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Reflections on Agrarian Change in India since Independence: Does 'Landlordism' Still Matter?

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Reflections on Agrarian Change in India since Independence: Does ‘Landlordism’ Still Matter?

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Abstract:

Since the ‘green revolution’ of the 1970s and 1980s agrarian capitalism in India has continued to develop. What was called ‘semi-feudalism’ has indeed ‘met the market’ (Rogers and Rogers 2001). Although both landlessness and inequality in land ownership have increased, the differentiation and polarization of peasant classes that was anticipated by some has almost frozen. Today’s ‘classes of labour’ reproduce themselves through a range of mostly precarious activities which may include some own cultivation. Land is no longer so much the basis of status and power – as both caste hierarchies and farmers’ movements have weakened. Poor, lower caste people have loosened the ties of dependence, but without securing much political leverage for themselves. New patterns of inequality and of exclusion are emerging, and they sometimes involve the reproduction of power by the old locally dominant castes of the principal landholders/landlords. The many people who are effectively excluded do not appear to constitute anything approaching a ‘classe dangereuse’ in the eyes of the dominant castes/class.

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Reflections on Agrarian Change in India since Independence: Does ‘Landlordism’ Still Matter?¹

Though there are some differences of emphasis among them, all three of the major left parties of India, the CPI(M), the CPI and the CPI(Maoist), continue to stress the significance of ‘landlordism’ and of the failure of successive governments of India to resolve the agrarian question. The current programme of the CPI(M) argues:

3.15 The agrarian question continues to be the foremost national question before the people of India. Its resolution requires revolutionary change, including radical and thoroughgoing agrarian reforms that target abolition of landlordism, moneylender-merchant exploitation and caste and gender oppression in the countryside. The bankruptcy of the bourgeois-landlord rule in India is nowhere more evident than in its failure to address, much less solve, the agrarian question in a progressive, democratic way.

3.16 After independence, instead of abolishing landlordism, the Congress rulers adopted agrarian policies to transform the semi-feudal landlords into capitalist landlords and develop a stratum of rich peasants. The legislative measures for abolishing the old statutory landlordism permitted them to get huge compensation and retain big amounts of land. Implementation of tenancy laws, which provided for the right of resumption of land under the pretext of self-cultivation led to the eviction of millions of tenants. Land ceiling laws provided sufficient loopholes to maintain large holdings intact. Millions of acres of surplus land were neither taken over, nor distributed to the agricultural workers and poor peasants. The record of the Congress party is one of monumental betrayal of the historic opportunity for rural transformation.

3.18 In agrarian relations, the major trend has been the development of capitalist relations in the countryside which is characterised by: The proletarianisation of large sections of the rural working masses and a huge increase in the number of agricultural workers as a proportion of the rural population; the accelerated differentiation of the peasantry; production for the market; the large-scale eviction of tenants holding traditional leases; and increased levels of re-investment of capital in agriculture and agriculture-related activity by the rural rich, particularly landlords, laying the basis for the reproduction of capital on a scale that did not hitherto exist. [Paragraph 3.19 then proceeds to argue that there is considerable variation between regions in terms of the development of capitalist relations of production and that ‘there are regions where old forms of landlordism and tenancy and archaic forms of labour service, servitude and bondage still play an important part in agrarian relations ... *Capitalist development in Indian agriculture is not based on a resolute destruction of older forms*, but has been superimposed on a swamp of

¹ This paper was written for the Conference on Agrarian Transformation in India, held at Wolfson College, Oxford, 13-14 July 2011. I am grateful to Dr. Alpa Shah of Goldsmiths College, University of London, for the invitation to participate in the conference

pre-capitalist production relations and forms of social organisation. The development of the "modern" does not preclude the continued existence of the archaic: *India is a vast and living example of the rule that capitalism penetrates agriculture and rural society in a myriad ways*'. (emphasis added)]

3.24 The development of capitalism in agriculture under State sponsorship has led to a sharp division between the rural rich comprising the landlords, capitalist farmers, rich peasants and their allies and the mass of the peasantry mainly agricultural workers, poor peasants and the artisans. The subsequent policies of liberalisation in agriculture have further increased the burden on the rural poor. It is this exploitative order which is responsible for mass poverty. Without breaking the land monopoly and ending the debt burden of the poor peasants and agricultural workers, the basis for the economic and social transformation of the country cannot be laid. [Thus the first task of the People's Democratic government is to 'Abolish landlordism by implementing radical land reforms and give land free of cost to the agricultural labourers and poor peasants']

The CPI provides less substantial argument but also states:

The Alternative Path suggested by the Party in the interest of the democratic development of India's society should stress certain features. A few of these are:

* **Land reforms**, which implies distribution of all ceiling lands, bhoodan land and government waste land to the landless must have top priority. The possibility of lowering ceiling in areas which are coming under irrigation should be explored. Suitable legislations, if necessary be enacted to achieve this. But the main thing is to struggle for it by mobilizing the landless. All attempts to do away with ceiling laws or bypass them through lease and contract, corporatisation, farm houses transgressing into agricultural lands etc. should be firmly opposed.

