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– An 'Entitlement' Approach**

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Introduction:

The notion that a society's history is moulded in significant ways by the nature of its 'food system' - i.e., the manner in which food is produced and distributed - is not a new one. Certain well-known theories of the history of pre-capitalist societies make explicit use of this notion. One example is Wittfogel's theory of 'Oriental Despotism'. Building on the earlier works of Bernier and Marx, this theory perceives much of the ancient Orient, including India, as having remained remarkably stagnant over many centuries, and explains this stagnation in terms of the particular form of food production adopted in these societies, namely, the form of 'hydraulic agriculture' based on large-scale irrigation. Recent research has, however, revealed a number of serious flaws in the historical premises of this theory, not the least of which is its undue emphasis on the role of large-scale irrigation.¹

¹. For wide-ranging criticisms of this theory, see Habib (n.d.) and Sawyer (1977), among others.

A related but somewhat different approach was adopted by the historical enquiries built on the concept of the "Indian Village Community" popularised by Maine (1876) and Marx (1942). For our present purposes, the essential elements of this approach may be summarised in the form of the following propositions. The 'food system' of pre-colonial India was characterised by communal ownership of the principal means of production (i.e., land) and custom-based distribution of food within the village community. The members of each community supplied to each other all the goods and services needed for subsistence and claimed a share of the village's food production on the basis of some customary rights. These characteristics of the 'food system' gave rise to self-sufficient closed village economies which had very little interaction with the outside world. Some external forces, most notably state, regularly took away a part of the village's food produce; but such impositions neither affected the internal structure of the village community nor entailed any feedback from the community to the wider social order, such as the nature of the state.

The history of India was thus viewed as one where political changes were taking place in the wider society without affecting or being affected by the unchanging structures of the village communities. This particular conception of the 'Indian Village Community', and of its relationship with the outside society, is no longer

accepted in its totality by the modern historians.² It has, for example, been satisfactorily established that rights on the land closely approximating the modern concept of private property rights did exist quite early in Indian history³. More importantly for our present context, the history of the external society did not really run parallel to the history of the village communities - as we shall see, each profoundly affected the other even long before the modern era.

The inadequacy of these earlier approaches does not, however, mean that the role of the 'food system' is not important in shaping the course of history. But it does mean that a different approach is needed to see the nature of this role. The present essay tries to explicate this role by focussing at the same time on the 'system of production' (i.e., the technological, geographical and social conditions of food production) as well as the 'system of entitlements to food'. The latter concept refers to the set of 'entitlement relations' i.e., the rules and conventions which govern the ability of

² A comprehensive account of the evolution of the concept of the village community can be found in Dewey (1972). The inadequacy of this concept in the Indian context is discussed by Habib (1985) and Mukhia (1985a), among others.

³ Kosambi (1975, p.257) quotes the following from *Milindipanha*, a pre-Christian-era text: "When a man clears away the jungle and sets free (*niharti*) a piece of land ... people say it is his land. It is because he has brought this land into use that he is called the owner of the land." Such ownership rights were, however, severely circumscribed at that time; the approximation to the notion of full-fledged private property rights came much later. See, for example, Grover (1963) and Chandra (1974) on the nature of land rights in the late pre-colonial period.

different members of a society to procure food. In his classic exposition of the concept of 'entitlement relations', Amartya Sen explained it thus: "A person's ability to command food - indeed to command any commodity he wishes to acquire or retain - depends on the entitlement relations that govern possession and use in that society. It depends on what he owns, what exchange possibilities are offered to him, what is given to him free, and what is taken away from him." (Sen 1981, p. 154)

To illustrate the idea of 'entitlement relations' further with an example of special relevance in our present context, we may consider the notion of rights on the produce of land. During much of India's history, no single individual (or family) could claim exclusive rights on the produce of land, even if a given piece of land remained in the hereditary possession of the same family. There was typically a hierarchy of rights through which different groups of non-producers claimed a share of food. The legitimacy of these rights apparently sprang from long-standing conventions, but in the ultimate analysis such legitimacy derived from either coercive power or religious sanctions - the two often working hand in hand. A particular structure of such rights gave rise to a particular set of 'entitlement relations'. There are, of course, other kinds of 'entitlement relations' too, for example the rules that govern the relative entitlements of a debtor-peasant vis-a vis his creditor

to the food produced on the former's land. Yet another kind of 'entitlement relations' is related to 'production relations' i.e., the terms and arrangements under which land and labour are brought together in the process of production. The set of all such 'entitlement relations' constitutes what we have referred to above as the 'system of entitlements'.

The 'entitlement relations' do not of course remain static over time. A sudden discrete change or the cumulative effect of a long period of slow changes brings about regimes of 'entitlement-shifts'. We have argued in this essay that 'entitlement-shifts' have played a crucial role, along with the 'system of food production', in shaping the course of Indian history.⁴ Much of our analysis is concerned with trying to understand how the 'system of entitlements' evolved in different epochs in Indian history, how and when this evolution gave rise to significant 'entitlement-shifts' and how these shifts in turn shaped the course of subsequent history.

We should, however, mention at this stage certain limitations of this study, some self-imposed and some forced by the nature of available information. First, no attempt is made to do a comprehensive study of the 'system of entitlements' for any period in history covering all kinds of 'entitlement relations' among all

⁴ Tilly (1983) has examined the role of 'entitlement shifts' in the causation of certain episodes of conflicts over food in the history of Europe.

sections of the society. Only some crucial ones are identified on the basis of their potency in explaining some selected historical episodes. Secondly, although we are deeply concerned with the entitlement to food, we are unable to offer any quantitative estimates of how much food was actually consumed by different social groups in different periods of history - such data are available only for the last few decades. Our analysis of 'entitlement-shifts' is therefore based on inferences drawn from qualitative evidence regarding the changes in 'entitlement relations'. Thirdly, we have completely left out the history of Penninsular India (in the south) which evolved somewhat differently from, although not completely independently of, the history of the rest of India. Fourthly, as we enter the colonial period, we restrict the regional coverage even further as our information about regional diversity becomes much too rich at this stage to permit any concise coverage of all the different regions. For this period, we concentrate on Bengal, located in the eastern part of India, where the colonial power first struck root and whose potential for economic exploitation always loomed large in the calculations of colonial policy-makers. Finally, our account of history stops at the achievement of national independence from the colonial powers in 1947; however, we do begin at the very beginning.

The Antiquity:

Recent archeological evidence indicates that the earliest phase of settled agriculture started in India in Neolithic times, about the sixth millenium BC.⁵ Cattle and some other animals were already domesticated, but their use as draught animals was still unexplored. There is also no evidence of the use of the plough. Given such a low level of technology and the difficulty of clearing forests (in the absence of sharp metals), the level of production must have been very low. It is likely that settled cultivation at this stage was only a minor adjunct to what was still essentially a food-gathering community. A vastly improved stage of agriculture is noticed during the Indus Valley civilisation (BC 1800-2600), when there is clear evidence of the use of both ploughs and draught animals. A whole array of foodgrains and other crops were grown at this time, making use of the water that came with the regular inundations of the Indus and its numerous tributaries.

The demise of the Indus civilization led to a severe retrogression in the evolution of agriculture. It still remains a matter of some dispute as to how exactly this civilisation came to an end. The most plausible hypothesis advanced so far is the one which sees the Aryan invaders systematically destroying the Indus

⁵ The pre-history of Indian agriculture is discussed in Sahi (1981).

culture and subjugating its authors through superior military force, some time in the first half of the second millenium BC (Kosambi 1975). By a careful interpretation of the Aryans' earliest religious text *Rigveda*, Kosambi and several other scholars have pieced together a consistent picture of the momentous events of this period. This picture reveals that the invaders were predominantly pastoralists; they coveted their wealth in the form of animals (chiefly cows) and slaves, and subsisted mainly on animal food, supplemented by a single foodgrain, barley. They regarded with scorn the dyke-based agriculture of their enemies; their god *Indra* was believed to take pride in destroying the dams that sustained the Indus Valley agriculture. The Aryan conquest thus amounted to the forcible replacement of one mode of food economy by another. The consequent retrogression in the evolution of settled agriculture must have retarded in no small measure the overall economic evolution of the ancient Indian society.

It took more than one thousand years for the conditions of a sophisticated agriculture-based economy to reappear. During this time, the centre of settlements shifted gradually to the east, culminating in the second half of the first millenium BC in the emergence of the great Mauryan empires which spanned a vast expanse of the Gangetic basin. The history of this long period of transition is important in the present context for a number of reasons. The technological and social

conditions of production and distribution of food that obtained during this period led to certain developments which were to mould the social history of India in a manner whose marks are visible even today. One of the them is the *varna*-system of social hierarchy based on religious sanction - the forerunner of the latter-day caste system, and the other is the related phenomenon of untouchability.

