INTRODUCTION

Nature of the study:

This study arose in the context of the increasing attention being paid by historians to the need for a detailed and critical examination of rural society in medieval India. The complex forms of rights over land and its produce, extending both horizontally and vertically, gave rise to complex agrarian social relations. We have made an attempt to analyse the various forms of disputes between the constituents of village society in eastern Rajasthan in order to grasp more fully the inter-relationships between them and simultaneously the nature of the contradictions inherent within the rural hierarchical framework.

Such a study assumes greater significance in the context of the sequence of crises that shook the foundations of the Mughal Empire during the eighteenth century. The deepening socio-economic crisis of the Mughal State led to the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies and saw the consolidation of a number of autonomous independent states. The intensified factional struggles among the nobility were only the political manifestations of the economic aspect of the crisis of the eighteenth century. A critical analysis of the socio-economic history of the eighteenth century thus becomes relevant for an investigation of the elements
of change as well as continuity in rural society - especially since this period was, as has been mentioned, a period of crisis. The choice of the period assumes greater importance if it is accepted that a phase of generalized and widespread socio-economic instability brings the contradictions inherent in rural society into sharper focus.

To obtain a clearer understanding of the dynamics of agrarian social relations it is essential that comprehensive micro-level studies of the primary production-cum-administrative unit, the village, are undertaken. Any alterations of conditions in the agrarian economy at the base were inevitably reflected at all levels of the social structure because the income of the dominant classes depended so intimately on the productivity of the peasant. Closely linked with the nature of the agrarian economy, therefore, were the social relations both between and within the various constitutents of rural society.

We have looked at disputes as being primarily manifestations of underlying contradictions and tensions that existed within society. Changes in the agrarian economy would, therefore, have an impact on the intensity and nature of rural conflict. If the changes were such that they did not alter the basic socio-economic relationships
in society, and hence the nature of the inherent contradictions, they would affect rural tensions only in the sphere of altering the intensity of conflict. If however, the changes in the economy created conditions for the emergence of new social relations of production, the contradictions, and hence the nature of conflict would alter. Thus a study of disputes and tensions within society would seem to provide a reliable indicator of impending social change or the potentialities of reorganization of social relations.

With this perspective we have utilised our evidence on rural disputes in eastern Rajasthan during the eighteenth century, to study the various forms of conflict between the constituents of rural society. Towards this end we have analysed a variety of inter-related problems. These primarily concern:

1) the identification of the major areas of conflict and the frequency of various kinds of disputes,

2) an analysis of the contradictions existing between various classes and also within sections of a class, as manifested in the forms of rural conflict, in order to establish the existence of a trend in the intensity of existing social contradictions. We also propose
viii) to study the disputes both in class and caste terms and determine whether class/caste ties were being consolidated or broken;

ix) to determine whether there was a formulation of new alignments of interest groups during the course of the eighteenth century and, if so, the basis for such alignments. Further,

x) an interesting field of inquiry would be to study the nature of the tension and conflict within the socially and economically differentiated sections of the peasantry and the impact of the penetration of a money economy on these relationships. Lastly,

xi) we intend to examine the attitude of the state towards various forms of rural conflict;

xii) the role played by the state judiciary, the local administrative bodies and the village panchayats in the administration of justice; and finally,

xiii) the social and commercial disputes to a limited extent, due to the paucity of data.

Rather than attempt a purely descriptive and quantitative study of the rural disputes, we have endeavoured to place the conflicts within the framework of eighteenth
century rural society and analyse them in relation to the socio-economic processes and the relations of production prevalent.

The first chapter contains a brief survey of the various sections comprising the village society, the nature of their rights, positions and their relationships with other sections and the state. Following this survey, the nature of the agrarian economy in eastern Rajasthan during the eighteenth century, the property relations and the concomitant areas of contradictions as well as the commonality of interests between various constituents of rural society, have been placed within an analytical framework. The role of the state, the politico-administrative crisis, the changes in the economy and the effects of these on social conflict have been discussed. Since the chapter recapitulates some of the essential features of medieval Indian rural society, with particular reference to eastern Rajasthan, which have been studied by historians, it is exclusively based on secondary works even where I had access to primary information.

