

Inequality and  
Social change.

1972



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Dr A. Ramaswami Mudaliar Lectures, 1971  
delivered under the auspices of the University of Kerala

R.R. NO. 155/74

# Inequality and Social Change

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DELHI  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS  
1972

*Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W. 1*  
Glasgow New York Toronto Melbourne Wellington  
Cape Town Ibadan Nairobi Lusaka Addis Ababa  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi Lahore Dacca  
Kuala Lumpur Hong Kong Tokyo  
2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi 6

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André BÉTEILLE 1934

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For  
NIRMAL KUMAR BOSE  
who taught me to disagree





## PREFACE

The two essays printed here are based on the Ramaswami Mudaliar Lectures delivered at Trivandrum in July 1971. I am grateful to the University of Kerala and in particular to its Vice-Chancellor, Dr George Jacob, for inviting me to deliver these lectures. Their preparation has enabled me to formulate some of the ideas which grew out of the research I did during the tenure of a Fellowship awarded by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund to which I would like to record my thanks.

I am grateful to the University of Kerala for granting me permission to make my own arrangement for this publication and to Oxford University Press for making this arrangement so simple.

*Delhi*  
1972

André Bételle

# 1 THE NATURE AND FORMS OF INEQUALITY

The study of inequality occupies a central place in Sociology and has, in a sense, provided the main impetus to the growth of the discipline itself. It is also of special interest to those concerned with the problems of contemporary India; for while we are committed to a social order based on complete equality, we live in a society which is among the most rigidly hierarchical in the world.

My plan is to first discuss the problem in broad and general terms: to comment on the nature of social inequality, its principal aspects and forms, and indicate briefly certain changes which are believed to be taking place in it. The second chapter will be devoted to the problem of inequality in contemporary India. This in itself is a large and complex subject and I shall concentrate primarily on inequalities in the agrarian structure. I hope that some of the issues raised in the first chapter will help to give a perspective to the specific problems which I shall consider in the second.

I would like to begin by sketching out briefly what I consider to be the proper sociological approach to the problem of inequality. This is essential because, since the problem is of general and not merely academic interest, it has been discussed in diverse terms. Very broadly, social scientists tend to adopt a positive as opposed to a normative approach to the problem. This is not to say that they do not have their own preferences in the matter, for they are not likely to be very different in their basic commitments from other members of the society in which they live. Rather, it is the social scientist's task to point out that the real choice is not generally between equality and inequality or even between different degrees of inequality; in the real world what one chooses is very often one type of inequality in place of another.<sup>1</sup>

I am not trying to suggest that social scientists in general—or even sociologists in particular—are in complete agreement about the nature and types of inequality. In fact there are very few subjects which divide them as sharply as this.<sup>2</sup> The very terms which they use for describing the subject—social inequality, social class, social stratification—are objects of bitter controversy. But I believe that the development of the discipline over the last hundred years enables us to speak with some confidence about a sociological approach to the

problem.

The first step in the direction of a sociological approach is taken when we shift our attention from inequalities inherent in the nature of human beings to those inherent in their conditions of existence.<sup>3</sup> I would not deny that individual human beings are unequally endowed both physically and mentally. These inequalities, however, are not of very direct interest to sociologists. Our interest is in the differences in life chances and life styles among people which result from the different positions they occupy in society—as landowners and labourers, let us say, or as Brahmins and Harijans.

It is beyond question that individuals differ in their natural abilities and aptitudes. But if we take two sufficiently large groups of individuals we will find that the different levels of intelligence are similarly distributed within them. Both will have roughly the same proportion of people with average, above average and below average intelligence. The sociologist is not concerned primarily with interpersonal differences as such. His concern is with systematic differences between aggregates of individuals. Such differences do exist but, so far as we know, not in regard to native intelligence or aptitude.

These remarks call for some clarification. At the turn of the century it was widely believed that the different races were unequally endowed, some being superior in intelligence to others. Thus the white races were considered superior to the dark and, among the Whites, the so-called Nordic race was considered superior to the rest. The argument was given a measure of plausibility by the fact that the division of the world into the white and dark races corresponded roughly with its division into the economically advanced and backward countries.

The relationship between race and intelligence has been studied in great detail with regard to Negroes and Whites in the United States. These studies show that there is no difference between the two groups in their patterns of native intelligence.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Negroes tend to show a consistently lower level of performance than Whites. This important social fact is explained by the unequal positions occupied by members of the two groups in the class system, the power structure and the status hierarchy of American society.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Negroes perform less well than Whites because they

are on the whole poorer, in more subordinate positions and held in lower esteem.

We are now in a position to define our approach in somewhat more positive terms. In studying inequality our primary concern is with certain basic structural phenomena such as class, status and power which are found to exist in all societies. These might properly be described as social facts. They are social facts to the extent that they exist independently of what individuals think or feel about them and in the sense that they cannot be changed according to the will and pleasure of individuals.<sup>6</sup>

Each society has its characteristic pattern of stratification, using that term in a broad sense. The individual is born into a particular stratum and, in most cases, remains a member of it for the rest of his life. In some cases he might move from one stratum to another, either upwards or downwards, but this in itself would not change the nature of the strata themselves or their mutual positions. Much of what the individual does in life—and indeed a great deal of what he can do—will depend on the stratum or hierarchical level to which he belongs.

One important implication of the statement that inequality is a social fact is that patterns of inequality or stratification vary from one society to another. The class structure of American society is different from the class structure of the Scandinavian countries. The distribution of power in the Soviet Union is not the same as the distribution of power in the United Kingdom. Distinctions of status are arranged differently in India as compared to Thailand. The task of the sociologist is to study in a systematic manner the similarities and differences between patterns of stratification in different societies.

A second implication of the view that inequality is a social fact is that patterns of stratification change over time. The class structure of the United States is not the same today as it was at the time of the Civil War. In the Soviet Union the distribution of power changed radically after the Revolution. Even in India the distinctions of status have not remained immutable.

I would like to draw attention to an aspect of the structure of inequality which might on first view appear paradoxical. Because inequality is a social fact it cannot be changed according to the mere will of individuals. But by the same token it is a product of collective

experience, and when this experience changes the pattern of inequality is also likely to change. All sociologists agree that the structure of inequality cannot be changed effectively by arbitrary individual decisions. They differ greatly on the extent to which they consider it possible — or even desirable — to direct changes in the pattern of inequality by conscious human intervention either by administrative or by political means.<sup>7</sup>

As I have already indicated, there are different aspects of inequality which coexist in the same society. These are too numerous to be considered or even listed in full.<sup>8</sup> I propose to confine myself to the principal aspects or dimensions of social inequality. Among the ones which are most noticeable in contemporary societies are the inequalities of income, occupation and education.<sup>9</sup> To these we must add the inequalities of power or those which manifest themselves in relations of dominance and subordination. Finally there are inequalities of status which are a reflection of the fact that not all categories of people are accorded the same measure of esteem in their society.

