

An Agrarian History of South Asia

David Ludden's book offers a comprehensive historical framework for understanding the regional diversity of agrarian South Asia. Adopting a long-term view of history, it treats South Asia not as a single civilisation territory, but rather as a patchwork of agrarian regions, each with its own social, cultural, and political histories. The discussion begins during the first millennium, when institutions of ritual, conquest, and patriarchy formed an archipelago of farming regimes that steadily displaced and assimilated pastoral and tribal communities. It goes on to consider how, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the concept of modern territoriality evolved as farmers pushed agriculture to its physical limits and states created permanent rights to all the land. Subsequent chapters focus on the development of agrarian capitalism in village societies, which emerged under the British and which formed the bedrock of the modern political economy. In contemporary South Asia, the book argues, economic development and social movements continue to reflect the influence of agrarian localism and the shifting fortunes of agrarian regions with histories which can be traced back to medieval times.

As a comparative synthesis of the literature on agrarian regimes in South Asia, the book promises to be a valuable resource for students of agrarian and regional history, as well as of comparative world history.

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be found at the end of the volume.

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IV · 4

An Agrarian History of South Asia

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Cambridge History of India covers the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In some respects it marks a radical change in the style of Cambridge Histories, but in others the editors feel that they are working firmly within an established academic tradition.

During the summer of 1896, F. W. Maitland and Lord Acton between them evolved the idea for a comprehensive modern history. By the end of the year the Syndics of the University Press had committed themselves to the *Cambridge Modern History*, and Lord Acton had been put in charge of it. It was hoped that publication would begin in 1899 and be completed by 1904, but the first volume in fact came out in 1902 and the last in 1910, with additional volumes of tables and maps in 1911 and 1912.

The *History* was a great success, and it was followed by a whole series of distinctive Cambridge Histories covering English Literature, the Ancient World, India, British Foreign Policy, Economic History, Medieval History, the British Empire, Africa, China and Latin America; and even now other new series are being prepared. Indeed, the various Histories have given the Press notable strength in the publication of general reference books in the arts and social sciences.

What has made the Cambridge Histories so distinctive is that they have never been simply dictionaries or encyclopaedias. The Histories have, in H. A. L. Fisher's words, always been 'written by an army of specialists concentrating the latest results of special study'. Yet as Acton agreed with the Syndics in 1896, they have not been mere compilations of existing material but original works. Undoubtedly many of the Histories are uneven in quality, some have become out of date very rapidly, but their virtue has been that they have consistently done more than simply record an existing state of knowledge: they have tended to focus interest on research and they have provided a massive stimulus to further work. This has made their publication doubly worthwhile and has distinguished them intellectually from

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other sorts of reference book. The editors of *The New Cambridge History of India* have acknowledged this in their work.

The original *Cambridge History of India* was published between 1922 and 1937. It was planned in six volumes, but of these, volume 2 dealing with the period between the first century AD and the Muslim invasion of India never appeared. Some of the material is still of value, but in many respects it is now out of date. The last fifty years have seen a great deal of new research on India, and a striking feature of recent work has been to cast doubt on the validity of the quite arbitrary chronological and categorical way in which Indian history has been conventionally divided.

The editors decided that it would not be academically desirable to prepare a new *History of India* using the traditional format. The selective nature of research on Indian history over the past half-century would doom such a project from the start and the whole of Indian history could not be covered in an even or comprehensive manner. They concluded that the best scheme would be to have a *History* divided into four overlapping chronological volumes, each containing short books on individual themes or subjects. Although in extent the work will therefore be equivalent to a dozen massive tomes of the traditional sort, in form *The New Cambridge History of India* will appear as a shelf full of separate but complementary parts. Accordingly, the main divisions are between I. *The Mughals and their Contemporaries*, II. *Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism*, III. *The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society*, and IV. *The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia*.

Just as the books within these volumes are complementary so too do they intersect with each other, both thematically and chronologically. As the books appear they are intended to give a view of the subject as it now stands and to act as a stimulus to further research. We do expect the *New Cambridge History of India* to be not the last word on the subject but an essential voice in the continuing discussion about it.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about history's attachment to land. It considers the present day in the context of the past two millennia, because a wide historical view is needed to appreciate the ideas that shape contemporary mentalities, and because earthly environments today are being shaped by long-term historical forces. As the book goes on, I consider some elements of Eurasian history and introduce some ideas about geography, technology, patriarchy, ritual, ecology, and other subjects that situate South Asian farmers in their wider world. I also indicate that more research into the historical dynamics of territoriality is needed to improve our knowledge of culture and political economy. But, like other volumes in *The New Cambridge History of India*, the main goal of this book is to draw together research by many scholars on a coherent set of historical themes without rehearsing academic debates or piling up citations. The bibliographical essay is a guide to relevant literature that sprawls across the disciplines of history, anthropology, economics, geography, political science, and rural sociology. I apologise for not covering many regions well enough and particularly for slighting Assam, Baluchistan, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Nepal, Orissa, and Sri Lanka. This failure results partly from the state of research but mostly from my own inability to compile appropriate data in the time and space allotted. For these reasons, territories in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan form my central subject matter.

