

Peasants' choices? Indian agriculture and the limits of commercialization in nineteenth-century Bihar¹

By PETER ROBB

This essay discusses agricultural decision making in one part of India, in Bihar, which was socio-economically 'backward' yet deeply involved in commercial production during the nineteenth century. The combination of allegedly discordant characteristics is usually attributed to 'forced commercialization', the presumption being that the norm is free entry into the market. The term does not disturb the sway of most economic theories, which assume that capitalism was exported, and closed systems were opened out, as international trade expanded—a model which fits poorly with an agricultural system previously but still incompletely market-involved, as in much of India. Intellectually and in reality, we find here the imperialism of western economics, if 'empire' be understood as rule over diverse 'nations'. An enormous growth in trade obviously had major consequences, but not just from western influence driven by western demand and power. Generally, India modified British ideas and institutions, and allowed their adoption by Indians. Hence the essay will question the idea that economic change has comprised a one-way traffic to a single destination, and turned subsistence peasants into capitalist farmers or landless agricultural workers under the influence of the market, a picture now rejected by some economic historians of India. It will place a marker limiting the depth of commercialization, and of capitalist development.

I

The approach is encouraged by current interpretations of eighteenth-century India which seek to replace the notions of political anarchy and economic decline with (at least for some areas) a picture of growing trade, developing merchant culture, and the involvement in agricultural production of territorial magnate-traders. The economy was characterized by a high

¹ Several of the discussions of the London Third World Economic History Group at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, have contributed to the ideas presented in this essay; Kaoru Sugihara's comments have been invaluable. A version of the paper was read to the Economic History Society at Exeter in 1989; it is an abridgement of part of the argument of a book in preparation on the British and nineteenth-century Bihar. See the **Footnote references** below for general sources on the eighteenth century and commercialization outside Bihar, and for works by authors mentioned without footnoting.

degree of political and fiscal intervention.² Trade had given rise to various family firms and castes, and to communities cutting across caste, which exchanged, insured, and transported money and goods. The pillar of indigenous mercantilism was the command of labour, of landed peasantry through rent, and more directly of large numbers of landless and dependent smallholders. To extract produce or stimulate production, in order to match demand, the elites invested directly in irrigation or provided incentives to break in new land. But, most characteristically, they lent money or seed at the time of ploughing and sowing, recovering the investment at the harvest. In the same way they used food loans to secure seasonal labour. By such means, too, a merchant could readily introduce a new cash crop or even bring new areas under the plough.

In describing this society, one should not expect a precise and exclusive functional definition for such words as 'landlord', 'tenant', 'peasant', 'banker', 'merchant', or 'state'.³ In Bihar in the early 1800s, mixed occupations were common, and perhaps the norm among artisans, so that (splitting actual and ritual concepts of labour) most of those whose caste names implied they would be working at a craft may have been engaged in agriculture. This suggests that demand was low and cultivation relatively more profitable than most trades, and also that labour would be available to the elites.⁴ Conceptually, merchants, moneylenders, and cultivators and so on existed, but roles were often multiple, ambiguous, or overlapping. Even at the village level, though a few cultivators, artisans, and labourers followed their occupation exclusively, many dabbled in several roles. The typical eighteenth-century merchant house, too, financed agriculture, farmed land revenue, lent out money, traded locally and at a distance, probably managed money transfers, and possibly took in deposits. But there was also, paradoxically, an unusually strong tendency for economic functions to be subdivided. The land- or revenue-focused power set up and taxed markets, placed tolls upon roads, fords, ferries, landings, and gateways, but also provided a host of specialized agents who exacted the taxes and fees, and acted as go-betweens, adjudicators, weighers and measurers, operating between the principals in commercial and financial transactions. The typical creature of the age was the *dalal*, the broker, who was not of one character but of many. Even in a small market such apparently inseparable operations as introducing the parties to a bargain, setting a price, weighing or assessing the produce, verifying the payment, accepting it, and recording the deal, might each be entrusted (even product by product) to a specialist intermediary who enjoyed a local monopoly backed by political power and paid for in cesses.

² Bayly, 'Indian merchants', p. 178. Various papers read at SOAS by G. D. Sharma and Madhavi Bajkewal also contributed to this account.

³ See Robb, 'Ideas', pp. 18-23. Clearly, these theoretical objections apply also to terms such as 'market', 'economic', 'social', and 'political', which are used here as analytical categories within which 'real' complexities are confined. By contrast Ludden, 'Productive power', seems to hope for greater certainty of terminology. The fact that such problems are not confined to the past is illustrated trenchantly by Polly Hill's writings.

⁴ See Buchanan, *Shahabad*. This volume is used here, but see also his volumes on Behar and Purnea districts.

Generally, too, even without the impact of warfare, there was quite a lot of mobility between villages during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the countryside was not full of neat, fixed settlements, with measured fields and estates. Some areas *were* densely settled and carefully marked out; but in others there were scattered or temporary dwellings and plots. Often people, especially the poor, were bonded to other people rather than to land, so that all would move together; others would escape from such ties and try to search out favourable terms for their labour. Many areas had traditions of military recruitment, especially among the poorer members of higher classes, and, where families remained behind in the village, they could be supported on army pay and booty. In the north, as the central authority of the Mughal empire weakened, migrant clans of military tribes or pastoralists moved from the hill lands across the plains and river valleys, setting up military kingdoms, settling in villages, and ousting or depressing some of the earlier elites. In south India, though the rich irrigated lands tended to be held by numerous share-holders who organized revenue payments and controlled labour for irrigation and agriculture, the drier lands were controlled by headmen and their followers (often of military origin and occupation) who were ready to move whole communities from season to season in search of land or water. And everywhere there were migrant traders and moneylenders.

This was not a peasant society in the sense of being typified by household production on smallholdings under strong but external political control. Above the village level there were chiefs, landlords, military leaders, and officials, who claimed rights and dues from the villages. But also most villages contained dominant high status groups with above average landholdings; subservient groups, with smaller holdings or no land, provided labour. Before the arrival of the British in the eighteenth century, there were distinctions between 'residents' and 'non-residents', 'permanent' and 'temporary' cultivators, shareholders and sharecroppers. The dominant groups usually held village office, managed most of the local resources, and controlled the village's contact with the outside world. Generally they took part in establishing or maintaining irrigation, in collecting land taxes, and in encouraging, managing, and taxing trade and markets. In many places sizeable proportions of the land were controlled by such groups either without paying land revenue to the state, or on very favourable terms. They employed others to cultivate their land whenever possible, as sharecroppers, tenants, labourers, or slaves, but would work in their own fields if necessary, for example if they were relatively numerous and each family's holdings were small. For example, in Tirunelveli at the tip of India, a moderately rich area with a large export trade, where peasant cultivators were supposed to be the norm, 55 per cent of landholders in 1817 reportedly cultivated their own land (using slaves and other labour), while 38 per cent let their holdings to non-resident (unprivileged) tenants. In poorer, dry, inland Salem, the great majority of holdings were said to be cultivated using family labour; little produce was exported; but still there were to be found 'rich' families

with 'five ploughs', and hence some tenancy, hired labour, and agrarian servitude.⁵

Exchanges of food, land, and labour, and a degree of interdependence characterized the 'villages'; this could extend to the allocation of the land, the use of cattle, ploughs, and water, and the choice and harvesting of crops. Entrenched or customary rights existed for different social levels, and dominance relied on office, wealth, stores of grain, social prestige, or force of arms, as well as on possession of land. The elites 'managed' village life, paying labourers in food and small plots of land, and lending to poorer cultivators. Independent producers would sell directly to traders, and also take a share of some of the crops of poorer farmers to whom they had given seed and food. They might take up and encourage the spread of particular crops. They were often associated with petty state building, or with revenue-collecting rights, especially during the eighteenth century. Since land revenue dues were calculated in money terms, and, even if collected in kind, were paid in cash into the state's coffers, the produce of the countryside was naturally attracted to towns and over substantial distances, from both farmers and artisans. The revenues came not only from rich irrigated tracts, those most closely controlled and taxed by outsiders, but in varying degrees from all regions where there were revenue demands and rents. Most areas therefore had some experience of the complex and extensive trading networks, which dealt in all the necessities of life—food-grains, oilseeds, salt, cloth, utensils, timber, and livestock—and with their local representatives in the form of specialist traders or moneylenders. Thus three production strategies could exist together: crops were grown for use, they were sold for subsistence (including payments to others), and they were sold for gain.

