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CLASS STRATIFICATION IN RURAL INDIA: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS[1]

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Abstract

The present paper has the objective of making a historical analysis of the system of class stratification in the rural society of India. In doing so, the paper discusses the patterns of class stratification in pre-colonial or medieval rural society in India, the impact of the British rule on the agrarian class stratification and the emerging trends in class stratification in post-independence rural India. The rural society of medieval India as a whole had five classes: supra-local feudal landlords or overlords, sub-feudal land lords, occupancy raiyats/tenants, sharecroppers and rural artisans, and agricultural labourers. By the end of the British rule the rural society in India had a stratification system consisting of seven classes: zamindar landlords, tenant-landlords, entrepreneur farmers, owner-cultivators and registered tenants, sharecroppers, artisans, and agrarian labourers. The major trends of the class structure of rural India, that have been noticed after the independence are: the replacement of the zamindars by the new landlords, emergence of the capitalist cultivators, decrease in the number of tenants and consequent increase in the number of owner cultivators, continued existence of tenancy and sharecropping, increase in the number of agricultural labourers, and decline of traditional artisans.

INTRODUCTION

Rural society in India continues to be highly stratified and unequal. Although various forces of change before and after independence have had their impact on the rural society and affected the hierarchies based on class, caste and power, problems of poverty, casteism, communalism and discrimination of various kinds continue

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to be widespread and defeat the efforts at tackling them. An effective intervention to resolve these issues requires an in-depth understanding of the patterns of social stratification and forces that intensify social inequalities.

However, such an attempt at understanding social stratification is not easy. Lack of historical and up-to-date data is a major problem on the way of such a task. Applying the concepts and theories of social stratification basically evolved in the West to the Indian situation often turns out to be an inadequate exercise as these do not fully suit our reality. Yet an effort is made here to adapt the theory of class stratification and apply it to the Indian society, wherein caste stratification is also a reality. In doing so, this paper proposes to examine the following: (i) the concept of class stratification, (ii) the patterns of class stratification in pre-colonial or medieval rural society in India, (iii) the impact of the British rule on the agrarian class stratification and (iv) the emerging trends in class stratification in post-independence rural India. One could examine the emerging trends of the socio-economic structure of a society best in the light of the historical development of that society. This paper attempts to trace the phenomenon of class stratification since the medieval period.

CONCEPT OF CLASS STRATIFICATION

To understand 'class stratification', it is necessary that we define the two associated concepts –'social stratification' and 'class'. There are a number of definitions of the concept of social stratification. The definition provided by Demerath and Marwell (1976: 147) seems to be adequate for our purpose. They define social stratification as a patterned set of distinctions in social rank which results from unequal distribution of resources and rewards. In other words, the term refers to the presence of social groups which are ranked one above the other, usually in terms of the amount of power, prestige and wealth their members possess. From this description of the concept of social stratification it is clear that social stratification is a form of social inequality or socially created inequality. Although many sociologists tend to use the two terms - social inequality and social stratification - interchangeably, some make a distinction between the two. A hierarchy of positions or individuals ranked on a continuum of occupational statuses which command varying degrees of prestige and economic

reward cannot be termed social stratification, although it is *a* form of social inequality. Social stratification involves a hierarchy of social groups. Members of a particular stratum have a common identity, like interests and a similar life-style. They enjoy or suffer the unequal distribution of rewards in society as members of different social groups (Haralambos *et al*. 1980: 20-25).

The rewards or resources, which serve as the basis of stratification in a society, are many. Max Weber distinguished three kinds of resources as the basis of stratification: wealth, prestige or honour and power. Accordingly he distinguished three types of social strata "classes" based on the economic criterion of wealth, "status groups" based on the social criterion of prestige and honour, and "parties" based on the political criterion of power. He also holds that in reality these three criteria may not always be realised simultaneously in the same group. For example, it is possible for a group to be relatively rich without honour, or relatively poor and yet highly respected. In the same way educated persons may enjoy higher honour but need not be wealthy (Bendix and Lipset 1966). In contrast to Weber, Karl Marx had his concept of stratification as a system predominantly based on the economic factor. According to him human society is stratified into classes on the basis of the ownership of the means of production and relations of production (Bendix and Lipset 1966; Bose 1984: 34-44).

There have been attempts to study the stratification system of the agrarian society in India using one or more of the three criteria provided by Weber. While some have concentrated on the analysis of class structure, others have focused on caste structure based on prestige and honour. Yet others have analysed the power stratification patterns in terms of the power elite (Bose 1984; Bardhan 1982; Ghurye 1932; Neeladri 1971: 51-58; Brass 1983; Carter 1974; Narain *et al*. 1976; Gangrade 1978; Sirsikar 1970, to mention a few). Still others have applied the two or three dimensional framework to analyse caste and class, land and power, caste and power, and caste, class and power (Beteille 1971; S.T. Epstein 1973; Srinivas 1966; Shah 1984; Jayaram 1981; Singh 1988; Bardhan 1984; Kothari 1970; K.L. Sharma 1974; Sivakumar and Sivakumar 1979; Chauhan 1980; Dak 1982; Ghurye 1961; Lakshmlnarayana 1970). The present paper has the objective of

analysing the stratification of rural society in India based on the economic criterion. In doing so it does not deny the other bases of social stratification. It only limits its scope. The term class stratification in this paper refers to the division of society into social groups called classes on the basis of the economic criterion.

CLASS STRATIFICATION IN MEDIEVAL AGRARIAN SOCIETY

Was the pre-British medieval rural society stratified into classes? If yes, what was the pattern of such class stratification? How was it linked to other patterns of stratification such as caste? Were there variations in these patterns of social stratification? These are the important questions to which an answer is attempted in this section.

First of all, let us try to answer the question whether the pre-colonial medieval agrarian society was stratified or not. It was generally held by many in the past, including Karl Marx, some British officials and Indian nationalists, that Indian villages in pre-colonial times were homogeneous communities with little economic differentiation. Such a view, however, has been given up in the light of historical evidence. It is now recognised beyond doubt that Indian agrarian society in medieval times was stratified into classes. As Beteille (1980: 107-120) shows it was too differentiated and stratified to suit the label of homogeneous community given to it. This leads us to the second question about the pattern of class stratification during medieval times. Based on attempts made by researchers to formulate a class framework for different regions of India and the country as a whole, the rural society of medieval India as a whole can be divided into five classes. They are (i) supra-local feudal landlords or overlords, (ii) sub-feudal land lords, (iii) occupancy raiyats/tenants, (iv) sharecroppers and rural artisans, and (v) agricultural labourers. A description of the characteristics of each of these classes is essential in order to understand the nature of the class structure of the rural society in medieval India.

Feudal Landlords

The feudal overlords from the emperor through the maha-rajas, rajas and chieftains to the petty *jagirdars* (known also as *taluqdars* and *thickanedars)* formed the top ranking group in medieval rural India.

