

**“CLASS” AND “EXPLOITATION” IN AGRICULTURE: DEBATES
ON THE “NEW FARMERS’ MOVEMENTS”**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of*

Master of Philosophy

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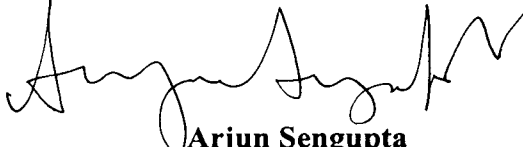


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July 25, 2011

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Class**” and “**Exploitation**” in **Agriculture: Debates on the “New Farmers’ Movements**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is an original research work and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University / Institution.



Arjun Sengupta



July 25, 2011

CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled “Class” and “Exploitation” in Agriculture: Debates on the “New Farmers’ Movements” submitted by Arjun Sengupta to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This study is an attempt to understanding certain significant features of the discourses on the agrarian question today through an analysis of the academic debates on the so-called ‘New Farmers’ Movements’ which emerged in the 1970s in the ‘green revolution’ areas. Significant themes of class and exploitation, as they appear in current perspectives on the agrarian sector in India today, will be examined in the light of, by drawing certain analytical insights from, these debates. These debates can provide illumination of certain much-studies processes in the agrarian sector like displacement and ecological degradation.

1.1 The Context

1.1.1. Development, Displacement and Ecological Degradation

Agriculture and the question of land have acquired, over the last few years, a renewed prominence in academic, policy and NGO circles. A major reason for this has been the increased frequency and scale of acquisition of agricultural and forested land for setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and other kinds of industrial complexes. Since the enactment of the Special Economic Zones Act in 2005, and its implementation in 2006, vast swathes of agricultural land have been acquired by different state governments for establishing SEZs. By 2008, more than 400 SEZs had received government approval, with many more in the process of acquiring such approval. (Citizens’ Research Collective, 2008). The SEZ policy faced widespread opposition from a large spectrum of academics, intellectuals and activists. Such opposition represented diverse objections, but the most salient of the latter was on the ground of the massive acquisition of agricultural land that inevitably resulted in the displacement of those dependent on land for their livelihoods. In a number of instances, such projects came to be opposed by those who would be displaced by them. This opposition was often supported by a range of civil society groups. On some occasions, such opposition resulted in a violent response from governmental authorities. In 2006, thirteen tribals were killed in police firing in Kalinganagar, Orissa, while opposing a large-scale project which would have displaced them from their land. In 2007, several peasants lost their lives when the police opened fire on groups opposing acquisition of land in Nandigram and Singur, in West Bengal, at a very politically surcharged conjuncture. These

incidents played a catalytic role in pitchforking the question of acquisition of agricultural land, for industries, to substantial prominence.

Criticisms of land acquisition for industrial purposes sought to link up the question of acquisition with larger questions of development. Very often, it would be claimed that acquisition of agricultural land represented a misplaced development priority in which the industrial sector was being privileged over the agrarian sector. This was often accompanied by an understanding of the state as an agent of furthering and strengthening the supposed exploitative dominance of the urban elite over those engaged in agriculture. It was suggested that the very development paradigm adopted in independent India, with its emphasis on rapid industrialization, was, in fact, an expression of this dominance. A case was often made for a model of development in which traditional patterns of production would be the fulcrum of economic processes. Rural industrialization, which would not be dependent on heavy machinery and energy-intensive production processes, was a common motif in such lines of argumentation.

Further, the dominant pattern of development was also seen as repugnant to the preservation of environmental and ecological balances. Such arguments, voiced very prominently by civil society groups and movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan, focused on the linkage between the fragility of ecological systems, and the livelihoods of those who were dependent on the preservation of such systems. The environmentalist discourse, again, saw the state as the principal agency through which environmental degradation was being carried out by the urban elites, thereby dispossessing vast non-urban masses of their sources of livelihood. A certain identity was proposed, therefore, between the preservation of the environment and safeguarding the livelihoods of those who drew their sustenance from agricultural land and forests.

1.1.2 Agrarian Distress

The above discourse, centered on the themes of land acquisition and environmental degradation, it must be remembered, has found particular resonance amongst academic and activist circles, partly on account of the distress being experienced by agricultural sector as a whole. It has been pointed out by several observers that the process of liberalization and

structural change in the economy, initiated in 1991, has had an enormously detrimental impact on agricultural [see, for instance, Ramachandran (2011)]. Ramachandran points out that the “new policy regime is identified with the reversal of land reform, change in the policies of administered agricultural input costs and output prices, cutbacks in public investment in rural physical and social infrastructure, the severe weakening of the institutional structure of social and development banking, the lowering of barriers on agricultural trade in agricultural commodities, on the import of agricultural products, the weakening of the public infrastructure for storage and marketing, cutbacks in the public distribution system, and the undermining of national systems of research and extension and mechanisms for the protection of national plant and other biological wealth.”(Ramachandran, *ibid*: 53). The consequences of these policy shifts have been striking. Agricultural production has become unremunerative and unviable for the bulk of the peasantry. Pillai points out that a Situation Assessment Survey of Income, Expenditure and Productive Assets of Farmer Households conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation in 2003 showed that of all the households owning less than 4 hectares of land that were surveyed, 96.2 per cent incurred a monthly consumption expenditure greater than their monthly income from all sources (Pillai, 2007). A particularly acute manifestation of this crisis is the increasing frequency of suicides committed by peasants unable to meet their debt requirements (Vasavi, 1999). This set of circumstances, attended centrally by declining agricultural incomes, constitutes a very important aspect of the context in which the above perspectives assumed salience and specificity. The agrarian crisis seemed to add strength to the thesis of an urban-industrial elite exploiting the countryside as a whole. It was claimed, and this argument found enormous currency in the discourses of Non-Governmental Organisations, that agrarian distress, on the one hand, and displacement and environmental degradation, on the other, are different aspects of the same larger structure of exploitation in which the state plays a pivotal role in transferring resources from the agrarian to the industrial sector [see, for instance, Saxena (2008)].

1.2. New Social Movements

The above perspectives and discourses seem to share a fair amount of common ground, and common lineage, with the ideology of what are referred to as new social movements. A notion emerging in the context of what are seen as post-industrial societies, these movements

are seen as fundamentally different from 'old' movements on several counts. It must be remembered that the reference points for 'newness', as conceived by several of those who have theorized or endorsed the idea of new social movements, are the conventional working class and peasant movements spearheaded by communist and socialist parties till around the nineteen-sixties. Touraine, for instance, points out that while the 'old' movements operated on a larger, structural, and 'meta' understanding of social parameters, the 'new' movements involve a definitive shift to personal and fragmented kinds of mobilization (Touraine, 1984). The thrust of these movements lie in the radical questioning of cultural, social and normative modes and practices that are dominant in society.

Habermas points out that while the earlier kinds of movements had a greater engagement with the state, the new social movements seek to defend civil society against the maraudings of a technocratic state (Habermas, 1981). Thus, the new social movements, as against earlier forms of left mobilization, do not attempt to capture state power but try to question the validity of the form of state power itself. Kothari, therefore, seeks to find in the new movements an *alternative* to the state itself (Kothari, 1988). It is on account of this that the new social movements maintain a distance from mainstream political formations like political parties. The state itself, regardless of the socio-economic context it is located within, is seen as a source of oppression. Thus, the appropriation of state power by certain exploited classes does not remain a legitimate objective. Civil society, as the only possible counterpoise to the allegedly despotic domain of the state, emerges as the arena of political action. New social movement theorization is, thus, attended by an attempted redefinition of the *political* itself.

The notion of the state employed in such an understanding, however, is marked by a certain degree of abstraction. Thus oppressiveness and exploitation are seen as *inherent* characteristics of the state. The state, perceived as a modern western institution, is regarded, therefore, as necessarily attended by the propensity to exercise a tyrannical authority and dominion over the rest of society. In a certain sense, it is irrelevant to the new social movements whether the state in question is capitalist or socialist in character. Further, the specific social relations which circumscribe the functioning of the state do not command too much of attention in the theoretical and analytical schema of the new social movements. Thus, Omvedt emphasizes that the new social movements are *anti-systemic* in character (Omvedt, 1993). The prime targets of these movements are the exploitative imposition of the state. She sees these movements as single-issue efforts to bring about change. The social non-specificity and ambiguity of the notions of 'anti-systemic' and 'change' are quite clear.

The logical corollary of this non-specificity of the characterization of the state is non-specificity in the understanding of society and social relationships themselves. Thus, Omvedt claims that the new social movements have moved away from the 'old' notions of class to new formulations of 'exploitation' as a category. Quite apart from the question of whether the issue of exploitation can be posed meaningfully without an understanding of class relations, the elimination of class relations makes the formulation of strategies of systemic social change very difficult. In fact, the shift renders the notion of systemic change itself quite analytically irrelevant. Further, it imposes a non-differentiated understanding of a social formation, in which tensions and contradictions can only be understood in terms of an *external* opposition between the state and the rest of society. Thus, Kothari's characterization of civil society as the exclusive province of democratic politics, in which adequate differentiation and internal contradiction is not introduced into concept of civil society, and where thrust of politics is directed singularly against the state, is a logical outcome of the undifferentiated and non-specific characterization of the state.

Of course, the non-specificity, in a certain sense, is sought to be made up for through a specification of the *form* of the state. This is often accompanied by a characterization and criticism of the form of development. Thus, Kothari claims that the fundamental social antagonisms in most third world societies in the second half of the twentieth century have been generated by the pattern of development which has been followed, and social movements in these societies have to principally challenge this pattern of development (Kothari, *ibid.*). Strategies of development based on heavy industrialization and energy-intensive technological modernisation are seen as an assault on the third world social formations, which result in large-scale destabilization and dispossession. In fact the movements identified as new social movements in India have been a principle source of the discourses of dispossession and environmental degradation delineated in the previous sections.

1.3 Class and relations of exploitation in agrarian India

A central and unifying feature of the discourses sketched out above is the tendency of regarding the agrarian sector as a unified whole. There seems to be an understanding that certain dominant processes of development affect all sections of the rural population in a

similar way. The rural population, in other words, is viewed in an *undifferentiated* manner. It is precisely this approach that enables these discourses to foreground the supposed relationship between the urban-industrial sector, *as a whole*, on the one hand, and the agricultural sector, *as a whole*, on the other. In effect, what is being argued is that relationships of exploitation and oppression within the agrarian population are not relevant to the understanding of exploitative relations within the social formation as a whole. This feature is enormously significant. It is quite widely established that agrarian relations in India, during the colonial period, were marked by the most extreme kinds of landlordism [See, for example, Dasgupta (1984)]. The extent of land concentration was massive. Poor peasants, tenants and agricultural labourers were subjected to extremely burdensome extractions of several kinds by the colonial state, landlords, merchants, usurers and others. Agrarian relations, or relations of ownership and production, between different sections of the rural population, were thus characterized by the most egregious forms of exploitation.

In post-independence India, while land reforms formed a part of the rhetoric of the state, redistribution of land has not been carried out to any significant extent. Several problems attended the land reforms programme – from administrative bottlenecks to evasion by landlords by employing both technical loopholes in the reform laws as well as their enormous clout and influence with the governmental and administrative machinery (See Chattopadhyay, 1973). Even apart from these problems, in some respects, like land ceiling for example, there were fundamental problems even at the level of policy formulation. Thus, in several states, the ceiling was set at a level that no meaningful redistribution of land could possibly take place. This failure of the fundamental task of land reforms meant that exploitative relations between different sections of the rural population – between different agrarian *classes* continued. Large masses of the agrarian population continued to be exploited by a small section of the rural rich.

The New Agricultural Strategy, initiated in 1966, and resulting in what is referred to as the ‘green revolution’, did not in any way lead to a blunting of this exploitation. Though the green revolution did involve a substantial increase in agricultural output, for certain crops and in certain regions, the benefits of this increase accrued to a very narrow section of the peasants. In fact, as Dhanagare points out, in many instances, the adoption of the New Agricultural Strategy led to a sharpening of inequality between the different agrarian classes (Dhanagare, 1987). There seems to be a wide understanding that contrary to official

projections about the implications of the green revolution for the poor peasantry and landless labourers, the expected 'trickle down' never really happened. Instead, one witnessed in this period an intensification of the extraction of surplus from the rural poor by the rural rich. Patnaik points out, for instance, that the real wages for agricultural labour in the green revolution period actually went through a *decline* (Patnaik, U., 1986). The massive rural inequalities, involving a vast concentration of land and other assets, therefore, were *strengthened*, if anything, by the green revolution.

In the post-liberalisation period, these inequalities have received further sustenance. While the policy changes, ushered in as a part of the process of structural adjustment, have had an impact on all agrarian classes, it must be remembered that this impact has been *differential* across classes. Poor peasants and agricultural labourers have been the worst sufferers of the process of liberalization. An instance of this variable impact can be seen in the provisioning of rural credit. Ramachandran and Swaminathan point out that there has been a substantial decline in the number of rural bank branches over the 1990s (Ramachandran *et al.*, 2005). This withdrawal of formal banking and credit facilities has taken a disproportionate toll on the rural poor – the poor peasantry and landless agricultural labourers (Chavan, 2007). Out of all the agrarian classes, the rural poor have the greatest need for formal credit. Credit at low rates can make a substantial difference to those who possess minimal land, for whom the availability of modern inputs is the only way they can make the cultivation of their plots viable. Further, poor peasants and agricultural labourers often require credit to even meet their basic consumption requirements. In the absence of the formal credit facilities, the rural poor are forced to continue depending on the local usurers for credit at extremely high rates of interest. Chavan writes:

Inclusion of the excluded – sectors of the economy, social groups or regions – in the formal financial system primarily requires significant expansion of the geographical coverage and functional reach of the financial system. This indeed was the objective of the policy of social or development banking adopted in the country after the nationalization of major banks in 1969. Under this policy, there was a thrust on setting up bank branches in areas that had an underdeveloped banking infrastructure. Thus, banks were asked to extend their services to rural areas. Further, banks were mandated to direct a certain percentage of their credit to sectors that were in need of formal credit but to which credit supply from formal agencies had till then been

limited. These priority sectors mainly included agriculture, small-scale industries along with certain socio-economically backward sections of the population, which were referred to as the “weaker sections”. Dalits were included under weaker sections (Chavan, *ibid.*: 3219).

She goes on to point out that in the post-liberalisation period the policy thrust shifted from extension of the reach of the financial system to the latter’s commercial profitability and feasibility. As a result, social and development banking suffered enormously. Banks have been asked to pursue equity as one of their objectives, but without compromising on commercial considerations. The consequences of this have been enormously detrimental particularly for the poorest sections of the peasantry. Socially oppressed groups, like dalit castes, have been the worst sufferers. Chavan highlights that while in 1992 banks were the largest source of credit for dalit households, in 2002 this position had been taken by moneylenders. Between the two years, the percentage of dalit households that owed at least one loan to a bank increased by at three percentage points, while the proportion of dalit households that had at least one outstanding loan to a moneylender increased by four percentage points. This obviously meant a substantially increased exploitation of dalit households at large, through usurious rates of interest. The changes for the non-dalit households, though discernible, were not as dramatic. The withdrawal of formal credit facilities, in the post-liberalisation period, thus, has had the sharpest and the most debilitating impact on the poorest of the rural population. Chavan concludes:

According to the All India Debt and Investment Survey, for Dalit households, commercial banks were the most important source of credit in 1992. There was, however, a sharp fall in the share of debt from commercial banks between 1992 and 2002. The vacuum thus created was filled primarily by professional moneylenders. While professional moneylenders did emerge in 2002 as an important source of livelihood for other rural households as well, their hold over Dalit households was much stronger than other households. The increased presence of informal credit also meant an increased and onerous interest burden on rural households in 2002 (Chavan, *ibid.*: 3223).

The impact of liberalization on agriculture, therefore, has been *differential* over different classes of the rural population. Further, it has also been noted by several commentators that

even in today's conjuncture surplus accumulation by capitalist farmers and rich peasants continues. Ramachandran, for instance, points out that while public investment in agriculture has stagnated in consonance with the nature of liberalization, private investment has increased quite substantially (Ramachandran, *ibid.*). Evidence of this is to be found in the increased levels of mechanization in form of tractors, power tillers, water pumps and the like. The sale of tractors and other mechanical implements has shown a steady and significant rise. The bulk of this investment is made by large farmers and landlords. Surplus appropriation and accumulation, thus, has continued in the countryside even in the post-liberalisation period.

Further, there is substantial literature that attests to the continuation of extreme forms of exploitation of certain rural classes by other rural classes. Rawal highlights, for instance, that in rural Haryana, the post-liberalisation period has witnessed a further sharpening of the exploitative character of long-term labour contracts (Rawal, 2006). These contracts range from the hiring, on an annual basis, of farm servants referred to as *naukars*, to crop-sharing arrangements known as *siri*. While the wages or crop-share paid out are extremely low, there are many forms of non-economic or *social* oppression that the labourers are subjected to by their employers. Caste becomes a crucial axis of oppression in such cases as most of the labourers and *siri* cultivators are drawn from dalit and other lower castes. Importantly, he stresses the fact that credit is an important instrument through which the employers maintain their dominance and control over agricultural labour. The employment of this instrument has increased, both in terms of scale and intensity, over the last twenty years as a result of the withdrawal of formal credit as a part of the process of liberalization. We find here, therefore, a stark instance of processes of structural adjustment feeding into and sharpening pre-existent relations of exploitation.

Further, the relationship between between class exploitation and caste oppression, as indicated in the instance of Haryana, remains a deeply entrenched feature of agrarian social relations. Thus, Thorat writes:

The pattern of land ownership is highly skewed against SCs. Nearly 70 percent of SC households either do not own land or have very small landholdings of less than 0.4 ha. A very small proportion (less than 6 per cent) consists of medium and large farmers. The scenario of landownership among SCs is even grimmer in Bihar, Haryana, Kerala

and Punjab, where more than 90 percent of SC households possess negligible or no land (Thorat, 2009: 56).

Even apart from the very limited access to land, dalit castes are very often subjected to very stark forms of discrimination through market segmentation. Heyer points out, that in the context of the Coimbatore region in Tamil Nadu, that a despite a substantial amount of industrialization in the region, dalit agricultural labourers have not been able to take advantage of the new avenues of employment, as much as those belonging to other castes, on account of acute forms of discrimination in the industrial labour market (Heyer, 2010). This compels the dalit agricultural labourers to confine themselves to the agrarian sector under miserable conditions of living and sharp social disadvantage. Relations of exploitation, thus, still run rife within the agrarian sector. Production and labour processes are marked by a striking intensity of surplus extraction. Further, given the diversity of production arrangements in Indian agriculture, the methods of surplus appropriation are varied as well. There are a wide plurality of ways in which one class exploits another class.

1.4 The concept of class

It would be useful to examine, here, what the notion of class specifically consists in. The idea of class owes its origin to Marxist thought. It would seem ironic that Marx himself never defined class very clearly. As Friedman points out the closest he came to providing a definition of class was in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he wrote:

..in so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode, of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class [Friedman (1974): 321]

The fundamentals of class, therefore, seem to consist in the common location of a group of people within a set of economic relations. Perrone and Wright point out that in Marxist terms the concept of class has three elements: commonality of location, the relational character of the different locations, and the entrenchment of those locations in social relations of production (Perrone *et. al.*, 1977). These relations of production are fundamentally defined in terms of who owns the means of production and who owns the product's of the producers'

labour. These relations are, therefore, fundamentally those of the extraction of the surplus produced by the direct producers over and above what is required for their subsistence. Lenin's definition of class displays this centrality of surplus extraction:

..large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the *share of social wealth* of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it (emphasis mine) [Lenin 1981: 421].

It must be remembered here that, within the Marxian scheme, the existence of different classes must be sought in the realm of *production*, and not those of consumption and circulation. As Patnaik points out, one of Marx's significant contribution to the political economy of his time was to highlight that it is principally within the domain of production processes that surplus is appropriated in a class- divided society (Patnaik, P. 2000). Thus, within capitalism, surplus is appropriated by the capitalists, not through exchange in the market of commodities, but through the capital-wage relationship i.e., through the relationship between the capitalists who own the means of productions, and wage labourers who own nothing apart from their *capacity* to labour which they sell to the capitalists as commodities. This is extremely significant since it implies that for the identification of class one has to concretely examine the specific labour processes and property relations that attend the processes of production.

The above understanding has been sought to be employed by many in investigating the class structure in agrarian societies. Of course, which aspects of the above conceptualization are stressed has depended on the contexts of the specific studies being carried out. Thus, while, for instance, following Lenin and Mao, Patnaik has chosen to focus on the extent of labour a particular class hires in or hire out as the criterion for the identification of classes, Athreya *et. al.* have stressed the ability of the members of a particular class to reproduce their operations in the every subsequent crop cycle without resorting to hiring labour out [Patnaik, U. (1999); Athreya *et. al.* (1987)]. Ramachandran, on the other hand, has opted to operate with a combination of the two criteria (Ramachandran, 2011).

It must be stressed here that the employment of these criterion presupposes rural inequality to be structural in character. In other words it sees rural inequality as a systemic part of

arrangements of production in the countryside. As already indicated, this stress on the actual processes and systems of production is crucial. As Patnaik points out, there has been a strong tendency within studies on agrarian relations to the entire peasantry as an undifferentiated mass. Represented most popularly by the works of Chayanov in the twentieth century, this approach seeks to understand the inequalities in terms of mere income differentials. Often, it carries out analysis by assuming, in an empirically untenable manner, 'peasant households' to be the basic unit of the agrarian sector. The features of such a household are taken to be 'average' in terms of its attributes like size, income etc. Such an approach, as she stresses, can be a vast impediment in understanding the systemic character of the exploitation *within* the agrarian sector. The countryside, she emphasizes, is populated by different *classes* which bear particular relationships to one another in the scheme of production. It is these relationships that are responsible for economic differentials like income. Thus, ignoring or eclipsing these relationships will inevitably lead to a misunderstanding of the character of rural inequality, in particular, and the social formation, in general.

It is this centrality of class relations and systemic inequalities within agrarian society which calls for a deeper examination of both the discourses of rural inequality, and those on the link between dispossession, development and environmental degradation. A thorough examination is required of the manner in which categories such as the 'peasantry', 'class', 'exploitation' and the like are mobilized within these discourses. Crucial to such an examination would be the understanding of the state that accompanies such discursive mobilizations. The linkage between the role played by categories such as industrialization in such discursive schemes too would be significant. The relationship between the peasantry and industrialization, as already indicated, has been a recurrent motif in some of the most influential discourses on agriculture. The employment, therefore, of the theme of the relationship between the industrial and the agrarian sector, within these discourses, requires serious consideration.

1.5 Discourses on the New Farmers' Movements

The 1970s saw the emergence of large farmer agitation in several parts of the country. The most significant and sustained movements emerged in areas where what is known as the Green Revolution had some substantial penetration – Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Punjab,

Haryana and Western UP. These movements, over a fairly short span of time, established themselves, assumed significant strength, and invited a large amount of public attention. The most significant of these movements were – the Tamil Nadu Agriculturalists' Association (Tamilaga Vyavasavavigal Sangham or TVS) in Tamil Nadu, Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in UP, Punjab and Haryana, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in Gujarat, and the Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha (KRRS) in Karnataka. Led largely by capitalist farmers and rich peasants, these movements could mobilize substantial sections of the rural population around agrarian demands that centred largely on the question of prices. The principal demand of these movements was 'remunerative' prices – in other words, lower prices for inputs like fertilisers, electricity, agricultural implements, seeds etc., and higher prices for the produce including both cereals and grains. This centrality of the price dimension sets these movements out from the bulk of the earlier agrarian mobilizations which were largely hinged on the demand of land and its redistribution, and in a related manner, the demand for higher wages.

Another striking feature of these movements is their professedly apolitical nature. This purported neutrality and a religiously reiterated emphasis on the absence of any political affiliation has been very important to the strategic and tactical operation of these movements. Earlier agrarian mobilizations, very often, had open formal or informal links with political organisations. For instance, in the pre-independence period, a large number of movements had unfolded under the leadership of the Congress and the communist-led kisan sabhas. The declared political impartiality of the farmer movements in the 70s and 80s was an integral part of the attempt made by them to act as powerful pressure groups. It must, however, be added that several of these movements have eventually ended up lending formal or informal support to political parties particularly in electoral contexts, despite the strong rhetoric of having nothing to do with party politics.

Thirdly, as against earlier agrarian mobilizations, these movements were not directed against landlords, moneylenders and traders, who were previously identified by movements of varied kinds as the chief source of the agrarian exploitation, but against the state itself. The principal theme which bound all these movements together was that of the Indian state privileging the urban industrial sector over the agrarian sector in its totality. At the rhetorical level, this was posed as an unequal and unjust relationship between urban India and rural India. The classic formulation was the dichotomy between 'India' and 'Bharat', wherein the former denoted a

'westernized' and industrialized urban India, and the latter stood for a suffering and subjugated rural India involved principally in agriculture. The general tendency in these movements was to avoid any serious consideration of intra-sectoral differentiation, both within the industrial and agrarian sectors. It was claimed with great vehemence, by all these movements, that the agrarian sector *as a whole* was being marginalised by the Indian state – all agrarian classes bearing the onerous burden of this discrimination. Exploitative relations obtaining between the different agrarian classes were either denied or were dismissed as of secondary importance in the face of the central contradiction between town and country.

The above features have principally been responsible for the employment of the adjective 'new' in the new farmers' movements. The use of this term also implies the discursive location of these movements within the category of new social movements. A significant debate had raged from the nineteen-seventies to the nineteen-nineties about different aspects of these movements. The most significant questions that were debated were the following: the class character of these movements, the manner in which different classes related to these movements, the compatibility of the objectives of these movements with interests and needs of the poor peasantry and agricultural labour, the relation between these movements and the green revolution, and the relationship between these movements and transformations occurring in the connections between the agrarian and industrial sectors. On account of the nature of these coordinates, these debates can serve as a very useful discursive arena for the examination of the different ways in which categories such as the 'peasantry', 'class' and 'exploitation' are employed. As the contributions to this debate have been from several disciplines – from sociology to economics, the employment of these categories would display a fair degree of diversity. This would make such an examination even more worthwhile. The specific points of contestation would serve as particularly rich nodes for the analysis of these discourses.

1.6 Objectives

The objective of this study would be to examine the academic debate on the new farmers' movement. This examination of the debate will attempt to understand the manner in which

discourses around agriculture, agrarian relations and development have been constructed and employed in these debates. Further, the study will also seek to identify the different categories and themes that constitute these discourses and the relations between them. Certain categories such as 'class', 'exploitation' and the 'peasantry' will be focussed on.

