The paramount concern and sympathy which Moreland had for the Indian peasant, who made up about three quarters of the Indian population, is reflected clearly in his views interspersed in his various works and articles. As Director of Agriculture and Land Records for a long period of twelve years, Moreland had ample opportunities to acquaint himself with the Indian peasant. As pointed out by Sir Edward D. Maclagan, "Those who knew Mr. Moreland might rest assured that he had made the very best use possible of those opportunities (and that) .... he was the best authority on the peasants of India and on the history which dealt with them".[1] Moreland maintained that although India was and always had been a peasant-country, yet "the peasant is a somewhat shadowy figure in the background; the need is to bring him forward to his proper position, nearer the centre of the stage, to give him a share of the limelight alongside the captains of war, industry and administration".[2] However, the Indian peasant according to Moreland, "is no modern phenomenon, and, as far as we can penetrate into the past, we get glimpses of him very much as he is now. We see a man living in a village alongwith others like him, cultivating a small portion of its land wholly or mainly by the labour of his family, responsible for the management and finance of his undertaking, bearing the brunt of unfavourable seasons, getting the worst of the market, whether he buys or sells, plagued by money-lenders and tax-collectors, living hard and apt to submit to hard living as inevitable, but withal by far the most important person in the country. An aphorism current in the

fourteenth century described peasants and soldiers as "the two arms of the Kingdom", and, broadly speaking, that is true to-day also.[3] This was the position and plight of the Indian peasant as understood and summarised by Moreland.

Moreland's study of the Indian peasant presents a consistently humane approach with strong under-currents of sympathy for the Indian peasant, despite the fact that for Moreland too a much better fate awaited the Indian peasant in the benevolent fold of Pax Britannica. As early as 1904 when his first work went to the press he strongly believed that "the welfare of the cultivator may be affected for good or for evil by the actions of two distinct classes; the officials with whom he has to deal and the landholders (or their subordinates) under whom he holds his land".[4] He even went to the extent of stating that if the Kingdom is poor, the immediate cause was the poverty of the peasants.[5] He further argued that, the Indian peasant of today was in great measure the product of centuries of oppression in the past.[6] In fact Moreland found that the Indian peasants were neither "placid nor contended .... and, like the rest of us, they have their ideals of a better life; but they have also what is the fashion just now to call an inhibition, which prevents those ideals from being translated into action, and the question is how this inhibition has come into existence".[7] Moreland disagreed with the physical and physiological theories which attributed the peculiarities of the peasants' mentality to the Indian climate and

his diet. He suggested that "the main cause of the distinctive mentality of Indian peasants is to be found in the human environment, in the regime to which they have been subjected during the historical period. A survey of that regime shows that it was precisely of the kind which an expert psychologist might prescribe in order to produce the mentality which now exists. It enforced and stereotyped a very low standard of living; it penalized all enterprise, it denied all reward to the peasants, and it offered rewards of almost unbounded magnitude to the men who could exploit the peasants with success".[8]

Analysing the operation of this oppressive regime through the centuries, Moreland pointed out that in the Hindu and Muslim periods the peasants were bound by the duty to till the soil and pay a share of their produce to the State. Under the Dharma or the Hindu Sacred Law, it was the performance of these two fold duties which entitled the peasant to expect the King's protection, and "failure to perform it involved the sin of rebellion, and, apart from spiritual consequences, could be punished in this world by eviction from the land or otherwise".[9] The idea that cultivation was a duty to God and to the State, and not a right to which the peasant was entitled persisted right into the nineteenth century. Moreland found the signs which indicated that, the King's share tended to increase as time went on, and at any rate it came very near the danger point, so that it left the peasant practically nothing but a bare subsistence.

During the greater part of the Muslim rule in India, "a Kingdom had three essential constituents, the Sovereign who ruled it, the Army which supported the throne and the Peasantry which paid for both".[10] Moreland pointed out that "the religious law of the Muslim

conquerors recognised, if it did not formally prescribe, a regime of rack-renting". [11] Under that law the conqueror was free to dispossess unbelievers and distribute their land among his Muslim followers, but if the unbelievers were left in possession, "as was done in India, then the idea was that the profits of agriculture should ensure to Muslims and not to Hindus". [12] In fact some Muslim conquerors in practice, laid increased emphasis on the idea that failure to pay the revenue was an act of open rebellion, so that "in the seventeenth century the sale of a defaulter's wife and children, as rebels, and consequently slaves, was a recognised process for the recovery of arrears due while failure to cultivate sufficient land was punishable with flogging". [13] The only limit recognised by Muslim jurists was that of driving the cultivators of the land, and according to Moreland, that, in practice meant rack-renting for "so long as the peasants did not rebel or abscond, it was lawful to take all they could be made to pay". [14] Thus in India religion of the rulers also sided the rack-renters.

