

The Agrarian System of Mughal India: A Review Essay*

Tapan Raychaudhuri

Once in a very long while something happens to stir the shallow, turbid and yet extensive waters of Indian historiography. The publication of Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*¹ is generally recognized—even in the most unlikely quarters—as one of these rare occasions. The detailed knowledge on which the volume is based would satisfy the most rigorous demands of India's traditional scholarship: the not-so-whispered accusation of glib generalization, based on ill-understood and inadequate data, often levelled against the Indian protagonists of the analytical approach to history, would be quite pointless in this particular case. What is much more important, a large mass of data has been brought together here within a framework of clear and sober analysis to reconstruct a crucially significant area of India's past. Besides, the volume is something more than the product of an individual's effort. In recent years at Aligarh a small group of young scholars have succeeded in building up something like a historical 'school' in the true sense of the term. Habib's *Agrarian System* is the first major product of this new Aligarh 'school' and thus marks a fresh point of departure in Indian historiography.

Our knowledge and understanding of Indian agrarian society in the pre-colonial era, as derived from Moreland, Baden-Powell, Maine, etc. on the one hand and Marx and the Marxists on the other, are essentially simplistic, which fact perhaps explains the striking and unexpected similarity of views as between the British officials and the radical

*First Published in *Enquiry* (n.s.), 1965.

¹Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963).

thinkers mentioned above. The image generally projected is of an undifferentiated mass of small peasants, held together in fraternal village communities exercising by virtue of immemorial custom the communal right of hereditary occupation over arable land and pasture, subject only to revenue exploitation by the superior political-military authorities who expropriated the surplus directly or through power delegated to intermediate levels of authority. In this pre-class society, private ownership of land had not emerged: the concept was, in fact, irrelevant. For the situation, in Moreland's words, was 'antecedent to the process of disentangling the concept of private right from political allegiance'. In Marxist terms, the basic *fact* of communal property—which was really no property in the bourgeois sense—was masked by oriental despotism with 'the despotic government suspended over the small communities'. To repeat, property in land was irrelevant in these circumstances wherein cultivation was not a right but an enforceable duty. The 'self-sustaining unity of manufacture and agriculture' containing 'all the conditions for reproduction and surplus production' within the village community explains the economic viability and self-perpetuating character of this elementary form of social organization which could resist disintegration as much as evolution. Within this essentially changeless system, superficial mutations occurred through the aggregation of small states into empires, entailing changes in assessment and collection and in the composition of the exploiting class. These did not however affect either the organization or the relations of production. The sharers in the expropriated surplus might be of diverse origin, but they were identical in their economic functions and foundations. In so far as the only mentionable changes in agrarian society concerned this class, unconnected with production, the basic thesis of changelessness is not affected. At most, the variation in the degree and manner of revenue extraction permitted a limited range of fluctuations in output and the producers' share of it. But strictly limited; because most of the time in most places the expropriation of the surplus was as near total as was practicable.²

²The above account is a very brief summary of analysis and description elaborated, and endlessly repeated, in a vast body of literature. The best known among these are the works of Moreland, Baden-Powell's *The Indian Village Community*, Sir Henry Maine's *Village Communities: East and West* and Marx's *Letters on India* (the ideas contained in it were further developed in R.P. Dutt's *India Today*). These works may differ in approach, emphasis and terminology, but the above summary is a fairly accurate representation of their common conclusions. For a brief, authoritative exposition of these views one may refer to W.H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar*, pp. 96–8 and Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist*

This simple abstract model has been repeatedly put forward as the standard pattern of agrarian organization in Asia, and not by Marxists alone. Of course, one knew there were local differences; but these differences were considered to be either deviations from the norm or subsumed by the fundamental uniformity of socio-economic organization throughout this vast continent. In other words, the view that the local and regional variations were not significant enough was established pretty firmly. This image of the Oriental Society, with capital letters in appropriate places, is reborn, Phoenix-like, from time to time, of course with a seasonal change of feathers. Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* is perhaps the latest—but not the last, one apprehends—formidable *avatara* of this immortal bird.

Fortunately, over the last three decades or so, at a safe distance from the grand theory, specialists on different regions of Asia have produced a number of monographs which, when compared, bring out the striking individuality of socio-economic organizations in different parts of Asia, often within the same country. The abstract model of pre-class ante-property village communities, based on self-sufficiency, with the state in the role of an incubus, hardly fits any of these regional patterns. Even as a tool of analysis it has lost much of its value, unless one treats it as a starting hypothesis to be abandoned for the most part by the time one has finished investigation. The works of Van Leur, Schrieke and Meilink-Roelofsz on the Indonesian archipelago, of Doreen Warriner on the Middle East, of Lambton on Persia have all done their bit to demolish the image of a universal Oriental Society.³ To this growing library of studies on Asian societies, Habib's work is a very important addition. This detailed empirical study, though not free from the natural limitations of a general survey covering the whole of Mughal India and a wide time span, brings into focus the distinctive

Economic Formations, p. 35 (Hobsbawm's Introduction). The formulations in *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* are rather different from those in Marx's *Letters on India*, the identification of oriental society as a pre-class society being the most significantly different formulation developed in the former work. The implications of this analysis in the context of Mughal agrarian society is discussed later in this essay.

³J.C. Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*; Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*; Doreen Warriner, *Land and Poverty in the Middle East* (London, 1948); A.K.S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia* (OUP, 1953); Meilink-Roelofsz, *Asian Trade and European Influence* (The Hague, 1962).

traits of India's agrarian economy during a significant phase of the pre-colonial era.

The new light thrown on the nature of land rights perhaps marks the most significant point of departure from the traditional views sketched above. The self-contradictory yet simultaneously held theses that land ownership was an unknown category and that the king was the owner of all lands have both been proved to be equally incorrect. Private ownership of urban land and royal purchases of such lands from the subjects are evidence enough to disprove such theses. More significant however is the clear recognition in contemporary sources of the right of ownership (*milkijat*) in agricultural land as something different from mere usufructuary right. The *milkijat*, implying in practice the right of hereditary occupation including the right to rent out, is shown to have been generally vested in the *raiyat* or primary *zamindars*—terms which were more or less identical in connotation. An indirect evidence of the fact is that the individual peasant family, and not the village or the *zamindar*, is invariably the assessee for revenue purposes.⁴

Milkijat in agricultural land under the Mughals was not, according to Habib, the same as 'ownership' as understood today. The *raiyat* had no right to alienate his land freely. Cultivation as a right was vested hereditarily in the peasant, but it was also an obligation from which no peasant was exempt. He was thus not a free agent: if the land belonged to him, he also belonged to the land and hence was not very different in his rights and obligations from the European serfs. Besides, his right of hereditary occupation was at times interfered with in practice, if the land was lucrative enough to attract new peasants whenever the old occupants were forced out. The most striking proof of the peasants' subject status was the large-scale abandonment of cultivation by *raiyats* who had no other means of escaping an intolerable revenue burden.⁵

The above picture of peasants' rights differs from the traditional view mainly on one point, viz. the identification of the peasant as *malik*. Very recently, however, other researchers have suggested further modifications of the older views on the subject. Both Nurul Hasan and B.R. Grover have referred to numerous cases of sale of land by the *raiyats*, though Grover concedes that such transactions, relatively

⁴Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 113f, 174, 230.