The marginality of agrarian history demands attention. It is not unique to South Asia, but proportionately more books do seem to treat the agrarian past in Europe, the Americas, Russia, China, and Japan. Though culture and political economy are not more detached from the land in South Asia than elsewhere, scholars would seem to think so. This may reflect a more general alienation. As the urban middle-class intelligentsia came into being in the modern world economy, they wove the countryside into their epics of nationality, and, to this day, agrarian history evokes interest to the extent that country folk represent national identity. Everywhere, agrarian history is submerged in the historiography of nations and states. We need to keep this in mind because

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historical knowing is a force in modern transformations of the world and a tool for making the country in the image of the nation. National histories have formed territoriality and incorporated rustic folk into the project of modernity, so the past of its peasantry maps the rise of national power on the land. Modernity's general alienation from its agrarian environment pervades agrarian studies, and when combined with orientalist stereotypes, it simply pushed peasants more deeply into the margins of history in South Asia than elsewhere. Because villages there seemed totally traditional, lacking any inherent drive to modernity, they were assumed to have no actual history, only timeless permanence. Studies of the rural past thus recounted the incorporation and subordination of villagers by city folk. Urban elites made nations, and they made the history that brought South Asia from ancient times to the present. The village past seemed to be a permanent affliction.

There is much to learn on the margins of history. Most evidence on the agrarian past continues to be unused today, not because it is inaccessible but because it has seemed uninteresting and unimportant for the history of modernity; and we can use this neglect to measure the blinkers of modern minds. If we want to understand modernity as a moment of human history, agrarian history is a good place to look and South Asia is a good place to work, because here modern machineries of knowing have mangled less of the original data. In Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, scholars have constructed rural history as the legacy and memory of modernity and they have built national identity on a solid agrarian footing. In South Asia, domineering epistemologies of nationality have not paved over so much of the landscape or cemented together the past of nations and of peasants so comprehensively. Villages fit much more firmly and neatly into national histories in France, England, the United States, China, and Japan than they do in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The lasting force of regional diversity in South Asia derives from the fact that, historically, its agrarian territories have marched to different drummers, and even in different directions. Scholars have repeatedly argued that agrarian South Asia evades the discipline of progress. All the histories of all the empires and nations in South Asia could never capture the history of all its peoples.

With this in view, I want to explore agrarian history outside modernity's construction of the past. Life on the land seems to entangle, confront, and suffuse modernity without being overwhelmed or

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absorbed by it; and, when urban middle-class scholars write agrarian history, we stumble repeatedly and awkwardly upon this stubborn, enticing otherness. The misty longevity and persistent localism of agrarian history resist narration and escape the grids of time and space that define national history. Narratives cannot untangle all the rhythms of agrarian change or trace all the lines of movement in apparently stable rustic routines. Agrarian South Asia thus provides a historical vantage point from which to reconsider modernity and nationality. For this purpose, we need an extended chronology for tracing the rise of contemporary conditions. In this book, history's trajectory is not moving toward national independence or national development but rather into the trends that influence agrarian environments today. These trends represent other histories that are still unfolding inside national states but outside their control, in small-scale agrarian territories which have never been fully defined by modern nationality. These territories have their own histories in which local struggles are tangled up with national and international institutions and also with global networks of power, mobility, and communication.

In studies that cover long periods of time, semantic problems abound. I employ place names from different epochs – calling ancient Kosala 'the region of Lucknow' or 'Central Uttar Pradesh', for instance – to enable the reader to keep track of various terms that attach to places over millennia. This anachronism also encourages a reader to imagine a distant past alive in the present; and, indeed, people build a future on a past that never really disappears. Common terms that I use for regions (Awadh, Deccan, Bengal, Punjab, Assam, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Telangana, and such) refer broadly to old regions rather than to the strictly bounded territories of today. Modern cities and towns are useful landmarks, and contemporary political and administrative territories are convenient markers for large regions in all times. Modern district names help to identify small regions, but we need to keep in mind that district names and boundaries change, as do their identities within states and nations, especially after 1947. I use the district names for these geographical areas found in Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (second impression, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1992, p. 79).¹ Many district names continued to be used after

¹ For regional names during the historical periods before and after 1200, see Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 137.