Capitalist relations have largely penetrated into agriculture. But there are vast regions, especially in the Hindi belt, where the old feudal relations, landlordism, and religious institutions continue to exist and hold the peasants in bondage. They have large landholdings in their possession. It is land redistribution which will strike a blow at the social, economic and ideological base of landlordism of the old type. It would rouse the potential of the basic rural masses and revitalize our rural scene. (emphasis added)

The CPI(Maoist) takes very much the same line:

The countryside is dominated by landlords, usurers, merchants and religious institutions. These exploiting sections are the mainstay of the semi-feudal relations of production in the country. All these facts show that our country is a semi-feudal country. This class of feudal landlords protect and instigate casteism, communalism, superstition and maintains private armies, or goonda forces, perpetuates medieval oppression on the rural masses, and oppressed dalits, adivasis and women through often perpetrating massacres, rapes etc. It is this class of oppressors who hold social and political power ... No doubt, with the 'Green Revolution', some new class forces have emerged on the scene, but this so-called capitalist development has brought nothing except misery and resultant discontentment among the peasant masses, that too, on a massive scale. *Despite some changes in the areas of the 'Green Revolution', no significant change has occurred in the*

semi-feudal relations of India as a whole. [Consequently one of the primary tasks of the new people's democratic state, that the Maoists envisage will be established by revolution, will be to 'confiscate all land belonging to the landlords and religious institutions and (to) redistribute it among the landless poor peasants and agricultural labourers on the slogan of "land to the tillers"']. (emphasis added)

There certainly are differences of emphasis in these statements, with the CPI(Maoist) sticking to its line that the agrarian economy is still characterized primarily by semi-feudalism, while the older parties maintain that capitalist relations of production have penetrated much further. But there is really no difference between them when it comes to programme: all continue to advocate radical redistributivist land reform. There is no longer any echo of such a policy line on the part of either the Congress-led UPA government – which agreed with its partners in the Common Minimum Programme only to establish 'clear land titles' – or of the BJP opposition, which promises, however, to protect the land rights of farmers who confront demands for the appropriation of their land. Though neither of the pre-eminent national parties had much to say at all about the agricultural economy in its manifesto for the 2009 General Election there is good reason for thinking that both of them are sympathetic to arguments for an increased role for corporate capital in agriculture.

In this paper I aim briefly to trace the history of scholarly analysis of agrarian production relations in India, and to offer some assessment both of what scholars argue about the current status of these relations, and of what their arguments suggest in regard to the programmes of the left parties. Certainly some recent scholarship – such as that which records the declining power of caste hierarchies (Manor 2010), or the reduced significance of the village as a social entity in present-day India (Gupta 2005) – appears on the face of it to challenge the idea of the continuing importance of landlordism. Dipankar Gupta says 'What land reforms and land redistribution could not do, demography and sub-division of holdings has done to land ownership. Where are the big landlords? There are some, but they are few and far between' (2005: 752). He goes on, however, to say 'But does this make the village an egalitarian utopia? Far from it!' In the present context, therefore, are there grounds for questioning the continued emphasis of the left on redistributivist reform? The paper interrogates arguments about the contemporary significance of agrarian power, concluding in the end that land is no longer so much the basis of status and

power in rural society and that poor, lower caste people have loosened ties of dependence. Yet new patterns of exclusion and of inequality are clearly emerging.

A brief history of studies of agrarian production relations

India's agricultural economy, outside some pockets of commercial farming, had stagnated throughout the latter part of the colonial period in the first half of the twentieth century, and productivity was much lower than elsewhere in Asia. The London *Economist*, in its issue of 16 August 1947, at the time of India's independence, expressed the hope that 'the energy of the new governments [of both India and Pakistan] will be concentrated without delay on the fundamental question of increasing agricultural production' (cited by Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 10). But as it turned out, relatively little attention was paid to agriculture by the planners of India's economic development until, twenty years after 1947, problems of food supply brought it to the forefront of their concerns. Some leading members of the Congress, however, had for long recognized the problem of agrarian class relations in India. At the heart of the problem, in their view, was landlordism – the concentration of economic power in the rural economy in the hands of a small number of very large landholders, usually absentees, who held sway over what was often a hierarchy of tenants with varying degrees of security of tenure – together with the highly unequal distribution of landholdings, which meant that very many were uneconomic. The whole made for what Daniel Thorner, a fugitive in India from McCarthyism in his native United States, only a little later described as '(The) complex of legal, economic and social relations uniquely typical of the Indian countryside [that] served to produce an effect which I should like to call that of a built-in "depressor"' (Thorner 1956: 16). With this term he referred to agrarian production relations such as those depicted very clearly in the first village study conducted by the Agro-Economic Research Centre for Eastern India, that of the village of Sahajapur, in Bhirbhum District of West Bengal, in 1955–56 (AERC 1958). About 60 per cent of all the land owned by the 133 households of Sahajapur at that time was in the hands of just four men, each of whom gave out large amounts of land for cultivation by share-croppers, who also depended substantially on the same four landowners for advances of paddy loans that attracted very high rates of interest. These landowners accounted, too, for a large share of all the paddy sales from

the village, about 50 per cent of which they were able to make in the lean season when prices were at their highest. What Thorner described as ‘the depressor’ refers to such agrarian production relations – those that made it paying for landlords to live by appropriating rents, usurious interest and speculative trading profits from the impoverished mass of the peasantry, and thereby limited the possibilities of productivity raising investment in technical change. The landlords had no incentive to invest; the impoverished peasant masses were left with no means of investment.