Different scholars have emphasized different aspects of social inequality. Many of them give great importance to the economic factor. Apart from its intrinsic importance, the economic factor can be relatively easily measured and therefore studies which are based on it have generally an appearance of greater objectivity. The two factors most commonly used are income and occupation. Income can of course be precisely measured although it is not always easy to do this in practice. Occupations can also be ranked fairly precisely and in some countries, as in the United Kingdom, they are more or less officially graded in the Registrar General's classification.<sup>10</sup>

It will be seen that the economic factors are themselves of different kinds. In fact Marx, with whose name the emphasis on the economic aspects of social life is most widely associated, explicitly rejected the use of income and occupation as criteria for defining social class.<sup>11</sup> He emphasized the positions occupied by individuals in the organization of production. In other words, property rather than income or occupation was the economic factor to which Marx assigned crucial significance.

Others have emphasized the inequalities inherent in the distribu-

tion of power and authority. Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth century Arab historian, said: 'The possession of power is the source of riches'.<sup>12</sup> The so-called élite theorists who wrote mainly at the beginning of the present century also assigned primary significance to the political factor.<sup>13</sup> For them the basic cleavage was not between the rich and the poor or the propertied and the propertyless; it was between the élites and the masses or the rulers and the ruled. The élite theorists were critics of socialist thought and they argued that in a socialist regime new classes would take the place of the old. Their views find some confirmation in the works of the Yugoslav writer Milovan Djilas.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the economic and political factors there is what might be described as the 'status' factor. The concept of status is among the most difficult to define in Sociology.<sup>15</sup> Briefly, it is concerned with esteem and prestige rather than with wealth and power. It is difficult to talk about status in general terms because societies differ so greatly in the qualities they esteem. Status might be governed by concepts of ritual purity as in traditional India; by notions of honour and chivalry as in medieval Europe; or even by scholarly achievement as in classical China. Modern industrial societies have their own conceptions of status although the gradations of status there tend to be less conspicuous than in earlier societies.

I have considered briefly and in turn class, power and status, which are three of the principal aspects of social stratification in the broad sense of the term. This approach to the problem, which was first formulated by Max Weber, has been widely used by sociologists.<sup>16</sup> Since I have myself used the approach in the analysis of an Indian village,<sup>17</sup> I would like to emphasize that it is not the only way in which the problem can be studied. There is a somewhat different threefold scheme implicit in Ossowski's work. He describes three dichotomies which are as follows: (i) the rich and the poor; (ii) the rulers and the ruled; and (iii) those who work and those for whom others work.

The relations among the different aspects of stratification are complex and sociologists differ in the ways in which they view these relations. The principal difference is between those like Marx whom I would describe as reductionists and those like Weber whom I would describe as pluralists. The Marxists would not deny that

gradations of power and status exist in every society. Only, they see these as being derived from or dependent upon class distinctions which they consider to be the most fundamental of all social distinctions.

The pluralists adopt a different position. They would not deny the importance of economic distinctions. In fact Weber, unlike many of his interpreters, assigned a central place to class in sociological analysis. But he argued that status and power were also important and not wholly determined by economic factors. He tried to substantiate his arguments by a rather wider range of comparative studies than had been undertaken by Marx. Weber's position needs to be restated because it has often been misrepresented. He did not believe that status and power could be understood in isolation from economic factors. He believed that class, status and power were closely interdependent although none of them could be fully explained by the others.

The pluralist position is on the whole more flexible. It admits that the same factors may be differently combined. The pluralists would argue that two industrial societies which are very similar in their economic organization might differ somewhat in their distribution of power. Again, among pre-industrial societies the nature of the agrarian class structure did not always provide an exact clue to the nature of status gradations. However, although it is clear that different combinations are possible, the possibilities are by no means unlimited.

It might be argued that one or another aspect of inequality is likely to acquire special prominence in a particular society at a given phase of its historical development. There is little doubt that market forces, the rule of property and the division into capitalists and workers were the most conspicuous features of West European societies in the second half of the last century. It is no accident that Marxian theory, which assigned so much significance to the economic factor, was a product of this society. It is also not surprising that Marxian theory cannot, without substantial modification, explain satisfactorily the many inequalities and contradictions which undoubtedly exist in societies of the Soviet type. Perhaps an approach which gives a more important place to power and authority would be more suitable for analysing such societies.<sup>18</sup>

Some have argued that the most suitable approach to the understanding of traditional Indian society is through the caste system which is neither fundamentally economic nor fundamentally political but a hierarchical system built around the opposition of purity and pollution.<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt that the caste system in general and notions of purity and pollution in particular were very important in traditional India but I think it would be wrong to ignore the existence of economic and political distinctions there or even to assign a secondary place to them.<sup>20</sup> The only thing that we can say very firmly is that inequality manifests itself in different forms in societies of different kinds. We may now consider the patterns of inequality in some of the principal types of society.

Sociological studies have established beyond question the universality of social inequality. Wherever societies have been studied in detail they have revealed the existence of inequality in one form or another. Marx believed that 'class societies', or societies based on inequality and exploitation, represented a particular phase of historical development and were preceded by classless societies of the primitive type and would be succeeded by classless societies of the socialist or communist type. Marx's vision of a socialist society devoid of inequality and exploitation has not been realized in practice. His characterization of primitive societies has also failed to stand the test of further scholarly investigation.

Tribal or primitive societies differ greatly in the complexity of their organization. The simpler ones are not marked by rigid social inequalities although even here age and sex usually serve to stratify the population.<sup>21</sup> Kinship plays an important part in these societies. Where lineages exist they might be unequally ranked. Leach has shown how among the Kachins of highland Burma the rules of kinship and marriage serve to place individuals in a hierarchical order.<sup>22</sup>

Having indicated that inequality is a feature of all human societies, I would like to consider the nature of stratification in some of the principal types of societies. I cannot even attempt to be exhaustive within the scope of the present work. In fact, I am prepared to concede that even the task of classifying human societies into a number of clearly defined types has not yet been satisfactorily

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performed.

There is of course a typology of human societies as well as of systems of stratification in the Marxian scheme of analysis. Marx's typology divided historically existing societies into (i) Ancient Society based on slavery; (ii) Feudal Society based on serfdom; and (iii) Capitalist Society based on the division into capitalists and workers. This scheme is too broad and has failed to find a proper place for another type of society Marx occasionally discussed, namely, Asiatic Society which is of some importance from our point of view. Besides, the scheme is now somewhat out of date because it cannot fully accommodate the many changes which have taken place in industrial societies since Marx's time.<sup>23</sup>

Two contrasts are of special importance in contemporary sociological analysis. The first is between patterns of inequality in pre-industrial and industrial societies and the second is between types of stratification in the two variants of industrial society, the capitalist and the socialist. These contrasts are important because they might help to throw light on the changes which are likely to accompany the process of industrialization.

