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1

LANDLORD ABOLITION AND THE RURAL ORDER: EGYPT, INDIA

By strengthening the principle of private property where it was weakest, i.e. at the base of the social pyramid, the reforms have created a huge class of strong opponents of the class war ideology

Charan Singh, Indian politician, 1958

The future agrarian pattern should be that of cooperative joint farming, in which land will be pooled for joint cultivation

Indian National Congress Resolution, Nagpur 1959

As the twentieth century comes to its end, we can already be fairly certain that extensive passages in the histories which will be written about it will be devoted to its three World Wars, one hot and two cold; to the slump, the long boom, and the recession; to the proliferation of new states, the huge growth in population, the immense technological revolution, and, we must hope, to all the underdevelopment which has gone along with this. No doubt a great deal will be said too about the rise, expansion, maintenance and then sudden collapse of Soviet Communism. What, however, may very well not be given sufficient attention is the plethora of socialist inspired ventures especially in the huge rural societies of Asia and Africa in the third quarter of the twentieth century, even though arguably these affected even more of our common humanity than Soviet Communism ever did.

The essential story here runs something like this. Up until around the middle of the twentieth century, at a time when western colonial rule was still very widely prevalent, the rural areas of a considerable number of Asian and African countries were still dominated by aristocratic landlord families; by people, that is, that owned 200 acres,

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2000 acres, 20,000 acres, and sometimes even considerably more, under whom large numbers of peasants lived and worked as tenants, labourers and sharecroppers. At mid century, with some notable exceptions, such as in the Philippines, besides the ending of western colonial rule, this large landlordism was almost everywhere abolished. In the aftermath there was a whole series of attempts between about 1950 and 1975–80 to create within the heavily populated rural societies of these countries essentially egalitarian rural regimes. These attempts were sometimes made too where large landlords had not previously existed, and they characteristically entailed in the end the establishment of collectivised agriculture. Like Soviet Communism, however, they all failed. Instead, the preexisting differentiations within peasant society, though by no means fixed, became substantially reinforced, with significant consequences for the regimes in which something like half the world's population now lives. That is a very large part of the history of the twentieth century, and these are the issues that will be canvassed here.

That is easier to do because, thanks to the researches of anthropologists, economists, political scientists, geographers and others, as well as historians, we now know a great deal more about contemporary peasant societies than we did thirty or forty years ago. Not only is there by now a superabundance of detailed information; a very large number of pertinent issues have been canvassed. Here it is in no way to the purpose to consider anything more than a strict selection of these. We should begin, however, with a definition, and then, to set the chosen agenda, sketch out the pervasive picture that will be our preoccupation here.

While there are some who study peasant societies who would assert that it is essential to distinguish clearly between peasants and farmers, and others who would insist upon the importance of other distinctions, it seems best for present purposes to stick to a more comprehensive definition – from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which simply states that a peasant is 'one who lives in the country and works on the land'.[1]

[1] But see e.g. E. R. Wolf, *Peasants*, Eaglewood Cliffs 1966; T. Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth 1971; R. Stavenhagen, *Social Classes in Agrarian Societies*, New York 1975.

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More generally we may then remind ourselves that peasants ordinarily live in villages.[2] Sometimes these are composed of dispersed settlements, but more often they are nucleated. Within villages there have long been considerable degrees of differentiation – in power, resources and prestige. Yet there is often at the same time a good deal of village cohesion, born in part of a common heritage, but underscored too by a complex series of relationships, particularly between the more prestigious and relatively well-to-do in the village and those immediately 'beneath' them. This often has the effect of marginalising the poorest, but it generally serves to provide those at its apex with very considerable local power. Like other such men – and they are almost invariably men – they are apt to use this chiefly in their own interests. Since they ordinarily live in their own village it is relatively easy for them to control a great deal of what goes on there, as so much of it takes place under their own eyes or those of their kinsfolk and associates. Since, moreover, their villages are spatially scattered – five, ten, twenty and more miles out of town – they are in a good position to ensure that external authorities have very considerable difficulty in intervening in their affairs, and generally make every effort to see that this is so.