⁵Ibid., pp. 115, 118.

speaking, were extremely rare.⁶ Where they differ from Habib is in their rejection of the view that the peasants did not have the right to sell their land without any constraints. In Grover's opinion, Elphinstone's statement regarding the territories conquered from the Peshwa, 'that a large portion of the Ryots (Mearassees) are proprietors of their estates, subject to the payment of fixed land-tax to the government;... their property is hereditary and saleable, and they are never disposed while they pay their tax', applies to Mughal India as well. He, however, makes some important distinctions: in Mughal India, fallow and forest 'belonged' to the state, only the cultivated land being under peasant proprietorship, a significant modification of the popular views on communal ownership of land. Secondly, while Habib has written only of income differences among the agricultural classes, Grover identifies an irregular hierarchy of land rights: the peasant proprietors (*riaya*) who cultivated their own land (*khudkashta*) or had the right to rent out their land, tenants (*muzarian*) holding lands from the *riaya*, *pahikashikars* who owned land in a village where he did not live and *muqarari riaya* with hereditary rights of transfer, mortgage and sale of land, who, after reserving a holding for personal cultivation, farmed or rented out the residual land.⁷ Ravinder Kumar's recent thesis on 'State and Society in Maharashtra in the 19th Century'⁸ discloses a picture of rural society in the early nineteenth century essentially similar to Grover's account. This fact suggests a continuity of socio-economic organization which authorizes certain hypotheses about the agrarian system of Mughal India. Habib has hazarded a guess correlating the different levels of money income with the different strata of rural society (*zamindars*, rich peasants and poor peasants).⁹ He has not enquired into the possible composition of the different strata. In Maharashtra in the early nineteenth century, there was very little correlation between the level of land rights on the one hand and the size of the landholding, and the agriculturists' income on the other, though social and political power in the village was concentrated in the hands of the hereditary peasant proprietors, both rich and poor.¹⁰ One wonders

⁶N. Hasan, 'The Position of the Zamindars in the Mughal Empire', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1963–4; B.R. Grover, 'Nature of Land-Rights in Mughal India', *ibid.*, vol. 1, no. 1.

⁷B.R. Grover, *ibid.*, 3–5

⁸Ravinder Kumar, 'State and Society in Maharashtra in the 19th Century', Australian National University (Canberra, 1964).

⁹Ibid., pp. 119–20.

¹⁰Ibid., ch. I.

if the unstable conditions of the late seventeenth century generated a similar asymmetry so that there were *muzarian* or *pahikashtkars* richer than the local *zamindar*, *khudkashtkars* and the rentier peasant proprietors. A further point worth investigating is the consequence of such likely shifts in economic power in terms of social and administrative authority.

Our knowledge regarding the lowest strata of agrarian society—the people without any proprietary or tenancy rights in land—is still very inadequate. Habib has added some useful details to Moreland's statements¹¹ on agricultural labourers and 'village serfs' in India. He mentions cultivators who tilled other people's land, *chamars* who 'worked for wages in the fields of cultivators and Zamindars', *dhanuks* who husked rice and other groups who worked as guides and porters. The assumption that the 'landless' were not numerous is not consistent with another possibility, viz. that the bulk of the untouchables, a significant proportion of Hindu society, were excluded from occupancy rights. The phenomenon, somewhat puzzling in the context of a very favourable land-man ratio, is explained in terms of the rigid caste system, the rigidity in its turn being ascribed to hereditary division of labour necessitated by rural isolation and self-sufficiency.¹² But isolation and self-sufficiency of villages have not generated such immobility in other societies, to wit, in those of medieval Europe. Inadequacy of capital supply—Habib mentions how large sections of the peasantry depended 'wholly upon credit for their ability (to cultivate)'¹³—partly explain the origin of this class.¹³ One may however, have to fall back on social anthropology for a more satisfactory explanation.

Where in all this does one come across the proverbial village community, owning the land communally and redistributing it periodically among the coparceners? According to Habib, there is not 'the slightest suggestion anywhere in our sources' that the occupancy or proprietary right was ever held in common or land distributed periodically; the village community developed only in 'some spheres outside that of production'.¹⁴ This does not, however, finally lay a familiar ghost. True, the *Smriti* literature from very early times speaks exclusively of private property in arable land, laying down elaborate rules for inheritance, division and disposal. Yet, on the other hand, nineteenth-century

¹¹ W.H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar*, pp. 112–14.

¹² Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 120–2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 123.

British officials do describe communal ownership and periodic redistribution.¹⁵ The discrepancy may be explained in one of several alternative ways. A more exhaustive study of the sources may disclose the existence of communal ownership in the seventeenth century. The phenomenon of periodic distribution may have developed in the days of political and administrative anarchy. (It is unlikely that the British administrators made a mistake about such a distinctive practice.) At another level, except with regard to this important issue of redistribution, there is no essential contradiction between Habib's position and the mid-nineteenth-century evidence. To the nineteenth-century British administrators, ownership implied something more than the right of occupancy and alienation: its other essential characteristics included 'the right of regulating occupancy and appropriating rent'.¹⁶ We know from Grover's study¹⁷ that the renting of arable land was a familiar practice in the seventeenth century. In the North Western Provinces in the nineteenth century the tenant did not pay any rent in cash or kind to any individual peasant proprietor. He was only obliged to contribute a relatively larger share of his produce (as compared to the contribution of the coparceners) to the common pool which covered the 'expenses of the village'—the *Kharj-i-deh* of the seventeenth-century documents—as well as the revenue demand. The tenant was thus the tenant of the village community, not of any individual proprietor. As yet there is little to indicate that the position in the *raiayati* villages in the seventeenth century was different from the one described above.¹⁸ Development of private ownership from communal property, with vestiges of the earlier organization still clearly discernible, has been a characteristic feature of several Arab countries until very recently. The Arabs recognized private property in livestock, but only communal property in land whence developed the *mushaa* system in Palestine, Transjordan and Syria—a form of semi-collective ownership with regular reallocations—until considerations of efficiency led to the establishment of individual titles only in the days of the mandate.¹⁹ Habib has ascribed

¹⁵ See S.C. Gupta, *Agrarian Relations and Early British Rule*, p. 52f and the authorities cited by him.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Grover's casual reference in 'Nature of Land Rights' to renting out of land by individual peasants does not vitally affect this hypothesis.

