Peasants, moneylenders, colonial rule

grain) was inevitably accompanied by an expansion of credit. Malguzars who had never lost the role of moneylender, or just as easily acquired it, lent freely to their fellows and to the more substantial tenants, especially in Hoshangabad. Even before the long boom finally collapsed certain types of indebtedness were already causing more serious alarm. Just how much weight must be given to the anxiety of British officials like Bamfylde Fuller is problematical. Fuller joined readily in the chorus orchestrated by Denzil Ibbetson and other Punjab officials who formed the ruling official clique at Calcutta against the nefarious activities of the rural usurer and the danger he posed to continued peasant contentment with British rule. In the Central Provinces it so happened that he could point to an area where indebtedness took the shape of a direct confrontation between the humble toiling peasant and the professional Marwari and Parwar moneylender. It is evident that a rural entrepreneur would be most readily diverted from direct exploitation of the soil in areas where high farming and population pressure on the most fertile soil enabled rents to be driven up to a competition or rack-rent level. This happened earliest in the Jabalpur haveli (the region containing the district capital) where, as we have seen, circumstances had allowed the leading house of Seth Gokal Das, the Marwari, to gain an early and decisive hold. In the C.P. Revenue Administration Report for 1889–90 Fuller wrote that in the Jabalpur haveli rents had been run to cruelly high limits frequently ranging from Rs. 6 to Rs. 7 per acre for unirrigated land, and the tenants ‘have been chained down by debt into a position but little removed from that of servitude’. Analogous conditions, although prompted originally by high revenue pressure, were observed in the Sagar and Damoh havelis where the Kurmi malguzars struggled in the bania’s grip. Yet apart from special instances the major move of predominantly moneylending families into landholding did not occur until the great agrarian crisis and collapse of the decade 1893–1903 when, because of alternate flood and drought, famine even swept the Narmada valley districts. Before this disaster only some 16% of villages had been transferred in Jabalpur during the whole thirty-year settlement, the losses falling mainly on ‘old

feudal families many of whom parted with their villages to the mone
lenders'. In the eighteen years that followed 1889 some 40% of Jabalpur villages changed hands, more than half going to the mone
lenders. It was the same story as in Bundelkhand; the creditor was seeking to limit his losses by closing on his security rather than moving acquisitively into landholding as some sup
posed. He could not escape unscathed from his debtors' widespread default and huge sums had to be written off under debt conciliation proceedings.88

Unlike the fortunes of the cotton country of Berar to the immediate south the vicissitudes of the wheat zone seem to have had their origin more in fluctuations of weather than price, but the risks of overextension in wheat were sharply exposed. The Narmada valley districts experienced a savage setback in which their population fell off sharply for a time; but their much higher degree of agricultural security endowed them with a power of recuperation denied to the Malwa plateau on the north. There conditions resembled Bundelkhand more closely. The black mar
soils which prevailed in the haveli tracts had led to them being devoted entirely to the monoculture of wheat (or wheat and gram grown together, viz. birra) for the rabi harvest. Crop specialisation had so taken over that despite repeated crop failure the cultivators felt bound to go on borrowing seed grain and plunging themselves ever more deeply into debt. The Damoh settlement officer noted in 1914:

The Haveli... is a one-crop tract, and if the wheat is ruined it may be said that for that year all is lost... The Haveli tenant is noted for borrowing the same amount of rabi seed when he is in temporarily reduced circumstances as when he is prosperous. He knows that if wheat land is let go for a single year it may be lost to him for a decade. He thinks that he cannot afford to concentrate and in his reluctance to lose a little he has often lost all.89

Indebtedness in the entire Sagar and Narmada region exhibited those characteristic features that Darling observed later in the Punjab province. The problem was most severe at the two extremes – the intensive and the extensive margins. In the Punjab these proved to be firstly, the densely settled zones about the

89 Ibid., p. 10.
capital, Lahore, and the overpopulated submontane tract of Hoshiarpur and Gurdaspur, and, secondly, the insecure and thinly populated south-western districts of Dera Ghazi, Mianwali, Multan, and Muzaffargarh. In the Central Provinces these extremes were given emphasis because of the strong hold which the Marwari and Parwar bania moneylenders had established at both margins, both in the close-settled Jabalpur, Damoh or Sagar havelis and in the thinly-held insecure Khurai tahsil in the north of Sagar district. This latter tract suffered severely from drought and kans was never absent. Forty-one per cent of the tahsil was transferred between 1896 and 1916, the big moneylenders (including Diwan Bahadur Seth Ballabdas of Jabalpur) taking over shares equivalent to nearly a quarter of the tahsil. It was here that the gallia or debt serf was observed by the settlement officer in the late 1880s, and though subsequent inquiry failed to substantiate the charges Khurai tahsil continued to cause anxiety.\footnote{Saugor S.R. 1911–16 (Nagpur, 1918), pp. 33 ff. Saugor S.R. 1887–97, pp. 41–2.}

The Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee which reported in 1930 and which sought to put a good face on things confessed to concern over these marginal areas. Yet it insisted that these were exceptional. Despite bad seasons in the 1920s debt had not risen significantly in the secure tracts of the wheat zone taken as a whole. Only 5\% of cultivators were hopelessly indebted while 31\% were entirely free from debt.

If, therefore, we accept that the seriously indebted tracts were exceptional, what happened to the promise of capitalist agriculture that had looked so favourable in the 1880s? The boom conditions never returned after the series of unparalleled disasters. That conjuncture of a revolutionary advance in output led by a single leading crop, wheat, combined with high agricultural and low rental profits, was part of the pioneer age. The old single-mindedness of wheat monoculture was abandoned in favour of a greater measure of mixed farming, in which kharif crops and cattle products figured more prominently. The malguzar spread his risk. Proprietary cultivation fell back, subletting of sir increased, and with even the tenant able to sublet at two-and-a-half to three times the rent he himself paid, rental incomes took on a new importance.\footnote{Cf. Hoshangabad S.R. 1913–18 (Nagpur, 1919), pp. 19, 25, 40.} Moneylending was also given a fresh lease of
life. The Banking Enquiry Committee found that while some 20% of rural credit in the wheat zone was supplied by landlords the latter also played an increasingly profitable intermediary role as sublenders between the professional moneylender-bania and the tenant cultivator. Rai Sahib Pandit Laxinarayan of Noni told the Committee that only those malguzars and cultivators now accumulated wealth who combined moneylending with agriculture and that the former was the more paying business.\textsuperscript{42}

Now it may be said that this ‘advance towards vagueness’, which Geertz argued was characteristic of Asian society,\textsuperscript{43} this diffusion of economic roles and the obstinate refusal of the social and economic order to evolve on clear, determinate lines of class differentiation, all this was a return to the Indian norm. Charles Elliott had pardoned the low out-turn per acre in Hoshangabad on the analogy of the opening of the American prairies.\textsuperscript{44} But the malguzars of the Narmada valley were no Texans. Their attachment to a traditional life style was not to be shaken. Lordship and its attendant display were still dear to their heart. In Narsinghpur, where monied men had made least headway into the landlord ranks, the malguzar as late as the end of the 1920s was still fond of purchasing an elephant to mark his wealth and social ascendency.\textsuperscript{45} Even in Sagar, a Jain cult centre, the Parwar banias vied with each other in profuse public spending, lavishing often more than a lakh on the costly temple car (rath) ceremony in order to raise themselves through the honorific degrees of Singhai, Sawai Singhaj and Seth.\textsuperscript{46} Was it not an illusion to look on such men as capitalist entrepreneurs in a system of ‘federated grain factories’?\textsuperscript{47} Might it not be said that the exceptional profitability and expansion of wheat cultivation between the 1860s and 1890s was bound to end once the land was taken up, population grew, rents rose, and advancing prosperity made moneylending increasingly advantageous? Natural disaster in the 1890s merely hastened this inevitable conclusion. Yet this would be to misread the situation.

