Chapter 4
India’s Agrarian Society and the Peasant Question

Reflections on rural society are as old as rural society itself and shrewd observations on various aspects of rural life have been available for a long time. However, in the case of India, Desai thinks (1979a:2), “whatever studies have been made of the rural life are spasmodic, one-sided, sectional and mostly cursory.” In fact, it was A.R. Desai who was one of the pioneers in attempting a systematic study of rural society in all its aspects including “its life processes in their movement and further in their interconnections” (ibid). As S.P. Punalekar (1997: 80) elaborated, Desai concentrated on the problems of the rural poor, and tried to locate the problems in a larger historical-philosophical perspective. He “attempted to uncover the intrinsic political agenda of the ruling class and the state apparatus behind the changing strategies of rural development in the name of poverty alleviation or empowerment of the poor” (ibid).

India is a predominantly agrarian country where agricultural economy forms the material basis of life for a vast mass of the population. Not only so, it also determines their social organisations as well as moulds their psychological and ideological consciousness. According to Desai (2003: 3) “the existing rural society has become a veritable mosaic of various types of rural societies and hence reveals a diversified cultural pattern” which “has transformed it into a veritable museum of different and even conflicting cults and ideologies.” Rural India is today no longer a mere raw material producing hinterland but a vital part of Indian society and economy where major efforts are underway to overhaul the very productive base as well as its ideological and institutional superstructure. The great paradox of rural India is that, “In spite of the amazingly rich natural resources of India, its fertile and varied soil, its mineral treasures, its enormous population, the rural economy of India is on the brink
of collapse, its agrarian population in the grip of poverty and misery, its agriculture deteriorating at a fearful rate" (Desai 1979a: 62).

For the scholars, says Desai (1979b: XIII), "the rural population was treated as traditional, to be modernised by the new rulers in consonance with their major assumptions of 'development'" in independent India. Seen from this light, the role and activities of the peasantry were regarded as "dysfunctional, anomic, and disintegrative phenomena, obstructing the rapid and smooth development of the capitalist path since independence" (ibid). Thus, the peasant question must be understood against the impact of the spread of capitalism with its emphasis on production for profit and transformation of land from a means of subsistence to commodity. Within the scheme of worldwide spread of capitalism, British colonialism sabotaged the capitalist development of India—it perpetuated and even accentuated "the agrarian character of India since British capitalism, for its home industries," (Desai 1979a: 65) needed enormous quantities of cheap raw materials. Hence, India had to be "perpetuated as a reservoir of industrial raw materials, as 'an agrarian appendage of British industries'" (ibid).

In this context it will be relevant to have a brief look into the scholarly attitude and outlook to life of the Indian peasantry. For instance, Eric Stokes (1989: 311) identifies the peasantry as "the patient, humble, silent millions" while being fully aware that if their material well-being was not satisfied, if deep-seated discontent among them was allowed to persist then "the religious fanatic or political agitator would be able to carry a superficial nationalist movement down to the core of society" (ibid: 316). Barrington Moore Jr. perceives the Indian peasant as docile and lacking in revolutionary spirit. He attributes this to the village social structure which was "highly fragmented society composed of many races, religions and languages" (Moore Jr. 1966: 383) which he thought had remained relatively unchanged over time, especially the caste structure and the rules regulating social intercourse between castes. All these had an inbuilt
mechanism to enforce hierarchical submission of the peasant and thereby weaken his rebellious impulses. This was a feature of pre-British rural India and to Moore (ibid) indicates this fragmentation to be a “barrier to widespread rebellion.” But between the Battle of Plassey of 1757 and the Revolt of 1857, Moore records a number of peasant outbreaks where “the fragmentation of the Indian village is evidently not in all circumstances a barrier to subversion” (ibid: 380). Thus, Moore concludes (ibid), on the basis of peasant outbursts over the last two hundred years till Indian independence that “Indian peasants had very definite ideas about just and unjust rule, that economic grievances could drive even this supposedly docile population to rebellion on a local scale...” He continues that economic deterioration by slow degrees can become accepted by victims as part of the normal situation especially when no alternative is clearly visible. On the contrary, sudden impositions and demands which threaten or break accepted rules and customs can lead to outbursts—“even the traditionally docile Indian peasants struck en masse and raised the specter of agrarian revolt over much of Bengal in the 1860s when English overlords tried to force them to grow indigo at starvation prices...” (ibid: 474).

It should be remembered that as Marx, Engels and Lenin had identified ‘economic exploitation’, ‘class antagonism/conflict’ and ‘alienation’ as the main preconditions and sources of revolutionary transformation, so they had “all found the exploited peasantry a suitable ally of the working class” (Dhanagare 1983: 3). Marx had noted (1977: 492) as early as in 1853 that the Indian peasantry “had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties...with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events,...We must not forget that this undignified, stagnant, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbound forces of destruction...” Desai, no doubt, was influenced by such observation and says (1979b: XII), it should be borne in mind that contrary to the assumptions of the Indian peasants being
“passive, fatalistic, docile, unresisting and bogged down in the quagmire of superstitions and other-worldly fantasies... the Indian rural scene during the entire British period and thereafter, has been bristling with protests, revolts, and even large-scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages and lasting for years.”

Dhanagare (1983: 217) also is of the opinion that there is conclusive evidence that injustice and exploitation had definitely led the peasant to “burst through and a variety of peasant movements developed, particularly between 1920 and 1950...” He further argues, that the peasant movements had mostly been fragmented, regional or localised but he attributes that feature more to broader political forces at regional and national levels than to “any inherent ‘passivity’ of the Indian peasant or the peculiar village social structure as Moore suggests” (ibid).

Kathleen Gough (1974) is another scholar who strongly objected to the thesis of ‘docility’ of the Indian peasantry. In her opinion (ibid: 1391), “Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings, reaching back at least to the initial British conquest and the last decades of Mughal government.” Thus, Gough thinks, contrary to the opinions of Moore and Stokes, that the peasants were sufficiently militant in pre-British period to organise uprisings and struggles of their own. During British period Gough sees (ibid: 1392) the mutiny of 1857 as one movement “widely backed by the peasantry.” Like Dhanagare, Gough also argues (ibid) that limitations of peasant revolts in India are more attributable to broader political forces at provincial and national levels than to caste system or peculiar village social structure. She cites the examples (ibid) of E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Irfan Habib who had argued that in many cases the caste system had provided the peasants the framework and medium of organisation. She concludes (ibid: 1405) that “the uprisings were responses to relative deprivation of unusually severe character, always economic, and often also involving physical brutality or ethnic persecution.” The extensive
participation of the rural masses in the national-liberation struggle, the frenzy of communalism since the pre-independence days and numerous castes, provincial, linguistic, religious and other forms of tensions, antagonisms and conflicts prove that rural India is no longer inert, isolated and apathetic. Hence, "the seething cauldron of rural life is neither to be treated as a passive, quiet backpool of urban society nor to be treated as an auxiliary appendage of the dazzling metropolis." (Desai 1979a:1–2). No longer a part of colonial society and economy, it has to be studied for its own magnitude and significance.