The early Aryan society - the *Rigvedic* society as it is called - did have the rudiments of a *varna*-based hierarchy, but it was not much different from other primitive societies where religious sanction was also used to establish the hegemony of the non-producing class over the class of direct producers.⁶ At this stage, there was essentially a two-fold classification of social ranking - the upper rank being occupied by the warriors (*rajanyas*) and priests (*brahmana*), and the lower rank by the peasants (*vis*) and slaves. Social organisation was tribal in nature, and the tribal custom of reciprocity dominated the distributive regime. Food procured by the members of the tribe would be brought together in a tribal assembly (*vidatha*) and distributed by the warrior-chief (Sharma 1977). It was not exactly an egalitarian society, but differentiation could not have proceeded far in an economy where the productive level was still too low to yield any sizeable surplus. The phase of eastward

⁶ Kosambi (1975) has noted an interesting parallel between Vedic India and Caesar's Gauls; p.111.

expansion gradually strengthened the productive base by clearing more and more forest for cultivation. It was, however, a slow and difficult process, for in the absence of iron, which had not yet been brought into use, both clearing the forest and ploughing the soil were formidably difficult tasks. The relations of production that emerged at this stage are indicative of this technological base of food production. A system of petty peasant production could not emerge, as it was beyond the capacity of a single individual to clear the dense forest with inefficient copper tools and then plough the hard virgin land with his own labour. One therefore hears of large farms owned by upper-varna masters who employed servants and slaves, and of ploughs drawn by six or eight oxen (Bandyopadhyaya 1965).

Iron arrived in India around 1000 BC, but it was not before another four to five hundred years that it began to be used in agriculture. Until that happened, the productive base could not expand enough to enable the elites to institute a system where they could stay completely aloof from the direct producers of food and appropriate the surplus through a regular tax-collecting machinery supported by a standing army. In fact, the *rajanyas* had to depend on peasant militias for waging wars; force or *bala* was considered to be identical with the peasantry or *vis*, and perhaps to emphasise the point the *rajanyas* were advised by the priests to eat from the

same vessel with the *vis*.⁷ In the same manner, the *rajanyas* also had to co-operate with the peasantry in extending cultivation and even lend their hand to the plough. Given this necessity of maintaining a certain degree of social proximity, coupled with an inability to sustain a standing army, the instruments of coercion could not be sharpened enough. This weakness of the coercive machinery is revealed by the fact that although a formal tax called *sulka* was imposed on the peasantry, the institution of sacrificial offering called *bali* still constituted an important mechanism of transferring surplus. At an earlier stage, i.e., in the *Rig Vedic* era, *bali* was essentially a voluntary offering which the producers of food made to their social superiors. Gradually, in the late Vedic period, an element of compulsion came to be attached to it, but this compulsion was achieved not so much by brute force as by religious admonition. The author of *Satapatha Brahmana*, a religious text of the late Vedic period, freely preached the doctrine that "Nobility is the feeder and the people are the food; when there is abundant food for the feeder, that realm is indeed prosperous and thrives."⁸ In a situation like this where co-operation between the elites and the peasants could not be entirely avoided in social and economic spheres, a hegemony based on religious dogma as opposed to coercive force was more helpful in

⁷ This particular piece of advice came from the late Vedic text *Satapatha Brahmana*, cited in Sharma (1975).

⁸ Cited in Sharma (1975), p.6.

maintaining a secure flow of surplus from the producers of food to the non-producing elites. The ideology of varna-stratification was such a hegemonic device par excellence.

One intriguing question, however, arises at this point. Why didn't the varna system disappear once the use of iron made it possible, as in the age of Mauryan empire (beginning c. 315 BC), to expand the productive base and to sustain a military-bureaucratic machinery for surplus extraction? This question is not relevant for those, and there are many scholars of this school, who do not regard the varna system to have arisen in the first place as a social device for surplus appropriation. But those who emphasise the aspect of surplus appropriation are surely obliged to answer this question.

One plausible answer has recently been suggested in terms of the technology of food production - specifically, the delay in the introduction of iron in Indian agriculture. The argument simply is that the prolongation of non-iron agriculture, and the resulting low level of productivity, necessarily prolonged the reign of ritualism as a means of surplus appropriation and thus served to entrench the varna ideology in the Indian psyche. "In Greece iron-based crafts and agriculture appeared about four centuries earlier, and in Iran about two centuries earlier than India. Hence in a period when the Greeks were able to establish more

control on nature and substantially improve their mode of production, on account of low agricultural productivity ritualism and ritualist class grew far more rapidly in India...The later Vedic society, like the Homeric or the Avesta society, was an agrarian or peasant society dominated by the nobles, but here the priests lent a much stronger hand to the rulers than they did in Greece and Iran" (Sharma 1975, p.12). The prolonged importance of the ritualist class made the the *varna* ideology so entrenched that it was not only retained but also elaborated and rigidified into a bewilderingly complex caste system to suit the requirements of a different socio-economic formation which developed at a later period (Gupta 1980). But this is running ahead of our story; suffice it to note at this stage that the technology of food production which obtained at this crucial stage in history, and the mode of surplus appropriation that was dictated by it, gave rise to a particular 'system of entitlements' which had a decisive influence in making the *varna* ideology, and the subsequent caste system based on it, such a deeply entrenched feature of Indian social life.

The origin of yet another peculiarly Indian social institution, that of untouchability, can also be traced to the changing nature of the food economy during the long period of expansion into the forests of the Gangetic Plains. Initially, the expansion led to the creation of separate agricultural and hunting tribes living in

separate settlements but in a relation of economic complementarity. The expanding agricultural communities provided a market for forest products like skin and meat produced by the hunters, who in turn could supplement their forest diet with foodgrains produced by the nearby agricultural tribes. But this relationship was fundamentally altered by subsequent technological development. The possibility of raising leguminous foodcrops reduced the agriculturists' dependence on fish and meat, while the growing use of cotton affected the demand for animal skin. Consequently, as the agricultural settlements rapidly advanced, the areas of the forests that the hunters required for their subsistence became a hindrance rather than a complementary asset for the agriculturists.

The ensuing clash between the two communities resulted in the subjugation of the hunting tribes, and their members were now compelled to perform menial tasks for the benefit of peasant communities (Habib 1982). Their subjugation was made complete by invoking the ideology of *varna* in which the gradation of social hierarchy was equated with the degree of ritual purity. Since the conquered tribes were now compelled to carry out unclean tasks (such as grave digging, waste disposal etc.), they were relegated to the most impure and hence the lowest category. The degree of their impurity was underlined by declaring them Untouchables, so that they would forever be deprived of the scope for social

mobility and the rest of the society would gain for itself a class of people hereditarily condemned to carry out unclean, but socially necessary, tasks. The path from subjugation to untouchability was indeed mediated by the ideology of *varna*, but the origin of subjugation lay in the conflict between peasants and hunters/gatherers resulting from the changing nature of the food economy during the first millenium BC.⁹

The Rise and Fall of Mighty Empires:

As the technology of food production received a boost with the use of iron tools from around the middle of the first millenium BC, it heralded an era of far-ranging economic and social transformation. The first impact was felt in the universalisation of peasant production. The use of the iron axe made it possible for any single individual to clear enough forest for himself. Moreover, since iron ploughshares and ploughs with iron tips attached to it were much lighter, there was no need to use too many people to till the land. These stimulants to the system of peasant-based production were further reinforced by certain technological innovations. The new

⁹ It is significant that many names of the latter-day untouchable castes are mentioned in the earlier religious texts while referring to lowly, but still touchable, tribes engaged in hunting, fishing and food-gathering occupations. On this, see the evidence cited in Jha (1975).

possibilities of multiple cropping and rice-transplantation required more intensive and skilled labour, and called for decisions to be made on the basis of intimate knowledge of both soil and crop; and "only peasant farming could possess the capacities that were now in demand" (Habib 1982).

Greater efficiency of peasant agriculture led to increasing pressure for surplus-extraction by the ruling class. Larger volume of surplus enabled them to establish huge centralised empires based on regular fiscal bureaucracy and standing army which in turn made it possible to institutionalise the mechanism of surplus extraction. The 'entitlement relations' based on these institutional features are brought out clearly in the justly famous book *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (c. 300 BC), the political advisor to the emperor Chandragupta Maurya. In Kautilya's time, the principal mechanism for distributing food between producers and non-producers was the system of taxes and gifts. The state would normally tax away one-sixth of the produce; but in the case of irrigated land an additional one-fifth to one-third of the produce was demanded as the irrigation cess, so that in such lands the total appropriation could amount to as much as one-half of the produce. This tax was collected mostly in kind, and after keeping the royal share, a part of it was used for paying salaries to officials and another part for making gifts to the priests. The peasants were allowed to keep possession of their land as

long as they kept it in proper cultivation and paid their tax; but they were not allowed either to leave their villages or to keep their land uncultivated. Both these restrictions were motivated by the concern of the state to extract as much surplus from the peasantry as possible (Bhattacharya 1979).

The rate of surplus extraction became even more acute by a new development which gained momentum from the beginning of the Christian era. Formerly, the non-producing priestly class (*brahmana*) was rewarded by the king in the form of gifts of food and other commodities which were collected as tax from the peasants. Gradually, this reward began to take the form of land grants (*brahmadeya*); a priest would be granted a territorial unit whose tax revenue he would be entitled to enjoy. Similar land grants were also made to the chieftains of neighbouring independent tribes as a means of buying political alliance.