Such an analysis of the discourses employed in the debate would provide a clearer and sharper understanding of the manner in which these categories are being mobilised in discourses on the agrarian question today.

1.7 Scope

The study will be concerned with the debate on the new farmers' movement carried out in academic books and journals. It will not delve into engagements with the debate in other kinds of literature on this theme – for instance that published by political parties, NGOs or these movements themselves.

Further, the last three decades of the twentieth century saw rural mobilisations of kinds even apart from the new farmers' movements. Thus, movements around the rights of tenants and agricultural labourers led by communist parties and other political or social agencies, mobilisation of the rural poor along issues of caste, mobilisation of rural women on different specific issues and questions etc. have also occurred in this period. An examination of these movements, however, will be beyond the scope of this study.

1.8 Methodology

This study will be carried out through an examination of secondary material on India agriculture and the new farmers' movements. This literature will principally be academic in character and apart from the discipline of sociology would also belong to disciplines like economics and history.

1.9 Chapterisation

Chapter Two deals with the salient themes in the dominant discourses on the agrarian question today. Two themes – that of land acquisition and ecological degradation will be highlighted.

Chapter Three sketches a history of agrarian relations in colonial and post-colonial India.

Chapter Four examines the debate on the New Farmers' Movements.

Chapter Five is the concluding section.

Chapter Two: Salient Themes in Current Conceptualisations of The Agrarian Question

In recent literature on the agrarian sector and the peasantry, two themes have dominated. The most pervasive theme has been that of displacement and dispossession of those subsisting on agriculture. This theme has acquired particular salience over the last few years in the context of acquisition of land for Special Economic Zones and other kinds of industrial complexes. A treatment of this theme has often involved an evaluation of the kind of development trajectory that has been attempted in independent India. Categories of analysis informing this trajectory have been subjected to intense scrutiny. The second theme has been that of environmental degradation wrought by what are seen as mainstream and dominant development processes. A motif that has usually accompanied such interrogations has been that of the loss of livelihood of those groups, tribals for instance, who are seen as particularly dependent on the maintenance of allegedly vital ecological and environmental balances. These two themes, and the conceptual schemes they have been located within, have been extraordinarily influential, particularly at the interface between academic interventions on questions of development and non-governmental social activism. This chapter will attempt to sketch out the broad contours of the discourses, surrounding these themes, in the recent literature on the agrarian question. It will seek to analyse and evaluate some of the broadly representative writings that have contributed to the construction of these discourses.

2.1. Displacement, Development and the Peasantry

A vast array of criticisms of the acquisition of agricultural land has emerged, in recent times, both from academic circles as well as Non-Governmental Organisation-led movements and campaigns. K B Saxena, a commentator well known for his engagement with civil society groups and social activism, in an article in 2008, points out that development-induced development is one of the principal problems confronting the peasantry (Saxena, 2008). He suggests that while, on the one hand, the peasantry is being squeezed by agrarian distress, with cultivation becoming increasingly unviable, on the other, land is being forcibly taken away from the peasants. As a result, those involved in agriculture were coming under pressure from both directions. His article, however, deals with the latter aspect of the matter.

Saxena's principal argument is that a fundamental aspect of the development trajectory pursued by India, post-independence, has been large-scale industrialisation and infrastructure-building, which has resulted in the widespread displacement of people from their land and other productive assets. A large number of those who drew their sustenance from land, both agricultural and forest land, lost ownership/control over, or access to land as a result of these large scale projects. This developmental strategy, which Saxena understands to be dominated by the theme of 'modernisation', thus, has had very skewed and unequal implications for different sections of the people. While, according to him, it has benefitted a narrow section of what he characterises as the 'elite', the bulk of the people have been subjected to a process of immiserisation. According to Saxena, the developmental process has had particularly damaging consequences for dalits and tribals. He characterises the fundamental features of this kind of development, and the conceptual paradigm within which it unfolds, in the following manner:

Development is perceived by its protagonists in terms of modernisation, improved standard of living and industrial progress. The route to achieve it lies in the growth of GNP which would generate wealth, raise incomes, and create incentives for investment. This economic growth relies heavily on capital investment and advanced technology to harness existing natural and human resources. The large infrastructure and manufacturing projects emerge as its manifestations. These projects cannot be executed without land which is usually provided to the executing agencies through compulsory acquisition by the government. The displacement of people subsisting on such land has, therefore, been considered as inevitable and unavoidable. This displacement, in the long run, is also considered beneficial for the displaced persons because the existing subsistence agriculture cannot absorb the huge manpower dependent on it. The industrial development would provide alternative and more productive employment opportunities and generate increased income distribution effects. Conservation is another facet of this paradigm of development.

Saxena posits that the pattern of development has its origins in the colonial period. Colonial rule, in his account, had a major impact on the agrarian structure of the country, and landlessness emerged in a substantial way. Alienation of land became a widespread feature. At the same time, 'development', as characterised earlier, was introduced in the colonial period. Two substantial changes, in the framework governing the ownership, control and use

of land, were introduced. Firstly, land which was collectively used by communities, particularly tribal communities living in forested areas, to which no individual titles existed, were transferred to the state. This was effected through the introduction of the principle of 'eminent domain' which entailed the ultimate ownership of all property by the state. Secondly, a legal framework for the acquisition of privately owned land was introduced. This framework, Saxena suggests, did not take into account claims and entitlements to land which were traditional or customary in character, unaccompanied by legal titles. Thus, a legal structure governing land arose in which the state, in Saxena's view, was put in a position of unprecedented power vis-a-vis the people and traditional communities.

Further, he points out that the state, post-independence, as far as this relationship between the state and the people is concerned, is not fundamentally different. The paradigm of 'modernisation' and 'development, Saxena claims, has emerged even more strongly in the period after independence. Further, the legal ensemble framing the question of ownership of land has not undergone any substantial transformation. The laws which governed the acquisition, transfer and ownership of land in the colonial regime continue to be employed without significant alteration even post-independence.

His understanding of the implications of the liberalisation process on questions of land acquisition is quite specific. Saxena suggests that prior to liberalisation, the scale and frequency of development projects was smaller, on account of the limited capacity of the state to invest. Further, since these projects were projects in the public sector, those displaced still had some kind of a limited acceptance of such acquisition. However, he argues that since 1984, private firms began to be included within the realm of the provision for acquisition, in the Land Acquisition Act, on the grounds of 'public purpose'. As a result, the scale of acquisitions has risen substantially. Further, acquisition by private enterprises has resulted in the emergence of stronger and more widespread resistance to such a development strategy. This, Saxena argues, incidentally, is in stark contrast with the reaction to agrarian distress which, according to him, has been more passive, often taking the form of suicide by the peasants. In his view, the reason for this is that while in the case of acquisition of land the peasant's entire means of sustenance is taken away, in the case of agrarian distress and infeasibility of cultivation this is not so.

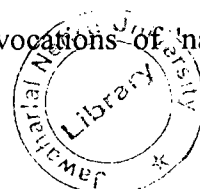
Kothari, similarly identifying the fundamental problem in the pattern of development

followed, makes the argument that an adequate system of resettlement and rehabilitation can be instituted only if certain larger structural socio-political parameters are challenged (Kothari, 1996). Though he does not delineate, very clearly, what those structural features are, his article provides certain clues as to what he means by them. Kothari locates the essential problem of displacement in the idea of planned development itself. Planned development according to Kothari is a symptom of excessive power vesting in the state, and an accompanying disenfranchisement of the people. It is this excessive power that leads the state to attach the importance that it does to large, capital-intensive projects - large dams, irrigation projects, thermal power plants, mines, large factories, urban projects etc. Further, he argues that the power exercised by the state leads to differential implications for different sections of the people. While, on the one hand, the elites get a disproportionately large share of the benefits of these projects, the weak and the vulnerable, on the other, bear a disproportionately large share of the costs of that development. He writes:

Despite constitutional mandates and an emphasis on favouring the underprivileged, in an overwhelming number of cases, both national and regional (and increasingly global) interests - the primary beneficiaries of the developmental process - transgress from or violate the interests of politically and economically weaker groups and individuals. In decisions on who should be displaced and what should be the treatment meted out to them, the more powerful interests have continued to prevail, especially when they have encountered poor and politically weak populations. This question is therefore essentially linked to democratising the planning process itself and integrally involving the historically underprivileged and disempowered in decisions that so crucially affect their lives, livelihoods and lifestyles. (Kothari, *ibid*: 1476).

The solution which he identifies, therefore, is greater democratisation of the planning process. He proposes that in all parts of the process - conception, implementation and post-implementation - those affected by the project have to be brought into a process of effective democratic decision-making, and this requires the institution of several democratic mechanisms and processes. The solution which Kothari poses, thus, is fundamentally political in character.

Further, this kind of development is accompanied by discursive invocations of national



interest', 'progress' and 'public good'. The interests of the people who are displaced - their right to a life of dignity, right to a minimum level of economic well-being etc. - are subordinated to these larger and more ambiguous objectives. Thus, under a veil of overarching and universal interest, interests of specific sections of the population, structurally placed in a position of socio-political and economic advantage, are furthered.

Kothari suggests that the inegalitarian character of this mode of development is evidenced in the manner in which resettlement and rehabilitation as a task is approached by the authorities in development projects. Firstly, the necessity of resettlement is hardly given any importance. This is reflected in the fact that in most projects since independence, the major bulk of the people displaced have not received any kind of resettlement and rehabilitation assistance. Secondly, the paradigm of 'cost-benefit analysis' which is employed to determine the feasibility of a particular project completely ignores the multiplicity of interests that those who are displaced have. The extent of the economic loss that the project entails for them, the sundering of their social fabric, the severing of their communal ties, the socio-cultural estrangement involved in settling in another place, the scattering of families etc. is hardly acknowledged. A number of these losses are simply not quantifiable. And even those that are, are thoroughly underestimated. For instance, the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 has provision for cash compensation to only those who have documented ownership or possession of land. There are, however, a multitude of other kinds of dependence on land which are unsupported by title/tenancy deeds, which the official legal framework of resettlement and compensation completely ignores. These range, according to Kothari, from tribal communal rights over forested lands, to the dependence of landless agricultural workers on land that they do not own or legally possess. Further, even tenancy relations in India, to this day, are characterised by a large degree of informality and extra-legality. Women peasants, again, seldom have any formal rights over the land they work on and cultivate. The interests of these myriad sections are not taken into account while determining the scope of compensation. Finally, even in those cases where compensation is given, or the individual/group dispossessed is resettled on land elsewhere, glaring inadequacies exist. Often, the resettlement occurs on land which is substantially inferior in quality to the land which has been lost. The resettlement, frequently, takes place on land which is located in a completely different cultural-linguistic milieu, which poses a very stiff and traumatic challenge of adjustment to the resettled population. Matters are compounded, often, by hostility from the host community. The most tragic dimension of such resettlement, however, is the possibility of displacement from even the

area of resettlement. This, in Kothari's account, has occurred in the case of a number of projects.

Kothari's principal claim, of course, is that those who depend on land - agricultural or forested - for their survival find themselves in a very finely balanced ecological relationship. The intrusion of development projects on their lives completely unsettles this equilibrium. And once unsettled, it is very difficult - on account of a host of reasons - for the displaced people to regain it. Thus, the problem of development-induced displaced, can, in very fundamental terms, be understood as an ecological problem. Kothari claims that one of the primary problems of the discourse of development is that it severs the economic question, in a manner of speaking, from the ecological question. And it is this severance that permits projects, which are patently infeasible in terms of their social and environmental costs, to be carried out.

It must be pointed out here that despite his insistence on understanding the condition of the peasant in his or her socio-cultural and ecological totality, at no point does he attempt to factor into his understanding any kind of differentiation within the people who depend on land for their livelihood. Despite pointing out that women, dalits and tribals are particularly vulnerable as far as shouldering the cost of development is concerned, at no point does he indicate which sections of the agrarian or tribal population it is that have been mounting resistance against displacement. This lack of identification exists despite a recurrent reference to the rising discontentment with development projects and the displacement that they lead to. The peasantry is fundamentally understood in an undifferentiated manner. Such an understanding poses problems as far as comprehending the consequences of large-scale development projects are concerned

Further, the claim that there is an unproblematically identifiable 'communal' solidarity which is 'ruptured' by the advent of development is an eminently contestable one. It would seem that the strong emphasis on such solidarity ignores the varied kinds of inequality marking agrarian life. Such inequities, of course, are varied in character, ranging from glaring inequality in land ownership to extremely oppressive caste hierarchies. An understanding of these inequalities and stratifications would seem indispensable in any discussion of rural or agrarian lives and livelihoods. Despite the intensity of Kothari's insistence on being attentive to the complex and concrete realities that the displaced find themselves in, such an

understanding of inequalities seems to be analytically absent in Kothari's article.

Oommen posits that the pattern of development followed in the developed countries, and attempted in India, has resulted in what he refers to as development pathologies (Oommen, 2006). These pathologies are the following – displacement, disparity, discrimination and distress. He argues that while the first of these – displacement – has received a fair amount of academic attention, the last three have been objects of what he characterises as ‘cognitive blackouts’. Disparity, in Oommen’s account, refers to the systemic inequalities that are generated and sustained by the current pattern of development – inequalities between the rich and the poor countries, on the one hand, and between the rich and the poor within these countries. Discrimination refers to the manner in which pre-existent forms of stratification and inequity, like caste oppression, for instance, have been intensified by the dominant model of development. And, lastly, distress entails the increasing frequency of deviance which can be understood as a consequence of this development pattern – the rising incidence of ‘suicides, rapes, murders, drug addiction etc.’ The existence of these multiple kinds of development pathologies suggests, according to Oommen, that the very notion of development must be interrogated.

Further, he argues, that even in the case of displacement, there are serious gaps in scholarship. He believes that there is a significant gap between the literature on social movements i.e. movements against displacement, on the one hand, and the literature on resettlement and rehabilitation, on the other. This distance, he contends, will have to be bridged. He writes:

..let me suggest that we have a sociology *of* resistance movement and a sociology *for* the resettlement of displaces. Although scarce beginnings have been made towards a sociology *for* resistance movement and a sociology *of* displacement policy, we need to move forward fast in both cases. While social movement researchers dismiss the researches on social policy as raw empiricism uninformed of theoretical frameworks, the social policy researchers accuse social movement researchers as indulging in abstract research not grounded in empirical reality. This persisting puerile controversy has harmed both sound theory construction and relevant empirical research because these are utterly complementary. I believe, nothing is more practical than a good theory.

Thus, in effect, he argues that there has been neglect, as far as the literature on social movements is concerned, in placing such movements within larger social and political-economic contexts. A manifestation of this is that most of the literature of on social movements are post-event studies i.e., studies of movements after they have ended. There are very few sociological studies which are carried out while a movement is on, or when displacement is proposed. As a result, hardly ever does a movement get adequately contextualized in the broader political processes and economic paradigms that shape the course that these movements take.

Further, sociological work on the policy of resettlement and rehabilitation, too, suffers from a similar lack of contextualization. Concrete contextualization will enable the establishment of analytical connections between the model of development that is being followed and the nature and extent of displacement. According to Oommen, this requires the development of a sociology *of* displacement, the parameters of which have to be far broader than the confines of the current kind of sociology of social movements. Such scholarship would look into the deeper political-economic underpinnings of the process of displacement, and the manner in which this connects with the paradigm of development. There would also have to be a firm focus, according to Oommen, on the socio-economic needs of different sections of the people. An accurate understanding of such needs would be instrumental in developing a comprehensive account of the processes of development.

The development of such scholarship, in Oommen's view, would be vital if movements against displacement are to make a transition from the micro level to the macro level. According to Oommen, movements against displacement, like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, have three levels – the micro, the meso and the macro. At the micro level, these movements are concerned with issues of resettlement and rehabilitation like the quantum of compensation for instance. At the second (meso) level, the movements are concerned with the question of displacement – whether the displacement is inevitable, the extent of displacement which is inevitable, the extent and quality of the land being acquired etc. Finally, at the macro level, movements like the NBA are concerned with the larger question of the desirability of the development pattern that has been adopted in post-colonial India. The strategy of capital-intensive, high-investment industrialization, Oommen maintains, is interrogated at this level. The transition from the micro to the macro level is imperative if the social movements are to

take on a powerful political character. It is only this transition that can enable these movements to realise their radical potential in its entirety. And the emergence of a sociology *for* social movements will contribute to the possibility of such a transition.

In another of his works, Oommen takes up the question of the model of development in greater detail (Oommen, 1992). The issue he addresses squarely here is that of technology. He argues that one cannot talk about whether technology is harmful or beneficial in the abstract, without reference to the kind of context it is placed in. Though he refers sympathetically to the Schumacherean idea of 'small is beautiful', he points out that the merits and demerits of modern and traditional technology can only be determined in terms of the extent to which it is compatible with the concrete setting in question. Extending the concept of 'appropriate' technology, he contends that the aptness of any kind of technology cannot be determined without understanding the paradigm which is governing its usage.

However, it does not become clear from his analysis what he implies by contextual location. It is not apparent, for instance, whether such a context would include the socio-economic relations within which a particular kind of technology is located. This ambiguity is brought to the fore by the centrality and specificity of his usage of the concepts of 'developed countries' and 'developing countries'. His exclusive characterisation of countries as more or less developed, in a discussion of the contextual appropriateness of technology, would suggest that he does not regard socio-economic relations as a very significant constituent of the context that he finds relevant. His analysis, otherwise, would have to reckon with phenomena of capitalism and imperialism as important contextual parameters within which questions of appropriate technology and the use of technology assume meaning. Thus, his claim that high technology, very often, fails to be useful for most of society, may be explained partly by the fact that the development and employment of that technology has largely unfolded within a capitalist order. Further, the course which development of technology takes in the developing countries is influenced, to varying degrees, depending upon the context, by the amount and nature of control which advanced capitalist countries, through political or economic means, are able to exert on them. For instance, during the colonial period, while certain specific kinds of technology were introduced in India, the overall development of improved technology and its diffusion suffered on account of several factors, one of the principal ones being the imposed openness of the Indian markets.

Such an omission, of categories like capitalism and imperialism, would imply a failure to meet the standard of contextual evaluation of technology which he prescribes himself. A further instance of such a partial understanding of context is to be found in his assertion that technology has largely been a product of the requirements of war production. He cites the instance of the massive budgetary allocation which research and development in military technology typically receives in the twentieth century. Such a view again suffers from the problem of a lack of adequate contextualisation. Firstly, war or military engagement itself does not occur in any abstract, decontextualised space. There are concrete motivations and thrusts which result in the pursuit of military strategies, and these again can be explained in terms of the nature of the socio-politico-economic relations obtaining between countries and within them. Secondly, the fact the production processes - processes for the production of the means of sustenance - themselves have been a key source of technological innovation is something that is almost axiomatic. Thus, posing technology as exclusively a product of war falls short of Oommen's own requirement of concrete contextualisation.

Such a non-contextualised view of technology, and industrial development, is also what characterises his understanding of the pathologies of development. An understanding of the four key pathologies which he identifies - disparity, discrimination, distress and displacement - would be enormously deficient in the absence of contextualisation within specific socio-economic parameters. Thus, when he discusses the current 'model of development', his analysis proceeds with minimal reference to the process of liberalisation, the class-divided nature of the society in which the model of the 'mixed path' was adopted after independence, the failure of land reforms in India which contributed to the preservation, if not strengthening, of inequalities in rural India etc. Ironically, understanding the nature of the pathologies, as he himself sees them, requires a thoroughgoing examination of the context. For instance, 'disparity' as a category would require an understanding of the kind of ownership pattern that informs the use of technology and capital. This would not be possible without a thoroughgoing class analysis of the society one is talking about. If that is the case, the absence of even a single mention of the category of capitalism while pointing out the growing disparity between the advanced capitalist countries and the developed countries is extremely problematic. The question of disparity, by its very nature, cannot be addressed without addressing the question of class.

Similarly, the question of development-induced displacement cannot be understood without

taking into account the socio-economic framework within which such development is taking place. For instance, particularly in the context of neo-liberalism, the character of the ownership of a development project – whether it is publicly or privately owned – is surely a significant factor in evaluating the project. The terms and conditions, and magnitude, of employment generated in a publicly owned project, tend to be quite different from, particularly since liberalisation, employment generated in projects involving purely privately owned capital. Further, the character of agrarian relations at the proposed site of the development project should again be a significant factor in the process of evaluation. The loss of land owned by large capitalist farmers is qualitatively a different thing from the acquisition of land from small and marginal farmers. Furthermore, the very vulnerability of livelihoods, particularly amongst marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, in the agrarian sector, is itself a part of the complex contextual setting within which processes of development are initiated. An understanding of displacement, therefore, has to be informed by an understanding of the larger socio-economic setting, one that is marked by features like overemployment, low productivity etc., particularly in the context of third world countries like India, where the agrarian sector is characterised by its large relative size, high levels of inequality, and restricted development of productivity.

There are other ways in which this fundamental lack of contextualisation manifests itself. Basu, for instance, examines the recent increase in the frequency of the acquisition of agricultural land, and attempts to provide an explanation for the same (Basu, 2007). He believes that this trend has to do with a new phase of the expansion of capitalism led by global capital. He suggests that since the 1970s capitalism in the developed countries has attempted to decrease labour cost through mechanisation. While this resulted in a decreased requirement of labour, it increased the demand for technical personnel. The latter part of the labour force had to be given substantial remuneration on account of the limited supply of such labour. The higher labour costs that this entailed compelled enterprises to look for other sources of extraction of surplus, apart from their regular profits. This drive to extract an increasing amount of surplus through channels other than profit is what is responsible for the acquisition and exploitation of land, water, minerals and other natural resources in the developing countries. Thus, the frequent spate in agricultural land, according to Basu, can be attributed to the intensified search of global capital for expanded surplus extraction.

Here, Basu introduces the concept of rent. He suggests that in the theoretical scheme of

Marxian political economy, rent refers to the surplus that is extracted on the basis of ownership of property which is immobile. For instance, he points out that the classical instance of rent - land rent - proceeds from the fact of the mere ownership of land. He then extends this conception of rent to include income from ownership of other kinds of assets, the mobility of which is restricted in an artificial manner. The additional profits made on the strength of owning intellectual property rights, extra profits made on account of the availability of cheap labour which remains cheap because of its spatial immobility etc. are characterised by Basu as rent. Thus, he goes on to claim that rent forms a structural part of overall surplus accumulation in contemporary capitalism. The unfolding of global capitalism depends on this kind of rent income.

The article then turns to the concept of primitive capital accumulation. According to Basu, primitive capital accumulation refers to the process of acquisition of rights over immovable property which, subsequently, becomes the basis of rent extraction. Thus, in Basu's account, primitive accumulation is a constant feature of capitalist accumulation, and particularly of global capitalist accumulation. He goes on to characterise the acquisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes as instances of primitive capital accumulation. He likens the situation of land acquisition existent in India today to the enclosure movement in 16th century England, wherein peasants were evicted from their land, and the land was subsequently given out to agricultural and industrial capitalist. The evicted peasants, thus, constituted an army of the propertyless who would subsequently become the modern working class in England. In Basu's view the acquisition of land from peasants for setting up SEZs is structurally similar to the enclosure movements, since both involved the expropriation of the producer from his means of production - principally land in both the cases. In both the cases, according to Basu, capital forcibly acquires rights to property which is immovable and thus can be the basis for the extraction of rent.

He points out that in the Marxian scheme, primitive capital accumulation is something that precedes capitalism. He recognises, thus, that his understanding of primitive accumulation as a constant feature of capitalism marks a departure from the Marxian scheme. However, he contends that the history of capitalism, particularly world capitalism in the recent years, has been marked by the most brutal kind of rent extraction which cannot be characterised as purely the appropriation of profits. Hence, the divergence from established marxist theory is justified.

He further goes on to argue that the recent instances of land acquisition in India, particularly in Nandigram and Singur (its a 2007 article), represent an intrusion of the *culture* of global capital on an ethical community which has not been commoditised. Thus, apart from being a phenomenon which is economic in nature, land acquisition is also a cultural assault. The resistance by peasants in the case of Nandigram and Singur, he contends, was principally against this capital-led disruption of their moral community - the incursion of what he refers to as 'commodity' culture into a completely different '*ethical*' system based on solidarity. This ethical system, according to Basu, represents an equilibrium between the community and nature, and acquisition marked a fundamental disruption of that life-world. Basu suggests that the assault of capital on the moral economy of the peasant represents a clash between the global and the local. The fundamental reason for this seems to be that capitalist development (with industrial development as its necessary component) is universal in character, whereas nature (embodied in agricultural land) is necessarily particular. Thus, acquisition represents an overwhelming of the particular by the universal - of the local by the global. Thus, in Basu's view, the appropriate way of resisting global capitalism is by upholding the local - i.e., by campaigning for the preservation of the specificity of the local in the face of the assault of global capital.

Basu's analysis, again, raises several questions. The most obvious issue is Basu's employment of the concepts of rent and primitive capital accumulation. If the concept of rent is large enough to accommodate things ranging from the income accruing from ownership of land to additional profits stemming from the availability of cheap labour, one wonders whether the concept is left with any utility at all. Capitalist surplus appropriation, if Basu's thesis about rent is taken to its logical conclusion, will become indistinguishable from other kinds of surplus appropriation. Even in a capitalist system, for instance, the property regime has to be preserved by law. Would this, one is led to wonder, not qualify as a restriction of mobility? If it can, then would not the concept of profit become indistinguishable from other forms of surplus? What would then be specific to capitalist social relations?

Further, the notion of extraction of rent constituting primitive capital accumulation is also problematic. To be sure, the acquisition of agricultural land inevitably entails the dispossession of peasants from their means of sustenance. But would this be enough to characterise such acquisition as primitive accumulation? For primitive accumulation to be

'primitive' must it not be seen as a process whereby the *conditions* for capitalist accumulation proper are *created*. In a political-economic situation like that in India, where capitalist relations can be said to have developed to a substantial extent, would it not be incorrect to say that land acquisition today creates the conditions for the development of capitalism? Capitalist expansion proper can be seen to be marked by the possibility wherein capital accumulation both entails the creation of new property regimes, and the acquisition of new property - in the form of land, mineral, water resources etc. Thus, is the invocation of the concept of primitive accumulation and the assertion that it constitutes a structural feature of capitalism really necessary?