They were the overlord zamindars of the pre-British days, termed as secondary zamindars by Stokes (1978: 37). They acquired their zamindari rights through conquest, colonisation, purchases or imperial power (Raychaudhuri 1982b: 12). They controlled and owned large areas of land - hundreds of villages in the case of large overlords as *khas* or own land. For example, the Nizam of Hyderabad held 1961 villages as *khas* and *bakasht* under the cultivating possession (Dhanagare 1983: 184). These areas of land were either sublet to others or cultivated through bonded servants or seasonal labourers. The areas of land closer to the feudal lords' dwelling were more likely to be cultivated by labourers, while the land in more distant places was given out on rent and farmed out to other tax-farmers or intermediary landlords. The rent/ revenue collection was done by officials appointed for the purpose as was done, for example, by the Amlas in Bihar, and the Rajhmukhs in Maratha ruled region and the Hyderabad principality. These feudal lords were the superior tenure holders of the pre-colonial days who had the right to hold land for the purpose of collecting rents or bringing it under cultivation by lending it to tenants (Chakravarty 1986: 1849). They collected rent either as tax or as crop share from the tenants.

The feudal overlords were predominantly from the upper/ dominant castes of the locality. In the north and north-eastern parts of the country, Rajputs, Brahmins, Bhumihars, Kayasthas, and some Mughals and Pathans belonged to this class. A few Kurmis, Gujjars, Jats, Jadhavs and Lodhs from the peasant castes were large landlords. In the north-west, Deccan and southern regions the feudal overlords came from the peasant elite lineages. Examples are the Nairs of Kerala, Kongu Vellalas of Tamil Nadu, Gajjapathis of Vijaya Nagaram of Andhra, Urs and Wodeyars of Mysore, and Muslim rulers of Bijapur and Hyderabad.

The feudal lords were also politically very powerful as they were part of the supra-local state power. They levied taxes or cesses, even illegal *abwabs,* and often maintained an army and administered justice. They had their own *kacheris* (courts) run by *amlas* and *lathaits* (armed or *lathi* wielding men), and scribe accountants to help in rent/revenue collection. They also functioned as caste leaders and could get the support of most of the upper castes to exploit and suppress the lower

castes (Nathan 1988: 670). They were the custodians of ancestral rights and customs of the local community, and could levy heavy penalties on transgressors. There were vast differences from one region to another with regard to the numerical strength, extent of wealth, power and rights of this feudal overlord class. Generally speaking they were a small minority in pre-colonial India. They had a consumerist and luxurious life style on the surplus appropriated largely from the peasantry and cheap labour of the low caste servants.

Sub-Feudal Lords

The layer of landlords that had come to occupy the position between the feudal overlords and the actual tillers could be termed as sub-feudal lords. They were smaller landlords mainly based at the local level. They were known variously as *pattidars*, *biswadars*, *maliks* or *dhaniamos* in the North and Dore, Dora or Dhani in the South. These village level landlords have been termed as primary zamindars by Stokes (1982: 37), in order to distinguish them from the secondary zamindars or feudal overlords. Often they were members of the dominant lineages in a number of contiguous villages that were grouped into lineage *tappas* or *parganas* (groups of villages ranging from 2 to 84). The grip of primary zamindars was more tenacious where they were identified with the cultivators as in the Bhaiachara community of Jats and where one community could obtain the position of a dominant minority in the village.

A large majority of them had economic and political base in the village. In fact, they had immediate proprietary dominion over the soil including the restricted power of mortgage and alienation as well as the right to locate cultivators, control the waste, sink wells and plant groves (Stokes 1982: 37). They shared with their supra-local kinsmen, various superior rights over the land for revenue (for example, *jagirdari, taluqdari*), rent collection and over *khas* or *sir* or *inam* land (for example, Rajput clans of the North or Brahmins of Agrahara in the South). All these rights had come to be divided and sub-divided over time on account of their inheritance by the children and kinsmen of a landlord or by way of sale or mortgage. As a result a large majority of them held petty shares (Stein 1982: 64, 1985a: 83). The processes of sale and mortgage had enabled new individuals, especially from the official and trading classes, to share these rights with the original tenure

holders. These sub-feudal landlords could appropriate considerable surplus generated by the peasants. By exercising joint responsibility over village commons, pastures and forests they earned further profit. They paid less revenue than all other subordinate cultivators on their *khas* or *sir* holdings and enjoyed shares in revenue-free *inam* land which was a big source of wealth (Dharma 1982: 207-211; Charlesworth 1985: 19-38; Stein 1985b: 416-417; Raychaudhuri 1982a: 178-184; R.S. Sharma 1965: 13-42; Kosambi 1975: 353-371).

The sub-feudal landlords, both the old and the relatively new, belonged predominantly to the upper castes and elite peasant lineages as did their supra local kinsmen (Fox 1971: 15-167; Ravinder 1983: 72-79; Lele 1981: 19-48). For instance, they were members of the Rajput, Brahmin, Bhumihar, Thyagi, Jat and some Muslim clans in the North, the Mudaliar, Vellala, elite Gowda/Bunt, Brahmin, Nair lineages in the South, and Maratha and Brahmin castes in the Deccan. The state functionaries, such as Patels, Kulkarnis, Deshmukhs, Deshpandes, Mukkadams and Patwaris, who belonged to this class, were mainly from the Brahmin and dominant peasant castes.

These sub-feudal landlords also enjoyed considerable political power locally as members of the local bodies variously known as Subha, Gota, Saha or Majalis, Kuttam and Panchayat, where all the affairs of the village were decided (Fukazawa 1982b: 252-253; Stein 1982: 34-35). When the central authority was too oppressive these local notables could organise and exercise considerable control. The opposite could also occur when the feudal overlords or lineage rajas were very powerful. They could reduce the administrative and fiscal powers of local kin brotherhoods or local landlords and replace them by state officials (Dumont 1970: 162; Ravinder 1983: 77-79; Fox 1971: 116). By and large, however, these village level sub-feudal landlords exercised considerable economic and political power, and appropriated a large share of the produce (Stein 1985a: 68-78; Habib 1982: 240-246).

Occupancy Raiyats or Tenants

The occupancy raiyats or tenants formed the third layer in the agrarian hierarchy in medieval India. They were primarily individuals who had acquired the right to hold land for the purpose of cultivating it themselves or with the help of their family members, hired servants

or partners (Chakravarty 1986: 1849). They also cultivated the land that belonged to, but not directly cultivated by, the village and supra-local feudal landlords. Their proprietary or tenure rights varied from one region to another. Some of them had greater security of tenure, hereditary rights of occupancy, transfer or lease, while others were temporary lease holders (Dharma 1982: 212). Secondly, not all occupancy tenants were actual tillers of the soil. Those from the upper castes or elite peasant lineages tended to lease out the land to sub-tenants, thus assuming the position of tenant-landlords (Nathan 1988:671). They held the position of privileged tenants paying low rents in perpetuity. For example, the Nair Kanamdars of Malabar and the Bunt Mulgenidars of Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka were privileged occupancy tenants who paid low rents in perpetuity and sublet their land to the Izhava or Moplah Verumpattamdars or Bhillava-Chalgenidars respectively (Ravinder 1983: 73; Dhanagare 1983: 26-27). There were vast economic differences among these occupancy raiyats or tenants depending on the amount of agricultural capital in the form of family labour, bullocks, ploughs and wells which they could command, and their tenure position in the village.