¹⁹ Warriner, *Land and Property*, pp. 18–21.

the gradual dissolution of the village community such as it was to the growth of commodity production.²⁰ One wonders whether a probable transformation of communal rights in land was at least partly the product of the same forces. Since, however, the evidence of the *Smriti* texts traces private property in land back to a much earlier period, such an explanation is not very satisfactory. As in the Arab countries, so here, powerful landlords and assignees, often living in the cities, may have contributed to a weakening of the communal tradition.²¹ Besides, one must not exaggerate the alienation of the village community from productive enterprise. Communal effort and control were far from unimportant when the cost of repayment of loans, purchase of seeds (in some cases) and the maintenance of canals was met from the communal pool to which every villager contributed.²²

Not so much outside the scope of production as outside the control of land, the village community was a reality in a number of ways, particularly in connection with the management of the financial life of the village, including the collection and payment of revenue. Two interesting facts emerge in this connection: first, that there were villages without headmen who were represented by any villager selected for the purpose in the community's dealings with officialdom; secondly, village headship (*muqaddami*) became in many cases a hereditary property which could be and often was bought and sold. Inequalities of landholding often derived from the *muqaddam*'s extra holding of 2½ per cent of the village lands equivalent to his perquisite of 2½ per cent of the revenue.²³ But as has been indicated above, the size of one's holding and one's status in the rural hierarchy were not evenly correlated. There must have been other sources of inequality besides the perquisite of village officials. A minority of well-to-do peasants has been a characteristic feature of many agrarian societies in the pre-capitalist era. We have *inter alia* the notable example of the Russian serfs who were allowed to trade and became millionaires.²⁴ Growth of the market for agricultural products may have favoured the enterprising and the fortunate and colonizing efforts further aggravated the inequalities. And during the unsettled years the progress from wealth to ownership and hence the suppression of communal rights were perhaps

²⁰Ibid., p. 128.

²¹Ibid., p. 6.

²²Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 126–7.

²³Ibid., pp. 126–7, 128–30.

²⁴J. Blum, *The European Peasantry from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, 1960), p. 22.

a natural process. Yet these are but surmises and we are still nowhere near the history of the Indian village communities and do not even know where, when or in what forms the institution actually existed. Habib's statement regarding the members of the *bhaiyachara* community belonging to one caste probably refers to the coparceners only and indirectly supports the thesis of dominant castes, if we read history backwards. Even on this point doubts are raised by Grover's description of multiple caste *zamindari* as well as *raiyyati* villages.²⁵

In trying to understand the nature, organization and economic basis of agrarian society, it is not enough to concentrate on the character of the peasantry, its position *vis-à-vis* the state and vice versa. In fact very often the label 'feudal' is fixed to a society on the basis of the role played in it by intermediary groups standing between the authority of the state and the masses subject to it—a role assessed in terms of political-administrative-military power and control over land.²⁶ The fascinating but not very fruitful exercise seeking to ascertain the degree of feudalism in terms of the classic West European model—complete with military obligation, commendation, subinfeudation, manors and serfs—or the even more exciting one which seeks to pin down the crucial feature of feudalism is not terribly relevant to our purpose. An analysis of the character and role of the intermediary groups is nevertheless important for they significantly affected the distribution of the produce and helped define the conditions of agricultural production as also the producer's social and economic status, itself an important factor in stimulating or retarding production. Fortunately, much of the recent research on the Mughal agrarian system has concentrated on this question so that enough is known to authorize more or less precise conclusions.

As regards the *mansabdar-jagirdars*, once wrongly considered the major intermediary group, much of the familiar details are confirmed anew the fact of the *jagirdar*'s claim being on revenue, not on land, the transferability of the *jagirs* except in the case of *altamgha* and *watan jagirs* and the central authority's efforts to enforce the standard revenue regulations in the assigned lands as well, in order to check the

²⁵ Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 123; Grover, 'Nature of *Dehat-i-Taaluqa* etc.', *Indian Economic and Social History Review (IESHR)*, vol. 2, nos 2 and 3.

²⁶ For a recent instance of the identification of the Indian economy in the ancient period as 'feudal' on the basis of land grants to non-producing groups, see R.S. Sharma, 'Land-grants to Vassals and Officials in N. India (c. AD 1000–1200)', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. IV, pt 1 (1961) and 'The Origins of Feudalism in India c. AD 400–650)', *ibid.*, vol. 1, pt 3 (1958).

possibilities of oppression, have now been discussed with a wealth of documentary evidence.²⁷ The impression left by this restatement of known facts is that the system of revenue assignment in lieu of cash salary was simply a convenient arrangement for maintaining the bureaucracy: it rid the central government of a fair measure of irksome responsibility with regard to collection and disbursement without any corresponding reduction in authority or increase in the revenue burden. Other facts, mentioned but not sufficiently emphasized, suggest a very different situation. Without any long-term interest in the territory assigned to him for a short period, the *jagirdar* unhesitatingly fleeced the peasant. Complaints to the higher authorities, permitted in theory, were nearly impossible in practice and were at best ineffective. The system of farming out *jagirs*, discouraged by the government, apparently to little purpose, further aggravated the situation. The financial crisis of the Mughal empire, in the later years of Aurangzeb and afterwards, with too many *mansabdars* and not enough *jagirs* to go around led to a steady deterioration all round:²⁸ a government unable to provide adequate revenue assignments could hardly have told its revenue assignees how to behave towards *ryots* and the impoverished *jagirdar* now had an additional incentive to squeeze the producer. The significance of these facts becomes clear if one remembers that the *khalisa*, directly under the revenue administration of the central government, never accounted for more than 1/5th of the total assessment except for a brief period under Akbar.²⁹ Thus in the greater part of the imperial territories, there does not appear to have been any check on the unlimited exploitation of the rural population. The real measure of the subjection of the peasantry is to be assessed in terms of what went on in the assigned territories, and not in the *khalisa* where practical considerations, if nothing else, partly restrained the oppressors. Abandonment of cultivation on a large scale and the mass migration of peasants—phenomena likely to occur only when the agriculturist's income is reduced to a point below the already meagre subsistence level—make sense only in the context discussed above. A government, dependent for its existence on the income from agriculture, which it was eager to maintain and extend, could not have gone on killing the geese that laid the golden egg's year after year. The assignee, briefly enjoying an inadequate and precarious income from his *jagir*, could not on the other

²⁷ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 260, 273, 296–7, 318, 320–3.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 270; Noman Ahmad Siddiqi, 'Revenue Administration of the Mughal Empire in the First Half of the 18th Century', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Aligarh Muslim University).