It was these conditions that the *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* of 1949 sought to change, through radical reform (that would deliver ‘land to the tiller’) and the establishment of a pattern of village-based cooperative farming. Such ideas continued to be debated through the 1950s and they were put forward again in the ‘Resolution on Agricultural Organisational Pattern’ that was moved before the annual meeting of the Congress held in Nagpur in 1959. The defeat of this resolution, thanks to the campaigning against it organised by Charan Singh, leader of rich peasants from Uttar Pradesh, finally marked the failure of the Nehruvian state to resolve India’s ‘agrarian question’ (exactly as the CPI(M) argues in its programme, quoted above) – and this in turn substantially helps to account for the relative failure of planned economic development in the country (as Suikhamoy Chakravarti suggested: 1987).

The final version of the India’s First Five-Year Plan (1951–56) did endorse the main recommendations of the Agrarian Reforms Committee, whilst stopping short of a generalized attack on private property, and legislation enacted in various major states between 1950 and 1954 did bring about a major change in the pattern of land ownership across large parts of the country, through the abolition of intermediary rights and tenures (that had been controlled by the tax-farming *zamindars*). But neither these reforms, nor subsequent legislation that was supposed to bring about redistributive land reform, brought about the end of ‘landlordism’ – exactly as the CPI(M) argues in its programme. In practice it was the larger occupancy tenants – a class of rich peasants – who benefited most from zamindari abolition and who increased their political power (already established within the Congress in the 1930s) and were able to undermine and frustrate further attempts at agrarian reform (as at Nagpur in 1959). Thorner’s ‘depressor’ remained in place.

India's agriculture benefited from investments in irrigation development and the expansion of the cultivated area in the 1950s, and total agricultural production between 1952–3 and 1964–5 grew by 3.42 per cent per annum – though production of food grains grew only at 2.75 per cent, barely keeping pace with population growth. Under the most considered and significant of all India's economic plans, the Second Five-Year Plan (1956–61) agriculture was treated as a kind of 'bargain basement', it being assumed that output could be increased primarily through institutional measures rather than requiring substantial outlays (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 60–65), and not long afterwards, in the mid-1960s, the country faced serious shortages of food. It was in this context that agriculture at last became a priority for planners and the government adopted what became known as the New Agricultural Strategy, intended to make agriculture more productive through technological investments and price incentives; and it was at this juncture that the new higher-yielding varieties of wheat and rice began to be introduced and the 'green revolution' took off, from the later 1960s.

Although the 'green revolution' had both a positive impact on the productivity of Indian food grains agriculture and ultimately a positive impact on poverty, through increased employment and a tightening of rural labour markets – reflected in increasing real wages in agriculture in the 1980s – and through lower food prices (Lipton with Longhurst 1989), the principal beneficiaries were again the rich peasants who were in the best position to take advantage of the new technology. As was said at the time, though the technology of the 'green revolution' was technically scale neutral, it was not 'resource neutral'. Thus it was that Indian scholars, stimulated at first by Ashok Rudra in articles published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, began to debate the development of capitalist agriculture and the differentiation of the peasantry. At the same time, however, others – notably Amit Bhaduri – developed ideas about agrarian relations comparable with those of Daniel Thorner, into a more rigorous theory of 'semi-feudalism' (Bhaduri 1973), providing a stronger theoretical basis for the idea that agrarian power relations blocked the transition to more productive capitalist agriculture. Meanwhile Krishna Bharadwaj in her work on 'production conditions in Indian agriculture' (1974) advanced ideas about what she referred to as the 'compulsive involvement in markets' of the mass of smallholding peasant producers in India. With this term she spoke of 'the category of the

economically very weak sections of the peasantry ... all of whom have an extremely weak “bargaining” position in the markets. Yet they cannot avoid involving themselves in market operations ... The higher degree of monetization of inputs and outputs on very small farms [attested in farm management survey data] indicates this element of compulsive involvement in markets, reflecting conditions of distress’ (Bharadwaj, in Harriss 1982: 272). Later Bharadwaj and Bhaduri both spoke of this in terms of the phenomenon of ‘forced commercialisation’ (Bharadwaj 1985). These latter arguments, in particular, about semi-feudalism and forced commercialisation, justified the continued emphasis in the programmatic statements of left parties in India, on the need for redistributive land reform and fundamental changes in the organization of agricultural production (on lines, in fact, very much like those that had previously been advocated by the Congress party).

