INTRODUCTION

This study was undertaken as part of a general wave of renewed interest in 'peasant studies' which gripped a host of us, at the J.N.U. Our concerns to begin with were somewhat different - the debate on 'modes of production' having only just shaken up social scientists in India. Theoretical nuances apart, the contribution of those who had built up what is commonly known as the 'Eastern India' model in agrarian studies in India was equally stimulating. These formed the immediate backdrop to our initial forays into research. Over the years, however, the concerns and issues involving peasant studies have both shifted course as well as outgrown the initial stage. This study, consequently, hangs midway down the stream; looking for its moorings in the initial premises of the old debate, and finding itself pulled in the direction of new concerns.

Research into the agrarian history of Punjab still offers many possibilities. For, try as one might, there was no way of incorporating Punjab into the scope of the Eastern India model. Since the case of Punjab had always been treated as 'different', there was no need to prove the point, one could straightaway get down to the question of how it was different, and why? The problem arose at another level. Punjab, especially the Canal Colonies, which form the focus of this study, stood out as an example of colonial development enterprise.
The deeper one went into the achievements of the grandiose irrigation scheme, the more the need was felt to assess this in the context of colonial agriculture. Was it possible for the colonial state to overcome the constraints that its very existence imposed on Indian Agriculture? From the start it was clear that to even set out in search of Hori, the anti-hero of Indian agriculture, was a vain exercise as far as Punjab was concerned. There was no alternative but to accept that Hori, though representative of a vast mass of the exploited Indian peasant, was not representative of the entire range of the oppressed peasantry in colonial times. Given the nature of uneven development under colonialism, Punjab was 'different', though not altogether so.

As compared to other regions, the social history of Punjab still remains under-researched. This makes things at once easy and more difficult. For a vast majority of those undertaking research on Punjab, it is only now that agrarian change in Punjab prior to the Green Revolution has acquired any significance. History writing in Punjab had for long confined itself to a study of the various Gurus and their times or the Sikh chieftains; extending at best to Punjab politics in the anti-imperialist phase. Indu Banga's study was therefore a welcome change.\(^1\) Even so, published work on the social and economic history of Punjab remains limited. Banerji's book, fills the gap only to a limited extent.\(^2\) Banerji having

\(^1\) Banga, 1978.
\(^2\) H. Banerji, 1982.
delved deep into source material on the agrarian structure of Punjab in the second half of the nineteenth century, provides an overwhelming volume of information but leaves some questions unanswered. Mishra's study and recent articles published by him, are firstly a comparative study of patterns of long-term agrarian change in Bombay and Punjab; secondly the problems he addresses himself to are more closely related to growth-economics than social history even though the study covers a vast span from 1881-1972. It refers to the Canal Colonies also in this context. Bhattacharya's study, also unpublished, covers a whole range of issues related to the society and economy of the Punjab while specifically concentrating on questions relating to production and exchange. Bhattacharya, while referring to the Canal Colonies, concerns himself primarily with Central and Eastern Punjab.

Available studies on the Canal Colonies are either of the pre-1947 period, or more recent ones, all unpublished. While Paustian's is a somewhat contemporary account of irrigation in the Canal Colonies, its financial implications and costs incurred by cultivators on account of the same, Madan confines himself by and large to the ecological issues involved in and emanating from extension of canal irrigation in Western Punjab. A study of behavioural patterns, as well as the goals, role and models that arose out of canal irrigation -
along the structuralist-functionalist method—again does not deal with problems of agrarian history. Unpublished papers available indicate that research on the Canal Colonies has by and large concentrated on issues of policy and political structure or protest. Ali specifically sets out to study the impact of agricultural colonisation on the economy and society of the Punjab, but again, refrains from delving into aspects of both economic policy and development, confining itself more to issues related to allotment policy and its social-political consequences.

This study examines developments in the Colony tracts of Western Punjab in the context of extension of canal irrigation to this region. Colonisation covered about six districts of Western Punjab, but also extended to parts of two other districts which strictly speaking lay in Central Punjab. The Colony districts were by and large part of the arid, rainless tracts of Western Punjab, where cultivation was extremely insecure. Water and irrigation were both of great importance in the regional economy for whatever cultivation was carried out, was dependent on inundation, inundation canals built by the pre-British rulers and, wells. The lands, sparsely populated, were inhabited by numerous tribes and other communities leading a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence along with some settled agriculturists. The vast tracts pro-

6 A.J. Siddiqi, 1968, unpub., microfilm, NMML.
vided ample grazing grounds and the inhabitants enjoyed customary rights over these. Into this leisurely life revolving around a small natural stream, a stray well or a seasonal water-channel, with rainfall offering more hope than actual relief, suddenly waved the magic wand of Pax Britannica. This changed the face of the region for all times to come. What was the impact of Colonisation on the old settlers? Who benefitted from allotments on the canals? Where did the settlers come from? Was there a pattern in the flow of migrants and what impact did Colonisation and migration have on demographic trends? These are some of the questions we address ourselves to, while also examining the claims of the success of Colonisation. For, soon after Colonisation several problems pointing to the negative aspects came up. These related to the disruption of the natural drainage system, resulting in water-logging and efflorescence. This and Colonisation generally adversely affected the old cultivators and their lands (Chapter I).