But, in so far as agricultural production was directed towards markets, it operated under close control and within constraints. The travelling merchants, who reached villages at harvest time, seldom set their prices competitively. Buyers attempted to monopolize access to the villages and to employ coercion in various forms in order to secure the crop: advance payments provided the weapon of debt, but the revenue and rent demands usually ensured that a sale would be agreed promptly at the harvest. One finds arrangements of these kinds all over India, across a long timespan. From the seventeenth century, for example, most villages in western India contained a trader who advanced seed and food (but rarely cash) and later took a share of the harvest. And a more extreme version was described in Ferozepur district in the Punjab in 1832: 'The Hindu merchants, from the command which they have of money, exercise a preponderating influence The ryuts [cultivators], from their extreme poverty, are forced to mortgage their crops to provide themselves with seed and the necessary implements of husbandry. Money is advanced at an enormous rate of interest The cattle and even the ploughs are the property of the merchants'.⁶ Such systems spread commodity production thinly, limiting the influence of the market even in

⁵ Kumar, *Land and caste*, pp. 19, 20, 22-3; see also Ludden, *Peasant history*.

⁶ Roseberry, *Imperial rule*, p. 234, quoting from Mackeson's, 'Journal of a voyage from Lodiana to Mithankot by the Satraj river'.

the most commercially oriented regions, and reducing the effective monetization of transactions at village level. Payments of land or grain secured produce at minimal cost, but at the expense of a sub-contracting system which isolated the long-distance trader and the producer from each other, and did not necessarily involve the capitalist in actual production. Such systems have sometimes been identified with a specific stage of economic development. The present discussion asks if this was so, or, to put it another way, what changed in the nineteenth century?

On the one hand is the picture of vigorous local trade. To Chaudhuri, Bengal's post-1770 recession seemed so deep that commercial agriculture could develop only in response to international demand. Now, instead, we have Datta's account of the region's rice trade.⁷ And even in poor, overtaxed south Bihar early in the nineteenth century, rice (and in smaller quantities barley, other grains, and pulses) were exported and imported. Wheat was exported in large quantities, as were various amounts of spices, oilseeds, oils, cotton cloth, blankets, paper, timber products, and some locally-bred buffaloes. Tobacco, sugar, most culinary salt, cotton and cotton thread, iron, brass and other metal utensils, and most oxen, were imported.⁸ On the other hand, this is not to imply, as Datta does, a well-integrated monetized economy at all social levels, given the evidence of diverse weights and measures, transportation difficulties, payments and credit in kind, and other market imperfections. There was still much payment through land, and a relatively small proportion of the cultivated area devoted to marketed crops. Datta shows that rice, opium, and indigo were all extracted largely in association with advances to cultivators, but overlooks the fact that such crops occupied a part of very many holdings, necessitating intermediaries and social control over labour and poor cultivators.⁹ Moreover, a similar situation obtained in late nineteenth-century Bihar, which was not thereby less commercialized; money was then more rather than less generally available.¹⁰ How do we define change, while explaining these continuities? A possible answer is that cultivators had been 'using' merchants in order to spread risk by exploiting the system of advance payments; later problems, revealed in famines, represent 'teething troubles' from incomplete changes in modes of production.¹¹ But, from a Bihari perspective, it is difficult to endorse this analysis. The moneylender was often regarded as a social inferior, but most advance payments subordinated the borrower, because he could at best shift only to another patron, and seldom possessed the resources to operate independently. Even those in dominant positions, who lent to

⁷ Chaudhuri, *Commercial agriculture*, and *idem*, 'Agricultural growth'; Datta, 'Merchants and peasants'.

⁸ Buchanan, *Shahabad*.

⁹ Datta, 'Rural Bengal', esp. pp. 329-38.

¹⁰ Buchanan, *Shahabad*. Demonetization is suggested in Perlin, 'Proto-industrialisation'; but in Shahabad in the early 1800s, though money was exchanged in several places, including at some cloth dealers, bank notes could be changed for cash only at Arrah, the main town. Revenue had to be paid in the Company's silver coinage, but most instalments were managed by large moneylenders (much land revenue by just one banker in Arrah) who encouraged circulation of the less reliable and cheaper Banares silver. The Company's copper coinage was found only in Arrah, though other debased coins and cowrees were more widely used.

¹¹ I owe this argument to Burton Stein. It recalls the meliorist explanations of McAlpin, *Subject to famine*.

others, often needed to employ intermediaries, and were kept afloat with help from moneylenders.

II

Over most of the century the British gradually regulated and bureaucratized the fiscal apparatus. By adding some real security and a clearer definition to landed property, they reduced the need for elites to extract surplus as revenue agents as well as landowners or creditors. The British state also withdrew progressively from most of the attempts to control markets or monopolize trade. At the same time, India generally became more involved in external markets. Yet, paradoxically, at the level of the agricultural producer and the immediate relations of production, almost all of the features just described for the eighteenth century apply perfectly well (at least in Bihar) at the end of the nineteenth. Some, including advance payments as a restriction of the producers' options, were encouraged by the expansion of trading opportunities. The central image remains one of dispersed or fragmented commercial production, and of intermixed social and political controls (which the advance payments may exemplify). The agriculture of commerce was far from commercial, yet the 'peasant farm' was not an autonomous unit of production and decision making. Pursuing these points, we will discover mutual or intrinsic as well as superordinate controls defining the orbit of peasants' choices, and indeed that commercial and political influences were themselves restricted to particular, appropriate means of managing production and securing surplus.

An excellent example of a surviving rent-based production system was the irrigated cultivation in Gaya district, south Bihar, where the supply of water supposedly justified produce sharing rents (*bhaoli*), to ensure and remunerate the input of the landlords.¹² Their 'earth-moving' (*gilandazi*), as it was called, was a capital investment in a technical sense, and richly rewarding in those terms. But in large part the 'capital' comprised social prestige and organization, to enlist an unpaid or low-paid local labour force, to strike and enforce agreements between villages, and so on. A consequence of *bhaoli* rents, in the nineteenth century as in the eighteenth, was that the landlord or intermediary leaseholder (*thikadar*) was obliged to endorse a small army of village officials. On any estate, in addition to several kinds of cash rent, there were at least two forms of produce collection: actual crop division (*batai*) and appraisal (*danabandi*). The landlord needed an agent, watchmen to prevent pilferage before and during the harvest, an accountant (*patwari*), an assessor, a measurer, an arbitrator, a recording clerk or writer, and a headman. As with the *dalali* system in the local markets, and for the same reasons (fragmentation of function and of points of 'taxation'), this rental system was highly interventionist. It not only extracted rent but redistributed produce within the village: almost three-quarters of the population, whether as village servants, artisans, or labourers, received some perquisites from

¹² Among many sources relating to this system and agriculture in Gaya, the most useful, from which the present account is mainly drawn, is Grierson, *Gaya*. See also Sengupta, 'Indigenous irrigation'.

the harvests of others, under a collective supervision, and mostly before division—that is, before any allocation of the produce into the private store of *zamindar* and *raiyat* (landlord and cultivator).

