RAMKRISHNA MUKHERJEE

THE DYNAMICS OF A RURAL SOCIETY

ADEMIE-VERLAG · BERLIN

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF
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A Study of the Economic Structure in Bengal Villages

by

RAMKRISHNA MUKHERJEE

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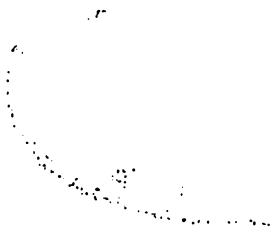

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The objective behind the present study is to examine the dynamics of a rural society and to show that the dynamics of a society cannot be revealed without an analysis of its economic structure. This is a standpoint which for rural societies is not entertained by all social scientists. For, while the importance of studying the economic structure of a "developed" and an industrialised society is not doubted by the general run of social scientists today[1], the view still prevails in some quarters that a study of the economic structure of the so-called "primitive" and peasant societies is hardly necessary and that it is not likely to be fruitful. According to this view, such a study cannot conform to social realities, as the peasants are after-all "peasants" (that is, an undifferentiated or a little-differentiated homogenous mass) and so either it is not possible to ascertain their economic structure or it is not necessary to make such a study in order to understand their way and view of life.

As opposed to such a viewpoint, the writer has made attempts to show from intensive village studies that for the peasant societies also it is possible to ascertain their economic structure, and that an examination of the role of the economic structure in these societies reveals the importance of such a study[2]. The writer has also tried to explain how the inter-community tension in the Uganda Protectorate in British East Africa is the result of the alignment of the three communities — British, Indian and African — to the three levels of the economic structure of Uganda today[3]. Thus the relevance of studying the economic

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[1] Even though a *social status classification*, based on occupational groupings, can only partially represent the economic structure of a society, a course of analysis of the role of the "Social Classes" in Britain in recent times has suggested how important it is to study the economic structure of a "developed" and industrialised society in order to have a clear idea of the total field of social relations and thus to understand the dynamics of the society (cf. *Social Mobility in Britain*, edited by D. V. Glass and contributed by him, the present writer and others).

[2] cf. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *Sur une méthode d'étude de Structure économique on prenant pour base six villages du Bengale; Economic Structure of Rural Bengal: A Survey of Six Villages; The Economic Structure and Social Life in Six Villages of Bengal; Economic Structure in Two Breton Villages* (jointly with F. K. Girling); *Breton Family and Economic Structure* (jointly with F. K. Girling); *Six Villages of Bengal: A Socio-Economic Survey.*

[3] cf. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *Communal Tension in Uganda: A Sociological Analysis; The Problem of Uganda: A Study in Acculturation.*

structure of a peasant or a "primitive" society has already been suggested. And now in this study the writer will further examine the hypothesis that, as found in "developed" and industrialised societies, in the peasant societies also the function of the economic structure is of vital importance to their course of development, and that without such an analysis it is not possible to appreciate the dynamics of these societies.

This hypothesis will be tested in two stages. Firstly, only the economic sphere of a society will be taken into consideration and it will be shown how without an analysis of the economic structure it is not possible to have a true understanding of the character of its economy, which undoubtedly plays a basic role in the social development of any people. Secondly, in the socio-ideological sphere of a society, it will be shown what an important effect the economic structure has on the social organisation of the people. In this way, the present study will endeavour to prove that even while accepting a schematic formulation of human society as obeying three sets of laws, viz. economic, social and ideological, an examination of the economic structure of a society is basic to its proper understanding.

Rural Bengal in the British period of India's history has been selected to test the writer's hypothesis for two important reasons. Firstly, like other rural societies in British India, rural Bengal was often regarded as representing an "egalitarian" society, that is, as composed of a mass of undifferentiated or little-differentiated people. Therefore, a study of the economic structure of this society should have been of the least importance in order to obtain a correct view of the way of life of the Bengal villagers. Secondly, as in other rural areas in India, the social organisation of rural Bengal was regarded as basically governed by the institution of caste system, and this is still true to an extent. Therefore, if it can be shown that the persistance of this institution in the British period of Bengal's history was due to the peculiar development of the economic structure of the society, it will be made clear how this phenomenon can dominate the life of a people not only in the economic but also in the social and ideological spheres.

Thus, from an analysis of the economic structure in Bengal villages, the need for its study in order to examine the dynamics of a rural society may be further indicated.

CHAPTER I

"PEASANT" SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

1. An "Egalitarian" Society?

Villages in British India were often regarded as comprising an egalitarian society with a uniformly low financial status and primitive ways of living.[1] To those who characterised India as a "Village Continent" this was a proof of peculiar oriental features of Indian social organisation; and so they declared that India could not be made amenable to quick political changes.[2] To others, however, there was no political necessity to arrive at such a conclusion as to the egalitarian character of India's village societies, but it is not unlikely that India's almost complete dependence on agricultural production, the primitive state of her productive forces in agriculture and the poorly developed techniques of production could give such an impression to a casual observer.[3] And, needless to say, such

[1] Thus the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India noted in 1928 (cf. *The Report*, p. 6):

"The desire to accumulate money is not characteristic of rural society."

(See also *The Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. 1, p. 18; M. A. Huque's *The Man Behind the Plough*, p. vi; etc.).

[2] Thus the Indian Statutory Commission drew the conclusion from its tour in India (cf. Vol. 1, p. 15):

"Any quickening of general political judgement, any widening of rural horizons beyond the traditional and engrossing interest of weather and water and crops and cattle, with the round of festivals and fairs and any such change from these immemorial preoccupations of the average Indian villager is bound to come very slowly indeed."

[3] For details regarding India's and Bengal's dependence on the agrarian economy, the poor state of the productive forces and of the techniques of production, see for instance the *Census Reports of India* for 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941, and 1951 (for the Republic of India only); P. A. Wadia and K. T. Merchant's *Our Economic Problems*, p. 88ff; M. B. Nanavati and J. J. Anjaria's *The Indian Rural Problem*, p. 39ff; W. Burn's *Technological Possibilities of Agricultural Development in India*; P. N. Driver's *Problems of Zemindari and Land Revenue Reconstruction in India*; M. A. Huque's *The Man Behind the Plough*; Parimalkumar Roy's *Agricultural Economics of Bengal*, Part I, p. 121ff; *The Report on Bengal* of the Famine Inquiry Commission, p. 201ff; *The Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, Vol. 1, p. 74ff; etc.

an impression could be made also from rural Bengal alone. For, as an integral part of British India, Bengal was in no way different from the rest of the subcontinent in regard to the character of her economy and the nature of her rural society.[1]

This myth of "equality" among the Indian or Bengal villagers has, of course, been exploded by many economists;[2] but the fact cannot be ignored that the "traditional" simple life which the bulk of the people led in the rural areas and the generally deteriorating appearance of the villages which could not pass unnoticed even by the most superficial observers tended to support this belief in the age-old *static* character of India's village society.[3] Indeed, even a casual visitor to rural areas could not but be struck by the apalling poverty of the majority of the villagers and the comparatively low standard of living of all the people. And so the upshot was that, however superficial such impressions may be, at first sight they tended to confirm the prevailing belief in the egalitarian nature of village societies in India. Therefore, in order to establish the *need* for studying the economic structure of rural Bengal in the British period of her history, it will be of interest to refute at the outset this illusion of egalitarianism of her rural society.

It may however be noted beforehand that a few isolated cases of large incomes in a place with uniformly poorer or smaller earnings would not be out of place in a so-called egalitarian society. As a matter of fact, in view of his knowledge

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[1] For Bengal it is particularly worthy of note that up to the division of this province of British India in 1947 into the State of West Bengal within the Indian Union and East Bengal or East Pakistan her population as depended on agriculture was estimated to be between 75 and 80 per cent of the total. Also, according to the *Census of Agricultural Implements in Bengal*, conducted in 1940 by the Department of Agriculture, Forest and Fisheries of the Bengal Government, out of the total of 4,337,160 implements used in Bengal to till the soil, 4,330,804 were wodden ploughs, 6304 were iron ploughs, and only the remaining 52 were tractors. From the same census it is found that there were only 128 oil-engines for irrigation and 55 tubewells fitted with electric pump. No wonder, therefore, that according to the *Statistical Abstract for British India: 1930—31 to 1939—40* only 6.8 per cent of the total cultivated area of Bengal was irrigated. For further details (e. g., cattle, seeds, manure, and other conditions of production) see, for instance, M. A. Huque's *The Man Behind the Plough*; Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *Six Villages of Bengal;* etc.

[2] See, for instance, *The Indian Rural Problem*, pp. 74—75.

[3] The Indian Central Banking Enquiry Committee estimated that in 1928 the annual per capita income of the agricultural population in India was only Rs. 42 (cf. *The Majority Report*, Vol. 1, part 1). The average income of rural Bengal per household was also found to be very low indeed; in 1933, it was estimated at Rs. 114 only with the average size of the household as 6.89, that is, Rs. 16.5 per capita on an average (cf. *The Preliminary Report of the Board of Economic Enquiry on Rural Indebtedness*). Even after the marked inflation during the last war and quick prosperity of the top stratum in rural society because of a sharp rise in the price of crops, the per capita yearly income of an average villager in Bengal was found to be only Rs. 165 according to the sample survey conducted in 1946 (cf. Table I. 2). Evidently, such poor incomes led the bulk of the rural population to a plain and simple living and thus gave the impression of an egalitarian society.

that even in ancient times rich people were not found totally absent from village areas in India, a casual observer may thus like to account for the presence of villagers of different social and economic standing in British India or Bengal. But careful investigations have shown that in the British period of her history, even within the limited sphere of the economic life in rural Bengal, there was an appreciable range of incomes received from different sources. Table 1.1, which has been prepared from the data collected in 1946 by the Indian Statistical Institute from a sample survey of randomly selected rural households in Bengal, exhibits this sharp income-hierarchy.

Table 1.1

Per capita income (in rupees)	Number of households	Percentage of total households
(1)	(2)	(3)
0— 99	1772	13.0
100— 199	7428	54.4
200— 299	3037	22.3
300— 399	894	6.6
400— 499	304	2.2
500— 599	99	0.7
600— 699	40	0.3
700— 799	30	0.2
800— 899	14	0.1
900— 999	11	0.1
1000—1099	4	0.1
1100—1199	4	
1200—1299	3	
1300—1399	1	
1400—1499	2	
1500 & more	2	
Total	13645	100.0

The nature of the income distribution will be better understood from Table 1.2 which gives the statistical constants of the household incomes.

Table 1.2

Statistical constants	Per capita income (in Rs.)
(1)	(2)
Median	165.413
Mean	186.887
Standard deviation	105.745
$\text{Gamma}_1 = \gamma_1$	2.904
$\text{Gamma}_2 = \gamma_2$	17.631

The above tables show that in rural Bengal the households did not form a compact group of similar economic position, of which income is evidently the simplest measure. It will also be noticed from Table 1.1 that although the incomes ranged over a somewhat wide dimension, the overwhelming majority of the people was restricted within a small range. This made the distribution so asymmetrical and peaked (leptocurtic) with a heavy density in a narrow sector[1], as is realised from Table 1.2.

The important conclusion which emerges from the above is that inequality in income distribution leading to sharp differentiation within a society is possible even when the average income of the people is very low and the total range narrow.[2] Consequently what seems to have been fundamental to the rural society of Bengal under British rule was not its low average income and its comparatively narrow range (which apparently gave it an egalitarian character), but the presence of well-defined income hierarchy even within the small range.

The inequality in income distribution and the presence of an income hierarchy naturally suggests a concentration of income in a sector of society. This is borne out by a simple frequency distribution of the sampled households of rural Bengal under per capita income, as shown in Table 1.3. The data in this table relate to the extensive sample survey referred to earlier[3].

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[1] It may be of interest to compare the pareto-graduation of these incomes of the rural households for the whole of Bengal with that for all households in 6 villages in the district of Bogra in 1941—42 and in 12 villages in the district of Birbhum in 1937 (cf. *A Note on the Concentration of Income in Bengal Villages* by Ramkrishna Mukherjee and Moni Mohan Mukherjee). The equations are given below.

Bengal: $\log y = 7.0132 - 1.8055 \log x$,
Bogra: $\log y = 4.0077 - 1.6244 \log x$,
Birbhum: $\log y = 4.8882 - 1.4839 \log x$.

The value of ν, as obtained from the above graduations, viz. 1.8055, 1.6244, and 1.4839, for the rural Bengal as a whole and for the groups of villages in the districts of Bogra and Birbhum, respectively, are similar to that obtained for the United States for the period 1914 to 1919, viz. 1.56 ± 0.12 (cf. *The Analysis of Economic Time Series* by Harold T. Davis, p. 403). This analysis thus leads to a conclusion quite contrary to the concept of an egalitarian society in rural Bengal.

[2] A similar conclusion was drawn by Miyoji Hayakawa while studying the Pareto distribution of income in the rural areas of Japan (cf. *The Application of Pareto's Law of Income to Japanese Data* by Miyoji Hayakawa). He computed the entire income distribution of the sample of 108 communes out of the 274 in Hokkaido in Japan and found the value of ν as 1.40774. The value of ν, if computed for incomes over 1000 yen only, was 1.55837.

[3] The curves of concentration of per capita incomes of the sampled rural households for the whole of Bengal and that for the 6 and 12 villages in Bogra and Birbhum can be prepared on the basis of the pareto-graduation of the incomes. For, if p_x stands for the percentage of households possessing x or more and if q_x is the percentage of the total income possessed by this percentage of population, then the curve of concentration is derived from the equation:

Table 1.3

Per capita income (in rupees)	Number of households	Total income of the group	Percentage of Total household	Percentage of Total income
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
0— 99	1772	141,498	13	5
100—199	7428	1.094,164	54	43
200—299	3037	726,485	22	29
300—499	1198	437,770	9	17
500+	210	146,760	2	6
Total	13645	2,546,677	100	100

The above analysis thus suggests that instead of believing in the myth of egalitarian character of rural Bengal one should examine its economic structure.

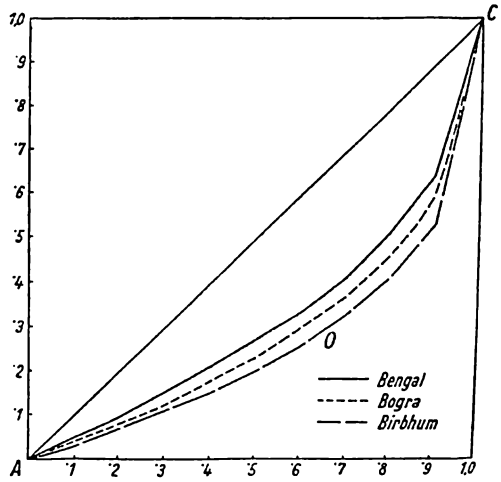
2. Socia-economic Units

Needless to say, in a *social* study the criterion to determine the economic structure should be such as that it will not merely segregate the people into abstract statistical categories of various "elements" of a society; it must express the *social* significance of the economic hierarchy. It will be obvious from the preceding discussion that the people of rural Bengal could easily be classified into distinct groups by their income levels. Since rural Bengal depended essentially on an agrarian economy, landholdings of the villagers could also be used for this purpose, as from a sample survey of 5,284 random households in rural Bengal in 1944—45 it was found that the coefficient of correlation between the total land owned by a household and its total income was 0.6216.[1] But such

$q_x = 1 - (1 - p_x)^{1/\delta}$, where $\delta = \nu/(\nu - 1)$. (cf. *The Theory of Econometrics* by Harold T. Davis, pp. 32—34). The equations worked out in this way are given below and the curves of concentration are shown in the diagram.

Bengal: $q_x = 1 - (1 - p_x)^{0.4401}$,
Bogra: $q_x = 1 - (1 - p_x)^{0.3863}$,
Birbhum: $q_x = 1 - (1 - p_x)^{0.3261}$.

The curves show how acute is the inequality of income distribution among the Bengal villagers and how it has culminated in sharp polarisation.



[1] H. S. M. Ishaque's *Agricultural Statistics by Plot to Plot Enumeration in Bengal: 1944—45*, p. 53.

a classification into a mathematical or an "economic" category would ignore the *social* factor. It would not represent the real life of the people as social beings in their day to day existence. The criterion should therefore be one which has traditional recognition in the society.

In India a person living in a rural area is usually described as (a) inhabiting a particular territory or a village, or (b) belonging to a particular caste or community, or (c) living by a particular family or household occupation. Now since the income of a people may be regarded as the simplest measure of their economic condition, on the basis of their household incomes the Bengal villagers could be classified under the criteria of *village, caste and religious group,* and *household occupation* in order to examine which of the three criteria serves best to segregate the people into socio-economic units which are heterogeneous *between* one another but homogeneous *within* themselves. But it would be obvious that even to obtain a dimensional picture for the whole of Bengal it is not possible to present a frequency table by villages, as according to the 1941 census there were in all 84,213 villages in Bengal. It is however a common knowledge that villages in British India were inhabited by people of varying economic standard, so that this grouping cannot be used as a criterion to segregate the rural households into economically homogeneous units.[1]

As regards the other two criteria, it is first necessary to explain their components. The religious classification of the Bengal villagers can broadly be done as Hindu, Moslem and others. Their household occupations may be defined as

[1] Incidentally, it may be of interest to note that the average household incomes by districts also indicate that the administrative sectors are inhabited by people of very different economic position, and that the proportions of such groups within the sectors vary greatly from district to district. This is shown in the table below which reproduces the data published in *The Preliminary Report of the Board of Economic Enquiry on Rural Indebtedness.*

District (Rural Areas only)	Number of families surveyed	Mean ± S. E. of family income 1928		1933	
(1)	(2)	(3)		(4)	
Burdwan	490	272	8	156	6
Birbhum	252	238	10	172	9
Bankura	258	146	6	86	6
Midnapur	559	228	16	144	9
Murshidabad	233	198	13	132	8
Jessore	490	164	5	84	3
Nadia	304	235	9	141	6
Pabna	297	179	6	79	3
Bogra	397	257	8	128	5
Rangpur	1043	220	5	99	2
Rajshahi	207	222	14	113	6
Malda	77	48	6	29	4
Dacca	549	235	7	115	4
Faridpur	424	207	6	105	3
Chittagang	344	136	20	81	5
Tippera	345	247	6	123	3
All Districts	6359	218	4	114	2

those from which each of the households derived most of its incomes. On this basis the people of rural Bengal could be classified under nine occupational groups according to the following description.

(1) *Landholders* are either the subinfeudatory landlords created by the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793 or those landowning persons who do not work on their land but let out the holdings for sharecropping for which they receive at least a half share of the crop. In Bengal they are known as *Zemindar* or *Jotdar*.

(2) *Supervisory Farmers* are those who live by having their land cultivated by hired labourers. They are generally distinguished from the ordinary cultivators by a qualifying prefix of being rich, viz. *dhani chasi* or *dhani grihastha*.

(3) *Cultivators* are the self-sufficient peasants who possess tenancy rights over their holdings and cultivate them for themselves. They are usually known as *chasi grihastha*.

(4) *Sharecroppers* are those who live mainly by tilling other peoples' land on a crop-sharing basis. They usually possess a pair of cattle, a plough, and seeds for production, and are thus differentiated from the agricultural labourers some of whom may be paid by crops instead of cash wages. There is also an important distinction between the two groups inasmuch as that while the actual earnings of the sharecroppers will depend on the total crop produced on the land, the wages of the agricultural labourers (either in cash or in kind) are fixed beforehand. The sharecroppers are known as *adhiars* or *bargadars*.

(5) *Agricultural labourers*, as explained above, are those who are paid in wages for their work in agricultural production. They are known as *kisans* or *kisan-majoors*.

(6) *Artisans* are the rural craftsmen, like weavers, carpenters, potters, blacksmiths, etc., most of whom own their means of production and produce for themselves by their own labour.

(7) *Traders* are generally the petty shopkeepers, maintaining a grocery store or a stationary shop in the village, or are peddlars. Very rarely they are large-scale businessmen.

(8) *Service-holders* are in the main the menial employees of the local government or public organisations or of individual households, such as sweeper, messenger, watchman, domestic servant, etc.

(9) *Others*, as a whole, group the remaining households pursuing some ill-defined lowly occupations or living on the charity of other members of society.

Now, in order to examine the relative efficiency of the two criteria in differentiating the rural population, for those religious and occupational groups as stated above ogives have been prepared from the cumulative percentage distribution of per capita household incomes. The ogives are shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, and the data relating to them are given in Table 1.4.

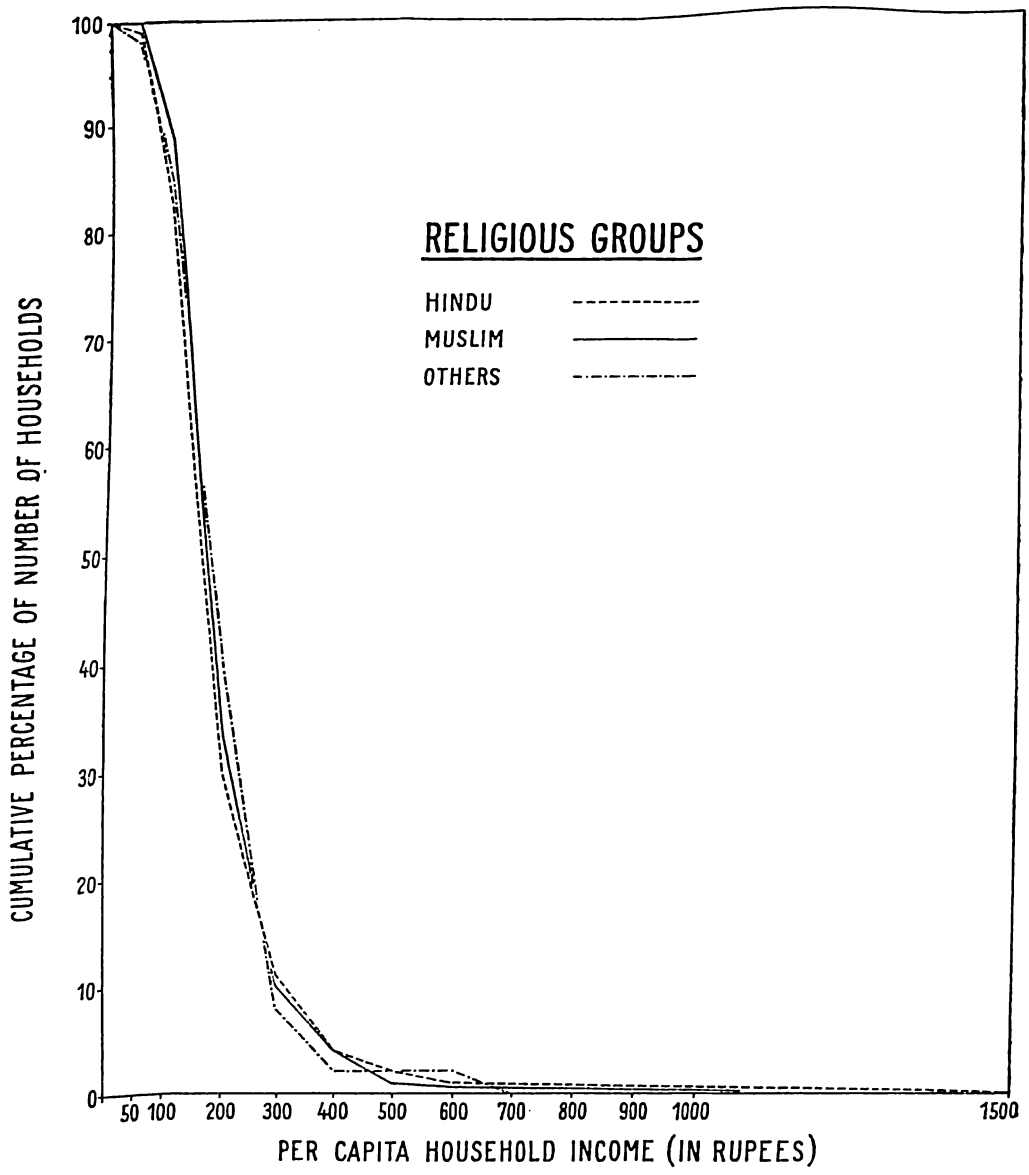

RELIGIOUS GROUPS
HINDU
MUSLIM
OTHERS
CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS
PER CAPITA HOUSEHOLD INCOME (IN RUPEES)
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90
100
50 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1500

Figure I. 1

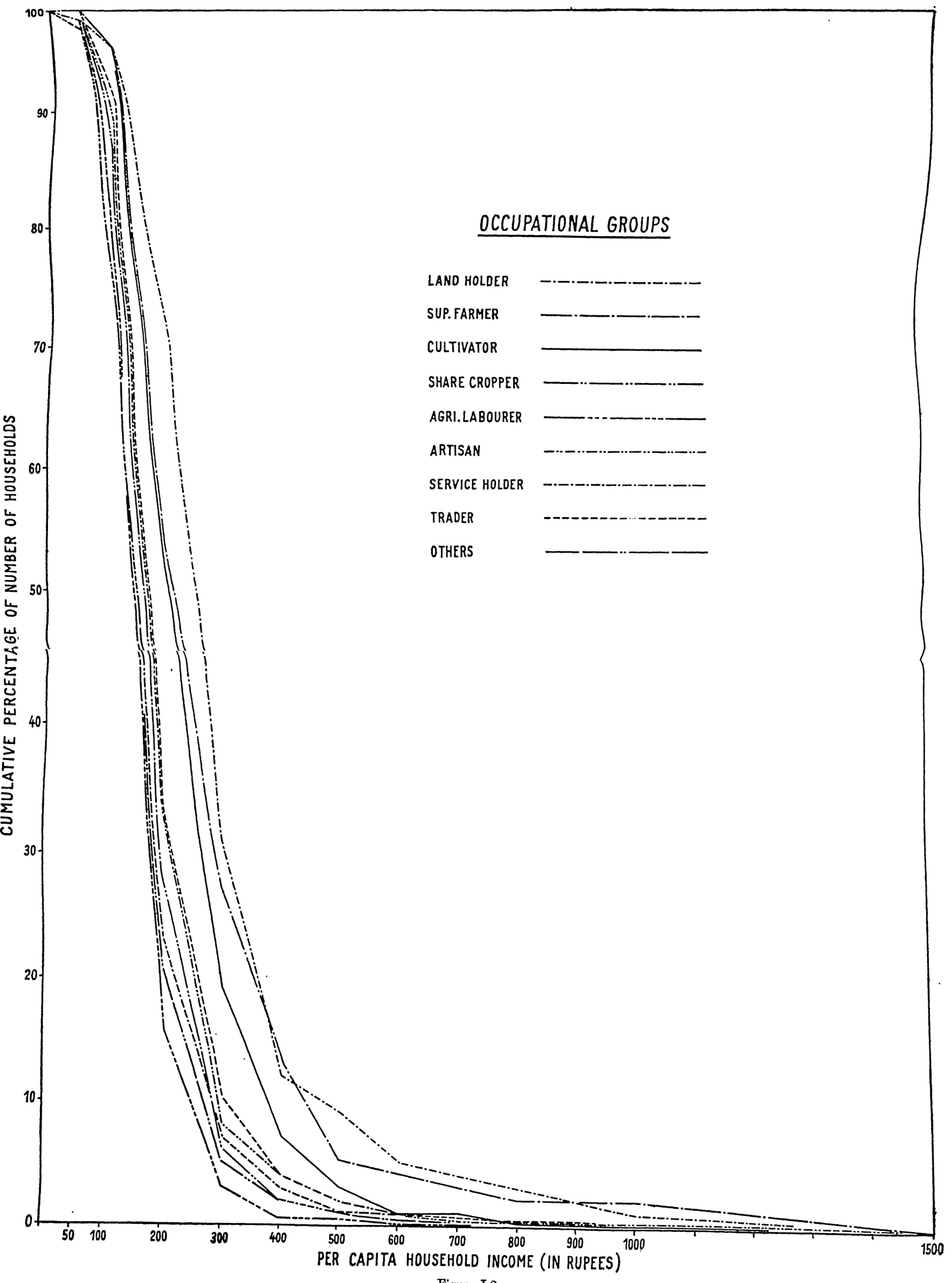

OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS
LAND HOLDER
SUP. FARMER
CULTIVATOR
SHARE CROPPER
AGRI. LABOURER
ARTISAN
SERVICE HOLDER
TRADER
OTHERS
CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
50
100
200
300
400
500
600
700
800
900
1000
1500
PER CAPITA HOUSEHOLD INCOME (IN RUPEES)

Figure I.2

Table 1.4

Particulars	N	Cumulative percentages of total households with per capita yearly income in Rupees												
		1+	50+	100+	200+	300+	400+	500+	600+	700+	800+	900+	1000+	1500+
Religious grouping														
Hindu	4814	100	99	83	30	11	4	2	1	0.8	0.5	0.4	0.2	0.2
Muslim	8778	100	100	89	34	10	4	1	0.7	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.06	0.01
Others	53	100	98	85	40	8	2	2	2	—	—	—	—	—
Occupational grouping														
Landholder	138	100	100	96	71	31	12	9	5	4	3	2	2	—
Supervisory farmer	394	100	99	96	54	27	13	5	4	3	2	2	1	—
Cultivator	4233	100	100	96	52	19	7	3	1	1	0.3	0.2	0.2	—
Trader	1169	100	100	91	34	10	4	2	1	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1
Artisan	264	100	100	89	34	8	4	2	1	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	—
Sharecropper	760	100	100	87	28	6	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Service-holder	1066	100	99	78	23	7	3	1	1	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.2	—
Agricultural labourer	4395	100	99	81	16	3	0.6	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	—
Others	1226	100	98	78	21	5	2	1	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1
Total	13645	100	99	87	33	10	4	2	0.8	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.01

By comparing the two ogives it will be seen that household occupations can better segregate the rural population than the religious groups. This will also be evident from the Table 1.5 which gives the average per capita incomes of the households classified by the two criteria.

Table 1.5

Criterion	Number of households	Average per capita income (in rupees)
(1)	(2)	(3)
Religious Groups		
Hindu	4814	183
Moslem	8778	189
Others	53	184
Household Occupational Groups		
Landholder	138	290
Supervisory farmer	394	253
Cultivator	4233	228
Trader	1169	194
Artisan	264	189
Sharecropper	760	173
Agricultural labourer	4395	149
Service-holder	1066	167
Others	1226	160

The above table shows that unlike the religious groups, the average incomes of which are nearly the same, the occupational groups maintain a distinct gradation according to their economic position. It is however worthy of note that although household occupation is found to be the best of the three criteria under consideration, the ogives in Figure 1.2 did not show very clear segregation of the occupational groups even when the distinctiveness of the groupings was fairly well maintained. This suggests that for a precise determination of the economic structure the occupational groups should be further grouped into fewer categories depending upon their socio-economic position in the rural society.

Three classes have, therefore, been formed out of the nine occupational groups. Their descriptions and the basis for this classification are given below.

(1) The Class I is composed of the occupational groups of *landholders* and *supervisory farmers*, that is, of the subinfeudatory landlords and the prosperous non-cultivating or supervisory farmers whose top-most position in society is unquestioned.

(2) The Class II mainly comprises the self-sufficient peasantry, viz. the *cultivators*; but the *artisans* and *traders* are also included in this class because, like the *cultivators*, most of them barely maintain a somewhat self-sufficient existence, partly based on land.

(3) The Class III is composed of the remaining occupational groups, viz. the *sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, service-holders*, and *others*, which are formed of those people who depend on working for other members of society or in the case of a few of them on the charity of the wealthier folks.

For these three classes also ogives have been prepared on the basis of the data given in Table 1.6. The ogives are shown in Figure 1.3.

Table 1.6

Class	N	Cumulative percentage of total households with per capita yearly income in Rupees												
		1+	50+	100+	200+	300+	400+	500+	600+	700+	800+	900+	1000+	1500+
I	532	100	100	96	58	28	13	6	4	3	2	2	1	—
II	5666	100	100	94	47	17	6	3	1	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.01
III	7447	100	99	81	19	4	1	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.09	0.05	0.01
Total	13645	100	99	87	33	10	4	2	0.8	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.01

It will be seen from the Figure 1.3 that the classes indeed maintain a clear segregation in regard to their economic levels. This will also be evident from the Table 1.7 which indicates the economic position of the three classes. For this table shows that while the Class I comprising only 4 per cent of the total households has an income of nearly one and half times more than the over-all

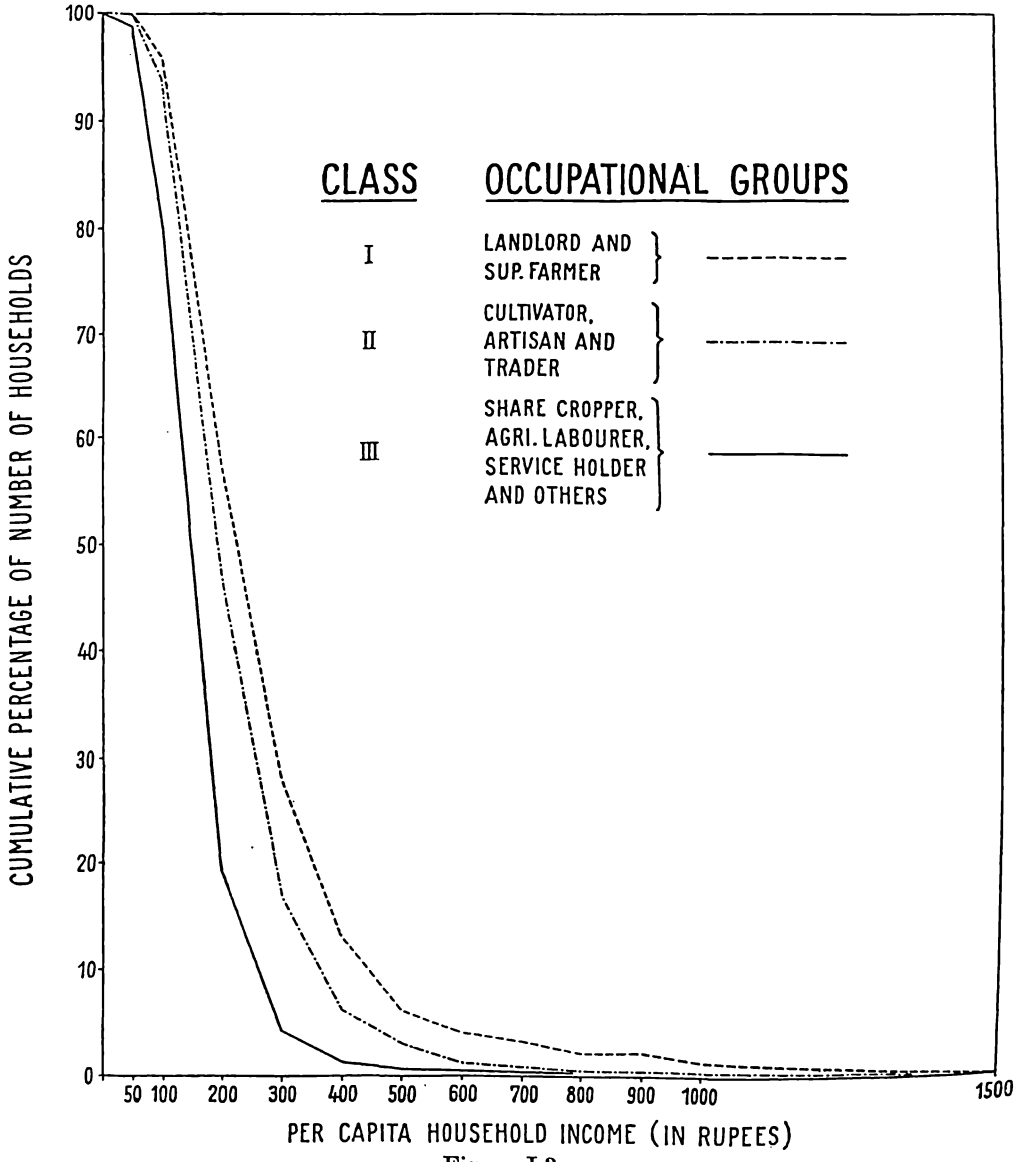

CLASS
OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS
I
LANDLORD AND SUP. FARMER
II
CULTIVATOR, ARTISAN AND TRADER
III
SHARE CROPPER, AGRI. LABOURER, SERVICE HOLDER AND OTHERS
CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
50 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1500
PER CAPITA HOUSEHOLD INCOME (IN RUPEES)

Figure I.3

average, the Class II comprising nearly half of the total households has an income of a little more than the general average, and the Class III, comprising more than half of the total households has an income of less than the general average.

The present analysis thus indicates that the economic structure of rural Bengal, as it emerged in the British period of her history, is represented by the abvoe three classes defined in relation to her socio-economic units.

Table 1.7

Class	Number of households	Average per capita household income	Percentage of total household	Index of average income
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
I	532	262	4	140
II	5666	219	42	117
III	7447	156	54	83
All	13645	187	100	100

3. Classes and Production-relations

The economic structure of a society, however, is not revealed merely by segregating the people into homogeneous units of similar economic status. For man is a social producer of his means of livelihood, and therefore the operation of an economy is the total manifestation of the inter-relationship of the people in regard to the production of wealth in society. Consequently the composition of the economic structure should be the total representation of the different types of production-relations which the people have entered into in course of their economic activities. This means that the economic structure must reflect the way in which the means of production are owned and reveal the social relations between men which have resulted from their connections with the process of production. Therefore, in order to establish that the three classes represent the economic structure, it is necessary to examine how they distinguish themselves according to their production-relations in the society as a whole, over and above indicating (as shown earlier) the generally recognised socio-economic position of the people in rural society.

It has been noted in the beginning that the rural economy of Bengal was based on agricultural production. It has also been shown that the socio-economic hierarchy which segregated the people into different groups of similar economic status was mainly composed of the agricultural population. The small section depending primarily on non-agricultural occupations was also vitally connected with the agrarian economy (mainly as craftsmen, traders and such), because their living depended upon the well-being of the peasantry and the peasantry also

could not live without having their needs met by these people. Moreover, a large number of non-agricultural households had a direct interest in agricultural production. This will be evident from the Table 1.8 which has been prepared from the data collected during the 1946 sample survey mentioned earlier.

Table 1.8

Cultivable area owned by non-agricultural households (in acres)	Percentage of total households	Percentage of agricultural labourers in household	Mean area cultivated per household	Area share-cropped as percentage of area cultivated	Percentage of area given for share-cropping to total owned	Percentage of households giving land out for share-cropping
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
No land	57.7	66.9	0.1	72.3	—	—
1.0—1.9	34.1	30.8	0.5	16.0	34.5	34.4
2.0—4.9	6.3	1.5	1.3	11.9	55.8	61.2
5.0—9.9	1.3	0.8	2.8	8.5	58.1	68.5
10.0 & above	0.6	—	5.5	1.9	59.0	74.7
Total	100.0	100.0	0.4	22.2	47.7	16.9

The table shows that whether the non-agricultural households owned any land or not, and whatever the size of their owned holdings was, almost all of them directly participated in agricultural production. The overwhelming majority of such households did not possess any land or only a negligible area of less than 2 acres (cf. column 2), but a large number of them took to agriculture, evidently as their secondary or tertiary source of income, as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers (cf. columns 3 and 5). Only a few of them, owning large-sized holdings but having their primary occupations mostly as craftsmen or traders, either cultivated those holdings themselves (cf. column 4), and sometimes by means of hired labour, or let it out for sharecropping (columns 6 and 7) in order to spend all their time on non-agricultural activities. It follows, therefore, that the composition of the economic structure of rural Bengal must express the production-relations of the agrarian economy.

