1.1 Agricultural Labour in the Ancient and the Medieval Period: A bird’s eye-view:

In the last half-a-century or so, a large body of historical research has accumulated which indicates that landless agricultural labourers formed a significant proportion of the rural population in Ancient and Medieval India. 'How significant?', is a question which cannot be answered with satisfactory precision, owing to lack of hard evidence. Historians are generally in agreement that the peasants, as producers of surplus, emerged as a distinct socio-economic group in India during the agricultural revolution in the Indian civilization, which calibrated carbon dating now places within B.C. 2600-1800. Agricultural production even during this period, to some extent at least, relied on servile landless labour (D.R. Chanana, 1960, p.17; D.D. Kosambi, 1970, p.70). However, the extent of this group is hard to establish.

The immediate successors of the Indus culture, the 'Aryans', after destroying/subjugating those in control in the preceding system, accentuated and gradually cemented the stratification in the agrarian society. The evidence used by historians to suggest such a process is culled out primarily from the Vedic literature. An oft-quoted hymn in Book X of Rigveda offers a picture of this stratified society. As Habib notes, 'However simplified, the varna scheme of the hymn seems to reflect faithfully the deep division of the peasantry into its free vis and the servile dasyus, who, transmuted as Vaisyas and Sudras, form respectively the third and fourth varnas' (Irfan Habib, 1983, p.26). It seems that the agricultural labourers belonged, not only during initial 'Aryan' phase but for many centuries to come, almost completely to the fourth varna, i.e. the Sudras. The social structure based on material circumstances of surplus - extraction was of course cemented by 'a religion of gods, superstitions and priests' (Habib,
1983), embedded in ascending Brahminical discourse. It probably need not be emphasized that the Brahminical discourse played an eminent role in shaping the socio-economic structure/structure of power. Of course the rise to dominance of Brahminical discourse was not a simple, singular process. Amongst other things, it involved a process of subjugation and assimilation of other numerous discourses which were marginalised.

From around B.C. 1500, for the next two millennia or so, agriculture on the Indian subcontinent underwent a long and tortuous process of transition with substantial alterations in forces and relations of production and modes of social organisation. The coming of metallurgy was amongst the most significant moments in this process. The trajectory and the content of evolution in Northern and Southern India were quite independent of each other almost down to the Mauryan conquests (third century B.C.). Moreover, even after that, the regional specificities have been quite important. Without getting into any detailed discussion of this transformation process, we need to note that this process created complex social formations with peasants and servile or semi-servile labourers as producers of surplus, working under land-owning masters.

For Northern India, there is considerable controversy among historians over the dating of (i) the significant presence of a stratum of castes relying principally on agricultural labour, and (ii) the relegation of these castes to this exclusive position. Mihir Shah (1984) provides a useful summary of the relevant arguments in this debate. It is generally accepted that the exclusive position of these castes had to do with their belonging to the lowest rungs of the varna-system (R. Thapar, 1966; R.S. Sharma, 1980; Irfan Habib, 1983). But formation of the shudra varna cannot be dated earlier than the end of the Atharva Ved period (approx. BC 800), which has been contested by Habib (1983). Vivekanand Jha (1975), in his important study on the history of untouchables, suggests that, in the vedic period, while the shudras were clearly a subordinate social stratum, their subjugation became complete only during the later periods.
There is general agreement among historians that certainly by Northern Black Polish phase (B.C. 600 - B.C. 300), the mass of shudra population came to be employed as landless agricultural labourers. Various Brahminical sources as well as Buddhist and Jain texts provide a strong evidence to this effect. Enormous expansion of agriculture based on the discoveries of the new methods of cultivation and vast increase in the number of crops had a very important role to play in this process (Habib, 1983).

For South India, 'even the rough ancestry that one can assign to the existence of these castes in this servile state is not clear' (M. Shah, 1984, p.21). Caste-system in the South is generally understood to be a feature of indigenous 'Dravidian' tradition. However, the ascendancy of Brahminical discourse had consequences similar to those in the North for the differentiation in the rural society - 'whole strata of castes were ritually debarred from access to land and subject to a spectrum of disabilities deriving from their situation at the bottom of the caste ladder. As agriculture developed, their principal means of livelihood increasingly became agricultural labour' (M. Shah, 1984, p.23). There is scattered evidence for the existence of such castes from early AD period onwards.

Thus whatever be the differences in the ancestry and the precise dating of the establishment of these castes as landless labouring class in different regions of the country, the evidence from all over the country suggests the existence of such castes/class in a significant way by early AD period. To quote Irfan Habib: 'The five hundred years preceding the birth of Christ must have been one of the most formative periods of Indian social history. They moulded the basic contours of the caste system, with a peasantry deeply divided into endless endogamous communities and rigorously separated from the artisans as well as 'menial labourers' (Habib, 1983, p.34). According to Professor Habib (Ibid), the consolidation of agricultural labourers as a separate class took place during the first millennium A.D. It is a remarkable fact about Indian history that
once these castes became established as labouring classes, it remained a
durable feature, in a fundamental way, of the Indian social structure till the
recent past.