\textsuperscript{42} Report of C.P. Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1919–30 (Nagpur, 1930), 1, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{43} Cited above, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{44} Hoshangabad S.R. 1865, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{45} C.P. Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report, Appx ii, p. 680.
\textsuperscript{47} Professor M. M. Postan’s description of thirteenth-century English monastic estates.
Like so many regions that had earlier experienced the surge of commercialised agriculture, whether it was the Patna region, Bundelkhand, or Benares and the eastern U.P., permanent disappointment and frustration succeeded to the first spring hopes of constant dynamic growth. Yet it was underpopulation rather than overpopulation that appears to have kept back the economic development of the Narmada valley. Practising a careless agriculture and relying for labour chiefly on the massive seasonal migration of Gonds and others from the hills, even the most fertile tracts remained thinly occupied. Cultivators were under no pressure of population to abandon their careless mode of agriculture more suitable for pioneer days. Yet just as Bundelkhand discovered after recovering from the famine of 1868–9 that the cotton market had permanently altered its sources of supply, so the Narmada wheat cultivators discovered that the highly volatile export market had gone. India’s position as a major world wheat supplier began in any event to fade away after 1900 and dwindled to nothing by 1930. Yet almost the whole of this declining export trade fell from the turn of the century into the hands of the Punjab. More seriously Punjab and western U.P. took up between them from the 1890s pretty well the entire increase in the much larger domestic wheat market. Up to the end of British rule the area under wheat and wheat-gram in the Central Provinces never permanently recovered the figure of 3½ million acres which it had attained by 1879. What is more noticeable is that while the insecure districts like Saugor and Damoh recovered their peak wheat acreage by 1923, the major wheat-producing district of Hoshangabad rarely again rose above 70% of the old 1891–2


F. J. Plymen, the C.P. Director of Agriculture, said total annual migration for harvest labour was up to 120,000 for the wheat zone, Royal Commission on Agriculture in India (London, 1927), VI, p. 5.

49 For decline of India’s overseas wheat exports and growing Punjab share, cf. Report on Marketing of Wheat in India (Simla, 1937), p. 48. For increase of domestic wheat production and Punjab’s share cf. ibid., p. 3. Punjab wheat acreage rose from 6½ million acres in 1870 to nearly 9½ millions (as a ten-year average) in the decade 1925–35.

peak production, and by 1935–6 after the slump was still only 64%.

Plymen, the Central Provinces’ Director of Agriculture, acknowledged to the Banking Enquiry Committee that the low return of 800 lb an acre had allowed the Punjab to beat the Central Provinces in costs of production. At the critical point when the high profitability of wheat cultivation could only be sustained by high farming with its more intensive capital inputs of irrigation facilities and manure, the Hoshangabad cultivators turned away to the more certain returns from mixed cropping, dairy-farming and rentier landlordism. The more dynamic element among the monied men fixed their attention increasingly on the development of industrial enterprise in the city of Jabalpur. Here the Marwari house of Seth Gokaldas made its most significant contribution towards the future. The second Green Revolution in the Narmada valley is only now struggling painfully from the planner’s drawing board.

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81 Annual Season and Crop Reports of C.P. from 1919–20 to 1935–36 (Nagpur, 1920 etc.).

82 Royal Commission on Agriculture in India (London, 1927), vi, p. 72.

The return of the peasant to South Asian history

No platitude could be more trite than that the balance of destiny in South Asia rests in peasant hands, yet no platitude has been grasped with more laggardliness by political scientists and historians. Part of the explanation is perhaps the split level at which South Asian society appears to operate. Charles Metcalfe and Karl Marx long ago gave vivid formulation to the notion of an underlying discontinuity between the political superstructure and the agrarian base.¹ No doubt this insulation of the peasant world from the state is in some measure typical of all pre-modern autocracies, but in the Indian subcontinent it seemed to receive particular reinforcement from the brittle foreign-conquest character of the larger political systems and from what appeared to be the peculiar economic and social self-sufficiency of a village society regulated by the institutions of caste. As a result even the periodic irruption of the peasantry into politics through rebellion looks strangely absent in Indian history, unless one follows Irfan Habib in regarding the rise of the Maratha, Sikh and Jat powers in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as essentially peasant movements, or believes with Kathleen Gough that constant peasant rebellion under colonial rule has been deliberately overlooked.² It has, therefore, seemed natural to treat politics as a self-contained activity and relegate rural India to the role of a dim,

¹ The argument and sources are summarised in Paper 1, pp. 19–21.
shadowy backcloth to the political stage. This attitude survived
the ending of colonial rule. At independence not merely was
power transferred from white to brown hands but the historical
study of the subcontinent was transferred from amateurs to pro-
fessionals. The latter turned at once to investigate the political
processes by which the displacement of the Raj had been accom-
plished. For this they ransacked the records of the legislative
assembly, the council chamber, and the party pandal, burst open
the ballot boxes and rifled the correspondence of the dead. Yet it
is only to rediscover the truth long since trumpeted meta-
phorically by Kipling in his uproarious barrack-room ballad,
Loot, that in history’s many-storied pagoda the most precious
treasures are buried out of sight in the good strong earth of the
foundations. To what T. S. Eliot called ‘the life of significant
soil’ the historians of the French, Russian, and even English
revolutions have long ago resorted, fired by the conviction that
in all pre-industrial societies the river of historical change issues
from rural springs, and taught by modern experience that while
cities may go up in revolt it is the countryside that makes or
breaks revolutions. Now too among the students of the colonial
revolution in South Asia the city slickers are at last quitting
town.

