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STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN AGRARIAN SOCIETY

A study of Southern Vizagapatam, 1770-1900 (Research report)

This is a survey of a research project which I have worked on for several years. The major purpose of the study is to describe the conditions of peasant society in a particular area of India at two definite periods of time. The area is the Southern Division of Vizagapatam district in Andhra Pradesh and the periods are the last 30 years of the 18th century and the last 30 years of the 19th century. During the first of these periods peasant society was struggling for survival under the strains of changing monsoons, political upheaval and heavy taxation, and as a consequence of these strains the peasants adapted their efforts to a positive land-labour ratio. In the second period at the end of the 19th century conditions had changed, war had been eliminated and competition for power and influence had found its way into different patterns of behaviour. Changing monsoons, however, were still matters of strain and survival and the land-labour ratio had changed to the point where population made heavy demands on the utilization of existing resources.

As research on so-called traditional societies has progressed, it has been increasingly realized that these were even more crisis-prone than the modern world, which is always so apt to misuse this metaphor. Even if life was half as short to the Andhra peasant of this period than it is today and only spanned some 20 to 30 years he was unlikely not to have experienced a period of serious depression in the wake of failing monsoons and or a break-down in the political or administrative framework of society. As the old Telugu proverb so aptly puts it: rather the fruits of the earth than the rewards of the powerful. Just as the study of other pre-industrialized societies has suggested, it

would amount to stupidity not to accept that Indian peasant society existed in a state of flux and that the way in which economic, political and social life was organized was closely related to an assessment of the dangers and difficulties which were apt to occur within this particular environment. Before I begin to talk about the content, methodology and source material of the work, I should therefore like to outline the major strains to which this society was exposed.

The major strain on Indian society at any period of time is the unpredictability of the monsoon. According to area, soil conditions and population pressure it attains proportions and at certain intervals in time and space reaches heights which no human foresight can cope with. It is a major determinant, and heavily responsible for periods of plenty and periods of scarcity. It also acts in a destructive manner on the system of communications and the formation of capital. It is partly responsible for the isolation of human settlements, thereby contributing to a particular type of social organization. By distributing the bounties of nature unequally from one year to another it places a heavy burden on those who are supposed to administer the surplus, and a temptation to appropriate too large a share to those who carry influence as intermediaries between local society and the super-structure, thereby inhibiting capital formation. The administrative structure which we encounter particularly in pre-British India or in Indian-administered territories was partly constructed to cope with this situation. It consisted of a system of checks and balances which often broke down because of the everlasting conflict between short-run and long-term gains. That the monsoon acts directly on the formation of fixed capital is aptly illustrated by the wholesale moving of villages at regularly occurring shifts in the course of rivers. This happened quite often in the 18th century and should not be considered as uneconomic behavior, but it gives an interesting example of a society which had to adapt its efforts to particular circumstances over which they had only small influence.

The second and in the late 18th century endemic strain was war. Like the rain, its consequences could fall in either heavy or light showers. It may be vain to try to explain the heterogeneous character of the Indian body politic, but just as it is useful geographically to distinguish between nuclear zones, route zones and zones of relative

isolation, it is useful to distinguish between the rich rice-growing alluvial tracts and the surrounding hilly and mountainous country. It is obvious that the surplus created in the rice-growing areas provided the basis for a political structure which unless it was powerful and always on the alert stood in danger of being overturned by more vigorous neighbours. The alluvial tracts, the hilly areas and the mountainous ones were often intertwined in a pattern which made stable alliances difficult, even within fairly well established territorial units. An interesting account of these problems has been provided by Professor Bernard Cohn in his article "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: the Banaras Region"¹. This article makes it clear that political alliances at almost all levels of the hierarchy were fluid. In the area I am dealing with French and British penetration turned these shifting alliances into outright warfare with heavy casualties, bitter memories and much physical hardship.