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1947 – though they have been changed with increasing frequency in the past twenty years – and whenever possible I refer to districts without naming the national state within which they lie. This helps to avoid the impression that the boundaries of contemporary states were inscribed on the agrarian landscape before 1947. The relationship between national territories and agrarian territory is a subject for discussion in chapters 1 and 4. When I use states within the Republic of India to discuss times before they were formed, I do so only for the purpose of location; and this does not imply that these political boundaries had some incipient historical reality in the distant past. The historical formation of modern political regions is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Many terms need to be handled carefully because they resonate with contemporary politics. When I refer to the Tamil, Telugu, or Kannada country, or to ‘the Marathi-speaking region’, I am simply referring to a widely recognised linguistic region, rather than to a linguistic state or cultural territory. The Tamil country, for instance, has always included many non-Tamil speakers, and much of its important literature is composed in languages other than Tamil. Referring to the south-eastern part of the coastal plain as ‘the Tamil coast’ does not mean that this is the only way or the best way to refer to this region; it is merely the most convenient for me here; and it also serves to remind us that agriculture occurs within culture. Similar caveats pertain to all sites with new meanings in cultural politics: I use ‘Bombay’ rather than ‘Mumbai’ because it is more recognisable. I use ‘Madras’ rather than ‘Chennai’, ‘Uttarakhand’ rather than ‘the Himalayan districts of Uttar Pradesh’. Terms for agricultural landscapes that pertain across the whole period of my discussion are defined in the last section of chapter 1. These landscapes are not meant to displace other regional terminologies; they simply help to organise regional complexity for an agrarian historical geography.

Personal names do not pose serious problems and their most commonly used forms are employed here. The names of groups, dynasties, and some events (such as the wars of 1857) are more troublesome. Group names often appear in personal names and they are almost always necessary for locating people in society. But in long stretches of historical time, groups move in and out of existence and group names change meaning very drastically. For instance, the term ‘Rajput’ acquired its modern meaning from the sixteenth century

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(chapter 3), but with suitable caveats, and despite the controversial character of origin stories, I use these terms to indicate group characteristics, if not subjective identity, over a longer period of time. Other group names – such as Vellala, Jat, Kunbi, Maratha, and Marava – have also changed meanings but they can be used in a similar way. When I refer to the distant past of social groups whose present identities are marked by such terms, and when I speculate as to their social composition or activities before modern times, I often discuss the past in terms that people in these groups will not endorse today. The creators of social identities recount collective experience in terms that become part of human experience, but historians can tell other tales to indicate other aspects of the past. This difference is not just one of perspective, or a feature of insider and outsider subject positions. Because history reshuffles and redefines perspectives, we need to trace the emergence of subject positions historically, and this is most difficult when they are in the making, which many are today. Quickly changing, hotly contested social identities pose the most serious problem, for instance with groups identified as Untouchables, Harijans, and Dalits. I use the term ‘untouchable’ here to refer to the caste condition of this lowest-ranked group in the *varna* scheme, and ‘harijan’ and ‘dalit’ to refer to their representation and identity within modern political movements. Though the term ‘adivasi’ is preferable in our contemporary political context, the terminology of ‘tribes’ and ‘tribal peoples’ is much more common in the literature; it captures a critical feature of the cultural distinctiveness of these groups, and it attaches to the official census and legal category of ‘scheduled tribe’. I use ‘adivasi’, therefore, to refer to tribal peoples in their contemporary condition of political activity; and these tribal mobilizations form a theme in agrarian history that is central for understanding long-term change. Using any term to refer to a social group or population has the additional pitfall of implying that everyone in a group is the same, that collective identities are built into individuals, and that terms which have by convention come to identify a group are used by people in the group to represent themselves. Group names are deployed for various political, cultural, and rhetorical ends and terms that are used here have various connotations which cannot be controlled by any tricks of phrasing. Similarly, terms for religious groupings are quite contentious today, and I try to avoid using them except as general labels of cultural location.

CHAPTER 1

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Most of human history in South Asia is a feature of life on the land, but most documents that we use to write agrarian history concern the state. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* set the tone by putting farming and herding under the heading of state revenue. Hundreds of thousands of stone and copper inscriptions appear in the first millennium of the Common Era (CE). Scattered across the land from Nepal to Sri Lanka, they documented agrarian conditions, but their purpose was rather to constitute medieval dynasties. After 1300, official documents narrate more and more powerful states. In the sixteenth century, Mughal sultans built South Asia's first empire of agrarian taxation, and their revenue assessments, collections, and entitlements produced more data on agrarian conditions than any previous regime. In 1595, Abu-l-Fazl's *Ai'n-i Akbari* depicted agriculture in accounts of imperial finance. After 1760, English officials did the same. After 1870, nationalists rendered the country as part of the nation, and since 1947 agriculture has been a measure of national development. For two millennia, elites have recorded agrarian facts to bolster regimes and to mobilise the opposition, so we inherit a huge archive documenting agrarian aspects of historical states.