Moreland indicated that the glowing accounts of the work of such few agrarian reformers as Sher Shah, Akbar, Todar Mal and Murshid Quli Khan, who tried to treat the peasants equitably, and confine the

[12] Ibid., p. 331.
[13] W.H. Moreland, "Peasants, Landholders And The State", in Modern India ed. by Sir John Cumming, p. 153. According to Moreland, "This conception of the peasant's duty persisted right up to the establishment of British rule, and even at the opening of the present century it was familiar in some sparsely populated states: its disappearance from the greater part of this country has resulted almost entirely from the growth of population during the nineteenth century, and the consequent emergence of competition for cultivable land".
claim on them within reasonable limits, should not mislead the ordinary reader to conclude that care for the peasant was a feature of the period as a whole. This was certainly not the case. Measured either by time or by area - these prominent events are mere episodes; when you reckon them up they account altogether for perhaps less than fifty years out of the six centuries of Muslim rule; and for the great bulk of the period the fortunes of the peasants were in the hands, not of great Kings or sagacious ministers, but of a multitude of intermediaries, each man intent only on filling his pockets, and precluded, from doing anything in the way of permanent improvement. These intermediaries according to Moreland were the key to the agrarian history of the period. Prominent amongst them were the revenue-assignee and the revenue farmer, both of whom were bound by the conditions of their tenure to squeeze the country dry. In fact, the assignees who held more than three quarters of the country must be regarded as the real masters of the peasants. It were the peasants who satisfied the constant and urgent need of money of the ruling classes and their intense desire to accumulate large fortunes. However, owing to the uncertainty of tenure and keen struggle for productive assignments, "to invest capital, or leave resources in the peasants' pockets, would have merely been to invite other claimants to come forward. The only prudent course was to squeeze your assignment dry, and then to set to work to get transferred to one which still held a little money. That was the ordinary state of affairs."

[15] W.H. Moreland, "The Indian Peasant In History", The Near East and India, p. 36b. This statement of Moreland is obviously open to debate specially keeping in view the agrarian reforms of Ala-ud-din Khilji and the Tughlugs.
affairs throughout the Muslim period". [16] These conditions applied to the revenue farmers also, so that Moreland pointed out, that there was little to choose between the farmer and the assignee. In the Hindu States in the north and central India, conditions were sometimes better, because when oppression became intolerable the peasants sometimes sought refuge there. In the South, on the other hand, farming prevailed in its worst possible form, a system, which made rack-renting inevitable. Besides Moreland indicated that apart from the land-revenue, "supplementary exactions must have operated to produce a clean sweep of everything the peasants were known to have in their possession. The regime under which the bulk of the Indian peasants lived during six centuries may be described briefly as rack-renting, under the whip".[17]

The peasant did not derive much assistance from him environment also. In calamities he was ordinarily left to bear the burden unassisted, except that he might secure a reduction in the land


revenue.[18] Also, "he did not enjoy that security of tenure which is the first condition of successful peasant farming". [19] He obtained very little "active help from the other classes of the community; he was placed at a disadvantage in his relations with the market, and any tendency which may have existed towards enterprise was sterilized by nature of the Administration.[20]

Even Pelsaert, the Dutch factor at Agra during Jahangir's reign, observed that "the land would give a plentiful, or even an extraordinary yield, if the peasants were not so cruelly and pitilessly oppressed; for villages which, owing to some small shortage of produce, are unable to pay the full amount of the revenue-farm, are made prize, so to speak, by their masters or governors, and wives and children sold, on the pretext of a charge of rebellion. Some peasants abscond to escape their tyranny, and take refuge with rajas who are in


[19] W.H. Moreland, India At The Death of Akbar, An Economic Study, Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi, 1962, Reprint, p. 120. See Also P.J. Marshall, The New Cambridge History of India, II.2, Bengal The British Bridgehead - Eastern India 1740-1828, Orient Longman, Calcutta, 1987. p. 137. The contemporary British opinion believed that the peasant could now till his land" With a security that was entirely new, With the blessing of security, they could prosper as never before.