Now an examination of the specific roles of the three classes shows that they certainly satisfy this conditions of expressing the production-relations of the agrariane economy of Bengal during the British period of her history. Thus the Class I is seen to be composed of the landed gentry, viz. the landholders and supervisory farmers. These people did not actively participate in agriculture but enriched themselves from the concentration of land — the principal means of production — in their group by using others' labour for production. According to the 1946 survey data, they accounted for only 4 per cent of the total house-

holds of rural Bengal, but owned 11 per cent of the total land. In other words, this class possessed two and three-quarters more than what it could claim in case of an equitable distribution.

The Class II is found to be composed mainly of self-sufficient and self-cultivating peasants with proprietory rights on land. To this class also belonged the traders and the more or less self-sufficient and self-working artisans who owned their means of production and whose dominant role in society was to produce by employing their own labour. As noted earlier, the bulk of them also depended directly on the agrarian economy (cf. Table 1.8). According to the survey data mentioned above, this class comprised 42 per cent of the total households of rural Bengal and owned 68 per cent of the total land; that is, in addition to what it could claim under equitable condition, it possessed a little more.

Finally, the Class III is seen to have been composed mainly of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers with very little or no land of their own. The non-agricultural occupational groups included in this class, viz. "service-holders" and "others", also partly depended on sharecropping or working as agricultural labourers. More or less as a propertyless class, the Class III thus served as the concomitant of the landed gentry, and its members barely maintained a living by supplying their labour for the prosperity of the Class I.[1] According to the survey of 1946, this class included 54 per cent of the total households but possessed only 21 per cent of the total land, that is, about one-third of what it could have claimed under equitable condition.

The operation of the economy of rural Bengal in the British period of her history is thus seen to have been dependant on two sets of productions-relations in society; one between the Classes I and III as owner and not-owner of the means of production (land) and as user and supplier of labour, respectively, and the other of the Class II as owner of the means of production and user of own labour.

4. Class II and the Production-relation in pre-British Days

In order to fully appreciate the role of the above three classes to express the economic forces of the society through the medium of the economic structure, it is first necessary to examine the production-relations in Bengal's agriculture in the pre-British period of her history. For the specific significance of the three classes of the economic structure would lose much of its importance if it is found that the production-relations had remained unchanged from the time before the advent of the British. In the following pages, therefore, a brief account is given of how the economic forces in agriculture found their expression in the pre-British days.

[1] Controversies exist as to whether the status of a sharecropper is similar to that of an agricultural labourer. This point will be discussed later.

There is the special reason for discussing this topic as several scholars have tended to prove that no fundamental change was effected in the economic structure of rural society after the advent of British rule. They point out that reference to persons engaged in agricultural production without any usufructuary or proprietory right over the land and being paid for their labour in cash or in kinds is available from ancient Indian literatures.[1] Such cases, no doubt, occurred in ancient India and especially in the periods of "later Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads" as well as in the Buddhist period. During these times the Brahmins had their land cultivated by other persons, for as belonging to the privileged section of the society they were in a position to enforce such an arrangement and probably in consequence thereof social opinion also developed against their directly participating in agricultural production.[2] Likewise, when they possessed lands, the Kshatriyas (and especially the royalties and the nobilities holding state-farms, etc.) had their estates cultivated in this way.[3] Also the Buddhist monks made use of workers for the cultivation of monastery lands of their Samghas because cultivation was not regarded as a legitimate pursuit of the monks or the brotherhood even though the monasteries could possess properties including land for cultivation.[4]

Probably, the labour thus called for in order to serve the top stratum of society came from the lowest social stratum comprising the Sudras and Dasas, and also from the conquered enemies and those aboriginals who were newly entering the fold of the *varna* system and not being conversant with plough cultivation were in a more vulnerable position to be exploited by the upper stratum of society than were the settled Vaishyas from whom the ruling power could only extract taxes for the landholdings held and used by them.[5]

Such workers in the agrarian economy, that is, those who worked on others' land without themselves having any usufructuary or proprietory right over the

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[1] See, for instance, R. Shamasastry's *Kautiliya's Arthasastra*, pp. 128—129; C. A. F. Rhys Davids's *Notes on Early Economic Conditions in Northern India*, p. 860; U. N. Ghosal's *The Agrarian System in Ancient India*, pp. 11, 39, 51—52, 61; Radha Kumud Mookerjee's *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern (with special reference to Bengal)*, p. 134; etc.

[2] See, for instance, A. Berriedale Keith's *The Period of the Later Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads*; C. A. F. Rhys Davids's *Economic Conditions According to Early Buddhist Literature*, p. 203; etc.

[3] See, for instance, U. N. Ghosal's *The Agrarian System in Ancient India*, pp. 11—12, 31, 39, 78—79, 91.

[4] See, for instance, Radha Kumud Mookerjee's *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, p. 136.

[5] See, for instance, A. S. Altekar's *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 70ff; A. Berriedale Keith's *The Period of the Later Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads*, pp. 127—129; U. N. Ghosal's *The Agrarian System in Ancient India*, pp. 82—83; N. C. Banerjee's *Economic Life and Progress in Ancient India*, Volume I, *Hindu Period*, Part 1, *From the Earliest Times to the Rise of Maurya Empire*, pp. 92—93; etc.

holding, were apparently present throughout the pre-British period of India's history. For in the early British period also they have been mentioned in the studies of the East India Company officers.[1] And because of the presence of these workers in agricultural production from ancient times, there is a tendency among some historians and sociologists to undermine the peculiar significance of the landholder cum sharecropper or the supervisory farmer cum agricultural labourer relationships in British India (as well as in Bengal) by equating the modern sharecroppers and agricultural labourers with those workers in pre-British India. The well-known Indian historian Radha Kumud Mookerjee, for instance, has endeavoured to draw this conclusion in his study of the Indian land system.[2]

But it should be borne in mind that not only the essential character of sharecropping and cultivation by hired labour as producing commodities in the agrarian economy was absent in the pre-British period of India's history (as will be further explained later), but on the contrary in ancient India the self-sufficient cultivator using a plot of land in the village on a hereditary basis was indeed the dominant and practically the only producing type.[3] And the same was true for the Moslem period of India's history as well as during the early years of British rule; the other workers in agricultural production existing more as exceptions than as the general rule.[4]

This was so because once villages were established in ancient India with agriculture by means of plough cultivation as the basis of the economy and they extended over the plains of the subcontinent, the village community system became the most dominant form of socio-economic organisation in India. This process of development in India from the Mauryan and Gupta periods has been noted in earlier as well as in recent researches.[5] What is of importance to note here is that in this village community system, characterised by self-sufficient and autonomous village units, land was held communally by the entire village, so that each household lived on subsistence production on the land allotted to it under usufructuary rights.

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[1] See, for instance, H. T. Colebrooke's *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, p. 91; Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's *A Survey of the Zilla of Dinajpoore;* etc.

[2] Radha Kumud Mookerjee's *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern (with special reference to Bengal)*.

[3] See, for instance, R. Shamasastry's *Kautiliya's Arthasastra;* A. Berriedale Keith's *The Age of the Rigveda;* pp. 99—101; U. N. Ghosal's *The Agrarian System in Ancient India*, pp. 19, 80; Radha Kumud Mookerjee's *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, pp. 134, 138; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India*, pp. 157, 315; etc.

[4] See, for instance, W. H. Moreland's *The Revenue System of the Mughul Empire*, p. 452ff; Radha Kumud Mookerjee's *Indian Land System: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, p. 158; H. T. Colebrooke's *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, p. 92; etc.

[5] See, for instance, Christian Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Vol. II, p. 721ff; Mountstuart Elphinstone's *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*, p. 68ff; J. F. Hewitt's *The Communal Origin of Indian Land Tenures;* John D. Mayne's *A Treatise*

Possibly, within a village the peasant-householders were keen to maintain their respective rights over the plots under use and sometimes transfer or alienation of land also took place. Such features of land relations within a village have been noted by several research scholars in recent times; and they have prompted some social scientists to denounce the view that the Indian social organisation was based on the village community system (which was self-sufficient and autonomous in character and held the total area of the village in common possession of the villagers) and that while living under a subsistence economy the individual households within a village community had essentially usufructuary rights over the holdings they possessed and used. But, as has been referred to earlier, the descriptions given of the administrative organisation and the socio-economic life in India by reputed Indologists and historians point to the fact that such was the state of affairs in Indian society from about the fourth-fifth centuries of the Christian era.

From these descriptions one sees that in those days "agriculture was the main occupation of the villages, but each of them had usually its own compliment of weavers, potters, carpenters, oil-pressers and goldsmiths"[1]. Thus forming a self-sufficient economic unit, the villagers were organised into a community which had a headman who, "designated as *Grāmeyaka* in some place and *Grāmādhyaksha* in others, was at the head of the village administration"[2]. There was also a "non-official local council" composed of all or the representatives of the *Great Men of the Village* (viz. *mahattamas* in the Uttar Pradesh area of today, *mahattaras* in Maharashtra, *mahājanas* in Karnatak, and *perumakkāl* in the Tamil country), who were either the "leading householders of the village"[3] or the village-elders, that is, the "senior persons of different classes [castes?], who had acquired a pre-eminent status by their age, experience and character"[4]. In addition, in some parts of India at least, such as in Maharashtra, Karnatak and the Tamil country, there used to be a Primary Assembly of all villagers, (viz. *ur* and *sabha* in the Tamil country), which was entrusted among other duties with the most important task "to elect the village executive"[5].

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on Hindu Law and Usage, pp. 6, 217ff; H. S. Maine's *The Village Communities in the East and the West*, and *Ancient Law*, p. 216ff; R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar's *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, Chapter XIV; A. S. Altekar's *State & Government in Ancient India*, Chapter XI, &c.; U. N. Ghosal's *Political Theory and Administrative Organization*, Chapter XVI in "The Classical Age", edited by R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker, *Political Theory, Administrative Organisation, Law and Legal Institutions* and *Social Conditions*, Chapters X and XII in "The Age of Imperial Kanauj", edited by R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India*, Chapters VIII, XIII, &c.; D. D. Kosambi's *The Basis of India's History* (*I*), pp. 35—45; etc.

[1] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, p. 266.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 266.

[3] R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker (editors) — *The Classical Age*, p. 353.

[4] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, pp. 266—267.

[5] A. S. Altekar — *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 176.

The autonomous character of these village communities is evident from the facts elicited by the scholars that the "jurisdiction of the village authorities extended over houses, streets, *bazars*, burning grounds, temples, wells, tanks, waste lands, forests and cultivable lands"[1]; that the village council "looked after village defence, settled village disputes, organised works of public utility, acted as a trustee for minors, and collected the government revenues and paid them into the central treasury"[2]; and that the central state governments "could eventually reach the people and discharge their functions mainly through these bodies"[3]. On the other hand, it has been stated that "the representatives of the people had a decisive voice in them" (that is, in the village councils), for the "local executive officers were usually hereditary servants and not members of the central bureaucracy; they, therefore, usually sided with the local bodies in their tussle with the central government"[4]. Thus, while, on one side, "almost all functions of the government, except that of organising the army, determining foreign policy, and declaring and conducting a war, were discharged through the agency of the local bodies, where the representatives of the locality had a powerful voice"[5], on the other, the village communities were such independent and powerful societal units that: "Kings may impose any number of taxes; eventually those only could be realised which the village councils could agree to collect"[6].

Indeed, the relevance of the village community sytem to the Indian society is further stressed by the fact that while it has sometimes been said that peasant-proprietorship and direct access of the sovereign to the peasants were the predominant features of social organisation in the south, during the period from the middle of the sixth to the middle of the ninth century of the Christian era in this part of India: "The organization which made for the continuity of life and tradition, held society together, and carried it safe through the storms and turmoils of political revolution was the autonomous, self-sufficient village"[7].

There is hardly any doubt, therefore, that whether or not land transfer or alienation took place within a village in those days, village communities did exist in India. But could they be characterised as "based on possession in common of the land", while individual households lived on subsistence production on the land allotted to them under usufructuary rights? Those who have a contrary viewpoint may note that even in an old treaty like Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* there was the provision for individual households to sell the *vāstu* to certain categories of persons[8].

[1] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vakataka-Gupta Age*, p. 266.
[2] *ibid.*, pp. 266—267.
[3] A. S. Altekar — *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 70.
[4] *ibid.*, p. 70.
[5] R.C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭka-Gupta Age*, p. 252.
[6] A. S. Altekar — *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 70.
[7] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri — *A History of South India*, p. 157.
[8] R. Shamasastry — *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, Book III, Chapter 9.

But apart from a discussion on whether the village community system had already developed into a dominant institution at the time of Kautilya (a proposition which needs special examination), and apart from the fact that "purchase" and "sale" of land in ancient India generally meant the purchase of the exemption from the king's tax-demand and the sale or transfer of the right to collect taxes from the area "sold" (as will be explained in a following page with particular reference to Bengal), it may be worth stating that there are more than one evidence in favour of what has been stated above.

Firstly, it is worthy of note that even though it was stated with regard to south India during the sixth to the seventeenth century of the Christian era that "great prestige attached to ownership of land, and everyone, whatever his occupation, aimed at having a small plot he could call his own", it was also noted simultaneously that "periodical redistribution of the arable land of a village among its inhabitants prevailed in many parts of the country till comparatively recent times"[1]. It appears probable therefore that what is meant by "ownership of land" in the above and several such studies was essentially a usufructurary right vested on the "arable land" at least, if not also on the homesteads.

Secondly, the cases of land alienation recorded in those days show that they were overwhelmingly, if not entirely, as religious gifts and endowments to Brahmins and religious organisations, and were for the purpose of providing sustinence to those who were engaded in spiritual activities[2]. By this form of land alienation "the donees acquired only the right to receive the royal revenues and could not dispossess any tenants"[3]. Therefore, those who previously used the holdings could go on possessing and using them as before. And, even if some donees employed some individuals for production on the holdings, the latter also could eventually become the possessors and users of the land for all purposes. As it has been stated with regard to those peasants who were described as "tenant-cultivators" in south India and who worked "especially on lands belonging to temples and other corporate institutions", their terms of tenancy were "fixed either by the terms of original endowment or by separate negotiation in each case" and "very often such tenants had rights which made them more or less part-owners (?) of the land they cultivated"[4]. It is thus seen that, barring some exceptional cases, land alienation in those days need not have disturbed the position of the villagers within a village

[1] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri — *A History of South India*, p. 315.

[2] See, for instance, R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, Chapters XIV and XVIII; R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker (editors) — *The Classical Age*, Chapters XVI, XXII, &c.; R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker (editors) — *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, Chapters X, XIII, &c.; A. S. Altekar — *State & Government in Ancient India*, Chapter XI, &c.; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri — *A History of South India*, Chapter XIII; etc.

[3] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, p. 332.

[4] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri — *A History of South India*, p. 315.

community as producers for themselves on the holdings they possessed and used (with the surplus going over to the State or to the donees).

Thirdly, besides as religious gifts, those lands underwent transfer which had fallen vacant on account of "want of heirs or failure to pay the land-tax", and therefore the sovereign authority was interested to see that some individuals possess them as otherwise no land-tax would be forthcoming from these lands[1]. Here, again, the cases of land transfer do not refer to an inherent right vested with a private "ownership" to buy and sell land freely. On the contrary, these land-holdings were usually given "in charity" by the king, that is, without payment, probably signifying thereby that land had not become a coveted *commodity*. And it is also worthy of note in this connection that such holdings were for no other purposes than *possession* and *use*, and therefore were with the stipulation that like other landholders the new possessors will also have to pay a land-tax[2].

Fourthly, as it has been categorically stated in an authoritative study of the social and economic conditions in India during c. 200—550 A. D., although land transfer and alienation sometimes took place in the villages, the entire system worked in such a way that it "discouraged absentee landlordism"[3].

From the above evidences, therefore, it seems reasonable to surmise that an individual's hold on land in ancient India was more in terms of *possession* than, strictly speaking, of *ownership*; so that land was used for subsistence production by direct producers instead of it being used merely as a property for profit-making and as a commodity to be bought and sold.

Simultaneously, one should bear in mind the important fact that disposal of any land within a village was quite out of the question without the prior permission and direct supervision of the village council or assembly. In case a villager wanted to transfer a piece of his holding, it was necessary for him to obtain first "the consent of the fellow villagers or the permission of the village or town council", and then the actual transfer could be effected only "in the presence of the village elders, who formally demarcated the piece"[4]. Likewise: "The fallow and waste lands belonged to the state, but their actual disposal was made with the consent and through the agency of the local village *Panchāyat* or town council"[5]. Indeed, such was the corporate power of the village community over the area it held that, as has been specifically mentioned with regard to Bengal, when the sovereign authority wanted to make a "gift" of a piece of land in a village (that is, confer on the donee the right to collect taxes from the holding previously enjoyed by the State), it had first to obtain the permission of the village assembly, although such

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[1] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, pp. 332—333.
[2] *ibid.*, pp. 332—333.
[3] *ibid.*, pp. 331—332.
[4] *ibid.*, p. 332.
[5] *ibid.*, p. 332.

a gift need not affect the internal arrangements of the village community; and even though the sovereign authority became stronger in course of time, yet in later years also it had to announce its desire before the village assembly before the gift was actually conferred.[1]

It may not, therefore, be wrong to conclude on the basis of above facts that whether or not land alienation and transfer took place in Indian villages in ancient times, virtually land was then only for possession and use by the rural households for subsistence production, and, in a broad sense at least, the self-sufficient and autonomous village communities were based on "possession in common of the land".

Such an organisation of rural society, high-lighted by the institution of the village community system, presupposes that the self-sufficient cultivator using a plot of land in the village on a hereditary basis was obviously the dominant and practically the only producing type; and, as has been stated before, all evidence point to this state of affairs in Indian society in those days. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that this form of production-relation had become so stabilised in the society of north India and a large part of south India that hundreds of years of rule by different sovereigns — (who might have previously lived under different socio-economic environments, like the Pathans or Mughals, or who might have followed all through their live different faiths, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.) — affected little change in the structure of the village community system.[2] Indeed, so much was the decentralised strength of the village community system that although new forces had begun to emerge in society from about the fifteenth century in order to break through this institution, they could not completely do away with it even by the middle of the eighteenth century.[3]

The village community system thus gave a special imprint to Indian feudalism whereby the self-working, self-possessing and self-sufficient type of a cultivator represented the characteristic form of production-relation prevalent in the agrarian economy of those days.[4] Within the sphere of a subsistence economy and joint-possession of land by the entire village community there was very little scope for the development of the landholder cum sharecropper and supervisory farmer cum agricultural labourer relationships. For this reason, even though

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[1] Niharranjan Ray — *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 213, 252—253, &c.

[2] This point was very aptly stated by Sir Charles Metcalfe in his *Minute*, dated 7th November, 1830, printed in the *Report of Select Committee of House of Commons*, British Parliament, 1832, Vol. III, Appendix 84, p. 331. See also what Karl Marx wrote in connection with his remarks on *Division of Labour and Manufacture* in *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 350—352.

[3] For a brief account of the "new forces" mentioned above, see, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4.

[4] For a brief discussion on this point, see *ibid.*, Chapter 4.

Colebrooke mentions the presence of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers at the time of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793, their importance in society vis-a-vis that of the self-cultivating settled peasants (*ryots*) was so insignificant that all discussions on the prevailing agrarian relations in Bengal, which were documented in the famous *Fifth Report* of the British Parliament, centred round the relative position of the *ryot* and *zemindar* (revenue-farmer, according to the connotation of the term in the pre-British days), without hardly any mention of the above two categories of relations in agricultural production.[1] Also in this report as well as in the writings of the East India Company officers it was repeatedly stated how vital was the village community system as an institution in India, in which there was no place for a landlord (as the revenue farmers — the *zemindars* — were later turned into) and how the cultivable areas in the villages were in the main held communally.[2]

Even for Bengal, where it was asserted by some British scholars that "proprietorship of the lands" existed before the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement in 1793, the above-mentioned *Fifth Report* stated quite categorically that previously the *zemindars* were essentially "accountable managers and collectors, and not lords and proprietors of the lands"[3]; that "the sale of land by auction, or in any other way, for realising arrears of land revenue, appears to have been unusual, if not unknown in all parts of India, before its introduction by the British government into the Company's dominions"[4]; and that traces still remained to show that the village community system had also existed in Bengal.[5]

Furthermore, while commenting on the operation of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal stated in the Legislative Council in 1883: "In the interval of 66 years, i. e. 1793 to 1859, while the proprietory body grew in strength and prospered in wealth, the village communities perished".[6] And the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee described in 1949 how, up to the "early part of the 19th century", the "community right in cultivable land" still remained in force among the "tribal people" in the district

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[1] Parliamentary Papers — *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 28 July 1812.

[2] See, for instance, *The Fifth Report*, pp. 13, 16—19, 47, 50, 79—80, 85, 96, 105, &c; Mountstuart Elphinstone's *Report on the Territories Conquered from the Peswa; The Minute* of Holt Mackenzie, the Secretary to the Board of Commissioners in the Conquered and Ceded Provnices; H. S. Maine's *Ancient Law*, p. 216ff; etc.

[3] *The Fifth Report*, p. 80.

[4] *ibid.*, pp. 47—48.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 17.

[6] Quoted in the *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, p. 33.

of Midnapur in west Bengal, in the Chittagong Hill tracts at the extreme east, and in the Garo Hills in Assam.[1]

Also Niharranjan Ray, who has examined in great details the land settlement of Bengal from the earliest to the times of the Sena kings, noted: (a) cases of land transfer as available from epigraphic records were in the nature of *gift*, and *not sale*, of land from the king or an individual to a Brahmin or to a religious organisation, and were meant to be used directly for religious purposes (such as building a temple, etc.) or for the maintenance of the religious persons or bodies concerned while prosecuting their spiritual duties; (b) royal gifts of land essentially meant the conferring of the right to enjoy taxes from the land donated for religious purposes to Brahmins or to religious organisations; (c) even for such donations the king previously announced his intention to the village elders and perhaps also to all the villagers, and the donee praying for the land also did the same; and (d) individual *possessors* could make a gift of their land for religious purposes to Brahmins or to religious organisations after first "buying" the land from the king for a sum considered to meet the commuted tax-dues of the State, as the donated land would not henceforth bear any tax to the king and therefore he would also be entitled to one-sixth part of the spiritual gain (*punya*) accruing to the donor of the land in lieu of the one-sixth part of the crop which was due to the king as his land-tax.[2]

These facts show that the "purchase" and "sale", or gift, of land in ancient times, which have often been cited as examples to indicate that village land was not held communally by the village communities, merely meant the "purchase" of the exemption from the king's tax-demands, the "sale" or transfer of the right to collect taxes from the territory (a village or villages or separate tracts in a village), or the gift of the privilege to enjoy the tributes and taxes on the land.

In this connection it is worthy of note that, firstly, within the village community system it was not difficult for a person to become a self-possessing and self-working peasant, and therefore, even if demanded, the supply of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers for a landholder could not be very extensive. For,

[1] It was written in the *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* (p. 35):
"Even in Bengal traces of community right in cultivable land were in existence in the early part of the 19th century amongst tribal people of what is known as 'jungle mahal' in the district of Midnapore. The 'Mandali' tenures of the same district originated with the patriarch or headman (locally known as Mandal) of each community of the tribal people. The Mandal was the sole representative of the community in its dealings with the outside world. Each Mandal took settlement of lands to the different members according to their requirements, keeping out certain lands for the common use of the whole community. Traces of communal rights are still to be found in the Jhumming cultivation in the Garo Hills in Assam and in the Chittagong Hill tracts."

[2] *Bangaleer Ithihas* by Niharranjan Ray, pp. 212—213, 217—221, 235, 242, 244, 247—249, 251—253, &c.

as the principal means of production in agriculture, viz. land, was available in plenty and without any proprietory right over it, and as the capital necessary to obtain other means of production (viz. plough, cattle, etc.) could not have been very large, the peasants would naturally not prefer to work as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. Secondly, because in the rural areas production was essentially for direct consumption only and there was no extensive home or external market for the agricultural produce[1], the incentive was lacking to any landholder (who "purchased" land or received a gift of it) to make use of his holding for the production of commodities for the market. Therefore, even if in some cases a Brahmin or a religious body wanted and actually employed sharecroppers or agricultural labourers to cultivate the donated land instead of merely collecting taxes from the peasants using it, and even if some Kshatriya estate-holders also took interest in agricultural production in this way, such cases were so infrequent that, as explained before, they could not affect the basic production-relation in society of the self-possessing, self-working and self-sufficient cultivator type.

In the Moslem period also the situation remained the same. As it was under the former Hindu kings, during the rule of the Turko-Afghans from the twelfth century, the "village communities continued unaffected by the establishment of a new government in the country"[2], and during the Mughal rule from the sixteenth century, although Baden-Powell observed that "the Mughal revenue-system is the direct cause of the (unforeseen) growth of the zamíndár landlord of Bengal"[3], he also remarked that "the Mughals closely conformed to the old Hindu system" and that their ideas of collecting taxes and tributes "fell in with the system of the land-revenue payment already in force".[4] Furthermore, he quoted what Ghulam Hassan, the reputed Indian historian and author of *Sayyar muta, ákhirín*, had told Mr. Shore, namely: "The emperor is proprietor of the revenue; he is not proprietor of the soil".[5] Also, referring to Altam*ghá* and Suyúr-*ghal*, which have sometimes

[1] It is not difficult to understand that within the villages there was no great demand for the production of commodities, as the self-sufficient and autonomous village communities lived on subsistence production. Therefore, only that part of the produce became a commodity which went to the State authorities in the form of taxes and tributes. As Marx stated quite correctly (cf. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 350—351):

"The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity. Hence, production here is independent of that division of labour brought about, in Indian society as a whole, by means of the exchange of commodities. It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the State, into whose hands from time immemorial a certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind."

[2] R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri and Kalikinkar Datta — *An Advanced History of India*, p. 395.

[3] *The Land System of British India* by B. H. Baden-Powell, Vol. I, p. 188.

[4] *ibid.*, pp. 182—183.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 231.

been mentioned as proofs of the growth of the concept of private property in land and of landlordism in the Mughal period of India's history, he noted that *altamghá* was "rather an assignment of the revenue of cultivated land" and grants under *suyúr-ghal* were "assignments of revenue only".[1]

Thus it is seen that throughout the pre-British period of India's history land grants meant predominatly the conferring of right to land-revenue. It is true that the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal monarchs created nobles out of their associates and settled territories on them, whereby they have often been described by historians as *fief-holders*[2]. It is also known that the might of some fief-holders led them to revolt against the monarch's power and declare their sovereignty over the territories placed under their management. Similarly, on the basis of an alliance with some fief-holders, conspiracies to overthrow a reigning monarch by some rebellious princes and other powerful usurpers were practically a regular phenomenon throughout the Moslem period of India's history. But these fief-holders, like the monarch himself, did not have a direct control *within* the villages and of the peasants. They were essentially the collectors of king's revenue from the territories conferred on them, with the stipulation that a part of the collection they made directly or through their intermediaries was to be retained for their own maintenance and of the army, etc. This could not and did not affect the continuance of the subsistence economy in the rural areas governed by the village community system, and therefore of the production-relation represented by the self-possessing, self-working and self-sufficient cultivators.

Moreover, land grants in the pre-British days not only did not lead to the establishment of private property-right in land and to the growth of landlordism, but also in absence of an expanding market for crops (as there was not yet a *qualitative* change in the socio-economic set-up in the rural areas up to the beginning of British rule, even though new forces had begun to gain ground from about the fifteenth century), sharecropping and cultivation by hired labour (which could produce crops as commodities in ever-increasing bulk) were not *demanded* by society as important production-relations in the agrarian economy of India. For these reasons, even though in the feudal period of India's history the king might have asserted his right as the proprietor of the soil[3], and the grant of *altamghá* in the late Mughal period might have strengthened the political and economic power of the feudal nobility[4], these features in Indian history did not fundamentally affect the usufructuary right of the village community to its land and that of the individual possession of cultivable plots by the villagers.

[1] *ibid.*, pp. 530—531.

[2] See, for instance, *Khwājah Nizāmuddīn Ahmad's The Tabaqāt-i-Akbarī*, translated by B. De.

[3] This point has been noted by many scholars. In regard to Bengal, see, for instance, Niharranjan Ray's *Bangaleer Ithihas*, p. 252; Sachin Sen's *Studies in the Land Economics of Bengal*; etc.

[4] See, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4.

This point was previously noted by Shelvanker who also explained why the concept of *ownership of land* was rather irrelevant in those days.[1] For while within the framework of Indian feudalism the feudal hierarchy (from the king down to the hierarchy of officials and other nobilities) lived on the surplus labour of the peasants and artisans and was interested in the taxes and tributes it extracted from the self-working peasants (who possessed plots as allocated by the village communities), *within* the village it had practically no direct control. Here it was the village community which ruled, while the feudal power maintained its authority *over* the village by means of its representative keeping in touch with the village council and the village headman, the latter being in some ways the representative of the feudal hierarchy *within* a village. Thus, as Shelvanker put quite correctly, Indian feudalism (like European feudalism) was fiscal and military in character, but (unlike the latter) it was not manorial.[2] And, therefore, the renowned Hindu law-giver Manu also recommended that while the king was the sovereign of all lands, "as the leech, the calf, and the bee take their food little by little, even so must the king draw from his realm moderate annual taxes" through a hierarchy of officials responsible for one, ten, twenty, hundred, and thousand villages, with a minister placed on top of all of them.[3]

It is thus seen that, because of the village community system and the absence of distinct property rights over land, the peasants possessed it and used it for subsistence production while their surplus labour was enjoyed through taxes and tributes by the feudal hierarchy from the king down to the village headmen as well as by the special Brahmin and other donee (later including also the Moslem priests and nobility) who received gifts of land.

Evidently, such an arrangement in society could not give rise to a *class* of landlords or landholders in pre-British India, for, firstly, the basic pre-requisite for such a development, namely, private property-right over the land, was practically absent in all parts of India (except in some small areas, such as in Kerala at the extreme south-west and Assam in the far east); secondly, the type of land transfer, as noted above, was obviously an occassional phenomenon, as all gifts for religious and other special purposes are; and, thirdly, even such transfers did not always alter the predominant production-relation in society. In general, therefore, the peasants went on possessing the lands they were used to; only in some exceptional cases their tax-dues did not go to the king or his representative but to the person or the religious organisation which received gifts.

Thus in pre-British India, while the establishment of villages with a harmonious combination of agriculture (plough cultivation) and handicrafts had given

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[1] *The Problem of India* by K. S. Shelvanker, pp. 77—80.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 79.

[3] *The Laws of Manu* (*Manusmṛti*) by Georg Bühler, Chapter VII, Slokas 80, 113—120, 128—132, &c.

rise to self-possessing, self-working and self-sufficient peasants within the village community system, the society in those days hardly gave any scope for the *development* of other production-relations in agriculture, namely, that between a landholder and sharecropper or that between a supervisory farmer and wage-labourer. Therefore, until the entire organisation and the subsistence character of production was basically altered, that is, until (a) the concept of private property in land was fully established, (b) landlords were created from the previous revenue-farmers, (c) the village community system disintegrated, and (d) the crops acquired a *commodity value* under British rule (instead of having essentially only a *use value* as before), the traditional small-scale cultivation by self-sufficient peasantry of the Class II of the economic structure, as defined previously, remained as the predominant and practically the only form of production-relation in India's and Bengal's agrarian society.

5. Emergence of the Classes I and III

How did the production-relation in rural Bengal, as represented by the Class II of the economic structure, undergo transformation in the British period and the previously-defined Classes I and III emerged in society ? As noted above, there were several important factors which working conjointly led to this end. Of these, the introduction of private property-right over land and of landlordism as well as the simultaneous disintegration of the village community system should be discussed first. For they laid the basis and worked in the direction of the eventual emergence of the Classes I and III of the economic structure at the expense of the Class II.

To discuss this course of change, one should begin with the advent of British rule in the *subah* of Bengal (later known as the British provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in Eastern India). For, beginning with the British control over the life and labour of the poeple, and especially from 1765 when the East India Company took over the civil administration from the Nawab of Bengal, the rural economy was put under great strain. Political control over one of the richest regions in India fulfilled the long-felt desire of British merchant capital to "buy" Indian produces at the least expense possible[1]; but this created a havoc in the life of artisans, traders and peasants in Bengal. In order to avoid competition, by several means — fair or foul — the Indian traders (and especially the big merchants) were removed from the scene unless they became "agents" of the East India Company.[2] Simultaneously, the artisans were made to work for the Company, its

[1] For a detailed description of the role of British merchant capital in India see, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company.*

[2] How this was achieved by keeping the Indian traders subject to the State demand for inland commercial taxes while the British East India Company, its officers and other English merchants traded tax-free has been ably described by R. C. Dutt in *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule,* Chapter 2.

officers and other English merchants for a mere pittance, so that they could not maintain even the reproductory rate of their economy; and in large numbers they were in consequence forced to give up their age-old professions and live as peasants in the rural areas.[1] This initiated a serious overpressure on the agrarian economy, while the latter was itself in a crisis as the foreign rulers utterly neglected one of the prime needs for the previously-flourishing agriculture of Bengal, viz. facilities for irrigation and drainage.[2] Moreover, the peasants were so oppressed by the ever-increasing demand for land-tax[3] as well as by various other means[4] that in less than a quarter of a century Bengal, which was noted for her rich cultivation, was partly turned into a wild forest.[5]

Yet, in spite of all such ravages done in Bengal in the second half of the eighteenth century, the village community system had not fully disintegrated. But, as mentioned before, when with the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary

[1] For details, see, for instance, William Bolt's *Considerations on Indian Affairs*, pp. 73, 83, 191—194, &c.; R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, Chapters II—IV, XIII—XV; etc.

[2] Maintenance of huge public works (water reservoirs, etc.) were from earlier times the responsibility of the State. From these reservoirs water was supplied to the villages by means of innumerable canals and small rivers, which also functioned as an efficient system for drainage. But from the time Bengal came under British rule very little was done to maintain these public works. As it can be worked out from the figures collected by Marx from the official sources and given in his article entitled *India Bill (b): Sir Charles Wood's Apologia*, even so late as in 1851—52 less than one per cent of the gross revenue from the three English Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras was spent on "roads, canals, bridges, and other works of public necessity", which partly might have had something to do with the facilities for irrigation and drainage. For details, see, for instance, Sir William Wilcocks' *Lecture on the Ancient System of Irrigation in Bengal and Its Application to Modern Problems;* R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule* and *The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age;* the manuscripts of the socio-economic surveys conducted by Dr. Francis Buchanan in India in the first decade of the nineteenth century; etc.

[3] For details, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 5, Section entitled *Estate-Farming of Bengal.*

[4] For instance, as Adam Smith noted in his study entitled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations:*

"It has not been uncommon, I am well assured, for the chief, that is the first clerk of a factory (belonging to the English East India Company), to order a peasant to plough up a rich field of poppies, and sow it with rice or some other grain. The pretence was, to prevent a scarcity of provisions; but the real reason, to give the chief an opportunity of selling at a better price a large quantity of opium, which he happened then to have upon hand. Upon other occasions the order has been reversed; and a rich field of rice or other grain has been ploughed up, in order to make room for a plantation of poppies; when the chief foresaw that extraordinary profit was likely to be made by opium." (Vol. II, p. 132.)

[5] In his *Minute of the 18th of September, 1789*, Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India, noted:

"I may safely assert, that one-third of the Company's territory in Hindostan, is now a jungle inhabited only by wild beasts." (cf. *The Fifth Report*).

Settlement of land in 1793 the landlords were created and the concept of private property in land was fully established, the village community system was lost for ever. The basis was thus laid for the emergence of the Classes I and III.

That the concept of private property in land was a new innovation in Bengal was stated quite candidly in the *Fifth Report* of the British Parliament[1]. As quoted before, the *Fifth Report* recorded that "the sale of land by auction, or in any other way, for realising arrears of land revenue, appears to have been unusual, if not unknown in all parts of India, before its introduction by the British government into the Company's dominions". This statement was quite in accordance with what has been discussed previously, namely, whether or not land transfer and alienation sometimes took place in rural society in earlier times, land could not be freely bought and sold by the villagers, and the peasants possessing usufructuary rights over their holdings could not be easily dispossessed. It will also be remembered that even when the kings desired to settle some land-holdings which had fallen vacant "on account of want of heirs or failure to pay the land-tax", they were "often seen granting them in charity" to the new holders, although in accordance with the previous arrangement the new holders also were required to pay the land-tax to the sovereign authorities.[2] Such stipulations suggest that land was not considered as a private property of any one, and the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, arrangement was that the peasants would possess and use their holdings for subsistence production while the sovereign authority would extract their surplus labour in the form of land-tax. But the British gave "rights of free transfer and absolute ownership — especially in the 'ryotwari' tracts — to the cultivators which they had never possessed before"[3]; and in Bengal, under the Permanent Zemindary Settle-

[1] To quote from *The Fifth Report* (pp. 18—19):

"... the leading members of the supreme government appear to have been, at an early period of the transactions now commencing, impressed with a strong persuasion of the proprietory right in the soil possessed by the Zemindars, or if the right could not be made out, consistently with the institutions of the former government, that reason and humanity irresistibly urged the introduction of it....

If any deviations from the established usages of the natives should occur, in what was intended to be done, the advantage was still so entirely on their side, particularly in regard to the landholder, that it was presumed they would at once sufficiently perceive the benefit intended, and not object to it, because the mode of introducing it was new, nor regret the abolition of practices injurious to them, on account of their having been of long standing....

In the progress and conclusion of this important transaction, the government appeared willing to recognise the proprietory right of the zemindars in the land; not so much, from any proof of the existence of such right, discernible in his relative situation under the Mogul government, in its best form, as from the desire of improving their condition under the British government, as far as it might be done consistently with the permanency of the revenue and with the rights of the cultivators on the soil."

[2] R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (editors) — *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, pp. 332—333.

[3] D. R. Gadgil — *The Industrial Evolution of India*, p. 28.

ment, the concept of private property in land was further strengthened by giving the *zemindars* (the previous revenue-farmes) "the proprietory right in the soil".

This had a far-reaching effect in the rural society of Bengal. For it is obvious from the preceding discussion that the composition of the economic structure in its form as described before is mainly the result of inequality in land distribution and its concentration and polarisation. This gave rise to the Classes I and III of the landed gentry and the disintegrated peasantry, respectively. Otherwise, all or mainly those who were interested in the agricultural economy would have been of the self-sufficient and self-working type of the Class II. This form of the economic structure is thus to a great extent the expression of property-inequality in landholding.

It should, however, be borne in mind that by itself the introduction of a new concept cannot produce a *social* effect unless there are means and initiative to put it into practice. From this consideration, therefore, the concept of private property in land could only serve as the historical pre-requisite to the eventual emergence of the Classes I and III in the rural society of Bengal, as characterised by the concentration of ownership of the means of production in the hands of a class consisting of only a minor section of society and the consequent emergence of a propertyless class for whom *ultimately* the sale of their labour power remains as the only source of livelihood.[1] There is also no doubt that while due to low incomes in a monetised economy many households belonging to the Class II were forced to incur deficit budgets and this ultimately led to further loss of their property in land and in the consequent change in the economic structure by inflating the Classes III and I,[2] the property-inequality in landholding could only

[1] While discussing the ever-swelling army of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers in Bengal, the Land Revenue Commission noted in 1940 (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, pp. 67—68, 71):
"Many bargadars are the original tenants who have lost their lands in the Civil Courts for failure to pay their rent or other liabilities. . . . We are of the opinion that this is one of the most difficult problems that we have to face. It is bound up with the commercialisation of land to which our attention is drawn in the first term of reference, i. e., the appropriation of the most valuable right in land — the occupancy right — by non-agriculturists. . . . Free transferability has tended and must tend to facilitate the transfer of raiyati lands into the hands of mahajans and non-agriculturists, with the result that the number of rack-rented bargadars and under-raiyats is going up by leaps and bounds. It is clear that it is as great a danger to the stability of the existing raiyats as their opportunities for subletting."