This, then, was the historical conjuncture and the intellectual context of the end of the 1970s when an international group of scholars brought together by the American SSRC began to debate ‘Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity’ [*APAP*] (the title of the book that they published in 1984: see Desai, Rudolph and Rudra, eds, 1984). The book as a whole represents an important set of reflections upon agrarian change in India up to the mid-1980s, after which time studies of the agrarian economy and society began to be much less prominent than they had been, and analysis of agrarian production relations – until much more recently – to mark time.

As Susanne Rudolph says in her introduction to *APAP*, ‘The central problematic ... was how local power structures impinge upon levels of and changes in agricultural production or productivity. The focus on local agrarian structures quickly expanded to suggest the relevance of translocal forces as well. But the question remained, do some [local] power relations obstruct productivity? Do others facilitate it?’ (1984: 12). The group was concerned with such questions as that of the persistence or not, in the context of the increasing commodification of Indian agriculture and the possible or actual development of agrarian capitalism, of the production relations described by Thorner as ‘the depressor’ and theorized by Bhaduri as ‘semi-feudalism’ – or what has been, and continues to be referred to by the left parties, as ‘landlordism’. In other words, did the particular concentration of economic power in the South Asian countryside, reflected especially in inequalities in landholding, still constrain the development of agricultural

productivity, or not? In the context of ‘green revolution’ did the historically often observed inverse relationship between farm size and productivity – perhaps resulting in part at least from the ‘compulsive involvement’ in markets of small producers – still hold, or not? How did agrarian power structures vary across the region, with what consequences, and how were they changing?

Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity

Two themes, or sets of arguments, stand out in *APAP*. The first has to do with theory and methodology. The collection as a whole emphasizes the importance of locality (whilst not neglecting the importance of translocal influences), and in doing so it brings out the importance of specific histories. As Meghnad Desai wrote in the collection, ‘given the uneven regional development of different parts of South Asia, a production of ecological and historical forces, it is incorrect to put a single label on the entire subcontinent ... (and) ... when it comes to analyzing local situations, sufficient attention has to be paid to the historical background’ (1984: 176). Amen to that. This unexceptionable statement should be read, however, with reference to the context of the literature of that moment: many of the contributions to what was called at the time ‘the mode of production debate’, concerned with the development of capitalism, or not, in Indian agriculture, were marked by a formulaic, generalized history (Harriss 1980). *APAP* as a whole, in contrast, shows the unevenness of the commercialisation of agriculture across different regions of India, the acute difficulties of generalization and the bluntness of universalizing theory. Marxist theory was not spared, though the authors addressed, notably, the limitations of neo-classical economics.

The second important set of arguments in the book is that which provides substantive answers to the central problematic that *APAP* addresses. Against the powerful argument that “‘semi-feudal’ configurations [or ‘the depressor’] block the transition to a technically progressive capitalist agriculture’ – an idea that was taken very seriously at the time by the Planning Commission’s *Task Force on Agrarian Relations* – the central finding of *APAP* was that ‘the relationship between power structures and productivity (is) highly variable’ (Rudolph 1984: 12–13). Sukhamoy Chakravarti, B.B.Chaudhury and Ronald Herring all advanced

empirical evidence refuting the semi-feudal thesis. Herring summed up his own review of evidence and argument, saying that:

Contrary to a great deal of received theory, there does not seem to be much evidence that traditional social organizations of production mandate agricultural stagnation. This does not mean that some structures of economic and political power locally are not immediate obstacles to productive investment ... but that at the farm level and the aggregate level the question of change over time is rooted in the size and disposition of the economic surplus in interaction with state policies toward agriculture and the resulting opportunity structure as perceived by those classes which command the lion's share of the surplus. *These questions are then empirical and cannot be settled at the theoretical level* (Herring 1984: 216, emphasis added)

A critical argument for Herring was that it is the deployment of the surplus that is crucial for agricultural productivity, and that the form of appropriation of surplus does not determine its deployment. He, and other contributors to *APAP* agreed that the concentration of scarce resources in the hands of powerful agriculturalists, often at the expense of the less powerful, commonly reduces the productive potential of small farms – but he pointed out that it could also encourage entrepreneurial risk-taking on the parts of some, at least, of the power holders. In the context of a modernizing agricultural sector, the evidence – Herring believed – now showed that the classic inverse relationship between farm size and productivity, so often referred to as constituting an essential reason for advocating redistributive land reform, probably no longer held.

Generally, the argument of the book was that the association between power and productivity is shaped by variations in regional political economy and ecological circumstances – and it seems not at all in conflict with the argument that is still put by the CPI(M) in its programme: that ‘Capitalist development in Indian agriculture is not based on a resolute destruction of older forms, but has been superimposed on a swamp of pre-capitalist production relations and forms of social organisation’. It was concluded (at least by Susanne Rudolph) that ‘the case for altering the power structure has to rest mainly on political and equity grounds [not on grounds of its contribution to agricultural growth]’ (Rudolph 1984: 15). Herring argued, more provocatively, that ‘in a modernising agricultural sector, land control becomes less determinative of both political and economic power’ (1984: 203). These are arguments that I want to consider

further in the context of what has been happening more recently in Indian agriculture and in rural society.

