.<sup>8</sup> And this might have resulted into the growth of a class of 'National Bourgeoisie', the very existence of whose socio-economic interests might pose a threat to colonial interests.

Permanent Settlement recognized the zamindars as proprietors of soil subject to their fixed payment of cash rent with rights of hereditary succession, sales and mortgage. Before going into the analytical detail about the posterior effects of such settlement, it may be worthwhile to refer to Ramesh Chandra Datta, who categorically upheld the system as beneficial. In this words

" In England ( Pitt's permanent settlement after five years since the operation of permanent settlement in Bengal) the settlement benefited the landed class only, in Bengal the settlement has benefited the whole agricultural community. The entire peasant population shares the benefit and is more prosperous and resourceful on account of this measure .... In England it saved the land lord class from added taxation, in Bengal it has saved the nation from fatal disastrous famine." 9

Such theoretical expectations were far from reality which may be observed from the following.

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8. Similar view has been held by Ramkrishna Mukherjee, in R.Mukherjee, 1957, op.cit, p.52 .

9. R.C.Dutta, The Economic History of India under British Rule, R.K.Paul, 1963, p.65 .

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF ZAMINDARS

The major section of zamindars of Bengal comprised largely business community or urban rich whose primary orientation was profit making from investment in lands. The other section comprised erstwhile established land holding families like 'Rajas' of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Burdwan etc. who were de-facto rulers in their estates. After the grant of Diwani ( 1765) they were the collectors of revenue installed by Muslim rulers with hereditary tenure of office.

In spite of the differential composition of the above categories, the common denominator was that, all of them were from upper caste Bengali Hindus along with some upper sections of Muslims like Sayads. Thus, from the social hierarchy and economic structure under British rule, a few interesting features may be derived. Firstly, it may be observed that, the great majority of persons belonging to upper castes ( who were erstwhile tax or tribute receivers) maintained their socio-economic dominance even under the newly evolved economic system. Because the purchase of estates during Muslim period was made mostly by high caste landlords belonging to Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya communities along with some Muslims, who held high offices in the contemporary revenue services.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, most of the urban based trading and business communities which showed an interest in land

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10. N.K.Sinha, Economic History of Bengal, Vol.II, Calcutta, 1956.

since the second half of 18th century, gradually emerged as a distinct class of zamindars, namely Subarbabaniks, Gandhabaniks, Telis, Moira etc.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, from nine artisan communities, known as 'Nabashakha' group of communities, a small section, by virtue of achieving economic upliftment through trade, emerged as landlords. But their greater counterpart suffered heavily due to the disintegration of village cottage industry and were pushed out to resort to sharecropping or working as agriculture labour as ready means to subsist.<sup>12</sup> The same was the fate even of the Muslim functional castes. But mostly the upper strata of Muslims like 'Sayads' sustained their dominance by virtue of their role as zaminders.<sup>13</sup>

The Zamindars ( with whom the lands were settled) by exercising their right to sub-let lands, gave tenurial rights to the tenants of first order, who in turn gave the lands to the further lower strata of tenants. The resultant was the

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11. H.R.Sanyal, 'Social Mobility in Bengal: Its sources and Constraints', in "Indian Historical Review", Vol. II, No.1, July, 1975, p.87.

12. ibid, pp. 89-90, See also R.Mukherjee, 1957, op.cit ,pp.100-104.

13. R.Mukherjee, op.cit, pp. 121-124 .

emergence of a peculiar network of agrarian stratification whereby the actual owner of the soil was screened by a host of intermediaries.<sup>14</sup> Their differential interests culminated to the the increasing miseries of the peasants at the lowest rung who had to shoulder the burden of profits for the higher orders. The most serious misery caused by the permanent settlement was that it failed to define and protect the rights of the raiyats and left them at the mercy of landlords. The increasing number of intermediaries through sub-infeudation and rack-renting : created thereby a distinct class of absentee landowners.

Through the vicious network of sub-infeudation and rack-renting however, the cream of the profit invariably was mopped up by the upper layers of tenants leaving a bare minimum for the tiller . This pioneered the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the general accretion of the poor peasantry. And socio-economically speaking, the absentee landowners or the zamindars gradually imbibed western habits - they shifted to towns and led a life of luxury at the cost of the growing miseries of the actual tillers or the peasants. Accordingly, there was the growth of an urban Bengali middle-class comprising mostly upper castes, who lived on remittance from their estates

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14. R.K.Mukherjee has noticed 50 to 70 orders of 'Pattanidars' Mukherjee, 1933, op. cit., p.98, See also S.Roy, Bharater Krishak Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram, (Beng.), D.N.B.A. Bros., Calcutta, 1972; K.Mukherjee Land Reforms, H.Chatterjee and Company, Calcutta, 1952, p.9.

coupled with salaries earned through city professions.<sup>15</sup>

Thus under Permanent Settlement the feudal ties from the pre-British era were further continued. Middle-class 'Bhadralok' (gentry), often of humble origin, were infused with the pattern of relationship when they acquired zamindari estates or even extensive tenurial rights. Their emulation of western culture may be due to a number of factors which can be primarily traced from the derived aims behind permanent settlements, i.e. to create an affluent class with unquestioned loyalty to colonial rule. The western education initiated by British also partially generated a sense of belonging to the elite class. And the traditional Hindu cultural values of becoming non-cultivating and rent-receiving landowners also had a significant socio-psychological role in it, which was more latent than manifested.

Before the passing of the Regulating Act of 1799, some large estates or their parts were put into sale on account of failure to pay government revenues. The zamindars, whose lands were eventually sold, were literally the rulers of their estates being known as "Rajahs" such as those of Nadia, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bishnupur, Birbhum and Burdwan.<sup>16</sup> The rapid disintegration of such zamindar class was not because of their lack of income but because of their parasitical existence coupled with extravagant wasteful ways of living.

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15. S.Sen, Agrarian Relations in India, PPH, New Delhi, 1969, pp. 7-8.

16. By the turn of 18th century the greater portion of estates like Nadia, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Bishnupur had been alienated. The Birbhum Estate faced complete ruins and the Burdwan Estate was partially crippled. S.Sen op.cit, p.10.

Socio- economically speaking what seems more relevant was the social composition of the emerging class of landlords, who were, by and large, traders and service holders under the various zamindari estates.<sup>17</sup> Through such process, as has been referred earlier that, apart from some upper castes involved in service, business and trade, some sections of artisan castes as well as lower castes were also elevated to the status of zamindars. From above what gains greater sociological bearing, is the fact that ownership of land and collection of revenue, through time immemorial has been assigned a higher status symbol in India. Similarly, while such elevating castes used the economic opportunities for economic upliftment, the psychological force of being socially uplifted also had a very significant role to play. This may be substantiated from Tapan Roychowdhury's study of Bakerganj district in East Bengal.

" Sociological explanations are probably relevant. Moving up the social ladder to the top story of zamindar-cum- choudhuryhood was an ambition fairly common to all with a bit of extra savings to invest. The purchase of a tenure, besides providing a small steady income, was often the equivalent of a firmly set little tie on a modest rung of the ladder. It is significant that many a co-sharer in the tenures derived no income whatsoever from his 'landed interests', yet retained it as a symbol of prestige.... the prestige value of becoming a rent-receiver rather than a mere "owner" of lands cultivated by hired or crop-sharing labourers was probably an important influence."<sup>18</sup>

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17. S.Sen, 1979, op.cit. pp. 7-8.

18. T.Roychowdhury, 'Permanent Settlement in Operation in R.E. Frykenberg, (ed) "Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History", Manohar, New Delhi, 1979, p.168.

This process was a very significant trend in the agricultural situation in Bengal indicating a dissociation from agriculture which may have been linked up with certain social factors rather than altogether economic. Such influence of value over the pure economic interest<sup>19</sup> also played a very deterministic role in the process of class antagonism, mobilization and class struggle which would be discussed in the forthcoming chapter.

Permanent Settlement with its essential paraphernalia like money rent, free sale and mortgage, etc. paved the way for the moneyed elements such as traders, money lenders, to emerge. The emergence of such elements altered literally the whole network of erstwhile relationships between tenants and owners which was guided by various rights, obligations and customs. These emerging landlords being alien to the local values and equipped with governmental protection, tried to obtain maximum returns, caring least for the local customs. Since then, the exploitation of the tenantry by landowners rose to its peak until some occasional mild reforms were made in favour of the tenantry.

As has been noted earlier, owing to the fragmentation of land it was really very difficult to define the tenantry with occupancy rights. Nevertheless, through various rent Acts such as Act of 1859, the settled raiyats were defined as raiyats holding land at a fixed rent since the operation of permanent

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19. A.Ghosh and K.Dutta, Development of Capitalist Relations in Agriculture, PPH, New Delhi, 1977, pp.7-8.



Settlement, Occupancy raiyats were defined as raiyats having an uninterrupted possession for 12 years and were entitled to 'pattas' (written deeds for occupancy rights) at fair and equitable rights. Such occupancy raiyats had a de-jure right to sue the landlords in case of violation of his rights. But a critical analysis will show that the 'de-facto' situation had a sharp deviation under the given system.

Before reviewing the conditions of the occupancy tenants the non-occupancy tenants may be considered, who could not have an uninterrupted possession for 12 years and remained at the mercy of rapacious landowners. The landowners in order to bypass the occupancy rights invariably shifted the tenants from one plot to another. Hence the number of occupancy-tenants with official holding of deeds, remained very sparse. Such tenants being a small fraction, remained detached from the mass of the non-occupancy tenants and comprised relatively more well to do peasants. From a study,<sup>20</sup> it may be noted that even the rights of the peasants to sue did not yield any viable alteration to the situation. During the period between 1860-70, the number of cases filed by the tenants amounted to 61,594 with a contrasting total of 4,94,040 cases filed by the landlords.<sup>20</sup> Finally, a sharp disparity of economic potentialities between landlords and the tenants hardly could let the latter to supersede over the vulnerability of the former even before the court of law. But such so called ameliorative provisions very effectively segregated a section of the tenant class from the rest; even though in reality it yielded no significant betterment for that small section too.