Hence 'peasant choices' about cropping and work depended upon a wide range of controls related mainly to the extraction of rent, but also to interdependence within the local community. Each cultivator's responsibility, even for his day-to-day activities, was circumscribed in various ways, because neither his holding nor his methods of production existed in isolation from the political structures which surrounded him. He might be bound to provide labour for others; he hardly had a free market in which to obtain labour himself. His choice of cash crops would depend not only on his own judgment but on patterns of land use and water supply beyond his immediate control. Nor could he always decide the methods or timing of his cultivation. Agricultural equipment was frequently shared, and labour bonded. In north Bihar, for example, the usual word for ploughman (*harwaha*) meant one who worked after taking advance payments; a different word (*uttha*) was used for a ploughman who worked without them.¹³

This was still very much the system as described early in the century by Buchanan, when on a typical estate he found many small local intermediaries of the *zamindar*, who were permitted to collect rents and supposed to keep up reservoirs and other irrigation works, and many holders of rent-free lands and other privileged tenants, including some who claimed descent from former proprietors, as well as village clerks, crop assessors, messengers, and watchmen. Most villages did not have headmen as such, but the term (here *jeth raiyat*) was used generally for wealthy tenants, who (in Buchanan's words) 'commonly assist their poor and ignorant neighbours in settling their accompts'. Of the villagers who controlled land and agriculture, he distinguished gentry (people of high caste or social status), artisans or traders who rented land, and 'ploughmen', a class which ranged from wage labourers and sharecroppers to rich cultivators who had sufficient surplus to be able to act as village 'traders'. The local name for the latter, *girhashta beopar*, meant 'householder-trader'; Buchanan called them 'trading farmers'. Such 'cultivators' had some capital and might keep bullocks to transport grain to market, but they dealt chiefly with their poorer neighbours, supporting them between harvests. Advances were made 'at a very usurious rate' of interest, and repaid from the crop. Cultivation was carried on individually or sometimes by large bands working each other's fields in turn. A few 'slaves' were employed, and ploughmen and day labourers, again bonded through small advances in money or by land-grants for sharecropping. The local grain trade was in the hands of travelling merchants, and other products were exported or imported mainly by boatmen.¹⁴ In most respects, these

¹³ Grierson, *Behar peasant life*, pp. 177-9, 197-201 & 313-20; and *Proceedings of the Government of India, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Agriculture Branch*, C series, no. 2, May 1898 (National Archives of India, New Delhi; hereafter *R. & A. Agric.*), C2 October 1898, and C7 & 9 December 1898.

¹⁴ Buchanan, *Shahabad*. Compare the volumes on these districts, in Hunter, *Statistical account*, and the report of the Bihar and Orissa Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, 3 vols. (Patna, 1930).

conditions survived the arrival both of the British and of the railway, and were still in evidence 80 years later.

III

However, by late in the nineteenth century there were complaints that absentee landlords no longer ensured the irrigation works which had supported south Bihar throughout the ages, even though the evidence from government estates is that it remained in the interests of the landlord and his local representatives to maintain them. There was a strong tendency towards the commutation of produce rents.¹⁵ It might be concluded that the old regime was being broken down by the influence of changing law and markets. Certainly, alongside the old and extensive trade in rice and oilseeds, three crops—sugar, opium, and indigo—were grown and sold in Bihar to a greatly increased extent during the nineteenth century. In the second and third of these, Bihari output was of global significance, managed in one case by the British state, and in the other by European planters and export houses. Yet the most striking feature of the cultivation of these new crops was not new relations of production, but the persistence of indirect and intermixed (socio-political) methods of control.¹⁶ In opium, for example, there was a huge increase in the value of the crop, while crude prices to the cultivator remained stable; but at the same time, between 1840 and 1880, the area under cultivation was extended by more than two-and-a-half times.

The key to production was an advance payments system already established in its essentials during the eighteenth century, and later embodied in Regulation VI of 1799. Its administration comprised three distinct levels above the cultivators. At the top was the Collector as Deputy Opium Agent and, in Bihar, his 11 sub-deputies. Next were minor officials, the *gomashtras* who received the opium and were paid a salary and commission, and the *ziladars*, on salary only, who were responsible for groups of 20 or 30 villages. An important part of their function was to prevent the growers from retaining any of the opium or disposing of it privately. At the third level were the *khatadars*—25,000 in the 1880s with an average of 32 cultivators each, whom they allegedly represented. The *khatadar* recruited the cultivators, or *assamis*, signed the agreement which they supposedly made, arranged with the *ziladar* to receive and distribute cash advances on up to three occasions, organized irrigation loans and their repayment, in practice (though not in regulations) made the *taidad* or estimate of the crop which the *gomashtra* presented in

¹⁵ On the other hand complaints of decay may have been perennial; they appear still in Singh and Kumar, *Monograph*, pp. 62-3.

¹⁶ See R. & A. *Agric.*, A17-8 Jan. 1891; Kling, *Blue Mutiny*; Mishra, *Agrarian problems*; Fisher, 'Planters and peasants'; and especially Poucheпадass, *Planteurs et paysans*. The case of indigo will also be discussed at length in my forthcoming book (see note 1). For opium see especially Wright, *Economic problems*, pp. 106-65; *Selections from the records of the Government of Bengal*, 1; *Report of a Commission appointed by the Government of India to enquire into the working of the Opium Department in Bengal and the North-Western Provinces*; Colebrooke, *Husbandry*, p. 117; Ram Chand Pandit, joint opium contractor, in *Selections from the Duncan records* II, p. 166; A. C. Mangles (Opium Agent, Patna) to the Commissioner of Patna Division, 18 March 1883, Records of the Commissioner of Patna Division, Bihar State Archives, *basta* (bundle) 338, collection 7, file 84, 10 (1883-4) (hereafter PCR), and the Collector of Gaya to the Commissioner, *ibid.*, 7/91. For the evidence before the opium commission see PCR 364 29/8 (1895-6).

February or March to determine the amount of the second advance payment, and finally brought the *assamis* to the *ziladar* and *gomashia*, and distributed the final payment for the opium. The *khatadar* was a relatively powerful and prosperous intermediary or 'principal cultivator', a village official or rich peasant.

Despite the criticisms from the time of Burke, it was sometimes said that the cultivators welcomed opium advances in preference to the exactions of landlords; a century later in the 1880s *zamindars* were still allegedly hostile to opium cultivation because it promoted independence. An opium cultivator was closely involved with agents of government. By the later nineteenth century, he tended to pay money rents on all his land, at a time when some *zamindars* were trying to extend their *zerat* (demesne land) and the arena of informal, unregulated rents, so as to return to produce-sharing or sharecropping arrangements. Moreover, in many parts of Bihar only limited areas were cropped with cereals of a quality suitable for marketing, and local prices were very responsive to harvest yield, greatly reducing the return to the cultivator from good harvests. Much of the rice, wheat, barley, and maize was poor, and the majority of the millets and pulses were 'not much superior to the seeds of wild grasses' so that even in the dearest seasons they had little market value.¹⁷ By contrast, opium, though brought cheaply in relation to the price obtained by government, was very valuable locally, not least for being paid for at a fixed rate. It could provide a source of capital or credit for the development of other crops. Opium advances and improvement loans provided money for investment or expenditure, on relatively favourable terms.

But it is plain that benefits were not evenly shared. Opium cultivation exhausted the soil, and the cultivator. It was grown on the best land, and was extravagant of manure; the poppies had to be watered continually until they were two or three inches high, and then thinned two or three times. The harvest began with the removal of the petals, and involved the repeated lancing of the opium pods, a process lasting over several weeks. The drug had to be dried in cloth; both the cloth and the liquid residue were collected by the opium agents. The flowers were made into opium cakes, packed in the leaves and stalks of the plant. There were petitions against opium cultivation as early as 1818; by the 1880s, as the crop became less and less attractive, it was said that unwilling growers were being coerced with the assistance of the native police and trumped-up charges. Officials would admit only that there were grievances, but the most compelling testimony is to the petty tyranny of the opium department's local subordinates. The *khatadars* were paid a small commission, so little, it was admitted, that they had to derive illegal income from their office; but no opium agent was ever successfully prosecuted in Bihar.

The claim that opium cultivation deepened the subjection of most cultivators is therefore justified. Yet, firstly, this subjection was not absolute; secondly, it was not directly to the opium department; and thirdly, it was not uniform among a body of cultivators. Later in the century, some shifted

¹⁷ D. N. Reid (indigo planter of Saran) to Mangles, 30 Dec. 1881, *R. & A. Agric.*, B3 May 1899.

from opium to indigo, or (near towns and railways) took to tobacco, potatoes, or other vegetables, either independently or at the behest of patrons and local magnates. Mounting protests chiefly reflected the extent to which opium was less advantageous to the *khatadar* than other crops. Similar arguments can be made about opposition to indigo, culminating in Gandhi's intervention in 1917. Finally, the subjection did not occur, in the form that it did, entirely because it was convenient and profitable for the British. As early as 1831, and several times thereafter, officials proposed to abandon advance payments and hence to bypass the local intermediary and his socio-political power. All these schemes were ruled impracticable. The same system, the British found, was used not just by *mahajans* (bankers), but 'even in private matters such as hiring a *palky*' (carriage).¹⁸ Similarly from the 1880s indigo planters, under government pressure to introduce more 'commercial' methods, made various experiments in direct purchasing but fell back mainly upon varieties of advance payments, indirect management, and landlord-style coercion. The opium agents were obviously monopolists and creditors but also allied with rent-collectors, great landlords, and dominant villagers; the planters were leaseholders as well. But all were buyers who failed to establish a direct contact with their suppliers.