There is by now conclusive evidence, culled from a large body of literary texts of that period, that the pressure from both the state and the grantees increasingly tilted the 'system of entitlements' against the peasants. There is no quantitative evidence to substantiate this inference, but there is plenty of qualitative evidence pointing to an impending social crisis generated by oppressive extortions. This period of crisis has been symbolised in the contemporary epics and

religious texts of all hues (Hindu, Buddhist and Jain) as the *kaliyuga* - an age of total decadence - or the *yuganta* - the end of an epoch¹⁰. To give just a few examples, the classic Hindu epic *Mahabharata* describes this age as one where the villages will be harrassed by forced labour and overtaxation; the Hindu religious text *Skanda Purana* also refers to the exploitation and subjection of the lower peasantry by the rulers as one of the main features of the *Kali* age; the Buddhist text *Jataka* describes it even more vividly as an age where the kings will resort to "crushing their subjects like sugarcane in a mill and ... taxing them even to the last farthing".

The peasantry of course did not always accept their fate with passive resignation. They eventually revolted, refused to pay taxes, flouted the principles of *varna*-based religion, and even resorted to murdering their erstwhile masters. This reaction of the oppressed was described and condemned by the contemporary Hindu religious texts as a sign of all-round moral decadence; and it is this notion of moral decadence that the concept of *Kaliyuga* was meant to symbolise. The social ramifications of this conflict were varied and diverse, but at the very core it was simply a struggle over entitlements to food. The nobles and the priests, armed with military power and religious sanction, were trying to enhance their entitlements at the expense of the

¹⁰ Yadava (1978) offers an excellent interpretative account of the literary evidence.

direct producers who in turn were trying to resist them in the only way they could, namely, by flouting the symbols of authority. This struggle had a most pronounced effect on the subsequent course of Indian history - it brought to an end the age of mighty empires and ushered in a new era with an entirely different socio-economic formation¹¹.

The renowned Hindu law-giver Manu (c. 200 BC - 200 AD) and several other authorities of the time suggested two methods of dealing with the crisis of Kaliyuga: punishment (*danda*) and restoration of social order (*varnasramadharma*) through an ideological campaign. In reality neither of them worked. Since it became difficult to collect taxes, it was no longer possible to run the state and to pay the state-supported classes of priests, administrators and soldiers. As an alternative, the practice of land grants began to be adopted on a wide scale, particularly from the 4th and 5th century AD onwards. Instead of receiving salaries and other remunerations from the treasury, these people were now to enjoy the tax revenue they would collect from the territories granted to them.

This device relieved the state from the onerous task of collecting taxes from an increasingly recalcitrant peasantry, while ensuring a means of paying the priests

¹¹ The following account of social transformation is based on the pioneering research of Kosambi (1975), Sharma (1965, 1974, 1985) and Yadava (1973, 1976).

and officials. There was also a conjunctural factor contributing to the spread of land grants at this time. For a number of reasons, the thriving tradition of international commerce which had connected India to far-flung areas of the east and the west for nearly a thousand years, came to an end during this period of social crisis.¹² These reasons had to do with extraneous factors, but their impact was to deepen the internal crisis by drying up the flow of precious metals which formed the basis of an extensive currency system that developed during the age of the mighty empires. In the absence of coins, the state officials of a sprawling empire could no longer be paid their salaries. The device of land grant was the only alternative left.

It is not possible to judge whether the internal social revolt or the external trade crisis was the principal motive force behind the proliferation of land grants; but there is no doubt that the two factors reinforced each other, and together they brought about a fundamental change in social organisation - they ushered in the era of 'Indian Feudalism'. The recipients of land grants were given sweeping powers by royal charters - both fiscal and seignorial power. At the same time, the rights of the king were severely curtailed - the

¹² Trade with the eastern part of the Roman empire ended in the third century, and silk trade with Persia and the Byzantium ended in the middle of the sixth century. Commerce with China and South-East Asia also came to a halt at around this time. The decay of large urban centres which once flourished in the northern India in the early Christian era bears testimony to this decline in trade. For the details of this process, see Sharma (1965).

successors of the king and the people in power were asked by the charters to observe the terms of the grant, and the royal army was prohibited from entering the land of the grantee without the latter's permission. All this enabled the recipients of royal charters to establish themselves as feudal overlords within their assigned territories.

At the same time, another group of landlords emerged from below. Taking advantage of a weakened central authority, many village headmen and tribal chiefs asserted their independence and assumed the same powers and privileges as were given to the royal grantees. This dual process has been described by Kosambi (1975) as 'feudalism from above' and 'feudalism from below'. By about the middle of the first millennium AD, this process was complete - the day of the large centralised empires was gone and the era of feudalism had begun.

As we have seen, the proximate cause of this epochal change was the system of land grants; but this system was itself partly a consequence of the 'entitlement-shifts' that had occurred in the early years of the Christian era.

Early Medieval Period: The Age of 'Indian Feudalism'¹³:

We shall now explore how the new form of social organisation affected the 'system of entitlements' and with what consequences. It is now generally accepted that at least one good thing came out of this change, namely, the demise of slavery. The institution of slavery was never a predominant feature of the social order of ancient India, but it did exist; the slaves were employed by the state as well as by large landowners to till their land. As the state power atrophied and large landowners increasingly withdrew from direct cultivation to establish themselves as feudal rentiers, slaves were turned into rent-paying peasants.

But the overall effect was to tilt the balance further against the interest of the poorer class, especially the peasants. Centralised control from a distance was replaced by localised control from close by, and the subjugation of the peasantry became all the more

¹³ There is a big controversy over the dating of Indian feudalism and also on whether there was at all a feudal era in Indian history. Most of the present-day historians who perceive the existence of a feudal era share the view that an acceptable date is roughly from about 5th to 12th century AD. Mukhia (1980, 1985) challenges the feudal characterisation of this period on the ground that although the social organisation of this period has some striking similarities with the classical picture of European feudalism, one crucial difference lies in the relative unimportance of serfdom in India; and this difference, according to him, makes it difficult to talk of feudalism in India if feudalism is to be understood as a Marxian category of mode of production. While noting the force of Mukhia's argument, we believe that the similarities with European feudalism are close enough to talk of Indian feudalism as a descriptive category, provided, as Habib (1985, p.50) has suggested, due stress is laid on the word 'Indian'.

intense for it. Initially the land grant charters gave only usufructuary rights to the beneficiaries. But the later charters enjoined such powers as rendered them the *de facto* owners of village land. They were often given a blanket authority to enjoy the village in all possible ways (*sarvopaya-samyuktam*). Sometimes their entitlements were spelt out in such great detail as to leave no doubt about the scope of their reach. For example, "the beneficiary is entitled to collect taxes, all kinds of income, all kinds of occasional taxes, and this 'all' (*sarva*) is never specified. Similarly he is entitled to collect proper and improper taxes, fixed and not fixed taxes, and at the end of the list of the taxes the term *et cetera* (*adi, adikam*) is used." (Sharma 1985, p.22). All these no doubt added enormously to the power of the beneficiaries. This power was strengthened even more by the conferment of seignorial rights on them.

The evidence regarding the increasing subjugation of the peasantry is essentially qualitative in nature, but none the less persuasive for that.¹⁴ We have noted earlier that the introduction of iron ushered in an era of independent peasant production around the middle of the first millenium BC. Careful study of Kautliya's *Arthasastra* has shown that although there did exist large farms, both state and private, the bulk of cultivation was carried out by independent petty producers in the Maurya

¹⁴ Most of the detailed evidence can be found in Sharma (1965) and Yadava (1973), and their summary presentations in Sharma (1985) and Yadava (1974).

period (Bhattacharya 1979). They never had ownership rights in the modern bourgeois sense, but as long as they cultivated and paid taxes they could remain essentially free producers. The new order of the early medieval era, however, led to severe curtailment of their rights.

There are several indications of the feudal lords' increasing usurpation of rights at the expense of the peasants. One kind of evidence comes from the inscriptional records of land sales transactions. In the Gupta period, the last of the mighty empires of ancient India, the records of these transactions mention not only the rights of the king but also of the local administrative body (*adhikarana*) and of the occupant of the land; the money for the purchase of land was given to *adhikarana* and sometimes also to the occupant. But the land grant inscriptions of the post Gupta period do not mention the rights of the *adhikarana*, not to speak of the individual occupants. Secondly, most land grants after the seventh century AD gave away the village along with the fallow, orchard and pasture lands on which the peasants used to have free communal rights. Thirdly, many land grants of the post-Gupta period empowered the beneficiary to evict the old peasants and settle new ones at their will. By a fascinating study of the evolution of the terms used for the peasants and landlords, Sharma (1985) has shown how the actual tiller of the soil gradually became no more than a tiller without any rights on the land or its produce independent of the will of the

landlord who in turn evolved into the receptacle of all kinds of rights.