For present purposes what is no less important is that these prominent villagers comprise a significantly larger proportion of the population of these countries than large landlords ever did, with the consequence that their power in national terms is often far greater than is sometimes appreciated. Not only do they generally dominate the key interactions between their localised communities and the state; upon the abolition of large landlordism they frequently came to comprise the crucial base upon which so many of the body politics of these countries came to rest.

A paradigm story here comes from Egypt. There, as late as 1952, large proprietors, totalling only 0.5 per cent of its landowners, held no less than 35 per cent of the available agricultural land, whilst 72 per cent of those owning less than one feddan – that is a little over one acre –

[2] For a journalist's portrait of seventeen villages in almost as many different Third World countries during the 1970s see R. Critchfield, *Villages*, New York 1981.

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held together only 35 per cent of the land; all of this moreover, when 60 per cent of Egypt's peasants held no land at all. In Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century, it has been reported: 'the village scene was dominated by the large landlord usually referred to as the Pasha. His manor house which overshadowed the mud houses of the fellahin was run by a small army of permanent workers and their families. Invariably, he, as the Umda (or village mayor), was the representative of the state . . . he represented the political and social power in the village, and he certainly used his power to ensure his mastery.'[3]

But then in July 1952 a group of Egyptian army officers led by Colonel Nasser broke the back of this regime by carrying through their military revolution, expelled King Farouk, and immediately calculating 'that if their revolution were to persist, they had both to destroy the power of the entrenched class of big landlords and to win the support of smallholders and the poor rural classes', decided as early as September 1952 to embark upon a major land reform so as 'to break the power of the old ruling oligarchy, with its roots in big estates'. At the outset that did not, however, entail an extensive redistribution of land, for that, we are told, 'was ruled out for ideological and political reasons', because 'decisive action against the thin top layer of absentee big landowners is politically much easier than against the top 10 per cent of landowners . . . who usually oppose fiercely any further downward adjustment of the land ceiling'.[4]

As a consequence the ceiling upon permitted land ownership per person in Egypt was first fixed at 200 feddans. Amidst many a qualification it was later reduced to 100 feddans in 1961[5] and then to 50 in 1969. Whilst that broke the hold of the Pasha class in the Egyptian countryside, it had the effect of making the principal beneficiaries of the changes which occurred there the 'rich and

[3] S. Radwan & E. Lee, 'The State and Agrarian Change: A Case Study of Egypt, 1952–77', in D. Ghai, A. R. Khan, E. Lee & S. Radwan, *Agrarian Systems and Rural Development*, London 1979, pp. 163, 165. See also G. Baer, *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt, 1800–1950*, London 1962.

[4] M. Abdel-Fadil, *Development, Income Distribution and Social Change in Rural Egypt (1952–1970). A Study in the Political Economy of Agrarian Transition*, Cambridge 1975, pp. 7, 10, 22, 117.

[5] See generally G. S. Saab, *The Egyptian Agrarian Reform 1952–1962*, Oxford 1967.

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middle peasants', and in the new era it was people of this kind who came to enjoy predominant political and economic power in the rural areas. They were soon employing significant amounts of labour. They secured the lion's share of the loans, tractors, pesticides and fertilisers which at the government's instance they found readily available, and from the outset they won control of the extensive network of agricultural cooperatives which the government established. They then substantially developed their own production for the market; came to possess 62 per cent of the country's farm area and about 80–90 per cent of its farm stock; and were well to the fore amongst those benefiting from the new marketing and pricing policies the new regime fostered.[6] Landless and 'small' peasantry did, it seems, see some not wholly insignificant increases in their incomes, but the landless still comprised 30 per cent of the rural population, and evidently 'made little progress in assuming political leadership roles'.[7]

The overall political implications of these developments were soon clear. The political success of the Nasserite regime in Egypt came to be grounded in its control of the countryside. That in turn was based on the fact that it enjoyed the strong support there of 'a class of rich farmers'. Small peasants with holdings of 3–5 feddans might perhaps have supported those who were even poorer against this 'class' – who were careful to make 'common cause against the interests of the rural poor' – but in that event (so we are authoritatively told) there would have been 'widespread opposition among small peasants to the various forms of collectivisation which would be necessary to ameliorate the conditions of the landless in a substantial and irreversible way'.[8]