rebellion, and consequently the fields lie empty and unsown, and grown into wilderness. Such oppression is exceedingly widespread in this country".[21] Bernier who stayed in the Mughal empire from 1656 to 1658, also gave a melancholy description of the state of the peasantry, thus "Even a considerable portion of the good land remains untitled from want of labourers; many of whom perish in consequence of the bad treatment they experience from the governors. These poor people, when incapable of discharging the demands of their rapacious lords, are not only deprived of the means of subsistence, but are bereft of their children, who are carried away as slaves. Thus it happens that many of the peasantry, driven to despair by so execrable a tyranny, abandon the country, and seek a more tolerable mode of existence either in the towns or in the camps. Sometimes they fly to the territories of a Raja, because they find less oppression and are allowed a greater degree of comfort".[22] Bernier also observed that "the ground is seldom tilled except under compulsion and no person is willing to or able to repair the ditches and canals; the whole country is badly cultivated, and a great part is rendered unproductive for want of irrigation ..... No adequate idea can be conveyed of the suffering of the people. The cudgel and the whip counsel them to incessant labours for the benefit of


others". [23] Tavernier also, who travelled in India at intervals between 1640 and 1660, wrote that in the Mughal Empire, the peasants "are reduced to great poverty because if the governors become aware that they possess any property, they seize it straight away by its right or by force. You may see in India whole provinces like deserts, from where the peasants have fled on account of the oppression of the Governors". [24]

The administrative system, therefore deprived the peasants of the natural incentive to energy; because they could not hope to retain any material proportion of an increase in their income; men of ability "were discouraged from producing, and attracted by the very great prizes to be won in the struggle for distribution; it was better to be a peon than a peasant". [25]

Such a regime not only rendered impossible any constructive policy of development, but under it there was no chance of a rise in the peasant's standard of living also. "No peasant could dare to be seen spending money for that would mean increased demands by his masters. It was much better to bury money than to spend it". [26] According to Moreland, under such conditions, the life of a peasant had very few attractions, so that "It was much better to be a parasite than a producer; the parasite carried the whip, the producer must expect to feel it". [27] It was thus indisputable "that such a regime, prolonged

[23] Francois Bernier, Travels In the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668, pp. 200-238
[27] Ibid., p. 394
through the centuries, would of itself suffice to produce the type of peasant, which the earliest British administrators found in India". [28] The cultivators never dispaired their liability to pay revenue, and the only question for them was its amount. The cultivator went on cultivating and paying revenue, but "when life became intolerable, owing to the want of security or to the excessive demands, he left the village and either took land else where or started life afresh as a robber". [29]

Moreland indicated that under the British, growth in population and establishment of internal peace was followed by the rapid extension of cultivation. He pointed out that "by the middle of the nineteenth century competition for land became so acute that the peasants were offering rents upto, or even in excess of the Ricardian standard, rents which would not leave them more than a bare subsistence, or even that, while landholders were rapidly tending to regard such rents as their reasonable dues". [30] Consequently a series of Tenancy Acts were passed by which the landholders power of eviction was curtailed and the enhancement of rents was limited. Under the British rule the whip was soon discarded. Even the share of the produce surrendered by the peasant was much smaller than it was in the Muslim times, and "from an outside figure of one-fifth down to one-tenth or less, as against one-half or one third". [31] Thus while, "The standards of the Muslim period left the peasant practically nothing for either 'better farming' or 'better living',... the standards now in force leave ordinarily a substantial margin at the disposal of the peasant". [32]

[31] Ibid., p. 160.
However, Moreland indicated that the practise of rack-renting, though condemned formally had still not entirely disappeared. Yet, Moreland pointed out that while, "It would not be true to claim that oppression no longer exists, but it may fairly be said that now, for the first time for six centuries, and possibly for sixteen, the peasants have been given a chance of lifting up their heads".[33]

Moreland was practical enough to realise that for India, "Whatever hopes for the future may be based on the prospect of industrial developments, the fact remains that, for the present and for some time to come, the great bulk of the national income must be drawn from the soil".[34] Thus, according to Moreland, the question of the peasants' efficiency or inefficiency was one of practical and pressing importance, since it governed the rate of progress in almost every field of national activity. However, the towns were led by long experience to consider cheap food as the natural state of things, and to judge the peasants efficiency primarily by the prices which they had to pay. In fact, Moreland found that the distinctive mental attitude, that the peasant existed merely to provide cheap food for a small minority of the people still survived. In other words, the towns were fed by the country below cost and Moreland found reasons for this development "in the indigenous revenue system as it was worked by successive Moslem dynasties; the State claimed as its revenue a very large share, sometimes as much as one-half of the gross produce of the soil, and the enforced marketing of this proportion ensured abundant and cheap supplies for the towns, while the peasants had often to surrender more than they could really afford".[35] Even the early European visitors to India were struck by the poverty of the peasants and one of them observed that the peasants "are so miserable that for a penny they would endure to be whipped, and they eat so little that it seemed they