Over the centuries, however, agrarian history has also moved along in farming environments, outside the institutional structure of states, almost always connected in one way or another to state authority, but embedded basically in the everyday life of agricultural communities. Dynasties expand into agrarian space. Empires incorporate farm and forest, using various degrees and types of power, gaining here, losing there, adapting to local circumstances and modifying state institutions to embrace new regions of cultivation. Modern nations appropriate agrarian identity and territory. But politics condition agriculture without determining the logic of farming or the character of agrarian life; and country folk always seem to elude state control, even as some locals are sinews of state power in the village. Rulers and farmers – state power and agrarian social forces – interact historically and shape one another and, in this context, states tell only part of the story of the

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agrarian past. Scholars need documentation produced outside the state and a critical perspective on official records to situate the historical imagination at the slippery articulation of state institutions and agrarian communities.

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Maintaining this kind of perspective – seeing agrarian history askew of state power and reading official sources against the grain – becomes more difficult for the period after 1870, when documentation also becomes most plentiful. A respected modern scholarly canon and a vast modern official archive have colluded to make it difficult for scholars to imagine that agrarian *history* – as distinct from timeless, age-old, village tradition and peasant culture – has any real autonomy from the power of the state. Villagers, farmers, agricultural workers, forest cultivators, and pastoral peoples often appear in the dramas of history, but they most often appear to be moving on history's stage in reaction to state activity or in response to elite initiative, obeying or resisting controls imposed upon them by state institutions and by powerful, autonomous elites. The rustic world – both in itself and for itself – appears in such accounts to be an ancient repetition. Agrarian folk appear as a negative mirror image of all that is urban, industrial, and modern; not as makers of history, but rather as inhabitants of history, endowed with mentalities and memories which can be recovered, but not with creative powers to transform their world. Such an appearance took hold in the nineteenth century, as a very long trend of increasing state power in South Asia accelerated dramatically under British rule. A turning point occurred around 1870, by which time the institutions of imperial bureaucracy, ideologies of development, and analytical sciences of management had been combined with industrial technology to form the material and cultural context for agrarian life that we call modernity. Until then, official documents still recorded aspects of agrarian societies that eluded state control and official understanding, but, from this point onward, texts render the countryside through the lens of the modern state's minute and comprehensive managerial empiricism. Agrarian sites now appear as standardised objects of administration, policy debate, and political struggle. Idiosyncratic local histories and old agrarian territories were in effect buried by imperial modernity under mountains of homogeneous,

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official data, as villages, towns, districts, and provinces became standard units for conventional studies of politics, economics, culture, and society. The non-modern quality of the agrarian past became quaint stuff for gazetteers and folklore, irrelevant for history except as a reflection of archaic peasant memory and tradition – marginalia – cut off from the modern historical mainstream.

Modernity's understanding of the 'agrarian' focused first and foremost on matters of state policy, agricultural production, law and order, and resistance and rebellion. Agrarian history appeared first as a chronicle of state policy, whose impact was measured in the endless dance of numbers on agrarian taxation, rent, debt, cropping, output, living standards, technology, demography, land holding, contracts, marketing, and other money matters. For the city folk who worked in government and in the urban public sphere – the brains of modernity – rustic localities became alien, peripheral, and abstract. All the places, experiences, and circumstances 'out there' in the country became significant primarily as indicators of conditions and trends in modern state territory. To comprehend the country, modernity invented statistics and theories to capture the basic principles of agricultural production and rural society in parsimonious assumptions, models, and ideal types. Compact and comprehensive data informed theories of caste society, village tradition, capitalist transformations, agricultural improvement, and the market economy; these were formalised and packed into portable textbooks and handbooks. Farm statistics rolled off government presses. Official manuals codified agrarian administration. All things agrarian entered the book of the modern state. Agrarian facts entered modern minds through policy debates, statistical studies, guide books, travel maps, law reports, ethnography, news, and theories of modernity and tradition.

In this context, the urban middle classes invented an agrarian discourse that was preoccupied with matters of public policy. By 1870, agrarian conditions appeared most influentially in statistics that measured economic progress and government efforts to develop agriculture. By then, policy debates about rural India excited Indian middle-class intellectuals for whom modernity involved a cultural opposition between their own urbanity and the rural, rustic, tradition of the village. Already in the 1850s, when Karl Marx sat in London using East India Company dispatches to write about India for readers of the *New York Tribune*, a modern world information network was