However, the agrarian society of India, like any other post-colonial counterpart, is distinct from the agrarian sectors of western developed capitalist countries. Desai cautions (1965:1453) that one should not forget that "the colonial and semi-colonial Asiatic countries...were deliberately kept agrarian and underdeveloped by the European rulers." Not only was India's industrial development kept chained to the requirements of colonial economy but foreign rule also "...created an indent on the agrarian social structure which disfigured it and made these countries a wild, agrarian hinterland of foreign industry and foreign capitalist organisations and thus brought them into the vortex of modern economic relations without allowing the consequences of these trends to mature in the form of a fully industrialized society, with the agrarian sector as a healthy but subordinate part" (ibid: 1453). Hence, the agrarian sector is not in the pre-capitalist, underdeveloped feudal stage, lagging behind the developed countries in terms of time. On the contrary, they "are in a qualitatively different phase" (ibid: 1454) whereby adoption of the West European model of industrial development will progressively enhance the crises of agriculture.

A brief glimpse into the pre-colonial and colonial past is necessary in order to comprehend the present state of acute crisis in Indian agriculture and the life of the agrarian people. In identifying the pre-colonial past, especially in the sphere of village economy, Desai has been profoundly influenced by Marx.
In the opinion of the latter (1977: 491–92), Indian rural life was characterised by 
“...since the remotest times, a social system of particular features—the so-called village-system, which gave to each of these small unions their independent organization and distinct life...Those family communities were based on domestic industry, in that peculiar combination of hand-weaving, hand-spinning and hand-tilling agriculture which gave them self-supporting power.” The same thesis we find in the Capital (1986, 1: 337) where Marx says that these village communities were “based on possession in common of the land...each forms a compact whole producing all it requires.” On the eve of British conquest of India the rural society was composed of a multitude of villages, each living an almost independent, atomistic and self-sufficient socio-economic existence. Says Desai, “It stood impregnable in face of all foreign invasions, dynastic changes, all violent territorial shiftings in inter-state struggles” (1981: 7). Political upheavals and changes did not touch the atomistic village-system, though according to an old official report of the British House of Commons on Indian affairs, “the villages themselves have been sometimes injured, and even desolated by war, famine and disease...” (Marx 1977: 491-92). But, “the structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the stormclouds of the political sky” (Marx 1986, 1: 338–39). Hence, economically the villages remained self-sufficient where, as Marx had observed (ibid: 337), “the chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity.” Desai reiterates that (1981: 9–10) production was for consumption where “the entire produce was almost locally consumed by the peasant and non-peasant village population...” Hence, “economically, the village was predominantly autarchic” (ibid: 11).

As Engels had written to Marx in June 1853 (Palme-Dutt 1997: 84), “The key to the whole East is the absence of private property in land.” Engels had then elaborated in another letter to Marx on June 6, 1853 (ibid: 85) that perhaps “...the reason lies principally in the climate, combined with the
conditions of the soil... Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of cultivation and this is the concern either of the communes, the Provinces or the Central Government. R. Palme-Dutt (ibid) also supports this observation, “The conditions of cultivation were not compatible with private property in land and so arose the typical ‘Asiatic Economy’ of the remains of primitive communism in the village system below, and the despotic Central Government above, in charge of irrigation and public works, alongside war and plunder.” This thesis, however, has been debated and contested by other scholars.

D. Chattopadhyaya (Desai 2003: 160) is of the view that “private ownership of land had not been a prominent feature of the traditional agrarian India.” He continues that there was a system of collective ownership as an alternative to crown-property—“apart from the actual tillers of the soil, there were craftsmen and others in the village communities; the land and the village (bhumi ksetrada) belonged to them all, jointly” (ibid: 162). This thesis was also supported by western scholars like Wilks, Campbell, Maine, etc., (Desai 2003:156) who “concluded that the traditional Indian village communities, like the Marks or Townships of early Europe as studied by von Maurer, exercised joint ownership over land.”

This view, however, has been challenged by other scholars. According to D.D. Kosambi (ibid: 149) “The question ‘who owns the land?’ is difficult to answer because ‘ownership had totally different meanings under Indian feudalism and the European bourgeois or proto-bourgeois mode.’ For instance, tribal concept of land was as ‘territory’ and not ‘property’ to be held in common by the tribe whose symbol and expression was the chief. Again, “the lumberdars held responsible for payment of taxes, soon found it possible to claim ownership rights of the new type, though they had only been representatives of the commune” (ibid). Hence, it is apparent that land in pre-British India was not a commodity, though soon to become under colonial institutional structure. According to Bula Bhadra (1989: 23), Kosambi had also
discovered the growth and prevalence of commodity production, trade and private landed property which are "elements that certainly negate Marx's thesis." In India, as K.S. Shelvankar (Desai 2003:150) notes, "The king did not, in theory, create subordinate owners of land because he himself was not in theory the supreme owner of the land" though this, again, has not been accepted by scholars like T.L. Smith (ibid: 160).

S. Naqvi in his article (Bhadra1989: 23) "Marx on India's Pre-Asiatic Society" in K.M. Kurien (ed.), *India—State and Society: A Marxian Approach* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1975) has also found elements like private property in land, the rise and growth of numerous marketing towns and cities that were 'economically active and viable', presence of affluent classes of 'merchants, shippers and moneylenders' etc. "which directly contradict Marx's theory." In Irfan Habib's analysis (Bhadra 1989: 25) in his *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963) we find additional elements like non-existence of communal ownership of land, "the existence of 'class' struggle in terms of 'armed resistance' of the peasantry or of the zamindars (i.e. landed interests) or of both vis-à-vis the Mughal ruling class of officials including the king." Romila Thapar (1968: 322–23) also thinks that the belief in the absence of private property in land during pre-British India was based on a misunderstanding of the agrarian system of Mughal empire—not only such property existed but the rule of property changed significantly over the centuries.

D.N. Dhanagare (1983:28) opines that social stratification system and division of labour leading to functional specialisation of different castes actually "facilitated certain communal arrangements subsidiary to actual cultivation which often led many to imagine that land was held under a system of communal ownership." He continues that in certain spheres outside the actual agricultural production like caste system, collective action was indispensable and perhaps in these areas there were semblances of communal ownership.
Furthermore, like Daniel Thomer ["Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production", December 1966, Contributions to Indian Sociology 9, pp. 44, 57], Dhanagare is also skeptical regarding the self-sufficient nature of the village system. He is of the opinion (1983: 28) that "there seems to be little doubt that agricultural production was geared to the needs of the collectivity and hence was in essence subsistence or non-market oriented." Bula Bhadra (1989: 443) cites the examples of George Campbell's Modern India (London, 1852), Mark Wilks's Historical Sketches of the South India (1810-17), and the Fifth Report of 1812, all of which contain reliable and valid data regarding the existence of private property in land. Indigenous scholars (Bhadra 1989: 17) like P. Nath [A Study of the Economic Condition of Ancient India, 1929], N.C. Bandyopadhyaya [Economic Life and Progress in Ancient India, V.1, 1945], U.N. Ghosal [The Agrarian System of Ancient India], etc., had proved on the basis of concrete data from indigenous source materials that private property in land was very much in existence before the advent of British colonialism in the eighteenth century. Bula Bhadra (1989: 443) also supports this view and says that, "Ex facie the relevant data sources conform not only the development of the private property in land but also its evolution in different forms...allodial and the feudal. While the former stands for free peasants' ownership, the latter meant the hierarchical landownership of the feudal lord who also exercised state power to a certain degree over the land he owned." In the words of Henry Maine (as quoted by Hamza Alavi, August 1975:1255), "Land in pre-British India was one of the aspects of rulership, whether viewed in the person of a raja, in the body corporate of a bhaichara (brotherhood) village, or in the person of the zamindar, the closest approximation to the Roman pater familias. Thus the Indian view of land was also political."