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20. K.C.Das, Rural Debt, (Mimeo), Calcutta, 1920, pp.25-27.

The next remarkable development, in significantly moulding the agrarian social structure, was the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 which extended two basic rights to the occupancy tenants; i) to sell or mortgage one's holding like a commodity independently of the landlord, and ii) recognition of tenant's rights who held lands for 12 years in a particular village. But the so called revolutionary Act of 1885 also ignored, as did earlier acts, the rights of non-occupancy tenants e.g. share cropper.

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Above all " Abhwab " was also rampant in Bengal. Radhakamal Mukherjee estimated that upto the first quarter of 20th century the amount of "Abhwab" in Bengal ranged from 30% to 120% of the legal rent.<sup>22</sup>

Under the pressure of illegal exaction and such half-hearted legal protections many a small occupancy raiyat thus sold away his right. This process found impetus by the operation of merchant-cum-usurers who had consolidated themselves by then as an integral component in the agrarian arena. Thus there came a steady growth in the pauperization and ruination of small peasants.

#### MONEY LENDER CREDIT AND ALIENATION NEXUS

The foundation of money lending and usury was cemented by the emergence of commercial agriculture and the merchant

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21. "Abhwabs" were feudal levies varying from district to district in varying amounts like marriage fees, digging tanks, water channels etc. to be paid by the peasants.

22. R.K.Mukherjee, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

capital in agriculture. Since the introduction of Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, there emerged a new stratum of owners. They comprised primarily, pure traders, who wanted to inflaten their resources as well as to own control over the supply of raw materials. They were further coupled with well to do raiyats and the money lenders. And the relationship between landlord and tenant thus, was transformed into a relationship of raiyat- mahajan or trader-mahajan who had links with the urban trading organisations. As has been mentioned earlier that apart from the upper castes like Kayasthas, Baidyas and Brahmins some lower castes were also involved in trade and business alongwith a keen interest in agriculture, e.g. Telis ( oilmen) of Nadia, Chasa-Dhoba ( cultivating sub caste of washerman) of Hooghly, Nadia, Jessore, and 24 Parganas, Shahas of Rangpur and others, emerged as a community of money lenders, grain merchant and traders.<sup>23</sup>

The Banking Enquiry Commission Report 1929-30 says that , such money lenders were chiefly Hindus, comprising mainly a small section of wealthy businessmen and a large section of middlemen who were often themselves cultivators and relatively solvent to make fortune in trading

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23. H.R.Sanyal, op. cit, pp. 77-81.

of cash crops and money lending.

However, the role of usurious capital also found access through the need for consumption loan as well as through the non-economic necessities like performance of rituals and ceremonies, where cultural values had a greater impact over the economic necessity.

Owing to poverty, the poor peasants and partly middle peasants also sought for such loans, invariably at higher rates of interest. It has been observed that the normal stipulation was 1½ maunds to be repaid against every mound borrowed.<sup>25</sup> Such loans were usually calculated at the harvest rates which were invariably lower and were appropriated at the cost price when it reached the peak. Since the first quarter of 20th century, the rural indebtedness soared high. The report of Bengal Banking Enquiry Committee, during the year 1929 estimated that the average debt per agricultural family was Rs.160 and the per capita debt was Rs.31. And the total agricultural debt amounted to Rs. 93 crores. Beside that, adding paddy loan with it for the same year, the total agricultural debt amounted to around 100 crores.<sup>26</sup> The report further reinstates that the rate of interest was glaringly higher in the districts of Burdwan,

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24. Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Commission Report, 1929-30, vol.1, pp. 404-408.

25. ibid, pp. 21-22.

26. ibid, pp. 69-70.

24 Parganas, Dacca, Mymensingh, Buckerganj, Faridpur and Howrah, reaching as much as 225% per annum.<sup>27</sup>

The situation was further coupled with an increasing pressure on land due to the disintegration of rural industry. For these displaced persons the ready means of livelihood was agriculture.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the cultivator was being used to his physically possible limit without having to incur any substantial expenditure in capital investment for land-reclamation and improvements of technology in production. This resulted into a sharp decline in production of crops. The outcome was that in order to subsist and meet with the demands of the landlords, peasants sought loans from money lenders. Being unable to repay the ever increasing debt and usurious interest they often lost their holdings. Thus the peasant's debt burden as a whole in the year 1929-30 amounted to about 41% of the peasant's gross produce.<sup>29</sup>

Various factors, primarily economic, were responsible for such a development of inordinate growth of commercialization of agriculture. In reality for the peasants it was nothing more than a subsistence agriculture functioning itself under certain particular historical conditions rather than their conscious response to the market situation. Peasants sold away portions

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27. ibid, p.198.

28. For detail see R.Mukherjee, The Rise and Fall of the East India Company, Barlin, 1958, Chapter 5 and 6, R.P.Dutt, 1970, op. cit, chapter 5, D.Thorner 'Deindustrialization in India' in D.& A. Thorner (ed) "Land and Labour in India", Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, pp.55- 108.

29. Banking Enquiry Commission Report, op. cit. pp.21-22.

of their produce in order to meet the rents for the land. Similarly in the case of cash crops like Indigo, Jutes, Poppy, etc. advances were available enabling the peasants to clear up their rents as well as debts. Indebtedness during the 19th and 20th century was paradoxically higher in regions of cash crop and it was possibly because of the increase in the values of land and its produce. Money lenders thus, found a positive interest which was no longer confined to profit as a financial intermediary, but increasingly to the acquisition and speculation on land.<sup>30</sup>

#### Rise in Price

Since the latter half of 19th century the prices of the agricultural products, alongwith the values of the land, showed a steady rise. Apparently that should have ameliorated the conditions of the peasants but reality was often far apart. Many a peasant could not sell away his produce in the free market for he was within the clutch of money lenders who lent him grain during needs. The system of Dadan ( advance) for the cash crops forced the peasant to deliver a fixed quantity of produce at much below the market rate. The loan and interests were calculated in money, while often the transactions were in terms of grains. Thus the so called Mahajan ( creditors) exploited from both, the interest on loan and making profit on the sale and purchase of the grain. Such double barrell

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30. G.Myrdal, Asian Drama : An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations, vol.II, Penguin, Harmonds Worth, 1966., p.1042.

exploitation was extremely pronounced in the tribal areas e.g. Santhal Parganas in early 20th century, where the communication with the market was harsh.<sup>31</sup> Although the rise in price did yield some profit to the small holder, yet it was not at par with his demands. The following data highlights the disparity between agricultural income and the retail expenditure :

TABLE - 4.1

|  | YEARS   |           |           |           |
|--|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|  | 1890-94 | 1895-1899 | 1900-1904 | 1905-1909 |
| Average per capita index number of agricultural income                       | 100     | 107       | 102       | 116       |
| Average index number of the retail price at which an agriculturist purchases | 100     | 101       | 109       | 126       |

Source - Report of the Datta Commission, para-1, p.435, ref. B.B.Chowdhury, 1975, p. 114.

Evidences say, that except a very small sections, being primarily money lenders like "Sahas", most of the money lenders were the 'raiyat- mahajans' which was a later development. Following the prohibition on usufractory mortgages under the Amendment of Bengal Tenancy Act, 1938, the traditional money lenders ( traders, businessmen), whatever meagre in size , ceased to give loans causing an inordinate growth of

31. B.B.Chowdhury, ' The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, in Indian Historical Review, vol.2, No.1, 1975, p.114.

'raiyyat- mahajans'.<sup>32</sup>Debt and Alienation

The money lenders, credit and alienation nexus culminated in the peasant's alienation from the land. The situation of economic necessities due to rise in price was fanned by the so-called progressive and welfare oriented legislations enabling the peasants to have a right to sell or mortgage.<sup>33</sup> The lands of the occupancy raiyyats thus in no time slipped into the hands of rapacious money lenders. The following statistics may substantiate the gravity in the process of alienation and depeasantization in the agriculture of Bengal.

TABLE- 4.2

| <u>Years</u> | <u>Number of sales</u> | <u>Number of mortgages</u> |
|--------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1930         | 1,29,184               | 5,10,944                   |
| 1931         | 1,05,701               | 3,76,422                   |
| 1932         | 1,14,609               | 3,38,345                   |
| 1933         | 1,20,492               | 3,13,431                   |
| 1934         | 1,47,619               | 4,49,400                   |
| 1935         | 1,60,341               | 3,57,297                   |
| 1936         | 1,72,956               | 3,52,469                   |
| 1937         | 1,64,819               | 3,62,529                   |
| 1938         | 2,42,583               | 1,64,895                   |
| 1939         | 5,00,224               | 1,54,780                   |
| 1940         | 5,02,357               | 1,60,152                   |
| 1941         | 6,34,113               | 1,51,533                   |
| 1942         | 7,49,495               | 1,06,088                   |

Source : Report on the Administration of the Regulation Deptt.  
(Ref. B.B.Chowdhury, 1975, pp. 138-139).

32. There was rarely any distinct social group as money lenders but often they were prosperous tenants. As Dinajpur survey Settlement Report ( 1934-40, para 22,23) goes 'the conception of village Bania, foreign to the cultivator in caste and tradition and sucking the blood of depressed tenants, does not fit in Dinajpur. If there is any blood sucking, it is done by the richer cultivators themselves', ref. in Ghosh and Datta, 1977, op.cit. pp. 62-63.

33. Bengal Banking Enquiry Commission Report ( 1929-30) gives a positive correlation between the growing commodity price  
contd..



From the table above, apart from the mammoth bulk of mortgages and selling away of lands, a very interesting feature may be noticed. There is a gradual decline in the mortgages and upward trend of selling away the land. The reason for such inverse correlation lies in the fact that the more the economic depression of 30's mounted high, the lesser the security on land was. Hence the situation was more inaccessible to mortgages. The only resort was to sell away the land and get hold of the money.

