
UNIT 28 AGRARIAN POLICY AND LAND RIGHTS

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28.1 INTRODUCTION

Agrarian policy comprises all the actions of government towards agriculture. It includes policies relating to land revenue, surveying and records; to land ownership, tenancy and rural labour; to agricultural production and trade; and to the science and development of cultivation. It is complex and its detail may seem dull. But it is very important. It affects, among other things, the following:

- *politics* – how power is exercised in the countryside; how the state tries to gain support; what interests it represents;
- *government* – what it can and cannot do, and what it is for; the state's income and how it is spent;
- *economy* – the terms on which societies organise the production of food and the exchange of goods; the comparative importance of cultivation, processing, industry and services; a country's or a region's standing among others;
- *well-being* – the social distribution of food, work and wealth; levels of health and population;
- *culture* – attitudes towards property, employment, family and inheritance; other social and moral values, such as the significance and purpose of cultivation; how people think about socio-economic classes and 'rights'.

For a foreign government, agrarian policy therefore provided what is arguably the most important point of influence upon the subject people and territory. In India the British, though so few and distant from the majority of people, could use agrarian

policy to change the nature of landholding, the availability of land, and the capacity of people to move from one place or one job to another. They could use it to influence the kinds of crop that were grown, the manner in which credit was provided to cultivators, and the ways crops were marketed. They could use it to affect the patterns of consumption, the basis of prestige, and the terms on which some Indians gained dominance over others. They could use it to control and reward favoured classes, and to transform India's internal and international economy.

Or, more precisely, as we should not think of any government as being all-powerful and all-knowing, they could introduce policies for a variety of motives, and find that they produced a range of intended and unintended effects.

With hindsight, we can see that agrarian policies led to a kind of revolution in India. Though agrarian legacies and continuities were important, the picture of an India of unchanging villages was never true. But the picture became even less accurate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

28.2 MOTIVES AND CONTEXTS OF LAND POLICIES

This discussion will concern itself with only one aspect of colonial agrarian policy, the large aspect related to land rights. There are two main contexts, relating to the motives lying behind the policies.

First is the motive of *control*. Land policies are partly about ensuring that there is order in the countryside, and that revenue is readily relinquished to the state. This does not mean that land policies were merely a form of coercion. Just as important, they offered a means of persuasion. The British wanted to support or create classes which would have an interest in collaborating with them, and which would be able to curb those who tried to resist or avoid the state's authority. The British also intended (though they did not succeed) to ensure basic levels of well-being in the population as a whole, so as to avoid the costs and dislocation of famine, disease and desertion, and thus protect future state revenues.

Second, there is the question of *trade*. In the eighteenth century British trade with India centred on exchanging India's manufactured cotton-goods for bullion (silver and gold). This was partly because there was little market in India for British produce, but also because silver and gold were not simply money but commodities wanted by India that Europe could supply relatively cheaply. Even cheaper for the British East India Company, however, was to make its purchases in India using revenues from Indian territories, and profits from the sale of products in which the Company established a monopoly, such as salt and opium. Such strategies also implied land policies.

Later, from the mid-nineteenth century, this not very efficient or profitable system gave way to one that sought to draw on a much wider range of products, and to involve a much bigger proportion of Indian consumers. This meant that land policies became even more important. Overseas land and labour resources were now beginning to support and enrich the population and the capitalists of Britain, as its industrialisation progressed. At first, slave plantations, north American development, and newer colonies of settlement played a larger part in this process than India. But India soon became a source of raw materials (cotton, jute, indigo) and of some foods and drugs (opium, tea, coffee, wheat), and also a market for British manufactures. The surpluses earned by India's foreign trade (except with Britain) helped Britain to finance its own deficits in trade

with some other countries. India was also a vital site for British employment, services and investment.

Contrary to what is sometimes thought, colonial land policies were not exactly calculated to achieve these effects, which were the outcome of countless individual economic decisions and not of any far-seeing state plan. But certainly Indian land policies were expected to help or at least not to hinder British economic interests, which were also supported by the economic theories of those days. The success of the policies can be seen in the extent to which India's countryside *did* perform the roles required of it by British industrialists, merchants and consumers.

28.3 REVENUE SETTLEMENTS

The basis of land policy was the revenue settlement, meaning the decision as to how much would be paid to the state for land, who would pay it, and on what terms and conditions.

28.3.1 The Permanent Settlement

The tendency in India was for strong states to reach down as near as possible to the actual cultivators for information about agriculture and land-holding, and in order to fix responsibility for the payment of land revenue. No pre-colonial states managed to do without local intermediaries – lords, record-keepers, headmen, and so on – but many kept careful records relating to land-holding and revenue payment. The most celebrated survey was that ordered by Todar Mal, finance minister of the Mughal emperor, Akbar. During much of the seventeenth century, this and further surveys permitted a system of regulated revenue settlement based on assessments of agricultural output.

In the eighteenth century, however, there was an ever-increasing demand for revenue. This was attributable to a number of factors: the growth of stronger regional states, the cost of warfare, investment in production and trade, tributes paid to others (especially the Marathas and the British East India Company), and loss of income to intermediaries or to the powerful, again including the European trading companies, which generally avoided local tolls and taxes. This need for money led to agreements between local rulers and either the powerful elites (a few *zamindars*, then meaning the territorial lords and official revenue-collectors) or efficient 'fixers', so-called revenue-farmers or *ijaradars* chosen by auction. In general these arrangements implied short-term increases in revenue in return for a reduction of central control.

In 1765 the British East India Company gained control over the revenues of Bengal and Bihar. At first the Company worked through deputies who also served the Nawab of Bengal; and, even when it took control directly at the behest of the Governor, Warren Hastings, in 1772, it still awarded the revenue-collecting right to the highest bidders for terms of one or more years. But the Company was gaining information through access to the revenue records (moved to Calcutta), the experience of some European collectors, and also a commission of inquiry in the districts. Strong theoretical and practical arguments were advanced, notably by Council-member, Philip Francis, that short-term revenue-farming was unwise.

In 1789, therefore, a ten-year settlement was declared by the acting Governor, Sir John Shore. In 1793, under the new Governor, Lord Cornwallis, this was superseded

by a settlement that was declared permanent: that is, the rate of tax was fixed for ever. The settlement was to be made by local arrangements using the existing records (without survey) and with what were thought to be (but in many instances were not) hereditary landed interests, the *zamindars*.

Many considerations lay behind this system, which was ordered from Britain. It provided a means of running India through general rules, set out in a long list of Regulations enforceable by the courts. Such minimal direct government was favoured by the political theories of the day. The system was also thought suited to Indian expectations and to conditions in Bengal, where the self-seeking servants of an imperfectly organised commercial company were now in possession of an empire. Making the settlement with *zamindars* would secure, or if necessary create, an indigenous rural aristocracy. Permanence would place a clear and fixed limit to the government's share of production, and thus encourage investment, higher productivity and trade, which then would increase the government's income indirectly.

To some extent these goals were achieved, though the Company soon turned against the Bengal system. The cultivated area increased, and more crops were grown for local and international markets, adding to an already commercialised agriculture, and to established means for the reclamation of land. *Zamindars*, despite pockets of resistance, gave up their broader military and political roles, and became adjuncts to a new political order and subjects of the Company's government. Gradually, from the early years when land could barely be sold at any price, a valuable land market grew, along with population, giving meaning to the rights created in and after 1793. New landlords, at first often resisted by local communities, were able to call on state force to ensure their possession. A tendency in favour of separate rather than shared landholding led to partitions under official scrutiny, so that the number of *zamindars* increased markedly, especially in some districts. Land became a reliable security for borrowing and mortgages, but also, therefore, a means whereby traders and moneylenders could extract agrarian produce at lower cost and somewhat reduced risk to themselves.

The permanent settlement attached possession to revenue-payment. In the past, non-payers could be punished in their person – by imprisonment or torture, for example. Now their property was at risk. Some great *zamindars* lost out, as the revenue demand was often set at rates that were initially very high (a notional 90 per cent of income). But new regulations were introduced to help the remainder, over the next few decades, by giving them near-absolute powers over their tenants and over tenants' property, including standing crops.

Some agrarian classes had their pre-existing rights recognised. This qualified those given to *zamindars*. In some areas intermediary landholders (*jotedars*) gained most from the permanent settlement, through directly managing production. On the whole, however, the legal position of cultivators was weakened. For most of the nineteenth century, until changes in the law and in official attitudes, they did not share in the benefits as incomes from agriculture improved. Even in the eighteenth century, dispossessed and opportunist people had formed criminal gangs (as dacoits) in the countryside. In the nineteenth century, armed or concerted resistance broke out, expressing various mixtures of religious, social and economic grievances. Disease, scarcity and famine worsened in rural communities, partly because of the gradual spread of the effect of these changes in property law.

28.3.2 The Temporary Settlements

Very soon after the introduction of the permanent settlement in north east India, it was challenged by Company officials, especially Thomas Munro, who held that it was inappropriate to the areas they knew. In Munro's case this meant parts of the Madras presidency, where (despite a permanent settlement along the Andhra coast) he claimed that either there were no identifiable landlords, or the local chiefs threatened British rule and should be removed not revived. More generally he argued that a *zamindari* settlement was contrary to Indian understandings of landholding and revenue-obligations. A little later, around 1812, these conservative arguments were allied with the reformist and anti-aristocratic tendencies of Utilitarian thinkers and political economists, such as James Mill, who now controlled the London administration of the Company. This alliance ensured that no further settlements would be permanent.

It was argued that landlords did not generally contribute to prosperity, and were not doing so in Bengal; and that production would be best increased by giving property rights to those responsible for tilling the soil. It was claimed that Indians did not understand or were abusing the elaborate legal system that had been set up in Bengal, and that they would be better served by rulers who combined executive and judicial functions.

In future, therefore, most settlements were '*raiyyatwari*', that is made with the *raiyyats* (those regarded as 'actual cultivators') rather than with landlords. Such settlements were introduced in southern and western India. Similar but modified versions were later devised for 'village communities' (*mahalwari* settlements) based around co-sharers (*pattidari* or *bhaiachara*), in parts of north India, especially the Punjab.

Broadly speaking, these temporary settlements relied on close surveys of the countryside, and on regularly revised records. Revenue-rates for each cultivated plot were set for a limited period, commonly thirty years. Actual payments depended on annual reports on the use of that plot. Temporary settlements therefore implied close and personal rather than distant and legalistic government. They nevertheless standardised the categories of landholding, and replaced systems based on shares or collective liabilities with ones based on individual title.

The surveys were always elaborate, and became more time-consuming and 'scientific' during the nineteenth century, separating measurement and the drawing of plans from the recording of landholders and from economic, social and historical assessments of the conditions in every village and in regions (called *circles*) of similar character. Revenue rates were increasingly set at levels related to the supposed capacity of the soil (not current output), in order to discourage idleness. They were calculated in accordance with the definition of rent by the classical economist, David Ricardo – namely, that it was merely the unearned extra produce from better land, compared with that from the least favourable land, and therefore both measurable and safe to tax. When this (in fact very imprecise) calculation led to overly high revenue demands, these were modified by more subjective assessments of what areas could afford to pay.

The Punjab in particular, in the later nineteenth century, advocated a peasant-proprietary model of agrarian policy, and turned the survey and settlement report into an expensive intellectual exercise, one of the founts of today's anthropology and development studies. By contrast, the United Provinces saw a resurgence of

belief in aristocratic land-control, especially in Awadh following the rebellion of 1857-8. There, a settlement was made with superior landlords (*taluqdars*) in replacement of a village-level settlement introduced immediately after the British annexation. It was debated whether this and other settlements should be made permanent. In the event they remained temporary, even where superior revenue-collectors were again recognised, for example in central India as well as in Awadh.

28.4 SUBSEQUENT ADJUSTMENTS

The systems introduced between 1770 and the 1850s did not remain unchanged. New ideas and perceived problems prompted adjustments, which continued up to and after the end of British rule.

28.4.1 Preserving Property

Many measures were taken to preserve property. On larger estates the British encouraged primogeniture, so as to avoid the risk of subdivision upon inheritance. In the twentieth century too many, though less effectual, efforts were made to halt the fragmentation of plots of cultivation, and to facilitate land-swaps that would consolidate scattered holdings.

Legislation was passed to ease the burden on 'encumbered estates' whose survival was threatened by bad management or misfortune. The Court of Wards, first introduced into Bengal in 1790 and 1793, provided for the temporary administration of an estate by the Board of Revenue, where necessary or requested, in the stead of an 'incapable *zamindar*' (a description often held to include women).

Especially after riots in the Deccan in 1875, a host of more general measures sought to protect landholders in the temporarily-settled areas against moneylenders who, supposedly, were snapping up land-rights and disturbing the time-honoured political and social equilibrium of the countryside. Various laws qualified the advantage given to creditors by the increased security of landed property, including tenancies, and by the operation of the laws of contract. The most extreme of these was the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900, which tried to restrict land transfer (and hence mortgages on rural land) to recognised agriculturists, members of the 'tribes and castes' listed in a schedule to the Act.

28.4.2 Tenancy Reform

Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century the government sought mainly to ensure that revenue was paid promptly, in the second half it became more concerned with agricultural development. This matched the demands of British industry for raw materials and markets, but also responded to worries about rural unrest and about the condition and vulnerability of the poor. Such concerns had become important to policy and to political debate from the late 1830s onwards. One consequence was an attempt once again to use property rights as a means of securing political and economic goals. Gradually the idea of state-enforced rights was applied further and further down the tenurial and social scale.

Various Tenancy Acts set out both to protect superior land-owning interests and to provide a measure of security to the cultivators. In the second half of the nineteenth century these enactments began to give some rights to those who held land from landlords rather than directly or indirectly from the state.

In Bengal, the Rent Act of 1859, while purporting to help *zamindars* collect rents, also recorded as settled or occupancy tenants those who had held land for twelve years. It placed restrictions on the enhancement of rents. It also sought to improve landlord-tenant relations, and the more effective resolution of agrarian disputes.

Defects in this legislation, and more radical impulses for reform in the aftermath of further famine and rural unrest, led to the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which added two major points. Firstly, there were more elaborate classifications of tenants and gradations of rights, with a presumption of occupancy status in a village for all those holding any land in that village. In many areas this status now applied to large majorities of first-tier tenants (that is, excluding those who were the tenants of other tenants). Secondly, there was provision for survey and settlement, to establish and record rights, holdings and rents, by analogy with the procedures in temporarily-settled areas. These had the effect, as operations proceeded, of establishing tenant rights and familiarising people with them.

Indian legislation was influenced by the ideas of fair and fixed rents and secure tenure that had been popularised during tenancy debates in Ireland, where they took on a populist and nationalist hue. More important, however, was that the 1885 Act extended the Punjab peasant-proprietary model. The occupancy tenants of Bengal and Bihar (the latter region being the immediate focus of attention, in view of the poverty of the region) were being ensured a kind of property in their land-holdings, in order to encourage them to invest in agriculture – to make them, in short, rich peasants.

The trend after 1885 was for the principles of the Bengal Act to be extended elsewhere, such as to the Central Provinces in 1895. But it was overtaken by measures designed to regulate all aspects of agrarian relations. Other regions had also had tenancy legislation, but the needs were different where numerous cultivators rather than landlords were the ostensible revenue-payers. In the twentieth century, too, further measures were taken in Bengal and Bihar (as elsewhere) to afford some legal protection to sub-tenants, share-croppers and labour. None of these, strictly, related to property. Rather they built on arguments about equity (also heard during the debates over the 1885 Act).

The role of government was being extended. It was no longer content merely to frame the agrarian structure (that is, establish and define landed property) in the hope of promoting commercial expansion and securing its revenue. It now placed a new emphasis on investigation and statistics, on agricultural experiments and credit-provision, and even on direct intervention (committees for particular crops, price-fixing, and finally development planning), as part of broader social and economic strategies.

28.5 NEW KINDS OF LAND RIGHTS

Agrarian policy towards land rights, considered in isolation, thus retained an echo of the minimal government favoured in the eighteenth century and by *laissez-faire* doctrines in the nineteenth. This does not mean it was not radically different from what had gone before. Colonial policy introduced new ideas about land use and types of land control. These ideas were common to the different kinds of agrarian policy.

It used to be thought that British laws created land-ownership in India, but it is now plain that this depends on what is meant by the term. In some senses there was private property in land in India from the earliest historical times. Religious notions of renunciation depended on it, as did payments and grants to kings, temples, elites, co-sharers, workers and artisans. Over time, different states found sophisticated ways of measuring and defining land rights, including surveys, records and title-deeds. Land-rights could be sold and inherited; and there were stories and theories about their ultimate origins, and about the proper behaviour of landholders. The holders would enjoy one or more of very many specific kinds of tenure. Of course land-rights were not absolute – they never are – and they could be lost by force or usurpation. They would be qualified by obligations to pay land taxes and/or to supply materials and manpower. They were subject to communal and joint-family obligations, and generally to the rights of others, both superiors and inferiors. All these things also applied to land rights under the British.

What colonial laws and policies did to land rights was more subtle, in theory and also increasingly in practice. They reduced the number of different types of right to those only which the law specified. They made each type's benefits and obligations more definite – by legal definitions, by more precise measurement through scientific surveys, by more exact records, and by the decisions of a hierarchy of courts. They applied uniform concepts to all land: that is, they tried to deny the existence of land of doubtful or shared ownership. There were no sacred groves or shrines that did not belong to a temple or a *mahant*; no forest or flood-plain without owners; no house, well, *ghat* or bazaar without a proprietor. The owner did not need to be an individual, of course. The owner could be a family, a village, a corporation, or the state. But for all that, only one kind of 'ownership' was to be recognised, the kind established in the state's law.

Many local variants and distinctions, and some pragmatic responses to circumstance, were ignored or overridden, for example, between kinds of co-sharers, between resident and non-resident landholders, or between high and low castes. Other pre-existing types were reinforced and generalised, at least in the law, as new categories of landlords, intermediary tenure-holders, tenants and sub-tenants, and later of settled and occupancy tenants or tenants-at-will.

Now, the characteristics or 'incidents' of property were always spelled out. A *zamindar* in Mughal times had any of a range of possible rights, but in particular he had the duty to collect revenue for the state, retaining a proportion for himself (supposedly ten per cent). His revenue-collecting (*malguzari*) right derived from Mughal authority; in regulation districts even the amounts of the collections were theoretically specified by surveys and rules. In addition the *zamindar* might have chiefly powers, derived from his local socio-political standing: his character, caste or lineage, and his command of retainers. These powers carried some obligations to the community, and certainly produced further income, for example through tolls, control over markets, payments for credit, use of forced labour, and further shares of produce. There would have also been others occupying and using *the same land*, who might similarly have had effective rights over it, for example a right to cultivate, or to reside in a village and exploit village resources. Such rights too fell into particular categories and had specific names, and, just like *zamindari* rights, they could be derived from license, or custom, or power. Pre-colonial rights therefore could be of different types and degrees, and could overlap in relation to the same plot of land.

Within British territory (that is, leaving aside the Indian states), all landowning became in one sense identical, as a complete collection of rights to land, unless some legal provision said otherwise. Landlords were given exclusive titles to specified areas, with qualifications made by law reserving certain other rights for the state, for sub-proprietors or for privileged tenants. All these rights derived from the state and its laws, while any unspecified sub-rights derived only from the landlord. The *khudkasht raiyat* – a cultivator with superior, residence rights in a locality – was turned into a ‘tenant’, for example. And if he was not provided for in the state’s regulations, he could legally gain the right to use land only by *contract* – that is, through an agreement he made with the landlord. He might have privileges or he might have no security of tenure; and in theory this was decided by law not force.

Several provisions turned land into a commodity that could be readily bought and sold, firstly because it could not be arbitrarily seized by the powerful, not even by the state itself, and secondly because it was largely free from encumbrances (that is, subordinate rights that would reduce its value).

One consequence was that ‘rent’ and hence ‘*abwabs*’ (illegal cesses) also changed their meaning. Payments of various kinds had always been made to social and political superiors, on different pretexts, sanctioned partly by the state and partly by custom, and according to what was thought fair or affordable, or what could be extorted given the relative power of the parties involved. Now, there was merely ‘rent’, meaning a contractual payment for the use of land. Anything beyond ‘rent’ became illegal. In the absence of formal leases, and given colonial expressions of respect for Indian ‘custom’, it took a long time before this legal distinction meant anything much in reality. But ultimately rents became more regulated, and ‘illegal’ cesses and dues became much harder to exact. These changes placed pressure upon landlords, and forced them to devise new ways of securing their incomes. Some left the land to better-resourced managers (including European planters) or more skilful agriculturists. Others improved their own management, or cultivated more on their own account, or hardened the terms offered to bonded labour and share-croppers.

This leads on to another important point, that the British related ownership to *use*. Like most other states, they favoured settled agriculture over all other modes of land-utilisation, though they also created reserved forests (as the Mughals did hunting tracts). They deliberately set land-revenue rates – and designed the systems and chose the revenue payers – in order to maximise commercial production, though oddly they chose to do this while thinking they were conserving an old order, and while trying to make land tenure more secure.

Moreover, land which was not in regular use the British defined as ‘waste’. Much of such ‘waste’ they denied to landholders and communities who had had informal shared control over it; they resumed it for the state or allocated it to private owners. Moreover, they greatly reduced the areas that were revenue-free (*inam* or *lakhiraj*). Earlier regimes had left vast amounts of land and its produce in the hands of others, to pay for public services and goods (officials, armies, temples, mosques, schools), and had drawn much government income from their own state lands (*khalisa*). The colonial government was not eager to manage lands directly or to look to state land as a major source of income. And they recognised revenue-free lands only where they could not avoid doing so. Because they wanted to ensure the validity of titles to land, they had to respect specific, unimpeachable, written revenue-free rights, whether from before or after British rule. But for their own part, even when they needed to

show particular marks of favour by making land-grants, for example to soldiers in the Punjab, they very seldom awarded them revenue-free. They preferred to encourage marketing and to collect cash into the treasuries, and then to govern through employees who were paid in money.

What all this implies is a particular idea of the purpose of land: above all, it was to be cultivated, to produce crops that could be sold. The land had to pay, to its owner and then to the state. This was not wholly new of course, as all states and for that matter all settled cultivators had always had much the same idea about land. Exploitation of land resources and the human shaping of landscape certainly long preceded colonial rule in India, and one should not imagine that there was some kind of pre-colonial ecological harmony between man and soil.

But the commercial use of land did become, in British rhetoric, almost the only, the hegemonic idea of what land was for, and this undoubtedly reduced the grip of alternative views: for example, of land as a place of ritual, in such activities as ploughing, sowing and harvesting; of land as sacred and as the basis of the political order; of land as patrimony, or a common good for kin or community; of land as a public store of wealth to be drawn on as necessary; of land as a means of expressing and enforcing social customs and distinctions.

28.6 CONSEQUENCES

Did it all matter? We return briefly to a couple of the issues raised at the beginning. Other conclusions would also be possible, in regard to all the issues raised then.

28.6.1 Differentiation

One consequence of all colonial agrarian policy was the firming up of social classes, and the hardening of divisions between them. With regard to landholdings the evidence is unequivocal. There was a tendency for larger holdings to become relatively more profitable, to preserve their integrity (as seen in statistics of average number and size), and to maintain or even increase their share of total cultivated area. There was also a tendency for the number of smaller holdings to increase, and for their size and share to diminish. These related tendencies had different starting-points and took different forms in different places; and there were differences between permanently- and temporarily-settled tracts, and between irrigated and dry lands. But, broadly, these same two features can be seen everywhere, among and between holdings with many different kinds of title, in lands dominated by large land-owners, and in lands under peasant-proprietors.

There had always been many landless in India, and migrant populations of many kinds. Under colonial rule (and since) the pressure increased for people to settle on land and cultivate it, but larger proportions than ever were unable to subsist from the land in their possession. The growing numbers in cities and in factories were too small proportionately to compensate for this change, especially as population and average life-expectancy rose. Micro-holdings – and share-cropping, and food from landlords' home farms – often became devices to lower cash wages. There was an impoverishment of large sections of India's population. Many factors contributed to this, but an important contribution was made by the very large increase in the numbers of people who could not live by their land alone but had to rely on employment by others.

28.6.2 Politics and Civic Character

The property laws and agrarian policies of the colonial state were related to a number of different ideas, of political economy in particular; for example: property rights, landlordism and village community. These ideas were influential, partly because exemplified in real measures of government and law. Thus Mahatma Gandhi had a vision of an India of self-regulating, self-sufficient communities which was in some respects indistinguishable from the ideal advanced by European anti-materialists and moralists, and also by some colonial policy-makers. The latter believed the 'village republic' to be the original Indian way. They tried to recreate it not only in the Punjab but also elsewhere, as a basis for tenancy and commercial production (Bengal in 1885) and even for local policing (the dream of a village watch supported by a local community).

Independent India sought *zamindari* abolition and land ceilings partly because of these colonial debates about the best means of securing economic progress and social equity. This was another victory for the peasant-proprietary school, but also (in the event) for the subterfuge, pragmatism and compromise that had none the less preserved the wealth and power of many landed families.

Many groups identified themselves through class interests that also drew on these debates, and the broader European discourse to which they had been indebted. The *zamindars* came first, with societies defending their political interests and seeking to reduce their liabilities. In Bengal in the 1870s and 1880s both additional local taxation and tenancy laws were resisted as a 'confiscation of property'. On the other hand, as a defence of property, land revenue was repeatedly reduced as a proportion of incomes and of total tax during the colonial period, and rural taxation has remained comparatively low since independence.

Later, each formation of a *kisan sabha* (peasant society), for example, also reflected a complex indigenous and colonial inheritance. Where a society was active, there were usually more successful agriculturists operating within a market economy, and new rivalries as a result of that upward mobility. There were often religious and social movements drawing on older texts and (especially Vaishnava) traditions, and making claims to status within an increasingly generalised *varna* hierarchy. And there were always claims about fair tenancy and enjoyment of property, concepts that had been imbedded in colonial laws, and transmitted through administration, courts, surveys and settlements.