The third strain which I should like to mention is that of population growth. Here of course I have to enter a note of warning. What I have in mind is of course not the modern type of population growth, primarily created by the fall in death rates. What I am thinking of is the population growth which occurred at certain intervals because of a series of good harvests or perhaps rather because of the absence or passing occurrence of failing monsoons combined with the elimination of open warfare. We are back to the old problem of classical economy which deals with the relation between resources and population. The Indian economy in the second half of the 19th century has a lot to contribute to this discussion and I hope to be able to demonstrate that population growth was a strain on Indian society long before the eradication of malaria and the introduction of modern medicine. Why, one may ask, should these obvious influences be made so much of? Because they serve as a useful introduction to the problems I am dealing with, and for the simple reason that many historians mention them, but fail to measure them, or measure their impact on society in a given area and in a given period of time. They should be measured and they should be weighted along with other influences which had an impact on agrarian society.

We can now proceed to the table of contents which is detailed in Appendix 1. Since monsoon failure in both the periods that I am trying to describe in some detail is the stress situation par excellence, I shall devote a full chapter to the geography and ecology of the area, so that the natural resources on which the human settlements had to rely are fully comprehended. From that I shall pass on to a description of the permanent features exhibited in the organisation of village society. Then come the pivotal chapters which contain a description of peasant society at the end of the 18th century and peasant society at the end of the 19th century. A detailed account of peasant society at two periods in time with a gap of 70 years and with no attempt to interconnect them may seem a somewhat unorthodox procedure. It is, however, deliberate and raises some questions of methodology which I should like to deal with here. History is a strange discipline, which suffers from the fact that important evidence may not be recorded in the source material that we have to rely on for information. To this may be added the danger of misinterpreting evidence because we are not familiar with the basic structure of a society. If we just carry on chronologically through periods with scanty information and periods of abundant information the risk of misinterpretation increases. It is important to go in depth where it is possible to do so and try to extract knowledge of fundamental features. For the two periods I have mentioned above the source material is fairly abundant and I hope it will be possible to reconstruct not only the formal frameworks of society, economics and politics, but also to reach an understanding of the manner in which they worked. If this is done misinterpretations and bias may be avoided. What I am frightened of is of course to write yet another story of the British Raj, as seen by the Raj, or the servants of the Raj. What I hope to do is to relegate the British presence in this area to its proper proportions, to an important, but perhaps not a vital role, in the lives of the Andhra peasants. Incidentally the feringhees (the foreigners as they were called) may be looked upon with more sympathy, perhaps with a certain amount of charity, if they are put in their place like other humans subject to forces and fortunes beyond their control. I am of course not going to leave a gap of 70 years empty. When the two chapters on peasant society have been finished I shall try to provide the missing link by chapters which deal with changes in economic opportunities, changes in the over-

head structure, changes within village society and changes in fortunes between various types of villages. This survey will draw heavily on the research material which I have collected for the years 1800-1870.

On the analytical level I shall try to make use of models borrowed from the social sciences, economics in particular. What is a model? Joan Robinson and John Eatwell have explained the uses of models as "extracting the bare essential elements of a problem, cutting out all irrelevant details, and examining the interaction between its parts".² How relevant are models of this type in the area and the historical setting I am dealing with? I believe they are highly relevant. By consensus among economists David Ricardo has been given the place of honour as the founding father of model building in economics. In chapter II of the Principles of Economy and Taxation, which is the famous chapter 'On Rent', Ricardo gives his example of the different outturn of produce on land of three different categories of quality with a given quantity of capital and labour. As population increases, land of an inferior quality is brought into cultivation and we have to reckon with the result of diminishing returns.³ A child who has grown up in an Indian village has a fair and practical knowledge of the idea of diminishing returns in agriculture, he knows the difference in outturn of an acre of cultivated land with a given quantity of capital and labour, only he will probably replace Ricardo's categories of land quality by access to irrigation. The differences in outturn on land close to an outlet of water, on land at the end of a system of canals, on land irrigated by wells, and finally on dry land which has to rely on occasional rainfall, are conspicuous. Again in the words of a Telugu proverb, "The man possessing land near the irrigation source will, even with a slight effort, realize more than one who works hard on his land at a distance from it". An attempt to quantify these differences provides us with interesting information on possibilities of capital investment in this particular environment. From the figures which exist in the taxation records (1889) it looks as if a change from dry cultivation to well-water cultivation implied a doubling in the quantity of capital, a doubling in the quantity of labour and a doubling in the quantity of outturn. In other words, leaving aside the question of a more even production curve over the years, there would be no long-term gains on capital outlay, only the reward of accommo-