Another striking problem with Basu's analysis is that he completely ignores the presence of differentiation within the peasantry. It is this omission which enables him to talk about the 'peasant' being the bearer of a 'moral economy'. There has been a significant development of capitalist relations in Indian agriculture, a fact which Basu misses completely. Further, his claim that the peasant inhabits a world that is non-commoditised is quite unfounded. It is quite widely established that in most parts of the country, and in West Bengal at the very least, the market has penetrated deep into the agrarian scene. An increasingly large part of the produce, across a number of agrarian classes, is sold in the market, and the peasantry is also majorly dependent on the market for the purchase of inputs and articles of personal consumption. Thus, the projected dichotomy between an industrial sector (and corollarily, an urban sector) that is characterised by market relations and the circulation of commodities, on the one hand, and an agrarian sector marked by an absence of such relations, on the other, is quite completely untenable.

The invocation of the 'moral economy' of the peasantry is quite widespread in the literature on land acquisition. Following Basu (2007), Dia Da Costa claims that acquisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes, particularly in the case of Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal, represents a dispossession of 'meaning' (Da Costa, 2007). She contends that the acquisition of land in West Bengal has been a disruption of the world view of the peasantry – the universe of signs, symbols and values that govern peasant life. The model of development within which such acquisition is taking place is that of 'accumulation by dispossession', a concept that has been developed by David Harvey. Accumulation by dispossession, as postulated by Harvey, is a process wherein transnational capital moves across territories in search of opportunities of accumulation. The principal mechanism of this

accumulation is the dispossession of petty producers of their means of subsistence – through the acquisition of land, mineral resources etc. Harvey presents this kind of accumulation as an analogue of the Marxian notion of primitive accumulation, which he believes is a structural and integral part of capitalist accumulation even after the latter has reached a mature state of development. Harvey distinguishes accumulation by dispossession from ‘expanded reproduction’ which refers to accumulation on the basis of extraction of surplus value from the purchase and use of the labour power of the worker. Harvey claims that in the period of neo-liberalism originating in the late 1970s, the bulk of the accumulation of surplus in the globalised capitalist system takes the form of accumulation by dispossession rather than expanded reproduction.

Da Costa adopts this framework of accumulation by dispossession and claims that the current pattern of industrialization being followed in India is an instance of a developmental strategy geared to such accumulation. The kind of conversion of agricultural land into industrial land cannot be understood as expanded reproduction since the process of dispossession of petty production serves as the bulwark of this kind of accumulation. Da Costa, further, argues for an expansion of the notion of such accumulation by incorporating the dispossession of ‘meanings’. She suggests that the peasantry, particularly the peasantry of West Bengal had a common corpus of shared meanings and values. Though she does not specify what these shared values are, at several points she highlights the fact that the bulk of peasantry are contented with agriculture and do not desire a shift to participation in industrial production. The acquisition of land for industrialization, therefore, represents an assault on the common corpus of values and an attempt to squash those meanings which the people engaged in agriculture attach to their lives. This, Da Costa sees as integral to the process of accumulation by dispossession.

There is in Da Costa’s analysis no indication whatsoever of even the possibility that there may be different classes that are involved in agricultural production. A logical consequence of this is that she can unproblematically refer to a certain peasant ethos. Further, the manner in which small and medium peasants have been squeezed, in terms of the declining feasibility of petty production, in the neo-liberal regime, is completely absent from her analysis. This leads her to a conceptualization of globalisation and its impact upon agrarian life, which misses out on certain critical aspects of the question.

There is also a certain essentialisation of the 'peasant' and the peasantry. The peasant is not seen as a historically constituted subject, but rather as a bearer of certain unchanging values and meanings. For instance, in her analysis of the moral universe of the peasant in West Bengal, the manner in which the process of land reforms has contributed to the shaping of that universe is not addressed at all. There is, therefore, in Da Costa analysis an inattentiveness to both differentiation and historicity.

2.2 Differentiation and The Differential Impact of Displacement

Though sparse, academic contributions have also been made about how the fact of class differentiation compounds the issue of acquisition and displacement. This strand in the literature stresses that agrarian relations – relations between the different agrarian classes, – is a vital factor in the manner in which the dynamics of displacement operates. Balagopal suggests that while acquisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes was resulting in deprivation for a large number of people dependent on land, some of the central hinges of the discussion of the question of land acquisition were misplaced. He points that often the argument against land acquisition was that fertile lands were being acquired where 'wastelands' or less fertile stretches could have been taken. He contends that this is an untenable argument. There are, he argues, hardly any 'wastelands' in the Indian countryside. Almost all of the land has been put to some kind of use. The bulk of the land recognised in the records as 'wasteland' was, in practice, being used by that section of the rural population which possessed very little or no land. Such land was of vital importance to their subsistence. The question of distress caused by acquisition, therefore, was not, principally, a question of whether the land was fertile or not. He points out that it, in fact, can be argued that acquisition of fertile land can probably be more feasible as the higher compensation amount can enable those displaced to make use of alternative employment. Those making use of what is officially recorded as "wasteland", since they do not have any title to the land will not get any compensation, and can, therefore, be said to be far worse off than the displaced owners of fertile lands. Hence, the argument that fertile land should not be acquired, and less fertile land or 'wasteland' should, does not hold any water.

Such wastelands, he goes on to argue, are often put to extremely systematic use. Citing fishing as an instance, he suggests that to say, therefore, that since coastal land where this

activity is carried out is not registered as cultivated land, its acquisition does not affect anyone's interests and can be unproblematically carried out, is completely untenable. Further, he points out that one of the clauses of the central rules under the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Act (Rule 5(2)) requires that land granted for the purpose of establishing an SEZ must be contiguous. Thus, it is absolutely impossible, even if one were to assume that some amount of completely unused land existed, to acquire only such unused land.

The characterisation of acquired land as 'wasteland' was often a smokescreen employed by state agencies carrying out such acquisition to conceal the extent of dispossession and displacement that it entailed. The inhabitants or users of these lands were typically those belonging to the most vulnerable sections of the agrarian population. Citing the instance of Orissa, he points out that despite the existence of laws such as the Orissa Prevention of Land Encroachment Act, 1972, and Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights), Act, 2006, these legislations, in most cases, have been unable to secure legal ownership rights to these lands. Thus, as has been exemplified in several instances, particularly in SEZ projects like that of POSCO in Orissa, they have been dispossessed without any compensation or resettlement whatsoever.

Balagopal goes on to take issue with the identification of the principle of eminent domain as the principal problem of the legal framework underpinning land acquisition. He suggests that the Land Acquisition Act does not have much to do with this principle. The principle was imported by the judiciary from English law to justistically preserve the possibility of land reforms. Land acquisition, conventionally, did not rely on this principle. He holds, however, that since the principle is class neutral, it could very well be used against the poor and the vulnerable. Thus, it is much better to rely on legal and juridical principles which do not have this neutrality - which have the explicit intent of safeguarding the interests of the poor. He adduces the directive principles of state policy in the Indian constitution as an example and points out that these principles could very well have formed the juridical basis of the intended land reforms rather than the principle of eminent domain.

Finally, he argues that solutions have to be sought in the realm of guaranteeing adequate resettlement and rehabilitation. He suggests that the legal possibility of the acquisition of land cannot be done away with. In particular, he identifies a problem with the argument that acquisition must always be contingent on the consent of the Gram Sabha. He argues that this

is not possible in a situation where an enormous amount of stratification and differentiation obtains within villages. He contends that such inequalities, and their reflection in the political character of the local representative bodies, will make these bodies oppose even those kinds of acquisition which stand to benefit those belonging to the lower social and economic strata in the villages. Acquisition, thus, cannot be made conditional on the consent of such bodies.

Sharan, in different contributions at different points in time, holds that the dispossession of the lands of tribals in Jharkhand is a process which has been occurring for a long time. However, the process has received a boost in the period post-independence on account of acquisition of land for 'public purpose' (Sharan, 2005). He maintains that the process of alienation of tribal lands in this region began with the Mughals, the regime of Akbar to be particular, when, a vast amount of land was brought directly under the control of the Raja of Chhotanagpur who would extract heavy rents in cash and in kind from the tribal chiefs (Sharan, 1999). It was also at this juncture that the transfer of privately held land was begun to be permitted. In the colonial period, this extraction went through an intensification. The Permanent Settlement gave rise to an elaborate system of sub-infeudation premised on the extraction of extremely steep and fixed rents. A large number of traders and merchants, primarily non-tribals, acquired ownership and possession over land cultivated by the tribal population. In this period, the transformed agrarian situation found expression in the enactment of several legislations like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908. While these acts were passed with the professed intent of the containment of the alienation of tribal land, and the restoration of illegally alienated land, often, on account of loopholes, they ended up strengthening the hands of the landlords and other exploiters of the tribal population. What must be borne in mind here, is that the bulk of these legislations were attempts at reconciliation following fierce agitations carried out by sections of tribals. The Birsa, Kol and Santhal rebellions are exemplary instances of the latter.

The inefficacy of legislative measures in curbing the alienation of tribal land in Jharkhand continues even post-independence. The Scheduled Area Regulation Act of 1969, for instance, provides for the restoration of illegally alienated tribal land. Significantly, it mandates the establishment of special courts for focused and expeditious adjudication of claims for restoration. However, on account of the socio-political clout of those sections that have illegitimately acquired land, the implementation of the provisions of the Act have been extremely poor. Sharan writes:

According to government records, up to 2001-02, 60,646 cases for restoration involving 85,777.22 acres of land were filed out of which 34,608 cases were upheld involving 46,797.36 acres of land and the rest were rejected. The possession of land could be given only in 21,445 cases involving 29,829.7 acres of land. The SAR court for the restoration of tribal land has been functioning in a most unsatisfactory manner resulting in the continued alienation of land. The courts have become centres of corruption and function mainly to legalise earlier illegally alienated land through collusive restoration suits.

The fundamental problem post-independence, according to Sharan, and as has been indicated earlier is the acquisition of land for 'public purpose'. This, according to him, results in the alienation of land for different kinds of reasons. Firstly, the acquisition of land for the industrial complexes, mining complexes etc. results in tribals losing land. Further, however, such investment in the forested areas, results in a substantial migration to these areas, which, in turn, puts pressure on the land. Again, alienation of tribal land results. These two processes taken together constitute the largest source of the dispossession of tribal land. Further, schemes for rehabilitation and resettlement tend to be extremely poor, and in most cases, particularly in Jharkhand, are not implemented. Sharan points out that in Jharkhand around half of the land acquired for 'public purpose' has been tribal land. And, only about twenty five percent of the displaced adivasis have been rehabilitated. The gravity of the scenario, however, according to Sharan, is relieved by two positive possibilities. Firstly, Sharan indicates that on account of agitations undertaken by adivasis and other sections of the rural poor, in the recent period the alienation of tribal land, while still significant, has reduced substantially in Jharkhand. Secondly, under the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, Gram Sabhas have been vested with significant authority over land in the village. Through the Gram Sabha, therefore, the Act requires the consent of the community for undertaking the acquisition of land even for 'public purpose'. This would, in Sharan's view, be a significant constraint on the processes of tribal land alienation.

There is, however, another significant dimension of the problem to which Sharan draws our attention. He points out that since independence, intra-tribal land alienation has also been an important feature. Thus, an increasingly sizeable proportion of the land being alienated by the adivasis is accruing to other adivasis. Further, a substantial elite within the tribal groups have

emerged, a section of which has displayed an increasing propensity for non-agricultural self-employment. This section, therefore, is voluntarily and consciously alienating land, and is seeking relaxation in the legal norms and requirements governing such alienation. An expression of this is to be found in the proposal of the former Chief Minister of Jharkhand Babulal Marandi's proposal that adivasis should be permitted to sell their land so as to be able to take advantage of the market prices.

In another article (Chaudhary, 1999), Sharan and others point out that while most of the adivasis have land, land concentration is still quite high amongst them.

Land is concentrated in a few hands, while 57.4% of the tribals own only 12.7% of the land, 3.8% of the large land holding tribals (owning more than 10 acres of land) own 24% of the land. There is inter-tribe variation in this respect also. 71.2% of the Santals own 40.9% of land and 1.7% of them own 8.9% of land, 40.1% of Oraon own 16% of land while 4.7% of them own 20.7% of land 41.1% of Mundas own 10.5% of land and at the upper end 8.9% of them own 46% of land. 56.9% of Ho at the lower end own their product (other than forest product) to the consumer, cooperatives or trader. Most of them sell their product directly to the consumer. Only 7.1% of the tribals sell their product to traders. Mostly, Oraon, Munda and other tribes sell their product. 3.1% of the Oraon, 20.7% of Munda and 24.1 other tribes sell their product while only 12.6% of Santal and 15.1% of Ho sell their product. (*Ibid.*)

The existence of such differentiation, (across tribes, between tribes and within tribes) has given rise to substantial contestation with respect to the question of alienation of tribal land. This differentiation also raises certain questions about the kind of exploitation that exists, if it does, within the adivasi groups. The presence of such exploitation is rendered likely by the existence of such land concentration. It is typically, with the active involvement and cooperation, if not the leadership of the rural landed elite that exploitation and dispossession of the tribal poor is carried out. In Sharan's writings, however, we do not find a further elaboration of this dimension.

2.3 Environmental Degradation and Agrarian Livelihoods

As pointed out earlier, the discourse on development and dispossession has often been conjoined with an environmentalist criticism of the ecological ramifications of capital-intensive and energy-intensive development. Ecological degradation has often become a central motif in the opposition to the development paradigm being pursued since independence. This has been accompanied, in certain strands of such criticism, by an equation between the environment and the livelihoods and interests of the rural poor.

In a review mapping the trajectory of what she refers to as environmental sociology, Baviskar points out that the theorization of environmental issues is not something particularly new in Indian social thought (Baviskar, 1997 b). From Verrier Elwin to J.C. Kumarappa, the inextricability of social life and the environment had been quite powerfully articulated. Baviskar points out that the first theoretical formulation of this relationship was to be found, in India, in the works of Dr. Radhakamal Mukherjee. Mukherjee's concept of 'social ecology' entailed the notion of human life as deeply embedded in ecological processes. However, she argues that this understanding was fundamentally flawed because social processes and ecological processes belonged two different orders of reality. The concept of social ecology, therefore, involved a reduction of something fundamentally social to something fundamentally non-social. Thus, Baviskar prefers the concept of 'environmental sociology' which involves a conceptual insertion of the environment and the ecology into the social landscape rather than the other way around.

Baviskar points out that till the emergence of movements such as Chipko, development and the environment used to be seen in dichotomous terms. While on the one hand, there were those who would argue that the concerns of growth and development far outweighed the environmental concerns, on the other, there were the proponents of the view that the question of environmental preservation should have sweeping priority over issues of livelihood and development. She argues that movements like Chipko broke this deadlock, and facilitated the emergence of 'ecological marxists' who refused to see development and environment as dichotomously separated issues. She writes:

Ecological Marxists asserted that India's development policies had failed because they had not fundamentally changed the patterns of control over the means of production. The concentration of the means of production in the hands of the state bureaucracy, the industrial elite and the rich peasants had skewed technological choices, production decisions and income distribution. The interests and priorities of these dominant classes created a mindset which saw industrialization and urbanization as the only path to development. The impoverishment of the working class and the impoverishment of the environment were seen to be inter-related. Ecological crises grew out of the inequities of control over, not only industry and land, but also other productive resources such as water, forests and pastures. A model of development based on uncontrolled industrialization was bound to fail because it destroyed both the natural resource base on which material prosperity is founded, as well as sources of livelihood of the poor. Such a model only served the short-term interests of the rich (Baviskar, *ibid.*: 197).

She then goes on to identify 'sustainable development' as a model of development that can reconcile the objectives of environmental preservation and the needs and interests of the poor and the vulnerable. Here, however, one must pause. If the fundamental reason for the disproportion and imbalance in the dominant development strategy being pursued is the fact of the concentration of the means of production in the hands of a narrow social stratum, how can the solution or the alternative be posed as another 'model of development'? Surely, if the fundamental anomaly lies in the pattern of ownership of productive assets, an adequate response must surely be principally concerned with this pattern itself, and not with the 'model of development', which Baviskar claims herself is not the root of the problem. Further, it is not clear what she implies by 'uncontrolled' industrialization. Does she refer to the fact that industrialisation is occurring in a paradigm wherein there is no control over what is produced and how much? Or is she referring to the nature of industrialisation which requires a high capital investment and is technology-intensive? If the former implication is what she intends, then, to be sure, the suggested paradigm of 'sustainable development' is insufficient since it carries no specification as far as ownership is concerned. It is, in fact, concerned with the nature of the technology employed which is quite irrelevant to the understanding of whether industrialisation is controlled or uncontrolled. The anarchy, so to speak, of industrial production, within the current paradigm of development, is not a function of the nature of the technology being employed, but a question of the ownership patterns attending such

industrialisation. Ironically, recognition of this is posited by Baviskar as one of the principal components of the ecological Marxist's understanding of the relationship between the environment and development.

If she, however, is adopting the second notion of 'uncontrolled' and is arguing that high technology itself is uncontrollable, then, of course, she is violating the precepts of ecological Marxism, as she has laid down herself, in a much more straightforward manner. Such straightforwardness is also in evidence when she points out that environmental sociologists have often omitted to look at the 'macro framework of development' involving questions of industrialisation and urbanisation. This understanding of the macro-framework of development in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation, to the exclusion of issues such as the nature of the state since independence, and the kind of social groups which have exerted control over it, is, again, an instance of contextualizing technology and industrialisation within itself, without any external social referents.

She goes on to point out, however, that often environmental sociology suffers from a certain romanticisation of the past. This is accompanied by an evasion of the inequities which are present in the countryside. Such neglect of the inequalities of one kind results, in Baviskar's view, in an inability of sociological accounts of environmental movements to transcend the understanding which these movements have of themselves. She suggests that very often environmental sociologists have a neo-Chayanovian understanding of agrarian or non-urban life, wherein the whole of non-urban India is presumed to be peopled by independent petty proprietors who neither exploit nor are exploited by other agrarian classes. This blinds them to the pervasive exploitation that marks the countryside, and makes them adopt a simplistic understanding of the relationship between those surviving on lands and forests and the environment.

In another of her works, she claims that it is this oversimplified understanding that often drives a wedge between urban activists working with these environmental movements and the people that they are working with (Baviskar, 1997 a). Citing the example of a certain organization working with a tribal community living in a forested area in Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh, she points out that often there is a severe tension between the objectives of the activists and the tribal leaders. The tribal community, here, is engaged in cultivation, of land within the forest, and is at the same time dependent on forest produce. There has been a

raging conflict between the tribal community and the forest department which has steadfastly sought to make the forest land inaccessible to the tribals for cultivation. It is in this conflict that the organization has extended support to the tribal cultivators and has challenged the political clout of the forest department. It has even succeeded in ensuring unhampered cultivation in certain parts of the forest. There is, however, a key difference between how the activists of the organization look at the question of tribal livelihoods, and how the tribal leaders look at it. Thus, while the organization stresses, with persistent vehemence, the importance of preserving the forests apart from cultivating, the tribal leaders think that the primary interest of the tribal community lies in extending cultivation in the forest lands to the greatest extent possible. This is reflected in the fact that in certain parts where the organization has been particularly successful in challenging the forest department, the tribals have almost put the whole of the forested land under cultivation. This, the organisation's activists, see as a breach of their environmental objectives and resist strongly. The environmental activists' view of the concrete conditions under which the tribal community lives is thus at a sharp variance with how the tribals themselves consider the question of their livelihoods. Further, the tribal leaders also, on certain occasions, have held that only they can understand their interests, not activists from the cities. There is, relatedly, an increasingly prevalent perspective that the needs of the tribal groups will only be met when there is a strong tribal presence in the government. This is, in fact, quite ironic since the tribal identity of those living in the area has been mobilized very sharply by the organization in its political agitations against the forest department.

Baviskar regards this purely as a disjunct between a view that stresses environmental preservation and one that emphasizes livelihoods. Such an understanding, however, seems to be insufficient. A part of the problem would seem to lie in the non-recognition, by the environmentalists, that the livelihood opportunities of the tribal population were very meager *to begin with*. The sum-total of their precarious position, in other words, could not be attributed to the lack of access to forest lands. A significant part of the situation seems to be that the land cultivated by the tribal groups simply did not yield much. A strong problem of low productivity was, therefore, a part of the concrete situation that the tribal groups found themselves in. And if this were the case, then a range of vital amenities – from low-priced fertilizers to credit facilities – would have to be provided by the state. Thus, the characterization of the state as unqualifiedly an obstacle in the path of the tribals acquiring secure livelihoods can be seen to be mistaken. State-backed technological intervention must

be seen as a concrete requirement for even tribal groups cultivating land in forested areas. Thus, a blanket rejection of technology and the apparatus of the state, appears to fall short of the purported requirements of ecological Marxism, as posited by Baviskar herself.

Shiva and Bandyopadhyay, in an almost paradigmatic formulation of the tenets of environmental sociology, posit that the principal problem with the development paradigm being pursued in countries of the third world like India is that development is equated with economic growth (Bandyopadhyay, *et al.* 1998). They further argue that economic growth is identified with the expansion of the market. Thus, the rubric of development that has been adopted by most third world countries entails an identification between development and the expansion of markets. Shiva and Bandyopadhyay claim that the post World War II ideology of rapid economic growth has resulted in widespread economic devastation. In third world countries, wherein an overwhelming number of people are dependent on the environment and delicate ecological balances for their survival, this means a process of absolute and stark immiserisation.

They suggest that in the case of India, prior to colonial rule, the processes of production that were employed had a fundamental congruence with processes of environmental self-regeneration. In other words resource utilization was carried out in manner which was compatible with ecological resources renewing themselves. This was partly made possible by indigenous value systems that accorded enormous significance to the environment. There were local traditional institutional checks and balances which ensured that the exploitation of resources did not disrupt irreparably fundamental and vital ecological balances. Methods of cultivation, harnessing forest produce, artisanal production etc. were in essential harmony with environmental sustenance. They write:

A characteristic of Indian civilization has been its sensitivity to the natural ecosystems. Vital renewable natural resources like vegetation, soil, water etc. were managed and utilized according to well-defined social norms that respected the known ecological processes. The indigenous modes of natural resources utilization were sensitive to the limits to which these resources could be used. It is said that the codes to visiting important pilgrim centres, like Badrinath in sensitive Himalayan ecosystem, included a maximum stay of one night so that the temple area would not put excess pressure on the local natural resource base. In the pre-colonial indigenous

economic processes, the levels of utilization of natural resources were generally not significant enough to result in drastic environmental problems. There were useful social norms for environmentally safe resource utilization and people protested against destructive resource uses even against the kings (Bandyopadhyay *et al.*, *ibid.*: 1223).

The vital feature being identified here is a socially maintained normative tethering of the process of resource utilization to local needs. With the arrival of colonial rule, it was this critical tethering, according to Bandyopadhyay and Shiva, which got sundered. Resource utilization in India got tied to the resource requirements of industrial production in England. This was facilitated by the introduction of a normative/legal regime which wrested ownership of natural resources from local communities and passed it into the hands of the colonial state. A systematic assault was mounted on the existent communal forms of ownership and resource use. The new legal framework enabled the beginning of large-scale and indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources in India – including land, forests, water, minerals etc. Commercial agriculture and plantation farming were introduced to cater to the raw material requirements of the industrial countries in the west. The Indian market was opened up to the industrial output of the western countries, resulting in the decimation of small-scale artisanal production in India. Thus, according to Bandyopadhyay and Shiva, centuries-old subsistence-oriented systems of production were pushed to the margins under colonial rule.

They go on to argue that when India attained political independence, the orientation to the needs and requirements of industrial production in the Britain was replaced by the ideology of economic growth. The expansion of the market, and accumulation of capital, became the principal objectives of the process of development. Thus, the legal framework which facilitated the unbridled colonial exploitation of natural resources was retained. Within that framework, a policy of developing heavy, capital-intensive industries and large scale development projects was pursued. This continued to impoverish the livelihoods of people dependent on the ecological and environmental balances.

Interestingly, Bandyopadhyay and Shiva posit a theory of two India's – one constituted of urban-industrial enclaves in which heavy industries and other capital-intensive enterprises are located, and the other consisting of the mass of the Indian population reliant for their

livelihoods on delicate processes of environmental self-regeneration and whose condition is being rendered increasingly precarious by the model of resource-intensive development being pursued. While the first brings enormous wealth to what they refer to as the 'elite', the second sinks deeper and deeper into misery on account of the dispossession and erosion of ecological resources. They argue that both these sectors compete for the same resources since the resource base is finite and limited. And since the urban-industrial sector possesses much greater political strength, it manages to divert resources away from the second sector for its own use. Thus, post-independence India has witnessed a system of internal colonialism, wherein one sector has exploited another sector in a colonial fashion. Bandyopadhyay and Shiva further point out that since there is, typically, a spatial separation between the sector of industrial development and that sector where the resources are extracted, this process of extraction often remains an invisible one and does not draw much public attention. This creates a false notion that there can be an infinite expansion of modern industrial production without an irreversible destruction of ecological resources and a consequent absolute immiserisation of the overwhelming majority of the people. Bandyopadhyay and Shiva claim, thus, that the fact that the urban-industrial sector can expand only at the cost of the impoverishment of the non-industrial sector becomes concealed. The idea of development as economic growth, therefore, assumes salience in an unproblematic manner.

They suggest that there are three distinct economies that must be considered while examining the question of growth and development. Firstly, there is the economy of the market which is politically the dominant economy today. This economy is premised on the objective of market expansion through an uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources. Then there is the economy of natural processes. This consists of processes through which ecological regeneration occur. The third economy is the 'survival' economy which entails production processes which operate in a manner that both the regeneration of environmental balances and the survival of those dependent on these balances is ensured. Bandyopadyay and Shiva suggest that in the current mode of development these three economies share specific relationships with each other. The economy of the market, on account of its very character, has a devastating impact on the economy of survival and the economy of natural processes. The unfettered and intensive exploitation of resources that the economy of the market involves makes it difficult for ecological resources to regenerate themselves, resulting in massive and widespread environmental degradation. Consequently, those who are dependent on these ecological resources – land, forests, water etc. – for their survival, suffer a process of

dramatic immiserisation. Thus, while the economies of natural processes and survival are inextricably and deeply tied together, the economy of the market stands in devastating opposition to both of them. An environmentally and ecologically sensitive paradigm of development, and one that does not lead to the loss of livelihood for the majority of the population, therefore, needs to take into account the economies of natural processes and livelihoods.