In short, influences from these agrarian policies can be seen in assumptions that nowadays are scarcely questioned. More than that, they may be traced in the very fabric of society. Take the case of Calcutta. It has long been dominated by upper-caste literate service and professional elites, the *bhadralok*. These were not the direct descendants of the mixed bag of landed magnates, merchants, bankers and office-holders that ran the eighteenth-century city. They were the product of a society made in large part by the permanent *zamindari* settlement.

After an upheaval in which some great families were dispossessed, the settlement permitted the emergence of secure and increasingly wealthy landed classes. It allowed them to live away from the land in the city; to build houses, temples, schools and hospitals; and to sponsor societies, printing, and other civic goods. True, it created many smaller and subordinate landed interests that were less

secure, indeed insufficient. But, on the other hand, it demanded a range of lesser employees, the managers, agents, and clerks that worked the system in practice, plus a host of professionals, especially lawyers.

The permanent settlement was based on regulation and then on statute, implying top-heavy and centralised private and public bureaucracies, regulated by the law-courts, rather than dispersed day-to-day hands-on administration by landholder and state. Calcutta's concentration of writers and literate workers was the result, and they in turn required and manned Calcutta's offices, schools, newspapers and associations.

Other kinds of revenue settlement encouraged other kinds of government and society – too many to be detailed here. Colonial Calcutta and Bengal might be contrasted with Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), the administrative, commercial and industrial centres of regions with temporary *raiyatwari* settlements. They might also be compared with colonial Lahore and Punjab. The priorities of military recruitment as reflected in revenue and land policy, the emphasis on peasant proprietorship (of the so-called agricultural castes), the preservation of some great landed families, and in general a paternalist government defending its personalised rule and customary law: these agrarian policies help explain much of the Punjab's twentieth-century political history, before and after partition, and once again remind us of the formative influence of agrarian policies.

28.7 SUMMARY

Agrarian policies were crucial to the consolidation of British power in India. Through their agrarian policies the British sought to establish order in the countryside, create a social basis of support, and develop a system of production that could supply the colonial demand for agrarian commodities. In 1789, a ten-year settlement was introduced. In 1793 this was superseded by a permanent settlement by which the rate of tax was fixed forever. By the early nineteenth century this revenue system was criticized by officials and questioned by zamindars. This chapter looks at the many pressures that shaped these settlements and also analyses the tenancy reforms that were introduced after the mid-nineteenth century. It discusses how these policies led to changes in land rights and transformation of rural society.

28.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Analyse the chief characteristics of British Indian government's land policy.
- 2) Discuss the reasons behind the introduction of the Permanent Settlement. What were its socio-economic impacts?
- 3) What accounts for the shift from Permanent Settlement to the temporary settlements?
- 4) Critically examine the tenancy reforms by the British Indian government.
- 5) To what extent did British agrarian policy deepen the differentiation within the rural society?

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UNIT 29 PATTERNS OF COMMERCIALISATION

Structure

- 29.1 Introduction
- 29.2 The Classical Approach to Indian Commercialisation
- 29.3 Revising the History of Indian Commercialisation
- 29.4 Commercialisation in Pre-Modern India
- 29.5 Political Territories in Commercial Spaces
- 29.6 Transition to Capitalist Empire
- 29.7 Spatial Patterns of Modern Commercialisation
- 29.8 Geographical Continuities in Indian Commercialisation
- 29.9 The Impact of Indian Commercialisation
- 29.10 Summary
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29.1 INTRODUCTION

Commerce is market exchange, the trading of things with intermediary media called “money.” In the social relations of commercial exchange, the value of money establishes exchange values, or “prices,” for things called “commodities,” which may have other values, based for example, in culture and nutrition, but only their relative market values appear in the calculations that organize commercial transactions where people buy and sell things for money.

Commercialisation is a historical process that turns more things into commodities, brings more people into market exchange, makes more social transactions commercial transactions, and interprets more of the value of things through pricing. Commercialisation pervades societies with commodities, expands the geographical reach of commerce, and makes markets more pervasive in everyday life. Commercialisation transforms human experience by establishing commercial transactions in settings where markets had previously been absent or unimportant.

To study commercialisation, we can imagine a spectrum of social settings, on one end of which, there is no commerce, as for example, in transactions between a nursing mother and her newborn child, and on the other end of which, markets organize all transactions, as on a stock exchange. We can also imagine this spectrum spatially, as being composed of places, like isolated villages, with little commerce, and others, like cities and suburbs, with a lot. Over time, commercialisation increases the proportion of market transactions in social life and social space.

Moving up the scale of commercialisation implicates culture as well as economic life. Creating markets requires making rules to govern the possession, or

ownership, of items held as property and exchanged for money. Commercial actors must also agree about procedures for measuring exchange values. Such shared understandings about the conduct of commerce comprise its cultural content, and we can use “commercialism” to denote any combination of ideas, symbols, values, rules, and institutions that forms the cultural basis of market exchange.

Commercialism often includes people with different cultural identities, defined by ethnicity, language, and religion, because people often share understandings about market exchange despite other differences. Yet each culture also gives commercialism distinctive features, by giving things symbolic values that inform prices, by forming bonds of trust and credit-worthiness, and by legitimating political institutions and social power relations that form effective rules of ownership and legitimate social exchange. Rulers mint money, define property rights, adjudicate disputes, punish violations, and establish official measurements. Cultural elites engage commerce in and across cultural boundaries, using assets acquired through trade, gifts, plunder, theft, tribute, and taxation. People with power and authority make implicit rules as well as explicit laws that govern the possession and exchange of commodities. [Appadurai 1986; Curtin 1984; Gregory 1997; Ludden 1996; Rudner 1994]

Many if not most social transactions operate without recourse to money and markets. How we understand this realm of non-commercial exchange influences how we understand the conditions under which commercialisation occurs and its impact on social environments.

One method is to classify societies according to their dominant form of social exchange. Using this method, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and others depict societies dominated by communal, feudal, and despotic social relations, which allow commerce a marginal role. Theorists thus identify societies that inhabit the low end of the spectrum of commercialisation, and argue that moving such societies up the scale of commercialisation involves a fundamental transformation of a social structure, a dramatic disjuncture, which generates new social structures characterized by increasingly prevalent market exchange. [Hobsbawm 1964]

Another method is to analyze the range of exchange relationships in society. Using this method, Karl Polanyi defined two forms of non-commercial exchange, called “reciprocity” and “redistribution.” In reciprocal exchange, transactions among individuals express feelings of mutual obligation, and in redistributive exchange, people deliver goods and services to a central authority for redistribution according to established rules of entitlement. E.P.Thompson used the phrase “moral economy” to denote cultural rules that express such obligations and entitlements. Societies that include a mix of reciprocal, redistributive, and market exchange inhabit a range of locations on the spectrum of commercialisation; and moving up the scale involves changing the balance and content of social relations to make markets more prevalent. [Chayanov 1966, 1977, Polanyi 1957a, 1957b; Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Sen 1981]

Theorists thus provide various ways to conceptualize social environments that may contradict, resist, accommodate, and encourage commercialisation. Historians have used and revised these theoretical approaches to study commercialisation in India.

29.2 THE CLASSICAL APPROACH TO INDIAN COMMERCIALISATION

By classifying social structures according to their dominant form of social exchange, many scholars have concluded that though commercialism had spread widely across pre-modern Eurasia, only Western Europe generated the globally expansive commercialisation that became capitalism. All histories of commercialisation are entangled with this idea, which thus requires some historical reflection.

When the English term, “capitalism,” entered our vocabulary, about 1850, it referred to the idea promoted by Adam Smith that national wealth grows in proportion to the productive force of autonomous individuals using privately owned assets for personal gain in market exchange. By 1890, the term was in wide circulation, and for the next century, its usage carried three implications: an economic system based on private property, individual profit, and state enforced market principles emerged uniquely in Western Europe; it defines modern economic development; but it also has rivals, based on socialism, communism, and non-European cultural traditions. After 1990, the last of these implications faded away, as the collapse of communist and socialist regimes gave the idea of capitalism a stronger claim to universality, and a new phrase, “global capitalism,” came into circulation, to indicate a new world order in which capitalism has no rivals. [Barber 1967]

In this classical view, European capitalism generated commercialisation around the world. In India, British imperialism appears to have forced commerce into traditional societies, where the dominant unit of social exchange was an essentially self-sufficient village community, in which families, castes, and sects organized exchange with their indigenous moral economy and with minimal recourse to money or markets. In the social structure of traditional India, commerce operated only on the margins of village society; and merchants moved among villages and urban centers to form exchange relationships embedded in a society that strictly constrained commercial expansion. Traditional state institutions also constrained commerce, because, though states extracted taxes that entered markets, they also subjected social exchange to the dominance of elites who treated markets only as means to enrich themselves. Reciprocal obligations and redistributive systems thus squeezed merchants into strictly confined social roles and gave commercialisation no general indigenous impetus. [Beaud 1983; Habib 1969, 1988; Mukherjee 1957; Wallerstein 1979, 1983]

In this classical perspective, Indian commercialisation began with British imperialism, which introduced capitalism and launched a dramatic transformation of India’s social structure. Scholars differ about the outcome. In general, however, they agree that the combined force of indigenous culture and imperialist exploitation prevented the replication of Western capitalism in India.³ Indian commercialisation thus appears to be a historical process marked by a disjuncture based on the alienation of tradition and modernity, which still coexistence uneasily in India. [Gadgil and Guha 1992]

29.3 REVISING THE HISTORY OF INDIAN COMMERCIALISATION

Historical research indicates that pre-modern India was actually quite open to commercialisation, which expanded steadily over the centuries and more rapidly after 1500. Many isolated societies did subsist without commerce, but many regions

of commercial expansion also developed. Pre-modern India comprised a vast, diverse mixture of societies and modes of social exchange, rather than one traditional structure.

Instead of imagining that British capitalism invaded a traditional India where commerce played a marginal role, many scholars now envision British imperialism emerging inside and feeding itself on the broad circulation of commodities in commercialized Indian regions, and then expanding imperial power to control commercialisation to serve British interests. Indian commercialisation can thus be understood as a hybrid process, combining local and imperial energies, and transforming Indian societies without producing drastic historical disjuncture, despite all the attending violence, conflict, and radical social, cultural, and economic change. [B.B.Chaudhuri 1996; K.N.Chaudhuri 1985; Ludden 1999, 2002; Roy 2000; Subrahmanyam 1990; Subrahmanyam and Bayly 1988]

Such revised understandings of Indian commercialisation now inform scholarly disputes about the uniquely European origins and character of capitalism. Global commercialisation may indeed have had many origins. Culturally distinct forms of capitalism may have emerged in many environments, connected to one another by Western imperialism, which made Western models of capitalism ideologically dominant. Rather than imagining that Europe forced Asia up the scale of commercialisation, many scholars argue that historical capitalism inhabits shifting cultural spaces where diverse peoples have invented diverse capitalisms, in a world of growing inequality, where the idea of the West's unique capacity to modernize the world became an ideological tool that served imperialism, nationalism, and Cold War, but no longer constrains the historical imagination. [Bose 1990; Ludden 2004; Maddison 1983].

29.4 COMMERCIALISATION IN PRE-MODERN INDIA

Structural images of traditional India rest on the geographical premise that India was once a single territory filled with sedentary societies. India was from ancient times, however, a land of vast mobility, open to the mixing and movement of people, goods, ideas, cultures, and technologies, by land, river, and sea. Land was abundant and migrations were constant across lands between the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean, where mobility typified social environments as much as sedentary life, and in many places and times, much more.

The scale of human mobility increased in every century. India was a land of opportunity for all kinds of migrants. Available evidence allows us to speculate that during the two centuries after 1600, almost half the total population of southern Asia may have comprised mobile artisans and workers; peasants colonizing new land; itinerant merchants and nomads; pilgrims; shifting cultivators and hunters; migratory service workers and literati; herders and transporters; people fleeing war, drought, and flood; and soldiers and camp followers supplying troops on the move.

All this mobility entailed widespread conflict and expanding commercial activity, commodity production, and economic interconnections. Mobility spawned market exchange on routes among places with diverse ecological endowments, where people specialized in using local resources and traded products with

other localities, near and far. Borderlands between forest and plain, valleys and uplands, and land and sea were most active commercial spaces.

Caste societies embraced commercialism. Village people active in markets included weavers, oil-pressers, toddy tappers, carpenters, ironsmiths, herders, hunters, and farmers producing tobacco, dyes, spices, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. All variety of cloth, metal, wood, stone, animals, and foodstuffs moved in markets. Elaborate cuisines, arts, and manufactures emerged in sites of commercial accumulation, where social elites stimulated consumer trades, as did rulers and religious institutions. Buddhism and Islam moved along trade routes. Hindu temples became central sites for commercial transactions. Pilgrimage and festivals spawned markets. Many people sold their labour for money, including well diggers, soldiers, and many other service workers.

Cities and towns developed as demographic collections of consumers and specialized occupational groups. Pre-modern urbanism was by no means confined to precincts of walled cities; it rather spread out to envelop settlements in walking or boating distance where mobile people and goods met in dense combinations. State revenues depended especially on regions where people and trade concentrated, where taxes enriched financiers who invested in trade, money exchange, and state taxation. Regions of commercialism developed around such sites, whose influence expanded into hinterlands, creating geographies of commercialisation, anchored in local combinations of state power, religious authority, and social solidarity, connected by trade routes and enriched by networks of mobility with no boundaries whatever.

29.5 POLITICAL TERRITORIES IN COMMERCIAL SPACES

Pre-modern commercialism moved among many sites, routes, and institutions, and was never contained by political or cultural territory. Yet the political geography of the Mughal Empire had significant consequences for commercialisation, because it incorporated commercial centers and routes from Kabul to Dhaka and from Srinagar to Daultabad, and thus produced unprecedented economic integration among regions of commercialism, each operating in its own environment yet connected by Mughal militarism, coinage, elites, entitlements, and taxation.

Urbanism became more prominent along routes inside Mughal territory, which extended across southern Asia to Istanbul and Moscow, and across the Indian Ocean to Europe and America. The empire had political boundaries but no economic boundaries: all imperial borders remained entirely open to mobility that provided commercial assets for people inside Mughal territory. In the eighteenth century, Mughal borderlands became more difficult for Mughals to subdue and control, as commercialisation enriched political competitors, including the Bengal Nawabs and British East India Company, who used Mughal techniques to generate revenues and attract commercial investors inside and outside territories of Mughal authority.

Mughal borderlands of Indian commercialisation became heartlands for a new kind of imperialism that arose in highly commercialised coastal regions around Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. In these coastal regions, all the cultural mixing that typified pre-modern times made Europeans natives, not of India defined

by inland territorialism, but rather of another India, defined by settler mobility in an Indian Ocean world without borders, where sea routes came ashore on the Indian coast and channelled commerce in and out of Mughal domains.

Eighteenth century land and sea routes of Indian commercialism sustained an expansively commercial militarism that engaged many inland rulers who funded war with cash revenues drawn from commercialised regions, with credit from rural and urban bankers, and with direct state borrowing from urban bankers. To this pool of military funding, the English added funds from speculators in London who banked on profits from British conquest in India. Using this combination of commercial assets, the English acquired military supremacy, first on the Indian coast, then in valleys that channelled wealth to and from the coast, and then in the uplands.

29.6 TRANSITIONS TO CAPITALIST EMPIRE

From its Portuguese beginning, in 1498, European sea trades in Asia had strong military backing. In the eighteenth century, the English East India Company developed an expansive military basis for its Indian commercial operations, which, after 1757, drew commercial capital increasingly from taxation in conquered territory, where British state authority sold property entitlements to local landed elites. In 1785, Warren Hastings defended his military priorities against critics in London by bragging that the Company's military "insured the blessing of peace, security, and abundance to the subjects of its immediate dominion, while it dealt out the terrors of conquest to the remotest enemies of the parent state . . . while every other member of the British Empire was afflicted with the plagues of wars or insurrection." British wars with revolutionary France began soon after Lord Cornwallis became Governor General, and by the 1790s, his boosters in London could brag that England had successfully used its military "to revive its arts, diffuse its manufactured productions, restore its revenue, and once more, to give splendour to its empire."

During British wars against Napoleon, Tipu Sultan, and Marathas (1790-1818), an epochal shift occurred in the historic relationship between commerce and militarism, and thus between geographies of commerce and state territorialism. Previously, rulers had used armies to secure territories where commerce expanded in connected but borderless spaces; now, the English used the military to force regions into commercial territories to benefit the parent state of the British Empire. Militarism became a means to integrate commerce and state authority inside the territorial order of capitalism.

After 1820, British industrialism emerged as a pre-eminent economic and political force, having been boosted financially by war state expenditure and Indian revenues. As English industry took center stage in imperial policy, English industrialists used state power over trade to advance their own interests and thus impoverished weavers in Ireland and India, simultaneously.

In decades from 1820 to 1860, as imperial armies conquered most of what became British India, English investors began to finance railways in the Indian Presidencies, to tighten control over Indian assets, militarily and commercially. Until the 1840s, most Indian revenues were assigned to meet the cost of conquest, administration, and remittance, as trade policies shifted onto *laissez faire* lines to support Britain's global interests. In 1833, the Company became an agency serving British global

enterprise, and thus, soon after the abolition of slavery, in 1833, the Company arranged to send shiploads of indentured workers from Calcutta to replace slaves on English plantations in the West Indies. By 1860, state-managed indentured labour migration sustained British plantations in north-eastern British Indian territories, conquered after 1820. [Jha 1996; Siddique 1990; Tinker 1974]

From 1823 to 1854, the exchange value of the Indian Rupee declined, which increased the real value of India taxation and made it more cost effective for government to invest Indian taxes in India. At the same time, London sought outlets for British industrial capital and new supply systems for industrial raw materials. British state investments in India ensued, to cheapen imports, exports, and military operations and to increase revenue by extending British capital investments in plantations, railways, cities, roads, ports, shipping, irrigation, and other ventures.

In the 1840s, a commission of Parliament met to consider ways to improve supplies of raw cotton to Lancashire mills. Bombay Presidency attracted special attention, along with Egypt, as potential sources of raw cotton. The goal was to expand cotton exports from these regions to counter-balance England's dependence on cotton from the American South. When the US Civil War broke out, in 1860, Egypt and India filled a void in cotton supplies created by the Union blockade of Confederate ports in America.

After 1870, state investments produced foundations for India's modern development regime. In 1871, the Indian Government obtained authority to raise loans for productive purposes, and large irrigation projects began, following earlier success raising revenues from smaller projects. Imperial institutions then provided the technical, ideological, and political basis for a modern system of economic development. Government projects focused sharply on the most commercially profitable agricultural crops. State investments employed native contractors and benefited landowners producing commodities for domestic and export markets. This pattern of trickle-down development patronage, which linked local commercial environments to imperial circuits of capital accumulation through the everyday practice of the state's productive investments, remained in state development operations after 1947. [Ludden 1992, 1994]

29.7 SPATIAL PATTERNS OF MODERN COMMERCIALISATION

From 1880 to 1920, Europe's High Imperialism organized global commercialism on a larger scale than ever before. Statistical evidence also emerged by which to measure global patterns of economic inequality, which have remained remarkably resilient since then. South Asia and all other subordinate imperial territories became increasingly poor compared to Europe and America. Between 1870 and 1985, ratios of per capita income between the world's richest and poorest countries increased more than six-fold. Today, economic inequality among rich and poor national economies is still increasing.

By 1880, new spatial patterns of commercialisation had emerged in British India. Like Ceylon and Malaya, Assam became a quintessential plantation economy, where British investors drove out peasant producers and controlled markets in land, labour, and all other commodities. Indentured migrants from British territories worked plantation land, which had been taken away by the state from indigenous mountain

people. The state organized indentured labour migrations by landless workers, for instance, from southern Tamil districts to Ceylon and Malaya, and from north India, Bihar, and Bengal to Assam.

British East Africa and British Burma also developed circuits of capital accumulation anchored in India. In East and South Africa, merchants from Gujarat and emigrant workers from Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras built railways and urban centers. Between 1896 and 1928, seventy-five percent of emigrants from Indian ports went to Ceylon and Malaya; ten percent, to Africa; nine percent, to the Caribbean; and the remaining six percent, to Fiji and Mauritius, which became island plantation economies. In Burma, Tamil Chettiyars financed new rice farms in the Irrawaddy River delta, which generated huge exports of rice for world markets, including India, where urbanization increased demand for imported rice. The food crisis that generated the 1943 Bengal famine began when Japan conquered Burma and cut off rice supplies to Calcutta.

Specialized regions of farm production developed in British India along railways that led to major port cities. One major example is the Deccan, which became cotton country, where commercial investments entangled almost all farmers, poor and rich alike. In 1876, Deccan Riots were the first major clash between local farmers and immigrant Indian financiers, and gave birth to official anxiety about village stability during capitalist development. This anxiety became a major impetus for imperial theories of traditional village harmony, which needed support by state patronage for local landed elites.

The responsiveness of Indian farmers to price incentives spawned many commercially specialized regions with an export orientation, producing cotton, wheat, rice, coal, coke, jute, hides and skins, tea, ores, and wool. Data from 1914 show that most Indian cotton left Bombay and came from Maharashtra. All tea came to Calcutta and Colombo from British plantations in Assam, Darjeeling, and hills around Kandy. Most export rice came to Rangoon. Wheat came primarily from fields under state irrigation in Punjab and western United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh). Oilseeds came to Bombay from Hyderabad territory (Andhra Pradesh), the Central Provinces (Madhya Pradesh), and Bombay Presidency (Maharashtra). Coal, coke, and ores came from Jharkhand to Calcutta and Bombay. Eastern Bengal (Bangladesh) produced almost all the world's jute, which went to Scotland but also increasingly to jute mills around Calcutta.

Indian industrialism emerged in this context and accelerated commercialisation around major cities. After 1880, two decades of low prices in Europe and America and rising prices in South Asia encouraged investments in India by firms producing for Indian as well as world markets. Commodity prices in India rose rapidly after 1880, along with export commodity production, until the crash in 1929. These were decades of the most rapid expansion of commercial farm production to that time.

Early Indian industrialization was so impressive that the imperial Factory Act (1881) imposed rules on Indian factories to reduce their comparative advantage in virtue of low local labour costs and cheap access to raw materials in India. In 1887, J.N. Tata's Empress Mill arose at Nagpur, in the heart of cotton country. Tata Iron and Steel Works at Jamshedpur consumed increasing supplies of ore and coal, which by the 1920s rivaled exports from Calcutta. In 1914, India was the world's fourth largest industrial cotton textile producer. Coal, iron, steel, jute and other industries generated

specialized regions of heavy industry around Bombay, Ahmedabad, Nagpur, Kanpur, Calcutta, Jamshedpur, and Madras.

World War One stimulated imperial policies to enhance India's industrialization to make India less dependent on imports; and the Great Depression, 1929-1933, again boosted industrial growth by reducing prices for farm output compared to manufactures. As a result, industrial output in British India grew steadily from 1913 to 1938 and was 58% higher at the end of the Depression than at the start of World War One; compared to slower and more uneven rates of growth in the UK and Germany. [Morris D. Morris in Kumar, 1983]

By 1920, India had a complex national economy, dominated by agriculture but including a large public sector, major centres of large-scale industrial production, and countless small-scale industrial concerns producing cloth, leather, and metal goods. In 1913, manufactures comprised twenty percent of Indian exports, valued at ten percent of national income, figures never since surpassed. In 1914, the US Consul at Bombay called India "one of the few large countries of the world where there is an 'open door' for the trade of all countries." England was still India's dominant trading partner, but losing ground. In 1914, the UK sent 63% of British India's imports and received 25% of its exports; and by 1926, these figures stood at 51% and 21%, respectively. By 1926, total trade with the UK averaged 32% for the five major ports (Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Karachi, and Rangoon). Bombay and Rangoon did 43% of overseas business with Asia and the Middle East. Calcutta did a quarter of its business with America. [Roy 1999, 2000]

Migration data also indicate the growing complexity of India as a region of the world economy. In 1911, the British numbered only 62% of resident Europeans in British India. Four times more immigrants arrived in India from Asia than from Europe, and seven of ten came from Nepal and Afghanistan. In 1911, Nepalis entering India outnumbered resident Britons by fifty percent; total Asian immigrants numbered three times as many. By 1921, Indian emigration far exceeded immigration. Between 1896 and 1928, 83% of 1,206,000 emigrants left British India from Madras (which accounted for only 10% of overseas trade), where most went to Ceylon and Malaya. Bombay emigrants went mostly to East and South Africa, and Calcutta emigrants, to Fiji and the West Indies. By 1921, India's modern diaspora was well underway.

29.8 GEOGRAPHICAL CONTINUITIES IN INDIAN COMMERCIALISATION

The British began their Indian empire on the coast. Their power then extended up river valleys into the interior, and finally, into highlands and mountains. These coasts, river valleys, highlands, and mountains had been distinctive commercial environments before 1800, and though increasingly forged into a unified imperial pattern, remained distinctive in 1947. Since then, national development has not erased their distinctiveness.

Before 1800, coastal environs had been most open to direct local involvements with overseas commercialism, and after 1800, imperial capitalism concentrated first around ports. The imperial economic order then spread along railways inland from Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. Coastal ports became cosmopolitan sites for the mixing of inland and overseas cultures and interests. Indications of this distinction appear in the 1911 census, which shows that English literates numbered less than

1% of the population of British India, but 12% of the population of Calcutta. Madras and Bombay shared with Calcutta very high figures for the percent of literate people who were literate in English. The mixing of old and new social elites was most intense along the coast. Brahmans were about 6% of the total 1911 Indian population, with very high rates of English literacy, especially near the coast. More than 25% of literate Brahmans were literate in English in Madras and Bengal Presidencies, and about 20% in Bombay Presidency.

British imperialism moved inland along river valleys into uplands and regions, where the Mughals and their competitors, allies, and subordinates had held much more power than along the coast. In these regions, commercialisation after 1800 continued to include noticeably higher doses of state coercion, violence, and rebellion. Strategic alliances between imperial and local military force anchored the colonial regime. Cantonments and security installations marked the spatial and social organization of commercialisation.

