The study of peasantry in the context of socio-economic developments in ancient India has remained almost a neglected field so far. In agrarian societies, the key figure in the basic subsistence economy is always the peasant.1 Surprisingly, no exclusive monograph on the peasant has appeared so far. There is a general denial on the part of the modern scholars to treat the peasants as an independent category. There is hardly any agreement even among sociologists and social anthropologists about the meaning attached to such terms as 'peasant society', 'peasant community', 'peasant culture', etc. At times, they recognise peasant society as a residual category, putting together all kinds of societies, which are neither manifestly 'tribal' nor explicitly 'industrial'.2 Some have even equated the peasantry with the rural society itself.3 Raymond Firth seems to accept this broader concept by


implying that the peasant category will include, in addition to the tillers of soil, all those who live by the various forms of labour which are associated with the community of tillers.¹ Eric Wolf defines peasants as rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that use the surplus both to maintain its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder among groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their goods and special services in turn.² Robert Redfield places the peasants in relational opposition to 'an elite of the manor, town or city' implying their low status in social hierarchy.³ T. Shanin, who uses the terms 'peasantry', 'peasant community', and 'peasant society' loosely, too views the relationship between the peasants and non-peasants as one between 'villagers' and 'non-villagers'.⁴ For Redfield, the latter group is 'an elite of the manor, town or city' whereas for Shanin, they are the outsiders who subject the peasants to domination. In his analysis of Russian peasantry, V.I. Lenin stratified it into kuluk,

¹ See Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India, pp. 11-12.
stredniak and bedniak, i.e., rich, middle, and poor peasants, respectively.\textsuperscript{1} This obvious cleavage within the peasantry undermines the idea of its being a homogeneous category and the peasants' subjection to domination by outsiders alone.

W.H. Moreland defines peasant as 'a man who, whatever the incidents of tenure may be, cultivates a holding entirely or mainly by his family labour'.\textsuperscript{2} An almost similar definition is given by Irfan Habib when he states that peasant is 'a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements and using the labour of his family'.\textsuperscript{3} Both of them ignore the factor of land control while defining the peasant. In terms of the control and use of land, the peasantry may be differentiated into the non-cultivating landowners, peasant proprietors, sharecroppers and landless labourers.\textsuperscript{4} The social organisation of agricultural production reflects a particular pattern of property rights. Broadly speaking, three main patterns of

\begin{enumerate}
\item W.H. Moreland, \textit{The Agrarian System of Moslem India}, Delhi, 1968, p. 3.
\end{enumerate}
productive organisation are found to exist. The first is based on hired labour, the second on family labour, and third on tenancy. But each category has many variants. For instance, the tenants and share-croppers are linked with the landowners by rights and obligations which create a wide range of variation. As such, the different modes of productive organisation lead to stratification on the basis of the extent of hired labour and the 'material wealth' employed in cultivation. The first category makes an extensive use of hired labour and has better agricultural implements. The second category uses mainly family labour but occasionally makes use of the hired labour, especially at the time of sowing and harvesting seasons. Outside help may also be used on the basis of exchange of mutual labour. The marginal peasants have not enough land even to absorb the whole of their family labour, and are, therefore, economically dependent on the sale of their labour to others to supplement their income from land. But they are not

1. Ibid., p. 31.
wholly dependent peasants. The last category is that of tenant cultivators who can further be differentiated into permanent and temporary tenants depending upon the nature of land tenure. Permanent tenants have more or less secure rights of occupancy whereas the temporary tenants do not possess such rights.

In India, the cleavage within the peasantry had developed at an early stage in the growth of agrarian economy. The 'Indus Culture' not only gave India its first cities in Harappa and Mohanjodaro, but also its first peasantry. The Indus civilisation marks a distinct shift towards the development of agriculture as a major provider of food in contrast to the early stage of food gathering.

1. Sometimes, under conditions of impoverishment, the peasants mortgage their small holdings for temporary usage and unable to reimburse the necessary sum on the expiration of the time agreed, lose it permanently. Deprived of land and occasionally of even implements of production, they are forced to seek employment on royal or private estates, and are reduced to mere tenants and hired labourers. See C.V. Vaidya, Epic India, Bombay, 1907, p. 219. Bongard Levin calls them 'the reserve force of the exploited groups'. See Mauryan India, New Delhi, 1985 p. 162.