According to Bandyopadhyay and Shiva, environmental movements, or what they refer to as 'ecology movements' attempt to do exactly that. By starkly highlighting the multiple implications that development projects of different kinds have on the environment and livelihoods, these movements have called into question the legitimacy of the development paradigm which is being pursued. They also maintain that most of these movements, while focusing on the question of livelihoods of those who have been affected by the development projects, have successfully extended their discourse and agitation to the level of the larger political critique.

There seem to be several problems with the analysis presented by Bandyopadhyay and Shiva. Firstly, the notion of the kind of environmental harmony that existed prior to colonial rule in India is rather questionable. While, it is true that levels of productivity tended to be quite low in pre-colonial times, they cite no historical evidence for the kind of ecological equilibrium that they claim was characteristic of pre-colonial India. In fact, Habib has pointed out that a large amount of ecological change, deforestation for instance, was carried out for reasons of greater production from very early on in Indian history (Habib, 1983). For instance, large tracts of the Indo-Gangetic plains, which today are marked by settled agriculture, were at one point densely forested. The clearing of these forests was a process that was initiated and completed to a great extent in the first millennium BC itself. Thus, the idyll of a perfect harmony with environmental processes prior to colonization seems to be quite untenable.

Another problem seems to be the analysis' complete indifference to the existence of inequalities prior to the arrival of colonial rule. Thus, the fact that even before the advent of colonial rule there were major and acute inequalities in the ownership of land is given a complete go-by. The Indian peasantry has for a very long time been subjected to all kinds of taxes, rents and levies from various classes of landlords, merchants, usurers, representatives of the state etc. Caste oppression, particularly of dalit agricultural workers, bonded labourers,

attached servants etc. was severe (Dingwaney *et al.*, 1990). As a result, even in the pre-colonial times peasants and agricultural labourers had to face varied kinds of exploitation. The livelihoods of vast sections of the Indian population were depressed even at that early a stage. Hence, perceiving colonialism as the exhaustive sources of all inequalities is a problematic.

This non-recognition of the inequalities prior to colonialism, extends to their understanding of the non-industrial sector in present day India as well. Thus, when they write about the fragile livelihoods of the people dependent on agriculture, they fail to take into account the skewed distribution of productive assets in the agrarian sector which may be an important contributor to that fragility. Thus, the fact that enormous land inequality exists in India even to this day is not factored into their examination of the question of the condition of the peasantry at all. This may very easily have resulted in an overstatement of both the extent and significance of environmental degradation.

Further, by starting with the premise that technological innovation and modern scientific development are bound to be to the detriment of the people deriving their livelihood from the primary sector, they completely ignore the importance of increasing productivity for such livelihoods. Thus, the kind of improvement that can occur with better access to irrigation fertilizers, cheaper access to technology etc. is incompatible with their theoretical schema. That low yields, especially in an agrarian context like India with typically very low land-man ratios, are a major source of impoverishment for the peasantry is too significant a factor for any serious analysis of non-industrial livelihoods in India to ignore. Posing productivity as a non-issue also, obviously, leads them to ignore the class inequalities in the distribution of access to technology. The question of the necessity of enabling the poorer strata of the peasantry to access technology, in order to improve their livelihoods, is therefore, completely bypassed.

One may plausibly propose that it is this inability to even pose the question of inequality in the non-industrial sector meaningfully, given their theoretical and philosophical presuppositions, that enables Bandyopadhyay and Shiva to conceive of two Indias – two sectors within India – where one dominates the other. It is the non-recognition of the existence of classes within the non-industrial and industrial sectors which enables them to talk about these sectors as homogenous wholes. Thus, the fact that the rural rich –consisting

primarily of landlords, large farmers etc. – have consistently benefitted from planning and policy priorities is completely ignored. Further, that the state in India has completely refused to carry out thoroughgoing land reforms is another fact that can in no way be accounted for in their two-sector schema. Finally, this schema also makes it very difficult to have any kind of analytical focus on the kind of exploitation that exists within the industrial sector. The concept of ‘livelihood’ is employed in such a manner that it would seem that the notion does not apply to the working class in the industrial sector at all. Thus, there exists in the two-Indias formula an all-round evasion of the question of concrete class inequalities.

Some objections, of course, have been registered to such evasions of the question of class inequalities. Certain contributions have argued for a more thorough understanding of the situation that the rural poor find themselves in. Prasad, for instance, argues that this deficient understanding of the role of the state is one of the principal drawbacks of the environmental movement (Prasad, 2004). She points out that one of the key problems that is faced by tribal groups, in many parts of the country, is exploitation at the hands of merchants and intermediaries who purchase their produce. These merchants and commission agents provide a level of compensation to tribal cultivators and forest produce gatherers which keeps these groups in a very impoverished state. The only way, therefore, this exploitation can be ended is through active state intervention. If the state does not actively procure the products which the tribals produce, at a certain guaranteed minimum price, the exploitation by the merchants will continue. Thus, the environmental movements, in arguing for a complete withdrawal of the state from the lives of the tribal groups, are committing a serious error.

Further, as the livelihoods of the tribal cultivators are typically very fragile, there has to be a substantial investment on the part of the state. The state has to provide cheap access to technology, irrigation facilities, credit etc. to these cultivators, a task which it has always severely neglected. Further, the state also has to provide for the dissemination of the results of agricultural research and extension to these groups. Prasad points out that the practice of shifting cultivation, often referred to as *jhum* cultivation, prevalent amongst tribal groups in different parts of the country, is typically marked by very low yields. This situation can be altered only through persistent and systematic state intervention involving an attempt to scientifically buttress the quality of the land that they work on. Thus, the state needs to become a crucial agent of transformation.

Another expression of this attitude towards the state is the insistence, by environmental movements, that the revival of traditional structures of authority and decision-making is necessary for the preservation of the livelihoods of tribals. This is accompanied by a rejection of what are regarded as modern models of citizenship. It is believed that modern development, through its imposition of an alien and hegemonic norm of citizenship, has resulted in the erosion of structures of community decision-making which had ensured the governance of the life of the community by the community itself. The erosion of these structures, thus, represents an appropriation of the rights of the community by a tyrannical modern state. The task of environmental movements fighting for the rights of these communities is, hence, to ensure that the traditional communal structures of governance are restored. Prasad writes:

The Indian environmental movement has been arguing that state capitalism has always served the interests of industrial capital. This means that 'environmentalism of the poor' sees the modern state as an instrument of large-scale industrialization that has alienated the people from their own natural resources. The system of state monopoly over natural resources prevalent in India is considered by activists as a shining example of both the capitalist and socialist models of development. According to them, these developmental models have led to rising inequalities, social unrest and instability in the Indian society. They have used state control over resources to favour an elite that acts as predators over the rest of society. From the point of view of the environmental movement, there is a sharp opposition of interests between community institutions and the modern state where 'community' institutions are seen as serving the interests of the larger mass of the Indian population. (Prasad, *ibid.*: 18)

Thus, the category of 'community' is counterposed to that of the state, wherein the latter is seen to be unqualifiedly detrimental to the former. There is, therefore, an oversimplified and abstract understanding of the modern state as *inherently* oppressive. It is precisely for this reason, as Prasad points out above, that both capitalism and socialism are seen to be unacceptable.

Further, she argues that the environmental movements employ the concept of 'community', to almost the complete exclusion of the concept of class. This results in a crude

romanticisation of the 'community' (particularly the past of the community) involving a near-total blindness to the presence of exploitation and oppression within these communities. Furthermore, this also takes attention away from the exploitation which is suffered by tribal peasants and landless tribal labourers at the hands of the local landed elite, merchants, moneylenders etc. It is perhaps this lack of emphasis on the inequality-stricken nature of the 'community' (whether it is understood at the level of the tribal group or at the level of the village) that enables the projection of the neat binary opposition between the interests of the tribals and the state. Tribal landlessness exists as a systemic feature of land ownership in India. It is not merely a consequence of displacement on account of the intervention of the state. Thus, tribal groups can also be seen as some of the worst victims of the deeply-entrenched landlordism in the countryside. Environmental movements, Prasad suggests, have been more or less silent on this aspect of the problem. Comprehensive land reforms, involving a redistribution of the land of landlords and large capitalist farmers, can make a major dent in the kind of exploitation that tribals are subjected to. And it is precisely for a recognition of this necessity, that the concept of 'class' is indispensable.

Finally, Prasad stresses that modernity and modern scientific and technological development, on the one hand, and ecological sustainability, need not be incompatible. In fact, scientific research and the application of its results, can positively contribute to the accomplishment of such sustainability. What is required is an assertion of the rural poor, including tribals and other exploited groups, compelling the state to extend critical modern facilities and benefits to them. This calls for, according to Prasad, an approach to the question of the environment that has the question of class as its fulcrum.

It would seem from the above analysis, thus, that certain key themes, motifs and categories dominate the literature on agriculture and rural India today. The most conspicuous of these themes are that of displacement and environmental degradation. Another motif, which is quite intimately connected with these themes, is the allegedly skewed pattern of development pursued since independence. Several categories are vital to the construction of these discourses. One such fundamental category is the notion of the state as essentially an instrument of the urban to elite to oppress and exploit the countryside. A continuity is often proposed between the colonial regime and the regime post-independence. It is posited that independence merely represented a replacement of the colonial power by the urban elite as exploiters of rural India. Analytically, of course, this is accompanied by a conceptualization

of rural India and urban India as two homogenous masses, without much internal exploitation. Crucial class differences, both within the agrarian sector and the industrial sector are, therefore, missed. The motif of the two Indias – an industrial India and an agrarian India, wherein the former exploits the latter – runs through much of this literature.

Chapter Three: A Brief History of Agrarian Relations in India

A comprehension of the context in which the so called 'new' farmers' movements emerged necessitates an understanding of the manner in which agrarian relations and developmental dynamics unfolded in modern India. This chapter will attempt, therefore, to develop a broadbrush account of the kinds of shifts and transformation characterized the agrarian realm in India in the modern period. Thus, the first two sections will examine agrarian relations, and changes and developments therein, in the colonial period. The third section will deal with the inability of the Indian state to transform the skewed agrarian structure it inherited from the colonial past. This will, of course, be conjoined with a study of the broad contours of the strategy of development which the state adopted post-independence. The fourth section will look at the kind of changes that were brought about by what is often popularly referred to as the 'green revolution'. What will be of particular importance here is the range of implications this 'revolution' had on agrarian relations. These changes, it must be remembered, form the immediate socio-economic and political backdrop for the rise the farmer movements under consideration.

3.1. Agrarian Relations under Colonial Rule

While one can perceive innumerable variations, across time and space, in the characteristics of agriculture in the colonial period in India, there are certain broad commonalities that do emerge. The most significant of these features are the following: a massive overburdening of agriculture in terms of the population engaged in and dependent upon it, severe exploitation of the peasantry by a landlord class, an enormous burden of land revenue on the peasantry, acute exploitation of the peasantry by merchant's and usurer's capital, extremely low levels of productivity, increasing levels of commercialisation, and increasing differentiation within the peasantry resulting in an expansion in the ranks of landless labourers. Of course, the manifestation and intensity of these characteristics exhibited an enormous degree of diversity. But they can be said to constitute the broad contours of the agrarian scene in India during the colonial period.

Dutt, in an extensive treatment of the Indian economy in the colonial period, points out that colonization represented a stagnation of the economy at large (Dutt, 2007). Central to this

was the role played by the free inflow of the industrial output of England into the Indian economy which had a devastating impact on the pre-colonial industrial base in India, limited though it had been. Further, this kind of an openness of the economy prevented any further industrial development. This resulted in an increased pressure on agriculture. Dutt quotes the Central Banking Enquiry Committee report of 1931:

The proportion of the population of India living on agriculture is very large and it has been steadily on the increase. The proportion was 61 percent in the year 1891. It rose to 66 percent in 1901 and to 73 percent in 1921. The census figures for 1931 are not available to us, but it may be fairly presumed that the figure has reached still higher in 1931. (Dutt, 2007, *ibid.*: 204)

Dutt further goes on to quote the Census Commissioner for 1911 to expound the causes for this increased dependence.

The extensive importation of cheap European piece goods and utensils, and the establishment in India itself of numerous factories of the western type, have more or less destroyed many village industries. The high prices of agricultural produce have also led many village artisans to abandon their hereditary craft in favour of agriculture... The extent to which this disintegration of the old village organization is proceeding varies considerably in different parts. The change is more noticeable in the more advanced provinces (*Id.*).

Thus, the disintegration of pre-existent systems of manufacture was principally responsible for the increase of the demographic burden on agriculture. In an already backward agriculture, such an increase meant further deprivation for the peasantry. Dutt points out here that despite several colonial authorities and agencies pointing out this increase in the burden on agriculture, hardly ever was a systematic diagnosis of reasons for this undertaken by them. This evasion was effected through invocations of an essentially 'rural' or 'agricultural' India. Agriculture was projected as being 'natural' to the Indian scheme of things. The archetype of the traditional, enclosed, self-reliant, inward looking Indian village was projected as something that belonged to the 'essence' of India, with the corollary being that industrial development would be an unhealthy and unwelcome breach of this essence. Dutt quotes an extract from the Simon Commission Report as an instance of such an invocation:

Any quickening of general political judgment, any widening of rural horizons beyond the traditional and engrossing interest of weather and water and crops and cattle, with the round of festivals and fairs and family ceremonies, and the dread of famine or flood – any such change from these immemorial preoccupations of the average Indian villager is bound to come very slowly indeed. (Dutt, *ibid.*: 202)

The role of colonialism, thus, in the processes of deindustrialization were sought to be concealed through such essentialism. Colonialism, however, was responsible in another way for adding to the relative demographic pressure on agriculture. A striking feature of colonial agriculture was the substantial amount of land that remained out of cultivation. This, Dutt claims, was a consequence of the general burden that colonialism exerted on the peasantry. On account of a heavy revenue burden, heavy rent burden, low productivity etc. the peasant at the end of the production cycle was left with just enough for his bare survival, if even that. This resulted in the inability of the peasantry to bring greater areas under cultivation. Thus, a potential means of lessening the pressure on land was foreclosed.

Land monopoly and revenue-extraction were major sources of distress for the peasantry as well. Landlordism and land monopoly were not new to agrarian society in India. Habib points out how an inegalitarian agrarian structure has characterized most of Indian history (Habib, 1983). Under the Mughals, for instance, there existed an elaborate and demanding revenue structure in which *zamindars* and other local lords and officials enjoyed vast privileges. The agricultural surplus was shared between these strata and the state. Thus, Ghosh writes:

The revenue, it was understood, was to be shared, in definite proportion between the cultivator and the government. The shares varied when the land was recently cleared and required extraordinary labour, but when it was fully settled and productive, the cultivator had about two-fifths, and the government the remainder. The government share was again divided between the zamindar and the village officers. The zamindar generally retained about one-tenth of this share, or little more than three-fiftieth part of the whole. The residue was divided between the mokuddim or head cultivator of the village, who was either deemed to be responsible for originally settling the village, or derived the right by inheritance or by purchase. He was in charge of promoting and directing its cultivation, others who got due shares were the

“pausbaun gorayat”, who guarded the crop, and “putwarry” or village accountant, on whom the cultivators relied for adjusting their demands to the payment of their rents. An allotted share of the produce, or a special grant of land, was allowed for the ‘canongoe’ or confidential agent of the government, who was the depository and monitor of the established regulation. (Ghosh, 1988).

Thus, even prior to the emergence of colonial rule, there were numerous claimants, including the local landlord, to the surplus produced by the peasants. Agrarian relations in India, therefore, have been characterised by landlordism for a fairly long period of time.

A digression may be in order here. In the nineteen eighties, a particularly vigorous debate had raged largely between Marxist historians on the nature of the Indian social formation prior to colonial rule. Some of the most significant contributors to the debate were Harbans Mukhia, R. S. Sharma and Irfan Habib. While Mukhia, in essence, argues for a notion of independent peasant production in the medieval period (Mukhia, 1985), Sharma and Habib arrive at a picture of peasant production marked by enormous inequality and stratification (Habib, 1985; Sharma, 1984). Habib argues that when one inspects the agrarian system under the Mughals, two very crucial features stand out. Firstly, the centralized Mughal state subjected cultivation and cultivators to an onerous fiscal burden (which, of course, varied across time and space). This fiscal burden resulted in a depressed standard of living for the bulk of the peasantry. Secondly, there were elaborate organized strata of local landlords and officials who received a part of the agricultural surplus. Their relative strength, vis-à-vis the central state, often depended on the conjunctural strength of the central seat of Mughal imperial power. Thus, in periods in which the central leadership was strong, one saw a diminution of the power of the local landlord classes. Similarly, the local ruling classes proved to be the most powerful precisely in those periods when the cohesion of the empire was going through a crisis. Further, even within the village sharp kinds of stratification, principally on the basis of caste, existed. Apart from such stratification at the level of the group, there were numerous types of exploitation that took place on an individual basis. The exploitation of hired wage labour, belonging invariably to dalit castes, by individual landlords and rich peasants would be an instance of the latter which was fairly widespread. Habib writes:

Thus, collective subjection was accompanied by individual subjection in varied forms, existing principally through the framework of caste. This duality was

reflected in the attitude of the state, which reserved the right to bypass the village headman and impose its land-tax on each individual peasant (*asami-war*), whenever this was to its advantage. Moreover, since the state's claims were exercised through individual assignees of particular territories (*jagirs*), movements of peasants were subject to restraint, though in practice considerable mobility existed among the peasantry (cf. *pai kasht* peasants). These varied forms of subjection of different categories of the rural population have little in common with serfdom, nor with the classic image of the village community. They resulted from a historical process chiefly under the varied impact of the caste system, petty production and the rent-receiving state. (Habib, *ibid.*: 47)

Thus, the picture which emerges of pre-colonial India is one of a society stricken with numerous types of contradiction and exploitation. While, on the one hand, there existed several strata between the state and the village, the structure of the village itself, on the other, was marked by severe oppression and inequality. One needs to bear this in mind while trying to examine landlordism and agrarian structure under colonialism, since there have been several strong trends, both academic and political, which have attempted to show that inequalities in the Indian social structure have principally been a contribution of the colonial period. This kind of an understanding ranges from the early writings of Marx himself (*ibid.*) to the ideological positions of several strands within the nationalist movements which attempted to project some kind of a pre-colonial egalitarian idyll or other.

The colonial agrarian structure, thus, represents, to a large extent, a *superimposition* on pre-existent agrarian relations. Several of the features of the Indian agrarian system that predated the consolidation of colonial rule, persisted into the colonial period in an *aggravated* form. Thus, we find that landlordism reached an unprecedented degree of complexity and elaborateness in the colonial period. As is common knowledge, there were principally two kinds of land tenure in the colonial period – the Permanent Settlement and the Ryotwari. The former (also often referred to as the *zamindari* system) was instituted in the year 1773, and its scope of operation extended to Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and northern parts of the Madras Presidency. This system of land tenure involved the formal recognition of a stratum of tax collectors (*zamindars*) who would also have rights in the land. These collectors would have to hand over to the government a certain fixed amount in cash after every annual production cycle. What is important to note here is that the assessed fixed revenue would apply in

perpetuity – i.e., permanently – irrespective of the fluctuations and vagaries of agricultural production particularly within an agrarian system which was prone to massive fluctuations on account of the low degree of technological development. This revenue system resulted, therefore, in massive levels of impoverishment of the peasantry. Further, the fixity of the amount applied only to the sum transferred from the *zamindars* to the state – and crucially not the rent paid by the actual cultivators to the *zamindars*. Thus, while immediately after the settlement of the permanent revenue amounts, on account of the low levels of production, even the *zamindar* found it extremely difficult to fulfil the revenue demand, over time the relative burden of the revenue demand declined. However, this decline only meant a decrease of the burden on the *zamindar*. It did not relieve the misery of the cultivator in any way as the *zamindars* kept on increasing their share of the surplus – in other words, they continued extracting as much surplus from the cultivators as they were extracting earlier. This enormously strengthened the position of the landlords – *both* vis-à-vis the state and the peasantry. (Dutt, *ibid.*)

Further, the rights in the land that were granted to the tax-collector were inheritable and transferable. They could be bought and sold. Furthermore, on non-payment of the revenue demand, the estate of the *zamindar* could be taken back by the state and sold to other bidders. The landlords, in other words, were given *modern* property rights over the land. This marked an extremely significant departure from the previous forms of landlordism wherein the *zamindars*, despite wielding enormous influence over the cultivators, could not, for the most part, regard the land operated by the latter as their personal property. Bandyopadhyay writes in the context of the Permanent Settlement:

The British East India Company, superimposing 18th century western concepts of private property on a very different indigenous land system, assumed that the ‘revenue farmers’ in fact owned the land, even though they neither worked on it nor invested in it. Ignoring any rights of the actual tillers, the permanent settlement of Bengal in 1793 gave the *zamindars* the right to fix their terms with the cultivators in return for a fixed land revenue from the *zamindars* to the state. The latter was payable in cash while the rents to be paid by actual cultivators to the *zamindars* were not. By this single piece of legislation, actual tillers of the soil became tenants, while a class of revenue farmers became *de facto* owners of the land they did not cultivate. (Bandyopadhyay, 1993: A-151)

Others, however, have pointed out that the creation of a class of landlords with a transferable and inheritable private ownership of land was something that was consciously carried out by the colonial rulers. Dutt, for instance, argues:

The purpose of the permanent Zamindari settlement was to create a new class of landlords after the English model as the social buttress of English rule. It was recognised that, with the small numbers of English, holding down a vast population, it was absolutely necessary to establish a social basis for their power through the creation of a new class whose interests, through receiving a subsidiary share in the spoils (one-eleventh, in the original intention), would be bound up with the maintenance of English rule. Lord Cornwallis, in the memorandum in which he defended his policy, made clear that he was explicitly conscious that he was creating a new class, and establishing rights which bore no relation to the previous rights of the *zamindars*; he was, he stated, “convinced that, failing the claim of right of the *Zamindars*, it would be necessary for the public good to grant a right of property in the soil to them, or to persons of other descriptions.” Sir Richard Temple, in his, *Men and Events of My Time in India*”, records that Lord Cornwallis’ Permanent Settlement was “a measure which was effected to naturalise the landed institutions of England among the natives of Bengal.”(Dutt, *ibid.*: 232).

Thus, the private ownership of the landlord over the estate over which he has rights of tax collection was, thus, a fundamentally new development in the Indian agrarian system. It must be remembered that not only did it take a very heavy toll on the lives of the peasantry, but in certain cases it caused the class of *zamindars* substantial distress as well. Bandopadhyay, for instance, points out that the transferability of land, along with the heavy revenue demand, particularly in the early years of the Permanent Settlement, ensured that a section of the landlords would inevitably find it difficult to meet the revenue requirements forfeiting, thereby, their right to the land (Bandopadhyay, *ibid.*). Their place was often taken by new landlords drawn from the commercial classes who would be even more oppressive and extractive than the previous landlords.

Under the ryotwari system, the tax was supposed to be directly collected from the cultivators. The revenue was assessed and settled periodically, instead of there being a permanently

settled revenue. This system was regarded both by English as well as Indian commentators of the time as more rational and humane. This system was in application over most of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this system of land revenue was bereft of landlordism. In most cases, the one paying the tax would be the landlord and not the actual cultivator of the land (Bagchi, 1992). Elaborate systems of sub-infeudation emerged even in the ryotwari areas. Despite the absence of a permanently fixed revenue, this system of land tenure, too, spelt disaster for the peasantry. Bagchi notes that the assessed revenue tended, typically, to be so high that it had to be revised quite frequently. Further, the process of the introduction of private and transferable rights to the land went even further in ryotwari areas than the *zamindari* ones. The reason for this was that on account of the *relative* absence of the intermediaries, individual farms became more susceptible to alienation on account of non-payment of revenue. Pieces and plots of land, the revenue on which had been defaulted upon, would be auctioned off. Thus, peasants, under the ryotwari arrangement lived under a vast amount of insecurity.

Further, it has been pointed out that the peasantry in the ryotwari areas exhibited a greater amount of differentiation than the *zamindari* areas. One of the crucial factors which enabled this, of course, was the recognition of the private property rights, limited though it was, of the individual cultivators. Banerjee and Iyer point out that in the ryotwari areas “an extensive cadastral survey of the land was done, and a detailed record of rights was prepared, which served as the legal title to the land for the cultivator.” (Banerjee *et al.*, 2005: 1193).

Another striking feature of the agrarian system in the colonial period, and a feature that sets this period apart from previous periods, is the high levels of commercialisation. By commercialisation two things are implied. Firstly, the term refers to the phenomenon of production predominantly for sale in the market rather than for personal consumption. Secondly, it may also refer to a significant shift from food crops to cash crops. The colonial period saw a remarkable increase in commercialisation in both senses of the term. The reasons for this, according to Thorner and Thorner, are two-fold (Thorner A. *et al.*, 2005). A part of the stimulus for greater commercial production came from the increased burden of revenue itself. The requirements of stiff rates of taxation compelled a significant part of the peasantry to sell their output in the market. A further fact bears highlighting. Habib has pointed out that agrarian relations in pre-colonial India were such that conversion of agricultural produce into commodities (i.e., their sale in the market) occurred only *after* the

extraction of surplus (Habib, 1985). Thus, it was only the agricultural produce in the form of revenue that would be sold in the market, and that too after the produce had already been received from the cultivator. In colonial India, there was a widespread rise of the phenomenon of the conversion of agricultural produce into commodities *before* the expropriation of the surplus. Thus, the produce was sold in the market even before the revenue was handed over to the collecting agencies. This, of course, was rendered possible by the introduction and regularisation in many regions of the collection of revenue in cash. However, the significance of this fact lies in the need to recognise that the existence of markets itself need not be a completely reliable indication of the level of commercialisation in agriculture. Even in the Mughal period, thus, there was a strong presence of markets where agricultural produce was bought and sold. This, however, does not mean that a high level of commercialisation existed then, since the sale typically was not made by the cultivator but by the appropriator of the produce of the cultivator. In the colonial period, the sale was made by the cultivators themselves.

The second reason for the increase in the level of commercialisation was the fact that the British colonial rulers needed a variety of crops for their industrial raw material requirements in Britain. Thorner and Thorner point out:

Another basic reason for the rapid growth in the cultivation of cash crops was the fact such a development was welcome to the British authorities in India, who did everything in their power to foster it. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain itself has passes through the Industrial Revolution. British industries were then the greatest in the world, and they kept on expanding. British manufacturers clamoured for raw materials and sought anxiously for good markets in which to dispose of their finished products.. Once the railways were opened it became possible for inland areas in India to produce for the world market. Wheat poured out of the Punjab, cotton out of Bombay, and jute out of Bengal. As commercial agricultural and money economy spread, the older practices associated with a self-subsisting economy declined. As industrial crops (e.g., cotton, groundnuts, sugarcane, tobacco) were more paying than foodgrains, the peasants who could tended to shift over to these. In some districts the peasants shifted over completely to industrial crops and had to buy their foodstuffs from dealers. Villagers sent to the

market the cereal reserves traditionally kept for poor years (Thorner, A. *et al.*, 2005: 54).