Post-1857 grants of huge Talukdar estates to old Zamindars in Western UP represent a broad accommodation of old military elites. In Punjab, military recruitment and establishments grew alongside state investment in irrigation canals that benefited military-peasant-landlords. In Bombay Presidency, Maratha jagirdars, sardars, inamdars, deshmukhs, and deshpandes kept old estates under new property laws.

Imperial expansion into highlands and mountains combined the force of Indian and British lowland interests, which both moved into areas of shifting cultivation inhabited by groups who became known as “tribals” in British India. Before 1947, many mountain territories were still not conquered sufficiently to allow full incorporation into the lowland economy, but many were. Coffee and tea planters took mountains around Assam and Mysore. Mountain forests everywhere became sites for commercial timber extraction.

Most highlands remote from centres of Mughal power in 1700 remained remote from centres of political and economic power in 1950, but commercialisation of the highlands increased with the expansion of lowland agrarian populations into the mountains, which steadily displaced tribal inhabitants, causing numerous clashes; and with the incorporation of tribal people into circuits of labour migration in the plains, which, for example, brought countless Nepalis into India, and incorporated tribals into agrarian economies in Berar and Gujarat. [Bates 1981, 1985, 1988; Breman 1985, 1989; Jha 1996]

As India became a unified commercial economy, old regions of commercialism retained distinctive characteristics and acquired new ones. The Mughal heartland became a corridor of British imperial investments that steadily increased the wealth of western regions compared to the east. This unequal development continues today. Madras and Bombay hinterlands retained independent economic identities, as did commercial regions around Trivandrum, Bangalore, and Hyderabad. Mountain domains became increasingly marked by subordination to the plains, which disadvantaged local populations compared to lowland immigrants. Highlands and dry lands became the modern frontier for agricultural expansion. From 1880 to 1980, the highest rates of increase in the ratio of total farmland to total land area (from 903% to 206%) appear in Tripura, Sikkim, Nagaland, Assam, Rajasthan, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Orissa. The lowest figures (from 122% to 103%) appear in the old agrarian lowlands of Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Kerala. [J.F.Richards]

29.9 THE IMPACT OF INDIAN COMMERCIALISATION

Today, historians focus research on geographical regions in which patterns of change indicate commercialisation had different meanings for different people and in different places and times. Some patterns emerge across regions and comprise national patterns in contemporary India. Regional conditions are significant everywhere: they continue today to inform prices, bonds of trust and credit, and social power relations that set effective rules of ownership and social exchange. One good example is commercial sugar cultivation, which has operated in eastern UP under the impress of local landed elite domination and in Maharashtra under the control of staunchly independent landed entrepreneurs. [Amin 1984; Attwood 1992]

Commercialisation progressed along with other changes that influenced its impact. Most importantly, the quantitative proportion of land and population shifted. India became a densely populated region of the world for the first time after 1850. Social competition for land and other natural resources increased accordingly. The relative market value of land and labour shifted: land became more valuable compared to labour. The imperial state made landed property a strictly defined object of legal possession. Landed property rights thus became a modern institutional basis for commercialisation. In this context, capital investments in land, above all, irrigation, commercial agriculture, and urban development, increase the value of privileged land most rapidly and differentiated the landscape into sites defined by their respective attractiveness for investors. Technological change, above all, in industry, transportation, and communication, enhanced the differential impact of commercialisation, by making some sites especially valuable for commercial investment, particularly around cities and towns. Urbanization advanced rapidly after 1900 and accelerated after 1947. The percent of India's population living in urban centres increased by just over *one* percent (from 11% to 12%) during the first three decades after 1900, by *six* percent during the next three (1931-1961), and by *eight* percent in the next three decades (1961-1991). Ecological change accelerated similarly. In *three* decades *after* 1950, livestock, net cultivation, and built-up land increased as much they had during *seven* previous decades, while forest cover declined at the same rate and population grew about fifteen percent *faster*. [J.F.Richards]

Commercialisation is thus impossible to disentangle from other historical processes that have also changed the composition of social environments. Political change is important in this context. Imperialism has structured commercialisation to serve Western interests. Nationalism has produced new state territories where politics structures commercialisation to serve national interests. New state borders broke old routes of commercial transit in some parts of South Asia, which had, for instance, carried land rents and jute from eastern Bengal to enrich the Calcutta *bhadralok* and to sustain Calcutta jute mills for many decades. The partition of Punjab caused massive disruptions and severed many old commercial connections. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Burma emerged as entirely new territories for commercialisation under national regimes whose respective histories have structured its impact ever since.

In India, regional state regimes emerged after 1956, which enhanced the regionalism of Indian commercialisation and continuities with regional patterns

that developed in pre-modern times and under British rule. In all Indian states, local and regional elites now engage commerce using power and authority to make rules that effectively govern the possession and exchange of most commodities. India's integration as a national economy and its economic governance in New Delhi increased under a regime of national development planning, which made the Indian bureaucracy and intelligentsia increasingly influential. The politics of commercialism in India today thus involves local, regional, and national institutions, whose combined impact continues to differentiate the meanings of commercialisation. [Bardhan 1984, 1986; Rudra 1984, 1989; Rudra and Bardhan 1978]

In a long-term perspective, commercialisation has comprised a process that began long before 1800 and accelerated thereafter to shift the balance and content of exchange relationships everywhere in India. Two commodities, land and labour, indicate most clearly how that alteration defines Indian capitalism as a distinctive formation operating inside India's national borders. State laws pertain more forcefully to land and labour than to other items of exchange, and the historical process of defining land and labour as commodities is still, in fact, underway. Land reform laws eliminated Zamindar property rights and produced a profusion of small private holdings. Social movements continue to demand legal redefinitions of property rights. Labour laws pertain primarily to heavy industry and workers' rights in the informal and agricultural sectors remain subjects of on-going contestation and legal revision. Rural markets for land and labour are today, as they were a century ago, bound up tightly with the local power of landed elites and high status social groups, whose role in law making is most visible inside Indian states but increasingly visible at the national level as well. The lowest status social groups have little landed property and mostly work for higher status employers, as the market value of their labour continues to decline compared to the value of land, as poor land becomes poorer compared to rich land, and as finance capital exerts increasing control over land and labour. [Harriss-White 1996; Yanagisawa 1996; Atchi Reddy 1996]

In this light, it seems that Indian commercialisation evolved into Indian capitalism without causing a drastic disjuncture in the composition of the social structure, allowing many old elite groups to retain substantial control over commodity production and exchange. Political disjunctures, which mark the history of British imperialism and Indian independence, also mark this evolution, as Indian commercialism changed over time in a changing Indian landscape as well as in commercial spaces that escape the confines of Indian national territory. The long period of British rule composed a long transition from pre-modern Indian commercialism to contemporary Indian capitalism, during which modern institutions came into existence that continue to exert substantial influence on social relations of economic development. [Dirks 2001; Ludden 1993; Metcalf 1995; Washbrook 1981, 1989, 1994]

Commercialisation transforms human experience by establishing commercial transactions in settings where markets had previously been absent or unimportant, most notably in villages where the privatisation of land eliminated customary rights to sustenance for landless families, who depended increasingly on informal contracts, indenture, and various forms of bondage and trafficking. One dramatic example of this dilemma appeared in 1981, when researchers found over four lakh low caste labourers from poor villages in northern Bihar

working on rich farms in Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur districts of Punjab, where recruiters also brought Chhotanagpur tribals for employers who bid for them at auction. Though this illegal trade had ceased by 1991, Punjab farmers were still advancing huge sums to bring Biharis to work in their fields, and officials who found workers held in bondage had them released to local authorities. [Singh 1995]

Commercialisation has included enrichment and destitution, for families, localities, and regions. Though some progress in reducing the aggregate burden of poverty occurred before 1990, most rural Indians still hover near the poverty line, most precariously in poor regions where capital investments are meagre, as in dry farm regions from eastern Maharashtra south to Rayalaseema, where the limitation of the green revolution to irrigated land is apparent and the contrast with prosperous Punjab could not be greater, and where, in 1997-8, two hundred poor farmers, burdened with huge debts to plant cash crops (mostly cotton, but also *tur dal* and other pulses), committed suicide when faced with crop failure, foreclosure, and destitution. -When crop prices crashed in 1997, farmers mortgaged their land to moneylenders, and then drought, floods, and pests killed their crops. Farmers killed themselves by drinking pesticide, a symbol of the green revolution that left them behind.

Social disparities amidst commercialisation have appeared more clearly as scholars have more often applied a gender lens to the study of change. Land ownership remains a male preserve in South Asia, and even more so, the management of land as commercial property. The same privatisation of property that made village workers dependents of landed families turned even women in landed families labourers working for men inside patriarchal legal systems where the market value of female labour as children, wives, mothers, care givers, and wage workers increasingly defined their position in society. This entailed profound social change, which occurred over many decades and variously in different locations, but always operated inside gender ideologies that evoke traditional values and social norms to regulate change within parameters that hold patriarchal power in place. Thus, commercialisation also appears in the gendered lens of social research as one dynamic process among many others that comprise historical trajectories of Indian capitalism today. [Agarwal 1992, 1994; Banerjee 1989, Borthwick 1984; Clark 1993; Krishnamurthy 1989; Mitra 1981; Omvedt 1980; Prasad 1988; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Sharma 1985; Shiva 1989; Thomas 1988]

29.10 SUMMARY

We began by defining commercialisation and its impact over the existing culture, society and commerce. The history of commercialisation can be traced back to the pre-colonial period. A high degree of commercialisation was achieved in the Mughal period. During the eighteenth century, with fading Mughal boundaries, we see the emergence of highly commercialised coastal regions – Bombay, Madras, Calcutta. At the same time we also see the growth of a ‘commercial capitalism’ in which European Companies became equal partners, particularly the Portuguese, English and the Dutch. Introduction of railways and the emphasis on plantation economy led to the emergence of new spatial patterns of commercialisation. With British Imperialism commercialisation spread – moving up the hills, into river valleys, across forest areas. This chapter looks at the nature and implication of this expansion.

29.11 EXERCISES

- 1) What is commercialisation? Do you agree that Indian commercialisation began with British imperialism?
- 2) What role did militarism play in commercialisation during the colonial period?
- 3) Analyse the spatial patterns of commercialisation in the first half of the 20th century.
- 4) Critically examine the socio-economic impact of commercialisation during the colonial period.

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UNIT 30 FOREST ECONOMIES IN COLONIAL INDIA

Structure

- 30.1 Introduction
- 30.2 Forests and Livelihoods
 - 30.2.1 Forests and Agriculture
 - 30.2.2 Forests as Pasture Lands
 - 30.2.3 Forests and Household Industry
- 30.3 Forestry and the Colonialism
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- 30.4 Summary
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- 30.6 Suggested Readings

30.1 INTRODUCTION

The writings of the 1970s and early 1980s on rural economies in India largely concentrated on systems of permanent cultivation. But from the mid 1980s onwards this trend began to change and was signified by the publication of Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas*. Guha showed that the relationship between forests and the state changed when the British began looking for sources of timber to build the railways. Guha and the other scholars writing on the forests in the 1980s and early 1990s made three main propositions. First, scientific forestry offered a universal framework of conservation geared to modern capitalism and imposed on local tribal societies. Thus it responded more to global demands rather than local demands. Second monocultures and conversion of natural forests into timber plantations was the cornerstone of scientific forestry and adversely affected biodiversity in forests. Third: state monopoly over forests and the growth of scientific forestry led to displacement of local people from forest lands and the alienation of their forest rights. So, argued Guha, the introduction of scientific forestry was a "colonial watershed" that resulted in the commercialization of forest use and brought about unprecedented destruction in forested areas.

The idea that colonial control over forests was initially prompted more by commercial rather than conservation needs was discussed by many scholars following Guha. However this argument was also strongly contested. Richard Grove argued in his book *Green Imperialism*, that British Imperialism in Africa and Asia was in fact conscious of the need for conservation, and it was driven by a desire to look for pristine environments in the third world. Other historians acknowledged that Grove had dug up valuable material on the subject, but suggested that his understanding of the nature of British Imperialism was inadequate and flawed. For example Ravi Rajan stated that Imperialism was conservation conscious because conservation

was necessary for capitalism: it helped mobilize revenue and natural resources. However, we must remember that the use of conservation to maximize revenue for industrial capitalism was not merely confined to colonial countries but was in fact even prevalent in the European countries where internal colonization by state forestry was a common practice. It can not be therefore considered a “colonial watershed”. Within this debate about colonial forestry as a “watershed” some historians have also attempted to explore the more complex relationships between local forest economies and scientific forestry. (Sivaramakrishnan, Delhi, 1999)

Since the early histories of forests focused primarily on the systems of state forestry and their impact, they often did not analyze how forest economies worked. This meant that in most cases, forests were not seen as integral parts of the larger local and regional economy. The relationship between colonialism and forestry was also seen in a rather narrow way: there was no attempt to look at the way it was determined by the larger agrarian policies of the colonial government. This Unit explores the working of the forest economies and their relationship with the wider political economy. It also discusses the transformation and development of the forest economy, the various faces of colonial forest management, and, the complex relationship between local resource use patterns and scientific forestry.

30.2 FORESTS AND LIVELIHOODS

Most literature on forestry tells us that the forests of India were an abode of the tribal people who were primarily dependent on forests for their subsistence. This was true to a certain extent. But, forests provided crucial inputs not only for the survival of tribal groups, but also of peasants, craftsmen and pastoral communities. In this sense forests provided a space for the play of competing interests. This Section will look at the interface between forests and different forms of resource use, different patterns of livelihood. We will not focus on tribals since Unit 32 deals with tribal economies.

30.2.1 Forests and Agriculture

The relationship between forests and agricultural societies was often an antagonistic one. An expansion of cultivation often meant deforestation. But peasant settlers also depended on the forests for some of their daily needs like firewood and fodder. The complex and contradictory relationship between forests and agriculture was mediated by a string of relationships of exchange and production. In the case of the UP Hills Dangwal has shown how common lands and forests provided tuber, fuel, vegetable, water, slate and silt. These products augmented the resources of the peasants, and many of them were crucial for maintaining the ecological balance and soil fertility of the agrarian economy. (Dangwal, 1998, 349-72) Similarly in the Central Indian plains the forests formed an important part of the common resources of the village. Village settlements and the *Wajib-ul arz* (a village level revenue document) defined peasant rights on forests and commons. It was here that peasants came into contact with the tribal communities and often also employed them to graze cattle and collect firewood from the forests. In Central India, as in the UP Hills, expansion of cultivation led to deforestation, and this at times affected climatic changes and aggravated the impact of drought, thus forcing the poorer cultivators to depend on gathering forest fruits for consumption. In the case of cropping patterns it is evident that some of the practices of shifting agriculture were adopted in peasant cultivation. The Gond cultivator's cycle was modified to exclude the practices of burning and cutting trees.

Yet the fallows remained almost the same affecting productivity levels. (Prasad, Delhi, 1998) This was not only evident in the Central Provinces but also the UP Hills where peasants combined cultivation on higher altitude dry tracts with that on fertile lands in the valley. (Dangwal, pp.358-60) Thus the expansion of cultivation into forestlands led to the transformation of the livelihood of peasants, tribals and all associated in the larger agricultural system.

30.2.2 Forests as Pasture Lands

The interface between forests, agricultural economies and other common lands was also reflected in the seasonal use of forests and common lands for grazing. For example in Himachal Pradesh herders had access to forest lands for seasonal grazing, but these grazing rights were leased out to them by local villagers. (Saberwal, Delhi, 1998, p.34) Before the colonial period the contribution of forests to the local economy was considered important in the grant of land rights by the rulers of Chamba. (Singh, Delhi, 1995, p.38) Similarly Alpine grazing in Central Punjab was regulated by collective rights of herders in commons and forest lands, and thus grazing in the forests formed an important part of the annual pastoral cycle. (Bhattacharya, Delhi, 1995)

In the Central Provinces peasants, forest dwellers shared forestlands on the fringes of *ryotwari* (revenue settlement made by the British with individual peasants; it recognized individual rights of the peasants on land) villages, and specialist herdsmen like the Ahirs, Gowaries and the Banjaras. The Ahirs took the cattle for grazing into the forests and got wages from individual peasant households for doing the task. Their intimate relationships with the Gonds and others living in the forest were a result of these daily excursions. Russell notes that in Chanda, the Ahirs had developed intimate links with the Gonds. They not only employed Gonds to graze cattle but also admitted them within the Ahir caste. In fact, the origins of the Gowarie community of Chanda were traced to inter-marriage between Gonds Ahirs. In Mandla (Vidarbha region), villagers thought that Ahirs were not part of the Hindu community as they lived with the Gonds. (Prasad, 1994, Chapter-5)

The relationships of the Banjaras with the peasant and forest communities followed a different pattern. Edward Balfour, writing in the 1840s, described the Banjaras of Central India as grain merchants who carried their wares on pack oxen. They moved over long distances, traversing difficult terrain to get supplies that they took into districts where scarcity prevailed. Later, they also began supplying grain to the army camps acquired an important status in the political economy of the Central Provinces. (Balfour, Calcutta: 1844, p.2-3) The Banjaras made their living from the sale of salt and oil to forest dwellers and by transporting goods. Ethnographers have given instances of the Charans (bards) and the Banjaras carrying loads for the Rajput and the Maratha armies. (Cumberledge 1882; Col. Mackenzie, 1881; Russell and Hiralal, Vol. 2, pp.163-192). Their ability to negotiate thick forests and 'rugged' terrain made them indispensable to the rulers who relied on them to carry messages and arms. The British therefore often condemned them as robbers and bandits. They also regularly grazed in the forests and their nomadic tract spanned from Mirzapur in East Uttar Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh, with Central Provinces falling in between. Their utility to the peasant economy was minimal. Though they sold a few milk products to the peasants, they never grazed peasant cattle. This was done by the more "trusted" graziers and residents of the village, like the Ahirs and Gowaries, who were seen as members of low castes, but included in the system of exchanges within the village community.

30.2.3 Forests and Household Industry

While the movements of the pastoralists mediated the relationship between different local economies, the links between forests and urban centers were maintained by the mobility of the artisans. They ensured the development of wider linkages of forests with other economies. Let us consider those who made lac jewellery and toys. The craftsmen who worked with lac did not necessarily live inside the forest because upper caste peasants and craftsmen regarded lac propagation with superstitious repugnance. Therefore these craftsmen bought lac sticks from the Gonds, Korkus and Baigas. (Russell and Hiralal, Vol.3, p.122) The lac seed swarmed twice a year, in December and June. Labour for its collection was necessary in June-July for the *baisakh* crop and in October-November for the *kartik* crop. Thereafter lac was taken to the markets where the forest dwellers sold it to the craftsmen. The main lac market near Mandla was in Seoni where lac was in great demand. (Lac 1875, pp.85-86; Lac 1919, p.3.) After collection, stick lac was picked off the wood, and then the encrusted twigs and barks were placed in long cotton bags. These bags were heated and the lacquer gum squeezed from the sticks and mixed with clay and other materials to make toys and bangles. Since the best business for the Lakheras (artisans who made lac toys and jewellery) was during times of festival, so their income was seasonal. While their main markets were in small towns like Mandla and Seoni in Madhya Pradesh, they also sold bangles in the villages. The presence of lac artisans in the suburbs of towns and the mobility of the Korkus, Gonds and the Baigas to sell the lac, established complex linkages between the urban, agricultural and forest societies. The tribes found themselves at the lower end of these networks. They had to walk long distances to get to the markets and had to sell their lac at prices that the artisans were willing to pay. Within the social hierarchy the Lakheras – the artisans who moulded lac – were superior to the tribal Baigas. (Russell and Hiralal, Vol.3: 106)

Similar linkages between urban centres and forests were evident in the case of the dyers. The main dyers of the province were the Koshtis, Chippas, Nillars, Rangaris and Rangrez. They dyed threads and cloths in traditional colours, mainly reds and yellow got from the roots of trees like *al*, *kusum* and *rohun*. Resin was extracted by tree tapping, and in some cases, by pounding roots. James Forsyth (*The Highlands of Central India*, London, 1871) does not record whether resin or gum was extracted by the dyer or bought from the forest dweller. Rangrez and Rangaris wove silk-bordered cloths and dyed their own thread with lac or *palas* flowers. Since they abhorred manual labour, it is likely that they bought stick lac, and *palas* flowers from forest people. Apart from this, the *tussar* silk industry and the silk weavers were dependent on the collection of silk cocoons by Gonds. Silk weavers, like Koshtis bought cocoons from the forest communities and boiled them, and wound the tread on reels. Dyers used myrabolans flowers to produce blue or black colours, while red dye was extracted from lac. Other cotton weavers like Chippas, Nillars and the Rangrez also bought flowers of a similar kind to make dyes for cloths. These dyers did not necessarily develop close social relations with the forest communities. Those like the Koshtis lived in towns, enjoyed a good income, and exercised power in their relations with forest communities. But the reluctance of these artisans to go into the forest to collect their own resins also made them dependent on mobile forest dwellers. (Russell and Hiralal, Vols. 2&3) A similar inter-linkage between household industry and peasant economies could be seen in the area of iron smithy and rural engineering. Local iron ore smelters and craftsmen, especially the Agarias, mined iron ore (Central Provinces) in the forested areas, and

repaired the implements of both the tribal people and the peasants. They were also grain traders who supplied grains to tribal people in times of stress. (Elwin, 1944)

Thus we see that the forest economy was not a closed economy, nor was it an economy that revolved only around trees. Rather forests were part of a larger agrarian system that provided support services to peasants, pastoralists and artisans. Therefore changes in forest management had implications for all such groups in different localities and regions. Colonial interventions in forest and agrarian societies ought to be seen in this context.

30.3 FORESTRY AND THE COLONIALISM

From the middle of nineteenth century 'scientific forestry' was introduced in most parts of the country. One of the main aims of scientific forestry was to exert control over forests and ensure that forests were used for larger imperial interests. An expansion of railways meant a demand for timber for sleepers; and the forests had to feed this demand. The impact of this was particularly felt in the North Western Provinces, the Garhwal region with *deodar* and *chir* trees and Central Provinces with *sal* trees. The forested areas in Central Provinces were contracted out for felling of *sal* even before the formation of the forest department in 1864. During this period the colonial government successfully negotiated the lease of *deodar* and *chir* forests of the Tehri Garhwal kingdom and the annual profit from these forests increased over the years, and was about Rs. 1.6 lakh between 1910-1925. Similar deals were made with the rulers of Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and the Central Indian states. The strategic value of India's forests was enhanced in the inter-war period with 228,076 tonnes of timber being supplied to the specially created 'timber branch' of the munitions board, and 50,000 tonnes of fodder were supplied for military operations in Egypt and Iraq. Between 1914 and 1919 about 1.7 million cubic meters of timber was exported annually for military operations. Along with this the resin industry in Central India was a boon to the gun powder factories of France and America. (Guha and Gadgil, 1992, p.138) This vast scale of operations was not possible without the setting up of an extensive system of control and systematic exploitation of forest resources. In this Section we consider some of the principles of scientific forestry and the mechanisms by which they were implemented.

30.3.1 State Monopoly Versus Community Control

After the establishment of state monopoly over the forest areas under the Indian Forest Act 1865, the colonial state was in search of a more stringent piece of legislation to regulate the local use of forested areas. This need was fulfilled by the Indian Forest Act 1878, but there was a serious debate over the kind of control that should be exercised over the forests. Officials like B.H. Baden Powell argued that the state had an irrevocable authority on forest resources and any right granted to the people would only be a 'privilege' received at the 'pleasure of the state'. This position refused to recognize the fact that the forest dwellers, pastoralists and agricultural communities enjoyed some customary rights in the forests and were therefore entitled to use these resources. This position, termed as the 'annexationist' position (Guha, *IESHR*, 27, 1, 1990) was based on the theory that all land which was not under cultivation belonged to the state and that all customary use was exercised at the mercy of the monarch. However this position was contested by the Madras government. The Commissioner of Madras argued that village woodlands were not village 'privilege' but village property, thereby inadvertently admitting that

the state had no absolute control over forests. The first Inspector General of Forests, Dietrich Brandis, tried to mediate between these two ends of the spectrum. While Brandis himself believed in the critical role of the 'village forests', and agreed with the Madras government that local people in India should have rights similar to the rights of a user in Europe. But he proposed an in-between position to reconcile the opposed arguments, suggesting that the rights in village forests should be exercised under the overall control of the state. So he advocated a restricted take over of forests by the State. (For greater details of the debate see Guha, *IESHR*, 27, 1, 1990, pp.65-84) However this position gave way to a centralized 1878 Forest Act.

30.3.2 Global Industrial Capitalism and Forest Diversity

It is true that the framework of forestry described above recognised timber and mono-cultures as one of the crucial elements of early-nineteenth century scientific forestry. (Rangarajan, Delhi, 1998; and Guha, Delhi, 1989) However by the late 1880s changing priorities of imperial forestry showed that this was no longer true. The importance of different types of forest produce in different periods reflects the nature of the changing forest management practices and their relationship with local people. In the mid-nineteenth century, especially after the formation of the forest department in 1865, forest produce was classified into major and minor forest produce. At that time the criteria of classification were based on the method of extraction of the product and its commercial value. Its commercial value was in turn established through demand in the world market. This was also reflected in the scientific interest of the foresters themselves in some of the medicinal plants, herbs and economically important products like *katha* and bamboo. This point was especially noted by Richard Tucker in the case of the Western Himalayas, where he showed that though the foresters of the region, had an intellectual curiosity for documenting non-timber forest produce, but had left its management to the market through the system of imposition of a low license fee for *katha* collection by the contractors, who in turn made big profits. However this whole system remained on the periphery of forest management till at least the 1920s. (Tucker, p. 478)

In contrast a much more proactive role of industrial capitalism and the market was seen in the forests of the Central Provinces. The first evidence of rising international demand for minor forest produce was seen in the rising prices of lac that had many industrial uses in America, England and Germany and the exported lac was often converted into shellac in these countries in the nineteenth century. (Prasad, 2003b) The initial attempts to modify the ways in which lac was propagated and new varieties of lac introduced, failed in the Central Provinces. The government noted that since the province was not capable of yielding lac of real value it was not worthwhile for the government to take up lac cultivation on its own. Therefore it was considered better if private agencies and contractors were given the right to propagate lac. (Prasad, 2003b) Thus the European managing agencies like Messrs. Jardine and Skinner were given the first contracts for forests of Sambalpur (presently in Orissa). The District Commissioner of Sambalpur, Bowie reasoned that, the "propagation of lac is only carried on by Gonds, Binjiwars and other jungle tribes who are poor and always require advances to survive. While they propagate lac the government can only give advances if it has the lease of the jungle. By taking a royalty, the interests of the government and the firm will be kept identical". (Prasad, 2003b) This official assertion of the compatibility of the Gond, official and industrial interests was one of the first steps towards the inclusion of Binjiwars into the world market. The royalty and advance were indicative of the presence of the European agencies in the forest

economy. The managing agency used their knowledge and technique to propagate lac and reap huge profits.

