CHAPTER – I
CHAPTER I

Agriculture and the Colonial State: Colonial Politics of Power over Land and People

Mr. President, in the old times of the Moghul rule and the Sikh Government, the agriculturists were never so badly off as they are at the present evil times.1

-M.M. Shah Nawaz, 1931.

There is no doubt that rural indebtedness has increased during British rule.2

-Dr. F.X. Desouza, 1936.

Colonialism -the economic, political and social policies by which colonies are governed-is belief in the merits of the colonial system as promoting the welfare of the nation colonized. Colonized countries are seen as living monuments to the superiority of the colonizing countries.3

Colonial remoulding of a pre-modern economy

In that sense, subjugated by the first industrial nation of the world, India offered the classic case of the colonial remoulding of a pre-modern economy by the middle of the eighteenth century.4 The early colonial state was chiefly an agrarian state that used various representations of “oriental despotism” to justify its legitimacy and fortify its claims to ultimate power through the bureaucratic regulation of landed property. Building

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1 Mian Muhammad Shah Nawaz, (Member, Legislative Assembly, West Central Punjab: Muhammadan) speaking on 10 September 1931 on the Resolution Re Agricultural Distress moved by Mr. Amar Nath Dutt (Burdwan Division: Non-Muhammadan Rural), Legislative Assembly Debates (LAD), Volume V, 1-22 September 1931, 225. The Assembly divided. The motion was negatived. (Ayes-23; Noes-51.)

2 Dr. F.X. Desouza (Nominated Non-Official) speaking in the Legislative Assembly on 24 September 1936 on the Resolution Re Indebtedness of Agriculturists moved by Mr. N.C. Chunder (Calcutta: Non-Muhammadan Urban), LAD, Volume VII, 15-28 September 1936, 1802. The Assembly divided. The motion was adopted. (Ayes-74; Noes-41.)

3 A superiority mitigated only by an awareness of observations and knowledge in these countries which antedate modern science. For example, the famous physicist Jean-Baptiste Biot, contemporary of Auguste Comte, devoted his studies on Indian Astronomy and Chinese Astronomy (1862) to the denial of the antiquity and originality of the observations and methods of calculation of the Indians.-Pietro Redondi with P.V. Pillai, The History of Sciences, The French Debate, Orient Longman Ltd., 1989, 12.

Similarly, James Mill disputed and rejected practically every claim ever made on behalf of Indian culture and intellectual traditions, but paid particular attention to dismissing Indian scientific works. Mill rebuked early British administrators (particularly, Sir William Jones) for having taken the natives “to be a people of high civilization, while they have in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization.”-Amartya Sen, History and the Enterprise of Knowledge, Inaugural Address, 61st Annual Session of the Indian History Congress, Calcutta University, 2-4 January 2001, 8. Thus, in the colonial politics of power over land and people, even the intellectual past, albeit history, of the colonies was colonized.

on arguments between those who held that the East India Company* was inheriting the king’s right of ownership over all property, and those who used a Ricardian theory of rent to claim for the Company the right to set revenue rates and collect taxes as fundamental to the custodial project of the state, the British gradually established a state bureaucracy that focused primarily on land revenue. Decisions about whether the bureaucracy should accord proprietary rights to landlords (zamindars), village brotherhoods, or principal cultivators (ryots) became critical interventions in the relationship between state and society, at the same time these decisions both produced and were produced by a variety of different histories of India that were important parts of early colonial rhetoric of rule.5

John Shore and Charles Grant, two senior servants of the East India Company, advanced conflicting views and opposing theories on the issue of land ownership. While Shore held that the zamindars were the proprietors of land and were liable to pay customary dues, Grant maintained that that the proprietary rights were vested in the Government and it had the right to make settlements with anybody – zamindars or ryots on any terms. The authorities in England, however, accepted Shore’s views and accordingly the Permanent Settlement was made with the zamindars. The effect of the Permanent Settlement on the ryots was ruinous. To ensure regular payment of land revenue the hands of the zamindars

* Outsourcing British Sovereignty: In 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted a charter to ‘The Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies’ for fifteen years. That expiry date was cancelled by her heir, James I, giving the East India Company exclusive trading rights in perpetuity. The only caveat: if it failed to turn a profit for three consecutive years, it voided all its rights. Thus a beast was created whose only object was money. It would pursue this object with unprecedented success. King Charles II would turn the East India Company into a monster. With five acts, he gave it an amazing array of rights without responsibilities. By the 1670s, the East India Company could mint its own coin, maintain its own army, wage war, make peace, acquire new territories and impose its own civil and criminal laws – and all without any accountability, save to its shareholders. This was pure capitalism, unleashed for the first time in history. Combined with the gradual fragmentation of Mughal control, which had begun after Akbar’s death in 1605, it would prove to be almost unstoppable. This private empire of money, unburdened by conscience, rampaged across Asia unfettered until the 1850s. Guided only by market forces, it was both incredibly successful and incredibly brutal. In 1834, Thomas Babington Macaulay freely admitted that licensing out British sovereignty to a private company was inappropriate. “It is the strangest of all governments,” he said, “but it is designed for the strangest of all empires.” – Alex Von Tunzelmann, Indian Summer, The Secret History of the End of an Empire, Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2007, 14-15.


* The Permanent Settlement is usually accepted as a landmark denoting a two-fold discontinuity in Bengal’s history: the virtual ruin of the old families who had superior interests in land, and, simultaneously, the creation of a legally protected ownership of land vested in the zamindar which cut across and undermined all earlier patterns of land rights. - Tapan Raychaudhuri, ‘Permanent Settlement in Operation: Bakarganj District, East Bengal’ in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed, Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History, Manohar, 1979, 166.
had to be strengthened.* By the Haptam (Regulation VII of 1799), the landlords were
given arbitrary powers to distrain the ryots’ property for realising arrear rent. Thus the
interests of the farmers were ignored, who often became victims of inhuman oppression
by the zamindars. The Panjam (Act V of 1812) to some extent tried to mitigate the
harshness of Haptam’s provisions. But the real defects were not remedied, and the
exploitation of the ryots by the zamindars continued unchecked. The Bengal Rent Act
(Act X of 1859) sought to limit the arbitrary powers exercised by the landlords, but it also
failed to provide adequate security to the ryots. Besides realising the revenues payable to
them, the landlords exacted many other extra dues. The Somprakas condemned the
devious ways and means by which the naibs and gomasthas drained the tenants. It also
criticised the zamindars that exploited the ryots. Revealing the nature of the economic
exploitation to which the peasants were subjected, the Somprakas enumerated some
abwabs (additional cesses) exacted by the zamindars: while settling a dispute the
zamindars took fines from the accused; the greedy landlord took money both from the
complainant and the accused; contribution collected for performing social functions and
religious rites; deposit for cutting grass of the fallow lands of the zamindars; deposit for
fishing in the tanks of the estates owned by the zamindars; some zamindars took money
as dhulat for allowing the ryots to walk through the ways built by them; the zamindars
received money on the occasion of the marriage of the daughters of the peasants; the
landlords received Nazar or Nazrana when the ryots came to see them or the zamindars
met them; in the eastern part of the country the zamindars took money for allowing
people belonging to the lower castes to ride on Palki (palaquin) during their marriage
ceremonies. This analysis of the various forms of economic exploitation perpetrated by
the landlords revealed that the zamindars were more concerned about the collection of
rent from the ryots and payment of their own taxes to the Government, than increasing
the fertility of land.6 Intellectual histories of some of the key players of the period by
historians such as Ranajit Guha, Eric Stokes, and Burton Stein have revealed how

* In fact, there was a confusing pattern of responses to regional conditions and various types of suitable and
unsuitable precedent. Nevertheless, there was a common denominator and that was the same as that of
various and sometimes contradictory constitutional reforms: the need to retain a social base for the
maintenance of British rule. A restricted franchise and a limited protection of the tenantry were also two
sides of the same coin in this respect. - Dietmar Rothermund, Government, Landlord, and Peasant in India,
integral historical argument was to political ambition and European experience.\textsuperscript{7} Thus with the colonial conquest, the perception of the medieval Indian state began to be affected by a new context. All the possible rights and claims ever set forth on behalf of that state had to be strongly reasserted, so that these could be rightfully possessed in inheritance by the colonial state. In brief, the pre-colonial state was held to have been the proprietor of the soil with full rights to rent; and, if any private property in land was now to be created, say that of the Bengal zamindars, it was to be by an act of the state, that is, the English East India Company.\textsuperscript{8} With the gradual consolidation of British power following the liquidation of the Maratha menace against their supremacy, the East India Company assumed the role of Paramount Power and reduced the Princely States to the status of Feudatories.\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} They ensured effective control over the Princes without, however, involving themselves much in the internal administration of the States. Thus the Princes though treated as subordinates to British Paramountcy were allowed to rule their respective States without any fear of interference and remained outside the jurisdiction of British Regulations. For example, since 1804, separate Treaties and Engagements signed with the Rajas in Orissa vested in them enough power to conduct the internal administration with a 'free hand'. Their loyalty to the British Raj was considered more important than the welfare of the people they governed.\textsuperscript{9} W. Hunter noted in 1870s that since the establishment of British Government in India, embankments received less attention than under native rulers.\textsuperscript{10}

Decline of Indian Feudal Politics of Power over Land and People

According to D.D. Kosambi:

Feudalism's decline in India may be said to date from the inability of

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. 147-48. \\
\textsuperscript{7} Nicholas B. Dirks, ibid. 110. \\
\textsuperscript{8} Shireen Moosvi, 'The Pre-Colonial State' in Social Scientist 382-383, Volume 33, Numbers 3-4, March-April 2005, 40-53. \\
\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} In the century after Robert Clive's famous victory at Plassey in 1757, the East India Company had embarked upon a run of military enterprises. Its armies fought the Burmese twice, annexing Burma in 1852; the Afghans once; and the Sikhs twice, taking the entirety of the Punjab by 1849. They took Gwalior in 1844, and conquered Sind in 1843, Nagpur in 1853, and Oudh in 1856. By then, almost 70 per cent of the subcontinent could be called British territory. - Alex Von Tunzelmann, Indian Summer. The Secret History of the End of an Empire, Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2007, 15. \\
\textsuperscript{9} Sadashiva Pradhan, Agrarian and Political Movements. States of Orissa, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1986 \\
Indian feudalism to defend the country against British penetration. Indian feudalism had tried its strength against the British bourgeoisie for the last time in the unsuccessful rebellion of 1857. Soon thereafter, the British abandoned their long-standing policy of liquidating feudal principalities and instead began to bolster up remaining regimes of this kind—provided they were weak enough to be dependent and hence compliant. Marx noted that the very same people who fought in the British Parliament against aristocratic privilege at home voted to maintain far worse rajas and nabobs in India—as a matter of policy, for profit. Despite British support, and in a sense because of it, Indian feudalism no longer had any independent strength and vitality of its own. Its economic basis had been ruined by the construction of railroads, the decay of village industry, the establishment of a system of fixed assessment of land values and payment of taxes in cash rather than in kind, the importation of commodities from England, and the introduction of mechanised production in Indian cities. The role of the village usurer changed. Previously he had been an integral part of the village economy, but he had been legally obliged to cancel a debt on which total repayment amounted to double the original loan: there was no redress against default since land could not be alienated nor could a feudal lord be brought to court. With British rule came survey and registry of land plots, cash taxes, cash crops for large-scale export to a world market (indigo, cotton, jute, tea, tobacco, opium), registration of debts and mortgages, alienability of the peasant’s land—in a word, the framework within which land could gradually be converted into capitalist private property which the former usurer could acquire and rent out and exploit.11

No wonder then that, unfitted by temperament or training to contemplate the surrender of power and wealth, many princes clung to autocracy, autonomy and British Paramountcy in the face of the deeper forces of nationalism that swept away much of princely power by 1956.12 Thus the nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of British politics of power over land and people over those of India’s. It was, therefore, important as the most formative period of the British Empire from the point of view of economic development and transformation in agrarian economy.13 Consequently, in the ultimate analysis, a combination of semi-feudal relations, born of politics of power over India and its inhabitants, was a distinctive feature of the colonial impact on India’s political economy and society.

