
UNIT 27 PEASANTRY AND WORKING CLASSES

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27.1 INTRODUCTION

The Leftist movement in twentieth century Indian politics brought the focus to bear upon peasants, workers and their movements during the freedom struggle. Attempts to write the histories of these movements involved a closer study of class relations in Indian society, especially peasant-landlord relations and worker-capitalist relations. There had been earlier studies of related aspects, especially a voluminous historical literature on industry. The aim of radical historiography, however, was to treat the peasants and workers as historical subjects in their own right. Soon, it became evident that the history of workers and peasants might not be grasped fully without taking their evolving relationship with the superior classes into account. As these realisations dawned, the new labour historians emphasised the importance of treating labour and capital together. By the very nature of the subject, moreover, the older colonial historiography had tended to treat agrarian relations as a whole, keeping in view the mutual relations of tenants and landlords in any investigation of the condition of peasants.

The terms 'peasant' and 'worker, it may be noted in this context, were somewhat novel terms in Indian history. Colonial historiography had usually used the terms 'tenant' and 'ryot' rather than the 'peasant'. The term 'ryot' was a distortion of the Persian term '*raiyyat*', which meant, literally, 'subject'. In Mughal times, all subordinate classes of villagers, including the tillers of the land who were liable to pay the land tax, were referred to as 'ri'aya' (plural of *raiyyat*) or subjects. While the peasants were very much there in the pre-colonial period, the class of industrial workers did not exist then. The people who did exist were the artisans, farms servants, field labourers, tanners, distillers, and the miscellaneous class of the labouring poor including sweepers, scavengers, palanquin bearers and so on. The industrial proletariat was a new class that emerged along with the rise of large-scale industry in the later nineteenth century. Worker's history, in the stricter sense of the term, could not have existed before then. **The conceptualisation of the peasant as a separate class and the emergence of the workers as a distinct new class led to the emergence of peasants' and workers' history in the course of the twentieth century.** The Marxist concept of the class and the spread of the communist ideology in India constituted a factor in the emergence of the radical historiography relating to workers and peasants.

The leftist historiography of workers and peasants grew especially in the period after independence. A. R. Desai, a Marxist intellectual, edited *Peasant Struggles in India* (Bombay, 1979). Sunil Kumar Sen, a CPI historian and himself an active participant in the Tebhaga or Sharecropper Movement in late colonial Bengal, wrote an eye-witness historical account entitled *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* (Calcutta, 1972), and later produced *Working Class Movements in India 1885-1975* (Delhi, 1994). Another straightforward Marxist account was by Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1970* (Calcutta, 1977).

27.2 HISTORIOGRAPHY BEFORE 1947

It would be a mistake to think that peasant and workers constituted an entirely new subject, nor would it be right to say that there was no interest in the subject before the emergence of socialism. That there was an early interest in the conditions of the poor is shown by Reverend Lal Behari Day's English language fictional work, *Govinda Samanta* (2 vols., 1874). It was brought out in a new edition entitled *Bengal Peasant Life* (1878), which contained important material on the peasantry of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the Brahmo social reformer, Sasipada Banerjee, launched the Bengali magazine *Bharat Sharmajibi* (The Indian Worker) as early as 1874, and this magazine contained important historical material.

One may, indeed, go back to the eighteenth century, and find English and Persian accounts of agriculture and the agriculturist. H.T. Colebrooke, a senior East India Company servant, wrote his *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal in 1794* (new ed. Calcutta 1804). Recently, historians have traced an important Persian manuscript entitled *Risala-i Zirat* (Treatise on Agriculture), written by a late Mughal official of Bengal for a company servant in 1785, in which he set out four distinct categories of cultivators; (1) *muqarrari* cultivator, a tenant with a permanent deed (2) *khudkasht* cultivator, a tenant with understood rights in his own village, (3) *paikasht* cultivator, a tenant residing in a village other than the one in which his field was located, and (4) *kaljanah*, or 'one who tilled land as the subordinate of another cultivator', (see Harbanb Mukhia, 'The *Risala-i Zirat* [a Treatise on Agriculture]', included in Harbanb Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History* (New Delhi, 1993). From later records, it becomes clear that the fourth type of agriculturist might be an under-tenant, a sharecropper or a plain farm servant. The distinction between the resident (*khudkasht*) peasant and the migrant (*Paikasht*) peasant slowly disappeared during the colonial period due to increasing population pressure, but the same factor kept alive the more fundamental distinction between the peasant and the agricultural servant. The latter was entered in the censuses of colonial India as farm servant or field labourer, and he was a man even below the sharecropper, who still had the status of a peasant.