²⁹ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 271–2.

hand care less as to what happened to the ryot. Seizing the entire harvest or taking the population in slavery could be for him, but not for the state, a rational source of profit. N.A. Siddiqi in his thesis³⁰ has described the gradual impoverishment and exit of the big *jagirdar*, replaced by a class of men who bought from the *jagirdar* or otherwise secured the right to collect revenue over parts of the erstwhile big *jagirs*, a right which eventually became hereditary in many instances. An increasingly strong school of thought would have us believe that the virtual dissolution of the Mughal empire in the eighteenth century was accompanied by a gradual extension of peace and prosperity in many of the virtually independent provincial kingdoms. One wonders whether the mutations in the *jagirdari* system had something to do with this improvement.

It is with regard to the nature and role of *zamindari* rights that recent research has dug up the most significantly new information. A careful scrutiny of the well-known manuscripts of the *Ain* has revealed that the *zamindars* were not simply a princely class that managed to survive here and there mainly outside the heartland of the empire; the *Ain* actually mentions the castes of the *zamindars* for practically every *sarkar* in the imperial territory, a fact which was overlooked earlier owing to editorial errors in the printed editions of the compendium.³¹ The *zamindars* were in fact to be found everywhere, in *jagir* as well as *khalisa* territory.

³⁰ Siddiqi, 'Revenue Administration of the Mughal Empire'.

³¹ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. p. 136f. Habib has, however, not been quite fair to Moreland in ascribing to him without adequate qualifications the view 'that the *zamindars* in Mughal times really meant a vassal chief and could not exist in the directly administered territories of the empire' (p. 136). Moreland in his *India at the Death of Akbar* (pp. 3-4) clearly states: 'In various parts of the Empire we find that the local administration was in the hands of men who are spoken of consistently as 'zamindars'... it would be a mistake to regard these *zamindars* as necessarily equivalent to *Princes* or *Chiefs*; the word covers everybody, other than a grantee or an official, who stood between the peasants and the Emperor, and it may mean a land-holder in the modern sense, a chief, or a rebel... we hear of them in the Gangetic plain, where Akbar's supremacy was definitely established; we hear of them in the borderlands... and we find them in Rajputana, and in the mountainous country south of Allahabad and Benares... and if we possessed detailed knowledge of the position of individuals, we should probably find a wide variety of superior tenures, ranging from what would now be termed landholders to rulers in subordinate alliance with the Emperor. ... '(emphasis mine) Far from contradicting Moreland's conclusions, recent research has actually proved his surmises to be correct.

They were however not a homogeneous class. In fact even the term 'intermediary' would not apply to large sections covered by that multi-purpose nomenclature. The different types of *zamindars* had, however, one thing, besides their name, in common: in contradistinction to other elements in the rural society, they represented a higher level of rights and privileges. Any analysis of the class divisions in rural society must primarily concentrate on these superior rights of the *zamindars*; the stratification of rights at the level of the actual cultivators (including what Nurul Hasan has described as the primary *zamindars*)³² was itself determined by these superior rights. There is a continual shift in the character and composition of the various types of *zamindars*. The levers of change and the element of dynamism in the rural society were closely interlinked with this particular process: any vital change in the role of the *zamindars* implied a change in the class structure of agrarian society.

Historically, the *zamindari* rights appear to have been derived from two sources which were at times intermingled. The *zamindaran-i-umda* or the chieftains as well as Nurul Hasan's 'intermediary *zamindars*' enjoying the rights to collect revenue and some administrative power over relatively small territories were repositories of independent or semi-independent political and military authority some time or other. The 'primary *zamindars*', indistinguishable from the *riyaya*, who had the right of regulating occupancy and appropriating 'rent', were the original colonizers and settlers of the soil or their descendants: such at least was the theoretical basis of their rights and a certain degree of political authority appears to have been originally implicit in it, particularly when the cultivating *zamindar* was simply the scion of a proliferating family which once also collected revenue and exercised administrative power.³³ These was, however, nothing static about the position of these groups. The erstwhile political authority undertook to pay *peshkash* (tribute), or became a *mansabdar* of the empire holding his territory as *watan jagir*, not necessarily coterminous with his ancestral lands. The *zamindari* status of the 'intermediary *zamindar*', however hoary its antiquity, was derived, under the Mughals, from imperial *sanads* formally conferring the 'office'. Under the *sanad*, the *zamindar* became a *malguzar*, an official responsible for the collection of revenue from the land under his control, almost invariably more extensive than

³² Hasan, 'The Position of zamindars'.

³³ B.R. Grover, 'Nature of *Dehat-i-Taaluqa*'.

his ancestral holding.³⁴ From this point there are movements in two different directions. The *zamindar* might become a *sadr zamindar* with jurisdiction over numerous *parganas* or (outside Bengal) a *taaluqdar* with superior rights over smaller *zamindars* who paid their revenue through him. Still a cog, however big, in the wheel of the revenue administration, the *taaluqdar* before long consolidated his rights in the nature of perquisites and eventually laid claim to proprietorship over the territories under his control. Secondly, the *zamindari* rights might suffer a dilution or diminution as well generating in the process other forms of control over land. The Bengal *taaluqdars*—both independent (i.e. *huzuri*, paying revenue directly to the state) and dependent (i.e. *muskuri*, paying revenue through some *zamindar*)³⁵—secured rights essentially similar to that of the *zamindars* through colonization, purchase or gift and thus emerged as a distinct level of intermediaries. The frequent sales and partitions of the *zamindari* and *taaluqdar* lands often reduced the individual holding to a size which forced the individual *zamindars* to become, once more, a *khudkashta* ryot, paying revenue through the real or putative head of the family, now a chief *zamindar*. But even such *khudkashta* ryots, as discussed above, shared in the right to determine occupancy. This pattern of stratification was complicated by criss-cross relationships created by the combination of different levels of rights in the hands of the same individuals.³⁶ The bewildering complexity of land rights which characterize the British period of Indian history, particularly the minute stratification found in certain parts of Bengal, assumed their final proportions in comparatively recent times, but the origins are surely traceable to the Mughal period.