Unlike opium, sugar was not a monopoly, nor was it a product manufactured wholly by modern factory methods and for export, like indigo in Bihar. But it, too, was grown in a small way on a large number of holdings, 'within a complex system of indebtedness and dependence', to benefit the profits of intermediaries, especially the processors and traders of refined sugar, 'a pretty wealthy class of people'.¹⁹ Once again, the system was resilient. In Shahabad, south Bihar, the sugar manufacturers Thomson and Mylne concluded that it was impossible to institute a central factory system, based on steam-driven machinery, partly because of the refusal of the *raiyats* to grow cane for them or sell their standing crops at a 'fair valuation'. The obstacle was the price paid under existing local arrangements, and the obligations between the cultivators and the landlords or sugar factors.²⁰ In north Bihar, by contrast, European sugar factories expanded in the early twentieth century, even though the natural conditions for cane were not as good as in the south, simply because the planters transferred their capital and hence their *raiyats'* cultivation from indigo to sugar. The factories acted as their own brokers, advancing seed and sometimes money short-term.²¹ In the late 1930s cane was still purchased through contractors, who prevented the establishment of cooperative sugarcane societies.²²

¹⁸ Report on opium cultivation by Forbes, Commissioner of Patna Division, PCR 364 29/8 (1895/6).

¹⁹ The quotations on sugar in this paragraph are from the Commissioner's report in PCR 364 29/8 (1895-6). The fullest modern account of the sugar industry is Amin, *Sugarcane*, and see also Whitcombe, *Agrarian conditions*. This essay draws on Watt, *Economic products*, vi, pp. 3-380; Grierson, *Bihar peasant life*, pp. 50-60 and 232-7; B. C. Basu, 'Note on the manufacture of sugar and its probable improvements', *R. & A. Agric.*, A9-11 July 1892; the proceedings of the Agricultural Conference. Oct. 1893, *R. & A. Agric.* A9-10 Feb. 1894; and the *Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India* (1927), VIII (hereafter *RCA*). See also *R. & A. Agric.*, A22, A27 & A29-30 Feb. and A10 July 1890, and A9-11 July 1892.

²⁰ R. & A. Land Revenue Branch B52-3 June 1895.

²¹ See especially, in *RCA*, the evidence of J. Henry, Lohat Sugar Works, Darbhanga; C. G. Atkins, Dowlatpore Agricultural Concern; and N. Meyrick, Bihar Planters' Association, Motihari.

²² Director of Agriculture's letter, 28 April 1937, Bihar Development Department (Industries), nos. 1-18, Jan., file 18/218 (1938), Bihar State Archives, Patna.

IV

Fisher makes an interesting but perhaps overstated distinction between dedicated and general trade. In the case of indigo, or opium, or oilseeds, trade was carried on between known dealers at specific places, but in the case of rice by cartmen in numerous short-range transactions. Only in this context could *raiya*s hope to participate themselves, cutting out the middlemen, and they sought to do so, from the 1860s at least, by owning their own carts and carrying on their own marketing. The missing element in this analysis is fuller information about the *raiya*s who were thus involved in trade: some were becoming traders just as some were becoming moneylenders or rent-receivers. Such opportunities almost certainly widened, as also did the gap between rich and poor, but none of the changes—neither dedicated trade, nor peasant-traders—constituted a sharp break with the past. Commercial agriculture in Bihar, far from overturning an antique style, adopted many features of eighteenth-century agrarian relations, and of the rent-based model still found in nineteenth-century Gaya. And yet elites entered the market to dispose of produce they had themselves produced, or which they had acquired from their control over others. Why did more cultivators not respond to the market directly? To do so required capital, independence, access to transport, and awareness—in a situation in which many were poor, dependent, and isolated. As a result, the cultivator was not necessarily an economic man, making agricultural decisions within parameters of need and opportunity determined by the state and merchants. This point has often been remarked. It is less common to remark that the traders also were not wholly free agents.

A more pertinent form of the question is this: why did government, planters, and merchants alike continue (over such a very long period, in such different trading conditions) to adopt these 'pre-' or 'proto-capitalist' relations of production? Why do many of their successors continue to do so today? One obvious answer is profit. Socio-political and credit-based controls were devices for securing labour at artificially low cost, whether for the landlord who paid his field-workers in land as well as food, or for the indigo planter or opium agent who largely avoided having to compete in order to attract cultivators. Concentration not on production but on credit and distribution, on processing and retailing, is a situation analogous to that observed in other areas of smallholding (or dispersed manufacturing).²³ Certainly there was coercion. Yet the lack of either direct production control, or a wholesale market, complicated supply and arguably diverted profits to middlemen. Thus, if on one hand this was a pocket 'command' economy, on the other it was a costly and incomplete commercialization impeded from 'inside'. The cultivator was unable to break out of his subordination, but also the external market or the state was unable to prevail against the intermediary—and he in turn chose or was constrained to secure produce through intermixed control. Perhaps the system persisted because of specific

²³ Friedman, 'World market', and Harriss, *Rural development*. The system was not at all confined to the nineteenth century; Raj, *Commercialization*, passim.

features affecting agricultural decisions: hence the need to locate the choices concerning production.

Chief among these features were the differentiation of the society, the intricacies of landholding, the complexities of land-use and agriculture, and the resilience of custom. In villages the most common exchanges of labour and goods were between patrons and clients. Also, well before any European involvement, commerce had had to accommodate itself to all these conditions; by the nineteenth century, therefore, habits or institutions were already long established. There were independent producers in Bihar—landlords and planters using hired labour on their 'own' lands, small market-gardeners, and so on—but characteristically 'commercial' farming was widely dispersed and indirectly controlled. Institutional impediments explain why there were so many producers: landholding patterns, dense population, government interference. Imperfections in the market—considerable self-sufficiency among agriculturists, relatively low volumes, still difficult transportation, the communications block of differing cultures and illiteracy—these account for the difficulties for buyers of obtaining produce from the multitudes of cultivators. Interposed powers (landlords, village elites, and long-established traders) also made it hard to penetrate to the individual seller of crops. The answer was at hand: to use intermediaries, and rental and debt bondage; to work with the social and political conditions, rather than across them. Commercial agriculture had to be carried on in a small proportion of a large number of smallholdings; produce extraction relied on complex, even parallel systems of control; it was no wonder that the 'eighteenth-century' way, command of manpower, should have commended itself to later entrepreneurs.

We cannot go into all these features in detail here. The continuing existence of hierarchies of control, and the minute subdivisions of landed holdings, are familiar aspects, and their great importance in this analysis may be accepted without further ado, as may that of habits produced by earlier involvement in trade. Other factors, such as fertility of soil, customs over land use, and village institutions could also be influential. A distinction may be drawn, for example, between high-value, marketable production and poorer food grains, despite 'command' through debt, landholding or social prestige. Above all, it mattered that agricultural decision making was fragmented, that various levels and areas of autonomy persisted. Even the lowliest cultivator made some of his own decisions; the *raiyyat* might be left alone to decide on techniques, and even to choose the crop on most of his lands. Subject to caste restrictions and the demands of superiors, he could manage his labour too. But then, for all the other resources which he needed—credit, land, water, even implements and animals—he was more likely to depend on others. Even within each basic production unit, the allocation of tasks among family members or between them and employees or patrons might be subject to restrictions and agreements.

The typical sponsor of cash crops could seldom overturn this collective decision making, which enabled villages or groups to observe distinctions in land use or decide on methods of cultivation. Hence, traders and planters chiefly influenced production decisions only on a small part of the best land.