Agriculture, the Rural Economy and Agrarian Production Relations in the Early C21

Amidst much controversy over the process and impacts of the great shift in economic policy in India that is commonly seen as having been initiated by the ‘economic reforms’ instituted by the Congress government in 1991 – though is now seen as having been initiated even earlier (see Kohli 2006) – one set of facts is widely accepted: the agricultural economy has been largely neglected by the policy reformers, and agriculture has increasingly lagged behind the rest of the economy – which in turn is no longer affected nearly so much as it was in the past by variations in agricultural production (Chandrasekhar 2007).

It is extremely difficult, indeed, given the considerable variance in the performance of the agricultural economy from year to year – due to the highly uncertain climatic conditions characteristic of most of India – to draw clear-cut conclusions about growth trends, and much depends of course on which years or groups of years are taken for comparison over time. Still, there is no doubt about the fact that the growth of agriculture has lagged behind that of the rest of the economy. That this has been particularly marked in the period of high overall growth after 2003 was recognized both by the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, in speeches made in June 2010 (see *The Hindu* 18 June and 20 June 2010). Both regretted that agriculture had been growing at a rate of only about 2 per cent per annum, as against the target of 4 per cent per annum set in the Eleventh Plan, and both spoke of the need to raise the growth rate. The estimates made by Bhalla and Singh (2009) of the annual compound growth rate of value of agricultural output show this as having increased at the rate of 3.37 per cent per annum in 1990–93 over 1980–83, but at only 1.74 per cent in 2003–06 over 1990–93. Panagariya (2008) has more bullish estimates but still shows the agricultural growth rate in 2000–2006 as having been lower than in the period 1951–65. The noted agricultural economist A. Vaidyanathan argues, however, that ‘rigorous statistical tests on official time series do not provide strong corroboration of a progressive deceleration of

agricultural growth' (2006: 4011). But he points out as well that these data also show that the average of annual changes in total output, area and yields are lower, and much more volatile, over the 15 years after 1989 than they were in the preceding period of 20 years. The problems of the agricultural economy over the recent past are strongly attested, quite apart from the evidence that is found in the increased incidence of suicides reported amongst farmers.

What seems to have happened is that the productivity gains of the 'green revolution' were pretty much exhausted before the end of the 1980s, with yield levels having reached a plateau, while the costs of cultivation continued to climb. This was, in part, because of the necessity for farmers to use increasing amounts of increasingly costly and increasingly ineffective plant protection chemicals, and fertilizers, while in major areas of agriculture dependent upon groundwater irrigation rapidly retreating water tables also increased the costs of cultivation (Harriss-White and Janakarajan 2004). Public investment in agricultural infrastructure and research had declined (Ramachandran and Rawal 2010), and alongside it, private investments as well (they have generally gone in tandem with public investments). Neither the earlier mode of state intervention in agriculture, however, nor the more recent liberalisation policies, effectively addresses fundamental problems having to do with the inefficient and often wasteful use of agricultural resources – including the failure to use irrigation water efficiently, partly because of neglect of the maintenance of irrigation structures and limitations of their design; excessive use of chemical fertilizers; and degradation of soils. There is a long history of poor use of key agricultural resources in India, in comparison with China and elsewhere in East Asia. This was a theme developed years ago by Myrdal in his monumental *Asian Drama* (1968). In the early 1950s, Myrdal showed, the overall productivity of agriculture (in relation to land) was roughly twice as high in China as in India – and it remains so still. In 1999–2000 yields of rice per hectare in China stood at 4.1 tonnes, while in India they were just under 2 tonnes (and still only 2.1 tonnes in 2009–10). The problems of agricultural productivity are connected with institutional weaknesses, as in irrigation management – which is also generally much more efficient in East Asia – and in credit and marketing organization, that are in turn compounded 'by government policies for [subsidized] pricing of water, electricity, fertilizers and credit which induce demand growth far in excess of available supplies ... and encourage inefficient use of scarce agricultural resources' (Vaidyanathan 2006:4013; and see Harriss-White and Janakarajan

2004). And, it should be added, disproportionately benefit wealthier farmers in richer states such as Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. Tackling such problems calls for more than just increasing public investment (see also Vaidyanathan 2010, chapters 4 and 5).

How important, then, is agrarian power/landlordism now, in accounting for the problems of agricultural productivity? How has the agrarian structure of India changed over the last quarter-century since the publication of *APAP*? What is the nature of the agrarian question now? A starting point in answering these questions is in the following three (interlocking) propositions (after Harriss 2010: 144–47):

- (1) The differentiation and polarization of peasant classes has nearly frozen;
- (2) Land is no longer so important as the basis of status and power (exactly as Herring suggested in *APAP*, see above), and neither does it serve to limit the livelihood possibilities of the poor;
- (3) The poor have loosened ties of dependence but exercise little leverage over the political space.