The *zamindars*, other than the *khudkashta* ryots, were not the owners (*malik*) of the soil. What rights the chieftains actually exercised *vis-à-vis* the tillers and the land under them, is not yet very clear. Bernier's statement affirming that the peasants were better off under the autonomous chieftains seems reasonable in view of the chieftains' vested interest—not shared by the *jagirdars*—in long-term agricultural prosperity. Nurul Hasan has, however, questioned its veracity. The 'intermediary *zamindars*'—who often enjoyed certain perquisites in their capacity of village headmen (*chaudhuri*)—were entitled to a share of the revenue as their *zamindari* perquisite, which assumed different

³⁴ Hasan, 'The Position of the Zamindars'.

³⁵ B.R. Grover, 'Nature of *Dehat-i-Taaluqa*'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

forms and names in different parts of the country, but was never very lucrative. The right to these perquisites and to collect revenue was owned by the *zamindar* and was in fact freely sold. Besides, the *zamindar* collected additional cesses (*abwabs*) and had his personal lands over which he enjoyed full proprietary rights. What the *zamindars* did with their personal land remains something of a mystery. Grover says that they generally got it 'cultivated by others'. Does this imply some sort of demesne farming with forced or wage labour or simply that the land was rented out? The same author adduces evidence to prove that rent, as distinct from revenue, was paid to the proprietors usually as a specified proportion of the produce. The primary *zamindars* also received rent, probably on a communal basis, from the *pahikashtkars* and *muzarian*.

The position in Bengal was somewhat different from elsewhere: here the *zamindar* paid a fixed amount to the state apparently not based on any calculation of the produce, an arrangement somewhat similar to that under the Permanent Settlement. Presumably, the *zamindari* perquisite in such a case was not a fixed proportion of the revenue demand.

The *zamindari* rights had a caste basis—increasingly heterogeneous through sale and transfer of rights, yet never completely destroyed. Another basis of the *zamindar*'s power was the armed retainers, either peasants impressed into military service or mercenaries paid in cash or rent-free lands. The caste basis evidently was relevant for all types of *zamindars*; the armed retainers were maintained by the chiefs and intermediate *zamindars* only.³⁷

One more group stood between the revenue-payer and the state: the grantees who held their land by virtue of their religious merit—the Muslim 'army of prayer' whose services were by no means inessential to the state, and the Hindu Brahmins, Vaishnavs, etc. Holding their lands from the state as well as *zamindars* and *jagirdars*, such grantees actually enjoyed only a claim to revenue and not to any proprietary rights in the land. At least this appears to have been the position of the Muslim *aimadars*; it is likely, but not certain, that the Hindu grantees were in a similar position. Individually, these revenue assignees were not important, as the lands under their individual control were seldom very extensive. As a group, they accounted for as much as 5.4 per cent

³⁷ The above discussion is based on the articles by N. Hasan and B.R. Grover already referred to and Habib, *Agrarian System*, ch. v.

of the revenue in some areas.³⁸ The grants, resumable in theory and at times in practice, appear to have been generally treated as hereditary.³⁹ In their impact on agrarian life, the grantees were comparable to small *jagirdars* except that they had a long-term interest in their assignment. To describe them as parasitical is misleading, since in the eyes of their contemporaries they surely rendered a service of great importance.

Can we, in the light of all this new information, tackle a basic question, namely the precise character of the peasantry and its determinants? Attempts to answer it in terms of the familiar categories—degree of independence or subjection and extent of proprietary rights—can not elicit any clear formulation. One reason for this lack of clarity is that we have no definite notion as yet of the relative proportions of the different categories of peasants. Obviously our question can have very different answers depending on whether the peasant proprietors or tenants or landless labourers constituted the majority or at least very significant proportions of the total. Possible regional variations which are casually referred to but nowhere investigated by any of the scholars mentioned above raise further difficulties. It would be a matter for surprise if in a country of continental proportions the same basic pattern was to be found everywhere. In conditions hardly more dynamic than those of seventeenth century India, Western European feudalism flourished in a relatively limited area while Scandinavia and regions east of the Elbe developed socio-economic systems of a very different character.⁴⁰ Nearer home, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Transjordan, Doreen Warriner has identified regional variations in agrarian organization caused by topographical and historical factors.⁴¹ The possible impact on agrarian society of differences in fertility, water supply, altitude, proximity to the urban market, levels of culture, etc. needs to be enquired into. Conceivably, data on most of these points are very inadequate, but such a statement is not authorized until at least the questions have been posed. What we have at the moment is an introductory general statement which fits together scattered evidence relating to dif-

³⁸ Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 314. This figure does not include the grants made to Hindus, or by agencies other than the imperial government.

³⁹ Sheikh Abdur Rashid, 'Siyurghal Lands Under the Mughals', *Sir Jadunath Sarkar Commemoration Volume* (1958). 'Madad-i-Maash Grants Under the Mughals', *Journal of the Pakistan History Congress* (1959).

⁴⁰ cf. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, Introduction and ch. I.

⁴¹ Warriner, *Land and Property*, pp. 3f, 18f. Similar regional variations in modern India have been discussed in Chen Han-Seng, *Agrarian Regions of India*. See Alice and Daniel Thorner, *Land and Labour in India*, ch. IV.

ferent regions and points of time and material collected from the administrative records of a central authority which necessarily sought to impose at least a certain measure of uniformity. Notwithstanding the great value of such a statement as a starting point, it may induce a misleading assumption of unchanging uniformity. If such uniformity was in fact there, one could be sure of it only after comparing different regions over a period of time.⁴²