Some widely recognised facts about the conditions of these
agricultural labourers, for almost two millennia (i.e. from approx. B.C. 500 to the
advent of British colonialism), may be noted briefly.

(1) In almost every region of the country, these labourers operated within
the framework of the Jajmani system (shaped by Brahminical discourse).\footnote{Dumont's useful summary of the main constitutive features of the Jajmani system may be noted here: "In the first place it makes use of hereditary personal relationships to express the division of labour; each family has a family of specialists at its disposal for each specialised task. Secondly, it regulates prestations and counter-prestations in a way which accords with custom; for the usual tasks, repayment is in kind; it is not made individually for each particular prestation but is spread over the whole year, as is natural for a permanent relationship in an agricultural setting; a little food may be provided each day, and there is always the right to a fixed quantity of grain at harvest time, and finally there are obligatory presents on the occasion of the main festivals of the year and, above all, at the major family ceremonies" (L. Dumont, 1980, pp.98-99).}

(2) There were some crucial differences in the forms and the content of
employer-labourer relationships in different regions, as a multitude of forms
developed which could be distinguished in terms of degree of
freedom/constraints, yet almost everywhere the agricultural labourers were
"subject to a whole range of social disabilities" (Shah, 1984, p.23). In most
cases, it meant that they were exclusively relegated to the occupation of
landless agricultural and menial labour.

(3) As R.S. Sharma (1980) and Irfan Habib (1983) have suggested, some
sections of shudra castes went up the social ladder, but it was in the nature of
exceptions. 'Overall this stratum of labourers remained intact with the number
of castes involved, in fact increasing over time. The most important mechanism
for this rise, both in the North and the South was the process of detribalisation'
(M. Shah, 1984, p.24). Vivekanand Jha's study shows that the number of
untouchables went on increasing by the addition of new castes to this category
(Jha, 1975). To quote Habib, 'Excluded from the village and prevented from
holding land, the untouchables could never become peasants; they were thus forced to follow the prescribed menial occupations which kept them alive in the slack season so as to be available when needed for work in the field' (I. Habib, 1983, p. 40). According to Habib (ibid), the subjection of the menial proletariat to the caste peasantry continued practically unabated throughout modern times.

(4) The peasantry itself was characterized by a considerable degree of stratification and some segments were subject to various economic and extraneous constraints. It is possible that a section of the peasantry comprised of low-earning share-croppers and economically this group was not very different from agricultural labourers.

Historians are more forthcoming about the estimates of agricultural labour class, for Mughal India and subsequent periods. Angus Maddison (1971, p. 33) suggested that of the total labour force in Mughal India, 72 percent was in the rural economy and majority of them were landless labourers. In Habib's view, in North India in the Mughal period, the size of this labour force would have been as high as 20-25 percent of the rural population (Irfan Habib, 1984).

The crucial explanans in Habib's explanation for such a size of agricultural labour are, (i) the severe disabilities imposed on certain castes in the rural economy, relegating them to a labouring stratum, and (ii) the large size of the landholdings of the dominant landowners which could not be tilled by family-labour. In any case, the cultural strictures associated with upper caste landholders implied their minimal participation in the agricultural labour-process.

There are a large number of other studies, for the immediately pre-colonial and early colonial periods, providing the evidence establishing substantial presence of landless labourers in the rural economy. Some of the better-known works are: S. Chandra (1974) for South India, E. Stokes (1978) for Uttar Pradesh, H. Fukazawa (1984) for Maharashtra and the Deccan, D. Singh (1976) and H. Mukhia (1977) for Rajasthan, R. Ray (1979) for Bengal, B. Chaudhari (1984) for Bengal and Bihar, B. Hjejle (1967), Dharma Kumar (1975).
and M. Shah (1984) for South India. All these studies suggest, (i) a high level of agrarian differentiation, (ii) a significant proportion of landless agricultural labourers or a 'substantial extent of pre-capitalist employer-labourer relations' (Patnaik, 1983, p.4), and relate (i) and (ii) to the operation of strictures associated with the caste-system. Some of these studies also point to the importance of the economic mechanism of debt-bondage in keeping the labourers in a servile/semi-servile state.

These features provided a definite distinctiveness to the Indian agrarian structure and had significant consequences for the form and content of agrarian transformation following capitalist penetration during British colonialism. Although the capitalist transformation in India has not only been different from the transformation processes in other parts of the world but has taken diverse forms in different parts of the country itself yet, at a high level of generality, it is possible to talk in terms of the 'Indian path'.