Because of the British authorities' dependence on the land revenue, the colonial administration kept the ryot constantly in its view and therefore in its records. The same cannot be said of the agricultural labourer, for he was not a tenant and was not liable to pay land revenue from any tenancy. Only the ryot, therefore, is treated along with the zamindar in B. H. Barden-Powell's *Manual of Land Revenue System and Land Tenures of India* (Calcutta, 1882), later republished in the well-known three-volume *Land Systems of British India* (Oxford, 1892). Another official, W.H. Moreland, drew up the *Notes on the Agricultural Conditions and Problems of the United Provinces, Revised up to 1911* (Allahabad, 1913), and later on he produced the classic *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Cambridge, 1929).

From the works of Baden Powell and W.H. Moreland, it emerged clearly that the land revenue of the state and the rent of the landlord had been the traditional mechanisms of

the appropriation of the peasant surplus, not only in the colonial period but also in pre-colonial times. Yet another traditional mechanism of surplus appropriation, indebtedness and the charges upon it, assumed a novel importance in the colonial period, and drew the attention of the British officials in due course. As the ryot began to lose land, and riots broke out against the money-lender, two Punjab officers wrote important works on the ryot's indebtedness, and on the social tensions generated by money lending operations: S.S. Thorburn, *Musalman and Money-lenders in the Punjab* (1866) and Malcom Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London, 1932).

The colonial administration also generated works on labour employed in cottage and small-scale industries. Two important official works relating to Uttar Pradesh were William Hoey, *A Monograph on Trade and Manufactures in Northern India* (Lucknow, 1880), and A.C. Chatterjee, *Notes on the Industries of the United Provinces* (Allahabad, 1908). Logically, a mid-day point in the transition from the cottage to the factory was the workshop employing several artisans, and this important development was touched on in an unofficial work: N.M. Joshi, *Urban Handicrafts of the Bombay Deccan* (Poona, 1936).

The emergence of large-scale industry produced two new social forces: labour and capital. Among the works of the colonial period relating to these new developments may be mentioned S.M. Rutnagar, *Bombay Industries: the Cotton Mills* (Bombay, 1927); D.H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India* (New York, 1934); and Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Indian Working Class* (Bombay, 1945). It will be evident that by the late colonial period the worker had found his place beside the peasant as a force to reckon with in the economic life of the country. The involvement of these types of people in the growing political unrest included the UK Government to dispatch two royal commissions that generated important reports on their conditions: *The Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, Report* (1928) and *The Royal Commission on Labour in India, Report* (1931). The colonial period generated great body of evidence on the peasant and the worker for research after independence.

27.3 THE LEFT PARADIGM AND ITS CRITICS

The left identified the working class as the vanguard of the class struggle and the most progressive political force in Indian society. The overwhelming mass of the population still lived off agriculture, and the leftist historians were therefore induced to pay some attention to the peasantry. They came up with a paradigm, or framework of understanding, in order to make sense of change in agrarian society during the colonial period. The paradigm was worked out soon after independence in such works as S.J. Patel, *Agricultural Workers in Modern India and Pakistan* (Bombay, 1952) and Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Dynamics of a Rural Society* (Berlin, 1957). On this view of the matter, colonial rule in India produced a series of related changes in agrarian society: the creation of landed property by law; forced commercialisation of crops; land brought to the market as a commodity; the spread of peasant indebtedness and land alienation; the disintegration of the peasantry into rich peasants and poor peasants; depeasantisation, landlessness and the emergence of a pauperised class of landless labourers; the collapse of the village community of self-sufficient peasants and a far reaching process of social stratification in the countryside