With increasing control came increasing extortions. In Kautilya's time the standard tax rate was one-sixth of the produce. By the end of the first millenium AD, this tax was supplemented by a whole host of others. *Lekhapaddhati*, a 11-12th century text, reveals that upto two-thirds of the produce was being collected from the peasants (Yadava 1973, p.297-8). A new mechanism of extraction also came into vogue at this time in the form of forced labour. In a pioneering study of forced labour (as distinct from slavery) in Indian history, G. K. Rai (1976) has shown that this phenomenon did not exist in India till the early centuries of the Christian era. When it eventually did emerge (in the critical period of Kaliyuga referred to earlier) only the king had the right to impose forced labour. Gradually, as the feudal order took its hold, all the local potentates started to usurp this right. Also initially, only the Sudra agricultural labourers and other menial workers were forced to render labour service; but gradually the peasants and artisans fell victim too. Yet another means of extraction was the intensification of the sharecropping system. We come across the sharecroppers for the first time in Indian history in Kautilya's *Arthasastra* in the pre-Christian era; but they were mostly employed on the state land which accounted for a minor proportion of total cultivated area. Although there are indirect indications

that sharecroppers might have been employed by the private landowners as well (Bhattacharya 1979), the complete silence of Kautilya about the existence of this practice in the private sphere is perhaps indicative of its minor role. By the end of the first millenium AD, however, the number of sharecroppers had become so large that Parasara, a theologian of c.600-900 AD, was led to consider the possibility of forming a separate caste out of them (Yadava 1976, p.48).

There is reason to believe that this swelling of sharecroppers was at least partly due to a debt-mediated process of land alienation. R. S. Sharma's (1965a) path-breaking study on the practice of usury in early medieval India lends support to this inference. He has noted that the earlier law-givers like Gautama and Manu do not mention land in the list of things that could be pledged against loans; but the medieval law-givers like Brhaspati and Katyayana make it clear that the usufructuary rights on land could be surrendered by the loanee not only as a means of paying interest, but also of the capital itself. Furthermore, even when land was not pledged it could be sold to clear off debts. Such alienation of land, either through usufructuary mortgagage or through outright sale, must have reduced many peasants to the status of sharecroppers when faced with an increasing burden of extortion.

There are also other indications of the increasingly distressed condition of the poorer class. Sharma's study of usury reveals that from the beginning to the end of the first millenium AD, the standard rate of interest on cash loans went up from 10% to 24% per annum. Sharma himself explains this increase as a consequence of reduced supply of money in the later period, but other findings of his own study give reasons to believe that it could at least in part be a symptom of a wider process of immiserisation. For instance, in the earlier period the law-givers had postulated the principle of *dviagunyam*, according to which the accumulated debt liability including interest and principal could not exceed a maximum of twice the principal; but this restriction was waived by the later authorities. Similarly, the maximum limit imposed by the earlier law-givers on debt liability in the case of loans given in kind were subsequently removed, especially in the case of commodities consumed by the poorer group. All this, plus the rise of forced labour and sharecropping, certainly indicates a greatly weakened position of the poor in the 'system of entitlements'.

The contemporary religious and literary texts give ample support to this inference. For example, it was stated in *Padma Purana*, a contemporary religious text that the peasantry was so greatly oppressed that they could not even support their families; similarly a verse in another text, *Subhasita-Ratnakosa*, reveals that the

peasants were reduced to such dire circumstances as to find themselves on the verge of being uprooted from their villages.¹⁵ A new phase of social tension began as a consequence of this forcible shift of entitlement against the poor. A thirteenth century commentator (Hemachandra) mentions the formation of armed *srenis* (guilds) of peasants who used weapons made of wood; other commentaries show that these guilds were protesting against oppressive dues, in addition to organising cultivation on a co-operative basis. In the eleventh century, Ksemendra remarked that in his age of *Yugaksaya* (the end of an era) the peasants were turning increasingly violent; the earlier episode of *kaliyuga* is echoed in the later *Puranas*. The most spectacular revolt occurred in Bengal when the lowly *Kaibartas* fought against the mighty king Rampal, armed with wood and bamboo and led by their legendary leader Bhina, but were ultimately vanquished by the superior military strength of the nobles.

Unable to confront the mighty nobles, the protest and resentment of the poor increasingly took the form of desertion into heretical religious movements (Yadava 1976). Some of them, particularly the Bhakti and Tantric movements, were originally aimed at bringing about reconciliation and integration, but in the course of time they too acted as vehicles of protest. These movements

¹⁵ These and other textual references in this paragraph are cited in Yadava (1976) and Sharma (1985).

preached a different code of life (*gramyadharma*) more suited to the everyday concerns of village life as opposed to the varna-based religion (*varnasramadharma*) preached by the Brahmana priests from time immemorial. By rejecting the established religious order, the hapless poor sought to register their symbolic protest. However, even this symbolic protest dissipated over time as the heretical movements were infiltrated and neutralised by the protectors of the established order.

The preceding discussion shows that the 'system' of entitlements' shifted heavily against the peasantry in particular and the poorer classes in general as the era of feudalism reached its peak in the 11th and 12th centuries. But unlike a similar shift in the closing stages of the mighty empires, this one did not lead to far-reaching changes in political and economic organisation of the society. The internal crisis generated by this shift led to some isolated acts of rebellion and some muted protest in the form of non-conformist religious movements, but did not overthrow the existing 'system of entitlements'. This was at least partly because of the fact that before the crisis could find a resolution, the internal developments were overtaken by an external invasion of momentous consequences.¹⁶

¹⁶ These consequences are discussed in the next section.

However, it must be recognised that the specific 'system of entitlements' that prevailed during the feudal era and the reactions it evoked among the oppressed did leave certain lasting imprints on the subsequent social history of India. One of them - the proliferation of non-conformist religions - has already been mentioned. Many of these religions, perhaps in a somewhat mutated form, still hold sway over a considerable segment of the Indian population. A second legacy of immense consequences for Indian social history is the rigidification of the caste system. The caste ideology of basing social hierarchy on birth and occupation drew its sustenance from the ideology of hierarchy embedded in the varna-system discussed earlier; but the actual ordering of the castes depended on the hierarchy of entitlements. For example, a goldsmith would belong to a higher caste compared to an ironsmith because the former catered to a social group who had a higher ranking in the hierarchy of entitlements compared to the ordinary run of people who needed the services of an ironsmith.¹⁷ Thirdly, the fact that the feudal overlords managed to shift the scale of entitlements in their favour so heavily and yet avoid the kind of fierce reactions that had destroyed the earlier empires gave them a deeply entrenched position of social superiority. So deep was this entrenchment that when political power was centralised yet again in the subsequent period, their social position and their

¹⁷ For an argument along this line, see Gupta (1980); however, Gupta's analytical framework is not one of entitlements but that of the Marxian mode of production.

control over the ordinary people could not be ignored by the new rulers. In their reincarnation as *zamindars*, this class of feudal potentates thus came to play an important role in the subsequent social and political history of India, right upto the middle of the present century. To this phase of history we now turn.

Mighty Empires Yet Again:

Muslim invaders from the near East conquered large territories of India at the turn of the thirteenth century, made India their home and stayed at the helm of power for over five hundred years (c. 1200 - 1700). There were two distinct political phases of this period - the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal period - the dividing line being the year 1526. Recent historiography tends to show that despite the political break, there was an essential continuity in the economic base of polity in the two subperiods.¹⁸ This section attempts an analysis of this base to discern the 'system of entitlements' that it gave rise to, and to trace the impact of this system on the subsequent course of history.

¹⁸ The classic exposition of the economic base of this period is contained in Moreland (1929) and Habib (1963, 1969, 1978).

We may begin by noting the most significant political development of this period, namely, the re-emergence of a large centralised empire - subjugating and incorporating a great many feudal kingdoms. The subjugation of local potentates was made possible by superior military strength; but it was the revival of money that made it possible to run a vast centralised empire. International commerce was already reviving in the eleventh and twelfth centuries after many centuries of decadence, and with thriving commerce came precious metal. The increased use of coins that was made possible by the inflow of precious metals enabled the new rulers to run a centralised administration over a vast territory. Centralisation and monetisation brought in their wake a decisive shift in the economic base of the polity.

The whole political edifice of this period was based on a massive land tax that sustained the royalty as well as its numerous functionaries. After depending on tributes from the subjugated potentates for the first few decades, the Sultanate instituted a uniform system of taxation at the time of Sultan Alauddin Khilji (1296-1316); this system was to set the pattern for the rest of the period (and in a mutated form even for the British colonial period). The multiplicity of taxes imposed on the peasants by the feudal lords was replaced by a single land tax, supplemented in a small measure by a house tax and and a tax on milch cattle. The land revenue system

had three main features: (i) it was assessed usually as a share of the produce, (ii) the claim was on the individual farmer but collection was made from a common village pool, and (iii) although assessed as a share of the produce, revenue was usually collected in the form of cash, and even when collected in kind it was usually sold on the market. The standard tax rate was set at half the produce. It is not altogether certain whether this level of taxation constituted a decisive break with the level of surplus extraction that obtained in the earlier period, but it is now generally believed that this was perhaps not so.¹⁹

However, the specific mechanism through which this tax was collected did lead to significant changes in the overall 'system of entitlements'. Two aspects of this mechanism are especially relevant in this context: one is the institutional features of revenue administration and the other is the increasing use of the cash nexus. Each of these two aspects deserves to be treated in some detail.

The framework of revenue administration was a fairly complex one. For our present purposes, we shall only note some of its salient features.²⁰ The first significant feature is the incorporation of a large number of erstwhile local potentates in the revenue machinery. Over

¹⁹ See, for example, Mukhia (1980), p.192 and Habib (1982), p.35.

