

State Intervention and Peasantry : The Case of the British Rule In Indian History

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The British rule replaced the earlier existing state and its operationalization by enforcing the rule of an alien power and developed mechanisms to interact with peasantry. Colonial mission was at the centre of British rule in India, and that is why this period is different from the other periods preceding and following it. Colonialism, if viewed from the perspective of world society, indicates towards hegemonic conditions. A precise understanding of the notion of hegemony shall provide a better understanding of agrarian relations in India during this period.

The first part of this paper is on a precise understanding of the notion of colonialism and hegemony. In the second part a historical account of agrarian conditions helps in visualizing the impact of the colonial rule. In the third part an analysis of agrarian relations makes precise the nature and working of mechanisms such as **Zamindari**, which was full of exploitation and characterized by class system of economy. In the fourth part, the nature and working of another institution **Ryotwari** are analysed. In both systems of land tenure agrarian inequalities and class relations emerged in such a way that they did not exhibit peasant's strength. It was perhaps the force of colonialism which superseded the mechanism of **Zamindari** and **Ryotwari**, hence, needed the discussion first.

1. Colonialism and the Agrarian Question

There is a need to put the agrarian question in a proper historical perspective in order to understand the present day agrarian social structure of India. During the British period of its history, India had witnessed the then new colonial capitalist economy which destroyed the basic fabric of the earlier existing structure. In this process the prior existing contradiction – basically the primordial ones, were tapped by the Britishers to the maximum possible extent. Studies in Sociology and other social sciences on agrarian social structure seem to have been caught up as well as exhibit certain basic and fundamental questions that still remain not only vague and unclear but also not seriously attempted. The analysis of the agrarian social structure during the British period of history in India requires an understanding of some basic theoretical standpoints. Theoretically speaking, it may be visualised that the analysis should concern itself with the already existing contradiction within the agrarian social structure. Logically speaking these two

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standpoints seem contrary rather than contradictory. We recognize the theoretical importance of both of these. Both of these are dealt with first separately and then together in the following discussion.

Before examining the impact of wider forces from outside which penetrated in the Indian economy in general and agrarian economy in particular, it seems a necessary step first to identify those outside forces and then to construct their theoretical and conceptual positions. In this regard the most important concept among others is that of colonialism. Colonialism dominated the world history for quite a long time for more than three centuries. Terry Boswell (1989) tried to examine it, in relation with some other concepts like those of imperialism, stagnation, world economy, hegemony, hierarchy, war among the nations and inertia. The strength of this article lies in the rigorous treatment of colonialism and other concepts related to it, as well as the time series analysis and regression techniques are also applied. If the theoretical and conceptual analysis of colonialism is supplemented as well as examined with quantitative data from different parts of the world, it gets strengthened and becomes precise. While making an analysis of colonialism the foremost important item is time. Like any other sociological concept, the concept of colonialism is also a time bound concept. In its history and structure the concept of colonialism in the world dates roughly between 1640 A.D.– 1960 A.D. Since the colonial rule in India dates between this period, it seems necessary to examine and analyse the relevance of the concept of colonialism as it operated at a much wider area than with which it appears at the moment. A precise construction of the concept of colonialism as well as its theoretical relevance is to be established first in order to understand the mechanism of its operationalization in India during the British colonial rule.

The area of operationalization of the concept of colonialism is much wider than a nation. Another concept related to colonialism has also come into being and i.e. the concept of world society. In a slightly different context concerning the contemporary world the concept of world society is thought of as superior to that of international relations. John W. Burton (1972) who saw the promises of the concept of world society over international relations seems to have gone beyond national or post-national conceptions of society. Although the concept of colonialism is related to that of world society, but it is not post-national, in fact it involves different nations interacting with each other at a given point of time. The concept of world society has, however, been claimed as superior to certain other processes and conceptions like imperialism, modernization, international relations and the Marxist theory of political economy (Boswell 1989 : 182). The concept of colonialism does not include mercantile activities which predates capitalism. Capitalism is that necessary condition on which colonialism develops. Capitalism, according to Terry Boswell (1989 : 182), came into existence in 1640 A.D., the year with which his analysis begins. The period of colonization in the world attained its peak during the years 1920 A.D.– 1940 A.D., however, it declined in the year 1960 A.D. But even during the peak years of colonialism there remained certain areas (like unconquered part of China by Japan) which remained of the concept of colonialism as well as its theoretical relevance is to be established first in order to understand the mechanism of its operationalization in India during the British colonial rule.