The category 'pre-industrial' society is a very broad and loose one as any residual category is bound to be. Industrial societies themselves, as I have just indicated, are not all of the same kind. Therefore the contrast between the two can be made only in very general terms and would naturally admit many exceptions. I would sum up the differences between the two by saying that pre-industrial societies tend to be of the estate or the caste type whereas the characteristic divisions of industrial societies are either classes or strata.<sup>24</sup>

Estates were the characteristic divisions of feudal society in Europe. The estates or orders were not only unequally ranked but their inequality was legally recognized. The same laws did not apply to the clergy, the nobility and the commoners. In its details the European estate system was quite complex.<sup>25</sup> The number of estates, their internal subdivisions and their mutual relations varied according to time and place but the basic framework remained broadly similar. If we define estates broadly to mean social divisions which are legally recognized as being unequal in rank, they have existed in a large number of societies including Japan and pre-Columbian

Mexico.

In a caste society also the divisions between groups tend to be clear cut and if anything they are even more elaborate and rigid. There is some dispute among scholars whether the term caste should be used in a general sense to refer to all rigid social distinctions or in a specific sense to refer only to the Indian case.<sup>26</sup> In the present context I shall use the term in its specific sense. It has been said that social distinctions in an estate system are upheld by law whereas in a caste system they are upheld by religion.<sup>27</sup> This is a little misleading. Religious ideas had an important place in the European estate system and in India caste distinctions were upheld by customary law. What the two systems had in common was that social distinctions not only existed in practice but were also accepted in principle.

Social distinctions in both estate and caste societies are closely associated with the ownership and control of land. In feudal Europe the social prominence of the clergy was closely associated with its rights over the land and in India the Brahmins enjoyed the greatest influence in those areas where they were substantial landowners. In traditional agrarian societies rights over the land are usually exercised by the family and are transmitted through inheritance from one generation to another. As a consequence, birth in the appropriate order generally determines one's social position although some scope is left for individual achievement, more perhaps in an estate society than in a caste society.

The importance of birth and family, the dependence on the land and the low rate of geographical mobility serve to underline the distinctions between the different estates or castes. They develop characteristic differences in their styles of life in such matters as dress, diet, habitation, speech and manners. Social distinctions in agrarian societies are generally more visible than they are in industrial societies. It does not follow from this that they are always greater in extent.

Classes and strata are the characteristic divisions of modern industrial societies. Sociologists have debated at great length about the class structure of what might be described as societies of the capitalist or pluralist type which exist in North America and West Europe.<sup>28</sup> Some would describe their class structures in terms of an

upper class, a middle class and a lower class; others would speak of a capitalist class, a middle class and a working class; yet others would present a more complex scheme comprising an upper upper, a lower upper, an upper middle, a lower middle, an upper lower and a lower lower class. East European sociologists are inclined to deny the existence of classes in their society and speak, instead, of strata; they see their society as being divided into workers, peasants and the intelligentsia.<sup>29</sup>

While conceding that there are many differences between the patterns of inequality in the two types of industrial society, I would like to indicate two features which they share in common and which might serve to differentiate them from estate and caste societies. Firstly, the boundaries between classes and between strata in industrial societies are less rigid and clear-cut and the inequalities which exist there are on the whole rather less visible. Secondly, although inequalities are often very great in these societies, they exist within a normative order which is built on the premise of equality.

I have spoken of whole societies as if each was characterized by only one pattern of inequality. This is a gross oversimplification whose limitations become obvious as soon as we examine societies of the Indian kind which are predominantly agricultural but which also have an industrial sector. The basic question is whether in such societies one should speak of a single unified system of stratification or of at least two systems whose mutual relations are at best ambiguous. This question can be asked in regard to all complex societies but its relevance is particularly clear in the so-called 'developing' societies.

Some scholars have proposed that the term 'situation' be used for describing each sector with its characteristic pattern of stratification.<sup>30</sup> While this is a useful way of representing systems of inequality as a first approximation and in static terms, it leaves open the question of the relations between the different sectors themselves. In order to understand these relations we have to examine certain basic changes which are taking place in systems of stratification in different parts of the world. I now turn to a consideration of these.

The last two hundred years have witnessed many changes in pat-

terns of social inequality. These changes have been closely associated with the process of industrialization and are therefore most clearly in evidence in the industrial societies of today. It is important to understand them if only for the light they may throw on the possibilities which are open to those countries which have embarked on the process of industrialization.

It is not easy to assess the significance or even the nature of the changes which have taken place in industrial societies during the last fifty years. Sharply divergent views are expressed by scholars belonging to the two types of industrial society. These views are propounded, attacked and defended with so much heat and passion that it is not always easy to separate statements of fact from expressions of prejudice.<sup>31</sup> Sociologists of the Western world are on the whole inclined to argue that patterns of stratification in the two types of industrial society are coming more and more to resemble each other.<sup>32</sup> This point of view is sharply repudiated by Soviet sociologists.<sup>33</sup>

Raymond Aron has noted that the two great nineteenth-century sociologists, Tocqueville and Marx, had images of the future of capitalist society which were in many ways diametrically opposite.<sup>34</sup> Marx believed that capitalist society was working rapidly towards its own destruction through a steady increase in social inequality. Tocqueville, on the other hand, saw a hopeful future for democracy which he believed would lead to a decline in inequality among men. Aron believes that in this regard Tocqueville was more right than Marx and perhaps most Western sociologists would share his optimism.

I will not address myself directly to the question whether inequalities are increasing or decreasing. But I think that there will be general agreement that social stratification in the second half of the twentieth century is less simple, less clear-cut and less visible than it has been in the past.

The relations between the different dimensions of stratification have become more complex than before and new dimensions are perhaps now becoming relevant.<sup>35</sup> The distinctions between the strata are less sharp, rigid and clearly defined than in the past; this is no doubt associated with an increase in individual mobility. Finally, social distinctions are less visible today than they have been

in previous centuries. This is as true of distinctions relating to the class structure in Britain as of those relating to the distribution of power in the U. S. S. R.

Among the factors most widely invoked to explain these changes is the growth of an industrial economy. The linkages between economic growth, the elimination of want and the reduction of inequality are almost regarded as axiomatic in the Western world. East European scholars do not view economic growth as a sufficient condition for the elimination of inequality but they too regard it as a necessary condition. There is no doubt that, by reducing poverty and squalor, economic growth tends to make inequality less visible although we should not rule out the possibility of its creating at the same time new and more subtle forms of inequality.

Associated with these economic changes there have been a number of important changes in the legal and political systems. T. H. Marshall has described in detail the growth in England first of legal equality, then of political equality and finally of civic equality.<sup>36</sup> Two developments have been particularly important in this regard. There has been first of all an extension of democracy in the widest sense of the term. Then there are the mechanisms which have been created specifically to benefit the underprivileged strata, as for instance the policy for the special treatment of the Backward Classes in India.<sup>37</sup>

While most Western scholars argue that economic inequalities are being progressively reduced in their society, this view would not be accepted by all. A study made not many years ago by Richard Titmuss in Britain showed that the equalization of wealth and income in that country was more apparent than real.<sup>38</sup> Further, in the spheres of both education and occupation the equality of opportunity which seems to exist in principle is far from being realized in practice.<sup>39</sup> In the socialist countries also the gap between manual and non-manual work continues to be an important basis of economic inequality.