By the early 1960s this situation had, however, become quite unacceptable to President Nasser and his immediate entourage who had now committed themselves to introducing Arab Socialism in Egypt.[9] As they saw it the agrarian regime they had established, far from generating greater equity in the countryside, had left a great deal of landlessness untouched, had generated much greater

6 E.g. Abdel-Fadil, *Rural Egypt*, passim. 7 Ibid., pp. 60, 121.
8 Ibid.
9 P. O'Brien, *The Revolution in Egypt's Economic System. From Private Enterprise to Socialism 1952–1965*, London 1966.

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differentiation amongst the peasantry, and had done far too little to mitigate the poverty of the poorest. Through their officially sponsored Arab Socialist Union they accordingly sought in 1965–6 to bring about much more radical change in the countryside by undercutting the rich peasant-dominated 'Committees of Twenty' they had created in the villages by establishing in their place 'Leadership Groups' selected wherever possible from amongst the poorer peasantry.[10]

There was then a critical development. In April 1966, a socialist activist named Salah Husain Maqlad in a village called Kamshish was murdered, seemingly at the instance of its longest established leading family. That brought Nasser to a firm decision. He immediately proceeded with the establishment of an aggressively named Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism that was instructed to wipe out all forms of peasant exploitation in the countryside. Such, however, was the consequential furore amongst Egypt's rural and urban elites, that when, under the impact of Nasser's disastrous Six Day War with Israel in June 1967, his regime juddered, the Higher Committee was quickly put out of business, and for good measure in the following year those accused in the Kamshish case were all acquitted.[11]

That meant, so we are told, that 'by the end of the 1960s there were clear indications, that because of the new compromise between the urban and rural elites with the regime the balance of power in rural Egypt had shifted once again in favour of the rich and middle peasants'.[12] Indeed to judge from a tell-tale episode in the Egyptian People's Assembly in 1972 when the government introduced a Bill to impose a tax on fruit orchards, amounting to the equivalent of some 20 British pounds per feddan, the latter could often call the tune;

[10] Ibid., p. 122; I. F. Harik, 'Mobilization Policy and Political Change in Rural Egypt' in R. Antoun & I. F. Harik, eds., *Rural Politics and Social Change in the Middle East*, Bloomington 1972, pp. 287–314, esp. pp. 306–10. See more generally but esp. Ch. 6, I. Harik, *The Political Mobilization of Peasants. A Study of an Egyptian Community*, Bloomington 1974.

[11] See especially H. Ansari, *Egypt, The Stalled Society*, New York 1986, Ch. 1, but also more generally. See e.g. further R. Springborg, *Family, Power and Politics in Egypt. Sayed Bei-Marei, his Clan, Clients and Cohorts*, Philadelphia 1982, Ch. 8 (and more generally too).

[12] Abdel-Fadil, *Rural Egypt*, p. 122.

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because of the vigorous opposition of the rural lobby the Bill failed to pass. The ability of the more powerful villagers to have their own way against the government's own wishes was once again exposed.[13]

All of which was neatly symbolised on Nasser's death in 1970 in the person of his successor, President Sadat – the son of a leading villager, who not only maintained his village home throughout his years in power, but soon swept aside all of Nasser's commitments to Arab Socialism too.[14] Whilst there were those who forecast that 'sharpening class contradictions' would soon characterise the Egyptian regime,[15] in the event the alliance between the richer peasantry and the urban-based regime in Egypt remained intact.

These developments have been summarised in terms which will soon become repetitive. 'Following the implementation of land reforms', an Egyptian scholar tells us, 'and the consequent erosion in the power of the landed Aristocracy . . . the group of rich and middle peasants emerged as a new rural elite [in Egypt] with dominant political and economic power in the new agrarian system.' Their position was further secured by the early 1970s through 'the dogged and highly successful defence of the interests of the new rural bourgeoisie by the kulak lobby in the People's Assembly'.[16]

That, it has to be suggested, was a characteristic outturn of some major events in a great many African and Asian countries in the second half of the twentieth century.