Some of those who contributed to the ‘mode of production’ debate of the 1970s thought that the differentiation of peasant classes – towards the establishment of an agrarian capitalist class and a substantial rural proletariat – was proceeding apace, but with the advantage of hindsight it is clear that Byres’ argument that what was taking place was rather ‘partial proletarianisation’, with small and marginal producers continuing to reproduce themselves, partly by virtue of labouring outside agriculture, was substantially correct (Byres 1981). The Indian agricultural economy is still characterized by extensive small-scale, household-based production. The distribution both of ownership and of operational holdings is distinctly pear-shaped, and what are described as ‘marginal’ operated holdings (of one hectare, or less, in extent) now account for 70 per cent of the total. Most such holdings are unlikely to be capable of ‘providing enough work or income to be the main livelihood of the household’ (Hazell et al. 2007: 1). The point is proven in findings of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies from village surveys in Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra that it was virtually impossible in

2005–06 for households with operational holdings of *two* hectares of land or less (who account for all but a small share of all the cultivators in the country, clearly), to earn an income sufficient for family survival. The net annual incomes from crop production of very many households were actually negative (Ramachandran and Rawal 2010). Household reproduction now very often takes place as a result of migration (both rural–urban and rural–rural, and short term and long term), of the remittances associated with it, and of increasing employment outside agriculture but still within the rural economy (though the levels of such employment have not grown very strongly in the recent past, and much of it probably is driven by distress). The significance of labour migration is highlighted, for example by Gerry and Janine Rodgers in their study of two Bihar villages over 40 years (Rodgers and Rodgers 2011), in Jan Breman’s studies of the ‘footloose proletariat’ of south Gujarat (2007), and in a re-study of a Tamil village (Harriss et al. 2010); and some estimates suggest that there may be as many as 100 million migrant workers in the country. A more reliable estimate from the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector is that the number of seasonal migrants is of the order of 30 million (while Jan Breman suggests that it is likely to be closer to 60 million). As Bernstein has argued, more generally, the dominance of capital today is no longer expressed in ‘classic’ capital–labour relations. There are, he suggests, ‘classes of labour’ pursuing their reproduction ‘through insecure and oppressive – and typically increasingly insecure – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure “informal sector” (“survival”) activity, including farming’ (Bernstein 2008, cited by Lerche 2010: 65).

The differentiation and polarization of peasant classes has, therefore, nearly frozen. Estimations made by Vikas Rawal (2008), using data from the 59th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) for 2003–04 show that 31 per cent of rural households across the country as a whole own no land at all, and another 30 per cent own less than 0.4 hectare (or about one acre of land), while only a little over 5 per cent of households own more than three hectares (and just 0.52 per cent own more than ten). Still, the absolute numbers and the relative share in the rural population of households without land – which have for long been considerable – have been increasing, so differentiation hasn’t quite frozen. The data from 2003–04 are not strictly comparable with those from an earlier round of the NSS, for 1992, but Rawal suggests that they show an increase of as much as six percentage points in landlessness, while inequality in land

ownership also increased. Over most of the country, however, ‘landlordism’, as I defined it earlier, seems to have declined. The share of leased-in land in the total operated area, according to the NSS, declined from only 10.7 per cent in 1960–61 to just 6.5 per cent in the *kharif* (summer) season of 2002–03; while field studies suggest that much of the land that is leased-in these days is *from* smaller to larger landholders (as Rodgers and Rodgers report from Bihar, arguing as well that tenancy ‘no longer plays a central role in economic control’ : 2011, 46). Traces of classic landlordism remain, however. The dependence of very many in the rural economy upon borrowing money at usurious rates of interest has almost certainly increased again in recent years, as a result of financial liberalization (Ramachandran and Rawal 2010), and those who are able to secure surplus product can still make speculative trading profits. Inequality in land ownership still gives considerable power locally – economic, social and political – to the relatively small numbers of larger landowners and the increasing numbers of capitalist farmers. How, then, can I argue that ‘land is no longer so important as the basis of status and power’?

Part of the argument here has to do with what some scholars refer to as ‘the declining power of caste hierarchies’: ‘Caste [has come increasingly] to denote not hierarchy but difference. Lower status groups [are] well advanced in the transition from subservience to negotiation. For one anthropologist, G.K.Karanth, this trend has gone so far in most villages that it is now inaccurate to say that a caste “system” exists there, because that word implies greater order than we actually find ... It is difficult to overstate the importance of this change’ (Manor 2010: 10). Local caste dominance, based on control of land, and through control over land the capacity to exercise control over people, is no longer so significant as it was. One statement of this comes from a village study in Bihar, where it is said that: ‘

The importance of land as a factor of livelihood and dominance is decreasing and other factors of production are becoming more important ... more and more people are losing interest in village affairs. The urge to dominate over the lower castes always had a political-economic angle, and once the locus of the economy has partially shifted away from the village, the tendency to dominate is beginning to wither away’ (Singh 2005: 3173).