The more closely we look at the political system, the more difficult we find it to decide whether the decline of inequality in the modern world is real. On the one hand there is the increase in 'participation' in electoral and civic activities particularly in the Anglo-American political systems; in fact, many American political scientists would

regard participation as a crucial indicator of modernization.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand there is the increasing concentration of the means of violence and of persuasion not only in the Soviet type of political system but also in the American; this is an aspect of modern political systems which, following C. Wright Mills,<sup>41</sup> many scholars have begun to view with apprehension. It now appears that if we define 'participation' in a certain way, an increase in political participation can be made to appear perfectly compatible with rising inequality in the distribution of power.

This leads us to questions regarding the ways in which changes in the system of stratification may be brought about. I have already suggested that there are strict limits to these changes, but beyond this there are two possible approaches to the problem. On the one hand, it may be argued that the natural tendency of economic growth is to bring about a reduction in social inequality and therefore not very much needs to be done beyond providing the most suitable conditions for this growth. This is the classic liberal argument. It is in a sense a circular argument and it is based more on optimism than on any firmly established sociological theory.

The other argument is also not based on any firm theory but it assigns more importance to conscious human intervention. According to this argument inequalities can and should be reduced by means of political and administrative action provided such action is based on an intelligent appreciation of existing reality. There is no doubt that certain types of economic inequality can be eliminated and others considerably reduced by this means. But it must be remembered that the instruments through which this can be done are essentially political and that political instruments are not, from our viewpoint, neutral since they are themselves an aspect of social inequality. It would be difficult to deny that in the Soviet Union the political system introduced new inequalities in the very process of destroying the existing economic inequalities.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the relationship between inequality as it exists in a society and as it is perceived by the members of that society. In doing this I shall also touch upon the relationships between inequality, conflict and social change.

The study of human societies can be approached from two different angles. There is first the division of society into groups and categories of diverse kinds which can be examined in a systematic and objective way. The sociologist studies the morphology of these in broadly the same way in which the biologist studies the morphology of animal organisms. But a human society is not merely a collection of individuals arranged systematically into a set of groups and categories. It is also based on a set of norms and values, of modes of action which are considered right, proper and desirable. The structure of norms and values is as much a part of sociological inquiry as the structure of groups and categories.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, inequality can be studied not only as a mode of existence but also as a mode of consciousness. Societies differ not only in their division into groups and categories and the arrangement of these in a hierarchical system; they differ also in the extent to which these divisions are regarded as right, proper and desirable. We have already seen how difficult it is to compare the inequalities existing between groups and categories in different societies. The norms of different societies are, if anything, even more difficult to describe and compare in an objective way. They are often ambiguous and made up of heterogeneous elements. The unstated values of a society are sometimes clearly in conflict with the stated norms. In spite of this, one can make certain broad and general statements regarding the place of inequality in the normative structure of different societies.

It might sound a little surprising today, but most societies of the past have regarded inequality and not equality as the normal condition among men. I use the word 'normal' in its two meanings to refer both to what is general and what is considered proper and legitimate. I have already indicated that the distinctive feature of caste and estate societies was that inequalities not only existed in practice but were also accepted in principle. It would perhaps be better to say that the distinctive feature of contemporary societies is that although inequalities exist in fact they are no longer considered legitimate.

The acceptance of a hierarchical order was general and widespread in the old régime of Europe. In feudal society the existing order of estates was considered providential and God-given. The

concept of hierarchy as applying to divisions both in human society and the wider universe was well developed in Christian theology.<sup>43</sup> In India, hierarchical values and norms were if anything even more deeply and widely accepted.<sup>44</sup> They were given an elaborate philosophical justification through the development of the twin concepts of *dharma* and *karma*.

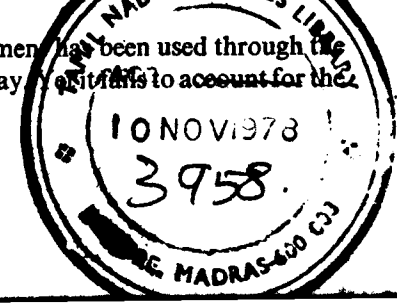
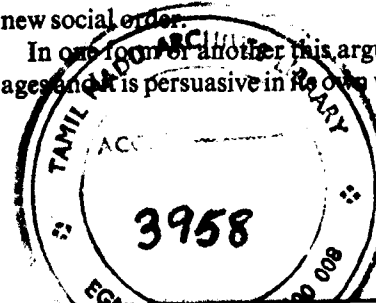
It follows from this that human societies are broadly of two kinds which I shall call harmonic and disharmonic. I describe a harmonic social system as one in which there is consistency between the existential order and the normative order and a disharmonic system as one in which the two are in conflict. In a harmonic system inequalities not only exist in fact but are also considered legitimate. In a disharmonic system inequalities are no longer invested with legitimacy although they continue to exist in fact.

The difference between a harmonic and a disharmonic system can be best illustrated by contrasting the caste system in traditional India with the colour-caste system in the United States.<sup>45</sup> In traditional India the barriers between castes existed in a moral environment which was dominated by hierarchical values. In the United States the barriers between Negroes and Whites exist in a moral environment which is committed to equality. The relations between Negroes and Whites are also relations of tension and conflict.

I would argue from this that conflicts between classes or between castes or strata follow to a large extent from the contradictions between the normative and the existential orders. In a harmonic society these conflicts are likely to be limited and subdued. In a disharmonic society they are likely to be open and endemic.

I find this way of looking at conflict more satisfactory than the view which seeks to explain it in terms of the existence of inequality as such. According to the latter view, conflict takes place when inequalities in the conditions of existence go beyond a certain point. These inequalities of condition themselves create a consciousness of oppression and the consciousness in course of time acquires a political form. The conflict between the 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed' leads to the elimination of the old inequalities and the creation of a new social order.

In one form or another this argument has been used through the ages and it is persuasive in its own way. It fails to account for the



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relative absence of conflict in precisely those societies which have had the most extreme and the most manifest forms of inequality. The existence of such forms of inequality in traditional Indian society cannot be denied. But it cannot be said that this society was characterized either by much conflict or by much change. Conflict and change are much more characteristic of modern industrial societies. They take their most acute form in course of the change from a harmonic to a disharmonic order.

I would like to emphasize that my argument should not be taken as a plea for a return to the harmonic society. I do not believe that would be possible even if one considered it desirable. My argument was meant to underline the difficulties involved in building a society on the promise of equality.

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## 2 INEQUALITY IN RURAL INDIA

Indian society has been viewed as the classic example of a hierarchical system. In this chapter I propose to examine some aspects of inequality in Indian society and certain changes that are taking place in them. The main question which arises while considering these changes is whether they represent an increase or decrease in the *degree* of inequality or are merely changes from one *type* of inequality to another. This is a large question and, so far from being able to provide a full answer to it, I may not even be able to raise it at every stage; but it follows from the discussion in Chapter 1 that we have to keep it continually in mind while considering a problem of this nature.