Subsequent research revealed that these notions were misinformed, and based on an inadequate acquaintance with the vast documentation in the colonial archives. The

work of serious historical investigation and revision began with Dharma Kumar's pioneering work, *Land and Caste in South India, Agricultural Labour in Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1965). She proved with rich documentation that pre-colonial and early-colonial India already possessed a vast agrarian under-class of bonded labourers who traditionally belonged to the untouchable castes. Landlessness here was function of caste and not of the market. Rajat and Ratna Ray followed with an article in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (vol. 10, 1973), entitled 'The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal under the British Imperium: a study of Quasi-Stable Subsistence Equilibrium in Underdeveloped Societies in a Changing World', in which they contended that a group of rich peasants who had their lands cultivated by sharecroppers and bonded labourers existed even at the beginning of colonial rule, and were beneficiaries of economic change in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet another attack on the Marxist paradigm of polarisation between rich and poor peasants during the colonial period came from a contrary direction. There had earlier been a debate in Russia between V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov on stratification with the peasantry. As against Lenin's thesis that growth of agrarian capitalism and the emergence of a class of *kulaks* (rich peasants) had permanently stratified the Russian peasantry into rich and poor, Chayanov contended that the Russian peasantry remained a homogeneous and subsistence-oriented community of small-holders among whom differences of farm size were cyclical and not consolidated into permanent distinctions. Eric Stokes, in his contribution to *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol.2, C.1757-c.1970*, edited by Dharma Kumar (Cambridge, 1983), expressed the opinion that there was no agrarian polarisation. If divisions did occur in the countryside, it was 'more because of the slow impoverishment of the mass than the enrichment of the few' (contribution entitled 'Agrarian Relations: Northern and Central India'). Opinion on this complex issue has remained divided. Did the peasants remain an undifferentiated class of poor small holders? Neil Chalesworth, in *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850 – 1935* (Cambridge, 1985) contended that a certain degree of commercialisation of agriculture in colonial India had the effect of pushing up a number of peasants. Sugata Bose, on the other hand, maintained, in *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics 1919-1947* (Cambridge, 1986), that rich farmers were to be seen only among reclaimers of land in a few frontier areas. In the more settled districts of East Bengal, the egalitarian peasant small holding system remained intact for most of the colonial period. More recently, Nariaki Nukazato, in *Agrarian System in Eastern Bengal C. 1870-1910* (Calcutta, 1994), has found that even there, at least a quarter of the land had come under the unequal relationship of cultivating employers and sharecropping under-tenants. He lends support to an earlier thesis to this effect in Binay Bhushan Chudhuri, 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947,' *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 2, 1975. Chaudhuri's article made the important point that the growing number of sharecroppers among the peasants indicated an incipient process of depeasantisation even while outwardly the small-holding system appeared to be intact.

Historians, moreover, came to concede that class was not the only factor in differentiation among the peasantry. Studies such as M.C.Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India*, David Pocock, *Kanbi and Patidar: a study of the Patidar Community of Gujarat*, and Stephen F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922* (1980) showed that caste and community were capable of producing important rural solidarities among the members, setting them apart from other peasants.

27.4 THE LONGER TERM PERSPECTIVE

W.H. Moreland had set the agenda for a long-term visualisation of the role of the state in the life of the rural population. Marxist historians at Aligarh, following in his footsteps set about exploring aspects of agrarian life and the state formation in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. In the early 1960s, Irfan Habib, a formidable Aligarh historian, demonstrated the overwhelming presence of the Mughal state in the life of the heavily taxed peasantry in *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* (Bombay, 1963). He depicted several peasant rebellions that occurred in the reign of Aurangzeb. The two ends of the spectrum, the state and the village, were also portrayed with the help of rich Marathi documentation by the Japanese historian Hiroshi Fukazawa, whose essays were collected together in *The Medieval Deccan; Peasants, Social Systems and States, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (New Delhi, 1991). The American historian, Burton Stein, maintained that the state, rooted in the life of the peasant community, had a weaker and more segmented character than Irfan Habib had allowed, at least in the south. This non-Marxist perspective was set forth in Stein's *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi, 1980). Another American historian, David Ludden, undertook a long-term study of local rulers and villagers in Tirunelveli district in the deep south. The micro-study spanned the pre-colonial and colonial periods and was entitled *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985). The history of peasants now had a broader perspective than the initial Marxist studies of peasant movements.