By 1919 the colonial government claimed that the methods used by the forest communities were inefficient for mass propagation. R.S. Troup contended that the methods of local lac propagation were inadequate in at least two ways: the expenses involved in searching for the lac bearing shoots and large quantities of lac are wasted due to the time taken to collect lac. (Troup, 1919, 225) The Forest Research Institute, where Troup worked, carried out lac experiments to see the extent to which these disadvantages could be minimised. But as Troup pointed out the experiments led to no conclusive results in the techniques for propagating lac. The ambivalent results, Troup felt, were a result of the fact that the experiments were carried out in the lower Shivaliks, a region distinctly unsuitable for lac cultivation. However he suggested some conditions under which lac cultivation could be carried out more effectively. The annual pollarding of lac trees, the growth of trees in an open position, and the need for thinning trees more regularly, were identified as some of the desirable steps to be undertaken. Troup and his team carried out experiments over ten years. They divided the forested tracts with trees of different girth and ages into strips and applied the lac worm at different times. At each time they recorded the amount of lac that they got from the tree. In this way they determined the ideal conditions for the harvest of lac. While these experiments were being carried out the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces proposed the introduction of machinery in lac cultivation. He felt that by introducing technological innovations in forests the production of lac could increase and the production process become more efficient. This would save the effort of watching the lac throughout the season, and confine the use of labour to the collecting process. He refuted the proposition that the employment opportunities of the Binjiwars and Gonds would be affected if this happened and instead stated that the measure would help tribal lac collectors to strike a better bargain with the representatives of managing agencies. In order to maximise production and assess the value of lac, several government sponsored experiments were carried out in the early 20th century. A number of techniques were tried to improve the quality of the seeds, minimize labour required and reduce the injury to trees. But the reported failure of all efforts, (according to the special lac officer), proved that the methods used by forest dwellers and the peasants were more effective especially in terms of their cost efficiency. (Madhya Pradesh Secretariat Records Bhopal (Hereafter MPSR), file No: 114, September 1920) Thus the European managers continued to incorporate local techniques for lac propagation within its system of collection and production.

One of the main reasons for this was the need for the continuous and rapid supply of lac and shellac to the European industry in the inter-war period. This period also saw a significant change in the nature of trade. While in the nineteenth century significant amounts of shellac was being produced outside the country, in the pre and inter war period some shellac producing units came up in urban areas on the hinterland. For example the Divisional Forest Officer of Bilaspur Division noted that a button and shellac company had been established in Champa by a European firm to reduce the charges of the middleman and save on freight carriage to Europe. (Best, *Indian Forester* 1912, 514) By the 1940s there were 35 shellac factories in Chhattisgarh that produced 16 per cent of the lac in the entire country. (*Provincial Industries Committee Report*, 1946, Nagpur, 1947, 67)

The influx of European capital in lac provided the forest communities with seasonal employment in the forest areas. The expansion of lac production created labour opportunities for the Bhumias and Gonds who started working for managing agencies like Jardine and Skinner. These opportunities were important for their survival in the wake of restrictions over forest use especially after the reservation of forests in 1878. The first adverse impact of this was seen on the inter-linkages between the artisan and the forest dwellers. The forest dweller started supplying lac to the agents of the European firm instead of the artisan. The leasing system created monopolies of managing firms over forests and labour, pushing out smaller lac artisans from the market. It also put tribal lac collectors at the mercy of European capitalist firms whose main interest lay in using cheap labour to propagate and export lac.

From the discussion above it is clear that non-timber forest produce was used as an entry point for initiating a process of selective integration of local society into the global capitalist system guided by imperial imperatives. And it was the same constraints that also unleashed two other trends in the Central Provinces. The first was the one where substitution of forest produce took place in industrial processes. The most prominent example of this was the dyeing industry of the Province where many natural dyeing methods were replaced by chemical dyes for foreign cotton and synthetic cloths. This led to a certain amount of 'deindustrialisation' within the local economy as pointed out by Tirthankar Roy. Another trend was the incorporation of local artisans into the Imperial system of taxation and production as seen in the case of the Agarias of the Central Provinces. These variegated trends however underlined one common tendency, i.e., the manipulation of local conditions to meet the needs of the world capitalist system through the colonial machinery. And it was this objective that ensured that not only timber trees but also the trees important for some of the so called 'minor forest produce' were preserved by the state conservation system.

30.3.3 Reordering Customary Rights in Forests and the Commons

Despite the valiant effort of the people like Brandis at the decentralization of forest management, it is possible to argue that such arguments for local institutional control over forests did not tamper with the basic structure of British Imperial forestry. In fact they created the basis for the restructuring of the local economy of forest use and its integration into the larger colonial economy. The case of the unique *nistar* or customary use rights in the Central Provinces proves the point adequately. The system of commutation used here made the state an active participant in the management of forest use. Under this system the unit of assessment would be the household. Each household was to make a small annual contribution to the government and in return earned the right to pick firewood and grass, but purely for household needs. Of course, the officials termed even this as a privilege, thus denying the household all its customary rights. (Prasad, 2003a) In this sense the provincial forest policy followed Baden-Powell's conventional position that recognised custom as a privilege and not a right that the local people could demand. At the same time Brandis' recognising that local demands were crucial to the survival of colonial control over forested areas was also acknowledged under the commutation system. Historians like Guha have often argued that Brandis was the father of current day participatory forestry that has characterised Joint Forest Management. (Guha, 1996) But the issues raised by the commutation system related to the definition of 'household needs'. In Chanda the district administration held that every village would be assessed at two *annas*

per household. This fixed rate would apply to the extraction of firewood and charcoal. In other words the people were allowed to take firewood, fuel and charcoal worth two *annas*. Other produce like *mahua*, lac and *harra* were fixed at a rate of three *annas* and an equivalent amount of this produce could be collected by households who chose to pay this sum. (Prasad, 2003a) Only firewood and fuel were considered essential for household needs and therefore the charges on them were fixed at a lower rate than other minor forest produce. This meant that a range of other produce for instance, ritual food such as liquor, *harra* and *mahua* - was considered a luxury. Within this limited view, the officials assumed that the needs of every household were similar and that the consumption followed a uniform pattern – both in terms of quantity and the kind of produce consumed. Whether the household contained 4 or 8 people, they were only entitled to 2 *annas* worth of fuel and firewood. By defining needs in this manner the state sought to regulate local practice by using the considerations of demand and supply and balancing them against the working and regeneration of forest produce so that long-term advantages could be drawn out of it.

Similar redefinition was done for the rights of the pastoralists whose movements were also controlled. The animals were to be divided into two classes: cattle belonging to agriculturists and grazing for agricultural purposes; and cattle belonging to professional graziers and traders. The first category was further divided into local privileged graziers and cattle coming from other localities. The cattle of professional graziers were classified as follows: agricultural cattle of peasants including milk cows for private use; milk cattle used for profits and other cattle used for profits by pastoral people. (Prasad, 2003a) A sharp separation was drawn between commercial and subsistence forms. However in actuality the creation of the grazing commons show that the nature of the grazing and milking activities was such that it was difficult to distinguish between commercial and subsistence needs. Such a divorce between the pastoralists and the agrarian society was also seen in the case of Punjab where officials clearly stated that cattle could only be grazed for domestic and agricultural purposes. (Bhattacharya, 1995) This type of restructuring was done to maximise revenue and suit the long-term colonial ends of controlling the entire agrarian economy and the forest laws were a crucial part of this game plan.

30.4 SUMMARY

This Unit has shown that the forests formed an integral part of the entire agrarian economy in nineteenth century India. They supported a large number of occupations to different degrees and the parameters of local forest economies overlapped with larger pastoral, artisanal and agricultural economies. We have seen that while the forests may have been the primary livelihood base of the tribal people, they provided important inputs to tanners, dyers, lac processors and even cattle breeders and pastoralists. In the process the forest dwellers came in contact with the fringe communities and developed relationships of co-operation and conflict with them. Thus the Binjiwars and Gonds sold silk and lac cocoons to the artisans and the Gonds were often hired by the Ahirs to graze some of their cattle. Similarly there was an exchange relationship between the Agarias and Baiga, the former receiving grains in return for the repair of Baiga sickles and axes. These types of relationships in fact signified a system that was inter-connected and open-ended in its nature. And it was the very mobility between different ecosystems and forms of resource use that allowed the survival of multiple forms of subsistence.

Scientific forestry as a “colonial watershed” has to be seen in the context of this open-ended and multi-occupational structure. It created a monopoly right of the state over forest land and resources, displaced the rights of the local people; and, restructured the local economy. The main aim of this restructuring was to alter the relationship between the local forest economy and global industrial capitalism in a way that yielded long term advantage to the colonial power. This aim was achieved by using at least three distinctive mechanisms that have been described in this chapter. The first was the institutionalisation of state ownership over forests despite some strong resistance from within the colonial regime. In fact, in practice, the plank of resistance offered by people like Brandis soon facilitated the incorporation of local skill, knowledge, and households into the project of global capitalism. The second was the modification of customary use practices according to colonial needs. This had a particularly adverse impact on the life of the pastoralists. And finally this Unit has shown that the selective integration of the local forest economy along with the skills and local knowledge base of the forest produce collectors into global industrial capitalist system led to an adverse impact on the local artisanal economies from the late nineteenth century onwards. The introduction of these three factors, however, also meant that the application of scientific forestry was conditioned not only by Imperial imperatives, but also by local and regional factors, the interplay of which determined the variegated nature and impact of colonial interventions in India.

30.5 EXERCISES

- 1) ‘Early colonial policy was governed by commercial rather than conservation needs.’ Comment.
- 2) In what sense were the forests critical for the survival of peasants and artisans?
- 3) What is ‘scientific forestry’? Examine the impact of scientific forestry during the colonial period.
- 4) Discuss the customary rights of forest dwellers. In what ways were these modified as a result of colonial intervention?

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UNIT 31 DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND AGRARIAN SOCIETY IN COLONIAL INDIA

Structure

- 31.1 Introduction
- 31.2 Sources
 - 31.2.1 Early Census
 - 31.2.2 Limitations
- 31.3 Question of Population Growth
 - 31.3.1 Mortality and Fertility Trends
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- 31.6 Summary
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31.1 INTRODUCTION

The population of India according to the latest census in 2001 has been estimated at more than one billion. Indians today account for 16.5 per cent of the world's population and this is expected to increase for the next five decades before a period of population decline begins. This Unit attempts to study the history of demographic change in modern India to understand the changing trends in population size, the determinants of population change and finally its relation to the country's economy.

Population change can be explained by three basic demographic factors: births, deaths and migration. Expressed as an equation (called the Balancing Equation in demography) this may be written as:

$$P_t = P_0 + B - D + I - E$$

Where P_0 is the initial size of the population

P_t is the terminal size of the population

B, D, I and E denote the number of births, deaths and in-migrants and out-migrants between the two dates.

An excess of births over deaths will increase population whereas the reverse will result in population decrease, assuming migration to be constant. In the Indian context the proportion of migrants to the total population of the country was very small and therefore of little demographic significance for the country as a whole. Thus we

need to look at mortality and fertility trends to understand the changing trends in modern india's population size.

31.2 SOURCES

The English East India Company and then the British Crown, generated unprecedented quantities of information in the course of their efforts to conquer and rule India. In this study of long term demographic changes in India we will base our reconstruction primarily on colonial government sources as they constitute the only set of sources that are even approximately comparable over a long period of time.

Numbers have commanded respect for possessing certain inherent putative attributes- objectivity, comparability and very importantly, a promise of accuracy. Historians have (or should have) a healthy suspicion of sources. The need is to take the supplied official sources as partial statements of reality and then deploy clearly stated and transparent methods to correct them. This chapter therefore describes and corrects the demographic and economic data that are used for telling the story of Indian fertility in past times.

31.2.1 Early Census

The two main sources that provide us with demographic information for the colonial period are the decennial censuses and the annual vital registration reports. Maligned and overused in equal measure, the Census has been the most definitive and widely used source for demographic studies of the sub-continent. The first census of the entire country was conducted by the British in 1871-72. This has been followed by subsequent enumerations every ten years – even Britain cannot boast of this unbroken record, having had to skip the 1941 census. Historians of India and elsewhere have produced a fairly large corpus of literature contextualising colonial sources of information in terms of the changing ideology and mechanics of imperial domination. One of the best and early critical discussions of the Indian census was by Bernard Cohn. Cohn pointed out that the Indian census was not merely a neutral tool for information gathering. The classificatory logic and form of the census in turn created conditions for new strategies of caste and status mobility and electoral contests. Numeric information was an ideal form of expression for the colonial state. It elided differences of language, history, economy and society. At once it allowed the maddening complexity of India to be made comprehensible through numbers. That the colonial state felt was relevant at that particular point in time. In a similar vein Appadurai argues that the census allowed the “The huge diversity of castes, sects, tribes, and other practical groupings of the Indian landscape ... [to be] rendered into a vast categorical landscape untethered to the specificities of the agrarian landscape.” (Appadurai, 1997, p.327) He goes on to claim that “This unyoking occurs in two major steps, one associated with the period before 1870, in which issues of land settlement and taxation are dominant colonial projects, and the other with the period from 1870 to 1931, the period of the great All-India census, in which the enumeration of human populations is the dominant project. The period from about 1840 to 1870 is the period of transition from one major orientation to the other.” (Appadurai, 1997, p.327) The purpose here is not to discuss at length the processes that went into the construction of colonial categories for social analysis and ordering but merely to emphasise that the tools of colonial social and economic information gathering need to be located in the context of changing colonial perceptions, which in turn were related, though not always in clearly straightforward ways, to the varying demands of the colonial enterprise of imperialism.

The need for a census of India was felt by the English rulers much before the first census of India that was finally conducted in 1871 and 1872. A number of provinces had conducted population enumerations in the first half the nineteenth century but these were not planned in tandem with other English administered territories. Probably the first census in India to classify the enumerated population by sex, age, caste and dwelling units was Henry Walter's 1830 census of Dacca city. Though a number of provincial and local enumerations were carried out in different parts of the country in the second half of the century before 1871, the census of the North West Provinces taken on the night of 31 December 1852 with a reference date of 1 January 1853 was the first census conducted on modern lines. In 1849 the Government of India directed provincial governments to conduct quinquennial population enumerations on the lines of those carried out in the North West Provinces by revenue officials. The Board of Revenue in a circular to all collectors, asked them to follow the North West Provinces' pattern with due attention to local specificities while conducting the proposed quinquennial censuses. Madras was the only Presidency to have implemented this directive in full.

Following the Board of Revenue order Madras carried out four enumerations in 1851-52, 1856-57, 1861-62 and 1866-67. The fifth quinquennial census was merged with the Imperial all India census of 1871-72. The quinquennial enumerations and the subsequent census figures suggest plausible and comparable rates of growth. The first all India census was planned to be conducted in 1861 but had to be postponed to 1871 owing to the Rebellion of 1857 in the north and straitened financial circumstances for the government. The aggregate population figures from 1871 appear quite consistent and reliable.

The first census of India was not carried out simultaneously in all places. While it was conducted in November 1871 in Madras, Mysore and Coorg and Burma, it could be carried out only in 1872 in the Central Provinces, Bombay, North West Provinces and Bengal.

Since then the census has been conducted every ten years. Political problems have in certain years forced the government to either abbreviate the scope of the census (1941) or omit certain areas (eg. Assam and Kashmir in 1981 and 1991, respectively).

This study uses the colonial censuses from 1871-72 and the vital registration statistics to reconstruct colonial India's demographic history. A brief note on the strengths and limitations of each of these sources will be in order.

31.2.2 Limitations

All the post 1871-72 censuses were synchronous – i.e. carried out simultaneously everywhere – population enumerations. Table 3 below gives a tabular view of the subjects enumerated in each of the censuses between 1881 and 1981. Two censuses of the colonial period require special mention. The 1931 census was the last census for which caste or more accurately *jati* data was published. It has gained notoriety for its changed method of recording age and smoothed age distributions, which has made the published age figures non-comparable with earlier and later census, age distributions. In this census in contrast to earlier practise, the “age at next birthday” was recorded in place of the earlier “completed years”. Nationalist agitation was another factor that militated against this enumeration. Further, the Sarda Act (1929) also led to inaccuracies in the age returns of unmarried girls: since child marriage became illegal, women's age was overstated during marriage to avoid possible penalty.

However this problem attracted many a demographer to unsmooth the smoothed distribution though none can claim complete success.

One important development in the context of the 1931 census was the Indian Fertility Enquiry of 1931. This enquiry “was not a part of the general census enquiry and was not covered by legislative enactment. It depended largely on how far district, Municipal and Local Board officers were prepared to assist.”¹ This incomplete but most useful survey suggests significant class and caste specific fertility patterns.

The financial exigencies of the Second World War forced the government to drastically abbreviate the published report and tables in 1941. The straitened circumstances also led to a change from household enumeration schedules to individual slips. However, the individual slips were retained and this enabled a subsequent 2 per cent sample, often referred to as the Y-Sample after the Census Commissioner Yeatts, providing detailed age specific information on nuptial status and occupation and industry. Caste data for all individuals was recorded for the last time in 1941.

After independence the recording of caste except in cases of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was stopped. A provisional list of Backward Classes was also prepared by this census. Since 1951 post-enumeration checks were made regularly after each enumeration to check for accuracy. Changes were effected in economic classification.

One important administrative change was that with the passing of the Census Act in 1948, the census was recognised as a single permanent organisation under the Ministry of Home Affairs under a Registrar General who was also the *ex-officio* Census Commissioner for India.

Indian census data has been plagued by the problems not so much of under-enumeration but age-sex selective undercounting and the poor quality of age reporting.

In many parts of India unmarried girls of marriageable age were not counted. Again, we find that most Indians reported their age wrongly and the reported age data suffered from serious problems of digit-preference and age-heaping. The unreliability of Indian age data has been corrected by using a variety of smoothing techniques, but this further reduces the robustness of indirect estimates of mortality and fertility based on Indian census age-distributions.

The second basic demographic data base for this study is the annual series on births and deaths published by the government. This report was known as the *Report of the Sanitary Commissioner*. Subsequently its nomenclature changed to *The Report of the Director of Public Health*. In the post independence years, these statistics at the district level were published in the annual series known as the *Vital Statistics of India* which became available from 1958.

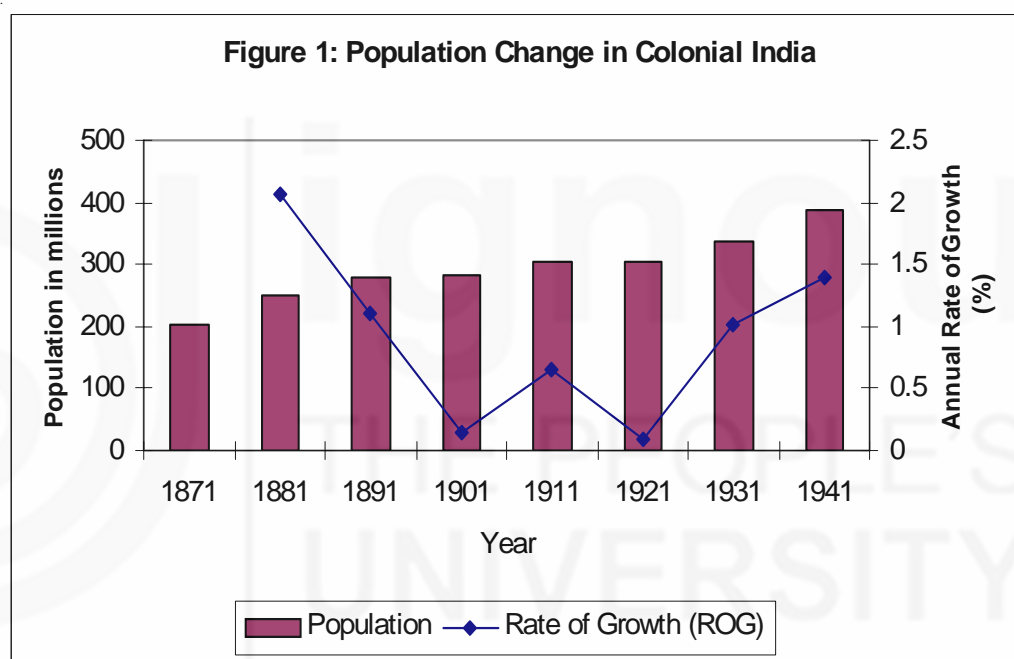
After suitable corrections are made in the level of the reported vital statistics they provide an invaluable source not in making precise demographic projections but in charting the changing trends of annual fertility and mortality movements.

¹ Census of India, 1931, vol. Xiv, Madras, Part I p.146 cited in Dwarkanath Ghosh, “The Indian fertility enquiry, 1931” (paper presented at the 2nd All-India Population and 1st Family Hygiene Conference, 1938).

31.3 QUESTION OF POPULATION GROWTH

Let us look at the decennial trend of population growth. Figure 1 charts the trends in population size and the growth rate of the population from 1871 to 1941. In absolute terms, population grew steadily over the period, increasing from 203 million in 1871 to 389 million in 1941. But the rate of growth shows a different picture. The highest rate of growth is registered for the decade between 1871 and 1881 despite severe famine mortality in Mysore (1877), Madras (1878) and Bombay (1876-77). The growth rate for this period has been spuriously inflated by the better coverage in 1881 relative to 1871-72. Central India, Rajasthan and Punjab which accounted for 3 million people in 1881 were not counted. Further, even in areas that were covered by census enumeration an estimated 12 million people escaped counting.

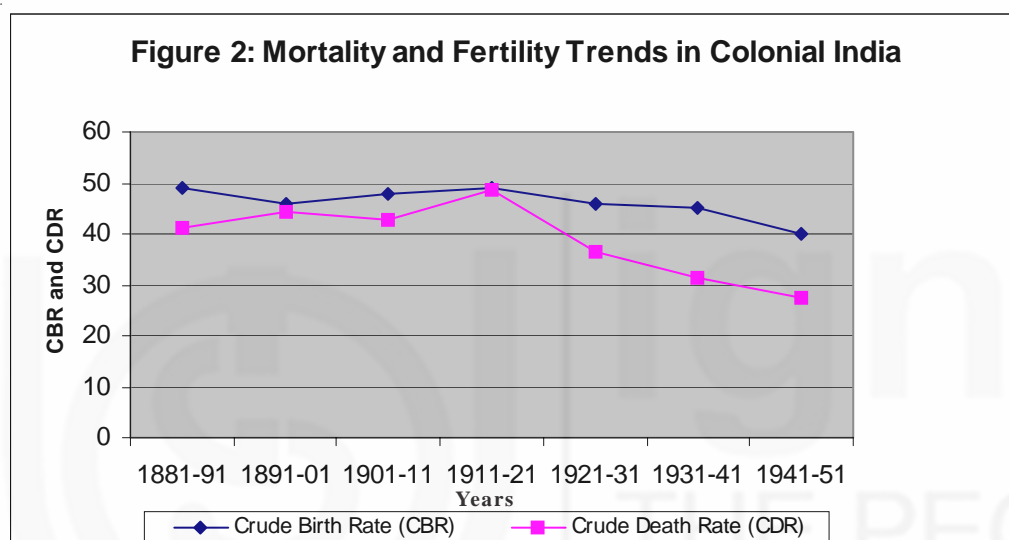
From 1881 we find that the absolute size of the population increased slowly till 1921, but the annual rate of growth (ROG) showed a clearly declining trend till 1921. After 1921, the growth rate exhibited a rapid upward trend.



This brings us to the question of why population growth in India showed a marked increase after 1921. To answer this question we look at two sets of determinants: demographic and non-demographic. Going back to the Balancing Equation on page 1 we know that population change is the result of changes in births, deaths and migration. The proportion of migrants to the country's total population was as small as 3 per cent? And showed little change across time. This very small proportion of migrants permits us to discount migration as a substantive factor in population change and treat colonial India as a closed population. On taking migration out of the Balancing Equation we are left with births and deaths as the most important variables explaining the course of India's population history. A sustained excess of births over deaths will lead to population increase whereas continued excess deaths or frequent incidence of large excess mortality will result in population decline or stagnation. These demographic variables (fertility and mortality), it must be kept in mind, influence one another and are closely related to a variety of non-demographic influences. Let us first describe the trends in mortality and fertility and then try to explain their varying levels and direction.

31.3.1 Mortality and Fertility Trends

Ideally annual mortality and fertility data should be taken from the vital registration series. The high degree of incompleteness in Indian historical vital registration data does not permit this, forcing us to depend on indirect census based estimates of mortality and fertility. However, the incomplete registration data, indirect census based estimates as well as intercensal growth rates all confirm high mortality till 1921 followed by a marked secular decline. The above mortality and fertility curves show that the fertility-mortality differential sharply increased in the post-1921 decades. A continued excess of births over deaths thus clearly explain the rapid growth in India's population after 1921. Figure 2 shows that fertility continued to be high throughout the period of the colonial censuses whereas mortality declined sharply after 1921. Infant deaths formed a large part of total deaths. The infant mortality trend moved in consonance with the CDR (Crude Death Rate) trend.