I shall confine myself to a discussion of inequalities in the agrarian structure. From Chapter 1 it will be evident that the forms of inequality in the urban or industrial sector will be different, but I do not intend to examine these here. It might be argued that since I am interested in changes in patterns of inequality I would do better to concentrate on the industrial rather than the agrarian sector since the changes in the latter are likely to be more significant. I am not persuaded by this kind of argument. In India agriculture is a mode of livelihood and a way of life for the majority of people and the changes that take place in it are going to be of profound significance for many years to come.

In discussing inequalities in the agricultural sector one can of course concentrate on one or another aspect or dimension of inequality. A great many studies on India devote themselves to caste which is no doubt an institution of great importance in our rural areas even today. My main emphasis in this chapter will, however, be on inequalities which relate to the ownership, control and use of land and other material resources. This does not mean that I shall ignore altogether the distinctions of caste; rather, I shall comment on them mainly in the context of inequalities in the agrarian class structure.

Even within the limits which I have set for myself the problem is a large and complex one. In a country like India one encounters the coexistence of very different patterns of inequality, some of which appear more 'traditional' while others appear more 'modern'. There

are differences not only between regions but between districts within the same region and sometimes between villages within the same district. In considering these differences one has to be particularly careful not to mistake mere diversity in space for changes over time.

Two sets of factors are particularly important in explaining the variations in the patterns of inequality which we find today. There is first the difference in ecological conditions which accounts for differences in land use, in productive organization and in the nature of the agrarian class structure. The main difference here is between the areas of wheat cultivation in the North and the areas of wet paddy cultivation in the East and South. Ecological factors can sometimes be shown to account for variations even at the district level. In Tanjore district there are important differences in patterns of inequality between the Old and the New Deltas where ecological conditions are quite different.

Historical factors are also important in accounting for these differences. Muslim rule and British rule affected the different parts of the country in different ways. We are particularly concerned with the development of different systems of land revenue administration, each of which has left its deposit in the area where it was established.<sup>8</sup> British rule established certain patterns of land revenue administration which were different from those which prevailed elsewhere, for instance, in the princely states of Rajasthan. In British India itself the inequalities which developed in the *zamindari* areas such as Bengal were different from those prevalent in the *ryotwari* areas such as Madras.

In all parts of the country agrarian society has been for centuries graded into layers or strata which were hierarchically arranged. These layers might not all be present in any one local community. In some areas there might be many layers and in others only a few. One or other of the strata might be internally differentiated at one place and relatively homogeneous at another. In other words, the pattern was everywhere hierarchical although the details of the hierarchy and the extent to which it was elaborated varied greatly in both space and time.

Taking the country as a whole, one can speak of the existence of six broad strata or layers till the time of the land reforms. At the top were the non-cultivating owners and below them came the non-

cultivating lessees. The differences between the two might not always be very great and in Bengal, under the Permanent Settlement, the non-cultivating lessees were themselves often divided into ten or as many as fifteen grades.<sup>9</sup> Below these came the cultivating owners who are otherwise described as peasant proprietors and next to them were the cultivating tenants with occupancy rights. Further down came the sharecroppers and at the very bottom were the landless agricultural labourers.

There are two aspects of the traditional organization of agricultural production which have a special bearing on the problem of social inequality. The first is the inverse relationship between the ownership and control of land on the one hand and, on the other, the performance of work, especially manual work; the second is what I would describe as the proliferation of intermediaries. I ought to mention that most traditional agrarian societies have been characterized by these two tendencies although in varying degree.

In most parts of India landowning groups avoided manual work, particularly when it was arduous and onerous. It is not enough to say that they did so because, being economically better off, they could afford to; it can be easily demonstrated that manual work was often avoided for reasons of status and sometimes at considerable economic cost. Some would relate the avoidance of manual work to the caste system and to the Hindu attitudes towards purity and pollution on which it was based; this explanation is not wholly satisfactory because aristocratic Muslim landowners were as much averse to manual work as their Hindu counterparts. I would suggest that ecological factors had some part in this because regional differences reveal an interesting pattern. The aversion to manual work is particularly strong in areas of wet paddy cultivation where this work is both more difficult and more unpleasant than in areas of wheat cultivation. I find it unreasonable to seek explanations for the avoidance of manual work without taking into account the nature of this work itself.

The proliferation of intermediaries is in one sense a consequence of the tendency to avoid work. It is no accident, therefore, that it is so conspicuous in the Eastern and Southern regions which are areas of wet paddy cultivation where manual work is both difficult and

unpleasant. I might add that even the work of personally supervising paddy cultivation in the monsoon season is something which many landowners prefer to avoid. This, I believe, is one reason which accounts for the widespread practice of sharecropping in states like West Bengal, Tamilnadu and Kerala.

The factors discussed above account mainly for the presence of what I would describe as 'lower intermediaries'. They do not, by themselves, explain the presence of a series of higher intermediaries which we find in such ecologically disparate areas as Bengal on the one hand and Rajasthan on the other. Their presence owes itself to a number of historical factors which, for a variety of reasons, I shall not discuss here.

I have referred to variations in space in the patterns of agrarian hierarchy but commented very little so far about changes in these patterns over time. Clearly, it would be wrong to think of traditional Indian society as having maintained itself on a fixed and immutable pattern over the ages. As I have hinted, major changes in the political order sometimes led to changes in the system of land revenue administration which in turn might lead to some changes in the agrarian hierarchy. At the same time, it seems evident that the agrarian system in India has been basically hierarchical in character over a fairly long period in its history.

It has sometimes been suggested that the hierarchical pattern of agrarian relations was largely a creation of British rule in India. It is certainly true that many new grades of intermediaries were created by the Permanent Settlement, particularly in Eastern India.<sup>4</sup> But it is equally true that intermediaries of many grades existed both outside the areas of British rule and in those parts of British India which were outside the Permanent Settlement. The agrarian hierarchy in Rajasthan has traditionally been composed of many layers.<sup>5</sup> In Tanjore, where the British made a *ryotwari* settlement, the agrarian hierarchy was also characterized by several grades.<sup>6</sup>

It would be unreal to talk about the agrarian hierarchy in India in isolation from the division into castes which is such an important feature of Indian society.<sup>7</sup> In discussing caste and the agrarian hierarchy we must be particularly careful to remember that the two systems are different though closely related.<sup>8</sup> Many social anthropologists making community studies in India tend to ignore this. As

a consequence, they talk about the relations between landlords and tenants or between landowners and labourers as if they were relations between castes.<sup>9</sup> This has been a cause of considerable confusion.

The relationship between caste and the agrarian hierarchy can be studied at two levels. There is, first of all, a surface relationship which we observe in the empirical association between grades or layers in the two systems. But there is also a deeper and, I believe, more fundamental relationship between the two. In the traditional pattern of agrarian relations inequalities not only existed in fact but were also accepted as legitimate. If we regard caste not merely as a system of relations but also as a system of values we can understand a little better what made the agrarian hierarchy acceptable even to those who were at its bottom.<sup>10</sup>

The association between caste on the one hand and the ownership, control and use of land on the other becomes quite clear if we take a sufficiently broad view of the two systems. Traditionally the larger landowners were of the highest castes; members of the lowest castes were generally landless labourers; and in between were the middle level 'peasant' or 'cultivating' castes.