" The anti-money lender measures, gave them some relief. This was however, temporary, and before long the peasantry realised the adverse effects of these measures. Scared by such measures, the creditors refused to lend any money at all... they (peasants) eventually agreed to borrow on more stringent conditions than before. Curiously enough, though the size of indebtedness actually diminished in the late 1930s, the number of distress sales of peasants' holdings largely increased." 34

The findings of Indian Statistical Institute for the famine year 1943, reveals that out of 65 lakhs of peasant families owning land in Bengal, about 9.2 lakhs of families sold away part or the whole of their holdings. The total number of families thus selling or mortgaging their lands was 14.9 lakhs owning about 28% of the total owned peasant land.<sup>35</sup>

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and the growth of mortgages, op.cit, p.65. See also . B.B.Chowdhury, 'Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar, 1919-39' in A.R.Desai (ed), "Peasant struggle in India," Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1979, pp. 357-59.

34. B.B.Chowdhury, 1979, op. cit., p.357.

35. B.B.Chowdhury, 1975, op.cit, p.141.

All these things give clear indication of a mode of production which neither is feudal but a feeble capitalistic growth. On the one hand there was an inordinate growth of rich peasants and jotedars, on the other hand, there was relegations of large bulk of poor peasants mainly into the rank of share cropper or agricultural labourer. In such a context of usury, credit and alienations Marx views " usury crystalizes money wealth where the means of production are dispersed. It does not alter the mode of production but attaches itself firmly, to it like a parasite ..... It sucks out its blood, enervates it and compells reproduction to proceed under even more pitiable conditions."<sup>36</sup>

#### Regional Variance of Land Tenureship

Even after the introduction of Permanent Settlement in Bengal certain parts of Bengal did not come under the fold of it. There were distinct agrarian structures of their own namely, Darjeeling District, Cooch Behar District and the greater part of Jalpaiguri District. Unfortunately historical material on agrarian relation on this region of North Bengal is dismally inadequate.

The distinct land tenureship of the aforesaid three districts did not have a hierarchic chain of multiple intermediaries ( as that of under permanent settlement) excepting to a very limited degree. And such enclave pattern of agrarian situation comprised a large bulk of people

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36. Karl Marx, Capital, vol. II, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1949, p. 583.

with tribal origin and expressed a fairly different kind of exploitation from that of the settled areas of Bengal. In the district of Cooch Behar, 'Raja' was at the top of agrarian hierarchy who appeared in much the same relations with the 'jotdar' as did the zamindars in relation to his raiyats. The following are the agrarian categories next to Raja "Jotadar", with whom the settlement was made, paid rent to Raja. The under tenants next to 'jotedar' were 'Chukandidar', 'Dar-Chukanidar', 'Daradur-Chukanidar', 'Tasia Chukanidar' and 'Raiyat'. Excepting the last category, basically all other categories were primarily non-cultivating owners having to pay different degrees of rent; which is very similar to that of usufructory rights in permanently settled areas in Bengal.<sup>37</sup> But all the undertenants in Cooch Behar, except the raiyat, had an occupancy right with valid documents. The raiyat was nothing more than a share cropper known as 'Andhier' who did not have any settled right.<sup>38</sup>

The areas that constitute the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri originally remained outside British territory, which were gradually merged with these two districts through war or grant. Excepting the jungle areas,

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37. But the exception was also there. The lands cultivated by "Jotedar" is found to be fairly large in the sub-div. of Mekhligange alongwith other descending categories. For detail see W.W.Hunters, Statistical Account of Bengal, D.K.Publishing House, Dekhi, reprinted 1974, p.390.

38. Hunter W.W., ibid, pp.388-389 :

in both these districts the common denominator was 'Jotedars' who, it seems, were original settlers clearing forest lands for cultivation. Thereafter the rule of succession was applied to their ownership and control over the Jotes. Next to Jotdar were 'chukanidar' or 'Mulanidar', who entered into contracts for a stipulated period against a fixed money rental having no right to sell or transfer the rights, without having the consent from the Jotedar. The raiyats were annual tenants having to pay fixed money rent to 'Jotedar'. The last was the 'Praja' or tenant- at will, who paid rent in kind. The prajas were chiefly of tribal origin namely 'Rajbanshi and Koch'.

Prior to British take over, in the terai region, extending over the Himalayan foothills, the 'Chowdhuris' (the Bengal revenue officers) were Chief 'Jotedars' with some de facto civil and criminal powers. They used to collect revenue primarily from the Mechs, Dhimals and other settled Bengali inhabitants, However by 1884, chowdhuris were replaced from their earlier politico- social positions, but through governmental settlements with jotedars for stipulated period, the erstwhile Chowdhuris sustained their economic preponderance.<sup>39</sup>

By 20th century, 'Jotedari' and 'Andhiari' system took a crystalized form of relations of production. After the enactment of Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, and resettlement of

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39. W.W.Hunter, ibid, pp. 117-118 .

1916, the existing intermediaries even below jotdar<sup>a</sup> obtained permanent heritable rights and those settled tenants preferred more to have their lands cultivated by share-cropper.<sup>40</sup>

During the period between 1889-1916, in the districts of Jalpaiguri ( western Doors, outside the permanently settled area) the total number of persons holding jots fell from 23,339 to 15,244, a decrease by 34.6%. But the fascinating point during the said period was that the total area under jotedars was short-up by 41.52%. The situation was coupled further with an increase in the number of andhiar by 46.10 percent.<sup>41</sup> The resultant of that was two-fold; gradual concentration of lands in the hands of fewer jotedar and a steady growth of sharecroppers. The growth of

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40. V.Xaxa, 'Evaluation of Agrarian Structure and Class Relations in Jalpaiguri District ( W.B.)', in "Sociological Bulletin", vol. 29, No.1, March, 1980, pp. 71-72.

Apart from that, some other factors were also responsible for the growth of sharecropper in these areas. It may be recalled that this part alongwith the southern deltaic regions of Bengal, largely had uncultivated forest lands. By the early 20th century, those lands were leased out through auction in lots for reclamation. The owners of such forest lands often offered the incentive of share cropping rights to the persons, who were involved in the clearance of forest and prepare the land for cultivation. See N.Bandopadhaya, 'Land Reform and Share cropping' in "Mainstream", 17th May, 1975 pp. 10-033

41. J.P.Grunning, Eastern Bengal and Assam Distt. Gazettier, Jalpaiguri, p.72.

agricultural labourer as such, was a later development, since there were ample lands wherein even a distressed person could earn his livings as a sharecropper. But with the growth of population and lack of arable lands and debt bondage, the development of agricultural labourer took shape. But it was not that acute as was in other parts of Bengal.

Moreover, through time, with the contact of commercial agriculture and growth of population this part of North Bengal also developed similar traits with the emergence of non-cultivating land owner by the first quarter of 20th century. Substantially the lands were slipping out in the hands of non-agricultural people like lawyers, traders, merchants etc. who were by and large, Bengali upper caste middle class and the Marwari ( business community) emigrants from Rajasthan.<sup>42</sup>

Under the given system of production, the share-cropping relations or andhi, more or less, remained uniform throughout Bengal. But it varied sharply at the level of functional role of ownership. The Notedar was much more involved in the function of cultivation as contrast to the zamindars who were, by and large, absentee landowners having least involvement in the actual system of production. Though Beteille observes a kind of common life style among jotadars as a category, e.g. in Dinajpur district of North Bengal, both

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42. J.P.Grunning, ibid, pp. 99-101.

large and small jotedars were Rajbanshis, who shared a common style of life and were also linked up by the ties of kinship.<sup>43</sup> But such sharing of common life-style as well as life chances functioned very much at the localized levels. And in no case it turned out to be a pattern.

Thus, in that region of North Bengal, the agrarian structure did not comprise a homogeneous category of Jotedars, which grew further with the emergence of absentee landowners and the growth of share-croppers.

#### Bargadar and Labourers in Agriculture

The emergence of sharecropper as a distinct category is a by-product of specific historical conditions i.e. the lopsided or a feeble capitalistic relation which emerged not from the <sup>disintegration of</sup> traditional feudal relations of production but from ascribed colonial economy.<sup>44</sup> The primary reason for increasing barga is hinged up on economic expediency of alienation or depeasantization. In most of the cases it was due to default of payment of rent or loan. As Floud Commission Report goes that the barga system mushroomed with commercialization of agriculture and absorption of rights by non agriculturists.<sup>45</sup> Secondly,

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43. A. Beteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, (The case of Jotedars), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 134-135.

44. For detail see U. Patnaik, 'On the Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture; a Reply', in "EPW", 30th Sept. 1972.

45. Ref. in S. Sen, 1979, op.cit., pp. 24-25 .

with the steady rise in price, the land owners showed a tendency to have produce rents to earn a double headed profit. As has been mentioned earlier that, when depression mounted high during the periods between 1928-40, maximum lands slipped out of the hands of small peasants and the tragedy lied in their becoming bargadar on the same lands. The situation was further coupled with the low land/man ratio, increased population, disintegration of village handicrafts, the slow pace of industrialization, growth of absentee or semi-absentee landlordism, growth of middle class urban employees especially in the towns and cities, and finally, periodic influx of poverty stricken tribal migrants from the adjoining states especially Bihar.<sup>46</sup> The situation may be substantiated from the report of Land Revenue Commission, 1940, which though found 21% of the land being cultivated by bargadar, yet the figure might have been understated. The reason for such contention seems very simple, that the bargadars having an underdog situation often were reluctant to get themselves recorded for the fear of being evicted by the owner. The report further stated that between the period of 1928-40, 31.7% of the total land were transferred and were resettled to the bargadar.<sup>47</sup>

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46. N.Bandopadhaya, 1975, op.cit., pp. 10-33 .