2. André Béteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, p. 120.


4. The stage at which peasants originate within the society must naturally arrive only after agriculture is established as a major provider of food.
The urban civilisation was based on the appropriation of the surplus produced by the peasants.\textsuperscript{1} This appropriation of the surplus production created conditions for the emergence of a differentiated society, but later developments in agriculture differentiated the peasantry itself.\textsuperscript{2}

The use of iron in the upper Ganga plain, around 1000 B.C., caused rapid spread of the forest clearings. But in the freshly cleared ground, full of roots and hard soil, a very heavy plough was needed.\textsuperscript{3} The use of heavy ploughs implied masters working with the servile cultivators. The peasants were supplanted by men possessing wealth, particularly in the form of cattle or slaves, who came to control large stretches of land.\textsuperscript{4} A.B.Keith states that the peasants working in their own fields were being substituted by the big landlords cultivating their estates by means of

\begin{itemize}
  \item 2. Romila Thapar, on the basis of the absence of the taxation system and the voluntary transferring of the surplus, refuses to admit the existence of a peasant formation during the Vedic period; to her, the collection of taxes seems crucial to any peasant formation. See Presidential Address, AHS, \textit{Proc.IHC}, Varanasi, 1969, p. 5.
  \item 3. This makes intelligible the reference in the later-Vedic period and Brāhmana literature to ploughs drawn by six, eight or even twelve oxen. See \textit{Atharvaveda}, VI, 91. 1; \textit{Sat.Brah.}, VII, 2.2.6.
\end{itemize}
slaves.¹ The impression is corroborated by the testimony of the Jātakas where we frequently meet big brāhmaṇa landowners who had their fields cultivated by the slaves and day labourers.² We also come across the gahapatis in the early Pali texts—the wealthy landowners who cultivated their farms with the help of slaves and hired labourers.³ The big landowners also carried on a money-lending business which must have helped in the perpetuation of their control over other segments of the peasantry, i.e., the kassakas.⁴ Thus, the common peasants increasingly came to be subjected to the authority of the local superior class itself, a situation which indicates the exploitation of the peasants from 'within'. Those who possessed 'material wealth' and slave power came to constitute the upper strata of the peasantry.

1. Ibid., pp. 114-115.
3. Romila Thapar, Presidential Address, AHS, Proc.IHC, Varanasi, 1969, p. 6; R. Fick, The Social Organisation in North-East India, pp. 253, 305. During the time of Buddha, a major change in the agrarian structure was the emergence of large estates owned by individual kshatriya families. See Romila Thapar, Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations, Hyderabad, 1984, p. 43. Gahapatis are often mentioned in the inscriptions. See LL Nos. 193, 201, 202, 449, 450, 725, 1127, 1206, 1209, 1211, 1216, 1221, 1222, 1244, 1247-48, 1252, 1254-55, 1260, 1277, 1281, 1302.
During the Maurya period, waste lands were brought under cultivation through the State's initiative by colonising new areas and settling it with śūdra cultivators.\(^1\) It led to the creation of a new group of peasants. The *Arthaśāstra* refers to some independent śūdra peasants owning land, but they held it on a tenure which was not secure.\(^2\) In these newly colonized areas, the State had its farms (sītā) which were cultivated either directly by the State under the supervision of the sītādhyaksha or leased to the tenant-cultivators. They were, again, of two categories, i.e., the share-croppers (ardhasītikas) who employed their own capital and shared half of the produce; and the land labourers who were provided with all facilities by the State and received one-fourth or one-fifth share of the produce.\(^3\) Kautilya enjoins the king to grant revenue free land to certain brāhmaṇas.\(^4\) They did not cultivate it with their own physical labour. This admittedly created another category of landholders having superior rights over land.

Yājñavalkya refers to four hierarchical stages in agrarian economy, i.e., mahīpati, kṣetrasvāmi, kārṣaka, and the

\(^1\) AS\(^1\) \(*\) 3 \(\) 4. \(\), \(II\), \(1\).
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid., \(II\), \(24\).
\(^4\) Ibid., \(II\), \(2\).
sub-tenant.\textsuperscript{1} Brihaspati, however, introduced the term svāmi in place of the term kṣetrasvāmi, but makes it clear that the svāmi formed an intermediate stage between the rājā and the actual tiller of the soil.\textsuperscript{2} It may be suggested that the svāmi owned his position to the practice of leasing out land to temporary cultivators. He lived on the rent collected from the peasants who were even liable to penalties if they neglected cultivation.\textsuperscript{3} Thus, there existed different layers of peasantry.\textsuperscript{4} In the Ganga plains, the bulk of the population comprised peasant proprietors who owned agricultural implements and cultivated their fields mostly with the help of family labour.\textsuperscript{5}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Yāj., II, 158.
\item Brih., XIX, 54-55.
\item Yāj., II, 157-58 ; Brih. XIX, 53, 55.
\item E.J. Rapson (ed.), The Cambridge History of India, Vol. I, p. 428. Also see Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India, p. 12.
\end{enumerate}
II