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beginning to span urban sites of English literacy running from East Asia to Europe and the Americas; and all the English-speaking middle classes had soon formed a broadly similar sensibility toward agrarian issues, which emphasised the state's responsibility to facilitate the expansion of private production and wealth. Thus a book like Robert Mulhall's *The Progress of the World in Arts, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacture, Instruction, Railways, and Public Wealth*, published in London (in 1880) came rapidly to Philadelphia and New York; and it described economic progress in terms that typified public discourse in British India. Though many urban intellectuals in South Asia knew the countryside personally – as landowners, merchants, bankers, and lawyers, and by their own family experience – their public discussions and formulations of agrarian knowledge did not highlight their own direct, intimate knowledge. Their sense of agrarian territory rested firmly on official knowledge. By 1880, competing interest groups were vocal in national policy debates concerning agriculture in Europe, America, and territories of the British empire spilling over into Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean,¹ and agrarian issues made a good public showing in British India during policy debates about taxation, land law, money lending, tenancy reform, tariffs and trade, irrigation expenditure, commodity crops (sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton, tea, and opium), bonded labour, indenture, famines, land alienation, cooperative credit, survey and settlement, agricultural sciences, and forestry. More than any direct experience of village life, these debates informed the evolution of national ideas about the historical substance of agrarian South Asia.

The modern intelligentsia found their countryside in the interwoven discourses of empire and nationality. In the major urban centres of British India, national leaders among the Indian middle classes shared with Europeans an urban identity, alienated from the countryside. But at the same time, imperial ideology lumped all the natives together as native subjects, so India's political nationality evolved as intellectuals brought town and country together in the abstract opposition of 'Indian' and 'British'. This enabled Indian nationalists to produce a distinctively *national* sense of agrarian territory inside the British empire. Nationalism protected the cultural status of the urban middle

¹ Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846–1919*, London, 1994, pp. 167–9.

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classes as it united peoples of India against the oppressions of colonialism. By promulgating modern ideas about religious community, racial identity, linguistic identity, national development, and political progress, middle-class leaders made the foreign character of British rule the central issue in agrarian history. They subsumed the history of all the national land and all the people of the nation into a unitary history of the Indian nation. Modern nationality made the Indian middle classes both equal to and superior to, both like and not like, their country cousins; equally native but more knowledgeable, articulate, international, and modern – ready for leadership. Educated leaders of the nation could speak for the country, on behalf of country folk. As a literate voice for illiterate people, a national intelligentsia could present agricultural problems to the public and represent the inarticulate ‘rural masses’. National voices expressed a distinctively middle-class middleness by translating (vernacular) village tradition into the (English) language of modernity. They made the problems of the country into a critique of colonial policy so as to make agrarian South Asia a colonial problem, calling out for national attention. By the 1850s, texts written along these lines appear in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras; and from the 1870s, a national agrarian imagination formed among authors such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Romesh Chandra Dutt, and M. G. Ranade. After 1870, novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and academic studies depicted the national countryside more and more frequently in a set of iconic images. By the 1920s, national agrarian studies were institutionalised in universities. National culture had subsumed agrarian territories.

Between 1870 and 1930, agrarian South Asia assumed its modern intellectual appearance and acquired its own history. Old orientalist and official knowledge – from the days of Company Raj – were still basic. But the conjuncture of famines (and, in Bengal, devastating cyclones) with the rise of the national intelligentsia in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s made a deep, lasting impression. Agrarian localism and diversity dissolved into a national history of endemic village distress, calamity, and poverty that demanded urgent attention from progressive agents of development. After 1877, stereotypes of famine spread widely and quickly. To raise funds for his relief organisation in India, George Lambert rushed to America in 1898 to publish a book entitled *India, Horror-Stricken Empire (containing a full Account of the*

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Famine, Plague, and Earthquake of 1896–7. Including a complete narration of Relief Work through the Home and Foreign Relief Commission). In 1913, a student, Alexander Loveday, wrote a prize-winning essay at Peterhouse, Cambridge, declaring sophomorically: 'Poverty in England, or America, or Germany is a question of the distribution of wealth . . . [whereas in] India, it is a question of production.' Loveday went on to explain India's woes by citing the quality of soil, weather, technology, and agricultural practices; and, like Lambert, he opined that only massive state investment and relief, supported by enlightened, generous, public contributions, could reduce the suffering of the poor in British India.² By 1900, it was firmly planted in the mind of modernity that South Asian villagers live perpetually at the edge of death and starvation, on the brink of catastrophe.

In the 1840s, we can see the early beginnings of a modern development discourse (which would provide a strong narrative centre for agrarian historical studies) in petitions by critics of the East India Company against excessive, coercive taxation, and in petitions by Arthur Cotton for increased government irrigation expenditure. In 1869, Lord Mayo argued for the foundation of an imperial department of agriculture in terms that indicate the tone of public discussion:

For generations to come the progress of India . . . must be directly dependent on her progress in agriculture . . . There is perhaps no country in the world in which the State has so immediate and direct an interest in such questions . . . Throughout the greater part of India, every measure for the improvement of the land enhances the value of the property of the State. The duties which in England are performed by a good landlord fall in India, in a great measure, upon the government. Speaking generally, the only Indian landlord who can command the requisite knowledge is the state.³

Nationalists used Mayo's argument against his government. They argued that Indian prosperity had become poverty under the British. Famine deaths had increased. Excess taxation had ruined agriculture. Land settlements had punished investors. Deindustrialisation had forced workers onto the land. State expenditure for improvement was

² Lambert's book was published by the Mennonite Publishing Company, Elkhart, India. A. Lovejoy, B.A., *The History and Economics of Indian Famines* (Le Baz Prize Essay, 1913), first published, 1914; reprinted by Usha Publishing, Delhi, 1985, pp. 5–8.