In effect, the colonial project eventually replaced thousands of years of India’s traditions of politics of power over land and people [i.e., rajatantra: ‘political formations from the first millennium B.C. on that brought a degree of power—military, revenue,

12 D.E.U. Baker, Baghelkhand, or the Tiger’s Lair, Region and Nation in Indian History, OUP, 2007, 312.
administrative, cultural, and religious -to bear on the people of a given territory, and were not merely agencies subduing a tract to acquire booty or extract revenue.14] with those of the English variety: British Raj (-tantra). Colonial rule, in the interests of domination and exploitation, integrated the subcontinent far more tightly than ever before.15 Thus, in the entire history of rajatantra in India, British Raj-tantra, i.e., the colonial politics of power over land and people was its highest expression. With much truth, the Report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform (1934) claimed that British rule “has given to India that which throughout the centuries she never possessed, a government whose authority is unquestioned in any part of the sub-continent”.16 Musing on contemporary events in India, Jawaharlal Nehru was self-critical in his Autobiography (1936): “What has been the record of British rule in India? Who are we to complain of its deficiencies when they were but the consequences of our own failings?”17 Thus by the middle of the nineteenth century, India’s colonial society was marked by a sharp disjunction between a small, alien ruling group, British in culture, and a quarter of a billion Indians whom the British effectively controlled.18 Except for restricted contact with the Indian population – with their servants, their Indian subordinates and a few ‘respectable natives’- they had little contact with the Indian population outside their work. Vast ignorance about the actual nature of Indian society, indigenous law, economics and political structure characterized most of those in London and in India who made the decisions which shaped the ultimate nature of British rule in India.19* Thus the basic character of the British colonial state was to promote its own interests that, obviously, remained tied to the pattern of Britain’s social, economic and

16 Quoted in Jawaharlal Nehru, An Autobiography with Musings on Recent Events in India, John Lane the Bodley Head, London, 1936, 433.
17 Ibid. 448.
19 Ibid. 463.
* In those days [1908] there was little practically no social contact between English people and Indians, much less so for boys of my age. The sahibs lived in the insulated little Englands they had created for themselves; their exclusive clubs were defiled by no black man’s shadow, excepting only the ‘bearers’ who poured out their chhota and bara pegs. They had built around themselves a mythical aura about their nobility and greatness and superior virtues, about carrying the black man’s burden and all that. This myth took such firm root that even after forty years of Independence it still survives. -Salim Ali, The Fall of a Sparrow, OUP, 2007, 9.
political interests. Therefore, agricultural production in India during the colonial period, dominated by the colonial politics of power over India’s political economy, was determined by imperial preferences and needs.20

Colonial Appropriation

The nature of the peasant economy in India has been a subject for academic analysis ever since the East India Company tried to investigate the rural situation in order to impose land revenue systems aimed to extract the maximum surplus with the minimum of administrative and political costs.21 The Company’s taxing inflexibility was not spurred only by its rapacious ‘revenue hunger’ but significantly because it was integral to realising its particular mode of colonial appropriation.22 But the Indian national movement was deeply and firmly rooted in an understanding of the nature and character of colonial economic domination and exploitation.23 Consequently, a whole galaxy of eminent historians, economists, and other scholars — agreeing with Karl Marx — has conclusively shown that maximum profit from India’s agriculture was the hallmark of the British colonial policy;24 that is, profit motive was the prime mover of the colonial state; that the agriculturist suffered from heavy assessment of land revenue by the policy of the alien government which ruled India for so many years. No wonder then that colonial agrarian policy was moulded basically by a combination of greed for more revenues and desires to encourage certain types of agricultural production for export.25 As a result, a great deal of nationalist agitation throughout the period of the national movement was based on the Drain theory according to which a part of India’s national product and social capital was being exported to Britain for which India got no economic or material return; that is, India was being compelled to pay an indirect tribute to its rulers. The Drain theory began to epitomize as well as concentrate the entire nationalist critique of colonial economic domination. The high priest, the great theoriser and populariser of the Drain

theory was Dadabhai Naoroji.  

**Indebtedness of Agriculturists**

As in normal years, the condition of the agriculturist was far from satisfactory in the thirties of the twentieth century. Jawaharlal Nehru noted: 'Like most of us, I took them for granted.' He was there because there was nowhere else to go. He was ill-housed, under-fed and badly clothed. He lived in a lifelong perpetual poverty and his lot was not far removed from utter destitution. The existence of crushing debt was universally acknowledged to be the main cause of this state of affairs. The average agriculturist was born in debt, lived in debt and died in debt. What caused alarm was that the debt was unproductive and tended to increase automatically. The reports of the different Provincial Banking Inquiry Committees concluded: "There is a general consensus of opinion that the volume of agricultural indebtedness has been increasing in the course of the last century." The agriculturist's condition was such that whatever surplus he got after paying the revenue and expenses on cultivation, including his livelihood - his livelihood included bare necessities of life, not to say of better living, no allowance made for medical relief, decent clothing, insurance against sickness, and temporary as well as permanent disability; it was assumed that he wore a langota and remained half naked and was pleased with half a meal per day- was absorbed by interest charges. Perchance if he fell sick, if by chance he was blessed with an issue and organised a simple thanksgiving ceremony, if by chance he bought a few fancy things for his dear little ones at home, if he married, if he wished to change the course of water running down his fields, he incurred debt. As agriculture barely yielded him his subsistence, the debt increased by leaps and bounds. During the thirties, the prices of food grain and other agricultural produce fell abnormally, to the immense advantage of sahukars. "The agricultural produce now sells for a song and is wholly taken away by the money-lenders in lieu of interest. The

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27 Jawaharlal Nehru, op.cit. 57.

28 Seth Haji Abdoola Haroon (Sind: Muhammadan Rural) moving the Resolution in the name of Sir Abdulla Suhrawardy (absent) Re. Civil Court Decrees and Proceedings against Agriculturists: "In view of the general economic depression this Assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to introduce, without delay, legislation prohibiting execution of Civil Court decrees against agricultural landholders and farmers for the next two years, and prohibiting institution of any new Civil Court proceedings against them for past debts for the next two years." LAD, 10.9.1931, 200-02. The Resolution was, by leave of the Assembly, withdrawn.
agriculturist is not left with enough grain to feed himself and his family.\footnote{Ibid.} It was estimated by the Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee that the rural debt stood at the colossal figure of 877 crores in 1929, which worked out to 23 per cent of land revenue. It was estimated that the average land revenue as estimated by the Indian Year Book, 1930-31, was 37.4 crores. The Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee remarked that the interest charges varied from 12 to 75 per cent. The rate was highest in Sind in the Bombay Presidency, rising to 50 per cent. The average interest paid was at least 25 per cent and if the total debt of the agriculturist was calculated at about 900 crores, the yearly amount of interest paid by them amounted to 225 crores, whereas the land revenue was only 37 crores. On all sides a hue and cry was raised that the burden of taxation was very high. It was proposed that land revenue be reduced by one-half. The agriculturists were neither in a position to pay the land revenue nor the interest. \textquote{I ask of you when the agriculturists are unable to pay even land revenue, it is impossible to expect of them, without giving rise to serious social and economic upheavals, to pay interest running to 5 to 10 times the land revenue,} \footnote{Ibid.} It was feared that if money-lenders persisted, riots similar to Deccan, Santhal and Sukkur might follow, with the result that the agriculturists as well as money-lenders would be ruined for good.\footnote{Ibid.}

Sir, I have known instances in which whole families have committed suicide for not being able to support themselves, and the state of the children starving before the eyes of their starving parents is such as to move the heart of any man. In the Punjab I know that murders of money-lenders have taken place already, and I think it is on a large and increasing scale; and howeversoever a money-lender may take a decree for execution, this will never be executed, and I am afraid those money-lenders who go to the rural areas for the execution of their decrees will find that, unless they take a strong military force, there is no chance of their decrees being executed.\footnote{Ibid.}

The figure of the village moneylender was undoubtedly a most convenient villain.

\footnote{Debt in its various forms has contributed to this infinite cycle of seemingly perpetual thralldom. Villagers of lower standing have usually been the first to seek help for other than sound economic reasons. Instead of borrowing money for seed, fertilizer, or repair of irrigation works, such villagers have more commonly sought means to support unproductive ceremonials and extravagances. Typically, a man has borrowed more than he could make in ten years to make sure that the marriage of a daughter was in such style that he would not lose standing, if not caste, among his fellows. But the man of such poor position and caste has thereby been the greater credit risk to the moneylender. Borrowing secretly at some fantastic rate of compound interest, he has watched the original sum owed grow so rapidly that he has been caught in the toils of debt bondage in perpetuity. And in many villages, moneylender and landlord have been one and the same. -Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed, \textit{Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History}, Manohar, 1979, xiv.}
However, this villain was most of the time a farmer himself. Also:

Stability as a result of British rule has added to the misery of agriculturists and tended to increase the debt. In pre-British days, dynasties succeeded dynasties very rapidly, with the result that with the change of dynasty the agriculturists became free of the debt and made a new start in life. They obtained a chance to start with a clean slate and improve their condition. Nonetheless, British Indian agrarian legislation was supposed to support the stability of foreign rule in India.

The Sangbad Prabhakar (1831) of Isvarchandra Gupta who had great sympathy for the peasants of Bengal effectively reflected the state of contemporary public feeling. In many of its articles the reasons behind the plight of the peasants of the province were discussed. The contributing factors, according to the paper, were (i) shortcomings of the Permanent Settlement, (ii) extortion by the zamindars and others connected with the collection of land revenue, and (iii) reluctance on the part of the Government to improve agriculture. In the opinion of the Prabhakar the fear of auction of the estate in case of delay in payment, stipulated in the Permanent Settlement, made the zamindars so anxious to collect revenues that they did not even hesitate to realize their dues by selling the houses of the peasants. To these were added the ignorance of the peasants of the nature of exploitation, which was responsible for their sad plight. Numerous extortions made the cultivator’s life miserable. The Sangbad Prabhakar underlined that the entire machinery of exploitation was a creation of the Permanent Settlement and as such no improvement of the condition of the peasants was possible without reforming the land settlement.