The observations of Kathleen Gough can be taken as a sum-up of the whole debate. In her article entitled "Modes of Production in Southern India" (Gough 1980: 337) Gough undertakes a study of the southern states of India in
general and Thanjavur in particular. There she finds that in almost all the Hindu kingdoms of that region, there existed the Asiatic Mode of Production in some form or other, almost till the later decades of the eighteenth century. She continues that the AMP conformed in fundamental respects to Marx's model but "the Asiatic Mode of Production in Thanjavur permitted greater social change, social stratification, development of the productive forces, urbanisation, and commodity production, than Marx's model allows for. In particular, it gave rise to varying grades of communal serfdom and slavery that are distinguishable both from the private slavery of classical Western Europe and the serfdom of feudal Europe, and also from the 'general slavery of the Orient' to which Marx refers as characteristic of the Asiatic Mode of Production" (ibid). Gough continues (ibid) that from 1771 onwards "the Asiatic Mode of Production was shattered and some hybrid, semi-capitalist relations developed. India in this period was in the process of being conquered and transformed into a colonial state within the British social formation, which as a whole was dominated by the capitalist means of production in transition from its mercantile-manufacturing to its industrial phase, although actual production relations in India remained mostly pre-capitalist or semi-capitalist."

In this connection mention may be made of another controversy which arose during the same period regarding whether pre-capitalist India, on the eve of British conquest, was ripe for an industrial revolution by its own efforts. Scholars like R.Palme-Dutt (1997: 94-96, 304), M.N. Roy (1971: 9-10,16), Hirendranath Mukherjee (1962a: 96), A.R.Desai (1981:16), etc., are of the opinion that by the eighteenth century the Mughal Empire had started disintegrating rapidly and upon its ruins the British colonialists had succeeded in establishing an empire of a new kind. This distorted the potential development towards capitalism; however, Indian society, by that time, was ready to burst through the fetters of the prevailing feudal agrarian system. As Palme-Dutt notes (1997: 304), "It does not necessarily follow from this that such a
destruction would have been impossible without British conquest.” Desai acknowledges the historically progressive role of British imperialism in destroying the pre-capitalist socio-economic order but as the Mughal Empire was disintegrating, a new trading middle-class was beginning to emerge. However, as the politico-economic structure remained predominantly feudal so “India was destined to undergo a new invasion from a country which had already reached a more advanced stage of economic development, before these new economic forces had been able to weld her into unity and while she was in a state of transition and disintegration which left her an easy prey to foreign conquest” (Desai 1981: 31).

This view has been opposed by Shaibal Gupta in his article “Potential of Industrial Revolution in Pre-British India” (EPW, March 1, 1980: 471). According to Gupta, all these scholars have taken the economic categories to understand this issue. He accepts that the economic categories like commodity production, wage-labour, etc., are the objective factors which contribute to economic transformations. However, on the one hand, these economic categories can be present in feudal or pre-capitalist economies also; on the other hand, these are not enough because they have to be complemented with the subjective factor of ‘class-struggle’ “which gives the decisive twist to social change” (Gupta 1980: 471). In pre-British India, continues Gupta (ibid), the trading and mercantile classes were present as also the phenomenon of the market. But the accrued capital and social surplus had not been made mobile or available for industrial expansion but was squandered in building temples, mosques, etc. As a result, due to the nature of capital utilisation, India’s technology became unprogressive. Last, but not the least, the merchant class in India, which had earlier collaborated with feudal interests and later with imperialism, became an obstacle to development. Hence, before the advent of the British in India, whatever might have been the character of economic categories during that period, the class relations had not matured sufficiently to
usher in a bourgeois revolution. This position has been supported (Gupta 1980) by other scholars like Irfan Habib (1971), V.I. Pavlov [The Indian Capitalist Class, pp.41–42], A.I.Chicherov [Economic Development in the 16th–18th Century, p.236], etc.

In spite of these debates regarding existence or non-existence of private property in land and self-sufficiency of the village system, Desai maintains (1981) that the village represented a closed society where social life was governed by family, caste and community rules. As Marx had observed (1977: 490), “However changing the political aspect of India’s past must appear, its social condition has remained unaltered since its remotest antiquity, until the first decennium of the 19th century.” Marx, in his turn, had taken (1986: 338) the concept of such “unchangeableness of Asiatic societies...in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic States, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty” from the observations of Th. Stamford Raffles, late Lieutenant-Governor of Java in his work The History of Java (London, 1817, V.1,p. 285).

During the British period the village experienced a steady transformation. Its economic self-sufficiency was dissolved as it was harnessed first to the national-colonial and then to the world capitalist economy. As R.Palme-Dutt (1997: 87) observes, the difference between earlier conquests and British conquest of India differed in mainly two respects. On the one hand, the earlier conquerors unlike the British had never interfered with the economic base of society. On the other hand, they, again unlike the British, had eventually been absorbed within the socio-cultural-economic fabric of the country. “The British conquest shattered that basis and remained a foreign force, acting from outside and withdrawing its tribute outside” (ibid). Desai (1981:32) tries to analyse its cause more lucidly when he observes that, “In fact, all invaders from the north, who established their sway over and subsequently settled in India as rulers, belonged, before they came to India, to a society which was economically
more backward than the Indian." In Desai's opinion (ibid) all these societies were pre-feudal nomadic or in the semi-feudal stages of development. Thus, their conquest, domicile and rule did not involve any 'overhauling' and 'reconstruction' of the prevailing Indian economic system. "The British conquest of India was, however, of a different type. It was the conquest of India by a modern nation which had abolished feudalism in its own country and created, in its place, modern bourgeois society" (ibid: 33). With the British conquest, in place of production for consumption the economy started producing for profit and the market. One can say after Marx (1977: 491) that, "British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry." The influx of cheap foreign goods destroyed the equilibrium of agriculture and artisan industry while the entire social system and the rural power structure were fatally undermined by the administrative laws of the centralised British colonial state. Colonial and semi-colonial expansion deranged the old pre-industrial sets of interaction, "'petrified' many social institutions...and thereby initiated a new stratification system by 'mobilising landed property', thus destroying the traditional protection and security surrounding the individual" (Desai 1965:1454). Marx had observed way back in 1853, June 10 (1977: 489) that, "England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing." R.Palme-Dutt (1997: 87) reiterates the point that "the victory of foreign capitalism in India differed from the victory of capitalism in Europe, in that the destructive process was not accompanied by any corresponding growth of new forces." Desai also follows the same argument to observe (2003:118) that "it was not replaced by a new social framework, a new institutional matrix, a new outlook corresponding to and in harmony with the new type of economy." Hence, it can be said after Marx (1977: 489) that, "This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one...separates
Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history.

Transformation of the concept of ‘land’ as a commodity also brought corresponding changes in social relationships and obligations in conformity with the new connotation of ‘Land’. In place of pre-colonial atomised village-system the process of colonising the countryside “led to the process of atomizing and proletarianizing (sic) peasant population, with the consequent ferment among them in the comparative-capitalist matrix unparalleled even in their past histories” (Desai 1965:1454). Such forceful colonisation in the countryside was compounded by another development, originating from the same source, i.e. colonialism. A section from within the peasant community was encouraged to embrace the capitalist economic path and become entrepreneurs. They were expected to “abandon their ties to neighbours and kin, and use their surpluses in culturally novel ways to further their own stand in the market” (Desai 1979b: 768). Thus, “the spread of capitalism necessarily produces a revolution of its own,” (ibid) where people from other classes were transformed into capitalists. This was “an unequal encounter between the societies which first incubated it and societies which were engulfed by it, in the course of its spread” (ibid). For the latter, not only economic changes but large-scale and often irreversible socio-cultural transformations took place.