1.2 The Colonial Context and Agricultural Labour:

Scholars are in considerable disagreement over the impact of colonial rule on the growth of the class of agricultural labourers in the Indian society. A survey article by Vyas and Shivmaggi (1975) provides a useful summary of different views.

On the one extreme, some scholars [such as Patel (1953), Malviya (1955), Ghosh (1969)] ascribe even the emergence of a distinct class of agricultural labourers to the British rule. According to Patel, 'There is a consensus of opinion that, in the pre-nineteenth century India, there was no noticeably large class of agricultural labourers. There were domestic and menial servants, but their numbers were small and they did not form a definite group of persons whose sole or major occupation was work on the land of others for compensation in kind or cash. The large scale of agricultural labourers represents a new form of social relationship that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India' (Patel, 1952).
About the proportion of agricultural labour in pre-nineteenth century Indian rural population, Patel is simply wrong, as has been discussed in the first section of this chapter. In fact, there is a consensus of opinion to the contrary: significant presence of landless labourers in the rural population. However, Patel may be right in pointing to a marked increase in the pace of pauperisation during the colonial rule, leading to a swelling of the ranks of agricultural labourers.

On the other extreme is the view held by Dharma Kumar (1965) that the importance attached to the colonial rule for significant increase in the size of landless labourers, as is done by 'Indian Nationalists and Marxists', is misplaced. She argued that, at least in the area covered by her investigations (i.e. Madras Presidency of British India), agricultural labourers were already a large class at the advent of colonial rule. Their numerical significance was not any less than comparable figures for the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Kumar, the agricultural labourers would have formed roughly around 10-15 percent of the total population and 17-25% of the agricultural population of the Madras Presidency in 1800 (Kumar, 1965, p.181). She arrives at these figures by backward extrapolation of census data on agricultural labour, on the basis of two assumptions: (i) that most members of certain castes were agricultural labourers in this period, and (ii) that the rates of growth of population of these castes was not very different from the rest of the population.

Some scholars are inclined to the view that, though pre-colonial agrarian structure was characterized by a significant presence of landless labourers, Kumar overestimates its size. Utsa Patnaik holds that Kumar's own estimates, from early census data on population by castes in Madras Presidency, show that even if all members of untouchable castes are assumed to have been in

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#It may be noted here that for different census years between 1871 and 1921, proportion of agricultural labourers to total agricultural populations, as estimated by Patel (1952), ranged between 18 percent to 26.2 percent. Joshi's estimates, for the same, ranged between 18 percent to 20.7 percent (Joshi, 1958).
bondage, at the most 10 to 12 percent of rural population, on the most generous estimate, would have fallen into this category according to the four decennial Censuses between 1871 and 1901. Yet by 1921 in Madras, agricultural labourers made up 36.1 percent of the rural population and this had jumped to 52.1 percent by 1931. Allowing for all problems of comparability of the censuses, the trend of sharp increase is unmistakable and is repeated in every region of British India to varying degrees (Patnaik, 1983, p.7).

Even if one assumes that, at the advent of colonial rule, a segment of share-croppers belonging to non-untouchable castes were effectively attached labourers, a possibility which has not been investigated adequately to my knowledge and whose empirical significance may be difficult to establish due to the sketchy nature of available data, it is hard to sustain the view that characterizes the colonial state as a 'night watchman' vis-a-vis the size and work conditions of agricultural labourers, as the colonial government intervened actively in the economic arena. The entire gamut of the policies of the colonial state, 'free import of cheap manufactures, heavy revenue burdens, rigid collection in cash, application of the laws of distraint of property and imprisonment of defaulting debtors - led to a massive displacement of artisans on the one hand and pauperisation of large sections of the indebted poorer peasantry into landlessness on the other' (Patnaik, 1983, p.6). The debate on the destructive effects of British rule on the indigenous economy and society, associated with the pioneering work of R.C. Dutt (1904) and subsequently developed principally by Indian scholars (notably A.K. Bagchi, 1972, 1976) still continues to rage, and may be difficult to settle empirically due to the paucity of data, yet it seems reasonable to argue that the integration of a 'traditional'...
economy into the world capitalist network of production and exchange must have accelerated the process of the growth of agricultural labourers.

Apart from the increase in the growth of agricultural labour, the colonial period is also characterized by another important feature: an increasing number of caste-Hindus, belonging to intermediate and lower castes, and Saiyad Muslims were pushed to join the ranks of agricultural labourers (Mukherjee, 1957). Thus a picture of almost total overlap between the spectrum of untouchable castes and agricultural labour class, valid for ancient and medieval India, started changing. This realization would be an important corrective to some of the sociological theories of the origin of modern class of landless labourers in India.

