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978-0-521-29770-7 - The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India

Eric Stokes

Excerpt

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Introduction

To probe the nature of the 'traditional' agrarian order in which the vast bulk of the population of the Indian subcontinent was embraced, and to explore the extent to which rural society underwent fundamental alteration under colonial rule, forms the double-thread of inquiry linking these essays. Although events elsewhere in Asia, the practical concerns of development economists, and the rise of 'peasant studies' as an academic pursuit, have all combined to bring into fresh prominence the agrarian life of South Asia, it is remarkable how far thought and observation have been shorn of all but the most rudimentary historical dimension. The modern mind is the poorer in consequence, an impressive technical expertise being partnered all too often by a singular naiveté concerning the historic bases and continuities of the human society that it is planning to change. Doubtless the professional historian is himself much to blame for this condition, reluctant as he has been to put on the pair of good strong boots that Tawney declared to be an essential part of his equipment. Much of his difficulty has lain in the apparent complexity and technicality of Indian land systems and his despair at naturalising them among the common topics of historical discourse. Social anthropologists have long been preaching that complexity is the hallmark of pre-industrial rather than of industrial societies. But the complexity attending the manner in which land was held in the subcontinent was doubly compounded by the interlocking of land tenures with tax collection structures in an ancient order of civilisation. The British quickly added a further complication of their own. The force of subconscious ideology and the practical need to stabilise the tax system within an impersonal bureaucratic form of rule prompted them at the outset of colonial rule to introduce a modern form of private property right. How far the British

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misunderstood and distorted South Asian society in consequence has remained a matter of controversy. Certainly the British believed that they were innovating. It was a fixed article of their faith that, because the land tax imposed by rapacious native governments had traditionally absorbed the entire economic rent, effective private property in land had hitherto had no general existence. Engels, echoing Marx, gave this belief vivid expression in his aphorism that the key to the whole of the East lay in the absence of private property in land.¹ Yet although the property arising from the perpetual or long-term limitation of the land tax was novel, the British proclaimed their purpose as being not to overturn existing rights but to give amplification and legal certainty to rights that had hitherto remained vague and inchoate. Modern critics have argued that a fundamental distortion of Indian tenures was caused by the British inability to free themselves of the notion of an absolute and exclusive form of proprietorship when interests in land were traditionally multiple and inclusive.² Certainly British legal forms brusquely compressed the overlapping and complex gradations of rural society into the crude categories of landlord, tenant and labourer. Yet such critics have believed too readily in British gullibility and imagined that senior officials did not appreciate the discrepancy between British law and Indian fact.

British revenue law – at least in northern India – was perfectly clear that the novel private proprietary right it created lay not in the land itself but in the right to levy revenue from it.³ The existence of a separate and distinct customary right of physical dominion, including the power to locate cultivators, plant groves, sink wells, and in some areas control the waste, was never seriously questioned. What the British attempted to do was to weld the novel property attaching to the revenue-collecting right (*malguzari*) to this primary right of dominion. But rendering the revenue-collecting right compulsorily saleable, for default or in satisfaction of decrees for debt, ensured that even where the right

¹ Engels to Marx, 6 June 1853, cited S. Avineri, *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (New York, 1969), p. 451.

² Cf. Walter C. Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India* (New Haven, Conn., 1962), pp. 51 ff.

³ Cf. James Cumming, c. 1820, 'The rights granted to the zamindars were proprietary rights in the Circar [Government] share of the produce of the land and not in the land itself', cited Rajat Ray, "'Zamindars" and "Jotedars" in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 9, no. 1 (1975), p. 87.