In a colonial country like India the old socio-cultural structures and systems were shattered without being replaced by the more advanced capitalist counterparts. The West disintegrated the old fabric but introduced distorted ones shaped by and suited to its own colonial requirements. For instance, “the old principle of co-ordination and co-operation...on which the pre-British community was based, was replaced by the principle of competition which set into motion a whirlpool in the social structure” (Desai 2003:118). This experience—uprooting the entire past and creating a new colonial social situation—had many repercussions. So far as the rural toiling masses were
concerned it created such politico-economic and socio-cultural circumstances, that they "could not attain security or improve their conditions by going back to the past, nor could they better their positions in the emerging new belated capitalist formations, which in the context of the historically declining phase of the capitalist system as a whole, had lost the ability to even fulfil the bourgeois-democratic tasks" (Desai 1979b: 764).

Desai clarifies the position of the peasantry within the entire population, identifying them as part of the rural population, while in pre-colonial period the village population consisted mainly of the peasantry. As Marx records (1986: 672ff) that in Europe by the end of fifteenth and the beginning of sixteenth centuries the foundations of the capitalist mode of production were laid down when "the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land, to which the latter had the same feudal right as the lord himself, and by the usurpation of the common lands....Even in the last decade of the 17th century, the yeomanry, the class of independent peasants...had disappeared, and so had, in the last decade of the 18th century, the last trace of the common land of the agricultural labourer....Whilst the place of the independent yeoman was taken by tenants at will, small farmers on yearly leases, a servile rabble dependent on the pleasure of the landlords, the systematic robbery of the communal lands helped especially...to swell those large farms, that were called in the 18th century capital farms or merchant farms, and to 'set free' the agricultural population as proletarians for manufacturing industry....They conquered the field for capitalistic agriculture, made the soil part and parcel of capital, and created for the town industries the necessary supply of a 'free' and outlawed proletariat." What took almost four centuries in Europe was accomplished in India in the course of just about one century when under the impact of British rule and its economic policies rural society was "regrouped into classes of agrarian
landlords, peasant proprietors, tenants and agricultural labourers along with strata of ruined artisans..." (Desai1979a: 32). The non-cultivating classes were the moneylenders and the traders, representing private interests and controlling both the sources of credit and disposal of the produce. Among these classes wealth was concentrated in the hands of the big landlords, prosperous capitalist farmers, top stratum of the peasant proprietors and moneylenders and traders. On the other side were the tenants, small cultivators, ruined artisans and landless agricultural proletariat, which also included agrarian serfs and debt slaves. The latter group was systematically and thoroughly exploited, impoverished and pauperised—the population which formed the producing section became economically underprivileged, living a precarious, insecure existence. Such stratification in the rural sector was a direct consequence of British colonial policy which "ushered in a qualitatively new set of property relations by making land a commodity, thereby giving a mortal blow to the peculiar feudal relations prevailing in the countryside" (Desai1979b:12).

The new proprietary relations, thus, destroyed the pre-capitalist system of customary and legal obligations. The individual producer replaced the village community as the unit of revenue assessment, payment and collection. It, in consequence, "ushered in a process of sale, mortgage, transfer of proprietary rights, assets and crops all of which made the alienation of land a powerful feature in the peasants' life" (ibid). Such transformation of land, assets and crops into commodities made the landlords, big peasants, moneylenders, traders into hoarders of wealth while the actual cultivators, says Desai (ibid: 180), "were reduced to the status of sharecroppers, tenants and even landless labourers bound to the land with the status of almost semi-slaves." Colonial-capitalist profit-oriented economic and political forces uprooted the artisans and the peasants from their moorings, who lost their customary modes of living and traditional organisations, and suffered from the rigours of law which were favourable to the propertied classes. Thus, a peculiar kind of stratification was
created with a sharp division: on one side were the men of means constituting the propertied classes; on the other side were the propertyless that were being progressively pauperised and proletarianised. Desai reiterates (ibid: XXIII) after Douglas Deal, who in his article “Peasant Revolts and Resistance in the Modern World—A Comparative View” in the Journal of Contemporary Asia said, “this process of proletarianization has itself been one of the major causes of agrarian revolutions in the modern world.”

Another major cause of agrarian crises can be traced back to the process of colonial and semi-colonial expansion in the countryside. Such expansion forcefully thwarted technical and institutional improvements in agriculture. This, on the one hand, was the reason for non-absorption of rural population in secondary and tertiary occupations; on the other, initiated ever-increasing pressure on land. Hence, colonialism “forced agriculture to remain technically inefficient, incapable of utilizing technological and scientific improvements, and operated predominantly by small peasants, tenants and landless labourers on uneconomic units of operational holdings” (Desai 1965:1454). Furthermore, the proportion of small peasants, tenants, agricultural labourers, etc., constituted the majority of rural population vis-à-vis the rich farmers who were the only section to show inclination for the application of modern techniques and scientific inputs.

It was this underprivileged section that faced exploitation, both feudal and capitalist, which participated in the national liberation movement and tried to express its desires and aspirations as a ‘class’, quite separate from the wealthy, propertied agrarian classes. Hence, according to Desai (1979b: XXIII–XXIV), the Marxian “division of the agrarian population as formulated by eminent Marxists like Lenin, Trotsky, Mao Tse-Tung and others,...clarifies more sharply the dynamic of transformation in capitalistically reforged agrarian structures in colonial and semi-colonial countries.”

115
In colonial period the peasantry faced both feudal and capitalist exploitation. In the native princely states agriculture was “the chief, if not the sole, occupation of the people...” (Desai 1938: 23). But the conditions were even more miserable than those in British India as the “agriculturalists in the states” were “more intensely exploited as a result of forcibly collected, oppressive land revenues and other exactions imposed on them according to the sweet will of the princes” (ibid).

Capitalist exploitation took place in British India where the colonial bourgeois economy was introduced in the agrarian sector so far as it served the capitalist world market. But in place of “a capitalist mode of production in agriculture” the colonial state “perpetuated and strengthened the feudal and seni (sic)-feudal mode of production as the dominant mode” (Desai 1979b: XVI). This ensured the continuation of pre-capitalist, non-free bonded labour which, in the process of pauperisation and proletarianisation, served the capitalist world market by providing extremely cheap labour. This labour was indicative of a feudal or semi-feudal mode of production, yet, assisted the expansion of the sphere of capitalist mode of production. This peculiar way in which capitalist socio-economic forms were ushered in without the capitalist mode of production being made dominant is one of the root causes for the crises of Indian agriculture. This trend continued even in the post-independence era which led to the emergence of new socio-economic formations which, says Desai (ibid: XVI–XVII), can be viewed as a “neo-colony, a peripheral capitalism, a satellite formation or a backward capitalist social formation.”

Exploitation of the peasantry was not limited to the foreign masters or the ruler princes of native states. The Congress leadership had often used the exploited agrarian classes in the nationalist movement “to build up pressure, but not permitted to take to the road of radical and revolutionary class and militant mass struggles...” (ibid: XX). This was because “the Congress leadership was
solicitous of the interests of the capitalists and landed magnates” (Desai 1981:191) and were afraid that the masses might overthrow even the indigenous bourgeois-landlord classes in the process of overthrowing imperialism. Hence, the poor, propertyless masses were carefully monitored so that their struggles were not directed against the local exploiters on the one hand, and withdrawn as soon as they showed signs of getting out of control, on the other. In fact R. Palme-Dutt (1997: 317) traces the recalcitrance of the Indian National Congress, to let the mass movements mature, to its very origin—the “character of the National Congress in its origin is very important for all its subsequent history. This double strand in its role and being runs right through its history: on the one hand, the strand of cooperation with imperialism against the ‘menace’ of the mass movement; on the other hand, the strand of leadership of the masses in the national struggle.” Palme-Dutt continues that this two-fold character can be traced through all the contradictions of its leadership, from Gokhale in the old stage to his disciple, Gandhi in the later stages and through all the stages of mass movement. The reason for such vacillating role of the bourgeois-dominated Congress was due to the fact that it was afraid “that ‘too rapid’ advance may end in destroying its privileges along with those of the imperialists” (ibid: 318).