[2] The Land Revenue Commission noted in 1940 (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 75):
"The effect of the tendencies described above (viz. "the ever-increasing pressure of population on land", subdivision of holdings because of "Hindu and Muslim laws of inheritance and the free right of transfer") has been to increase the number of uneconomic holdings in Bengal and to reduce many of the raiyats, who have been compelled to part with their land, to the position of bargadars without any rights. . . . We believe that about half the holdings of Bengal are barely sufficient for the maintenance of the families which own them."

be the resultant expression of a particular *direction* of the economic forces in society. The more important factor which should therefore be examined at the outset is *how* this property-inequality in landholding began to take effect and became aggravated in course of time, whereby the Classes I and III grew successively at the expense of the Class II. This process of change is vitally linked up with the role of landlordism in Bengal. Hence it is discussed in some details in the following pages.

It is now an established fact that in the British period of her history the course of development of the economy of rural Bengal and of the relationships existing in land were fundamentally dependant on the Permanent Zemindary Settlement introduced by the East India Company in 1793. By this system the institution of private property in land — "the rights of the cultivators on the soil" and "the proprietory rights of the zemindars in the land"[1] — was established, and simultaneously the previous revenue-farmers were fully brought within the orbit of the British system of land administration. These revenue-farmers were shorn off their political and military powers which they had usurped during the unsettled period of the first half of the eighteenth century when the Mughal Empire was crumbling to pieces.[2] But, on the other hand, they were made into landlords, that is, *owners* of the estates from which previously they had the right of only collecting the land-revenue as demanded by the Nawab of Bengal or the representative of the Great Mughal at Delhi.[3] Now, with the assurance of immense economic gain,

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[1] The *Fifth Report*, p. 19.

[2] Thus the Article VIII of the Bengal Code on the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793 ran as follows:

"Governor General reserves to himself the option of resuming the whole or part of such allowances or produce of such lands according as he may think proper in consequence of his having exonerated the proprietors of land from the charge of keeping the peace and appointed officers on the part of the Government to superintend the police of the country."

Also, the Section 66 of the Bengal Regulation VIII of 1793 stated:

"Zemindars . . ., are prohibited from taking cognisance of or interfering in matters or causes coming within the jurisdiction of the court of civil judicature . . . or the Magistrates under pain of being liable to the payment of such fines to Government . . ."

[3] Thus H. T. Colebrooke noted quite explicitly in 1804 in his *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* (p. 64):

". . . the zemindars are now acknowledged as proprietors of the soil. Yet it has been admitted by a very high authority, that anciently the sovereign was the superior of the soil, that the zemindars were officers of revenue, justice, and police; that their office was frequently, but not necessarily, hereditary; . . ."

Also, D. J. Mcniele reported to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1873 (cf. *Memorandum on the Revenue Administration of the Lower Provinces of Bengal*, p. 9):

"The zemindars with whom the settlement was originally made were for the most part powerful chiefs, whose authority extended over wide tracts of the country. Of these tracts they were by the Settlement constituted the proprietors."

they were reduced to the position of middlemen between the poeple and the foreign government.[1]

It is of interest to note that at the beginning some of the revenue-farmers who had now become landlords, declined to raise the ever-increasing land-revenue demand of the foreign government at the cost of reducing the peasants to the position of destitutes.[2] But the class of "new gentlemen proprietors", most of whom

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[1] That the previous revenue-farmers were reduced to the position of vassals of the East India Company, and later of the British colonial government, is evident from several clauses in the *Bengal Code* of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793 as well as from additional Regulations passed from time to time in connection with this form of land-tenure. For instance, from the Section 3 of the Regulation XI of 1806 it is seen how the *zemindars*, as the biggest landholders, were ordered to look after the Company's troops passing through their territories:

"On receiving the notification (re: arrival of troops, etc.) the collector immediately issues the necessary orders to the landholders . . . or, the other persons in charge of lands through which the troops are to pass, for providing the supplies required and for making any requisite preparations of boats or temporary bridges or otherwise for enabling the troops to cross such rivers or nalas as may intersect their march without any impediment or delay."

Also, in Regulation XI of 1826 it was stated:

"Any landholder . . . who may have been duly required by a collector of the land revenue . . . to provide supplies, etc. shall wilfully disobey or neglect the same or shall without sufficient cause fail to exert himself for the due execution of their duty so assigned to him shall on proof of such failure, neglect, or, disobedience to the satisfaction of the collector by whom the order may have been issued, . . . be liable to a fine proportionate to the defaulters condition in life and the circumstances of the case . . ."

Furthermore, the following words from Lord William Bentinck, who was the Governor-General of India during 1828—35, will attest to the middle position assigned by the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793 to the newly-created landlords as between the foreign government and the people (cf. *Lord Bentinck's speech on November 8, 1829*):

"If security was wanting against extensive popular tumult or revolution, I should say that the Permanent Settlement, though a failure in many other respects and in most important essentials, has this great advantage at least, of having created a vast body of rich, landed proprietors deeply interested in the continuance of the British Dominion and having complete command over the mass of the people."

The above view of Lord Bentinck in 1829 (that is, after he became the Governor-General and was thus entrusted with the task of ruling India) should be compared with what he had previously recorded in a *Minute*, dated 29th April, 1806 (cf. *The Fifth Report*, p. 160):

"I am satisfied, that the creation of zemindars, is a measure incompatible with the true interest of the government, and of the community at large."

[2] D. J. Mcniele reported in 1873 to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in his *Memorandum on the Revenue Administration of the Lower Provinces of Bengal* (p. 9):

"But under the influence of the Regulations of 1793 these large zemindaries were speedily broken up. The Government demand was the one fixed link in the chain of administration, and the first unbending fixture that the people of the country ever had to deal with. The zemindars had no power to invest their demands upon their tenantry with the same rigid

were "rapacious businessman" as agents of the East India Company and its officials and who now became the landlords by replacing the benevolent ones, "were ready to stick at nothing to extract the last anna from the peasantry in order to pay their quota and fill their own pockets".[1] And, in any case, all of them (whether they were the newly-created landlords or the previous revenue-farmers transformed into such) did not participate in agricultural produc-

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character, and the result was widespread default in the payment of the Government dues, and extensive consequent sales of estates, or, parts of estates, for recovery of arrears. In 1796—97 lands bearing a total sudder jumma of sicca Rs. 14,18,756 were sold for arrears of revenue, and in 1797—98 the jumma of lands so sold amounted to sicca Rs. 22,74,076. By the end of the century the greater portions of the estates of the Nuddea, Rajshahye, Bishenpore and Dinajepore Rajahs had been alienated. The Burdwan estate was seriously crippled, and the Beerbhoom zemindari was completely ruined. A host of similar zemindars shared the same fate. In fact it is scarcely too much to say that, within the ten years that immediately following the permanent settlement, a complete revolution took place in the constitution and ownership of the estates which formed the subject of that settlement. The total collections from 1794 to 1798 amounted, however, to sicca Rs. 2,65,00,000, being only three lakhs [three hundred thousand — RKM] short of the annual demand, showing how effectually the main object in view was obtained at the expense of so much individual suffering."

The Fifth Report of the British Parliament had also recorded the report of the Collector of Midnapur, dated 12th February, 1802, in which it was stated (cf. *The Fifth Report*, p. 60):

"The system of sales and attachments . . . has in the course of a very few years reduced most of the great Zemindars in Bengal to distress and beggary and produced a greater change in the landed property of Bengal than has perhaps ever happened in the same space of time in any age or country by the mere effect of internal regulations."

[1] cf. R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, p. 216:

On the role of the Indian agents of the East India Company (viz. the *baniyans* and *gomasthas*) in the first phase of British rule in Bengal, see, for instance, William Bolt's *Considerations on Indian Affairs*, pp. 73, 83, 191—194, &c.; and R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*.

It may be of interest to note here that passing of the Regulation VII of 1799, generally described as the notorious *Haptam*, by which "the zamindars were vested with wide and arbitrary powers of distraint" (cf. *The Report of the Land Revenue Commission: Bengal*, Vol. I, p. 21), greatly helped the ruthless landlords to squeeze the last penny out of the rack-rented peasants in order to meet the revenue demands of the British Government as well as to make their own money. Referring to *Haptam*, Atul Chandra Guha noted in his book entitled *A Brief Sketch of the Land System of Bengal and Behar* (p. 126):

"In the preamble it was recited that the landlords could not readily get in their rents and in order to remedy this evil, the Regulation gave the landlords practically unrestricted power of distraint and in many cases, of arrest of the defaulters' person. They were empowered to distrain the defaulters' crops and other personal properties, without sending any notice to any court or public officer. . . . With a view to give landlords greater power still, the Magistrates were required to punish by fine or imprisonment, raiyats who could not establish the truth of complaints made against landlords or their distraining agents, and the Civil Courts were directed to indemnify zemindari officers when they were improperly summoned."

tion by improving the state of the productive forces or the techniques of production.[1]

Arguments were put forward both from the landlord and the government quarters that in Bengal it was not so very necessary to look after artificial irrigation, drainage and land improvements, for the land was extremely rich and cultivation had not yet spread so much over the whole country that intensive production should become a matter of decisive importance. But apart from the fact that, as stated before, artificial irrigation and drainage have always been the prime necessity in India (and in Bengal too) in order to make her rich lands produce abundant crops throughout the year and that in the first phase of British rule the ancient system of irrigation and drainage was lost to the Indian people while they were not provided with a better system, in later years also the situation did not undergo any basic change. Even when in a few years time the extent of cultivation reached the saturation point (as will be explained later) and the progressive development of Bengal's agrarian economy called for a drastic change in the state of productive forces, the landed gentry did not undertake this responsibility.[2] On the contrary, as before, they went on maintaining

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[1] Noting the situation in Bengal over eighty years from the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement in 1793, D. J. Mcniele stated in his *Memorandum on the Revenue Administration of the Lower Provinces of Bengal* (p. 18):

"It should, however, be observed that improvement in the modes of culture is not conspicuous. The demand for land has not in most parts yet reached the point, at which the enhancement of its productive powers becomes the indispensible condition of profitable occupation. For, on the one hand, the spread of the population has always been, and is still, subject in Bengal to violent and widely operating checks from epidemic diseases and calamities of season; and on the other, the natural productiveness of the soil is for the most part very great, and the greater portion of the delta of the Ganges and Bhurmputar being annually enriched by a coating of alluvial deposits, which yields abundant harvests to a very scanty husbandry. Under the circumstances it is not surprising to find artificial irrigation, drainage, and manuring confined to high lands, and those cultivated with certain specially valuable crops."

[2] Thus P. N. Driver noted in 1949 in his *Problems of Zemindari and Land Revenue Reconstruction in India* (pp. 79—81):

"It is ridiculous to believe that the Zamindars would be interested in land improvement if there were no Tenancy Laws. How many improvements in land were introduced by the Zamindars before the Tenancy Laws were passed? How much capital did the Bengal Zamindar for example invest in land before the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885? Even when the Zamindars had full power of enhancing rents without going to a court of law they were not interested in the land or in investing any capital in it. We have it on the unimpeachable authority of Raja Ram Mohan Roy that the landlords did not invest any capital in land. The Statistics of Agriculture in Bengal, a publication of 1868 tells us: 'Improvements in Agriculture are rare. The zamindar is often an absentee landlord caring only for his rents.' . . . The land improvement registers maintained in the districts have shown to the Income-tax authorities that very little capital has been invested by the Zamindars. The Assistant Commissioner of Income-tax, Calcutta, tells us:

their parasitic existence on land by means of rack-renting the peasantry and also by several forms of illegal exactions from the same source.[1]

The logical consequence of the creation of such a class of parasitic landlords was that it constantly drew larger number of people to this source of income. Subinfeudation began to take place at an accelerated rate and the position of the peasantry became worse and worse.[2] The Indian Statutory Commission pointed

'During my official career ... I have not come across any act of improvement by the Zamindars. On the other hand the improvements made by their predecessors or other pious people before the Permanent Settlement are allowed to decay.' "

[1] The vast fortune which went to the landlords is evident from the figures of rent obtained from the *Cess Report of the Revenue Board.* At the time of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement in 1793 it was arranged that the Government would obtain 90 per cent of the total collections (the gross rentals of the peasants at that time being not more than forty million rupees), and the zemindars would keep only 10 per cent of it. But by the year 1900 while the revenue demand remained roughly at forty million rupees as before, and therefore the zemindars were entitled to four million rupees only, they obtained about a hundred and sixty-five million rupees as rent from the cultivators, that is, they retained for themselves about a hundred and twenty-five million rupees after paying the revenue to the State. Professor Radha Kamal Mukherjee noted that even as far back as half a century ago the peasants were paying "30 times more to the zemindars than their due for the collection of revenue" (cf. *Land Problems in India*, p. 305). Driver noted in 1949 (p. 62): " ... later estimates of rent receipts are considerably higher and have varied from 15 crores to 30 crores of rupees", that is, between 150 and 300 million rupees!

The above figures however do not take account of the illegal exactions made by the zemindars. An estimate of such exactions was made by three different speakers while discussing the Tenancy Act in the Second Session of the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1937. The estimate ranged between sixty million and hundred and twenty million rupees!

[2] Regarding subinfeudation in landlord's estates, D. J. Mcniele stated in 1873 in his previously-mentioned *Memorandum* (pp. 15—16):

"At the permanent settlement the Government, by abdicating its position as exclusive possessor of the soil, and contenting itself with a permanent rent-charge on the land, escaped thenceforward all the labor and risks attendant upon detailed mofussil management. The zemindars were not slow to follow the example set them, and immediately began to dispose of their zemindaries in a similar manner. Permanent under tenures, known as patni tenures, were created in large numbers, and extensive tracts were leased out on long terms. By the year 1819 permanent alienations of the kind described had been so extensively effected, that they were formally legalised by RegulationVIII of that year, and means afforded to the zemindar of recovering arrears of rent from his patnidars, almost identical with those by which the demands of Government were enforced against himself. The practice of granting such under tenures has steadily continued, until at the present day but a small proportion of the whole permanently-settled area of Bengal remains in the direct possession of the zemindars. In these alienations the zemindars made far better terms for themselves than the Government was able to make for itself in 1793. ... The process of subinfeudation described above has not terminated with the patnidars and izaradars. Darpatnies, dar-izaras, and even further subordinate tenures, have been created in large numbers."

Parimalkumar Roy noted in his study of the *Agricultural Economics of Bengal* (p. 221):

"The number of rent-receivers is increasing every year. There was an increase in their number by 62% between 1921 and 1931, while the number of actual cultivators possessing

out that there were as many as 50 or more subinfeudatory interests on land in some cases.[1]

And while the entire burden of maintaining these landlords fell on the peasantry, within the poorly developed conditions of production the income of the villagers from agriculture soon reached the saturation point and began to show the phase of decline. Cultivation extended to the physically possible limit; without substantial expenditure in capital investment for land-reclamation and improvements it was no longer possible to increase the total area for agricultural production.[2] Also, since the productive techniques hardly improved and the landlords

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occupancy rights decreased, that is, the number of landless labourers increased, in the same period by 49%."

And, while criticising the tenancy legislation, the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal noted in 1940 (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 67):

"Unrestricted subletting invariably leads to rack-renting, to prevent which has always beeen one of the main objects of tenancy legislation. The chief criticism of tenancy legislation in this Province which has been made in the evidence before us is that the Act of 1885 did not protect, as such, the actual tillers of the soil."

[1] Mentioned in the *Report of the Land Revenue Commission: Bengal*, Vol. I, p. 37. The Commission also stated: "Subinfeudation is responsible for rack-renting".

[2] In 1879 Sir James Caird noted in his report on the Famine Commission presented to the Secretary of State for India: (cf. *The Report of Sir James Caird to the Secretary of State for India*, October 31, 1879, in "The Report of the Famine Commission of India"):

"The available good land in India is nearly all occupied. There are extensive areas of good waste land covered with jungle in various parts of the country, which might be reclaimed and rendered suitable for cultivation; but for that object capital must be employed, and the people have little to spare."

W. W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Bengal* which was published in 1875 recorded that in almost all the districts of Bengal there were little land to spare for cultivation unless the forests were cleared, the swamps reclaimed, and capital improvements were made in other areas.

According to government statistics, in 1939—40, "forests" claimed only 9.1 per cent of the total surveyed area of Bengal, "current fallow" 9.4 per cent, land "not available for cultivation" 18.8 per cent, "other uncultivated land excluding current fallow" 13.2 per cent, and the "net cropped area" 49.5 per cent. The "net cropped area" has remained constant over a number of years. It was 49.0 per cent of the total area in 1916—17; in 1936—37 it remained as 49.7 per cent.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the Royal Commission on Agriculture stated in 1928 (cf. *The Report*, pp. 604—605):

"The uncultivated area is divided into 'culturable waste other than fallow' and land 'not available for cultivation'. This division of the uncultivated area is to a large extent arbitrary. . . . It is difficult to believe that the whole of the vast area now classed as 'not available for cultivation' . . . is either not available for cultivation or not suitable for cultivation."

The above extract makes it only too clear that quite a long time ago the extent of cultivation under the present system of production had reached the saturation point, and therefore further extension was not possible without capital investment on land either in the form of land reclamation or capital improvements. Such measures could bring in about another one-third of the total surveyed area of undivided Bengal under cultivation.

seldom looked after land improvements, the rate of production of crops began to decline.[1]

Furthermore, with the disintegration of rural industries as a part of the concerted plan to reduce India into a supplier of raw materials to the British industrialists and a consumer of British manufactures, the pressure on agriculture went on increasing.[2] Eventually, agriculture became virtually the only source of livelihood available to all the people in rural Bengal, as it was also in the whole of India.[3] And

[1] The following figures given by the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, pp. 21—22) show how rapidly the yield of crops has deteriorated. While examining the figures particular attention should be given to "winter rice" which registers the most marked decline. Winter rice is the most important crop in Bengal. It is sown on about 88 per cent of the total cultivated area (cf. *Crop Survey Reports* submitted by the Indian Statistical Institute to the Government of Bengal) and accounts for 61 per cent of the total valuation of agricultural produce in Bengal (cf. M. A. Huque's *Man Behind the Plough*, p. 102).

Quinquennium ending	Average yield in lbs. per acre in Bengal			
	Wheat	Winter rice	Gram	Rape and Mustard
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1906—07	801	1,234	881	492
1911—12	861	983	881	492
1916—17	698	1,036	867	460
1921—22	688	1,020	826	485
1926—27	721	1,022	811	483
Decrease in percentage in 25 years	10	17	8	2

It may also be of interest to note that the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee stated in its report (Vol. I, p. 21):

"The fertility of the agricultural land is deteriorating steadily on account of the absence of manure. The yield of the different crops has become less and less."

[2] For a sociological background to the disintegration of industries in India under early British rule, see, for instance, R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, Chapter V; and Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 5 and 6. For an account of how the reputed industries of India were destroyed under British rule, see, for instance, R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*; and for an analysis of over-pressure on agriculture and its consequences upon Indian society, see, for instance, R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, Chapter VIII.

It may be of interest to note here that in 1840 Sir Charles Trevelyan reported to the House of Commons Select Committee:

"We have swept away their manufactures; they have nothing to depend on but the produce of their land."

[3] The Famine Commission of 1880 noted in its report:

"At the root of much of the poverty of the people of India and of the risks to which they are exposed in seasons of scarcity, lies the unfortunate circumstance that agriculture forms almost the sole occupation of the mass of the population, . . ."

And, in 1928, the Royal Commission on Agriculture stated in its report how acute was this problem of overcrowding in agriculture and the consequent distress of the people. To quote (cf. *The Report*, p. 433):

this resulted in further impoverishment of the rural population, as there remained no outlet from the overburdened agrarian economy while the inflow increased continually.[1]

The sum-total result of these factors was that in order to maintain their existence and to meet the demands of the landlords the peasants began to borrow from the moneylenders and frequently lost their landholdings, being unable to repay the ever-increasing amount of debt and usurious interests.[2] Sometimes

"The crowding of the people on the land, the lack of alternative means of securing a living, the difficulty of finding any avenue of escape and the early age at which a man is burdened with dependents, combine to force the cultivator to grow food wherever he can and on whatever terms he can."

[1] For Bengal it is of interest to note that at the time of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of 1793 the authorities were confident that there was enough land to go round, so that the problem of the occupancy right of the peasants was not a serious concern to them. Lord Cornwallis recorded in his *Minute of the 18th of September, 1789* (cf. *The Fifth Report*):

"I may safely assert, that one-third of the Company's territory in Hindostan, is now a jungle inhabited only by wild beasts. Will a ten years' lease induce any proprietor to clear away that jungle, and encourage the ryot to come and cultivate his lands; when, at the end of that lease, he must either submit to be taxed, *ad libitum*, for their newly cultivated lands, or lose all hopes of deriving any benefit from his labour, for which perhaps by that time, he will hardly be repaid?"

But soon the pressure on agriculture and consequently on land became increasingly acute. In the words of Sir William Hunter (cf. *India's Despatch to the Secretary of State*, No. 6, dated 21st March, 1882, para 40), at the time of the Permanent Settlement the tenants were "protected by economic laws more powerful than any legal system. There was then more land in Bengal awaiting cultivation than there were people to cultivate it." But a fundamental change in the situation took place afterwards, so that at the time of sending the despatch Hunter noted: "It is no longer the landlord who stands in need of tenants, but the tenants who are competing against each other for land."

The Census of Bengal found the number of cultivated acres per cultivator as 3.1 in 1921; ten years later, the Census of 1931 found it to be 2.2. The Bengal Census Report of 1921 recorded that "in such figures as these that the explanation of the poverty of cultivator lies". The Land Revenue Commission, Bengal, noted in its report in 1940 (cf. Vol. I, p. 74):

"The economic difficulties that exist in Bengal today are primarily due to the ever-increasing pressure of population on land."

[2] As early as in 1880 the Famine Commission reported:

"One-third of the landholding classes are deeply and inextricably in debt, and at least an equal proportion are in debt, though not beyond the power of recovering themselves."

Sir Edward Maclagan observed in 1911, as quoted in the *Report of the Central Banking Enquiry Committee* (cf. *The Majority Report*, Vol. I, Part 1, p. 55):

"It has been long recognised that indebtedness is no new thing in India. . . . But it is also acknowledged that the indebtedness has risen considerably during our rule, and more especially during the last half century. The reports received from time to time and the evidence of annual sale and mortgage data show clearly there has been a very considerable increase of debt during the last century."

The Indian Statutory Commission noted in 1930 (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 16):

"The vast majority of peasants live in debt to the moneylender."

they sold their land outright without going through the intervening phase of first *borrowing* the money.[1]

The upshot was obvious. Loss of land, the primary means of production in the agrarian economy, naturally precluded the possibility to the rural people to remain as self-possessing, self-working and self-sufficient peasants. But, on the other hand, there was hardly any other source of income available to them, as industrialisation and the development of urban occupations in Bengal were

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The Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee estimated in 1930 that the average debt per agricultural family in Bengal was Rs. 165. This figure should be compared with the average annual income of rural families in Bengal, which in 1933 was Rs. 114, as stated earlier. As regards the usurious interests charged by moneylenders, see, for instance, the *Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, the *Preliminary Report of the Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry on Rural Indebtedness*, and R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, pp. 230—239. How the increasing burden of debt led to the loss of land of the agriculturists was noted by the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal in 1940 as follows (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 71):

"Free transferability has tended and must tend to facilitate the transfer of raiyati lands into the hands of mahajans (moneylenders) and non-agriculturists, with the result that the number of rack-rented bargadars and under-raiyats is going up by leaps and bounds. It is clear that it is as great a danger to the stability of the existing raiyats as their opportunities for subletting."

[1] The following figures obtained from official records of the Bengal Government show the number of documents registered during 1930 to 1943 for sale or mortgage of land.

Year	Number registered (in thousands)		Average value aper document (in Rs.)	
	Sold	Mortgaged	Sold	Mortgaged
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1930	25	51	292	182
1931	22	37	250	173
1932	24	34	217	162
1933	25	31	208	158
1934	30	35	183	129
1935	32	34	181	141
1936	34	35	179	137
1937	33	30	182	133
1938	41	16	178	175
1939	65	15	163	140
1940	65	76	185	125
1941	87	15	158	120
1942	88	10	172	110
1943	169	18	187	106

Comparing columns (2) and (3) of the table it will be found that the general trend during the period was for the sale to increase and the number mortgaged to decrease. This tends to confirm the statement made in the text that with the growing intensity of the crisis the peasants found it better to sell the land outright instead of first mortgaging it to a moneylender. How rapidly the crisis grew will be evident from the fact that, leaving aside the famine year of 1943 which recorded a very marked increase, the sale of landholdings increased by nearly four times during the twelve years ending in 1942.

at a very slow pace indeed.[1] Therefore, the landless or the semi-landless peasants were obliged to depend on agriculture as their source of livelihood, either as wage-labourers or as sharecroppers. And as the land from these devitalised peasants concentrated in the hands of a few at the top of society, such a prospect also opened up in rural Bengal.

In this way, there emerged the Classes I and III in society as vital components of the economic structure of rural Bengal in the British period of her history.

6. Function of the Economic Structure

The above analysis, however, only explains *how* the Classes I and III emerged in rural society of Bengal; it does not discuss *why* they emerged. This question "why" is, no doubt, of a decisive importance in any scientific study, as otherwise it will not be realised how the economic forces of rural Bengal found their expression through the economic structure composed of the three classes as defined

It is also interesting to note that while the number of sales increased, the average price registered a smaller figure (cf. column 4 of the table). And this happened at a time when the price of land shot up tremendously with what the Land Revenue Commission of 1938 characterised as the "commercialisation of land".

The obvious conclusion which emerges is that those who mainly sold their lands were not big estate-holders or rich farmers but the small peasants who had to dispose of their small plots to survive.

[1] The extent of industrialisation of Bengal under British rule will be apparent from the following table which gives the average daily number of males and females employed in factories falling under the Factories' Act (cf. B. G. Ghate — *Changes in the occupational distribution of the population*, p. 16):

Period	(Figures in thousands) Males	Females
(1)	(2)	(3)
1919—24	396	65
1925—30	464	74
1931—35	413	59

That the impoverished peasantry did not have a good chance to find other forms of urban employment, besides in the very slowly developing manufacturing industries, is apparent from the fact that the growth of urban population of Bengal has been very slow indeed. This will be seen from the table below prepared from the Census data.

Year	Number of town dwellers for every 1,000 Rural population
(1)	(2)
1892	60
1901	65
1911	69
1921	73
1931	79
1941	97

previously. The following analysis, therefore, will endeavour to answer this question.

There cannot be any doubt that the existence of the disintegrated peasantry as sharecroppers or wage-labourers could not be possible without the concurrence of those who controlled the entire system of production in the society even without directly participating in it. Sharecropping or large-scale farming by hired labourers must have therefore been to the advantage of the landowning class; and, in fact, as the circumstances were, a situation favourable to this arrangement was developing in Bengal at this stage. The main feature of this new situation was that with the growing change in the character of the rural economy of Bengal, instead of remaining satisfied as previously with a fixed rent (in kind or in cash) obtained from the settled peasants with tenancy rights, the landowning class became increasingly interested in the actual share of the agricultural product. Since this process of change in the economy of rural Bengal in the British period of her history is of great relevance to the present study, it has been discussed below in some details.

From the time that Bengal came under British rule the character of her trade was in a process of change. This process was primarily governed by two dominant characteristics of British rule in India in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, viz. the policies of British merchant capital and industrial capital, respectively. To note first the role of the former, as a typical representative of merchant capital the original aim of the East India Company was to secure a monopoly trade in Indian products, and to secure the goods at the least expense possible.[1] As stated before, this aim was realised when the Company established political control over Bengal after the battle of Plassey in 1757; and the result was that while previously the Company had to exchange bullion for the Indian products (as they had little to offer to the Indian merchants in the form of merchandise), after the battle of Plassey it was possible for the Company "to carry on the whole trade of India (China excepted) for three years together without sending out one ounce of bullion".[2] In other words, the trade became virtually a cloak for the extraction of Bengal's wealth and resources. For instance, the Governor of Bengal, Harry Verelst, reported that during the three years from 1766 to 1768 the exports amounted to £ 6,311,250, while the imports from Britain was of only £ 624,375.[3]

Furthermore, besides devitalising Bengal through the channel of "trade", colossal tributes were extracted by the Company and its officers from the Nawabs of Bengal. During the eight years after the battle of Plassey this amounted to

[1] For the sociological basis of this aim, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 1 and 2.

[2] cf. L. Scrafton's *Reflection on the Government of Indostan*, 1763.

[3] Harry Verelst — *View of the Rise, &c., of the English Government in Bengal*, Appendix 177.

about £ 7,760,198.[1] In addition, from 1765, when the civil administration of the *subah* of Bengal was taken over by the Company from the hands of the Nawab, the desire to make money from "estate-farming" began to play an increasingly important role. As reported to the British Parliament in 1773, during the first six years after 1765 the total revenue obtained from Bengal was £ 13,066,761 and the total expenditure was £ 9,027,609, and the balance of £ 4,039,152 was remitted as "clear gain".[2]

Thus, through "trading" activities and political and economic domination of Bengal, from taxes and tributes as well as from craft production and the land, enormous fortunes were made by the Company, its officers and other English merchants. But the effect of this plunder was to destroy the normally-developing economic life of Bengal. For, instead of remaining an exporting country of her manufactured goods as she was before, and which accounted for her remarkable prosperity in the Mughal period of her history, henceforth Bengal had her economic wealth drained away for the benefit of the foreign merchants and their compatriots.[3]

This reckless extraction, however, had to stop. For the plunder from India after the battle of Plassey had provided the necessary accumulation of capital in Britain, which made the industrial revolution of England possible in the later half of the eighteenth century;[4] and now the British industrialists, who had grown in strength and were influencing Britain's political life, stood up resolutely against the role of British merchant capital in India. As opposed to the aim of merchant capital, which was not the hunt for a market for the British merchandise, the industrial capital wanted to make India a dumping ground for its products.[5] But this presupposed the liquidation of the East India Company, stoppage of indiscriminate extraction of India's wealth, and putting the Indian economy in an order suited to the demands of the British industrialists to provide them with raw materials and with a market for their manufactures. A new direction in British policy towards India (and Bengal) was thus called for.

This change began to be manifest from the year 1773 when Lord North's Regulating Act was passed in British Parliament.[6] Later, while the voice of the

[1] cf. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 5.

[2] Parliamentary Papers — *The Fourth Report of the Committee of Secrecy Appointed by the House of Commons on the State of the East India Company*, p. 535.

[3] For the sociological background to this change, and for details regarding the situation in the Mughal period and how the change was effected, see, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 1, 4, 5 and 6; and R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule.*

[4] See, for instance, Brooks Adams' *The Law of Civilisation and Decay*, pp. 259—260, 263—264.

[5] For details, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 1 and 6; and R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, Chapters IV and V.

[6] For the significance of this Act and for the activities of the British industrialists afterwards, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 6.

British industrialists became stronger and stronger (as evident from Mr. Fox's India Bill of 1783, Mr. Pitt's India Act of 1784, the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly trade with India in 1813, and its final liquidation in 1858), new measures were introduced in order to prepare India for exploitation by British industrial capital.

In the earlier phase of British rule, anarchy and chaos and indiscriminate loot and plunder were killing the proverbial goose laying golden eggs. As reported by Lord Cornwallis in 1789, "one-third of the Company's territory in Hindostan, is now a jungle inhabited only by wild beasts". Such a situation was not at all conducive to finding a regular market for British goods in India or for the supply of raw materials for British industries from the subcontinent. Therefore, during the Governor-Generalship of Lord Cornwallis (1786—1793, and 1805), the administration of India was reorganised, and in place of individual corruption and pillage by the British employees of the Company the foundations were laid for the system of well-paid civil servants. Also in order to check the unplanned extraction of India's resources by the previous methods of estate-farming, some definite forms of land-tenure were introduced in different parts of India. In Bengal, as stated before, this took the form of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement.

Subsequently, with the establishment of better and quicker means of transport and communication, the character of India's external trade underwent a qualitative transformation. Previously India was mainly the exporter of finished cotton and silk goods and spices, etc.; but now with the destruction of her industries and a fundamental change in the aim of the foreign rulers, she became an importer of finished cotton goods and other commodities and exporter of raw materials. Bengal was no exception in this respect; on the contrary, here this change in the character of trade was very well marked[1]. And this change syn-

[1] Thus the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* noted in 1908 (cf. Vol. VII, Bengal, p. 271): "British trade with Bengal commenced about 1633; but prior to the acquisition of the Province it was on a very small scale, and *in 1759 only thirty vessels with an aggregate burden of less than 4,000 tons sailed from Calcutta.* The chief exports were opium from Bihar and Rangpur, silk manufactured goods and raw silk from Murshidabad and Rajshahi, muslins from Dacca, indigo and saltpetre from Bihar and cotton cloths from Patna. *Little except bullion was imported.* The 150 years of British rule have witnessed a commercial revolution. *Hand-woven silks and cottons are no longer exported, and machine-made European piece-goods have taken the first place among the imports. On the other hand, owing to the increased facilities for the transport of goods, the food-crops have been largely displaced by fibres and oilseeds, which now figure largely among the exports.* The principal imports are yearns and textile fabrics, metals and machinery, oil and sugar; and the principal exports are raw and manufactured jute, coal, tea, opium, hides, rice, linseed, indigo, and lac. Bengal enjoys a practical monopoly of the export of coal, raw and manufactured jute, lac, saltpetre, and raw silk, and has a large or preponderating share in that of opium, indigo, rice, hides and tea." (my italics — author.)

chronised to a large extent with the establishment of landlordism as the governing social force in the rural areas.[1]

[1] Thus the table below, prepared from the data supplied in the appendix of C. J. Hamilton's *The Trade Relations between England and India*, will attest to the fact that from an exporting country of finished textile goods Bengal was reduced to an importing country of cotton piece-goods and exporter of raw materials, and that in some measure this change synchronised with the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement in 1793.

Period	Average yearly index number (Base 1793 = 100)			
	Value of Bengal piece-goods exported to England and sold at Company's sales	Official value of cotton goods exported from Great Britain	Quantity of raw cotton imported into Great Britain	Quantity of raw silk imported into England
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1771—1778	90.5	—	—	—
1779—1786	81.9	—	666*	—
1787—1794	101.0	95.6	1297	72.3**
1793	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
1795—1802	102.5	268.9	2163	48.8
1803—1810	42.6***	657.6	3831	66.6
1811—1818	—	1012.4	4997	102.5****
Actual for the Index Year — 1793	£ 1,216,801	£ 1,733,807	19,040,929 lbs.	736,081 lbs.

Notes: * Data since 1781; ** Data since 1791;
*** Data up to 1809; **** Records of 1812 and 1813 destroyed.

Source of the table: Col. (2) — Milburn's *Oriental Commerce*, Vol. II, p. 234.
Col. (3) — (5), Macgregor's *Commercial Tariffs*.

It is seen from the table that while before 1793, the year in which the Permanent Zemindary Settlement was introduced, Bengal's piece-goods' market in England was continually rising, it was reduced to almost nothing within the next two decades. On the other hand, import of raw cotton and raw silk into Great Britain and the export of cotton goods therefrom went up by leaps and bounds during the same period of 1795—1818.

It is true that the ommission in col. (2) of the above table for the period 1811—1818 is largely due to the fact that the Company's monopoly of trade with India was abolished in 1813. But there are other evidence to show that, as a result of heavy import duties in England on *muslin*, etc., the export of products from India were drastically curtailed, while under favourable conditions (such as, exemption of customs duties, efficient transport facilities, etc.) British products began to flood the Indian countryside (cf. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 6). Thus, in 1813, Calcutta exported to London £ 2 million worth of cotton goods, and, in 1830, Calcutta imported £ 2 million of British cotton manufactures.

Furthermore, from the facts available from the *Evidence taken before the House of Commons' Committee* (1832, Vol. II, Appendix 7) it is seen that during 1800—1828 the export of cotton bales from the port of Calcutta to the United Kingdom increased from 605 bales to 4,105, whereas during nearly the same period, from 1800 to 1829, the export of cotton piece-goods decreased from 2,636 bales to 433 bales. Similarly, while the export of silk piece-goods (for which figures are avialable only for ten years of 1819—28) showed a slightly increasing trend up to 1825 and then registered a sharp fall, the export of raw silk increased by nearly 40 to 50 times from 213 bales in 1800 to 10,431 bales in 1828 and 7,000 bales in 1829.

The reason for this coincidence has already been noted; namely, all these features which were new in Bengal were the outcome of the governing objective of British industrial capital to pave the way for its full play in the colony.[1] What is now of greater importance to note is that the well-being of the newly-created landlords was also dependant on their adjustment to this new situation. Otherwise, how could they so securely establish themselves in the society, and become economically so strong?

It has been described before that, as time went on from 1793, concentration of land began to take place in society. But *why* did it take place unless the landowning class found that its best possible profit depended on this concentration and polarisation of land? For, if the subsistence character of the rural economy prevailed as before, the main course the privilege section of society would have had taken was to draw fixed land-rents from the peasants settled on their estates; and that could not give rise to the Class III of the economic structure, comprising mainly the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. In other words, the Class I of landowners must have been provided with an initiative to keep the disintegrated peasantry in Class III. This initiative is linked up with the change in the character of the economy of rural Bengal, as it will be seen from the following discussion.

[1] The following table, taken from Macgregor's *Commercial Tariffs* (p. 119) and reproduced in the appendix of C. J. Hamilton's *The Trade Relations between England and India*, will be of interest here.

Period	Value (in £) of the export of merchandise by the East India Company	
	Yearly average	Index (1781—90 = 100)
1708—1720	128,373	37
1721—1730	100,285	29
1731—1740	144,797	41
1741—1750	188,850	54
1751—1760	288,511	83
1761—1770	389,204	111
1771—1780	376,105	108
1781—1790	349,298	100
1791—1800	664,057	190
1801—1810	817,791	234

It will be noticed from the table that the export of merchandise to India increseased sharply from the time of the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement. In other words, India was being rapidly transformed into a dumping ground for British manufactured goods.

It may be worth noting that during twenty years after the establishment of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement, that is, during 1794—1813, the value of cotton goods sent out from England to ports east of Cape of Good Hope, mainly to India, increased by nearly 700 times from £ 156 in the year ending on the 5th of January 1794 to £ 108,824 in the year ending on the 5th of January 1813 (cf. *Return to an Order of the House of Commons*, dated 4th May, 1813). And, while the first import of British cotton twists to India was in 1823, it rose to the figure of 4,000,000 lbs. in 1828 from that of 121,000 lbs. in 1824 (cf. R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, Chapter XVI).

The most important effect of the changes in the character of external trade of Bengal was that it affected the relations of production in the agrarian economy. Agricultural production, which previously possessed only or mainly a use-value, began to assume the character of commodity. For production was henceforth geared to the demands of the market. This process should be examined carefully, for this supplies the answer to the question: why the relation of production between a landholder and sharecropper or that between a supervisory farmer and wage-labourer developed in Bengal in the British period of her history.