27.5 PEASANT MOVEMENTS

The above perspective lent a growing sophistication to the study of peasant struggles. A growing band of non-Marxist historians entered the field with new concepts. The pioneer in this sophisticated new variety of history was Eric Stokes, whose essays on the conditions and movements of peasants paid due attention to caste, markets, tax burden and a variety of other factors. His essays were collected together in *The Peasant and The Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978). The sociologist D. N. Dhangare's *Peasant Movements in India* (Delhi, 1983) represented another breakaway from the older one-dimensional Marxist perspective. Ranjit Guha, at the same time, brought a subalternist perspective to bear on the subject in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1983). He showed that peasant actions were typically circumscribed by the locality, based on caste or communal ties, and oriented towards an inversion of existing hierarchy rather than a revolutionary breakthrough on the Marxist model.

27.6 LABOUR HISTORY

The older leftist history of the trade union movement in India assumed, uncritically, that the working class in India was practically the same, in its social constitution and outlook, as the European working class. Closer examination of the sources by the historians threw doubt on the revolutionary potential and socialist outlook of the so-called 'proletariat'. It was demonstrated by the new labour historians that the mentality and the consciousness of the industrial workers did not differ all that much from the outlook of the poor who depended on the casual labour market in town and country. Among the works that revised labour history substantially may be mentioned Morris David Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force India: A Study of the Bombay*

Cotton Mills 1845-1947 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965); R.K. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay 1919-29: a Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills* (Canberra, 1981); Sujata Patel, *The Making of Industrial Relations. The Ahmedabad Textile Industry 1918-1939* (Delhi, 1987), a study of the Gandhian model of trade unionism based on the cooperation of capital and labour; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1989), a study of jute mill labour from the Subalternist point of view; and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay 1900-1940* (Cambridge, 1994). Dipesh Chakrabarty noted that the 'hierarchical precapitalist culture' of the workers made them prone to communal violence and inclined them to dependence on the 'Sardars' who recruited them. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, in his wide ranging study, noted the dependence of the workers on the 'Dadas' in the neighbourhood. Instead of organising themselves into effective modern trade unions, the rural migrants to the mill towns depended on jobbers and on communal solidarities. They were prone to unorganised easily-suppressed violence. Communal riots displaced prolonged, successful strikes all too often in labour unrest.

In a book entitled *Village Communities in the East and West* (London, 1871), Sir Henry Maine conceived old Indian society in terms of status and community, as against contract and class. The picture of isolated, self sufficient village communities might have been overdrawn even then. As colonial rule progressed, so did the understanding of Indian society, and this is reflected in the title of a recent work: Kapil Kumar (ed.), *Congress and Classes: Nationalism, Workers and Peasants* (New Delhi, 1988). The long-term effect of colonial rule was to bring the classes into play in a new national area.

27.7 SUMMARY

The land and the peasantry had been an object of attention by the colonial officials since the early days of colonial rule. Land revenue was the most important source of government's income and the peasants were the people who worked the land and occasionally rose in rebellion against the landlords and the government. The dependence of the colonial government on land revenue necessitated that the peasantry was kept under close scrutiny. Several early works, therefore, focused on the land-revenue systems. However, in the course of time, academically oriented and impartial studies about the land settlement and the peasantry, both for the colonial and pre-colonial periods, began to appear.

The industrial working classes were of more recent origins. The establishment of modern factories and their ancillaries, the railways, ports and construction activities were the source of the new working class. Studies related to the themes of the modern industries and the modern working class began to appear since the early 20th century. The evidences generated by the colonial government on various aspects of labour in different regions of the country helped the scholars in this field.

Although many of these studies and done by the leftist scholars, there were several other scholars who differ with them on various issues, such as the increasing polarisation within the peasantry, the non-existence of a significant number of agricultural workers during pre-colonial period and on the revolutionary potential of the modern working class.

27.8 EXERCISES

- 1) How did the peasant and working class histories begin? Discuss the histories related to these classes before independence.
- 2) Give an account of the histories of peasants and working classes after independence.