32 Seth Haji Abdoola Haroon (Sind: Muhammadan Rural) op.cit.
34 Smarajit Chakraborti, The Bengali Press, Firma KLM Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1976, 54-55: To substantiate its accusation that the Government had done little for the development of agriculture the paper cited one instance. Every year the cultivators suffered from the breaches of the Damodar embankments, but the Government had shown a callous indifference to the problem. It may be pointed out that the ancient embankments, though reinforced by the zamindars, could not check frequent floods that caused much damage to houses and crops. There were severe floods in 1840 and 1848. But the Government took no steps to obviate the sufferings of the people. Between 1856 and 1860 the old embankments along the left bank of the river Damodar were reinforced to make the East Indian Railway route from Calcutta to Burdwan safe. To check the occurrence of high floods on this side of the river, the Government ordered, in 1855, the demolition of twenty miles of locally-built embankments on the right bank opposite Burdwan. The result was that for hundred years since 1856, the inhabitants of the right bank of the river suffered from periodic floods and remonstrated in vain. It was politics of power over land and people, indeed.
Speaking on the Resolution Re. Indebtedness of Agriculturists on 24 September 1936, Mr. Basanta Kumar Das exhorted the Legislative Assembly: “No doubt the question of agricultural indebtedness is also a complicated problem; but I submit no one will dispute the fact that the best interests of the country demand that this should be faced with a determination to solve it in the best possible way.” He informed that the indebtedness of the agriculturists of India was undoubtedly appalling; the extent of the indebtedness of the agriculturists found by the Banking Inquiry Committee in 1930 was 900 crores of rupees which mounted up by 1936 to at least 1500 crores of rupees, while the total revenue to the Government in rupees was only 36 crores and the total value of the principal crops was only 475 crores of rupees.\(^{35}\) Therefore, a Resolution Re. Civil Court Decrees and Proceedings against Agriculturists, though eventually withdrawn by leave of the Assembly, was moved in the Legislative Assembly on 10 September 1931 that read as follows:

> In view of the general economic depression this assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to introduce, without delay, legislation prohibiting execution of Civil Court decrees against agricultural landholders and farmers for the next two years, and prohibiting institution of any new Civil Court proceedings against them for past debts for the next two years.\(^{36}\)

On the same day, yet another Resolution Re. Agricultural Distress, though the Assembly divided and the motion negatived by a majority of 51 against 23, was moved that ran as follows:

> This Assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to form a committee of inquiry consisting of experts and Members of the Assembly to inquire into the causes of the present agricultural distress and to devise means for improving the condition of the agricultural population.\(^{37}\)

The Legislative Assembly adopted the Resolution Re Indebtedness of Agriculturists on 24 September 1936 by a majority of 74 against 41: to enquire into the question of indebtedness of agriculturists of the whole of India with a view to find out the approximate total debt, the area of land which had passed from the hands of the agriculturists to money-lenders, the area of land mortgaged with money-lenders; and to enquire and report on the remedies and provisions of law legislated in different provinces

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\(^{35}\) Resolution Re Indebtedness of Agriculturists, LAD, 24.9.1936, Volume VII, 15\(^{th}\) to 28\(^{th}\) September 1936, 1795-1840.

\(^{36}\) Resolution Re. Civil Court Decrees and Proceedings against Agriculturists moved in the name of Sir Abdulla Suhrawardy by Seth Haji Abdoola Haroon (Sind: Muhammadan Rural), LAD, 10 September 1931, Vol. V (1-22 September 1931), 199.
for their amelioration 'by which the interests of the agriculturists could be fully safeguarded and thereby extricate them from their present miserable plight.' The growing influence of the kisan sabha activities all through the thirties was reflected in the central legislature of India also. Therefore, a number of Debt Conciliation legislations and such other ameliorative palliatives were accomplished during the 1930s by the Local Governments: for instance, the Punjab Regulation of Accounts Act, 1930, the Central Provinces Debt Conciliation Act, 1933, the Bengal Moneylenders Act, 1933, the Central Provinces Moneylenders Act, 1934, the Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act, 1934, the Madras Debtors Protection Act, 1934, the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act, 1935, the Madras Debt Conciliation Act, 1936, etc. Thus, almost every province legislated to provide for the scaling down of agricultural debt but the volume of indebtedness showed no sign of any substantial decrease. It is interesting to note here that as early as 1880, the Famine Commission, which also incidentally, as a means of preventing the distress caused by famine or increasing the power of the people to resist the distress caused by famine, went into the question of rural indebtedness, held:

We have found no reason to believe that the agricultural population of India have at any known period of their history been generally free from debt, although individuals or classes may have fallen into deeper embarrassments under the British rule than was common in the native dynasties which preceded them.

Thus it was admitted by the Famine Commission that under the British Government since the British occupation, the indebtedness of agriculturist rose from year to year until they groaned under the burden to the extent, that even so early as 1855 in Ahmednagar district the people refused to use the water of the Lakh Canal - a very important irrigation measure, because they were so desperate that they did not care whether they had a good crop or a bad because of what they sowed, others would reap the benefit; they thought that the benefit would go to the sowcar. Then came the famine Commission of 1898, which did not contribute very much to the question of agricultural indebtedness, but the Famine Commission of 1901 dealt specially with the question of agricultural indebtedness in the Presidency of Bombay, and this is what they said:

It is not necessary to trace here the efforts which since 1875 have been made to remedy this lamentable state of things. Commissions have sat and reported. Acts of the Legislature have been passed and amended; executive action of various sorts has been taken, but of all, the result has been disappointing. Comparing the statistics of sales and mortgages in the four

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Resolution Re. Agricultural Distress moved by Mr. Amar Nath Dutt, LAD, 10 September 1931, Vol. V (1-22 September 1931), 218.
districts to which the Relief Acts have applied with the corresponding figures in non-Act districts and weighing the evidence of the witnesses on the point, we form the conclusion that these Acts have done but little substantial good. The Deccan Agriculturist Commission of the 1870s, constituted after the Kunbis broke out into open riots in the Deccan, was, perhaps, the first serious attempt to deal with the question of rural indebtedness. But the Deccan Riots Commission of 1875 did very valuable work and their report covering the question of agricultural indebtedness in 12 villages in the province of Bombay said:

It appears that about one-third of the occupants of Government land are embarrassed with debt, that their debts average about 18 times their assessment, and that nearly two-thirds of the debt is secured by mortgage of land. ‘The real cause of the general indebtedness’, wrote the Bankura settlement officer, ‘is to be found in the narrow margin which is left to the cultivator from the produce of his land to set by in case of an emergency after feeding himself and his family.’ In west Bengal, for example, it was usual for a major crop failure to occur once every three or four years. Peasant smallholders had to borrow heavily to obtain food and seeds to survive these bad years and to pay off their rents which were pitched high. The chief cause of indebtedness was of course the general poverty of the cultivating class. The increasing burden of indebtedness led to the gradual expropriation of medium and small cultivators from their land and concentration of land and other means of production in the hands of moneylenders or wealthy cultivators. The structure of landholding as it emerged under colonial rule was described as pyramidal by Eric Stokes. The dwarf-holding cultivators could not eke out their subsistence from the small plot of land, which they possessed and had, to either lease-in extra land from large landowners or usurers or work as part time wage labourers. This led to the emergence of a new set of social relationship between the top hierarchy of rural society with the bottom. In sum, as Jawaharlal Nehru put it:

The taluqadors and the big zamindars, the lords of the land, the “natural leaders of the people”, as they are proud of calling themselves, had been the spoilt children of the British Government, but that Government had succeeded, by the special education and upbringing it provided or failed to provide for them, in reducing them, as a class, to a state of complete

38 Q. No. 141 Re. Action Taken on the Resolution Re. Indebtedness of Agriculturists Passed by the Legislative Assembly by Sardar Mangal Singh, LAD., 25.1.1937, 71; Resolution Re Indebtedness of Agriculturists, LAD., 24.9.1936, Volume VII, 15th to 28th September 1936, 1795-1840.
39 Resolution Re Indebtedness of Agriculturists, LAD, Fourth Session of the Fifth Legislative Assembly, Volume VII, 15 - 28 September 1936, 1795-1840. The indebtedness of the agriculturists of India was undoubtedly appalling.
intellectual impotence. They did nothing at all for their tenantry, such as landlords in other countries have to some little extent often done, and became complete parasites on the land and the people. Their chief activity lay in endeavouring to placate the local officials, without whose favour they could not exist for long, and demanding ceaselessly a protection of their special interests and privileges. 42

Market-oriented Colonialism

Historically, capitalism arrived amidst a surrounding non-capitalist world. Once it had taken root in the industry, it invaded agriculture and surrounding countryside. The market economy drained the food-grain reserves of the peasantry. Mass poverty itself was an inevitable consequence of the colonial rule. With increasing influence of market economy there was a shift in agricultural production from a predominantly subsistence-oriented farming to a predominantly commercial agriculture. The cropping pattern underwent a change from food-crops to non-food crops and from inferior cereals to superior cereals. In agriculture commodity production proceeded in a special way, each region specialising in the production of a specific crop. 43 In many regions various means were used to encourage or compel cultivators to grow industrial crops, and even food crops, for export. In addition to highland plantations for tea, coffee, cinnamon, and later, rubber, large areas of the plains were at different periods turned over to indigo, opium, cotton, oilseeds, jute, pepper, coconuts, and other export crops. Landlords and local merchants profited from their sales to British export firms, and brought pressure on peasants to grow them in their roles as wage labourers, serfs, tenants or indebted smallholders. Despite the expansion of the total cultivated area, the production of export crops reduced the area available for subsistence farming in at least some regions such as Kerala. 44 In Champaran, in Bihar, for example, indigo plantations abounded until the year 1917.