One may be surprised at their laggardliness, but that would be
to underrate the difficulties. Spengler roundly declared that the
peasant is without history, meaning that he leaves no trace of his
own in the form of the written word. We usually come at him only
by external observation, and in the case of India by external
observation of a peculiarly precise, distorted, and forbidding kind.
Our intelligence is overwhelmingly desk-bound and official, the
product of clerk and tax collector, of men of the office and not the
spade, whether their faces have been white or brown. Their pur-
poses were essentially fiscal and legal, their data overwhelmingly
impersonal and statistical. Despite the wealth of government
records, the phenomena of rural life were lumped crudely into
general categories irrespective of their manifold and bewildering
variety, and they have remained entangled in a fearsome thicket
of technicality. These circumstances made them peculiarly vulner-

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8 Barrington Moore, Jnr discusses ‘the apparent political docility of the
Indian peasants’ in Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: lord
able to the distorting simplifications of the modern intelligence. Unreachable through the intimacy of shared experience and its accompanying intuitive understanding, the peasantry has to be approached through mental surrogates, through generalisations, concepts, models and theories. No class outside the so-called primitive societies has been so totally struck down as the hapless victim of the academic interpreter.

This tendency for abstract presupposition to rush in to cover up the absence of direct experience has remained to this day, and in turn has rendered South Asian history, itself one of the most literal-minded branches of historical study, the unwitting prey of intellectual fashion. Nowhere has this been more marked than over the notion of the Indian village community.

So powerfully did the image of a traditional India composed of a myriad of self-contained village republics stamp itself upon the educated consciousness of the nineteenth century that the influence of modernity was read invariably as a disintegrative one. Had not the traditional forms of local self-government resting on the village panchayat and the village headman been rapidly drained of life by the judicial and administrative machinery of the modern state? Had not the monetisation of the land-revenue demand and the pressure for cash-cropping been followed by an invasion of the closed village economy by foreign manufacturers with the resultant overthrow of traditional handicrafts? Had not the novel introduction of modern proprietary title deprived the peasant of his essential property in the soil, and in law or practice reduced him to a mere tenant or labourer of an outside purchaser, usually an urban moneylender? Crude, simple, powerful ideas like these were shared alike by British administrators and Indian nationalists by the later nineteenth century. They resulted in fitful latter-day efforts to resurrect village institutions, to stem

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4 Cf. William Cunningham, the Cambridge economic historian, on a visit to India, writing on 8 March 1882: ‘Each village was self-sufficing when the simple necessaries of life were manufactured by the village carpenter, potter, and weaver who were supported by common contributions from village resources. Manchester mills are now underselling the local weavers... domestic spinning is dying out. The more prosperous men are withdrawing from the responsibilities of village life, the authority of the patil is disappearing, and the village artisans are no longer supported... Trade is the great solvent which breaks up social organization... we really are nihilists, overthrowing the institutions of society, and helpless to develop anything in their stead.’ E. Homberger, W. Janeway and S. Schama, The Cambridge Mind (London, 1970), pp. 22, 24.
further alienation of peasant land to outsiders, and to introduce village cooperatives.

Indian nationalists found it still harder to resist sentimentality and the Gandhian school shaped their soaring political ideals on the revival of a golden past in which *panchayati raj* and an autonomous village economy symbolised by the spinning wheel would re-emerge triumphant.\(^6\) Down to the Second World War almost every school of historical interpretation, Marxist or non-Marxist, was agreed that whatever the novel degree of physical unity imposed, the main effect of British rule on traditional Indian agrarian structure was one of dissolution.\(^6\) To Nehru it was axiomatic that despite India’s stormy history ‘the village self-governing community continued. Its break-up began only under British rule.” The one novel social formation that emerged to counter this trend was (what could still unblushingly be called) the modern English-educated Indian middle class, from whose ranks the reintegrative force of nationalism was destined to spring.

The powerful simplicity of this historical imagery was lost in the post-War decades. Two contradictory currents of academic interpretation converged to form a new view of the past, which renounced the concept of foreign rule as the agent of massive structural change and berated the arrogance behind the assumption that a few thousand white men held India’s millions in the hollow of their hands. Colonial rule was shown to be a much weaker form of dominion and one essentially dependent on the internal cooperation of the ruled. Firstly, in Western academic circles the neo-Machiavellian school of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher insisted that imperialism so far from constituting an all-powerful impulse was always exerted with maximum economy of effort, and was, therefore, dependent on finding appropriate sets of collaborators among rival local elites. In this intellectual climate Robert Frykenberg demonstrated how in the


\(^7\) J. Nehru, *Discovery of India* (Bombay, 1961 edn), p. 263.
Return of the peasant

districts – or at least, in Guntur district in Madras – the British reigned but did not rule.\(^8\) The shifting district officer danced unwittingly to the tune called by the local official service class. In the towns no modern middle class emerged, as Marx and others had prophesied, for economic change was far too limited in extent to cause structural social change. Already at the colonial take-over India possessed a sophisticated economy and a complex, articulated society that could readily accommodate itself to the increased volume of commercial activity under colonial rule without undergoing fundamental internal alteration. Hence there was simply some lateral adjustment and internal circulation of elites. The most successful collaborators with the British were the old cleri­sy or literate service castes, a section of which took as readily to English as their fathers to Persian, Urdu or Modi. Modern nationalism could be explained purely in terms of the internal dynamics of this group. While they derived their political and social strength from their role as a broker class capable of interpreting and manipulating the impulses and discontents moving other sections of traditional Indian society, the main motor force behind nationalism stemmed from their own internal divisions and competitiveness. Competing interests as well as pure factionalism drove them to exert upward pressure on the British overlords for a greater place in the sun of official power and patronage and to thrust downwards to mobilise support among aggrieved elements in traditional society beneath. Such, put crudely, was the substance of Anil Seal’s conclusion in *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, published in 1968, but which first saw the light of day as a fellowship dissertation in 1961. Oddly it came curiously close to the old Colonel Blimp view that modern nationalism was an artifact, the projection of the ills and ambitions of a swollen intelligentsia in no way representative of the country at large. In such a scenario the peasantry remained an inert mass.

This neo-Machiavellian interpretation had taken wing in the 1950s when elite theory, Namierism, and the ‘end-of-ideology’ mood were current in Western academic circles. As an intellectual tradition its roots ran back to Pareto, Mosca and Michels.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) Among the influential works of the 1950s concerned with elitism and neo-Machiavellianism were C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956), J. H.
Unwittingly it was aided and abetted by the neo-Marxist school of economic history and sociology of the post-War generation. This too saw colonialism in a different light, not as the brutal but progressive force envisaged by Marx but as a parasitic blood-sucking vampire that left its victim enervated but unchanged. Its function was to skim cash crops off a stagnant agrarian base, or as Clifford Geertz has argued (for the argument has currency outside purely Marxist circles) ‘the central desire of all imperialist countries was the wish to bring people’s products into the world economy but not the people themselves; to have one’s economic cake and eat it too by producing capitalist goods with precapitalist workers on precapitalist land’. 10 Capitalism had struck a local bargain with feudalism. Such an argument allowed no room for the conception of a modern, populist nationalism producing a groundswell from below. It gave no place to the peasantry as an active component, and so curiously reinforced the elitist interpretation of the neo-Machiavellians.