One indication of the close association between the two systems is that the hierarchy of caste was most elaborate in precisely those regions where the agrarian hierarchy was also elaborate. Once again, areas of wet paddy cultivation such as the Gangetic delta, the Kaveri delta and Malabar are the ones where both caste and the agrarian hierarchy were elaborately graded. In Rajasthan, which has a different ecological pattern, there was a fairly elaborate gradation among 'higher intermediaries' which seems to have been matched by a complex pattern of ranking among Rajput clans and lineages.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand in Haryana and the Punjab both the caste and the agrarian hierarchies were relatively simple.

We can see the association between the two hierarchies even more clearly when we contrast two different areas in the same state such as east and west Uttar Pradesh.<sup>12</sup> In east Uttar Pradesh the agrarian hierarchy is quite elaborate and so is the caste hierarchy with the dominance of non-cultivating landowning castes such as Brahmins and Rajputs. In west Uttar Pradesh there is a dominance of peasant proprietors or cultivating owners belonging to middle level

castes such as Jat and Ahir and both the hierarchies are relatively simple.

I must emphasize that there is only a broad correspondence between caste and the agrarian hierarchy and exceptions to the kind of association I have indicated are many. This is only to be expected since the caste hierarchy has been relatively stable and has changed only over long periods of time whereas the agrarian hierarchy, particularly at the upper levels, has been more responsive to changes in the political and administrative systems. In Bengal, for instance, the Permanent Settlement made the agrarian hierarchy rather more elaborate than in Tamilnadu but one would not expect corresponding changes in the caste hierarchy to follow immediately from this. What is noteworthy is that, in spite of the very uneven rates of change in the two hierarchies, there was so much correspondence between them right until the middle of the present century.

Wherever there was a concentration of large non-cultivating owners or lessees, they usually belonged to the highest castes. In Bengal they were predominantly Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas, in east Uttar Pradesh they were Rajputs and Brahmins, in Rajasthan they were Rajputs and in Malabar they were Brahmins and Nairs of the highest subcastes. There were no doubt many exceptions. The Permanent Settlement led to the purchase of some fairly large estates by members of middle level castes some of whom must have held estates even before the British came. But in the aggregate, the estate and tenure holders were predominantly members of the highest Hindu castes or of high-status Muslim families.

The peasants or *raiya*s, on the other hand, belonged predominantly to the middle level cultivating castes such as Sadgope, Kurmi, Jat, Ahir, Patidar, Maratha, Reddi and Vellala. I ought to point out that in some cases the big *raiya*s might be economically much better off than many estate or tenure holders. Further, in a large number of communities such big *raiya*s belonging to castes at the middle level might actually represent the top of the local hierarchy. But if we view the regional system we will find that they generally belonged at the middle and not the top.

At the lower levels, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers belonged to the lowest castes. Generally, they were predominantly Harijans or Adivasis. In some areas, such as Bengal, there was an

order of rank between the two since Adivasi women worked in the fields whereas women belonging to the higher Harijan castes generally did not.<sup>13</sup>

It might be argued that I have been discussing ownership, leasing and tenancy, but that it is wrong to do so in a society where private property in land did not exist before it was created by the British. The notion of property, as the sociologist sees it, is very complex, and I do not here wish to enter into the question whether property rights in land did or did not exist in India before the British period. It is sufficient for my argument that there were unequal rights in the control and use of land, and it cannot be denied that in the traditional system these inequalities were closely related to the inequalities of caste.

The deeper implication of this argument is that inequalities in the control and use of land not only existed in the traditional order but were also more or less accepted as legitimate. The caste system contributed to the persistence of these inequalities by providing the values and norms which were appropriate to the agrarian hierarchy. I have argued earlier that caste and the agrarian system have to be conceived as different. I would now like to add that, although different in principle, agrarian relations were in practice often expressed in the idiom of caste.<sup>14</sup> In fact, in the traditional order caste provided an idiom for expressing different kinds of relations.

The traditional agrarian system was a harmonic system to the extent that it had successfully assimilated the values of caste. It can be shown without much difficulty that this assimilation was never completely successful. For one thing, there never was complete correspondence between one's caste position and one's position in the agrarian hierarchy. A man of high caste with a low economic position would not accept that position very easily and a man of low caste who had moved upward might find it difficult to make himself acceptable to those whose economic equal he had become. This would be a source of ambiguity, tension and conflict. Furthermore, it is difficult to know how deeply and universally the values of caste were themselves accepted by the people.<sup>15</sup>

All we can say is that the traditional agrarian system in India approximated rather closely to the harmonic type of social system. But it would be wrong to believe that it was altogether unique in this

regard. Traditional society in both China and Japan was deeply permeated by hierarchical values which were particularly conspicuous in the relations between gentry and peasantry.<sup>16</sup> In feudal Europe, again, inequalities in the agrarian system were both persistent and legally recognized. But perhaps Indian society went further than any other in elaborating its system of hierarchical values.

I have so far discussed the agrarian hierarchy as if it were more or less unchanging, but I have hinted that this involved a degree of oversimplification. I have also indicated some of the factors which could be considered responsible for changes in it, such as a new policy of land revenue administration. I now propose to briefly identify these factors in a more systematic way and to consider in somewhat greater detail the changes to which they have led.

In talking about change I would like to concentrate mainly on what is happening today. While it is impossible to understand current tendencies fully without some reference to long-term processes, I shall not attempt here to go back into history beyond the beginning of the present century: I shall mainly discuss developments since Independence which, in my belief, constitutes an important watershed, and sketch out the background to specific changes as and when this becomes necessary. Even within these limits I cannot attempt to be exhaustive. I shall examine the effect on the agrarian hierarchy of three types of factors which I describe as (i) market forces; (ii) governmental measures; and (iii) political action.

We may begin examining the impact of market forces on the agrarian hierarchy by considering changes in the association between caste and landownership. The first social anthropologist to draw attention to this problem was F.G. Bailey who made a case study in Orissa in the early fifties.<sup>17</sup> Bailey found that land had come into the market and the consequence of this was that some castes whose members did not own any land in the past were able to buy it. On the other hand, the Warriors, who were the traditional landowning caste and owned all the land in the village in 1884, owned only 28 per cent of it when Bailey made his study.<sup>18</sup>

Similar observations began to be made by other social anthropologists studying villages in other parts of the country. In the village which I studied in Tanjore district in 1961-2, it became clear to me

that land had been coming into the market for quite some time and that this process had led to a change in the relationship between caste and the agrarian hierarchy. I divided the population of the village, first, into Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas and, then, on a different basis, into landowners, tenants and agricultural labourers, and tried to analyse changes in the relations between the two systems.<sup>19</sup>

At the turn of the last century there was a high degree of correspondence between caste and the agrarian hierarchy. Most Brahmins were landowners, the Non-Brahmins were usually tenants and the Adi-Dravidas, agricultural labourers. Gradually many Brahmins sold their land, some of which was bought by Non-Brahmins and, in one or two cases, even by Adi-Dravidas. Further, several Adi-Dravidas became tenants whereas in the past they had almost all been agricultural labourers. This kind of change might be described as a change from a system of cumulative inequalities to one of dispersed inequalities;<sup>20</sup> or, from a relatively closed to a relatively open system of stratification.<sup>21</sup>

We have too little systematic or reliable data to be able to say how far-reaching or widespread these changes have been. Not all village studies made by social anthropologists tell us very much about these relationships, and those that do say something do not all say the same thing. Three village studies have been made in Tanjore district recently and they all indicate that there has been transfer of land from the landowning to the cultivating castes.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the data that we have for three villages in Mysore show that there is still a very high concentration of land within a single caste.<sup>23</sup> I am inclined to believe that the second case is more typical than the first.