Mortality

What explains this marked mortality transition in India? The more popular explanations highlight the reduced incidence of famines, epidemics and lethality of endemic diseases due to improved communications, irrigation, public sanitation and health care in the post 1921 years. These explanations can be found in the works of Kingsley Davis (1951), S.N. Agarwala (1973) and Leela and Pravin Visaria (1983).

Davis suggested that famines were controlled through development of roads, railways and irrigation by the British, and Modern medical advances checked epidemic diseases. To explain the reduction of famine mortality and intensity in terms of irrigation is questionable. In the first forty three years of the twentieth century the country did remain free of any major famine. However, the percentage of irrigated area to total cultivated area increased only marginally from 20 per cent in 1901 to 23 per cent in 1930. Improvement in communications is also an inadequate explanation for controlling famines. Better communications can reduce the risk and intensity of famine by ensuring more stable food supplies. This in turn will get reflected in the variation of food prices in the country. However, famines recurred repeatedly in the years up to 1900. For the period 1865 to 1900 the coefficient of variation in the prices of wheat and rice fall from more than 40 per cent to nearly 20 per cent. If this massive decrease in price variation could not prevent famines it is difficult to argue that a subsequent fall in this index by about five percent could stop famines. (Guha, 2001)

Leela and Pravin Visaria ascribe the slow rate of population increase up to 1921 to high mortality that was “primarily related to waves of epidemics.” It is true that epidemic and endemic diseases were major killers in colonial India, but what remains unexplained is why these diseases suddenly lose their lethal power in the 1920s.

It is true that famine and epidemic mortality greatly reduced in the post 1921 period. If this cannot be ascribed to economic improvement or improved health care, then how is this conundrum of India’s mortality transition to be explained?

Ira Klein explains the falling trend in mortality in terms of a change in the host-parasite relations that invested the Indian population with greater immunity to diseases. This interesting thesis, in turn, has been refuted by Sumit Guha on the basis of an examination of age-specific death rates. If the immunological explanation is correct then we should see differential improvement in mortality by age-group, but this is not so. (Guha, 2001)

Guha, then goes on to explain the mortality decline in terms of reduced fluctuations of foodgrain output after the second decade of the twentieth century which is explained by more stable rainfall in the 1925 to 1950 period relative to the years between 1900 to 1925. Guha associates this reduction in the marked volatility of food production with the human host’s increased ability to resist potentially lethal diseases. It may be pointed out here that volatility in monsoon precipitation once again showed an increasing trend in the post independence years. This increase not being accompanied by worsening mortality may be explained by increased state intervention. The colonial mortality transition can be ascribed to the blessings of the rain gods only if we hold constant the minimalist intervention of the colonial state in matters of agriculture and food security. Shiela Zurbrigg, also emphasises the close interrelationship between nutrition and disease exposure. (Delhi, 2001)

From 1921 or after the influenza pandemic of 1918 the crude birth death rate began on a course of secular decrease.

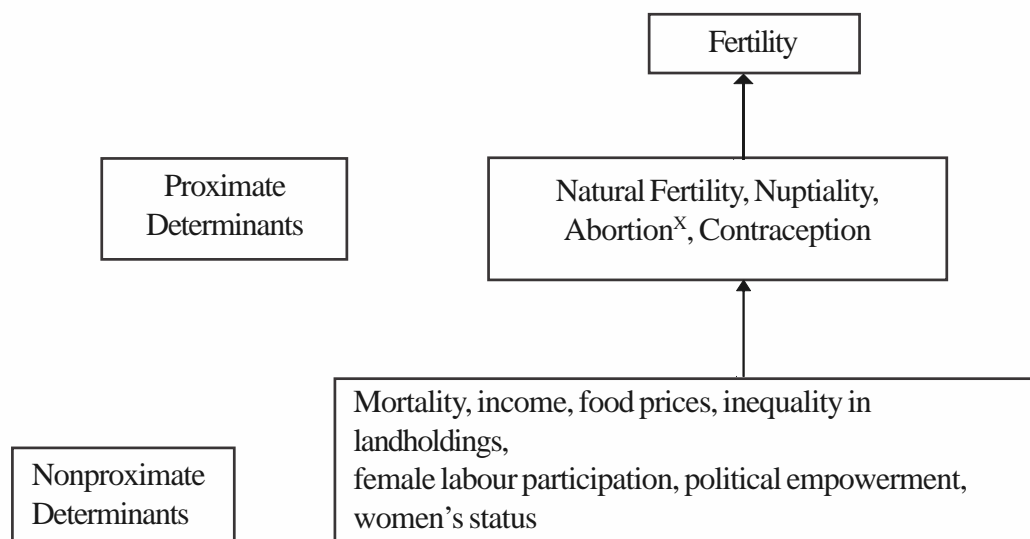
Fertility

This brings us to the other main determinant of population size – fertility. In demography fertility refers to the number of live births expressed as a proportion of the total population (Crude Birth Rate), population of women (GFR), per woman (TFR) etc. There is general consensus that India has had high fertility, though the recorded levels are much below the biological maximum of human population. Drawing upon Bongaarts’ useful model, fertility is seen as the outcome of proximate and nonproximate determinants. The proximate determinants for which time series data are available for the entire period of the study, are natural fertility and nuptiality¹. Even for nuptiality, the data are not annual but available only at the time of the decennial census. The second group of variables, that Bongaarts categorised as nonproximate determinants of fertility are those that affected fertility *via* the proximate determinants, such as mortality, income, food prices, inequality in landholdings, female labour participation, political empowerment, women’s status.

The chart below provides a schematic view of the determinants of fertility that are studied here.

¹Nuptiality literally means – relating to marriage. When nuptiality (proportion of married women in a population) is high population increases.

Figure 3: Determinants of Fertility



^x Abortion has not been analysed for lack of quantitative information.

Demographers had in earlier discussions viewed pre-transitional populations as characterised by uncontrolled high fertility. Louis Henry presented his concept of ‘natural fertility’ based on his family reconstitution of Crulai in Normandy in 1953. Henry initially defined natural fertility as legitimate or marital fertility that was unchecked by either contraception or induced abortion. Henry defined ‘natural fertility’ as “fertility of a human population that makes no deliberate effort to limit births.” (Louis, 1953). Subsequently (1961), he refined it to “fertility in the absence of parity-dependent birth control....”

There has been a large amount of work on the biological aspects of human fertility and the biological maximum is supposed to be fifteen live births per woman. However, even ‘natural fertility’ societies have experienced fertility levels much below this maximum. The difference between total fertility and total fecundity in ‘natural fertility’ regimes can be explained largely by the ‘exposure to risk’ which is governed primarily by the length of sexual partnership, eg. marriage and lactational infecundability.

Studies of natural fertility in India have estimated the natural fertility to be low in the pre-transitional period at six births per woman in the 1930s increasing to seven and nine in the 1970s and 1980s with improvements in healthcare. Sriya Iyer includes widowhood as a one of the depressants of natural fertility in India. However, Henry’s two definitions and subsequent use of the term seems to exclude widowhood as a determinant of natural fertility; the latter being more related to the broad category of nuptiality. (2002)

Estimating the level of natural fertility in india for the historical period in terms of lactational infecundity, post partum amenohrrea, coital frequency, etc. Is simply not possible in the absence of data. We next come to the other proximate determinant of fertility that is nuptiality. Although the annual vital registration series did not collect data on marriage, the decennial census does provide us with data on marital status by age. This permits estimation of the proportion married by age and the mean age at marriage.

Figure 4: Proportion of Married per thousand Females and Mean Age at Marriage

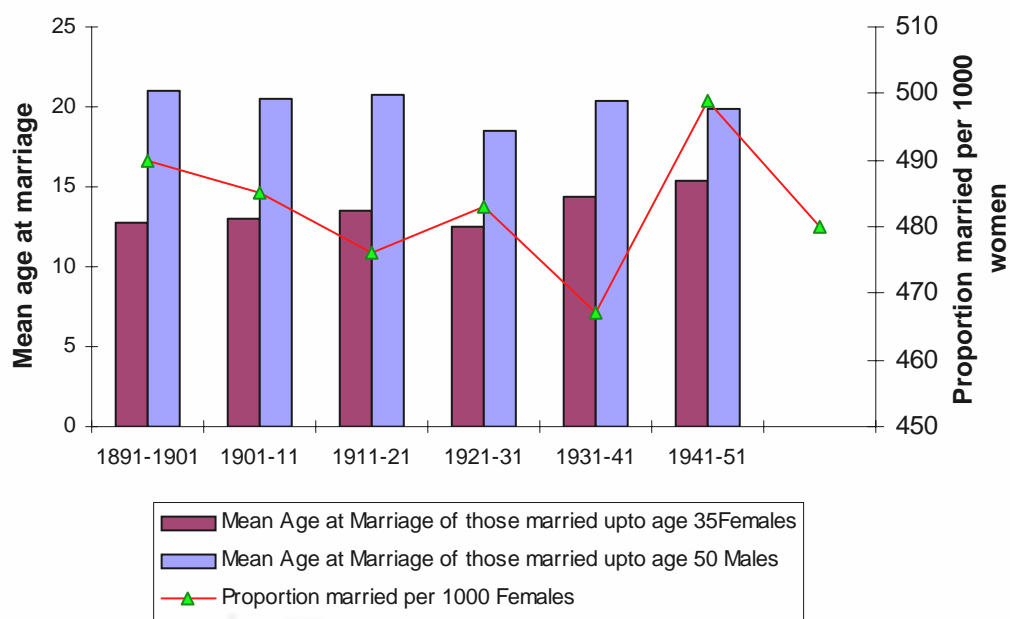


Figure 4 above shows the mean age at marriage increasing marginally from around 13 years to 15 years for girls between 1891 and 1951. This marginal change in the age at marriage at the all-India level can be safely assumed to have had no great affect on fertility. Similarly, the mean age at marriage showed a small downward trend between 1891 and 1941 with a spike in 1931, that was probably caused by increased marriages to circumvent the Sarada Act.

Thus despite nuptiality showing a small decrease, fertility continued to increase possibly due to the increase in natural fertility. Small increases in the age at first marriage for very young women do not alter fertility significantly. Widowhood also contributed to keeping the fertility level much below biological limits. At the all-India level the near universal incidence of marriage, absence of contraception and the low age at first marriage contributed to high fertility. According to Thomas Malthus, population is regulated by two kinds of checks – the “preventive” and the “positive”. The preventive check which mainly operated through delayed marriages and celibacy was of small significance for India as a whole whereas the “positive” check operating through increased mortality and diseases was much more significant.

Mortality apart from periodically lowering population size also worked in tandem with fertility. Fertility responded to mortality in two ways: First by “replacement” and secondly by “hoarding”. Replacement refers to a process by which a live birth replaces a dead child. Hoarding, on the other hand implies having more births than needed in order to attain an expected family size, given the expectation that some children would die. Thus, in the course of demographic change over time, we find that high and volatile mortality pushed up fertility often after the period of crisis ended. After mortality began on its course of decline, fertility continued to remain at pre-mortality transition levels resulting in steep population increases as was witnessed in India till the 1980s.

31.3.2 Age Structure of the Population

Next, we come to the age-structure of the population. The age-distribution of a population is primarily determined by fertility and secondarily by mortality. The Indian age pyramid unlike that of advanced industrial countries has a very broad base and a very narrow top suggesting that a large proportion of the population is young.

Figures 5a and b clearly show that the age distribution remained remarkably stable with

Figure 4a: Summary Age Distribution-Males

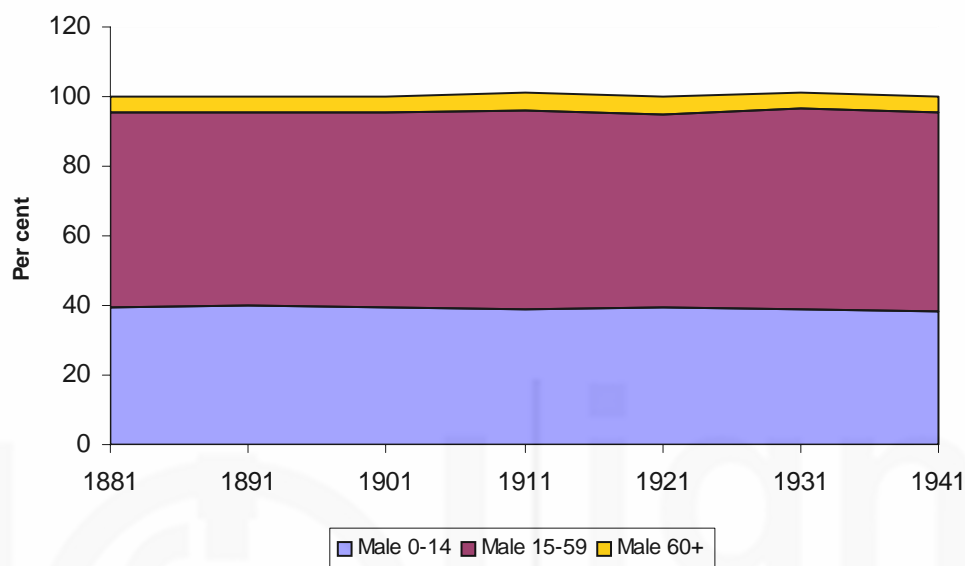
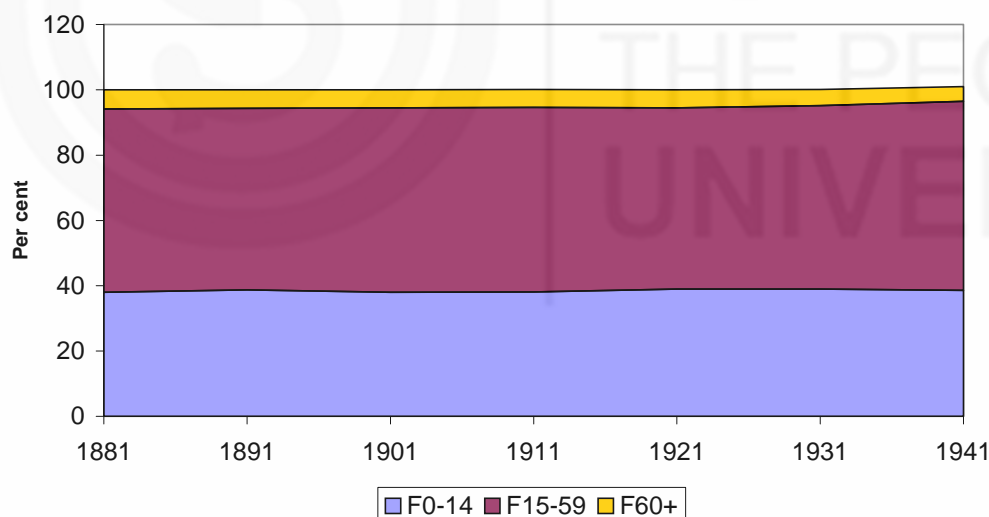


Figure 5b: Summary Age Distribution-Females



a large and virtually constant proportion of young people. In a closed population as that of India's, the large proportion of children points to high levels of fertility. The age distribution also suggests a high dependency ratio. Further, the youthfulness of the population also ensured a continued population momentum that would last beyond the onset of fertility decline.

31.3.3 Sex Composition of the Population

We now come to sex-composition of the population. The sex ratio at birth usually falls between 1040 to 1070, internationally. In other words 104 to 107 male babies are born for every 100 female babies. On the other hand male mortality is also generally higher than female mortality in the older age groups. Despite this, India has exhibited a continuous

decrease in the proportion of women. This is explained by lower life expectancy at birth for females. This all-India trend however does not hold good for many parts of India as we shall see in our discussion of regional trends.

Table 1: Sex Ratio, Life Expectation at Birth and Dependency Ratio

	1871-1881	1881-91	1891-1901	1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41
Sex Ratio	1040	1042	1037	1047	1056	1062	1069
Dependency Ratio	79.1	79.8	77.6	77.4	80.1	76.1	75.1
e0 Males/e0 Females	0.93	0.96	0.98	0.97	0.93	1.01	1.02

Notes: Sex Ratio-Male population per 1000 females; Dependency Ratio: Population aged 0 to 14 years and above 60 years per 100 people between ages 15-59, e₀ males/e₀ females; Life expectation at birth for males divided by life expectation at birth for females.

In terms of demographic variables we can conclude with confidence that the population of India grew slowly from 1871 to 1921 largely because of the mortality check despite high fertility. In the post 1921 years up to the 1980s fertility remained high but mortality declined leading to rapid population growth and resulting in a very young age population. Women fared badly in terms of mortality relative to men throughout our period.

This fairly simple story of colonial indian demographic history becomes very much more complex when we study demographic variables in relation to social institutions and economic change. Demographic variables such as mortality, morbidity, nuptiality, sex ratios and fertility are not exogenously determined variables. They are predicated on a host of institutions and conditions that are influenced by context specific patterns of social and economic change. To study these linkages we are compelled to look at smaller and more homogenous regions for otherwise we lose sense specifics at levels of aggregation as large as india.

31.4 REGIONAL VARIATIONS

British india was a creation of the colonial state premised on political and administrative considerations. Stretching from the himalayyas in the north to the tropics in the south, and from the deserts in the west to the deltas of the east, british india was formed by the differential incorporation of pre-existing peoples, polities and institutions into a new colonial state. Generalisations for an area as varied as india with its many constituent regions and sub-regions conceal a number of regional and sub-regional particularities. This necessarily compels us to disaggregate the various component regions and zones within colonial india to get a more nuanced picture.

Population increased in the pre-mortality transition period (1871-1921) at an average annual growth rate of 0.37 per cent for india as a whole.

Table 2: Population Increase, CDR, CBR and Sex Ratio

	1871-1921	1921-1941	1871-1921	1921-1941	1891-1921	1881-1941
	Annual ROG (%)		Average CDR		Average CBR SR	
East Zone	0.52	1.37	46.7	46.65	53.4	1025
West Zone	0.14	1.3	42.1	46.45	54.5	1077
Central Zone*	0.47	1.29	31.3	46.35	53.7	1031
North Zone	0.19	1.25	47	42.95	47.3	1122
South Zone	0.47	0.92	33.65	33.95	41.3	985
All India	0.37	1.22	45.85	43.25	49.4	1050

Source: Based on Visaria and Visaria (1983).

* Data suspect, ROG, CDR, CBR and SR refer to rate of growth, Crude Death Rate, Crude Birth Rate and population Sex Ratio respectively

In the next period (1921-1941) the growth rate sharply increased to 1.22 per cent for the country. On disaggregating the country into five geographical zones: East, west, central, north and south, we see that the first period the central and south zones exhibited the highest growth rates. However in the subsequent period, a marked reversal took place. The south zone now showed the lowest rate of population increase.

The fertility and mortality estimates in table 3 should be taken as best as indicative and in no way can they claim any accuracy. What the figures do suggest is that mortality acted as a major check on population increase. South india fared much better in the pre 1921 period with relatively high growth and a lower level of mortality. There again seems to be a clear connection between high mortality and high fertility. In terms of the sex composition of the population, except for the south zone, and the east zone (in 1881 and 1891) the country as a whole registered an excess of men over women. Further, as the experience of the south zone points to, regions with a longer history of relatively lower fertility and mortality, appear to have attained fertility transition earlier than those that experienced longer periods of high mortality and fertility.

31.5 DEMOGRAPHY-SOCIETY INTERRELATIONS

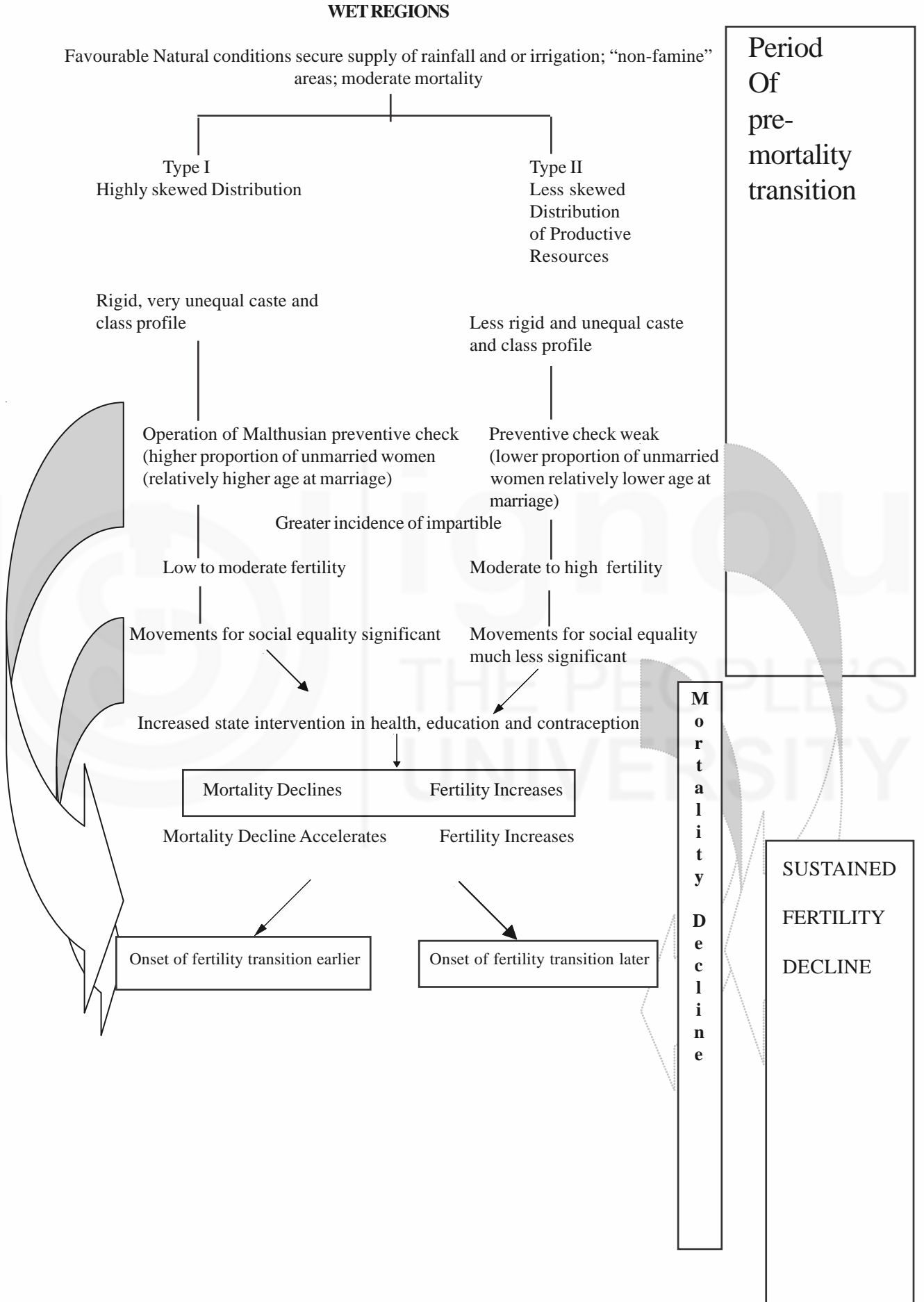
When confronted by questions such as why did the south zone have more women, or why did mortality increase till 1921 to fall subsequently or why did the age at marriage vary across regions, we have to look to changing social institution and economy for explaining the observed demographic phenomena.

While many social scientists initially conceptualised population as an exogenous factor in social change, demographers have increasingly come to recognise the close interrelationship between demographic and social variables.

In the indian case there have been some works on demography that have used data from the past. However, when resort is made to social structures of historical vintage, such as kinship systems, female autonomy in explaining fertility outcomes, these determining structures are seen as static systems. Recognition of historical contingency requires the viewing of these systems or structures as being subject to change at different rates through time. Social scientists try to explain a variety of phenomena in terms of a dependent variable that can be understood by resort to a set of explanatory variables. In the context of demographic change, extant research has argued for determinants ranging from cultural practices, to women's participation rates in the labour force to literacy. The problem with this approach is that when it is applied to a data set comprising socially and historically diverse component groups, the assumption being made is that the same relationship should hold good for each of the constituent groups. In the process contextual specificity is given short shrift.

Let us take two different demographic regimes to illustrate the varied ways in which demography and society and ecology relate to each other. Most regions of india in the colonial period can be described as high mortality-high fertility regimes. The exception to this was the moderate mortality-moderate fertility regime. While "dry" regions were characterised by the first type of demographic regime, the "wet" regions registered a greater incidence of the second type of regime. This division into dry and wet ecotypes is entirely schematic.

Figure 5a: schematic of Representation of Demography- Society Interaction



DRY REGIONS

Unfavourable Natural conditions- insecure supply of rainfall and or irrigation; "famine" areas; high mortality; significant variation in mortality

Less skewed Distribution of Land
Less rigid and unequal caste and class profile
Geographically restricted boundary of labour circulation and commodity circulation.

Preventive check weak
Operation of positive check
(lower proportion of unmarried women
relatively lower age at marriage)
Weak influence of high Hinduism

High fertility

Movements for social equality much less significant

Increased state intervention in health, education and contraception

Mortality Declines Fertility Increases

Onset of fertility transition later

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The schematic diagram above tries to capture the differences in the structures, processes and demographic outcomes in the wet and dry regions. Demography in a sense is the most basic of social processes – the very process of biological reproduction on which is premised social reproduction. The extant social relations in the form of institutions based on prevailing configurations of economic, political and cultural power crucially impact upon the significance of the demographic variable. Thus, for locating the significance of the demographic variable and its determinants and outcomes, both trends and conjunctures need to be examined closely.