These raiyats/tenants were predominantly from the peasant castes of the locality, such as Kurmis, Ahirs, Yadavas, Gujjars, Jats, Tyagis and Lodhis in the North (Saxena 1985: 15-19; Jain 1985: 7). In the western and southern regions of India the Kunbis of Maharashtra, the Kunbi-patidars of Gujarat, the Reddys and the Kammas of Andhra, the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats of Karnataka, and the Kallars, the Vellammas, the Vellalas and the Mudaliars of Tamil Nadu could be brought under this category. Some of them, however, belonged to the same caste as their landlords, as the dispossessed members of the upper castes who were pushed down to the level of common cultivators due to proliferation of their numbers and political conquest. For instance, in Gujarat and parts of Uttar Pradesh there were many Rajput tenants (Stein 1985a: 82-83; Stokes 1982: 64). Because of their hold over the instruments of production and skill in agriculture these raiyat/ tenant groups exercised considerable bargaining power. The feudal landlords had to treat them with deference in order to retain them on the land. When harshly treated they left the area en masse with their subordinate labourers as well as tenants, cattle and belongings to an area that was more conducive for cultivation (Ravinder 1983: 73; Dhanagare 1983: 26-27).

Sharecroppers and Artisans

The sharecroppers known variously as Verumpattamdars (Kerala), Chalgenidars (Karnataka) and Bargadars or Adhiars (West Bengal) came fourth in the agrarian hierarchy. They were the largest mass of unrecorded tenants. They had neither security of tenure, nor fixity of rents (Raychaudhari 1982b: 14). They were exploited by all the three classes above them and had to pay very high rents which varied from place to place and caste to caste (50 to 75 per cent of the produce). Illegal cesses or *abwabs* to the feudal landlords had to be paid by them. Even free labour (*begar*) was exacted from them. They had to sell to their landlords their grains, vegetables or milk products at prices below those prevalent in the market (Nandi 1985: 174-175; Habib 1982: 238; Charlesworth 1985: 202). They were predominantly from the backward castes, tribes and the erstwhile untouchable castes, and had little political power.

The artisans of pre-colonial India could be placed on par with the sharecroppers in most cases. Some of the peasants were also artisans. Coarse cloths produced by the peasant artisans for their own consumption, were partly disposed in the market. Certain extractive industries like salt and iron were also largely in the hands of part time peasants. Silk yarn and jaggery were also produced by them (Raychaudhuri 1982b: 21). The artisans held certain rights over the agricultural produce and could get a customary share of the grain heap at any harvest. Presumably most artisans functioned mainly within the customary arrangements (called *jajmani* or *balutedari*) and subsistence oriented production (Breman 1974). At least some hereditary artisans produced goods for the market.

The artisans such as pot makers, iron smiths, washer-men, weavers and oil extractors, and village servants such as watchmen and sweepers were also given small plots of land as *inam* in lieu of their service to the village. In turn they had to provide goods and services to the feudal class much below the market price. Merchants had also gained control over the produce of the artisans by advancing to them cash and raw materials and purchasing their products (Raychaudhuri 1982b: 21; Fukazawa 1982b: 249-260).

The artisans belonged to the backward castes including peasant castes while the village servants were from the lower castes. As they were involved in manual labour their social status tended to be low. Little is known about the extent of political power held by the artisan class. In Tamil Nadu and other southern regions, for instance, they seem to have formed their own alliances called *Velankai* and *Edankai* (right and left alliances) and held their own militia to counter the dominance of the *nattar* (Stein 1982: 23; Raychaudhuri 1982b: 15-26).

Agricultural Labourers

The agricultural labourers and the farm servants were the lowest ranking class in the pre-colonial agrarian hierarchy. Knowledge about their proportion in the population and the conditions under which they worked is very limited. In Mughal India they seem to have had formed a fifth or quarter of the total population (Habib 1982: 240-241). The conditions under which they worked differed from place to place. There were bonded labourers (*jeetha* and *hali* systems of bondage) and relatively free labourers, and both permanent and casual farm labourers (Raychaudhuri 1982b: 12). They were employed in the most arduous tasks such as ploughing, levelling of land, clearing of forests and digging of wells. They were paid a small subsistence wage for their hard work. They formed a reserved labour force for the landlords. Often they functioned as labourers cum sharecroppers (Nandi 1985: 174-175).

The agricultural labourers were predominantly from the dalit and tribal groups (Nathan 1988: 680). The Cherumas, Chamars, Pulayas, Paraiyas, Mahars, Madigas, Holleyas, Malas, Mangs, Koragas, Paniyas and Kurubas are some examples. Words such as *adimai* (Tamil) and *adima* (Malayalam), which literally mean slave, were generally associated with them (Stein 1982: 30-31). In some areas farm labourers also were from the same caste as their landlords or members of backward castes. The upper caste labourers had better opportunity to move up and become sharecroppers or small cultivators because of their kinship links with the village e1ite while such avenues were rare for the dalits. In some areas they were transferred, mortgaged, gifted or even hired out, bought or sold with the land (Dharma 1982: 212). Slave trade seems to have prevailed in some areas of Tamil Nadu, Malabar and to a lesser extent in Dakshina Kannada (Ravinder 1983: 73).

Conclusion

An important point that emerges from the analysis of the class system in the medieval period is the preponderance of the small peasantry consisting of the petty landlords, petty raiyats and tenants in the agrarian structure. So it was basically a peasant society with a small minority of feudal lords, a larger group of petty landlords and a majority of poor peasants. Secondly, there was much overlap among the class categories as far as the roles of tenant and landlord were concerned. The feudal lords were landlord renters, and also functioned as owner cultivators and even tenants at times. Occupancy raiyats or tenants could assume tenant, landlord and even part time labourer roles. The sharecroppers did combine the roles of tenants at will and labourers, while the farm labourers could be part time cultivators of their own tiny plots. Thirdly, persons from the various classes could move up or down the agrarian hierarchy - political conquest, land grants, change of occupation, leasing in, purchase or occupation of new land, migration and hypergamy made such mobility possible. Fourthly, on the whole there was a high correlation between the layers of class and caste. The feudal and sub-feudal landlords were predominantly upper caste men, and the occupancy tenants and raiyats were mainly from the middle castes. The sharecroppers and artisans were by and large from the backward castes and tribes, while the agricultural labourers and the farm servants were mainly from among the dalits and poor tribes (Beteille 1972: 22-23).