47. Report of the Land Revenue Commission, 1940  
volume 2, p.120.



Besides such pure economic exigencies, certain socio-economic forces also reigned high. It has already been referred that certain religious inhibitions have restrained some upper caste people from practicing cultivation directly by themselves. Secondly, as has been noticed earlier, that a sense of status role as a social force played a very significant role for the growth and sustenance of Barga. Settlement officer in Hooghly observed that, having achieved an improved material condition, a chunk of cultivating communities e.g. Kaibartas or Mahishyas, turned the lands to bargadars belonging to Bagdis or Bouri (untouchable communities for cultivation). These people were mostly raiyats who had migrated to that place.<sup>48</sup> Some people from higher castes like, Kayasthas were also relegated from the status of occupancy raiyat and became landless. But these dispossessed upper caste peasants stucked with sharecropping, as under the traditional hierarchy working as sharecropper had higher social status than working as manual labourers. Even though this gave them better social status, yet it was not always as remunerative as working as agricultural labourer.<sup>49</sup>

The relegation of poor peasants to share cropper definitely marked a very striking intra-structural change within the agrarian social structure. B.B.Chowdhury possibly

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48. Ref. by B.B.Chowdhury, op.cit, pp.150-151.

49. For detail see P.N.Mukherjee, Pre-Pub, 'Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal', J.N.U., New Delhi, pp. 34-38.

misconceived such change when he held that there was hardly any intra-structural change under the new forces. Because, the actual cultivator in many cases, even having lost of his economic position, continued to remain in the land.<sup>50</sup> But viewing sociologically it may be viewed that not only he loses his legal rights and the returns, but his change of position in status hierarchy is remarkably high, at the place of cultural or value matrix. Thus, it would not be arbitrary to conclude that under the new forces, there was an intrastructural change that remarkably altered one's class as well as status position in the society.

#### Agricultural Labourer

This category of agriculture labourer was nothing new to the agrarian social structure of India and Bengal in particular. It has been noted earlier that a veritable feature of traditional hierarchy was the gradations in the ownership and the nature of labour on the land, which has some kind of ideological justification e.g. caste values. Thus the agricultural labour force was supplied primarily from the tribals and lower castes e.g. the castes under the category of 'Ajalchal', and 'Antyaj', alongwith some tribals. Even among the Muslims, the syads were by and large land

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50. B.B.Chowdhury, op.cit., pp.164-165.

owning community whereas, 'Khuthe' Muslims or 'Jollahs' provided the necessary labour force for agriculture. In spite of the viable transformation of the erstwhile traditional economy the status of the downtrodden, like such labourers, did not much alter socially as well as economically.<sup>51</sup>

How the colonial economy has resulted into gradual pauperization has been seen. Through that process of pauperization in agriculture, the pursuit of agricultural labour was the last resort for these alienated peasants and the disintegrated artisans. That resulted into general accretion in the bulk of agricultural labourer in India in general and Bengal in particular. It is also evident that, prior to rigorous moneyed economy under colonial fold in agriculture the mode of payment was mostly in terms of kind than in cash. But the daily wage in terms of cash or a combination of both had become more rigorous under the colonial economy.

The nature and type of agriculture labourer varies from region to region, broadly on the basis of the following: duration of labour, medium and mode of payment, hours of work, linkage with any creditor, debt bondage and finally freedom to work for different employers etc. All such relations are being determined by the degree of relations of economic dependence.

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51. For detail see R. Mukherjee, 1957, op.cit., pp. 81-107.

The First ( 1950-51) and Second ( 1956-57) Agriculture Labour Enquiry of India classified all agricultural labourers into two categories of attached and casual labourers. But such categorization faced a sharp criticism from Thorner. To him, such was a catch-all blanket term for a non homogeneous group of agriculture labour in India.<sup>52</sup> He observes a broad distinction between free and unfree labourer. From socio-economic point of view, Thorner's idea of free and unfree labourer has a great bearing in the study of agrarian social structure. An unfree labourer is one, whose bargaining power virtually is non-existent or has been surrendered. He is also tied to the master through customary obligations that tend to be non-economic. A free-labourer, on the other hand, is able to accept or reject the conditions and wages offered by the employer. But at the same time it is admitted that if a free labourer wishes to refrain from working, the economic stringency may compel him to agree temporarily to terms which he does not consider favourable.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, a casual labourer may be considered as a free labourer in so far as his choice of work is concerned. And the semi-attached labourer, though has a restriction on such freedom of choice, nonetheless he is partly free. For, he can work under different employer when there is no work under the master with whom he is attached.

A veritable trait, of agrarian social structure of Bengal, is the relative absence of the bonded or forced

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52. D.Thorner in D & A Thorner, 1962 , op.cit. Ch. 1 ,

53. ibid.

labourer, due to hereditary debt bondage or the like conditions. In the words of Bardhan and Rudra 'bonded labour as a category ..... may have been important in the past and who may still exist to some extent in localised pockets in other parts of India, do not seem to be at all significant in West Bengal.<sup>54</sup> In no study, hereditary or outstanding long term debt, as an obligatory basis of long term attachment of the labour, has yet been found to be significant in the context of Bengal.

Finally, the agricultural labourer as a category, though was in existence through the history of Bengal, but their growth in number found a fillip during the colonial era.

Before concluding this chapter a few points may be highlighted. First, under the colonial economy the transformation of agrarian economy from the erstwhile feudal to the capitalistic stage was sheer abortive in which there was a peculiar assortment of incipient capitalist development with a significant feudal hangover. Hence the agrarian inequality and agrarian class relations also evolved through such process and yielded nothing more than acute inequality in the productive process and distribution of returns. Through the whole process, the common denominator was the history of massive hierarchy of exploitation that affected most to the people at the lower rungs of the social

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54. P. Bardhan & A. Rudra, 'Types of Labour Attachment in Agriculture' in "EPW", vol. xv, No. 35, Aug, 30, 1980, p. 1478.

as well as economic hierarchy.

It has also been seen that in the agrarian social structure of Bengal, there was an alignment between economic hierarchy and social hierarchy through time. For a comprehensive study, such an alignment between economic and social hierarchy should have been taken at more micro-level taking each group or community like upper and lower caste Hindus, scheduled castes and tribes, alongwith Syad Muslims and Muslim functional castes. But unfortunately the data for such an analysis are dismally inadequate.

Yet some observations may be derived. It has been observed that great majority of persons belonging to upper castes alongwith a few Muslims who were erstwhile tax or tribute getters, restored their economic position, and found access to a new class exploitation through secured land-lordism. But of course some were severely relegated.

Secondly, the producing castes of pre-British days belonging mostly to upper and middle rung of status hierarchy partially restored their economic position as self working peasants or as artisans or traders. At the same time it may be also evident that a significant portion of such categories were lowered further down to both economic and partly to social hierarchy.

Thirdly, the large part of lower caste people primarily belonging to serving castes, <sup>and</sup> the tribals remained

at the bottom rung and swelled the population of the agricultural labourer.

Finally, some castes of the middle rung or even lower in the status hierarchy, by virtue of having and utilizing the better economic opportunities under colonial economy, placed themselves in a better economic order.

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CHAPTER V

PEASANTRY, CLASS AND AGRARIAN CONFLICT



## PEASANTRY, CLASS AND AGRARIAN CONFLICT

The reviewal of agrarian relations and agrarian social structure of India and Bengal in particular, has been understood through the earlier chapters in terms of their objective parameters like peasant, class, exploitation etc. through their value matrix in the colonial period. What gains prominence, from that, is the existence and sustenance of agrarian inequality, through its changing panorama of exploitation.

It has been observed very clearly as to how land and other resources were transformed increasingly into commodity. As commodity, they were subjected to the demands of a market which had only an indirect relationship to the needs of rural people who were dependent directly upon it. Wolf thus, rightly observes that where in the past market behaviour had been largely subsidiary to the existential problems of subsistence; now existence and its problems become subsidiary to the market.<sup>1</sup> The process operated through a unique combination of capitalist and feudal mode of economy with various economic and extra economic exactions. This was further accompanied by a distinct process of land alienation and depeasantization with corresponding growth of landlords. It is evident,

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1. E. R. Wolf, 'On Peasant Rebellions', in T. Shanin (ed) "Peasants and Peasant Societies", Penguin, 1971, p. 266.

through time that such inequality and exploitation matrix, as a historical reality, culminates into a sense of deprivation in the given context and stage. This in turn finds expression through some kind of protest with varying forms, content and goals. Such culmination may be aimed at inter or infra-structural change or a resistance to change the given structure of relationship.<sup>2</sup> But all that are subsequent upon the development and growth of a particular stage, which in turn is the outcome of a variety of corresponding developments.

Hence a stage of deprivation as the historical reality, may at a particular stage (preceeding its outbursts) appear to be normative through various values which rationalise the inequality and deprivation.<sup>3</sup> But such state of affair may be called a dormant stage, which may manifests itself through some occassion or events. Such occasion or event however, are consequent upon their latent cause i.e. the sense of deprivation.

Inequality and agrarian conflict are historical realities but their interrelationship is not only complex but in many ways ambiguous. As it has been noted earlier, that it depends upon the specific context and in all such cases one has to consider inequalities not only as they exist but also as they are perceived by the people acting on it. The relations between various groups and categories,

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2. For detail in intra or inter- structural movements<sup>and</sup> changes see P.N.Mukherjee, 'Social Movement and Social change' in "Sociological Bulletin," vol. 21, No.1, March, 1977, pp.38-58.

3. The best example may be 'economic inequality'

in an agrarian structure, are governed by the multiple factors and consciousness of such relationships vary at different levels of categories. Such consciousness may be articulated by the exogenous factors like organized party or the like forces for political action to change the existing order or a resistance to change the order. Yet the degree and nature of the consciousness vary largely among various groups and categories.

In the context of the great socio-political upheavals, the distinct role of the peasantry has been witnessed by the world, especially during 20th century, e.g. Russian revolution of 1905 and 1917, Chinese revolution since 1921, Vietnamese revolution since the world war-II, Cuban revolution of 1958 and so on. But, the role of peasantry as a revolutionary class often has been understressed or under-estimated. Marx for example, in the given context, could not rely much on peasantry as a distinct and independent revolutionary class. Yet he recognises that it is a force to be won over and led by the proletariat for a successful revolution.<sup>4</sup> Lenin, though better apprehended the role of the peasantry, nevertheless he beat the similar tune on the peasant's inability to emerge as an independent force without the proletariat leadership.<sup>5</sup>

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3. having sanctions of religious or cultural values under the agrarian social structure in India.
4. K.Marx, The Eighteenth Bromaire of Louis Bonaparte, Progress Publishers, 1977, pp. 101-117.
5. V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, vol.II, Lawrence and Wisheart, 1947, pp. 647-648 .