In order to begin to examine this phenomenon rather more extensively we can turn to the Indian story. That is particularly illuminating, in part because, whilst landlords and princes there generally suffered the fate of Egypt's Pashas, the sustained attempts in

[13] Ibid., p. 49, fn. 26.

[14] See e.g. J. Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of the Two Regimes*, Princeton 1983; R. A. Hinnebusch, *Egyptian Politics under Sadat*, Cambridge 1985.

[15] Abdel-Fadil, *Rural Egypt*, pp. 121, 123.

[16] Ibid., pp. 121–3. See also more generally Radwan & Lee, 'Case Study of Egypt'; Ansari, *Egypt*; Waterbury, *Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*; J. B. Mayfield, *Rural Politics in Nasser's Egypt*, Austin, Texas 1971; M. Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945–1970*, New York 1973; A. Richards, *Egypt's Agricultural Development, 1800–1980*, Boulder 1982; D. Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945–90*, 3rd ed. London 1991.

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India to create a substantially egalitarian rural order were a good deal more multi-faceted than elsewhere; but in part too because we have a great many more details about the power structuring of rural societies in India than for almost any other Asian or African country. Whilst the details are, of course, distinctly Indian, they nonetheless serve to delineate many of the characteristic contours of other predominantly rural societies elsewhere with which we shall be concerned.

Many people will have read with delight La Roy Ladourie's scintillating account of the fourteenth-century French village of Montaillou.[17] Now it happens that Indian historians of the third quarter of the twentieth century have a shelf-full of such studies to which to turn in the plethora of accounts by anthropologists and others who, knowing something of the local language, lived in one or more Indian village in these years as 'participant observers'. Whilst their studies were inevitably limited to nothing more than a tiny handful of the half-million or so villages in which something like three-quarters of India's 600 million people lived, they nevertheless provide some wonderfully rich historical material, which it is high time we used for scholarly purposes a great deal more extensively.

Such studies commonly begin with some essential preliminaries. They focus for the most part on one or more nucleated villages (though they sometimes describe closely localised regions as well).[18] They provide some account of its agricultural cycle and its religious practices. They give details of its population – from often less, to sometimes considerably more than a thousand people. They specify the number of households – ordinarily in the hundreds – and the physical distribution of its different castes – usually with its Untouchables confined to a separate quarter off to one side. They spell out the complications of the village's ritual hierarchy – with the Brahmans,

[17] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou. Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294–1324*, translated by Barbara Bray, London 1978.

[18] I trust it will be absolutely clear that in turning to such accounts I am in no way subscribing, here or anywhere later, to any idea of an autonomous 'Asian', or for that matter 'African' or 'Southwest Pacific' village. I take for granted the position in J. Bremen's somewhat polemical *The Shattered Image. Construction and Deconstruction of the Village*, Dordrecht 1988, and not least its last sentence: '*The* Asian village never existed.' That does not mean, however, that studies of particular villages at a particular point in time are not often quite invaluable.

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however few, and however variegated, holding a principal position; often a substantial community of well-to-do peasants very prominent too; together very often with the largest proportion of the population in a multiplicity of castes in the very fluid middle position; along with the Untouchables, the 'Scheduled Castes', quite inevitably at the outer edge. They describe too the forces binding the village together – from the pervasive sense of village membership to the use of kinship terms across many caste barriers – and then detail the dependency relations of so many villagers, particularly the most immiserated, upon the better-to-do.

Although there are a great many variants in this literature, let alone in the hundreds of thousands of villages that have not been reported on, there does then seem to have been one persistent constant – differential landholdings.

Take three examples from three different studies of three different villages in three different parts of India in three successive decades.