In Saran district, fields could be classified generally in six ways; the pattern was more or less repeated everywhere under different names. There was *korar*, land adjacent to the *basti* or settlement, and used for the main cash crops (poppy, indigo, and sugar-cane); then the much larger area of general farmland or *chour*, cultivated with *bhadoi* and *rabi* (autumn and spring) crops (maize, barley, pulses) in ordinary years or with paddy when there was abundant rain; then *bharsi*, similar land even further from the village; then *choum*, low-lying land used only for the main winter rice crop (almost 35 per cent of the total acreage); and finally *bagh* lands containing fruit and other trees, and *parti* (waste or pasture). Hence the planter competed mainly over the allocation of *korar*, but did not introduce its links with the market, nor otherwise fundamentally alter land use.²⁴ Moreover we can distinguish the sponsorship of cash crops from that of methods of cultivation. Intermediaries tried, but usually unsuccessfully, to prevent practices whereby different crops were sown together, often to avert risk or to produce home supplies alongside cash crops: such partnerships allowed gradual adjustments from year to year and also rapid changes of tactic within each season. For example, cotton was generally grown with *rahar* (a pulse), linseed in rows with gram (chick-pea) or as a border to mixed plots of wheat and barley, and the latter broadcast with rapeseed. The rather tender oilseed, sesamum or *til*, was universally grown as a border or mixed crop, to provide household supplies of oil.²⁵ Nor could commercial pressures immediately unravel the many agreements over labour and implements, which persisted throughout the century and beyond. Labour sharing was called *badlaiya*, *palta*, or *painch*; agreement to plough fields in turn was generally called *bhanj*. These systems, usually regarded as reciprocal, were also strongly hierarchical.²⁶ Thus interdependence and subordination wove a web in which agricultural decisions were caught.

So-called commercialization differs case by case, therefore, because modes of production evolve within specific cultural and technical parameters. The system in Gaya, for example, depended on interrelated physical and political conditions. First, stiff clayey soils and the undulation of a succession of broad river valleys allowed the building of banks across the drainage lines, and longer channels to divert water from rivers. Flow irrigation, necessarily preferred, implied high-level reservoirs, so that, as the river beds were usually 8 or 10 feet below the gradually sloping countryside, most channels were several miles long and fed a number of reservoirs in turn. Such conditions demanded the close involvement of landlords and their agents. Secondly, by contrast, the lands on which cash rather than produce rents prevailed, included poor plots which received no irrigation, and cultivable waste when first brought under the plough, but also lands irrigated from

²⁴ G. Roy, Dpty. Collector, to Saran Collector, 30 Sep./Oct. 1889, PCR 350, 2/472 (1889-90).

²⁵ See D. N. Mukherjee, 'Wheat survey of Bengal', *R. & A. Agric.*, A45-7 Feb. 1908; *R. & A. Agric.*, A7 May 1890; *R. & A. Agric.*, A20-2 Jan. 1891; *R. & A. Agric.*, C35 Sept. 1893 (experimental cultivation of Buxar and other wheats); *R. & A. Agric.*, C5 Feb. 1899 (on cotton).

²⁶ Grierson, *Behar peasant life*, pp. 177-8.

wells, often near rivers.²⁷ Similarly, different crops or combinations of crops might also impose particular agricultural regimes. The imperatives of oilseeds grown incidentally as a border to other crops and processed simply, locally, and at any time during the year, were clearly very different from those of sugarcane, tying up land over several harvests, demanding irrigation, having to be guarded, needing complex processing as soon as possible, and producing high returns per acre.²⁸ There was a bewildering array of factors at work: ecology, location, soil type, technology, tenures, rentals, cropping patterns, and economic considerations—the field within which ‘choices’ were made in agriculture.

V

The findings of this paper modify some of the more sweeping interpretations of ‘capitalism’ and of ‘development’. First, they contradict the idea that poorer, ‘less commercial’ areas took little part in commerce and experienced little occupational diversity, and the opposite idea that commercialization necessarily implies economic advance. We may note the very wide range of productive, artistic, ceremonial, and religious professions, and the various and extensive trade, even in rather depressed areas of Bihar in the early nineteenth century. Equally, the range of activities cited to indicate the dynamism of a small Punjabi centre in the 1920s and 1930s, could be replicated in a similar large village in moribund Bihar in the 1870s.²⁹ This is not to say that all economies are the same; in Buchanan’s Bihar the high proportion of ‘service’ occupations tells us of the large local expenditure on manpower, rather than commodities, for display and ceremonies. Nor should the economic upheavals which (by contrast) occurred in India later in the nineteenth century be underestimated. The changes included new crops, enlarged cultivation, new agriculturists (from military, service, pastoral, ‘tribal’ people, and artisans), new routes and management for trade, reduced transactional costs (better communications and fewer local tolls and duties), new urban centres, increased and re-directed exports, and changing organization and deployments of capital. Most of these raise problems of interpretation; some were economically beneficial, some favoured certain areas or people, some had immediate or delayed ill-effects. In agriculture, despite massive investment and rising returns (and applying the anachronistic notion of a ‘national economy’), the issues to be considered include the loss of a particular sort of compact between state capital, agricultural development

²⁷ The reservoirs (*ahars*) were three-sided areas (some very large and on average covering about 100 acres), built out from a high point of land, and fed by a channel (*pain*). Well water was usually raised by hand from shallow, temporary wells, and was applied particularly to poppy cultivation but also to wheat and sugarcane. See n. 12 above.

²⁸ Accordingly, in Gaya, areas devoted to particular crops, most notably sugarcane, under a system of rotation, were customarily divided in each village into three parts, shared between the different holdings. When sugarcane was cultivated, often followed by opium, the tenant paid a cash rent. In the third year, provided rice was grown and hence *pain* and *ahara* irrigation applied, a *bhaoli* rent was paid; the system was called *paran*.

²⁹ Compare Dewey, ‘Consequences’ and Robb, *Evolution*; see also Datta, ‘Merchants and peasants’. Presumably economic advance derived more from level and rapidity of exchange, and profitability, than from the range or type of activity.

and trade; the deflationary effects of some East India Company policies; the subsequent limits on state investment and the weakness of public institutions of capital; the diversion of investment into agriculture and away from manufacture (though not all processing); the concentration on low-value production in bulk; the discouragement of certain established local patterns of demand; the emphasis upon export trade (a model of economic advance perhaps less than apt for India) whenever state intervention and the development of the infrastructure took place; and the capture of large parts of the export trade by European investors and managers. But it is precisely because change was so marked in many respects that the lack of change at the lower levels of commercial production is of such interest.

Secondly, therefore, one can see that the oppressive social conditions in some regions were not, in any simple sense, the result of recent commercial expansion. They existed because of a colloquy amongst a range of conditions, including trade. The capitalist was often the chief beneficiary of the system of production, but he alone did not invent it, and nor could he change it at will. One is reminded of Chayanov's pluralism, his reference to the inhibition of proletarianization in nineteenth-century Russia: 'while *in a production sense* concentration in agriculture is scarcely reflected in the foundation of new large-scale undertakings, *in an economic sense* capitalism as a general economic system makes great headway in agriculture.' The difference is that Chayanov shared with much marxist and developmentalist thought the idea of rural non-capitalist production as essentially passive—family farm sectors subordinated to the 'hegemony' of capitalist relations³⁰—and also transitional, following from the assumption by Marx that there must be a dominant mode to provide the 'law of motion' and 'a general illumination', whereby, for example, in the feudal middle ages all capital, including artisans' tools, had a 'landed-property character', and in bourgeois society agriculture is more and more 'a branch of industry. . . entirely dominated by capital'. But in Bihar, it is far from clear that the localized command economy was subordinated to capitalism, as a determinant of the mode of production, remaking it in its own image; almost the reverse was true. The elites did not newly *become* capitalist, and their commercial dominance was mediated through pre-capitalist relations. This is a 'firm historical location', as called for by Byres, but an uncomfortable one.³¹

It will be noticed that these arguments also offer a critique of entrenched attitudes to 'pre-modern' production and the 'village community'. They accord with many of the descriptions by Indian anthropologists, which (though concentrated, to a misleading degree, on the village as an isolate or exemplum) nonetheless repeatedly record its wider involvement, its interdependence and its hierarchies as they influence agricultural production:³² The assumption has been that these conditions are 'modern',

³⁰ Chayanov, 'Peasant farm organization', pp. 257, 225.