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Terry Boswell (1989) argues that colonialism as both phenomenon as well as concept, declined to present reality of the post World War II era. Between the years 1945 A.D.– 1965 A.D. 93 colonies got freedom and only 12 were established. A discussion on agrarian relations in India during the British rule of her history should take into account among other things the role played by external forces like colonialism which changed the very fabric of Indian society. There is a need to reconstruct the nature and type of agrarian social structure in pre-British era to understand various changes introduced during the British rule. Equally important it is look into the various aspects of those concepts that have been seen in relation to agrarian social structure. Not simply their relationship with social structure, these concepts exhibit several debatable areas around them. Some of these conceptions are like : self-sufficiency of villages, villages as little republics, land-alienation on religious as well as other grounds, possession rather than sale of land and comparatively strong position of the artisan. A rigorous examination of these notions seems necessary.

The agrarian conditions during the British rule were related to the origin, development and decline of colonialism, A theoretical construct on colonialism might suggest its working at least at two levels – at the level of centre and at the level of periphery. Terry Boswell (1989) seems to have appreciated the term core over centre. He has however, tried to visualise changes taking place at centre vis-a-vis periphery. Accordingly, at the level of centre (core) the important changes included : (i) the rejection of the ideology as well as praxis of formal colonialism, (ii) the rise in the costs of labour and (iii) the rise in the costs of colonial administration. At the level of periphery following changes occurred : (i) the rise in the number of colonial revolts, (ii) the development of nationalist ideology, (iii) the impacts of socialist ideology and (iv) the economic development of the country.

The power structure in the world took a new shape and started working along different dimension after the World War II. Terry Boswell (1989) identifies the end of the World War II as a significant point in the world history, since accordingly it was the time when the process of what he calls it decolonization started. These global issues have and special relevance with the Indian history which witnessed its national independence only two years later than the end of the World War II. Although changes at global as well as at national level could be discussed vis-a-vis each other.

The period of the end of the World War II had another significance. Both of the then emerging powers of the World, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. gained from the process of decolonization which followed the World War II. The U.S.A. had to gain much if the earlier imperialists lost their ground by trying to fill the power vacuum and the U.S.S.R. had the chances to work at much wider areas with the notion of anti-imperialist ideology. But Terry Boswell seems to have given more emphasis on the operation of the U.S.S.R. at the level of periphery rather than at core. The impact of anti-imperialist ideology of the Soviet Union had its impact on the polity of India also. The still controversial role of the Communist Party of India (the CPI) in the first phase calling the World War II as imperialists' war and in the latter phase when the U.S.S.R. was attacked by Germany naming it as peoples' war is a lively example of it. But one thing is certain and that is that for the first time in the world history, socialism began to operate as an ideology of state.

Before examining the agrarian conditions in India and the British colonial rule on them there are certain points that require attention at conceptual and theoretical level. Although Marx speaks of imperialism but does not elaborate much on it. In fact theoretical constructs on imperialism were attempted by Lenin (1917). Lenin identified imperialist forces as the expression of the highest stage that capitalism could acquire. Contradicting it Terry Boswell (1989) maintains that the World War I (on which Lenin based his observations of imperialism), represented highest stage of imperialism. It refers to the strengthening of capitalism even further and the decline of imperialism after the World War I. Socialist countries of the second world never allowed colonialism to flourish. This marked a structural change – creation of such a powerful block against the development of colonialism. The number of the socialist countries increased from 1 in 1917 to 13 in 1954. Prior to the World War II the movements that were led by colonial landlords and bourgeoisie were now replaced by the movement that were for the purpose of mass-liberation and were being led by guerrilla armies and left nationalists.

Yet another concept related to colonialism namely, hegemony has been discussed at length by Terry Boswell (1989). The main criticism of Terry Boswell may be that while on the one hand he prefers to dissociate capitalism from colonialism, the former may flourish but not the latter (as it appears from his analysis) but on the other hand he puts colonialism and hegemony in such an organic form that the latter could not be alienated from the former . It simply means that the hegemony also vanished with colonialism. The argument that is being advanced here is that hegemony may be dissociated with colonialism and may further be associated with the capitalism since it continues to exist. But it all depends upon the definition of hegemony that one conceives. Terry Boswell refers to hegemony or hegemonic conditions when there is “a historical period of low international rivalry when one core power manifests simultaneously productive commercial and

financial superiority over all other core powers.” (Boswell 1989 : 187). This definition is both narrow as well as vague. It is narrow because it does not go beyond colonialism and it is vague because it does not allow the development of any idea of counter hegemonic forces. Another limitation with this definition is that it happens to be so time bound in such a manner as if there is no room left for any parallel situation to that in the world history. For example, Terry Boswell (1989) identifies four stages of hegemony in a time bound manner like: (a) Hegemonic Ascent, (b) Hegemonic Victory (1815 – 1849) and (1920 – 1944) (c) Hegemonic Maturity (1850 – 1872) and (1945 – 1967) and (d) Hegemonic Decline (1650 – 1692) and (1873 – 1897). There is a need to broaden the concept of hegemony for the analysis of the contemporary world, it has to be liberated and isolated from the concept of colonialism to make it widely applicable and to associate it with certain other concepts like that of capitalism.