Yet this new double mirror held up to historical nature has already been badly cracked. Even the neo-Machiavellians following the argument whithersoever it led are now foremost in proclaiming that the Congress movement was a mere coalition of provincial associations and that the ultimate power base of politics is to be discovered in the countryside in the person of the local political ‘boss’. This migration from the capital to the mofussil finds one of its most striking exemplifications in the work of two younger Cambridge historians, Christopher Baker and David Washbrook. 11 But other more powerful influences have, of course, been principally responsible for shattering the elitist image. The


C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook, South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880–1940 (Delhi, 1975).
ideological and political shock waves released by successful peasant war and rebellion in China and Vietnam, the impact of the Green Revolution and the echoing impulses from South Asian agricultural economics and Western peasant studies have together shaken the foundations of the old learning. The result is a conceptual revolution that has run far ahead of empirical inquiry. Even in the more readily accessible terrain of political history the shift in the angle of vision is seen by Anil Seal as having transcendent importance. But in the immensely diverse and intractable domain of peasant society the advance of theory without adequate empirical definition and support has led to an analysis that is often as rudimentary as the older generalisations about the internal structure of the self-sufficient Indian village community. In pre-Independence days the Congress and Marxist Left defined the comprador or collaborating elements as the princes, the big landlords, and the merchant usurers; these were the allies of imperialism and the upholders of reaction in the countryside. Now that these elements have been cut down or severely pollarded, the true culprit has been discovered. He is, of course, none other than the kulak, the ‘rich peasant’, supposedly the mainstay of the Congress Right throughout most of the subcontinent and the unyielding opponent of genuine land reform and true democracy. Here the old picture of ‘changeless change’ or ‘static expansion’, or whatever paradoxical term one uses to describe the involution rather than evolution of the Indian village community, has to be modified to accommodate a measure of structural change – sufficient at least for a ‘rich peasant’ or kulak class to be separated out.

Not that stratification within the village has not always existed. The reports of all first-hand observers even at the beginning of the nineteenth century – particularly the careful observations of Buchanan-Hamilton in Bengal and Bihar – testify to the importance of a dominant peasant elite. Yet from 1860 or so this elite

\[12\] A. Seal, ‘Imperialism and Nationalism in India’ in J. A. Gallagher et al., pp. 1 ff.


was armed with special advantages because of its ability to benefit from the bursting of the price dam and the enhanced profits to be made from cash crops like jute, cotton, wheat, sugar and tobacco. The struggle of the resident village land controllers against the superior rent owners and landlords for the appropriation of the new 'surplus value' sometimes took violent forms. K. K. Sen Gupta has interpreted the Pabna disturbances of 1873 in this fashion, the fight for the new wealth from jute taking the form of a struggle over occupancy rights between zamindars and jotedars.\textsuperscript{18}

There was scarcely time for a 'rich peasant' class to separate itself out in northern India before the great explosion of 1857, although the later 1840s and early 1850s saw a great expansion of cultivation and other signs of an agricultural boom. It would seem that the major agrarian violence did not come from peasant groups most closely involved in cash-cropping. Rather it came from traditionally superior clan communities for whom British rule had meant loss of political consequence and relative economic deprivation. The western parts of the rebellion zone, around Delhi and in modern Haryana, had in pre-British days been dominated by cattle-keeping peoples of Rajput and quasi-Rajput status who scorned the plough. Such were the Bhattis and Ranghars of Haryana and the Gujar of the upper Doab, looked upon by the British as naturally turbulent. The British land-revenue system had pressed hard against them, weighted as it was in favour of the thrifty agriculturist by its taxation of all land as arable rather than pasture. Yet they had suffered more than the heavy hand of the tax collector. The Bhattis of Hissar had found themselves pushed off their extensive grazing grounds and the land marked out in blocks for the industrious Jat immigrants. In the Doab the Gujar had lost their old predominance formerly exercised from the mukararis of Landhaura and Parikshitgarh. Gujar village maliks had seen their malguzari (or revenue engagement)

rights pass extensively into the hands of their urban creditors in towns like Sikandarabad, which they sacked with fanatical ferocity. Yet the most determined resistance to British authority and the best organised rural uprisings came from groups least penetrated by the urban usurer and least affected by the sale of land-control rights in satisfaction of debts. They usually inhabited riverine tracts or little alsatias where the writ of government had at best run with difficulty. Such were the tracts close to the Jumna river throughout its length from the Siwaliks to where it joined the Ganges at Allahabad. The Gujarás of the Gangoh region and the Pandir Rajputs of the Kata, the Jats of Noh Jhil in the Mathura district, the Bhadauria Rajputs of Agra, the Chauhan Rajputs of Chakkarnagar in Etawah are merely a few examples of such embattled communities. They largely stood on the periphery of the high-farming area, and worked under traditional forms of leadership which leaned either to ‘republican’ or ‘monarchical’ forms. Even in a high farming sugar-growing district like Shahjahanpur the Chandel Rajputs of the Khundur ilaqa refused to cultivate sugar from fear of losing their land-control rights. The first care of these and similar communities like the Jhangara Rajputs of Bareilly or the Ahars of Budaun was apparently to maintain their local quasi-autonomy, and they stood ready to resist central bureaucratic authority whether it was that of the British or of the successor rebel power of Khan Bahadur Khan. Yet to warn us against using all this as a form of negative evidence in favour of the turbulence of declining ‘middle peasant’ groups and the docility of ‘rich peasants’ is the remarkable rebellion of the Jat communities of western Meerut and Muzaffarnagar districts. These had long been famous for their advanced cash-crop farming and had been the primary beneficiaries of the reopening of the old Mughal East Jumna Canal in 1830. The British were totally at a loss to understand the Jat uprising. ‘[W]ithout the slightest cause or the slightest excuse...these thriving agriculturalists became rebels,’ was the judgement of Fleetwood Williams, the Meerut Special Commissioner, ‘the whole population threw themselves heart and soul into the combination against Government, and to this in great measure the

protraction of the siege of Delhi may be ascribed, and a great deal of the disaffection in the Meerut and neighbouring districts'.

What stands out in all these instances is the supra-village organisation of the clan community and its capacity to unite against what was conceived as an external threat whether coming from Government, rebel, taxman, or urban creditor. One may suggest that even in the altered conditions of the twentieth century this capacity for local combination on clan or caste lines remained an important ingredient in all important peasant agitations. Of course some form of 'crisis' leadership and organisation was required to compose internal factions and extend political scale. In 1857 it was provided either by lineage 'rajas' or in the 'republican' Jat areas by self-made leaders like the old Pindari warrior, Khairati Khan, in the Muzaffarnagar district and before him 'Shah Mull' in the Meerut. In the twentieth century this function fell to political parties or religious organisations.