³ Elizabeth Manak, 'Formulation of Agricultural Policy in Imperial India, 1872–1920: A Case Study of Madras Presidency', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1979, p. 27.

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paltry and the government's claim to be working in the interest of the people was at best hypocritical.

The national agrarian scene became a ground for debate, research, and political action; and in these formative decades, state institutions and urban intellectuals invented the modern sciences of development. Engineers had already captured the field of irrigation. Soil scientists, chemists, biologists, and botanists did research that would be organised under the Imperial Council for Agricultural Research and catalogued extensively in 1929 by the Royal Commission on Agriculture. State scientists made British India into a laboratory for breeding new crop varieties fifty years before the green revolution. Economists studied mountains of official statistics on food supplies, prices, commodity crops (indigo, opium, sugarcane, tea, coffee, jute, tobacco, groundnuts, wheat, and rice), farm incomes, investment, and productivity; and they also developed an original theory of Indian economics, which stimulated the first round of village studies in the 1920s. The science of Indian economics was described authoritatively by Radhakamal Mukerjee, in 1916, in a textbook that began with a model of a traditional village economy disrupted by heavy tax demands, private property laws, voracious money lending, and capitalist commercialism, all imposed by the British.⁴ Commercialisation loomed large for the early economists and, drawing on data going back to the 1840s, their studies often focused on problems of coercion. This focus was logical because their model of a traditional village economy did not include any indigenous commercial impulse or history, so that coercion would seem necessary to initiate agrarian commodity production and taxation. Forced sales, bonded labour, coerced revenue collections, and excess land alienation were seen as colonial pathologies, producing poverty and needing to be studied and remedied. Freedom from colonialism became widely identified with freedom from all the coercion and disruption of capitalism. Basic elements of the national model of village India were not unique to India, and Gandhian ideas of village self-sufficiency, solidarity, and harmony were also found in pre-modern Britain, for instance by Gilbert Slater, the first professor of Indian Economics at the University of Madras. Like his contemporaries, H. H. Mann and Radhakamal Mukerjee, Slater saw the village economy in Europe and Asia as traditionally stable and coherent; this

⁴ *The Foundation of Indian Economics*, Bombay, 1916.

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provided what Mann would call the 'social framework of agriculture' – what Karl Polanyi would later describe as the 'embeddedness' of the economy in traditional society. Using this broadly accepted theory of indigenous, village India, many economists sought to bolster village tradition while making villagers richer at the same time, to make modernisation and development more authentically and effectively Indian. Gandhian and Nehruvian ideas about Indian modernity had the same scientific roots.

By 1930, historians had also nationalised agrarian India. But they took a different path. A century before the convocation of the Indian National Congress, Indologists and orientalists – Indians and Europeans – were composing texts that would inspire the national imagination. In the middle-class college curriculum, history informed nationality. R. C. Dutt was a towering figure. He responded to W. W. Hunter's (1868) call for 'rural history' with his own study of Bengal peasant conditions (1874); he wrote a serious study of ancient India (1896); and then he wrote the first nationalist history of colonial agrarian policy (1908). With Dutt, history joined the national movement, and in the 1920s it became a national ground for debate and exhortation. History books discussed all types of national issues and formed a repository for competing accounts of national character.⁵ In this context, in 1929, William Moreland published the first academic monograph on agrarian history, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*.⁶ Dutt and Naoroji had set the stage by recounting the greatness of classical India and the depredations of British rule, and Moreland confronted the nationalist critique of British land policies with a study of pre-British north India, going back to the fourteenth century, to argue that old elements from India's past explained its agricultural backwardness, not British rule. He countered the national glorification of Indian tradition with an account of pre-colonial oppression, which put Muslim rulers specifically in a bad light. The 'idea of agricultural

⁵ See David Ludden, 'History (Pre-Colonial)', in Joseph W. Elder, Ainslee T. Embree, and Edward C. Dimock, eds., *India's Worlds and U.S. Scholars: 1947–1997*, Delhi, 1998, pp. 265–82.