COLONIAL RULE AND CLASS-STRATA IN PURAL INDIA

The processes initiated by the British were varied in nature but basically aimed at safeguarding their interests in India. The revenue settlement policies (zamindari and raiyatwari), tenancy reforms, construction of roads and expansion of communication, development of canal irrigation, secular education system, uniform-codified legal system, civil services, and laws against slavery and excesses of money lenders did influence the agrarian social structure in various ways.

Debate about the Impact of British

The impact of the colonial policy on the agrarian society in India is a highly debated issue among historians and sociologists. According to some, including some British officials and nationalists, British rule led to economic decline. Some others, who hold the opposite view,

claim that the colonial policy brought about radical transformation of the Indian agrarian structure by ushering in capitalism. The third position is that there was neither decline nor transformation (Charlesworth 1985: 1-10, 93; Stokes 1982: 40-86; Ranadive 1979: 337). The fourth view holds that the British rule had a contradictory impact. These four views have varying implications for analysing the issue of class stratification in the agrarian society of colonial India. Those who hold the view of socio-economic decline claim that the British ruling class prospered at the cost of our peasantry as a whole which was impoverished by imperialist exploitation and drain of resources (Dutt 1979: 84-95). The emerging class contradiction was thus between the surplus appropriating British ruling class and the mass of producers. Such a view is too simplistic as it does not reveal the internal class contradictions within the agrarian hierarchy. The holders of the second view claim that a capitalist entrepreneur class of farmers and an agrarian proletariat class emerged in the countryside and that capitalism replaced feudalism in agriculture. In other words, the capitalist classes replaced feudal classes. However there is no clear evidence to show that such a radical change occurred in India. The holders of the third view dismiss the arguments of both the groups above with the help of various regional studies (Charlesworth 1985; Stokes 1978). According to them the British overlord class was too weak to be able to shape the Indian society or alter its socio-economic structure. Indian agrarian society was highly stratified to begin with, and continued to be so with some minor modifications here and there. It emerged basically unaltered towards the end of the British period with the concentration of wealth and power in a few at the top, and a large majority of the small peasantry at the bottom (Baden 1892: 244; Stokes 1978: 3, 32; Charlesworth 1985: 5). The holders of the fourth view opine that the British rule had contradictory impact on the rural society: "the British preserved as well as destroyed the conditions of India's pre-capitalist economy, accelerated as well as retarded the development of capitalism in India" (Chattopadhyay 1972: 185-192). It is generally accepted today that the colonial policy had contradictory impact on the rural society and did cause some changes in the class structure of rural India. These changes, however, varied from place to place. Now let us take a look at some of the attempts at identifying the nature of the class strata at the end of British rule in India.

Classes in Agrarian Society at the End of British Rule

Various scholars have made attempts to bring the elaborate gradations of pre-independence British India under specific class categories. For instance, Beteille (1972: 19-20) tried to bring them under six broad strata or layers: the non-cultivating owners, the non-cultivating lessees, the cultivating owners and peasant proprietors, the cultivating tenants with occupancy rights, the sharecroppers, and the landless labourers. At the apex of this class system was the British imperialist power – the biggest exploiter of the surplus. The zamindari abolition committee set up by the Indian government at the time of independence, also gives us some clues to understand the nature of the classes that emerged towards the end of the British rule. It spoke of a minority of large zamindars on one side and a great mass of agriculturists with minute holding on the other. The committee passed over in silence the intermediate peasant elite who were the main beneficiaries of the abolition of zamindari system and from whom the strongest support for the measure came. The class hierarchy that emerged in India at the end of British rule was a complex one. The feudal, capitalist and colonial forces of exploitation combined themselves into a class of surplus appropriators, and the small tenancy and labour remained the exploited ones (Mishra 1984: 167-172; Alavi 1975).

The above views on the class-structure that emerged at the end of British rule show that there were definite changes in the agrarian hierarchy during the period. By the end of British rule in India the rural society in India had a stratification system consisting of seven classes. They are (i) zamindari landlords, (ii) tenant-landlords, (iii) entrepreneur farmers, (iv) owner-cultivators and registered tenants, (v) sharecroppers, (vi) artisans, and (vii) agrarian labourers. Now let us look at the characteristics of each of these classes and their links with and differences from the pre-colonial classes.

Zamindari Landlords

The zamindari landlords emerged as a strong feudal class at the end of the British rule in India. They controlled vast areas of land as a class and individually possessed estates of varying sizes. The best and most fertile parts were cultivated by them directly with the services of the farm servants and other parts leased out. Some of these landlords

were also involved in activities such as money lending, trade and industry. They could operate in most cases without taking recourse to extra-legal methods of coercion because their power and control over the land had been reinforced by increasing population pressure and rising demand for land among the peasants who were willing to lease-in land at high rates of rent. These landlords were basically the members of the erstwhile feudal overlord and sub-feudal classes, along with a few new entrants.

The zamindari landlord class emerged more distinctly out of the three land revenue settlements executed by the British - the zamindari, the mahalwari and the raiyatwari. The land controllers dominant in a region had been recognised by the British as landed proprietors in the region and revenue settlements for the region had been undertaken with them. The zamindari settlement had been executed with the landed aristocrats or the feudal lords or the rajas, *taluqdars*, *jagirdars*, zamindars, *polygars* and *nayaks* and with village *maliks* or primary zamindars. Similarly the mahalwari settlement had been made with village notables who were members of coparcenary or joint holding villages (Stokes 1982: 65; Mishra 1984: 167-168). The raiyatwari settlement was made supposedly with the raiyats or direct cultivators without any intervention of an intermediary. However, in reality this settlement gave recognition to all the superior land controllers such as *mirasdars*, *inamdars*, *pankukars* or shareholders of the village communities (Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975: 57). These so called raiyats were in reality medium or large landlords including small feudal lords, who by and large belonged to the *poligar* families. They got much of their land cultivated through subordinate tenants and farm servants (Mishra 1984: 168). The Khots of Konkan, Janmis of Kerala and Guthedars of coastal Karnataka had also been granted proprietary titles. Thus the zamindari, raiyatwari and mahalwari land revenue settlement policies were different juridical versions of the same feudal-landlordism. The large zamindars of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the individual landlords in Madras and Bombay presidencies, the corporate village coparceners or village zamindars in the united provinces and Punjab were all men firmly rooted in the soil and functioned as landlords. The British regulated their hold over the land by granting them legal recognition and consolidating their rights and privileges. The British legal, police and administrative machinery

reinforced these rights. Their customary rights over *inam* and wastelands had also been recognised in most cases even by the British (Stokes 1978: 33; Dharma 1965: 72; Nathan 1988: 669; Chaudhuri 1982: 92-97).