Fearing renewed upheavals the British authorities in zamindari territories like Bengal and the North-Western Provinces moved from the 1870s to protect the superior peasantry through tenancy laws. By rent control and fixity of tenure they gradually brought about a virtual 'transfer of ownership' to the village maliks. In the ryotwar provinces, especially where railway communications or irrigation had lent an impulse to cash-cropping, the peasant elite had little in the way of a superior landlord class to contend with, and surged ahead. Everywhere in India the more thrusting peasant benefited from stricter provision against differential land assessments on the more industrious agricultural castes. The rise of the rich peasant, we are told, was balanced by the decline of the poorer peasant. For the latter was left to feel the full weight of dearer prices without himself being able to move effectively into the market economy because of his inadequate command of land and credit. Hence he was either forced back on subsistence farming, or, if he produced cash crops, was reduced to the dependent status of a sharecropper and debt peon. Dependence on the rich peasant was particularly marked in Bengal where the jotedar increasingly let out the greater part of his land to bargadars or adhiars, cultivators who as their name implied

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19 See above, pp. 15 ff., 175 ff.
paid over half their crop as rent and were left with a bare subsistence wage in kind.\textsuperscript{21} Hence we are to suppose that agrarian society was not blown apart by market forces as Marx and others had foretold, but instead it was taken hold of and stretched out elastically from either extremity.

The progress of the rich peasant was subject to much regional variety even within the confines of a single province like Bombay, and Ravinder Kumar has claimed to observe a newly rich elite ensconced on the Deccan plateau by the 1840s. Reports on parts of Gujarat in the 1850s observe the same phenomenon taking the shape of a drive by the lesser Kunbi peasants for Patidar status.\textsuperscript{22} Yet there seems general agreement that the ‘golden age’ of the rich peasant in India spanned the period 1860–1900 – at least in areas like Gujarat and the Narmada valley where prosperity went unchequered by famine.\textsuperscript{23} In the Hoshangabad district of the Narmada valley the wheat boom had created by the 1890s a clearly recognisable class of rich peasant farmers:

They have almost without exception good \textit{pucca} houses, built with an elaborate main entrance (\textit{darwaza}) which is easily distinguishable from the houses of the tenants, and around which cluster their cattle sheds and granaries. They practically never do any manual labour, the majority employing bailiffs to do even the supervision of their cultivation.\textsuperscript{24}

Elsewhere the golden age was shorter and more fitful. Traditionally D. R. Gadgil sees the all-India halcyon phase as a brief one running from 1880–95 when there was no real failure of the rains in the whole of the subcontinent and ‘a phenomenal expansion in the export of the raw Indian produce took place’.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. R. and R. Ray, \textquote{The Dynamics of Continuity}.


\textsuperscript{23} D. Hardiman, \textquote{Peasant Agitations in Kheda District, Gujarat, 1917–1934}, Sussex D.Phil. 1975, p. 55 says the ‘golden age’ for the lesser Kunbis lasted from 1855 to 1899.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Hoshangabad Settlement Report 1891–96} (1905), p. 35.

\textsuperscript{25} D. R. Gadgil, \textit{The Industrial Evolution of India} (5th edn, OUP India 1971), p. 64.
The boom came to an end in the later 1890s when it slowly became evident that India had entered an agrarian 'crisis' whose nature ran deeper than the effect of famine and plagues extended over more than a dozen years (1895–1908) and affecting hitherto secure tracts. Not only did the period coincide with the thirty-year revision of the land-revenue demand in northern, central and western India, and with the attempt of governments and landlords to obtain their share of the increase in rental values since the 1860s and 1870s; but the communications revolution and increased competition for labour began to loosen the hold of rich farmers over predial labour in significant fashion. The 'rich peasant' began to feel himself under pressure from above and below. For the first time there was a significant questioning of the discretionary and authoritarian character of British district administration, whether this concerned framing the revised revenue assessment in Gujarat and parts of the Central Provinces, or prescribing new canal rates and new conditions of tenure and agricultural practice in the Punjab canal colonies. The result was to bring the better-off peasant into politics often at first as part of a movement of decorous protest on the part of all landholders great and small, such as the movement to which R. C. Dutt's Open Letters to Curzon (1900) gave publicity. The flare-up in the lower Chenab Canal Colony in 1907 showed, however, that protest could easily get out of hand and assume serious proportions.

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How far the institution of predial labour declined through growing scarcity of labour or through changes in the cropping pattern and consequent labour abundance is discussed in Jan Breman, Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India (Los Angeles and Berkeley, 1974). For the effects of higher wages and decline of deference on the part of the Baraiya (Koli) labouring class in Kaira from c. 1900, D. Hardiman, op. cit., p. 81 and passim.

27 R. C. Dutt took up the issue as President of Congress at the Lucknow Sessions in 1899 and publicised the decorously-couched protests of Indian members of the Viceroy's Legislative Council in Open Letters to Lord Curzon (London, 1900).

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The First World War and its aftermath vastly accentuated these tendencies. The thriving Punjab peasantry was caught between the expansive pull of rising crop prices and the incentive these gave to use every available hand on the land and the constrictive counter-pull of the British authorities forcing recruitment for war service and rationing consumer goods. The Punjab disturbances of 1919 of which the Amritsar massacre was the dramatic centre-piece reflected the temporary loss of the rich peasant's collaboration with Government. In the Chenab Canal Colony Basil Poff has shown how the British were constrained to switch rural collaborators and find their new ones among the traditionally turbulent Kharral and Bhatti groups whom the original colonisation by Jat peasant groups was intended to pacify. 28

In 1917 Gandhi mounted the first of his satyagrahas in the indigo-growing district of Champaran in Bihar. Jacques Pouchepadass has recently sought to dispose of the myth that Gandhi and his associates had a monopoly of political activism while 'the peasants themselves remain[ed] as a pathetic downtrodden mass in the background'. 30 He has concluded that the main agent in peasant political mobilisation was the 'richer peasants' who found the European plantocracy a rival to their ambitions for dominance in landholding and the supply of credit. In the Kheda (Kaira) satyagraha in Gujarat in the same year, where the issue was remission of the revenue demand because of poor seasons, Judith Brown has similarly concluded: 'Kaira's wealthiest farmers were Patidars, and it is logical to assume that they were the core of the satyagraha'. 31 The same generalisation can be applied to the Kisan Sabha and Eka movement centred on Rae Bareli and the eastern districts of Avadh from 1920 onwards. 32