2. Agrarian Conditions in India during the British Rule

In order to develop a precise understanding of agrarian relations, the general approach as well as the one concerning the main issue (agrarian-relations-conditions and class-structure), it appears necessary to move out of a single discipline and take note of at least two other disciplines namely economics and history. However, the sociological approach has never been abandoned at any state – it exists as intact as it should throughout the present research, but on the other hand if there are certain useful informations in the above stated two disciplines then they are required to be taken into consideration at least. For a precise understanding of agrarian class structure of Bengal, it seems essential at this stage of reconnoitre into a vast sea of literature available before us. A brief, but essential scan of various issues concerned has been attempted. Here every possible care has been taken to include the available material. On the basis of the proposed scanning of literature, apart from actual information leading towards an analysis, an effort has been made to catch hold of the methodology involved in these studies. And in such a situation when sociological studies were not available such a scan could be more meaningful. After the proposed scan, some sociological studies and interpretations would be taken up.

Zamindari abolition seems to have been a central issue around agrarian relations during the British rule. The Indian National Congress relied heavily on this issue particularly to mobilise their support in the countryside. Even before the present question had been brought to the forefront and several efforts to mobilise peasantry earlier by Charan Singh and later on by Devi Lal and Mahendra Singh Tikait reflect its importance in the contemporary period itself. The issue of Zamindari abolition, among others got reflected in the drafts of the AICC (All India Congress Committee) published around when India got freedom (AICC 1948). This small manuscript discusses the then relevant issues (around 1946 – 47) on agrarian conditions. The reflection of these agrarian issues as a major part of their programme was not limited up to the Indian National Congress but these issues on the other hand were raised by some other political parties as well as organizations like : The All India Kisan Sabha, the Communist Party of India, the Congress Socialist Party and the United Indian Patriotic Organization (Daniel Thorner 1980). During the same period another prominent leader Charan Singh (He was in the Congress Party at that time) came out with two writings trying to make his view. Charan Singh (1947 a) has discussed the agrarian conditions for the time period between 1901 – 1941. He expressed his views on land tenure I

peasant proprietorship, regulation of the size of holdings and also discussed how different castes were engaged either as cultivators or as proprietors. Although his observations were limited to a particular area i.e. the Western Uttar Pradesh only, but could serve as point from where, if the data are available, a comparative study of different regions in the colonial period could be made. In his second book, Charan Singh (1947b) apart from other issues has discussed the complex problems – to be adopted as strategies, like maintenance of peasant proprietorship vs. the question of taking away the land from non-agriculturalists. He was in favour of bigger size of land holdings (in during his time the pieces of land on which agriculture was done were very small in size and these were unproductive) but opposed to the notion of collective farming. His own particular readings as well as experiences did not coincide with the western notion of co-operative farming. He had a difference of opinion on this particular point with Jawaharlal Nehru who wanted collective farming in the Western style. Agrarian conditions in Bengal (between 1765–1872) have been discussed by Abhay Chandra Das (1881). He had tried to examine the Zamindar – Ryot relationship in Bengal and also referred to various issues like the nature of permanent settlement and the conditions of agricultural labours. Various issues related to the permanent settlement have been studied by S. Gopal (1949). An account of the permanent settlement in Bengal has been taken note of B.H. Baden-Powell (1974). “The main issue or argument put forward by the British government has been that when the tax on land has been fixed for a limited time period, say ten years in most of the cases, the Zamindar was expected to raise additional income in his area and it was also thought that he shall invest it for the development of agriculture. But Zamindars did not use whatever additional income they had at their disposal for the development of agriculture, on the other hand the land tax imposed by them on the peasantry had been exorbitant.” Some additional informations are available in the form of historical documents and it appears at the moment that a detailed analysis of these has not been done so far. A scan of writings in history speaks of the following issues in particular (along with the general nature of agrarian economy), these issues are : Zamindari – settlement (along with a discussion on permanent settlement), Bengal presidency, Ryotwari-system, Madras presidency, Peasant-proprietorship, and political economy of the permanent settlement. Although B.H. Baden-Powell has written a lot on Indian villages and agrarian conditions in India, there is still a need to make a precise analysis on the basis of the data which are available in his works. It is also important from another point of view, and i.e. that Baden-Powell’s writings cover a larger territory of description. Methodologically, it would be relevant to have a few cross-cultural studies – a comparative analysis of agrarian conditions during the British rule. Apart from a wide range of the area taken up for description, Baden-Powell’s writings discuss some important issues like, the origin of Zamindari system, permanent settlements (Badan-Powell 1895 ; 1896) and a few others. Several other references of the works of Baden-Powell are also relevant and could be referred to in the following discussion.