From about the middle of the nineteenth century railways and steamerways were introduced in India with the primary object of bringing raw materials for the British industrialists from the remotest corners of the country to the ports for export to England and with the aim of circulating British manufactures into even the smallest village.[1] And with this development more and more the crops began to possess a monetary value, and were ultimately turned into commodities.[2]

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[1] Gadgil wrote while discussing the condition of the "Agriculturists, 1860—80" (cf. *The Industrial Evolution of India*, pp. 17—18):

"The rapidity with which the demand for cotton from England was met by India was only made possible by the many measures of improvement, which had been undertaken in India during the past decade. Chief among these was the extension of roads and railways. . . . Till about 1845 very little had been done to forward road construction in India. . . . About 1850 the extension of this trunk road [Calcutta-Benares] to Delhi was undertaken and the work was completed by 1853. But the real progress in road-building was begun under the vigorous Governor-Generalship of Lord Dalhousie by the newly formed Public Works Department. The trunk road to Delhi was completed and its further extension to Peshawar was vigorously begun. Road-building thus really began in the fifties. After 1857 the necessity of roads for military purposes and also as feeders for the great railway trunk lines was realised and the next decade saw a rapid extension of roads in India.

But this work was now overshadowed by the even more important work of railway extension. The question of railway building in India was broached as early as 1845. . . . An experimental line had already been undertaken near Calcutta in 1849; and in 1854 the first line of railway in India — from Bombay to Thana — was opened for traffic. From this date the work was pushed on vigorously until 1857, when it was temporarily checked. The ten years following saw a remarkable growth of railways in India; the work was carried on continuously and the lenght of miles open for traffic had been increased from 432 miles in 1859 to 5,015 miles in 1869. . . . The first obvious effect of railway was, of course, that of making communication quicker, and for long journeys much cheaper. This was very important, as it was the extension of railways and roads that made possible the carriage of cotton in large quantities from the fields to the sea-ports."

R. C. Dutt noted in 1901 in *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule* (p. 311): "The present railway system of India ministers to the wants of commerce much more effectually . . .".

[2] How the improved transport system helped in the rapid inland distribution of crops and for their export, and thus created a favourable situation for their gradual transformation into commodities, will be evident from the following extracts from the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (cf. Vol. VII, *Bengal*, pp. 271, 272—273 and p. 277):

Furthermore, this change in the character of crop-production was effected not only by the development of the external market. Because of the role of landlordism in Bengal, as explained earlier, a home market for crops was also developing rapidly with the creation of an ever-growing section of disintegrated peasantry who could not produce enough for themselves.[1] This further aggravated the situation. For, while the external trade was also helping the transformation of foodgrains into commodities[2], this was now fully established with the extensive spread of the home market.[3]

"The 150 years of British rule have witnessed a commercial revolution. Hand-woven silks and cottons are no longer exported, and machine-made European piece-goods have taken the first place among the imports. On the other hand, owing to the increased facilities for the transport of goods, the food-crops have been largely displaced by fibres and oilseeds, which now figure largely among the exports.. . .

"The railways, rivers, canals, and roads carry country produce to the ports for export, and distribute the imports. Calcutta, the chief receiving and distributing centre, is connected with all parts of the Province by the railways, which carry the bulk of the internal trade. Next in importance as a channel of communication are the Calcutta and Eastern Canals, which carry enormous quantitites of rice and jute from the eastern District into Calcutta. . . .

"The rapid extension of railways has revolutionized agricultural and trade conditions. . . . The railways have also done much to level prices and to moderate their fluctuations; and by putting food-grains in circulation, they have led to a vast increase in the cultivation of fibres, oilseeds, and other non-food crops of commercial value."

[1] The extent to which the home market developed in rural Bengal will be evident from the fact that while five acres of land was considered by the Land Revenue Commission of 1938 as the minimum size of an economic holding (cf. Vol. I, p. 86), the number of cultivated acres per cultivator in Bengal was found to be 3.1 in 1921 and 2.2 in 1931, respectively. This indicates that a large number of people were below the subsistence level and therefore had to depend on the home market for foodgrains. A sample survey of 19,599 households organized by the Land Revenue Commission in 1938 found that 74.6 per cent of the total households of rural Bengal had holdings below 5 acres, and only 25.4 per cent above 5 acres of land (cf. Vol. II, Appendix IX, Table VIII b). A sample survey of 80 000 households, organised by the Indian Statistical Institute in 1944—45, revealed that in rural Bengal only 11.5 per cent of the total households owned land of 5 acres or more. It will be recalled that, as evident from the extracts quoted earlier from the Report of the Land Revenue Commission of 1938, changes in landholding leading to its concentration in the hands of a few wealthy people and the consequent devitalisation of the previously self-sufficient peasantry has been going on in Bengal for a long time.

[2] As noted earlier, the export of raw materials from Bengal to England included foodgrans too. The following extract from R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule* will be of further interest in this connection (cf. p. 278):

"The export of rice from Bengal in the husk increased to 1000 tons shortly before 1830, principally owing to the invention of machinery for freeing it from the husk after its arrival in England."

[3] The following extract from the *Report of the Famine Inquiry Commission on Bengal* (pp. 10—11) would be of interest in this connection, and specially so if it is borne in mind that, as the Commission described earlier (*ibid*, p. 5), "Bengal may be described as a land of rice growers and rice eaters."

The upshot was obvious. Henceforth the landowning class became more and more interested in directly securing crops from the land instead of settling peasants on it. For under the existing tenancy laws the landowners could not demand as large a share of the crops (in kind or in cash) from the settled peasants (of Class II) as they could obtain otherwise. So they favoured the use of the disintegrated peasantry as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. And since large-scale farming was not profitable under the primitive state of the productive forces, as the productivity of labour remained very low, and since there was little scope for mechanisation and over-all development of the productive forces in agriculture, as industrialisation of the society was at a snail's pace and machineries and other necessaries for large-scale farming (such as an organised irrigation system, etc.) were hardly available, even without participating in agricultural production the landlords lived on deriving a larger income from sharecropping than from employing the disintegrated peasants as agricultural labourers.[1] Thus

"Consumers of rice may be broadly divided into three classes. First, there are those who buy their supplies from the market all the year round. This class comprise practically the whole of the non-agricultural population, both in urban and rural areas, as well as a large proportion of the agricultural labourers. . . . The second class consists of all those who do not buy any supplies from the market, that is, that section of the agricultural population whose holdings are large enough to provide their annual rice requirements in addition to seed and a margin for meeting the expenses of cultivation, the payment of rent, and other essential cash needs. Lastly, there are groups who buy their supplies from the market only during certain parts of the year and not at others. These include numerous small holders who do not grow sufficient rice for their own needs as well as agricultural labourers who receive wages in kind."

How rice or paddy has become a commodity in the market is also evident from the following extract from the *Report of the Famine Inquiry Commission* (*ibid*, p. 11):

"How much of the rice crop is retained by the grower and how much comes in the market depends upon various factors and varies from district to district, from village to village, from one holding to another, and from year to year. Primarily, it depends upon how much the cultivator retains for his domestic consumption and seed, and it may be taken as a general rule that the proportion retained varies inversely with the size of the holding. Small growers, however, often sell a proportion of their crop immediately after the harvest for the payment of rent, repayment of debt, and for meeting other pressing cash obligations even though the produce in their possession may not be sufficient for their needs throughout the year. Again, in those districts in which jute is the principal cash crop, the proportion retained is higher than in districts where rice is the main cash crop. Taking the province as a whole, it has been estimated that normally 54 per cent of the total rice crop is retained by the producer, that is, the proportion which comes on the market is 46 per cent."

[1] The following table extracted from the author's paper entitled *A Note on the Concentration of Agricultural Wealth in Bengal* will attest to the above statement. Since paddy is the main crop of Bengal, being sown on about 88 per cent of the total cultivated land, all types of social relations of production are found only in the production of *aus* and *aman*, the two principal varieties of paddy grown in Bengal. *Aus* comprises about 23 per cent and *aman* about 77 per of the total area under paddy; the other variety *boro* being grown on a negligible area. The land under *aus* is generally not kept fallow for the rest of the year after the harvest

the landholder cum sharecropper relationship increasingly became the dominant form of production-relation in rural Bengal[1].

It is of interest to note that this relationship between the propertied and the propertyless classes in the agrarian economy, viz. that of a landholder and a sharecropper, was possible not only because it was to the advantage of the top-most people in society (who, for reasons noted before, could wield their economic, social and even political power in order to gain this end), but also because the impoverished peasants were not strongly against such a relationship; on the contrary, they found this as the next best alternative. Otherwise, either there would not have been sufficient incentive to develop such a relationship or so much tension would have generated at the beginning between the propertied and the pro-

of the crop, and *aman* is grown on that field. Therefore, the study of production-relations in regard to the *aman* paddy alone (the principal food and money crop of Bengal) will be sufficient for the purpose.

Type of social relations in production	Net income (in Rs.)		Percentage of net income to gross	
	Rajshahi & Bogra	Birbhum	Rajshahi & Bogra	Birbhum
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
State	0.6—0.5	1.0	2	3
Landlord (*Zemindar*).	1.3—1.4	3.1	4	9
Landholder (*Joldar*) .	13.8	13.6	44	38
Supervisory Farmer .	13.2	11.3	42	32
Cultivator.....	19.8	14.8	63	42
Sharecropper	8.3	5.5	26	15
Agricultural labourer	8.9	7.8	28	22
Gross Income.....	31.4	35.5	100	100

It can be seen from the table that in both areas, Rajshahi and Bogra and Birbhum, the proportion of net income to gross is highest for the landholder (barring the cultivator for the obvious reason that he owns the land and does the whole job himself) and the lowest for the sharecropper. The income of the latter is even lower than that of the agricultural labourer. The income of supervisory farmer is also close but comes next to that of the landholder even though he has to spend some time in supervision over the hired labourers as well as for the maintenance and provision of draught cattle, plough, seed, manure and such other necessaries of cultivation. The landlord, on the other hand, has nothing to worry about.

[1] The 1946 sample survey of rural households in Bengal may be regarded to have led to a different conclusion. It can be seen from the Table 1.5 that according to household occupations, while 138 households in the sample were returned as "landholder", there were 394 households under the category of "supervisory farmer"; and, likewise, while 760 households were returned under the category of "sharecropper", 4355 were placed under the category of "agricultural labourer". One may conclude from these figures that instead of the landholder cum sharecropper relationship, it was that between the supervisory farmer and agricultural labourer which had been gaining ground in the agrarian economy of Bengal. But it should be remenbered that the period in which this survey was conducted was abnormal in the sense that at that time the wage-rates of the agricultural labourers had not yet risen in parity with the price of crops, and especially of rice. Therefore, for a short period, it was profitable to those belonging to the Class I of the economic structure to become supervisory farmers rather than remain as landholders. Also, to many of those in Class I, who had their land cultivated partly by sharecroppers and partly by hired labourers, the income as a

pertyless classes in society that such a relationship could not attain the minimum stability needed for its security and development.

The points in favour of the disintegrated peasantry to adopt the landholder cum sharecropper relationship in absence of that between a supervisory farmer and an agricultural labourer were two. Firstly, such a relationship secured their employment throughout the year; while, because of extreme overcrowding in agriculture, if they remained as agricultural labourers, they might not have been able to secure regular employment. Secondly, as a sharecropper the peasant still remained a *grihastha* or husbandman, and therefore socially he ranked in the same or nearly the same level as that of a *ryot* (i. e., a settled peasant in Class II) who is a true husbandman. He would not, therefore, be considered to belong to the group of *kisans* or agricultural labourers; a group which is socially placed lower than the former.[1]

If not for the above two reasons, it might have been difficult for the landed interest in society to utisile the labour of the disintegrated peasantry for its most favourable gain. However, it should be stressed again that this new relation of production in agriculture was primarily determined by the demands of the privileged section in the rural society as a property-owning class and by the transformation in the agrarian economy from subsistence to commodity production. In other words, it was the new situation which opened up in Bengal in the era of

"supervisory farmer" had now become greater than the income as a "landholder", and therefore, the household occupation being defined as that occupation from which a household drew the largest part of its income, these households were returned in the survey as "supervisory farmers".

As regards the disintegrated peasantry, firstly, in conformity with the demands of the top stratum of society, for a time they had to earn their livelihood more as agricultural labourers than sharecroppers; and, secondly, there was also the point that many of them having lost their subsidiary means of production besides land (such as, cattle, plough, etc.) during the famine of 1943 (cf. *A Sample Survey of the After-effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943*), they could not but work as agricultural labourers until they could amass sufficient capital to buy the implements and accessories necessary to become sharecroppers again.

This, however, was a passing phase. As is well known, soon the production-relation between landholder and sharecropper asserted itself in Bengal as it was before. Moreover, it is worth noting that even in that abnormal period the "supervisory farmers" also remained partially as "landholders", and that more land in the whole of Bengal was sharecropped than cultivated by hired labourers. This has been shown by Dr. Ambica Ghosh in his paper entitled *Agricultural Labour in Bengal* from an analysis of the same data as collected in 1946.

It is also worthy of note that Dr. Gyan Chand stated in his paper on "Share Tenancies" in the 4th Conference of Indian Society of Agricultural Economics that about 20 per cent of the cultivable area of Bengal was cultivated by sharecroppers having no legal protection (cf. *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, p. 37).

[1] Thus the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal noted in 1940 (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 67): "The provision in the Tenancy Act of 1928, which definitely declared the Bargadars (sharecroppers) with few exceptions to be labourers was, we hold, a retrograde measure. . . . Socially, they are regarded in their villages as having a better status than labourers."

British industrial capital that led to the emergence of the Classes I and III in the economic structure of rural society.

For this reason, the *ownership* of land with the introduction of the concept of property-right in landholdings, or even the heavy concentration of land in the hands of a few in society (which followed from the parasitic existence of the landlords and the onset of crisis in the rural economy) did not emerge as the only disquieting feature in the "peasant" society of Bengal under British rule. The constant exploitation of the landless and the almost landless population by the landed interest further aggravated the situation, and brought out the distinctive characteristics of the rural society. Concentration of income in the hands of a few in Class I as a result of property-inequality (concentration of land) was further enhanced by the concentration of agricultural wealth in the same class. And the cumulative effect of the operation of these factors was that poverty due to uneconomic holdings, being coupled with the most ruthless form of exploitation of the disintegrated peasantry (conditioned by the same property relations)[1], led to further inequality, which in its turn resulted in greater concentration of agricultural wealth. In consequence, sharecropping and cultivation by hired labour grew at the expense of self-cultivation, and began to be expressed by the form of the economic structure described in the foregoing pages.[2]

This is how in the British period of her history the economic forces of commodity production in the "peasant" economy of rural Bengal found their expression through the medium of the economic structure.

Why Study Economic Structure?

From the above examination of the function of the economic structure it is now possible to come to the concluding discussion on the importance of studying

[1] Referring to the sharecroppers, the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal noted (cf. *The Report*, Vol. I, p. 67):

"These are the people tied to the land of whom Sir Henry Maine says 'the status of the salve is always deplorable, the status of the predial slave is often worse than that of the household slave, but the lowest depth of miserable subjection is reached when the person enthralled to the land is at the mercy of peasants, whether they exercise their powers singly or in communities'."

Needless to say, the "peasants" in the above extract are none other than the "landholders" as defined in the foregoing pages.

[2] That since the middle of the nineteenth century the numbers of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers increased rapidly in Bengal was noted by the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal in 1940 and by the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1954. How this became a serious phenomenon in the rural society has been noted by Ambica Ghosh in his paper entitled *Agricultural Labour in Bengal*. For an intensive analysis of this characteristic of rural Bengal and of the changes in the relative strength of the three classes of the economic structure from 1922 to 1945, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *Six Villages of Bengal*.

the economic structure of a "peasant" society in order to assess the true character of the economy which governs the society. This will, therefore, be done below.

The preceding analysis has shown how the economic structure, as it emerged under British rule, expressed the economic forces working within the agrarian economy of Bengal. It is seen therefrom that a new relationship between a propertied and a propertyless class grew at the expense of the self-possessing, self-working and self-sufficient peasantry of the pre-British type. What is of greater importance to note in this connection is that the growth of this new relationship had a particularly retrogressive character. The predominance of the growth of landholder (*jotdar*) cum sharecropper (*bargadar*) relationship indicates that while the form of "peasant" cultivation was maintained as before, the relation of production was made suitable to the new function of commodity production. Thus the landowning top stratum of the society (in whichever name its members were designated, viz. *zemindars*, *talookdars*, *jotdars*, etc.) functioned as *rent-receivers* by drawing a share of the produce from the cultivators without taking a direct interest in production, and the mass of the peasantry (either as the "traditional" *ryots* of the Class II or as sharecroppers, who formed the bulk of the disintegrated peasantry belonging to the Class III) lived in the illusion of remaining as sons of the soil — as *grihasthas*. On the other hand, the ownership of large tracts of land by a wealthy few did not automatically lead to improvements in agricultural technique and emancipation of the mass of the people from uneconomic small-scale cultivation.

This was so because under British rule the privileged section in society found that its prosperity depended on merely remaining as landowner, that is, as landlords or as "landholders". For, as noted before, with the onset of the foreign rule, in order to avoid competition in the era of exploitation of India by British merchant capital, the foreign rulers did not allow the previously growing class of Indian merchants and artisans to develop independently; and in the next phase of exploitation of India by British industrial capital they transformed the subcontinent into an "Agricultural Farm of England", as Martin, Wilson and others described so forcefully.[1] Therefore, as under colonial conditions a progressive development of the agrarian economy by means of large-scale cultivation, etc., was ruled out and even in later years there developed little scope for the development of an industrial economy or mechanised farming[2], the landowners preferred to remain as semi-feudal rent-receivers and thrived on the increasing appropriation of the surplus labour of the peasantry by engaging the poor peasants from the constantly devitalised stratum of the "traditional" *ryots* of Class II as sharecroppers in Class III.

[1] cf. Martin's *Eastern India;* Wilson's continuation to Mill's *The History of British India*, Vol. VII, p. 385; etc.

[2] See, for instance, the literatures cited in pages 1 and 2, and also R. P. Dutt's *India Today*.

The landowners did not look after the mode of production and for the improvement of the productive forces, which were essential to the development of large-scale farming and for which the precondition was created by the increasing concentration of land in their hands with the aggravating agrarian crisis and the consequent disintegration of the peasantry in course of time. After the break-up of the village community system in the first phase of British rule in India, large-scale farming would have initiated progress in the agrarian economy; and this the landowning class, which arose with the introduction of the Permanent Zemindary Settlement and the concept of private property in land and subsequent commercialisation of crops, could have undertaken. But instead of taking this forward step, which the colonial set-up of the country forbade them to do, the landowners adjusted themselves to making their profits as dependant on continually increasing their share of the produce which was obtained from the labour and meagre capital of the "peasants" (sharecroppers included) who were made responsible for the entire system of production. In other words, while with the destruction of the village community system the basis of Indian feudalism disappeared,[1] in rural areas feudalism was reimposed in another form; and therefore in the British period of her history the agrarian economy of rural Bengal remained as semi-feudal, although it was henceforth made suitable to the demands of commodity production of crops.

It is worthy of note here that some authorities are inclined to differ from describing the character of rural Bengal's economy under British rule as semi-feudal. In the expropriation of land from the peasantry and in the ever-increasing growth of the army of sharecroppers they find the introduction of capitalism in Bengal's agriculture. Following this viewpoint they are inclined to describe the sharecroppers as wage-labourers and to characterise the production-relation between a landholder and sharecropper as that between a capitalist and a proletariat.[2] Such an explanation, however, would have been justified if the introduction of capitalism in agriculture merely meant the disintegration of the peasantry and the concentration of land in the hands of a few. But capitalism in agriculture means a fundamental change from the feudal set-up of society, whereby the agrarian eco-

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[1] For details, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 4—6.

[2] Thus P. N. Driver remarked in his study of the *Problems of Zamindari and Land Revenue Reconstruction in India* (p. 80):

"Technically speaking the agricultural labourer is one who had no land of any kind to cultivate and who sells his labour power to others in order to earn a living. This automatically excludes any kind of an 'owner' or even a 'tenant' from being regarded as the pure proletariat. This technical exclusion however hides the real facts about the situation. . . . If we take a typical Bengali *krishan*, for example, there is hardly any doubt that although he is a sharer in the final produce he is really a labourer working for a wage which is mainly paid in kind."

nomy is better organised through large-scale farming and mechanisation, and the farm workers are finally reduced to the position of cogs in the wheel of production without any over-all authority or responsibility in planning for production. As far as possible, within the capitalist system agriculture is thus brought to a higher level, somewhat comparable with the industrial economy. For this transformation the disintegration of the peasantry, expropriation of the peasant's land and the growth of commodity production are undoubtedly indispensable pre-requisites; but these features alone need not lead to a capitalist development. Therefore, while in a free and industrially developing country these changes might have had paved the way for a capitalist agricultural system, in the peculiar colonial conditions of Bengal they only led to greater feudal exploitation by the parasitic rent-receivers, viz. the "landholders".

In this connection one should not forget that in Bengal further consolidation of land during the war and famine period of 1941—45 did not produce an essential change in the relations of production. The subinfeudatory landlords remained as before and went on collecting land-rents. Also the orientation of the disintegrated peasants remained towards the "peasant" economy, and not away from it. As previously, they took full charge of production, and whether they wanted or not, in lieu of any other source of livelihood, they could not leave the "peasant economy" and "freely" sale their labour-power for wages. They were thus *tied* to their small holdings and continued with the "traditional" mode of production. The only difference from the previous situation was that the landlords henceforth collected heavier rents, and as sharecroppers the disintegrated peasants were reduced to a position which, at least superficially, resembled that of a serf rather than of a wage-labourer. For, under the existing circumstances, they *could not* break away from the land and this decadent economy.

And the upshot was that, as a further disadvantage to the disintegrated peasantry, the landholders allotted plots of land to the sharecroppers for one year only and without any tenancy rights. Thus the latter were deprived of even the minimum security under tenancy laws which they had gained earlier after bitter struggles in the nineteenth century.[1] Also the landrent from the sharecroppers becoming at least a half share of the produce instead of its money equivalent of the maximum of one-fourth from the peasants with tenancy rights, the new relationship led to further exploitation of the poeple by the landed interest. Here

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[1] When the Permanent Zemindary Settlement was established in 1793 the *ryots* (cultivators) had practically no tenancy rights at all, and the landlords were free to impose any rent on them. Bitter struggles between the peasants and the landlords over a few decades, which sometimes took the character of rebellion, led to the passing of the Ryotwari Acts of 1853 and 1858 with many tenancy laws introduced during the period and afterwards. For details, see for instance, *The Report of the Land Revenue Commission: Bengal*, Vol. I, and L. Natarajan's *Peasant Uprisings in India: 1850—1900.*

again the peasants lost what they had gained earlier for the fixation of a lower land-rent.[1]

There is no doubt, therefore, that the essential character of the rural economy which emerged in Bengal under British rule was that of a disintegrating system which was not only not replaced by one better than what prevailed when Bengal was an independent and sovereign country, but, although new functions of commodity production gained a foothold and eventually began to control the society, the character of the feudal economy of the pre-British days was preserved in a way; and in a way that was pernicious. Thus while the *form* of "peasant cultivation" remained in vogue, its *content* was so changed that it could only lead to the disintegration of the life of the bulk of the people and to mass pauperisation.

Moreover, in later years while the disintegration of the economy went on in rapid strides, the new relation of production was more stabilised instead of there being a progressive change in the character of the economy. This was very well marked after the famine of 1943. During this famine not only a large section of the peasantry lost their land and also other means of production (such as draught cattle), but they had also to borrow grain almost every year even for their sustinence, not to speak of borrowing it as seeds for production.[2] Furthermore, lacking the draught animals, the amount of cowdung which they could have freely used as manure was not available. And, needless to say, in their

1 For details, see *The Report of the Land Revenue Commission: Bengal.*

2 The following extract from the author's and his colleagues' study of the after-effects of the Bengal famine of 1943 would be relevant here (cf. *A Sample Survey of the After-effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943*):

"The land problem that faces the country at present, after the famine, may now be formulated from the figures discussed in previous section. Even before the famine, shortage of paddy land was acute in Bengal. In the province as a whole about a third of all rural families did not own any paddy land while two-fifths had less than 2 acres, so that about three-fourths of all families had no paddy land or less than 2 acres. Subdivisions (administrative grouping below the district) in which families owned, on an average, less land were naturally more severely affected by the famine. Families holding less land were obliged to sell out more heavily which has further increased the number in the lower economic levels. Mortgaging was also comparatively heavy among the less favourably placed families. Much of this land is not likely to be redeemed and would gradually pass into other hands leading to a further increase in the proportion of families owning little or no paddy land. During the famine, 2.6 lakhs of families (out of 65 lakhs owning paddy land) had totally lost their holdings, and were thus reduced to the rank of landless labour. This has made the agricultural economy still more top heavy.

Even before the famine, several groups had become differentiated within the general category of agricultural occupations which have been designated in this report as 'agriculture', 'agriculture & labour', 'agricultural labour', and 'non-cultivating owner'. The famine has caused the transfer of an appreciable number of families from the group of 'agriculture' to 'agriculture & labour', and from 'agricultur & labour' to 'agricultural labour'; and has thus accentuated inequalities in the distribution of paddy land in the province. This is, of course, not surprising and could have been anticipated on *a priori*

state of well-being, the devitalised peasants found it impossible to obtain all these items from their own account. As a result, these requirements began to be met by the landholders. But that did not mean that the landholders began to take a direct interest in agricultural production or that in the society attempts were made to increase the productivity of labour in the agrarian economy by initiating large-scale farming on the basis of mechanised production. On the contrary, henceforth, in addition to the yearly allottment of their lands to the share-croppers, the landholders sometimes also provided them with cattle, implements, seeds, etc. for the *continuance* of the "peasant" cultivation. But this provision was in the form of a "loan"; and, therefore, charging interest on the loan, after the harvest the landholders received two-third share of the crops and the share-croppers only one-third. Thus, having received all these necessaries for cultivation as current loans, in order to maintain their existence as *chasi-grihastha* the sharecroppers had to pay henceforth still heavier rents. Consequently, they went more often to the moneylenders to make a living and were thus increasingly over-burdened with usurious interests. The disintegration of the peasantry, however accelerated it was, did not therefore lead to a break away from the semi-feudal economy. Its basis (namely, the peasantry supplying the capital — self-owned or borrowed — and labour for production, and the landowning class thriving on the rents received from the land) remained intact and was further strengthened by heavier rents and bigger interests from the "crushed" peasantry.[1] This indeed remained as the essential character of Bengal's agrarian economy under British rule.

To conclude now this discussion, it is worth stressing finally that this peculiarly retrogressive character of the rural economy of Bengal under British rule

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grounds. The present sample survey has, however, supplied a factual basis and has shown the extent and direction of changes caused by the famine in concrete terms.

As already noted, the total number of plough cattle of Bengal before the famine was just adequate or fell short of requirements for the cultivation of *aman* paddy, the main crop of the province. The net loss of plough cattle was about 10 or 11 lakhs (about 13%) during the famine period which must seriously affect agricultural operations in future. Out of this, 9.4 lakhs (65%) were lost by sale, and 5 lakhs (or 35%) of cattle by death. Only about one-fourth of the loss (3.5 lakhs) was replaced by purchase. About 3 lakhs or 8.5% of families of rural Bengal had probably lost all the cattle they had before the famine making it difficult or practically impossible for them to carry on normal agricultural operations. [10 lakhs equal 1 million — RKM].

Sales of cattle largely exceeded purchases showing that transfers had taken place not merely from one rural family to another, but that large purchases had been made by outsiders (possibly by contractors for the supply of meat for army consumption).

The average number of plough cattle owned per family naturally decreased in all groups but the reduction was largest in 'agriculture' and 'agriculture & labour', the two groups mainly concerned with cultivation. Even before the famine a considerable number of these families did not own any cattle; their number increased during the famine and further aggravated the cattle position."

[1] See, for instance, *The Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee.*

could not be unravelled without an objective analysis of the economic structure of the society. As opposed to such an analytical study, only a descriptive study of the system of agricultural production and of the life of the peasantry *as a whole* would have merely indicated that the agrarian system and the "peasant" society remained backward and "primitive". Such studies could elicit only a *formal* explanation of the chronic food crisis in Bengal during the British period of her history, viz. that Bengal did not produce enough to feed her people, and quite wrongly could lead to the conclusion (as one often heard from British administrators and statesmen) that this failure was due to the backwardness and indolent habit of the mass of the peasantry.[1] On the other hand, stressing only on this backwardness of rural life, even some sympathetic and patriotic writers could speak of the "frugal demands" of the Bengal villagers whose only amibition, according to them, is somehow to pass their life with the minimum of needs.[2] But it should be evident from the foregoing analysis that the agrarian crisis in Bengal was neither due to the backwardness and indolent habit of the people nor could it be solved merely by a charitable disposition to the peasants.

One may therefore conclude that this truth could be unravelled only by a study of the economic structure of the society which showed that the agrarian crisis was due to the colonial system imposed on the country and the role of the parasitic landowning class as an appendage to that system, whereby their profit-motive could find ample satisfaction while preserving the "peasant" cultivation without any capital outlay in order to improve the state of the productive forces. However industrious the mass of the peasantry might have been and

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[1] For instance, the Royal Commission on Agriculture remarked in 1928 (cf. *The Report*, pp. 5—6):

"Since the Government of India passed, in 1858, from the hands of the East India Company to that of the Crown, there have been many developments, but the main characteristics of village life are still those of the centuries anterior to British rule. . . . Even when the population of India was much less dense than it is today and the area available for cultivation per head was much greater, it does not appear that there was any considerable section of the community which attempted to add to its wealth by producing more than it required for its own immediate needs."

One should also bear in mind the conclusion which the Indian Statutory Commission drew in 1930 as quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

[2] For instance, even Azizul Huque, who as a leading figure in the Krishak Praja Party was closely connected with the problems of the Bengal peasantry in the nineteen-thirties, noted in his book *The Man behind the Plough* (p. vi):

"The needs of the Bengal peasantry are very modest and limited. A little food, some scanty clothing, a few crude utensils, a humble shelter, a few lean animals to plough with and the simplest instruments for tillage — these are that he needs. He lives on the land of his ancestors and he would be happy to die in the same open yard where all those who had gone before him breathed their last. He has no equipment in the shape of either education or knowledge to enable him to go out of his village to seek his living elsewhere. He loves his land, his family and his inefficient and uneconomic cattle. . . ."

whether or not they wanted to revolutionise agricultural production, the heavy burden of rents and interests on their head and their accelerated pauperisation could never allow them to check the crisis and improve the agrarian economy so long as the parasitic landowning class maintained its role in the production-relations. This basic question in solving the agrarian crisis of Bengal could not be understood without a thorough analysis of the economic structure, which alone could reveal the dominant economic forces working within the society.

Herein lies the importance of studying the economic structure of a "peasant" society.

CHAPTER II

SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

1. Caste System and Social Organisation

Is the economic structure such an important phenomenon even in a "peasant" society that it not only reveals the dynamic changes in the economic life of the people (which were hidden under the cloak of "primitive" and "traditional" form of economic organisation), but also has a significant role to play in their social life ? This is the question which will be discussed in this chapter with reference to rural Bengal in the British period of her history, and in regard to the institution of caste system.

This discussion will have an added interest, for while it is almost universally agreed that the institution of caste system was the pivot of Indian social organisation, in recent years questions have been raised whether the caste system was dying out in British India or whether it tenaciously maintained its hold. And these questions are not of mere academic interest, for any measure taken in order to uproot this evil (as is generally agreed in India today) from the society has got to be in the light of the dynamics of this institution in the immediate past. So the social scientists are often confronted with this problem; but, curiously enough, both the views as stated above can be supported from a superficial examination of the situation.

It is true that when after T. B. Macaulay's remarkable discovery in 1835 that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia"[1] modern education in western science and literature became the chief subject of study in the State System of Education in British India, this could have an adverse effect on the caste-ideology because the westernised education could counterpoise sanskritised teaching which commonly upheld the ethics of the caste system. It is equally true that, when in 1858 India became a Crown Colony, Queen Victoria's proclamation (viz. that Indians "of whatever

[1] cf. *The Minute* by T. B. Macaulay, dated 2nd February, 1853; quoted by Ramsay Muir in *The Making of British India*, p. 299.

race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our services, the duties of which they may be qualified, by their education, ability, and integrity, duly to discharge") could give an impetus to the disintegration of the caste system by the violation of its fundamental discipline of unaltered division of labour in society in the form of hereditarily transmitted occupations of the people. Similarly, the *Caste Disabilities Removal Act XXI* of 1850 (which enforced that deprivation of one's caste would not henceforth imply forfeiture of his rights of property) and similar Acts and Regulations passed later in different parts of British India made serious onslaughts on the sanctions of the caste system. And, simultaneously, at however slow a tempo, urbanisation and industrialisation of India (especially from the beginning of the present century) had an effect on the caste system to lose its force in the towns of British India. Yet it remains a fact that almost the entire rural population and the great majority of town-dwellers in British India went on adhering to the caste discipline of interdining and inter-marriage, and caste-consciousness remained in the pores of society.

Diametrically opposite opinions have therefore been voiced on the role of castes in India. From the bold assertions made by the thin layer of "westernised" section of the Indian society that the caste system is a thing of the past, the pendulum swings to the other extreme and influences the fond hopes of the Hindu revivalists that the dogged preservation of the institution, in spite of the onslaughts made on its discipline from time to time, shows that it is so intrinsically connected with the so-called Indian Way of Life that to think of India without a caste system is practically the same as visualising a non-Indian situation. And in the midst of these two views lies the vast mass of Indian and international public who are utterly confused as to the course of the caste system in India.

It is therefore the duty of a social scientist to find a solution to this enigma. How is it that nearly two centuries of British rule in India, which even in the midst of inhuman sufferings and misery inflicted on the Indian people had cast the death-knell to the previous system of her economy and social life[1], could not demolish the caste system? The answer to this question will obviously have to be sought in the rural areas, for up to the end of British rule more than two-fifths of the Indian population lived in villages and the caste system is most deeply entrenched therein. Therefore, whatever changes may have occurred in the practices of the caste system in the towns, and they are very little, they could merely scratch the surface of the problem. The life-force of the institution is in the village. The question thus boils down to the querry: did the rural life in British India sustain this institution, or was it slowly but surely leading to its ultimate liquidation?

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[1] For a sociological analysis of the situation, see, for instance, R. P. Dutt's *India Today*, Chapter IV, &c.; and Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 4—6.

In this chapter the inquiry will be limited to Bengal, the undivided province of British India before it was separated into the State of West Bengal in the Republic of India and the East Bengal or Eastern Pakistan. This province, which was the classical arena for the introduction and flowering of British rule in India, will thus serve as a fair illustration of how the caste system worked in practice in British India. Also, hereby it will be seen how this very important social institution is influenced by the economic structure of society.

However, before discussing the problem with specific reference to Bengal, it will be of interest to give a short account of the *function* of the caste system in pre-British India, so that its role thereafter in Bengal can be examined in its proper context.

2. Caste and Economic Structure in pre-British Days

There is no doubt that the Indian caste system represents a confusion of all manner of distinctions which reflect occupational differences, racial and ethnic differences, cultural differences, etc. Probably for this reason there are so many theories on the origin of the caste system in India; some seeking its root primarily in the racial and ethnic differences, some in the socio-spiritual evolution of the tribal characteristics of India in ancient times, some only in the occupational differences, some merely in the spiritual beliefs of the pre-Aryans and Aryans in India, and so forth. It is likely that several factors working conjointly led in course of time to the emergence of the Indian caste system; its social, economic, and ideological facets being specifically influenced by several factors. Such a discussion, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. Even so it is necessary to examine the following questions in order to have an understanding of what is this Indian caste system and how it works in Indian society. The questions are:

(1) What are the main attributes of this institution?

(2) How is the institution represented in the social structure of India?

(3) Is it only a specific institution of the Hindus, or is it a typical *Indian* institution?

(4) What was its social function, and how was it stabilised in the Indian society in pre-British times?

As to the first question, it can be said with some degree of certainty that the main attributes of a caste are: (i) common hereditary occupation, (ii) endogamy, and (iii) commensality. These attributes, working in a dynamic process in Indian society, have led to the formation of mutually exclusive and hierarchically arranged strictly organised rigid groups in society. And thus producing immutable and distinct social units to build the edifices of the centuries-old Indian

social structure, the caste system came to represent an unique form of social organisation, whereby the Indian society depicts a peculiar picture of unity in diversity.

The question that follows is: what are these immutable, mutually exclusive, and stable groups in Indian society? Are they denoted by the division of the Hindu society into broad socio-economic-spiritual levels of four *varnas*, as is asserted by some Indologists and sociologists? Or, are they the large number of *jatis* which are found within each *varna*; that is, the hereditarily fixed social units which are demarcated from one another by the three main attributes noted above and which may be arranged in different hierarchical orders in particular societies in different parts of India, such as in Bengal, Maharastra, etc.?

According to the *varnadharma*, the society is divided horizontally into four levels or strata.[1] There are the Brahmins at the top of society, whose social function is prescribed to look after the spiritual needs of the people and who are to live on the gifts and levies obtained from other members of society. Next in rank are the Kshatriyas whose social function is said to protect the society from external aggression as well as to maintain it from internal disturbances; and who are to live on taxes and tributes obtained from the remaining people. The social function of the Vaishyas, placed lower in the scale than the Kshatriyas, is to produce for the society as husbandmen and to provide for other material needs of the people as traders and such. They are to live, on the one hand, by supplying gifts, taxes and tributes to the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and, on the other, by making use of the Sudras' as well as their own labour for production and distribution of material goods, etc. Lastly, the social function of the Sudras, who are placed at the lowest rung of the societal ladder, is to serve the other three *varnas* and to live on their kindness.

Now if this sort of social ranking is to be regarded as representing the caste system of India, how could it occupy such a unique position in society as is claimed by practically all schools of thought on Indian studies? For the stratification of a society into such broad levels according to the degree of nobility of birth (as the *varna* system depicts) is not unknown in other parts of the world. As Émile Senart put it precisely[2]:

"La répartition hiérarchique de la population en classes est un fait presque universal; le régime des castes est un phénomène unique."

What then is this unique characteristic of the Indian caste system? It is that within each of these four horizontal levels in the society there are hierarchies

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[1] For the law-giver Manu's version of the *varna* division of society, see Georg Bühler's *The Laws of Manu*, p. 24, I. 88—I. 91. For further details according to several other authorities, see, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Chapter III in Volume II, Part 1 (1941).

[2] Senart, Émile — *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, p. 176.

of *jatis* which are usually detailed and immutable occupational groups and which are further distinguished by the attributes of inter-marriage and inter-dining. To take the Brahmins, for example, even out of those who are inclined to think that the Indian caste system is denoted by the *jati*-division rather than by the *varna*-division of society[1], some are found to assert that, contrary to the other three *varnas* in which many *jatis* are found, the Brahmins represent one *varna* and one *jati*. Richard Fick, for instance, noted: „Eine Kaste im Sinne ihrer eigenen Theorie bilden nur die Brahmanen"[2]. But from law books of ancient India it is seen that the segregation of the Brahmins into many *jatis* (which forbade inter-marriage and inter-dining) had begun long time ago, and from recent studies on the Indian caste system it is quite clear that there are many Brahmin *jatis* in different parts of the subcontinent.[3]

As for Bengal, both from past and present evidence, she gives a very interesting picture of *jati*-division among the Brahmins. This part of India was "aryanised" at a much later date, and therefore historical evidence are comparatively easily available to show that in Bengal there developed differences among the Brahmins according to geographical areas they first inhabited and their source of livelihood. Because of these differences inter-marriage between the mutually exclusive groups and in some cases even inter-dining between them were eventually prohibited. Thus by the twelfth century of the present era the Rarhi and the Varendra Brahmins were distinctly separated in accordance with their first habitation of *Rarh-desh* and *Varendra-bhumi*, and the two groups eventually became endogamous.[4] Besides the Rarhi and Varendra Brahmins, there were the Vaidik Brahmins who probably came in Bengal in about the eleventh century. Their name suggests that they were well-versed in the Vedas, and it has been stated by eminent historians that they were brought into Bengal from west India (and therefore Paschatya Vaidik) and south India (therefore, Dakshinatya Vaidik),

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[1] This view is directly supported by Richard Fick in *Die Sociale Gliederung im Nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, pp. 22, 214, 215, &c.; J. Jolly in *Beiträge zur indischen Rechtgeschichte*, pp. 507—518; Émile Senart in his book *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, pp. 139, 151, 221; S. V. Ketkar in *An Essay on Hinduism*, pp. xxi—xxii; and by many others.