28 Basil Poff, 'Rural Control and Imperial Violence in the Punjab in 1919', unpublished seminar paper Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge University, January 1975.
The next round of agrarian-based political crises coincided with the onset of the world slump after 1928. They began in Bardoli in Gujarat where the Congress leaders determined to renew the anti-Government campaign hastily broken off by Gandhi in 1922 after news of the resort to violence at Chauri Chaura in the U.P. Again, as Ghanshyam Shah has recently emphasised, this was a movement conducted avowedly in the interests of superior landowning peasantry who were contesting an enhancement of 22% in the land-revenue assessment announced in 1927. Following on the success of the Bardoli agitation Congress launched its Civil Disobedience campaign in the U.P. in 1930 with a special emphasis on mobilising peasant discontent. But constantly this was directed towards the superior peasantry and attempts to push the movement into a more radical stance were firmly repressed. Parallel but separate was agrarian unrest in Burma. Here, as Michael Adas has sought to demonstrate, the gathering disaffection which characterised Lower Burma after 1900 can be directly related to the ending of the rice boom of the later nineteenth century and to the onset of new difficulties over land and labour supply which tended to polarise and stratify the peasant communities even more sharply. The old view, fostered by J. S. Furnivall and others, was that the commercialisation of agriculture left the peasantry an inert and disintegrating mass while the benefits of rice production were siphoned off by the mechanism of a ‘plural society’ in which almost all the modern ‘capitalist’ and service roles were filled by European, Indian and Chinese immigrants. Michael Adas now argues that it simply was not true that imperialism skimmed cash crops off a stagnant agrarian base as Geertz has suggested. In fact the colonisation of the Irrawaddy delta rice bowl had brought about a high degree of social mobility and the emergence of a thrusting rich peasant class among the Burmese. It was the frustration of this class, anxious to push its sons into the professions, and finding its advance blocked by the expatriate grip over


G. Pandey, op. cit.
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the economy and employment opportunities, that sparked off the troubles of the 1920s. Race riots in Rangoon in 1922 and again in 1928 were followed by the much more serious agrarian rebellion of Saya San in 1928–30. As in India much of the cause could be traced to the thwarting of rising expectations:

Insofar as it was economically inspired, the Saya San rebellion was a product of frustrated hopes rather than hopeless oppression. Although the problems of Burma’s economy were very serious by the 1920’s, few, if any, persons in the province starved even when the slump was at its worst in the early 1930’s. In the boom decades of the late nineteenth century and early 1900’s, however, the classes engaged in agrarian production had come to expect rather high standards of living and levels of consumption and considerable upward mobility. In the decades of transition social and economic realities increasingly fell short of these expectations. By the time of the Depression the social and economic arrangements that had once brought the Burmese cultivator prosperity no longer seemed to work in his favour. Consequently thousands of agriculturalists allied themselves with visionaries and pongsis who promised to destroy the institutions that had evolved under alien rule and to bring about a return of an idealized golden age in the past.\(^{35}\)

All these instances suggest a groundswell coming up from within peasant society which was decisive in loosening the political hold of colonial rule and promoting the nationalist cause. Without the rural dimension the urban politician would have remained ineffectual. Yet the mechanism by which the politicisation of the countryside was accomplished is all-important, for it defines the locus of historical initiative. Christopher Baker and David Washbrook have continued the tradition of the Cambridge school in giving primacy to political action and the role of central authority. Their main theme is that before 1920 the old Madras Presidency remained a stable, if not stagnant, society, almost unaffected (except in a few exceptional areas) by the limited extent of economic development that had occurred under British rule. At best there was a strengthening of the economic position of the rich peasant. Yet between 1900 and 1920 politics came to the countryside. The effective agent of political mobilisation was Government itself, which found it expedient for the solution of its own besetting financial problems to extend administration and

\(^{35}\text{M. Adas, The Burma Delta, pp. 202–3.}\)
introduce some measure of local self-taxation and self-government. The use of electoral machinery produced in turn the rise of political parties, caste associations, and a range of other associational activities. Their emergence in this period ‘can hardly be ascribed to a sudden alteration in the socio-economic base’. Politicisation brought about in this fashion proceeded from the top downwards; and we are given to suppose that it remained firmly under the initiative and control of the rich peasant ‘boss’. That is, at least until 1930, when the full force of the world depression struck Madras. The price fall caught the ‘village elite’ with particular severity, but the tenant and landless classes were also sharply affected. Rural society became the scene of violent agitations which the Congress leaders orchestrated in the Civil Disobedience campaign and subsequently utilised to unseat the ruling Justice Party. It may be, therefore, that in the south we are dealing with a more slow moving time scale in which the climacteric date was 1930 rather than 1900 or 1917. Until then the ‘rich peasant’ can be viewed as remaining largely prosperous and so loyal to the Raj, and only subsequently was he turned by economic change into more radical political courses. In Baker’s final account the role of economic forces in effecting structural social and political change would thus seem to have gained ultimate recognition. Yet he still leaves in play the central political initiative of the Raj in withdrawing British authority from the provinces and in introducing a ‘mass’ franchise under the 1937 India Act. We are left with a philosophy of historical conjuncture rather than of economic determinism.

One of the inherent difficulties of the ‘rich peasant’ or kulak concept is that it bears a pejorative rather than a scientifically neutral connotation. Even non-Marxist historians lean instinctively to the assumption that the political influence of the rich peasant must by definition be thrown into the reactionary scale. Those more Marxist-inclined see this reactionary influence extended to the economic field. The Bengali jotedar has been indicted by Ratna and Rajat Ray as the buttress both of ‘imperialism’ and ‘underdevelopment’ in the countryside throughout the nineteenth century. Sumit Sarkar has smelled out the jotedar as the

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86 C. J. Baker and D. Washbrook, *South India*, p. 43.
87 C. J. Baker, *The Politics of South India*.
prime historical agent of communalism. When Curzon promul-
gated his partition of Bengal, Hindu and Muslim students in
Calcutta expressed the natural unity of the intelligentsia by
marching hand in hand in demonstration in September 1906 to
hymn the common mother country and hurl defiance at the Raj.
But the united front was shattered by the Muslim jotedars of
eastern Bengal who used the opportunity under the cloak of
religion to prosecute their economic war against the largely Hindu
zamindars and called in the maulavis to their aid. In this way
responsibility for sundering the seamless web of the Bengali
‘nation’ and propelling it towards the luckless state of modern
Bangladesh and West Bengal can be laid firmly at the door of the
rich peasant. As the story is told by Sunil Sen, so reactionary did
the rich peasant become that even before the ending of colonial
rule the bargadar sharecroppers rose up in the Tebhaga rebellion
of 1946–7 against his parasitic exactions.

The distrust of the ‘rich peasant’ infects the account of less
politically-committed historians. It is easy to interpret the limited
and controlled nature of peasant agitation in the Kisan Sabha
movement of 1920–1 and 1930–1 and of the contemporaneous
anti-Government campaigns in Gujarat as an indicator of the
fears of the more substantial peasantry, worried lest the landless
and petty cultivators whom they had mobilised should get out of
hand and mount a general campaign for land redistribution, or
loose off mindless pillage of haves by have-nots. In this interpreta-
tion the Leninist and Maoist analyses of peasant society, as
mediated through the writings of Eric Wolf, have exercised a
compelling influence. The triple division of the peasantry into
rich, middle, and poor is now taken as axiomatic. In this teaching
it is, of course, the middle peasant, the truly marginal man,
partially enmeshed in the market economy but partially still re-
taining the independence of the subsistence farmer, who is the
essential soul of anticolonial resistance and revolution. In contrast

38 Sumit Sarkar, ‘Hindu; Muslim Relations in Swadeshi Bengal, 1903–1908’,
IESHR, xx, 2 (1972), pp. 161 ff. Also The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal,
1903–1908 (New Delhi, 1973).
40 Eric Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century (London, 1971). The
literature is surveyed inter alia in Hamza Alavi, ‘Peasants and Revolution’,
in K. Gough and H. P. Sharma (eds.), Imperialism and Revolution in
the rich peasant remains the natural upholder of the status quo, being all too closely integrated in the market economy and the established political order to make anything more than careful reformist gestures.