Agriculture was the key variable in the political economy of the India. Trend rates of change in all crop yields continuously stayed ahead of population between 1891 and 1946 except for the years 1936-1946. However, foodgrain output failed to keep pace with population increase from the decade 1911-1921 up to 1946, ironically the period when famines largely disappeared. The severity and the frequency of malevolent famines sharply fell. There were no major famines during the first half of the twentieth century. However this is not to say that these were years of great prosperity. Scarcities, associated price hikes, endemic diseases and epidemics continued to take their human toll. Further, the economic growth of these years benefited regions and classes very unequally. In areas with high levels of agricultural commercialisation and a large section of the population (landless wage labour or poor peasants) dependent on the market for their food supplies, a sharp price hike usually resulted in heightened mortality. This section of the population was most vulnerable to 'slump' famines where a failure of entitlement was caused by shrinking employment, which occurred during years of lowered rainfall. High and volatile mortality led to short-run falls in conception rates followed by increased fertility. Generally, in such insecure agro-economic zones high fertility accompanied high mortality. Risk insuring social institutions were also not significant. Further, in the absence of high levels of inequality in landholdings and a small landless labour force coupled with a near absence of non-agrarian employment, access to education and migration, and movements for egalitarian change were not significant. In this context when mortality started declining fertility continued to remain high. Access to new technologies of health and contraception and ideologies of development failed to spread among the bulk of the rural population, making the reach of increased state intervention in the years after independence very limited.

Wet regions, on the other hand behaved very differently. In the pre-transition mortality phase, though they were largely safe from monsoon failure and ensuing famines, the steep social incline made the economically weaker agricultural workers and marginal peasants vulnerable to price hikes. However, the population of these areas were not ravaged by the repeated general famines. In many of these wet regions sharp social and economic contradictions resulted in powerful movements for class and caste equality in the 1920s and 30s. Though these movements *per se* did not have demographic outcomes, by raising popular empowerment and strengthening popular institutions at the village level, the population of the wet regions were in a better position to demand and utilise the increased intervention of the post colonial state in the field of health and education. This greatly contributed to the continued mortality fall and the somewhat earlier onset of fertility decline.

The lower mortality, greater agricultural security, lower sex-ratios and somewhat lower fertility and higher age at marriage in colonial southern India in relation to the country as a whole, are features of long duration. These traits have been recently rediscovered as determinants of the accelerated fertility decline in parts of India; however, they seem to stem from a social and economic structure specific to many

regions in South India that was already manifest during the colonial period. The contemporary differentials in the spatial distribution of fertility and nuptiality largely continue to follow earlier patterns. States and districts that have made major reductions in fertility in the contemporary period also happen to have been areas of relatively lower fertility in the past with distinct social and economic structures. By highlighting these trends and characteristics we hope to emphasise that the demographic transformations have to be studied over time paying attention to both historically conditioned and regionally varying structures and agency.

31.6 SUMMARY

On the basis of the decennial censuses conducted by the British we can reconstruct the demographic history of the colonial period. The figures in the census have problems, but if we interpret them with care and correct some of their biases, they give us a broad picture of changes within the population. If we look at these figures, the long-term trend becomes fairly clear. Seen in absolute terms, the population grew steadily from the late nineteenth century. The rate of growth (ROG) however fell between 1881 and 1921 and increased after that. It is clear that fertility rates did not go up, but mortality rates declined, leading to population growth. This chapter considers all the possible determinants of this increase. If we shift our focus from the general all India trends to the regional patterns, we discover interesting variations. This chapter looks into some of these contrasts, and suggests a broad difference between the demographic regimes of wet and dry zones.

31.7 GLOSSARY

Age Heaping	Age heaping occurs because many people round their age up or down to the nearest number that ends in 0 or 5. When the ages are graphed, the distribution is not smooth; instead, there are heaps over the ages ending in 0 and 5.
Age-Specific Fertility Rate	The number of births per woman within a specific age interval during a specified time.
Crude Birth Rate	Crude Birth Rate is the number of births per 1000 of population
Crude Death Rate	Crude Death Rate is the number of deaths per 1000 of population.
Digit Preference	Demographers have shown that people exhibit preferences for ages having certain terminal digits. This is referred to as digit heaping For example, single-year-of-age data shows a strong preference for ages ending in “0,” with somewhat lesser preferences for ages ending in “5,” “2,” and “8.” Conversely, these data show negative preferences for ages ending in “9,” and “1” (Shryock et al. 1971, p. 204).
e_0 males & e_0 females	Life expectancy at Birth is denoted by the e and subscript 0 = e_0
GFR (Gross Fertility Rate)	Number of births of women per 1000.

Lactational Infecundity	When the woman is breast-feeding her fecundity goes down.
Smoothed Age Distributions	Age fluctuations reduced by using statistical techniques.
Total Fecundity	Biological ability to produce.
Total Fertility Rate (TFR)	The total number of live births a woman would have on average, if she were to live to the maximum age.

31.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the limitations of the data in colonial censuses?
- 2) Discuss the changing pattern of mortality-fertility curves during the colonial period.
- 3) Examine the question of population growth in the colonial period.
- 4) To what extent famines affected the population growth in the colonial period?
- 5) Why did fertility growth behave differently in dry and wet regions?

31.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 32 TRIBAL SOCIETY AND COLONIAL ECONOMY

Structure

- 32.1 Introduction
- 32.2 Defining the Pre-Colonial Tribal Economy
- 32.3 Nature and Patterns of Colonial Domination in Tribal India
- 32.4 Tribal Economies in State Owned Agricultural and Forest Lands
- 32.5 The Colonial Impact and Tribal Response
 - 32.5.1 From Producers to Labourers
 - 32.5.2 Modes of Protest and Identity Formation
- 32.6 Summary
- 32.7 Exercises
- 32.8 Suggested Readings

32.1 INTRODUCTION

Marshall Sahlins, the famous American anthropologist, once called the tribal society, which he said was characterised by hunting and gathering, as “the original affluent society” or the society of plenty. By this he meant that the people practising this form of subsistence could live a prosperous lifestyle from the bounty of nature and accumulate wealth in the form of gifts, grains and livestock to build and expand their economies and societies. This image has also been replicated in Indian historiography, which has often used the trope of happy, prosperous, stable and harmonious tribal society in pre-colonial India in its work. In this broad historiographical context, the study of the encounter of the tribal society with the colonial economy is ridden with examples of devastation and destitution of tribal people with the advent of the British. Generally speaking, there has also been a tendency to regard colonialism as both, an economic and ecological watershed in the history of tribal economies. While this is true at a very general level, historians differ on the nature of the colonial impact.

In this Unit we discuss the nature and different dimensions of the colonial impact on the tribal economy. Though the term ‘tribal’ is a highly contested one, in this Unit it is used to refer to people who were dependent, for a large measure, on the forest economy, for their subsistence from the early 19th century onwards. This means that even if they possessed land and were engaged in cultivation, a large part of their seasonal income was from forests either in terms of the sale of non-timber forest produce, or labour for the forest department. Many of these tribal people lived inside or on the fringes of the forest and their dependence on forests is also a result of a long term historical process which we consider in this Unit.

32.2 DEFINING THE PRE-COLONIAL TRIBAL ECONOMY

It has often been assumed that tribal people and their societies lived in insulated and secluded enclaves before the advent of the British in India. This means that their economies and culture was relatively untouched by outside markets and

therefore were relatively closed, egalitarian and prosperous communities. These economies were free of exploitation because they had no private property and need rather than the profit motive necessitated their relationships of exchange. In one sense the tribal economy was characterised as being quite the opposite of peasant agriculture under the colonial rule where the peasants held individual titles to land, depended mostly on settled cultivation for their livelihoods and also sold a good part of their produce in the commercial market. But the historical evidence from many of the areas show that such a notion of the tribal economy in the anthropological writings of the 1930s was steeped in ecological romanticism.

In pre-colonial central and northern India one of the main factors that had an impact on both identity and subsistence was the military conflict between ruling elite in both the Maratha and Mughal periods. The chieftain societies of different tribes like the Gonds or the Khakkars or Jats also participated in these conflicts. At the same time the tribals who were peasants and or gatherers in the forests were forced to support their own chieftains and therefore formed bands in forests and formed an important part of the chieftains mercenary army. In this context it is important to remember that the term “tribes” has been used very loosely for communities which existed in a “pre-class society”. The definition of tribes as “a pre-class society was implied in the work of D.D. Kosambi *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* who stated that band and hunting gathering societies were characterised by relations that were determined by birth and marriage and not necessarily economic activity. However Kosambi was also quick to point out that these relations were open-ended and changed according the situation. In keeping with this definition many communities that were later described as peasants by Britishers were termed tribes by the accounts of the medieval period. Chetan Singh’s early article (1988) on the role of tribal chieftains in Mughal administration clearly identified warrior and ruling classes of indigenous kingdoms as superior tribal linkages. Amongst these were the Jats, the Khakhars, Baluchis and Afghans. In this vein, the chief feature of their society was not only their blood and kinship line of descent but also their pastoral and non-sedentary occupational characteristics. In a later article (1995) Singh is however more categorical about the mention of hunters and gatherers as primitive people. For example he writes of their references in Abul Fazl’s *Akbarnama* where tribal people were described as ‘men who go naked living in the wilds, and subsist by their bows and arrows and the game they kill’. He also argues that the medieval texts show that in the case of tribals like the Gonds ‘that people of India despise them and regard them outside the pale of their realm and religion’. Such an identification of tribals as outside the realm of the sedentary cultivation was contingent upon the development of a system of land administration which was an important characteristic of the Mughal 16th and 17th centuries and British regimes of the 19th century. Before that the British perceptions of tribes were conditioned by their own contingencies. For example the Anglo-Maratha conflicts of the 18th century led to descriptions of the Gond chieftains as the ‘lords of the rugged hills’ and their subjects as people who were prone to anarchic behaviour and ‘habitual depredations’. Some of these depredations were described as ‘ravages of lawless tribes’ who assisted the errant and ‘chaotic’ rulers. We see similar perceptions of the tribes on the northeast frontiers of the British Rule. Writing about the eastern Naga tribes in the early 19th century Captain Michelle (1826) said that the Nagas carried on the most profitable trade in slaves and suppressed all *ryots* in their

neighbourhood. The greed of gain caused endless feuds between villages and tribes. Similarly K.S Singh's account of the Jharkhand tribes also shows the wide ranging changes within the tribal society and economy in the pre-colonial period. There was a spate of migrations and cultural influences in the early medieval period and this resulted in several conflicts between the tribal and non-tribal people in the region. Similar trends were also noticed in Orissa where the migrations by caste Hindu communities led to an increase in their conflict with tribal people. However, in both these areas it is also mentioned in studies of pre-colonial tribal polities that the tribals enjoyed a special place within the larger structure of governance.

On the economic front, tribal polities were, open-ended in that they had relationships with the larger political economy. Perhaps the most striking example of this is from Jharkhand where *zamindars* tied up with traders from Bengal for sale of lac and silk cocoons, one of the main forest produces of the time. There were state-owned forests which were the property of the *zamindars* and where the tribals gave free labour in return for their rights to forests. K.S. Singh's account of the Chhotanagpur Raj shows that the role of the tribal *zamindars* and rajas in ordering and structuring the economy was an important one. Even while the tribal aristocracy gave the local residents the rights to use the forest for their needs, the commercial appropriation of forestlands continued and strengthened the hold of the traders over non-timber forest produce.

In this context the examples that I give below show how land grants and rights and the nature of forest cover influenced forest rights and use patterns in the late pre-colonial and early colonial period. In *zamindari* and *jagirdari* tracts sub-feudation formed the basis of relative autonomy of control over forest and land resources by local institutions like tribal *panchayats* or headmen. However there were emerging relations of dependence between the local traders and tribal gatherers of forest produce. The value chains that emerged out of Hunter's descriptions (*Statistical Account of Bengal*, volume xvi-xvii of forest for Singhbhum, Manbhum and Hazaribagh districts) show that these were of three kinds. First, there was the use of the non-timber forest produce for household purposes. The jungles of the Chhotanagpur plateau were dominated by the sal, asan, palas, mhowa and amla trees, of which sal was the most prominent specie. The main produce in mid 19th century was recorded as lac, silk, bee wax, dhaura or sal resin, leaves and roots. Of these flowers, leaves and roots were also used to supplement the diet of marginal and small cultivators. They also proved to be the sole food that people had in times of famine. Apart from this mhowa was used for making toddy and for ritualistic purposes. Both commercially and culturally important trees and produce were often owned by the *zamindar* and the most prominent amongst these was the mhowa tree. Mhowa flowers were used by tribal people to make their liquor and also in marriage and other ceremonies. The *zamindar* collected rent for collection of mhowa seeds and flowers from these trees even if they stood on the lands of the tribal farmers. In Hazaribagh 2 or 3 small mhowa trees came for a rupee where as in Manbhum one large tree cost the same amount of rent. The nature of rent in Manbhum depended on the kind of trees and ranged from 4 *annas* to 2 or 3 rupees per tree. The saved crop could also vary much in price and fetched from 2 to 8 maunds of mhowa per rupee, but the exchange with the mahajans was mostly in kind. They usually gave 3-4 *ser* of rice and some salt for one maund of mhowa. The *mahajani* system was also dominant in the trading

of lac and silk cocoons, and the profits in this trading were quite high even though the propagation of their cocoons required a high degree of knowledge and competence. The tussar silk cocoon of Hazaribagh, Manbhum and Lohardaga was reared on the asan tree and its eggs were collected from the jungle and hatched either in the growers house or in specially erected huts in the jungle. The system of taxes on the silk propagators differed from region to region. In Manbhum every silk cocoon rearer paid Rs. 2 or 3 to the landlord. It is estimated that the landlord collected 300 pounds a year from such rent and the annual estimated produce was about 750 maunds from 1000 acres of land. In Lohardaga, the silk growers paid three types of taxes. In Hazaribagh on the other hand the silk growers paid 6-8 *annas* to the *zamindar* and the area on which silk was reared was not more than 30 square miles with not more than 5 to 6 asan trees in an acre. This system of rent ensured that the tribals became dependent of traders for advance payments so that they could pay their rents. In Hazaribagh the middlemen supported the silk growers who were mostly Santhals, Kurmis or Goalas while they were watching the cocoons in the forest. Consequently the growers were obliged to sell their cocoons to these middlemen at abysmally low rates. The value addition to the cocoons was mostly at the level of small towns and urban cities. There was hardly any export of silk cloth from the region and most of the weavers sold their cloth in urban areas or in local *haats* (periodic markets) through the *mahajans*. (Tirthankar Roy, 1999)

As in the case of forests, the domination of tribal aristocracy over the peasants continued even in the case of agriculture. For example in the Ahom kingdoms of Assam the Raja considered plough cultivation as the path to progress and facilitated the immigration of Tai-Ahoms who used the plough as opposed to the *jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation; an age old traditional practice based on 'slash and burn' method of cultivation) of the Chutiya and Kachari tribes. But the structure of taxation was different, instead of monetary taxes the tribals gave slave labour to their rulers. Much of this labour was used to cultivate 'good land' and *kheda* operation (literally pens or stockades; an enclosure constructed to capture wild elephants for domestication) for elephant capture. These tribals did not plough their lands, instead they had developed an indigenous bunding technology, and used hoe to cultivate local coarse rice. But the system of land management and cultivation was such that it required the maintenance of community assets. (Amalendu Guha, 1987) But not all tribals practised *jhum* and some like the Jaintia practised a combination of *jhum* and plough cultivation depending on whether they lived on marginal areas or not. Though there are many examples of such land revenue extraction from Northeast India, the forms of tribal landholdings varied from one region to the other. An example of this can be seen in the constitution of agricultural co-operatives and guilds in Cachar where tribals and non-tribals co-operated with each other in production processes and the land was under the control of these guilds. The rest of the land, not under these guilds belonged to the king and the state and was given out as land grants to the tribal and non-tribal aristocracy. (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1987)

In the eastern region of Orissa the situation was slightly different where the ex-tribal Chieftains and Rajas of areas like Bonai and Keonjhar had brought caste Hindu cultivators to settle on better lands. The immigrants were taxed more heavily than the tribal people because tribals were considered the original inhabitants of the region. (L.K. Mahapatra, 1987) The situation was similar in

the territories of the Bhonsale Raja in Nagpur State where the Gonds were not tenants or people with land grants like the Brahmins and other castes. They were people who cultivated land at the pleasure of their chieftain as is reflected in the piece of iron given to him every year. Access to land and forest was thus, a result of a privilege granted in return for assistance whenever the ruler required it. Serving in the Gond Rajah's army or providing labour as farm or domestic servants were forms of this assistance. (Archana Prasad, 1999) In the neighbouring areas of the Kondmals, the Konds lived in the highlands while the Oriyas lived in the plains. But the Oriya Rajas left the Konds to their own devices and Kond institutions and resource use patterns co-existed with Oriya ones. (F.G. Bailey, 1960)

What is clear from the examples that I have related above is the fact that the tribal economy was not *closed* nor was it *isolated* from the rest of the pre-colonial political economy in almost all regions of the country. The idea that it was prosperous and egalitarian is also not true, rather the tribal economies of the pre-colonial era were deeply differentiated and depended on the expropriation of the labour of poor tribals for their labour. This differentiation was a result of waves of immigration and consolidation of fiefdoms from the late ancient and early medieval period onwards. The agro-pastoral systems that emerged were subjected to wide-ranging changes where tribal people were continuously marginalised into lands with low productivity. The impact of this process was however conditioned by a certain amount of autonomy for local institutions as well as a mobility between different eco-zones. These two crucial factors allowed the tribal people survive the turmoil of the late pre-colonial period. This autonomy and mobility was constrained in the colonial period.

32.3 NATURE AND PATTERNS OF COLONIAL DOMINATION IN TRIBAL INDIA

Given the vast expanse of the Indian subcontinent, the penetration and impact of colonialism variegated in nature. The first area to face British annexation was undivided Bengal and this was followed by Madras, Punjab, Assam and the Central Provinces. Different land tenures were introduced in these areas, and these tenure systems also had a differential impact on rights to forests and other common lands. For most part the British government declared most common resources and lands to be under the exclusive ownership of the state especially with the coming of the Indian Forest Act 1865. Similarly the late 19th century saw the enactment of the Private Forests Acts and Rules in several states where forests lay in *zamindari* estates. In these the nature of forest rights granted to tribal people was different and its implication for the integration of tribal economies into the colonial system was different from one where the government had direct control over land and natural resources. These differences led to diverse types of impacts on and protests from tribal people. They also had a variegated impact on the identity politics of the regions. In this Section we consider some of the processes and impacts from different regions of the country.

Permanent Settlement and the Tribal Economy

Many of the tribals of Eastern and Central India resided in the princely and zamindari estates in the period preceding the annexation of these areas by the British. The first permanent settlement of *zaminidaris* in tribal areas was done

in 1793 after the annexation of Bengal. Of the permanent settlement areas, Midnapur, Santhal Parganas and Chhotanagpur plateau had the largest tribal populations. Apart from this there were the areas of Orissa where a bulk of the *zamindaris* and princely states were settled after annexation in 1803. Most of these *zamindaris* were under forests that were slated for land reclamation in the early 19th century after the establishment of the Company Raj. (K. Sivaramakrishnan, 1999) Ranchi, Manbhum and Singhbhum experiencing vigorous expansion in the *zamindari* areas where as Hazaribagh and Palamu had reached a stagnation point. It is significant to note that the only British territories lay in the districts of Hazaribagh and Palamu and most of the forest and mineral wealth of these regions was in private hands. (P.P. Mohapatra, 1990) Two types of trends could be noted within the *zamindari* systems of these areas. On the one hand there were the landlord villages where the *zamindar* enjoyed all rights over wastelands and jungles, and on the other hand there were the *khutkutti* villages, or villages where agricultural lands were held jointly by the founders of the villages. These founders paid nominal tributes to the *zamindars* and they also enjoyed exclusive rights over jungles and wastelands. There was also another system of rights over jungles called *Korkar* where ordinary rent paying tenants also had some customary usufruct rights in forests and the exclusive rights to reclaim wastelands. Thus the forests, on which a major portion of the tribal subsistence was dependent by the early 19th century, were in private hands with 79% of the village commons being under private control in undivided Bengal. Similar trends were also found in other areas of Permanent Settlements like Orissa. Here 66,000 square miles was permanently settled and 5000 square miles was directly under British control. Here tribals were largely concentrated in the States of Jeypore, Bonai, and Keonjhar. Some of the only major tribal areas under British control were the Kondmals and Sambalpur after the 1830s. But unlike Jharkhand most of these areas were under a single Oriya or tribal Raja who did not follow a system of sub-feudation. Rather they gave land grants to a number of Kshatriya and Brahmin people and the tribals were mostly landless labours in these princely states. With the coming of the British these states were reduced to status of *zamindaris* that owed a tribute or had to pay rent to the British. The settlement procedures were prescribed by the Britishers and created a land market in the tribal *zamindaris*. There was thus the emergence of a rich peasant class of Bengalis who exploited the tribal people for labour. (Biswamoy Pati, 1993) Similar patterns were also found in the tribal *zamindaris* and princely states of Bastar, Central Provinces and Western India. (Nandini Sundar, 1997, Sumit Guha, 1999)

Land settlements were only one mode of resource control in tribal *zamindaris*, the second was management of forests and nonarable land. Tribal *zamindaris* were mostly situated on foothills or highlands of thickly forested areas. While it is true that a large portion of this area was demarcated for cultivation before the mid-19th century, most of the jungles were privately controlled in most of these regions. This meant that even while the British government prescribed the rules by which forests were to be worked, the primary benefit from these forests accrued to the *zamindars*. In some cases the value of these forests was quite high and the produce such as honey, silk, lac, and timber had the potential of yielding good revenue. The exploitation and trade in forest resources increased rapidly especially after the coming of the Railways. In Chhotanagpur for example Hunter records that trade of sal timber was controlled by the local

mahajans who sold them to the forest department for a large profit. Officials often noted that the Government derived virtually no benefit from the forest sector, the major portion of which was appropriated by the *mahajan* who only paid a small royalty to the *zamindar* for the use of his land.

But it was in the case of non-timber forest produce that the tribals were most exploited. In Manbhum middlemen paid Santhals, Bhumijis, Kharias, Paharias and other lower caste people advances to rear cocoons. These cocoons were sold at the price of 213 cocoons to a rupee and were then exported to Bengal. In 1871 the silk exports were estimated at 10,000 pounds. In Lohardaga district the cocoons were sold to the traders for Rs. 5 to 7 per maund and exported to Mirzapur, Benaras, and Patna. In Hazaribagh the middlemen support the silk growers who are mostly Santhals, Kurmis or Goalas while they were watching the cocoons in the forest. Consequently the growers were obliged to sell their cocoons to these middlemen at the rate of Rs. 5 or 6 for 1680 cocoons. The *baniyas* in turn sold these cocoons to the *mahajans* for Rs 5 for 1330 cocoons. Then these cocoons were exported to Burdwan or Gaya at the price of Rs. 15 per 1000, if the cocoons were sold to the Tanti *baniyas* then the rate was Rs. 5 for 80 cocoons. The Tanti *baniyas* are basically weavers who take out the thread from the cocoons and weave them into small pieces of silk that they sold to the *mahajans* at Rs. 8 and 8 *annas*. The value addition to the cocoons was mostly at the level of small towns and urban cities. There was hardly any export of silk cloth from the region and most of the weavers sold their cloth in urban areas or in local *haats* through the *mahajans*. (Tirthankar Roy, 1999) In the case of lac the system was a little different as the lac was not only collected from Jharkhand but also brought from the Central Provinces to Ranchi (till the late 19th century) by the *mahajans*. It was then processed in the Ranchi Lac Factory before stick lac was exported out of the region. But whatever the variations in the system of exchange and value chains, the *mahajani* system occupied a central position in the tribal areas of colonial Bihar and Orissa. Further it was not only confined to the non-timber forest produce trade, but was also evident in agriculture and other spheres of life. The sharp contradictions and differentiation between the local tribals and outsiders underlined the class contradictions in the permanent settlement regions. (Prabhu Mohapatra, 1990 K.S. Singh, 1985) This conflict took the form of various uprisings that have also been well documented in the past by several scholars. (K.S. Singh, 1985, Susan Devalle, 1992)

Apart from the growing impoverishment of tribal people there was one other feature of the colonial *zamindari* economy vis-à-vis its relationship with the Empire. The British often used the forests as a site of exercising their power and control. In forestry too, attempts were made to acquire private forests and enact a Private Forest Bill but these attempts failed quite badly. At best the *zamindari* forests could be administered under Section 38 of the Indian Forest Act. (B.B. Sinha, 1979) In Central Provinces too, Rules were framed for controlling private forests and Forest mahals were constituted for doing this. All private forests were to ban shifting cultivation and carry out felling in accordance with the Indian Forest Act. In Bengal too, the 1890s saw the direct control of the forest tracts in the permanent settlement areas where the British forest department started working the forests instead of giving them on contract. The process of reservation to be followed was the same as that of government forest tracts and shifting cultivation was to be banned. By the turn of the century, the British Forest Department had also imposed its writ over princely states

like Bastar. (K. Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, Nandini Sundar, 1997) These measures cut off the only source of subsistence for the poor tribal people, many of whom had migrated from government forests into the zamindari areas because the zamindars allowed them to do shifting cultivation. Thus by the 20th century the difference between Government owned lands and the permanent settlement areas declined considerably and the impact of this on tribal life and subsistence was disastrous.

32.4 TRIBAL ECONOMIES IN STATE OWNED AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST LANDS

Perhaps there is no better example than the Central Provinces for describing the sorts of changes that affected the tribal areas on agricultural and forest lands that were directly controlled by the British Government. The annexation of the State of Nagpur in 1854 saw direct intervention in the agrarian system by the colonial regime. This meant that the principals behind both settlements and forest rights were guided by concerns of revenue maximisation and administrative convenience. The debate on the settlement question in the 1830s reviewed the permanent settlement experience of Bengal and Orissa and decided that Munro's *ryotwari* settlements were more appropriate. The thirty-year settlement was thus seen as a good substitute for Permanent Settlement. It would induce a feeling of security amongst proprietors without giving them a permanent control over their holdings. Thus individual land rights were given to cultivators whose revenue was assessed every 3 years so that the government would be able to get the maximum revenue for itself. The rights of local households over grazing and forests lands were also defined by the land settlements that initially based themselves on Maratha land records. This naturally meant that most tribal people with the exception of Gonds hardly got any land or forest rights since their rights were never recorded in the late pre-colonial times. Coupled with this, the state declared itself the owner of all forests under the Indian Forest Act 1865 and made a stringent classification of forestlands under the Indian Forest Act 1878.

