

Peasantry and the Colonial Debate in Central Provinces: Structural Conditions and Continuities

Nandita Banerjee

The English, by their right of conquest, had become the arbiters of Indian society. Representing a society governed by possession individualism in their own country, they were anxious to find out the true proprietors of land. However, the answer to this question was confounded by the meaning to be applied to words'. The question of 'rights' could mean one thing in one context and a different thing in another milieu. As the author of a Cobden club essay had remarked –

'Property in land, as a transferable mercantile commodity absolutely owned and passing from hand to hand like any chattel, is not an ancient institution but a modern development, reached only in a few very advanced countries. In the greater part of the world the right of cultivating particular portions of the earth is rather a privilege than a property; a privilege first of a whole people, then of a particular tribe or a particular village community and finally of particular individuals of the community. In this last stage the land is partitioned off to those individuals as a matter of mutual convenience, but not in unconditional property; it long remains subject to certain conditions and to reversionary interests of the community, which prevent its uncontrolled alienation and attach to it certain common rights and common burden In India the rent was generally levied by the state or the immediate assignees and representatives of the state; but nevertheless, there was frequently to be found in the village communities a privilege or property in the occupation and management of the soil, which constituted as strong a form of property as can anywhere be found short of our modern form of landed property.'⁷¹

It thus remained to be debated among peasant enthusiasts and their opponents whether the Cultivators in the Central Indian districts were entitled to any 'right' in the soil. Some districts of the Nagpur region (which were later incorporated into Maharashtra after independence was attained) were close to the districts which had formerly been under Maratha rule and which were thereafter included in the Bombay presidency and the Bombay officers found it curious that they were following the ryotwar system and attaching great importance to peasant rights while certain districts with a similar historical background had been placed under the control of category to landlords (Magoozars) in the central provinces. Within the Central provinces itself, many officers like Lucie - Smith, the settlement officer of Chanda, Sir George Campbell, the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces and Rivett - Carnac, the settlement officer of the wurdah district thought that Lord Canning, the Governor General was too stressed out with the post - Mutiny resettlement and pacification of the country when he decided to confer proprietary rights on the revenue contractors or Venters' (as they were called in the Nimar District) in the Sagar Narmada Territories or the Nagpur Country. However, Familiarity with the system of Cultivation and rev-

enue assessment of these territories.² Show that given the British Government's concern for regular collections of revenue assessments and their anxiety to collect the maximum amount that the land would yield it was impossible to work the settlements without the aid of the malagoozars, whether he was the wuttundar under Patel as he was a usurious revenue contractor for the village.

During Maratha rule cultivators were engaged afresh every year for the field they would cultivate and for the rent they would pay.³ The settlement officer of Betul maintained a class of hereditary cultivators or 'meerasidars'. But although he had heard of them, he could not find any trace of them when he came to administer the district. As opposed to the meerasadars there were the Ooprees. The literal of this word was strangers, who cultivated the village from time to time with out any right whatsoever. The settlement officer of Betul however, admitted that there were a group of substantial cultivators who 'held on from year to year, and from father to son, so long as the rent demanded was duly paid.'⁴ The commissioner of Nagpur notes that "there are few villages wherein tenants of many years company may not be found, who have, in fact been located in the land they cultivate for as many years and in many instances, for longer periods than the malagoozars themselves"⁵ references to the special influence of some cultivators in village affairs also about in the reports of Sir Richard Jenkins. "In the case the more respectable or wealthiest cultivators it was the interest of the *patel* to maintain them in possession", remarked the settlement officer of Chhindwara" as he would be much more certain of getting his rent if he had to deal with a new man destitute of resources. "Similarly esteemed were "Persons who sank wells and in other wags expended capital in improving the land" and they generally were allowed to remain in possession and at then deaths thin sons other heirs, were allowed to succeed; and this it come to pass that land did sometimes for generations remain in the occupancy of the same family."⁶

While investing malagoozars with proprietary titles in land the policy markers were not absolutely negligent of these "concurrent interests."⁷ All the instructions emanating from the North West Provinces Govt. contained promises for protecting old cultivations. One the government had decided on the consolidation of the right of the landlord by the new settlement, the chief commissioner of the tenants should be consolidated"⁸.