Ramkheri village in western India was studied in the early 1950s. There (it was reported) each head of a Rajput household owned on average 22 acres of land, while those in the next most prosperous caste, the Goseins, held on average only 14 acres, whereas amongst the other twenty-four castes in the village, Brahmans held only 10 acres, Cotton-carders 4.55, and the Tanners a mere 0.2.[19]

Likewise in Devisar village in Rajasthan in the late 1960s, the Rajput landowners held 29 per cent of the land in the village, the Jats 23 per cent, while below the next three or four castes, who held less than 10 per cent each, stood the remaining eighteen castes owning as little as from 1.9 to 0.04 per cent each.[20]

[19] A. C. Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India*, London 1960. For some further village studies of the 1950s see M. N. Srinivas, ed., *India's Villages*, Bombay 1955; S. C. Dube, *Indian Village*, London 1955; F. G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, Manchester 1957; idem, *Tribe, Caste and Nation*, Manchester 1960; O. Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India. Studies in a Delhi Village*, Chicago 1958; T. S. Epstein, *Economic Development and Social Change in South Asia*, Manchester 1972; K. Gough, *Rural Society in Southeast India*, Cambridge 1981.

[20] D. B. Miller, *From Hierarchy to Stratification: Changing Patterns of Social Inequality in a North Indian Village*, Delhi 1975. For some further examples of village studies of the 1960s see A. Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Berkeley 1965; G. Etienne, *Studies in Indian Agriculture. The Art of the Possible*, Berkeley 1968; K. Ishwaran, *Shivapur: A South Indian Village*, London 1968; A. Chakravarti, *Contradiction and Change. Emerging Patterns of Change in a Rajasthan Village*, Delhi 1975; M. Sharma, *The*

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Similarly in the Uttar Pradesh village of Palanpur, which was studied in 1974, the preeminent Thakurs and Muraos, who comprised 47 per cent of the village population, held 71 per cent of its lands, whereas each of the other half dozen or so other castes in the village held between only 8 and 0.7 per cent each.[21]

Within these differences the anthropologists discerned what they called the 'dominant castes'. Whilst Brahmans invariably held the ritual primacy in a village, except in parts of south India village dominance generally resided elsewhere. It was not always entirely tied to wealth; other leadership qualities needed to be displayed as well.

Take for a start Ramkheri village in western India once again.[22] Here the largest landholders, the Rajputs, were, it was said, 'clearly dominant both in positions of statutory political authority and also in the informal and traditional contexts of inter-caste village activity . . . all Rajputs tended to have something of the ruler about them, and to arrogate this to themselves.' That dominance was expressed in their monopoly of the village headmanship; their control of the village council; the principal role they played in the village's festivals, and in the generosity they displayed in providing feasts for their fellow villagers without regard to caste or wealth.

Much the same was reported of the rather larger village of Gaon in the Poona District of western India at around the same time.[23] Here,

Politics of Inequality. Competition and Control in an Indian Village, Honolulu 1978; M. J. Leaf, *Information and Behavior in a Sikh Village. Social Organisation Reconsidered*, Berkeley 1972. For a very comparable study of a Nepalese village at this time see A. P. Caplan, *Priests and Cobblers. A Study of Social Change in a Hindu Village in Western Nepal*, Aylesbury 1972.

[21] C. J. Bliss & N. H. Stern, *Palanpur: The Economy of an Indian Village*, Delhi 1982. For further examples of village studies in the 1970s see G. Wood, 'The Process of Differentiation among the Peasantry in Desipur, North Bihar, India', Institute of Development Studies, Sussex 1973; J. Harriss, *Capitalism and Peasant Farming. Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu*, Bombay 1982; P. Hill, *Dry Grain Farming Families. Hausaland (Nigeria) and Karnataka (India) Compared*, Cambridge 1982. For some village studies, begun in the 1950s, and later renewed, see T. S. Epstein, *South India. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Mysore Villages Revisited*, London 1973, and K. Gough, *Rural Change in Southeast India 1952 to 1980s*, Delhi 1989. The classic example of this kind of second look was W. & C. Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls, 1930-1960*, Berkeley 1963.

[22] Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India*, passim.

[23] H. Orenstein, *Gaon: Conflict and Cohesion in an Indian Village*, Princeton 1965.

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