Ashoka was, probably, the first Indian ruler to appreciate the importance of rural population. The significance of the peasantry was realised by him owing to the fact that the economy had changed from a pastoral to a predominantly agrarian one. Increasing dependence on land, as the largest single source of income to the State in the form of land revenue, placed the peasant in a new and important economic role. The reigning sovereigns began to show their concern for the security of the peasants. Baden Powell states that 'all the settled rulers had recognised that security to the cultivators means in the long run the best revenue.' There are many instances where the rulers are advised to levy just taxes on the peasants. Kauṭilya lays down that the State should protect the peasants from the molestation of oppressive fines, free labour and taxes. Again, we find that the *Arthaśāstra* also

3. For details, see Chapter on Land Revenue.
4. AS', II, 1.
enjoins remissions when the land is invaded by hostile force or by forest marauders or is afflicted with disease and famine.\(^1\) The king is also advised to advance seeds and other provisions during the times of natural calamity.\(^2\) In the Mahābhārata, there is a warning to the king to see that the peasants of the kingdom do not leave it because of oppressive taxation.\(^3\) Manu says that the king who oppresses his subjects is soon deprived of his kingdom.\(^4\) These statements of the law-givers seem to have been theoretical injunctions for the protection of the peasants from financial oppression. Such principles of taxation and advice to the rulers were not always faithfully followed by them and peasants were subjected to numerous taxes that severely undermined their condition. In the Rājatarāṇī, we find king Lalitāditya warning his successors not to leave with the cultivators of land more than what is necessary for their bare subsistence and the tillage of their fields. If they are allowed to keep more wealth, they would become strong enough to neglect the commands of the king.\(^5\)

\(^{1}\) Ibid.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., IV, 3.

\(^{3}\) \textit{Mbh.}, \textit{Śānti Parva}, 126.9 ; 137.

\(^{4}\) Manu, VII, 111-12.

\(^{5}\) M.A. Stein (tr.), Kalhana's \textit{Rājatarāṇī}, Vol. II, Delhi, 1961, p. 304.
There is a passage in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa which says that the vaishya is to be oppressed at will by the kshatriya.¹ The view expressed in the legal texts that the burden of taxation on the peasantry amounted normally to one-sixth of the produce had little reality behind it. In fact, the peasants were subjected to numerous taxes and obligations. The inscriptions clearly indicate that the fiscal burden on the peasants went on increasing from the Gupta period onwards.² It seems that in order to compensate the loss of revenue as a result of land grants, the State imposed new cesses on the peasants. The numerous privileges granted to the donees mentioned in the land charters reflect the burden of taxes and other obligations to which the peasants were subjected.

An important source of oppression seems to have been the billeting of royal officers and soldiers in the villages. In the Jātakas, we have instances of unjust and tyrannical exactions on the part of the king’s officers.³ Some Sātavāhana land grants record donations of land, which were exempted from the entrance of royal officers.⁴

¹. Ait.Brāh., VI, 29.
². For details, see Chapter on Land Revenue.
³. Jāt., V. 98. "Oppressed with taxes, the inhabitants lived in the forest like beasts with their wives and children. In the day the king’s people plundered, at night the thieves".

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Similarly, several Vākāṭaka land grants mention the term \textit{abhaṭachhatra-prāves'ya}, which has been explained as 'not to be entered by regular soldiers and umbrella-bearers'.² The restrictions imposed on the \textit{chāṭas} and \textit{bhāṭas} in the land grants show that they were probably in the habit of realising illegal taxes from the peasants for their own benefit.³ Yājñavalkya mentions them together with thieves and record-keepers (kāya-sthas).⁴ The cruelty and avarice of the \textit{chāṭas} and \textit{bhāṭas} perhaps account for the popular dislike for them.⁵ At one place, Bāṇa describes them as talking and laughing with the slaves and servants of the nobles after taking plenty of grain from the fields.⁶ At another place, he says that the poor grumbled at the cruelty and ill-treatment received at their hands.⁷ Similarly, in the play \textit{Mricchakatika}, a friend of the hero remarks in Prākrit that 'even the most daring and wicked, will not dare to go to a place where the \textit{chāṭas}, courtiers, etc., reside.'⁸