The Champaran tenant was bound by law to plant three out of every twenty parts of his land with indigo for his landlord. This system was known as the tinkathia system, as three kathas out of twenty (which make one acre) had to be planted with indigo. 45

All this was done because India’s policies were determined in Britain and in the interests of the British economy and the British capitalist class. An important aspect of the

42 Jawaharlal Nehru, op.cit. 58.
43 Brahma Nand, op.cit. 8-10.
44 “Progress in agricultural production appeared to be waiting on the demand of a market which in India did not exist.” -Royal Commission on Agriculture in India (1928) Abridged Report, Agricole Publishing Academy, New Delhi, Reprinted 1983, 8.
underdevelopment of India was the denial of state support to industry and agriculture. The linkage with the world market and development of roads and railways led to a large part of rural produce entering the urban and world markets and to the production of commercial crops. However, commercialisation of agriculture did not lead to capitalist farming or improved technology. Its chief result was that better soil, available water and other resources were diverted from food crops to commercial crops. For example, in 1938-39, only 11 per cent of all cropped land was under improved seeds, their use being largely confined to non-food cash crops. And to suit British industry, a peculiar structure of production and international division of labour was forced upon India: it produced and exported foodstuffs and raw materials - cotton, jute, oilseeds, and minerals - and imported manufactured products of British industry from biscuits and shoes to machinery, cars and railway engines. Having destroyed India’s traditional handicraft exports, and blocked export of her goods, e.g. textiles that would compete with Britain’s home industries, India’s colonial dependence made sure that only her agricultural raw materials and other non-manufactured goods were exported. Thus Indian agriculture largely was a commercial enterprise under the aegis of the colonial state, though ‘the precise pattern of commercialisation naturally varied from crop to crop’, as per its impending interests and requirements. Therefore, for centuries an exporter of cotton textiles and other handicraft products, India became an importer of cotton textiles and an exporter of cotton and other raw materials. As late as 1935-39, food, drink, tobacco and raw materials constituted 68.5 per cent of India’s exports, while manufactured goods were 64.4 per cent of her imports. Lest India become strong enough economically to break from the Empire, and in order, too, to help British industries in the motherland, Indian industries were discouraged and Indian shipping and shipbuilding were officially restricted. Education

47 Ibid.
48 Sumit Sarkar, op.cit. 30.
49 Bipan Chandra, Amles Tripathi and Barun De, Freedom Struggle, NBT, New Delhi, 1972, 8.
50 Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit.

* Britain was the largest purchaser of exports from India, but as against more than 60% of the visible imports of private merchandise (and a much larger percentage of total imports) coming into India from the U.K., only between 23.4% and 31.1% of Indian exports were taken by the U.K. over the years from 1901 to 1914. Even if we take the British Empire as a whole, the proportion of Indian exports going to it does not
was not designed to train a technical staff for industry nor a professional class to serve the country. With a population of approximately 380,000,000, India, in 1939, had only 1,306 students of agriculture, 2,413 of engineering, 719 of veterinary science, 150 of technology, 63 of forestry and only 3,561 in medicine, in her colleges and universities, according to the official Statistical Abstract for British India.\(^5\) As for the vast majority of poor Indian peasants, as mentioned above, commercialization was often a forced process, as money was needed to meet the growing burden of revenues and rents in cash. “Coimbatore peasants once told a British Collector that they were growing cotton simply because they could not eat it; the grain they might have cultivated would have been consumed by themselves, whereas now they went half-fed but at least had the money with which to meet revenue demands.”\(^5\)2 Similarly, a well-known thinker and literary figure of Bengal, Pramatha Chowdhury (Birbal), writing in the Statesman of 5 March 1920, quoted a representative of zamindars to say, “It is an undeniable fact that seventy per cent of the peasantry out of the seventy seven per cent of the whole population is so poor that the income per capita is not more than a few rupees a year, and they go to bed every day without a square meal.”\(^5\)3 To aid the process of commodity production and commercialisation of agriculture, the age-old technique of ‘catch them young’ was also adopted by the colonial state. Education, indeed, was a powerful tool. For example, in the instructions issued in September 1935 by the Director of Public Instruction, United Provinces, for the preparation of new common language readers for classes I to IV of primary schools for boys, ‘Tea Topics’ was mentioned as a subject “on which lessons may also be included.” The Indian Tea Cess Committee did make a representation, but the Government of the United Provinces had already accepted the principle that lessons on common industries might also be introduced. Although, the Government claimed ‘that rise to 50% or more in any of the years except 1901 and falls to 37.7% in 1914. This pattern of trade suited British needs quite well; for, on the one hand, Britain had a large market where her goods entered duty-free when other markets were closing against her. On the other hand, a large portion of Indian exports (primarily raw materials and manufactured jute) going to countries outside the Empire meant that India earned a large export surplus with continental Europe and with the hard-currency areas of America with which the U.K. had normally a large deficit. -A.K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939 (Cambridge: 1972), p. 48.


\(^5\) Sumit Sarkar, op.cit. 32.

\(^5\) Durga Prasad Bhattacharya, ‘A Note on the Peasant Movement of Bengal, 1850-1947 as in Language and Literature of Bengal’, Indian Historical Records Commission, Sources on Indian History, Volume-I, National Archives of India, New Delhi, 2005, 197-209.
the lessons in question contained no propaganda on behalf of tea but were confined mainly to the importance to India of the indigenous tea industry', yet the nationalists had demanded to know: "Are Government prepared to consider the advisability of instructing the Tea Cess Committee not to do propaganda for the consumption of tea among young children?"  

The increasing production of cash crops was, however, a major feature of the development of Indian peasant agriculture under the impact of the money economy. It was noticed that the production of such cash crops was often less profitable for the peasant than an expansion of his usual food crop production would have been if he had chosen to devote his land and labour to this instead of taking up the new crops which usually involved higher risks and more attention. This seemingly perverse behaviour can be explained by the fact that the peasant cultivated what his creditor expected him to grow rather than what he would have done if he had a free choice. The creditor was, of course, more interested in the margin of profit than in the price in absolute terms, and furthermore, the village money-lender was also dependent on the sources of credit available to him and would, therefore, favour crops for which advances were provided in some way or another. This kind of pre-emption of productive capacity was a major element of the economic determinant of peasant agriculture in India in the period of our study.  

Thus, the area of cultivated agricultural land increased under the British, who pressed for the extensive farming of commercial crops, especially cotton. This was, for example, particularly true of the jari variety grown in the Berar region, much in demand in the Bombay market for export to England, the requirement for which increased yet further when prices for American cotton were higher. During the American Civil War, the area in Maharashtra planted with cotton increased rapidly, as American exports of this crop ceased and Lancashire faced a cotton famine, the result being a sudden rise in the British demand for Indian raw cotton. Even after the Civil War ended, the sown area

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* According to the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, 1928: "A cess of six annas is levied on every hundred pounds of tea exported and the proceeds of this, which now amount to over Rs. 12 lakhs per annum, are made over to the Indian Tea Cess Committee to be utilised in promoting the interests of the Indian tea industry." (p.62)
went on increasing, as demand for this commodity in both foreign and Indian markets expanded, and the opening of the Nagpur branch of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway in 1866 facilitated its transportation. Producers expanded the cultivation of this crop, and Alfred Lyall – writing in 1870 – described the agrarian situation of Berar in the following words:

The land revenue increased and multiplied with marvellous rapidity under the combined stimuli of good Government, railways and the Manchester cotton famine. Cultivation spread over the land like a flood tide.

The area under cotton, which was only 38 per cent in Amravati and 29 per cent in Yavatmal during 1891-92, increased gradually to 57 and 45 per cent respectively in the years 1925-26. Also, made totally dependent on a very distant and unknown foreign market with which his only link was through a formidable chain of intermediaries, the Indian peasant was repeatedly made to bear the burden of wildly fluctuating prices. For example, the cotton boom of the 1860s collapsed as dramatically as it had appeared; consequently, the prosperity of the Deccan cotton belt turned into the heavy indebtedness, famine and agrarian riots of the mid-70s; the decline in world agricultural prices from the 1870s to the 1890s due to the vastly increased supplies coming from North America, Argentina and Australia affected Indian wheat and raw cotton; and the great Depression that hit India from 1929-30 brought agricultural prices crushing down to half or less of their normal levels and dealt a severe blow to the already impoverished peasants burdened with high taxes and rents: ‘there were people who desired goods that they could not purchase, and there were people who had goods that they could not sell’. "Sir, the agricultural population is on the verge of revolt."
Satellite of the British Economy

Although some provinces - like the Punjab, which was transformed into a Hydraulic Society *par excellence*, where in all nine major irrigation works were built, were subsidised chiefly in the interest of the colonial state by Government, many others were left to be blessed by Providence. As India was made to change her role as the exporter of industrial goods to that of agricultural produce, and the domestic market also expanded with the development of certain modern industries and urban centres, much greater emphasis came to be laid on market-oriented production. The two interrelated trends were characteristic of all parts of the subcontinent. No doubt, the primary justification of the *Pax Britannica* lay in the need for converting India into a satellite of the British economy. After all, Britain needed a market for the products of her mills and factories, and supply of agricultural raw materials and wage goods. Once the peasantry became enmeshed in the domain of the market, they laid themselves open to all the disadvantages of highly inequitable and uncertain product markets, not to mention the interlinked credit markets. The marketing structures were specially geared to benefit the purchasers of agricultural products and the primary producers had no control over volatile price movements. Obviously, the interests of the British colonial state were primary, those of the cultivator’s secondary. Thus in the ultimate analysis of the *realpolitik* of politics of power over land and people, of which British imperialism was the highest expression by the 19th century, India’s political economy was to be exploited for Britain’s benefit. In this phase of intensive colonialism, itself a consequence of the affirmation of the industrial revolution in Britain, other significant new developments also tended to make quicker, easier and broader the commercial contacts of the industrial west with the sources of raw materials, including India. The opening of the Suez Canal (1869), synchronising with the fast growth of steam navigation revolutionised the east-west trade. Telegraphic communications between England and India since 1855 further broadened the contact by making possible a more accurate and quicker study of the demand and supply position and of other related phenomena. The liberalisation of tariff policy by the

63 Ibid. 13-15.
64 Sugata Bose, op.cit. 275.
65 Brahma Nand, op.cit. 4-5.
Government of India, particularly after 1867, by abolishing or reducing export duties on very many commodities, and the gradual fall in ocean freight also contributed to the expansion of India’s foreign trade. These developments affected not only the volume, but also the commodity composition of the trade. It was no longer practically confined to ‘drugs, dyes and luxuries’, and now included in increasing quantities foodgrains, fibres and other great staples of universal consumption.  

The pre-railways means of transport were incompatible with rapid development of commerce. The internal as well as the external market of the agricultural produce tended to widen with the growth and expansion of railways. In effect, the railway construction of the second half of the nineteenth century may be said to have completed the ‘colonization’ of the Indian economy, pulling all its erstwhile isolated segments inside the net of British Free Trade.