²⁰ For the most detailed account, see Habib (1963).

time this group came to be known as the *zamindars* - a social class that played a critical role in the socio-political history of India right to the dawn of national independence in the middle of the present century. Muslim emperors realized early on that although this class had yielded to the superior force of the empire, they still commanded an almost servile loyalty of the subjects of their feudal territories and as such it would be difficult to collect taxes from the far-flung areas of the empire without their active co-operation. Accordingly, once they swore their loyalty to the emperor, the *zamindars* were assigned the task of collecting revenue from their respective territories and passing it on to the centre in return for certain privileges. They were allowed to retain a certain percentage (varying from 10 to 25 per cent) of the collected revenue, and were also given rent-free grants of land which they could keep under hereditary proprietary rights. The second important feature is the system of revenue assignment called *jagirdari* in Mughal times (*iqta* in the Sultanate period). A class of people called *jagirdars* were allowed to enjoy the revenue of specified areas (*jagir*) in return for rendering certain services to the emperor. A majority of this class consisted of royal officials (*mansabdars*) for whom the *jagir* was in fact a remuneration in lieu of salary. Some of the bigger *zamindars* were also granted *jagir* in return for giving military support to the emperor in the form of men and animals. A third feature was the existence of a

large number of *ta'alluqa* villages which were not lorded over by any zamindar; in such villages it was the responsibility of village headmen, variously known as *muqaddam*, *patel*, etc., to collect revenue from the peasants and hand it over to the agents of the state.

Each of these three features contributed in their own way to curtailing over time the entitlement of the peasantry. The zamindars who were absorbed in the revenue machinery retained much of their status and power, but had to accept a drastic reduction in income, the privileges granted to them being far too meagre compared to their loss of feudal income. This fact was to remain a perennial source of tension between the old and the new order. More significantly for our present purpose, the zamindars often tried to regain some of the loss by imposing extra levies on the peasants in violation of imperial regulations. The fact that they remained a critical element in the official revenue collecting machinery only made it easier for them to tag on their extra demands.

The jagirdars acted from an altogether different kind of motive. In order to ensure that the jagirdars did not grow any feudal roots (which might have proved a threat to centralised control), the imperial policy was to assign short-term transferable jagirs. It was, however, a policy that was bound to generate a myopic outlook among the jagirdars. They were induced to enjoy

their assignments to the fullest extent possible in the short time they had it at their disposal without worrying about the long-term consequences on agricultural productivity or the future revenue-yielding capacity of the jagir.²¹ The extreme form of such myopia was the institution of revenue farming. The jagirdars often tended to capitalize the future value of their earning by leasing out the revenue rights to moneyed men who would pay a fixed sum to the jagirdar and keep to themselves all the revenue they would collect from the assigned villages for a specified period. These revenue farmers (*ijaradars*) would bid with each other for buying the revenue rights, thus ensuring on the one hand a high return for the jagirdar and sealing on the other the fate of the peasantry who would now be subjected to extreme extortions so that the *ijaradari* investment might yield a handsome return.

The third feature, namely, the role of village headmen (*muqaddams*), was also a potential source of extortion. Each village acted as a single fiscal and economic entity, and maintained a common financial pool (*fota*) from which revenue payments and other 'village expenses' were met. This gave the *muqaddams* an opportunity to manipulate the tax burden (in co-operation with village-level revenue officials) so as to shift the

²¹ The contemporary French traveller Bernier, whose *Travels in the Mughal Empire: 1656-68* contains some of the earliest insights into the workings of the Mughal society, pointed this out as the basic defect in the political system of the Mughals; cited in Habib (1969), p.40, fn. 25.

burden from themselves and other influential members of the community (*kalantaran*) on to the shoulder of the poorer peasants, for as long as the total payment out of the common pool equalled the total assessment made on the village, the official obligation was deemed fulfilled.

We have noted above how the administrative mechanism of revenue collection gave rise to forces which would shift the 'system of entitlements' against the poorer peasants. It remains to consider the role of the cash nexus. There were in theory three different methods of revenue collection during the Mughal period: an actual division of the harvest (*batai*), a fixed crop demand based on the application of a specified share on the estimated crop (*kankut*), and a standard cash rate levied per unit area (*zabt*). The first two methods should in theory have led to collection in kind; but in actual practice, the demand was often commuted in cash based on quite arbitrary prices. The general practice of monetised collection had several consequences. First, it provided a stimulus to the production of cash crops like sugarcane, indigo, poppy, tobacco, etc. Compared to the traditional foodcrops, most of these cash crops required larger investments in cattle and equipment, and involved greater risk. Neither the investment nor the risk was within the reach of the smaller farmers; consequently only the richer farmers (*muqaddams* etc) could take advantage of the high returns that the cash crops promised. This led to increasing stratification within the peasantry. Some

of the richer peasants who were now being enriched even more went on to purchase *zamindari* rights, thus acquiring an additional weapon with which to exploit the lower peasantry.

There was also a more direct way in which the cash nexus caused distress to the poorer peasants. For the first time in history, a vast majority of them were obliged to sell a large part of their product in order to pay revenue in cash. It was not always easy to do so because when the harvest was poor the practice of basing demand on estimated crop often failed to make the necessary adjustment of the revenue burden, or because when prices fell too sharply the practice of using arbitrary prices worked to the disadvantage of the peasants. Moreover, there is evidence that in certain cases, the farmers were pressurised to pay their dues even before the crop was harvested. All this meant that the peasants became increasingly indebted and the practice of usury thrived.²² Of course, quite apart from monetisation, the very fact of higher extortion of the peasantry by different layers of authority starting from the state at the top to the *muqaddam* at the bottom was itself a reason enough for growing indebtedness. Apparently, the phenomenon became so serious over time that emperor Aurangzeb had to issue an order (c.1684) providing exemption from the poll tax for the poor

²² See Habib (1964) for a comprehensive account of the 'credit relations' in this period.

peasants in recognition of their massive indebtedness (Habib 1964, p. 394). On the other side of the coin, usury became a prosperous business - many of the zamindars took to this business in order to supplement their income and many of the professional moneylenders converted themselves into landlords by purchasing zamindari rights.

While the drain of surplus from and the internal stratification within the villages were making further dents into the already modest entitlement of the lower peasantry, a small minority of the population were advancing their own. Apart from the royal family itself, the most spectacular gainers were the *mansbadars* (the royal officials) who numbered about 8000 in 1647. It has been estimated that the income of 445 *mansabdars* amounted to 61.5% of the total revenues of the Empire; and of these again a mere 73 (i.e., 0.9% of the total) claimed 37.6% of the total revenue (Qaiser 1967, pp. 239.40).

As it happened, almost all the *mansabdars*, along with their large retinues, were based in the urban areas.²³ Consequently, the huge concentration of land revenue into their hands implied a massive transfer of resources from rural to urban areas. After allowing for the portion of revenue that remained in the hands of the rural gentry (zamindars, muqaddams etc), it has been

²³ The salaried *mansabdars* had no reason to seek a rural base; and even those who were granted *jagirs* did not strike rural roots owing to the shifting and temporary nature of their assignments.

estimated that anything between a quarter to one-half of the gross agricultural produce was transferred to the urban ruling class (Habib 69, p.41). The result of this massive transfer was a remarkable growth in urbanisation, along with the expansion of trade and crafts. The largest cities of this period (viz. Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Fatehpur Sikri, Patna, Ahmedabad and Dacca) were described by contemporary European travellers as rivalling and sometimes exceeding the largest of European cities like London and Paris (Chandra 1966, p.323). There was also a very large number of smaller towns. It has been roughly estimated that the urban population of Mughal India amounted to as much as 15% of the total, a distinctly higher proportion than at the end of the 19th century (Habib 1982, p.35)

All this gave an appearance of dazzling prosperity to the Mughal empire. But this was no more than a reflection of the massive shift of entitlement that had occurred at the expense of the direct producers of food. Although there exists no quantitative estimate of the change in the standard of living in this period, there are reasons to believe that the shift probably meant not only a relative but also an absolute decline.²⁴ It does not seem likely that agricultural productivity per person experienced any secular improvement in the Mughal period. The only major technological change that occurred in

²⁴ See Chandra (1982) for such evidence as exists on the standard of living at the early stage of Mughal rule (c.1595) and for a rough comparison with late nineteenth century.

agriculture during the period of Muslim rule was the introduction of the wooden Persian wheel which greatly facilitated lift-irrigation. This device was, however, already in widespread use at the inception of the Mughal period; the next advance came only in the latter part of the nineteenth century, long after the Mughal rule had ended, when the metallic version of Persian wheel made it possible to disperse irrigation over a much wider area (Habib 1980, p.3). Other advances that occurred during the Mughal period related mostly to cash crops and horticulture whose benefit to the majority of the poor farmers must have been very small. When these observations are combined with the obvious one that population growth steadily pushed the frontiers of agriculture towards less fertile lands, it seems safe to conclude that average productivity in the small peasant sector could not have risen to any significant degree. Consequently, relative decline in entitlement must have meant absolute decline as well.