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1. \textit{Ep. Ind.}, XXII, No. 27, 1, 20; XXIII, No. 14, 11. 30-31; XXIV, No. 10, 1. 21; XXVI, No. 21, 1. 25; \textit{CII.}, III, No. 55, p. 238.
2. \textit{Ibid.}, XXII, p. 175.
4. \textit{Yāj.}, I, 335.
7. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 211.
It is, therefore, no wonder that the donees were protected from these people by a special clause of the land charters which sought to prohibit their entrance into the donated area.\(^1\)

The villagers had to pay forced contributions to the royal troops when they halted at or passed through the village.\(^2\) The practice may be compared to the tax called *senābhakta* in the *Arthasastra*.\(^3\) The villagers also had to furnish cattle in relays for transport.\(^4\) Moreover, they were under obligation to supply boiled rice, curd, vegetables, milk, fruits, etc., to the royal officers on tour.\(^5\) The practice of realising contributions, which were consumed locally by royal troops and officers, tended to set them up as another class of intermediaries, which further reduced the peasantry to a servile position.

There were several other obligations which the peasants had to fulfil. The term *utsaṅga*, according to Bhattasvāmin, referred to the offerings which were given by the

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1. It was a popular feeling among the Romans in the first century B.C. that the *publicans*, who were associated with tax-collection, were a nuisance and that it was the duty of every honest administrator to combat them. See Rostovtzeoff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, Vol. II, Oxford, 1941, p. 965.
2. *CII.*, III, No. 21, p. 98 fn.2.
inhabitants of the city and countryside on the occasion of some festive event such as the birth of a prince.\textsuperscript{1} Presents called paññākara were given to the king on the occasion of his coronation.\textsuperscript{2} Strabo writes that during the hair washing ceremony of the king, people vied with one another in making him rich presents.\textsuperscript{3} The Mahābhārata speaks of voluntary contributions (dakṣina) made by the people to the king for performing sacrifices for public welfare.\textsuperscript{4} All these offerings, literally voluntary, were really the tribute paid out of fear or tips for the acquirement of specific favours and could hardly differ from the bheṣ or nazrānā exacted from poor peasants in later times.\textsuperscript{5} In a rock inscription\textsuperscript{6} belonging to modern Hazaribagh district in Bihar, we find how the inhabitants of a village, unable to furnish the king of Magadha with avalagaka, approached a merchant who supplied the king’s requirements on their behalf.\textsuperscript{7} 

\begin{itemize}
  \item[2.] Richard Fick, The Social Organisation in North-East India, p. 115.
  \item[3.] Strabo, XV, 1. 69.
  \item[4.] Mbh., XIII, 61. 24.
  \item[6.] Ep. Ind., II, No. 27; VII, No. 6.
  \item[7.] The term avalagaka has been taken by Kielhorn to mean ‘presents’ or ‘supplies’. See U.N. Ghoshal, Hindu Revenue System, p. 308.
\end{itemize}

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The Mahābhārata authorises the needy and the distressed king to seize the wealth of persons other than ascetics and brāhmaṇas.\(^1\) It is easy to imagine the serious consequences which would follow from a strict enforcement of this privilege. Pranāyā or benevolence, referred to in the Vākāṭaka records\(^2\), is used in the Junagarh Rock Inscription as an emergency levy.\(^3\) Kielhorn explains it as a contribution mainly voluntary but which people felt constrained to make.\(^4\) Kautilya advises the king to beg benevolences when he finds himself in great financial trouble, and devotes a whole chapter to the manner in which emergency levy should be collected.\(^5\) Benevolence, he suggests, should be extracted from karshakas (cultivators) at the rate of one-third or one-fourth of the grain\(^6\), one-sixth of vañya\(^7\), cotton, wax, fabrics, barks of trees, hemp, wood, silk, medicinal herbs, sandalwood, flowers, fruits, vegetables, firewood, bamboos, fresh and dry

6. Manu does not allow a king, even in distress, to exact more than one-fourth of the crop. - X, 118.
7. According to Shāmaśāstry, vañya means 'forest produce' and according to Ganapati Sāstry, it means 'wild rice'.