dating an enlarged labour force. But a change from dry to wet canal irrigated land looks as if it would have provided a 25-30% increase in outturn on equal amounts of capital and labour. Hence after a fairly heavy initial investment, there seems to have been a possibility of a long-term gain. Models like those made by Ricardo were made exactly to analyse the type of situation with which I am faced in my research material. But models of a less stringent character can also be used for analytical and illustrative purposes. I shall outline three, one which I am only in the process of constructing and two which I have utilized with some benefit.

In any predominantly agrarian economy one should try to make out a list of harvest years covering as many years as possible. A very rough manner of doing this would be to divide them up into bumper harvests, good years, medium years, bad years and years of scarcity. Where produce records are available this can be done with ease, but often we will have to rely on descriptive accounts, or on meteorological data compared with a detailed model of the agricultural cycle, which shows periods of sowing, transplanting and harvesting of the various crops. The value of the harvest model is not only that it characterizes each year, but that it presents the sequences. One year of plenty can make up for a year of scarcity, while two years of scarcity, or just two bad years followed by a failure of the monsoon means famine conditions, migration and loss of labour and capital. In Appendix II I have tried my hand at such a model, which in a rough manner makes it clear why the period from 1836-1846 amounts to a serious economic depression, the period from 1847-1858 to a period of real prosperity, whereas both the 1860s and 1870s can be described as periods of heavy fluctuations. It is obvious that other factors capable of relieving or deepening a depression should be added. It is important to look at income distribution, exchange possibilities, taxation and price level. A more sophisticated model can be constructed to weigh these matters; but in terms of importance they do not compete with the monsoon. They too are variable. A depression brought about by failing monsoons could be partially relieved by favourable export conditions for handicrafts and financial measures such as immediate tax relief. It could also be accelerated by adverse export opportunities and unrelieved tax pressure. During a major famine in the late 18th century the

number of weavers and looms increased, during the famine years in the late 19th century the weavers were thrown out of their occupation and pauperized. In the early 19th century tax relief was immediately granted during a harvest failure, by the middle of the 19th century heavy importations of corn seem to have taken its place.

At the political level it is important to establish who was the formal head, the person or agent invested with power, how large and effective was his power, to whom did he delegate it, for what purposes was it used. This under Indian conditions is perhaps always the most difficult question to answer, because more often than not power is subtly divided, the formal sphere and the actual sphere of power not coinciding. They can probably best be depicted as two intersecting circles. The agents of power or, as we may call them, the intermediaries are subject to different measures of supervision and work for different purposes. Who were they and how did they function? This is part of my study on which I still need further and more detailed information, before I can construct a model which could serve for further analysis.

Despite that, there is one point which I should like to make. It is easy, perhaps too easy, to see the superstructure as the exploiters of the base, and the administrative machinery as the means by which the surplus product was extracted from the producers. It is quite clear that a surplus produce was transferred from the base to the superstructure; but it is important to make clear that the superstructure was indispensable to the base for a variety of services. Apart from extracting a large surplus, the greater part of which was consumed by the intermediaries and those in command, it offered credit, redistributed part of the surplus and invested in irrigation works. It could thereby assure harmony between a large number of local societies which left on their own would probably have suffered from even greater hardships. When acting in a judicial capacity it strove to keep the balance between various occupations, and judgements did not automatically come out in favour of those most highly placed in the hierarchy. I am not arguing in favour of an abstract social ideal, but in a period and an environment which is apt to see maximization of economic opportunity in terms of competition I am drawing attention to the fact that in a rice cultivating area fed by monsoon rain a flexible administrative system which offered credit and redistributed gains in the right place

and at the right moment would be capable of a higher level of general production and productivity than a fragmented and rigid system could do. By saying so I am by no means going to deny the existence of a conflict of interests between the peasant and the king, to put it in simplified Indian terms, or between various groups within village society.