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had been correctly lodged with those wielding primary dominion there was no solder that could keep the two together. The malguzari right could all too readily become separated off as a form of ground rental property leaving the physical control of the land in the hands of others. It is still not always appreciated that in the high volume of sales that characterised the new British revenue systems in northern and central India it was for the most part revenue rights that were being transferred and not land. Hence the pattern of proprietary rights became little more than an index of revenue payers and bore a steadily more distant relationship to the distribution of operational holdings. The legal description of society failed to fit the economic and sociological. Rural society refused to be neatly segregated into the mutually exclusive roles of landlord, tenant, and labourer, and doubled or trebled these roles endlessly.⁴ Hence the loss of the malguzari right was often more a political than an economic fact. It is this degree of complication that is so frequently overlooked by those who have taken too literally the introduction of an exclusive proprietary title. Yet it vitally affects our understanding of the working structure of rural society, of the causes of peasant violence, and above all, of the larger question of the changes brought about by colonial rule.

On this larger question informed opinion, whether of scholars or practical administrators, has been traditionally divided, oscillating between the conviction of an India galvanised by Western intrusion and the opposite notion of the changeless East. Papers 1 and 12 look at the long historical debate it has occasioned. In its agrarian aspect the debate suffered a curious arrest, and from this has sprung the shallowness of much contemporary discussion on the historical side. What was the basic peasant tenure? In whose hands lay the primary dominion of the soil? These questions, which fired the train of discussion, appeared of vital practical importance in the early decades of the nineteenth century when the battle of land-revenue systems was being fought out. For the answers determined the point in the tenurial scale at which the 'boon' of modern proprietary title was to be accorded – whether at the level of the local magnate (the zamindari system), the joint-

⁴ This was also true of ryotwar districts. Cf. the observation on the Bombay presidency in I. J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 187: 'Many a cultivator was both landlord and tenant; he could be landholder, tenant, and labourer as well.'

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managing village notables (the *pattidari*, *mirasi*, or 'village zamindar' system), or the individual peasant holder (the ryotwari system). By the mid nineteenth century there was wide agreement that the coparcenary village community of joint-managing village notables had constituted the original tenure of Indian life, but that its derangement by the late eighteenth century over the greater part of the subcontinent had led to it being overlooked or set aside in the land-revenue systems of Bengal, Madras and Bombay. The independent momentum of administrative systems once under way ensured that there could be no going back. Yet the gathering belief in the historical primacy of the village community gave intellectual sanction to the currency of tenancy legislation which set in from the 1870s in northern India, and which sought to stabilise the position of those enjoying immediate and customary possessory dominion.

The academic elucidation of agrarian structure was given a decisive impetus by Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) and more especially his *Village Communities in East and West* (1871). Once in train the historical investigation of a state of society in which central power, seigniorial jurisdiction, and quasi-manorial forms were observed to have overlaid coparcenary village communities, might have been expected to yield results fully as illuminating as those achieved by Maitland in his analogous study of the historical growth of English society published in *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897). Yet it was not to be. Although Vinogradoff visited the Punjab in 1913 and put out a fascinating questionnaire, no European savant took up the subject.⁵ The Indian subcontinent had to make do with the encyclopaedic labours and muddled thinking of Baden Henry Baden-Powell. Both academic and official interest then dried up, not to be revived again until our own day. By 1900 the historical character of land tenures seemed an increasingly sterile issue in the Indian official world where the British were being driven by political pressure to rely less and less on land revenue as a taxation source, and where the gathering weight of the agrarian problem was suggesting radical courses to cut away the dead incubus of the past. But the aborted nature of the discussion has left the contemporary agronomist and sociologist curiously bereft of a solid historical foundation. Baden-

⁵ H. A. L. Fisher (ed.), *The Collected Papers of Paul Vinogradoff* (Oxford, 1928), i, pp. 52–4.

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Powell's *Land Systems of British India* (1892) and *The Indian Village Community* (1896) remain standard authorities nearly a century later and form the departure point for present-day scholarship.