Typically, empires throughout history have governed, outside their core area, by recognizing (or creating) local leaders, who were expected to maintain order and produce some amount in taxes or tribute – leaving it to the leaders how they maintained order and how they raised the money. Over the years of colonial rule in India, an agrarian structure evolved which landlords, moneylenders, merchants and the colonial state dominated. Subinfeudation, tenancy and sharecropping increasingly dominated both the zamindari and ryotwari areas. By the forties, the landlords controlled over 70 per cent of the land and along with moneylenders and the colonial state appropriated more than half of the total agricultural production. For long Bihar, for instance, suffered from exploitation and oppression that went along with the Raj and its Permanent Settlement, with intermediaries supplying the colonial state with considerable revenue. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 that Lord Cornwallis had made for the Zamindar’s ‘quiet enjoyment of their profitable estate’ was the backdrop against which agriculture in Bihar developed from then through the first half of the twentieth century. As early as 1818, the Permanent Settlement, said Lord Hastings, “had to our painful knowledge subjected


67 Ibid.

68 Irfan Habib, op.cit. 355-381.


70 Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit.

almost the whole of Lower classes throughout these provinces to most grievous
oppression, an oppression too, so guaranteed by our pledge, that we are unable to relieve
the suffered."72 Yet perhaps India's colonial past necessitated this historical continuity
and distortion. The situation in colonial India by 1934 was as follows:

India is a vast country and the land tenures are of different kinds in
different Provinces. In Bengal there is the permanent settlement as
well as in Bihar. In the United Provinces, there is the Talukdari system
and large tracts of land are owned by Talukdars who get their lands
cultivated by tenants. In the Presidency of Bombay, there is the
ryotwari system and every individual cultivator deals directly or is
dealt directly with the Crown. In this way the conditions of the tenure
and the conditions of land revenue and the relations of the landlord and
the tenant are different in different parts of the country.73

Thus from an all-India perspective, the agricultural situation in the country varied
substantially from region to region, in terms of climate, soil, irrigation, yield, cropping
pattern, market facility, cultivation practice, and, of course, tenurial arrangement. The
land administration also differed from the Zamindari to the Raiyatwari, and then to the
Mahalwari or the Malguzari, leading to the creation of both the permanently and
temporarily settled Zamindars and Taluqdar, as well as the perpetually and periodically
positioned tenant landholders, with intermediaries and sub-tenancies galore in between.74

What eventually came out of this melting pot of proprietary rights and tenurial
arrangements, and through the permutations and combinations of a plethora of
enactments affecting them, was a landed hierarchy of the Zamindars and Taluqdar
(paying tax to the Government and receiving rent from the occupant tenants), the
occupant tenants (paying rent to the Zamindars and Taluqdar in the Zamindari areas, and
tax to the Government in the non-zamindari areas), the sub-tenants (paying rent to the
occupant tenants in all the areas) and the landless tillers (selling labour power
everywhere, freely or in bondage, in exchange of subsistence). Then there was the
ubiquitous Mahajan, the traditional providers of rural credit.75

As per assessment made by S.T. Thirumalai, at the time of Independence (1947), Indian
agricultural land was administered under three systems of which the Zamindari system

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72 Durga Prasad Bhattacharya, op.cit.
73 Mr. B.V. Jadhav (Bombay Central Division: Non-Muhammadan Rural), speaking on the Resolution Re
Committee of Enquiry on Agricultural Distress, LAD, 6.4.1934, 3295-96.
74 Amit Kumar Gupta, The Agrarian Drama, The Leftists and the Rural Poor in India, 1934-1951,
75 Ibid.
covered nearly 57 per cent extending over nine major provinces including Bengal, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, north Madras, and parts of Assam and Orissa. The term zamindar had the same connotation as talukdar in Uttar Pradesh or malguzar in Central Provinces, or jagirdar in Rajasthan. The Mahalwari system (prevalent in some 5 per cent of the area) and the Raiyatwari system (prevalent in about 38 per cent of the area) also generated unprotected tenants, sub-tenants and sharecroppers who did not have any security over the land they cultivated. Between the zamindars and the tillers, there was a parasitical layer of intermediaries numbering up to 50 in some places. This parasitical layer ‘used to collect 4.5 times the intended revenue in Madras, up to 7.7 times in Bihar’, though the zamindars had a fixed tax to pay to the government, which was permanently fixed as land tax back in 1793. As per the assessment made by Kotosky, through these three systems, the landlords owned or controlled around 55 to 60 per cent of the privately owned land in India at the time of independence. In addition to the exploitation by landlords and intermediaries, as Daniel Thorner puts it, ‘...what was left to the actual cultivator, after the claims of various superior right-holders were satisfied, might well be subject to collection of unpaid debt by money-lenders. The mechanism for enforcement of this withdrawal of the great bulk of the product from the primary producers was provided by the new body of written law, the courts, the police, the promulgation of ordinances and so forth’.76 Also, because the colonial state’s interest in Indian agriculture was primarily confined to collecting land revenue, it spent very little on improving agriculture. Similarly, landlords and moneylenders found rack-renting of tenants and sharecroppers and usury far more profitable and safe than making productive investment in the land they owned or controlled. Agricultural education was completely neglected. All this was hardly conducive to agricultural development.77 The impoverished cultivators, most of them small peasants, tenants-at-will and sharecroppers, obviously, had no resources or incentive to invest in the improvement of agriculture by using better cattle and seeds, more manure and fertilizers and improved techniques of production. For most of the colonial period, landlessness rose, so that the number of landless agricultural labourers grew from 13 per cent of the agricultural population in 1871 to 28 per cent in 1951. The

77 Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit.
increase in tenant farming and sharecropping and overcrowding of agriculture was followed by an extreme subdivision of land into small holdings and fragmentation. Further, these holdings were scattered into non-contiguous parcels that led to cultivation becoming uneconomic and incapable of maintaining the cultivator even at a subsistence level.  

**Peasant movements**

Through most of Indian history, agriculture was a way of life for most people in the historically predominant socio-economic environment saturated with politics of power over land and people. A peasant movement generally emerged out of a given land relations. Since 1793 up to 1947, the Permanent Settlement loomed large in the history of agrarian relations in India. Collection of maximum revenue in the quickest possible time was the policy pursued by the East India Company after obtaining the *Dewani*. What happened prior to and immediately after the Permanent Settlement is documented in Parliamentary Papers and *Annals of Rural Bengal* and reflected also in *Anandmath* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Asok Mitra threw a flood of light on the whole situation from 1765 to 1951 in his report of *Census of Bengal*. But in the context of the twentieth century India, the movements that emerged from such discontents were marked by a new feature: now there was a circular interaction between the Indian freedom struggle and the struggles of the Indian peasant, that is they were deeply influenced by and, in their turn, had significant impact on the ongoing struggle for freedom from colonialism. There appears to be a gap of information on peasants' movement during the period 1900-1920. During this period, Swadeshi and Boycott Movement gathered momentum. Rabindranath Tagore was one of the leaders of the movement. Bipin Chandra Pal or Surendranath Banerjea hardly referred to any peasants' movement in their writings. Rabindranath sharply pointed out to the shortcomings of the movement (one of which was its failure to draw the musalmans) and also enumerated the reasons for it. Any peasant movement in Bengal proper was not a reality without the participation of the Muslim peasantry. It may be one of the reasons of a dull season in peasant movement during 1900-1920.  

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78 Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit.
79 Durga Prasad Bhattacharya, op.cit.
80 Ibid.
country in the nineteenth century, peasant masses became linked with the anti-imperialist movement in the Gandhi era. Once the path of peasant mobilization was trodden, it was difficult to halt, and the rural poor were drawn in the nationalist movement. Reviewing the different phases in our nationalist movement, Eric Stokes drew attention to the groundswell coming up from the peasants, which "was decisive in loosening the political hold of colonial rule and promoting the nationalist cause". There is an element of truth in Stokes's contention that the urban elite would have remained ineffectual without peasant support. What needs to be emphasized is that peasant movements revealed, as in a flash, the revolutionary potential inherent in the peasants and brought to the fore the crucial importance of the anti-feudal revolution. A new phase of the peasant movement opened with the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936. It was a sign of the times, when the intelligentsia, in the 1940s, went to the village, not in the Narodnik fashion but as builders of peasant movements. It is noteworthy that peasant women, coming from scheduled caste and tribal families, remained in the van of village meetings and processions, gave food and shelter to underground activists and often faced armed policemen. The lasting success of the Kisan Sabha lay in the fact that it built cadres of peasant women, some of whom emerged as local leaders. The peasant movements did accelerate the process of decolonisation, though the overriding consideration of the Kisan Sabha as well as the Indian National Congress was to mobilise the entire peasantry in the struggle for freedom from feudalism and imperialism.

The period between 1920 and 1947, the most significant in India's freedom struggle, witnessed a plethora of peasant organizations. Some of these drew their ideological orientation from the political liberalism of the Indian National Congress in general and from Mahatma Gandhi's political ethic of passive resistance in particular, or perhaps, more correctly, from his politics of rights over land and people. Other organizations of or for the peasants emerged out of the growing Left-wing activities in India and therefore looked to the theory and practice of Marxist socialism in general and to the Bolshevik model in particular. From the mid-twenties almost until 1950, peasant organisations of the latter type more or less dominated the scene although those with other doctrinal

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81 Sunil Sen, 'Rise of the Peasant', Presidential Address, Section III (Modern India), Indian History Congress, 56th Session, GNDU, Amritsar, 1985, 351-363.
complexions were not totally non-existent. In the twenties the Workers' and Peasant Parties, and a variety of kisan sabhas in the thirties and forties were set up in different parts of India. As regards the class base of peasant parties it could be said that from 1925 till 1938 or so it was predominantly the middle peasants, rich and well-to-do farmers, and substantial tenants, who took the leading part in organizing the parties. It was only after 1940 when the most influential peasant body of that period, the All India Kisan Sabha, turned to the problems of poor peasants and landless labourers that it ceased to be an exclusively rich and middle peasant party. Thereafter the response from poor peasants was overwhelming. The ideologies of peasant organizations vacillated between Gandhism on the one hand and Marxism-Leninism on the other. Varying emphasis on ends and means and a curious mixture of the two combined with Fabian socialism often characterised their concepts, demands, and overall agrarian policies. But during our period of study, the peasant parties moved gradually away from the Gandhian approach towards Marxism and Communism. For example, three important peasant struggles emerged in the second and third decades of the century: the kisan sabha and Eka movements in Avadh in U.P., the Mappila rebellion in Malabar, and the Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat. The universally and traditionally recognised evils of exorbitant rents, illegal levies, renewal fees or nazrana, arbitrary ejectments or bedakhli, accompanied by high price of food and other necessities following World War I fuelled agrarian discontent in Avadh that resulted in the organisation of the peasants of the province on modern lines into kisan sabhas. The U.P. Kisan Sabha was set up in February 1918 through the efforts of Gauri Shankar Misra and Indra Narain Dwivedi, and with the support of Madan Mohan Malviya. The Government pushed through the Oudh Rent (Amendment) Act in 1921 ameliorative enough for the time to assist in the decline of the movement. However, towards the end of the year, peasant discontent surfaced again in Avadh in the northern districts of Hardoi, Bahraich, and Sitapur of the province. The main grievances, resulting this time in the birth of the Eka or unity movement, related to the extraction of rent that was generally fifty per cent higher than the recorded rent, the oppression of thekedars to whom the work of rent-collection was farmed out and the practice of share-rents. In August 1921, peasant discontent erupted in the Malabar.

district of Kerala. Here Mappila tenants rebelled. Their grievances also related to lack of any security of tenure, renewal fees, high rents, and other oppressive landlord exactions. The no-tax movement of Bardoli taluq of Surat district in Gujarat in 1928 was similarly against thirty per cent increase over the existing assessment of the land revenue demand by the Bombay Government in 1926. As a result of which eventually the enhancement was reduced to 6.03 per cent. It may be recalled that Bardoli taluq was selected in 1922 as the place from where Mahatma Gandhi was to launch the civil disobedience campaign, but events in Chauri Chaura changed all that and the campaign never took off. However, because of the various preparations for the civil disobedience movement, Bardoli was intensely politically sensitised for the successful no-tax movement. The no-tax and no-revenue movements attacked the machinery of the colonial state; the tenant struggles led by the Kisan Sabha from 1937 onwards were directed against the landlords, the main bulwark of the British raj.