Some other writers also indirectly support this view by considering the *jatis* as sub-castes. This view was previously held by S. V. Ketkar in his *History of Caste in India*, p. 5 &c.; and P. V. Kane in his *History of Dharmaśāstra* has all along considered *jatis* as sub-castes (cf. Vol. II, Part 1, pp. 28, 33, 36, 44, 47, 48, 51, 55, 58, 69, 100, 103, &c.).

[2] cf. Richard Fick's *Die Sociale Gliederung im Nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, p. 214.

[3] See, for instance, J. Jolly's *Beiträge zur indischen Rechtgeschichte*, p. 515; P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśastra*, Vol. II, Part 1, pp. 109—110, 130, &c.; Émile Senart's *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, p. 29, &c.; S. V. Ketkar's *History of Caste in India*, p. 5; M. A. Sherring's *Hindu Tribes and Castes*, Vol. I, p. 99; John Wilson's *Indian Castes*, Vol. II, pp. 92ff; etc.

[4] See, for instance, Niharranjan Ray's *Bangaleer Ithihas*, p. 300, &c.; and also Émile Senart's *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, p. 39.

for although the traditional occupation of the Rarhi and Varendra Brahmins was priestly duties, they were found to be lacking in the true knowledge of the Vedas. It is interesting to note that this form of specialisation in *social* duties (in the sphere of looking after the spiritual needs of the people) eventually led to the prohibition of inter-marriage between the Rarhi or Varendra and the Vaidik Brahmins and they began to function as different Brahmin castes.[1] It is of further interest to note that there developed an even more rigid segregation between these priestly Brahmins and those of the same *varna* who while following the Brahminical traditions were engaged in such occupations in the ideological sphere of society as were considered of a lower standard than priestcraft. Thus these Srotriya Brahmins even prohibited inter-dining with the Grahavipra or Ganaka (astrologer) Brahmins, the Bhat (bard) Brahmins, the Agradani Brahmins (who in a funeral ceremony will eat the *pinda* or the sacrificial offering to the departed soul), etc.[2]

Thus it is seen that the *varna* division of society was from the beginning inadequate to represent the caste system of India.

It has however been asserted that while it is true that the *jati* division of society represents the Indian caste system today, these *jatis* in the main (if not entirely) are "sub-castes". These sub-castes are said to have been formed in one way from intermixture between the four *varnas* (*varnasamkara*), whereby some of the "sub-castes" turned into occupational guilds. Manu, for instance, described the Suta (manager of horses and chariots), Ambastha (who practised the art of healing), Magadha (trader), Nishada (fishermen), Ayogava (carpenter), etc., as those who evolved in society from the first stage of intermixture between the four *varnas*; and then Vena (drum player), Pukkasa (hunter), Dhigvana (leather worker), etc., as those who came into being from further stages of intermixture between the *varnas*, etc.[3] Another way of forming the "sub-castes" is said to have been in consequence of neglecting the duties of each *varna*, whereby, according to Manu, the Paundrikas, Kodas, Kambogas, Kinars, Kiratas, etc., were formed.[4] But, if the social history of India is studied scientifically, it is found that the caste system did not come into existence merely from intermixture between the *varnas* and/or from splitting of the peoples in each *varna* into sub-strata.

It is true that with increasing social division of labour in the Aryan society further differentiations took place within the varna structure, and thereby several *jatis* came into existence with their specific avocations and privileges and obligations in society. But it is also true that the *jati*-division of society was not

[1] *ibid.*, Ray, pp. 300—301; Senart, p. 39.
[2] Niharranjan Ray — *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 310—302, &c.
[3] See Chapter X in Georg Bühler's *The Laws of Manu.*
[4] *ibid.*

limited only to the "Aryans"; it took place in the *total* social complex and embraced all the people who took part in building the Indian civilisation. When the Aryan civilisation began to spread over the plains of India, it incorporated into its fold various other peoples. If these people were at an undifferentiated stage in their previous societies (that is, at the tribal stage), they were usually incorporated *en bloc* as specific *jatis* within the developing caste structure. And if socio-economic differentiations had already taken place within these societies (that is, classes had evolved and the societies were either in the process of detribalisation or were already detribalised), their members were now grouped to form different *jatis* and thus to occupy specific places in the *varna* structure in different levels of stratification.

For India as a whole this feature in her social development has been noted by several social scientists;[1] and for Bengal this process of evolution of the caste system may be discussed in some details on the basis of the valuable work done by Niharranjan Ray on the *History of the Bengalee People*. He found, for instance, that with the spread of Aryan civilisation in Bengal, the previous tribes of Paundrika, Avira, and Bhilla (according to Brahmavaivarta Purana) were turned into castes and located as *Asat-Sudra* in the *varna* classification of the society; the Koncha (present-day Koch), Mallo (present-day Malo ?), Kol, and Bhilla (according to Bhabadeva) were described as *Antyaja*; Pukkas, Khas (a present-day caste in Nepal), Khar, and Kamboga were characterised as *Mlechha*; and the two oldest tribes in Bengal, viz. Sumba and Savara, as well as Pulinda were equated with the *Yabana*.[2] Ray further noted that before the *aryanisation* of Bengal, social division of labour had taken place to such an extent in the plains of Bengal that there the people were following different vocations, such as commerce and trade, various forms of craft-production, agriculture, etc. Now as the Aryan civilisation went deeper into the society, these people were classified into different *jatis* in accordance with the specific occupations they were performing before; and henceforth these occupations were hereditarily fixed for them.[3] And while all these *jatis* were located in the stratum of the Sudras in the *varna* structure of the society, they were arranged in a hierarchical order.[4]

It is thus seen that the formation of *jatis* is rooted in the social division of labour within the society, and that the *jatis* came into existence when with the spread of Aryan civilisation stable relations were established between various

[1] See, for instance, D. D. Kosambi's *The Basis of Indian History* (I), pp. 35—45; J. Jolly's *Beiträge zur indischen Rechtgeschichte*, pp. 512—513; Émile Senart's *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, pp. 234—236; Christian Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Erster Band, pp. 801ff, 817ff; etc. See also Hermann Oldenberg's, *Zur Geschichte des indischen Kastenwesens*, pp. 267—290.

[2] Niharranjan Ray-*Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 305—306, 311, &c.

[3] *ibid.*, Chapter VI.

[4] See *ibid.*, Chapter VI; and also K. P. Chattopadhyay's *The History of Indian Social Organisation.*

peoples in different regions of India. And because such a stable society was formed or was dominated by those among whom the *varna* stratification had already existed, the *jatis* were located as immutable social units within the broad framework of the *varna* stratification of society. For the same reason, and because the *varna* stratification was upheld on the basis of nobility of birth and "purity" of maintaining one's rights and duties in the three levels of the *dvijas*, some "jatis" probably came into being also from *varnasamkara* and other ways of failing to maintain one's standard in society. But that the evolution of "jatis" in this way was not fundamental to the evolution of the caste system is further illustrated from Bengal where it is seen how the caste ideology was spread by the imported Brahmins among peoples who had not followed the *varnadharma* before and among whom the Brahminical society did not find it imperative that all the four *varnas must be brought into being.*

The *aryanisation* of Bengal and the introduction of the caste structure in her society began with the establishment of the rule of the Guptas in north Bengal and elsewhere in that part of India. On the basis of epigraphic evidence Niharranjan Ray has given an exhaustive analysis of the evolution of the caste structure of Bengal from this time up to the thirteenth century, and he has come to the conclusion that the caste structure of Bengal was made up of imported Brahmins from west, south and north India; the autochthonous artisans, traders, agriculturists, and such people in the society of Bengal at that time — all of whom became Sudras; and the tribal peoples who in course of time were detribalised and came within the pale of the Aryan civilisation.[1] Here the *varnas* of Kshatriya and Vaishya were distinctly lacking; in fact, Ray cites several examples to prove that in the beginning affilitation to these two *varnas* were not claimed even by the royalty and well-established merchants, etc., and only much later (by which time the caste system had been definitely established in Bengal) there began an assertion by the then kings that they were Kshatriyas![2] Yet the caste system with all its rigidity developed on the basis of *jatidharma*, and a hierarchy of hereditarily transmitted detailed occupational groups (which were segregated from one another by the rules of inter-marriage and inter-dining and which occupied permanently-fixed position in the societal hierarchy in accordance with the prescribed rights and duties, privileges and obligations, of each *jati* vis-a-vis others) came into existence.

It is thus evident that the Indian caste system is represented by the *jatidharma* which produced the immutable social units, and these units reflected permanently established extensive social division of labour in the society. The *jatis* thus built up the societal mosaic in a hierarchical order whereby a social structure evolved in India which has been lightly, but aptly, compared to a Chinese puzzle.

[1] Niharranjan Ray-*Bangaleer Ithihas*, Chapter VI.
[2] *ibid.*, pp. 277—278, 289—290, 315—320, &c.

Now, accepting that the *jatis* depict the castes and that they represented the social structure of India in old times, the question arises: is the caste system a typical *Indian* institution or is it specifically an institution of the Hindus? The answer to this question further suggests that the Indian caste system cannot be adequately described only by the *varna* system. For, if, as is sometimes declared, the caste system is purely the ideological and ethical basis of the Hindu society (that is, the society of those in India who profess to follow the Brahminical system of religion and philosophy, and the society which produced the *varna* division of society), how can it be explained that Buddhism in its practice at least was not opposed to the caste system[1], and that two primary *social* attributes of the caste system (viz. inter-marriage and inter-dining between different hereditarily determined sets of people in the same community) are also found among the Moslems of India to day (comprising one-third the population of the sub-continent)[2] and also to an extent among the Indian "aborigines" who form about one-tenth of the total population of the same geographical area?[3] Furthermore, how can it be explained that different *jatis* or occupational groups with almost the same rigidity as found among the Hindus have emerged also among the non-Hindus in India?[4]

Evidently, the caste system is a typical *Indian* institution rather than it being a peculiarity of any religious group pertaining to the Indian society. There is however no doubt that the system was first introduced and is most strictly followed by the Hindus who, significantly enough, were the first in India to settle down to a stable village life of plough cultivation and craft production, and eventually inaugurated the village community system. This point has been noted by many social scientists[5], and some of them have also drawn the essential

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[1] See Niharranjan Ray's *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 257, 285, 288, &c.; and Richard Fick's *Die Sociale Gliederung im Nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, pp. 20—21, &c.

[2] See, for instance, E. A. Gait's article entitled *Caste* in the "Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics", edited by James Hastings and John A. Selbie.

[3] See, for instance, H. H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal;* W. Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of N. W. Provinces and Oudh;* John C. Nesfield's *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh;* D. C. J. Ibbetson's *Outlines of Panjáb Ethnography;* R. V. Russel and H. Lal's *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India;* R. E. Enthoven's *Tribes and Castes of Bombay;* L. K. A. Iyer and H. V. Nanjundayya's *The Mysore Tribes and Castes;* L. K. A. Iyer's *The Cochin Tribes and Castes;* L. K. A. Iyer's *The Travancore Tribes and Castes;* E. Thurston and K. Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of South India;* Alfred Lyall's *Asiatic Studies;* Verrier Elwin's *The Aboriginals;* G. S. Ghurye's *The Aborigines — "so-called" — and Their Future;* J. H. Hutton's *Caste in India;* Mohinder Singh's *The Depressed Classes;* etc.

[4] *ibid.*

[5] See, for instance, Mountstuart Elphinstone's *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*, p. 75; H. S. Maine's *Ancient Law*, pp. 216—220, &c.; John D. Mayne's *A Treatise on Hindu Law and Usage*, pp. 6, 217—218, 227—228, &c.; J. F. Hewitt's *The Communal Origin of Indian Land Tenures*, pp. 628—641; A. S. Altekar's *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 237; D. D. Kosambi's *The Basis of Indian History* (I); etc.

connection between the village community system in India and the emergence of the *jatis* as building the socio-economic structure of Indian society.[1] As for Bengal, it is of interest to note that if one bears in mind that the *aryanisation* of this part of India began with the spread of the Gupta Empire in north Bengal in about the fifth century of the present era, one can draw a fruitful connection between the two following conclusions made by Niharranjan Ray in regard to the land settlement and evolution of caste structure in Bengal. Ray concluded that (1) "the first undisputed proof of settlement of the people and extension of agriculture is from the fifth century; prior to that there is no evidence available in regard to land" and (2) "it is possible to surmise that although the caste structure of the twelfth-thirteen centuries had not emerged very clearly in the fifth-eighth centuries, its general framework was built up in this period".[2]

The question that follows from the above discussion is: if the caste system is an Indian institution, what was its social function in the past? This question is again vitally linked up with the question that emerged from the preceding discussion, namely, why is it that the Hindu society which was the pioneer in organising stable village life in the plains of India on the basis of a harmonious combination of agriculture (plough cultivation) and handicrafts was stratified bi-dimensionally by *varna* × *jati* divisions of society, and this stratification determined hereditarily became the most distinctive feature of Indian social organisation ?[3] The answer to these questions appears to lie in the peculiar features of India's geography, the state of her productive forces at the time when the caste system was gradually established in society, and the multi-people character of Indian society which emerged as a mosaic of waves of immigrants to India, who

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[1] See, for instance, J. Jolly's *Beiträge zur indischen Rechtgeschichte*, pp. 512—513; Émile Senart's *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, pp. 218—222, 234—236, &c.; Christian Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Band II, pp. 728—729; etc.

[2] ef. *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 253 and 278. (English rendering by RKM).

[3] That the settled village life in India was based on a harmonious combination of agriculture and industries was reported by many officers of the East India Company, who first studied the territories which fell under British rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (cf. Mountstuart Elphinstone's *Report on the Territories Conquered from the Peswa*, submitted to the Governor-General in October 1819; the *Minute* of Holt Mackenzie, the Secretary to the Board of Commissioners in the Conquered and Ceded Provinces, dated 1st July, 1819; etc.). On the basis of such information the village community system of India was vividly described in the Parliamentary Papers of British Parliament entitled *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company* (cf. p. 85, and also pp. 13, 16—19, 47, 50, 79—80, 96, 105, &c.). Later, on the basis of these and additional materials obtained afterwards, R. C. Dutt noted that the village communities existed practically all over India in the pre-British days (cf. *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule* and *The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age*). Further details on the importance of the village community system for India, and for Bengal in particular, have already been given in Chapter I.

with their specific socio-cultural characteristics spun the web of Indian social organisation.

The most distinctive features of geography which influenced the early stages of India's agriculture were climate and territorial conditions, whereby artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks became the basis of the economy. But with the technical resources at their disposal, this demand for artificial irrigation could not be met by individual peasants, although individual peasant-households had by then come into existence with the spread of plough cultivation. As it has been noted: "This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which in the Occident drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated in the Orient [India, Epgyt, Mesopotemia, Persia, etc.], where civilisation was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralising power of government" in order to provide public works for irrigating the soil.[1] At the same time, based on her ethnic complexities, the village communities were established on the basis of common possession of land, common responsibility of all households in the village to look after the feeding canals, the culverts and bridges over these canals, the roads, and the protection and maintenance of the village by the village community as a whole.[2]

These self-sufficient village communities, the autonomous character of which was profusely described in later researches[3], have been characterised as the prolongation of "primitive democracy" in India's feudal epoch.[4] It is, however, worthy of note that these village communities were established permanently not by the *gentile organisation* of a tribal society, but by the conglomeration of different occupational groups, reflecting a higher stage in the social division of labour in society, and the emergence of stable relations between different cultural and ethnic groups residing in an area.[5] And these village communities were so peculiarly stabilised in India that hundreds of years of rule by sovereigns belonging to various religious faith and widely different socio-cultural background could not effect any significant change in them. There were Buddhists, Jains, and

[1] cf. Karl Marx's article entitled *The British Rule in India* in the New York Daily Tribune, June 25, 1853. For Bengal it is of interest to note that Niharranjan Ray is of the opinion that the king was regarded as the "proprietor of the lands" because epigraphic evidence indicate that to organise public works for irrigation was the responsibility of the king or the State (cf. *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 246—247, &c.).

[2] See, for instance, the literatures cited previously with reference to the village community system of India; and also Karl Marx's *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Volume I, pp. 350—352.

[3] *ibid.*

[4] D. A. Suleykin — *Basis Questions on the Periodisation of Ancient Indian History.*

[5] See, for instance, the writings of Kane, Senart, Fick, Jolly, Ray, Kosambi, Lassen, Oldenberg, Chattopadhyay, Maine, Mayne, Hewitt, Marx, etc., as cited earlier.

others; there came the Sakas and Hunas, and later the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals; but, as sovereign authorities or otherwise, all of them settled down in India and the village community system remained in force.[1]

Indeed, the villages behaved like cells in a living organism. When in course of time the population became too large for one village, another village was established with the surplus population in the same model as the previous one; and the daughter villager also went on with a self-sufficient existence. If diseases ravaged a village or a terrible invader set it ablaze or raized it to the ground, the surviving villagers went to another area in order to set up a new village or took temporary shelter in a neighbouring village to return to the old spot when the scourge was gone. In short, villages could be destroyed under bad rulers, and they could flourish under good rulers, but under good or bad rulers the village community system remained. This was the pivot of economic organisation in India in the pre-British days.

What supplied the *social force* to this kind of vegetative existence and reproduction of the villages, and thus upheld the village community system of India for centuries as unaffected by the political clouds over the Indian sky ? The answer to this question lies in the fact that besides its self-sufficient and autonomous character, and the simplicity of its organisation which, as stated before, stabilised the village community system in the economic sphere and maintained the villages as independent units in society vis-a-vis the outer world, *internally* the village communities were stabilised by the peculiar development of the Indian social structure on the basis of the caste system. For it was the *jati*-division of society which provided the internal mechanism of the village community system and stabilised it socially and ideologically.

In the village community system it was a *social need* that the village-units do not burst asunder because of tension generated within them by contradictory aspirations of the people in social and material life; and this need was fulfilled by the caste-ideology, whereby everybody in society (however humbly or loftily placed) had a definite socio-spiritual position and *specific* work to do. More than that. Such positions of different families in the village communities remained stationery through generations. Thus a Brahmin priest's son became a Brahmin priest, and so also his son; as it was the same in the family of a calender Brahmin or of other Brahmins living on distinct professions within the community. Similary, a blacksmith's son and grandson and their later descendants, all remained blacksmith; and so it was with all other castes of artisans, peasants,

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[1] See, for instance, Richard Fick's *Die Sociale Gliederung im nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, p. 20ff; R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker (editors) — *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, p. 373; Vincent A. Smith's *The Oxford History of India*, p. 8ff; R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri, and Kalikinkar Datta's *An Advanced History of India*, pp. 395, 397, &c.; etc.

traders, etc. Therefore, from one village, when it was oversaturated, households belonging to various castes (which could bring about an autonomous and self-sufficient existence in a separate area) would separate and form another village in the exact image of the parent one without creating tension either between different castes and occupational groups or within the village as a whole. Likewise, new villages were formed when with the spread of civilisation the people in outlying areas were brought under a stable economic life of plough cultivation and craft production; and along with it the detailed occupational groups among them as well as any ethnic or cultural differences in the assimilated communities of the local area were located in the caste structure. A similar pattern of societal mosaic thus appeared in a new settlement.[1]

In this way, the caste system supplied the *social* foundation to the village community system in India by providing the society with "an unalterable division of labour"; so that this system remained as the most important economic institution of Indian society until its basis began to be altered from about the fourteenth century with the rise of new forces in Indian society and until it was finally destroyed in the early years of British rule.[2]

If the caste system thus supplied the social force to the stabilisation of the economic life of the people in those days, how was it itself stabilised in the society in the social and ideological spheres of life? Here one finds the role of Hindu philosophy and religion which by means of the doctrine of Karma and the theory of Reincarnation supplied the caste system with an ideological basis and made it the fundamental social institution of the people. The doctrine of Karma and the theory of Reincarnation taught the people that their position in society was the consequence of their work in the previous birth and that their obedience to the ethics of the society (viz. to obey the caste rules and regulations and to accept the privileges and obligations of the respective castes in which they were born) would improve or deteriorate their caste position in the next life or might even lead to their deliverance from any future worldly existence[3]. Following this ideology not enough force could generate within the society to disrupt the standardised harmony, and if any one was fool enough to challenge this doctrine and seek for his improvement in this rather than in the next life, he could be effec-

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[1] See, for instance, the writings of Senart, Fick, Jolly, Ray, Kosambi, Lassen, Chattopadhyay, etc., as cited earlier.

[2] For details of this process see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 4—6.

[3] See, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, Part 1 (1941), p. 423; Vol. IV (1953), pp. 161—162, 173—176; Richard Fick's *Die Sociale Gliederung im Nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, pp. 213—216; J. Jolly's *Beiträge zur indischen Rechtgeschichte*, p. 513; Émile Senart's *Les Castes dans l'Inde*, p. 222, &c.; Christian Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Band I, pp. 801ff, Band II, pp. 728—729, &c.; Max Weber's *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik*, III. Abteilung — *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, pp. 248—249, &c.

tively silenced by the sanction of law.[1] And if his crime was so great that he became an outcaste, then he was lost to the society and practically dead for all purposes. For it is not difficult to imagine what a fate awaited an individual who was thrown out of the village community system and received no quarter from anywhere in the society with respect to his economic, social and spiritual needs.

Thus fulfilling the social and economic needs of the society at a certain stage of its development, the caste system played the most significant role in Indian social organisation so long as the village community system dominated Indian life; and simultaneously it transformed a self-developing social state into a "never-changing natural destiny", as it appeared to the people and still appears so to a very large number of the peoples of India.[2]

[1] See, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, Part 1 (1941), p. 155; Vol. III (1946), p. 881; &c.

[2] It may be of interest to note here that because the caste system had once a useful role to play in Indian society and afterwards it became an obstacle to India's further development, in the early years of British rule in India diametrically opposite opinions were voiced on this institution by several authorities on India. Thus, Abbé J. A. Dubois wrote in his *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (pp. 28—29):

"I believe caste division to be in many respects the *chef-d'oevre*, the happiest effort, of Hindu legislation. I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism, and that she preserved and perfected the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in a state of barbarism. . . . Caste assigns to each individual his own profession or calling; and the handing down of this system from father to son, from generation to generation, makes it impossible for any person or his descendants to change the condition of life which the law assigns to him for any other. Such an institution was probably the only means that the most clear-sighted prudence could devise for maintaining a state of civilization amongst a people endowed with the peculiar characteristics of the Hindus."

Similarly, Meredith Townshend remarked in *Asia and Europe* (p. 72):

"I firmly believe caste to be a marvellous discovery, a form of socialism which through ages has protected Hindoo society from anarchy and from the worst evils of industrial and competitive life — it is an automatic poor-law to begin with, and the strongest form known of trades union — but Christianity demands its sacrifices like every other creed, and caste in the Indian sense and Christianity cannot co-exist."

On the other hand, H. S. Maine stated emphatically that "division into classes which at a particular crisis of social history is necessary for the maintenance of the national existence degenerates into the most disastrous and blighting of all human institutions — Castes". (cf. *Anicent Law*, p. 16).

Evidently, the above-mentioned authorities failed to examine the institution of caste system in the light of progressive development of a society according to which an institution which was useful at one time can become retrogressive afterwards. Because of this, they were either all praise or all condemnation for the Indian caste system. As opposed to such judgements, it is therefore worth noting what other writers have said on the basis of studying the institution in a historical perspective. Thus, looking at the evolution of the Indian caste system in the light of India's historical development, S. A. Dange wrote about the period when the institution was useful to Indian society (cf. *India from Primitive Communism to Slavery*, pp. XII, XVIII—XIX):

Indeed, so much was the decentralised strength of the village community system and its accompanying caste-structure that when the Moslem invaders began to settle down in India from about the tenth century and substantially increased their number by converting large masses of people into Islam, they were also swallowed up by the system and as a community was segregated from the Hindus and others by the taboos of inter-marriage and inter-dining. Furthermore, although Islam strictly prohibits any distinction between the "true believers", such was the socio-economic and ideological force of the institution of castes as providing the *social basis* for the village community system (under which the

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"The household community with the growth in population and development of production soon breaks up and grows into a village community. The slave groups become the *Heena Jatis* of the village community and the members of the household community taking to different trades according to their choice or skill or need become crystallised into different castes. In this process the *Varnas* lose their validity and castes replace them in the structure of the new organisation — the village community. . . .

The coming into existence of the village community, with its hereditary division of labour by castes, developed the productive powers of society. Each caste and sub-caste, specialising in its own craft, developed it to the highest pitch possible for handicrafts. On the basis of the growth of productivity, also grew the surplus extracted by the ruling classes and the state. From this surplus were maintained the public works of irrigation and also those monuments of architecture, as have been preserved to us. The rich culture, the flowering of art and literature of the Gupta Empire, the vast irrigation works (one of the water works of Kashmir was built by an untouchable builder-engineer), the big trade and commerce of the mediaeval eras — all were the achievements of our productive powers developed by the village community, its agriculture and handicrafts and the special projection of the latter in the towns of the mediaeval kingships."

But the institutions of village community and the caste system also contained germs of obstruction to future development of India, for they did not give scope for the productive forces to develop further and for new relations of production to be inaugurated as demanded by society in later times. Therefore, describing the situation when the village community system was being destroyed in the early years of British rule in India, Marx remarked (cf. *The British Rule in India*):

"Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organisations disorganised and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilisation, and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of an aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan.

Moslems — immigrants or converts — settled down in Indian society) that caste-differentiation began to make invagination into this community as well. As a result, like the Hindus, the Moslems also began to prohibit inter-marriage and in some places also inter-dining between their different categories (as for example, Mughals, Pathans, Shias, Sunnis, Khojas, etc.); and various occupational groups of weavers, oilpressers, etc., which were hardly in any way different from the previously formed Hindu *jatis*, also emerged in this community.[1]

Social scientists have also shown that when even in recent times detribalised indigenous peoples of India took up a settled agricultural life within the *civilised* society of India, they also imbibed caste rules and regulations, although, like the Moslems, they might not fully adopt the ideological basis of Hindu society. Indeed, this has become such a serious problem for these people that a fundamental controversy is raging among the sociologists and ethnologists in India, some of whom would consider this phenomenon as the "loss of nerve" of the aboriginals when they are "forced" to come under Hindu domination, while some others would characterise these people as "backward Hindus".[2]

Also, throughout the pre-British period of India's history, new sects and groups were formed both from the Hindu and Moslem communities; and they were also eventually turned into castes. Moreover, within the caste hierarchy also changes took place sometimes in different parts of India. But the essential feature of all these additions, fluctuations, and changes was that, in general, the people did not break out of the caste system so long as the village community system remained the predominant institution in their economic life. All that happened was that *within* the caste system further and further differentiations took place. In short, the village community system and its accompanying caste structure engulfed all those who settled down in India in those days, for these two institutions were

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We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances, instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalising worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of *Hanuman*, the monkey, and *Sabbala* the cow.

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crime of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution."

[1] See, for instance, E. A. Gait's *Caste;* L. S. S. O'Malley's *Indian Caste Customs;* O'Malley's *Report of Bengal,* Census of India, 1910. Also in this connection see Syed Mujtaba Ali's *The Origin of the Khojāhs and their Religious Life Today,* pp. 2—4, 37, 40—43, 60, 65, &c., for interesting details regarding the little known *Kh*ojah sect in the Moslem community.

[2] See, Verrier Elwin's *The Aboriginals* and G. S. Ghurye's *The Aborigines — "So-Called" — and Their Future.*

found peculiarly suitable to the demands of India's economic and social life in that period.

From the above discussion one is, therefore, inclined to conclude that the role of the caste system as a social institution was important in connection with the socio-economic life of the people rather than exclusively with their ideological make-up. The material needs of the society at a certain stage of its development led to the emergence of this institution, while it was stabilised by the ideological basis of society prevailing at that time. And thus the institution was so stabilised that until the economic basis of society was basically altered the caste system remained as the most vital institution in Indian social organisation.

What was the economic basis of society which led to the flowering of the caste system and its stabilisation in society? The writer has shown elsewhere that the *jati*-division of society and the establishment of village communities on the basis of forming stable relations between different ethnic and socio-cultural groups residing in an area (among whom various occupational groups have come into existence as reflecting a high stage in the social division of labour) are two important characteristics of Indian feudalism[1]. Previous to that class relations in society were represented only by the *varna*-division of society, as has been remarked by Senart and others. But in this epoch of India's social development the *jatis* built up the economic structure of society; and the *varna* system, while losing its previous usefulness, went on broadly representing the class relations in society by grouping the *jatis* in the previously-mentioned levels.

Thus it is true that the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas went on living on the surplus labour of the remaining *varnahindus*, viz. the Vaishyas and Sudras; but this particular stage of social development had some special features which are stated below.

Firstly, the forms of production and usurpation had become manifold, and they were reflected in the —

(a) multitude of *usurping castes* of Brahmins (religious priests of various denomination, teachers, calender Brahmins, astrologers, etc.) and of Kshatriyas (kings, nobles, state and revenue officials, village headmen, etc.);

(b) large number of *producing and distributing castes* of artisans, traders, agriculturists, etc., in the levels of Vaishyas and Sudras, which specialised in particular forms and branches of production and distribution; and

(c) presence of *serving castes* which were formed mainly of those who were described as Antyaja, Mlechha, etc., and who were probably in a tribal stage before.

Secondly, while the usurping castes also could not easily change their position, that of the producing, distributing and serving castes was rigidly fixed in society.

[1] See, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4, Section entitled *The Social Organism*.

The renowned law-giver Manu ordained that "a Brâhmaṇa, unable to subsist by his peculiar occupations . . . may live according to the law applicable to Kshatriyas; for the latter is next to him in rank"; and if he fails to make a living thereby, "he may adopt a Vaiśya's mode of life, employing himself in agriculture and rearing cattle".[1] Similarly, a Kshatriya, "who has fallen into distress", may subsist by taking up the Vaishya's mode of life; while "he must never arrogantly adopt the mode of life (prescribed for his) betters".[2] But, even though it appears that the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas could thus take up the occupations of the producing castes under dire circumstances, in fact their participation in actual production was strongly discouraged. Along with the above recommendations, Manu gave the injunctions that "a Brâhmaṇa, or a Kshatriya, living by a Vaiśya's mode of subsistence, shall carefully avoid (the pursuit of) agriculture, (which causes) injury to many beings and depends on others"; and that "he who, through a want of means of subsistence, gives up the strictness with respect to his duties, may sell, in order to increase his wealth, the commodities sold by Vaiśyas", making, however, certain exceptions.[3] The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas could thus become only, or mainly, traders under unusual circumstances.

Regarding the Vaishyas and the Sudras, on the other hand, Manu's dictates were that a "Vaiśya who is unable to subsist by his own duties, may even maintain himself by a Śûdra's mode of life, avoiding (however) acts forbidden to him"; and "a Śûdra, being unable to find service with the twice-born and threatened with the loss of his sons and wife (through hunger), may maintain himself by handicrafts", but he should follow "those mechanical occupations and those various practical arts by following which the twice-born are (best) served".[4] In other words, what have been described here as the usurping professions were strictly forbidden to the Vaishyas and Sudras, and the latter had to be particularly subservient to the needs of the *dvija* and especially of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. Manu noted further that: "The service of Brâhmaṇas alone is declared (to be) an excellent occupation for a Śûdra; for whatever else besides this he may perform will bear him no fruit"; but: "If a Śûdra, (unable to subsist by serving Brâhmaṇas,) seeks a livelihood, he may serve Kshatriyas, or he may also seek to maintain himself by attending on a wealthy Vaiśya".[5]

Such respective positions accorded by Manu to the usurping and the producing, distributing and serving castes hardly altered in their main characteristics in the

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[1] *Manusmṛti*, translated by Georg Bühler under the title *The Laws of Manu*, Chapter X, *ślokas* 81—82.

[2] *ibid.*, Chapter X, *śloka* 95.

[3] *ibid.*, Chapter X, *ślokas* 83, 85.

[4] *ibid.*, Chapter X, *ślokas* 98—100.

[5] *ibid.*, Chapter X, *ślokas*, 123, 121.

hands of subsequent law-givers.[1] Hence, while the son of a Brahmin priest or of a Kshatriya warrior could become a trader (and even a farmer under exceptional circumstances), the son of a Vaishya farmer or a Sudra oilpresser or fisherman could not rise along the societal ladder from his fixed position in society as a primary producer. And such a strict obedience to the regulations in society was particularly enforced for the Sudras and the *untouchables*, who had to perform the heaviest and the most unwholesome tasks in society.[2] As Altekar stated quite precisely, the State in those days "gave a general support to the *varnāśhramadharma*, which was undoubtedly iniquitious, especially to the Sudras and Untouchables".[3] The producing, distributing and serving castes had, therefore, to remain tied to their respective occupations; and only by accepting such a position as depended on the societal hierarchy and allegiance to the ideological, social, political and economic life propounded and upheld by the ruling class (Brahmins and Kshatriyas, respectively) that these producing, distributing and serving castes could exist in society. Otherwise, the members of these castes could be physically punished or thrown out of society, which meant (if not physical extermination) social death.[4]

Thirdly, the share of their labour, which these producing and serving castes (as well as the trading castes) had to give to the ruling class, was determined and enforced by the authority of the State functioning on the basis of the Dharma, as enunciated and expounded by the Brahmins (from the highest authority at the centre of the state power to the petty village priest) and as upheld by the Kshatriyas (from the king at the centre down to the village headman in the smallest unit in society, and through the medium of the hierarchical representatives of the king, viz. the state and revenue officials).[5] Manu prescribed for a Brahmin three occupations as "his means of subsistence, (viz.) sacrificing for others, teaching, and accepting gifts from pure men"; for a Kshatriya, "to carry arms for striking and for throwing", evidently to maintain law and order in society; for a Vaishya,' 'to trade, (to rear) cattle, and agriculture"; and for a Sudra only one occupation, viz. "to serve meekly even these (other) three castes", [the translator meaning thereby the three *dvija varnas* of Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya].[6] In addition, Manu

[1] For details, see, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, Part 1, Chapters III and IV, which give details regarding the duties, disabilities and privileges of the *usurping*, *producing* and *serving* castes, as reflected by the injunctions given for each *varna* by different authorities on *Dharmaśāstra*.

[2] See, for instance, A. S. Altekar's *State & Government in Ancient India*; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India*, Chapters VII, VIII, and XIII; P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, Part 1, Chapters II—IV; etc.

[3] cf. A. S. Altekar — *State & Government in Ancient India*, p. 245.

[4] See, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, Part 1, Chapters III and IV; Vol. IV, Chapters I—VI.

[5] See, for instance, A. S. Altekar's *State & Gouvernment in Ancient India*, pp. 38—39, 61, 110—111, 124, 132, 238, &c.

[6] *Manusmṛti*, Georg Bühler's translation, Chapter X, *slokas* 76, 79; Chapter I, *sloka* 91.

noted that: (i) "Whatever exists in the world is the property of the Brâhmaṇa; on account of the excellence of his origin the Brâhmaṇa is, indeed, entitled to it all"; (ii) "(The king) should carefully compel Vaiśyas and Śûdras to perform the work (prescribed) for them; for if these two (castes) swerved from their duties, they would throw this (whole) world into confusion"; and (iii) "No collection of wealth must be made by a Śûdra, even though he be able (to do it); for a Śûdra who had acquired wealth, gives pain to Brâhmaṇas".[1] Furthermore, he fixed the share of the contributions from the agriculturists, artisans, traders, etc., which will be enjoyed by the ruling class; enjoined the forms of services the so-called "menial servants" were to perform in society; and enforced that the king as the sovereign of all lands was to maintain this *dharma* or law and order, and "as the leech, the calf, and the bee take their food little by little, even so much the king draw from his realm moderate annual taxes" through a hierarchy of officials responsible for one, ten, twenty, hundred, and thousand villages, with a minister placed on top of all of them.[2] It was primarily on the basis of this law or *dharma*, further expounded and elaborated by subsequent law-givers[3], that the Indian society was ruled wherever the "new civilisation", high-lighted by the village community and the caste systems, established itself.

Evidently, the above features in society in those days tend to indicate that the village communities were based on a form of hereditary serfdom; in which, as the serving castes (most of them *untouchables*) had the worst lot, they have often been clearly characterised as serfs by several Indologists and historians.[4] On the other hand, the ideological, political and economic power in society was held by the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes, which in a hierarchical order from the centre down to the village-units ran the State and as non-producing castes lived on the surplus surrendered to them by the producing castes in the form of taxes and tributes and enjoyed the services performed by the serving castes. It is true that some Vaishya merchants did acquire considerable wealth in those days and thereby they could influence the ruling class of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas: but, firstly, such Vaishya merchants were not very many in comparison with the Vaishya farmers, petty traders, etc., in the villages; secondly, the law-givers did not give them a position other than as subservient to the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas; and, thirdly, they could not assume any other role than as intermediaries between the usurping and the producing castes. It may, therefore, be justified to conclude that in this epoch of India's history while the producing and serving castes, belonging

[1] *ibid.*, Chapter I. *sloka* 100; Chapter IX, *sloka* 418; Chapter X, *sloka* 129.

[2] *ibid.*, Chapter I, *slokas* 88—91; Chapter II, *slokas* 31—32; Chapter IV, *slokas* 3, 60—61, 253—254; Chapter VII, *slokas* 24, 80—85, 113—122, 127—138; Chapter VIII, *slokas* 398—399, 410—418; Chapter X, *slokas* 74—129; etc.

[3] See, for instance, P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra.*

[4] See, for instance, A. S. Altekar's *State & Government in Ancient India*; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India*; R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar's *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*; etc.

to the ranks of Vaishya and Sudra and to the groups of detribalised immigrants to the Hindu society, had a serf-like existence in society, the usurping castes of Brahmins and Kshatriyas lived as feudal rent-receivers *from* and *within* the villages.

In this way, while the *varnadharma* represented the previously evolved class relations in society, in conformity with the extensive social division of labour and the *social demands* for production in the feudal epoch of India's history, the *jatidharma* built the economic structure of Indian society.[1] Indeed, as mentioned before, this feature of India's socio-economic life was so suitable to the needs of the society at that time that when the Moslem immigrants settled down in India among them also the *jati*-division began to make in-roads, while they remained unaffected by the *varna*-division of Hindu society. Also the converts to Islam forsook the ethics of *varnāśharmadharma*, but not of *jatidharma*. And, because at that particular stage of social development the social forces were so well-balanced by the village community system and the caste system (*jatidharma*) that to many the life in pre-British India, as based on these two predominant institutions in Indian society, appeared as static and unchanging from immemorial times.

Furthermore, that the *jatis* built the economic structure of Indian feudal society is indicated by the fact that when from about the fourteenth century new forces began to develop in India in order to break through the feudal structure of society, these forces severely attacked the stability of the village community system (which forbade the development of the internal market in India) and began ideological campaigns against the caste structure of Indian society (which had provided the social force to the stabilisation and maintenance of the village community system). As the writer has described elsewhere, India was then striving for a change in her productive set-up.[2] Production and commerce in India had then reached an unprecedented height; measures were being taken to destroy the subsistence and autonomous character of the village communities and bring them in line with the commodity production of urban economy; and simultaneously spiritual onslaughts were made on the caste system by the leaders of the Bhakti movement, the leaders being mainly from the castes of artisans and traders. The spontaneous development of the Bhakti movement in various parts of India without any apparent connection between those who led the movement in different areas indicated that instead of only *individuals* it was the approaching new *social system* which promoted this movement in order to do away with the previous

[1] Probably this was the reason why Marx recorded in his draft on *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (pp. 399—400):

"... wo die besondre Art der Arbeit — die Meisterschaft in derselben, und dementsprechend das Eigentum am Arbeitsinstrument = Eigentum an den Produktionsbedingungen —, so schließt es zwar Sklaverei und Leibeigenschaft aus; kann aber in der Form des Kastenwesens eine analoge negative Entwicklung erhalten."