Jeffrey Witsoe, from another village in Bihar reports that ‘Over the last two decades, Rajput dominance was replaced by the emergence of multiple power centres’ (2011: 20). In this case the decline of caste dominance has had to do with wider political changes; in the former

case it has been the outcome of economic changes, such as those that I noted earlier which have meant that people depend increasingly on income earned outside agriculture and outside the village, and which have been so widely reported. In other cases, as the profitability of agriculture has declined, or as a result of the ways in which members of landowning higher castes have sought to secure their continuing status distinction, there has been a tendency for them to move out of agriculture (Mayer 1996 and Harriss 2006 on the former and Gidwani 2000 on the latter). Alongside these developments there has sometimes come about the emergence of a new and very different generation of local leaders, as Krishna (2003) has explained with regard to rural Rajasthan, from amongst the educated but often unemployed younger men, including some from a dalit background.

Of course there are a huge difficulties with generalizations about the decline of dominance based on land control, for the sorts of reasons noted years ago by the authors of *APAP*. There is enormous variation from region to region and from locality to locality even within one region. To refer to the last point alone, about the emergence of a new class of local leaders, this is noted, too, by Surinder Jodhka from Punjab. But Jodhka reports that there the new ‘political entrepreneurs’ though not necessarily rich ‘are invariably from upper or dominant caste groups’ (2011: 16). And the proposition that ‘land is no longer so important as the basis of status and power’ should certainly not be overestimated. There is a strong tendency for those who have been rural power holders to invest outside agriculture, and in education, sometimes so as to secure employment in the public sector (see, for example Rutten 1995 on the former, and Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008, on the latter) - and through these means they have secured the reproduction of their power regionally, even if it may have been diminished in the village.

It is true that the class power of rich farmers coming mainly from upper-middle castes appears to have declined significantly. ‘Farmers movements’ that strongly represented the interests of the most intensively commercialized producers became a major factor in Indian politics in the 1980s (Brass, ed. 1995), but have declined substantially since the early 1990s. The fact that they are so divided, notably over reactions to the globalization of the Indian economy – supported by the Shetkari Sanghatana, one of the biggest farmers’ organizations, and vehemently opposed by others, especially by the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha [KRRS], which has been a

darling of the anti-globalisation movement internationally – does not help their case. Jonathan Pattenden, from a village study of the KRRS (2005), has shown that all the conditions that had been conducive to KRRS mobilisations in the 1980s started to break down by the middle of the 1990s. The intensification of commercial agriculture had created circumstances that provided for cross-class mobilisation, and the burying of caste and class differences, for the time-being, by conflict between the peasantry generally, and the local state and merchants. At the same time the profitability of agriculture made available resources – notably of time, for richer peasants – for engaging in mobilisational activity. The decline in the profitability of agriculture changed all of this. Non-agricultural activities and incomes became much more important and those more influential people who had been the local leaders of the KRRS became interested rather in ‘gatekeeping activities’ – roles in which they mediate between other people and the state, and are able to use these roles to secure resources for themselves (for example, from the allocation of ration cards). The significance of such roles – and the opportunities opened up by them – have been enhanced by political decentralisation through panchayati raj and increasing political competition. In one sense this account of changes that have taken place in rural Karnataka substantiates the point that land in itself is no longer so much the basis of power and status – but it also shows how local power is still reproduced.

The collective class power of the rich peasantry/big farmers of India has diminished over the last two decades, however – as, in Pattenden’s words, ‘the sense of togetherness that had accompanied [the rise of the farmers’ movements] had been replaced by a growing social fragmentation with people “looking after themselves”’ (2005: 1982). Meanwhile the ties of dependence upon them of poorer people from lower castes, have unquestionably been weakened. Empirical examples of this come from village studies in the very diverse settings of Tamil Nadu, where dalit labourers are no longer dependent in the way they were 30 years ago on the dominant landowners, and real wages for agricultural labour have at last broken through long-running stasis (Harriss et al. 2010), Bihar (see Bhushan Singh’s study, cited earlier), and Punjab (the work of Surinder Jodhka). Reports of the local impact of what is now called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, that gives rural people the right to up to 100 days of employment in public works, further underline these points. Even if a significant

share of the public resources devoted to the scheme are diverted through corruption, the fact of the right to and of the availability of such employment contributes significantly to the countervailing power of rural labour, which is disproportionately dalit, and can push up rural wages (e.g., Harriss et al. 2010). In some cases this may have a negative impact, of course, on agricultural production and productivity because it can lead farmers to take land out of cultivation. For all these reasons, it is quite clear that local agrarian power is not what it was – though even so, as I have argued, those who have been locally powerful have often been adroit at hanging onto power, though more outside than within village arenas.