The process initiated by the British had also brought about some changes at the upper levels of the agrarian class hierarchy. Almost every raja or the feudal overlord of pre-colonial days saw a decline in his fortune during colonial period. A class that had been dependent on military prowess to amass wealth or surplus naturally fell short of the managerial skills required in the new situation under the British. The rajas and *poligars* who resisted the British had been crushed. Some aristocratic elements, such as Rajput rajas of northern and central India, suffered slow decay and were left in a shrunken condition. A significant proportion of them, however, made adjustment as village notables (Stokes 1978: 41-42). Some large zamindars in Bengal and Bihar, for instance, because of their extravagant ways were pushed towards ruin but were replaced by members of their own families, making no difference to the composition of the zamindar class (Nathan 1988: 669). A large number of estates of those who were unable to meet revenue demands were partitioned and sold at auctions. Many new men from commercial, official and urban background purchased these estates. The new sub-feudal intermediaries were added as new layers to the already complex rural scene, because the new purchasers left the original tenure holders on their own land (now in the position of tenants), without affecting their financial advantages and political control over the village (Dharma 1982: 215-231; Stokes 1978: 42). Some large zamindars themselves sold parts of their estates and leased out significant portions on large initial payments (for example, to *pathidars*, *jotedars* or fixed lease holders). The new purchasers and leasers of zamindari, *mirasi* rights with monetary income from non-agricultural activities grew in wealth and importance, as the income of the large zamindars declined. Inheritance laws and changes over to individual property from joint family property led to reduction in size of the estates of many large and petty zamindars. All these processes led to the diffusion of landed property at the sub-feudal level of the rural society (Chaudhuri 1982: 109-119).

No fundamental change in the caste composition of the elite landlord class occurred during the British period. The new purchasers of zamindari rights were by and large from the gentry castes and elite peasant castes (Saxena 1985: 15-17). Thus the transfer and sale of property occurred mainly within the upper castes. A sample survey of Bihar in 1951 showed that the Brahmins and Rajputs (together less than 10 per cent of the families surveyed) made up about 79 per cent of the landowners. Thus the superior land controllers or zamindari landlords came mostly from the same caste in 1947 as in 1850 (Stokes 1978: 26). However, the historical forces also converted some of the peasant caste men into petty feudal landlords (Mishra 1984: 171).

The Tenant Landlords

The British land policy also led to the strengthening of the new class of tenant landlords in rural India. The growth of land market for rent collecting rights (i.e., zamindari, *khoti*) during the colonial period brought in new layers of intermediaries, especially in zamindari areas. These were by and large from upper castes who leased out land to others. The recognition, granted by the British to occupancy raiyats and tenants, and registering them as owner cultivators strengthened the tenant-landlords further (for example, the *jotedars* of Bengal). These tenant-landlords held land on lease from the zamindars or large raiyats and in turn rented it out to others. The selling of land to upper caste men and urban interests further contributed to the increase in the number of tenant landlords. The tenant landlordism which existed in the pre-colonial period increased further with the addition of new layers of intermediaries. The tenant landlords in many areas registered themselves as occupancy tenants or raiyats rather than as tenure-holders, as there was no provision for the registration under raiyats or sharecroppers (inferior tenants) on the land of occupancy raiyats and superior or permanent tenants (Nathan 1988: 670). The tenant-landlords had their hold over the land strengthened with the help of the British. The motive behind the subletting of land by the big tenants was the considerable margin between the rent that the sharecroppers paid and the one they themselves paid, and absence of any legal protection against an increase in sharecroppers' rent (Chaudhuri 1982: 132-143; Charlesworth 1985: 186-187).

Entrepreneur Farmers

A class of enterprising farmers (the forerunners of the present day capitalist class) who consciously began to manage estates and plantations as a business arose from among the upper and intermediate layers of the rural society (Many British planters holding large coffee/ tea estates were concentrated in certain regions too). They used the opportunities of commercialisation to become prosperous. Examples could be cited, in this connection, of Indapur gentlemen farmers, the Kunbis of Sattara, the Malis of Saswad, the Kunbi-patidars of Kheda, the Jats of Ferozepore, the Malis of Ambala, the Sahukars of Multan, the Vellalas of Nellore and the Coorgis/Kodavas of Kodagu or the erstwhile Coorg. A good number of them took the opportunities provided by commercialisation and expanding markets to pioneer cultivation of cash crops (Stokes 1978: 56-58; Banerjee 1982: 206; Reddy 1987: 68). Because of their strong feudal ties and characteristics, these entrepreneurs could not develop into a full-pledged capitalist class. Besides, their emergence was restricted to irrigated (for example, canal colonies of the Punjab) and market linked zones. Their development even in these pockets was the consequence of forced commercialisation (production of raw materials and cash crops forced upon the peasants by the British), and partly a response to the forces of market (Nathan 1988: 673-674). The entrepreneur farmers were by and large from the peasant dominant castes and formed a small proportion of the agrarian population in commercialised pockets.

The Owner Cultivators and Registered Tenants

The measures taken by the British to safeguard the actual tillers or cultivators strengthened the petit peasant culture in India. The owner cultivators and some categories of tenants were registered in land records all over, and thus granted protection from eviction and security of tenure. They were vested with actual rights of proprietorship over the land on condition of paying fixed ground rents to the superior land-holders or landlords (Stokes 1982: 84; Reddy 1987: 68-70). The majority of them held minute holdings as a consequence of sub-division and fragmentation of holdings that marked the British period (Stokes 1982: 62-63). A large majority of the small peasants cultivated their land with the help of family labour. Those who had large landholdings or substantial cultivators did so with the help of farm servants as in the past. The better off among these operated as money lenders and

grain traders overshadowing in importance the poorer among the zamindars and landlords (Henningham 1984: 223). The peasants could derive full economic benefits from self-cultivated small holdings if there were no subordinate cultivators who enjoyed legal protection. Most of the substantial cultivators benefited much under these circumstances (Stokes 1982: 84; Chaudhuri 1982: 128). Most of the poor cultivators, however, supplemented their meagre income through leasing in small plots of land and engaging themselves in casual labour.

The owner cultivators/registered tenants were by a large from among the peasant castes of the locality including backward peasant castes and tribes. Some upper caste members (for example, Rajputs and Brahmins) also became part of this class as they were pushed down to the level of common cultivators during the British period and perhaps even earlier.

The Sharecroppers

It is observed by some that the vast bulk of the rural poor crowded into the rank of lower tenants as sharecroppers (Stokes 1982: 13). During the British period some evicted raiyats and tenants, and the displaced artisans joined their ranks. A rise in their number in certain areas was noted. In raiyatwari regions of the Deccan there were already a few tenants. Significant growth in their number from the 1880's has been noted by Fukazawa (1982a: 202-204). Tenancy seems to have risen in landlord dominant areas of the north Konkan too. The situation of sharecroppers seems to have worsened in most parts where they were not registered as tenants. The vesting of proprietary titles on landlords, without ensuring fixity of tenure and rents to the actual tillers or sharecroppers, was responsible for this.