It is true, that the inescapable fragmentation of peasantry, together with diversified socio-economic and political perspectives and aspirations, definitely is a constraint for the constellation of a concerted and coordinated action. Shanin and Wolf reiterated similar views.<sup>6</sup> Wolf emphasises on the role of interest :

" ... peasants' interest- especially among poor peasants- often cross-cut the class alignments. Rich and poor peasants may be kinfolk, or peasant may be at one and the same time owner, renter, sharecropper .... Each different involvement aligns him differently with his fellows and with the outside world." <sup>7</sup>

Hence, how far a peasantry may be regarded as a class is not a clear cut problem but it should be seen rather as a question of degree and historical periods. Alavi possibly poses the problem rightly, that the question is not whether the peasants are or are not revolutionary rather, under what circumstances they become revolutionary or what roles different sections of the peasantry play in revolutionary situation ?<sup>8</sup>

In the peasant upsurge or movements, like any other movement, may be seen, an inter-relationship between change in the conditions of existence, sense of deprivation, together with the goals, means and ideologies of different sections of

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6. E.Wolf, 1971, op.cit, pp. 264-274, and T.Shanin, 'Peasantry as a Political Factor' in Shanin (ed), 1971, op.cit, pp. 238-262.

7. E.Wolf, ibid, pp. 264-265 .

8. H.Alavi, ' Peasants and Revolution', in A.R.Desai (ed), "Peasant struggle in India", Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1979, p.672 .

peasantry. The societal change and the peasant discontent are inextricably related to each other. Peasant discontent thus, in the form of sense of deprivation, declining socio-economic status, insufficiently met aspirations etc. are preceded by certain socio-economic developments like encroachment on existing rights on land or the erstwhile rights, break up or development of new economic forces, etc.

This part is directly concerned with the goals, ideologies and means of peasant movement. The first question to that pertinency, comes to one's mind as to what do the peasants want and what is the nature of their consciously wanted changes ? This may include major social changes or specific changes. Finally, to what direction the change is desired- the change of the structure in a given structure or the intra-structural change i.e. partial change of the structure.

Wolf argues that rebelliousness of peasantry is, for the sake of ultimate aim, to remain traditional.<sup>9</sup> But such reasoning may hold good in the case of encroachment in the existing order where peasantry, has a vivid memory of earlier communal existence. In such a case, peasants' demands are quite limited and specific. But when such demands transcend that limit and look for a new order e.g. bourgeoisie proprietorship, they no longer remain backward

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9. E.Wolf, Peasant War of 20th Century, Faber and Faber, London, 1971, P-292.

looking. But such attitude of conservatism and demand for new order vary according to the reality of the given situation or in a given stage. Thus it seems that Wolf's emphasis on traditionalism may cover only half of the logically possible and empirically extant cases<sup>10</sup>.

The given sense of deprivation precedes new ideologies for protest. The diffusion of new ideologies, by definition stimulate movements with specific or general demands, depending on the nature of the ideology. There seems to be no agreement of views in regard to the circumstances under which new ideologies spring up, excepting that, they generally crop-up from a situation of stress. It is because, various institutions like religion etc. often get linked-up with economic situation and the demands, on which the movements go, become comprehensive and broad. This may be observed from the various agrarian tensions in India where a direct correlation between ethnic values and economic organisation, may be traced.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the means of manifestation of the movements also vary from situation to situation. The following may be premised, not of course as all embracing but as a general

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10. H.R.Landsberger, Rural Protest, McMillan, 1974, p.38.

11. The best examples may be traced through the movements like Sanyasi Vidroha, Wahavi rebellion, Ferazi rebellion etc. where the economic deprivation found impetus through religious values. For detail of these movements see S.Roy, Bharater Krishok Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram, D.N.B.A.Brs, Calcutta, 1972.

observation, that the early spontaneous demands of the peasants are limited with specific ends, localized and are not violent in nature. But prolonged frustration may radicalize the means of the movements and widen the horizon of its scope. Here comes again the role of leadership and ideology to the extent of adoption of violent or non violent means along with the scope of operation.<sup>12</sup>

Above all, the most important factor is the 'homogeneity of interests' within various categories of the peasantry. It is likely that the primary issue, on which the movement is launched, will not embrace all the cross-cutting cleavages which might result into total involvement of one section of the peasantry but indifference or even hostility of the other.

Peasant upsurges in the above light may take various forms of actions; independent class action ; where social class crystalizes in the course of conflict-relationship. Through such a process it may further be reinforced by a vanguard party and thereby a nationwide organisation with a specific ideology and end may emerge. Secondly, there may be spontaneous amorphous political action in the form of localized riots.<sup>13</sup> But such sheer localised event may also kindle the fire for broader action.

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12. It is also to be noted that , the nature of the demands is relative through time and space, i.e. a localized movement may become the part of nationalist movement or vice-versa, e.g. the role of the peasantry in the National Independence Movement in India.

13. For detail see T. Shanin, 1971, op.cit, pp. 258-260 .

In the above context, the peasant upsurge in Bengal may be reviewed. But such an attempt can not go without its bearing on the movements in the outer horizon of Bengal. But to keep parity and precision of the study it has been highlighted in the context of Bengal during the colonial period.

Following Gough, the peasant rebellions under our period of study in Bengal may be categorised into five, namely:- a) Restorative rebellions with an aim to restore the erstwhile socio-economic and political order e.g. Santhal revolt of 1855-56, (b) Peasant rebellion in the form of religious movement which became specially prominent during the famines e.g., Muslim Maulavis and Farazis rebellion during 1827-31, 1838 and 1851, (c) Social Banditry<sup>14</sup> e.g. Sansyasi and Rakir's rebellion in the late 18th century, (d) Wider insurrection to redress particular grievance or grievances, e.g. Indigo rebellion during 1866 and other contemporary rebellions, (e) Modern mass insurrections like Tebhaga rebellion during 1946-47.<sup>15</sup>

For a precise understanding of the nature and context of the peasant movements in Bengal, the major movements have been highlighted : Santhal rebellion, Indigo rebellion,

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14. The term used by Hobsbawm in Primitive Rebels, Manchester University Press, 1959, pp. 19-29.

15. For detail see , K.Gough, 'Indian Peasant Uprisings: in A.R.Desai (ed), 1979, op.cit, pp. 94-118 ,



revolts in eastern and central Bengal since 1873 and Tabhanga rebellion.<sup>16</sup>

Santhal Rebellion :

Santhals in Bengal are distributed primarily in the districts of Midnapore, Birbhum and Bankura where they settled after clearing the jungle lands.<sup>17</sup> But with the emergence of Permanent Settlement, the lands, that they tilled for centuries, were passed over to the zamindars followed by a pressing demands for increasing rents. Consequently, there came a retreat of the Santhals in search of new lands in the woods and make new reclamation. And through the process, they reached to an extreme limit of retreat<sup>18</sup> The situation was further aggravated by a combined system of oppressive exaction of rents, extortion and forcible dispossession of the property. It was coupled further by the high interests on loans which the Santhal peasants often took. Such interest rates ranged from 50 to 500 % . The usurious rate of interests, as Calcutta review goes, made a santhal see his crop, cattle, even himself with the family being appropriated for the debt which, though ten times paid remained the same over years.<sup>19</sup> From those money lenders

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17. A.C.Das, The Indian Ryot, Calcutta, 1881, pp. 564-565 .

18. A.C.Das, op.cit, pp. 564-565 .

19. Calcutta Review, 1856, 1860, ref. by L.Natarajan in 'The Santhal Insurrection' 1855-56, in A.R.Desai (ed) 1979, op.cit, p.137 .

and traders a good bulk comprised Bengali trading community from the adjacent districts of Burdwan and Birbhum.

Under such socio-economic forces, there came a number of far reaching sequences that contributed further fuel to the fire of the Santhal peasants' sense of deprivation. Apart from the cumulative economic oppression as referred above, some social forces were also significantly contributory, e.g. the gradual weakening of the institution of 'Manjhi' ( headmen) who enjoyed a very high socio-economic status in the society. Under the new system, the zamindars considered 'Manjhis' as ordinary farmers and made him to pay the enhanced rents and in the case of failure to pay such rents he was subsequently replaced by the persons who, though alien to the community, agreed to pay the rent.<sup>20</sup>

The removal of 'Manjhi' not only did have an economic impact but it was a resentment to the community as a whole. Because, the status of the 'Manjhi' had tremendous social or sentimental value among the community as a whole.

Thus such cumulative socio economic oppressions culminated into an insurrection. Initially it took the form of robbing of the landlords, traders and money lenders. Soon it grew up into a full fledged violent insurrection.

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20. B.K.Chowdhury, 'Agrarian Economy and Agrarian Relations in Bengal, 1859- 1885' in N.K. Sinha (ed), The History of Bengal, Calcutta, 1967.

comprising a large bulk of Santhals, from Birbhum, Bankura, Chotnagpur and Hazaribagh. The basic goal of the insurrection was to put an end to the oppression by zamindars and the mahajans ( traders) and take possession of the country to set up a government of their own. <sup>21</sup>

The Santhals were aided largely , by a number of low caste Bengalis like ' Telis' (oilmen), 'Gwalas' (Milkmen) etc. who had also suffered in some form or other under the new socio-political and economic forces. This enabled a kind of solidarity which cut across the lines of caste or religion.

From above discussion we can arrive at certain observations regarding the nature of this movement. Even though it was basically a localised upsurge, yet it was largely a restorative movement employing violent means and an ideology of restoration. Secondly, the leadership emerged from the peasants themselves and there was no role of an organised political party being guided by exogenous forces. Thirdly, social forces, as mentioned above, involved the entire community of Santhals irrespective of any particular section or a class of peasantry. There were undeniably important social factors which were not exclusively dependent upon economic forces. Therefore, it may be surmised that the movement was not a demarcated class struggle against another class with a discreet class consciousness.