And there still is a link between agrarian power, much modified though it now is, as a result of the changes that have taken place in India's economy, polity and society, and agricultural productivity. The fundamental problems, across the country as a whole, of the wasteful and inefficient use of agricultural resources, that I referred to earlier, do substantially reflect the continuing political weight of the 'farm lobby', diminished though it may be. Successive governments, national and state level, have continued to find it extremely difficult to reduce the burden of subsidies that, as Vaidyanathan (cited above) put it, 'encourage inefficient use of scarce agricultural resources'. Those who are locally powerful continue to manipulate, for example, the use of irrigation water and the management of irrigation structures in ways that are wasteful and inefficient. The paradox (as it seems) that agrarian power undermines agricultural productivity remains, in this way, as powerful as ever it was.

Conclusion

I have sought to bring out the nuances and even contradictions in contemporary trends of agrarian change. The development of agrarian capitalism has continued since the high days of the 'green revolution' when the mode of production in Indian agriculture was so much debated. In the words of the title of an article on their work in Bihar villages by Gerry and Janine Rodgers, 'semi-feudalism has met the market' (Rodgers and Rodgers 2001) – even though traces of it may still remain (as the same authors have argued more recently: 2011). The differentiation and polarization of peasant classes that was anticipated by some scholars has almost frozen, even though both landlessness and inequality in land ownership have increased, because of the ways

in which present-day ‘classes of labour’ reproduce themselves through a range of mostly precarious activities which may include some own cultivation. In this context land is no longer so much the basis of status and power – as studies both of the declining power of caste hierarchies, and of the weakening of farmers’ movements have shown - and poor, lower caste people have loosened the ties of dependence, though still without being able to secure much political leverage for themselves. And ‘new patterns of inequality, exclusion and adverse incorporation’ (Rodgers and Rodgers 2011: 49) are clearly emerging, such as those that are described in terms of ‘neo-bondage’, and sometimes involving the reproduction of their local power by some of those, at least, from the old locally dominant castes of the principal landholders/landlords. These conclusions are borne out, for notable example, in Jan Breman’s studies over the last half-century, in south Gujarat. He notes, sadly, at the end of his most recent study, that there is rather little sign that those very many people who are effectively excluded are coming to constitute anything approaching a ‘classe dangereuse’ from the point of view of the dominant castes/class; and, he says, ‘the idea of natural inequality continues to be the cornerstone of the social fabric’ (2007: 438).

I believe, therefore, that there is strong evidence for thinking that the agrarian production relations described by Daniel Thorner as ‘the depressor’, modeled by Amit Bhaduri as ‘semi-feudalism’, and referred to by the left parties as landlordism, have been substantially transformed over large parts of India. Yet the rural economy is still characterized by considerable, possibly growing inequality, and by social exclusions relating to caste. Is there, then, still a case for redistributive land reform, as the left parties continue to maintain? Vikas Rawal, from his study of household level data from the 48th and 59th rounds (1992 and 2003–04) of the National Sample Survey, on landholdings – and whose calculations, cited above, on the distribution of ownership holdings, lend support to some of the figures given in their programmes by both the CPI(M) and the CPI(Maoist) – provides a careful argument to show that there is still a potential for redistribution, even after decades in which there has been an enormous amount of subdivision of holdings. Rawal provides ‘ballpark estimates’, on the basis of the admittedly crude assumption of a uniform ceiling on ownership holdings of 20 acres, to show that ‘there is about 15 million acres of ceiling surplus land in India’. As he goes on to say ‘this is more than three

times the total amount of land that has ever been redistributed under land reform programmes in all states' (2008: 47). This is not to say that there is a large potential for redistribution, given the fact that such a very small proportion of agricultural land in India has been redistributed hitherto, but still, it lends weight to Michael Lipton's conclusion in his recent comprehensive restatement of the case for land reform that '*in South Asia, still containing half the world's poor, 10ha is in most countries a large owned farm (and) there is scope for some further land reform, but land shortage and growing [though still, surely, seriously inadequate – JH] non-farm work opportunities may largely limit it to creating tiny "home-gardens" for increasingly part-time rural farmers*' (Lipton 2009: 9, emphasis added).

Case there may be for continuing to press for redistributive land reform, but there is little sign of political mobilization to make claims for it, even on the part of the CPI(M) which has been responsible for such success as there has been in India in bringing about reform, in its two bastions of Kerala and West Bengal. And now the CPI(Maoist), whilst it continues to hold to the programmatic statements cited earlier, appears in practice to have shifted its focus to struggles over the dispossession of especially tribal people in Central India, to make way for infrastructural, industrial and mining projects. Susanne Rudolph's conclusion in *APAP* that 'the case for altering the power structure has to rest mainly on political and equity grounds' might actually be amended, because land reform would contribute to weakening the influence of the 'farm lobby' that is partly responsible for the persistence of conditions in India that undermine agricultural productivity. There is little indication, however, that the case has real political traction. Agrarian power will probably be reduced in the end rather by the development of the non-agricultural economy, by the opening up of more productive employment opportunities outside agriculture (the severe lack of which is the great limitation of India's remarkable economic growth of recent years), and by the deepening of substantive democracy as decentralized democratic institutions become more powerful.

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