Thus, it was this integration into the world capitalist system which provided a major thrust to the phenomenon of commercialisation. Apart from the fact of cash crops having a higher price, and therefore being more remunerative an option for the cultivator, it must be remembered that in many instances the shift to cash crops was effected through simple coercion. (Guha, 1974). Natarajan, in the context of the forced cultivation of indigo in Bengal, quotes a circular issued by the Governor-General in Council in 1810 which charged the planters with the following offences:

1. Acts of violence, which, although they amount not in the legal sense of the word to murder, have occasioned the death of the natives.
2. Illegal detention of natives in confinement, especially in stocks, with a view to recovery of balances alleged to be due from them or for other causes.
3. Assembling in a tumultuary manner the people attached to their respective factories and others and engaging in violent affrays with other indigo planters.
4. Illicit infliction of punishment by means of rattan or otherwise on the cultivators or other natives. (Natarajan, 1979: 149).

The use of force, therefore, was often a significant feature of the process of integration with the world economy. Now, the process of commercialisation had a number of significant consequences for the agrarian system in India. As was indicated in the Thorners' quote, the shift to sale in the market and production of cash crops resulted in acute forms of food insecurity for a large section of the peasantry. As can be recalled from the preceding analysis, the agrarian scene in India in the colonial period was in any case characterised by an extreme demographic pressure on land. Further, and relatedly, the levels of technological development and productivity were extremely low. Commercialisation, therefore, meant a further fall in the already low levels of access to foodgrains for consumption.

Commercialisation, also, and very significantly, resulted in a hastening of the process of differentiation within the peasantry. Integration with the market implied that those peasants who were relatively affluent could further consolidate their position, whereas those under

greater distress sank further into misery. The process of class formation within agriculture was, thus, sharpened and accentuated (Dutt, *ibid.* : 237).

A further aspect of the process of commercialisation was the increased dominance of userer's and merchant's capital over cultivation. The debt burden on the peasantry increased enormously. While, debt, as an economic category, was not new to the Indian economy, there is a broad consensus that in the colonial period the burden of debt reached its very peak. Dutt quotes Sir Edward Maclagan writing in 1911:

It has long been recognised that indebtedness is no new thing in India. The writings of Munro, Elphinstone and others make it clear that there was much debt even at the beginning of our rule. But it is also acknowledged that the indebtedness has risen considerably during our rule, and more especially during the last half century. The reports received from time to time and the evidence of average sale and mortgage data show clearly there has been a very considerable increase of debt during the last half century. (Dutt, *ibid.*: 247.)

Cooper points out that the exploitation of the peasantry through the merchant and the usurer was often sharpened at those points where the profitability of trade in the concerned crops increased (Cooper,1983). She points out, for instance, that in the fluctuating economic climate of the 1930s and 1940s, landlords and traders in Bengal would very often combine their operations. It became extremely profitable for the landlords to also become the monopoly buyers of the grain for sale in the market when the prices of agricultural commodities rose. Further, userer's capital and landlordism, too, were closely related. Cooper writes:

Sharecropping and indebtedness were clearly closely intertwined. An investigation into fifteen villages in Dinajpur district found that of 504 families, 156 families took *dehri* loans, for subsistence. 852 *maunds* were borrowed and 1280 *maunds* were to be repaid. 25 percent of those indebted were sharecroppers in debt to their landlords, and all but three of the 99 creditors were landlords and rich peasants... All the sharecroppers in Khanpur village, and many of those who were both sharecroppers and had other tenancies, took *deria* loans from the landlords who gave them land on share contract. (Cooper, *ibid.*: 242).

It was this combination of the functions of the landlord, merchant and usurer which contributed enormously to sharpening the exploitation of the peasantry and strengthening the position of the landlords. This interlinking of different markets, as the phenomenon has often been referred to in academic literature, has prompted some observers to characterise the Indian agrarian system as 'semi-feudal'. Whether one agrees with this characterisation or not, it remains a fact that this interlinkage contributed, in a massive way, to the establishment of the stranglehold of the rural rich over the countryside.

Under the multiple pressures of steep revenue, landlord extraction, exploitation by moneylenders and traders, and unprecedented levels of commercialisation, a sizeable section of the peasantry lost their land and joined the ranks of the landless labourers. Patnaik points out that though India always had a sizeable section of the agrarian population which did not own any land, the category of landless agricultural labourers went through a vast expansion in the colonial period (Patnaik, U., 1983). Patnaik identifies three distinct sources of the increase in the proportion of agricultural labourers in the agrarian population. Firstly, practices of hereditary servitude and slavery, which were quite widespread in the southern parts of India, suffered a setback with colonial rule. She writes:

With conquest by Britain and the incorporation of British India into the world-wide system of colonial trade and direct surplus extraction, the position of the hereditary labourer tended to change, and the class of landless workers was greatly augmented. With regard to the first aspect, there was initiated a considerable migration of the worst-off labourers and the destitute to other parts of the Empire - to South Africa, Mauritius, the West Indies under the indentured labour system of recruitment. Simultaneously the opening up of mines and plantations within the country also offered an alternative avenue of employment albeit on a meagre scale. Migration from Madras Presidency is estimated to have been between 11 and 15 percent of annual population growth throughout the 19th century, while plantations offered employment to one million people towards the end of the century. (Patnaik, U., *ibid.*: 6).

Thus, we see that the penetration of market relations and the emergence of new forms of production resulted in the undermining of traditional forms of servitude and this led to an

expansion in the numbers of the agricultural labour force. Patnaik stress, however, that in the later part of colonial rule, the numbers of landless agricultural labourers were so large that they couldn't possibly be exhausted by those who were formerly in hereditary servitude. The two other sources of increase in the population of agricultural labourers become important here. The widespread destruction of cottage industries and handicrafts, as a result of the flooding of Indian markets by manufactured goods imported from England, led to the reduction of vast numbers of artisans to the landless labourers. Further, the general immiserisation of the peasantry often resulted in the distress sale of their land by the peasants. This would often take the form of the loss of land to moneylenders in the event of non-payment of debt. All these processes, conjointly, led to the gigantic expansion in the numbers of those without land.

3.2. Perspectives on the Agrarian Question in Pre-Independence India

The colonial period saw an intensive engagement with the agrarian question by different quarters. Despite great internal diversity, there were certain distinct positions on the agrarian question that characterised the colonial, nationalist and communist perspectives on the agrarian question. An understanding, therefore, of these positions would be useful in understanding the kind of trajectory that the development of agriculture took post-independence. This section will attempt a broadbrush analysis of these varying perspectives.

The political-economic interests of the colonial rulers moulded their understanding of the problems of Indian agriculture. As Joshi points out, the colonial perspective on Indian agriculture was marked by two salient features – an understanding of agrarian development and backwardness in isolation from the question of economic development *in general*, and an inordinate stress on low levels of technological development in agriculture without any serious consideration of the effects of institutional structures (Joshi, 1967). The first feature, of course, stemmed from the necessity of discursively concealing the de-industrialisation and lack of overall economic development that colonialism meant for the Indian economy. The second, again, was necessary given the degree of interweaving between the extraction of heavy revenue, structures of landlordism and colonial rule. The problem of agriculture was, thus, posed as an abstract one – with essentialism serving as the pivot of such an understanding. It has been pointed out earlier in this study, for instance, that the colonial

rulers found it necessary to construct an 'essential' Indian 'rurality', in order to conceal the historically specific and contingent character of the demographic overburdening of Indian agriculture.

Of course, this kind of an essentialisation was closely intermeshed with orientalist discourses that acquired enormous salience in 19th century Europe. There seemed to be three fundamental features to this understanding of Indian society – a) the village as the fundamental unit of social organisation in India; b) the village as the autonomous self-sufficient unit; and c) caste as the fundamental organisational principle of the village. Elements of this characterisation, it must be remembered, often stemmed from actual pragmatic needs of colonial administration. Thakur points out:

In due course, the concept of the village as an autonomous unit came into its own; it marvellously filled and legitimised the colonial need for a well-defined basic unit. The village made Indian territory intelligible and manageable to the colonial rulers. The latter could make sense of the village in the light of their own experiences as members of the English society employing categories they had historically known. In a way, the village heralded the colonial understanding of Indian territory as caste made Indian people amenable to British understanding. After all, not only had the people to be categorised and counted but also land to be mapped out in well-demarcated universal units. (Thakur, 2005: 26).

The fundamental and pivotal attribute of the colonial understanding of rural society and the agrarian question in India seems to be a striking lack of historicity. This feature pervaded, and in a sense unified, the understanding of the Orient, and of India in particular, to be found in the works of diverse writers ranging from Mill to the early Marx. (Habib, 1985.) This lack of historicity stems from the non-recognition of certain crucial features of the Indian agrarian scene – the complex structures of surplus extraction that colonialism gave rise to, de-industrialisation and absolute devastation of the artisanry, the rise and significance of towns in the Mughal period, the complex relations between the village and the centralised Mughal state, the varied exploitative mechanisms of the operation of caste, the fact that exploitation occurred both on a collective and *individual* basis etc.

While certain elements of this kind of an understanding of the agrarian question found their way into the discourse of the nationalists, nationalist thinking was typically characterised by a sharp indictment of the varied consequences that the colonial rule had had on the Indian economy. Thus, the early nationalists had carried out a trenchant and comprehensive analysis of the kind of burden that colonial rule imposed on the peasantry. The principal analytical target of early nationalists like M.G. Ranade and R.C Dutt was the tendency of the colonial rulers to examine the agrarian question in isolation from the general backwardness of the economy. They posited that the question of the health of the agrarian economy was inextricably linked to the question of industrial development. Colonial rule, by dismantling and inhibiting the latter, had multiplied manifold the woes of the agrarian sector. They recognised quite distinctly that the overburdening of the agrarian sector was an integral part of the general lack of development in the economy at large.

R.C. Dutt, Joshi indicates, believed that it was this consideration of the agrarian question in abstraction from the general question of economic development that led the colonial rulers to attack undue emphasis to the development of productivity in agriculture. While such increased productivity was most certainly important, it could not be achieved without achieving all-round economic development. Thus, Joshi quotes Dutt:

..because India remained mainly agricultural, it was too often assumed that the urgent necessity was to improve methods of agricultural production first before there could be any general advance.. I could not visualise any long-term increase in agricultural productivity without a greater measure of industrial development. (Joshi, *ibid.*: 448).

Dutt, also, perceived quite clearly the vastly deleterious role played by the agrarian structure and the nature of property relations therein. He clearly identified an important cause of the backwardness of Indian agriculture in the fact that the actual tiller, after the payment of steep rent and revenue, was hardly left with anything that he or she could invest in production. While Ranade was extremely forthright in his endorsement of the need to create a class of entrepreneurial large farmers, Dutt was more attentive to the question of the misery of the actual tillers of the soil. Both, however, were fundamentally agreed that the eventual resolution of the agrarian question required development which took demographic pressure off the land. Thus, for them even the question of an institutional reform in land ownership

and revenue structure was essentially tied up with the question of overall economic development.

It must be remembered here that while, on the one hand, the early nationalists carried out an extensive analysis of the problems that the agrarian sector faced under colonial rule, this intellectual exercise very seldom translated into a clear and effective programme for political action. This is not very surprising considering that in this phase of the nationalist movement (till the beginning of the twentieth century), the Congress-led movement had hardly achieved any penetration into the mass of the Indian population. The orientation of the movement itself was one of negotiation between a narrow section of urban elite and the colonial government. Further, as Joshi emphasises, at this juncture the early nationalists could have conceived, in however tentative a manner, of two possible paths of agrarian transition – one involving the development of the landlord class into a class of dynamic agricultural entrepreneurs, and the other entailing the emergence of a dynamic farming class from within the peasantry itself. Joshi claims that there was a broad preference amongst the early nationalists for the former path of agrarian transition. (Joshi, *id.*) This is of significance since this orientation remained through the course of the nationalist movement and was the single-most important feature of the manner in which the Congress-led movement sought to conceptualise the problems of rural India.

The political expression of this preference was to be found in the kind of demands that the nationalist movement, in this phase, made with reference to the agrarian sector. Suri points out that in the early years the demands of the nationalists were centred on an opposition to further increases in revenue (Suri, 1987). It was recognised that the revenue demands had risen too high and that there should be restriction on further increase. There were demands, therefore, that the revenue, in those places where it was not permanently settled, should be permanently settled so that the colonial administration cannot increase it periodically. Suri quotes the resolution on land revenue adopted by the Lahore session of the Congress in 1893:

This Congress desires to call attention to the profound alarm which has been created by the action of government in interfering with the existing Permanent Settlement in Bengal and Bihar (in matters of survey and other cases) and with the terms of the *sanads* of the permanently settled estates in Madras, and deeming such tampering with solemn public pledges, no matter under what pretences, a national calamity,

hereby pledges itself to oppose, in all possible legitimate ways, any and all such reactionary attacks on Permanent Settlements and their holders. (Suri, *ibid.*: 26).

These demands for permanently settled tenures were often accompanied by pleas for more secure and better-defined property rights in land. There were, of course, several contradictions in such demands. Firstly, and most significantly, the demands for greater relaxations, lesser revenue and permanent settlement, was made for relationships between the landlords and the colonial state, and not between the landlord and the actual tiller of the soil. No demands were made for any reduction or restriction of the rent payable by the tiller to the landlord. Secondly, the demand for greater recognition of private rights in landed property was hardly ever made for the actual cultivator. It must be recalled that even in the ryotwari areas, the ownership of the land hardly ever lay with the tiller. The 'ryot' who got recognition as the one in possession of the land was in most cases the landlord who did not expend any labour on the land. It was in support of greater property rights for this class of landowners that the Congress sought to mobilise public opinion (Suri, *ibid.*: 27).

This evasion of the question of the severe exploitation of the peasantry by the landlord persisted into the later phases of the nationalist movement. With the emergence of the influence of Gandhi within the nationalist movement, the Congress began to actively mobilise the peasantry as it was felt that without such a mobilisation the base of the nationalist movement would remain very narrow. The non-violent, non-cooperation movement in Champaran in 1917 marked the beginning of the process of enlisting the support of the peasantry. However, as Suri points out, the demands around which the peasantry was sought to be mobilised were inevitably against the exploitation of the colonial state. No-tax campaigns became a regular means of drawing the mass of the peasantry into the nationalist movement. Campaigns and struggles against the *zamindars* and other landlords, however, were actively discouraged. In May, 1921, Gandhi wrote:

The kisan movement has received an impetus from non-cooperation but it is anterior to and independent of it. While we will not hesitate to advise the kisans when the moment comes to suspend payment of taxes to the government, it is not contemplated that at any stage of non-cooperation we would seek to deprive the zamindars of their rent. The kisan movement must be confined to the improvement of the status of the kisans and the betterment of relations between the zamindar and them. The kisans

must be advised scrupulously to abide by the terms of their agreement with the zamindars, whether such agreement is written or inferred from custom. Where a contract or even a written custom is bad, they may not try to uproot it by violence without previous reference to zamindars. In every case there should be a friendly discussion with the zamindars and an attempt made to arrive at a settlement (Suri, *ibid.*: 28).

Thus, while, under the leadership of Gandhi, the nationalist movement sought to reach out to the mass of the peasantry, they refused to tackle, in any significant or meaningful manner, the question of landlordism. The vision underpinning such campaigns seemed to be one of amity and mutual cooperation between the peasants and the landlords. This seems to be reflected in Gandhi's conceptualization of the Indian village as well. As Jodhka points out, Gandhi's understanding of the village was central to his conceptualization of the form that India would take post-independence (Jodhka, 2002). Thus, the village was counterpoised to the 'western civilisation' as whole. This necessitated the invocation of a notion of the Indian village which circumvents the question of the intense oppression and exploitation that characterized the Indian village. The 'brutality' and 'godlessness' of the industrial west was compared to the 'spiritual' and 'moral' ethos of the Indian village. The questions of landlordism, and the exploitation of the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers, were well-nigh bypassed. The idea of 'trusteeship' that the position of the landlord was supposed to entail was a part of this understanding. Though Gandhi did address the question of caste exploitation, he saw this exploitation in a manner that was divorced from the larger context of a complex of different kinds of economic and social oppression within the village. This, as Jodhka emphasizes again, was attacked by several voices in pre-colonial India including Ambedkar (Jodhka, *ibid.*: 3350).

It was in the context of such attempts by the Congress to mobilize the peasantry on the basis of a partial view of the agrarian question that the communist perspective on India's problems emerged (Suri, *ibid.*). This perspective emerged initially from within the ranks of the Congress. Thus, the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936, and its policies, objectives and struggles began to show a clear divergence from the limited understanding that the Congress exhibited of the problems of rural India. Suri writes:

When the Kisan Sabha mobilised peasants for the immediate abolition of zamindari, reduction of land revenue, rent and water rates and liquidation of debts, the Congress grew more and more hostile to the Kisan Sabha. Congress ministries in several provinces had unleashed a repressive policy against the peasant movement when a series of struggles broke out against feudal oppression, especially in Bihar and Andhra. At the Haripura session (February 1938), Congress passed a lengthy resolution on “Kisan Sabhas” stating that the Congress “will not countenance any of the activities of those Congressmen who as members of the Kisan Sabha help in creating an atmosphere hostile to Congress principles and policy.”(Suri, *ibid.*, 34)

The Kisan Sabha continued increasing the scale and intensity of its activities, however. The movement had a fairly clear understanding that the struggles against imperialism and landlordism cannot be divorced from one another. There was a recognition that the *zamindars* and other landlords were in an alliance with the colonial rulers – they structurally needed each other to survive. Thus, it was felt that the question of landlordism could not be avoided if one were serious about fighting colonialism. Dutt quotes the resolution passed at the fifth session of the All-India Kisan Sabha, held at Palasa in March 1940, in the context of the second World War:

..The Sabha further believes that the kisans, possessing as they do the highest stake in the peace, will themselves along with the mazdurs, be in the vanguard of the struggle for freedom in challenging the authority of the alien Government and resisting the drain of all the resources of the country. To that end, the kisans should forthwith initiate their day-to-day struggle under the leadership of their own Sabha against the British Government as well as Indian rulers, zamindars and sahumars who form the pillars of its power in the country. These struggles growing in intensity and extending over wide areas should very soon be integrated into a country-wide no tax and no-rent movement which would end the economic power of these parasites of imperialism and shake the political might of the British Government in the land..

In fact, as Suri stresses, it was under pressure from the mobilization of the Kisan Sabha that the Congress under the leadership, and on the initiative of Nehru, was forced to take into cognizance the political importance of the question of landlordism. The removal of intermediaries between the peasant and the state entered the agenda of the Congress as well.

In its election manifesto before the 1946 elections, for instance, the theme of land reform finds a very strong presence (Suri, *ibid.*: 35). However, a strong element of compromise with the class of the intermediaries existed here as well. The manifesto explicitly declared that the reform of land ownership would only be carried out after the payment of *equitable compensation*. Such compensation would ensure that a vast concentration of wealth continues to remain in the hands of the landlords. This would potentially have a massive significance for a developing economy like that of India with already a very low resource base, and was a far cry from the communist demand for land reforms. Thus, while the Congress, over time, was forced to factor the issue of landlord exploitation into their political agenda the form of that incorporation carried within it an expression of a vast and disastrous compromise.

3.3 The Development of Agriculture Post-Independence

The trajectory of agricultural development and agrarian relations, notwithstanding unevenness both spatial and temporal, were marked by certain broad features: persistence of vast inequality in the ownership of land, persistence of low levels of productivity, continuance of an inordinate demographic pressure on land, increasing class differentiation within the peasantry, growth in the ranks of the marginal peasants, emergence of a substantial class of rich peasants and capitalist farmers, increased commercialization, and a limited attempt at technological modernization. In this section we will carry out an analysis of the path of agrarian development pursued in independent India in light of these features.

3.3.1 The Failure of Land Reforms

The most striking and significant of these features, of course, has been the failure of the state to carry out comprehensive land reforms that would end the gigantic concentration of land ownership as existed in colonial India. The inequality in the ownership of land, over the course of the post-independence period, has more or less remained unchanged. In fact, it has been argued by some that the concentration of land has actually increased. Ramachandran and Rawal, for instance, have pointed out that between 1960-61 and 2003-04, the Gini coefficient for the distribution of ownership holdings has *increased* from 0.58 to 0.62. (Ramachandran *et al.*, 2009). This inability, if not refusal to carry out land reforms, was in continuance of the kind of political positions that the Congress leadership of the nationalist

movement took on the question of landlordism. Thus, in the immediate post-independence period, while lip service was paid to the issue of redistribution of land and other land reforms, there was a vast gap between rhetoric and implementation.

The land reforms announced by the government post-independence were three-pronged. They included the abolition of *zamindari* and other intermediate tenures, tenancy reforms and imposition of land ceiling. Koshy points out that on each of these counts both the formulation of policies and the process of implementation suffered from several deep problems (Koshy, 1974). As far as the first set of measures – the abolition of intermediate –tenures is concerned, at the statutory level, a certain degree of seriousness was exhibited by the government. By 1954, almost all state governments had passed legislations formally aimed at the abolition of intermediaries. However, this success was largely confined to the statutory level. Koshy suggests that there were deliberate inclusions of glaring loopholes that rendered the process of implementation of the abolition an extremely formidable one. One striking loophole present in most legislations of this kind was the provision permitting the resumption of that part of the land which was under the *personal cultivation* of the land owner. This land was often referred to as the *khudkasht* land of the landlord. Such *personal* cultivation was understood to include even that land which is cultivated with the help of hired labourers (Patnaik, U., 1983). The legislations, therefore, resulted in mass evictions of tenants by the landlords who began to cultivate their land through hired labour. The new laws, therefore, did not address the problem of land concentration at all. What they principally brought about was a change in the *nature* of the extraction of surplus by the landlord. A shift from cultivation by a tenantry to cultivation by hired labourers implies a shift from rent to profit as the form of the surplus (Patnaik, U., 1972). The fact of the ownership of the bulk of the land by a narrow social stratum of landlords was left more or less unaffected. At the same time the large numbers of tenants who were evicted joined the ranks of agricultural labourers, which was in any case a sizeable category by then.

Further, another extremely significant feature of the abolition of intermediate tenures was the fact that the *zamindars*, *jagirdars* etc. were to be compensated heavily, by the state, for whatever land was acquired from them. This, it must be remembered, was carried out when the new post-independence state was extremely resource-constrained. Thus, Koshy points out that the total compensation to landlords calculated in the Third Plan document stood at Rs 670 crores (Koshy, *ibid*). It must be pointed out here that an equitable redistribution of assets

in the agrarian sector could have had any meaning only if surplus land was appropriated from the erstwhile *zamindars* without any compensation. The payment of hefty compensation, coupled with the utilization of the numerous loopholes that the legislations offered, had the consequence that the socio-economic strength of the landlords remained intact. The money received as compensation was invested by the landlords in productive investment like industrial production, technological upgradation of the cultivation of their land etc. *and in unproductive avenues like usury*. Compensation, therefore, only resulted in the consolidation of the class dominance of the landlords.

On the issue of tenancy reforms, again, there was an overwhelming non-performance. The biggest problem, as far as the implementation of tenancy reforms was considered, apart from the mass ejection of tenants that was described above, was the near-complete absence of tenancy records. This made it extremely difficult for tenants to claim tenurial rights. Even after legislations were passed on the issue of tenurial rights, hardly any effort was made by the state governments for carrying out a recording of tenancies. Further, as has been pointed out by Ladejinsky, landlords through their influence over the local administration and police, can often scuttle any attempt made by the tenants to assert their tenurial rights (Ladejinsky, 1972). Further, non-implementation, on the question of establishing fair rent, was extremely serious as well. Koshy points out that while in the First Plan maximum rent limits to be set were between one-fourth to one-fifth of the produce, its translation into statutory form was exceedingly tardy. Additionally, even as late as the 1970s states like Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir had statutory limits of rent set between one-third and one-half the produce (Koshy, *ibid.*) It must be remembered here, again, that the absence of registered tenancies has, obviously, resulted in massive violations of the fair rent stipulations.

A rather significant feature of the tenancy reforms is that a very narrow stratum of better-off tenants did derive some benefit from the reforms. As Patnaik points out:

Tenancy legislation, by not distinguishing between the different classes within the tenants, promoted a sharp differentiation: the poorest, being evicted and joining the ranks of landless labour, the best-off tenants, on the contrary, purchasing ownership and enlarging their holdings. Only when evictions were substantially over were

some provisions about minimum area to be left with the tenants incorporated into the laws. (Patnaik, U., 1983)

These best-off tenants, typically, were the ones who had registered tenancies and had leased in a fair amount of land. Lerche, for instance, recognises, following Srivastava (1989), that the rise to affluence of certain middle castes in east UP and Bihar is, to some extent, a consequence of land reforms (Lerche, 1998). It must be remembered here that several states had provisions in their reform legislations enabling tenants to acquire the non-resumable land of the landlord on the payment of a certain compensation. It was, obviously, in most cases only the affluent sections of the tenantry which could take advantage of such provisions.

The most ill-formulated and neglected aspect of land reforms was, of course, the implementation of land ceilings and the distribution of the surplus land to poor peasants and landless labourers. It was this component of the land reforms that the post-independence government was most non-committal and hesitant about. This hesitation is quite symbolic of the government's reluctance to carry out land reforms *at large* since, as several commentators like Parthasarathy and Raju have always emphatically maintained, implementation of land ceiling and distribution of above-ceiling land is necessarily the backbone of any effective land reforms programme (Parthasarathy *et al.*, 1972). Land ceiling is a direct intervention in the way land as an asset is distributed. The Congress government, in the immediate post-independence period, rhetoric notwithstanding, hardly took any initiative to implement land ceilings. Concrete steps to enact ceiling legislations were taken only in the Third Plan period. Different state governments enacted their legislations at different points in time, with vastly variable modalities and ceiling levels. These legislations, further, suffered from enormous loopholes which made it extremely easy for the landlords to violate. From a retrospective analysis of these loopholes, it would seem that they represented a deliberate attempt on the part of the state governments to circumvent the responsibility of land reform.