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21. For detail see Letter from Commissioner of Bhagalpur to the Secretary of the Govt. of Bengal, July 9th, 1855, ref. in K.Datta, The Santhal Insurrection, of 1855-57, Calcutta, 1940, pp. 14 to 15.

The Santhal movement was suppressed ruthlessly in an uneven encounter between trained government army and the rebel peasants, fighting with bow and arrow, yet the clarion-call of Santhal rebellion was an example of organisation and militancy to the future course to come.

### Indigo Rebellion

Under the colonial policy of cultivation of commercial crops like jute, indigo, cotton, etc. there came an elaborate technique of procuring slave or indentured labour to provide the work force to cultivate such crops. The indigo planters comprising retired officers of East India Company and young upstarts with a background of slave drivers in America, acquired lands for cultivation of indigo from the zamindars in Bengal. The tenants under the acquired lands were forced to grow indigo through an elaborate process of oppression.

The cultivation of indigo provoked universal resistance. The Ferazi movement of both Barasat (1831-32) and Faridpur (1846) showed a strong anti-indigo feeling. The resistance first came in the form of constitutional agitation like sending petitions to the concerned authority with a cursory response. Gradually it took violent forms.<sup>22</sup>

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22. B.K.Chowdhury, in <sup>N.K.</sup> A.Sinha (ed), 1967, op.cit. p.276.

Indignation grew all over the indigo growing districts like Nawāda, Jessore, Khulna, Pabna, 24 Parganas, Faridpur etc. In April, 1860, all the cultivators of Barasat Sub-division launched the first great general strike in the history of the Indian peasantry and refused to sow indigo.<sup>23</sup>

Gradually numerous other related grievances gained prominences which adversely affected other section of the agrarian structure, also, like petty zamindars who were forced to giving lease to the planters. Henceforth, the indigo rebellion also embraced directly or indirectly a large bulk of other related sections in it.<sup>24</sup>

It is a fact that the movement did not have an organised leadership like political party, yet, it found an indirect support from the upper class urban middle class intelligentsia who rendered support to the movement through various publications.<sup>25</sup> The observation of Natarajan that, the brutality of the indigo-planters had succeeded in winning such support from the middle class intelligentsia speaks inadequate truth. Because, it has already been mentioned that the cultivation of indigo also affected

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23. L.Natarajan, 'Indigo Cultivators Strike; 1860', in A.R.Desai (ed), 1979, op.cit. pp.148-158 .

24. For detail see Natarajan, ibid, pp.148-158. See also S.Roy, 1972, op.cit., Pp.317-320 and Parliamentary Papers : 1861, vol.xiv, pp.171-172.

25. Hindu Patriot, 19th May, 1860, pp.96-97, Calcutta Review, June, 1860, p. 355, Nil Darpan ( Bengali) Dinobandhu Mitra, etc.

considerably a part of the middle class petty zamindars. It is they for whom such compassionate support by the urban middle class was rendered than the brutality committed upon the ryots or peasants.

A few crucial issues may be derived at this juncture. It was aimed primarily at the redressal of grievances like refusal to sow indigo and thus, it was more of a non-cooperation movement directed for an intra-systematic change. Secondly, the whole movement spinned around a kind of homogeneity of interest, because all sections of the peasantry had common cause of suffering i.e. indigo. But of course the nature of sufferings at different sections of the society varied. In spite of the absence of an extraneous force like political party, certain catalytic force i.e. support of the urban middle class, though not directly, helped the movement for materialising the goals.

Peasant Struggle Preceding Tebhanga Movement in Eastern and Central Bengal since 1873

Prior to Tebhanga movement, there came a series of peasant unrests following Santhal and indigo rebellion. As it has been seen earlier that till 1859 the colonial government gave a perfunctory concern to the occupancy rights of the raiyats ( occupancy tenants). The enactments under the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 and 1885, giving formal rights to the occupancy ryots, were though half hearted,<sup>25</sup> yet they were

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25. The reason for calling them half hearted has been discussed in the last chapter.

very significant for the growth and development of peasant movements in the later years. And such resistences were relatively better organised ( though not by an articulate vanguard party with a discreet leadership and ideology) than the earlier spontaneous and desperate revolts.

Certain circumstances played a viable role in the growth of these upsurges, (a) The peasants ( or their legal advisers ) were becoming increasingly conscious about the formal laws regarding the occupancy rights. This was also partly due to the bureaucrafic extension into subdivisonal system, <sup>entailing</sup> relatively a better access to the rent question by the peasants, (b) The role of the contemporary vernacular journals may have been a significant factor. They were mostly run and published by the urban educated middle class depicting the conditions of the peasants, (c) The increasing legal knowledge was followed by a large participation of substantial peasants or well-off peasants to protest against the existing system in agriculture . These peasants by virtue of their better socio-economic position could more successfully resist the zamindars than the distitute peasants or poor peasants.<sup>26</sup>

The upsurges during the given period, had a distinct organisation under the peasants' league. The first, such

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26. For detail see B.K.Chowdhury, in <sup>N.K.</sup> A.Sinha (ed), 1967 op.cit. , p.290.

movement , occurred in the district of Pabna in the year 1873 under the aegis of a well-organised league.<sup>27</sup> This pioneered and fostered the formation of similar movements in other parts, namely, eastern and central Bengal in the later years.

The basic cause of the movement of 1873 was the restoration of the rights of occupancy raiyats offered by the Act of 1859 . Hence this movement, alongwith other such upsurges in the later years, involved primarily the interests of the occupancy raiyats or substantial peasants.

The upsurge of 1873 has been viewed by K.Sengupta basically as a non-violent with only occasional violence for the reduction of enhanced rents.<sup>28</sup> And the movement was legalistic in character which was misunderstood by the authors like Suprakash Roy or Benoy Chowdhury who unduly consider it to be violent.<sup>29</sup>

A notable feature of that movement was its bargaining nature between the tenants and the landlords. Hence the educated middle class played a different role than what it played in

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27. For detail see <sup>K.K. Sengupta</sup> 'Agrarian League of Pabna, 1873' in "Indian Economic and Social History Review" vol.vii, No.2, June, 1970.
28. K.K.Sengupta, 'Peasants Struggle in Pabna, 1873 Its Legalistic Character' in A.R.Desai, (ed), 1979, op.cit., pp. 180-183 .
29. S.Roy, 1972, op.cit., ch. on "Sirajganj Rebellion" and B.K.Chowdhury, in <sup>N.K.</sup> Sinha (ed), op.cit., pp.288-292 .



Indigo rebellion through their publications like 'Hindu Patriot, July 14, 1873', as well as 'Amrita Bazar Patrika' ( quoted in 'Hindu Patriot, June 30, 1873), etc.

Even though this movement could not bring an end to the landlord's exploitation, yet it was a first step for partially organised movements in other parts of Bengal like Dacca, Mymensingh, Tripura, Backerganj, Faridpur, Rajshahi and Bogra etc.

Like earlier movements, these movements were also aimed at establishing occupancy rights with reduction in the enhancement of rents. And the means adopted by all such movements were basically nonviolent and legalistic in nature with occasional violence.<sup>30</sup>

Following the suit of the discussions in earlier movements, certain findings may be attempted; (1) the movements were not much localised and encompassed a huge mass of people ranging over a prolonged period of time, (2) The goals were reformatory i.e. to seek security of tenancy and ending of enhancement of rents. Therefore, these movements sought after the redressal of grievances or intra-systematic changes, rather to change the system as such i.e. abolition of Zamindari or the institution of rent altogether. Refusal to give rent, though occurred at certain stage, but it was due to sheer exigencies than any conscious attempt, (3) Owing

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30. K.K.Sengupta, 1979, in A.R.Desai (ed), op.cit, pp.178-186.

to the absence of an organised political party and leadership, the partially united leagues were not based on any definite ideology, (4) For the indigo rebellion the grievance of unremunerative cultivation of indigo was more or less uniform every where. But the latter movements though had congenial grievances, yet their extent and nature varied from region to region. And this possibly gives an answer to why such movements were not uniform everywhere, (5) Finally, at no point of the movement due attention was paid to the relationship between occupancy tenants and their under-tenants ( sharecroppers) or the rights of the under-tenants. Nevertheless the share-croppers and agricultural labourer were dragged to the movement under the plea that landlords were the common enemy to be subjugated.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, taking an account of the empirical situations, it may be surmised that, the peasant consciousness, though was very strong, yet it was not immanent and uniform at every section of the peasantry. Apart from the organisational weakness, the major weakness was the absence of an organised ideology or a philosophy behind the programme of action, e.g. relating the peasant grievances to some fundamental socio-economic institutions thereby to give a broader and deep rooted perspective to the rebellion. Because the very existence, of the exploitative institutions or the basic structure of the society that rationalised the systematic exploitation was not challenged.

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31. K.K.Sengupta, 'Agrarian Disturbance in 19th Century Bengal', in Desai (ed), 1979, op.cit, pp. 189-203 ,

Agrarian conflicts since the early 20th century reached into a new era through the emergence of organised peasant association like 'Kisan Sabha'. It was earmarked by the greater involvement with broader perspective like Nationalists Movement which went beyond the localised level with a far more organised philosophy.

The Nationalist Movement led by Congress initially had an elaborate agrarian programme. But it could not afford a guideline for broader peasant movement or an organised philosophy for class struggle. Congress formed peasant committees for meeting with the grievances, but they were strikingly restricted to seeking relief against the excessive rates of land revenue and were in no case directed against the zamindars. Therefore, despite the fact that, the foment of peasant discontent mounted high under such process, but after the withdrawal of non cooperation movement after March, 1923 by Congress, the peasant agitation lost its strength. Thus, paradoxically, the peasant upsurges and National Movements were tied on the point that congress wanted to strengthen the Nationalist Movement through the participation of the peasantry rather to fight for the peasantry itself.<sup>32</sup>

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32. For the brevity of the discussion, peasant movements and mobilizations under the aegis of National Liberation Movement has not been dealt with, for detail see U.Mehta, 'Peasants Movement in India' in Desai (ed), 1979, op.cit., pp.743-750; S.Chowdhury, 'Early Struggle: 1905-18' in Desai, op.cit., pp.221-236; S.Chowdhury, Peasant and Workers' Movement in India (1905-1919), PPH, New Delhi 1971, pp.73-114; B.B.Chowdhury, 1979, in Desai, op.cit. pp. 336-371; see also H.Alavi 'Peasants and Revolution' in Desai (ed), 1979, op.cit., pp.696-715,

It is a fact that, Congress leadership added considerable weightage towards the peasant mobilization. But it may also be true that, the nationalist leaders, under the aegis of Congress, felt that a movement by the peasantry as an independent force against the imperialist power, as well as, against the existing agrarian structure, would threaten the very existence of Nationalist Movement. That was evident from the Congress Working Committee report, (12th February : 1922, Bardoli), which was openly critical of both the occurrence of violence as well as any independent peasant movement in the form of 'No Rent' movement.