The second neglected historian on agrarian relations happens to be Nilmoni Mukherjee. Although lately, he became a co-author in Frykenberg’s book (referred to earlier) in one of the articles with the editor, Nilmoni Mukherjee has written on ryotwari-system and social organisation in Madras Presidency. Nilmoni Mukherjee (1972) has also written on Zamindar’s views on the economic development of Bengal. Additionally, Mukherjee has written a few more articles on ryotwari-system (Mukherjee 1959; 1961; 1963 a; 1963 b). In the first article he discusses it (ryotwari-system) in relation to Mirasi rights in Madras presidency (Mukherjee 1961), in the

second article it has been examined in relation with caste–structure (Mukherjee 1963a), in the third article it has been discussed in relation to rural society (Mukherjee 1959), and in the fourth article it has been examined in relation to what he calls it agricultural serfdom (Mukherjee 1963b).

Apart from these scholars on agrarian history of India there are a few others that have been hitherto omitted from most of the studies that appeared even recently. A few of the prominent but neglected works on agrarian history of India are: Karuna M. Mukherjee (1977), Radha and Rajat Ray (1975), Ratna Ray (1974), Drijadas Datta (1914), Romesh Dutt (1903), and C.S. Srinivaschari (1949). However, apart from a few historians and their works, there had been a few studies of villages – these studies include the socio – economic profile of the village from anthropological point of view. A few village studies and their reference as well as analysis could make the understanding of agrarian relations better. Some of these village studies were consulted and given due attention and interpreted from a sociological perspective. A few of these relevant village studies, surveys and investigation of records have been conducted by anthropologists and sociologists and economic historians like : Rudra Dutt Singh (1956), P.C. Joshi (1963), D.D. Kosambi (1947) A.M. Shah and others (1963), and Daniel and Alice Thorner (1957).

An attempt had been made to identify and highlight the importance of the research material which could have not been used meaningfully so far by the social scientists. But as the researches on agrarian relations in particular have taken the interdisciplinary sort of a status, it is therefore, neither desired nor useful to keep ourselves away from whatever is going on in economics and in history. Now on the other hand, there are conceptual bearings to make an analysis of **Zamindari** and **Ryotwari** system in two different parts namely Calcutta and Madras Presidency respectively. It has been tried to be examined whether inequalities leading to class relations are found in each case or not. If yes, then the hypothesis developed earlier that class relations were likely to emerge in **Zamindari** as well as **Ryotwari** areas, because they had been the two parts of a similar programme and that was to carry on the British colonial interests forward. Agrarian class structure of Bengal and Madras have been put to a systematic analysis.

3. Agrarian Relations in Zamindari Areas

An effort has been made here to examine the nature and type of the agrarian social structure of Bengal and elsewhere during the British rule, in a sociological perspective. B.H. Baden-Powell who has written a considerable lot on agrarian conditions and village economy in India, narrated about Bengal also. It seems necessary to understand the agrarian social structure of Bengal, because every other form of **Zamindari** system had developed either on the basis of it or got modified or even attempted to be altered altogether. B.H. Baden-Powell (1895;389), accepts, “Bengal system is the parent of all others”. There is a need to understand it in a proper perspective so that the other types to be discussed at the various stages of the present work, could not only be distinguished from it but also seen in association with it. This approach could be brought near to Max Weber’s ideal type construction. Although not attempted from that angle,

but effort could be made to construct the ideal type of Zamindari system in Bengal and to explain the regional variations from it in different individual cases. It could be a typical sociological approach to study agrarian relations. Or, it could be another way of engaging ourselves in sociology of agrarian relations. B.H. Baden-Powell (1972) in his another writing says that **Zamindari** system, during the days of Muhammadan times was known as “aggregate of rights”. It had the support of the traditional system of values according to which **Zamindari** system was known as superior ownership of all the entire domain. And it all rested upon the traditional and customary notion according to which land belonged to state (King) and no single individual had a right to own it (1972 : 208). It could well be considered as a royal or supreme right.

B.H. Baden-Powell (1972 : 300) has referred to a distinction between two types of grants – one known as **birtiya** and the other as **Zamindari**. These rights, apart from its legal aspect, seem to have had some customary presence also. **Birtiya** used to be such sort of a grant which was given as a customary mark for subsistence. **Birtiya** has been referred to as one who receives the birth – a term which has its reference either in Hindi or prakrit language meaning subsistence or maintenance. However, **Birtiya** had been sanctioned by the estate as a part of royal grain-share to provide subsistence and there were some conflicts over this. But apart from this the king or **raja** used to grant **Zamindari**. B.H. Baden-Powell (1972) emphasises on the “collectivity” that was known as **Zamindari**. The share of grain went to the state and **Zamindar** took his share of dues. In other words, the King granted two sorts of land rights one being given to those who had something religious to do. The **birtiya** right might have gone to **Brahmins** in lieu of their religious duties. Its historical relevance is important from the point of view of what is happening in the agrarian situation today. History, it seems could become relevant if that might explain the present day phenomenon. The land granted in the name of temple might have served some purpose in history but several issues of aggression have been noted as they got built-up around them. The other right in land, namely **Zamindari** also had its significance, it later became almost a hereditary right. The village had been converted into what Baden-Powell (1972) calls it a “joint-or” “landlord-village”.