So powerfully has this theoretical analysis carried conviction that historians fall over themselves to discover the radical middle peasant at the centre of disturbance. David Hardiman has gone so far as to say that in the Civil Disobedience movements in Gujarat, 'the rich peasants, who often acted as village leaders, had to be forced in many cases to join in and lead the agitation. As a result, we can say that although the lesser Patidars were not a class of middle peasants as such, they tended to act in the interests of the middle peasantry'. Hardiman is so impressed with Wolf's model that he has taken over Wolf's explanation of the radicalism of the 'middle peasantry' for India and put it down to the loss of their rights as small proprietors. 'In the past, the middle peasants had held sharehold rights in the villages, but under a capitalist economy they were demoted to the ranks of the proletariat as mere tenant farmers. Unlike the poor peasants, the middle peasants have often refused to accept this menial role.' Yet this theoretical argument has to be reconciled with the contradiction that the Kheda (and Bardoli) agitations centred almost entirely on the protest against land tax pressure on owners. The middle peasants in the Charotar, the richest part of the Kheda district, so far from having been 'proletarianised' were the largest land-owning group. But how is a 'middle peasant' to be defined? Hardiman adopts the standard mode of definition according to size of landholding, a rich peasant owning in the Petlad Taluka (Charotar) more than 25 bighas (16 acres), a middle peasant 5 to 25 bighas (3½ to 16 acres), and a poor peasant less than 5 bighas. Taking an all-India basis for the period 1945–55 T. J. Byres defines the middle peasant as one holding between 5 and 15 acres, the rich and poor peasant categories falling respectively above and below

43 D. Hardiman, 'Politicisation and Agitation among the Dominant Peasants in Early Twentieth Century India', _EPW_, ix, (28 Feb. 1976), p. 369. I am indebted to Peter Mayer of Adelaide University for drawing this thoughtful and stimulating article to my attention.
44 D. Hardiman, op. cit., pp. 316–18. This is a table of proprietary and not cultivating rights. Such a table of landownership is a less meaningful index than a table of operational holdings viz. the actual amount of land, whether owned or leased in, that a farmer commands.
these amounts. Inevitably any definition remains imprecise, even more so since the Marxist classification is not seeking to measure the scale of income polarisation but to define a distinct economic and social role for each category. Now, under colonial rule the rich peasants on the Marxist definition ‘were a class of capitalist farmers in embryo, in the womb of the old order’, men who marketed the bulk of their crop and employed a preponderance of hired rather than family labour. The middle peasant in contrast used almost entirely family labour and consumed the larger part of his production. Size of holding may be a crude indicator of peasant category but more important, it has been argued, is the input of capital and labour. To establish viable economic class-groups is, therefore, difficult enough; to identify such groupings in a given historical or contemporary setting sets up serious logical strains. Hardiman found in Kheda that social and political action was primarily conducted within the framework of extended lineage or caste groups. ‘The distinction between a superior and lesser Patidar was not a class distinction. Within each superior and lesser Patidar village it was possible to find rich, middle and even poor Patidar peasants.’ Hence he felt obliged to analyse the peasant agitations historically according to ‘precise cultural distinctions’ rather than ‘imprecise class distinctions’. Sociologists have refused to accept the concept of separate and discordant hierarchies of wealth and status within the confines of a local community, and have resolved the dilemma by the idea of the summation of roles in a dominant caste. Where a single caste is dominant the relations among its leaders are likely to be those of factional competition based on vertical cross-caste alliances with ‘followers’. It has been argued, however, that social

47 T. J. Byres, op. cit.
organisation in the dominant caste at a lower level occurs by way of horizontal mobilisation within the caste group. This is the level of the middle peasantry, and caste organisation, though acting in the interests of the middle peasantry, pulls in rich and poor peasants alike. This thesis utilised by Hardiman propounds that despite the outward appearance of moving on caste lines local society operates in fact in class terms. Such a thesis also appears to be implicit in Ghanshyam Shah’s analysis of the Bardoli agitation of 1928.60

In discussing the 1942 Quit India disturbances in Bihar and eastern U.P., M. V. Harcourt is equally at pains to find the locus of agitation in the middle peasantry. From police and Congress reports he concludes that ‘the statistics on caste certainly do not indicate a rising of “the wretched of the earth” in status terms. They show rather a predominantly middle and high caste crowd.’ Indeed some 44.5% of the ‘crowd’ were drawn from the Brahmin and Rajput-Bhuiyar castes. Yet Harcourt finds no difficulty in calling the movement primarily a kisan rebellion, and in defining ‘kisan’ as belonging to the bottom of the tenurial hierarchy. For him the kisans are ‘either “dwarf cultivators” from the bottom strata of the jotedar category or sharecroppers’.61 It is a bold semantic leap.

Yet the notion – in Hamza Alavi’s words – that ‘poor peasants are initially the least militant’ and ‘middle peasants... are initially the most militant’62 is not borne out by observers in the south. While D. N. Dhanagare rejects it for India as a whole63 Robert Hardgrave has found that in the Mappila Rebellion of 1921 in Kerala the main rebellion zone lay in the Ernad and Walluvanad talukas of South Malabar where militancy came from the poorest tenant cultivators of Kerala who were sharply differentiated economically and socially from their landlords. The area of north Malabar dominated by middle and rich peasant owner cultivators lagged well behind.64 D. N. Dhanagare comments on the Telan-

gana ‘insurrection’ of 1946–51 in the Andhra delta and neighbouring Hyderabad that ‘the poor peasants and the labourers were the backbone of the resistance from the beginning till the very end’. Joan Mencher has concluded from her study of Chingleput that ‘organised movements have occurred in areas where there is a strong polarisation between the landless and all others... Small or middle peasants have not been the ones to organise or lead revolts of any kind. This is strongly opposed to the situation described by Wolf. In the South Indian peasant context it has been the landless labourers, unconstrained by possible ties to the land, who have been the main agitators or strikers.’

Mencher’s attempt to classify rural society in Chingleput according to primary occupation – landlord, capitalist farmer, independent farmer, small holder, and landless farmer – comes to nothing. The multiplicity of roles exercised by individuals and the constant shifting from one to another leave the lines of demarcation too broken and blurred to be of service. It is precisely this overlapping of functions, she concludes, that inhibits class conflict. Although in the 1971 census some 43% of male rural workers were classified as agricultural labourers by primary occupation, some of these in any one year would become sharecroppers. Even the smallest landholders, instead of conforming to the image of the poor peasant, were employers (perhaps because of the peculiar labour requirements of wet rice cultivation), and the small 2-acre men identified themselves with the landed rather than the landless.