As is clear, the inner dynamics of all these struggles were, more or less, identical. Yet these struggles were both anti-feudal and anti-colonial: the peasant had now arrived on the scene as the ‘subject’ of Indian history. Thus it may be seen that a particularly striking feature of the political landscape was the considerable congruence of the lines that defined the boundaries of influence of the peasant movement and the national movement. Peasant struggles in the twentieth century, and especially after 1918, tended to emerge either along with, and as part of the national struggle or in areas and among sections that had at one time or another felt the impact of the anti-imperialist struggles.

By the 1930s the Indian national movement and the freedom struggle entered a new phase of nation-wide awakening of Indian peasants to their own strength and capacity to organize for the betterment of their living conditions. All told, the peasants were placed in a situation where they continued to pay taxes, rents, and debts at pre-Depression rates while their incomes continued to spiral steadily downward. The Civil Disobedience movement launched in this atmosphere of discontent in 1930 soon took on the form of no-tax and no-rent campaign in many parts of the country. Peasants, emboldened by the

83 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit.
85 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit. 343-55.
success of the Bardoli Satyagraha (1928), joined the protest in large numbers. In Andhra, for example, the political movement enmeshed with the campaign against re-settlement that threatened an increase in land revenue. In U.P., no-revenue soon turned into no-rent and the movement continued even during the truce following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Mahatma Gandhi himself issued a manifesto to the U.P. kisans asking them to pay only fifty per cent of the legal rent and get receipts for payment of the full amount. Peasants in Gujarat, particularly in Surat and Kheda, refused to pay their taxes and went on hijrat to neighbouring Baroda territory to escape government repression. Their lands and movable property were confiscated. In Bihar and Bengal, powerful movements were launched against the hated chowkidara tax by which villagers were made to pay for the upkeep of their own oppressors. In Punjab, a no-revenue campaign accompanied the emergence of kisan sabhas that demanded a reduction in land revenue and water rates and debts. Forest satyagrahas by which peasants, including tribals, defied the forest laws that prohibited them from use of the forests, were popular in Maharashtra, Bihar and the Central Provinces. Anti-zamindari struggles emerged in Andhra, and the first target was the Venkatagiri zamindari in Nellore district.66

Politics of Power: Left versus Right

The following excerpts from the proceedings (dated 10.9.1931) of the Legislative Assembly are indicative and representative of the overall political mindset prevailing in India in the opening years of our study:

Sir, the science of political economy has changed so much from the days when we were students in college that I find that all the theories which we find in Fawcett's book have been exploded. It is no longer a question of land, labour and capital, but it is a question of socialism, communism, Third International, Fourth International and dictatorship of the proletariat.67

Again,

Otherwise, you talk of terrorism and revolution. There will be a revolution, an economic revolution in the country where the masses will rise and upset every Government and even those of us who pose as capitalists.68

66 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit.
67 Mr. Amar Nath Dutt (Burdwan Division: Non-Muhammadan Rural) moving the Resolution Re Agricultural Distress: "This Assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to form a committee of inquiry consisting of experts and Members of the Assembly to inquire into the causes of the present agricultural distress and to devise means for improving the condition of the agricultural population.", LAD, 10.9.1931, 218.
68 Mr. B. Das (Orissa Division: Non-Muhammadan), op.cit., 223.
Politically, the years 1935 and, particularly 1936 saw the emergence of a pattern in Indian politics that would be repeated often, both before and after Independence. Outwardly, all the signs were of a significant lurch to the left: growing Socialist and Communist activity (despite the 1934 ban on the Communist Party of India), numerous labour and peasant struggles, the formation of several Left-led all-India mass organisations, and Congress Presidential addresses by Jawaharlal Nehru at Lucknow and Faizpur (April and December 1936) which formally seemed to embody virtually all the radical aspirations and programmes of the Left. Yet in the end the Right within the Congress was able to skillfully and effectively ride and indeed utilize the storm, and by the summer of 1937 Congress ministries were being formed to work a significant part of the Government of India Act, 1935 which everyone had been denouncing for years.89 The formation of Congress Ministries in a majority of the provinces in early 1937 marked the beginning of a new phase in the growth of the peasant movement. The momentum generated by the election campaign was not only maintained but increased after it was over. In fact, for example, the year 1937 may be said to mark the real beginning of the most vigorous phase of the peasant movement in pre-Independence Punjab.90 After all, the nationalist political movements for liberation such as the non-cooperation (1920-2) and civil disobedience (1930-2) movements and their leadership depended heavily on the peasantry, and tried to harness agrarian discontent to the anti-colonial struggle. But they fostered peasant resistance only up to a limit. The success of their efforts to mobilize the peasantry within the framework of the Indian national freedom struggle was also limited, because the forces generating agrarian discontent lay far outside the sphere of purely nationalist politics and were embedded deeply in the agrarian class structure and newly emergent contradictions in the countryside.91

The most formidable and oppressive strongholds of feudalism lay in the princely States, and, these had already witnessed numerous spontaneous local peasant outbreaks - the most recent incidents being in Sikar thikana (jagir) of Jaipur, against revenue-enhancement in the midst of Depression, and at Lohanu in Punjab where an agitation against a tax on camels led to firing in 1935. The All-India States Peoples Conference,

89 Sumit Sarkar, op.cit. 338.
90 Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit.137.
91 D. N. Dhanagare, op.cit. 227.
However, was so far a very moderate and elitist body, confined to drawing up petitions and issuing pamphlets, while the Congress still stuck to a strict policy of non-interference. As late as 1934, Mahatma Gandhi reiterated the 'helplessness' of the Congress, and expressed the hope that princes could be persuaded to behave as good 'trusties' for their subjects. 1936 marked the clear beginning of a change. Jawaharlal Nehru's address to the fifth session of the States Peoples' Conference urged the need for mass contacts in place of mere petitions, and the session for the first time drew up a programme of agrarian demands: a one-third cut in land revenue, scaling-down of debts, and an enquiry into peasant grievances in the context of the 'tragedies' of Kashmir, Alwar, Sikar (Jaipur), and Lohanu. The following year, the formation of Congress ministries set off a veritable upsurge in large parts of princely India. A Kisan Manifesto was finalised at the All India Kisan Committee session in Bombay and formally presented to the Congress Working Committee to be incorporated into its forthcoming manifesto for the 1937 elections. The Kisan Manifesto considerably influenced the agrarian programme adopted by the Congress at its Faizpur (Maharashtra) session, which included demands for fifty per cent reduction in land revenue and rent, a moratorium on debts, the abolition of feudal levies, security of tenure for tenants, a living wage for agricultural labourers, and the recognition of peasant unions. At Faizpur, along with the Congress session was held the second session of the All India Kisan Congress presided over by N. G. Ranga, who declared: 'We are organizing ourselves in order to prepare ourselves for the final inauguration of a Socialist state and society.'

The Telangana Liberation Struggle started as peasant struggle in 1946. It was directed, as usual against forced labour, illegal exactions, evictions by landlords and oppression by village patels. Later the struggle developed into revolt against Nizam's feudal autocracy, and even later against the offensive of the State. The socio-economic and political life of the Telangana people was of abject serfdom. In this explosive background the Telangana movement started under the banner of the Andhra Mahasabha in 1928. The movement started over certain economic demands and finally culminated into an armed liberation struggle to overthrow the Nizam rule. The Andhra Mahasabha started with modest

92 Sumit Sarkar, op.cit. 339-42.
93 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit.
reformist agenda in 1928. By 1940-42, it was transformed into a united militant front against Nizam autocracy. In the post-second world war phase, the movement got intensified due to mass revolutionary people’s upsurge. This forced the landlords either to leave their village or to surrender to the Gram Raj. Around one third of the Telangana area was liberated from feudal exploitation and Gram Raj was established. Thus, what began as a partial struggle developed into a peasant revolution in Telangana, which became a part of the national democratic movement leading to the liquidation of the Nizam’s rule in Hyderabad.

After all, the Indian National Congress in fact owed much of its success in the provincial elections of January 1937 to the agriculture related agenda of the Kisan Sabha. The political atmosphere in the country underwent a marked change: increased civil liberties, a new sense of freedom born of the feeling that ‘our own people are in power’, ‘a heightened sense of expectation that the ministries would bring in pro-people measures’ - all combined to make the years 1937-39 the high water-mark of the peasant movement. The rising tide of peasant awakening was checked by the outbreak of World War II which brought about the resignation of the Congress Ministries and the launching of severe repression against left-wing and kisan sabha leaders and workers because of their strong anti-War stance. The adoption by the Communist Party of India of the Peoples’ War line in December 1941 following Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union created dissensions between the Communist and non-Communist members of the kisan sabha. These dissensions came to a head with the Quit India Movement. Nevertheless, during the War years the kisan sabha continued to play an important role in various kinds of relief work, as for example in the Bengal Famine of 1943*, and helped to lessen the rigour of shortages of essential goods, rationing and the like.