Earlier, in theory at least, all the tenants (including the inferior ones) had the right to cultivate the land in their possession and a definite share in the produce of the land. But now the customary rights of the inferior tenants who were not registered were undermined and they could easily be ejected from the land or transferred from one plot to another to prevent them from claiming occupancy rights. As the landlords/raiyats declared a significant proportion of land in the cultivating possession of sharecroppers as their own *khudkasht* (under their self-cultivation without tenants), many tenants and sharecroppers

became mere tenants at will (Nathan 1988: 676). The land rights of many cultivators especially from the backward castes and tribes became further eroded and they were made to pay higher rents and perform much *begar* or free labour. For instance, Chaudhuri (1982: 125-128, 157) notes that in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa the old *batai* system (a simple division of actual crop) had been replaced by *dhanabandi* (a division of estimated crop) and zamindars insisted that *dhanabandi* be paid in cash at market rates of certain periods of the year. As the prices of agricultural produce began to rise, zamindars wanted conversion of money rents into produce rents. In response the tenants at times resorted to pilfering the grains before they were stored for division. The poor peasant and tenant tensions began to mount in many parts of rural India during the last decades of the British rule, an indicator of the oppressive situation of the tenants at the close of British rule in India (Dhanagare 1983).

The Artisans

The traditional view holds that the artisans as a class were destroyed to a significant extent due to the British trade policy (Dutt 1979: 97-126). The export of cotton from Lancashire seems to have led to the pauperisation of weavers in Bengal. But there is no evidence to show that the artisans as a whole were pauperised. It is true that the artisan sector did not get the benefit of capital generated in agriculture during the British period, which remained tied up in consumption, agriculture and money lending. This may have caused further deterioration in the situation of rural artisans. In some parts artisans were also deprived of their *inam* lands by the village landlords. Unable to meet their needs, some of the artisans also resorted to sharecropping and part time casual labour. Some of them moved into urban areas and took up urban jobs.

Agricultural Labourers

There is no evidence to show any phenomenal increase in the number of agrarian labourers in India during the British period. But some increase in their number was reported in certain parts of rural India because of the decay of artisan crafts and reduction in number of those engaged in village services (Nathan 1988: 680). Impoverished peasants also began to work as part time labourers. Tribals who lived

by hunting and shifting cultivation were also forced into agricultural labour including bonded labour due to further erosion of forests during the British period as in the earlier times. But generally speaking towards the end of British rule the landless or pure agricultural labourers formed a very small percentage of the total population (Stokes 1982: 63). An official enquiry held in 1950-51 revealed that 58 per cent of agrarian labourers owned some land. The plots, however, were very small and the agricultural labourers received only a negligible portion of their total income from their own land (Chaudhuri 1982: 163-176).

Some change seems to have occurred in the situation of the agricultural labourers during the colonial period. In the beginning of the British rule agrarian labourers were mostly attached servants, belonging to the lowest castes and bonded labourers. Debt was most important for their attachment. Later reports of the British point out a gradual decline of this system of attached labour and domestic serfdom, and the emergence of casual labour as the dominant type of labour. According to an enquiry of 1950-51, casual labour formed more than 76 per cent of the total agricultural labour families, while only 26 per cent were attached labourers (Chaudhuri 1982: 163-166).

As regards the caste composition of the agricultural labourers, the British rule seems to have caused the broadening of the social base of agricultural labourers. This occurred because of the diminution of per-capita holdings of a section of small peasants who were mainly from the peasant backward castes. By and large, however, the agrarian labourers hailed from the depressed castes as in the pre-colonial days.

Concerning the situation of agrarian labourers during the colonial period there are contradictory views. According to Dharma (1982: 239-240), the number of working days of agricultural labourers in an year seems to have declined in the South as a sign of growing unemployment. The population pressure seems to have caused decline in the real income of agrarian labourers. The weakening of the ties of patronage seems to have increased the suffering of labourers in some parts as they had to face insecurity and unemployment. Some improvement has also been noted in some areas in the situation of agrarian labourers due to availability of non-agricultural jobs in cities and towns, and rise in real wages (for example in the Punjab colony).

Some improvement in the social situation of the agrarian labourers in the first half of the 20th century in the South has also been attributed to the rise of depressed castes. For examples, the Pallas of Madras improved their status to some extent, and the Naickers (Gounders) and Nadars of Tamil Nadu as well as the Izhavas of Kerala moved up the class ladder, raising their caste status. The Cherumans of Kerala were the slowest to change. Earnings from indentured labour in the Indian plantations and other British colonies, allocation of waste lands to depressed castes by the British government in some parts and movement of landlords to cities helped free some bonded labourers. The anti-slavery laws passed by the British had some impact in certain areas. The system of debt bondage, however, continued into the post independence period. In the Madras presidency the agrestic serf class, in some districts as much as fifth of the population, was left unfree under its traditional masters despite anti-slavery legislation (Stokes 1978: 33).

Conclusion

The analysis of the class structure of the agrarian society, which emerged at the end of British rule, brings out certain major issues to the fore. First, the agrarian hierarchy or relations were modified considerably, but were not radically restructured during the colonial period. The changes were more at the upper levels or classes compared to the lower levels. Secondly, the British attempt to compress the overlapping and complex gradations of rural society under the crude categories of landlord, tenant and labourers was a failure. Their official class categorisation of rural society did not correspond to the actual society. Some of the peasants functioned as landlords/ tenants and petty money lenders even in raiyatwari regions (Stokes 1978: 3). Thirdly, the economic differences between the various classes were also not clearly established especially at the lower levels of the upper classes and higher levels of the lower classes. For example, in certain regions (like Saharanpur of Uttar Pradesh in 1870) there was hardly any distinction between the rent paying tenant and revenue paying proprietor. Some of the zamindars even of upper castes did manual work and often cultivated substantial part of their holdings with the help of family labour (Saxena 1985). Fourthly, the rural society continued to remain basically a small peasant society. The petty landlords, small raiyats, tenants and sharecroppers were the numerical

majority. Those holding vast tracts of land were fewer in number, while 65-75 per cent were petty producers (with full ownership to partial cultivation rights and no right), holding small and fragmented pieces of land (Dhanagare 1983: 17; Charlesworth 1985: 235). Thus, despite all changes promoted by the British, the peasant petit culture was left intact. Fifthly, the land holding patterns remained relatively stable during the colonial era with widespread inequalities. No substantial rise in inequality of land ownership has been noted in most parts (Charlesworth 1985: 295-299). In fact, the larger estates became reduced in size and the small family farms did not get consolidated into large sized farms leading to class polarisation. Sixthly, significant correlation between caste and class continued to prevail. All India Agricultural Labour Enquiry, 1951 clearly brings out that as many as 78 per cent of the revenue payers were from forward castes, while 7.8 per cent were from backward castes and 14 per cent from dalits (of course with petty plots). Of the tenants (or raiyats), fully two thirds were from the backward castes. The Rajputs, an upper caste, surprisingly account for 14 per cent of the tenants; a good number of them, however, seem to have been tenant-landlords. The dalits accounted for 51 per cent of the agricultural labourers, and backward castes, 45 per cent (Nathan 1988: 690). Thus there was some level of correlation between caste and class. Seventhly, the inter-class and inter-caste relations changed during the colonial period in some areas. The *jajman-kamin* or *jajmani–balutedari* ties became weak in a number of commercially prosperous regions. The traditional form of wage payment (out of the common heap of produce) was replaced by annual contracts, and wages of the *kamins* were often determined by the utility of their service and not by custom, as in the past (Banerjee 1982: 210).