The most striking opportunity of circumvention lay in fact of the unit to which the ceiling limit would be applicable. It was desirable, for the successful implementation of the land ceiling, that a single family be made the unit of application of the ceiling, instead of individual members of the family. Chattopadhyay points out that in several states individuals were made the unit of ceiling application. As a result, the total land that could legitimately vest with the family was too high for a meaningful redistribution of land (Chattopadhyay,

1973). Further, even where the family was the unit of ceiling laws, in some states, enough provisions were added to bypass the constraints that this imposed on the resumption of land. Chattopadhyay cites the instance of Bihar. In Bihar, while the family was made the unit, there were provisions for the legitimate transfer of land, by way of gift, to the landowner's son, daughter, grandchildren, or to any other person who would inherit such land or would have a share therein. Thus, what was effected here was an undue expansion of the definition of the family which made the application of the ceiling quite meaningless. It is in this context that Mencher points out that the period following the enactment of land ceiling legislations in Tamil Nadu saw an increase in the incidence of landed property being registered in the name of women. She writes:

Land held in female names too assumes importance here. In Manjapalayam alone, 322 acres or 21 percent of the cultivable land is listed as belonging to females. Some are wives of villagers, but not all. Some are sisters married out to nearby villages or even urban places, some are dead grandmothers, some are totally unrelated to villagers, eg., the wife of a Kanchipuram shopkeeper. Sometimes, when the land belongs to a sister, it is managed so that she can get her yearly rice from her holding, but sometimes the sister may not even know that there is land in her name. Most commonly, when the land in a particular family is divided up among a number of brothers employed outside – sons with jobs far and wide – and various women live in the household or outside, it can easily be made to appear on paper as if there has been considerable break up of family (Mencher, 1975: 245).

Apart from such transfers within the family, a large number of *benami* transfers were carried out in which the transferee was often fictitious. There have also been numerous instances, as Chattopadhyay indicates, of land being transferred to someone, by someone unrelated to him or her, without the recipient's knowledge (Chattopadhyay, *ibid.*). It must be remembered that usually there would be a long gap between the enactment of a land ceiling legislation and its implementation. It was this period which was utilised by the landlords to carry out these *mala fide* transfers. However, in certain states like Madhya Pradesh, transfers made even after the law came into force were recognised (*Ibid.*).

Further, the substantial owners of land wielded a large amount of influence over the administration, particularly the local administration. As Gill points out, the landed sections

had very expansive connections with the authorities who were in charge of the implementation of land reforms. Looking at land reforms in the context of Punjab, he suggests that this influential section completely derailed the process of redistribution of land. Apart from having control over the local police, local administration and village accountants, they also had a decisive sway over the larger structures of state power even at the regional level. He writes:

These persons, men with means as they are, had an edge over the poor tillers, who could not mobilise requisite resources to compete with them. Even otherwise, they had the goodwill and patronage of the auctioneering officers on their side. As a result, the poor and needy persons, depending upon agriculture alone, had been deprived of the opportunity of purchasing these lands and such actual landless tillers of land as were occupying the same, of course, were unauthorisedly uprooted... It frustrated the cherished ideology of land for landless tillers (Gill, 1989: A-82).

Another conspicuous and convenient avenue for evasion of land ceiling was afforded by the provision in most state legislations which exempted tank fisheries, orchards, efficiently managed farms and religious institutions from their purview. Very often, as Chattopadhyay suggests, landowners would plant a few fruit-bearing trees on vast swathes of land and would get them registered as orchards in order to evade ceiling (Chattopadhyay, *ibid.*). Further, temples have always been used in large parts of India as means of concealing concentration of land. In the context of Tamil Nadu, for instance, Menon argues that temples have often been some of the largest owners of land. The temple managements would attempt to extract as much rent as possible, and frequently the rent charged on the cultivation of temple lands would be higher than that charged on other land (Menon, 1979). Temples, thus, were a prime site of land concentration, and exempting them from land ceiling implied the loss of a large amount of surplus land which could be distributed. In any case, the construction of a rudimentary temple on one's land could very easily qualify that land as belonging to a religious institution. This, again, was resorted to in numerous cases.

A significant tactic often resorted to by landlords was litigation. Article 226 of the Constitution, for instance, was quite freely employed by landlords whenever their surplus land was acquired by the state. This would often stall the process of acquisition and distribution, and in the mean time, through the exercise of their local and regional clout, the

landlords could employ extra-legal methods to trump the claims made by others – the tenants, for instance, - on the surplus land. Of course, there was very little attempt from the government (and the legislature, in general) to provide legislative immunity to the land ceiling laws which would take them outside the ambit of such motivated litigation. For instance, the central government could have made provisions for the inclusion of the land reform legislations within the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution, which it did not (Chattopadhyay, 1973).

The presence of these loopholes and problems ensured, of course, that an abysmally low amount of land was identified as surplus. Further, a very small proportion of this identified land was actually appropriated by the state, and a slender fraction of this actually distributed. Thus, as Lajedinsky points out, for instance, between the early 1960s and the end of the 1970s the states of Bihar, Mysore, Kerala and Orissa did not contribute even an acre to the surplus land (Ladejinsky, *ibid.*). A state like Andhra Pradesh, with notorious levels of land concentration, accounted for only 1400 acres of land. At the national level, he stresses, the identified surplus by the end of 1970 was just 2.4 million acres, and the distributed land just half of that. This amounted to a mere 0.3 percent of the total cultivable land in the country. The government, thus, had comprehensively failed in bringing about radical redistribution of land of any kind. Appu points out that even within official literature there was a recognition of this. He quotes the report of the Planning Commission's Task Force on Agrarian Relations published in 1973:

A broad assessment of the programmes of land reform adopted since independence is that the laws for the abolition of intermediary tenures have been implemented fairly efficiently, while in the fields of tenancy reform and ceiling on holdings, legislation has fallen short of proclaimed policy and implementation of enacted laws has been tardy and inefficient. With the abolition of intermediary interests the ownership of land became more broad-based and the erstwhile superior tenants acquired a higher social status. It should not, however, be overlooked that as a result of tenancy laws enacted in the decades prior to Independence the superior tenants had already been enjoying security of tenure and fixity of rent. It is a moot point whether the abolition of intermediary interests conferred any new economic benefit on the tenants. The programmes which could have led to a radical change in the agrarian structure and the elimination of some of the elements of exploitation in the

agrarian system and ushered in a measure of distributive justice were those of tenancy reform, ceiling on agricultural holdings, and distribution of land to the landless and small holders. As already pointed out these programmes cannot be said to have succeeded. Highly exploitative tenancy in the form of crop sharing still prevails in large parts of the country. Such tenancy arrangements have not only resulted in the perpetuation of social and economic injustice but have also become insurmountable hurdles in the path of the spread of modern technology and improved agricultural practices. Thus the overall assessment has to be that programmes of land reform adopted since independence had failed to bring about the required changes in the agrarian structure (Appu, 1974: A-72).

This failure must, of course, be located in the larger development strategy adopted by the independent Indian state. The Congress government, after independence, under the leadership of Nehru, sought to follow a path of state capitalism. It was widely felt that capitalist industrial development, of an autonomous character - which did not depend on foreign capital, was required for the overall economic development of the country. This kind of an autonomous development was possible only if the state played a major role by investing in certain core areas that could serve as the foundation for private capitalist development. Thus, the state was seen as having a key role to play in sectors such as production of capital goods, coal production, oil production etc. Further, there was a widespread consensus on the need for centralised planning. As Patnaik points out, the colonial period had been one of *laissez faire* par excellence. It was widely felt that an independent path of economic development could be chalked out only through centralised planning which attempted to coordinate investment decisions (Patnaik, P., 1998).

There were dissensions, of course, on the nature of the actual development strategy to be adopted. According to Patnaik, there were principally two kinds of development strategies which enjoyed substantial currency (*ibid.*). One was represented by what is known as the Bombay Plan of 1944. This plan envisaged state led capitalist development aimed at the replacement of the hegemony of foreign capital by that of Indian big business. It advocated the creation of a large public sector in those areas in which private investment would be too small or unremunerative, with the proposal of the withdrawal of the government from these sectors after the passage of a certain length of time. The plan did not envision any

redistribution of productive assets like land. It, understandably, largely found favour and support amongst the narrow section of Indian big capitalists.

The second kind of conception of India's development strategy can be seen to be represented by M.N. Roy's 'People's Plan'. This plan broadly communicated and encapsulated ideas of India's future development popular amongst those who subscribed to communist or leftist views. This plan recognised that planned state capitalism was absolutely essential for the autonomous development of the newly independent country. However, in order to make this process of development a widespread and broad-based one, a radical redistribution of productive assets like land was required. It, therefore, proposed radical land reforms and the containment of monopolies as essential components of a desirable development strategy (*ibid.*).

Patnaik contends that the Congress government post-independence tried to forge a path of development which lay between these two alternative strategies. Thus, while the government saw a permanent role for the public sector, and did invoke land reforms and monopoly-containment from time to time, it did not take the latter two objectives seriously. The Second Plan, for instance, which was the classic expression of the Nehru-Mahalanobis development strategy did not lay much emphasis on the very immediate need for land reforms. The entire thrust of this plan was on investment in the capital goods sector. And herein, according to Patnaik, lay the fundamental contradiction of Indian planning. The focus on capital goods production assumed that agriculture was a 'bargain sector' in which production could be easily expanded to provide wage goods for the workforce engaged in capital goods production. This, however, assumed that radical land reforms would be carried out which would increase agricultural production. Since this was never done, the heavy investment in capital goods production was bound to meet with little success. Such production would most certainly entail then a steady increase in the prices of agricultural commodities in general, and foodgrains in particular. This, in turn, would take a heavy toll on the working population.

Rao emphasises, in this context, that agricultural planning in India has always had a supply-side orientation. Agricultural production, in this scheme of planning, has almost exclusively been seen as related to questions of technological development. As a result, the concern with initiating *institutional* changes in the agrarian system has been minimal (Rao, 1994). Rao claims that this 'optimism' about the agricultural sector also extends to the question of the

outlays for agriculture in the plans. He points out that all plans after the First Plan (which apportioned agriculture a third of the total outlays), have given agriculture only between one-fourth and one-fifth of the total available public resources. This, Rao posits, is rendered even more ironic by the fact that the augmenting of private investment by public investment actually tends to be much higher in agriculture than in manufacture. The lack of adequate public investment, therefore, contributed quite sharply to the continuation of agricultural stagnation, and made the effects of the absence of institutional change even more pronounced.

Patnaik, following Kalecki, points out that one of the principal problems with the development strategy adopted by the state in independent India was the method of resource mobilisation (Patnaik, U., 1986). She contends that as a consequence of the kind of influence that big capitalists and landlords exerted over the new Indian state, taxation of these classes was never used an important source for financing public investment. As a result, there was a stress on deficit financing and indirect taxation. Both of the latter can have extremely inflationary consequences. The latter, in particular, imposes a much greater burden on the poor than on the rich on account of the greater proportion of their incomes that the poor spend on purchasing objects of mass consumption which are the kind of commodities on which indirect taxes are typically applied. Secondly, she points out that in the absence of land reforms, the levels of agricultural production will not be sufficient to feed the growing workforce in the non-agricultural sectors. This will always exert an added inflationary pressure on foodgrains. An expression of this was the terms of trade between agriculture and industries between agriculture and industry, which was decidedly in favour of the former between mid 1950s to the mid 1970s. Thirdly, she contends that the process of land reforms was indispensable even for the strategy of industrialisation. Land reforms, by improving the purchasing capacity of the mass of the population engaged in agriculture, create a substantial domestic market for the manufacturing sector. This internal market is crucial since external markets are not readily available to a newly industrialising country. The failure to carry out land reforms thus imposed a very heavy and serious constraint on even the development of the manufacturing sector.

3.3.2 The Green Revolution and Agrarian Relations

The failure to carry out land reforms, and the resultant stagnation in agricultural production, resulted in a massive crisis in food availability. The years 1964-65 and 1965-66 witnessed, on account of varied reasons including poor rainfall, a severe shortfall of foodgrains (Dasgupta, 1977). This recurring shortfall was sought to be met, in these years, through import of foodgrains and aid from other countries, principally the USA. Such food aid, particularly the notorious PL-480, it must be remembered was sought to be leveraged by the United States as an instrument of dominance at the geopolitical level. There was also at this point, amongst many circles, an apprehension that the supply of foodgrains by the food-surplus countries in the developed world to food-deficit countries in the third world could not continue for long since the former too were facing increasing constraints on agricultural production. Along these lines, a thesis forwarded by the Paddock brothers was published. According to them, widespread and severe famines would develop in several parts of the world by 1975. The United States, therefore, they proposed, should be 'selective' in providing aid to food-deficit countries. Only those countries should be aided, which have some substantial chance of dealing with the famine situation. India, the report declared, was irreparably food-deficient and therefore the United States should 'give up' on it. While there were many who were justifiably skeptical of this thesis, it serves as an expression of the direness of the food-situation which countries such as India were faced with (*ibid.*)

It was in this context, that the phenomenon referred to as the 'green revolution' has its origins. In 1966, The New Agricultural Strategy (NAS) was introduced. The new strategy was essentially a growth programme to be concentrated in certain regions which were marked by higher productivity and better infrastructural facilities. Thus, it was a strategy of focussing on those areas which were already strong in terms of agricultural production. As Rao points out, this strategy represented a fundamental shift from the earlier emphasis on publicly funded major irrigation works, with the objective of introducing irrigation to vast stretches of land which were previously unirrigated, to a stress on privately-funded minor irrigation works (Rao, *ibid.*). Of course, the strategy included the provision of government and other kinds of institutional funding. The core of this strategy lay in the intensive cultivation of certain selected areas and districts (founded on a programme of selection termed the Intensive Agricultural Districts Programme) through the use a 'package' of inputs. This package typically included high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, biochemical inputs like fertilisers,

pesticides and weedicides, use of mechanical implements like threshers, harvesters and tractors, and controlled irrigation (Chakravarty, 1973). The HYV seeds, of course, provided the fulcrum of this package. Wheat, as is quite well known, was the first crop in the cultivation of which these seeds were introduced. New kinds of seeds were imported from Mexico and Philippines and cross-bred in India to adapt them to the local conditions. It must be borne in mind that there was a fair degree of complementarity between the different kinds of inputs that constituted the package. As Dasgupta indicates, the biochemical inputs were warranted by the nature of the new seeds. These seeds consumed a greater amount of soil nutrients than traditional seeds. Thus, the use of these seeds required the increased use of fertilisers itself. Secondly, the HYV seeds had a greater vulnerability to certain kinds of pests, insects and weeds. The use of pesticides and other chemicals, thus, became a logical necessity. Further, the quickened pace of the crop cycle made it possible to cultivate two or, in some cases, even three crops a year. This required a hastening of the different component operations. The mechanisation of these operations –through the use of the tractor, harvester etc. – therefore became a requirement. Finally, the increased pace of the operations, and the tightening of the crop cycle, made the availability of controlled irrigation necessary. It was for this reason that mechanised tubewells played the significant role that they did play in the implementation of the NAS.

The areas identified for the implementation of the NAS were largely concentrated in Punjab, Haryana and western UP. It is this *selective* character which stands out as the most salient feature of the NAS. According to Rao, the adoption of the NAS is an emblematic aspect of the general failure of planning in India. Rao contends that there were broadly four possible paths that Indian planning could have taken to meet food and agricultural raw material needs (Rao, *ibid*). The first path was that of reliance on imports. This, however, could not feasibly be a long term strategy, though in the 1950s and 1960s imports were quite heavily relied upon. The second, as has been discussed, was to regard agriculture as a ‘bargain sector’. This, of course, served as the foundation of the Nehru-Mahalanobis strategy and was the guiding principle of the first three plans. The third path was that of focussing resources on certain areas which already had a fair degree of development. It was a strategy of ‘betting on the strongest’. An integral part of this path, according to Rao, was a bias against institutional reform. This was the precise strategy that the NAS represented. The adoption of this strategy represented, in a certain sense, a forsaking of the agenda of institutional reforms like land reforms. In fact, quite in contrast to the objective of land reforms, the NAS entailed a reliance

on landlords, capitalist farmers and rich peasants. These were identified as the classes that would be the driving force behind the increase in agricultural output. Thus, not only was there a bias against institutional reforms, but also against poor peasants and agricultural reforms – the classes which would potentially constitute the backbone of a strategy of institutional reform. The fourth possible strategy, of course, was that of institutional reforms itself. As has been pointed out earlier such a path could have contributed enormously to an increase in production expansion, and would also have created a substantial and much-needed domestic market for the industrial sector.

According to Rao, the adoption of the NAS represented, for the first time in Indian planning, a complete dissociation of the ideas of growth and distribution in agriculture. Before the adoption of this strategy, Rao contends, the idea of institutional reforms, no matter how nominally and ineffectively incorporated into the planning agenda, had at least a notional connection with that of the expansion of agricultural production. There was a general, and often rhetorical, recognition that the question of ending the concentration of land, and that of enhancing productivity, have an interconnection. The new agricultural strategy adopted in 1966 represents, in Rao's view, an abandonment of this very recognition. A manifestation and consequence of this was that from the 1970s a certain perceptible importance, within state policy, came to be attached to 'poverty eradication'. The Fourth Plan, for instance, incorporated separate programmes such as the Small Farmers' Development Agency (SFDA). The separation of growth from institutional reform, thus, implies a separation between growth and 'poverty eradication' as well. A notional disjunct, in other words was effected between expanding production and the welfare of overwhelmingly poor rural population.

Of course, as has been mentioned earlier, the disjunct was built into the very logic of the green revolution. The very nature of the package of inputs was such that it required a substantial amount of investment by individual farmers and peasants to be used. The richer farmers and peasants, therefore, had a distinct advantage as far as deriving the benefits of the NAS was concerned. This has resulted in a further strengthening of inequalities between the agrarian classes in the regions where the NAS has been applied. Junankar, for instance, points out that in Ferozepur district of Punjab, inequalities between rich cultivating households and capitalist farmers, on the one hand, and the poor peasants, on the other, in terms of land ownership increased over the earlier years of the green revolution (Junankar, 1975). It must

be remembered, however, that the increasing disparity that the green revolution brought with it was not a result of the *physical* character of the inputs that were. The chief reasons why small and marginal farmers could not have as much access to green revolution technology as rich farmers were *insitutional*. The institutional framework and administrative mechanisms within which the NAS unfolded were such that the rich farmers would benefit from it more. This is extremely significant since, as Dhanagare points out, often the *physical* characteristics of the input package were cited as a reason, by official implementing agencies, for making the new inputs available more easily to the larger farmers (Dhanagare, 1987). The argument posited was that the larger and richer farmers, who were often referred to as ‘progressive’ farmers, were *naturally* in a better position to put the new package to more efficient use, and therefore the focus must be on them. Dhanagare argues that this was nothing more than an untenable and unfounded pro-rich peasant bias. He indicates that the use of the new inputs, particularly the new seeds, was quite prevalent even amongst the middle and small peasants. Bhalla and Chaddha point out, for instance, in an extensive study of the impact of the green revolution on agriculture in Punjab, that often the percentage of expenditure made on the new inputs as a part of the total productive expenditure per acre was higher amongst the small peasants than amongst larger farmers (Bhalla *et al.*, 1983). The percentage of their output sold by small peasants in the market was quite substantial as well. Thus, there was no reason to assume, they concluded, that the rich farmers were *naturally* dynamic than the small peasants.

Arguing along similar lines Mencher, on the basis of a study of green revolution agriculture in Chingeput district, Tamil Nadu, points out that amongst government personnel responsible for the implementation of the NAS in this region there was almost a consensus that if the expanded production targets had to be met, one could not be bothered too much with the poor peasantry. She writes:

Consistently in interviews with agricultural officers, the impression came across that what they thought was needed to sustain the ‘green revolution’ was to forget about people with ‘uneconomic holdings’ – because these farmers really could not contribute to increased production. This was not always stated explicitly (though at times it was), but it was clearly implied by both what was said and what was left unsaid (Mencher, 1974: 313).

There was a broad and popular understanding amongst official circles, Mencher suggests, that the most pressing requirement for expanding production was to provide large farmers with as many 'incentives' to cultivate as possible. This had the consequence that most schemes and mechanisms of the distribution of the inputs of the NAS were fashioned in such a manner as to benefit the large farmers. Mencher cites the example of irrigation facilities. In Chingleput, on account of the new inputs, it became possible to cultivate a second or even a third crop. However, this required a secure irrigation, and groundwater was the most prominent source of such irrigation. However, the allocation of the loans for tubewells and pumpsets was such that it was only those farmers operating ten acres of land or more who could access this credit facility. There were numerous other such biases built into NAS mechanisms. The constraint on production faced by the poor peasantry was, therefore, not a *natural* one – it was one that was created through administrative mechanisms and policy instruments.

The argument was often made, as Mencher further highlights, that even when it came to distribution of land as a part of the pending land reforms, land would be given to those already possessing a few acres, rather than those without land, since the latter, it was assumed, would not be able to make efficient and productive use of the land (Mencher, *ibid.*) It was on the strength of this argument that often, in Tamil Nadu, when government *poramboke* land was supposed to be given to the peasantry, it was cornered largely by rich farmers and cronies of the administrators. Thus, not only did the green revolution unfold in a context marked by large concentration of land and the near-absence of land reforms, it also became one of the factors *hindering* the radical redistribution of land.

The institutional character of the disadvantage faced by the small and marginal farmers in availing of the benefits of the green revolution become important to note for another reason. As Ladejinsky points out, very often the argument is made from progressive quarters that the *technology* that constituted the green revolution had an inherent bias for the rich (Ladejinsky, 1973). The implication of this argument is that no matter what the institutional and social context of the employment of the green revolution technology, it will necessarily benefit the rich farmers exclusively. The technology is, therefore, regarded as inherently inegalitarian. Ladejinsky argues that such an argument is fundamentally misplaced. He points out that the green revolution *has* resulted in a dramatic expansion of agricultural yields at least in certain crops like wheat. Thus, between 1966 and 1973, wheat output in certain districts in Haryana, Punjab and west-UP, were almost doubled. Per acre yields in the same period, across these

regions, had an extremely high compound growth rate of 7.5 per cent per year. The problem, therefore, according to Ladejinsky, is not with the technology itself, but with the fact that large sections of the peasantry – principally the small and marginal farmers – could not adopt this technology on a sufficient scale. And the reasons for this are institutional. He points out that it is *principally* the inegalitarian agrarian structure which is responsible for the distributional effects of the green revolution. He writes:

In typical Indian conditions of great inequality of land ownership, of resources and marketed surpluses or no surpluses at all for uncounted number of farmers, income inequalities are equally unavoidable, and go way-way beyond the new technology, which, of course, did not help to smooth them out. But before placing the blame squarely at the door of the green revolution, one may ponder the Prime Minister's remark that there are two genuine majorities in India – the rich and the poor. As for those who like their statistics to prove a point, it is estimated that in 1969 out of a total rural population of 434 million, 103 million owned no land at all and another operated – not all of them necessarily owned – less than five acres per family. Taken together they represented 67 percent of the total rural population, and of that total an estimated 154 to 210 million lived in abject poverty, or at a level of Rs. 200 (\$26) per capita per year. In the face of these poverty magnitudes, not to speak of much else already noted, it ill-becomes one to expect that a new technology, born only yesterday as it were, could make any visible dent in rural poverty (Ladejinsky, *ibid*: A-137).

Thus, the shape the green revolution took was partly determined by the kind of agrarian structure and agrarian regime within which it operated. The distributional effects, thus, were coloured by the larger set of agrarian relations that obtained in the country. One significant effect that has already been pointed out was the growing inequality between the rich peasants and the small and marginal farmers. This increased inequality in the ownership or operation of productive assets like land can, of course, be explained only if one takes into account the passing of land from the poor peasantry to the larger farmers. This was an extremely widespread outcome of the adoption of the NAS. Thus, Ladejinsky points out that the green revolution entailed large-scale dispossession of the tenantry in the areas selected for the implementation of the new strategy (Ladejinsky, *ibid*). The advent of the green revolution enormously enhanced the productive value of land in these areas. As a result, either the rents

charged on land that was leased out to tenants increased enormously (from the traditional fifty percent of the output to a level as burdensome as seventy percent), or the tenants were evicted and the land brought under direct cultivation by the owners through hired labour. Even in cases where the rent was hiked up substantially, often the tenant would be unable to meet the increased demand and lose possession of the land. Such tenants would typically, then, join the ranks of agricultural labourers, or would become marginal farmers if they possessed some other meagre amount of land. There, of course, may be other processes through which proleterianisation or semi-proletarianisation occurred. Byres, for instance, in the case of Haryana points out that a curious feature of the change in distribution of operational holdings and that in landless, in the years of the green revolution in Haryana, is that while the concentration of operational holdings has increased, the proportion of the landless has not increased simultaneously (Byres, 1981). He argues that the reason for this lies in the fact that an increase in the productivity of land, in Haryana, resulted in a widespread process of larger landowners *hiring in* the land belonging to the smaller landowners. Thus, while a substantial section of the smaller landowners cease to operate any land they do not *technically* become landless. Such a process of reverse tenancy, of course, would have the same effects as the earlier kind of proletarianisation.

Apart from the process of proletarianisation, the green revolution has had a fairly detrimental impact on the condition of agricultural labourers. Patnaik, for instance, points out that the wages of agricultural workers, in terms of their nominal money value, has increased during the course of the green revolution in India as a whole, the real wages have declined on account a general inflationary trend in the economy which has been quite sharp (Patnaik, U., 1983). The theory of 'trickle down', therefore, which holds that strategies like the green revolution may sharpen inequality but still help improve the condition of the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers is unfounded. Bardhan contends, for instance, that in Punjab, Haryana and western U.P., despite production having increased by over 60 percent over the green revolution areas, there has been a decline in real wages (Bardhan, 1970). Further, he points out that despite the green revolution having resulted in a higher demand for agricultural labour, this expansion wasn't very impressive. While on the one hand, the more intensive cultivation that the new inputs brought with them required a higher amount of employment, on the other, the process of mechanisation, which became more widespread as the new strategy progressed, exerted a downward pressure on the requirement of labour.

Thus, even in terms of employment the green revolution did not imply a substantial improvement in the earnings of the agricultural labourers.

Thus, even after the implementation of the Green Revolution we find that severe inequalities in the agrarian sector persisted. In fact, the NAS contributed to a further sharpening of this inequality. It was in this context of a profoundly inegalitarian agrarian structure that the 'new farmers' movements' emerged.