Numerous instances of such manipulation have been cited by Desai (1939: 4ff). For instance, peaceful processions by kisans “to face the zamindars (the reactionary allies of the British Government) manfully and resist their oppression and exploitation” had been branded by Gandhi “as symptoms of ‘growing anarchy in the country.’” Again, instead of leading the anti-zamindar peasant movements, the Congress leaders and ministers of Bihar government had “released a campaign of slander against Kisan Sabhas, Swami Sahajanand and the entire band of Kisan workers” (ibid: 12–13). Not only so, “the Bihar Congress feels inveterate hostility to Kisan Sabhas and Kisan leaders like Sahajanand, Yadunandan, Rahul Sankartania...whose only crime is...to defend
the human rights of the peasants against grasping predatory claims of landlords and Shankars, and to ask the peasants to stand up against the terrorism of zamindar and his armed henchmen” (ibid: 13).

Such subjugation of the rural population throughout this period prevented the peasantry from acquiring a revolutionary potential. Desai reiterates (1979b: 764-65) the points made by Eric Wolf in his Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) that if the peasants were “guided by a party or a group firmly committed to destroying capitalism and take the social order to a non-capitalist path, the powerful rebellions launched by the peasantry, culminating in peasant wars can usher in conditions for the liberation of the peasantry and make it a part of the larger social order where the exploited strata would usher in a new epoch of non-capitalist socialist development, whatever the superstructural deformities arising out of faulty policies of the leadership.”

What, however, happened in India was that Gandhi’s astute leadership and organisational capacities prepared “a chain of leaders to organise workers and peasants in a manner which would harness their energy and direct these energies into particular types of movements that would be reformist, economic, non-violent and based on the principle of class collaboration, which was founded upon a theory of the exploiting classes functioning as ‘trustees’ of the people” (ibid: 214). Thus, the INC, called “the classic party of the Indian bourgeoisie and nascent capitalist landlords, rich farmers, viable middle peasants and sections of substantial tenants and sub-tenants...” (Desai 1986: XIV) undertook a series of peaceful, Satyagraha type struggles in the rural areas where the peasantry were used as a numerical force. Their indebtedness, resultant slavery and general distress were continuously and consistently ignored by the INC. This was so, as, the latter was fully aware that if the militancy of the peasantry was allowed to go unchecked then their struggles would break the backbone of not only colonialism but also of the indigenous bourgeois-rich
peasant combine and make a bid for non-capitalist path of development. The emergence of a proper leadership for the peasantry was continuously thwarted because that might mobilise the peasantry as a ‘class’ which would then “confiscate without compensation the lands of the landlords and zamindars making a bid for socialist revolution...” (ibid: XVI).

Actually there were certain objective factors which were hindrances to the evolution of the peasantry as a ‘class’ with revolutionary potentiality. Here Desai fully endorses Marx’s unwillingness to accept the peasantry as a ‘class’. To Marx (1977: 478–78) the peasantry was to be treated as “homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.” He continues that so far as the economic conditions of their existence, mode of life, interests or culture vary from people with other modes of life or are hostile to other modes of existence etc. they constitute a class. But “in so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class” (ibid: 479). Marx was also of the opinion that the peasantry was neither capable of leading or representing itself nor able to enforce their class interests by themselves. Following Marx, Desai elaborates some of the characteristics of the peasantry, characteristics which seem similar for the peasantry in both France and India.

For instance, the peasantry was never a homogenous class with common interests and objectives. The rich landowning sections in colonial era were always in favour of imperial rule. It was the non-affluent section, comprising of middle and poor peasants, tenants, sub-tenants and landless labourers who had to evolve as a class and organise their movement for amelioration of their distress and grievances. The peasant, due to his individual method of production is individualistic, tends to work alone or in small family or community groups and therefore, it is “difficult for him to collaborate in a common endeavour” (Desai 1981:194). Furthermore, unlike the factory worker,
the peasant cannot be collected under one roof. On the contrary, the latter is scattered over a vast area and thus, it proved difficult to organise the peasantry along economic and political lines. Desai also cites certain reasons for the cultural backwardness of the peasantry. To him (ibid: 195) the slow, monotonous pace of life in the village in contrast to the sharp-paced city life made the peasant "mentally dull and ignorant." As Marx had said (1977: 479), the peasantry which was "in stupefied seclusion within this old order" displayed the characteristics of conservatism, superstitions, prejudice—this peasant is not enlightened and does not "want to overthrow the old order through their own energies" (ibid). As Desai concludes (1981: 195), "rather than struggle for life by organized collective, audacious action, the kisans often submit to catastrophes in a helpless manner..." Finally, dependence upon "the unmastered forces of Nature like rain...contributes to make the peasant more superstitious and, to some extent, even diffident and defeatist" (ibid). According to Desai, it was in the course of the national liberation movement in the twentieth century that the peasants began to develop political consciousness and evolve as a 'class-for-itself'. However, prior to the period mentioned above, a number of peasant movements had occurred in India since the previous century. The difference between the movements of the two periods, according to Desai (ibid: 188), broadly emanates from the character of those of the earlier period being "spontaneous, spasmodic, and having limited and local economic aims."

The period from about 1870 to the second decade of the twentieth century saw a number of peasant uprisings. For instance, those in 1870 at Bengal, 1875 at Deccan and 1897 at Punjab were the most devastating. All these movements had occurred against local exploiters, either native or foreign. The principal causes were excessive rents, exorbitant incidence of debt, extortion of the peasants for revenue payment to the state etc. and it resulted in terrible poverty and sufferings for the peasantry. However, these struggles lacked a political content and were mostly anarchic in nature. Noticeable was the silence
which included introduction of technology and science in agriculture to make it more efficient, efforts to eliminate the subsistence orientation of production, price regulation, building infrastructure in order to widen the market of agricultural products, efforts to introduce cooperative societies like Vikas Mandals, Gram and Nyay Panchayats, etc., which would provide credit and marketing facilities. Other measures would be land reforms where land would be recovered from non-cultivating intermediaries and vested interests, imposing restrictions on sale, mortgage, letting and sub-letting of lands, measures to regulate private moneymaking, scale down debts etc. Efforts were made to change the traditional approach and atmosphere and “evolve new voluntary institutions and associations” like Community Development Blocks, National Extension Services etc. in places of “petrified old social institutions and values” (Desai 1965:1455). Land reforms were initiated to change the class relations in the countryside.

However, all such efforts were conceived on the basis of private enterprise operating with profit-making as the main incentive or motive force of production. Quite naturally, the rich farmer was to be the initiator of the transformations about to occur because the rich farmer was supposed to be the most advanced section and most responsive to changes among the agrarian population. The participatory role of the State was not to supplant the competitive system but to regulate and “soften the ravages of the unrestricted operation of the market mechanism in the context of imperfect and unequal competition” (ibid).