Within the limits of our inadequate knowledge, one may hazard certain very tentative formulations: we have here a class society with clearly articulated proprietary rights of various categories as also complex and divergent patterns of stratification. Some sections of the peasantry were the owners of the bulk of the agricultural land, while others had occupancy rights as tenants or were landless. Ownership included the right of alienation, rarely exercised in practice. The state and other extractors of revenue might expropriate the entire surplus, but seldom evicted the peasant from his land. But if cultivation was a right, it was also a duty enforced by the state. This probably meant that while the individual peasant might sell his land, the state tried to ensure that the land should not remain fallow. 'Normally', the peasant cultivated the land and the state or the intermediaries collected revenue; conflict between the right and the duty to cultivate did not arise; the peasant was not free only in the sense that custom or law did not restrict the revenue burden. Conflict arose when the revenue demand became intolerable. It is indeed doubtful how far the 'normal' situation described above was the one usually encountered. Peasants unwilling to pay revenue, *raiyat-i-zor talab*, were by no means exceptional. When their resistance failed, they tried to give up cultivation and run away. In law, they were not allowed to abandon cultivation; in fact, they frequently did so. It was at this point that the state sought to enforce the obligation to cultivate and the subjection of the peasant became something more than theoretical. In the later years of Aurangzeb's reign such conflicts and the mass migration of peasants became more and more frequent. We have here no doubt a form of subjection involving in extreme circumstances even the possibility of physical destruction:

⁴² For a discussion of possible approaches to local and regional variations within the general framework of a country's agrarian history, see Professor Postan's review of Kosminsky's *The English Village in the 13th Century* (Leningrad, 1935) in *Economic History Review* (1936). In this field, Marc Bloch's *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* is perhaps the best-known example of generalizations based on a comparative study of local and regional history.

but compared to the serfs in medieval Europe or Assam peasants obliged to render labour service to the Ahom kings or Malabar *kanam-kars* tied to the soil working for the *janmi* landowners,⁴³ the peasant in Mughal India in the *khalisa* lands was closer to freedom than dependence in terms of socio-economic organization. One may ask if even this measure of dependence was not the result of the gradual removal of customary checks on the revenue burden, particularly under the Mughals. There are examples of a free peasantry gradually reduced to subjection in other parts of the world, e.g. Iran under the later Abbasids⁴⁴ and the Byzantine empire during the high Middle Ages. In the latter case, scarcity of labour is known to have prompted the efforts at subjection.⁴⁵ This may have been an important influence in the Indian case as well; the fact that sections of the population had no right to occupy land further restricted the available labour force.

The data discussed in this article probably authorize an important distinction between two categories of the peasantry. The juridical independence and proprietary rights of the peasantry evidently meant something in the *khalisa* lands, because of the state's long-term interest in agricultural prosperity. But the position in the *jagir* lands appears to have been very different. The *jagirdar*, ephemerally connected with particular revenue assignments, is not really integrated with the structure of agrarian society: he might be said to represent, in Marxist terms, 'the despotic government suspended over the small communities'. He was very different from the *iqtadar* or *jagirdar* of the Turko-Afghan days, who often developed hereditary connections with the land assigned to him and thus came to constitute a stratum in rural society. With the courts and camps as his focal points of interest, the *jagirdar-mansabdar* was a non-rural phenomenon, disposing of the bulk of the agricultural surplus (since he accounted for the bulk of the imperial revenue), but not concerned with the control of production or its means. Under his practically despotic irresponsible authority, the condition of the peasantry was probably the hardest and the incentives to production correspondingly the lowest and this despite the feeble state effort to protect the peasantry. It seems reasonable to conclude then that there

⁴³ See S.K. Bhuiyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, ch. I and Logan's *Malabar* for discussions of the position of the dependent peasantry in these parts of India. It has been suggested later in this article that the ryots in the *jagirs* were probably far more dependent than their counterparts in the *khalisa*.

⁴⁴ Ann K.S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, (OUP, 1953) pp. 4. Sff.

⁴⁵ *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, pp. 192, 221.

were two categories of ryots: the one, in the *khalisa*, enjoyed a considerable degree of independence limited only by a heavy revenue demand and an obligation to cultivate which was at the same time a right and another, in the *jagir* lands, semi-servile in practice, frequently constrained to abandon their meagre and precarious livelihood. At times, owing to financial pressures on the administration, this line of distinction is wiped off. The key to the actual position of the agriculturist is hence to be sought not in social or economic organization but the manner in which administrative and political power was distributed and deployed.

Cutting across the distinction between the *riaya* in the *khalisa* and those in the *jagirs* is a second criterion of classification—the distinction between the *zamindari* and the *raiayati* villages. Whether the *zamindars* in their own interest acted as a shield for the masses of cultivators is a point worth investigating: the *a priori* arguments can cut both ways. What is certain is that the chiefs, intermediary *zamindars* and *taaluqdar*s were a rural class disposing of a portion of the agricultural surplus and as such created a pattern of stratification different from the one to be found in the *raiayati* villages, where the proprietary rights and the class structure were differently articulated. If there was no significant development of a land market, there was surely a very considerable volume of dealings in *zamindari* rights—the rights to dispose of a stated proportion of the surplus. By the end of the Mughal period, a mutation had taken place: the *taaluqdar*'s proprietary right had been gradually extended from a share in the produce to a control over the means of production; he was staking his claim to the *milkiyat* of the village lands, crucially including the authority to determine occupancy. Then there are the assignments based on religious merit, but these did not really introduce a distinct stratum in the hierarchy of land rights, for they merely represented the transfer of a fraction of revenue income from the state, the *jagirdar* or the *zamindar* to men of religious merit. In fine, the changes in the structure of land rights took place at two levels. At the level of the *khudkashtkars*, *pahikashtkars* and the *muzarian* the control of the actual means of production was the question at issue; evidently, there was vertical mobility, mainly upwards in terms of rights, but both ways so far as income and the size of holding were concerned. The limits of such mobility are worth investigating in a precise time space context. For one thing, a *pahikashtkar* could evidently become a *malik* only in lands he himself and colonized, a constraint which could have considerable potentiality as an incentive to extension of cultivation. At another level, the rights which undergo

mutation were concerned with shares in the produce and control over men rather than on land. Towards the end of our period, the two processes tend to merge.

Mutations in agrarian relationships may be causally related to economic pressures or incentives or both. Certain facts taken in isolation would suggest that incentives were practically absent from the Mughal agrarian system. If 50 per cent of the gross produce was actually extorted from the producer⁴⁶—that is, if this was the reality and not simply an administrative ‘ideal’—then the peasant could hardly have been left with a subsistence income in any accepted sense of the term. Such a paradoxical situation may nevertheless be economically viable for a period of time, because the ‘below subsistence income’, implying very low caloric content of food, may result in reduced longevity rather than abandonment of cultivation, where the peasant has no alternative means of survival. Habib’s reading of the contemporary evidence that everything that could be taken from the peasant was in fact taken—whether this amounted to 50 per cent of the gross produce or not—is perhaps very near the mark, subject to one important qualification. Through all the harrowing contemporary accounts of the poverty of the masses, one fact does emerge: the living standards of the poor were not the same everywhere. To take a single instance, Bowrey found it difficult to get small coins worth a *rupia* in the Orissa villages where there was also an acute scarcity of foodstuff; by contrast, he found Bengal a land abundant in all the necessities of life. Since the peasant’s income—the residue left after the payment of revenue in cash—depended not only on the magnitude of revenue demand, but on the price he could get for his produce, conditions of the market acquire an importance in this context, and these were not uniform throughout the country. One must also take into account the possible lack of uniformity in the vigour of revenue administration, particularly in the *zamin-dari* villages. In short, peasants with an income somewhat above the subsistence level were probably not altogether an unknown phenomenon. If this is correct, then the existence of incentives to production cannot be ruled out.