Although without the intellectual force and clarity of Maitland, Baden-Powell was nevertheless responsible for an important revision of the concept of the Indian village community in which he followed very much the line of Maitland's argument.⁶ So far from the coparcenary or joint village community being the original universal tenure, it was, he asserted, historically the exception and a later imposition over the severalty or ryotwar village which remained the norm. So, far from being general, the joint village was for the most part confined to northern and north-western India. Even then actual community of property was rare, the land usually being held in severalty and subject merely to joint responsibility and management in respect of the State revenue demand. Most types of joint village, Baden-Powell believed, had originated in local conquest or as a royal grant of revenue-collecting rights over ryotwar cultivators. Many of these grants were far from ancient. The proliferation of the grantee's kin within a few generations was sufficient to explain the progressive transformation of the tenure from single ownership (*zamindari khalis*) to joint undivided ownership (*zamindari mushtarka*) among his immediate descendants and then in the progress of time to division among the various branches (*pattis*) of the proprietary kin group. By this stage the group had become so enlarged that the profits on the revenue collected from subordinate cultivators no longer sufficed to support it. Part of the village lands would be taken into direct owner cultivation (*sir*) and held and cultivated in severalty. Subordinate cultivators would continue to pay their dues into a common treasury to be set against the revenue demand on the village as a whole. Any surplus or deficit would be distributed over *pattis* and individual *pattidars* on the basis of their ancestral share determined by their position in the genealogical table. So long as some land worked by subordinate 'tenant' cultivators remained common, the tenure was known as 'imperfect *pattidari*'. But ultimately, if in practice only occasionally, the entire village lands could be divided up among the *pattidars*,

⁶ Cf. C. J. Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community', *Modern Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (1972), pp. 320 ff.

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either as their individual sir or as their individual 'rent property'. In revenue language this condition was known as 'perfect pattidari', the essential characteristic being that each patti and pattidar, despite the fact that all holding was now complete severalty, continued to meet the revenue demand on the basis of ancestral shares. When too great a discrepancy appeared between actual holdings and ancestral shares, the ancestral-share principle could itself be abandoned and a straight area rate on holdings (*bach* or *bigha-dam*) adopted in its place. The British called this *bhaiachara* or 'custom of the brotherhood'. Except for the survival of joint responsibility for the revenue demand on the village as a whole, the tenure was almost indistinguishable from ryotwar. The development cycle of tenures had reached its term and could be started anew only by the village falling again into single ownership as a result of fresh local conquest, state grant, or – under the British – of forced transfer for revenue default or mortgage foreclosure. These tenurial types were, of course, crude models and practice showed infinite modifications, especially when the separate patts of a village or 'estate' were each held under different tenures. Although Baden-Powell adhered generally to the concept of a developmental cycle in tenures, he exempted *bhaiachara*. The term had been mistakenly used by British officials to indicate any joint tenure where the revenue was apportioned as a land or plough rate that did not follow the principle of ancestral shares. True *bhaiachara*, he believed, had an independent origin and did not spring as did all other forms of joint tenure from a political grant of overlordship, but stemmed from below as the result of the original tribal or clan colonisation of an empty tract. The rights divided among the colonists and their heirs were not the revenue payments of subordinate or conquered cultivators, but the virgin land itself. Yet apart from the vestigial right of the community to repartition the village lands Baden-Powell was unable in practice to distinguish this tenure from that in which the descendants of a single 'landlord' had come to occupy all the cultivated land themselves.

To the largely official audience for which he produced his books such fine distinctions must have seemed highly academic. With the practical desuetude of joint responsibility and the gathering pace of partitions the village communities were fast dissolving by the end of the nineteenth century into a form of either ryotwar or

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zamindari, according to the size of proprietary holding. Baden-Powell's plea for a census of village tenures in the Punjab and the N.W. Provinces and Oudh fell on deaf ears, and his emphasis on the essentially tribal character of true bhaiachara, exemplified by the Jats of Mathura district, must have seemed a crotchet on a par with the historical theory of the spread of Aryan institutions to which he chose to link it.