The difference between the Tanjore and the Mysore cases is partly explained by the fact that in the three Tanjore villages land was held by the Brahmins who are non-cultivating owners whereas in Mysore it is held by Okkaligas who are cultivating owners. It seems to me that wherever land was held by castes such as Brahmins and Kayasthas who have traditionally had very little to do with agriculture, they have often sold it and moved to the cities in search of careers in the professions and the services. Where, on the other hand, it was held by those who were cultivators by tradition — such as Jats — or whose traditions did not lead to urban employment — such as

Rajputs — they have retained and in some cases strengthened their control over the land.

Simply because land has come into the market it does not follow that it will come to be more widely distributed among the different castes. It is quite possible that it continues to be bought and sold by members of the same caste. Indeed there is very little evidence of land being bought by people from the lowest castes, who continue by and large to be sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. It is clear that if market forces have brought about any change in the relationship between caste and landownership, this change has not been spectacular.

This raises the general question whether such redistribution of land as is being brought about by market forces is leading to an increase or a decrease in social inequality. The National Sample Survey data seem to indicate some equalization in the distribution of land between 1953-4 and 1960-1, but these data have to be used with great caution.<sup>24</sup> Data on landownership are notoriously difficult to collect; the changes recorded are not very great; and we do not perhaps have a survey apparatus which is sensitive enough to record accurately small changes in the ownership of land for the country as a whole. Further, even if such changes have been coming about, we do not know to what extent they are being brought about by market forces.

There is reason to believe that in some areas land is passing from the hands of very small holders into those of middle and large proprietors. With the introduction of the new technology, agriculture has become highly profitable to those who have both land and capital to invest in it.<sup>25</sup> Profits have risen and, along with them, the price of land. A man who owns 20 or 25 acres of land in the Punjab or Haryana now wants to buy more land and is able to pay a very high price for it. Someone who has just an acre or two and no capital to put in might find it both necessary and desirable to sell his land at this price. This tendency, unless countered by others, is of course bound to lead to an increase in the disparity between the classes.

With the development of the new technology, the ownership of capital and not just land becomes a basis of inequality. In certain areas such as Punjab, Haryana and west Uttar Pradesh, tractors, pump-sets, power threshers and other forms of machinery are com-

ing to be widely used in agriculture. While people with holdings of medium- and sometimes small-size might invest in such machinery, the inequalities of land and of capital tend to be on the whole cumulative. What is more, it appears that the more land and capital a farmer owns, the more credit he is able to mobilize from both private and public sources.

Equality might of course be achieved not merely through the redistribution of land and capital but also through the redistribution of income. Here also the position is by no means fully clear. In the areas where the new technology has been successfully applied, it is not as if landowners alone have made large profits and invested them in land and capital. The wages of agricultural labourers have also risen, sometimes both rapidly and substantially. However, the rise in wages is as yet too recent and not sufficiently uniform for us to be able to say anything definite about its effect on the structure of inequality. Further, it also owes itself to a number of other factors which we shall consider a little later.

In discussing the effect of governmental measures on the agrarian hierarchy, I shall deal mainly with the land reforms, although one can also comment about other measures such as those related to minimum wages for agricultural labourers. The measures adopted for land reform have been very elaborate, partly because laws were enacted separately for the different states rather than for the country as a whole. On the other hand, we can be more specific here as to times, for it is possible to give precise dates for the enactment of these laws if not for their implementation.

The main thrust in the land reform programme was provided by the Congress party and the new government which came into power in 1947. The Congress set up an Agrarian Reforms Committee in 1947 and in 1949 the Committee submitted its Report in which the general principles of reform were laid down.<sup>26</sup> The first round of legislation was enacted in the early fifties<sup>27</sup> but the process of legislating continued well into the sixties and, indeed, major laws are being enacted even now. One of the principal criticisms of the land reform laws is that there has been much dilatoriness in their application, allowing in many cases the development of counter-measures which have frustrated their basic purpose.<sup>28</sup>

There can be no question but that the basic intention of the land reform programme was to bring about greater equality although it was hoped that this would at the same time increase production.<sup>29</sup> In concrete terms this was viewed as involving, first, the abolition of intermediaries and, second, the giving of land to the tiller. In view of what I have said earlier about the proliferation of intermediaries and the inverse relationship between work and landownership, it is not difficult to understand why this should have been so. The large body of land reform laws so far enacted—and still being enacted—can best be considered under three broad heads: (i) the acquisition or abolition of estates; (ii) the imposition of ceilings; and (iii) the regulation of tenancy.

I have already indicated the existence of a body of 'higher intermediaries' both within and outside the areas of Permanent Settlement and known variously as *zamindars*, *taluqdars* and *jagirdars*.<sup>30</sup> The *zamindars* under the Permanent Settlement were granted rights of revenue collection by the British but to these they added customary rights and privileges of various kinds. In Rajasthan the *jagirdars*—of whom there were many kinds—had enjoyed such customary rights and privileges before the British established their rule in India. The purpose of the legislation was not merely to reduce the economic power of the landlords but also to abolish the many 'feudal' exactions which they had imposed on the peasantry.

The abolition of intermediaries was accompanied by the payment of compensation on a graduated scale, the highest rates being paid to those with the lowest income. It is not easy to determine how much the intermediaries lost and how much they gained in the process. Many of the larger ones took advantage of loopholes in the law and had land over which they held only rights of revenue collection reclassified as home farm land which was exempted from this particular law. Some of them created tenures in the names of members of their family and recovered compensation at much higher rates than they were entitled to. It is clear that the redistributive effects of the laws abolishing intermediaries have been different from what was expected.

It is generally admitted that the laws enacted for the acquisition of estates did succeed in reducing the estates of the very large proprietors and in transforming to some extent their social character.