³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 106-7; Byres, 'Modes of production', to which this paragraph is indebted. Compare Dobb, *Capitalism*, p. 11, on 'the preponderating influence of a single, more or less homogeneous economic form'.

³² See, for example, Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, pp. 327-45 and ch. 22; Bêteille, *Caste, class and power*; Srinivas, *Remembered village*, esp. pp. 128-9; Mayer, *Caste and kinship*, p. 86, and chs. v, vi, and vii.

largely because such recent observations contrast with assertions, from Aristotle to Polanyi, that subsistence and market cultivation are different in kind, even though the former may predominate in different units of production (feudal estate or peasant smallholding), and also survive peripheral contact with the market. Subsistence agriculture developed as household or family farm production-for-use; supposedly, the peasant was self-sufficient both in labour and in consumption, and naturally his activities could not be described in terms of capital or profit. The same features are central to Chayanov's definitions: it is the fact that the peasant farm ordinarily employs no labour which above all singles it out as a category, an enterprise making 'non-capitalist' decisions. It may indeed be found in some parts of India, or at some social levels. But the idea of a *society* of egalitarian villages is now mostly abandoned, for the more distant as well as the recent past, even for its *fons et origo*, the Punjab. In the canal colonies, the most favourable conditions, peasant family farming extended at best only over about half the cultivated area.³³

When we talk of peasants it is hard not to think of a community which is undifferentiated, little involved in trade, and controlled from outside. We tend to assume that peasants change by *becoming* stratified or *beginning* to produce for the market. Yet there are no agrarian societies that are wholly egalitarian and isolated, with no experience of exchange. We do not need to deal in absolutes: degrees of self-sufficiency exist within families, within villages, within regions, and at each level some exchange is implied. Similarly among many degrees of market orientation, even the strongest need not rule out some subsistence production. The important differences between economies are found in forms and structures of connection and hierarchy, and in the manner as well as the degree of trade.

The experience of Indian peasants under colonial rule illustrates these points. The farmers of north India had been involved in commerce for millenia. Rural producers and (to a lesser extent) consumers took part in lively and various regional trade. By the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century the cultivators' produce was entering the market in two main ways, through relationships of either rent or debt. And, we have found, the autonomy of the Indian village was inherently hierarchical; the concomitant barriers paradoxically the occasion for a tyranny made all the sterner by the accommodation they demanded. For a majority of the peasantry in Bihar, family farm independence was not possible; indeed, since the social hierarchy developed from military, caste and state-based structures, it is difficult to imagine when the golden age of peasant production could have been. Only the rich were their own masters and their production drew on the labour of the poor. Commercialization increased this interdependence. It was easiest to supplement a certain amount of direct production using wage labour with a larger amount of what amounted to contracting out. Though more dramatic changes of production methods occurred at the margins of established Indian agriculture, with the central plantation and migrant wage labour systems adopted in the production of such important crops as tea and coffee (and

³³ Ali, *Punjab*, p. 204; also Bhattacharya, 'Agricultural labour', but contrast Kessinger, *Vilyatpur*.

though other large-scale and apparently disruptive investments were made in irrigation and transportation) most of the agricultural growth resulted from quasi- or 'forced' commercialization, within prevailing norms, rather than from a capitalist transformation.³⁴

The result has been said to be a mixed form of production, a 'coexistence of multiple modes', and attributed to the differentiation of the peasantry and consequent market imperfections. The idea seems traceable to a seminal article by Bagchi which observed the 'symbiotic relationship between precapitalist and capitalist modes of production' with reference to the use of 'non-market coercion' by European planters and government opium agents.³⁵ Subsequently Bhaduri theorized on the growing importance of forced commercial production in comparison with rent as a means of extracting surplus, on the fact that primitive accumulation relies on 'compulsions such as that created by the mechanism of debt' rather than competition on the basis of the relative efficiency of large and small farms, and on the detrimental developmental consequences of 'involuntary market involvement'.³⁶ Such analyses usually contain some connected assumptions. (1) The direction of economic development is universal and linear, by means of changes in a unitary or predominant mode of production, and towards or through 'capitalism' and 'industrialization'; this despite Althusser's revisionism.³⁷ (2) India's economic misfortunes result particularly from economic *reversal*, chiefly a failure to continue to industrialize.³⁸ (3) Indian agricultural production and producers were therefore subordinated to foreign capitalists, and a rural proletariat was created. (4) The colonial state and its laws were largely responsible. Thus Das, distinguishing between structures of work and exploitation, with the latter changing from rack-renting to usury and wage-labour, describes 'a distorted economy based on a distorted commercialisation';³⁹ and Mishra, seeing the permanent revenue settlement of 1793 as a crucial divide in the agrarian history of Bihar, argues that marketing was stimulated because cash rents were demanded to meet the higher tax, and because the new status for *zamindars* damaged non-*zamindari* land rights, and permitted intermediary tenures (which in Champaran explained the success of the indigo planters).

The present essay, without necessarily challenging all these conclusions, begins outside the prescriptions about history and social structures which underlie them. It suggests a more fundamental revision. Clearly, by the early 1800s or even earlier, some local producers already experienced competition from imported commodities; others suffered from a paucity of local demand when so many goods and services were exchanged through credit transactions, reflecting social prestige or in accordance with village custom. Moreover, on the one hand free peasant production was possible, but only for some, and its incidence had little to do with markets; while, on the other, commercial

³⁴ But contrast Dewey, 'Consequences' and Epstein, *Earthy soil*.

³⁵ Bharadwaj, 'Commercialisation', pp. 10-1 quoting Bagchi.

³⁶ Bhaduri, *Backward agriculture*, pp. 8-9, 26-7, 100.

³⁷ Thorner, 'Semi-feudalism or capitalism'.

³⁸ For a recent summary of the debate, see Krishnamurty, 'Deindustrialization'.

³⁹ Das, *Agrarian unrest*, pp. 1-78; Chaudhuri, 'Depeasantization'.

agriculture was in large part controlled by intermediaries, or by 'peasants' acting instead of capitalists. When we examine the experience of Bihar, we find areas of rural self-sufficiency and areas of commerce which were only part of a complex array of forces which influenced the modes of production, and which preclude *any* easy typologies. As a result, we abandon any attempt to resolve the heated and irreconcilable confusions among those trying to explain India in theoretical or marxist terms, and understand why they tend to produce hybrid terms (such as quasi-feudal, trans-class or 'false' consciousness).

VI

What model of village autonomy are we left with, if the old village community of family farm producers is unacceptable, and yet the capitalist cannot wholly transform it through trade? One repository of village autonomy is custom and belief, which delineate local traditions. They represent not a fixed agenda but an orbit for subjective negotiations and choices. In that sense, a Bihari cultivator's decisions were hedged in by his own experience and customs. He operated, as revealed in a contemporary linguistic record, within a rich tapestry of distinctions, which imply standards of behaviour as well as ecological norms. The many hundreds of names of soils were not just descriptive, but prescriptive;⁴⁰ agricultural processes too had a clear framework in language, for example in the distinct words for first, second, third, and fourth ploughings, for several kinds of re-ploughing after sowing, and for styles of ploughing (straight, diagonal, circular, cross, and so on). Such terminology seems not only to describe but almost to generate actions: thus the same word might generally be used for hoeing and for weeding, but there was a range of words for particular kinds of both activities.⁴¹ Conversely a restriction of vocabulary would mark a greater control over the environment. The Bihari lexicon seems more than technical; it is like snapshots of an attitude of mind.

In proverbs too one finds, more directly, a set of perceptions and value judgments. Many sayings recorded agricultural information, and behind such popular wisdom lay a broader corpus of belief. The agricultural calendar embodied memories which circumscribed practice, not simply that winter rice should be sown after the first fall of rain in Jeth (May-June), but that transplanting should begin after a special festival, on the fifth day of Sawan (July-August). Religious observations and sacred texts added to the sense of an unavoidable rhythm shared by the heavens, by time, in the seasons, in the cycle of crops, and hence by man. The divisions of time were imagined as so many *rajās* bestowing gifts. The recipient—or sufferer—was defined by his part in this transaction; a cultivator was not just one who grew crops, but one who performed certain agricultural functions according to the norms. In a host of customs and rhymes the cultivator was reminded of the expected

⁴⁰ The following discussion is based on Grierson, *Behar peasant life*, esp. division III.