In this context there were broadly three processes of colonial expansion that impacted on the tribal people. The first was the process of reclamation of lands for cultivation that led to severe land alienation amongst the tribal people of the Central Provinces and Kondmals of Orissa. However patterns differed in both these areas. In the Central Provinces tribal people were pushed into more and more marginal lands. This had a direct impact on the status of the aboriginal tenants in the districts like Chanda, Mandla and Bhandara where 80% of the Gond tenants were classed as peasants with some form of debt or the other. One third were categorised as very poor where as only 20 per cent of the Gond peasants were free from debts. The Baigas had no land at all and faced indebtedness and hunger. The settlements of the 1920s had shown that the average size of tribal holdings was declining more and more. This made the tribals more and more dependent on labour, as they could not pursue any other occupations because they were 'educationally and politically backward'. (W.V. Grigson, 1944) By the first quarter of the 20th century the government was forced to enact the Central Provinces Tenancy Act to prevent the alienation of tribal lands. In the Kondmals the situation was different as shortages in land led to migration of Konds in order to search for labour to meet their daily

needs. Many of them went of to work in mines, tea gardens and other places. (Bailey, 1960)

The second major factor influencing the patterns of tribal livelihood was the complete ban on shifting cultivation in government forests. It is well known that the poorest tribal people depended on different forms of shifting cultivation for a large part of their nutritional needs. But with the government take over of forests and the ban over this form of cultivation the tribals were once again forced to depend on labour for their livelihood. In some areas like the Central Provinces, they migrated to *zamindari* areas where they were allowed to practise this cultivation form till the late 19th century. (Archana Prasad, 1998) However it is important to remember that this ban was dictated by the strategic needs of the colonial Empire. Thus in Assam the shifting cultivators in the border areas were not disturbed. However in the inland area there were tribals who provided important labour opportunities to the forest department, the *taungya* system was introduced where tribals were allowed to practise *jhum* in a limited way. But this modified the *jhum* cycle irreparably and led to the further pauperisation of tribal people. (Bela Malik, 2002) At a different level the labour shortages due to migration also led to the colonists giving some limited rights for shifting cultivation in Central India. (Archana Prasad, 1998)

The third major process affecting tribal economies was the penetration of industrial capitalism in forested areas. Here the focus was not only on felling of timber but more importantly on the non-timber forest produce which formed an important supplementary part of tribal income. The rise in the world demand for minor forest produce led to the influx of European capital into forested areas and changed the very nature of production relations. The case studies of lac and tan show that the supply of raw materials to the artisans got curtailed because tribals started selling forest produce to the foreign firms. This was especially the case in the case of lac and dyes in Central India. The collection of lac sticks and flowers for dyeing was an important seasonal occupation where tribals had established links with artisans. The interference of the managing agencies in these sectors not only weakened this link but also facilitated the incorporation of local production processes in a colonial division of labour. Scientific experiments were carried out to either test the social and technical validity of local knowledge and techniques (as in the case of iron) or to justify the colonial domination of markets (as in the case of dyes). This was accompanied by the lack of initiative to invest in the upgradation of local techniques. The incorporation of local methods of extraction of minor forest produce was conditioned by the logic of colonial industrial capitalism. Tribal and artisan communities were now providing cheap labour and raw materials to the European industry. (Archana Prasad, 2002) The process of channelling this labour was systematised through the creation of forest villages in the late 19th century. These developments laid the basis for the underdevelopment of the productive forces in the tribal economies.

32.5 THE COLONIAL IMPACT AND TRIBAL RESPONSE

By the 1940s it was sufficiently clear that tribals in most parts of the country had lost their access and control over all productive resources [land and forests] and village-based infrastructure that could support their survival. The growing

landlessness of tribal people coupled with their lack of access to forest resources led to the complete breakdown of the tribal production system and the incorporation of the tribal economy into the larger colonial and capitalist economy. This incorporation was mainly in terms of different forms of labour that naturally incorporated the local knowledge and techniques in harnessing both land and forest resources. The second major impact of the colonial interventions was on identity formation and the nature of tribal polity. In this Section we consider both these processes.

32.5.1 From Producers to Labourers

The changing forms of labour employment and the swelling of the tribal labour force was something that was common to both permanent settlement and government owned areas. However the forms of labour varied from region to region. In the *zamindari* areas of Chhotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Orissa migration became a way of life. The loss of land coupled with the lack of income or exploitation induced migration to mining areas as well as tea gardens in Assam. In upper Assam, labour was procured through an indentured system for the tea gardens whereby labour was recruited from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Bihar and eastern United Provinces often by deceptive and coercive methods involving contractors. Where available without the system, it was later drawn into the higher-paying petroleum and coal operations. (Bela Malik, 2002, Prabhu Prasad Mohapatra, 1985)

In other areas where such migration did not exist, tribals worked in the forest department and on the fields of caste-Hindu peasants. However the seasonal nature of on farm labour ensured that most of the tribals were forced to work primarily for the forest department in order to earn their livelihood. For example in the Central Provinces the formation of forest villages in the late 19th century were aimed at providing a continuous flow of labour to the forest department. The first forest village regulations were issued in 1890. Under these laws forest villages could be established within the limits of any 'reserved' forest with the prior consent of the Conservator. The District Commissioner and the Divisional Forest Officer (D.F.O) would decide their location. Forest villages were to be designed solely for the permanent supply of labour and were not to be made with the intention of extension of cultivation. Lastly forest villages were to be made up of those communities that were 'habituated to the extraction of forest produce'. In areas where there were managing agencies for the extraction of non-timber forest produce the tribals were employed as labourers to produce lac and silk by cheap and efficient methods. In most cases local techniques for such propagation were integrated into these colonial systems of extraction. (Archana Prasad, 1998)

Similar processes were also seen in Assam where the *taungya* system was in force. Under this system, the tribals were forced to plant seedlings of teak on forest lands where *jhum* was done previously. The tribals would be allowed to sow their *jhum* crops between the rows of trees in order to meet their food needs. Tribals were employed in other labour operations. Reserves and experimental plantations needed extensive labour for clearing, sawing, transportation, weeding, fire protection and regeneration. This was partly supplied by seasonal immigration of the tribals (Nagas, Miris, Khamptis, Garos, and others) who came down in winter between the months of December and

March, a relatively slack period for *jhum* or shifting cultivation. In Assam, sawyers came from either the Surma valley or from Nepal in the dry season. The supply of the latter was stalled during the second world war with an increase in military recruitment of 'Gorkhas' and a diversion of sawyers to other parts of the country. Much of this work would be *begar* or forced labour. (Bela Malik, 2002)

The conditions of work of tribal people, especially on forestlands were inhuman. In an enquiry into the condition of forest labourers in Central Provinces Wylie, the Governor of Bombay, questioned the scale of wages paid to labour for felling and carting and demanded an early report on the subject. He also spoke of the problem of piece-work when he said that tribals were made to labour on roads till they were physically in a most unsatisfactory shape. Thus he concluded that the conditions under which they worked affected their health adversely. Lastly, the Baigas were exploited by the forest department, as the department extracted 'illegal and forced labour' during harvest and sowing time. The forest department made the labourers work more than 8 hours a day without paying them extra money. According to Wylie this was equivalent to the practice of *begar*. The department forcefully extracted supplies for visiting forest officials in the forest reserves. (Archana Prasad, 2002) The situation in Assam was similar where Garos were forced to perform *begar* in road building and live in forest villages. (Bela Malik, 2002) Thus we find that almost throughout the country tribals were converted from producers to providers of cheap labour and raw materials as a result of colonial interventions.

32.5.2 Modes of Protest and Identity Formation

It is not as if the tribal people of the country were mute spectators to colonial interventions. The earliest tribal revolts can be traced to mid 19th century with the Kol rebellion. Thereafter the *zamindari* areas of Chhotanagpur faced several other rebellions amongst which was Birsa Munda's rebellion against the *dikus* or outsiders in the region. In response to this movement the British were forced to enact the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1885. (K.S. Singh, 1985) Several princely states also saw tribal movements in response to adverse changes in land and forest management. Prominent amongst these was the Maria rebellion in Bastar in 1876 and 1910 which was meant to be against police repression and forest laws. Here too, the slogan was 'Bastar for Bastaris' against outsiders. (Nandini Sundar, 1997) In all these cases there was a perception that the Rajas had begun to deprive the tribal people of their customary rights especially after the advent of the British. It is because of this that tribal elites led the revolts against the Rajas.

These revolts had a tenuous relationship with the Congress nationalists and often flouted the norms and values espoused by the dominant tribal elite. One such revolt was the Forest Satyagraha of the 1930s in the Central Provinces where the Gonds flouted the forest laws in more than a symbolic way. They also turned violent and so the Congress leadership was forced to disown the movement. (David Baker, 1984) Another movement with tenuous relationship with Congress Nationalism was the Tana Bhagat Movement of the Oraons in the 1930s that played an important part in altering the tribal identity in the Chhotanagpur region. The movement not only impacted upon the process of identity formation of the Oraons but also led to a process of larger differentiation

amongst tribals in the Chhotanagpur agrarian society. (Sangeeta Dasgupta, 1999) Such assertion of tribal identity, religion and symbolism sometimes led to movements for separate states from the late 1930s onwards. Tribal leaderships argued that they would not ensure the balanced development of their area if tribal areas were not given the status of separate tribal states. Prominent amongst these movements was the one led by the Adibasi Sabha for a separate Santhal State as well as the movements for independence in Nagaland and some other parts of the Northeast.

Whereas these organised tribal movements reflected processes of underdevelopment and unequal exchange, regions with no organised tribal movements also faced another form of resistance. For example the Baiga of the Central Provinces started migrating from state owned areas to *zamindari* areas once their shifting cultivation was banned. They thus forced the government to form the Baiga Chak in which the government conceded to them some livelihood rights. However this was only possible because the Baigas presented themselves as shifting cultivators with ancient rights and customs that did not allow them to plough land. In reality such a representation was in fact just a way of negotiating with the British Government. (Archana Prasad, 1998) The Garos refused to put in the requisite number of days, usually as a part of the settlement, in lieu of 'privileges and concessions' in the forests, after being issued a permit. In 1899, some *raiya*s of Goalpara refused to render labour in protest against forced labour. (Bela Malik, 2002) Such forms of every-day protests led to the crystallisation and assertion of tribal identities in a plurality of ways. But whether organised, or unorganised, the tribal movements and forms of protest had one thing in common: they reflected the growing unequal exchange between the tribal economies and the wider regional and national political economy, and the consequent underdevelopments of these regions. It is this factor that made colonial interventions 'a watershed' in the life and development of tribal people.

32.6 SUMMARY

Studies on pre-colonial tribal societies often romanticize the past. These societies are referred to as relatively 'closed and isolated' but egalitarian. This Unit shows the problems with such ideas. It shows that tribal societies were not closed and isolated structures. They were part of a wider economic and political network. Colonial interventions created a drastic imbalance within the existing tribal structures. Permanent settlement led to the penetration of rich Bengali peasants into the tribal areas who exploited the tribals to their advantage. The *mahajani* system produced further contradictions. The Indian Forest Act of 1865, restricted tribal access to forests. All this led to clashes, conflicts and even armed uprisings – Kol, Birsa Munda, Maria, etc. The growing demands of forest produce across borders encouraged foreign capital to make inroads into tribal areas. Over the long term, these changes altered the existing production relations and resulted in loss of tribal control over productive resources to a large extent.

32.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What was the nature and pattern of tribal economy in the pre-colonial period?
- 2) Pre-colonial economy was 'closed and isolated'. Comment
- 3) Analyze the impact of colonial interventions on tribal economy.

- 4) Examine the nature of tribal protests and conflicts during the colonial period.
- 5) What was the implication of the transformation of the tribals from producers to labourers?

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UNIT 33 THE QUESTION OF AGRARIAN GROWTH AND STAGNATION

Structure

- 33.1 Introduction
- 33.2 Agricultural Production in Colonial India: A Framework for Analysis
- 33.3 Agricultural Production: 1890-1947
- 33.4 Individual Crop Production Trends
- 33.5 Regional Crop Production Trends
- 33.6 Debates Over Agricultural Statistics
- 33.7 The 19th Century Trends?
- 33.8 Summary
- 33.9 Exercises
- 33.10 Suggested Readings

33.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit aims to familiarise the reader with the main trends in agricultural production during the period 1850-1947. It specifically addresses the question of growth rates of acreage, yield and agricultural output. It also provides an overview of the main debates surrounding the issue of agricultural production. The Unit is structured as follows. The first section discusses the main issues in and the framework for understanding trends in agricultural production. The second section discusses the results of comprehensive agricultural production estimates at the macro level for the three key indicators : acreage, yield and output of both food grain and non food grain crops. Section III and Section IV analyse the production trends at the individual crop and regional level respectively. Section V examines the debate around agricultural production statistics of the period 1890-1946 and provides a brief discussion of 19th century production trends. Section VI provides the summary and conclusion to this Unit.

33.2 AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN COLONIAL INDIA: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The question of agricultural growth lies at the heart of the debate about the impact of colonialism in India. The issue of growing poverty, low rates of industrialisation and the destruction of handicrafts and traditional industry – the staple of the nationalist critique of colonialism hinged on the issue of agricultural growth. Did agricultural output grow fast enough under colonial rule to mitigate the consequences of population growth? Or in other words did food supply outstrip population growth during the colonial period? Then there is the question of commercialisation of agriculture. The colonial character of the economy was evident in the transformation of India from a manufacture exporting economy to an agricultural raw material exporting one. Did increasing production of cash crops for exports happen at the expense of food grains? Given that more than half the national income is estimated to have originated from agriculture and also because of the overwhelmingly agricultural character of

the workforce in India throughout the colonial period the centrality of agricultural output and its level and trend over time is crucial for understanding how the bulk of the Indian population fared under colonial rule. Apart from temporal changes in agricultural output, variations over space i.e. regional performance of agriculture is a significant issue. Did some regions grow while others stagnated or declined? If there were significant regional patterns discernible – what explains these variations?

Nationalist critiques of colonial rule and its impact on the standard of living of the people of India emerged in the middle of the 19th century. Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty of India and Un-British Rule* highlighted the utter poverty of Indian people by calculating the per- capita income in 1868-69 at Rs. 20. William Digby's provocative book 'Prosperous British India' (1901) castigated colonial rule for progressive impoverishment of the Indian population . While Naoroji's estimation of agricultural production was a single point estimate, Digby used three point estimates (1850, 1882, 1900) of agricultural production and national income. These estimations of poverty and low agricultural production gained credence due to the devastating series of famines of the late 19th century. There were several rebuttals of nationalist claims indicating low agricultural production and increasing impoverishment of population by the British Officials, the most notable being Lord Curzon's rebuttal of R. C. Dutt as also F.T Atkinson's (1902) systematic critique of Digby. (1902)¹

The trend and level of agricultural production has been the subject of intense debate since the late 19th century and has animated Indian historiography on the subject.² The nationalist school of historiography takes a substantially pessimist position, arguing that throughout the colonial period agrarian production was stymied: in the 19th century it barely kept pace with population increase while in the twentieth century, definitely lagged behind growing population. The nationalists blamed Colonial State policy of non –development, free trade, land revenue system, forced nature of commercialisation for the poor performance of agricultural production and saw the devastating series of famines in the late 19th century and early twentieth century as a direct consequence of such policies. Apart from the official challenge mentioned above, a revisionist view, most notably represented in the work of M.D. Morris and A.Heston (1963), asserted that there was substantial expansion in agricultural output throughout the 19th and the first half of the twentieth century, stronger in case of commercial crops and relatively slower for food grains, reflected in the slow but positive growth in the per capita national income. In the revisionist accounts colonial state policies were assessed positively. More recently, there has been a revival of the revisionist position specially in the work of Tirthankar Roy (2000), which has shifted attention away from the colonial state policy to focus on the process of commercialisation of agriculture. Increasing integration of Indian economy with the global market in the period 1860 – 1920s and the spur given by exports to commercialisation led to rising per capita income and sharp growth in production and productivity in agriculture. Cash crop production led growth was fuelled by productivity growth and rising income through out the period. This period of relatively open economy and growth was disrupted by the great depression of the 1930s . The 'malign' state of the nationalists is replaced by benign market in the neo revisionist account as the driver of agricultural growth.

¹ Bipan Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism*(New Delhi, 1966) pp28-40 provides a synoptic account of the late 19th century debate on poverty and agricultural production between nationalist leadership and the colonial officials.

² See for instance *Indian Economy in the 19th century : A Symposium*(Delhi, 1969)

Since the debate over agricultural output growth and its various components has critically hinged on interpretation of agricultural statistics of production and productivity, it is useful to examine the sources and coverage of such statistics. Agricultural statistics became available at the all India level following the recommendation of the Indian Famine Commission (1880). Stray statistics especially of commercial crops were available from the 1860s during the cotton boom. Comprehensive, though imperfect, statistics became available from the end of 1880s. The main source of the agricultural statistics at the All India level were the *Season and Crop Reports* published by the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture which provided district level statistics of cropped area, area under individual crops and estimates of output of each crop. Valuable information on harvest prices of crops and rainfall data was also published in these reports. The information thus generated was collated into two annual publications at the All India level – *Agricultural Statistics and Estimates of Area and Yields of Principal Crops in India*. The former provided data only on area under cultivation while the latter gave figures of area and output of eighteen crop forecasts, which occupied more than 95 per cent of total cropped area of the country. The *Season and Crop Reports*, which formed the basis of the agricultural statistics, was issued mainly for British Indian provinces while the national level statistics also included figures for some Princely States.

The *Season and Crop Report* estimated the total output for each (major crop) of the district by a simple formula $Y = A \times SY \times CF$, where $Y =$ Total output, $A =$ Area under the crop, $SY =$ Standard or Normal Yield, $CF =$ Seasonal Condition Factor. The Standard Yield was defined as a 'figure which in existing circumstances might be expected to be attained in the year if the rainfall and the season were of a character ordinary for the tract under consideration, that is, neither very favourable nor the reverse... the average yield on an average soil in an average year'³ Standard yield was usually derived by a series of crop cutting experiments of yields in the district and was subject to periodic revision (five years). Yet as is evident from the official definition with its emphasis on 'averageness', statistical accuracy or randomness of sample were hardly the criterion for choosing a particular figure. Seasonal condition factor (SCF), on the other hand, was a purely subjective estimation of the condition of the crop usually denoted in annas (1/16 of a rupee or 16 annas) which was then converted into a per centage of the normal or standard yield. Thus an 8 anna crop yielded a SCF of 50 per cent. The agency which was charged with reporting the condition factor as well as acreage under particular crop in a village in temporarily settled area (ryotwari or mahalwari) was the village *patwari*. His estimation was then subsequently corrected by a series of supervising officers and finally by the Director of Agriculture at the provincial level. In the Permanently settled areas it was the village chowkidar who was the primary reporting agency. Acreage figures in temporary revenue settlement areas were drawn with reference to the village records, but in the permanently settled areas, since the village records for revenue purposes were non-existent, the acreage figures were more of an 'eye estimation' successively corrected by the district level officers. Acreage figures were thus notoriously deficient for the permanently settled provinces such as Bengal, Bihar and Orissa except in districts where cadastral surveys and settlement operation had been carried out.⁴

³ *Estimates of the Area and Yield of the Principal Crops of India* Appendix 1, 1938 citing an 1897 circular.

⁴ Cadastral Survey and settlement operations were carried out in Bengal and Bihar districts beginning in the 1880s and most districts were covered by the end of 1920s. R revision surveys and settlement were carried out in fewer districts.

33.3 AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION: 1890-1947

George Blyn's monumental work on the agricultural production in British India carried out in the late 1940s and published in 1966 remains to date the most important account of the trends in crop production in India. Blyn utilised the Official series published in the *Estimates* and corrected it for discrepancies due to non reporting of crop figures for certain years in some Provinces. He produced three series that of output, acreage and yield of eighteen principal crops, eight food grain crops and ten non food grain crops for the years 1891/92- 1946/47. For aggregation of different crops the out turn and series was converted into value terms at constant prices of each individual crop based on average prices the period 1924-29. For the purpose of regional analysis, Blyn grouped together the provinces into six groups. Crops and regions for which Blyn produced production estimates are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Foodgrain	Non Foodgrain	Regions
Rice, Wheat, Bajra, Jowar, Maize, Barley, Gram, Ragi.	Cotton, Sugarcane, Linseed, Rape and Mustard, Sesame, Jute, Tea, Indigo, Tobacco	Greater Bengal, United Provinces, Greater Punjab, Bombay-Sind, Central Provinces, Madras

The all India production figures are presented in Table 2 which provides the five yearly average figures for acreage, yield and output

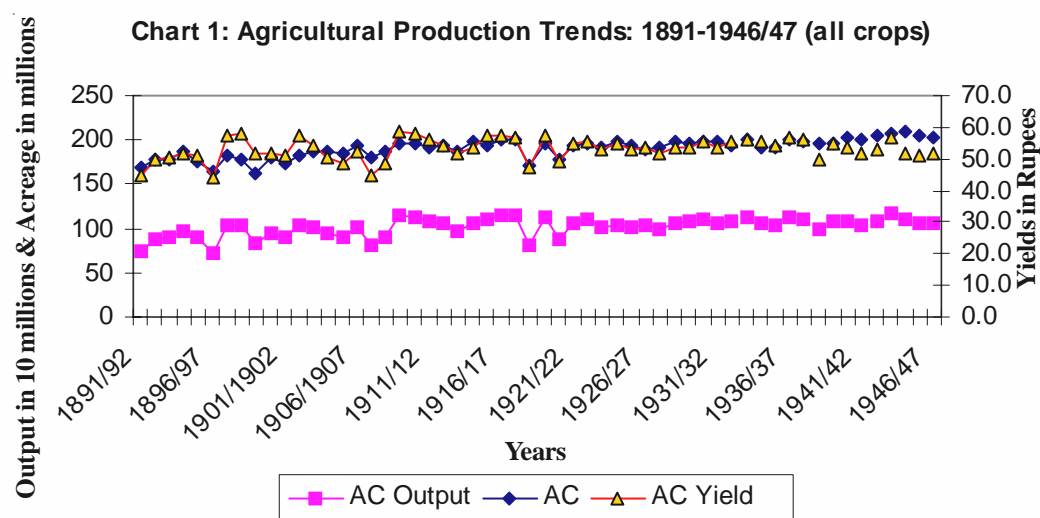
Table 2: Annual Average Agricultural Production : 1891-1946

Year	All Crops (AC)			Food Grain (FG)			Non Food-Grain (NFG)		
	Output	Acreage	Yield	Output	Acreage	Yield	Output	Acreage	Yield
1891-1895	8798	177	50	6911	147	47	1899	30	63
1896-1900	9167	174	53	7129	146	49	2038	28	72
1901-1905	9578	183	52	7308	151	49	2271	32	71
1906-1910	10017	190	53	7573	155	49	2444	35	70
1911-1915	10526	193	55	7801	156	50	2724	36	75
1916-1920	10243	189	54	7580	154	49	2657	35	75
1921-1925	10454	195	54	7649	158	48	2805	37	76
1926-1930	10530	195	54	7274	156	47	3256	39	83
1931-1935	10716	195	55	7353	158	46	3363	47	92
1936-1940	10804	199	54	7062	158	45	3742	51	91
1941-1946	10819	205	53	7347	169	43	3472	36	96

Note: Output in million Rs, Acreage in Millions, Yield in Rs.

Source: George Blyn (1966).

The absolute figures and the trends can be visualised from Chart I. But for an analysis of the trends it is important to examine the trend growth rate. The trend growth rate is computed such that the annual fluctuations are eliminated and an average growth rate for a specified period can be estimated. Blyn computed the trend growth rates by averaging the growth rates of ten overlapping decades beginning from 1891. The growth rate is denoted in per cent per year. Most of the analysis in this and subsequent sections will focus on trend growth rather than absolute figures.



AC Output = all crops output
 AC = all crops acreage
 AC Yield = all crops yield

Table 3: Agricultural Production: Trend Growth Rate 1891-1946 (per cent per year)

	Output			Acreage			Yield		
	1891-1946	1891-1916	1921-1946	1891-1946	1891-1916	1921-1946	1891-1946	1891-1916	1921-1946
All Crops	0.37	0.84	0.35	0.40	0.67	0.35	0.01	0.47	-0.02
Food grains	0.11	0.61	0.03	0.31	0.35	0.39	-0.18	0.29	-0.44
Non food grains	1.31	1.66	1.08	0.42	0.86	0.03	0.86	0.81	1.15
Population	0.67	0.44	1.12						

George Blyn (1966).

From Table 2 and 3 the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) Between 1891 and 1947, the annual growth rate of output of all crops was low (0.37 per cent) reinforcing the picture of near stagnation of agrarian production over the whole period. Viewed alongside the annual growth rate of population (0.67 per cent) it is quite clear that agricultural production lagged behind population growth measured over the whole period.
- 2) Practically the whole of the growth of agricultural production came from the expansion of acreage under crops –thus there was in fact near complete stagnation in agricultural productivity. Low quantitative growth was accompanied by the absence of qualitative growth in agrarian production.
- 3) However this dismal picture of low output growth and stagnation of productivity needs to be analysed by disaggregating the trend over time and separating out the trends for different crops. Thus in terms of temporal span, all three measures of agrarian production present a more favourable picture in the first half (1891-1921) of our period compared to the later half (1921-47). In the first half agricultural growth manages to keep ahead of population growth. It is mainly due to the drastic deceleration of growth of crop production in the second half that the overall growth rate for the whole period is pulled down. Since population growth accelerates during the second phase, at nearly two and half times the rate of the earlier period, per capita output plunges down by nearly 30 per cent.