⁶ Intellectual connections across the wider world of historical thinking are indicated by the fact that disruptions of modernity and 'the long-term evolution of rural society from the Middle Ages to the present' were also the foundational themes in rural history in England and France. The public presentation of Marc Bloch's long-term study of French rural society began with a series of lectures in Oslo in 1929. See Richard Kerr, 'The Nature of Rural History', in Richard Kerr, ed., *Themes in Rural History of the Western World*, Ames, 1993, pp. 4–5.

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development', he said, 'was already present in the fourteenth century, but the political and social environment was unusually unfavourable to its fruition'. Specifically, he said, from the Delhi sultanates (1206-1526) through the Mughal empire (1556-1707), 'two figures stand out as normally masters of the peasants' fate . . . the [revenue] farmer and the assignee' who together waged 'a barren struggle to divide, rather than . . . to increase, the annual produce of the country', a 'legacy of loss, which Moslem administrators left to their successors and which is still so far from final liquidation'.⁷

By 1930, agrarian history entered national policy debates and, ever since then, the writing of agrarian history has meshed with political disputation. Moreland pushed a line of argument against landlordism that was just gaining momentum when Jawaharlal Nehru became President of the All-India Congress Committee in 1930. He announced a radical turn in politics by writing this:

the great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due, *not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue*. In order therefore to remove this poverty and misery and to ameliorate the condition of the masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structure of society and to remove the gross inequalities.⁸

Nehru married history and politics; he used history politically the way Gandhi used philosophy. When he wrote *The Discovery of India*, in 1944, he found many lessons for the nation and its leaders in Indian history, going back to ancient times, and by 1947 Nehru's official version of agrarian history was etched into the Congress party platform:

Though poverty is widespread in India, it is essentially a rural problem, caused chiefly by overpressure on land and a lack of other wealth-producing occupations. India, under British rule, has been progressively ruralised, many of her avenues of work and employment closed, a vast mass of the population thrown on the land, which has undergone continuous fragmentation, till a very large number of holdings have become uneconomic. It is essential, therefore, that the problem of the land should be dealt with in all its aspects. Agriculture has to be improved on scientific lines and industry has to be developed rapidly in its various forms . . . so as not only to produce wealth but also to absorb people from the land . . .

⁷ William Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Cambridge, 1929; reprinted Delhi, 1968, pp. 205-6.

⁸ A. Moin Zaidi, ed., *A Tryst with Destiny: A Study of Economic Policy Resolutions of the Indian National Congress Passed During the last 100 years*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 54, italics added.

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Planning must lead to maximum employment, indeed to the employment of every able-bodied person.⁹

During the half-century after 1947, agrarian South Asia changed dramatically. I discuss this in chapter 4, but, to explain my approach in this book, I need to note that, during the 1950s and 1960s, state institutions charged with national development dominated politics and thinking about agrarian history. In these decades, historians focused primarily on state policy. Ranajit Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* and Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* both appeared in 1963, and they represent a historical perspective from which official statements of state ideology seem to determine state policy and to generate logical effects everywhere that policy reigns. The nationality of the countryside under British rule – its national unity as agrarian territory – seemed to be self-evident in these decades; and it was described beautifully in A. R. Desai's *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1948), and many other books. But during the 1960s – the decade of Nehru's death, of the early green revolution, and of continuing struggles for land reform – arguments began to gain ground among historians to the effect that dominant state ideologies do not necessarily determine the content or conduct of state policy; and, in addition, that states do not dictate the course of history. How ideas about history changed so radically in the 1960s and 1970s remains to be studied. Certainly historians of South Asia expanded their appreciation of the diversity of the subcontinent and of the longevity of its disparate agrarian regions. The national unity of colonial experience came unravelled with empirical work that challenged the arguments put forth in the 1947 Congress platform. Historians began to emphasise the local diversity of social forces and political alliances in British India. Regional diversity became more politically prominent after the 1956 states' reorganisation, the rise of non-Congress state governments, and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. An intellectual rupture also occurred in the paradigm of national development, which polarised agrarian studies. The theory and practice enshrined in the green revolution – based on state-sponsored science and technology – faced opposition from theorists and movements promoting revolutionary transformations based on worker and peasant mobilisation, a red revolution. During the last

⁹ A. Moin Zaidi, *A Tryst with Destiny*, p. 72.

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decade of anti-imperialist war in Vietnam, historians discovered a long history of agrarian radicalism in South Asia, and more evidence appeared to substantiate diverse, contrary theories of agrarian history.