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flesh, and one half of ivory and skins. The ‘pranaya’ was, beyond doubt, another handle given to oppression and avidity.\textsuperscript{1}

Another factor that undermined the position of the peasantry was the imposition of \textit{vishti}.\textsuperscript{2} It was a potential source of oppression.\textsuperscript{3} The Junagarh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman mentions that the Sudarsana lake was repaired with resources from the king’s own treasury without burdening the people, among other taxes, with \textit{vishti}.\textsuperscript{4} Similarly, in the \textit{Mahāvamsa}, which is assigned to about the fifth century A.D., a king is stated to have declined to make use of unpaid labour. It clearly indicates that \textit{vishti} was considered a burden on the people. But such examples were not widely emulated by the rulers. What this objectionable form of exaction could have been in the hands of unscrupulous rulers may be easily understood by comparing it with the working of its later counterpart ‘begar’. Kautilya, therefore, enjoins the king to protect agriculture from the molestation of oppressive \textit{vishti}.\textsuperscript{5} In the Epic period, no \textit{varṇa} was exempted from the compulsory labour. Even the brāhmaṇas were made to work if they did not follow

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Vishti} is all work or services which are exacted from any person who has not offered himself voluntarily.
\item \textit{Asī.}, II, 1.
\end{enumerate}
their own sacred profession. In the Maurya period, it covered dāsas and karmakaras (hired labourers). This labour was recruited by the supervisor (vīshṭibandhaka) and was paid. It is doubtful whether it was imposed on the free peasantry living in villages or not. But from the second century A.D., the practice seems to have been extended to all classes of subjects. Most of the law-givers of the period refer to forced labour imposed on the peasants.

By the time of the Guptas, the practice of vīshṭi had come to be firmly established. The land grants of the period show that the peasants had to render forced labour to the king. Forced labour assumed a wide magnitude in central India where it came to be known by the term sarva-visṭhi. The element of coercion and oppression must have

become stronger when the king's right to demand forced labour was transferred to the beneficiaries with almost undefined scope. The recipients of these grants could claim only customary taxes (samuchita), but there was no such limitation on the levy of forced labour. The beneficiaries would not fail to make wide and effective use of it, especially, in bringing barren land under cultivation.

The Vedic period witnessed the appearance of an embryonic village overlord, who had 'creatures led by noses' and kept the folk dependent upon him. In the Rigveda, he is referred to as grāmaṇī. In the later sources, he is known by a variety of terms, such as grāmabhojaka, grāmika, grāmadhipa. He has been referred to as grāmadhipati by Manu. Originally, perhaps, the grāmaṇi derived his right to the office through his descent from the founder of the

1. Ibid., XI, pp.80, 85, 174.
3. Lallanji Gopal, Economic Life of Northern India, Delhi, 1989, p.28.
4. Taittirīya Saṃhitā, II, 1.1.2, 1. 2.3.
5. See MacDonell and Keith, Vedic Index, s.v. 'grāmaṇi'.

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village. But from the time of the later law-books, i.e., from the end of the first millennium B.C., his appointment is documented as the king's representative in the village. He may have performed some sort of military function at a very early stage, but from the Maurya period onwards, his function was basically to help the state machinery in the collection of revenue from the village. Considering the strong tendency in all offices to become hereditary, the office of headman had probably acquired the hereditary element at a very early stage, and he began to personify one of the lower units of state administration.

We have clear evidence of the subjection of peasantry by the village headman in the Vedic period. With the increase in his powers, he began to assert his authority over the peasants more vigorously. In the Arthaśāstra, he is

1. Radharoman Mookerjee, *History and Incidents of Occupancy Rights*, Delhi, 1984, p. 30. Rhys Davids, however, is of the view that he was elected by the village council. See *Buddhist India*, pp. 25, 48. Also see AS., III, 10; K.P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, Bangalore, 1955, pp. 195, 197.


referred to as 'the master of the village'. Manu says that 'what must be given to the king by the village residents every day—food, clothes, fuel, etc., is to be collected by the village headman.' During the Gupta period, village headmen (grām-ādhipati-ayuktakas), while assuming semi-feudal character, were primarily concerned with their own gains by filling their own granaries. This must have increased the burden of taxation on the peasants. What is remarkable is that they could impose forced labour on peasant women to serve their own needs and comforts. Vātsyāyana says that the peasant women were compelled to do unpaid work of various kinds, such as filling up the granaries of the village headman, taking things in and out of his house, cleaning and decorating his residence, working in his fields, and spinning yarn of cotton, wool, flex, or hemp for his clothes. All this suggests that the peasants were being exploited by the village headman in every possible way.