[2] cf. *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4, Section entitled *Emergence of New Forces.*

economic structure which had now become decadent and was blocking the way to further development of productive forces in society.

The Bhakti movement however did not succeed in abolishing the caste system, just as the growing power of the Indian merchants and artisans failed to bring in a new epoch in India's history in the normal course of her development. For before the new forces which had emerged in India in the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries could stabilise themselves in society, the subcontinent was turned into a British colony. What happened then to the caste system ? Could it still maintain its hold on society, and how ? These are the questions which will be discussed in the following pages with particular reference to Bengal.

3. Caste Hierarchy and Economic Structure in Bengal under British Rule

Like in other parts of India, after Bengal passed into the hands of the British East India Company, the previously growing class of merchants and artisans was removed from the scene.[1] On the other hand, in spite of rising protests from the progressive section in Indian society and also in Britain, obscurantist customs were given a new lease of life in Indian society in the name of respecting the "traditional" customs and usages of the peoples of India.[2] Even so, the basis of the caste system, namely the village community system, was destroyed completely in the early years of British rule, and the concept of private property in land was established with the introduction of new forms of land tenures in British India.[3] Also, when the British administrators professed equal opportunities for all Indians irrespective of racial or caste distinction, it could have been expected that the caste system would soon wither away. But the caste system *did not* wither away; on the contrary, it remained in the pores of society, and especially in the rural areas. This was possible because while the caste system was losing its force during the earlier centuries, it regained its position in the ideological aspect under the patronage given to Brahminical religion and ethics by the British administrators like Warren Hastings and others; and in its social aspect, although it lost its previous economic basis in society, it expected a simultaneous existence with the *new* economic structure which emerged under British rule by dovetailing itself into the latter.

[1] *ibid.*, Chapter 5. For further details, see, for instance R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule.*

[2] See, for instance, J. N. Farquhar's *Modern Religious Movements in India*, pp. 8—13, &c.; John Clark Marshman's *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward* , Vol. I, pp. 157, 417—418, &c.; etc.

[3] See, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapters 5 and 6.

To discuss first how under British rule the caste system regained its position in the ideological aspect even though it had come under severe attacks in the preceding centuries in the hands of the leaders and proponents of the Bhakti movement, etc., in the last quarter of the eighteenth century an important course of reform was undertaken by the representatives of the East India Company in order to rule out chaos from the newly-subjugated country and to stabilise the Company's rule also in the social and ideological aspects of Indian life; but, curiously enough, instead of giving encouragement to the progressive forces to become stronger and stabilise themselves in society, the reform measures supported directly or indirectly the decadent forces and helped in the revival of the hold of the caste system in the ideological sphere of Indian life. In a way, it is true to say that this course of reform was introduced by Warren Hastings during his Governorship of the *subah* of Bengal (1772—74) and Governor-Generalship of the Company's territories in India (1774—86). When Hastings "actually assumed control of the government of Bengal", instead of continuing with the Dual Government as organised by Clive in 1765, and "laid the real foundations of the British power in India", as a shrewd and efficient Governor he also realised at the outset that it was necessary to have some knowledge of the inner workings of Indian society in order to stabilise the Company's rule therein.[1] Therefore, he took personal interest in codifying Hindu and Muhammadan laws, for he "was convinced that they formed the only sound basis of a reinvigorated system"[2]. In the beginning, his viewpoint was seriously challenged by those "Reformers in England" who believed that "Indian law had no value" and therefore "the greatest boon they could render to India was the introduction of English law"[3]. But "the British Government gradually worked back to his point of view", so that the "Act of 1833 authorised a codification of Indian law such as Hastings had begun at his own expense" and when India became a Crown Colony of Britain the Queen's "Procla-

[1] cf. Ramsay Muir's *The Making of British India: 1756—1858*, pp. 5—6.

How the Dual Government, (in which the collection of revenues, administration of justice and all other transactions were still made under the cover of the Nawab's authority and through his officiers while the Company was the real power and its servants "practised unbounded tyranny for their own gain, overawing the Nawab's servants and converting his tribunals of justice into instruments for the prosecution of their own purposes" [cf. R. C. Dutt's *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, p. 42]), resulted in chaos and anarchy in the *subah* of Bengal was noted by Governor Verelst as follows when he wrote to the Directors of the East India Company on the 16th December, 1769 (cf. *ibid.*, p. 49):

"We insensibly broke down the barrier betwixt us and Government, and the native grew uncertain where his obedience was due. Such a divided and complicated authority gave rise to oppressions and intrigues unknown at any other period; the Officiers of Government caught the infection, and being removed from any immediate control, proceeded with still greater audacity."

[2] cf. Ramsay Muir's *The Making of British India:* 1756—1858, p. 8.

[3] *ibid.*, pp. 7—8.

mation of 1858 promised respect for and maintenance of Indian customs as a fundamental principle"[1]. Thus, Hastings "saw what his successors only slowly learnt, that if the British power in India was to be lasting it must become an Indian power"[2]; and, significantly enough, whether genuinely interested in supporting the laws and customs of the Indian people or not, what Warren Hastings and his successors persisted in putting forward as Indian laws and custom took the direction of patronising religious orthodoxy instead of encouraging the liberal ideas which had gained ground in Indian society in the previous days and which were ushering in a progressive life in India with a permanent rapproachment between the Hindus and Moslems and the eradication of decadent customs and institutions.[3]

Under Hastings' government the laws for the Hindus were codified according to the Brahminical doctrine as contained in the *Dharmasastras*, and that for the Moslems according to the orthodox interpretation of Islam. Selected Brahmin *pandits* from different parts of the Subah of Bengal were brought to Calcutta where they were employed for two years in order to prepare a compendium of Hindu Law in Sanskrit on the basis of orthodox religious works starting with *Manu-smrti*.[4] The manuscript was then translated into Persian and from Persian into English by N. B. Halhead, whereby presented by Warren Hastings to the Court of Directors of the East India Company and published in 1776 it came to be known as Halhead's *Gentoo Code*. Likewise, Hastings employed "learned professors of the Mahomedan law, for translating from the Arabic into the Persian tongue, a com-

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[1] *ibid.*, p. 8.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 8

[3] From the fourteenth century onwards the Bhakti movement was preaching for the equality of all men before God and against the caste system and such other institutions and customs of the Hindus and the Moslems, which were blocking further social progress. Simultaneously, whether they were Moslems or Hindus, several Indian rulers in different parts of the subcontinent (including Bengal, of course) persevered to secularise the political and administrative life from religious domination and made positive efforts to establish a permanent harmony between the Hindus and the Moslems — the two largest communities in India. The effect produced by such progressive forces in Indian society in that period was so impressive that Sir John Marshall remarked (cf. R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri, and Kalikinkar Datta's *An Advanced History of India*, p. 403):

"... seldom in the history of mankind has the spectacle been witnessed of two civilisations, so vast and so strongly developed, yet so radically dissimilar as the Muhammadan and Hindu, meeting and mingling together. The very contrasts which existed between them, the wide divergences in their culture and their religions, make the history of the their impact peculiarly instructive."

(For some more details on how a new life was dawning in India during the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, see Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4, Section entitled "Emergence of New Forces".)

[4] cf. *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits, from a Persian Translation, made from the Original, written in the Shanscrit Language*, London, 1776, pp. 26—28.

pendium of their law, called *Hedaya*"[1], and thus Islamic orthodoxy also had the possibility to re-establish itself with new vigour within the Moslem community.

The 1781 Act of Settlement directed that all matters relating to inheritance, succession and contract were to be determined "in the case of Mohammedans by the laws and usages of Mohammedans and in the case of Gentoos by the laws and usages of Gentoos; and where only one of the parties shall be a Mohammedan or Gentoo by the laws and usages of the defendant"[2]. Moreover, although the above Act specifically referred to inheritance, succession and contract, "judicial interpretation" of the Act extended its application to "all family and religious matters" of the two communities; so that its provisions were commented upon as "the first recognition of the Warren Hastings rule in the English statute Law"[3]. And it is of further interest to note in this connection that: "In organizing the judicial system in the mofussil, Warren Hastings had made a rule that as regards inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages and institutions the laws of the Koran were to be administered for the Mohammedans and the laws of the Shastra for the Hindus"[4]. This rule, first enacted in Calcutta in 1781, was extended to Madras in 1802, and to Bombay in 1827. In course of time, along with the Company's conquest of all parts of India, it embraced the whole of the subcontinent.

Evidently, this course of reform had a far-reaching consequence upon Indian society, for it led to the revial of those forces among the people which had lost their usefulness with the further evolution of the society and had thus become even reactionary in character. It is true that one should not undermine the fact that even up to the time India came under British rule religious orthodoxy had an important bearing on the life of the people; but it is equally true that new values had also emerged in contradistinction to the orthodoxy of Brahminism and Islam and they were rapidly leading to the liberalisation of the Hindu and the Moslem views of life and towards a happy, peaceful and permanent rapproachment of all communities in India on the basis of *humane* qualities as enunciated by the proponents of the Bhakti movement and as encouraged in various ways by several Indian rulers in different parts of the subcontinent (including Bengal, obviously) and in different generations. But henceforth these ideas received a severe battering; on the other hand, not only in the economic sphere the growing stratum of artisans and traders was virtually reduced to non-entity, but in the social and ideological spheres of the society Brahminism and Islamic orthodoxy reasserted themselves with the support they received from the ruling authority.

[1] cf. Warren Hastings' despatch from India to the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London, dated February 21, 1784; quoted in Ramsay Muir's *The Making of British India: 1756—1858*, pp. 151—152.

[2] cf. *Social Legislation: Its Role in Social Welfare*, issued on behalf of The Planning Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, 1956, p. 16.

[3] *ibid.*, p. 16.

[4] *ibid.*, pp. 16—17.

It should, however, be noted that because at the time the East India Company emerged as the ruling power (first in the Subah of Bengal and then, in due course, all over India) progressive forces were jostling against decadent ones, it would have been difficult for some foreigners to have a clear insight at once into the workings of the social forces in Indian society during that period of transition. Therefore, it remains an open question whether the "reform measures" introduced at the onset of the Company's rule were deliberately intended to encourage the decadent forces or not. The fact, however, is there that throughout the British period of India's history the consistent policy of the foreign rulers remained as to stabilise somehow their rule in the subcontinent, and afterwards make it durable, without necessarily paying proper attention to the interests of the people brought under subjugation. This point has been clarified in many studies on British India, and glimpses of this policy are also obtained from the present one. Therefrom it is seen that the regeneratian of decadent forces and their renewed grip on the Indian society were the logical outcome of some "reform measures" which might or might not have been introduced to have that function in particular.

The upshot was that along with the destruction of the growing class of merchant and artisans, which formed the economic basis of the progressive forces emerging in Indian society during her period of transition, these "reform measures" put a serious check on the further growth of progressive forces in the social and ideological spheres of Indian life. In fact, the sum-total effect of such a policy as pursued by the Company during its rule and also afterwards by the foreign rulers was that the Indian society was first led towards retrogression instead of towards future progress, and then it remained backward in many ways. Indeed, whatever might have been the subjective attitude of Warren Hastings while supporting the religious orthodoxies in Indian society[1], there is hardly any room for doubt that

[1] It is still a debatable point whether or not Warren Hastings was prompted by a genuine desire to uphold Indian laws and custom, which, however, he thought to have been embodied only in orthodox religious works of the Hindus and Moslems. It has been asserted that: "One of Hastings' root principles was that Indian law and custom should be as far as possible preserved and respected" (cf. Ramsay Muir's *The Making of British India: 1756—1858*, p. 143). It is also known that Warren Hastings defended the "Indian system" when "he learnt that the wiseacres of 1773 proposed to introduce English law, to be administered by a new Supreme Court" (*ibid.*, p. 144). The letter he wrote in this connection on the 21st of March, 1774, to Lord Mansfield, "the greatest of English lawyers", rings a sincere note (*ibid.*, pp. 144—145). But at the same time one cannot fail to note that when political exigencies demanded otherwise, Hastings himself had no qualms to go against what he supported as Indian law and custom. Although, as Macaulay wrote referring to the Hindus, "according to their old national laws, a Brahmin could not be put to death for any crime whatever", Hastings, as "the real mover in the business", sent his adversary in Bengal, Nanda Kumar, "a Brahmin of the Brahmins", to the gallows in May 1775 (cf. Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Warren Hastings*, pp. 256—257, 254, 256). And it is of particular importance to note that not only Nanda Kumar's conviction by the Supreme Court has been considered by reputed historians as a

his and his successors' policy could not lead to "meeting and mingling together" of the Hindus and Moslems irrespective of their religious beliefs, which as a goal was cherished by the previous progressive rulers of India, like Akbar and others, and which was considered as "peculiarly instructive" by writers like Sir John Marshall. As it has been stated in a recent publication of the Government of India: "Legislative recognition given to the differences based on religion and caste may have been responsible to some extent for holding the two major communities apart"[1].

Moreover, the policy of the new ruling power was to drive a new wedge between these two largest communities in India. This became particulary manifest by the fact that, while standing by Islamic orthodoxy, in order to counter-balance the still existing political power of the Mughals and other Moslem rulers and their underlings in India, until "their power was securely established" the British rulers gave particular support to Brahminism; for then they had a great "use for the higher castes against the Mahomedan", as the Census Superintendant of West Bengal for 1951 stated so candidly.[2] Indeed, this was such an obvious feature of the Com-

"miscarriage of justice" and that "the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court over the indigenous population was doubtful", but while Hastings with such apparent sympathy had pleaded for Indian laws and customs one year earlier, Nanda Kumar was tried according to the English law and moreover "the English law making forgery a capital crime was not operative in India till many years after Nanda Kumār's alleged forgery had been committed" (cf. R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri and Kalikinkar Datta's *An Advanced History of India*, p. 786). Yet Hastings remained unperturbed and it has been reported that a few years later he referred to Judge Impey (who pronounced the death sentence to Nanda Kumar and about whom Macaulay wrote that: "No rational man can doubt that he took this course in order to gratify the Governor-General") as the person "to whose support he was at one time indebted for the safety of his fortune, honour, and reputation" (cf. Macaulay's *Warren Hastings*, p. 258).

Thus there are certainly reasons to doubt that it was a matter of *principle* with Hastings to champion Indian laws and custom or even that his intention was to preserve and respect only those laws and custom of the Indian people which could fit in with the progressive development of society. For it remains a fact that his support went to orthodoxy and not to the growing liberal ideas in the social and ideological life of the Indian people. The latter ones could have been codified and thus a basis could have been created for further progress in Indian society; a basis which during their reign Akbar and several other progressive Indian rulers endeavoured to lay down by giving stress to secular laws and custom of the people and also by listening to the proponents of the Bhakti movement, as Akbar did with Dadu in order to cement a lasting friendship between the Hindu and the Moslem communities (cf. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Chapter 4, Section entitled "The Emergence of New Forces"). And, if Akbar (also a new-comer in India) could find out which way the Indian society was moving at a time when the Mughal rule had not yet attained stability, why should such an understanding have been lost to such a wise representative of the East India Company as Warren Hastings, when other evidence are there to indicate that the English Company had the best appreciation of the forces working in Indian society in those days and took definite measures to destroy such forces as were opposed to its interests or to mould them in its favour?

[1] cf. *Social Legislation: Its Role in Social Welfare*, p. 17.

[2] A. Mitra — *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, p. 8.

pany's rule in India that, as mentioned before, even those foreigners who believed that the "awakening" of India came from British rule admitted that during those days the Brahminical doctrine and the practices of high-caste Hindus were deliberately supported and patronised by the rulers in order to circumvent "a grave danger to British trade and government" and "for the stability of their position".[1]

In this atmosphere, many decadent and obscurantist customs prevailed in society, or they revived in new vigour[2]; while the renewed role of Brahminism in

[1] cf. J. N. Farquhar's *Modern Religious Movements in India*, pp. 11, 9.

[2] In the period of transition during the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries, many social and ideological measures were propagated by the rising forces of progress in Indian society, and they were recommended and encouraged by several Indian rulers like Akbar and others. But under the rule of the East India Company most of them went overboard.

For instance, Akbar persevered to abolish the practice of widow-burning among the high-caste Hindus (cf. Sri Ram Sharma's *Mughal Government and Administration*, p. 168). But whether or not he was successful in this endeavour, it is important to state that although even *Manusmṛti* (the most important of all the standard *Dharmasastras* of the Hindus) did not enjoin this custom, basing on other *Dharmasastras* the *Gentoo Code* stated categorically that: "It is proper for a Woman, after her Husband's Death, to burn herself in the Fire with his Corpse; every Woman, who thus burns herself, shall remain in Paradise with her Husband Three *Crores* and Fifty *Lacks* of Years, by Destiny" (cf. *Gentoo Code*, p. 286). And, even under the rule of what was acclaimed as a "superior civilisation", this horrible practice continued until 1829; it being "carried out under British supervision" (cf. Farquhar's *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p. 9).

Several distinguished persons in Indian society at that time, such as Ram Mohan Roy, were against this practice. But the ruling authority was so adamant to maintain it in order to have the continued support of the decadent forces in Indian society for their rule that Ram Mohan Roy had to plead in person before the Court of Directors of the Company in London, while even a great savant like Wilson "was opposed to Bentick's abolition of *sati*, and seriously believed that it would cause the Government grave difficulty" (*ibid.*, pp. 11—12). Naturally, the outcome was as one could expect. On the basis of documented facts and figures Altekar stated that "the Satī custom could not have been in much greater vogue in the Hindu and Muslim periods than it was in the first quarter of the 19th century" (cf. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, p. 165).

Similarly, "Akbar tried to prevent child marriages even though both the Hindu and the Muslim orthodoxy backed this evil custom" (cf. Sri Ram Sharma's *Mughal Government and Administration*, p. 168). But, again, whether his attempt was successful or not, thanks to the support given to Hindu orthodoxy during the rule of the East India Company as well as afterwards, child-marriage went on in full swing in Indian society. It has been worked out from the studies of Indian "castes and tribes" made in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century that out of the total of 560 "castes and tribes" for which the requisite information was available, 37.3 per cent practised only child-marriage, 31.4 per cent practised both child and adult marriages, and only 31.3 per cent practised solely adult marriage (cf. Lucie Zeh's *Zur Frage der Kinderheirat in der indischen Gesellschaft in moderner Zeit*).

Furthermore, it is worthy of note that under the domination of Hindu orthodoxy many of the low castes and those tribals which had come within the pale of the "civilised" society took to the practice of child-marriage, although previously adult-marriage was the general rule with them. Thus it has been worked out from the same sources as for the above figures that while

society meant that the most important social institution it fostered, namely, the caste system, regained its grip on the ideological life of the Indian people, and particularly of the Hindus.

To consider now how under British rule the caste system re-established itself in the socio-economic aspect of life, the process of retrogression initiated by the support given to the deadent forces in society, in general, and to Brahminical

51 per cent of the total of 318 high-castes (for which the relevant information was available) practised child-marriage, 31 per cent practised both child and adult marriages, and 18 per cent only adult marriage, the corresponding proportions for the total sample of 224 low-castes (including untouchables, detribalised aborigines, undefined religious groups and Moslem castes) were 19, 32, and 49 per cents, respectively.

Indeed, how pernicious was this form of acculturation between the "lower sections of the community" and the dominant Hindu orthodoxy, and how belatedly a legal measure was enacted by the British Government in order to put a stop to this practice is evident from the fact that the Sarda Act of 1929, which fixed the minimum marriageable age for girls at 14 and for boys at 18, merely followed "the actual practice of the advanced middle classes of society" (cf. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, p. 74).

Also, like widow-burning and child-marriage, under the Company's rule the same was the state of affairs in regard to widow remarriage as well as divorce. Akbar had "permitted Hindu widows to remarry" (cf. Sri Ram Sharma's *Mughal Government and Administration*, p. 168); but, following the recommendation for undergoing *sati*, it was recorded in the *Gentoo Code* that, if after the death of her husband, a woman "cannot burn, she must, in that Case, preserve an inviolable Chastity; if she remains always chaste, she goes to Paradise; and if she does not preserve her Chastity, she goes to Hell" (cf. *Gentoo Code*, p. 286). Naturally, pursuant to such a strong sanction against widow remarriage, life-long widowhood remained in force in Hindu society. The upshot was that, after her marriage as a child, even if the husband died before the girl had attained maturity to enter into a conjugal life, she was to remain a virgin widow all her life and undergo all the penance and hardship associated with the rigorous life of a Hindu widow as recommended in the *Dharmasastras*.

Against such a cruel custom, the great Brahmin *pandit* of Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, had to plead for a long while with the Company's representatives in Calcutta and had to launch a campaign for a legal permission to widow remarriage before a law was made in 1856, "permitting widow remarriage under certain conditions" (cf. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, p. 186). Yet, among other reasons, since orthodoxy fully dominated the Indian society and went on dominating it, not only widow remarriage remained as a rare phenomenon among the high-caste Hindus and divorce was quite out of the question, but among the low-castes, Hinduised aboriginals, etc., widow remarriage was more and more restricted and the system of divorce was also gradually abolished, as the above-mentioned studies of Indian "castes and tribes" have distinctly recorded.

In such a vicious atmosphere as produced by the support given to orthodoxy, many other decadent and obscurantist customs prevailed in society, or they revived with renewed vigour. For instance, *kulinism*, which as an institution is said to have been elaborated in Bengal by Ballala Sena and his son, Lakshmana Sena, in the twelfth century, now became a scourge in society. The Brahmin families fell in for marrying their daughters to the "purest", that is, to the *kulin* Brahmins, whereby it became not uncommon for a *kulin* Brahmin to marry dozens of wives and sometimes even hundreds. The wives stayed life-long with their parents as grass widows, while the apostle of purity undertook his regular busines rounds and visited them for short periods according to the plan he had chalked out on the basis of the register he kept

orthodoxy, in particular, was further accelerated and eventually stabilised by another "reform" enacted in the last decade of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century, namely, the establishment of definite forms of land-tenures all over India with the common characteristic of introducing the concept of private property in land and with the special characteristic of creating landlords out of the previous revenue-farmers in the areas brought under the Permanent Zemindary Settlement of land, as in Bengal. How this transformation in the rural society provided the basis for the eventual emergence of the peculiar form of economic structure in Bengal under British rule has been described in the last chapter. And now, since, as will be seen later, the relation between the caste hierarchy and the new economic structure is fundamental to the existence of the caste system in the British period of Bengal's history (and to an extent even today as the legacy of the immediate past), this will be examined in some details in the following pages.

Firstly, it can be seen that the division of society into Caste Hindus, Moslems, and other bodies (the last including the Scheduled Castes, etc.) closely follows the economic structure as it has been described in the last chapter. This will be evident from the following table which is based on the data collected during the previously mentioned sample survey of rural Bengal in 1946.

Table 2.1

Classes of economic structure	Number of households				Percentage of total households			
	Caste Hindu	Moslem	Others	Total	Caste Hindu	Moslem	Others	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
I	241	290	1	532	5	3	2	4
II	1790	3856	20	5666	37	44	38	42
III	2783	4632	32	7447	58	53	60	54
Total	4814	8778	53	13645	100	100	100	100

The table shows that the Caste Hindus have a greater tendency to belong to Class I of the economic structure than the Moslems and "others"; the Moslems make a larger representation to Class II than the Caste Hindus and "others";

of the names and villages of all his fathers-in-law. Against such an abject degradation of women in society, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and many other progressive Indians launched vigorous struggles; but, although because of their campaigns as well as because of the growing economic difficulties this monstrous custom while flourishing during the Company's rule gradually fell into disuse, polygamy remained a law-abiding practice till the end of British rule in India. Only in a free and sovereign India polygamy was legally forbidden (and the minimum marriageable age for girls was raised to 16 years and for boys to 19 years) by the Hindu Marriage Act 25 of 18th May, 1955.

and the "others" are mainly concentrated in Class III. Even while dealing with a sample data, as mentioned above, the above frequency distribution was found to be statistically significant by a Chi-square test.

This association between the social hierarchy and the economic structure would have been better revealed if the Caste Hindu group was further classified by the caste affiliation of the households to the upper level of Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha and the lower level of "other Caste Hindus"; and, similarly, if the Moslem community could also be sub-divided into that of Sayyad Moslems and the functional castes within the Moslem community. But before discussing the data relating to the above social hierarchy, it would be worthwhile to explain the relative position of the units of the hierarchy in the society. This is therefore done below.

The division of the Hindu society into "upper Caste Hindus", "lower Caste Hindus" and the Scheduled Castes could be based on conventional practice in Bengal in regard to commensality in food and drinking water. Thus a Brahmin can accept dry food from the hands of a Vaidya and a Kayastha, but not from others. Then again, he may accept water from the "lower Caste Hindus", but not from any other member in society, whether the person concerned belongs to a low caste within the Hindu community or to any other community, such as Moslem, Christian, etc. And the members of the Scheduled Castes are those who while in general accepting the Hindu fold are placed lowest in the hierarchy and were formerly considered as untouchables. Even now they are so regarded by the Hindu traditionalists.

Besides such a conventional distinction between the three levels in the Hindu community, it is worthy of note that while in Bengal the Kshatriya and the Vaishya *varnas* have been lacking from the beginning of "aryanisation" of her society, in other parts of India the Kayasthas have been equated to the Kshatriyas and in Bengal also there is a tendency to do so, for the Kayasthas were probably at first state officials, viz. accountants and scribes, and as such they were equated to other royal officers who were mostly Kshatriyas.[1] As regards the Vaidyas, they occupy a position intermediate between the Brahmins and the Kayasthas, some equating them with the Ambastha who according to Manu are the offsprings from *anuloma* marriage between a Brahmin man and a Vaishya woman.[2] It is therefore legitimate to call the "upper Caste Hindus" of Bengal as belonging to the *usurping castes* of pre-British days.

As regards the "lower Caste Hindus" it should be borne in mind that although they are generally considered to belong to the *varna* level of Sudras, in Bengal the *varna* of Vaishya was lacking from the beginning, and that these are the

[1] For details, see P. V. Kane's *History and Dharmasāstra*, Vol. II, Part I, pp. 75—77; and Vol. IV, p. 271, &c.

[2] *ibid.*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 72; Georg Bühlers *The Laws of Manu*, X. 8.

artisan and peasant castes within the *varna* society, such as Mahisya, Napit, Kamar, Kumhar, Goala, Jugi, Barui, etc. These are then the *producing castes* of pre-British days, from whom in other parts of India also the Brahmins can take water without pollution.

Finally, in regard to the Scheduled Castes[1], references to them (such as for Bagdi, Chamar, Dom, Hari, Bauri, Kaibartta, Chandal, etc.) are found in ancient literatures relating to Bengal like the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Brahmabaibarttapurana*, in which they are classified as Antyaja, Mlechha, etc.[2] Evidently, the Scheduled Castes of British days were largely the *serving castes* of pre-British times.

Thus it appears that the caste-hierarchy within the Hindu community as the "upper Caste Hindus", "lower Caste Hindus" and the Scheduled Castes reflects the levels of the pre-British economic structure of society as explained before.

To consider next the Moslem community, the Sayyad Moslems consider themselves as true Moslems and regard the Moslems belonging to functional castes as socially inferior. O'Malley wrote in the 1910 Census Report of Bengal[3]:

"There is properly no caste system among the followers of the Prophet. All are on a religious equality; they meet and worship in the same mosque, and are divided into distinct groups, which are socially separate. Occupation, transmitted from generation to generation, has given rise to divisions characteristic as those of the Hindu functional castes. The Nikaris are fishermen, the Naluas are bamboo-mat makers, the Kulus are oil -pressers, the Dhobas are washermen, the Dhunias are cotton-carders, and the Hajjams are barbers. . . . There are also restrictions on eating together, though, according to their religion, a Mussalman cannot be degraded by taking food from another of a lower status. In spite of these principles, a Sheikh will not eat with a Jolah or Kulu in a ceremonial feast, and other groups will only with fellow members. On the other hand, there is a tendency for

[1] For the statutory definition of the Scheduled Castes in Bengal, see the *Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order*, 1936, S.R.L.O. No. 417.

Regarding the use of the terms *scheduled castes* and *scheduled tribes* for the 1941 and 1951 census of Bengal, the Census Superintendant of West Bengal for 1951 noted (cf. A. Mitra — *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, p. 5):

"According to the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1936, read with Article 26(1) of the First Schedule to the Government of India Act of 1935, *scheduled castes* means 'such castes, races, or tribes, or parts of or groups within castes, races, or tribes, being castes, races, or tribes which appear to His Majesty in Council to correspond to classes of persons formerly known as the *depressed classes*, as His Majesty may specify'. No person in Bengal who, for instance, professed Buddhism or a tribal religion was deemed to be a member of any scheduled caste. This limitation does not operate in 1951 and whereas in 1941 only Hindu members of the castes and tribes were scheduled, *scheduled castes and tribes* in 1951 include persons professing Buddhism or tribal faiths also, that is those who were excluded from the schedule in 1941".

[2] For details, see for instance, Niharranjan Ray's *Bangaleer Ithihas*, pp. 259—260, 303—309, &c.

[3] L. S. S. O'Malley's *Report of Bengal, Census of India: 1910*, p. 495.

the functional groups to call themselves Sheikhs, a generic name which is coming into use as a designation for all but Saiyads, Mughals and Pathans. In some parts this has gone so far, that Sheikh is said to be a name for the main caste, while the functional groups are referred to as Sheikh sub-castes. This in itself serves to show how far the Mussalmans of Bengal have assimilated Hindu ideas."

It is however also possible that since the Moslems in Bengal are in the main converts from the indigenous population[1], the Moslem functional castes were

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[1] The viewpoint that the Moslems of Bengal are in the main converts from the indigenous population was controverted by a section of the Moslem intelligentsia of the province; but the weakness in their argument was ably demonstrated by E. A. Gait in the 1901 Census Report, and is therefore quoted below (cf. *The Census of India 1901*, Vol. VI, pp. 165—181):

"It was never intended by Mr. Beverley [in the Census Report for 1872] to deny that many of the leading Muhammadan families can trace their origin to foreign sources. This is admitted by all. . . . It is also beyond doubt that owing to the Muhammadan law of inheritance and other causes, many families of foreign origin have gradually sunk and become merged in the general mass of the population, and that the numerous soldiers of fortune and their followers who once found a livelihood in Bengal must have left children behind them whose descendants are still alive. This, however, does not in any way account for the fact that there are more than 25 millions of Muhammadans in Bengal, or explain their local distribution.

In Bihar, which first came under Muslim rule, the proportion of Muhammadans is far smaller than it is in Bengal proper, and although in the latter tract, Muhammadans are numerous in the neighbourhood of the old capitals at Gaur, Panduah, Rajmahal and Murshidabad, near which most of the land grants are found, they are far less so than in Eastern and Northern Bengal, whither the stream of immigration must have been comparatively thin and attenuated. Even near the old capitals the Muhammadan settlers always sought the higher levels, and they would never willingly have taken up their residence in the rice swamps of Noakhali, Bogra and Backergunge.

The number of old Muhammadan families is very small in East and North Bangal, and yet it is there that the Muhammadans as a class are more numerous, not only than in any other part of Bengal, but than in any other part of India. Again, the early invaders were chiefly Pathans, not Arabs, and yet the Muhammadans of Bengal who call themselves Shekh outnumber those who profess to be Pathans in the ratio 50 to 1. The number of Moghals in this Province is quite insignificant, but that of *soi-disant* Shekha, is more than twenty times as great as the estimated population of Arabia. Many of these 'Shekhs', moreover, have only recently begun to claim this appellation. They were formerly known as Atraf in South and as Nasya in North Bengal; the latter word is still commonly used by outsiders, though the people concerned now prefer to describe themselves by a more pretentious name.

The small extent to which Muhammadans bulk in the population when their numbers are not added to from outside is shown by the fact that in Orissa, the last strong-hold of the Afgans in this Province, whither they fled after Akbar defeated them in Bengal, and where they were granted extensive jagirs, the proportion of Muhammadans to the total population is only 2½ per cent. . . .

. . . the affinities of the Muhammadans of East Bengal seem to be with the Pods and Chandals and those of North Bengal with the Rajbansis and Koches. The conclusion is based, not only on their striking physical resemblance to their neighbours, but also on the fact that the proportion of Hindus of other castes in these parts of the country is, and always has been, very small. The main castes are the Rajbansis (including Koches) in North Bengal and

formed mostly, if not entirely (as writers like J. H. Hutton suggest[1]), by the converts from low caste Hindus and untouchables. The Sayyad Moslems are, on the other hand, either converts from the *producing castes* of "lower Caste Hindus" or, if immigrant, most of them occupied a similar position in society, except those few who as state officials and such maintained a higher position and equated themselves to the *usurping castes* of the Hindus in pre-British times. The above differentiation within the Moslem community is suggested by the nature of traditional occupations of the Moslem functional castes and the great majority of the Sayyad Moslems. As regards the former, from a list taken from the 1931 Census Report of Bengal it is seen that their traditional occupations were mostly

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the Chandals and other castes of non-Aryan origin in East Bengal, so that even if the different groups yielded converts in equal proportions, the absolute number of converts from such castes would be much greater than from others. But, except in the case of forcible conversion, it is not likely that the proportions were at all equal. The Musalman religion, with its doctrine that all men are equal in the sight of God, must necessarily have presented far greater attractions to the Chandals and Koches, who were regarded as outcastes by the Hindus, than to the Brahmans, Baidyas, and Kayasthas, who in the Hindu caste system enjoy a position far above their fellows. The converts to Islam could not of course expect to rank with the higher classes of Muhammadans, but he would escape from the degradation which Hinduism imposes on him; he would no longer be scorned as a social leper; the mosque would be open to him; the Mullah would perform his religions ceremonies, and, when he died, he would be accorded a decent burial. The experience of the Christian missionaries in Bengal at the present day points to the same conclusion. Converts from the higher Hindu castes are rare, and it is amongst the non-Aryan tribes of the Chota Nagpur Plateau and North Bengal, and amongst the Chandals of Bakerganj, that the greates success is met with.

It is not contended that the higher castes did not contribute their quota, but it was undoubtedly a comparatively small one, and obtained usually by force or accident, rather than by a voluntary adhesion to the tenets of the Koran. This seems cleary indicated by the history of Muhammadan families of known Hindu origin. . . .

In Bihar a converted Hindu of the Brahman or Kayasth castes is usually allowed to call himself Shekh and to associate and intermarry with genuine Shekhs. A Babhan or Rajput in the same circumstances, becomes a Pathan, but the lower castes have to content themselves with the title Neu-Muslim and it is only after the lapse of some years that they are gradually recognised as Shekh. In Mymensingh high caste converts are given the title of Khan and call themselves Pathans.

Amongst the earlier converts, and especially in the functional groups, Hindu names and titles are still very common. Names such as Kali Shekh, Kalachand Shekh, Braja Shekh or Gopal Mandal are constantly met with. When a Mullah effects a conversion at the present day, he usually gives the neophyte a new name, but it is often chosen in such a way as to give some indication of the old one; Rajani for example becomes Riazuddin. This reminds one of the way in which a Muhammadan of low social position gradually assumes a more high sounding designation as he rises in life, which has given rise to the saying —

'Age thake Ulla Tulla Sheshe hay Uddin,
Taler Mamud upare jay kapal phere Jaddin., "

[1] cf. J. H. Hutton's *Caste in India*, pp. 31, 173, &c.

as those of Hindu *serving castes* of pre-British days.[1] They were circumcisors, mid-wives, washermen, etc.; and also petty artisans and traders, or fishermen and such, as also noted by O'Mally in the above extract. The traditional occupation of the Sayyad Moslems in Bengal was, on the other hand, mostly as peasants, that is, the same as that of the bulk of the Hindus belonging to the *producing castes*. It thus appears that the segregation within the Moslem community also can be broadly equated to the levels of the economic structure of Indian society in pre-British times, and especially to the levels of *serving castes* and *producing castes*.

Besides the above units of the social hierarchy, one should also consider the tribal population who still maintain their traditional social life in a large measure and who are generally regarded in the same societal level as the Scheduled Castes. Furthermore, those lowly poeple in society should also be taken into account who while being designated by the same name all over India (such as Nat, etc.) may belong to different religious groups (Hinduism, Islam, etc.) in different parts of India or even in the same area. Whatever may have been the origin of these groups, in the caste hierarchy they occupy a position similar to that of the Scheduled Castes and the Moslem functional castes.

Thus for a comprehensive study of the relation between the economic structure and the caste hierarchy, the affiliation to the three classes of the economic structure should be examined for each of the groups of "upper Caste Hindus", "lower Caste Hindus", Scheduled Castes, Sayyad Moslems, Moslem functional castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the "intermediate" groups like Nat, etc. But, unfortunately, from the available data it is impossible to undertake such an elaborate analysis for the whole of Bengal. Even so, it can be shown from a series of partial analysis that, in general, the "upper Caste Hindus" belong to Class I of the

[1] The list of Moslem functional castes in the 1931 census report for Bengal is as follows (vide, *Census of India: 1931*, Vol. V, Part I, p. 423):

Name of the group	*Where reported*	*Traditional occupation*
Badiya or Abdul	Bogra	Circumcisers
Bajadars	Jessore	Musicians
Chunia	Bogra	—
Dai	Dacca, etc.	Women act as midwives
Dhawa	Bogra & Rajshahi	Fishermen
Duffadi	Malda	Hooka sellers
Karindi	Jessore	Originally hawkers of glass beads, now engaged in agricultural operations
Katihara	Bogra	Originally workers in lead foil used to decorate image of Durga, now gold and silver workers
Kulu	Bogra, etc.	Oilpressers
Kutti	Dacca	Masons, hackney-carriage drivers, etc.
Mahlfarash	Dacca	Fishermen
Manjhi	Bogra	Fishermen and boatmen, now turning to agriculture
Mirshikari	Bogra & Dacca	now goldsmiths
Naliya	Bogra	Weavers of reed mats
Pirkhodali	Malda	—
Punjhra	Malda	Fish sellers
Rasua	Jessore	Hawkers of glassware
Sanaidar	Dacca	Drummers
Sandar	Bogra	Hawkers of glass bangles and tinsel.

economic structure; the "lower Caste Hindus" and the Sayyad Moslems to Class II; the Scheduled Castes, the Moslem functional castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the "intermediate" groups to Class III. And thereby it will be realised how the caste-hierarchy (or the economic structure of society in the pre-British days) have dovetailed itself into the economic structure which emerged in Bengal during British rule.

As regards the "upper" and "lower" Caste Hindus, the Scheduled Castes, Sayyad Moslems, the *khulu* or oilpressing Moslems (which was the only Moslem functional caste found in these villages), the above hypothesis is substantiated by the following table which presents the data obtained from an intensive study of six villages in the district of Bogra in north Bengal, which the writer undertook during the last war.[1]

Table 2.2

Classes of economic structure	"upper" Caste Hindus	"lower" Caste Hindus	Sayyad Moslems	Scheduled Castes	*Khulu* Moslems
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		Number of persons			
I	4	—	21	—	—
II	—	10	50	7	16
III	1	4	79	33	7
Total	5	14	150	40	23
		Percentage of total			
I	80	—	14	—	—
II	—	71	33	18	70
III	20	29	53	82	30
Total	100	100	100	100	100

In the above table only the position of the *khulu* Moslems appears to contradict the above hypothesis, as they are represented more in Class II than in Class III of the economic structure. But this is mainly due to the fact that, while their condition was no better (in fact, worse) than that of the Scheduled Castes, since in lieu of a better occupation many of them still followed their traditional occupation of oilpressing as their primary source of livelihood, they were classified under the category of "artisans and traders" and were thus included in Class II of the economic structure.