The social and economic consequences of this shift of entitlement began to emerge from the seventeenth century onwards when cycles of famines with immense mortalities became a recurring feature. Peasants revolted in different parts of the empire, in many cases being led and supported by local zamindars who too had suffered a loss of entitlements vis-a-vis the royal officials. However, the relationship between the peasants and zamindars were not always a simple one of co-operation

against a common enemy. The fact that the zamindars used to impose extra levies on the peasants to make up for the loss they had suffered at the hands of the Empire, did not exactly endear them to the peasantry. It is no surprise, therefore, that a recent in-depth study of some of the most afflicted areas has revealed a rather complex pattern of alliances (Rana 1981). In some cases, where the zamindars and peasants belonged to the same caste, co-operation was easier to achieve; in some cases where such caste bonds did not exist the peasantry stayed aloof from the struggle between the zamindars and the empire on the pragmatic grounds that both groups were enemies in their eyes; in still other cases, they fought against the zamindars themselves whom they considered the chief vehicle of exploitation. But in every case, the root cause of unrest was the shift of entitlement that had taken place in favour of the urban ruling class.

As the unrest spread far and wide, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the flow of revenue, and without the flow of revenue it was impossible to maintain the centralised military-bureaucratic structure which had sustained the Mughal empire. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the centrifugal forces became irresistible; independent kingdoms and chiefdoms asserted their independence; and at one stage the Imperial reign came to encompass only a tiny area around the capital city Delhi. It was at this stage that the British conquered India and gave a whole new twist to its

history. There were several reasons why the British mercantile power decided to turn into a colonial power at this point in time,²⁵ but it is important to recognise that they did not colonise India by actually defeating the Mughals. They essentially built a new edifice on the ruins of an empire which had already been destroyed by the weight of its own internal contradictions; the shift of entitlements which the Mughals had brought about in order to sustain their majestic power proved in the end to be their own nemesis.

Agrarian Bengal in the Colonial Period: (1757 - 1947):

For the reasons mentioned in the introductory section, we shall restrict our coverage to Bengal while studying the evolution of 'entitlement relations' in the colonial period.²⁶ As we shall see, the operation of colonial policy, combined with demographic forces and the vicissitudes of a world economy with which agrarian Bengal became increasingly enmeshed, brought about far-reaching changes - both in the relations of production and in the modes of surplus appropriation. These changes

²⁵ For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see Marshall (1975).

²⁶ More specifically, our study covers what is known in the historiography of colonial India as 'Bengal proper' (now comprising most of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) as distinct from Greater Bengal which was a larger territory.

in the agrarian structure brought about corresponding changes in the relative entitlements of different social groups, which in turn had a decisive effect on the politics of Bengal in the closing stages of colonial rule and a lasting imprint on the nature of the post-colonial society. We may begin by delineating briefly those elements of colonial policy which are most relevant for our present purposes.

The nature of colonial policy in India went through several phases corresponding to the changing form of British capital- from mercantilist to industrial and on to the stage of monopoly capitalism. The mercantilist phase had of course started long before the colonial conquest; but its nature underwent a significant change after the onset of colonialism which was heralded by the victory of the English East India Company in the battle of Plassey in 1757 and consolidated by their acquisition of the revenue rights (*diwani*) in Bengal in 1765. Until that time, the operation of the East India Company consisted of purchasing exportable commodities from India, financed mostly by import of bullion from England, and then exporting these commodities all over the world. The significant change that occurred after 1765 was that they no longer needed to import bullion - at least not to the same degree - in order to finance their purchases in India. Their appropriation of land revenue in Bengal now provided the necessary 'investment fund'. In other words, they could now obtain the export commodities practically

free, and their exporting business amounted to an unrequited transfer of Bengal's surplus to England.

Faced with this happy prospect of being able to do business with other people's money, the Company set out to maximise its gain by extracting as much revenue as possible from the Bengal peasants.²⁷ The actual collection of revenue doubled between 1762-63 and 1765-66 (the first year of Company's *diwani*), and increased by another 50 per cent by 1778-79 (Habib 1975, p.26). Meanwhile, a disastrous famine struck Bengal in 1769-70, wiping off a third of its population. Although poor harvest owing to natural calamity was the proximate cause of this famine, the severity with which it struck must have been due in no small measure to the severe loss of entitlement imposed on the peasantry by the colonial drive for revenue. Such was the intensity of this drive that the level of assessments did not decline even in the famine years.

The extensive depopulation caused by the famine and the unrest caused by excessive burden of revenue led to a crisis of production. Concerned by the possibility that a deteriorating crisis of production will jeopardise the future collection of revenue, the authorities were forced to contemplate a basic change of policy. It was felt that production would only improve if a class of people could

²⁷ An additional reason was the Company's need for resources to wage wars against other parts of India.

be persuaded to invest in agriculture; however, in order to induce such investment this class had to be assured on the one hand that proprietary right on land would be permanently vested in them and on the other that most of the future gain from investment would accrue to them rather than to the state. On the basis of this reasoning, the system of Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal in 1793. The new system envisaged the creation of an entrepreneurial class out of the pre-existing zamindars and such other moneyed people as might be interested in investing in land; this class would collect land revenue on behalf of the government from within the territories permanently assigned to them;²⁸ and in order to give them proper inducement, state's claim on revenue per unit of land was fixed for ever, so that any future gain in rental arising from higher productivity or higher prices would accrue to the zamindars.²⁹

As it happened, however, the immediate consequence of the Permanent Settlement was a total disaster for the zamindar class. The rate of revenue demand was fixed at a high level on the ground that the government was foregoing all future claims on the increment of rent; but this level was much too high in relation to the depressed

²⁸ However, these assignments were permanent only as long as the zamindars were able to pay the revenue on due dates; in the case of default, the estates could be taken over by the government.

²⁹ There has been much debate among the Indian scholars over the actual motivation of the colonial rulers behind introducing the system of Permanent Settlement. For a modern view, see Chaudhuri (1983).

state of agriculture at the time. This factor, combined with a prolonged period of low agricultural prices, made it difficult to collect the stipulated revenue. As a result, many zamindari estates were foreclosed and sold up in auction. The situation changed at the turn of the nineteenth century when a long period of rising prices and extension of cultivation into the available wasteland enabled the zamindars to enhance their rental income. Over time, they came to claim the lion's share of the rental value of land, pushing the share of the state into negligible proportions. Initially, the share of the state amounted to 90 per cent of the rental; it declined to 28 per cent in all permanently settled areas towards the end of the nineteenth century, and further to 18.5 per cent by 1940 in Bengal. In terms of the share of gross agricultural produce, government revenue declined from 45 per cent in 1793 to just 1.7 per cent in 1940. (Chaudhuri 1983, pp. 89-90).

These developments gave rise to a certain perception among the contemporary observers regarding the nature of 'entitlement-shifts' that were taking place in colonial Bengal. According to this perception, the major shift in the initial stage was from Bengal as a whole to the colonial rulers; in the rest of the period the shift was believed to occur from the direct producers to the rent-receiving zamindari class.³⁰ However, the latter part of

³⁰ All throughout this paper we use the generic term zamindar to denote both the actual revenue-assignees of the government and the

this perception now seems to be in need of a fundamental revision in the light of a major breakthrough that has occurred over the last two decades in the historiography of agrarian Bengal. This new line of research has revealed that the zamindars were not the only elements, and in some cases not even the most important elements, in the agrarian structure of Bengal, who enhanced their entitlements at the expense of the peasants.³¹

More importantly, it now appears clear that the extraction of land revenue was not the only major mechanism of surplus appropriation in colonial Bengal, especially during the last decades of colonial rule in the twentieth century. The rural credit nexus was a powerful mechanism too. To give an indication, the Bengal Provincial Enquiry Committee estimated in 1930 that the total burden of debt constituted 41 per cent of peasants' gross produce, which contrasts with another official finding in 1933 that in some selected districts of Bengal the rent burden amounted to only 5 to 6 per cent of gross produce (Chaudhuri 1983, pp. 144 and 142). Yet another potent mechanism was the institution of undertenancy. The category of peasants from whom the zamindars or their intermediaries collected land revenue was known as occupancy tenants; but many of these revenue-paying tenants were themselves collecting rent from undertenants

many intermediaries employed by these assignees for collecting revenue from the peasants.

³¹ Some of the most important contributions have come from Chaudhuri (1967), Ray and Ray (1973, 1975), Chatterjee (1982, 1984), Bose (1986) and Kawai (1986).

to whom they had leased out land either on sharecropping or on fixed rental basis. In the case of sharecroppers, usually half the produce accrued as rent; as for fixed rental, it has been estimated for one group of such undertenants (*korfa*) that they often paid in rent as much as 87 per cent more to the occupancy tenants than the latter paid to the zamindars.³² The incidence of undertenancy rapidly increased after 1885 when the Bengal Tenancy Act strengthened the rights of occupancy tenants vis-a-vis the zamindars, but left the undertenants completely unprotected.³³ This development marked a shift of entitlement within the peasantry, not between the peasantry and the zamindars.

A final mechanism that emerged towards the end of the colonial rule was the alienation of peasants' land - the most basic source of their entitlement to food. The transfer of peasants' occupancy rights on land was a rare phenomenon in the early days of Permanent Settlement; it was also not allowed by law. But unofficial transactions became so widespread in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the government had to contemplate according legal recognition to it. A first attempt was made through the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885; the subsequent Amendments of 1928 and 1938 completed the

³² This estimate is based on data collected by the Floud Commission Report (1939) on the land revenue system in Bengal; see Chaudhuri (1983), p.143.