The hard information about the size of agricultural labour force started becoming available once the collection of statistical information regarding the occupational distribution of population in India began from 1871. Some attempts have been made [e.g. Joshi (1958), Patel (1952)] to compare the population data of various Census rounds beginning from the year 1871 to arrive at the figures for trend of growth of agricultural labourers over decades. Scholars have pointed to the serious limitations on the use of Census data for inter-Census comparisons to work out the number and proportion of agricultural labourers. Apart from the changes in the classification of population and definitions, of different occupational groups, other difficulties arise due to the frequent changes in the system of tabulation and presentation of data [Manbendu Chattopadhyay (1985) catalogues the basic problems].

Surendra Patel (1952), in his painstaking work, suggests that, allowing for all problems of comparability of the censuses, the trend of increase in the number and proportion of agricultural labourers is unmistakable and it holds for every region of British India to varying degrees. Patel emphasizes the distinctiveness of the regional patterns and links them to the land-revenue systems (Patel, 1952, pp.151-2). According to his estimates, the percentage of
landless agricultural labourers in population supported by agriculture in British India more than doubled to 38 per cent in 1931 compared to 18 percent in 1871. Apart from landless agricultural labourers, petty-proprietors, tenants-at-will and share-croppers, who enter the labour market in a significant way, tend to increase the total agricultural labour force substantially. According to Patel, these 'Dwarf-holding labourers' comprised 33.3 percent of the Agrarian Society in India, in 1931 (Patel, 1952, p.48). Thus, given the nature of available data, one gets only a rough and tentative picture of the social composition of the agrarian society during the colonial rule, yet Patel's hypothesis of a significant increase in the ranks of agricultural labourers seems a reasonable one.

1.3 A Concluding Remark:

One would suggest that the important changes in the labour sphere during the period of British colonial rule are best understood as a slow and limited transition to a new mode of production, namely, Capitalism, in which the colonial government intervened actively in the economic arena. In this process, the interests of the colonial power were, of course, of paramount importance for the colonial government.

It is well-established in the existing literature that the course of capitalist transformation during the colonial period cannot be understood and explained by analytically reducing it to any crude Eurocentric model (Shah, 1984). As is well-known, Marx's analysis of the genesis of capitalism in the British case focused on, and traced, two most important developments: (a) concentration of surplus in the hands of a distinct class which invested it to produce exchange value and thus accumulate further, and (b) emergence of 'doubly free' proletariat. Thus, in the agrarian sector, increasing peasant differentiation (whose premier mechanism was forcible dispossession of land held by the peasantry), and growth of landlessness became the most important indicators of capitalist transformation in the British case. But, even within Europe, the
British case offers a particular model, which was not replicated in other countries. For instance, Robert Brenner (1976, 1977) has noted that the fall of serfdom in France was followed by the emergence of a strong freeholding peasantry. This, along with certain other important features specific to the French case, Brenner argues, offers a different model of capitalist transformation, in which the process of differentiation is marked by alternative mechanisms.

Outside Europe, in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the capitalist transformation process has taken very diverse forms, as is evident from a large number of studies over past few decades. In the Indian case, given the pre-existence of a substantial population of landless labour, taking growth in landlessness/depeasantisation as the most important indicator of capitalist transformation may be inadequate and misleading. As Shah (1984) has argued, the transformation would much more be reflected in the qualitative changes in the relationship of the labourers with their employers.

To conclude: any general model of transformation from precapitalist systems to capitalism can, at a high level of generality, illuminate certain important tendencies. Expecting anything more from it, I believe, is futile. The argument, that Marxism offers a general model of capitalist transformation, is a simplistic caricature/unfair criticism. In the Marxian tradition, as Adnan has argued convincingly, 'there are different, and differing accounts of the process of capitalist development in specific social and economic contexts. These differences arise not only from the diversity of historical experience, but also from contending interpretations of causality at work' (Adnan, 1985, pp. PE-53). Marx and the 'classical' Marxists were aware that capitalist transformation in agriculture takes complex forms. Marx contributed a model to capture the English experience. Lenin and Kautsky extended Marx's work, critically and in seminal ways, to theorise about 'peculiarities' of agricultural production, alternative mechanisms of differentiation and the role of interlocked markets,
etc. [Adnan, 1985; Kautsky, 1976; Hussain and Tribe, 1981; Lenin, 1960;]. A careful reading of the classical texts provides important insights into many key issues in the contemporary debates. The debate on the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism' in Europe posed the relevant questions squarely and generated alternative paradigms. Subsequent well-known debates on South Asia, particularly the debate on the Mode of Production in Indian agriculture, have carried forward this task admirably. I do not wish to get into a detailed discussion of the relevant issues here. Instead, these remarks are in the nature of a prelude to the discussion of labour forms, wage-formation processes etc., in the area of my field studies, in the subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter six.