The rentier element is less predominant at the higher levels of the agrarian system than it was before Independence.<sup>31</sup> But large proprietors survived the execution of these laws because they were not directed against large proprietors as such but only against proprietors of a certain kind. What happened can be illustrated by taking the example of West Bengal. There the first round of legislation reduced the powers of the *zamindars* but did not affect the position of the *raiyats*. Now many *zamindars* in fact had quite small estates and some *raiyats* had very large holdings from which they might receive ten or twenty times the income of a medium-sized estate. The laws on ceilings, which came about ten years after those designed for the acquisition of estates, sought to deal with the problem of these big *raiyats* now widely described in West Bengal as *jotdars*.<sup>32</sup>

The laws on ceilings were meant to apply both to the big *raiyats* and to the ex-*zamindars* who had retained large properties in the form of home farms. The extent of the ceiling varied from one state to another and, within each state, according to the type of land. Generally a ceiling of 25 to 30 acres was imposed on irrigated land. Between 1969 and 1971, first in Kerala and then in West Bengal, the ceiling has been lowered further and it is to be reckoned by taking the family rather than the individual as the proprietary unit.

The ceiling laws were meant to achieve two objectives at the same time. They were meant, first of all, to reduce the holdings of the large landowners and, secondly, to redistribute the surplus recovered from them among the poor and the landless. It is widely admitted that the governmental measures designed to achieve these objectives have failed.<sup>33</sup> There has been widespread evasion of the ceiling laws so that not much surplus land could be recovered. The little that was recovered has not been redistributed in a satisfactory way because of administrative bottlenecks which have acted to the advantage of the higher strata and to the detriment of the lower.

The third type of legislation sought to deal with problems of tenancy at the lower levels. I have said that the abolition of *zamindari* did not affect the position of the *raiyats*. These *raiyats* not only had very large holdings in some cases but very often gave them out on lease to tenants-at-will and sharecroppers. Whereas the ceiling laws tried to restrict the scale of their operations, the tenancy regulations defined their obligations to their lessees. These regulations

sought to reduce inequalities between landowners and tenants by (i) lowering the rent which the landowner could legally demand and (ii) giving security to the tenant on his lease.

Tenancy legislation has had different consequences in different states. A report by a Ford Foundation consultant showed that, of the five districts studied, only Aligarh in west Uttar Pradesh had handled the problem satisfactorily whereas in Tanjore and West Godavari districts the laws had not had the desired effect.<sup>34</sup> It might be argued that these laws have had adverse consequences for tenants and sharecroppers who have in many areas been evicted by their landlords. Where tenants have been able to establish their rights their position has of course improved. From the data at our disposal it is difficult to say whether in the aggregate tenants have gained or lost more. It seems that tenants who already enjoyed some security of status came out best whereas sharecroppers with an uncertain legal position were the principal losers.

It would be difficult to argue that the land reforms have changed substantially the *degree* of inequality in the agrarian system although they have to some extent altered its nature. There is perhaps greater individual mobility than before although the chances of upward movement decline sharply as one moves from the upper to the lower levels of the hierarchy. Social distinctions are now less clear-cut and visible. They do not in any case have the legitimacy which they enjoyed in the past. Large landowners continue to exist but now they often do so in violation of the law. For all this, if the social pyramid has changed at all, this has been more by the top being slightly lowered than by the bottom being raised; *zamindars*, *talukdars* and *jagirdars* are no longer there but their absence has hardly benefited the landless.

The feeling is now widespread that governmental measures to reduce inequalities in the agrarian structure have been unsuccessful. These measures have at the same time put into question the legitimacy of the existing inequalities and have created new expectations regarding what is desirable and possible. One consequence of this has been the use of organized political action to transform the agrarian hierarchy.

When referring to political action what I have in mind are the

activities of political parties, peasant associations and other organizations and movements of a similar nature. I shall not enter into a discussion of the formal distinction between governmental and political action as I assume that the broad differences between the two are well-known.<sup>35</sup> But I do wish to emphasize that in any real situation the two types of action can operate independently, reinforce each other or be in conflict. Much depends on the nature and policy of the government as well as on the nature and activities of the political associations involved.

Organized political action has acquired significance in only some areas in the country. Broadly speaking, these are the areas of wet paddy cultivation in East and South India where the pressure of population on the land is high and where peasant associations and left-wing political parties enjoy wide popular support. The two states where political action has been most widely used to change the agrarian hierarchy are Kerala and West Bengal. In both states the government has been dominated by left-wing political parties which have close ties with peasant associations and movements.

The nature and direction of political action in the agrarian field have been broadly similar in Kerala and West Bengal and in what follows I shall take my examples mainly from the latter. When the United Front government was in power in West Bengal it sought to combine political with administrative means in implementing the land reform laws. The government found these laws to be acceptable in their spirit but felt that their implementation was being either delayed or prevented by the existing administrative structure. Given the advantages enjoyed by the big *raiyats*, this structure was not capable of doing the work by itself even under the best of circumstances. It was felt that the only way in which the landless could be made to exercise their rights was by creating the kind of political environment in which these rights would be respected by landowners and protected by officials.<sup>36</sup>

Political action of the kind we are considering has been directed towards three specific objectives: (i) recovering and redistributing surplus land, (ii) protecting the rights of sharecroppers and (iii) raising the wages of agricultural labourers. During the second United Front régime (1969–70) in West Bengal about 300,000 acres of surplus land were officially declared to have been recovered from

the big *raiya*s. The political parties and peasant associations played a part in this recovery although one cannot say exactly how much they contributed to it. Nor do we know how much land was seized or unofficially recovered and in what way this was redistributed. What seems clear is that with the political sanctions now available it is going to be difficult for big *raiya*s in states like West Bengal and Kerala to retain large holdings in violation of the law, although who will benefit and how much by these sanctions is not easy to determine.

Sharecroppers in West Bengal are known to have worked under exploitative conditions and to have received little protection from the law.<sup>37</sup> Landowners have made them supply all or most of the inputs, extracted a higher share of the produce than they were entitled to and frequently evicted them from the land. The peasant associations sought to protect the sharecroppers by making evictions difficult and by winning for them a higher share of the produce, sometimes through the forcible harvesting of crops. Political pressure has also been applied on landowners for raising the wages of labourers, sometimes informally as in West Bengal and at other times by a process of organized collective bargaining as in Tanjore district.<sup>38</sup>

It is not easy to assess the redistributive effects of the forces we have been considering. First of all, we can say very little about their scope; what has happened in Kerala and West Bengal may not happen elsewhere and even in these two states the trends may be reversed. Secondly, we have drawn attention mainly to the benefits of this kind of action and said very little about its costs. When land is forcibly seized by a party or an association it is not necessarily redistributed to the landless poor; sometimes it is retained for the use of those who are supporters of the party or association, irrespective of their economic condition. This has happened in West Bengal in regard to both the land and its harvest, and has been largely responsible for transforming the conflict between the rich and the poor into clashes between rival political parties.<sup>39</sup>

This leads back to my earlier argument that the political instruments which are used for destroying an existing system of inequality are not wholly neutral but themselves become the basis for a new system of inequality. This might sound rather like saying that it is

futile to try to destroy any system of inequality for in destroying one system we only create another. I would not carry my argument to that point. I would only like to plead that in trying to build a new social order we should proceed with the fewest illusions possible.

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