The insecurity of the condition of the cultivators had drawn the attention of the British administrators soon after they understood the short comings of then initial rule in the Sagar and Narmada Territories. "The rent rates in Zillah Sagar, Dumoh, Jabulpore.....are well understood to be excessively high" W. C. Erskine, Commissioner Sagar division to the sudder Board of Revenue, North West Provinces, "so much so that many of the poor cultivators are starving."(they had) nothing but their plough - cattle, no seed in store and no means of procuring it, except it be furnished to them by their mal goozars at ruinous rates;.....it has, long been the custom in this part of India for the malgoozarsto not only furnish seed, but to\feed the whole of their cultivators from the souring of the khurref till it is cut."⁹ A similar p cture of the system of cultivation in the Nimar district can be obtained from the description of Forsyth, the settlement officer of Nimar –

“A cultivator first starting a plough, he is a cadet of an old established farming family, generally has to brow both stock and food, and as he can give no security, has to pay such a rate of interest as will cover the consider able risk of loss to the lender. The rate for money is generally 2 percent per mensem and borrowed grain is returned in kind at double quantity. But as the money value of the grain always lower at harvest time than when it is borrowed, this does not represent quite 100 percent interest to the lender. One Kucha manee of jowar ($114 \frac{2}{5}$ ths maunds) is the usual quantity of food borrowed by a family; as the earliest crops of bajree, kootkee etc. ripen about the end of October, this quantity, repaid for usage at harvest time, would represent Rs. 20, altogether Rs. 32, thus leaving to the cultivator Rs. 79 – 8 - 0 , which is not more than the bare wages that himself and family might have earned by laboring for hire at similar work for the same time.”¹⁰

Equally degrading for the cultivator was the ang-sajee system where the monied man lends a pair of oxen and in exchange gets an equal share of the produce of the land “showing that the value of an “intelligent ryot” is held to be just equal to that of a pair of bullocks”¹¹

This cycle of borrowing and repayment was usually repeated till the province experienced the changes consequent on improved communication, increased demand for the products of the province and rising prices. The rising prices of tilee oil seeds helped the koorkoo cultivators in Nimar to break out of their cycle of indebtedness.¹²

Sometimes cultivators themselves took the initiative to take the grain, gur or cotton to the market to get the benefit of the large difference between process at head garters and in the local bazaars.¹³ If the cultivator had a cart and could spare the bullocks and the time, it paid him to carry his produce to the market himself even if it was as far as Itarsi and he often did that. Sometimes he added to the earnings from his land by carting a neighbor’s grain for hire he had disposed of his own; gur in particulars, owing to its small bulk and greater value was often taken by the growers to the bazaar. Standen, the settlement officer of Betul gives a vivid description of how people amongst the cultivators tried to get hold of their neighbor’s produce by lending a little money and get the benefit of the rising prices

“In every village a little bigger than the average there are one or more petty traders with a few carts or pack bullocks and a capital of a few hundred rupees. These men go about the villages in their neighborhood buying a couple of *Khandis* of Grain here and a here and a *mansi* of oil seed there, till they have laid out their capital, when they carry it away to market and after disposing of it and marking their profit come back for more”¹⁴

Many of the money lenders got hold of the produce of the land through their seed-lending and repayment in kind transactions and became quite wealthy traders.¹⁵ In this manner wheat was taken to Itarsi, oil seed to Berar and gur to the bazars of Paratwada, Chandar, Hiverkhed and Sendurjama in Berar. However, Betul gur was not as cheap as Northern Indian gur produced by canal and tank irrigation.¹⁶ Even in a district like Raepore, the stimulus of high prices had made the cultivators exporters of their own produce.¹⁷

The wealth of the cultivators was sometimes displayed in better houses, better clothes and more capital as in Hoshangabad¹⁸ or was buried in hoarding or Jewellery as in Raepoor.¹⁹

Rising prices of grain resulted in an increased demand for land and as a result in a rise in rents.²⁰ On March 2, 1864 Act X (Bengal Rent Act of 1859) was extended to the central provinces by which tenants occupying a plot for more than 12 years would be allowed to remain in occupation without getting their rent enhanced except under certain specified circumstances. The introduction of this right created great confusion in this province as competition rents had not as yet emerged and tenants often migrated from one district to another. The settlement officer of Chanda found the distinction between ryots holding for 12, years and those for less 'purely arbitrary'. In effect it deprived cultivators of a protection which was embedded in custom since a long time and placed "more than half the cultivating community at the mercy of the men now made proprietors."²¹ All these developments brought about a decrease in the number of mouroosee cultivators, an increase in the proprietor's home farm (*seer*) and a matching increase in the number of tenants-at-will. The special circumstances of the Central Provinces thus necessitated a new circular; the circular G of 20 April, 1865, by which certain cultivator were to have absolute occupancy rights,