B.H. Baden-Powell has (1972) has tried to clarify various categories included in the Zamindari system. Although it originated in Bengal, it was continuously improvised by the British Government and the local situations also compelled the system to work somewhat differently. That is why perhaps in Oudh and in the N.W.P we found a somewhat different conception of **Zamindari** system from the one that we had in Bengal.

However, Baden-Powell has referred to the following four categories of landholdings related to **zamindari** system.

(i) The term zamindari in itself could lead to some misconceptions till it does not indicate the sole or joint sort or rights. According to Baden-Powell it seems necessary to distinguish between what he calls it **khalis** (sole) and **mushtarka** (joint) which refer to a “sole landlord” & “undivided body” respectively.

(ii) Seemingly inferior to zamindari right there was another one known as **pattidari**, which was based upon ancestral or sometimes legal shares.

(iii) Another one known as imperfect **pattidari** in which in a majority of cases two portions (of land) were shared in different ways. This sort of a situation demands an attempt to examine the data more closely and carefully, due to its possible theoretical implications at later stages. It could well put a man into two or more different situations and his actions might vary accordingly. The facts of history could well indicate towards the difficulties which we might face if we attempt to classify the rural population into various fixed sort of categories. At this moment it could be pointed out that even during the British period it was difficult to put the agrarian population into certain fixed categories and this had its own implications for the analysis of the agrarian social structure of contemporary Indian situations.

(iv) A typical sort of an institution known as **bhaichara** has also been referred which existed in and around Punjab. It meant that land had been held in possession by the villagers on the basis of almost “equal lot”. These factual information could lead towards some serious thinking at the theoretical and conceptual level. At least two such implications could be referred here and before drawing any concluding remarks, there should be a proper examination of this institution of **bhaichara** as a phenomenon and also an attempt be made towards its conceptualization. First, if **bhaichara** has any such meaning as it has been referred by Baden-Powell, then that area (Punjab) at least must exhibit some characteristics of a more egalitarian sort of a distribution of land. And if such sort of a hypothesis has any validity, then areas in and around Punjab must have had co-operation among the equal ones and also a greater prosperity than other parts of India. The very notion of equality as is reflected through its culture needs a separate examination. In other words, the culture of equality must have had somethings in common at the level of its agrarian base also. Two, alternatively, then there should be a less disparity between the landowning and landless people in comparison to other parts of the country. If the whole of the Punjab had a culture of equality, then its agrarian social-structure must have had its roots. The whole phenomenon of a reform in the form of a religious movement could be a result of agrarian egalitarianism. However, before making any concluding remarks on Punjab, there is a need to collect some more data. But on the basis of the historical material provided by Baden-Powell certain sociological insights could be developed which point out that even today in Punjab **zamindar** does not have any derogatory meaning. In Punjab even today the term zamindar means the person who holds land or the one who is a landowner.

Baden-Powell (1972) has also pointed out towards the existence of two sorts of systems which could exist in the same village or estate. For example, it is possible that “imperfect **Pattidari**” and “imperfect **bhaichara**” could exist in one single village. In the entire north India a joint-ownership sort of a concept was attempted. But Baden-Powell (1972) points it out that land-rights were not very clearly defined in the N.W.P. as they were in Bengal. Similarly, the fixation of any period which could be an equivalent to that of Permanent Settlement of Bengal had made no difference. Eventually, neither joint-ownership nor fixation of a period for tax made any substantial difference (Baden-Powell, 1972 : 426-27).

In fact, in the northern part of India, class-relations had developed as consequence of the British agrarian policy introduced by the way of zamindari system. Relatively small differences in the zamindari areas of Bengal and Oudh and N.W.P. supports our earlier hypothesis that the Britishers created several sorts of systems just in order to fulfil their colonial interests. Entire

north India was converted into the land of landlords and agricultural labourers with a variety of inferior rights in land in between the two. Apart from the sources used by Baden-Powell it could be more relevant to examine the phenomenon of agrarian inequalities in the zamindari areas from certain other scholarly works.