The grants of villages to the donees affected the landed rights of the peasantry and increased the burden of taxation. The practice of land grants created a class of landed intermediaries between the king and the peasants.

1. AŚ., IV, 13; III. 10.
3. Vātsyāyana, Kāma., V. 5.5.
4. Ibid.
Being men on the spot, the donees could exploit the peasants more effectively.\(^1\) Initially, the donees were granted the right to land revenue and allied taxes only. But later on, when administrative and judicial rights were also transferred to them, they started asserting their superior rights in land. The peasants, in some cases, were reduced to the position of tenants-at-will.\(^2\) The artisans, who resided in these villages, held their plots of land and house-sites from the villagers in lieu of their services to them. But under the changed circumstances, they held their lands from the donees and rendered their services to them alone.\(^3\)

The rights in communal lands were also transferred to the donees. As the boundaries of most of the donated villages were left undefined, donees could take advantage of it to increase the land under their personal possession. Similarly, the right to pastures, water-reservoirs, etc., enabled them to tax the peasants further. The increase in the volume of taxes without corresponding rise in productivity and the ever growing rights of the donees in land not only subjected the peasantry to utmost economic

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1. The donees benefitted most from a wide range of taxes which they levied on the peasants at will. See Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, New Delhi, 1975, p. 27.
misery, but also sharpened the antagonism between the peasants and their exploiters.

How did the peasants react to their forced impoverishment? Our sources, both literary and epigraphic, provide no answer to it. There could be two possible forms of reaction. One was to leave the country which could be possible only in small kingdoms or near the territorial borders where it was feasible to migrate rapidly into another area under a different political control.¹ We are told that, on one occasion, the people of south Pañchāla fled to north Pañchāla because of oppressive taxation.² They could move to virgin areas and multiply production by founding new villages. But as the economic conditions and political organisation were basically the same everywhere, migration to new places did not help them in escaping the oppression of the rulers and beneficiaries. Moreover, they could not leave villages which were granted along with the inhabitants, for the beneficiaries had the legal authority to restrain them.³ Another possible reaction to oppressive

2. Divyāvandāna, pp. 435-37; Mbh., Vana Parva, I, 92.
3. The two spurious Copper-plates of Samudragupta indicate the possibility of the villagers oppressed with taxes migrating into tax-free villages. See CII., III, No. 60, pp. 256 ff.; Ep.Ind., XXV, No. 9.
conditions was to assert their land rights. The peasants were in actual possession of land, oxen and other agricultural implements. They could resist the increasing demands made by the beneficiaries. But we have no reference to such outbursts of peasant resistance during the period under review. The peasants in the donated areas were repeatedly asked to carry out the orders of the beneficiaries. The fact, that they were not permitted to arm themselves even in an emergency, must have acted as a serious check on peasant revolts. Probably, peasant discontent was contained by religious and ideological propaganda as well. Another significant factor which Eric Wolf points out is that the peasants did not possess the necessary base of material security to take the initiative to rebel. It seems that the peasants, pre-occupied with their struggle for existence, had become accustomed to accept uncomplainingly a subordinate position in society.

In Vincent. A. Smith’s view, the land revenue and other cesses imposed by the ancient as well as medieval rulers were in practice so heavy that they left the peasant

with a bare margin of his produce for his subsistence. "The government's share, it is true, was always limited theoretically, but, in practice, the State usually took all it could extort".\(^1\) While refuting Smith's impression, U.N. Ghoshal says that in so far as the ancient period is concerned, there is little, if any, positive evidence in favour of this statement.\(^2\) To substantiate his argument, he states that "the glimpses, which the observations of the foreign travellers furnished into the actual conditions of the people, generally indicate a happy and contented peasantry".\(^3\) But S.K. Maity has observed that as regards the material life of the common people, the Gupta period was not a golden age.\(^4\) D.N. Jha has also expressed the same view when he says that the taxes tended to increase in the Gupta period.\(^5\) Even during the subsequent periods, the peasants were far from happy and economically well-off.\(^6\)