[1] Details of this analysis are available in the paper entitiled *The Economic Structure and Social Life in Six Villages of Bengal* by Ramkrishna Mukherjee.

Comparable data are also available from west Bengal, from an intensive survey of 12 villages in the district of Birbhum, which was conducted in 1937 by the Visvabharati Institute for Rural Reconstruction. These are shown in Table 2.3 below.[1]

Table 2.3

Classes of economic structure	"upper" Caste Hindus	"lower" Caste Hindus	Sayyad Moslems	Scheduled Castes	Tribal
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		Number of persons			
I	62	52	7	24	1
II	4	74	25	21	8
III	3	44	68	132	91
Total	69	170	100	177	100
		Percentage of total			
I	90	31	7	13	1
II	6	44	25	12	8
III	4	25	68	75	91
Total	100	100	100	100	100

It will be noticed from the table that except the Sayyad Moslems the other caste-groups conform to their expected position in the economic structure of society. The anomalous position of the Sayyad Moslems in this sample may be accounted for by the regional characteristic of the district of Birbhum where only a few Moslems live with the majority population of Hindus. This however does not seriously affect the above hypothesis, as is further borne out by an examination of the median household incomes of the caste-groups. While giving the most satisfactory indication of group-characteristic, these median values show how clearly the caste-groups are demarcated in the society in accordance with their economic position. Thus the median household income for the year was Rs. 334 for the "upper Caste Hindus", Rs. 262 for the "lower Caste Hindus", Rs. 195 for the Sayyad Moslems, Rs. 131 for the Scheduled Castes, and Rs. 137 for the tribals.

For the whole of rural Bengal a somewhat comparable table including the "upper" and "lower" Caste Hindus, the Scheduled Castes, Sayyad Moslems and

[1] The data for this table were kindly lent to the writer by the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta.

one group of Moslem functional castes (viz. Jolahas, who, however, have in general a better position in society than other Moslem functional castes) can be prepared from the data available from the 1931 census of Bengal.[1] This is done in Table 2.4 below.

Table 2.4

Classes of economic structure	"upper" Caste Hindus	"lower" Caste Hindus	Sayyad Moslems	Scheduled Castes	Jolahas
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		Number of persons (All figures in thousands)			
I	454	120	14	23	4
II	167	981	21	212	63
III	131	264	10	711	14
Total	752	1365	45	946	81
		Percentage of total			
I	61	9	31	3	5
II	22	72	47	22	77
III	17	19	22	75	18
Total	100	100	100	100	100

The table shows that, except in the case of the Jolahas for the reason noted above, by and large the caste structure maintains the sort of relation with the economic structure as expected according to the stated hypothesis. Moreover, a Chi-square

[1] The Table 2.4 is based on the data supplied by the Table XI of the 1931 census tables for Bengal (cf. *Census of India: 1931*, Vol. V, Part II, p. 157).

It is worthy of note that regarding the association between the caste hierarchy and the economic structure the slight discrepancies noticed between what has been said above and what is found from the Table 2.4 are indeed in favour of the writer's thesis. These discrepancies are essentially due to the fact that (1) the census classification of occupations was made more on formal than on functional considerations, as a result of which the individuals belonging to different units of the social hierarchy could not always be properly placed in one of the three classes of the economic structure; and (2) because the Census Table XI is based on a selection of castes, only the "upper Caste Hindu" group of the social hierarchy could be fully represented by the castes of Brahmin, Vaidya and Kayastha, while the group of Moslem functional castes is represented only by one (the Jolahas), the "lower Caste Hindu" group by seven castes (viz. the Napit, Kamar, Kumhar, Goala, Jugi, Barui and Mahisya), and the Scheduled Castes group by eight (viz. Bagdi, Chamar, Dom, Hari, Muchi, Bauri, Jalia Kaibartta, and Namasudra).

Of these two limitations of the 1931 census data, the first one is more serious as it will be evident from below. On the basis of the information given in the census table, the grouping

test applied to the above frequencies (as the data relate to a selection of castes and not to all of them in Bengal) gave a value significant at the one per cent level of significance, proving thereby the reliability of the above conclusion.

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of occupations into the three classes of the economic structure could be made as follows:

Composition of classes of the economic structure	Reference to Table XI of 1931 Bengal Census for occupations (cf. *Census of India 1931*, Vol. V, Part II, p. 157)
I	Income from rent of land, agents and managers of landed estates, planters, forest officers, and their clerks, rent collectors, etc.; owners, managers, clerks, etc. under any form of industry; commissioned and gazetted officers; professing liberal arts like religion, law, medicine, and teaching; persons living on their income; contractors, clerks, cashiers, etc.
II	Cultivators of all kinds; raisers of livestock, milkmen, and herdsmen; artisans and other workers; traders; minor employees under Public Administration.
III	Labourers of all kinds, wood-cutters, fishers and huntsmen, boatmen, carters, palki-bearers, domestic servants, professing menial professions, low grade employees under Public Force, beggars, prostitutes, criminals, and inmates of jails.

It is seen from the above list that this classification could not rigorously maintain the definition of the classes as stated in last chapter. For instance, the category of "cultivation of all kinds" will include not only the more or less self-sufficient peasants but also the *jotdars* (landholders) who let out their lands for sharecropping as well as those few rich farmers who employ wage-labourers for their agricultural production, and also sharecroppers. Hence, the sharecroppers being much more in number than the *jotdars* and rich farmers, Class II according to the above classification was over-weighted by the former. Similarly, the large representation of the "upper Caste Hindus" in the *unproductive* category of the 1931 census (which inflated their figure for Class III in Table 2.4) was due to the fact that the 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement launched by the Indian National Congress against British Rule had landed many of them into prisons. In their case, therefore, this category did not reflect their economic level which, in general, was at least of Class II of the economic structure (as defined and explained before), if not of Class I in a greater proportion as suggested by the Tables 2.2 and 2.3.

The occupations listed for Class III, in general, follow the standard definition given earlier. But, even so, this class according to the above classification is sligthly overweighted by the inclusion of the political prisoners actually belonging to Class I or Class II (as noted above) and grossly under-weighted by the exclusion of a substantial number of sharecroppers and those craftsmen who have a similar status in society as that of the sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. The illustrative case of the latter, which also concerns the above analysis, is that of the Jolahas. It is well-known that a large number of them work as wage-labourers under rich weavers or in a similar position as that of the sharecroppers because the loom and other means of production for weaving are supplied to them by a *mahajan* (moneylender) and they get a share of the produce for their labour. Following the previously stated definition, such disintegrated artisans should have been put in Class III like the sharecroppers; but in the absence of necessary information, even while knowing that a large number of the Jolahas would go under Class III, they were included in Class II as their occupation was returned in the census table as "craft". It is not at all improbable that if the Jolahas could be properly classified, they would have mainly occupied Class III of the economic structure.

The case of the Jolahas further illustrates how the second limitation of the available data has affected the course of analysis. For, while, the group of Moslem functional castes is represented only by these people, they may not be regarded as the typical representative of this group. As is evident from the descriptive literatures on the subject, such as the District

The preceding all-Bengal analysis however did not take any account of the tribes. Therefore, on the basis of the 1951 census data for West Bengal, Table 2.5 has been prepared to show how only in one part of Bengal and at a date which can more specifically show the legacy of the past the social hierarchy is seen to maintain the sort of relation with the economic structure as enunciated before.[1]

Table 2.5

Classes of economic structure	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Others	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Number of persons (all figures in thousands)			
I	7	1	96	104
II	1226	326	6363	7915
III	1989	588	3343	5920
Total	3222	915	9802	13939
	Percentage of total			
I	0.22	0.11	0.98	0.75
II	38.05	35.63	64.92	56.78
III	61.73	64.26	34.10	42.47
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Gazetteers of Bengal, the Jolahas are comparatively less worse off than the members of other Moslem functional castes, many of whom lead the most miserable life of poverty and degradation, such as the Badiyas (circumcisors) or the Dais (of whom the women act as midwives).

In this connection it should also be noted that although data were available for Dhobas and Namasudras, they were not considered while preparing the Table 2.4, for it would have been palpably absurd to put them in Class II because the traditional occupation of the Dhobas was considered as "craft" and that of the Namasudras as "cultivation of all kinds". It may however be noted that their inclusion in the table would not have altered the conclusion drawn from the analysis; only the close association between the caste hierarchy and the economic structure would not have been brought out so clearly.

On the whole, it seems reasonable to conclude that since the discrepancies in the Table 2.4 work against the writer's thesis (that is, there is a close association between the social hierarchy and the economic structure) by increasing the representation of the "upper Caste Hindus" in Classes II and III, and of the Scheduled Castes and the Moslem functional caste (Jolahas) in Class II, the weakness of the available data further strengthens what the writer intends to prove.

[1] This table has been prepared from the data supplied in the Union Table E for West Bengal in the *Census Report on West Bengal, Sikkim and Chandernagore*, Part II-Tables (cf. *Census of India 1951*, Vol. VI), and in Tables I and II for West Bengal in the Census of India Paper No. 4, 1953, entitled *Special Groups — 1951 Census*.

It is seen from the table that although the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes depend more on the agrarian economy than the remaining population in rural Bengal (80 and 77 per cents of their total populations, respectively, as against 73 per cent of the remaining population),[1] they are located in very large proportions in Class III of the economic structure, while the remaining population in society (including the Caste Hindus and the entire Moslem community) occupy mainly the Class II, with 4 to 8 times the proportions of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Class I of the economic structure.

Unfortunately for the "intermediate" groups, like the Nats, no data are available for rural Bengal,[2] and, as seen from the above analyses, the Moslem functional castes also could not be adequately represented in the present study. No doubt, because of the lack of relevant data, this remains a weakness of the present course of analysis; but this may not be considered as very serious, for it is a common knowledge that members of these social groups generally live on pursuing their "traditional" occupations of petty craft production or trade or performing menial services to other members of society as well as by sharecropping the lands of landlords or by working as wage-labourers in the rural areas.[3] In other words, as has been noted before, they belong almost entirely to Class III of the economic

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It is worth noting that, broadly speaking, the census classification of "agricultural classes" as "Noncultivating owners of land; agricultural rent receivers and their dependants" corresponds to Class I of the economic structure as defined in the last chapter; "Cultivators of land wholly or mainly *owned* and their dependants" to Class II; and "Cultivators of land wholly or mainly *unowned* and their dependants" together with "Cultivating labourers and their dependants" to Class III. The Table 2.5 therefore refers only to those members of society who depend wholly or primarily on the agrarian economy, and does not include all members of society. But as in 1951 also rural Bengal depended overwhelmingly on agricultural production, with 75 per cent of the total population dependent on it, this table should give a fair picture for the society as a whole.

[1] The percentages of dependance on agriculture of the members of the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and the remaining population in West Bengal have been calculated from the Union Table E for West Bengal as mentioned earlier.

[2] In this connection, however, it may be of interest to note that according to the figures supplied by Mohinder Singh in his book entitled *The Depressed Classes* (cf. Appendix V), out of the total number of earners in the "intermediate" group of Nats, 29 per cent were returned as "cultivators" (obviously including sharecroppers) in the 1931 census, 37 per cent as beggars, prostitutes, etc., 16 per cent as labourers, herdsmen, etc., 9 per cent as following their traditional occupation of music and dancing, and the remaining 9 per cent were placed under the categories of industry, trade, etc.

[3] The traditional occupations of the Moslem functional castes have already been noted, as recorded in the 1931 Census Report for Bengal. As regards the "intermediate" groups, it may be of interest to state here that out of the 58 Scheduled Castes recorded in the 1951 Census of West Bengal, only one, namely the Lalbegi, was found to be composed of "Mahomedans though some of them claim to be Hindus", and this caste was described as a "caste of sweepers mainly found in Calcutta and 24-Parganas" (cf. A. Mitra's *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, p. 74).

structure. Therefore, even from the series of partial analyses as given above, it appears reasonable to conclude that there does exist a relation between the social hierarchy and the economic structure of Bengal in the British period of her history.

This conclusion, however, should not give the impression that the writer is inclined to prove that the proportion of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers in society (in Class III of the economic structure) is the result of differences in the social composition of the population. It is necessary to mention this, for a theory is apparently in circulation in some quarters in India according to which where the Scheduled Castes people are found in large numbers, the agricultural labourers are also there in great bulk. No doubt, such a theory looks at the situation from the wrong end of the telescope, for to say that the people placed low in the social hierarchy generally belong to Class III of the economic structure does not mean that all those in that class belong to the Scheduled Castes or the Moslem functional castes. This theory thus neglects the essential characteristics of the agrarian crisis in British India, because of which increasing numbers of Caste Hindus (though mainly "lower Caste Hindus") and Sayyad Moslems also came down to this class.

But, on the other hand, it will be quite wrong not to see, as the foregoing analysis has revealed, that the association between the social hierarchy (which was previously the economic structure of society) and the economic structure which emerged under British rule reveals some interesting features in society. Firstly, it is seen that the great majority of persons belonging to the *usurping castes*, who had previously lived on taxes and tributes from the producing and serving castes as feudal rent-receivers, now under British rule maintained their social and economic domination in society by belonging to Class I of the newly-evolved economic structure. Moreover, their role in society was further stabilised, for henceforth they became *landowners* which they were not before. Secondly, it is seen that the members of the *producing castes* of pre-British days remained in large numbers in Class II of the new economic structure, that is, they persevered to continue with their "traditional" role in society as self-sufficient and self-working artisans, peasants and traders. But it is also evident that due to the ever-aggravating agrarian crisis during British rule an appreciable proportion of them successively went ~~gone~~ down the ladder and were finally located in Class III of the economic structure, that is, in the circle of disintegrated peasantry and the like. And, thirdly, it is seen that in overwhelming numbers the low caste people, viz. the *serving castes* of pre-British days, remained at the bottom of the society — in Class III of the economic structure. Although many of them could no more earn their living only from their "traditional" occupations of serving other members of society, they remained, as before, especially under the domination of the *usurping castes*; for, in lieu of any other source of liveli-

hood, in increasing numbers they became sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and thus continued to live under the control of landholders.[1]

[1] It may be of interest to mention here the current occupations of the 58 Scheduled Castes, as recorded in Glossary A of *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, Census of 1951, pp. 70—76:

Name of the Scheduled Caste	Traditional and/or Current Occupations
1. Bagdi	Cultivating, fishing, menial services
2. Bahelia	Hunting, bird-catching, wage-labour
3. Baiti	Lime-making, mat-making (patials), weaving, dancing and begging
4. Bauri	Cultivating, earth-working, palanquin-bearing
5. Bedia	Vagrancy (?)
6. Beldar	As earth-workers and navvies
7. Bhuinmali	Cultivating, scavenging, palanquin-bearing, earth-working, menial services, music
8. Bhuiya	Military occupations(?) — as village watchmen, etc.
9. Bhumij	Cultivating, iron-smelting
10. Bind	Cultivating, hunting, fishing, earthworking
11. Chamar	Cultivating, tanning of hides
12. Dhoba/Dhobi	Cultivating, washing of clothes
13. Doai	Cultivating, fishing, palanquin-bearing, mat-making
14. Dom	Scavenging, basket and mat-making, cultivating, wage-labour, music
15. Dosadh	Cultivating; and as village watchmen and messengers, carriers, porters, grooms, etc.
16. Ghasi	Cultivating, fishing, menial services, music, (also women as midwives and nurses)
17. Gonhri	Cultivating, fishing
18. Hari	Scavenging, menial services
19. Jalia Kaibarta	Fishing
20. Jhalo Malo or Malo	Boating, fishing, cultivating, making twine, selling grocery etc.
21. Kadar	Cultivating, fishing, wage-labour
22. Kandra	Fishing, wage-labour, carrying lights in marriage processions, dancing in Hindu festivals, and a village watchmen
23. Kaora	As swineherds and day-labourers
24. Karenga	Basket-making, digging tanks, making cart wheels and other wooden articles, castrating goats and bullocks
25. Kastha	Cultivating and landholding. ("There seems to be no ground for including them in the list of scheduled castes")
26. Kaur	Cultivating
27. Khaira	As vegetable-growers and day-labourers
28. Khatik	Cultivating and selling vegetables
29. Koch	Cultivating (?)
30. Konai	Cultivating, fishing, wage-labour, dealing in hide, music
31. Konwar	("No details available")
32. Kora	Cultivating, tank-digging, road-making, earthwork
33. Kotal	Cultivating, "frequently employed as village watchmen"
34. Lalbegi	As sweepers
35. Lodha	Cultivating, wage-labour, collecting and selling firewood, collecting jungle produces
36. Lohar	Cultivating, carpentry, iron-smelting and blacksmithing
37. Mahar	Basket-making
38. Mahili, Mahli	Cultivating, wage-labour, palanquin-bearing, working in bamboo
39. Mal	Cultivating; and as watchmen, snake-charmers, and "bedias"
40. Mallah	Boating, fishing
41. Mal Paharia	"an aboriginal tribe of Ramgarh Hills of the Santal Parganas"
42. Methor	As sweepers
43. Muchi, Rishi, Ravidas, Ruidas	Leather-dressing and cobbling, basket-making, music
44. Musahars	Cultivating, wage-labour, palanquin-bearing
45. Nagesia	"A small Dravidian tribe of Chhotonagpur"
46. Namasudra (Chandal)	Cultivating, boating, shop-keeping, trading, carpentry; and "a considerable number now follow the various so-called learned professions"
47. Nunia	Cultivating, saltpetre-making, earthworking
48. Palia	"See Koch"
49. Pan	Weaving, basket-making, menial services
50. Pasi	As field labourers, porters, servants, tapper of palm trees
51. Patni	Cultivating, fishing, boating, basket-making, trading
52. Pod	Cultivating, fishing, trading, and "land-holding"
53. Rabha	?
54. Rajbanshi	"See Koch"
55. Rajwar	Cultivating
56. Sunri	Manufacture and sale of spirituous liquor, "mercantile pursuits"
57. Tiyar	Fishing, boating
58. Turi	Cultivating, basket-making, working in bamboo

Thus it is seen that while the previous economic structure of society lost its direct usefulness under British rule, the previous social strata did not wither away. On the contrary, they remained in society by dovetailing themselves in the newly-evolved class structure. This was possible because there was no fundamental change in the character of the economy which under colonial conditions and due to the lack of industrialisation on the one hand and the growth of landlordism on the other remained semi-feudal in all essentials. Therefore, the domination of the *usurping castes* in society (if not in such a direct form as it was before, for it had come under severe attacks from the fourteenth century onwards, as mentioned before) remained in force, and so in this new situation also both the *producing castes* and the *serving castes* remained unter their control. Only mass pauperisation (which became an important trait of the economic life under British rule because of the agrarian crisis) led more and more members of the *producing castes* to come down economically to the level of the *serving castes*, and all of them began to lead a life of abject poverty and dependance on the landholders.

In this way the peculiar development of the economic structure of rural Bengal in the British period of her history gave a new lease of life to the caste system and upheld the caste-ideology in society, although its economic function had become useless. This is indeed the crux of the dovetailing of the previous economic structure of the society (or the social hierarchy in the British period of Bengal's history) into the economic structure which emerged during British rule.

4. Caste System among the Hindus and the Social Order

Because the previous economic structure thus fitted itself into the changed economic structure, the caste-ideology could still prevail in the social life of the people and the caste system could expect to remain in the pores of society until a fundamental change takes place in the social order as reflected by the existing economic structure. For the Hindu community in rural Bengal, this will be evident from the following discussion.

In the British period of Bengal's history, several social reformers tried to release the society from the fetters of the caste system. The ideas of these social reformers first crystalised into the Brahmo Movement initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828. This movement, which among other social measures, like the introduction of widow marriage, calls for the total abolition of caste barrier from the Hindu society, has been regarded as the spearhead of social renaissance in Bengal.[1] But, in spite of this and other reform movements which later developed in Bengal, in rural areas the caste system went on dominating the society as before. For these reform measures worked only in the socio-religious superstructure of society, and did not affect the basic relations of production; that

[1] cf. Amit Sen's *Notes on Bengal Renaissance.*

is, they had hardly any effect on the economic structure of society. As a result, even the Brahmo sect, which is the most staunch propagandist for the abolition of the caste system, itself turned into an endogamous group with which the Hindus forbade inter-dining too. The caste system thus came out unscathed from the socio-religious attacks made upon the institution and even turned them into its own favour by converting the attacking groups, like the Brahmo sect, into something like separate castes.

Indeed, how deep-rooted the caste consciousness remained in the society is realised from the fact that only overpowering distress of the people occassionally broke down the caste-barrier, but as soon as the crisis was over the surviving masses went back to the traditional caste discipline. Thus when during the famine of 1943 hundreds of villagers died every day for want of food, the Moslem and Hindu villagers of various castes flocked to the same relief kitchen. In many places there were separate kitchens for Hindus and Moslems, but not separately for each caste. In those places, at first, the people belonging to various castes insisted on dry food, and only if that was not available and they anticipated sure death, they could be persuaded to share the gruel cooked for all in the same kitchen. But as soon as the critical period was over, they resumed their caste taboos regarding inter-dining, etc.

The following extract from Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* would be of interest here to show how the caste-outlook persisted even after breaking its rule *en masse* due to unbearable distress. Although the particular case refers to Orissa, a neighbouring state of Bengal and included in Bengal at the time of Risley, it could also be true for Bengal proper as the author himself stated in that book. To quote[1]:

"There exists now in Orissa a caste, called Chattarkhai, recorded in the lists of 1881, which is made up of people who lost their caste in 1866 for eating in relief-kitchen (chattras). The caste is divided into an upper and a lower sub-caste — the former comprising Brahmans, Karans, Khandaits and Gop-Goalas, the latter consisting of the castes ranking below these in the social scale. Members of each sub-caste marry within that group, irrespective of the caste to which they originally belonged; but no intermarriage is possible between members of the two sub-castes. It can hardly be doubted that much social misery must have been endured before these people adopted a solution so entirely at variance with the principles in which they had been brought up, and that *for one who became a Chattar-khai, many died of want.*" (my emphasis — RKM.)

The emphasised part in the above extract points out how pernicious the caste system had become as an institution.

It may also be of interest to note that the famine of 1943 had a much more severe effect on the lower than on the upper caste groups. The destitute camps

[1] cf. H. H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I, p. viii.

were filled with larger numbers of people belonging to the Scheduled Castes or the Moslem functional castes, showing that they could offer less resistance to the situation than the Caste Hindus or the Sayyad Moslems.[1] In general also the people belonging to these castes at the bottom of the society were proportionately more affected by the famine than were the Caste Hindus and the Sayyad Moslems.[2] But even this terrible catastrophe could not destroy the caste system. The social order and the character of the economic structure remaining the same as before, the people returned to the caste discipline as soon as the calamity passed away and continued the still dominant ideology in the society, namely, the Caste Hindu ideology of the bulk of the landlords.

This grip of the caste system on the people of rural Bengal does not mean that there has not been any change in the social structure during the British period of her history. In 1913 O'Malley wrote in the report of the 1910 census of Bengal[3]:

"In Bengal at the present time differentiation of occupation is the most fruitful source of fission, new groups being formed by it either into sub-castes or separate castes; it is often difficult to distinguish the two."

Thus it is seen that changes did take place in society. But it is also seen that changes were *within* the caste system instead of breaking away from the institution; a point which was further elaborated by O'Malley who as a member of the Indian Civil Service was in close contact with the Indian people for a long time and conducted the 1910 census of Bengal. To quote from one of his later writings[4]:

"On a survey of the whole situation it may be said that though there is a certain neglect of some canons of conduct, the lines of clevage between different castes have been neither obliterated nor obscured. There is a tendency, more especially among the educated sections of the upper classes, to abandon or modify caste customs, but there is no general revolt against the system. Forms may be changed, but fundamentally caste remains the same. Those who would sweep away abuses would leave the main edifice intact. Even untouchables, in all their anxiety to remove the stigma of birth, rarely suggest the total abolition of caste. The rebellion of these and other low castes against the place assigned to them in the system rests on the assumption that that system will remain. Hindu reformers who condemn untouchability also maintain that a caste system, though not perhaps in its present form, is essential to Hinduism."

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[1] See, for instance, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *Destitution in Contai Thana, Midnapur,* and *Effects of the Food Crisis of 1943 on the Rural Population of Noakhali, Bengal.*

[2] See, for instance, K. P. Chattopadhyay and Ramkrishna Mukherjee's *A Plan for Rehabilitation of Bengal.* The point made in the text was also confirmed from an examination of the unpublished data for Bengal (collected by the Indian Statistical Institute in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology of the University of Calcutta), which is now in possession of Professor K. P. Chattopadhyay.

[3] L. S. S. O'Malley — *Raport of Bengal,* Census of India: 1910, p. 496.

[4] cf. L. S. S. O'Malley's *Indian Caste Customs,* pp. 175—176.

How did changes then take place *within* the caste structure during the British period of Bengal's history? On this point writers of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, like Risley and Gait, gave ample information. To quote first from what Risley wrote in 1891[1]:

"Brahmanism knows nothing of open proselytism or forcible conversion, and attains its end in a different and more subtle fashion, for which no precise analogue can be found in the physical world. It leaves existing aggregates very much as they were, and so far from welding them together, after the manner of Islam, into large cohesive aggregates, tends rather to create an indefinite number of fresh groups; but every tribe that passes within the charmed circle of Hinduism inclined sooner or later to abandon its more primitive usages or to clothe them in some Brahmanical disguise. The strata, indeed, remain, or are multiplied; their relative positions are, on the whole, unaltered; only their fossils are metamorphosed into more advanced forms. One by one the ancient totems drop off, or are converted by a variety of ingenious devices into respectable personages of the standard mythology; the fetish gets a new name, and is promoted to the Hindu Pantheon in the guise of a special incarnation of one of the greater gods; the tribal chief sets up a family priest, starts a more or less romantic family legend, in course of time blossoms forth as a new variety of Rajput. His people follow his lead, and make haste to sacrifice their women at the shrine of social distinction. Infant-marriage with all its attendant horrors is introduced; widows are forbidden to marry again; and divorce, which plays a great and, on the whole, a useful part in tribal society, is summarily abolished. Throughout all these changes, which strike deep into the domestic life of people, the fiction is maintained that no real change has taken place, and every one believes, or affects to believe, that things are with them as they have been since the begining of time. It is curious to observe that the operation of these tendencies has been quickened, and the sphere of their action enlarged by the great expansion of railways which has taken place in India during the last few years."

Risley further elaborated on these tendencies as follows[2]:

"1. The leading men of an aboriginal tribe, having somehow got on in the world and become independent landed proprietors, manage to enrol themselves in one of the leading castes. They usually set up as Rajputs; their first step being to start a Brahman priest, who invents for them a mythical ancestor, supplies them with a family miracle connected with the locality where their tribe are settled, and discovers that they belong to some hitherto unheard-of clan of the great Rajput community. In the early stages of their advancement they generally find great difficulty in getting their daugthers married, as they will not marry within their own tribe, and Rajputs of their adopted caste will of course

[1] cf. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I, pp. xxvii—xxx.
[2] *ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. xv—xviii and lxxxiii—lxxxv.

not intermarry with them. But after a generation or two their persistency obtains its reward, and they intermarry, if not with pure Rajputs, at least with a superior order of manufactured Rajputs, whose promotion into the Brahmanical system dates far enough back for the steps by which it was gained to have been forgotten. Thus a real change of blood takes place; while in any case the tribal name is completely lost, and with it all possibility of accurately separating this class of people from the Hindus of purer blood, and of assigning them to any particular non-Aryan tribe. They have absorbed in the fullest sense of the word, and henceforth pose, and are locally accepted, as high-caste Hindus. All stages of the process, family miracle and all can be illustrated by actual instances from the leading families in Chota Nagpore.

"2. A number of aborigines embrace the tenets of a Hindu religious sect, losing thereby their tribal name and becoming Vaishnabs, Ramayats, and the like. Whether there is any mixture of blood or not will depend upon local circumstances and the rules of the sect regarding inter-marriage. Anyhow the identity of the converts as aborigines is usually, though not invariably, lost, and this also may therefore be regarded as a case of true absorption.

"3. A whole tribe of aborigines, or a large section of a tribe, enrol themselves in the ranks of Hinduism under the style of a new caste, which, though claiming an origin of remote antiquity, is readily distinguishable by its name from any of the standard and recognized castes. Thus the great majority of Koch inhabitants of Rungpore now invariably describe themselves as Rajbanshis or Bhanga Kshatriyas — a designation which enables them to represent themselves as an outlying branch of the Kshatriyas who fled to North-Eastern Bengal in order to escape from the wrath of Parasu-Rama. They claim descent from Raja Dasarath, father of Rama. They keep Brahmans, imitate the Brahmanical ritual in their marriage ceremony, and have begun to adopt the Brahmanical system of *gotras*. In respect of this last point they are now in a curious state of transition, as they have all hit upon the same *gotra* (Kasyapa), and thus habitually transgress the primary rule of the Brahmanical system, which absolutely prohibits marriage within the *gotra*. But for this defect in their connubial arrangements — a defect which will probably be corrected in a generation or two as they and their *purohits* rise in intelligence — there would be nothing in their customs to distinguish them from Aryan Hindus, although there has been no mixture of blood, and they remain thoroughly Koch under the name of Rajbanshi.

"4. A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section of a tribe, became gradually converted to Hinduism without, like the Rajbanshis, abandoning their tribal designation. This is what is happening among the Bhumij of Western Bengal. Here a pure Dravidian race have lost their original language, and now speak only Bengali: they worship Hindu gods in addition to their own (the tendency being to relegate the tribal gods to the women), and the more advanced among them

employ Brahmans as family priests. They still retain a set of totemistic exogamous subdivisions closely resembling those of the Mundas and the Santals, but they are beginning to forget the totems which the names of the subdivisions denote, and the names themselves will probably soon be abandoned in favour of more aristocratic designations. The tribe will then have become a caste, and will go on stripping itself of all customs likely to betray its true descent. The physical characteristics of its members will alone survive. After their transformation into a caste, the Bhumij will be more strictly endogamous than they were as a tribe, and even less likely to modify their physical type by intermarriage with other races.

"There is every reason to suppose that the movement of which certain phases are roughly sketched above, has been going on for many centuries, and that, although at the present day its working can probably be most readily observed in Chota Nagpore, the Orissa hills, and parts of Eastern and Northern Bengal, it must formerly have operated on a similar scale in Bengal proper and Behar."

"The tendency to imitate the usuages of the higher castes, which has been remarked in Behar and Chota Nagpore, operates much more strongly in Bengal proper and Orissa. In Orissa, for instance, the Goalas take a higher position than in Behar, and rigorously prohibit widow remarriage. Throughout Bengal the Kaibarttas, though ranking below the Nabasakh or group of thirteen (formerly nine) castes from whose hands an orthodox Brahman can take water, marry their daugthers as infants, and forbid their widows to remarry. In Dacca the gunny-weaving and mat-making Kapalis, and the Chandals, spoken of in Manu as 'the vilest of mankind', have given up widow remarriage, and the practice appears to be confined to the Gareri, Rishi, Koch-Mandai, and other aboriginal and semi-aboriginal castes. Similar evidence of the gradual spread of practices prevalent among the higher castes comes to us from Northern Bengal. The Rajbanshis of Rungpore, people of distinctly non-Aryan type, who have abandoned their tribal name of Koch in quite recent times, now pose as high-caste Hindus, and affect great indignation if asked whether their widows can remarry. The Paliyas of Dinagepore, also demonstrably Koch, fall into two sections — Rajbansi Paliyas and Byabahari, or 'common' Paliyas. The latter practise widow remarriage, but are begining to be ashamed of it, and in this and other matters show signs of a leaning towards orthodox usage. The former are as strict as the extreme ignorance of the 'fallen' Brahmans who act as their family priests admits; and as education spreads among them, they will go on continually raising their standard of ceremonial purity."

"It is clear that tendency of the lower strata of Hindu society is continually towards closer and closer conformity with the usuages of the higher castes. These alone present a definite pattern which admits, up to a certain point, of ready imitation, and the whole Brahmanical system works in this direction."

Also Gait wrote in 1911[1]:

"There are some castes, such as the Chasas and Khandaits of Orissa or the Kayastha and Sudras of East Bengal, which are nearly allied, though one ranks higher than the other. In such cases it is not unusual for members of the lower caste who rise in life to pass in course of time from the lower group to the higher. They begin by paying large sums for brides from the higher caste, and gradually become more and more closely associated with it, until, after several generations, their connextion with the lower caste is lost sight of, and they are regarded as genuine member of the higher . . .

"When a caste is prosperous beyond its neighbours, its members often become discontended with the rank assigned to them, and seek to change it. They cannot dispute the theory that caste is permanent and immutable, for Hindu society would never listen to such a heterodox idea. They therefore enlist the aid of fiction. They claim to be descended from some source other than that previously assigned to them; and if they can induce the Brahmans to endorse their claim, they often end by gaining general recognition for it, in spite of the opposition of rival castes who are adversely affected by their change of status.

"The Bengali Telis, for example, have largely deserted their traditional occupation of oil pressing in favour of trade, and are a fairly prosperous community. Under Warren Hastings, a high official, who belonged to their community, having amassed a great fortune, offered a munificent gift to the temple of Puri, in the hope of raising the status of his caste. The local priests refused to accept the gift from a member of a caste which was then regarded as unclean. The would-be donor appealed to the pandits of Hooghly and Nabadwip, and persuaded them to decide that the Bengal Teli is a trading caste, deriving its name, not from *tel*, 'oil', but from the *tula*, or 'balance', used by traders in their business. In consequence of this ruling the Telis in Bengal proper are now regarded as a clean Sudra caste, but in other parts of India they are still regarded as unclean. These Bengal Telis are gradually changing their name to *Tili*, while their original designation is being assumed by the Kalus, another caste of oil-pressers, whose social position is still very low. In the same Province the Chasi Kaibarttas pretend to be identified with the Mahisya, an extinct caste of much respectability."

Numerous such examples can be given to show that changes, if taking place at all, were *within* the institution of caste system. In the immediate past also the *modus operandi* remained the same. Thus Hutton, who was a member of the Indian Civil Service at the last stage of British rule in India, mentioned in his book entitled *Caste in India* that the Chasi Kaibarttas of Bengal, who are cultivators by caste-profession, were formerly of the same status in the caste hierarchy as the Jalia Kaibarttas, their counterparts, whose caste-occupation is fishing.

[1] cf. E. A. Gait's article entitled *Caste* in "Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics", p. 237.

But with the growing importance of agriculture in society (evidently because the crops were being turned into more important commodities than fish), the Chasi Kaibarttas began to differentiate themselves from the Jalia Kaibarttas by rating themselves higher than the latter. At first they refused to marry a Jalia Kaibartta girl and demanded higher bride price if a Jalia Kaibartta boy wanted to marry a Chasi Kaibartta girl. Later they completely broke off from the Jalia Kaibarttas and proscribed inter-marriage.[1]

From the above description of persistance and internal changes of the caste system during the British period, two main points are worthy of note. Firstly, as Risley remarked, it is true that this process of Hinduising the tribal and other peoples in society had been going on for a long time, but what is of greater importance to note is that the same process went on in the British period even though the previous relations of production within a subsistence economy had undergone changes in the later phase of commodity production and the caste system as a vital institution of the society had lost its basis with the destruction of the village community system. On the other hand, it remained as an obstacle to further social progress, for while the lower strata of the society were expropriated from their land and were "unpeasantised", this process did not lead to their emancipation from the caste-bondage as designed by the *usurping castes* of pre-British times. Now they remained subjected to the Caste Hindu ideology of the landlords within the *new* social order.

In the transitional phase of India's development from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century the non-Hindu and non-Moslem aboriginal peoples (along with many in these two communities) were veering round the Bhakti cult which spoke against caste-distinction and for the equality of all before God. But after the revival of religious orthodoxy and (particulary of Brahminism) and the resumption of a new socio-economic basis by the caste system in the economic structure of rural Bengal under British rule, these aboriginals came more and more under the domination of Brahminical ideology. Some of them did not totally give up the liberal teachings of the Bhakti movement and suppoted in some ways the views of Vaishnabism or such other schools of Bhakti cult; nevertheless, in course of time, all of them began to emerge as distinct castes within the Hindu fold just as the earlier aboriginals had become in the heyday of feudalism and Brahminical domination in India and Bengal. In 1882, Alfred Lyall spoke of "the gradual Brahmanising of the aboriginal, non-Aryan, or caste-less tribes" of India;[2] in 1891, as stated above, Risley described in his study on the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* that one of the most important features of this Brahminising was the transformation of the aboriginals into low castes within the Hindu community; and, as late as in 1951, the study on the *Tribes and Castes of West Bengal* made by the

[1] cf. J. H. Hutton's *Caste in India*, p. 51.
[2] cf. Alfred Lyall's *Asiatic Studies*, p. 102.

West Bengal census authority revealed how this process went on throughout the period of British rule and was still going on at the time of the census.[1] And that meant that the essential character of changes in the caste system was reflected in the tendency of the lower castes to "improve" their position, that is, to imbibe the traits of the upper castes, viz. that of their landlords and money-lenders. Like the Caste Hindus, they began to prohibit divorce and widow marriage, show their preference for child marriage, and even gradually accept the autocratic Brahminical cult with the observance of irrational food taboos.

On the basis of information available in Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* the following table has been prepared to show how as early as at the end of the last century one of the important customs of the orthodox Hindus, namely, child-marriage, had found its way among those who were later classified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Table 2.6

Type of marriage	Number of castes and tribes			Percentages of castes and tribes		
	Caste Hindus	Scheduled castes	Scheduled tribes	Caste Hindus	Scheduled castes	Scheduled tribes
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Child	56	10	2	63	31	7
Adult	7	3	17	8	10	63
Both	26	19	8	29	59	30
Total	89	32	27	100	100	100

Moreover, that the practice of child-marriage by the scheduled castes and tribes, like several other customs imbibed by them, is the result of their acculturation with the Caste Hindus is further evident from the following extracts from *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*:[2]

"1. Bagdi — A cultivating, fishing and menial caste of Western and Central Bengal. Appears to be aboriginal and Dravidian in descent. . . . Further east

[1] Referring to the role of Brahminism in society in the last phase of British rule, the Census Superintendant of West Bengal for the 1951 Census wrote (cf. A. Mitra's *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, p. 8):

"It is only in the course of the last eighty years, with the rapid and preternatural destruction of traditional skills, designs, techniques, markets and patrons, with nothing in their place to offer to castes so long employed in them who suddenly found themselves cast off their moorings, obliged to take to vocations other than their own, that caste lost whatever significance it had in the organisation of production. Stripped of its functional content, caste now seemed totally pointless; and instrument of oppression of Brahminism and little more".

[2] cf. A. Mitra's *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal, Glossary A — Scheduled Castes*, pp. 70—76.

the Bagdis are more and more Hinduised. In Bankura, Manbhum and parts of Orissa adult marriage is frequent which is rare in the east. In marriage the rituals are to a large extent borrowed from Hindu custom, *sindurdan* being considered the most important item in the more aboriginal sections. Sanga marriage of widows is allowed in most places. Divorce is not allowed in the more Hinduised sections. The Bagdis are served by degraded Brahmans. . . . The social status is very low.