Finally there is the relation of men and resources. Do we have to confine ourselves to the old land-labour ratio? Or can we construct a model of further sophistication? I am thinking in terms of a resource-balance model. Let us take a simple equation:

$$Y = S_{pr} + S_{pub} + C_{pr} + C_{pub}$$

Here Y stands for production, S_{pr} for the saving of local peasant society, S_{pub} for the saving made by the overhead structure and re-directed to the base as *taqāvi* (advances in money, seed or cattle before the season of cultivation), *marāmmat* (upkeep of irrigation system) and the building of new irrigation works. C_{pr} is the consumption of local peasant society and C_{pub} the consumption of the overhead structure. This is a very simple resource-balance model. Perhaps we should try to expand it with a mind to the particular society we are dealing with:

$$(Y_{sar} + Y_{maun})_{agr} + Y_{ind} = S_{pr} + C_{pr} + T_{sar} + T_{maun} + T_{ind}$$

In this equation Y_{sar} stands for the produce from those lands which bore the full impact of government taxation (sarkar land), Y_{maun} stands for the produce from lightly assessed land which was either occupied by village servants or in the control of landed gentry or civil servants called inamdars. Y_{ind} stands for industrial production, generally textiles. T_{sar} stands for the tax levied on so-called government lands, meaning only fully taxable lands, T_{maun} for the quit rent paid on the lightly assessed land. If Y can be measured either in terms of physical output or in terms of money, if taxation is known either as proportions of produce or in terms of money and if S_{pr} can be approximated by some knowledge of capital required for production, then some idea of the division of the resources may be gained, even if the size of consumption can only be approximated. Some knowledge of the goods which were free and an attempt to quantify them must of course be added to the sum of

private consumption. The central idea in the construction of a resource balance model in this historical setting is not to make an accurate statistical exercise, but to work out proportional relationships. An important point is that they differ from area to area and from village to village. Let me give an example. The use of this model has drawn my attention to the uneven distribution of lightly taxed lands which were left in the hands of the local gentry. This is almost always to be found in purely rice-cultivating villages, but even within these it is unequally distributed and it is possible to place particular villages on the map where gentry interests were predominant. Looking at the map I began to wonder whether they were there to protect the communication system, but this was not the case, the common characteristic being in fact that they were placed at particularly important and vulnerable points in the irrigation system, where control of and reinvestment in sluices were essential. It could be argued that a study of the distribution of the lightly-taxed land would have led to this discovery anyhow. This is perfectly true, but proportional relationships are not always so easy to cope with unless they are exhibited in a formal model.

We shall now look at the evidence at my disposal. Although this is only an informal paper I should like to express my gratitude to the three major depositories of records which I have drawn on. These are the State Archives of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, the Madras Record Office, Tamilnadu, and the India Office Library and Records in London. They have all shown a spirit of co-operation and a measure of courtesy for which I am truly grateful. The size of my material and some of its characteristics can be gathered from the graph I have made in Appendix III. The geographical area I am dealing with consists of approximately 200 settlements or villages in the Southern part of Vizagapatam district. For both the periods 1770-1800 and 1870-1900 information is available for individual villages containing information on number of inhabitants, caste distribution, area under cultivation, cultivation pattern, computed value of produce and the incidence of taxation. How far this statistical material can be relied upon poses a major question. I am inclined to believe that some of it errs in the direction of understatement and other parts can be shown

to be far too optimistic in their assessment of available resources, these biases being fairly easily detected. None of the information can be utilized at the level at which we are used to rely on modern statistical evidence for descriptive purposes. It is valuable, however, in throwing light on the working of institutions and in showing trends. Two examples may illustrate what I am saying. In the late 18th century agricultural labour and capital were mobile. Peasants could proceed to villages other than their own and by applying their work and capital reach a higher level of output and profit than they could have done at home. It is one thing to read in the records that peasants could be divided into several categories which entailed different rewards and different obligations, quite another to see from the statistics that this division was actually utilized to extract a higher surplus from the available resources, in other words an attempt to maximize profits. Secondly, by looking at variations in produce over a series of years in particular villages it is possible to work out a map of famine vulnerability which bears some relation to migration and uneven growth patterns of population.