In the villages, there lived various craftsmen who catered to the agricultural needs of the peasants. Pañini calls them grāmatakṣa.¹ They are also called by him as grāmaśilpin.² Patañjali has mentioned five categories of these craftsmen, namely, the potter, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the barber, and the weaver.³ The most important among them, from the point of village economy, was the blacksmith variously called as kammāra, lohākāra and lohavaniya.⁴ These ‘professional individuals’ were dependent on the free peasants, though they helped in maintaining the self-sufficient character of the villages.⁵ In a non-monetary rural set-up, they appear to have been bound to the peasants by jajmani ties.⁶ It required them to attend to the requirements of the cultivators and they were paid in kind, generally around the harvest season.⁷ The peasants had also a lot of societal

¹ Pañini, V, 4.95.
² Ibid., VI, 2.62.
⁴ LL. Nos. 1032, 1055; Ep.Ind., XXIV. p. 298.
⁷ P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Vol. III, p. 154. The carpenter, for example, received two percent of each peasant’s yield plus one to eight pounds of grain ‘for seed’, the blacksmith’s share was about 1.75 percent plus one to three pounds of ‘seed’, and so on. See D.D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of History, Bombay, 1990, pp. 337-338.
obligations towards the temples, priests, beggars, etc. They were required to contribute for religious ceremonies and festivities at the village level.\textsuperscript{1} The payments to village craftsmen in grain and other social obligations, which the peasants had to fulfil, further diluted their already meagre income. Moreover, the peasants had to face natural calamities like inadequate rain or excessive rainfall causing famine conditions in the country.\textsuperscript{2} Apart from famine, some other factors also occasionally aggravated scarcity and destroyed crops. Depredation of crops by pests called for serious attention.\textsuperscript{3} Rodents, moles, birds, and wild animals also damaged crops at the harvesting season.\textsuperscript{4} Pleurs and hunters rendered services to the peasants by the killing of birds and wild animals and, if the evidence

\begin{enumerate}
\item K.G. Gurumurthy, \textit{Indian Peasantry}, Delhi, 1982, p. 6.
\item Our sources do mention the occurrence of famines in the Ganga plains. Jaina tradition refers to the famine in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. See Romila Thapar, \textit{Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas}, p. 68. Evidence of such conditions may also be gathered from the two Mauryan inscriptions found at Sohagra and Mahasthan which specifically refer to the measures taken to ameliorate famine conditions in the Ganga plains. See Sel.Inscr., pp. 82, 85.
\item The \textit{Atharvaveda} mentions various methods for the extermination of vermin and insects - IV, 50, 52. Locust also destroyed crops. See \textit{Rām.}, VII, 7. 3 ; \textit{Mbh.}, VIII, 24. 22 ; A.N. Bose, \textit{Social and Rural Economy}, p. 107.
\item In the \textit{Rigveda}, reference is made to the peasants uttering loud cries to keep the birds away from destroying the growing corn. - X, 68. 1. To kill the wild animals that destroyed their crops, the peasants dug pitfalls, set stone-traps and planted snares. See M.A. Buch, \textit{Economic Life in Ancient India}, Vol. I, p. 100.
\end{enumerate}
of Megasthenes is to be believed, they received in the Mauryan times a subsidy of grain from the king for their beneficial work.\(^1\) A shadow figure made of straw was placed in the fields to frighten the birds causing destruction to crops.\(^2\) Then, there was a danger of fire when the reaped crops were stored on the threshing-floor.\(^3\) All these factors increased the hardships faced by the peasants.

IV

As for the social condition of the peasants, some significant changes were taking place in the traditional social hierarchy. In the later half of the first millennium B.C., village communities constituted a considerable proportion of population, primarily of free peasants.\(^4\) In the Ganga plains, the village communities were the most

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1. J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature*, p. 84.
3. We learn from the *Milinda Pañha* that the peasants kept pots of water with the object of putting out at once any spark of fire that might be kindled. See *SBE*, vol. XXXV, p. 67.
4. The term 'free peasant'denotes the cultivator who earns his or his family's subsistence by his own labour (including his family's labour and material sources). Though it does not exempt him from the obligation to part with his surplus produce in the form of taxes to the State, yet he retains complete control over the process of production on his land through his and his family's labour. See Karl Marx, *Das Capital*, Vol. III, Moscow, 1971, pp. 804, 807.
The free members of the village community belonged mainly to vaishya varṇa. In the Maurya period, however, the śūdras, who were the common helots of the upper three varṇas, began to draw closer to the vaishyas. The residents of the grāmas, set-up by the Mauryan rulers in newly-populated areas, were for the most part śūdra agriculturists (śūdrakārṣaka), as the free peasants would not prefer to shift from the settled villages. These new settlers had the status of temporary peasants. They were engaged by the State for a fixed period to till uncultivated land. As a rule, the śūdras possessed no cultivable plots of their own and worked as hired labourers in the fields.