We also discuss the emergence of the Canal Colony scheme, the evolution of policy in terms of irrigation financing. Earlier proposals for construction of canals in this region were all turned down. What then prompted government to flag off the biggest Colonisation scheme in later years? What were the considerations weighing in favour of heavy investments in canals? Were these considerations financial or was the objective different - development of agriculture and model agricultural communities? We turn to allotment policy for possible
answers. What was the basis of allotment and was this uniformly adhered to? Did all the Colonies follow a basic pattern or did factors determining allotment change over time? We discuss the categories of grants, the various contingent factors that came up - the needs of the army, the special grants, on conditional terms, the patronage grants to ensure political support in the region. The outcome of allotment policy was reflected in the predominance of certain categories of grantees as well as certain castes. What implications did this have for the future and the landownership pattern that emerged as a result of this policy? The vast tracts appropriated and, subsequently allotted to 'grantees', were originally the home of tribes and settlers who also enjoyed certain rights over these lands. What happened to the rights of these people in the changed circumstances and what was the process by which their lands, cultivated or grazing, were appropriated by government? (Chapter II).

Once the initial allotments were over, and the lands cleared up, the process of administrative consolidation of these lands began. This manifested itself in the form of settlement policy and water distribution and management. What was the extent and nature of revenue demand imposed on the cultivators? Was this a fixed demand, or was there an attempt made to scale-up the demand at regular intervals? What was the mechanism employed to raise revenue demand and how did reassessment affect the peasant? Did the non-canal irrigated
lands get any relief since the primary justification for raising demand was the security provided by irrigation supply? We examine the standard of assessment and how it was used to justify an increasing revenue demand. Did the benefits of canal-water reach all? What role did the canal bureaucracy play in the supply of water or lack of it? All through this period, cultivators clamoured for remission of revenue and water-rate demand pointing to the rigidity of demand, as well as its quantum in the context of crop failure consequent upon failure of irrigation supply. We examine the policy with regard to remissions in general and specifically in the context of the depression (Chapter III).

As discussed earlier, agrarian developments in Eastern India have provided a sort of model to study agrarian changes in colonial India. These have specifically contributed to the understanding of the nexus between the merchant-money lender and the landlord who together exploited the vast mass of peasants. Recent studies in agrarian change in other parts of India have further elaborated on these, or examined developments in different regions in the context of the basic postulates of this model. 8

In the Canal Colonies the extension of canal irrigation and cultivation set off a whole range of economic processes. Firstly, the total output and value of agricultural produce

went up remarkably. Within this, cultivation of wheat and cotton marked an unprecedented increase. Both crops were grown primarily for the market and the period up to the Mid-1920s saw a rapid expansion of the commercial network and growth of markets and expansion of communications. Exports from Karachi went up, establishing its primacy over other ports, with reference to wheat exports. The years marked the unprecedented price boom as well as slump. What was the impact of these in a region which had only recently and yet very rapidly been integrated into the world market? Who gained from the 'boom' prices and could the peasant withstand the depression? What was the impact on different strata within the peasantry of all these changes? Where did the government stand vis-a-vis all these developments? What was the nature of the 'market' that developed; and could all sections of the peasantry reap economic benefits from the changing situation or did it only enhance the vulnerability of the smallholder/tenant by exposing him to the market forces? (Chapter IV).

Along with commercial developments, we look at the social reflection of changes subsequent upon Colonisation. What was the pattern of tenancy that emerged? Did Colonisation help promote the ideal of self-cultivation? What was the form of rent appropriated by landlords, and the rate at which rent was taken? Colonisation held forth the promise of prosperity and profit - but did the vast mass of tenants
find themselves in a position to resist the attempts of the landlords to raise the component of rent in total demand on the peasant? Were all tenants equally oppressed? (Chapter V).

The economic standing of the peasantry is reflected in his ability to withstand economic pressures and being able to hold out against the combined or single-handed onslaught on his rights and status by the landlord and the moneylender. The debt question has been central to most studies in Indian agrarian history. We examine the nature of the debt problem in the Canal Colonies - its extent and impact. Was debt a sign of prosperity as argued by officialdom in Punjab? Or else, was it a reflection on the indolence and incompetence of the peasant? We discuss the debt question in terms of the nature of transaction, the various avenues open to the peasant to acquire loans, the role of governmental agencies, as well as the position vis-a-vis agriculturist and non-agriculturist moneylenders. How serious was the Punjab government about its anti-professional moneylender stance? Were the legislative provisions sufficient to prevent alienation and transfer of land from agriculturists to non-agriculturists? What about transfer of land from poor agriculturists to prosperous agriculturists who succeeded in acquiring land on cheap rates for cultivation at a time when cultivation was still profitable? Did the depression have any different impact on these trends? (Chapter VI).

These are some of the aspects covered by the study and
the questions we address ourselves to. Through this exercise we try to arrive at an assessment of the impact of Colonisation on the different rural classes; the impact in terms of evolution of society in this region, and the roots of social conflict contained within this pattern of development.

As is obvious, the study leaves some questions unanswered. In fact it raises many more. These will have to wait for further research and, more persistent researchers, perhaps.