The statistics have obviously not been collected with the care which modern scholars of social sciences would bestow on data collection and since some of these statistics were used for taxation purposes we have to add the probability that errors were deliberately introduced; but just a look at the categories used is of interest in itself. Thus it is possible to work out particular patterns of caste composition in villages with different production patterns. At the end of the 18th century fairly large dry villages often harboured considerable groups of craftsmen like weavers or blacksmiths and other low caste groups. These are also to be found in the market towns, but are exceptional in large wet-cultivation villages unless these were in the immediate neighbourhood of much-frequented roads. The silversmith or several families of silversmiths are on the other hand mostly to be found in fairly large villages where wet-cultivation was predominant, again with the reservation that proximity to a high-road or a harbour may reverse the pattern. Social characteristics can be combined with economic ones, and if this is so the historian is not altogether lost, despite the frailty of the statistical evidence.

The political scene is, as I have repeatedly stated, the most diffi-

cult one to penetrate. The villages that I am studying remained under the control of a few, but fairly effective, renters who were responsible either to local zamindars or to the Raja of Vizianagram up to the end of the 18th century. The villages were then directly controlled by a British collector for a few years and finally (1802) put up for sale by the British Government. Some of the allotments in which they had been divided were too heavily assessed, but they were all bought by the Raja of Vizianagram as a matter not of creating liquidity, but of retaining respect. Later some of them were resold to local gentry and to the Raja's banker who happened to be the son of a famous dubash (interpreter) to a British chief at the factory of Vizagapatam. Others reverted to the British Government. The dubash family got hold of the more valuable allotments, but had difficulty in establishing not so much their control, as their honour. They were low caste people and used methods fair and foul to establish themselves. Fair in this context means getting a British education, one member of the family actually being sent to Presidency College, Calcutta, and keeping on favourable terms both with the British overlord and the Raja of Vizianagram whom they continued to help through his financial difficulties. Foul signifies cheating the local gentry, bribing the British Indian under-civil servants and redirecting channels and watercourses to their own villages by use of naked force. When it came to defeating "the primitive rebel", who was in actual fact the descendant of the old local zamindar of Anakapilli, they left it to British troops to deal with what was obviously a locally backed uprising. It is not particularly difficult to reconstruct this history of drama and intrigue, it is far more difficult to see exactly how it influenced events at the local level. How did it affect the large and small inamdars who played a major role in the affairs of the villages and how did it affect the local civil servants? The difficulty can probably be gauged by the fact that the British Indian cutcherry (office) servants at Vizagapatam in the early part of the 19th century were receiving salaries both from the British Government and from the Raja of Vizianagram. The Raja paid them at a more liberal scale than the British, so whom did they serve? Obviously the Raja, but still they had to be careful that it was done in a manner which did not conflict too violently with the image of a powerful British Raj. It is obvious that the dealings which went on cannot be

adequately reflected in the British source material. Again a micro-study of two particular periods may provide us with certain ideas about the role of the inamdars and the role of the local civil servants; but the transition can probably not be adequately described. When Walter Elliot became Commissioner of the Northern Sarkars in the early 1850s he had little doubt about the inadequate control of the British civil servants, the enormous influence of the British Indian undercivil servants and the extent to which resources were being misallocated in Southern Vizagapatam. But in the period of transition from 1810-1850 there are a great many puzzles which may never be resolved.