2. Mbh., Sānti Parva, 60, 24-26, 92.2; Amarakosha, Vaisya-Varga, II, 9.6;
4. R.S. Sharma, Shudras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1958, p. 147.
5. In the Rigveda, the cultivator is referred to as kīnasa. See IV, 57.8. In the Apastamba Dharmasutra, kīnāśa is mentioned as a farm-worker who cultivated land plots. - II, 11. 28. 2. Asahāya, Nārada’s commentator, interprets the term kīnāśa as śūdra. - On Nārada, I, 181. That his labour was used in agriculture is borneout by the fact that the sudra is referred to in the Majjhima Nikāya as he who ‘works with the sickle and carries grain’. - II, 180. Romila Thapar has observed that śūdra was an all-embracing term which included the cultivator and the artisan and also the slave and hired labourer. See The Past and Prejudice, p. 56. But as cultivator, he may not own the land he cultivates and is, therefore, better
In the early centuries of the Christian era, the impact of Buddhism and Jainism and uncertain political conditions affected the established social order and led to the loosening of the strict subjection of the śūdras and to their transfer into share-croppers and dependent peasants. Several law-books show that land was rented out to the śūdra cultivators for half of the crop. This would suggest that the practice to lease land to the śūdras was becoming more common. In due course, they turned primary producers. B.N.S. Yadava presumes that the number of share-croppers must have exceeded that of free peasants in later period. In the absence of any statistical data, it is difficult to form an exact idea about the particular form of landholding predominating other forms at a given time and in a particular region due to uneven growth of land rights. But with the passage of time, the śūdra cultivators had certainly consolidated their social position by establishing

\[\text{described as ploughman working for a wage and dependent on the owner. See B.N.S. Yadava, 'The Account of the Kali Age and Social Transition', IHR, vol. V, Nos. 1 & 2, New Delhi, 1978-79, pp. 37-38.}\]


2. Manu, IV, 253; Vishṇu, LVII, 16, Yāj., 1. 166.


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permanent possession over land.  

The right of the śūdras to property is recognised both in the Manusmṛiti and the Mahābhārata.  

Manu says that the śūdra might bequeath his property in equal shares among his sons.  

Bṛhaspati prescribes severe corporal punishment for the śūdra who acts as a leader in boundary disputes relating to fields, which indirectly suggests that such śūdras had acquired some rights in land.  

Hiuen-Tsang describes the śūdra (shu-ti-lo) as agriculturist.  

A land charter from the middle Ganga plain, belonging to the 6th century A.D., lays down that the grant should be protected from the hands of the śūdras, as can be inferred from the phrase-śūdrakare(a)d - rakṣaṇaḥ.  

As usual, the donor instructs his descendants as well as others not to interfere with or disturb the beneficiary, but what is significant is that he also points out the necessity of protecting the grant from the śūdras.  

The rise of the śūdras from the servile position to that of the agriculturists is a matter of great consequence.  

2. Mbh., XIII, 47. 56.  
As the distinction between the vaishya agriculturists and the sudra agriculturists began to grow hazy, the well-to-do peasants turned to trade. J.D.M. Derrett seems to be quite right in his assumption that the original varṇa duty of agriculture was no longer associated with the vaishya who were now looked upon chiefly as traders.¹ It may be one of the reasons for the popularity of Jainism among the vaishyas.² On the other hand, it is equally important to note that general contempt for manual labour and the negative influence of Buddhism and Jainism, where the idea of non-violence had entered into all kinds of activities, sometimes to an absurd degree, must have had some effect in making the social position of the peasants very low.³ The communities that continued to depend upon agriculture were degraded from the vaishya to the sudra status.⁴

The economy in the Ganga plains was primarily based on agriculture. But the peasants, who sustained that economy through direct labour, were not economically well-off. The

³ G.L. Adhya, Early Indian Economics, Delhi, 1966, pp. 44-45.
increasing burden of taxation, forced labour, extra demands of the state functionaries as well as the donees, various societal obligations, etc.,-- all these contributed to the affliction and impoverishment of the 'real producers of the material wealth'.