Papers 2, 3 and 10 together seek to show that in the evolution of modern agrarian structures these matters were far from academic, and that they influenced the local pattern of 'caste' and 'class' relationships in an important manner. Baden-Powell's insistence on the separate origin and nature of the bhaiachara tenure is upheld and defended. But the differentia from other tenures is sought in economic ecology. It is the contention of these studies that not only the major tenurial distinctions between the ryotwar and non-ryotwar forms of village, but also caste differentiation and social distance erected upon them, can be largely explained in their origin by the distinction between regions of secure and insecure agriculture and their corresponding contrasts in population density.

Only in regions of secure agriculture and heavy population was there sufficient competition to allow the equivalent of a landlord's rent to emerge. Only here was it worthwhile for a person or group to assert immediate physical dominion over land beyond his or its immediate cultivating needs. Village landlord forms were, therefore, confined in broad terms to areas such as the wet farming districts of Andhra and Tamilnadu, the coastal tracts of the Konkan and Gujarat in western India, or the Gangetic plain below Delhi. This did not mean that extensive cultivable waste might not exist in close proximity to densely populated regions, but the waste was of such a nature – for example, in Bengal or in the Himalayan terai of Gorakhpur and Saharanpur districts – as to require considerable capital for its clearance and settlement. So that peopling such areas often threw up village or supra-village landlord forms. In Hoshangabad district in the Narmada valley the colonisation of the wheat lands threw the malguzari and ultimately the landlord right into the hands of anyone of whatever caste or calling who could finance the colonists until the first full harvest was secured. There is a still more important qualification to the notion of the generation of landlord rents. It is not suggested

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that economic rents emerged under conditions of a free-market agriculture. Rental tribute was always extracted by extra-economic coercion, but at the village level it was only worthwhile asserting a monopoly of access to land over and above one's cultivating needs under conditions of relative land scarcity. Of course even where the man/land ratio was low the state itself could assert a practical monopoly over an area sufficiently extensive to extort tribute from all alike, or a local magnate class like the Bundela *thakurs* or the Ceded Districts *poligars* could levy protection rent over villages. But this was an overlord rather than landlord right, since it fell short of proprietary dominion itself. Within the village there remained an absence of landlord forms for there was no profit to be made in 'leasing out'. So long as arable land was freely available, wealth and pre-eminence lay in cattle, ploughs, and the numbers and labour power of the cultivating family.⁷ Above all, privileged immunity from the full exaction of the state could be of the highest importance. Paper 2 argues that the structure of the ryotwar village with its characteristic apparatus of *ballotadars* or village officers and its dependence on petty 'service' tenures was the peculiar product of these conditions.

In practice the more successful forms of peasant agriculture appear to have emerged where owner-cultivator communities under ryotwar or *bhaiachara* forms obtained a novel security in their conditions of life.⁸ This might result from the renewal of political and fiscal security and the reinvigoration of long-distance traffic in agricultural produce; but above all it was aided by the novel agricultural security springing from the extension of well and canal irrigation. In this respect the doubling of the sown area in the Punjab and Haryana between 1850 and 1925 to 30 million acres represented a remarkable episode of internal colonialisation.⁹ Where conditions of insecure agriculture had originally produced

⁷ On the enormous extent of cultivable waste in the ryotwar districts of Salem, Anantapur, Bellary, etc. cf. D. Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 107.

⁸ Biplab Dasgupta, *Agrarian Change and the New Technology in India* (UNRISD, Geneva, 1977) observes that 'the new technology of green revolution has so far been more successful in *ryotwar* areas [in which he includes Punjab, Haryana, and West U.P.] dominated by thrifty, hardworking peasant proprietors'.

⁹ For expansion of cultivation of the Punjab, cf. S. S. Thornton, *The Punjab in Peace and War* (Edinburgh and London, 1904), p. 260; and also H. Calvert, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab*, 2nd edn (Lahore, 1936), p. 156.