The Congress policy of safeguarding the interests of landlords precipitated the emergence of an independent organisation for peasants movement in India and the formation of All India Kisan Sabha ( AIKS) in the year 1936.<sup>33</sup> The mounting economic crisis, produced by the oppression and the exploitation by the zamindars was given formal attention only in All India Kisan Congress at Lucknow, in 1936.<sup>34</sup> This was accompanied by the secondary demands like moratorium of debts, abolition of land revenue, minimum wage for agricultural labourers etc. Thus AIKS aimed to reconcile

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33. For detail on the composition of AIKS, see U.Mehta, 1979, op.cit; See also S.Sen, Agrarian Struggle in Bengal, 1946-47 PPH, New Delhi, 1972, pp.16-32; S.Sen, Agrarian Relations in India, 1793-1947, PPH, New Delhi, 1979, pp.187-195 .

34. S.Sen, 1972, op.cit., pp.17-18 .

the interests of all categories of peasants from rich to landless and unite them on a common platform. Precisely such goals had tremendous socio-economic impacts in terms of their means and nature of execution to achieve such goals.

In Bengal, the Communists ( C.P.I.) took the leadership under the Provincial Kisan Sabha ( BPKS), with a network of district level committees. In response to the above goals formulated by AIKS, BPKS launched agitations during 1937 for liquidation of debt, reduction of rent and often no-rent-movement. Such manoeuvres culminated to the greater upheavals known as 'Tebhanga Movement' 1946-47 with almost another contemporary upheaval called 'Tanka Movement'.<sup>35</sup>

#### Tebhanga and Tanka Movements

C.P.I., the champion of BPKS, had a dual policy- one from above i.e. a united front alliance with the Congress socialist party for a unity of all left wings and other from below, i.e. to include the peasantry for anti-imperialism and abolition of zamindari. To that mission, Kissan Sabha found a better soil in the share-croppers, for their organisation and mobilization. It was due to certain specific historical conditions, e.g. the growth of 'Bargadari' system since the turn of 19th century, which found a sudden fillip by late 1930's.

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35. 'Tebhanga' means the share of the 2/3 of the produce. 'Tanka' speaks of a category of tenancy where a fixed produce rent was to be paid as a rent similar to that of bargadari system. The 'Tankadars' were predominantly tribals, comprising Hajongs and Garos; inhabiting largely in the district of Mymensingh of East Bengal.

Tanka and Tebhaga revolts may be considered as the first organised peasant revolts in Bengal in which the interest of the lower strata of peasantry were at fore. These revolts are considered as the largest peasant upsurge in Bengal till the period under consideration.<sup>36</sup>

The Tanka movement was set in motion in 1937-38 with an aim to reduce the amount and form of rent, but not the abolition of the system as such. The movement under the guidance of B.P.K.S. partially, succeeded.<sup>37</sup>

Tebhaga movement did not initially begin as a movement of sharecroppers and was confined to the middle peasants. The bargadars were brought into the scene much later. Bhawani Sen, the principal theoretician of the movement observes that the process of culmination into the Tebhaga movement may be traced back to 1939 in the movement of Dinajpur district which though did not challenge the existing share of produce rent into half, yet challenged the illegal exaction. The Tebhaga movement though officially comes into light in 1946, it gathered momentum since 1945. The local Kisan Sabha cadres, though participated, in such early actions but Communist party as an active force joined them since 1946.<sup>38</sup>

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36. A.Rasul, Krishak Sabhar Itihash ( in Bengali), Calcutta, 1969, p.154, See also J.Bhattacharyya, 'An Examination of Leadership Entry in Bengal Peasant Revolts, 1937-47', in "Journal of Asian Studies", vol.36, No.4, p.611.

37. For details on Tanka movement vide J.Bhattacharyya, ibid, pp. 611-4 614.

38. B.Sen, Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India, PPH, New Delhi, 1962, pp. 124-130.

The movement was further reinforced and precipitated by certain historical events and conditions during 1940s that gave a kind of consciousness of existence among the share-croppers - a) Contact between the peasants and the educated youth through famine - relief during 1940s, <sup>which</sup> inculcated a sense of social justice among the hopeless peasants;

b) <sup>There was a</sup> change in the bargaining power of the bargadar. As a result of massive death of the work-force during famine, <sup>Also</sup> there was a crisis in the supply of labours being reinforced by alternative job opportunities in the regions under military operations, <sup>39</sup> c) The joint drive made by the authority and the Kisan Sabha against the hoarding jotedars.

The demands on which BPKS formulated its action plan for the movement like the preceding movements, aimed at redressal of specific grievances than the replacement of the system. The following were the basic demands of the movement along with certain secondary demands :

- (1) two-third share for the bargadar on the produce against a receipt accompanied by the Bargadar's tenancy right on the land he tills,
- (2) No other exactions would be deduced from the bargadar's share,
- (3) Interests on paddy loans should not exceed 12.5% , and
- (4) Harvest to be stocked at the threshing floor of the bargadar. <sup>40</sup>

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39. Such military operations were the result of possible Japanese invasion.

40. P.N.Mukherjee, op.cit., p.57 .

The Tebhaga revolt took off in 1946 at North Western tip of Dinajpur district and gradually spreaded over the adjacent districts in North Bengal extending further down to 24 parganas, in the south. Pockets of revolts also flared up in Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh where Tanka rebellion already ran high.

Initially, the movement took resort to non-violence, but with the border opposition from the jotedars during the harvest, it gradually grew into violent insurrection. It may be of further interest that at the beginning, the movement was launched against jotedars with large holdings, but the smaller landlords or petty jotedars were spared. But soon under the sweeping militancy, it was directed against the landlords of all sizes. It is quite evident that, paradoxically the interests of bargadar was not opposed to that of small land owners but under the sway of time it turned differently. The resultant, was the alienation of great bulk of middle class peasantry from the movement. The support of this section or at least its remaining neutral was considered as most essential even by the leaders of the party. But the unbridled scourage had already gone out of gear. Finally, under the shower of suppressive resistance, by the government, together with fragmented class base and confused leadership, there came an end to the movement by 1947.<sup>41</sup>

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41. B.Sen, 'Peoples age', 30th Nov. 1947, p.10,



Viewing sociologically, a very important dimension of the movement was its ethnic bent. In both Fanka and Tabhaga the primary organisers were generally from the middle peasants, belonging to upper castes. Most of the organisers or leaders from outside the locality also belonged to upper caste middle class people, whereas the rebellious peasants largely belonged to the lower Hindu castes and the tribals, viz, Rajbanshi, Pod, Dalu, Bonai, Hadi, Koch, Hajong, Santhal, etc.<sup>42</sup> The revolt infested areas notably North Bengal were mostly inhabited by the communities who were in the process of emulating Hindu values. Such trend ranged from higher ritual ranks ( such as Rajbanshi, Pods and Hadis claim for Kshtriya status) to the acknowledgement of communal dignity with a little claim for higher ritual rank ( e.g. Hajongs and Santhals of North Bengal).<sup>43</sup> J.Bhattacharyya very rightly points out that social hierarchy was essential factor in the mobilization process of the peasants. Because to such peasants ( backward castes and tribals), the primary identity of the outside leaders was their higher socio-economic status.<sup>44</sup> Such attitude possibly owes its root to the role of better off higher caste Hindu peasants in the articulation for National Movement and restoration of raiyats rights. Bhattacharyya, however, views quite rationally that, the rebels sought a better place in society i.e. communal dignity

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42. J.Bhattacharyya, op.cit, pp.620-624 .

43. For detail see, J.Bhattacharyya, ibid, pp.620-625.

44. ibid, 624 .

and higher rank by emulating Hindu code of conduct. They offered entry to the high caste Hindu leaders or organisers in return of affirmation of their socio-economic aspirations.<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, with the approach of independence a very strong communal sentiment i.e. Muslim Nationalism was mushroomed. And that often overshadowed the class conflict, whatever the Tebhaga movement had. And to that extent the social forces i.e. communal interest, overshadowed the economic forces i.e. class interest.

Ideologically speaking, this movement was also a movement aiming at an intra-systematic change, i.e. alterations of certain structural relations within the existing system of agrarian relations. But for the first time this movement had an organised combination of leadership and party that guided in setting the goals and means of the movement.

This movement, initially drew support and active participation from landless agricultural labourers and middle peasants. As the movement was not always favourable even to the small and middle peasants, gradually their support got alienated. And the movement, though did not have anything to offer to the landless agricultural labourers, yet they participated in it. In the self criticism, Bhowani Sen

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45. ibid, p. 634.

46. H. Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution' in Desai (ed), op.cit. P 706.

argues that the failure of the movement was due largely to its inability to win the support of the middle class, who had not been unsympathetic to the movement. But the fascinating point is that a considerable portion of leadership came from the middle class itself.<sup>47</sup>

Following the reviewal of peasant uprisings in Bengal, we are in a position to take stock of the nature of Indian peasantry, in the context of Bengal.