⁴¹ For example, for deep or superficial weeding, or for the first hoeing given to sugarcane in January-February or the special one given in June-July.

character of the season; he was provided with a timetable according to which he could anticipate heat or rainfall, and should carry out particular tasks, at once social, religious, and agricultural.⁴² He was offered the impression of predictability in, and hence ability to respond to, the environment, amid variable seasons. For this reason also agricultural decisions must be seen as taking place within a value system. Even crops were perceived as existing in a social as well as an economic hierarchy. Rice was a power in the land, its numerous varieties compared with the clans of the Rajputs or the Babhans, the dominant castes, but the millets were associated with poverty and lowliness.⁴³ If food were a major and visible illustration of status, cropping decisions could hardly be socially neutral, or easily imposed by outsiders.

Despite these very different conditions, nineteenth-century tenancy debates, pleas for state intervention, and popular protest were (and are) all sustained on European models such as industrialization's defeat of 'community' or the exploitation of 'workers' by individual property and capital. Such arguments distorted India's past and its present. An imposed economic change did not need a Weberian reform of custom, marxian classes, or suppression of skill *à la* Andrew Ure. Hence specialist intermediaries still had to operate various coercive levers, and at village level were not dislodged; indeed tenancy or contract laws and trade increased their hold. Produce for marketing outside the locality was still secured almost entirely by itinerants (*beparis*), by general or specialist traders and agents, who dealt on the one hand in the villages with cultivators or local controllers, and on the other hand in the towns with merchants. Direct links between village and exporter were still rare, though reported to be increasing late in the century. Usually any increase in marketing from within villages may be presumed to have represented a few villagers, including *bantias*, expanding their mercantile activities. The expansion was not so great as to suggest that it was undertaken by ordinary *raiya*s. Moreover, the *bepari* as an institution was still alive and well in the 1920s; while the growing number of carts, given the increasing scale of trade, roads, and population, does not prove a widening of direct popular access to the market, even in rice.

Scholars are understandably uncertain about classes in rural Bihar. Bhaduri compounds intermediaries and long-distance traders, and concentrates on 'direct agricultural producers, mostly small peasants' with a right of occupancy.⁴⁴ But Pouchepadass notes in north Bihar

des districts . . . qui sont . . . presque'entièrement la propriété d'un ou de quelques très grands *zamindār*, et où il n'existe pratiquement pas de paysans propriétaires. On y trouve, certes, une abondante population de tenanciers de rang moyen. Mais comment dire de ces paysans moyens qu'ils jouissent [sic] d'une sécurité particulière, alors qu'il [sic] sont soumis en permanence aux menaces et aux formes très diverses de contrainte extra-économique liées à leur situation semi-féodale?⁴⁵

⁴² Here, too, the labels were complex and precise; the year was divided not only into 12 months, each with a light and a dark half, but also into 27 lunar asterisms, each associated with some important agricultural activity: Grierson, *Behar peasant life*, division vi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴⁴ Bhaduri, *Backward agriculture*, pp. 17-8.

⁴⁵ Pouchepadass, *Caste et classe*, p. 84.

'Middle peasants' may be expected by theory, but empirically further disaggregations are needed. As village autonomy was inherently hierarchical, this is a tale not only of capitalists—or even kulaks—and peasants. At different levels people repeatedly gained control over others. There was no one distinct class lording it over a depressed peasantry or rural proletariat. Rent- and credit-based controls were repeated in small ways throughout the society, in village-wide arrangements and between even slightly richer and slightly poorer villagers. Thus, central to the argument, are the pre-existence of mutual dependence, the chains of command, and a fragmentation of decision-making. Authorities at different levels successively controlled elements of tenurial and economic power. Labour too was variously controlled; even so-called harvest shares—for agricultural, religious and other village services, or for artisans—were as much expressions of finely-graded hierarchy as of community. The intermediary was therefore not one category of individual but many. The sugar factor, the opium agent, the village headman, the richer cultivator represent together a multiplicity of brokers, all of them within as well as outside the village. They link different parts of the picture, but they also penetrate them, deconstructing the elements (peasant, lord, village, trader) which we tend to reify as exclusive categories.

Over the long term, it has been argued, north Indian elites became more directly involved in agriculture.⁴⁶ In the nineteenth century, of the usual routes to dominance, only military coercion was being inhibited; land control and economic power were on the whole encouraged. On the other hand, local environment and custom remained as guerilla bands swimming among the people, and thwarting the heavy armaments of capitalism. Hence 'commercial' production was dispersed; command over men and women remained the core. Workers were still captured through social and economic power, for the profits from their semi-independent production. The prerequisite and the legacy were layers of intermediaries, of distinct character and position. Their capital did not newly subject and dispossess agrarian labour; it reinforced subservience. Their role was both political (from land control, legal structures, and the exercise of physical power) and social (vested in status, value systems, and beliefs). They did not merely occupy a space left for local trade by a weak colonial power or by limited market encroachment; they maintained their position despite massive interventions by the state and by long-distance trade. Nor were they merely the local arm of the state or of international capital; they sought, in Bihar, to isolate these external forces from actual cultivators. There is nothing immutable about the situations described, but they are not especially or necessarily transitional. Their origins, nature, and strength need proper description, if we are to understand change. In this case it should be no surprise that, later, when population and property values rose, and even petty holdings were seized, these mostly went to rural elites.

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

⁴⁶ See Bayly, *Rulers, merchants*.