In the picture put together by the historian there are apt to be both major gaps and minor obscurities. Occasionally they can be overcome by a different approach or further research in the source material, but even if this does not happen one should be honest and open about it. If we gloss it over, it is not only the next scholar who will be in trouble; but one's own work which may be misinterpreted. What can be achieved in this study is I believe an interesting and differentiated account of the transformation from a particular form of what Professor Hicks has termed a customary-command economy to another particular form of a market economy in one of its early stages.⁴ If in telling this story some new light can be thrown on such topics as production relations in tropical agriculture, the interdependence of economic and social structures and the short-term and long-term reactions of a community to changing patterns of strain, I shall feel that my efforts have been adequately rewarded. The task, however, has by no means been completed.

Notes

- 1) Cohn 1962.
- 2) Robinson & Eatwell 1973, p. 11.
- 3) Ricardo 1937, pp. 34-37.
- 4) Hicks 1969.

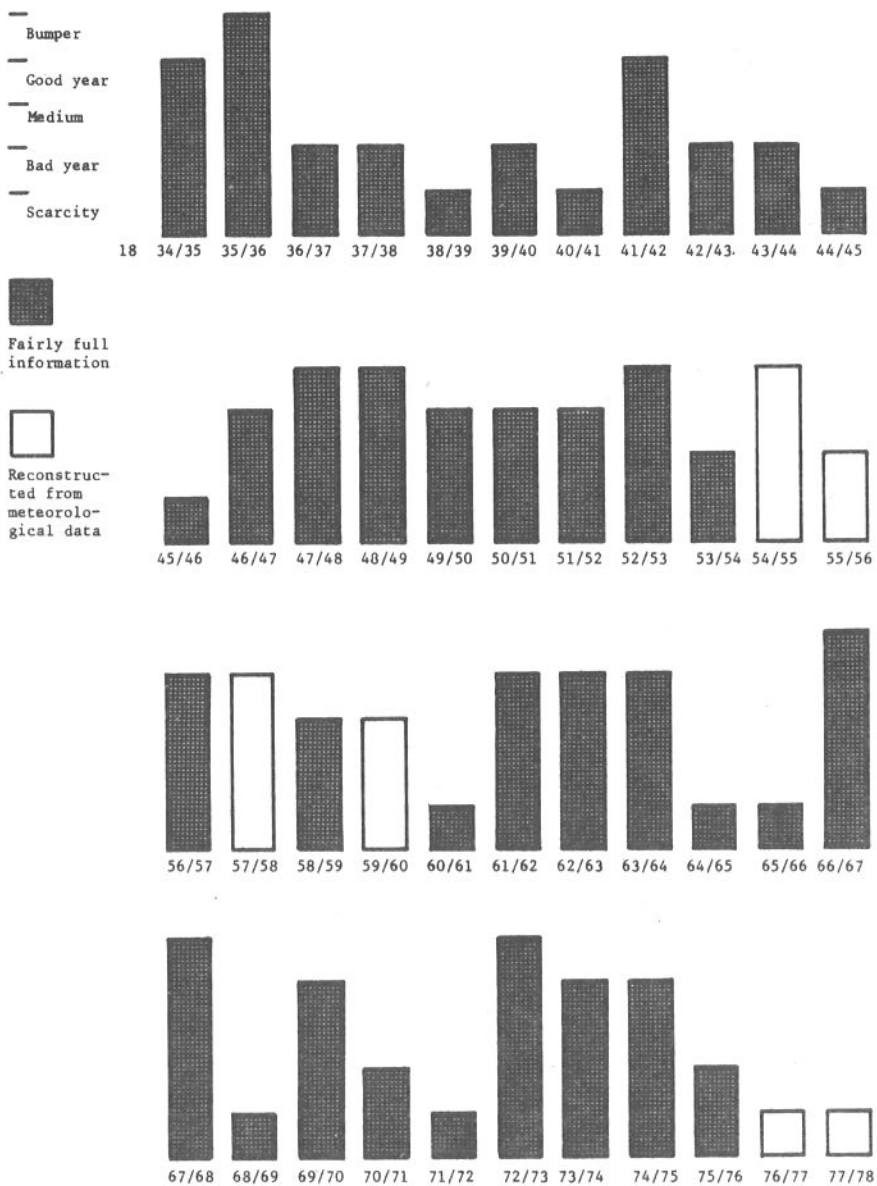
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