Barrington Moore found two major obstacles for Indian peasantry to become as rebellious as the Chinese peasantry. That are, 'the character of nationalist leaders imparted to their movement a quietest twist that helped to damp down what revolutionary tendencies there were among the peasants'. And the institution of 'caste system, which did enforce a hierarchical submission; Make a man feel humble by a thousand daily acts and he will behave in a humble way'.<sup>48</sup>

With regard to the first reservation of Moore, B.Chowdhury has pointed out that such failure on the part of the nationalist leaders under the aegis of Congress, could not stop Indian peasantry from being militant especially in Bengal. Yet it definitely gave a set back to the militancy of the peasant struggle at the moment when the

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47. B.Sen, 'The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal' in "Communist" September, 1947, p.130.

48. B.Moore, Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, London, 1967, PP. 375, 383.

G.Myrdal also reiterates such view. See, G.Myrdal, Asian Drama, An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nation vol. ii, Penguin Harmondsworth, p.1061.

whole peasant movements could be articulated and developed into a large scale peasant movement, forming thereby a first step in the attempt to change the existing system.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the second constraint K. Gough finds Moore's argument as untenable. Because, she has observed in her study in Thanjavur in 1952 that, caste etiquette may engender rebellious feelings which sometimes may burst forth.<sup>50</sup> B.Chowdhury observes that, the delicacy on the part of the agricultural labourer to rebel was more because of his lack of assurance regarding the results of the rebellion than any caste constraint.<sup>51</sup>

Gough seems to have half-hearted truth in her view on the role of the caste in the peasant discontents. Because at a given point of time and place, caste may have appeared to her as conducive to peasant discontent. But in another situation the overwhelming value system of caste may bottleneck the peasant's consciousness, which may have been one of the reasons for lack of peasant consciousness of the Indian peasantry along with good many other reasons. Chowdhury on the other hand, seems to have overlooked certain social factors e.g. the attempts of the relegated peasants to stick with share cropping, than to become an agriculture labourer for

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49. B.B. Chowdhury, 1979, in Desai, <sup>ed, op. cit.</sup> p.367.

50. K.Gough, 'Indian Peasant Uprisings' in A.R.Desai (ed) op.cit, p.119,

51. B.B.Chowdhury, op.cit, 1979, p.368 .

the fear of loosing social status.<sup>52</sup> This might partially propelle the sharecropper not to become militant always. But of course, that is also not a universal phenomenon, as we have already seen the militancy of the sharecroppers in Bengal who may appear at times as a vulnerable force.

Apart from that, certain veritable conditions really acted as a constraint to the peasant mobilisation and movement in India in general and Bengal in particular. First, the peasantry was not a homogeneous group and had a complex structure of interests e.g. where the bargadars were employed by richer peasants, as was often the case, the Kisan Sabha fought against the former running the risk of alienating the latter. Similarly, some agricultural labourers were avulsive to take part in the movement because opposing their employers would have a risk of loosing job as well as their tiny plot which were their barest subsistence. This was accompanied by a very peculiar feature, which loomed large during Tebhaga movement. It is a fact that, with the change in time and conditions of existence there comes a corresponding change in the role of the different sections of the peasantry. Similarly, in Bengal, the better off occupancy raiyats who were mostly later day's jotedars, fought in allience with the rebelks , through the movements till early 20th century. But this section became virtually hostile and opposite force to the peasant movement during Tebhaga struggle.

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52. See P.N.Mukherjee, op.cit, p.34-36 .

Finally, it may be noted that throughout the course of movement, the agricultural labourer as a category was equated with peasants ( cultivators or bargadars) as participants. But virtually no attention was paid to their grievances excepting a cursory attention in the All India Kishan Congress in 1939 at Lucknow for minimum wage to the labourer.<sup>53</sup>

Thus it may be concluded that the peasants movement in Bengal within the period of our discussion, could not take the shape of a demarcated class struggle and various political parties also failed to identify the nature of class structure with the dynamics of contradiction in agrarian arena of Bengal.

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53. G.Omvette, ' Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts', in Sociological Bulletin, volume 29, No.2, September, 1980,

## CONCLUSION

## C O N C L U S I O N

The present study is a <sup>re</sup>view of approaches and the study of class relations in general and of agrarian class relations in particular. We have attempted this analysis at three levels : i) analysis of the concept of class and the approaches to the study of agrarian class relations; ii) agrarian class relations in India and iii) dynamics of agrarian classes in Bengal. Our effort has been to analyse the role of various approaches namely Marxian and non-Marxian. On the Marxian side, we have taken up for analysis the views of Marx, Mao and Lenin in general and a number of economists, economic historians and sociologists in particular in regard to the study of class relations ( including agrarian) in India. On the non-Marxian side, we have reviewed the perspectives of Marx, Weber, G.Lenski, S.Ossowski, Richard Centres and several others in general and with regard to India we have examined the writings of Andre Beteille, K.C.Alexander, and others. We have also analysed the writings of those scholars who have attempted a 'mix' of the Marxian and the non-Marxian approaches to the study of class relations namely, Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Ajoy Saith, and Aswini Tanakha.

It has been realised by us that differentiation of the peasantry in India is not a recent phenomenon. It is wrong to assume that it emerged either due to colonial rule



in India or due to the development of capitalistic trend in agriculture. Historians have noticed distinctions of status, prestige and honour among various castes and classes including peasantry in ancient and mediavel periods. Spatial mobility, migration and conquest as the main factors of change have been identified by scholars like Romila Thapar, D.D. Kosambi, H.B.Lamb, B.Stein and very recently in British period by A.R.Desai and Bipan Chandra etc.

Differentiation of peasantry in the history of India, is a phenomenon of time immemorial, but that found a sudden accentuation during the colonial era. The whole agrarian economy faced a sudden change resulting thereby a change also in the patterns of agrarian relations. The various land tenure systems introduced by British rule such as, 'Zamindari', 'Raiyatwari', 'Mahalwari', etc. represented a variation in the system of production, and accordingly represented a differential nature of differentiation of peasantry under these systems. To illustrate these points, the example of Zamindari and Raiyatwari areas of Uttar Pradesh may be cited which had a differential system of production as well as differences in regard to peasantry. The western U.P. had largely Raiyatwari system whereas the Zamindari system existed in the eastern U.P. As we know in the former the Raiyat had direct access to the British government in regard to the land which he cultivated, whereas in the later, the zamindars managed the land on behalf of the government. Thus there were two distinct systems of production alongwith distinct systems of differentiation in the peasantry.

The economists in particular, who have dealt with agrarian class relations, have omitted microscopic realities from their analyses of agrarian social structure. Their studies are based on aggregate data and such analyses loose cite of actual relations between various classes as functional units. Analyses of the historians are based on secondary data like archival materials etc. In fact both of them have failed to see classes as concrete entities operating in a given microscopic situation. However, this is not true about all the economists or historical anthropologists namely Krishan Bhardwaj and Kathelin Gough. But these are only a few departures.

Our effort has been to map out the various approaches and their relevance to the study of agrarian social structure of India. But it has not been possible for us to attempt such a microscopic study on the basis of specific field work based work for this dissertation. However, whatever data we could gather about Bengal during the colonial era have been analysed and we hope this analysis would facilitate planning of field work for our Doctoral Thesis. After 1947 several legislations have been passed regarding land relations but we have not analysed that as we have thought that it could be taken up as a part of Doctoral programme.

It is well known fact that Bengal was the first state to have the initial impact of British rule in India. The Permanent Settlement was first introduced in Bengal. Thus in our view, Bengal forms a specific historical reality. It is

not that we deny its linkages with other parts of the country either in the past or in the present. But due to the reasons we have counted above we would like to treat this as a 'social formation' for the purpose of our study. There is no doubt that this social formation is a part of bigger social formation i.e. India as a whole. We are delineating Bengal as a social formation to understand the various stages of change in agrarian relations in colonial period and then link them up with the factors which are within the society, and the factors which have affected the stages of change from out side. Such an approach in fact is meant to take into account the levels of dialectics in this particular arena of study and then try to relate them to the other aspects of Bengal and wider society as well.

It has been seen that Permanent Settlement safeguarded the interest of the British rulers as well as the interests of the upper sections of the society . However, it is not that all the sections were equally affected by the British rule including Permanent Settlement. The upper caste Hindus and the upper stratum of Muslims e.g. Syads were benefitted to the maximum and it is they who became the class of landlords.

Land became increasingly a commodity through money rent, free sale, mortgage and the like forces which paved the way for the emergence of moneyed elements e.g. traders, money-lenders, etc. This resulted into the transformation of relationships between landlords and tenants into a relationship

of 'raiyat-mahajan' or 'trader-mahajan'. This was further coupled with the growth of commercial agriculture, rise in price of food-grains, money lending and massive land alienation of the peasants. The village artisans and craftsmen lost their traditional callings and were forced to take up agricultural labour and share-cropping.

The obvious eventuation of such a state of affair was a kind of outburst in the form of rural protest. Peasant movements in Bengal like any other parts in India have different stages of developments from localized, unorganized movement to organised movements led by organised political parties. We have seen how such political parties failed to perceive the revolutionary impulse of the lowest stratum of the peasantry i.e. agricultural labourers. We have also seen how the role of particular section of peasantry changes with time and the condition of existence.

Finally, under the above context of analysis certain enquiries remain to be answered in regard to the nature of class, contradiction and consciousness pertaining to agrarian relations in India. For that a few observations may be as follows :

i) owing to the diversity in the nature and background of the agrarian relations in India it is very difficult to specifically demarcate the agrarian classes whether it be a two-class or multi-class situation. For sociological reasons such demarcation of various classes may for heuristic purposes be attempted with a three-fold model of Lenin or five-fold model of Mao for the analysis of agrarian class structure. But it must be applied

as a tool only for the understanding and analysis. Any attempt to fit it uncritically into any situation is likely to be misleading; ii) It has been seen how cultural matrix of a given society also has a considerable impact in shaping its various economic relationships. Hence one finds a considerable congruence between caste and class even today; iii) It has also been seen how the various sections of the peasantry have differential interests at different points of time and places. And how such differential interests further change with the onslaught of new socio-economic forces.

This whole socio-economic milieu can better be grasped with an approach which is somewhat holistic and historical in nature. And such an approach needs to have both conformity and conflict relationships to identify the levels of dialectics in a particular arena of study ( within its given historicity) to relate them with broader aspects of the society.

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