- i) Ryots whose possession has carried with it something of an hereditary character.
- ii) Ryots who have spent such capital on their fields as to give them some special title to occupancy right,
- iii) Ryots who are relatives of present or former proprietors and whose occupancy right may be considered to some extent as a substitute for a share in the proprietary right.
- iv) Ryots of new villages who have hold their fields since the village was founded, or since those fields were reclaimed from the jungle.
- v) Ryots who have held their from a date *antecedent* to the proprietor's connection with the village as its landlord.
- vi) Ryots whose claim to occupancy right rests on a bare possession of 25 years or upwards.²²

Ryots who failed to come within these definitions and who nevertheless had held for more there twelve years were called *Shurtee* or conditional occupancy ryots, their tenure and status being subject to a revision of the rent law.²³ In Bengal Sir Barnes Peacock had at this time ruled that occupancy right merely meant the right to hold at the competitive market rate and a revision of the rent law was being expected. The government therefore wanted to keep options open and avoided a definite commitment. Temple sincerely believed that although "there was no declared law or unvarying custom, but still a certain sort of occupancy right would be usually conceded so long as a tenant paid his rent, the sense of the community was generally against his ejection and the position of some tenants became thus so strong as virtually to involve a right of contained occupancy."²⁴

Peasant enthusiasts, however, recovered lost ground from 1873-74 with the large number of transfers to malgoozaree rights to outside financiers. The importance of protecting cultivating right from capitalists was brought home in the end. Finally in 1883 the Central Provinces Tenancy Act was passed to protect cultivators against rent enhancement. Eviction was not possible unless

compensation was paid. However, it put a stop to the automatic accrual of occupancy right as a result of twelve years of continuous occupation.²⁵ This Act brought the rent law in the Central Provinces nearly at par with those provably in other non-Regulation provinces like the Punjab and Awadh where successive rent legislations had been passed in 1868 and 1886/87 to protect cultivating occupancy. Such protections of cultivating occupancies was an indirect acknowledgement of the potentialities of cultivating communities as prospective investors and promoters of agriculture.

The immediate beneficiaries of these Tenancy Acts were the class of cultivators who were classed as ‘absolute occupancy ryots.’ There was a time when land was abundant and its products were difficult to dispose of. Many cultivators specially Gonds had at that time renounced their right in land and left their villages to escape revenue liabilities had to pay more at that time as the malgoozars took advantage of their stationery conditions to screw more out of them. It was also true that they held the best soil of the village. But subsequently they did not have to face much increase in rent.²⁶

But the rent of ordinary cultivators was doubled by the malgoozors. The Harda Malgoozars in Hoshungabad made an enhancement of 133%. This was three times as much as was paid the earlier settlement.²⁷ In Wheat growing villages, the cultivators were particularly hard pressed by the demand for a kind rent (*Khot*) at the rate of 3 manis of wheat for one man of land in Harda. In bad harvest years such rents become irrecoverable and enmeshed the cultivator in the sets of the moneylender. In eastern tahsils of Hoshungabad, the landlord gave land and seed while the cultivators brought bullock & laboured. They had to return the seed with 50% interest during the harvest, the village servants were paid and the balance was equally divided between the cultivators and the malgoorzars.²⁸ Absolute occupancy tenures were not looked upon with favour by the Malgoozors and they took every opportunity to terminate such rights. Since many Gond cultivators left of their own accord, the malgoozars occupied their holdings. Some moneylenders got these cultivators so deeply entangled in their debt that the cultivators were glad to rounce their right and lease for better deals elsewhere. In this manner some 20% of absolute occupancy holdings have been vacated in the Hoshangabad district. In many villages there were money lenders who had recorded themselves as absolute occupancy tenants and had leased out thin holdings to other cultivators at high rents.

Simple occupancy right holdings under twelve year rule had, however, increased in extent under prescriptive rule. In some cases malgoorzars sold pieces of land with occupancy status and a low rental to moneylender and people desiring an investment. In other cases vacant holdings were assigned by malgoozars to their relatives with a view to avoid high assessment of revenue.²⁹

In villages of agriculturist malgoozars the cultivators were much better off. In Damoh the Lodhis and the Kurmis were the most prominent of the agricultural castes, but of them the Lodhis were the more prosperous. They occupied the hill villages and cultivated both the wheat and rice which gave them “two strings to a bow - one or their acting as insurance against a heavy seasonal disaster.”³⁰

The Kurmis held land in the haveli and had to depend for seed, cuttle and food on advances from money moneylenders and it is rare to find more than two or three men in a village who sow

their own seed. Their indebtedness could, however, be attributed to their willingness to keep up a connection with the moneylender and the debts were not irrecoverable.³¹ In Jubbalpore too, Kurmis Lodhis, Rajputs and Brahmins were well off.