³³ For an excellent exposition of the relation between the colonial Tenancy Laws and the agrarian structure of Bengal, see Sen (1982).

process. It has been estimated that between 1885 and 1913, recorded sales of land increased by as much as 500 per cent; moreover, this was a secularly expanding process, not a temporary phenomenon caused by famines, for there was no major famine in Bengal during this particular period. Of course, the situation became much more serious in famine years, as for example in the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 when in a single year as much as a quarter of the rural families either sold or mortgaged their land.³⁴

While all these different modes of 'entitlement-shifts' operated simultaneously, there existed significant regional variation in their relative importance. There was also variation over time, the Great Depression of the 1930s being a crucial watershed in this regard. It is important to understand these regional and temporal variations, not only to get an accurate picture of the nature of 'entitlement-shifts' but also to see the connection between these shifts and the emerging nature of political movements.³⁵

The classical notion of zamindars' exploitation was more true in the western and central districts (now

³⁴ See Chaudhuri (1975) for a pioneering study of the process of land alienation in the late colonial Bengal.

³⁵ Chatterjee (1982), Bose (1986) and Kawai (1986), among others, have recently brought into focus the significance of regional variation in the agrarian structure of Bengal. There are some differences in the emphasis laid by different authors; our own exposition here follows more closely that of Bose (1986).

belonging mostly to the present Indian state of West Bengal) than elsewhere. But rack-renting was only one of several ways in which the 'entitlement-shift' occurred as between the zamindars and the peasants. A little background will help to understand how this situation came about.

As noted before, the zamindars of Bengal went into a rent offensive after the initial turmoils of the early years of Permanent Settlement. For a long time, the principal method of rent enhancement was the extension of cultivation into new territories, including those which had lain waste following the massive depopulation wrought by the famine of 1769-70. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the land frontier in western Bengal was nearly exhausted. From that point onwards, rent could only be increased by raising the rate per unit of land. The resulting increase in rent burden, combined with several other factors, caused much impoverishment to the peasantry. One of these factors was the eastward shift of the river systems which had started in the sixteenth century and, by the middle of the nineteenth century, greatly reduced the fertility of soil and caused frequent failures of harvest. No attempt was made by the colonial rulers to improve the system of flood control and irrigation for counteracting the effects of this decadent river system. This was in sharp contrast with the colonial policy in southern and north-western India where the state made major investments in irrigation. The logic

of such differential treatment lay in the regional diversity of colonial revenue policy. Since the state had frozen its claim on revenue by instituting Permanent Settlement in Bengal, it could not hope to derive any benefit from the improvement in productivity, whereas elsewhere in India where the revenue rights had not been frozen the rulers had all the incentive to undertake the necessary investment.³⁶ The consequent low level of productivity in west (and central) Bengal meant that the peasants fell regularly into debt and were compelled to sell land for meeting their debt obligations.³⁷

The loss of entitlements that the peasants suffered through the mechanism of debt reappeared as gain of the zamindar class, for ever since the disappearance of European indigo planters in the second half of the nineteenth century it was the local zamindars who came to dominate the rural credit market in this part of Bengal.³⁸ The debt-mediated transfer of land helped to inflate an already sizeable demesne sector which the zamindars had acquired earlier at the stage of bringing wastelands into cultivation. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, yet another factor was working to increase the size of demesne land. Frequent outbreaks of malaria - a

³⁶ See Bagchi (1976) on this point.

³⁷ See the discussion on credit relations in Bose (1986), chapter 4.

³⁸ Apart from the zamindars, a good number of rich peasants also played an active role as creditors to the lower peasantry. It should be noted, however, that many of the rich peasants had also acquired intermediate rent-receiving rights so that in many cases they were indistinguishable from the zamindari class.

consequence of the decadent river systems - periodically depopulated large tracts of land. The deserted land was taken over by the zamindars; and while resettling new peasants at a later date they kept the most fertile lands under demesne cultivation giving away the inferior ones to the peasants.

The large demesne sector which the zamindars came to acquire through the various means described above also enabled them to dominate the market for rice which was the major commercial crop as well as the major subsistence crop of this region. Their involvement in the grain market also meant that while operating in the credit market the zamindars preferred to deal in grain loans, charging an interest rate of 25 to 50 per cent (in kind) for the few months before the harvest. The poor peasants, hardpressed to make a living on a deteriorating soil and periodically debilitated by the outbreak of malaria, became perennially dependent on such grain loans for their daily subsistence.

It is thus evident that the acquisition of a large demesne sector enabled the zamindars to consolidate their dominance over the peasantry in a number of ways. The part of the peasantry whose members utilised their surplus labour-time by cultivating the demesne land (either as wage labour or as sharecroppers) was of course under the direct control of the zamindars. But even that large section of the peasantry which remained independent

in the sphere of production, had to submit to a relation of dependence through their need for regular grain loans. Such overarching dominance of the zamindar class also meant that they never quite lost the ability to extract rent as had happened in the rest of Bengal towards the closing stages of the colonial rule. More significantly, when the onset of the Great Depression heralded a significant change in the structure of entitlements in the rest of Bengal, the zamindars of this region held their own and even consolidated their position. This in turn had important consequences for the nature of political movements that developed in different regions of Bengal in the subsequent years. But before we come to that story, we must examine the 'system of entitlements' that prevailed in other parts of Bengal prior to the Great Depression.

The districts of east Bengal (now comprising a part of Bangladesh) were characterised by the predominance of small independent peasants and the relative unimportance of the zamindars' demesne land. Once again, a little background will help to see how this situation came about. Agricultural settlement started apace in this region when the eastward shift of the river system and the closing of land frontiers in western Bengal induced a large-scale migration of population to the east. The reclamation process was carried out in atomistic form by independent peasant families, as no hard labour was required to reclaim the soft deltaic soil. Although

small, these miniature holdings proved to be eminently viable because of the high level of fertility, the possibility of raising more than one crop in a year and, from about the middle of the nineteenth century, the possibility of growing the highly remunerative cash crop jute. Consequently, the zamindar class of east Bengal could not establish the kind of control that their west Bengal counterparts had come to acquire. In the mid-1920s, the zamindars could not collect even one-third of their rental demand (Chaudhuri 1983, p. 136); in fact, after 1907 there was scarcely a year when they were able to collect more than 50 per cent of their demand (Bose 1986, p.101).

The principal mechanism of surplus extraction in this region consisted in the credit nexus. To give a few indications, an official report on the district of Dacca noted in 1917 that the annual interest payment constituted 20 per cent of total produce of the farmers while the rent paid to the zamindar was no more than 4 per cent; a report on the district of Mymensingh also noted in 1919 the contrast between a high burden of debt and the negligible share of rent in the farmers' household budgets (Bose 1986, p.106).

In the nineteenth century, there existed a professional moneylender class who lived on usury. At the turn of the twentieth century, a new class emerged in the form of trader-moneylenders and gradually supplanted the

older professionals. The emergence of this new group was linked to the expansion of jute cultivation. The cultivation of jute raised the credit needs of the farmers partly because its cultivation required more working capital, and partly because by foregoing the possibility of growing rice in the jute season the farmers had extended the gap between their own production of rice and their consumption needs. Traders in jute began to supply the required credit, and a large part of this finance came from the British-owned jute-manufacturing companies based in Calcutta. Through their credit operations, the manufacturing companies came to acquire a particularly effective method (*dadan*) of procuring raw jute. The debtors were often obliged to sell their jute in advance at an agreed price which could be as low as 50 per cent of the market price. As the lucrative nature of the credit market became clear, the rentier zamindar class also began to assume the role of creditors, often with money borrowed from the urban capital market. In this new venture they had finally found a way of maintaining their economic status which had been badly eroded by the fall of rental income. The new creditor groups - traders and zamindars - siphoned away most of the surplus of the jute producers; but since jute still remained a remunerative crop and since the land was fertile, the subsistence of the farmers was generally ensured.³⁹ Consequently, the loss of land did

³⁹ Quantitative evidence on the relative attractiveness of jute vis-a-vis the main alternative crop, rice, is presented by Goswami (1984).

not constitute a major mechanism of entitlement-loss for the peasants of east Bengal, at least not until the late 1930s.

A third region with distinctive features was the newly reclaimed jungle lands in the northern and southern districts of Bengal. Since these jungle lands were much more difficult to clear, the process of reclamation could not take the same atomistic form as in the case of the eastern delta. The zamindars of these districts tried to induce people of substantial means to finance and organise large-scale reclamation, by offering them various privileges - the most important of these being a very low rate of rent and hereditary rights of occupation. These financiers brought tribal people from the neighbouring areas to do the hard work, but after the job was done they deprived the backward tribals of any rights on the land they had cleared with their labour. Instead, the financiers themselves became virtual owners of vast tracts of newly reclaimed land. In the north such people came to be known as the *jotedars*. Most of them maintained direct involvement in cultivation, but as it was difficult to supervise the cultivation of such large tracts of land, they also leased out parts of it to the tribal workers on a sharecropping basis. This *jotedar-sharecropper* complex was the most distinguishing feature of the agrarian structure of this region, although there did exist a large group of smaller independent peasants as well.

Zamindars had little control in this region as they had already surrendered much of their power to the jotedars by offering them low rent as well as hereditary occupation as conditions of reclamation. Also, the possession of vast tracts of land was itself a source of immense power to the jotedars. They dominated the grain market as well as the credit market, dealing in grain loan as did the zamindars of west Bengal. Rental income from undertenants (sharecroppers as well as fixed-rent-tenants) and income from credit market were their principal methods of surplus extraction.