EMERGING CLASS STRATIFICATION IN POST - INDEPENDENCE RURAL INDIA

At the time of independence rural India had a class structure that was essentially medieval in nature, but significantly modified by the economic and political policies of the British government in India. Since the attainment of independence, various measures have been taken in India that would have repercussions on rural class structure. They include abolition of the zamindari system, princely states and privy purses, introduction of tenancy reforms, agricultural development programmes, rural development programmes, expansion

of educational and communicational networks, setting up of marketing channels, promotion of industries, and enactment of laws. The cumulative impact of all the programmes and measures, some planned and deliberately undertaken and others consequences of the operation of the market forces and structural mechanisms of the society, did alter the class-structure to a significant extent. Those changes which continue to occur are quite complex and not easy to analyse (Mencher 1974: 1437-1450). However, a general analysis of the changes that have taken place during the post-independence period in the class structure of rural India is attempted here. The major trends of the class structure of rural India that has been noticed are: the replacement of the zamindars by the new landlords, emergence of the capitalist cultivators, decrease in the number of tenants and consequent increase in the number of owner cultivators, continued existence of tenancy and sharecropping, increase in the number of agricultural labourers and decline of traditional artisans (Mishra 1984: 172-183; Pardesi 1980: 128-132; Bardhan 1982: 72-94; Bose 1984: 249-255; Omvedt 1981: 140-159; Patnaik 1976: 82-101).

Landlords

A clearly discernible aspect of the rural class structure in post-independence India is the continued existence of landlord renters (or feudal elements) in varying degrees in almost all parts of rural India. A good proportion of them are from the erstwhile zamindari (or feudal and sub-feudal classes) or rich raiyat categories (including the tenant landlord elements). They survived the zamindari abolition act because what was abolished by the act was not landlordism as such but the revenue collecting rights over the village. As a result only the land, over which the zamindars had the tax farming rights, was taken away from them, which resulted in the reduction in the size of large estates. But the zamindars could retain their own *khas* land. Consequently landlords with large landholdings could still retain them under their direct cultivation right. For instance, Jannuzzi (1974: 33) found landlords in Bihar who held estates of 5000 or more acres even after the zamindari abolition. In Uttar Pradesh nearly 5900 zamindars paying more than Rs.1000/- as revenue could get as much as 400000 acres of land recorded as *khas* and were left with an average of 70 acres (40 to 400 acres) (Saxena 1985: 17). Thus a significant proportion of the erstwhile zamindars (big and small) became the new landlord class.

The zamindari abolition did affect some traditional elites adversely, especially the absentee landlords from the urban mercantile castes, who were relatively new and had little established links with the rural institutions. They lost their land. A few Thakkurs and Muslims also lost their lands. The village level zamindars, raiyats and tenant landlords were not affected by this act as they could retain all their *khas* land. The occupancy tenants of the big zamindars (e.g. Jotedars of Bengal) also were the major beneficiaries of zamindari abolition and other land reform acts, because they could get themselves now registered as the owner cultivators over the land which in fact was cultivated by sharecroppers (Nathan, 1988: 672). A new class of landlords replacing the erstwhile zamindars thus emerged in the countryside. This class was composed of the feudal overlord and sub-feudal elements of the pre-colonial days or the zamindari elements of the colonial days with some neo-rich landlords. Their relations with their subordinate tenants and farm labourers tended to be more exploitative because of the weakening of patron client ties. However, they continued to be involved in rack-renting, money lending and debt bondage relations with their subordinates.

Capitalist Farmer

The emergence of capitalist farmers or the so called *kulaks* is another trend clearly visible in the class structure of the countryside. These *kulaks*, the gentlemen farmers of Thorner (1982: 1963-1964), are a thriving and prosperous group in the countryside. They adopt modern techniques of farming, make higher investment in agriculture, acquire more land where possible, and grow cash crops or mixed crops (food and cash). They are also generally speaking more market oriented. Although they depend on wage labourers for manual tasks, they do not shirk active involvement in farming activities (Roy 1979: 309; Patnaik 1971: 123-130; Rudra 1970: 85-87; Omvedt 1988: 378-379; S.J.M. Epstein 1988: 103-104; Joshi 1979: 9). This class has been the major beneficiary of all the agricultural development and reform programmes in free India. They have also gained access to modern education and salaried jobs (Beteille 1972: 28-32; Frankel 1971: 191-215; Jha 1980: 26-28; Mishra 1984: 178-179; Mohan Lal Sharma 1984: 231-234). The richer section of the peasantry seems to have accumulated wealth not only from agriculture but also from rural industries, trade, fair price shops and licences for dealing in essential

commodities like coal, kerosene, contracts, and income from members of the family working abroad as well as bureaucratic corruption (Saxena 1985). The emergence of the *kulak* or rich farmer led movements which have gained and continue to gain a number of concessions is an indication of the power of this class which controls almost all the levers of power at the local and state level, and now even at the central level to a significant extent. The *kulaks* are mainly from the elite and intermediate peasant castes with some representatives from the upper castes. Some from backward castes also have joined their ranks (Lele 1981: 56-58; Jannuzzi 1974). Some of them are sufficiently powerful to behave like petty zamindars (Henningham 1984: 235).

Owner Cultivators

Another emerging trend is the rise of owner cultivators – big, medium and small peasants - in the agrarian society of modern India. With the zamindari abolition almost all the erstwhile registered tenants/occupancy raiyats were able to get ownership rights over the land in zamindari areas. This process had already taken place in the raiytwari areas. The class of owner cultivators had also expanded substantially with the passage of tenancy abolition measures and take over of the land by owners for personal cultivation (Thorner 1982: 1968; Jha 1980: 111). Measures taken towards laying down ceiling on landholdings and distribution of surplus land also brought in a few new elements into this class especially from the backward peasant and lower dalit castes. By and large the small and medium owners cultivate their own land using family labour and employ labour only in seasons. Others cultivate it with farm labourers. The vast majority of the owner cultivators are small peasants and petty farmers who have shown substantial rise in their numbers and are continuing to increase. Most of them hold on to their sub-divided and fragmented small plots of land. According to the National Sample Survey, 37th Round (1982) as many as 74 per cent of the rural households operate at least one agricultural holding of which the majority are small holdings (Government of India 1988). According to agricultural census the number of marginal holdings (below 1 hectare) rose from 50.6 per cent in 1970-71 to 56.5 per cent in 1980-81. If the small holdings (1-2 hectares) are added to this, the below 2 hectare holdings amount to 75 per cent of the total. The total area controlled by them is 26 per cent or so (Shankar 1987: 30-36; Desrochers *et al.* 1988: 130). So agrarian

society continues to be what it was since pre-colonial time, a small peasant society. A large majority of these petty peasants are poor, debt-ridden, and have no access to market because of their subsistence farming and debt burden. Economically they are not a homogenous lot either. Some have enriched themselves and continue to prosper because of irrigation, cash crop farming and government schemes, while others are sliding downward and getting partly or fully involved in providing labour for others.