To sum up, Desai says (2003: 269), “the overall agrarian policy of the government which is a part of its major economic plan has kept the entire agrarian area as a private sector.” The political cohesion and uniformity of the post-colonial State was sought to be established by accepting the norms and legal premises in order to pursue development on a bourgeois path. The whole idea was “to create, strengthen and expand the industrial, commercial and
agrarian proprietary classes, who could produce for market and profit" (Desai 1986: XIII). The old traditional forces were also utilised “to the extent that they helped the path of development and...the emerging capitalist economic and political framework which was being constructed actively by the State of the Indian Union” (ibid: XIII-XIV). What was ignored in this whole scheme was that societies struggling to develop by pursuing capitalist path have to produce for market and profit. Consequently, this model presupposes “tough competition and cannot avoid the consequences of the law of concentration and centralization and weeding out inefficient and uneconomic producers” (Desai 1985c: 14). These “inefficient and uneconomic producers” are the non-owning poorer sections, and for their potentiality to overthrow the propertied classes they “are being viewed as unhealthy, irrational, impertinent, harmful and even dangerous. It is held that they create obstacles or even operate as disruptive forces in the process of modernization and in the development of the economy and society through the implementation of mixed economy indicative planning of the ruling classes in India” (ibid: 24–25).

The Indian bourgeoisie had adopted a fourfold programme to bring about changes in the agrarian sector. Desai highlights (1985b: 34; 1984:158) this fourfold programme: “a reshuffling of the class structure of rural society; the provision of facilities for the newly emerging rich peasant farmers and trading class for capital formation; the evolution of adequate politico-economic-social organisations to strengthen the richer peasants and simultaneously stifle the class organization of the exploited strata; and the evolution of cultural media which will help the new rich in agrarian areas to acquire social and cultural control over the masses and prevent the masses from gaining a true understanding of their real problems.”

Among the measures taken by the State to initiate agrarian revival and economic development, mention may be made of the “right to property as fundamental...as the bedrock of the entire endeavour to reconstruct Indian
economy" (Desai 1986:15). At the same time, right to work has not been accepted as a fundamental principle whereby labour power becomes a commodity "to be used and purchased by market forces and determined by the needs of the employers for the production of goods and services for profit" (Desai 1994: 35). Desai, in the same essay, cites another instance of preferential treatment for the propertied classes where compensation to the proprietor for the acquisition of his property for public purpose is laid down as a basic norm. However, it is not accompanied by the principle of compensating those whose labour-power is not utilised or permitted to be utilised even if the seller places it or wants to place it for the service of society in order to augment production. Thus, "there is no assurance of work, or compensation for loss of source of livelihood even when society can supply no alternative source" (Desai 1986:15). In fact, "the Constitution", says Desai, "expects the owners of the labour-power, who constitute a majority of the citizens, to maintain law and order, even if society and the state do not ensure the economic wherewithal to help them survive." (1994: 35).

The land reform measures taken up by the post-colonial State also reflect the same tendency. It began with the policy of eliminating the rural intermediaries in the form of absentee landlords and zamindars and taking over of their estates by the tenants after payment of compensations to the former by the latter. Apart from the policy of land acquisition with compensation, some ceiling on amount of land was fixed by which the entire land of the former landowner was not to be transferred to the tenants and the former could retain a sizeable portion. Moreover, not all but certain categories of tenants could acquire property rights over land. Only the rich tenants who could pay compensation were able to acquire ownership rights. The poorer sections of cultivating tenants, who could not afford to pay compensations, were either forced to borrow heavily for acquiring ownership rights or were denied the same. Side by side, they also lost tenurial security and became non-owning
proletariat. Hence, this policy limited the possibility of transfer of land from non-cultivating to cultivating classes. These measures, in the words of Desai (1986: 21), "sliced off a tip of the old landowning classes...and incorporated a small upper section of the tenants in the landowning group..." The poorer tenants and sub-tenants, on the other hand, were "being hurled into the bottomless pit of proletarianisation, and, ...being forced to undertake new kinds of bonded labour rooted, not in the feudal form of subsistence production, but in the emerging profit-oriented market and monetized commodity production associated with the growing capitalist economy in India" (ibid: 21–22).

The agricultural workers have not only been denied land, but tolerable living and working conditions on land as well. The landless labourers, says David Mandelbaum (Desai 2000: 91), "often gain nothing at all from the irrigation projects and the redistribution of land. They have nothing to begin with, nothing which can be improved, no means of getting a start and so they remain economically as well as socially disadvantaged." Hence, we find that the State created a broad-based agrarian proprietary class which would preserve and maintain capitalist economic system in the countryside. The miseries of the poorer sections have been augmented due to the lack of uniform agrarian reform policies all over the country. As land and associated reforms are state subject so these matters were left to the discretion of the states (provinces) which resulted in different states adopting "different criteria and level of rigour in the implementation of measures to effect land reforms" (Desai 1986: XVII).

Such measures, according to Desai, have benefited only a small rich section of the peasantry which has been thriving in the context of competitive, profit-oriented market-based economy at the cost of smaller farmers whose production efforts are becoming more and more uneconomic day by day. The decade of planning has not been able to initiate efficiency in agrarian production; not only so, but has also made India dependent on other countries for even food crops. To quote Desai (1965:1457), "That an agrarian country is
unable to produce enough cereals for the population is itself indicative of the inefficient and backward modes of production in agriculture. Improved implements, facilities and incentives are almost wholly used by rich farmers and that too for commercial crops which will bring in profit for the already rich section. These measures of reliance upon rich farmers to improve agriculture “are actually generating a process of disintegration, ruination, pauperization and proletarianisation of the vast majority of agriculturalists” (ibid). Rather than expanding the home market for industrial development and raising the purchasing power of the poor, implementation of land reform measures “has only resulted in increasing pauperisation of the toiling strata in rural society” (Desai 1985c:17). Actually, says Desai (1979a: 78), “the process of continued differentiation characteristic of all capitalism...is intensified in agrarian crisis to the point of mass ruin of the poor and middle peasants.” On the one hand, the toiling peasants are losing their implements, livestocks, labour-power; on the other hand, “more and more of the land passes into the hands of the banks, usurers and speculators; the former owner becomes an exploited tenant on what was formerly his own land” (ibid). Consequently, in a land of peasant proprietors nearly half the cultivators have become almost landless as the class of rich peasants “is pushing out a large section of poor peasants and even landless labourers from the ambit of profitable economic relationships” (Desai 1965:1457). The gross injustice of this is that the poorer sections “are uprooted from their cultivated land under the pretext of ‘voluntary surrenders’ which are actually forced surrenders of their land” (Desai 1985c: 17). However, Desai thinks that mere redistribution of land to the poor cultivators will not solve their problems in any way. Even if they get small plots of land, he raises the question (ibid: 17-18), “from where are they going to raise the necessary resources to improve agriculture and to make cultivation practicable?...It is not by strengthening private property in land, but only by eliminating it, one could
really think in terms of just, effective and genuinely radical solution of the agrarian problem in India.”

The measures adopted by the State to reconstruct the economic life of the rural people have generated consequent changes in the societal fabric of rural India. It has been found that often the richer landowning classes come from upper castes or specific regional, racial or religious groups while those belonging to the poorer, non-propertied sections actually belong to lower castes or specific regional, racial or religious groups. The process started in the colonial period when upper castes acquired control over land and at the same time over credit and marketing related business in the countryside. Many intermediate castes became substantial farmers or rich tenants to become rich peasants in the post-colonial state. At the same time, many other castes and sub-castes lost their occupations and modes of livelihood and took to agriculture. They were the small farmers and landless labourers who became progressively weaker and poorer to swell the ranks of non-propertied peasant classes in post-independence India. The backward and depressed castes and tribes became landless labourers, agrestic serfs or bond tillers. Castes were competing with castes and in the process we find a situation “where the old hierarchy of caste-system based on birth, status and ritual hallmarks, was being transformed into a new hierarchy based on the increasing monopoly of wealth, power and culture” (Desai 1979a:165). After independence some of the old classes, i.e. feudal and semi-feudal, have suffered while other classes like capitalist farmers have benefited. Often the zamindar type landlords have transformed “into a class of substantial farmers and agriculturalists” (ibid: 173). But the middle and lower sections did not benefit.