2. Bahelia — . . . allied to Bedias. . . . Allied to Dosadhs according to Risley. (No further information).

3. Baiti — They are served by degraded Brahmans, but usually by the barbers and washermen.

4. Bauri — A caste of Western Bengal and Bihar of non-Aryan descent. Traces of totemism survive in many places. . . . As with Bagdis, the eastern groups are more Hinduised and employ patit Brahmans. In Bankura however they employ their own priest. . . . Both infant and adult marriages are prevalent. The marriage customs are much the same as with Bagdis. Divorce and widow remarriage are allowed. . . . Social status is the same as of Haris and Ghasis. In Manbhum and Birbhum they have a higher status and do menial work for even high caste Hindus.

5. Bedia — In Bengal it comprises a number of vagrant gypsy-like groups who can hardly be considered to form a caste.

6. Beldar — A wandering Dravidian caste . . . Allied to Binds and Nunias. Adult marriage still survives. Widow remarriage and divorce are allowed. Divorced women may also remarry. Social customs are much the same as of low class Hindus of Bengal. Maithil Brahmans are employed. Status about the same as that of Nunias, Goras and Bauris.

7. Bhuinmali — A menial caste of East Bengal. Risley thinks they may be remnants of an aboriginal tribe. In other parts of Bengal, Bhuinmali is considered to be the same as a Hari. . . . Gait notes that probably Haris who have given up scavenging and taken to more respectable occupations prefer the designation of Bhuinmali.

Bhuinmalis are served by degraded Brahmans, and by barbers and washermen who are also of the same caste. In some places Bhuinmalis have given up pork. It is only in the last century that they first declined to eat with Chandals.

8. Bhuiya — The name refers to a large number of groups distributed all over Northern India, many of them being parts of Hindu orthodox society . . . . Those in Hazaribagh and Santal Parganas are considerably Hinduised, and the more well-to-do among them describe themselves as Tikaits or Ghatwals and claim Rajput descent. In Orissa a large section took up military occupations and became merged in the Khandaits. In Bihar, on the other hand, the Bhuiyas came under the domination of the Hindus and as Musahars (rat-eaters) they took rank among the low castes of Bihar. In Orissa States, in Keonjhar, Bonai, etc., the tribal

organisation still exists, and the Bhuiyas of West Bengal, who are scheduled castes, are perhaps of the same class.

9. Bhumij — A non-Aryan tribe of Manbhum, Singhbhum and Western Bengal. They are closely allied to if not identical with the Mundas. According to Risley they are Hinduised Mundas who have severed their connection with the parent tribe. . . . Adult marriage still is the rule though among the higher classes of the tribe, the zamindars and landlords, infant marriage is gaining ground. . . . Widow marriage is freely permitted by the Sanga ritual, marriage to the husband's younger brother being proper. Divorce by husband for adultery of the wife is allowed. Divorced wives may marry again by sanga rites. The higher classes follow the Hindu religion while the mass worship Singbonga, Dharm and a host of minor gods, . . . The higher classes employ Brahmans while the mass are served by their own priests, the 'Layas'. . . . The landlord class claim to be Rajputs, while the mass rank below the Kurmi but above Bauris, Bagdis, etc.

10. Bind — A non-Aryan caste . . . Adult marriage is prevalent but infant marriage is considered more respectable. . . . Widows remarry by the *sagai* form and marriage to the younger brother of the husband is considered proper. Divorce is not allowed. . . . The Hindu gods are revered but so also are Bandi, Sakha, Gorai, Bhuia, Panch Pir, etc. Kasi Baba is the patron saint. . . . they are considered impure in many areas, though in other places they rank as Koiris and Gangotas and are served by Maithil Brahmans.

11. Chamar — Both infant and adult marriages are in vogue. Widows are permitted to marry again, the deceased husband's younger brother being considered to be the proper match. Divorce is allowed and the divorced wives may remarry. In Bengal they have no Brahman priest, one of their own elders serving as such. . . . Their position in the society is one of the lowest. . . . Muchis were doubtless originally a branch of the chamars though they claim to be a distinct caste of a somewhat higher position.

12(a). Dhoba — The washerman caste of Bengal and Orissa is entirely distinct from that of Bihar. . . . Infant marriage is the rule. Widow remarriage is not allowed in Bengal but permitted in Orissa. Divorce is not allowed. . . . They are served by degraded Brahmans. Their rank in society is low but Dhobas consider themselves superior to many castes and would not generally wash for Patni, Muchi, Namasudra and the Bhuinmali.

12(b). Dhobi — Among Bihar Dhobis infant marriage is the custom. Widows and divorced women may marry by the *sagai* rite. For widows the proper person to remarry is the deceased husband's younger brother. . . . In many places, apart from the Hindu pantheon, respect is paid to Gari Bhuia, Baram Ghosi, or Ghosi Pachain. They are served by degraded Brahmans. The social position is low, and the Dhobis rank with Mushahars, Beldars, Chamars, etc.

13. Doai — Probably allied to Hajang. Doais of Rangpur have no Brahmans and they eat pork. . . . In Dacca, the Doais have become fully Hinduised. . . . They are served by Patit Brahmans.

14. Dom — Risley considers Doms to belong to an aboriginal race. . . . Religious and social observances vary even from district to district, so also does the social organisation. In Central and Eastern Bengal infant marriage is the rule while in Bihar and West Bengal, adult marriage is also prevalent. . . . In West Bengal the marriage rites are more or less Hinduised. In Bankura and Birbhum they are mainly the same as those in vogue among the Bagdis. Divorce and widow remarriage are usually allowed and the divorced women may remarry. Except in Bihar where the widow is expected to marry the deceased husband's younger brother, there is no restriction on the widow. The widow is usually married by the *sagai* or *sanga* rites. The caste organisation is strong and widow marriages and divorces are controlled by the same.

In Bihar in some places the sister's son or the elest member of the family acts as the priest. In Bankura and some other districts, the priests are a special class of Doms, or Dharma Pandits act as priests. In Murshidabad and part of Manbhum a degraded class of Brahmans officiate as priests, while in Santal Parganas, barbers perform the functions of the priest. In Bengal, the Doms mostly lean toward Vaishnabism, . . . In Western and Central Bengal, the dead are cremated, while in Eastern Bengal it is reported that the dead are usually buried or thrown away in the rivers.

15. Dosadh — Risley describes them as 'a degraded Aryan or refined Dravidian' caste indicating a considerable admixture of blood. Both infant and adult marriages are in vogue. Some Dosadhs hold that an adult bride should be married in the *sagai* form, like the widows. Widow remarriage and divorce are freely permitted. The marriage ceremonies are simple and follow the middle class Hindu rituals. No Brahman is employed except by the well-to-do, who employ degraded Brahmans. . . . In Eastern Bengal Sakadwipi Brahmans officiate as priests, while in the Santal Parganas, the Dhobi and the barber act as such. . . . Their social status is very low — no better than Doms and Chamars.

16. Ghasi — A Dravidian fishing and cultivating caste . . . ranks with Musahars and Doms. Ghasis have their own priests . . . In Chottonagpur widow marriage and divorce are freely practised and the women are reputed to be very loose. Both infant and adult marriages are prevalent.

17. Gonhri — The physical appearance of the caste approaches the non-Aryan type. Both adult and infant marriages are prevalent but the latter is considered to be more respectable. . . . Widow remarriage and divorce are freely allowed and the divorced women may remarry. The Gonhris are orthodox Hindus and are served by degraded Brahmans. . . . The status is undefined. Brahmans generally do not take water from their hands.

18. Hari — Risley thinks that the caste has been largely recruited from the ranks of the aboriginal races. . . . Infant marriage is seemed more respectable than adult marriage. . . . Widow remarriage is allowed and divorce is also permitted. Divorced women may remarry. Widows and divorced women marry by *nikah* form. They are served by priests of their own caste called Pandits, but in some areas degraded Brahmans are employed. The sister's son usually officiates at the ceremony corresponding to the Sradh. The dead are usually cremated. No other caste will eat or take water from a Hari. Their social rank is of the lowest.

19. Jalia Kaibarta — (Details not available).

20. Jhalo Malo or Malo — Described by Risley to be the remnants of a distinct aboriginal (Dravidian) tribe, they themselves claim to be Jhalla and Malla Kshatriyas of Jhalawar and Mallagarh, respectively. Infant marriage is usual. Divorce and widow remarriage are not permitted. They are served by barbers, washermen and degraded Brahmans. They probably rank below Kaivartas.

21. Kadar — '. . . probably a degraded offshoot from the Bhuiya tribe' (R). Both infant and adult marriages are in vogue. Widows may freely remarry. Divorce is freely permitted and the divorced woman may marry. The village barber is the priest. They burn their dead. Their social position is quite low. Doms and Haris being the only people who will take either food or water from their hands.

22. Kandra — Widow remarriage and divorce are practised. The dead bodies are both cremated and buried. They are served by a degraded class of Brahmans. In 1901 they had no Brahman priests. They profess to be Vaishnabas but mainly worship village deities.

23. Kaora — In 1891, Kaoras were treated as a sub-caste of Dom. . . . They are also considered to be a sub-caste of Haris.

24. Karenga — (Details not available).

25. Kastha — They were described as clean Sudras in 1901. . . . They claim to be Kayasthas.

26. Kaur — A Dravidian cultivating caste . . . Dudh Kaurs are fairly Hinduised and have Brahman priests, who are engaged only in marriages. Infant marriage is in vogue. Widow remarriage and divorce are allowed, widows being expected to marry the deceased husband's younger brother.

27. Khaira — (Details not available).

28. Khatik — They are orthodox Hindus. No Brahmans are employed, the priest being members of the caste. Infant marriage is the rule. Widow remarriage and divorce are allowed. Social status is a little higher than that of Musahars.

29. Koch — Risley describes them as a Dravidian tribe with suspected admixture of Mongolian blood. Koches claim to be Kshatriyas and many of them probably returned themselves as Rajbanshis who however would have nothing to do with them. Ethnically Koches, Rajbanshis and Palias have the same origin according to Risley and this seems to be admitted generally.

30. Konai — In Pabna Konais are considered to be the same as Matials, who are returned in 1901 as Muchis. . . . The social rank is low. Widows are allowed to remarry.

31. Konwar — (Details not available).

32. Kora — A caste of Chhotonagpur, Manbhum and Western Bengal. . . . Koras of Bengal are more or less Hinduised. In Chottonagpur and Manbhum, adult marriage is the rule, and both widow marriage and divorce are freely allowed. Their priests are not Brahmans but Layas who are members of the same caste. The dead are buried or burnt. In Bengal, however, infant marriage is preferred, and widow remarriage has been practically abandoned. They are served by degraded Brahmans and do not touch beef. In religion the Koras profess to be orthodox Hindus.

33. Kotal — A small cultivating caste of Dravidian origin . . . They do not recognise widow remarriage or divorce, and are served by degraded Brahmans. In religion, they are orthodox Hindus, . . . In diet they are orthodox. Their social position is equal to that of Namasudras.

34. Lalbegi — They claim descent from a Mahomedan saint Lal Beg and follow many Hindu customs. . . . They marry young and allow divorce and remarriage of widows. They worship both Mahomedan Pirs (Pir Jahar and Panch Pir) and also Jagadamba and other godlings of lower caste Hindus. Their priest is of the same community. Except in East Bengal they take pork. They do not practise circumcision. . . . The dead are buried, the funeral ceremonies being Mahomedan.

35. Lodha — An aboriginal tribe . . . They marry young and do not allow widow remarriage or divorce. . . . They have their own priests who are also Lodhas and are called Kotals.

36. Lohar — The blacksmith caste of Chhotonagpur and Behar. Risley thinks that the caste is a heterogeneous aggregate comprising members of different castes and tribes. Accordingly customs regarding marriage, divorce, religion, etc., vary from place to place. In Behar Lohars rank with Koiris and Kurmis, Brahmans take wather from their hand and the social customs are mostly similar to those of orthodox lower Hindu castes. In Chhotonagpur on the other hand their customs are mostly similar to those of the aboriginal races. In Bankura degraded Brahmans are employed but usually the aboriginal priest and the local sorcerer minister to their spiritual wants.

37. Mahar — (Details not available).

38. Mahili, Mahli — A Dravidian caste . . . Risley thinks that the main body of the caste is merely branch of the Santals separated at a comparatively recent time. Both infant and adult marriages are practised but the former is considered more respectable. The bride and bridegroom are first married to trees. . . . Divorce and widow remarriage are allowed. Divorced women may remarry and marriage to a younger brother of the deceased husband is considered proper. The dead are

buried, but also burnt in some localities. Mahlis profess to worship Hindu gods but special reverence is paid to Barpahari (cf. Santals and Mundas) and Manasa (cf. Bagdis). They eat beef, pork and fowl and rank with Bauris and Dosadhs.

39. Mal — Dravidian cultivating caste . . . Beverley thinks that Mals and Mal Paharias as also Oraons and Savars are of the same origin. . . . Infant and adult marriages are both practised, the former being preferred. Except among Rajbanshi Mals of Midnapur, widows may remarry. Divorce is allowed and the divorced women may remarry. Mals are completely Hinduised in religion but Manasa is paid special reverence. Except in Santal Parganas where degraded Brahmans are employed, the priests are their own headmen or elders. The dead are cremated. Beef and pork are abjured but the social status of the caste is not higher than that of Bagdis.

40. Mallah — (Details not available).

41. Mal Paharia — They are an aboriginal tribe of Ramgarh Hills of the Santal Pargans. . . . Adult marriage is usual. Widow remarriage is allowed, that to the deceased husband's younger brother being considered proper. Divorce is also allowed and remarriage of divorced women permitted. . . . Ancestor-worship is much in vogue. There are also village gods. There are no priests. The dead are usually burnt.

42. Methor — The name is not strictly that of a caste . . . (They are sweepers by profession).

43. Muchi, Rishi, Ravidas, Ruidas — Muchis are by origin doubtless a branch of the Chamars, though its members repudiate that name and claim to be a distinct caste of somewhat higher social position (R). . . . Both adult and infant marriages are practised but the latter is deemed more respectable. Divorce is allowed for adultery. Divorced women and widows may remarry by the *sanga* form with the permission of the *panchayet*. Widow remarriage is already not in favour. The Barabhagia sub-caste abjure beef and are served by degraded Brahmans. The Chhotobhagia caste eat beef. Most take pork and fowl, and have their priests from among themselves.

44. Musahars — Both infant and adult marriages are practised. Divorce is allowed. Marriage of widows and of divorced women by the *sagai* form is also allowed. . . . They are not served by Brahmans who, however, are consulted for fixing auspicious days. At Sraddhas, the sister's son acts as the priest (cf. Dom). . . . Beef is forbidden except among the Pahari sub-caste.

45. Nagesia (Nagesae, Kisan) — (No details available).

46. Namasudra — According to Risley a non-Aryan caste of Bengal . . . According to Risley, Pods, Karals, Kotals, Nunias and Beruas are subdividions of the Namasudras. But Pods themselves claim to be a superior caste. Infant marriage is usual. Divorce is not allowed. Widow remarriage once universally practised is now practically prohibited. Namasudras are strict Hindus . . . They are usually

Vaishnavas and are served by degraded Brahmans. The washermen and barbers are Namasudras. . . . The social position of the caste is still very low.

47. Nunia — The Nunia is a Dravidian caste . . . closely allied to Binds and Beldars, who may have the same origin (R). Infant marriage is the fashion. Widow marriage is allowed in *sagai* form, that to the younger brother of the deceased husband being considered proper. Divorce is also allowed and the divorced women are allowed to marry in *sagai* form. They are served by Tirhutia Brahmans. Ordinary form of Hinduism is followed. . . . The dead are burnt. . . . In parts of Bihar they rank with Kurmis and Koiris but in other parts their status is lower and no higher caste will take water from them.

48. Palia — See Koch.

49. Pan — From totemistic organisation of the caste Risley thinks they are Dravidians and not of Aryan descent as suggested by Dalton. Adult marriage is usual. Widow marriage, preferably to the deceased husband's younger brother, is allowed. Divorce is allowed and the divorced women may remarry. Pans are not served by Brahmans. Their priests are either Pans themselves or of the Nagesia caste. Religion is sort of bastard Hinduism. . . . The dead are burnt but also buried in Lohardaga area. They eat beef, pork and fowl and their social status is exceedingly low.

50. Pasi — This is a Dravidian caste . . . Infant marriage is considered respectable. Widow marriage in *sagai* form, preferably to the younger brother of the deceased husband, is allowed. Divorce is allowed and dirvoced women may remarry. Pasis are Saktas. Some sub-castes now employ degraded Brahmans. In funeral ceremonies, the sister's son even now officiate as the priest . . . Most of the Pasis eat fowl and field rats and rank with Binds and Chains.

51. Patni — Risley considers Patnis of Dravidian descent. According to Dr. Wise, Patnis were originally Doms. In North Bengal they are known as Dom Patnis. Now they claim to be Lupta Mahisyas which is strongly resented by the Mahisyas themselves. Infant marriage is the rule. Widow remarriage and divorce are not allowed. . . . Patnis are served by degraded Brahmans. . . . Brahmans would not take water from their hands. The Dhobas and the Napits are of the Patni caste. They rank with Jalia Kaivartas.

52. Pod — They marry their daughters early, forbid widow marriage and do not recognise divorce. They are orthodox Hindus and are served by degraded Brahmans. Their status is low, almost the same as of Bagdis. They now claim to be Pundra Kshatriyas.

53. Rabha — (Details not available).

54. Rajbanshi — See Koch.

55. Rajwar — A cultivating caste . . . probably of aboriginal origin. Both infant and adult marriages are practised. Widow remarriage is allowed in *sagai* form but is growing unpopular. Divorce is allowed and the divorced women

may remarry. The dead are burnt and a piece of bone is saved for being thrown in the Ganges or the Damodar. They profess to be Vaishnavas and are served by degraded Brahmans. The social rank is low and the Brahmans will not take water from their hands.

56. Sunri — Infant marriage is practised while widow remarriage and divorce are strictly prohibited. . . . Sunris observe the usual social and religious customs of the middle-class and are served by degraded Brahmans. In spite of their high economic position, the caste has a very low status. The Dhobas and the Napits are recruited from the Sunri caste.

57. Tiyar — The decrease in number in 1941 is probably very largely, if not entirely, due to the claim of the caste to be Rajbanshis or Mahisyas. (CB 31—487). They also call themselves Tilak Das and Suryabangshis. The name is probably dervied from Sanskrit Tivara, which means a hunter. It is a Dravidian boating and fishing caste . . . Infant marriage is usual, while widow remarriage and divorce are not recognised. Tiyars are all Vaishnavas. . . . Social status is uncertain in some places. They are usually not served by Dhobas and Napits. The priest is a degraded Brahman. The Bihar Tiyars have, in many cases, customs which differ from corresponding customs of Bengal Tiyars.

58. Turi — A non-Aryan caste . . . They are a Hinduised offshoot of Mundas (R). . . . Adult marriage is the rule. Widow marriage in *sagai* form is allowed, preferably to the younger brother of the deceased husband. Divorce is also allowed and the divorced women may remarry. They are being rapidly Hinduised and many now belong to the Siva Narayano sect. But Baranda Bhut and Bura Buri are held in special reverence. Except the Siva Narayanis, Turis are lax in matters of food, beef and pork being eaten by most others."

The above extracts give an idea of the result of acculturation of the aboriginals with the Caste Hindus; namely, while the *social forces* turned them into the so-called Scheduled Castes in society, governed by the Caste Hindu ideology the aborignal peoples began to adopt the custom of infant marriage, prohibit or restrict widow remarriage and divorce, and accept the Brahminical food taboos, etc.; and, as they became more and more Hinduised, they made attempts to rise in status in society not by proclaiming the equality of all irrespective of any birth qualification but by proclaiming a more "respectable" origin for themselves (such as belonging to the *varna* of Kshatriyas) than accepting their tribal origin.

Thus it is seen that the caste system, (which having passed the usefulness it had in the feudal times as supplying the framework to the Indian social organisation had come under severe attacks in the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries from the movements of the people, because it impeded further progressive development), was re-established with renewed vigour with the consistent support Brahminism received from the ruling authorities and the stability it gained by dovetailing its structure within the newly-evolved economic structure. The upshot was not

only that among the Caste Hindus the regenerated force of Brahminism enforced the position of individuals as cogs in the wheel of the caste-machinery with little scope for the expression of individual initiative and aspirations, but also, as ordained by the social order during British rule, among those aboriginals who henceforth came within the "civilised" society the caste-ideology and the imitation of the socio-religious practices of the higher castes began to produce pernicious effects. The eagerness of the so-called scheduled castes and tribes to rise up the caste ladder even at the cost of giving up what social and spiritual freedom they had before, which Risley and others indicated in the above extracts, became one of the common instances of the worst effects of acculturation among the lower strata of the Hindu society.

The second point which is worthy of note from the above extracts is that commodity production having become the dominant note in the agrarian economy, changes *within* the caste system began to be effected by no other *value* than the differentiation in the society between rich and poor. Thus Risley spoke of changes when the "leading men of an aboriginal tribe, *having somehow got on in the world and become independent landed proprietors*, manage to entrol themselves in one of the leading castes"; Gait noted cases "for members of the lowest caste who *rise in life* to pass in course of time from the lower group to the higher" or "when a caste is *prosperous beyond its neighbours* its members often become discontended with the rank assigned to them, and seek to change it"; and Hutton pointed out a good example in this connection. Furthermore, this relation between the transformed character of the economy and changes in the caste system was also indirectly stressed by Risley when he remarked that "It is curious to observe that the operation of these tendencies has been quickened, and the sphere of their action enlarged by the great expansion of railways which has taken place in India during the last few years". In other words, while the tendencies noted by Risley were present in pre-British times, later they were quickened by the introduction of railways which, as explained in the last chapter, helped to transform the agrarian economy from subsistence to commodity production by providing an efficient system to transport grains to the urban markets and overseas, and thus paved the way for further exploitation of the masses of the people through the landholder cum sharecropper relationship.

Thus it is seen that not only the loss of its previous economic basis did not destroy the caste system, but even the distinction by wealth in an economy of commodity production, which under normal circumstances should have cut across social distinctions based on birth-qualification, led on the contrary to further intensification of the institution within the society. This was so because while the crops had become commodities, the relation of production was not that between a wage-labourer selling his labour-power as a commodity and an employer of wage-labourers buying that commodity. On the other hand, the

relation that evolved and persisted under British rule was that between a rent-receiving landholder (whether he took a fixed land-rent or a share of the crops) and a peasant (whether he had tenancy right or not) who had to provide capital and labour for production; and on the basis of this relation of production the "upper Caste Hindus" forming the bulk of the class of landlords dominated the social life of others.

Indeed, that the social order which emerged during the British rule preserved the caste outlook in society is further evidenced by fact that the same process of Hinduisation of the lower strata of society by the Caste Hindu landlords of the upper strata (as implied in the writings of Lyall, Risley, Gait, etc. in the nineteenth and in the early years of the twentieth centuries) went on even in later years. As late as in 1943 Elwin, the well-known anthropologist, described the same process of Hinduisation of the "aboriginals"[1], and in the same year Ghurye, the reputed Indian sociologist, although he disagreed with Elwin and painted a favourable picture of the Caste Hindus, admitted that "some part of the discomfort (of the 'aborigines') is, no doubt, the direct consequence of the very nature of caste society"[2]. Moreover, he made it clear that:[3]

"The largest part of the distress (of the 'aborigines') is due to the loss of land, which, as we shall presently show, was facilitated by the British system of revenue and law. This system was introduced against some of the most earnest appeals made by very able and sympathetic administrators. And even when official after official, and report upon report, drew pointed attention to the evil wrought by this system, the high command of the British administrative machinery failed to rise to the situation, unless rudely shaken by violent disturbances — and then, too, in a piecemeal fashion. Divested of the potentiality of land-grabbing, Hindu contact would have been nothing but an unadulterated boon to the so-called aboriginal tribes."

Here, of course, Ghurye appears to have missed the essential feature of contact of the Caste Hindus with the "aboriginals", for it started with the "land-grabbing", as he aptly described the economic basis of such contact; and because of this the Caste Hindus could dominate over the detribalised population both economically and socially.

Furthermore, it should be noted that while Elwin spoke about the "aboriginals", meaning thereby the tribal peoples of India, Ghurye qualified the term and preferred to call them "Backward Hindus". This suggests that the way of life of these people is true, to a very great extent, for all members of the lower strata of the Hindu society. Indeed this is the point which Ghurye substantiated in his book, although he was not interested to look at it from the angle the present writer is in-

[1] cf. Verrier Elwin's *The Aboriginals.*
[2] cf. G. S. Ghurye's *The Aborigines — "So-called" — and Their Future,* p. 63.
[3] *ibid.,* p. 63.

clined to, namely, to note the dominance of the Caste Hindu ideology in the whole society. D. R. Gadgil stated in the Preface to the above-mentioned book by Ghurye:[1]

"Dr. Ghurye rightly points out that the problem of the 'so-called' aborigines is not essentially different from that of other classes in Hindu society who are social and economically depressed."

If it is now recalled that the people of the lower social strata represent economically a large section of the disintegrated peasantry and that the landlords belong mainly to the upper social strata, it will then be fully realised how the social order forbade the people from breaking through the institution of caste system.

5. Moslem Community and the Social Order

Like the ideological domination over the other members of the Hindu community by the "upper Caste Hindus", the persistence and elaboration of the functional castes among the Moslems, although Islam does not encourage any caste barrier, and the introduction of the dowry system in marriage among the wealthier Sayyad Moslems in place of their traditional practice of ensuring the security of the bride through a *mohar nama* or bride-price, are two typical examples of acculturation into the Moslem community from the "upper Caste Hindus". The dowry system was deliberately introduced by many Moslems belonging to the upper class in order to be in par(!) with the upper class Hindus. A saying became current among them that "you can get *any man* for your daughter, but if you want a *bridgeroom* (meaning a distinguished person) you must pay". Such was the outcome of imbibing a decadent ideology from the "upper Caste Hindus", that is, from the *usurping castes* of pre-British days, to which social group most of the Hindu landlords in the British period were affiliated.

The persistence and elaboration of the functional castes among the Moslems were also obviously due to accepting the Caste Hindu ideology in the same way as applied to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. This was very well noted by Gait in 1911. To quote[2]:

"The conventional division of the Indian Muhammadans is into four groups: Shaikh, Saiad, Mughal, and Pathan. Persons who, at the present day, describe themselves as Mughals and Pathans are usually descended, at least on the male side, from immigrants belonging to those races, but no such inference can be drawn from the use of the words Saiad and Shaikh. The real meaning of *Saiad* is a descendant of 'Ali', Muhammad's son-in-law, by his wife Fatima, and a *Shaikh* is an Arab. In India, however, the former term is appropriated freely by Muhammadans of any class who have acquired wealth and a good social position, while

[1] *ibid.*, p. xiii.

[2] cf. E. A. Gait's *Caste*, pp. 238—249.

the latter is often used indiscriminately by all local converts to Muhammadanism — and the majority of Indian Muhammadans are of this category — who do not belong to one or other of these functional groups of which no note is taken in the conventional classification of Muhammadans referred to above. This is especially the case in Bengal. In Northern India conversion to Islam does not so much affect a man's social status, and many castes, such as Rajput, Gujar, and Jat, are divided into two sections, one consisting of Muhammadans and the other of Hindus. The so-called Shaikhs are for the most part cultivators. Many of those who claim the title are known to others by less complimentary names, such as Nao-Muslim or Nasya.

"The Muhammadans themselves recognize two main social divisions: Ashraf, or noble, including all undoubted descedants of foreigners and converts from the higher Hindu castes, and Ajlaf, or common people. The latter term comprises all local converts of low origin, including most of the Shaikhs, and the various functional groups, such as Jolaha, or weaver; Dhunia, or cotton-carder; Khulu, or oilpresser; Darzi, or tailor; Hajjam, or barber; Kunjra, or greengrocer; and many others. These functional groups have *panchayats* who manage their affairs, and who, in many parts, exercise almost as rigorous a control as the managing body of a Hindu caste. Amongst the social offences of which they take cognizance are the eating of forbidden food, adultery, divorcing a wife without due cause, making a false accusation against a caste-fellow, and marrying persons not belonging to the group. The same state of things prevails in Upper India amongst those who have become Muhammadans without giving up their original caste distinctions. Such persons not only remain in their original social group, but also preserve most of the restrictions on social intercourse, inter-marriage, and the like, which they observed when still Hindus. Except in Upper India, the Muhammadans who do not belong to the above-mentioned functional groups, i. e. the Ashraf and the cultivating Shaikhs, have usually no *panchayats*. They are thus more free to follow their own inclinations, and there are, therefore, fewer restrictions on marriage. The pride of blood amongst those of foreign descent is, however, considerable. They keep a careful record ot their traditions and family connextions, and it is the general practice for a Saiad to marry a Saiad, a Pathan a Pathan, and so forth. But so long as both parties belong to the Ashraf community, no slur attaches to mixed marriages. On the other hand, intermarriage between Ashraf and Ajlaf is reprobated, and it is seldom that a man of the higher class will give his daughter to one of the lower. It is not so objectionable for an Ashraf man to take a wife from amongst the Ajlaf, but he is looked down on if does so, unless he has already one wife of his own class. Amongst the cultivating Shaikhs the restrictions on marriage are slight.

"The extent of the control exercised by the *Panchayats* in the case of the functional groups varies in different parts of the country; but where it is fully deve-

loped the groups concerned constitute regular castes of the Hindu pattern. There are fewer restrictions on eating with members of other groups than there are amongst the Hindus; but the rule that a man may not marry outside the limits of his own group or pass from one group to another is equally rigid. There is, however, this marked difference, that although a Darzi cannot become a Dhunia, or a Dhunia a Jolaha, there is no great difficulty in the way of a member of any of these groups who rise in life joining the ranks of the Shaiks or even of the Ashraf. There is a well-known proverb, 'Last year I was a Jolaha, this year I am a Shaikh; next year, if prices rise, I shall be a Saiad'. A well-to-do man of a functional group will often drop the functional designation, call himself Shaikh, and, by dint of hospitality, secure for himself a circle of friends from the poorer members of the Ashraf community. He will then marry into an Ashraf family, possibly of doubtful status, and his son may hope to be recognized as a true Ashraf. These changes are accompanied by a gradual change of name. A hypothetical Meherulla, for example, will become first Meheruddin, then Meheruddin Muhammad, and then Muhammad Meheruddin. He will next prefix Maulvi to his name and add Ahmad, and will finally blossom into Maulvi Muhammand Meheruddin Ahmad.

"*To sum up, it may said that, though caste is unknown to the Muhammadan religion, it exists in full force amongst many of the Muhammadans of Upper India, and in all parts of the country amongst the functional groups that form the lower strata of the community. The other Indian Muhammadans, though they do not recognize caste, have, nevertheless, been so far influenced by the example of their Hindu neighbours that they have become far more particular about their matrimonial alliance than are their coreligionists elsewhere.*" (my emphasis — writer).

Two things are worthy of note from the above extract. Firstly, as was found in the case of the Scheduled Castes and the detribalised population, even during the British days the orientation of the functional castes within the Moslem community was to rise up to the level of Sayyads instead of directly challenging the caste system. Secondly, here also it is found that this was attempted on the basis of *differentiation* within the landlord-controlled agrarian economy of commodity production. Thus, the Jolaha of the proverb, which incidentally is a Bengali one, could become a Shaikh because agricultural prices were high, and expected to become a Sayyad, that is, to reach the top of the social hierarchy, provided the agricultural prices remained high. Evidently, instead of denouncing the caste system as an institution, the same economic and social forces worked among the Moslems as among the Hindus, for they were subjected to the same social order. And, therefore, as is evident from what O'Malley wrote in 1913 in regard to one of the most important functional castes in Bengal, the social order remained as an obstacle to further progress among the Moslems also. To quote O'Malley[1]:

[1] cf. *Report of Bengal*, Census of India: 1910, p. 495.

"The Jolahas, writes my correspondent (Maulvi Muhammad Abdul Aziz, Probationary Deputy Collector, Arrah), 'will rather give their daughter in wedlock to a lazy, worthless, penniless and consumptive boy, belonging to their own caste, who will die the day after marriage, and leave the girl an unfortunate widow all her life, than marry her to a well-to-do, good-looking and stout youth of another caste'. A childless Jolah cannot even adopt as his son and heir a child of another caste. Widow marriage is also a serious offence, the punishment for which is permanent excommunication in rural areas."

Such was the outcome of acculturation of a decadent ideology within a social order which forbade progress.

6. Destructive Role of the Social Order

It has rightly been said that culture like electricity flows from a higher to a lower potential. The landlords, who dominated the society, being mainly the "upper Caste Hindus", their outlook towards life was diffused over the entire society. But this outlook did not lead to social emancipation of the masses and the growth of a new and progressive conception of life. Just as in the economic sphere the mass of the disintegrated peasantry (belonging in large numbers to the lower strata of the Hindu society or of the Moslem community) were squeezed out of their production-relation as "cultivator" and were led to successive stages of pauperisation while being kept as "peasants" and not as wage-labourers, so their orientation to the Caste Hindu ideology of their landlords did not affect any progressive change in their social and spiritual outlook. On the contrary, as Risley remarked in 1891, even whatever education could be received by these people of the lower strata, within the prevailing socio-economic set-up it hardly gave them a breadth of vision and thus led them to social emancipation. Moreover, while it could have been expected that at least some of the educated from this strata would come up with a clear notion of the social forces and would then break through the caste system, it is seen that even whatever facilities for education there were in the rural areas, they were mostly usurped by the upper stratum in society.

In Bengal, as in the rest of British India, education was exceedingly backward. During 1940—41 only 3.19 millions of children attended the rural schools which usually teach up to the primary standard with an occassional irregular class.[1] This number of students accounted for barely one-fourth of the total population of age 7—17 in rural Bengal according to the 1941 census.[2] In this situation, even

[1] cf. *Report on Public Instruction*, Government of Bengal.

[2] The age-group of 7—17 years has been taken into consideration to examine the spread of primary and secondary education in the rural areas because these ages are the approximate limits in primary and secondary schools in rural Bengal.

the meagre facilities that existed under British rule were utilised by the "upper Caste Hindus" mainly, and then by the Sayyad Moslems. This can be seen from the following table which has been prepared from the 1931 census data.[1]

Table 2.7

Social hierarchy	Population	Literate	Illiterate	Literate in English	Percentage of	
					Literate to the total population	Literate in English to total Literate
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
"upper Caste Hindus"	3,125,361	1,112,911	2,012,450	446,878	36	40
"lower Caste Hindus"	4,548,588	676,316	3,872,272	109,585	15	16
Scheduled Castes	4,418,082	212,678	4,205,404	26,683	5	12
Sayyad Moslems	162,905	35,864	127,041	9,903	22	28
Jolaha Moslems	270,300	19,242	251,058	3,055	7	16

As a legacy of the past, this situation remained true even after four years of independance of India. This will be realised from the table below which has been prepared from the 1951 census data for West Bengal.[2]

Table 2.8

Classes of economic structure	Total population	Literates	Percentage of Literates to total population
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
I	103,881	72,274	70
II	7,914,775	1,278,353	16
III	5,920,449	445,147	8
All "agricultural classes"	13,939,105	1,795,774	13

The above table shows the class-basis of education in rural Bengal, with which the possibility of utilising the educational facilities by the different units of the

[1] Vide Imperial Table XIV for Bengal, *Census of Bengal: 1931*, Vol. V, Part 2 of the Census of India: 1931. The table gives *Literacy by selected castes, tribes, races, and social groups.*

[2] Vide *Census of India 1951*, Vol. VI — West Bengal, Sikkim, and Chandernagore, Part II— Tables, State Table E and Union Table D VII.

As explained before, the classes of economic structure for the Table 2.8 have been derived in accordance with the definition of the "agricultural classes" in the census tables. The classes, therefore, refer only to those members of society, who depend primarily on the agrarian economy.

social hierarchy is obviously correlated because of the close association between this hierarchy and the economic structure.

Thus being conditioned to the caste-ideology from all aspects, the people in the lower social strata in rural Bengal were so steeped in the notion of caste and communal segregation in society that even their political and economic revolts sometimes took a peculiarly obscurantist character. As is well known, in the present century many Moslems were led to believe that the Hindus were their enemies. The Hindu landlords were posed before the Moslem peasantry more as Hindus than as landlords, and the upshot was that, for a temporary period at least, many of them were persuaded to make alliance with the Moslem landowning class instead of with the Hindu peasantry who shared the same fate as the former under the same set of landlords. Similar distortion also took place in the political and economic outlook of the Scheduled Castes peasantry, although it did not reach such virulence as it was between the Hindus and the Moslems. And it would be no exaggaration of facts to state that the growth of the communal organisations like the Moslem League or the Scheduled Castes Federation in the rural areas were typical examples of this distorted outlook of the Moslems and the Scheduled Castes peasantry.

Needless to say, the "upper Caste Hindu" landlords also endeavoured to avoid the inevitable resolution of the economic tension between them and the dispossessed peasantry by conditioning the mass of the people into the Caste Hindu ideology. Many of them therefore took up their stand in the Hindu Mahasabha and similar communal organisations. The following extract from O'Malley's book *Indian Caste Customs* is very revealing in this context:[1]

"In the past it (caste system) has helped to save Hindu society from disintegration and Hindu culture from destruction. Through successive conquests and revolutions it has been a stable force, and its stabilizing influence is not without political importance at the present time, when the communist movement is said to be a menace to India. A system which is permeated by religion is utterly opposed to the Bolshevist doctrine of a war upon religion. The idea of a class war is alien to a people which believes that the social hierarchy is divinely ordained and that equality is not only contrary to experience but is impossible because each man's state of life is predetermined by his actions in past lives.

"*Many thoughtful Indians are therefore strongly in favour of the caste system on the ground that it is a bulwark of society against revolutionary assault.*" (my empbasis — writer).

These "thoughtful Indians" obvoiusly belonged to the class of landlords to whom it was most necessary to preserve the myth that "the social hierarchy is divinely ordained".

[1] cf. pp. 180—181.

Indeed, this distortion of the natural outlook of the people went to such a length that is was possible to divide the subcontinent of India and thus weaken both the States formed thereby. Moreover, the two States could not find peace even after nearly a decade of separation, for it is unlikely that they will ever find peace until the distorted outlook of the Hindu and the Moslem masses is put right. On the same basis, even at present, caste and communal organisations in the Republics of India and Pakistan are doing harm to the progressive movements of the respective peoples.

In this way the peculiar development of the economy of rural Bengal during British rule left its imprint on the most important social institution, namely, the caste and communal division of the people. Needless to say, the social grouping of a people follows its own laws and possesses a life of its own; but the foregoing analysis has also shown how the social organisation must be amenable to the basic character of the economy and how the latter influences the social life of the people. Thus it has been seen that the orientation to the "upper Caste Hindu" ideology of the bulk of landlords did not give the mass of the pauperised people a new conception of life. On the contrary, this segregating ideology had such a pernicious effect on the society that sometimes even the fight for economic emancipation took a peculiarly retrogressive character which dissipated the energy of the people without showing them the way out of the impasse. And all this was possible because of the association of the economic structure of society with the most important social institution, viz. the caste system.[1]

One may therefore conclude from the above study that it has been possible to unravel the peculiar characteristics of the social and economic life in a "peasant" society because of studying the economic structure and examining its relation to the social organisation of the people. Otherwise, not only the basic character of the economy would not have been revealed (as found from the previous chapter), but it would not also have been possible to obtain a clear picture out of the contradictory views that the caste system is a thing of the past and that it is the *innate* characteristic of Indian life. There cannot be any doubt, therefore, that, in order to examine the dynamics of a society, and for a "peasant" society also, it is indispensable to study its economic structure; and that this is necessary even for a proper understanding of its social institutions.

[1] It should however be noted that the above analysis should not give the impression that there were no movements of the people to counteract their economic and social disintegration and to usher in a life of prosperity and progress. But the present study being restricted to the *main effects* of the social forces working in Bengal at a particular period in her history, a discussion on those movements has been considered beyond its scope.

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