A comparison between the levels of agricultural productivity and income in the Mughal period with those in the twentieth century was first made by Moreland.⁴⁷ The relative insignificance of this exercise has been obscured by polemical issues and the fact that such com-

⁴⁶ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 190f, 195.

⁴⁷ Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar*, 115f.

parison should concentrate on the structure of the economy rather than on the levels of output has been lost sight of. Habib has reopened the question; but his preoccupation remains the same as Moreland's. Moreland's hypothesis that the average agriculturist's income had, if anything, improved in the British period was based, *inter alia*, on a major fallacy, 'that in any particular region the numbers of the rural population have varied approximately with the area under cultivation',⁴⁸ because labour productivity, in the absence of technological change, had remained constant. The argument ignores the phenomenal growth of disguised unemployment in agriculture and the consequent possibility of a reduction in per capita income and output in this sector. Habib postulates a possible decline in income and productivity per acre on the familiar ground that with expansion of population inferior land was brought under cultivation. In addition to the very effective arguments put forward by Moreland against this line of reasoning, one may point out that colonization and extension of cultivation were regulated by a set of factors, including mere contingency, of which relative fertility of the soil was only one. The assumption that extension of cultivation necessarily meant the bringing of less fertile soil under the plough needs to be empirically validated before one can accept it. There is, however, an argument in favour of relatively higher labour productivity in the Mughal period. According to the evidence of our census data, significant growth in population in India is a post-World War I phenomenon primarily caused by the control of epidemic diseases.⁴⁹ If one may read history backwards from this evidence, Mughal India with its history of continuous wars, famines and epidemics, must have had, at most, a very slowly increasing population. Habib has, however, adduced enough evidence to prove the fact of substantial expansion of the area under cultivation during this period, a thesis supported with regard to Bengal by Abdul Karim's monograph on Murshid Quli Khan. An expanding agriculture with the population remaining more or less constant means an increase in labour productivity. Even in conditions of unchanging techniques this may have happened, if the pressures and incentives then at work forced, as seems likely, the idle or under-employed labour, e.g. in the joint families, to bring new land under cultivation.

How the pressures of revenue demand frequently cut into the meagre subsistence income of the peasant has been discussed by all

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ K. Davies, *Population of India and Pakistan*, pt II.

writers on the subject. Habib and Siddiqi have indicated an increase in this pressure during the declining days of the empire. The former ascribes a number of risings in northern India and the Maratha upheaval to this increasing pressure on the agriculturist and identifies this 'agrarian crisis' as a major factor in the decline of the empire. Whether he has overemphasized the role of the agrarian crisis or not is a question that can be answered only when we have a critical assessment of all other elements in the situation. That the contemporary sources, mostly written by officials involved in administrative problems, 'put the greatest store by the economic and administrative causes of the upheaval'⁵⁰ is, however, no proof that these were in fact the most crucial issues. Attempts to assess the relative weights of different factors in a process as complex as the decline of an empire is always rather baffling. The nature and causation of the peasants' risings may be a more rewarding subject of investigation. An interesting fact to be remembered in this connection is that in other parts of the world agrarian risings are known to have occurred when conditions were improving as well as in situations of growing fiscal burden.⁵¹ The role of religious movements in securing a cohesion, often across mutually conflicting class interests, which makes resistance possible is also worth investigating.⁵²

Besides the undoubtedly heavy pressure on the peasant, a system of incentives was also in operation. The revenue concessions, particularly those granted when land lying fallow was reclaimed or wells were repaired, were among the more obvious instances of such incentives.⁵³ At the level of the revenue-collecting *zamindar*, there was obvious advantage in encouraging colonization of new territory which was appreciated and acted upon at least in Murshid Quli's Bengal. At the level of the actual cultivator, one wonders whether the power, prestige, as also the marginal economic advantages associated with the status of the *malik* and *zamindar* in rural society did not encourage the tenant-cultivators to colonize unclaimed territory where alone they

⁵⁰ Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 339.

⁵¹ See for instance F.W.N. Hugenholtz, *Drie Boerenopstanden uit de Vijftiende Eeuw* (Haarlem, 1949). The author discusses how the French jacquerie of 1358 was the result of fiscal burdens while the English and Flemish risings of 1381 and 1323–8 respectively took place when conditions were improving.

⁵² Habib has actually referred to the cohesive influence of Sikhism, though not of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, but not analysed its implications as a factor in agrarian unrest.

⁵³ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 252–3.

could hope to acquire it. Both the settled peasant and the colonist could count upon some form of external assistance in their productive efforts. Interestingly enough, this external assistance did not assume the form of state-controlled irrigation which was insignificant in Mughal India: so far as this period is concerned, the grand thesis of hydraulic society has no legs to stand on.⁵⁴ The peasant was in fact helped in a way which has a very important bearing on our understanding of the contemporary economy: *taqavi* loans were granted, apparently on an extensive scale, by the state and the *zamindars* and these were supplemented by loans from the village moneylenders.⁵⁵ This fact suggests a penetration of capital into primary production to a degree never suspected before and traces the control of the moneylender on the peasant to a point of time much further back than the late nineteenth century. It further indicates that the primary producer was not concerned with exchange merely as a form of economic activity required to secure the wherewithal for the payment of revenue; the process of production itself had become partly dependent on exchange operations. In order to continue his agricultural production, the peasant mortgaged or 'pre-sold' the whole or a part of his produce and the cash he got in return was used to replenish his stock, buy seed-grain or maintain himself and family until the harvest season. Market forces penetrated into the peasant's world of subsistence-based isolation in other ways as well. We now have fairly convincing evidence of a steady upward trend in agricultural prices —probably in the urban retail market.⁵⁶ It has been suggested that the benefits of this price rise went exclusively to the middlemen. There are reasons for doubting this hypothesis. The demand for agricultural products in the urban centres was very great and all sources of supply were in positions of equal disadvantage with regard to access to the market. In such situations, while the middlemen are likely to profit most, peasants too may experience an upward trend in their income.⁵⁷ A more solid piece of evidence supports my contention: that

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 131–2, 254–5, 239–42; also see Grover's articles referred to above.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 89, 91, 249. Habib has not made it clear as to which price he is discussing. Thought his sources also are somewhat vague on this point, it does appear that both the *Ain* and the *Factory Records* mention retail prices only, mainly in the urban markets.