[34] W.H. Moreland, "The Indian Peasant And His Critics", Edinburgh Review, p. 246.
[35] Ibid., p. 247.
live by the air".[36]

However, Moreland found that the three-fold policy of development initiated under Lord Curzon, comprising "the co-operative movement, the systematic extension of irrigation and the application of science to the peasants' business was wholly favourable and had in fact, opened a new era for the Indian peasant. Thus while "the peasant is still a pessimist, but the idea that things may possibly be better has gained some ground". Further the old low level of prices, resulting from the oppressive revenue-system of the Muslim period, was gradually raised with the entry of India into the world markets under the British, so that now the peasant or middleman could count on receiving the value which the world thought fair, instead of the value which Indian urban tradition regarded as sufficient.[37] Highlighting the measures adopted by the British government, Moreland indicated that under the constructive agricultural policy, "The object of the State is to secure that the cultivator shall have the freest scope for his energies, together with access on the easiest terms to such knowledge as he requires, and to the requisite supplies of all the factors of agricultural production".[38] Thus the Irrigation, Co-operative, Civil Veterinary and Agricultural Departments had attained significant results in the promotion of this policy. The impact on the peasants had been of still greater importance. "The co-operator is distinguished from the unorganised peasant by a steadily growing breadth of the vision, by a readiness to consider new ideas and - for good cause shown - to depart from ancient custom, and by a higher level of individual and social manner".[39]

[39] Ibid., p. 353.
Moreland regretted that despite the sound judgement and experience in agricultural operations of the Indian peasants, they lacked productive energy as a whole and did not have that "versatile energy which is quick to profit by every new feature in the environment".[40] In fact, "The national income would be very much greater than it is, if Indian peasants in the mass had possessed qualities of let us say, successful Australian or Canadian farmers. The rise in prices would then have produced its full effect on standards of farming and of living. The co-operative movement would have been utilized to reduce the share intercepted by middlemen .... Obstructive customs would have been altered, and the legislatures would have been compelled to modify injurious laws. The farmers, in a word, would have taken charge of the situation, and would have turned it to their own advantage".[41] According to Moreland, the Indian peasant had failed to turn this opportunity to best account, chiefly because of his own defects and qualities. This was the diagnosis of the case of the Indian peasant according to Moreland. It was not that "the peasantry as a whole were originally deficient in productive energy; but the evidence on record justifies the statement that the causes which are known to have operated during the long period of Moslem rule would have sufficed to reduce a normally energetic peasantry to the condition which now exists".[42] Yet the fact that agriculture revived rapidly on the establishment of British rule proved that productive energy in the peasant was not dead "though unquestionably it was maimed and bruised". Thus, Moreland's inference was that the Indian peasant was worth saving. His suggestion was "to take the peasant as he is, make the best of him, and lead him to develop that quality of productive energy which the welfare of the country most requires".[43] In order to make the peasant


[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., p. 257.

[43] Ibid., p. 256.
conscious of the existing opportunities, Moreland pointed to the need for adult mass-education and compact and convenient holdings. Moreland was optimistic when he wrote, that though the mind of the Indian peasant "is still dominated by the tradition, based on centuries of oppression, that productive effort is of no avail; but if the force of that tradition can once be broken, there are grounds for hoping that he will be able and willing to play his part in providing the country with the income which it needs".[44] Thus the spread of the co-operative movement was particularly found to furnish a direct boost to the peasants' productive energy. Further Moreland believed that since the potential of Universities was so great, hence they should step forward "to ensure that the mass of students shall have opportunities of acquiring in the ordinary courses something like a just appreciation of the peasants' position in the State, of his needs, his limitations and his capacities,.... India is, and always has been a peasant country: to exhibit this basic fact and develop its implications is the best service which Universities can render to the cause of truth, and also of the country".[45] In fact, Moreland's optimism for the betterment of the Indian peasant has not gone unfulfilled, keeping in view the countrywide network of co-operative societies and banks, the establishment of Agricultural Universities and the legislation of independent India to ban Zamindari, the curse of which was evident in British India as well, and the overall improvement in the position enjoyed by the Indian peasant in the present times.