Agrarian relations, particularly the agrarian social structure of Bengal has been analysed by Ramkrishna Mukharjee (1957). Ramkrishna Mukharjee's class analysis of rural Bengal is based upon the secondary sources of data and has the merits of its own, particularly from the point of view of macro-sociology. In fact, Mukherjee's class analysis could have been a source of inspiration for many other studies and researches. But unfortunately, no serious attempts have been made in that direction. Studies in sociology and social anthropology of some village like Rampura (Srinivas 1952) and Shamirpet (Dube, 1955) along with a few others went in other direction. The village studies which appeared in 1952 and 1955 were responsible for not only what they dealt with or the perspective which they adopted, but also for the future course of the development of sociology in India. But the work of Ramkrishna Mukherjee which came out in 1957 did not generate further studies based upon his model of analysis or framework of enquiry. But it could be relevant to point it out here that the time has come now to examine the whole question from the sociology of knowledge perspective.

Even though Ramkrishna Mukharjee's research work on class relations in rural Bengal did not lead towards any similar study elsewhere, but despite several limitations of this work, it could still be considered to be an important landmark for examining the agrarian question. Ramkrishna Mukharjee's study exhibits certain merits of its own. To mention these merits of the study briefly, it could safely be said that Mukharjee's work examines the secondary data, attempts to respond to questions concerned with "macro-sociology" and moreover is an endeavor that examines social change and wields a proper perspective. Mukharjee's class analysis typically begins with the examination of various categories of households of Bengal on the basis of per capita income and this data includes 13,645 families (1957 : 3-6). Any such division of society which begins with the distribution of per capita income involves certain difficulties if associated with the Marxist perspective. But the statistical data related to 13,645 house-holds and their systematic presentation and analysis certainly reflects the need to examine various issues concerned with the rural Bengal. Mukherjee divides these households into five categories on the basis of per capita income. He later developed nine socio-economic categories on the basis of it. These nine socio-economic categories were: (i) Landlord, (ii) Supervisory farmers, (iii) Cultivators, (iv) Sharecroppers, (v) Agricultural Labourers, (vi) Artisans, (vii) Traders, (viii) Service holders and (ix) Others.

The important point of this classification happens to be that these categories have been constructed out of the empirical data. But it still remains to be examined whether these categories were mutually exclusive or there had been mixed sort of a phenomenon. Mukherjee (1957) later constructed what he calls it three "classes" on the basis of this classification. He included the occupational groups of landholders and supervisory farmers in what he calls it Class I, cultivators along with artisans and traders formed Class II, and the rest sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, service holders and others comprise Class III.

One more point needs the appreciation of Mukherjee's work. He not only classified the

population of rural Bengal into what he called it three classes, but also attempted to look into the phenomenon from a history of classes in rural Bengal and the notion of historicity had its own importance. In the area of theoretical orientations the writings that include history has its own place. Scholars like C. Wright Mills (1903) have appreciated the works of Herbert Spencer, E.A. Ross, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim, Thorstein Veble, Karl Max and Max Weber, just because they included and dealt with the problems concerned with the historicity of the phenomenon along with its conceptualization. C. Wright Mills (1959) has argued strongly in favour of the study of history, along with biography and society which if put together in a meaningful way, comprise what he calls it “the sociological imagination.”

Ramkrishna Mukharjee argues that during the British rule Class I and class III developed at the expense of class II. Meaning thereby a progress somewhat similar to the polarization of productive forces as described by Karl Marx. According to Mukharjee (1957) Class II comprising mainly of self-cultivating peasants was largely converted into the class of those who merely sold out their agricultural labour.

Mukherjee’s analysis of class relations in rural Bengal seems to be consistent with our earlier developed hypothesis that during the British rule several mechanisms were developed by them to fulfil their colonial interests. And the zamindari system was one of them. Before the British rule, the land was held in the possession rather than its ownership. The concept of the ownership of land and its possible alienation were the new phenomenon which were hitherto unknown in the Indian history. F.G. Bailey (1958) has also referred to the same phenomenon and inquired the questions like why land had come to the market and what were its social consequences. Ownership of land was certainly superior sort of right in land rather than its mere possession. This right to own as well as sell land has altered the basic feature of agrarian relations in India. From sociological point of view it could be described as an institutional change. Moreover, the growth of what Mukharjee calls it Class I and Class III at the expanse of Class II clearly points out that the British rulers created structure which somehow got legitimacy, as it went hand in hand with the traditional hierarchy. It could however, be speculated that the nature and extent of the earlier existing hierarchy was suddenly altered by the introduction of variety of new rights created in land. The agrarian social structure of Bengal was full of inequalities during the British rule.