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owner-cultivator rather than rentier-landlord tenures, there the novel security promoted a 'rich peasant' class which combined petty landlordism, moneylending and direct cultivation, and which was prominent by the 1880s among the Kunbi Patidars of Gujarat, the malguzars of the Narmada valley, and the village *maliks* of Haryana and the Punjab. These issues are touched upon in Papers 10 and 11.

In giving this degree of attention to nineteenth-century theorising on the Indian village community it is axiomatic to the argument that the 'ideological' context of debate contributed an important independent element to British land-revenue policy and to the transformation of Indian land tenures. This is not a popular view. Administrative policy has remained a comparatively neglected field for the historical scholar carried along by the post-War swing of interest away from transient imperialist superstructures to the inner workings of society. Older simplistic assumptions about the actions of ideas in modern South Asian history have deservedly been rejected. Few would now disagree that overt doctrine and covert presupposition had to work within the narrow constraints which were inherent in self-financing colonial autocracy and which allowed steadily diminishing room for manoeuvre. India was a country, as Kipling said, where the climate and the work were against playing bricks with words.¹⁰ Yet British action cannot be reduced entirely to a near-sighted pragmatism. The role of theory is looked at afresh in Paper 4. It is not supposed that ideas found lodgement unless they converged with felt need, but that is very different from saying that they were mere rationalisations of material interests or otiose justifications of simple expediency. Some historians have argued that even where ideological assumptions were most deeply imbedded in the colonial institutional structure, that is to say in the legal system of private property rights in land, their effect was largely negated by limiting devices whenever they threatened to cause social upheaval or disorder. Such historians suggest that tenancy legislation was primarily introduced to keep the countryside quiet, even though its successive steps brought about a virtual 'transfer of ownership' to the cultivator.¹¹ Hence on this view, despite the

¹⁰ R. Kipling, 'The Conversion of Aurelian McGoggin', *Plain Tales from the Hills* (London, 1965).

¹¹ Cf. Dietmar Rothermund, *The Phases of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay, 1970), p. 197.

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aristocratic reaction in official thinking after the 1857 Revolt, the British were slowly forced to desert their larger landlord collaborators. Yet there is another side to the expiry of earlier hopes for a capitalist revolution in North Indian agriculture based on larger proprietary units.

As late as the 1860s Baird Smith pronounced freely transferable property rights in land as not merely the most effective means of attracting capital into agriculture but as the best form of famine insurance. The institution of village landlords (or *malguzars*) in the 1860s in a large part of the Central Provinces argued a continuing faith in building up a rural capitalist class. Yet by the 1870s there were few who believed that the monied classes would produce improving landlords or that many would turn into capitalist farmers. 'For it cannot be too clearly understood', wrote W. G. Pedder, a leading Bombay revenue official, 'that only in the dream of a visionary will the English agricultural system of large landlords, capitalist farmers of large farms, and peasant labourers for wage, ever be substituted for the *petite culture* of India.'¹² It was ironic that just at the point when the railway was opening up the countryside to new markets on an unprecedented scale British administrators should become increasingly apprehensive about the future. Their taskmasters were famine and agrarian indebtedness, which appeared in alarming form in the 1870s. Shrewder officials believed the two were interconnected. The new facilities of communication changed famine from a regional to a class problem and left the labouring class and small plot holders throughout the country exposed to starvation because of scarcity food prices.¹³ To what extent was the small landholder undergoing gradual pauperisation? Pedder believed that the Deccan Riots of 1875 had shown that he was in serious danger of becoming 'the praedial serf of the money lender'. The frightening spectre which began to haunt officials was that not only would the increasing commercialisation of agriculture weaken the poorer peasant's defences against famine, but that the land would increasingly be starved of the capital that was essential for raising productivity. The threat of the moneylender took different shapes according to the land-revenue system in force. In the *mahalwari* region of

¹² W. G. Pedder, pamphlet, cited *Deccan Riots Commission Appx A Papers re Indebtedness of the Agricultural Classes in Bombay* (Bombay, 1876), pp. 139–40.

¹³ B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India, 1860–1965* (London, 1963), ch. i.