To sum up the picture prior to the Great Depression, the 'system of entitlements' in different parts of Bengal were as follows:⁴⁰ in west and central Bengal, the entitlements of the peasantry were facing a steady erosion to the benefit of the rentier class, but it was not through rent alone that the latter class was encroaching on the peasants' entitlement - usury through grain loan as well as appropriation of peasants' land were no less important tools; in east Bengal, the peasantry was more successful in holding on to their modest entitlements, but the enhancement they could have potentially achieved through the cultivation of jute was denied to them by the combination of a local usurious

⁴⁰ It should be stressed that the picture presented here is much too simplified; we have focussed only on the most prominent features in each region, ignoring many complexities and variations within each region.

class (traders and zamindars) and the colonial capitalists who exercised a firm control on the trade and manufacture of jute; in north Bengal the structure of entitlements was heavily biased in favour of the jotedars who kept a firm grip on the peasantry through land, credit and grain markets.

The onset of Great Depression brought about certain important changes in these structures.⁴¹ These changes occurred through the happenings in both product and credit markets. The prices of both jute and rice, the two principal crops of the region, fell dramatically in the early years of Depression - the jute prices in 1933-34 and the rice prices in 1932-33 were both 60% below their respective levels in 1928. Jute price recovered slightly later on but never reached the pre-Depression level as late as 1939; the price of rice in 1938 was still 50% below the level of ten years' earlier.⁴²

The fall in the price of rice, the principal cash crop of west Bengal, made it difficult for the peasants of this region to pay their rents or to repay their monetary debts. The fall in the price of jute had a similar effect on the debt-repayment ability of the east Bengal peasants. Faced with this situation, the peasants

⁴¹ The importance of the Great Depression for the agrarian economy of Bengal has been emphasised by Chatterjee (1982), Mukherjee (1982), Goswami (1984) and Bose (1986), among others.

⁴² For a detailed account of the price movements for jute and rice, see Mukherjee (1982).

all over Bengal started an agitation against the moneylenders and refused to repay their outstanding debts. These agitations and the resulting disruption in the recycling of usury capital led to the withholding of any fresh loans. The drying up of fresh loans was further accentuated by a number of other factors such as a general monetary crunch created by the colonial government's response to the Great Depression, the refusal of jute manufacturing companies to finance the jute trade as before (because they were now able to procure jute at rock bottom prices even without the contrivance of *dadan*) and finally a spate of anti-moneylender legislations.

By 1940, the market for cash credits was almost completely dried up.⁴³ This had a serious consequence for the peasantry, because such credits in the past had acted not only as a vehicle of surplus extraction but also as a means of allowing the peasant family to reproduce itself as an economic unit year after year, by meeting their consumption needs before the harvest. The peasants now had to find some alternative way of meeting their credit needs. In east Bengal, the effect of the general monetary crunch and the withdrawal of finance by the jute-manufacturing companies was to oust the zamindars and traders almost completely from the credit market. The void left by them was now partially filled in by a new group - the relatively better off farmers - who found in

⁴³ See Bose (1986), chapter 4.

this crisis an opportunity of expanding their land base. Initially, they lent to the smaller peasants under usufructuary mortgage; but after usufructuary mortgage was prohibited by a legislation of 1938, outright sale of land became the major instrument of meeting credit needs. From that point onwards, the loss of land became the principal mechanism of the long-term erosion of entitlements of the east Bengal peasants - a process that was greatly accentuated during the great famine of 1943. The structure of entitlements now became heavily tilted in favour of the richer peasants at the expense of both smaller peasants and the erstwhile moneylending groups - zamindars and traders - whose role had become heavily circumscribed by the credit crunch.

In west and central Bengal, the effect of the credit crunch took a radically different form. The disappearance of cash loan made the peasantry ever more dependent on grain loan from the landlords. As a result, the existing 'system of entitlements' was further fortified, the balance being tilted more heavily in favour of the landlords. Dependence on grain loan also increased in north Bengal, but the difference with west Bengal was that the jotedars could not always achieve an unambiguous improvement in their entitlements. They had been heavily engaged in the trade of rice and jute - much more than the landlords of west Bengal - so that the slump of the 1930s hurt them badly.

We are now in a position to consider how this evolution in the structure of entitlements affected the course of political movements in the late colonial Bengal.⁴⁴ This was the time when the Indian nationalist movement against the colonial rule was entering a decisive phase. One of the basic assumptions of the nationalist ideology was that the colonial rulers had forged an alliance with the zamindar class to facilitate the subjugation of the masses. Accordingly, the nationalist attack was directed as much against the colonial rulers as against the zamindar class - the agitation against an external power also created divisions within the rural society. West Bengal, however, was an exception. Here the nationalist movement could not prevail upon the peasantry to rise against the zamindar class as successfully as elsewhere. On a number of occasions when peasant agitation did manage to erupt, it usually did so against some impositions made the government. In the mid-1940s the sharecroppers of north Bengal had initiated an agitation (Tebhaga movement) against the jotedars, whose reverberations were also felt in parts of west Bengal. On this occasion, the wrath of the sharecroppers was indeed directed against the zamindars of west Bengal because the zamindars too, like the rich jotedars, employed sharecroppers on their personal land. But Tebhaga movement could never assume

⁴⁴ The following discussion draws heavily on Chatterjee (1982, 1982a) and Bose (1986).

the same proportions in the west as it did in the north, and it petered out much faster.

The failure of both nationalist and Tebhaga movements to make a dent into the position of the zamindar class in west Bengal was due mainly to the 'system of entitlements' that prevailed in this region. We have noted earlier that this system was heavily biased in favour of the zamindars vis-a-vis the peasantry, and became even more so during the Depression years. Apparently this should have made the peasantry all the more eager to rise against their exploiters. To see why this did not happen, we ought to note the manner in which the zamindars enhanced their entitlements. They were not simply a bunch of absentee landlords who lived on rent without getting involved in the activities of the rural economy.⁴⁵ As we have seen, they not only maintained a direct control on the labourers and sharecroppers who cultivated the demesne land but also exercised a wider control over the entire peasantry through the credit market - even more so after the Great Depression when in the absence of cash loans the peasants had to turn increasingly to grain loans from the landlords. This dependence was indeed the mechanism through which the 'system of entitlements' shifted towards the landlords, but this same dependence also meant that the very viability of the peasants' modest entitlement was

⁴⁵ Some of the largest zamindars might have been an exception to this pattern.

predicated upon their acquiescence in the existing 'system of entitlements'. Much the same was true about the relationship between the jotedars and sharecroppers in north Bengal - that is why the Tebhaga movement could only ask for an increased share for the sharecroppers (two-thirds instead of the traditional one-half) but not the abolition of the system of sharecropping itself. In other words, this movement represented an attempt to enhance the entitlements of the peasants without jeopardising the overall 'system of entitlements'.

The situation in east Bengal was, however, vastly different from the west. Here the nationalist movement did coincide with the anti-zamindari movement, but it also took an additional colour. As it happened, the zamindars of east Bengal were mostly Hindu while the majority of peasants were Muslims. Because of this religious division between the elites and the peasants, the coincidence between nationalist and anti-zamindari movements led to two important consequences. First, the wrath of the Muslim peasantry against the Hindu zamindars made it easier for the nationalist movement in east Bengal to come under the fold of an all-India Muslim separatist movement which was seeking at this time to establish a separate state for the Muslims while joining forces with the Hindu nationalists in the common struggle against the colonial power. Secondly, the emotions generated by the combination of Muslim separatist movement and anti-(Hindu)zamindari movement were seized

upon by the fundamentalists in both religions, which eventually led to extensive communal violence. Without attempting a complete explanation of these tumultuous events it can at least be safely asserted that the peasantry's willingness to rise against the zamindari class had an important role to play.

But how could the peasantry of east Bengal succeed in doing what their counterparts in west Bengal failed so conspicuously to do? A plausible answer can once again be found in the 'system of entitlements'. For a long time, the zamindars of east Bengal had enhanced their entitlements at the expense of the peasants - usually as pure rentiers in the nineteenth century and as creditors in the twentieth. As creditors, however, they also played a crucial role in reproducing the peasant economy in the manner of their counterparts in west Bengal. But as we have seen, they no longer played this crucial role after the credit crunch of the Depression years. The dominant position in the 'system of entitlements' now went to the richer section of the peasantry, and it is significant to note that it is this section that led the political movement against the zamindars of east Bengal.⁴⁶ Their success in enlisting the active support of the smaller peasantry owed to the fact that, unlike in west Bengal, the viability of the small peasants' modest entitlements no longer depended on their acquiescent relationship with the zamindar class - the old relation of dependence was

⁴⁶ See Bose (1986), chapter 6.

permanently ruptured when the zamindars were ousted from the credit market during the years of Depression.

It is thus evident that shifts in the 'system of entitlements' had a crucial role to play in the success of anti-zamindari movement in east Bengal which in turn served as the basis of such developments as the muslim separatist movement, the spread of communal violence and the eventual creation of East Pakistan (incorporating east Bengal) as the eastern wing of the independent Muslim state, Pakistan.

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