The same difficulty in finding a clearly articulated class structure is evident elsewhere. In Bengal the jotedar eludes precise definition. Basically he was the possessor of a ‘home farm’ or ‘demesne’ irrespective of overlord rights he might have held in other land. But the size of the jotes could differ so enormously that it is idle to pretend that all jotedars can be lumped together

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in a single class. Even in the Rays’ account they are constrained to acknowledge that, in Rangpur, Buchanan-Hamilton found giant jotedars with 500–6,000 acres, middle jotedars with 50 acres, as well as the normal range of villagers with much smaller amounts. Moreover the saleability of title resulted in absentee rentiers of the professional and service castes intermingling in the jotedar ranks with the traditional agricultural castes (Mahisiyas, Sadgops, etc.). It is only the force of modern political slogan-mongering that has tempted scholars to create a class out of such heterogeneous material, and it is difficult to see how the concept can survive André Béteille’s powerful essay in critical demolition.88

In any event, according to the lights of the academic left, the case of the jotedar is symptomatic of the tendency of the rich peasant to avoid capitalist farming and to fall back on the ‘semi-feudal’ exploitation of leasing out to sharecroppers. In this way cash-cropping has failed to transform economic and social relations and consequently class formation and conflict have been held back. While more traditionalist Marxist economists like Utsa Patnaik valiantly argue that a capitalist sector is becoming established in agriculture and that productivity of landholding observes the ordinary rules of economies of scale,89 there is a strong neo-Marxist school which believes in making a virtue of necessity and formulating a theory of ‘underdevelopment’ to explain the absence of capitalist relations. Djurfeldt and Lindberg have carried this tendency farthest. Despite the appearance of capitalist modes the rich peasant producing for market by means of wage labour is not in their view earning a true return on capital investment but simply exploiting his monopoly of a scarce means of production in a country where the ordinary man must raise a subsistence from the land or starve. This is a twentieth-century extension of Richard Jones’ theory of peasant rents in which, as stated by J. S. Mill, the landholder’s return is determined directly

by the ratio of population to land rather than to capital. In India this ratio drives wage rates so low that for Djurfeldt and Lindberg the rich farmer’s profit is in fact a form of land rent.\textsuperscript{60}

Despite overlapping roles a clear theoretical line can be drawn through village society between exploiters and exploited and income polarisation has increased drastically. Nevertheless the two authors are forced to conclude that ‘despite all poverty and suffering, Thalur is a coherent and even harmonious formation: there are few dissidents, and few conflicting world-views. This conclusion tallies with our spontaneous and most frustrating experience in the field: there is so little which augurs revolt, or even a protest.’\textsuperscript{61}

Their final explanation is one of economic and social dualism. The village survives as a pre-capitalist formation at the periphery of the system but through its external links via the market and the state it is subordinate to capitalism at the centre. In this way the ghost of the old notion of the self-contained Indian village community remains alive. In practice Marxists and non-Marxists record a more or less identical situation in which caste organisation and values tend to dominate in the village while at a wider territorial level the solidarities of class make their intermittent appearance. The account given by Djurfeldt and Lindberg differs little – once the academic top-structure has been cut away – from the balanced and sensible purview taken by Béteille in \textit{Caste, Class and Power} (1965) and reaffirmed in his more recent \textit{Essays in Agrarian Social Structure} (1974). A historian would comment that the one general agrarian movement which superficially bears the imprint of class was the campaign for zamindari abolition. But looked at more closely it represented an alliance of village leaders achieved through the political system to oust an alien or non-resident element from the village community. Even in the south where the evidence for class conflict among the peasantry is much more compelling, one may ask whether the movement against the Brahmin \textit{mirasdars} did not follow on from their gradual withdrawal from the direct supervision of cultivation into


\textsuperscript{61}Djurfeldt and Lindberg, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 316.
absentee public service employment and an increasingly rentier role. 68

In conclusion, we may say that agrarian agitation formed an increasingly important element in politics after 1900; that such agitations were scattered, intermittent, and short-lived; that they usually occurred either in 'high-farming' areas where agrarian society was peculiarly open to market forces or in peripheral areas that had been subjected to recent economic disturbance; that they took hold where supra-village caste organisation remained strong. Marxists acknowledge that the division of the peasantry into rich, middle and poor is a rough and ready heuristic device and that a much more refined instrument of classification is necessary for modern economic sociology. For the historian used to working with blunt tools the threefold division is probably adequate for the scantier evidence on which he has to work in peasant studies. Yet even if non-economic elements in social organisation could be brushed aside and a 13-point classificatory scale be employed as Linz has recently sought to use for European peasantry, the complexities of political response in Europe would warn of the difficulty of constructing some handy ready-reckoner on which the student of Indian political history could happily rely. 69 Indeed whether it is valid to view the peasantry as divided internally into opposed economic and social classes remains a matter of contention even among Marxists. Chayanov's argument of a cyclical mobility preventing any such permanent class formation continues to carry weight, and the débâcle which the ujamaa 'anti-kulak' policy in Tanzania has met with has drawn cries of protest from those who argue within the rounded circle of Marxist thought:

The relationship between progressive farmers and peasants is much more usefully understood as one between different strata of the same


J. Harriss, 'Implications of Changes in Agriculture for Social Relationships at the Village Level: the Case of Randam', in B. H. Farmer (ed.), Green Revolutions: Technological Change in Rice Growing Areas of Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka (Macmillan, London, 1977). The eastern taluks of the Old Delta in Thanjavur (Tanjore) present an exceptional case. Here Brahmín mirasdars have turned to commercial farming, tenancy has been almost eliminated, and the vast bulk of the Harijan population are employed as agricultural labourers. The naked congruence of caste and class has brought about an explosive situation.

69 Juan J. Linz, 'Patterns of Land Tenure, Division of Labor, and Voting Behavior in Europe', Comparative Politics, viii, 3 (April 1976), pp. 365 ff.
social class. From a Marxian perspective the progressive farmers are not a discrete social class separate from the peasantry: they are simply the most well-off section of the peasantry. Insofar as the concept of a peasantry can be understood to apply to that segment of the rural population characterised by (1) a dependence upon land husbandry for its principal source of livelihood, and (2) occupancy and cultivation of the land on the basis of family units, poorer peasants and progressive farmers belong to a common category in class terms. Whatever the dissimilarities in the sizes of their land-holding, both groups are composed of individuals who possess land and earn their living by investing their labor in it. The differential patterns of land occupancy demonstrated by Van Hekker and Van Velzen are evidence that processes of rural class formation are well under way, and not, as these authors assume, that economically opposed social classes have come into being.\(^*\)

If even the Marxist trumpet sounds so uncertain a note, who else will prepare for the battle? In the present age the historian must content himself with the role of humble camp follower to the sociologist and economist. But like the sweeper in my regiment who carried the thunder-box of the sahibs through the Arakan campaign there is the hope that in the end it is he and not they who will be awarded the decoration.