- 4) Non Food Grain(NFG) production during the whole period displayed sufficient dynamism with growth rate of output, acreage and yield being substantially higher than that of Food Grain (FG) crops and above the growth rate of population. An interesting aspect of the performance of NFGs is that the most of the growth of output of these crops was not from acreage expansion but from productivity growth. Thus between 1921 and 1947, while acreage under NFG crops stagnated, output grew by a healthy 1.08 per cent per annum and the resultant productivity growth was 1.15 per cent per annum.
- 5) In contrast to this food grain (FG) output growth was a near stagnant 0.11 per cent while productivity actually declined over the whole period at 0.18 per cent. FG output growth in the first period was above the population growth rate but after 1921 FG output stagnated at 0.03 per cent while population growth soared to 1.12 per cent (leading to a sharp decline in per capita food grain production.).

Blyn's agricultural production figures based on official statistics show two phenomena that need explanation: a) The lag between population growth and yields per acre intensified in the last quarter of British rule and b) the contrast in the performance of the NFG or cash crops against that of FG. We can begin explaining these macro trends if we further disaggregate these trends for different crops and regions.

33.4 INDIVIDUAL CROP PRODUCTION TRENDS

We first examine the broad changes in the composition of crop acreage over the period 1891-1946.

Table 4: Crop Composition : 1891-1946

Crops	1891-95 million acres	Per cent of allcrops	1941-46 in million acres	Per cent of all crops
Rice	66	37.3	74.1	36.0
Wheat	21.9	12.4	26.4	12.8
Jowar	20.9	11.8	22.1	10.7
Gram	11.1	6.3	15.1	7.3
Bajra	11.7	6.6	15.1	7.3
Barley	5.2	2.9	6.7	3.3
Maize	5.1	2.9	6.3	3.2
Ragi	4.4	2.5	3.4	1.7
Total Food grains	146	82.5	169	82
Cotton	9.6	5.6	11.6	5.6
Sugarcane	2.9	1.6	3.6	1.7
Jute	2.2	1.1	2.5	1.2
Groundnut	0.4	0.0	5.6	2.7
Oilseeds	12.5	7.0	11.1	5.4
Indigo	1.4	0.8	0.0	0.0
Total Non Foodgrain	30.4	17.2	536.5	17.7
All Crops	176.4	100	205.5	100

Source: George Blyn (1966).

What is remarkable is that there was hardly any change in the relative acreages under food grain and non-food grain crops. But there were fairly significant changes in the case of individual crops. To take up FG crops first. Acreage under rice and wheat expanded absolutely but there was no significant change in their relative weight in all crop acreage. Amongst the NFG crops, the only significant change was the rapid rise of groundnut as a major crop. From a completely insignificant crop at the beginning of our period 5 million acres were added in the next fifty years. This expansion of acreage was the maximum in Madras Presidency and to an extent in Bombay. During the same period total cropped area under oil seeds declined by nearly one and half million acres. This period also witnessed the total eclipse of indigo as an important cash crop – accentuating the trend beginning in the second half of the 19th century. Cotton acreage grew but most of the growth occurred in the first half of the period. In contrast, acreage of sugar cane expanded almost exclusively in the post 1921 phase and more spectacularly after 1931 when a protective duty imposed on imported sugar stimulated expansion. (Blyn 1966, pp.146-7)

Now as to the output of individual crops Table 5 shows the different trajectories of individual crops .

Table 5: Trend Growth Rates of Output and Yield : 1891-1946

Crops	1891-1946	1891-1916	1921-1946
Rice	-0.09 (-0.24)	0.35 (0.39)	-0.02 (-0.47)
Wheat	0.84 (0.38)	1.89 (1.25)	0.57 (0.02)
Jowar	0.05 (0.00)	0.50 (0.64)	-0.34 (-0.63)
Gram	0.26 (-0.26)	1.73 (0.52)	-1.15 (-0.88)
Bajra	0.72 (0.06)	1.86 (0.35)	-0.59 (-0.24)
Barley	0.02 (-0.12)	2.03 (0.71)	-1.34 (-1.11)
Maize	0.51 (0.21)	1.55 (0.88)	0.44 (0.10)
Ragi	-0.37 (0.12)	0.24 (0.29)	-0.98 (-0.10)
All Foodgrains	0.11 (-0.18)	0.61 (0.29)	0.03 (-0.44)
Sugar cane	1.30 (0.73)	0.22 (1.03)	3.00 (1.20)
Cotton	1.30 (0.95)	2.84 (0.98)	-0.01 (1.27)
Jute	0.27 (0.14)	2.13 (0.86)	-0.72 (-0.30)
Tea	2.74 (1.43)	4.24 (2.22)	2.08 (1.59)
Tobacco	0.03 (0.17)	-0.29 (0.72)	0.32 (-0.24)
Groundnut	6.26 (0.23)	8.74 (0.73)	3.24 (-0.61)
Rape and Mustard	0.07 (0.19)	0.59 (0.48)	0.03 (0.31)
Sesamum	0.09 (0.29)	1.22 (0.58)	-0.38 (-0.08)
Linseed	-0.47 (-0.10)	0.52 (1.05)	-1.27 (-0.80)
Indigo	-6.19 (0.47)	-6.02 (1.28)	-6.27 (-0.89)
AllNFG	1.31 (0.86)	1.66 (0.81)	1.08 (1.15)
ALL CROPS	0.37 (0.01)	0.84 (0.47)	0.35 (-0.02)

Note: The figures in brackets represent the yield trend growth rates.

Source: George Blyn (1966).

Among food grain crops, rice was the predominant crop and the trend in the yield of the crop influenced the overall trends in food grains. Thus the decline in rice yield was the most important reason for the overall low performance of food grain crops generally. The decline was most pronounced in the second half (1921-1946). This must be contrasted with the trends in yield of the other major cereal crop – wheat, which experienced significant growth. But even in the case of wheat the rate of growth of output was more than three times faster in the first half of the period compared to the latter half. The yield of wheat rose by 1.25 per cent per year in the first half and fell in the second half to a near zero rate. Thus while all food grain crops except rice and ragi witnessed some growth in output during the whole period, all crops except wheat and maize experienced negative rate of growth during the second half of the period (1921-1946). Yield was positive for all crops in the first half (including rice) and negative for all crops in the second half (except wheat and maize which too saw a significant retardation in growth).

As we have seen, non food grains, as a whole performed better than food grain crops, but there were significant differences between individual crops. Production of tea remained buoyant throughout though, given the nature of its production (plantations managed by foreign companies), complete export orientation and low backward linkages, its impact on the general welfare of the population was minimal. Cotton, on the other hand, was an important cash crop grown in large parts of the Deccan, Central Provinces and in the canal colonies of Punjab by mainly peasant producers. Sugarcane was an important cash crop in United Provinces, Bombay and Bihar and was produced by small peasants. Jute was the main cash crop grown by small peasants in Eastern Bengal and supplied both domestic and export markets. Groundnut, which was an insignificant crop at the beginning of the period, became the dominant cash crop in Madras where it grew on relatively infertile soil unsuitable for cultivation of other crops. All these crops (excepting sugarcane) saw sharp increases in production between 1891-1916, stimulated largely by increasing exports. Except tea, where India had a strong market dominance, rest of the agricultural crop exports declined after 1921 which in turn slowed down the production growth of these crops.

Table 6: Value of Exports of Selected Agricultural Products, 1881-1941 (Rs Million)

	Raw Jute	Jute	Cotton	Cotton goods	Tea	Wheat
1881	43.7	12.0	111.5	21.7	30.7	11.2
1891	76.0	24.8	165.3	94.9	55	60.4
1901	108.7	78.6	101.3	123.1	96.8	0.3
1911	154.9	170	360.5	116.1	124.6	129.5
1921	163.6	530	416.7	156.4	121.5	41
1931	128.8	319	464.1	48.4	260	2.1
1941	78.4	244	—	147.2	278.8	4.9

Source: K.N Chaudhuri 'Foreign Trade and Balance of Payments (1757-1947)' in Dharma Kumar (ed) (1983), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol II, Delhi.

The stimulus of export markets as fillip to cash crop production can be seen also in the case of wheat- rapid growth till 1911 and relative decline afterwards. Production of wheat and cotton, were both stimulated by the massive expansion of canal irrigation in Punjab. Irrigation expansion seemed to have stopped by 1921 and that accounted for the retardation and relative decline of cash crop growth after 1921. Nearly 20 million acres of canal-irrigated area were added in the 40 years between 1885-1925.

33.5 REGIONAL CROP PRODUCTION TRENDS

Now let us look at the regional variations in the rates of growth. Apart from the crop wise growth differential there were regional variations too.

Table 7: Regional Trend Growth Rates of Agricultural Output, 1891-1946

(per cent per year)

	Food grain 1891-1946	Non food grain 1891-1946	All Crop 1891-1946	All Crop 1891-1916	All Crop 1921-1946
Greater Bengal	-0.73	0.23	-0.45 (0.65)	-0.40 (0.56)	-0.23 (0.95)
United Provinces	0.35	0.92	0.42 (0.40)	1.02 (0.00)	0.27 (1.07)
Madras	0.42	2.37	0.98 (0.80)	1.71 (0.75)	0.42 (1.08)
Greater Punjab	1.10	2.40	1.57 (0.93)	2.17 (0.20)	1.30 (1.41)
Bombay Sind	0.27	1.44	0.66 (0.71)	0.70 (0.30)	0.79 (1.45)
Central Provinces	0.29	0.97	0.48 (0.58)	1.73 (0.61)	-.56 (0.96)
British India	0.11	1.31	0.37 (0.67)	0.84 (0.44)	0.35 (1.12)

Note: The figures in bracket are trend growth rates of population.

Source: George Blyn (1966).

The regional trends show that the All India figures of low growth in crop output was largely a result of the negative growth rate in Greater Bengal. Rest of the five regions show on an average a slightly better growth of output over the whole period (0.80 per cent per year) which is ahead of the population growth rate by a very small margin . If by including Greater Bengal, the All India story of agricultural production presents a dismal picture of very low output growth and declining per capita production, by excluding it we have a picture of low output growth and stagnating per capita production. Yet here again the inter temporal variation is different between regions. In the first half the output growth is positive in all regions except Bengal but in the second half Central Provinces also shows a negative growth. In the first half of the period, all regions (excepting Bengal) have higher output growth rate compared to population. But in the second half, output growth rate of all regions are below the population growth rate. It is interesting to note that Greater Bengal and Rest of India display contrasting trends between the first and second half of our period. In Greater Bengal the rate of decline of output is reduced in the second half by nearly fifty per cent (-.40 to -.23 per cent per year) while in the rest of the regions of British India the rate of growth of output is drastically reduced by 66 per cent(1.41 per cent to .48per cent).

Let us stay with the regional contrast a little longer and explore the experience of Greater Bengal and Greater Punjab. These two regions represent two extremes in the performance of agricultural production. In Greater Bengal included Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Assam. The main component of decline in all crop output was determined by the yields of rice which accounted for more than 75 percent of the total acreage. The Bengal figures in turn were determined largely by the rapid decline

in the rice output in Bihar and Orissa. If we exclude Bihar and Orissa, the figures of rice output in Bengal show stagnation rather than decline. What was the reason for the precipitous decline in the output of rice and other minor food grains in Bihar and Orissa? Blyn found that there was a fairly strong trend element in the total rainfall, which declined over the period 1911-46 for Bihar. But even after accounting for this possible decline there was still a large and unexplainable decline in rice output in Bihar and Orissa. This according to Blyn was a statistical aberration due to the continuation of a very high standard yield till 1922-23. This standard yield used for measuring annual yields was abruptly lowered after that year. The normal yield of Bihar and Orissa was from now calculated on independent crop cutting experiments, and this recalculated figure was now assumed to be the standard yield. To rectify for the presumed lower standard yield of rice for Bihar and Orissa, Blyn corrected the series by assuming the average output of 1937-41 to be the standard yield for the entire period.⁵ Thus with an assumption of a constant standard yield the Greater Bengal rice output was modified by Blyn to generate an alternative series for food grain output for Greater Bengal and British India as a whole. This modified series, raised the trend growth rates of food grain output of Greater Bengal by 58 percent for the whole period. The differences between the trend growth rates of the original and modified series for Greater Bengal and British India can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8: Trend Growth Rates: Agriculture Production-Greater Bengal and British India, 1891-1946

	Greater Bengal		British India	
	Original Series	Modified Series	Original series	Modified series
FG Yield	-0.55	-0.10	-0.18	0.04
AC Yield	-0.34	0.07	0.01	0.27
FG Output	-0.73	-0.15	0.11	0.30
AC Output	-0.45	0.00	0.37	0.55

Source: George Blyn (1966).

While the decline of Bihar and Orissa rice yield may have been a statistical aberration, it is doubtful if Blyn's correction assuming a constant yield for the whole period for all of Greater Bengal is justifiable since it lowers the initial base period figures by about 22 percent. Even with this most optimistic correction neither the food grain production nor all crop output could keep pace with the population growth. We still see a persistent decline in per capita food grain and all crop output over the whole period. The picture of stagnation and declining per capita output does not change substantially.

The trajectory of agricultural growth in Greater Punjab represents a sharp contrast to Greater Bengal. The overall output growth rate of 1.57 percent in Punjab is the highest in the whole of British India. This rate was composed of the food grain crop output growth rate of 1.10 percent (three times the All India Rate) and NFG output rate of 2.40 percent. In terms of temporal variation however we notice that the

⁵ Blyn reduced the average yield of the period 1891-1911 in Greater Bengal by 22 per cent each year to bring the 20 year average to the level of 1936-1941 (749 lbs per acre). This latter figure was then applied to the whole period 1891-1946. Thus with an assumption of a constant standard yield the Greater Bengal rice output was modified by Blyn to generate an alternative series for food grain output for Greater Bengal and British India as a whole. Blyn (1966) p222.

maximum growth was in the first half of the period (2.17 percent) which decelerates to 1.30 percent in the second half falling below the population growth rate (1.42 percent). Most of the expansion of output appears to have been due to the massive growth of acreage in the first half our period due to the great increase in cultivation in the canal colonies. Productivity (output / acre) growth rate was relatively less even though proportion of irrigated area to total cropped area increased substantially during this period. In 1885, only 29 percent of cropped area was irrigated in Punjab but by 1911 the proportion increased to 50 percent.

Table 9: Punjab Agricultural Production : Trend Growth Rates, 1891-1946

	Yield/acre			Acreage			Output			Population
	FG	NFG	AC	FG	NFG	AC	FG	NFG	AC	
1891-1916	0.30	0.52	0.47	1.70	1.75	1.75	1.99	1.56	2.17	0.20
1921-1946	0.47	1.70	0.90	0.39	0.50	0.44	0.92	1.80	1.30	1.41
1891-1946	0.31	1.13	0.62	0.87	1.20	0.96	1.10	1.40	1.57	.93

Source: George Blyn (1966).

If agricultural production in Punjab was driven by acreage expansion in the first half of our period, the growth in the second half is propelled by productivity growth specially in the NFG crops Cotton and Sugar. Extensive use of better seeds, the practice of intensive cultivation drove productivity up in these two crops.⁶ Though FG productivity also grew in the second half due to increased adoption of better seed and greater use of chemical fertiliser, the growth was not spectacular. The area of wheat under improved seeds grew from 5 percent in 1922 to about 50 percent by 1938-39, the irrigated area under wheat increased more slowly, and the improvement in wheat yields was even lower than the combined effect of these two factors would indicate. It seems that there were powerful counter tendencies operating to reduce yield specially in the food grain crops. One major counter tendency was the increasing problem of water logging and rising alkalinity of soil mainly as an effect of rapid growth of canal irrigation. It was estimated that nearly 24 percent of cropped area of Western Punjab districts were found to be beset with water logging in 1946-47.⁷ In the second half of our period, acreage expansion slows down as does productivity growth and consequently the output growth falls below the population growth. Blyn estimates that the trend of decline in per capita food production begins from the decade of 1911-1921 and in the next thirty years this decline was about 29 percent. So even in the most dynamic region of agricultural production , the spectre of declining per capita food grain production is an undeniable reality. But how rapid really was the growth before 1911? M.M Islam has argued that Blyn might have overestimated agricultural production growth between 1891 – 1911 and that the picture of Punjab’s dynamism need to be substantially modified. Islam uses an alternative production series based on the *Season and Crop Reports* to show relatively lower rates of growth compared to Blyn. Islam suggests that Blyn

⁶ See Carl Pray ‘Accuracy of Official Agricultural Statistics’ in Sumit Guha (ed) *Growth, Stagnation Or Decline?: Agricultural Productivity in British India* ,pp185-187 for extensive use of improved varieties of seeds in Sugar cane and Cotton and consequent rise in productivity. Acreage under improved variety sugar cane (Coimbatore variety) grew from 1per cent in 1921 to 78 per cent of the total acreage under sugar cane by 1944. Similarly larger area of Cotton came to be cultivated by high yielding American variety.

⁷ See M.M Islam ‘Trend in Crop Production in Undivided Punjab’ in Sumit Guha (ed) *Growth Stagnation or Decline?* P201-203.

overestimates the growth rates for food grain crops, in the period 1891-1906 (i.e before the publication of fuller production estimates of Season and Crop Reports) to arrive at a much rosier picture of Punjab agriculture.⁸

Table 10: Alternative Crop Output Trend Growth Rates : Punjab, 1891-1946.

	Islam's estimate 1891-1946	Blyn's estimate 1906-1946	Blyn 1891-1946
All crops	0.79	1.10	1.57
Foodgrain	0.42	0.41	1.10
Non Food Grain	2.64	2.10	2.40

Source: George Blyn (1966).

33.6 DEBATES OVER AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS

While Blyn's work on the agricultural production remains the single most comprehensive account of All India agricultural performance, several attempts have been made to improve upon it at the regional level. We need to consider some of these to reflect on the debate over agricultural stagnation and growth.

Blyn's agricultural production statistics was the basis for important estimations of national income by S.Sivsubrahmaniam for the period 1900-1947 and enjoyed a great deal of reputation in the radical nationalist historiography of the 1970s and early 1980s. However doubts were soon raised about Blyn's production estimates and the veracity of the official yield figures on which they were based. M.D Morris, an early dissenter, doubted whether the picture of decline food grain yield per acre could be sustained for the whole period. Citing an early study by Walter C. Neale, Morris argued that wheat yields in the districts of Muzaffarnagar and Bareilly increased by 900 percent between 1840-1940. Alan Heston provided the first systematic critique of the Blyn's production series by casting doubt over the official statistics especially on the Standard Yield and Seasonal Condition Factor components of the Production series. Clive Dewey debunked the official statistics because of the arbitrariness and unreliable methods used by those who collected the statistics, the patwaris and the Kanungos. Regional revisions were attempted by M.M Islam for Bengal and Carl Pray for Punjab. Islam revised the acreage and production figures of the 1920s and Pray argued that the official statistics were serious underestimates since they neglected the role of improvements in technology. The debate over the relative merits of Blyn's agricultural production series has been ably summarised in Sumit Guha (*Growth, Stagnation or Decline : Agricultural Productivity in British India, 1992*).

Those who have criticised Blyn's figures have focussed mainly on two components of the three that went into the making of the production series namely the Standard Yield and Seasonal Condition Factor (the product of these two elements gave the official yield or productivity). Heston's main criticism was that the official yield figures were subjectively estimated and were marked by an administrative bias. This bias was largely due to the proverbial " patwari pessimism" or the tendency on

⁸ K.L Datta, who also published an estimate of the Food grain output between 1890-1911 for Punjab found much higher initial crop out than Blyn and also a weak growth trend for that period. See arguments in favour and against Blyn's estimation in Punjab in Sumit Guha ' Introduction' in Sumit Guha ed) *Growth, Stagnation or Decline* pp22-25.

the part of the primary reporting agency to underestimate good years and overestimate bad years which led to systematic reduction of the seasonal condition factor. A second point of criticism was about the Standard Yield figures. It was argued that the standard yield figures were based on insufficient crop cutting experiments and were marked by large sampling errors, and changes in these figures did not reflect underlying yield trends. Heston demonstrated through a detailed analysis of the Bombay official yield figures that there was a declining trend over time which was unsupported by total rainfall trend during the period 1907-1947. (Heston, 1973) He suggested that the administrative bias was reinforced by a political bias towards remission of revenue (colonial officials were keen to show low yields and higher revenue remission to counter growing nationalist mobilisation). Secondly, Heston felt that standard yield figures were initially very high because European yields were projected on to India and when more realistic figures came to be adopted, there was a decline in Standard Yield figures over time. For Heston Blyn's downward trend in food grain crop yield was a statistical illusion. Since official yield figures were spurious, Heston emphasized that the picture of declining yield for food crops should be abandoned in favour of a constant yield for the whole period. He proposed that the yield figures of 1951-54 for all food crops based on extensive crop cutting methods should be applied to the acreage figures to generate a revised output series. For crops like cotton, sugarcane and tea, which showed a continuous increase in yield in the official series, he advocated the maintenance of official, yield figures.

How bad were the official yield figures in reality? It is interesting to note that for certain years in which both official yield and extensive crop cutting yields were published (1944-46), R.C Desai who did an extensive study of crop trends in 1937-1948 found that the official yields were underestimated vis a vis Crop cutting yields by a very narrow margin - 3.5 percent for rice and 1.5 percent for wheat. R.C Desai V.G Panse and P.V Sukhatme who were the pioneers of crop cutting method for yield estimations generally supported the Patwari estimations. Secondly, Heston's objections against declining condition factor in the official series due to administrative and political bias has been found to be untenable by Ashok Desai, Aswini Saith and Sumit Guha. The major point than had to be considered was whether the trend of declining official yield reflected underlying movements in real yield. And here Heston's alternative of constant yield (based on 1951-54 crop cutting yield) for the whole period 1868-1947 for major crops has been found wanting in many respects. Ashwini Saith's careful examination of United Provinces' wheat yield for the period 1840-1946 in Muzaffarnagar and Bareilly districts showed that contrary to an optimistic assessment of rising yield, there was a long term tendency for "intrinsic yield" to decline. This decline was partly offset for a short period due to what Saith calls a "shift effect" - i.e. shift of wheat from unirrigated to irrigated land. (Since irrigated wheat yield was nearly double the unirrigated yield) But once the shift effect had played out its role either with slowing down of expansion of canal irrigation or due to increasing alkalinity due to water logging, the long-term trend of decline in intrinsic yield resumed its course. If there is, as Saith shows, a long term tendency for decline of "intrinsic yield" then Blyn's figures are not implausible and the alternative of constant yield proposed by Heston is untenable. We are then left with Blyn's series of agricultural production for the period of 1890-1947 as the best and perhaps the most plausible estimation of trend in the key aspects of agrarian production in British India.

Blyn's portrayal of the overall picture of low growth and stagnation strengthens the nationalist argument about the baneful impact of colonial rule while the revisionists could take some consolation from the positive growth trend in the cash crop

production. Yet Blyn's statistics only seemed to deepen some of the paradoxes of agrarian growth. First: how did Indian population grow so rapidly (between 1921-1946) on the basis of a stagnant food grain production? Second: how do we square the fact of rapid agricultural growth in the late 19th century with evidence of recurring famines and scarcities? The answers depend seemingly on the relation between population growth and agrarian production. Were the trends in these two variables independent of each other or was there a causal relation between them? If we accept Blyn's picture we still are left with a huge gap about the trends for most of the 19th century. Were the trends of 1890-1920 a continuation of longer term trends of growth from the 19th century or was there only a brief period of growth within a larger cycle of stagnation and decline initiated in the 19th century?

33.7 THE 19TH CENTURY TRENDS?

What can we say about the longer term 19th century trend as a whole? It may be noted here that Heston's revised output estimates effectively lowers the estimates of the earlier periods and thus instead of a declining trend we are presented a rising trend of output, yield and per capita food grain production, specially for the later half of the 19th century. (Heston 'National Income' in Dharma Kumar (ed) *Cambridge Economic History of India*). The 19th century trends, in the absence of any series, are at best speculative. Heston's backward extrapolations of the mid 20th century yields are, as we have seen, highly improbable. Sumit Guha, on the basis of scattered evidence, a mix of reliable and highly speculative figures spread across several regions, has estimated that total cultivated area might have increased by 33 percent between 1825-1890.⁵ During the same period the best estimates of population growth range between 26 percent and 87 percent. Only with the lowest estimate of population growth can the acreage growth keep ahead of population.. During the same period he estimates, on the basis of all available crop cutting experiments in the District Settlement reports of North India and South India, a tendency for the yields to decline, though in several regions such as Punjab and United provinces irrigation might have countered this decline to an extent. Combining the trends in acreage, yields and population, Guha estimates a fairly slow growth in output and a decline in per capita output between 1825 -1890.

33.8 SUMMARY

Blyn's production figures based on the official yield and production series, established the following :

- a) Very low rates of growth of agricultural output between 1891-1946. and a strong trend of decline of per capita output.
- b) The relatively brighter performance of non foodgrain crops, while Foodgrain output stagnated. Within foodgrains, rice production declined while wheat production increased at a healthy rate.
- c) There were strong regional variations. Greater Bengal was stagnant while Punjab showed much greater buoyancy.

Agricultural production grew much faster in the first half of our period and stagnated or declined in most regions in the second half. Consequently per capita production increased in the first half and declined most precipitously in the second. Combined with the available trend estimates of the 1825-1890 we can now conclude that the period 1890-1920 represented a brief upward blimp in the overall trajectory of

agrarian stagnation and declining per capita output in the colonial period. The long trend of 19th century stagnation explains the massive mortalities due to recurrent famines in the late 19th century. The stagnant population trend of 1890-1921 and rapid expansion of acreage due to canal irrigation can explain the only favourable period of rising per capita output in the colonial period.

33.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the main trends in agricultural production in British India over the period 1890-1950.
- 2) What are the main factors for the difference in the performance of foodgrains and non foodgrains crops in the late 19th and early 20th century. Discuss with reference to regional variations.
- 3) Explain the reasons for the inter temporal variations in agricultural production from the late 19th to mid-20th century in British India.
- 4) How does the debate on agricultural statistics enhance our understanding of agricultural production.

33.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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M.A. History

List of Courses

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MHI-02	Modern World	8
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