Chapter Four: The Debates around the ‘New Farmers’ Movements’.

It was in the above-delineated backdrop that the ‘new farmers’ movements’ emerged. Emerging in the 1970s they could entrench themselves in those regions where the green revolution had some substantial penetration – Punjab, Haryana, western UP, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These movements had some distinctive features. Firstly, while the earlier agrarian movements were typically led by left parties, these movements were avowedly unaffiliated to any party formations. In fact, this equidistance from all political parties was a significant motif in the discourses of most of these movements. Secondly, while earlier agrarian mobilization were largely movements of the poor peasantry, tenants and agricultural labourers for land and wages, these movements were hinged on the demand for remunerative prices for agrarian products with a large degree of participation by rich farmers possession substantial amounts of productive assets. Thirdly, most of these movements have quite a loose and informal organizational structure. Finally, these movements exhibit a general reluctance to mobilize for larger structural change in a systematic manner. Thus, exertion of pressure, bargain and negotiation on issues of a very specific nature was their dominant mode of operation.

These features have led several social scientists (Lindberg, 1992) to characterise these movements as ‘new farmer movements’. This characterization has an additional implication, apart from the claim of novelty. While, most of the earlier agrarian movements have been characterised as *peasant* movements, the category of the ‘farmer’ has been used in this case. Underlying this, obviously, is a conceptual distinction between ‘peasant’ and ‘farmer’. It is claimed that peasants are agricultural producers who largely produce for subsistence, and are fairly insulated from the market even in terms of their consumption and the reproduction of their productive activity, while farmers are those producers who both in terms of their produce and their requirements are integrated with the market (Byres, 1994). On this view, since most of the participants in these movements are quite comprehensively integrated with the market (and this is presumably the reason for the centrality of the price question in their agitations), it is more appropriate to term them ‘farmer movements’ as against ‘peasant movements’.

Different aspects of these movements have been matters of great controversy amongst social scientists. Three fundamental issues of dispute can be identified – the causes of the emergence of these movements, the class nature of these movements, and the relationship between these movements and questions of caste oppression and communalism. Against the backdrop of these central points of dispute discussions have happened over several other issues – ranging from the relationship of these movements with global neo-liberalism to what the role of the state vis-à-vis agriculture has been in India. Obviously all of these questions are, to a greater or lesser degree, interconnected. The positions of different commentators on each of these points cannot, therefore, be treated in isolation from one another.

The central differential, which divides commentators on the farmers' movements, and which influences their understanding of every other aspect of these movements is the question of the class character of these movements. There are several dimensions to this question. Firstly, the question of class character concerns the classes that the leadership of the movement is drawn from. In other words, which agrarian classes, defined in terms of ownership of productive assets like land, give leadership to the movement. Secondly, it concerns the classes which the bulk of the participants belong to. Thirdly, the question of class character also concerns the issue of which classes benefit from the objectives of the movement and the manner in which the movement unfolds.

4.1. New Farmers' Movements and Class Exploitation within the Agrarian Sector

One of the earliest scholarly comments on the emerging movement in the 1970s came from Ashok Mitra (Mitra, 1977). Mitra argued that the farmer's movements were led by, and their objectives and interests were allied to, the class interests of the rural elite – in other words, the capitalist farmers. He refers to these capitalist farmers – the upper crust of the surplus farmers – as the 'rural oligarchy'. According to him there is an alliance between this rural oligarchy and monopoly capital in the exploitation of the rural and urban proletariat. He maintains that the rural oligarchy, through this alliance, derives better terms of trade, cheaper inputs and a perpetual deferment of land reforms. Monopoly capital, on the other hand, is able, in an unfettered manner, to enjoy a dominance over industrial, fiscal and monetary policies.

Writing about the Shetkari Sangathana, Gail Omvedt (Omvedt, 1980) argues that the farmer's movement was a movement largely of capitalist farmers and rich peasants, and it was only these classes which would benefit if the agitations for higher prices were successful. The immediate context in which she was writing was the successful conduct of an agitation by the Sangathana, led by the organisation's leader Sharad Joshi, for higher prices for sugarcane. Quoting statistics drawn from the 1971 Agricultural Census, she points out that 83 percent of all sugarcane in Maharashtra was grown on farms of 2 acres or more. She further argues that even this is an overestimate since village records often show separate members of big landowning families as holding 5 acres each separately (in a bid to evade appropriation of surplus land). Now, since five acres of sugarcane requires a substantial amount of capital, she concludes that the bulk of the sugarcane growers are capitalist farmers. She writes:

..it is safe to say that not only is the movement being led by the "rich peasants", it is also a movement basically *of* the rural rich which is in contradiction to the interests of the majority of the rural poor families (including agricultural labourers and poor peasants who depend on wage income) who basically require lower prices for food, higher wages for labour, and an end to atrocities, village goondaism and casteism. Even middle peasants, who buy on the market as much as they sell, have little to gain.

She goes on, by extension, to argue that these movements do nothing to eradicate rural inequalities. They do not represent even a conflict between capitalist farmers and the traditional landlords, since on account of the widespread development of capitalism in agriculture it has become nearly impossible to distinguish between the two strata. Further, the movement does not have any antagonism towards merchants either, who apart from the landed interests are the other major source of agrarian exploitation.

On the question of whether members of poorer classes of the peasantry participate in these struggles, she points out that on account of the 'village power' enjoyed by the Maratha capitalist powers, who have a long history of participation in movements, they have been able to establish a hegemony over the other agrarian classes. On whether, there is any objective basis to the perceived grievance of the capitalist farmers, she points out that even capitalist farming has a substantial amount of insecurity attached to it. She argues that as against the traditional landlord class, the rural bourgeoisie is relatively new, and therefore, is not in a

very strong position vis-à-vis industrial bourgeoisie. One may sense a certain contradiction here. If the capitalist farmer faces a fair degree of insecurity, as also weakness vis-à-vis the industrial bourgeoisie, what explains the wide village power which this class in her own account enjoys? Isn't there a contradiction between the entrenched power of the rural rich, one of the manifestations of which according to Omvedt is the Shetkari Sangathana, and claims of an insecure and weak rural capital? The problem here seems to be that there is a certain lack of historicisation of the role of the state. The existence of entrenched rural power would indicate a certain degree of patronage and support from the state, which would make the understanding of an insecure rural capital quite difficult to sustain. Since Omvedt in this piece avoids reference to the role of the state, the contradiction does not very starkly come to the fore.

Balagopal, in a 1987 piece, launches a vigorous attack on the farmer's movements on the basis of a similar understanding of the class content of these movements (Balagopal, 1987). He articulates a fundamental criticism of the concept of a 'Bharat'-versus-'India' antagonism in which the 'Bharat' or rural India is seen as an undifferentiated whole. He takes issue with the logic of this projected antagonism on four counts. Firstly, he believes that the idea of 'Bharat' and 'India' leads one to the false impression that there is no exploitation within the industrial sector. It would seem, on this view, that there are no poor and exploited people in the towns and the cities. Secondly, the alleged antagonism is based on the understanding that there is exploitation in the countryside. The peasantry is, therefore, projected as an undifferentiated 'community'. Thirdly, Balagopal maintains that the implicit idea behind the 'Bharat' formulation is that everyone in the countryside has essentially the same interest and the necessary manifestation of that interest is the demand for remunerative prices. And, fourthly, the 'Bharat' formulation, according to him, carries the idea that no one belonging to the countryside has any interest in urban India.

Countering the fourth aspect of the 'Bharat' formulation in detail, Balagopal points out that on account of the nature of the development of agriculture in modern India, a significant link has been established between the rural rich and the cities. He claims that an increasing proportion of agrarian surplus is being transferred by this elite to trade and businesses in the cities. Such capital, thus, straddles both town and the countryside. Thus, a water-tight separation between 'Bharat' and 'India' is thus untenable. Further, Balagopal argues that it is exactly this agrarian class which has established a deep connection with the towns that is at

the forefront of the farmer's movements. The ideology of the movements, according to him, is the ideology of this class.

Finally, he counters claims made by commentators like Sahasrabudhey (Sahasrabudhey, 1986) that Indian political economy is marked by 'internal colonialism', wherein the urban industrial sector exploits the rural sector. Sahasrabudhey's formulation is a parallel of the 'Bharat'-'India' divide – a divide between 'boycotted' or 'marginalised' society and 'westernised' society. Balagopal points out that the ideology behind such formulations is nothing more than a way of concealing class exploitation and caste oppression within the villages. It serves as a cover-up for the exploitation of the rural poor by the rural rich. It, therefore, is both an expression and instrument of hegemony.

Nadkarni too takes issue with the idea of internal colonialism (Nadkarni, 1987). He points out that the leaders of these movements, like Nanjundaswamy of the KRRS, have often insisted that they have to fight a second liberation struggle to free villages from the exploitation of the cities. Nadkarni finds this notion to be of Gandhian and Lohiaite lineage, and maintains that this argument does not hold water. Nadkarni points out that though in the late seventies terms of trade between agriculture and industry had shown a perceptible decline to the detriment of the former, in the long run, terms of trade have been steadily moving in favour of agriculture. Thus, claims of internal colonialism are completely unfounded. Nadkarni perceives a strong danger that the ideology and the strength of the movement has so crystallized (what he refers to as 'ideological fixation') that even when there is no objective basis for agitations on the price issue (for instance, in a situation when the terms of trade for agriculture unqualified improve rather than decline), such agitations may still be used by the rural elite *purely* for the purpose of strengthening their dominance over the other agrarian classes.

Tom Brass maintains that the farmer's movements are conservative in character, and aim at the preservation of the privileges of the rural rich (Brass, 1994). He goes further and adds that the ideology of these movements is strongly linked with a cultural/ethnic nationalism which can very easily feed into right wing fascist tendencies. Brass holds that by ignoring peasant differentiation, the ideology necessarily has to invoke the idea of the peasantry as a 'community' and, therefore, as a cultural category. The movements are, therefore, populist in character which completely take attention away from the exploitation and oppression in the countryside, and, in fact, often, feeds into them. He points out that the movements are,

essentially, anti-industrial and anti-modern in character. They construct a strict dichotomy between the peasantry, on the one hand, which is projected as the bearer of whatever is 'traditional', and the 'westernised', modern, urban-industrial sector on the other. This 'cultural' peasantry is then equated with the nation. This, according to Brass, is the essence of the 'Bharat' versus 'India' formulation. Thus, the oppressive cultural values which undergird the dominance of the rural elite are presented as national culture. Thus, this idea of the nation has class exploitation, caste and gender oppression, and communal dominance, built into it. This, Brass believes, is structurally analogous to the ideology which underlay the emergence of German fascism. He also suggests that the cultural nationalism of the RSS-BJP-VHP combine is not very different from this. It too operates with a notion of undifferentiated 'tradition' which is imperilled by the intrusion of 'western' science and modernity. The Shetkari Sangathana's search for 'alternative development' can thus be located within the same dynamic.

It is precisely this invocation of the undifferentiated 'peasant' culture, that enables the 'new' farmer's movements to ignore, and often suppress, the contradiction between the rich peasantry and agricultural labour. Demands like minimum wages for farm labour are completely given a go-by, or even when acknowledged, the acknowledgement occurs in a purely rhetorical manner. It is often claimed, particularly by Sharad Joshi of Shetkari Sangathan and Tikait of BKU, UP, that the condition of the agricultural labourers can improve only when that of the farmers improves. Thus, the 'insecurity' and 'misery' of the capitalist farmers is treated as an excuse for dismissing the demands of rural labour for better terms and conditions of work.

Further, Brass points out that the class character of the movements, particularly the Shetkari Sangathana, is established beyond doubt by the ambivalence of these movements towards imperialism and foreign finance capital. The Shetkari Sangathana, for instance, is strongly supportive of the GATT agreement and the framework of the Dunkel Draft. The GATT agreement which provides for the liberalisation of trade, according to Brass, would be disastrous for the mass of the peasantry, and the only class which stands to gain anything is the upper crust of the rich peasantry which will then have the unfettered license to export their produce. The Shetkari Sangathana, by endorsing the GATT, is revealing that it is a movement of the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers.

The support to GATT, however, according to Brass suffers from a fundamental short-sightedness, apart from being coloured by class interests. The GATT agreement will make possible the inundation of the Indian food market by the agricultural produce of the first world. This will inevitably take a toll, Brass maintains on the capitalist farmers as well. Of course, as has been pointed out by Banaji (Banaji, 1994), the response from sections of the rich farmer lobby to this observation often tends to be that the Indian 'peasantry' is strong and mature enough to compete in the global market. This, of course, is an inconsistency. If the rural sector (or 'Bharat') has been consistently exploited and oppressed by the industrial sector (or 'India'), then where does this ability to compete in the global market come from? This is a question which the Sangathana does not address in any manner, and even Brass does not provide any systematic explanation for the existence of this contradiction. An explanation of this contradiction is rendered even more urgent in light of the fact that M.S. Tikait of the BKU and Nanundaswamy of KRRS have been consistently outspoken against the GATT and the Dunkel Draft, as also generally against the entry of foreign finance capital in agriculture.

Dhanagare argues that the position of the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers, which finds expression in the form of the movements can be understood not in terms of dominance, in terms of the Gramscian formulation of 'hegemony' (Dhanagare, 1994). He argues that the participation of the poor peasantry in these movements cannot be understood as an expression of their class interest, since the movements do not take such interests forward at all. He quotes Gramsci:

...not through any special organisation of force but because it is able to go beyond its narrow corporate interests, exert a moral and intellectual leadership and make compromises with a variety of allies who are unified in a social block - of forces (which) represent a basis of consent for certain order in which the hegemony of the dominant class is created and recreated. (ibid, 88).

According to Dhanagare, the social movements represent this kind of a social block, which is led by the rich peasants and capitalist farmers who are able to exert to their hegemony over the poor peasantry. It is on account of this, that other agrarian classes whose class interests are not advanced by the farmer's movements participate in the movements. The populist discourse of 'peasant unity', of an undifferentiated countryside, therefore, is a strategic tool in the establishment and perpetuation of this hegemony. Dhanagare holds, further, that the

capitalist farmers have been able to enjoy this hegemony on account of their improved position resulting from land reforms and the green revolution.

Dhanagare, however, takes issue with Balagopal's thesis that it is that part of the rural propertied classes which has struck links with the towns that lends its ideology to the farmer's movements. This seems implausible to Dhanagare. Though he does not disagree with the existence of such a class, he thinks it is extremely unlikely that a class with such linkages would invoke a dichotomy between rural India and urban India in which the whole of the latter is seen to be unqualifiedly exploiting the former.

Banaji claims that the farmers' movements suffer from certain basic weaknesses (Banaji, 1994). He suggests, firstly, that since the social base of the movements has been drawn largely from certain locally dominant castes - Jats in UP and Marathas in Maharashtra, these movements have not been able to draw in members of subordinate castes in sufficient numbers. Secondly, the geographical spread of these movements has been limited. This, it must be remembered is not completely unconnected from the previous point since the dominance of these castes is also geographically specific. Thirdly, despite the rhetoric of being unconnected with political party formations, the movements, have from time to time, allied themselves with political parties. Banaji mentions the instance of the BKU in UP lending implicit support to the BJP in 1991. Further, in the late 1980s, the movements got embroiled in several inter-party and inner-party conflicts (instances of the latter are the involvement of certain factions of the Congress (I) in the agitations of the Shetkari Sangathana, and the factional fights within the BKU in Punjab over the question of the Akali Dal and Sikh militancy).

Banaji then goes on to argue that on account of certain aspects of the mobilisation happening on the lines of caste and 'community', these movements have not been able to stand up to the onslaught of the Hindutva political formations in the late eighties and the early nineties. He points out that in west UP, substantial sections of the base of the BKU has moved over to the BJP. Further, Tikait, towards the early nineties, became increasingly ambivalent on the question of communalism. In Karnataka, Banaji points out, there is an increasing convergence between the discourse of Nanjundaswamy and the KRRS, on the hand, and the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, on the other, which is completely controlled by the RSS.

Zoya Hasan elaborates on this connection between the farmer movements and the Hindutva right wing, by focusing on the BKU in UP (Zoya, 1989, 1994). She argues that there is a fundamental structural similarity between the discourse of the farmer's movements and that of the cultural nationalism of the Hindutva groups. While the farmer's movements project a cultural 'community' of peasants, without contradictions of caste and class within itself, which has mobilise itself against a culturally 'alien' western 'other', on the one hand, the Hindutva forces seek to project and mobilise an undifferentiated Hindu 'community' against a common enemy - the Muslim community. Underpinning both the discourses is the concealed dominance of certain specific classes and castes which are hegemonic.

The contradictions and tensions that were thus sought to be concealed came to the surface, according to Hasan, when the Mandal Commission Report was attempted to be implemented by the V.P. Singh government. Since the Jats in west UP, who constituted the core of the base of the BKU, did not fall within the ambit of the 'Other Backward Classes' who would benefit from the reservations, there was major discontentment within the ranks of the BKU against these reservations. A polarisation emerged as well, since the BKU had also till that point some participation from the lower castes. This polarisation was then exploited by the BJP which launched a massive and violent campaign both against the reservations, and on the lines of the Ayodhya issue. The upper caste discontentment against reservations, thus, were sought to be channelised by the right wing groups against Muslims. A large number of the members of the BKU were lured by this campaign, and this enormously weakened the influence of the BKU in UP. It, further, took a toll on the 'neutral' and 'secular' credentials of the BKU, which until then M.S. Tikait had cultivated quite carefully and painstakingly. Thus, it was because of the structural affinity between the discourses of the farmer movements and that of the right wing, that these movements could not effectively counter the menace of communalism.

Gopal Guru, again alleging such fundamental conservativeness, takes exception to one particular campaign within these movements - the Laxmi Mukti campaign of the Shetkari Sangathana(Guru, 1992). The Sangathana in its women's conference in Chandwad in 1986, passed certain resolutions towards the provision of land rights to women. It had been argued in the conference that the land system carried an inherent bias against women which imposed on them several disadvantages. A campaign should be launched, therefore, for the transfer of a part of the land within the family to the women of the family. The slogan which subsumed

such envisioned changes was 'Stree Shakti'. Following these resolutions, Sharad Joshi launched the Lakshmi Mukti campaign. The campaign involved the voluntary gifting of land by husbands to wives in peasant households. Guru points out several problems with this. Firstly, he suggests that the campaign involved a shift from 'Stree Mukti' to 'Lakshmi Mukti', in other words a shift from all women to just married women, which ensured that even these allegedly emancipatory changes were brought about within the existent patriarchal framework. Secondly, the campaign was completely voluntary in nature - the land had to be gifted to the women, it did not pass to the women as a matter of right. The question of how much land, and which part of the land to be transferred was to be decided completely by the husband. As a result, it was very often the case that even in those households in which land had been transferred, the transferred portion was extremely small and inferior in quality. Further, it was frequently found that while land had been transferred the husband still retained complete ownership of and control over pesticides, fertilisers and other inputs. Thirdly, Guru claims that even within the transfer of land the traditional gendered division of labour was reproduced. The campaign had a provision that the land transferred to the woman would be used for subsistence farming and not production for the market. Thus, the men, in the scheme of the campaign, would cultivate for the market, and the woman for the household. This would result, Guru maintains in the reproduction of the very same patriarchal pattern which the campaign was professedly initiated to combat. Finally, the transfer of land was extremely often used as a way of bypassing the land ceiling legislations (This is pointed out by Brass as well [Brass, 1994]). Thus, Gopal Guru concludes that the campaign, and the movement it was embedded within, while having a radical rhetoric was extremely conservative as far as its implications on gender and other axes of social inequality are concerned.

4.2. The Agrarian Sector as a Whole as a Victim of Exploitation

Cornelia Lenneberg, in a 1988 piece, takes up cudgels for the farmers' movements, particularly the Shetkari Sangathana (Lenneberg, 1988). She points out that the thesis that most of the sugarcane growers are capitalist farmers, which Omvedt had advanced was mistaken. Most sugarcane growers, she points out, grow sugarcane on only a part of their land since sugarcane requires perennial irrigation. Further, in a number of cases sugarcane is grown in rotation with other crops. Thus, taking the fact of growing sugarcane as conclusive

evidence that the farmer must necessarily have access to substantial amounts of capital is mistaken. Lenneberg maintains that the fundamental error behind these kind of positions lies in a wrong understanding of the agrarian changes that have been happening in India, and consequently, of the agrarian structure. She claims that the impression that capitalist development in agriculture is resulting in a neat class polarisation, wherein the middle peasantry is gradually vanishing, is wrong. The middle peasantry is a substantial presence in the Indian countryside. What has happened as a result of the development of capitalism, and relatedly the green revolution, is that the middle peasants are now increasingly selling their produce in the market. And this despite the fact that these peasants at the end of the cropping cycle are hardly left with any surplus. Thus, to see market participation as an indubitable sign of capitalist farming would be wrong. And it is these peasants, according to Lenneberg, who form the core of the farmers' movements, particularly the Shetkari Sangathana.

Lenneberg does not deny that there is a strong presence of rich peasants and capitalist farmers in the leadership of the movement. But despite this, she maintains, the bulk of the participants in the movement belong to the middle peasantry, and also the ideology of the movement is that of the middle peasantry. She contends that this movement has resulted in a large process of democratisation in the Maharashtra countryside. The middle peasants who are now increasingly exposed to the vagaries of the market have finally found a political voice in the form of these movements.

It must be remembered that the criterion which Lenneberg uses to identify the middle peasants as a class is in terms of the size of land holdings - the middle peasants are those who hold between five and twenty five acres of land. There are several problems here. Firstly, using the size of land holding as the sole criterion for identifying classes is itself problematic. The quality of land would depend on geographical features, climatic attributes, cropping history, presence of irrigation, kind of irrigation etc. Thus, the possession a certain amount of areas, in terms of the capacity to produce, can mean very different things in different geographical and institutional contexts. (Athreya *et al.*, 1990). But even if land were used as the sole criterion, to say that someone owning 25 acres of land, in the context of an agrarian economy marked by extreme land hunger, is a middle peasant is quite unconvincing. This is true regardless of the proportion of land which actually goes into the cultivation of cash crops. This is because, as Dhanagare points out, the very control over land brings with it certain powers and privileges within the rural economy, even if cultivation is for some time

withheld (Dhangare, 1994).

Staffan Lindberg has argued largely on the lines of Lenneberg (Lindberg, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997). He points out that the Green Revolution has resulted in widespread commercialisation. This means that large sections of the peasantry, and not just the rural rich, have gotten integrated with the market. They are now dependent on the market both for the sale of their produce, as also for the purchase of inputs like fertilizers, pesticides etc. as also for consumption requirements like food. This means that a large part of the peasantry is exposed to fluctuations of the market in terms of costs, revenue and food purchase. This, according to Lindberg, has resulted in distress across the middle peasantry. The farmer movements are, therefore, responses of this distressed and insecure peasantry. This peasantry requires remunerative prices for their output, and cheaper inputs.

Incidentally, the notion of class which Lindberg employs is that of the peasant's ability to reproduce himself or herself and his or her farm, as has been proposed by Athreya *et al.* Therefore, he does not depend on the holding-size criterion as Lenneberg does. It is despite this that he maintains that the spine of the farmer's movements, including the Shetkari Sangathana and the BKU, are the middle peasants. As far as the poor peasantry and the agricultural workers are concerned, who earn their living principally through working on other people's farms, Lindberg maintains that even they stand to gain from the movements, since an improvement in the condition of the middle and rich peasantry would also mean higher wages for them. This is extremely debatable. Byres (Byres, 1981) has categorically posited that the wage levels of agricultural workers has depended on their strength as a class-in-itself, in other words, on class action. Thus, an improvement in the condition and profitability of their employers will not necessarily translate into an increase in wages.

Further, Lindberg argues that the 'new farmer movements' can be placed squarely within the category of the 'new social movements'. (Lindberg, 1992). These movements, therefore, have a certain flexibility that enables them to launch multi-pronged and varied kinds of attacks on the status quo. These movements also, by and large operate, on the basis of identity and maintain a long distance from political parties and the state. It is because of this flexibility and apoliticalness, Lindberg argues, that these movements have been able to steer clear of communalism and the Hindutva forces. In fact, he cites the efforts of the Shetkari Sangathana in combatting commmunalism in the form of the Shiv Sena as remarkable and effective. He

completely avoids references to the allegations that a number of functionaries of the Shetkari Sangathana moved over to the Shiv Sena, or at least sympathised with latter. Further, he scrupulously avoids engaging with arguments which highlight the caste-oppressive and gendered nature of the discourse of the farmer's movements.

Another extremely problematic aspect of Lindberg's theses is that he believes that the Shetkari Sangathana is correct in endorsing the GATT and the Dunkel draft. It would seem that he shares the perception of the Sangathana that the GATT is advantageous for the peasantry at large because it would remove the unnecessary intervention of the state in the agricultural market. This is an extremely contestable position. As has been pointed out earlier the GATT agreement could mean ruin for a vast majority of the farmers, including sections of the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers. (Krishna Rao, 1997).

Omvedt in 1994, in a marked shift from her earlier evaluation of the farmer's movements, argues that there has been a thoroughgoing exploitation of the agrarian sector by the urban industrial sector. Her essential position is that the 'Nehruvian' development strategy which was followed in independent India was essentially one of rapid industrialisation at the expense of the agricultural sector. She writes:

An analysis of India's development policy and practice, usually called the 'Nehru' model, or the 'Nehru-Mahalanobis model' after the economist who dominated early Indian planning, makes it clear that the framers of the development planning effort sought consciously to utilize agriculture for building up the growth of industry. Nehru himself had been dedicated to building a modern, industrial India with a dominating public sector; 'socialism' was something he saw not in terms of the rule of the working class but rather as a rational, managed economy, the antidote to the 'bania civilisation of the West [Nehru, 1960]. In fact Nehru as much as Gandhi operated in terms of a trusteeship notion, the difference being that Gandhi saw private capitalists as potential trustees of mass interests, whereas Nehru believed that this could be done by an elite-managed state. Just as crucial were assumptions of the inherent backwardness of agriculture and the belief that surpluses extracted from agriculture could and should be used for industrial growth, and that even for the modernization of agriculture itself the technology and the impetus have to come from without (Omvedt, 1994: 130).