Footnote references

- Ali, I., *The Punjab under imperialism 1885-1947* (Princeton, 1988).
- Amin, S., *Sugarcane and sugar in Gorakhpur. An inquiry into peasant production for capitalist enterprise in colonial India* (Delhi, 1984).
- Bagchi, A. K., 'Colonialism and the nature of "capitalist" enterprise in India', *Econ. & Pol. Weekly* (30 July 1988), pp. PE 38-50.
- Baker, C. J., *An Indian rural economy. The Tamilnad countryside* (Oxford, 1984).
- Banerji, H., *Agrarian society of the Punjab, 1849-1901* (Delhi, 1980).
- Bharadwaj, K., 'A view of commercialisation in Indian agriculture and the development of capitalism', *J. Peasant Stud.*, 12 (1985), pp. 7-25.
- Bayly, C. A., 'Indian merchants in a "traditional" setting: Benares, 1780-1830', in C. Dewey and A. G. Hopkins, eds., *Imperial impact: studies in the economic history of Africa and India* (1978), pp. 171-93.
- Bayly, C. A., *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: north Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge, 1983).
- Bayly, C. A., 'State and economy in India over seven hundred years', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxxviii (1985), pp. 583-96.
- Bayly, C. A., *Indian society and the making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988).
- Béteille, A., *Caste, class and power. Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village* (Berkeley, 1971).
- Bhaduri, A., *The economic structure of backward agriculture* (1983).
- Bhattacharya, N., 'Agricultural labour and production: central and south-east Punjab, 1870-1940', in K. N. Raj, N. Bhattacharya, S. Guha, and S. Padhi, eds., *Essays on the commercialization of Indian agriculture* (Delhi, 1985), pp. 105-62.
- Bhattacharya, S. and Thapar, R., eds., *Situating Indian history* (Delhi, 1986).
- Bose, S., *Agrarian Bengal: economy, social structure and politics, 1919-1947* (Cambridge, 1986).
- Breman, J., *Patronage and exploitation. Changing agrarian relations in south Gujerat, India* (Berkeley, 1974).
- Buchanan, F., *An account of the district of Shahabad in 1812-13* (Patna, 1934).
- Byres, T. J., 'Modes of production and non-European pre-colonial societies: the nature and significance of the debate', *J. Peasant Stud.*, 12 (1985), pp. 1-18.
- Charlesworth, N., *British rule and the Indian economy 1800-1914* (1982).
- Charlesworth, N., *Peasants and imperial rule. Agriculture and agrarian society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850-1935* (Cambridge, 1985).
- Chaudhury, B. B. (Chowdhury, Benoy), *The growth of commercial agriculture in Bengal, 1757-1900* (Calcutta, 1964).
- Chaudhuri, B. B., 'The process of depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947', *Indian Hist. Rev.*, pp. 105-65.
- Chaudhuri, B. B., 'Agricultural growth in Bengal and Bihar, 1770-1860: growth of cultivation since the famine of 1770', *Bengal P. & P.* (1976), pp. 290-340.
- Chaudhuri, B. B., 'Rural power structure and agricultural productivity in eastern India, 1757-1947' in M. Desai, S. H. Rudolph, and A. Rudra, eds., *Agrarian power and agricultural productivity in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 100-70.
- Chaudhuri, K. N., and Dewey, C. J., eds., *Economy and society. Essays in Indian economic history* (Delhi, 1979).
- Chayanov, A. V., 'Peasant farm organization', in D. Thorner, B. Kerblay, and R. E. F. Smith, eds., *A. V. Chayanov on the theory of peasant economy* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 29-269.
- Colebrooke, H., *The husbandry of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1804; London, 1806).
- Das, A. N., *Agrarian unrest and socio-economic change in Bihar, 1900-1980* (New Delhi, 1983).
- Das, A. N., 'Changel: three centuries of an Indian village', *J. Peasant Stud.*, 15 (1987), pp. 3-60.
- Datta, R., 'Merchants and peasants: a study of the structure of local trade in late eighteenth-century Bengal', *Indian Econ. & Soc. Hist. Rev.*, 23 (1986), pp. 379-402.
- Datta, R., 'Rural Bengal: social structure and agrarian economy in the late eighteenth century' (unpub. Ph. D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1990).
- Desai, M., Rudolph, S. H., and Rudra, A., eds., *Agrarian power and agricultural productivity in south Asia* (Berkeley, 1984).
- Dewey, C., 'Some consequences of military expenditure in British India; the case of the upper Sind Sagar doab, 1849-1947', in C. Dewey, ed., *Arrested development in India. The historical dimension* (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 93-169.
- Dewey, C. and Hopkins, A. G., eds., *The imperial impact: studies in the economic history of Africa and India* (1978).
- Dobb, M., *Studies in the development of capitalism* (1963).
- Fisher, C. M., 'Planters and peasants: the ecological context of agrarian unrest on the indigo plantations of north Bihar', in C. Dewey and A. G. Hopkins, eds., *The imperial impact: studies in the economic history of Africa and India* (1978), pp. 114-31.

- Epstein, S. J. M., *The earthy soil. Bombay peasants and the Indian nationalist movement, 1919-1947* (Delhi, 1988).
- Friedman, H., 'World market, state and family farm', *Comp. Stud. Soc. & Hist.* 20 (1978), pp. 545-86.
- Guha, S., *The agrarian economy of the Bombay Deccan 1818-1941* (Delhi, 1985).
- Grierson, G. A., *Behar peasant life* (Calcutta, 1885).
- Grierson, G. A., *Notes on the district of Gaya* (Calcutta, 1893).
- Harriss, J., ed., *Rural development* (1982).
- Hill, P., *Dry grain farming families* (Cambridge, 1982).
- Hill, P., *Development economics on trial. The anthropological case for a prosecution* (Cambridge, 1986).
- Hunter, W. W., *A statistical account of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1876).
- Islam, S., *Bengal land tenure. The origin and growth of intermediate interests in the 19th century* (Rotterdam, 1985).
- Kessinger, T. G., *Vilyatpur: 1848-1968* (Berkeley, 1974).
- Khan, I. G., 'Revenue, agriculture and warfare in north India: technical knowledge and the post-Mughal elites, from the mid-18th to the early 19th century' (unpub. Ph. D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1990).
- Kling, B. B., *The blue mutiny. The indigo disturbances in Bengal 1859-1862* (Calcutta, 1977).
- Krishnamurty, J., 'Deindustrialization in Gangetic Bihar during the nineteenth century: another look at the evidence', *Indian Econ. & Soc. Hist. Rev.*, 22 (1985), pp. 399-416.
- Kumar, D., *Land and caste in south India* (Cambridge 1965).
- Kumar, D., ed., *The Cambridge economic history of India*, II (Cambridge, 1983).
- Ludden, D., *Peasant history in South India* (Princeton, 1985).
- Ludden, D., 'Productive power in agriculture: a survey of work on the local history of British India', in M. Desai, S. H. Rudolph, and A. Rudra, eds. *Agrarian power and agricultural productivity in south Asia* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 49-99.
- McAlpin, M. B., *Subject to famine. Food crisis and economic change in western India, 1860-1920* (Princeton, 1983).
- Mandelbaum, D. G., *Society in India. II. Change and continuity* (Berkeley, 1970).
- Marshall, P. J., *Bengal: the British bridgehead, eastern India 1740-1828* (Cambridge, 1987).
- Marx, K., *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973).
- Mayer, A. C., *Caste and kinship in central India* (1960).
- Mishra, G., *Agrarian problems of permanent settlement; a case study of Champaran* (New Delhi, 1978).
- Perlin, F., 'Proto-industrialisation and pre-colonial South Asia', *P & P*, 98 (1983), pp. 30-95.
- Pouchepadass, J., ed., *Caste et classe en Asie du sud* (Paris, 1982).
- Pouchepadass, J., *Planteurs et paysans dans l'Inde coloniale. L'indigo du Bihar et le mouvement gandhien du Champaran (1917-1918)* (Paris, 1986).
- Pouchepadass, J., *Paysans de la plaine du Gange: le district de Champaran, 1860-1950* (Paris, 1989).
- Raj, K. N., Bhattacharya, N., Guha, S., and Padhi, S., eds., *Essays on the commercialization of Indian agriculture* (Delhi, 1985).
- Ray, R., *Change in Bengal agrarian society, 1760-1850* (New Delhi, 1983).
- Robb, P., 'Ideas in agrarian history: some observations on the British and nineteenth-century Bihar', *J. Roy. Asiatic Soc.*, 1 (1990), pp. 17-43.
- Robb, P., *The evolution of British policy towards Indian politics 1880-1920. Essays on colonial attitudes, imperial strategies and Bihar* (New Delhi, forthcoming 1991).
- Roseberry, J. R., *Imperial rule in Punjab* (Riverdale, 1987).
- Sengupta, N., 'The indigenous irrigation organization in south Bihar', *Indian Econ. & Soc. Hist. Rev.*, 17 (1980), pp. 157-89.
- Singh, R. P. and Kumar, A., *Monograph of Bihar: a geographical study* (Patna, 1970).
- Srinivas, M. N., *The remembered village* (Berkeley, 1976).
- Stein, B., "'Arrested development" in India—but when and where?' in C. Dewey, ed., *Arrested development in India. The historical dimension* (New Delhi, 1984), pp. 49-65.
- Stokes, E., *The peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge, 1978).
- Subrahmanyam, S., 'Commerce and state power in eighteenth-century India: some reflections', *South Asia Res.*, 8 (1988), pp. 97-110.
- Subramanian, L., 'Baniyas and the British: the role of indigenous credit in the process of imperial expansion in western India in the second half of the eighteenth century', *Modern Asian Stud.*, 21 (1987), pp. 473-510.
- Thorner, A., 'Semi-feudalism or capitalism: the contemporary debate on classes and modes of production in India', in J. Pouchepadass, ed., *Caste et classe en Asie du sud* (Paris, 1982), pp. 19-72.
- Torri, M., 'Surat during the second half of the eighteenth century: what kind of social order?', *Modern Asian Stud.*, 21 (1987), pp. 679-710.
- Ure, A., *The philosophy of manufactures* (1835).
- Washbrook, D. A., *The emergence of provincial politics. The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1976).

Watt, G., *A dictionary of the economic products of India* (1890).

Whitcombe, E., *Agrarian conditions in northern India. 1. The United Provinces under British rule 1850-1900* (Berkeley, 1972).

Wright, H. R. C., *East-Indian economic problems in the age of Cornwallis and Raffles* (1961).