As production “is increasingly being tied to the apron-strings of profit-oriented, competitive market economy, a small group of substantial farmers are strengthening their competitive power at the cost of marginal and submarginal cultivators” (ibid: 113). Growing monetisation and commercialisation of
agriculture, loans from governmental and other organised credit agencies like cooperatives, etc., are advantageous to the rich farmers. The poor peasants on the other hand, are being squeezed by the moneylender-cum-trader and market mechanisms. In fact, a new power structure is emerging in rural areas comprising of moneylender-cum-trader, rich peasants and the administrative echelons “who predominantly happen also to belong to upper castes and probably to the same strata” (ibid: 122). This power elite transforms every legislative and other measures to its advantage at the cost of marginal peasants and landless labourers. The socio-economic policies of the government, as manifest through the Plans and welfare measures, fundamentally support the mechanisms of market “which is the happy hunting ground for a vast chain of middlemen and profiteers with all their fraudulent practices, and which has become only a graveyard for small farmers” (ibid: 124). Hence, we find that political freedom has not ushered in any qualitative change in the socio-economic set-up of rural India.

Land reforms introduced after independence had, says Desai (1986: XVIII), “two contradictory impacts on the agrarian population.” On the one hand, the socio-economic base of the proprietary classes was broadened and they were expected to initiate improved agricultural practices. A class of relatively smaller landlords, rich farmers emerging out of richer sections of tenants and a small section of upper-middle peasants, who also became traders and creditors, became part of the rural proprietary classes who were actively connected with agriculture. On the other hand, a vast number of tenants and small farmers became either proprietors of uneconomic holdings who were ultimately forced to lease their lands to rich peasants, or became proletarianised tenants “who cling to their land, without the earlier security of tenure, ultimately to be hurled into the—category of agricultural labourers” (ibid: 22). The conditions of the majority of the poor, proletarianised agrarian population became more insecure and uncertain. Capitalist developmental strategy
proletarianised the teeming agrarian poor—"the land reforms, in fact deprived the vast majority of peasants of their land and transformed them into an army of agrarian proletariat" (ibid: XVIII). This overwhelming section of the rural population was viewed by the State and its ruling proprietary classes as "a drag on the economy...a burden to the State...a brake and an obstacle to the efficient use of scarce resources of the Indian Union" and "the growing demands of the rural poor began to be viewed as dangerous, needing a harder and harsher approach by the State and the proprietary classes" (ibid: XVIII-XIX).

Along with land reform, the bourgeoisie at the helm of state affairs had also elaborated varieties of multiclass economic, political and social institutions. These institutions, in the context of class polarizations in the countryside, were actually being used to control the rural poor by the richer sections. For instance, in an economy founded on capitalist mixed economy postulates, the cooperatives of small farmers cannot succeed due to a number of reasons like inability to procure finance, incapacity to save, greater difficulties for work incentives, lower skills of management, etc.; in short, the small farmers are not "creditworthy" (Desai1985c: 21). Furthermore, if cooperatives are a part of an economic system "based on competition and mad craze for profit, they cannot remain unaffected by this basic underlying gestalt of the overall system;" at best they "in the context of the capitalist economic system can only function as an agency to pool some resources to carry on struggle in the competition" (ibid). Cooperatives in this system cannot operate as a lever of abolishing inequality; neither can they generate an atmosphere for people's participation in production. Thus, the cooperatives, Panchayats, welfare associations actually served the interests of the richer sections while helping them to establish their control over the poor and use political power to suppress their protests. In the words of Desai (ibid: 23), "the cooperative movement has in fact succeeded in strengthening that section of the rural population comprised of the richer strata.
which is considered as a main change agent for economic development.” Egalitarian slogans and propaganda are used in order to create confusion regarding the fundamental strategy of capitalist development based on private property in land and resultant inequality.

In order to provide institutional instruments at the hands of the local rich “the Indian National Congress which, prior to independence had sponsored Kisan Sabhas, landless labourers organizations, and peasant organizations has, after coming to power, scrupulously avoided building up class organizations of the exploited strata…” (Desai 1985b: 36; 1984:159–60). Adult franchise, in addition, subjected the rural populace to a wide variety of propaganda, campaigns and manipulations by the political parties. All these generated not only various organisations and associations but created “a unique type of awareness among people…a turbulent and peculiar type of political atmosphere after independence” (Desai1994: 35). At the same time, a huge cultural media was created to aid the profit-chasing proprietary strata in the countryside to gain control over the masses on the one hand, and prevent the latter from gaining a true understanding of their problems, on the other. A network of organisations and repressive apparatus was created “to smother and terrorise those who raised their voices or organised agitations and movements for securing those elementary needs and basic human rights” (ibid). By using all these methods the masses were prevented from rising in revolt against growing bourgeois exploitation and oppression.

The reshuffling of the agrarian classes has actually shaped various types of agrarian movements. According to Desai (1986:14), to most scholars “the portrayal of the changing profile of rural society becomes fragmented, a scattered portrait reflected in the broken pieces of a mirror, a kaleidoscopic jumble of partial pictures, undialectically juxtaposed.” From this kaleidoscope Desai classifies them into two categories: (a) movements launched by the newly-
created proprietary classes; and (b) movements by various sections of the agrarian poor.

The first type of movements, says Desai (ibid: XIX), were launched by the newly-created proprietary classes for “securing more and more concessions, facilities and assistance from the political authorities. They are more in the nature of pressurizing the State to give them a greater slice of resources and benefits rather than to the non-agrarian, predominantly industrial, and commercial urban proprietary classes.” In fact, some of the movements conducted by the all-India Kisan Sabha can be taken as examples of this kind, e.g. Anti-levy Movement of 1952–53 in West Bengal, Farmers’ Movements in 1966 in Tamil Nadu, in late 1970s in Maharashtra and Karnataka, in the 1980s in U.P. and Delhi, etc. The demands were mainly protest against enhanced rates of electricity, enhanced rates for sugarcane and onion, cotton, etc. Prominent farmers’ organisations which provided leadership were Shetkari Sangathan in Maharashtra, Ryot Sangham in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu Agricultural Association, Bharatiya Kisan Union in U.P. etc. (Chatterjee 2004: 248–49). These movements reveal a dual character—on the one hand, when carried on by poor farmers and agricultural labourers they reveal heroism, self-sacrifice, etc. But at another level, “the struggles are not inspired by a vision of the seizure of power or any overall strategy to unify these struggles with the struggles launched by the organized working class...They also reveal a sense of concern not to antagonize rich farmers and capitalist landowners...” (Desai 1986: 9). It is evident that the leadership is in the hands of the or at least under the influence of the rural proprietary classes. Dhanagare (1983: 218) also cites the examples of peasant rebellions at Champaran, Kheda, Bardoli in the pre-independence days during the 1920s or the No-Rent campaign in U.P. in 1930–32 as instances of movements by the middle and rich peasants. In most cases, these movements were targeted against the government and never showed “either ability or the inclination to ‘dynamite the total peasant social order’...” (ibid). Actually, these
movements are in the nature of competition between various proprietary classes for acquiring maximum benefits from the development process. They also use the State apparatus to exploit, oppress and terrorise the poor. We find an echo of such opinion in the words of Debjani Sengupta (Chatterjee 2004: 250) who says that the demands of agricultural labourers and poor peasants “have often been included in the formal charter of demands but never seriously pursued. They have also ignored the fact that in industries costs for such benefits to the labourers are shared by the employers. They have not only shied away from their responsibilities to the agricultural labourers, the latter’s interests also have often been opposed by them.” These movements are manifest through caste, linguistic, religious, ethnic and many other forms.