At this stage, one note of caution might be added. When a reference had been made towards the process of polarization, it meant only the gradual dissolution of the self-producing peasantry into the classes of non-producing **zamindar** and bulk of peasantry being reduced to the status of agricultural labour. However, certain precautions are needed when it is compared with polarization of society into two great classes as discussed by Karl Marx. Here, there was no contradiction between Class I and Class III as comparable to the one between bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But on the other hand the very growth of Class I and Class III was the part and parcel of a big programme, in which the whole of India was colonised. Class II and Class III were exploited by Class I but at the same time, if put together all of them were exploited by the British rulers. While analysing these sort of questions, it seems worthwhile to examine them not only from the point of view of agrarian inequalities in Bengal or elsewhere, but to locate and study the whole question from the point of view of colonialism and imperialism.

Yet another comment on the work of Ramkrishna Mukherjee is required here. He says that before the British rule Class II was the “only producing type” and land was possessed and not owned in the present sense of the term. Land was in plenty and land alienations were relatively unknown. At this stage, it seems necessary to point out that from the Marxist point of view it does not look proper to argue that one class (Class II) was the only producing type. In the Marxist analysis, one class does not mean anything, therefore, while referring to the work of Mukherjee this weakness of the approach could also be pointed out. Not in any attributional sense a class has any meaning till it has been referred in the context of some other class. In fact till now, except Mukherjee’s analysis we have not come across any such study in which a single class is supposed to be known as representative of a society at a particular point of time. Neither the studies like that of W. Lloyd Warner (1960) nor that of any Marxist Scholar⁷⁰ (Kolakowski 1978) has referred to such sort of conceptualization. But if we remove the term Class II from the analysis of Mukherjee and accept the other part of it that self working peasantry was the only producing type before the British rule in India, then this sort of a characterization could be brought nearer to the analysis of Marx. Marx has talked about the existence of such societies which were not characterised like the western type of societies and they existed without class-contradictions Marx has referred to such societies of the east as based upon asiatic mode of production. In short, asiatic mode of production refers to the situation where all peasant producers have submitted to the King, which collects the revenue from them (Bottomore 1985). This position of Marx could resemble to the one as narrated by Ramkrishna Mukherjee, but as far as the question of calling it Class II is concerned, the present author does not agree with it. On the other hand, scholars like Romila Thapar (1979) have questioned the very notion of asiatic mode of production as well as that of oriental despotism developed by Karl Wittfogel.⁷³ She is of the opinion that Marx himself at the later stage of his academic career had expressed doubts over the issues around the non-existence of private property altogether in Asiatic societies. A reference could also be made to the works done by some other scholars like A.R. Desai (1976), who have referred to the emergence of a parasitic sort of a non-producing class of zamindars which grew at the cost of actual cultivators of land.

The point that emerges out of various studies on the agrarian conditions is that zamindari system of land tenure was one such mechanism through which the Britishers fulfilled their colonial interests. The more relevant questions could be such which concern with the exploitation of the entire economy and the studies on agrarian relations require to re-examine the issues like imperialism to which the whole political economy of India got subjugated. For the present study it seems that it would suffice here to state that the zamindari system produced and had led towards the development of class relations in the agrarian social structure. But peasants did not accept these conditions uncritically and throughout the British period they had revolted here and there. All this required some serious studies of peasant movements in India during the British rule. One such study of peasant movement has been conducted by D.N. Dhanaagre (1986), it is based on the secondary sources of data. Studies like this could at later stages help in the conceptualization of peasantry under various conditions especially under the colonial rule.

4. Agrarian Relations in Ryotwari Areas

In the present section an attempt has been made to trace out the agrarian social structure where ryotwari system of land tenure was introduced. **Ryotwari** system of land tenure is often compared and contrasted with the **zamindari** system and also suggested as an important improvement over latter. **Ryotwari** system is said to be more egalitarian in nature, because unlike **zamindari** system there was no intermediary between the self-cultivating peasant and the state. Under **ryotwari** sort of a land tenure peasant was directly responsible to the state for the payment of land revenue. **Ryotwari** and **Zamindari** land tenure systems are often juxtaposed against each other to refer that they had represented egalitarian and non-egalitarian value systems respectively. But the hypothesis developed at the earlier stages of this work was that for the Britishers it was important to fulfill their colonial interests. It has been seen in the previous section too that for a proper understanding of the agrarian question there is a need to look beyond the notion of the then existing agrarian social structure. If, our hypothesis stands valid then, even in ryotwari system of land tenure there exists a possibility of class relations. The argument is precisely like this : if the British period of the Indian history had anything to do with colonial interests, then they were expected to invent various mechanisms to fulfill their colonial interests. **Ryotwari** system was also a part and parcel of their colonial mission. It could therefore, be argued logically that class relations, agrarian inequalities and contradictions should exist in **ryotwari** areas too. To test this logical possibility an effort has been made to trace out the agrarian social structure of Madras Presidency and also elsewhere where **ryotwari** system of land tenure was introduced. An effort has been made to bring out empirical facts on the basis of secondary sources for that purpose.