The Kisan Sabha under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, to begin with,

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95 Sunil Sen, ‘Rise of the Peasant’, op.cit.
96 Genocide by Capitalism: The famine was the direct result of the failure of the Bengal government and, indeed, the government of India as a whole, to regulate the market – thus allowing the price of rice to rise out of the reach of rural agricultural workers. The governments compounded the mistake by handing over the market to ‘unrestricted free trade’ in March 1943; they persisted, in the wake of human misery, in a policy whose effect was a sort of genocide by capitalism. – Alex Von Tunzelmann, Indian Summer, The Secret History of the End of an Empire, Simon & Schuster, London, 2007, 138-9
97 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit. 343.
received guarded and occasional support from some Congressmen who felt obliged to stand by the rhetoric of their party, but was joined more enthusiastically by the Congress Socialists under the leadership of Jaya Prakash Narayan, the Communist Party of India led by the peasant activist, Karyanand Sharma, and other radical elements in Bihar politics. More than these party groupings however, the movement gained enormous strength from the working peasantry, which agitated first for the reform of the zamindari system and later for its total abolition. The Congressmen who came into power briefly in 1937 and then in 1946 were forced by the agrarian agitation to address themselves to the question of changing the agrarian system through legislation. Incidentally, Bihar was the state to have the Zamindari Abolition Bill introduced in its legislature in 1947, which, as amended and approved by the Governor-General, was published as the Bihar Abolition of Zamindari Act, 1948. The kisan movement had as its major thrust of activity the organisation of self-cultivating peasants into Kisan Sabhas around the familiar demands of reduction of land revenue and water rates, relief from indebtedness, abolition of begar or forced labour, right to shamlat or village common land, right of shikar, amendment of Nazool laws, etc. In short, the immediate demands on which agrarian struggles were fought in the pre-Independence days were the traditional agrarian problems and issues like the reduction of taxes, the abolition of illegal cesses or feudal levies and begar or vethi, the ending of oppression by landlords and their agents, the reduction of debts, the restoration of illegally or illegitimately seized lands, and security of tenure for tenants. The struggles based on these demands were clearly not aimed at the overthrow of the existing agrarian structure but towards alleviating its most oppressive aspects. Nevertheless, they corroded the power of the landed classes in many ways and thus prepared the ground for the transformation of the structure itself. In sum, the kisan movement was faced with the task of transforming the peasants' consciousness and building movements based on a transformed consciousness. No doubt, the growth and development of the peasant movements were indissolubly linked with the Indian national struggle for freedom. Although agrarian tensions had long manifested themselves in the

98 Sunil Sen, op.cit.
99 Mridula Mukherjee, op.cit. 244.
100 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K.N. Panikkar, op.cit.
form of sporadic and spontaneous peasant uprisings in India, it was, however, only after
the intensification of the national movement, when the importance of wider mass
participation in it came to be increasingly realized, that the peasants began to fight in a
more disciplined manner and their movement took a definite organisational shape.101

One of the direct results of the colonial Permanent Settlement was that more land was
brought under cultivation, since every tenure holder was now anxious to raise his income
to pay off his landlord. In 1870s, it was noticed that agriculture, which had never been in
an advanced condition, gradually went on expanding during the whole of the 19th century.
For example, extensive reclamation of lands from jungle occurred in both north and south
of the Ganga, especially in the latter, constantly bringing huge tracts of wasteland under
the plough. At the time of the Permanent Settlement, the entire district of Bhagalpur, with
the exception of three parganas – Bhagalpur, Chhai and Kahalgaon, was agriculturally
backward and the uncultivated area was several times greater than what was found at the
time of first Survey and Settlement operations (1902-10). But 90 percent of its total area
was found fit for cultivation by 1930. The area lying north of the Ganga in the district of
Munger, described as ‘wholly unexplored’ in the Ain-i-Akbari, was brought under the
plough in the beginning of the twentieth century as 94.5 acres for every 100 acres became
fit for cultivation.102

The development of communications and, from the mid-1870s, the rapid expansion of the
export trade in food grains strained further the economic circumstances of agrarian
society, whilst untoward physical changes manifested themselves over vast areas of the
low-lying tracts of the Doab and the eastern uplands, where deforestation, the obstruction
of natural drainage by public works embankments, together with lateral seepage and flush
irrigation from canals exacerbated natural geological tendencies towards the
accumulation of toxic quantities of alkali salts in the upper layers of the soil. A depressed
peasantry laboured in a distorted environment.103

During the pre-British days, local scarcities tended to become famines due to poor transport network. Under British rule, famines tended to embrace ever wider area, despite (or because of) modern transport system of railways. Geographically, the regions, which were earlier immune to famines like Bengal and Malwa, were visited by devastating famines under British rule as pointed out by Irfan Habib. In pre-British period, famines were mostly natural calamities but under colonial rule they became human made disaster. Under colonial rule, investment in irrigation was neglected and modern transport system drained the stocks of food grains from the countryside. It should be stressed that it was the colonial rule itself, which created poverty and was, therefore, responsible for famines. According to Mahatma Gandhi, in his *Hind Swaraj*:

Railways have also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless and so the pressure of famine increases. Railways accentuate the evil nature of man.

The colonial period was strewn with the litter of many famines and stories of oppression of the ryot. Between 1799 and 1943, in 144 years of the British rule in India, there were 33 major famines, ignoring frequent scarcity situations in the different parts of the country. Deccan areas suffered repeatedly from famines in the second half of the nineteenth century. No reliable data are available regarding mortality due to these recurrent famines. There are, however, various estimates made by scholars both white and brown. In the notorious “Chhiaat ver Mannantar” (famine of ’76) in the late eighteenth century in Bengal about one-third of the population perished due to starvation. One could argue that the British had not by then fully established themselves as rulers of the country. After the Great Mutiny of 1857 when the Queen of England assumed power from the John Company and became the Empress of India (*Regina Imperator*), terrible famines occurred in India. Between 1860 and 1900, it had been estimated that famines caused starvation death of around fifteen million persons in India. Marx observed:

In the year 1866 more than a million Hindus died of hunger in the province of Orissa alone. Nevertheless, attempts were made to enrich the Indian treasury by the price at which necessaries of life were sold to the starving people.

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104 Brahma Nand, op.cit. 851.
106 Durga Prasad Bhattacharya, op.cit.
Dr. R. C. Dutt strongly argued that one of the major causes of frequent famines was the unjustifiably high rate of land revenue. Ruthless extraction of surplus value from the Indian peasants and landowners by the colonial authorities left them highly vulnerable to slight adverse fluctuation of crop production. Having no staying power, after paying the extortionate rent, cess and taxes to the zamindars or government as the case might be, any crop failure led to severe morbidity resulting in death. The Census Report of 1901 stated that “occurrence of a severe famine was marked by the disappearance of a third or a fourth of the population of the area afflicted”. In the Great famine of Bengal in 1943, partly engineered by the colonial government, perhaps as a measure of reprisal for the rebellious behaviour of His Majesty's subjects for participating in the ‘Quit India’ Movement of 1942, three to six million persons died in agony and pain due to starvation in the then Bengal.108

Achievements of Peasant Revolts

The achievements of peasant revolts in India, if viewed in the context of their proximate aims, are not as unimpressive as they sometimes appear.109 Anti-imperialism was an important component of the ideology of the peasant movements that emerged in the princely states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, Gwalior, Orissa, etc.110 Perhaps, the rise of the peasant is the single biggest event in modern Indian history from 1917 onwards. Although peasant revolts flared up in various parts of the country in the nineteenth century, peasant masses became linked with the anti-imperialist movement in the Gandhi era. Once the path of peasant mobilization was trodden, it was difficult to halt, and the rural poor were drawn in the nationalist movement. The groundswell coming up from the peasants ‘was decisive in loosening the political hold of colonial rule and promoting the nationalist cause’.111 The kisan movement failed to bring about the millennium. Nevertheless, their struggles aroused hopes in the hearts of the peasantry and prepared at least the assertive among them to carry on the struggle with greater vigour and more radical demands. The subsequent abolition of zamindari and the efforts to permanently

109 D. N. Dhanagare, op.cit. 227.
111 Sunil Sen, op.cit.
unsettle the colonial settlements in post-independent India are testimony to their achievements. Yet, perhaps, the peasant movements eventually led to the partition of the country in August 1947. Perhaps, the Zamindari abolition demand was a wee bit too radical for the big landholders, particularly of eastern and western and north-western India: they were scared that their power over land was ominously threatened. The Muslim middle class and the feudal lords of Punjab and Sindh had become convinced that only a separate state would safeguard their interests.\(^\text{112}\) In any case, as Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking at Ahmedabad on September 19, 1937, said: “The Hindu-Muslim question is a question of the upper classes and not of the masses. Both Hindu and Muslim masses are steeped in poverty, which can be removed from both simultaneously and not separately.”\(^\text{113}\) The social and natural environmental cost of the partition of India is perhaps impossible to quantify.

Consequences of British Colonial Politics of Power over Land and People

The Indian rural scene during the entire British period bristled with protests, revolts, and even large-scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages.\(^\text{114}\) Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings that were responses to relative deprivation of unusually severe character, always economic, and often also involving physical brutality or ethnic persecution.\(^\text{115}\) As already known, after all, peasant risings are traditionally tax rebellions. In India as a whole, peasants have repeatedly risen in revolt and agrarian unrest has indeed been an important under-current of political processes. Agrarian movements leading to the collapse of the Mughal empire, tribal revolts in many parts of India throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, indigo uprisings and the Pabna rent ‘disturbances’, the Deccan Riots of the 1870s, Moplah revolts in the first part of the 20th century, the Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat, Kisan agitations in U.P. in the 1920s, Ryots’ Movements in Andhra Pradesh in the 1930s and the massive Telengana uprising and Tebhaga movements in the 1940s are prominent examples of peasants influencing politics in the pre-Independence period.\(^\text{116}\) The colonial state was parasitic. Perhaps, it


\(^3\) A. R. Desai, ed, *Peasant Struggles in India*, OUP, 1979, xii.


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could not have been otherwise. Land was to tax; India’s natural and human resources and
capital were to subserve British colonial and imperial interests. No wonder then that in
1948 the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Committee, in speaking of the effect of
British Revenue policy, stated:

Millions of people were, by these settlements, deprived of rights that
they had enjoyed for well over two thousand years; hereditary
cultivating proprietors of land were turned into rack-rented tenants at
will, and conditions were thus created that led to continuous social
discord and economic deterioration and the decay of agriculture.117

Throughout the colonial period the peasantry lived on subsistence economy. Landlords,
intermediaries, moneylenders and the state extracted the surplus of their production. The
peasants continued under abject poverty, exploited, rack-rented and evicted. Their
condition was similar to that of the pre-land reform society in China: “Efforts of the
landlords to extract the maximum possible surplus from the peasant not only exposed him
to perpetual hunger but also destroyed his capacity and his motivation to improve his
land.”118

The landlord-British Raj collaboration in India restricted the growth of the capitalist
mode of production in the agrarian system, but perpetuated the feudal mode of production
without any substantial alteration in peasant farming. “The scholars who have studied the
agrarian situation of the Third World including Latin America have pointed out that the
feudal mode of production in agriculture is precisely at the service of imperialism rather
than antagonistically in contradiction with it.” Colonial land settlements perpetuated the
feudal tendencies in agriculture.119 The Indian peasantry became a tenantry under British
rule.120

British colonialism in India was fully structured during the 19th century – Indian economy
was integrated with the British and world capitalist economy in a subservient position
and India became a classical colony. Consequences of colonialism were various and
different. India was gradually underdeveloped and impoverished. Its traditional
handicrafts were ruined; modern industrial growth was delayed and stunted; Indian

117 Quoted in Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, OUP, 1987,
343-44.
since Independence’ in *India Past and Present*, Volume III, 1986, Number 1, 13-34.
119 Ibid.
120 Dietmar Rothermund, *Government, Landlord, and Peasant in India, Agrarian Relations under British
agriculture first stagnated and then entered a prolonged period of decline and ruin; large sectors of Indian economy – foreign trade, banking, plantations, transport, energy, modern industry and mining – came under foreign control. At the same time, an indigenous capitalist class did emerge during the second half of the 19th century even though it was cribbed and confined. What was perhaps more important, a nationalist intelligentsia took root during the same period.\textsuperscript{121}