The second category of movements are launched by the rural poor and targeted against the rural proprietary classes who are the beneficiaries of development. Despite the attempts by the power-wielders to crush them, these movements are gathering momentum. They are developing around numerous and diverse issues ranging from security of employment, minimum wages payable, rights over a certain share of the produce, putting an end to illegal and forcible dispossession and ejection from land to socio-cultural exploitation and humiliation by the upper caste-cum-upper-middle landowning classes in association with the State. The anti-eviction movement launched by the WBPKS in the 1950s or the Khentmajoor movement in 1974 organised by the Provincial Kisan Council of West Bengal are examples of this type of movement.

Another type of offences include, says Desai (1994: 36), sexual harassment, discrimination, humiliation and violence perpetrated on women; caste-based oppression and exploitation of Dalits and other backward castes; marginalisation, displacement and proletarianisation of tribal people etc. These categories of people are most hard-hit by the developmental projects of the State. It is especially the tribals who, apart from habitat or livelihood, lose their “ethnic identities, dialects, social structure and cultural ethos and norms
without the State "providing an alternate, more meaningful and satisfying higher humane alternative" (ibid).

Trapped in this vicious net the tribals and other rural poor are rallying around new types of agrarian movements. Desai gives the example (1986: 6) of Naxalbari movement when during 1966–67 governmental measures in the form of land tenure had resulted in disastrous consequences on the conditions of the rural poor which had sparked of peasant rebellions. Tribal revolts of Bihar, as chronicled by K.S. Singh (ibid: 145–167), director of Anthropological Survey of India and research fellow of ICSSR, also falls in this category. The Bharatiya Khet Majdoor Union has also conducted militant struggles by poor farmers and agricultural labourers which have the potentiality to become "the chief class in the rural areas...leader of the revolution...and how its demands can provide a proper strategy for struggles..." (ibid: 10). Dhanagare (1983: 218) cites some examples of peasant movements of this type where "the principal participants are invariably the poor peasants, tenants-at-will with smallholdings and share-croppers and landless labourers." Examples of such movements are Tebhaga and Telengana movements, which continued after independence and were conducted mainly by the bargadars in North Bengal in the case of the former and by the poor tribal tenantry and landless labourers in the case of the latter. These movements, says Desai (1994: 36), are questioning the functioning and morality of the socio-economic framework emerging in this country which treats the issue of minimum standard of human existence and requirement of basic provisions as "a 'law and order' problem or obstructive of national integration." The objectives of these movements are to secure the basic goods and services essential for a citizen to survive with dignity. As the chosen path of development is operating in a manner which denies the people the economic, political and socio-cultural prerequisites—to act as sovereign citizens and determine the path of development, so the movements are becoming more and more widespread and militant. Desai observes (1986: XXI) that, "The rural poor
do not want to perish. They no longer want to live a passive bestial existence. They are awakening, rising in revolt, and are deepening and widening their struggles." It is only in the course of the struggle that the rural poor will attain a higher level of consciousness, become the class with revolutionary potential and strive to establish "a radically different and qualitatively new type of society, where all human beings can at least be assured a decent, dignified existence to enable them to contribute creatively to the environment within which they live and die." (ibid.). Hence, the Indian revolution has the historically crucial role of not only ending the exploitative backward capitalist order created consciously by the ruling class in India. On the contrary, "its role has to be appreciated in terms of its far-reaching impact on world-wide struggles to end petrified world capitalist system itself." (ibid: XXV).

To Desai, even the Marxist scholarship available in India has been unable to portray the proper significance of the post-independence agrarian movements. Contrary to the opinions of the latter, mere completion of the bourgeois-democratic tasks will not be enough. Furthermore, by functioning under the hegemony of a proletarian party will also not give the desired end because ultimately the policies of the Left parties in India [viz. the C.P.I. and the C.P.I.(M)], are determined according to the exigencies of winning elections and preserving ministries (ibid: 4, 8). The Left parties in India have failed to evolve alternative organs of struggles of the exploited and oppressed classes comprising the agrarian proletariat, poor peasants, landless labourers etc. in the countryside. To Desai (1985c: 42), it is unfortunate that the Left parties wedded to National Democratic and People's Democratic revolutions and also "those who are involved neck-deep in parliamentary cretinism and are in desperate search for alliance with various categories of bourgeois parties for seats in assemblies, parliament and ministries and cabinets, are not able to see the sinister implication of the new policies which are being consciously evolved by the ruling class and their state in the Third World countries...but are busy
with evolving unprincipled alliances for electoral purposes with various sections of bourgeois and new-rich farmer classes” (ibid).

Apart from its heroism and self-sacrificing attitude, the rural poor should strive to unify the struggles occurring all over the country and inculcate the vision of seizing State-power. Moreover, the agricultural labourers are no longer to be considered as mere appendage of the peasantry but as a distinct class with its own particular demands and own kind of significance. Agrarian proletariat, due to its militancy, can become the vanguard and leader of the revolution in the rural areas. It would be complemented by the industrial proletariat in the urban sector “with poor peasantry as the main ally, the bourgeois, the rich farmers, and kulaks as the main enemy, and landlords as the subordinate ally of the rural bourgeoisie and the rich farmers in the countryside” (Desai 1986:10).

Desai, thus, reformulates the concept of class alliance in the forthcoming revolution. Here social transformation cannot be achieved by organic evolutionary processes within the basic existing structures; the need of the hour is a “r-evolutionary transformation of the structures themselves and cutting of dependent and dependency-generating ties” (Desai 1979b: 757).

The lower strata or the rural poor, under the impact of new political, economic and other forces, are becoming aware of the true nature of their problems though the ruling class, in connivance with the State machinery, seeks to “somehow or other divert the attention of the masses from the real cause of their malady...the capitalist socio-economic framework” (Desai 1986: 82). The ruling class is aware of its limitations and inability to meet the rising demands within the present scenario. They are, hence, forced to develop a series of myths to divert the attention of the people from the root cause of their distress. Thus, in economic and political operations the norms and values of bourgeois rationality are encouraged; on the other hand, in socio-cultural fields and in the area of providing alternative world-view the obscurantist, non-rationalist, non-militant, casteist, religious, superstitious value-system is fostered systematically.
Nevertheless, in spite of considerable efforts at ideological remodeling and remoulding of the masses, the rural poor have gained, says Desai (ibid: 29), “a new sense of realization that they have to compete to secure jobs and benefits.” Their economic dependence and lack of skills and education due to their inability to command resources are forcing them to develop anomic reactions. The struggles emerge and operate under tremendous difficulties like hostile atmosphere, lack of resources, multipronged manoeuvres (sic) of the ruling classes to prevent, distort and confuse them, State terrorism etc. Under such circumstances the movements of the rural poor, launched from time to time, has often been defensive, inadequately organised and based on wrong strategies. They have, says Desai (ibid: 30), nevertheless, expressed a “new determination to fight back and escape the ever-tightening noose put round their necks by the newly operating economy and polity.”