The second chapter deals with an explanatory-cum-descriptive study of the various forms of agrarian disputes highlighting their nature and complexity. This is followed by an empirical study of the various forms of conflict in
order to reveal the trends which emerge for the period under study. Here each document on agrarian disputes has been analysed in terms of (a) form of conflict, and (b) the contending parties. Those two factors have been arranged in a time series for the period under consideration in order to study the emergent trends.

The third chapter deals with a descriptive account of the non-agrarian disputes - i.e., social disputes and those related to commercial activities, and inferences drawn from them.

Chapter four, on methods of arbitration and adjudication, is primarily concerned with the judicial aspects of the disputes. Here the attitude of the state to various types of disputes and the various forms of conflict as expressed in the form of jurisprudence has been discussed. Further, the process of arbitration and adjudication at the three levels - the state judiciary or nyaya sabha, by the pargana administrative officials (particularly the amil), and the local panchayats have also been examined.

In chapter five, we have sought to interrelate the nature of rural disputes and the trends therein to
the socio-economic changes in eastern Rajasthan during the period. This chapter also incorporates our tentative conclusions.

Source Material:

In view of the scattered, though otherwise considerable, material available for our period and region we have limited the area to a sample study of six parganas, namely: Sawai Jaipur, Tonk, Jogi, Kaliyur, Lundaum and Gari Ka Thana.

The evidence on which this study is based is in the form of chithis (letters) preserved at the Jaipur Records section, Daftar Awan Hazuri, Rajasthan State Archives, Likaner. The chithis were written by the Awan of the Jaipur State to the administrative officials, particularly the amil. Each chithi contains the substance of the complaint received by the Awan, followed by his instructions on the matter. We are thereby given an insight into the nature of the complaint, the character of the contending parties and the methods of redressal.

We have been able to trace 239 chithis pertaining to rural conflict. These constitute the entire data available for our period and region. We have, however, excluded from our study documents on harassment and
violation of customary practices by the various pargana administrative officials like the amil, faujdar etc.

Although the chithis as a primary source of data are invaluable in the detail and variety of their information, we must point out the inadequacies of relying solely on this type of records for a comprehensive study. Firstly, in a number of cases the background information on the reasons for a dispute are not explicit, which makes it difficult to grasp the complexities of the case or to analyse it in terms of the power structure within the village.

Secondly, we have no means of cross-checking whether the instructions issued by the Diwan to the amils were, in fact, implemented. The possibility that very often the amil failed to act on the recommendations of the Diwan is reinforced by the fairly large number of complaints being referred back repeatedly for action by the amil.

Thirdly, often the state referred the disputes to the village, caste or commercial panchayat for arbitration. In such cases it is impossible to obtain reliable information regarding the composition of the panchayat, the method of decision making or the final decision.

Further, considering the importance assigned to the panchayats in resolving local disputes, it is very likely that a large number of disputes must have been settled by
them without reference to the state authority. As no records were maintained of the panchayat proceedings we of necessity are totally dependent on a mere fraction of the number of cases which were officially reported.

Fourthly, we have noted that the maximum number of disputes in the chithia are agrarian in origin, i.e. related to litigation over land revenue, jurisdictional rights, ownership of land etc. The number of non-agrarian disputes, viz., disputes concerning ancestral property, caste or commercial disputes etc. is, on the other hand, meagre. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that social disputes by their very nature were more likely to be resolved within the village panchayat and therefore rarely reported. Similarly commercial disputes would normally have been resolved within the commercial guild panchayats.

Fifthly, the data are uniformly available for all the parzanas under consideration for the period 1710-1770. However, in these six decades there is a disproportionately large number of documents available for the last four decades: and more especially for the decade 1740-50. This disparity in the availability of data, however, has been eliminated as far as possible by analysing frequency and
trends in terms of the proportionate distribution of the various forms of conflict over the period.

Despite these limitations, however, the importance of the *chithis* as primary source material cannot be underestimated. The wealth and variety of information on every aspect of rural administration, the nature of rights and the socio-economic relationships between the various strata of rural society, local and regional variations in customary practices, is essential to reconstruct a complete and interrelated picture of the medieval society in all its complexity.