B.H. Baden-Powell (1974) has accepted that ryotwari sort of the land tenure was fundamentally different from zamindari type as there was not any evidence available that could support the notion of the joint-ownership of land. According to him, if the land was in scarcity then some of the brothers sold out their land and settled elsewhere. It points out clearly that there were hardly any case of joint-ownership and it could be taken as a denial of the **zamindari** sort of a land tenure. This in fact supports the point that at least to some extent intermediaries were removed between cultivating peasant and the state.

Although spelled out in such a way the views of Baden-Powell have been contradicted later when some more data came and put to analysis. In the opinion of Robert Eric Frykenberg and Nilmoni Mukherjee (1979),⁷⁷ “**mirasi** rights” existed in the **ryotwari** areas. These **mirasi** rights were confined to the elite section of the society, particularly to the Brahmins. A reference has been made by the authors to the debate that went on between two British administrators namely Munro and Reed. Munro was of the opinion that the question concerning “**mirasi** rights” should have been dealt with firmly whereas Reed was of the opinion that even if equality had been arrived at some traditional or customary practices should not be neglected. The point of debate had been that Munro wanted equality in principle as well as in practice, whereas Reed was of the opinion that if that was done some tradition-led forces could revolt against the Britishers. Later Munro also accepted some points raised by Reed and conceded to them. And in this way “**mirasi** rights” loaded with customary flavour were introduced and from our point of view it seems important to examine the interaction of the land tenure system with the traditional social structure.

The British East India Company was not worried to give certain concessions as the traditional customary rights to the Hindus, so far their interests were not hampered. Frykenberg and Mukherjee (1979) have pointed out that this policy to give concessions to the Brahmins had its own consequences. It led towards the “idleness” rather than “enterprise and initiative” among them. In this way class-relations began to appear as it led towards the emergence of a class which depended upon the labour of other classes and it had tradition based legitimacy. Additionally, the concept of **Jamabandi** had also come into being which was almost equivalent to that of **Mahalwari** or joint ownership in the northern India. This cluster of non-working people was most unenterprising, unimaginative and consumption-oriented rather than adopting progressive ways to make some improvements in technology or other allied areas. It has also been pointed out clearly that according to current point of view “village leadership was not eliminated as an intermediary group” (Frykenberg and Mukherjee 1979 : 240).

Another scholarly contribution by Daniel Thorner (1980) needs a mention here. He has also accepted the existence of superior (**mirasi**) rights in land. Since the British rulers had a bad experience of **zamindari** system in Bengal they wanted to do away with it in Madras. But due to the assistance of **mirasi** or superior rights in land, ultimately it was neither landlord nor individual peasant but village community which was made responsible to pay the land revenue. Traditional social structure got itself manifested in another form during the British rule. Dharma Kumar (1984) has referred to the nature and extent of land revenue taken by the state. Dharma Kumar has clarified the significance of dry and wet land and differential amount of land revenue which was paid by the tenant. According to her in the case of dry land it was one half of the total produce and in the case of wet land it was three fifth of the total produce. In South India and particularly in Madras presidency the distinction between dry and wet land has had its roots in history and its significance could not be denied even today. Some sociological studies later used this dichotomy for the analysis of villages in South India.

The notion of **ryotwari** system of land tenure had met with some serious setbacks. It could however, be pointed out that the creation of ryotwari-system could be seen as a response to the critique of **Zamindari**-system. It did not originate from the soil of South India. And if materialistic interpretation could be relied upon then the very existence of inequalities, drawing legitimacy from tradition should have some roots in the infrastructure. Traditional social structure and values and the inequalities which they exhibited might have had its roots in the agrarian social structure.

The most significant contribution from our point of view has perhaps come from the study conducted by Andre Beteille (1979). He has referred to three types of inequalities in modern times. These inequalities are like : (i) between landlord and tenant, (ii) between landowner and wage labourer and (iii) between large-medium and small-proprietors. Referring to traditional system of agrarian conditions, he has pointed out that three sorts of institutions had been working there. These traditional institutions were : **waram**, **kuttahai** and **pannaiyal** According to **waram** a fixed share and in the case of **kuttahai** earlier amount agreed upon is paid to be made to the agricultural labour. Beteille says that **waram** system of land relations has become almost obsolete these days. But its historical existence had its own importance. Apart from Andre Beteille another study seems worth mentioning at this stage. Kathleen Gough has conducted a study in a village

in Tanjore district and has made an analysis of disputes in the village. Her study has its own place in the history of village studies in India, its contents are widely known and does not need any further reference here. To conclude, it could be said that some more insightful questions need to be attempted. Agrarian social structure in India during the British rule had the following four categories, (i) Landlords (ii) Peasant Proprietors, (iii) Sharecroppers and (iv) Agricultural Labourer.

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