⁵⁷ Compare for instance the situation in Tudor England when the growth of the London food market powerfully affected areas which had access to it. While the rentiers profited most from the situation, the peasants also enjoyed a rising standard of living. See Ramsey, *Tudor Economic Policy*, pp. 44f.

the peasants were responsive to new demand is proved by the striking expansion of tobacco cultivation in course of our period. If the producer had nothing to gain from the cultivation of a new cash crop, he was hardly likely to have undertaken it from a sheer propensity to innovation.

The above facts lead to a basic query regarding the nature of the Indian economy under the Mughals. The term 'monetization' and 'money economy' have been bandied about frequently enough in the literature on economic history, usually to the undoing of those who have indulged in this evidently tempting pastime. The temptation to apply these precious terms to Mughal India are indeed strong: the revenue demand, accounting for a third to one half of the total agricultural produce, was now on a cash basis; a vast and complicated mechanism of exchange attended to the distribution of this surplus over a land area of continental proportions; credit institutions of a fairly sophisticated variety helped in the functioning of administration, commerce and even agriculture;⁵⁸ and there was a steadily expanding export trade. There is however, one serious snag in the argument. Even forgetting that we do not know what part of the revenue was actually collected in cash, the available evidence is fairly conclusive on one point: the village sold, but hardly ever purchased anything from the outside world. So far as the consumption needs of the villagers, the bulk of the population, were concerned, the pattern of self-sufficiency was not affected. Grover has provided evidence to show that there was some exchange between small groups of neighbouring villages who stood in relations of mutual economic complementarity to one another.⁵⁹ We do not know, however, the extent of this pattern of economic organization. Besides, this too is a form of self-sufficiency with a group of villages rather than a single village as the basic unit. The relationship of mutual exchange between town and country which developed in Europe in the later Middle Ages and its consequences in terms of specialization and division of labour are absent from the Indian scene.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Irfan Habib, 'Banking in Mughal India', *Contributions to Indian Economic History*, I, 'Usury in Mughal India', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, (1964).

⁵⁹ Grover, 'Raqba-Bandi Documents of Akbar's Reign'. *Proceedings of Indian Historical Records Commission* (1961).

⁶⁰ There is some evidence of localization of manufactures, but this phenomenon was rather limited in extent and appears to have developed mainly in connection with the export trade leaving the bulk of the economy unaffected. See my *Jan Company in Coromandel* (The Hague, 1962), Introduction and last chapter; and 'Some Patterns of Economic Activity and Organisation in 17th Century India', *Proceedings of the Second International Economic History Conference*.

A large monetized sector did develop. The agricultural surplus extracted in the form of revenue was to be distributed among a numerous body of nobles, soldiers, bureaucrats, servants and retainers. Traders, middlemen, usurers and dealers in money provided the machinery for distribution. This very large segment of the population—the urban population accounted for a very high proportion of the total⁶¹—did not produce anything for their own consumption. They 'sold' their services, in one form or another, for a money income which they used to purchase their necessities of day-to-day existence or for hoarding. But the share of the produce taken away from the peasants was so high that the surplus, if any, left in their hands was evidently not enough to create a rural market for consumer goods. Hence, for all practical purposes, the process of monetization stopped at the border of village India. The villager sold his produce so as to pay the revenue, now demanded in cash, and may be partly to repay the moneylender unless he preferred payment in kind. For the rest, his life was geared to a tradition-based distribution of the rural produce among agriculturists, craftsmen and village servants. Habib mentions that compared to present times area for area, with a much smaller population, Mughal India had a much larger number of villages.⁶² This is what one might have expected, for the imperfections of the market prevented the growth of large centres of specialized production and when technique is inefficient, a self-sufficient unit cannot be very large. Grover's groups of mutually complementary villages probably added up in area to single medium-sized villages of later times.

Recent literature indicates a certain dynamism in the agrarian society of Mughal India, whatever its limitations in terms of increasing efficiency of the economy. Do we have evidence of a change as compared to earlier times? Such evidence is implicitly there, though its full articulation would depend on further research. The transition from a decentralized revenue administration with practically hereditary *jagirdars*, collection in kind and relatively unobtrusive central administrations to the Mughal system of revenue demand in cash, transferable *jagirs* and the increasing financial needs of a powerful, expanding and centralized empire is crucial in this context. It seems that in pre-Mughal India, despite some urban development, the distinction between town and country was far less marked; with rare exceptions, the ruling class extracted their share of the surplus in kind and used it directly for their own consumption and that of their retainers, sometimes making over

⁶¹ Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 76.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

their claims on revenue in particular areas to their men for the latter's maintenance; an elaborate machinery of exchange for the distribution of the surplus was not necessary under these circumstances. This is pretty close to the Marxian model of a subsistence-based agrarian society supporting an autocratic power. Only it was not classless. There is nothing to indicate that the class divisions in agrarian society as well as property rights in land originated with Babur's victory at Panipat. Yet, as the 'intermediate zamindar' ceases to derive his claims on revenue from political-military jurisdiction and becomes a *malguzar* ostensibly a revenue official living in the village, he becomes more closely integrated with the structure of rural society. He is now a *villager* with specified claims on the produce. No doubt these claims have the flavour of superior rights, but they are not based on the fiats of any local petty autocrat. The changes implicit in the structure of economic life discussed in this article are, however, much more far reaching than this. If our thumbnail sketch of the pre-Mughal society is correct, then under the Mughals the Indian economy had passed from a level of loosely integrated units of self-sufficiency to one where there is a vast monetized sector, involving the extensive development of internal commerce. The increased needs of the administration and the system of transferable *jagirs* almost certainly meant a screwing up of the revenue pressure compared to earlier times. Whether this happened through a process of substitution or superposition of claims on the producer is not terribly important. All available evidence seems to indicate that the magnitude of revenue demand deprived the producer of nearly the entire surplus and thus undermined the possibilities inherent in the growth of a relatively complex economic system, itself made possible and partly caused by the emergence of a strong centralized state integrating politically and administratively—and in some ways, economically as well—a land area of continental proportions.