The situation of Gond ryots, however, was actually very poor. Their cultivation suffered from low productivity and they supplemented their income by working as wage labour during harvests. They borrowed bullocks for Kharif ploughing on the *buhi* system under which a part of the produce is rendered for hire. They paid plough rent on bhag system. This is also common to Jubbalpore district. The proportion of produce to be rendered is fixed at a fraction ranging in individual cases or villages from one third to one fifth, and the amount to be actually given up at each harvest is determined either by appraisal of the standing crop (*Kut*) or by actual measurement on the threshing floor (*Agora*). Under this system the cash value of the rent rises equally with prices and the landlord also shares directly in any increase of produce resulting from ryots' improvements.³²

In Chanda too the same story of money lending malgoozars' exploitation of cultivators is repeated. In the *haveli* of Chanda *tahsil* the high incidence of debt was due to action of one malgoozars, Rai Bahaur Chandi Prasad who owned a very large number of Villages. He allowed grain debts with accumulated interest to reach an abnormal pitch. In some of his villages small tenants were found owing as much as 300 *Khandis* worth roughly Rs. 1500, for seed and food and all their crops were taken in satisfaction of interest only.

The northern portion of Brahmपुरi, where the soil was very fertile and the tract within reach of the Nagpur market, Cultivators had very good credit. However their debts were not more than ten times their rent and could be repaid if trouble was taken to do so.

Debts were high in north of Brahmपुरi, *haveli* of Chanda and the open tract of Warora; they were lowest in the Rajgarh and Amgaon parganas which have poor soils but good cultivators and were distant from the courts.³³

The patriarchal relations characteristic of former days between peasants and malgoozars was changing from about this time. While the malgoozars resorted to rack renting, oppression and litigation, cultivators had also become indifferent and independent. Their mutual antagonism was reflected in the discussions in the 'Malgoozar Sabhas' set up by the malgoozars to defend their interest as a class the cultivators did not have such association as yet but they were also learning to take advantage of the legal protections which was reflected in the large number of rent suits clogging the provincial Courts.

Notes and References :

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2. See Chapters 2 and 3
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4. S.R. Nagpur (1869) Para 102
5. Commissioner of Nagpur to supt. of survey and settlement, 13 Dec 1860, para 2 letters to Govt. of India, 1862 MPSAB
6. S.R. Chhindwara (1869), Para 205

7. Capt. Hector Mackenzie, See to C.C.C.P. to Col H.M. Durand, See to GOI, Foreign Dept. with the Government General No 3313, Nagpur, 18 July, 18 July, 1864, Para 15, Revenue A No 39-40, August 1864 in N.A.I.
8. S. R. Chanda (1869) Para 373
9. W.C. Erskine Com Saugor Division to the sudden Board of Revenue, NWP 7 July 1856 in selections relating to the revision of the Revenue settlement in the Sagar & Namada Territories 1850-62
10. S.R. Nimar (1869) Para 346
11. Ibid
12. Ibid Para 348
13. S. R. Betul (1894-99) Para 106
14. Ibid Para 97
15. Ibid
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17. S.R. Raepoor (1869) Para 221
18. S. R. Hoshangabad (1891-98) Para 75
19. S. R. Reapoor (1869) Para 149
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22. Circular G No. 1832 from Sec to C.C., C.P. to Sett. Com. C. P. 20 April, 1865 in NRSR File 27 of 1865 in MPCRO
23. Act X of 1859
24. Capt. H. Mackenzel, See to C. C, C.P. to Col. H. M Durand, See to GOI with the GG 18 July 1864 Para 10 In For Rev A Progs Aug 1864 File 39 - 40 in N.A.I.
25. Supplement to the Gazette of India, July 7, 1883, 1255 in Revenue Dept Compilations No 190(b), 1882-83
26. S. R. Hoshungabad (1891-98) Para 75
27. Ibid
28. Ibid Para 77
29. Ibid Para 68
30. S. R. Damoh (1888-91) Para 29
31. Ibid
32. Ibid, S.R. Jubbulpore (1886-1894) Para 30
33. S.R. Chanda (1897-06) Para 32.