Colonialism did accelerate the processes of commodity production, but these were controlled, geared not to the development of a domestic economy but to uncertain markets abroad. For example, under the impact of colonial trade, the textile industry declined and with it the riverine transportation of cotton, which had partly contributed to the earlier relative prosperity of Patna and other towns in Bihar, located along the Ganga.\textsuperscript{122}

By enhancing the peasant’s awareness of their exploitation by imperialism, the national movement increased their capacity to perceive other types of exploitation as well, such as that carried on by landlords and moneylenders.\textsuperscript{123} For example, zamindars frequently collected from their subordinates a whole range of customary payments. There were fees that the subordinate had to pay in addition to the rent. Payment had to be made to the zamindar before the \textit{rabi} (dry season) crop could be cut. Fees were levied at the time of the marriage of the son of a zamindar. A fee was paid when the zamindar gave the cultivator a receipt showing he had discharged his rent obligation; and, in one instance at least, a fee was charged when the zamindar’s elephant died to help defray the costs of a new one. Not only were cultivators supposed to pay fees to zamindars but artisans and merchants who inhabited bazaars were also subject to special taxes.\textsuperscript{124} The poor peasants’ ability to stand against their oppressors had often been reflected between 1932 and 1934 in a large number of happenings all over the country. A typical illustration was the manner in which the tenants forced the \textit{Malguzars} at Jaijaipur (1932) and Jangir (1933) areas of Bilaspur, the Central Provinces and Berar, to forgo rent and burn documents.\textsuperscript{125}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{121}{Bipan Chandra,\textit{ Ranade’s Economic Writings}, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990, vii.}
\footnote{122}{Arvind N. Das, op.cit. 26.}
\footnote{123}{Mridula Mukherjee,\textit{ Peasants in India’s Non-Violent Revolution, Practice and Theory}, Sage Publications, 2004, 348.}
\footnote{124}{Bernard S. Cohn, \textit{An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays}, OUP, 1987, 397.}
\footnote{125}{Amit Kumar Gupta, op.cit. 17.}
\end{footnotes}
The leftist organisers of kisans in 1935-36 were perhaps most active in Bihar under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand. They articulated peasants’ grievances by undertaking whirlwind tours in the countryside, and by addressing innumerable gatherings of kisans. Denouncing the oppressions of the zamindars and their amals (retainers), and predicting the extinction of the zamindari, the Swami and his followers often dwelt upon the miseries of the rural poor, the burdens of irregular exactions, the insecurities of the tenants and the problems of the landless labourers. Their campaigns sometimes resulted, not only in the kisans marches to the district officials and provincial legislators for voicing their demands, but also in organised resistance on a small scale. A typical example of such resistance took place early in 1936 in Tikari estate in Gaya. After evicting tenants of certain plots on the ground of outstanding rent, the Tikariraj tried to take away the crop that had been raised. The ousted peasants, supported by most of the villagers, opposed the move, surrounded the khalihan (barn) where the crop was stored, and guarded it to prevent its seizure by the amals.

No institution of British India so epitomised the imperial presence, as did zamindari. It was not merely the fidelity with which the zamindars represented the stated aims of the Government of India but the wanton impracticality with which they pursued them which convinced the nationalist reformers, casting a sceptical eye over the agrarian scene and its general wretchedness that the blame was to be laid squarely at the zamindar’s door. ‘To our misfortune,’ Jawaharlal Nehru declared, ‘we have zamindars everywhere and like a blight they have prevented healthy growth . . . We must, therefore, face this problem of landlordism and if we face it what can we do with it except to abolish it?’. Ultimately, zamindari was abolished after a prolonged process of legal battles and legislative filibustering by the richer zamindars, for instance, of Bihar, but the landlords were given compensation in the form of Zamindari Bonds for which a regular, though depressed, market developed in due course. Other Land Reform legislation was also enacted but implementation was not at all vigorous and the net change, for example, in the village of Changel in Bihar was that zamindars were removed from their formal position in the land-ownership structure, the position of occupancy tenants was marginally strengthened.

126 Amit Kumar Gupta, op.cit. 29-30.
and noises were heard of impending measures to benefit the poor. But mostly the village carried on as before.\textsuperscript{128} After all, on 15\textsuperscript{th} August 1947, it was not merely ‘transfer of power’ but ‘transfer of politics of power over land and people’. As such ‘politics of power’, i.e., \textit{rajaneeti} continued in the Republic of India, denying ‘politics of rights’, i.e., \textit{prajaneeti} its role in \textit{prajatantra}.

The colonial emphasis on commercialization of agriculture impacted the natural environment of India. The luxuriance of the tropical virgin forests appealed to the colonizing enthusiasts chiefly as indicating possibilities of its succession by equal luxuriance of plantations controlled by planters. They imagined of the ‘jungle’, ‘bush’ or ‘scrub’ being replaced by fields of sugar, cotton or tea.\textsuperscript{129} The colonial project of establishing coffee plantations disturbed the self-subsistent traditional tribal system, damaged the ecology, and resulted in environmental decline in the Shervaroy hills of Madras Presidency during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The colonial administration was least concerned about the tribal people’s customary rights over forest resources, and their traditional administrative and judicial systems. The British administration, which disregarded the tribal system, not only encouraged the British planters but even condoned their patently illegal activities. In other words, the means adopted to set up coffee plantations in the hills/forests to favour the British planters led to the disintegration of the age-old tribal socio-cultural system and their forest oriented economy. In the process of commercialisation, the colonial policy refused to accord due importance to ecology and environment as well as to the sustainable livelihood of the tribal communities.\textsuperscript{130} In effect, colonial rule simultaneously altered both agrarian society and nature in order to implant the Company zamindari system. For example in deltaic Orissa, the colonial government recast the previously flood-dependent agrarian regime into a flood-vulnerable landscape. This in turn led to the rupture of land, in hitherto unprecedented ways, from its previous

\textsuperscript{128} Arvind N. Das, ‘Changel: Three Centuries of an Indian Village’ in \textit{The Journal of Peasant Studies}, Volume 15, Number 1, October 1987, 3-60.
\textsuperscript{130} Velayutham Saravanan, ‘Colonialism and coffee plantations: Decline of environment and tribals in Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century’ \textit{The Indian Economic and Social History Review}, 41, 4 (2004), SAGE New Delhi, 465-488
ecological weave with the delta's hydrology.\textsuperscript{131}

**Appropriation of India: Fundamental Colonial Enterprise**

Thus landscape and nature, far from being peripheral or merely decorative, were central to the colonizing process. India's material environment became increasingly subject to the colonial understanding of landscape and nature, and to the scientific scrutiny of itinerant naturalists; it formed a central and integrating element in the wider constitution of colonial knowledge and a critical ingredient in the larger colonizing process. This was an appropriation of India, in its way, quite as fundamental to the colonial enterprise as the more familiar story of conquering armies, revenue systems and imperial bureaucracies.\textsuperscript{132}

Hence, British colonial rule marked a crucial watershed in the ecological history of India. The country's encounter with a technologically advanced and dynamic culture gave rise to profound dislocations at various levels of Indian society. There was the essential interdependence of ecological and social changes that came in the wake of colonial rule.\textsuperscript{133} From an ecological perspective, therefore, the clash of pre-industrial and industrial cultures in India may be represented in terms of the closure and creation of niches. In India, as elsewhere, the British usurped the ecological niches occupied by the hunter-gatherers, many of whom also practised shifting cultivation, and diminished substantially the niche space occupied by food producers, by alienating them from access to non-cultivated lands.\textsuperscript{134} Thus, 'agriculture also changes nature to create the physical characteristics of spaces in which people carry on social life, changing over time how people think about their world. Agriculture is humanity sculpting the earth, designing habitats, making a landscape as a kind of architecture, and producing symbolic domains that form the spatial attributes of civilization.'\textsuperscript{135} In colonial India the major thrust was on extensification of agriculture by bringing new areas under cultivation; thus, for example,


\textsuperscript{133} Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land, An Ecological History of India*, OUP, 1992, 5.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. 242.

by 1950, the net sown area per capita in India was 0.38 ha.\textsuperscript{136} India’s trade was in balance during the first two decades following Independence. This was a sharp departure from the past; the result of an inward-looking developmental model. Right through history, India ran big trade surpluses with the rest of the world that financed huge gold inflows from the days of the Roman Empire. Much of the gold plundered by Spain from the New World eventually found its way to India. India’s famed wealth seduced military adventurers, such as Mahmud Ghaznavi, Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali into making predatory raids, and financed the ‘drain of wealth’ during the colonial period. Economic historian Raymond Goldsmith estimated India’s net annual commodity exports at 2.1% during 1879-1913 and 0.9% during 1921-1946.\textsuperscript{137} Thus Colonialism affected our ‘universe’ no less profoundly than, say, the Scientific or Industrial Revolution. It was an economic as well as a cultural intervention.\textsuperscript{138} Agriculture is the epitome of human intervention in nature; and therefore, it is also the epitome of politics of power over land and people, (i.e., \textit{rajaneeti}): in the history of India, British colonialism was its highest expression. The first decade of our study (1937-47) was engaged in the preparation of the transfer, on the midnight of 15 August 1947,\textsuperscript{139} of politics of power over land and people (\textit{rajaneeti}) to the \textit{prajatantra} of the Republic of India, so formalised, solemnised, adopted, and enacted on 26 January 1950 in response to the rhetoric of negotiations of the freedom struggle. Since then the \textit{prajatantra} (Republic of India) is bravely attempting to \textit{adapt} itself, as best as possible, to the conduct of its affairs with the aid of \textit{rajaneeti}. But unfortunately, \textit{rajaneeti}, i.e., ‘politics of power’, by definition, is reasonable and tolerant only up to a point, beyond that totally unreasonable and intolerant; on the other hand,

\textsuperscript{136} J.S. Kanwar, ‘Research on Soils, Water and Agronomy and Its Impact on the Development of Natural Resources’ in \textit{40 Years of Agricultural Research and Education in India}, ICAR, New Delhi, 1989, 129.

\textsuperscript{137} Alok Sheel, ‘Structural shifts in India’s BoP’, \textit{The Economic Times}, Tuesday 29 May 2007, 16.


\textsuperscript{139} As the writer and politician Andre Malraux suggested, Britain’s decision to get out of India was ‘the most significant fact of the century’. It removed three-quarters of King George VI’s subjects overnight, reduced Britain to a ‘third rate power’, and proved that the practice of European imperialism was no longer sustainable. -Patrick French, \textit{Liberty or Death, India’s Journey to Independence and Division}, HarperCollins Publishers India, 1997, xxvi.
prajatantra calls only for immense reservoir of reason and tolerance, because prajaneeti is freedom from unreasonableness and intolerance, i.e., freedom from fear and hate. This was the refrain of India’s freedom struggle and the Indian national movement since the 1920s, and its momentum continued in free India.

Mid-night, when the world slept, was perhaps the most appropriate hour for Politics of Power over Land and People, i.e., rajaneeti to sneak in to subordinate Politics of Rights over Land and People, i.e., prajaneeti.