Sharecroppers and Tenants

Tenancy and sharecropping continue to exist to a greater or lesser extent in the agrarian class structure of post-independence India, although tenancy has been officially abolished or limited through legislative measures. The extent of tenancy and the situation of tenants continue to vary from region to region as in the past. Bardhan (1982: 72-94) found in his sample study of 500 villages in West Bengal that only a minority of tenants had security. Reddy (1987: 73) found tenancy in one form or other in all the 534 villages of Andhra Pradesh covered in his study. A few large farmers, who cultivated their own land, were also found to have some leased-in land probably from the absentee landlords or persons who were unable to cultivate their own land due to sickness or disability. Even in Karnataka where tenancy was legally abolished subtle forms of sharecropping continue to prevail which is more exploitative as it is hidden (Bhaduri, 1973: 120-137; Reddy, 1987: 73). It is clear from these studies that various forms of tenancy continue to prevail to a greater or lesser extent in most states in the post-independence period despite land reform laws. The situation of those engaged in sharecropping, wherever it exists, has also worsened. They are employed on yearly basis and changed often to prevent them from acquiring occupancy rights. Although there are laws practically in every state ensuring some relief to the tenants and sharecroppers, tenants at will who are not registered cannot take recourse to law. Eviction of tenants and sharecroppers has also been taking place, (Jha 1980: 6-7; Thorner 1982: 1967-1968; Omvedt 1981: 140-159).

Agricultural Labourers and Artisans

Another trend noticed in the agrarian class structure of independent India is the rise in the number of agricultural labourers. Although their number varies from place to place, they seem to have

risen in number in India as a whole from about 31.5 million in 1961 to nearly 55.5 million in 1981 (Bardhan 1982: 84-85; Kurien 1987: 43-51). It is not clear whether the rise is due to increase in population, shift of workers from non-agricultural to agricultural pursuits, or increasing proletarianisation of the peasantry or tenants (Haque 1987: 315-318). They continue to remain at the lowest rung of the class ladder - highly exploited and indebted. Prevalence of bonded labour, despite laws to the contrary, has made the lives of many tribal and low caste labourers miserable (Illaiah 1979: 7-8; Pradhan 1979: 481-484). Employment of migrant cheap labour from dry and underdeveloped zones tends to keep wages of the agrarian labourer down in high growth regions such as Punjab (Suri 1985). Only in regions where they are well organised (for example, Kerala) their situation has improved. Organised efforts of the agricultural labourers for better deal have been taking place in several parts of the country. Even in the feudal dominated areas of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, movements of the agrarian labourers have been emerging (Nathan 1988: 667). Lastly, the gradual and continuous process of displacement of rural artisans and their proletarianisation have continued unabated after independence with the spread of industrialisation and extension of urban rural market links. Reduction in demand for the goods and services of the artisans is mainly responsible for their proletarianisation. Rise in the number of rural labourers is partly because of the entry of the erstwhile artisans into their ranks.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the emerging trends in the agrarian class stratification in post-independence India certain points could be clearly noted. First, agrarian classes and relations among these classes are undergoing change. Various agrarian classes in many ways combine within themselves elements of both the old and the new and that too in varying degrees. The old feudal classes have been modified by the new developing relations and the new capitalist classes bear the marks of the old relations out of which they are emerging. Thus both feudal and capitalist elements exist in the agrarian class-structure. The capitalist relations probably have been superimposed over the old semi-feudal land relations (Tandon 1989: 17-20). The post-1965 era also witnessed the decline of the *jajmani* system or patronage type relations obviously due to expansion of monetisation and commodity production

(Mishra 1984: 179; Breman 1974: 253-255). Relations of a more contractual nature have tended to prevail between the landowners and their labourers (Beteille 1980: 118-120). Secondly, a great deal of role overlapping exists among the class categories as before. Often one and the same person assumes the roles of landlord, owner cultivator and tenant. Similarly poor peasants and sharecroppers may also function as agricultural labourers (Beteille 1980: 119). Thirdly, one finds no radical transformation in the direction of class polarisation into capitalist farmers and wage labourers. The rural class structure continues to be gradated rather than steep structured (Hariss 1982: 357; Bardhan 1982: 72-94). However, the abolition of intermediaries has resulted in reducing the number of gradations and simplifying the class structure (Beteille 1980: 116-118). Fourthly, there is little decline in the inequalities in land and rural asset ownership in modern agriculture. Only 3 per cent of the large holdings (10 hectares and above) account for more than 26 per cent of the cultivable land and 73 per cent of the marginal holdings account for less than 24 per cent of the cultivable land as per the land survey by the government of India held in 1976-77 (Desrochers *et al*. 1988: 130). Only 8 per cent of large and medium ownership holdings accounted for as much as 48 per cent of the total area owned in 1981 (Haque 1987: 314). Fifthly, caste and class continue to be correlated although the degree of correlation is less than in the past (Beteille 1969: 57-61). Although the upper and dominant peasant castes are predominantly represented in the upper classes, a significant number of intermediate and backward caste elites possess the new resources and have joined their rank. The majority of the dalits and backward caste peasants including bonded servants are poor peasants, sharecroppers or agrarian labourers (Thorner 1982: 1993; Shah 1984: 19-23; Chauhan 1980: 16-35; Beteille 1966: 191; Ranadive 1979: 337-348; Omvedt 1988: 376-377; Joshi 1979: 363-365).

In conclusion we can agree that the basic framework of class system in rural India has not altered in essence, but certain significant shifts have occurred in relative strengths and position of various classes in the agrarian hierarchy. The shifts have not brought relief to the poor-toiling peasantry. The top most classes of the agrarian hierarchy composed of the traditional elite and neo-rich elements in their ranks continue to appropriate increasing surplus generated in agriculture and rural industry along with the traders and urban rich (most of whom are also from the traditional elite classes and castes). The poor

peasantry is today unlike in the past subjected to more complex and subtle forms of exploitation and oppression. It is only when the poor peasants (including agrarian labourers) become increasingly and actively conscious of these forces that we can expect to see transformation of our society in favour of the oppressed.

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