Omvedt, therefore, does not see much of a distinction between the intervention of the state and that of private capital. As a consequence, despite her characterization of the state as 'elite-managed', suffers from a certain lack of social specification. This, again, reflects an understanding of the industrial sector and the agrarian sector as homogenous entities devoid of relevant internal differentiation. She points out, focusing on the Shetkari Sangathana, that the farmers' movements, while carrying out a materialist analysis of Indian society, have attempted to plug what she thinks are gaps within Marxist theory. She contends that the movements have developed an analysis which does not confine itself to property relations and the market. Their analysis is firmly focused on the category of exploitation. These movements recognize, she contends, that surplus is not primarily extracted through the market and relations of property, but through force and coercion. The primary mechanism of surplus appropriation, according to them, therefore, is from the agrarian sector to the industrial sector through the skewed pricing policies of the state. This analysis, again, becomes the foundation for the thesis of a 'Bharat' confronting an 'India'.

Of course, she points out that the distinction between 'Bharat' and 'India' is not an oversimplified one. She stresses that Joshi has consistently maintained that there are 'representatives' of 'Bharat' even in the cities – namely, the slum and pavement dwellers. Similarly, the countryside, too, has representatives of India – the exploiting local officials and administrators. Omvedt points out that in the terminology of the Sangathana, there are frequent references to 'urban dadas and rural gundas'. Thus, effectively, the argument that is made is that the even within the agrarian sector the exploitation that exists is of those who live in the countryside by those from outside of it. Similarly, even the exploitation of the urban poor represents the same axis of exploitation and oppression. It is quite irrelevant, therefore, according to this argument, to talk about exploitation of one agrarian class by another. Another significant aspect which emerges from the above extract is that the urban poor are not understood to be workers, either in the organized or the unorganized sector, but pavement and slum dwellers. This interpretation of the category of the urban poor is interesting since it reveals that processes of production, and their position within these processes, are not what define the poor, but *differences* such as the fact that they reside in slums. This serves, it may quite plausibly be hazarded, to conceal the stark kind of exploitation within the industrial sector. This is quite necessary if the theoretical schema posed by the Sangathana and by Omvedt, herself, is to be sustained. If the entire industrial

sector is to be seen as the exploiter of the entire agricultural sector, then differentiation, *even within the industrial sector*, becomes a problem.

This, of course, is accompanied by a specific characterization of the larger nature of the post-independence political regime in the country. It is claimed that on the attainment of political independence from Britain, transcontinental colonialism was replaced by internal colonialism. There emerged a 'dualistic system' in which the industrial sector, through the mechanism of the state, exploited the agrarian sector. Political independence, on this account, therefore, just meant that the exploiter of the countryside was merely changed. The exploitation remained.

The above analysis is attended by a very specific analysis of the position of agricultural labourers. Omvedt points out that the Sangathana has very consistently demanded a relatively high level of minimum wages for agricultural labour. It was Joshi's suggestion, she highlights, that minimum wages for agricultural labour must be on a par with the minimum remuneration received by a soldier in the Indian army. The basis for this was the dictum of *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*. Joshi proposed in 1987 that the minimum daily wage for agricultural labour be set at the level Rs. 25. This, at that time, was much higher than any legally established minimum wage. However, the argument advanced on the question of minimum wage was that as long as the government does not ensure 'remunerative' prices, the farmers will not be able to pay labourers minimum wages. The satisfaction of the demand of higher prices for agricultural produce was, thus, made a *precondition* for the payment of minimum wages. This is extremely significant. The understanding of agrarian relations being projected is that what accounts for the poor condition of the agricultural labourers is the fact that the medium and large farmers, who employ agricultural labour, are themselves in distress. Thus, the low wages being received by the agricultural workers are made out to be a function of the *general* exploitation of the agrarian sector, rather than the exploitation of agricultural labour by large and medium farmers.

This understanding emerged very starkly in the recommendations of the Standing Advisory Committee in Agriculture, instituted by the V.P. Singh government in 1990, and headed by Sharad Joshi. The committee recommended that the minimum wages proposed should become a part of the calculation of costs of cultivation on the basis of which the support prices for different crops are computed. This, however, came into conflict with the proposals

of the 'Expert Committee for Calculating the Costs of Cultivation in Agriculture', headed by C. Hanumantha Rao. Hanumantha Rao objected to the inclusion of minimum wages in the cost of cultivation. The argument, Omvedt explains, was that the wages of agricultural labour which were *actually paid* should be included in the calculation of cost of cultivation. This argument, it is not difficult to see, worked on the understanding that the wages that were actually paid were not determined either by the legal wage level or by the capacity of the farmers to pay, but by factors other than that. It has already been pointed out earlier that wage levels in agriculture primarily depend on the bargaining power of the class of agricultural labourers. Sharad Joshi's understanding, which is the one Omvedt endorses, thus involves a lack of the recognition of the kind of *class* relations that exists between the agricultural labourers and their employers.

Omvedt emphasizes that in consonance with the view of the state as the principal exploiter of the peasantry, the Sangathana has always maintained an opposition to the system of agricultural subsidies itself. Sharad Joshi argues that instead of subsidies, which only result in the fattening of 'inefficient' public sector fertilizer companies, their employees and bureaucrats, the state should incorporate higher non-subsidized prices of fertilizers, pesticides etc. into the support prices. Thus, the state should withdraw from the direct provisioning of inputs. There seems to be a deep problem in this kind of argumentation which Omvedt does not appear to recognize. The problems related to the inefficiency of government intervention would also attend the system of support prices as well. Further, in terms of government expenditure, even in Joshi's proposal, the fiscal burden of the subsidy remains. Essentially, therefore, what seems to be problematic to Joshi is the existence and operation of public sector fertilizer companies. The logical outcome of his argument, though unstated, would be that public companies should withdraw from fertilizer production, and private companies should take over. Such an argument seems to be firmly tied up with the neo-liberal thrust on structural adjustment. Apart from the general iniquitous consequences of the process of such adjustment, which has been quite well documented [see for instance Chandrashekhar *et al.*(?)], the shift proposed by Joshi in this instance would have severely detrimental consequences for the small and marginal farmers. Small and marginal peasants, on account of the kind of local influence exerted by the larger farmers, typically find it very difficult to avail of the provisioning of support prices. Often such peasants have to make distress sales of their produce to meet their production or consumption requirements. It must also be remembered that this class of peasants also finds securing institutional credit a rather

formidable task. These factors make the public provisioning of cheap fertilizers, pesticides etc. extremely important for these most vulnerable strata of the peasantry. The argument, therefore, of the dismantling of the subsidy regime would be congruous with the interests of only a narrow section of the peasantry, and would lead to a further pauperization of small and marginal farmers. The fact that Joshi makes this argument for such withdrawal of government intervention so consistently can very plausibly be seen as a demonstration of the specific *class* entrenchment of the Sangathana as a movement.

There also emerged another kind of argumentation highlighting traditional forms of solidarity within the farmers' movements. Sahay, for instance, argues that contrary to the perception that caste plays a debilitating and divisive role as far as agrarian mobilization is concerned, in the case of the farmers' movements, particularly the BKU in western UP, caste has served as a source of cohesion (Sahay, 2004). Highlighting the manner in which the *khaps* played a crucial organizational role in the functioning of the BKU, he argues that the fact that most of the peasant activists belonged to the community of *jats*, lent an ethos of equality to the working of the union. He points out that despite the fact that the BKU had a constitution, the actual organization was structured on traditional lines. Thus, the *sarva khap* (an umbrella congregation of all major khaps in the region) was successfully utilized by Tikait as an organizational bedrock.

This traditional framework and the alleged equality that it entailed was supplemented by the mobilization of several traditional motifs and practices. The communal smoking of the *hookah* was one such practice. Smoking a *hookah* together carried with it the symbolic message of a kind of fraternal equality. The term that was associated with this kind of a communal parity was *bhaichara*. Sahay writes:

Hookah is not just a traditional smoking instrument for the farmers of western UP, it is also a cultural instrument that symbolizes *bhaichara* (brotherhood). The persons who share the same *hookah* are believed to be united with each other based on the idea of brotherhood. Generally, in the villages of western UP, the persons belonging to the same caste get together regularly and share a *hookah*. Gupta observes that the members of a cultivating caste, such as the Jat, do not mind sharing a *hookah* with other cultivating castes like the Tyagi, Rawa or Gurjar. The villagers generally say that 'to smoke a *hookah* alone is a sign of misfortune, but to smoke a *hookah* in a

panchayat or gathering is a sign of good fortune.’ ..The BKU used this cultural instrument in its panchayats or agitations to arouse the feeling of brotherhood among the farmers of different social classes. In the BKU panchayat, it is always possible to see the farmers in groups sharing the same *hookah* by turns. Many newspapers and magazines have published photographs of the BKU farmers and their *chaudhury* sharing a *hookah* during panchayats and agitations (Sahay, *ibid.*: 410)

Apart from the *hookah*, Sahay argues, there were several other religious motifs that were employed in the course of the proceedings of the BKU. The *yagna*, a Hindu ritual involving sacrificial fire, was often performed at the sites of agitation. There was a constant attempt on Tikait’s part, Sahay points out, to project the movement of the union as *dharmayuddh*, or a religiously ordained righteous war. On certain occasions, Tikait also went to the extent of proclaiming that it was god who had ordered him to fight for the cause of the cultivators.

It was these practices, and the loose informal traditionally organized structure of the union, according to Sahay, which gave the functioning of the BKU its democratic character. As pointed out earlier, he believes that the sense of fraternity, which the invocation of traditional symbols, practices and organizational patterns induced, enabled the organization to function without a rigid hierarchy and yet work in a disciplined manner. Tikait, further, through his leadership would ensure that the sense of horizontality is always maintained. In Sahay’s view, he achieved this partly through the use of the traditional concept of *khap chaudhury*.

He writes:

He never presented himself as a leader of a formal registered union before the farmers, but as a *chaudhury* of his farming community. As he reasons, the farmers do not trust a *neta* (leader), whom they see as power mongering to realize his self-interest, whereas a *chaudhury* is believed to be working for the well-being of his community or *khap*. The traditions of clan-community make the farmers believe in the pristine sanctity of *khap-chaudhuryship*. A *khap chaudhury* is held in high esteem because he is considered to be a person of high moral character (Sahay, *ibid.*: 408).

The faith in the traditional position of the *chaudhury* thus cemented the *bhaichara* that served as the principal organizational bond that lent unity to the functioning of the BKU. Further, one also gets a sense here of how the traditional framework of the BKU contributed to the

maintenance of the non-political stance of the BKU. A traditional pattern of organizational authority was made to stand in for political leadership, thereby fulfilling the role that leadership by a political party may have played. Sahay further implies that supposed the righteousness, purity and honour of traditional leadership were actively employed to discredit participation and participants in mainstream politics. This, of course, was boosted by the proud irreverence that Tikait consciously cultivated towards political leaders. One such instance was when during a rally in 1988, he stated: 'Let there be two pyres, place him [Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister] on one and I will sit on the other. Light the pyres. We believe that he who is truthful cannot be affected by fire.' (Sahay, *ibid.*: 409).

Sahay contends that as long as the BKU operated strictly within the rubric of the traditional *khap*, and maintained the strong aversion to mainstream political leaders and parties, the union retained its capacity to mobilize large numbers of farmers. However, as Tikait's anti-politician stance eroded in practice, as he became increasingly proximate to the Janata Dal, BKU began to lose its influence over the lives of farmers in the region. Sahay claims that this shift made the union lose credibility in the eyes of the farmers in a big way. The thrust of Sahay's argument, thus seems to be, that as long as the discourse and practice of the union was structured on traditional lines the union succeeded in mobilizing farmers, and when it moved away from this to more modern forms of mobilization its ability to rally farmers suffered. He concludes from this that, as opposed to certain widespread notions in sociological literature, caste can provide a firm and effective foundation for agrarian mobilization.

There seem to be certain questions left unanswered in Sahay's analysis. Sahay assumes that most of the Jat peasants who participated in the BKU were independent peasant proprietors. However, this assumption is founded on data that purely pertains to the size of landholdings. Sahay points out that in Bhaju (a village in Muzaffarnagar district), 467 out of a total of 526 households (i.e., 89 per cent) who own land, do not own more than eight acres of land. The largest landowner owns nineteen acres of land. This is taken to suggest that there is a certain pronounced equality in terms of landholdings as far as the different landowning households are concerned. Now, there are several problems here. Firstly, the pattern of landownership itself cannot be a completely reliable indicator as far as class relations are concerned. Secondly, even from the given data it cannot be easily inferred that there is negligible land concentration. The above figures reveal that 11 per cent of the households do own more than

eight acres of land. Without determining what the different sizes of different landholdings are within this class, it cannot be said that even within the cultivating classes there is a fair degree of equality. For instance, if the average size of landholdings within the class of the remaining 11 per cent of the households turns out to be extremely high, and that in the class of the 89 percent of the households turns out to be extremely low, that would represent a rather inegalitarian agrarian structure. In other words, what is important here is to have an idea of the proportion of land held by the different size classes. As has been mentioned earlier, numerous exploitative relations can obtain between large farmers who own about twenty acres of perennially cultivated land, on the one hand, and those who own negligible amounts of land with irrigation of less constancy.

If different classes, therefore, do have a presence within the fold of the BKU, it becomes important to look at the relationship between them with respect to the movement. It would, then, become significant to look at which class gives leadership to the movement. Relatedly, it would be necessary to understand the congruence, or otherwise, between the demands of the movement and the interests of the different classes.

Further, Sahay does not regard the overwhelming dominance of *jats* in the BKU as a constraint on the evolution and direction of the movement. The extent to which this predominance made the movement vulnerable to the lure of the Hindu right wing, as has been discussed earlier, does not seem to be a consideration with Sahay at all. Furthermore, the manner in which this caste predominance impacted upon the attitude of the movement towards agricultural labourers, who typically belonged to the dalit castes, does not come up for any serious discussion. This is quite significant particularly because of the inability of the movement to address the interests of the landless labourers – the question of agricultural wages, for instance, - can be seen as one of the reasons that the movement could not garner the strength that it could have. Surely, the absence of a hegemony over a class as sizeable as that of landless labourers should be an important factor in the examination of any agrarian mobilization. The cultural/religious motifs that Sahay cites must also be placed in relation to this class.

There seems to be a deeper problem here. Despite mentioning the existence of class differences in the countryside, Sahay's mode of analysis still operates within the schema of seeing the agrarian population as an undifferentiated whole. The very token consideration of

the class of landless labourers would strongly suggest that this is the case. Sahay, in a sense, dismisses the factor of the presence of landless labour by pointing out that non-agricultural work is a major source of income for them in west UP. However, this characterization does not permit one to discount the significance of this class in agrarian relations and dynamics, since in numerous regions non-farm employment account for a substantial portion of the income of landless labour (see Bhalla, 1989). The presence of this source of income in west UP does not imply that this class has ceased to be an *agrarian* class. Such discounting would be similar to the exclusion of large farmers from an investigation of agrarian dynamics purely because they may have sources of non-agricultural income through non-farm investment of their surpluses.

Gupta, while sharing Sahay's understatement and underevaluation of the significance of the existence of different agrarian classes and the relations between them, diverges from his analysis in certain crucial respects (Gupta, 1992). Gupta points out that often the examination of rural societies, in general, and that of agrarian mobilization, in particular, suffers from a certain essentialisation of the peasantry. In this scheme of essentialisation, peasants are assumed to have a 'rural mentality' which is peculiar to those residing in the countryside and which is fundamentally incommensurable with the 'mentality' of those in urban areas. This mentality is supposed to be marked by pre-modern irrationality and insularity. This projection happens, Gupta argues, in a completely decontextualised and ahistorical way. Peasants are supposed to possess this 'peculiar' mentality *regardless* of the institutional structures that they find themselves in. Thus, farmer movements like BKU often tend to get analysed in terms of an essential *peasantness*. This construction of an essential 'moral economy', according to Gupta, becomes a fundamental hindrance in the comprehension and analysis of the character of these movements.

Gupta argues for an investigation of these movements in terms of the peculiar circumstances within which they unfold. Thus, he emphasizes that the BKU, which he studies as a case in point, operates much more like a union than any revivalistic or atavistic group of peasants. He points out that despite the veneration of the constant invocation of traditional motifs and themes, the fundamental demands of these movements are unqualifiedly economic and specific in character. He points out that the central demands of the BKU have been lower input costs, primarily electricity, and a better price for crops, primarily sugarcane. The large mobilizations that propelled the BKU into being a subject of great public discussion, occurred

on issues that are *exclusively* economic in character. On the basis of this, Gupta contends that very often the BKU operates like an urban trade union, agitating on issues that are specific to their concern. Thus, the understanding of these movements as an expression of pre-modern and essential rurality is completely unfounded. He writes:

Once it is understood that the BKU functions in essence like a union then one is ready to appreciate the specific characteristics of this union. The fact that it is a rural union should not send us off-track but should alert us instead to the constraints within which a rural union, such as the BKU, is forced to function. Here wages as such are of little concern for this is a union of peasant proprietors who physically work on their own land. Here bonuses, hours of work, midday meals etc. are quite beside the point. Instead the issues are non-payment of electricity dues, increase in the procurement prices of agricultural products, and the lowering of input prices. None of these are quaint, nor do they smack of obscure rural passions (Gupta, *ibid*: 163).

Gupta goes on to point out that the basis of Tikait's leadership is his hard-nosed pragmatism, rather than his traditional authority or charisma. He argues that Tikait is perennially burdened by the scrutiny of the activists of the BKU. In BKU meetings, he is often subjected to intense questioning and probing by other activists. The only legitimate answer to this scrutiny, in the eyes of the activists, can be proficiency in guiding the movement and its campaigns. The status of the *chaudhury*, according to Gupta, is of little use then. He argues, then, that most often the invocation of different elements of *jat* culture by Tikait is nothing more than an attempt to ease the burden of this scrutiny. The activists, however, tend not be contented with these invocations. Gupta points out an occasion where Tikait was reprimanded by another *jat* farmer who asserted that the farmers were in the movement not to protect the traditional institution of *chaudrahat* but to protect and demand their rights. Such assertions, Gupta stresses, are not complete aberrations. Thus, the extent to which the *khap* and the *chaudrahat* circumscribe the BKU and determine its nature must not be overestimated. There is, according to Gupta, a pressing economic logic that underpins the functioning of the BKU that stems from the concrete nature of the circumstances that the farmers find themselves in.

Further, Gupta argues that the BKU's avowed principle of opposition to political parties of all hues stems, not from any essential peasant pre-politicalness, but from the enormous

bargaining power which the equidistance from all parties provides it with. The lack of any direct political affiliation enabled the BKU to pressure the state government, on several occasions, to grant their demands. This, it must be remembered, was also the period in which peasants and farmers in the region had no clear political leadership. Charan Singh, who was formerly the undisputed and towering leader of the farmers in western UP and Haryana, had, to a substantial extent, lost credibility on account of what was perceived as his manipulative scramble to become the prime minister. In such a situation, exercising leadership over the farmers in the region would have required a consistent distance from mainstream political parties. Thus, the distance which Tikait and the BKU maintained from political parties, attended as it was by Tikait's sensational and unorthodox acts of irreverence towards established political leaders, came more from the pragmatic imperatives that the movement found itself confronted with, than a pre-political pre-modern aversion to institutions like political parties. Gupta points out, here, that there are numerous urban trade unions that function without any overt allegiance to any specific political party. Contemporary commentators, however, do not view this non-partisanship as evidence of any atavism or thrust on primordiality. In the case of farmers, however, on account of the currency of the 'rural mentality' thesis, such assumptions are almost invariably made.

However, while Gupta recognizes that there are concrete material imperatives behind the course that these farmers' movements have taken, there is a certain reluctance, again, in conceding the kind of limitations which the class-specific and caste-specific nature of the movement entail. Again, while he explicitly refers to the complete absence of issues of the landless labourers in the agenda of the BKU, he does not examine the manner in which the discourse of the BKU, and the agitations which it conducted, contended with the contradictions between the farmers and the agricultural labourers. Of course, he does point to the fact that dalits have no place in the cultural discourse of the movement. But what is missing is an understanding of whether, how, and to what extent this discourse plays a role in containing these contradictions. Similarly, Gupta does not allow for the possibility, it would seem, for there being a contradiction between the goals of the movement and the interests of the agricultural labourers and the poor peasantry. This is accompanied by a rather stark silence on how it is that the BKU manages to operate without bothering to create its hegemony over the classes whose interest it does not represent.

It appears, quite strongly, here that this inattentiveness to questions of conflicting class

interests and the building of hegemony, stems, as in the case of several authors examined above, from the propensity to view the agrarian sector as undifferentiated. This presumed fundamental homogeneity rests, in Gupta's analysis, as it rested in Sahay's study on an unwarranted assumption of equality within the group of owner-cultivators at large, and an undervaluation of the significance of landless labor in determining the character of agrarian relations in any given context. What results from this, ironically, is an undermining of Gupta's own insistence on viewing the form and content of agrarian mobilizations as shaped by concrete circumstances. While, of course, he steers clear of the 'rural mentality' thesis, his underspecification of the role of certain groups and classes defeats his stated objective of salvaging the countryside from unwarranted and static characterizations.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

We have seen that the dominant perspectives on the agrarian question revolve around issues of displacement, development and ecological degradation. The argument is widespread that the dominant form of development being followed today, based as it is heavy industrialisation and capital intensive technological development, is fundamentally flawed since it leads to the immiserisation of those dependent on land and forests for their subsistence. In this discourse, industrialisation and industrial development results in the acquisition of agricultural land, thus dispossessing vast masses of people dependent on agriculture. This leads to a grave loss of livelihood and an acute erosion of identity for the rural poor. According to these discourses, the industrial sector, led by the urban, 'westernised' elite, oppresses and exploits the agrarian sector at large. Acquisition of agricultural land is an instance of such exploitation. It is precisely this kind of exploitation which has been responsible for the widespread poverty and insecurity that is to be found in third world countries like India.

We have also seen that, within these discourses, the criticism of the dominant model of development is often very closely tied in with a theme of environmental degradation. Thus, according to this perspective, the development strategy based on heavy industrialisation results in a disruption of vital ecological balances, thereby impoverishing the environment. Further, and this is a very significant aspect of this discourse, an equation is set up between rural livelihoods and the environment. It is claimed that those dependent on agriculture and forest produce rely very crucially on the preservation of ecological balances for their livelihoods. Environmental degradation, therefore, implies that these livelihoods are imperilled. Thus, a discursive identity is established between the environment and the supposed well-being of the agrarian sector. The urban-industrial sector, therefore, is seen as not only dispossessing people through the direct acquisition of land, but also through an irreversible disruption of ecological processes.

We have discussed how one of the crucial problems of such discourses is that they have an extremely limited understanding of processes of exploitation. These discourses are able to construct an opposition between the industrial sector, as a whole, and the agrarian sector, as whole, precisely because they ignore the deep inequalities within these sectors. In the context

of the agrarian sector, specifically, these discourses almost completely circumvent the question of the exploitation of certain agrarian classes by others. Thus, exploitation within the countryside is never factored, as a relevant consideration, into analyses of development processes. The fact that a large majority of those involved in agricultural production do not possess land does not enter, in any significant manner, in such discourses. Vital issues like the lack access that poor peasants have to state support and the provisioning of vital inputs like cheap irrigation facilities are not accorded any substantial significance.

We have also carried out a brief examination of the nature of agrarian relations in India in the colonial period and in the post-independence period. In both these periods, the most striking feature of the agrarian scenario has been the vast inequalities that exist between the different agrarian classes. In the colonial period, an elaborate system of exploitative sub-infeudation was superimposed on pre-existent inequalities. Several forms of acute exploitation characterised agrarian relations in most parts of India. Landlords and affluent farmers were major sharers of the agricultural surplus apart from the colonial state. In a number of regions, like Bengal, an entire new class of large landholders possessing private ownership interests in land was created. In the post-independence period, while the state rhetorically employed the theme of land reforms, such reforms were hardly carried out. On account of several loopholes built into land reform legislations, the enormous clout of the landed classes, and delays in implementation, no substantial redistribution of land was carried out. Further, often these attempted reforms had the consequence of an even further worsening in the condition of the tenants and poor peasants. A large amount of land passed from the hands of the poor peasants to landlords and rich peasants. Further, we have seen that the 'green revolution' further exacerbated rural inequality. As the benefits of the green revolution technologies were cornered by the rural rich, class differentiation within the agrarian sector was further sharpened.

This is the context in which the 'new farmers' movements' emerged. We have seen that in the debate on the nature of the new farmers' movements there are two distinct streams. According to one stream, these movements were essentially a response of the agrarian sector at large, languishing under the burden of the oppression and exploitation of the industrial sector. This section of the literature projects the concerns and objectives of these movements as those of the peasantry in general. Often, the discourses of the homogenous peasantry identified elsewhere in the study are employed in endorsement of these movements. The

theme of there being an essential and fundamental dichotomy between rural and urban India – between ‘Bharat’ and ‘India’ – is often employed very powerfully. This strand of the literature attempts invariably to diminish the presence and significance of the diverse inequalities between the different rural classes.

The other stream highlights the fact the nature of these movements was extremely class-specific. The demands of these movements, for instance, were centred on the question of the prices of agricultural produce. This cannot be a fundamental concern of the rural poor as most sections within them are net-consumers of foodgrains. Further, the questions of the redistribution of land and of agricultural wages were very comprehensively evaded in these movements. Even in terms of the composition of these movements, there was a predominance of rich farmers belonging to the upper castes. Most of these movements drew very little participation from the dalit agricultural labourers. It has also been pointed out that it is precisely this class and caste-specific nature that was responsible for the numerous limitations that these movements suffered from.

This fundamental importance of the existence of relations of exploitation within the countryside should always be a very strong and significant consideration in understanding the agrarian question of the present day. From the agrarian distress wrought by liberalisation to issues of displacement, it must be remembered that the impact of all these processes are class-specific. The poor peasantry and agricultural labourers have affected the most by the introduction of these policies over the last twenty years. At the same time, processes of exploitation within the agricultural sector continue unabated. If anything, the new policies of liberalisation and structural adjustment have *sharpened* these inequalities and relations of exploitation.

The following have been the limitations of the study. Firstly, the literature on the ‘new farmers’ movements’ has been limited in quantum and scattered across disciplines. Thus, contributions to the debate have spanned across the disciplines of sociology, history and anthropology. As these contributions are located within varied disciplinary constraints, their commensurability becomes a serious limitation. Secondly, most of the contributions to the debate on the new farmers’ movements have not been made in the last decade. This does pose some problems as far as current contextualisation and comparison are concerned. Finally,

over the last two decades there has been a sharp decline in the number of sociological works on agrarian relations and other allied issues. This, again, poses a rather formidable constraint.

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