By 1980, agrarian history had moved away from the state toward society. Though modern history remained officially confined to the colonial period, agrarian history continued to reach back into the medieval period and to extend to the present day; and it continued to reach beyond the limits of South Asia in its concern with poverty, revolution, imperialism, and other Third World issues. By 1985, some writing in agrarian history was still concerned primarily with national history, but more and more work focused on local, subaltern, peasant, pastoral, and tribal experience. When Ranajit Guha's first volume of *Subaltern Studies* appeared in 1981 and his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* arrived in 1983, it was clear that a major shift in historical thinking had occurred since 1963. In the 1980s and 1990s, the study of the state was further displaced by studies of social power. This trend was not confined to South Asia. The historical profession in general turned away from politics and economics toward society and culture. In these decades, national states also lost power in their own national territories as structural adjustment and economic liberalisation changed the role of the state in development. Nationalism became an object of academic and cultural criticism. State-centred development strategies came under attack; people-centred, grassroots development became prominent. Environmentalism, feminism, and indigenous people's movements challenged old development agendas. Again, South Asia was not alone. A modern world regime of economic development which began to emerge in the 1920s – centred on the complementary opposition of capitalism and socialism – crumbled in the 1980s (though some of its old players – the World Bank, the IMF, huge foundations, multinational corporations, and big capitalist countries – are still thriving today). In South Asia, new social movements arose as the Congress Party declined. Battles in Punjab, Jharkhand, Telangana, Bihar, Jaffna, Kashmir, Assam, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and elsewhere turned attention toward regional and local issues. Many scholars who would have been looking for the roots of revolution during the 1970s turned instead in the 1990s to localised, often doggedly individualistic resistance among subaltern peoples. Historians began to look at both capitalist and socialist states with a new critical eye, 'from the bottom up', which

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gave the state a new kind of theoretical meaning. The state now came to be studied not so much from the inside – from the centre of state policy thinking – as from the margin, from points of critical perspective outside the state and its policy consciousness.

These intellectual trends have left scholars in a better position to explore social power in state territories and everyday life. We can now use history to illuminate contemporary conditions and bring history down to the present, rather than stopping history in 1947. This book considers a long history of social power in many agrarian environments rather than treating agrarian history as a feature of nationality, nationalism, or nationhood. It combines research in a number of different theoretical paradigms to form a comparative history of regions and localities. It does not attempt to represent authentic local voices in agrarian societies, subaltern or otherwise. Recent efforts to capture subaltern voices are salutary, but they pinpoint historical situations rather than describing agrarian change, and they have little to say about patterns of diversity. Everyday life obscures patterns of change across generations and across landscapes of disparate local circumstances. As we accumulate more accounts of local experience, we need to step back periodically to assess patterns and trends, and that is my intention here. Moreover, studies of existing consciousness do not confront the veracity of ideas about the agrarian past, and old ideas tend to survive in popular discourse long after scholars have shown them to be untrue. For instance, a fallacious assumption still remains that basic stability characterised the agrarian world before colonialism. This sturdy idea leads many authors, even today, to imagine the nineteenth century as it was theorised by Karl Marx, R. C. Dutt, and Radhakamal Mukerjee, as a time of radical disjuncture and discontinuity imposed on stable village society, culture, and economy by European conquest and colonial domination. Agrarian history has other stories to tell.

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South Asia includes well over a billion people (a quarter of the world's population), and eight of ten live in places classified officially as 'rural', surrounded by agriculture. A much smaller proportion work on the land and non-agricultural employment is growing rapidly, but a substantial majority still depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

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Agrarian history is not just a local matter, therefore, even though farming is always local in its everyday conduct: the agrarian past has conditioned states as well as most other social institutions. For historical study, we can define agriculture as the social organisation of physical powers to produce organic material for human use. Animal and forest products fall within this definition, so agriculture includes not only farming but also animal husbandry, pastoralism, fishing, and harvesting the forest (though not mining, manufacturing, trade, transportation, banking, ritual activity, writing history, and other related occupations). This broad definition is useful because many specialised types of production are tightly intertwined in agrarian environments and we need one term to embrace many specialists even as we consider their situations separately. To historicise agriculture, we need to map its complexity as a social phenomenon involving the daily exertion of energy and intelligence by many individuals. Agrarian space is at once political, social, and cultural. It is political because power and resistance constitute work on the land, effect control over assets, and distribute products. Farms are also sites of culture. As the words 'culture' and 'cultivation' indicate, farming is embedded within powers to 'civilise' land, and agriculture entails symbolic and dramatic activity that might seem to have little to do with farming – including religious rituals, urban spectacles, and even history writing. Agriculture is obviously economic in the original household sense, but also in the modern sense that farms represent individual rationality and sustain national wealth. Farming is full of input–output rationality and calculations that do not necessarily obey the economists. Farms are physically built into specific bits of land to create landscapes that farmers change over time, so farming falls into the realm of natural and physical science in addition to social science. No one academic discipline controls the study of agriculture.

We can bring together all the various dimensions of agriculture by focusing on landscapes of social power. Farming is the point of contact between the human powers that organise agriculture and the changing natural environment. No other occupation changes the land so much as farming. It is the major engine of ecological change in human history. State institutions enclose and influence social power in agricultural territory, and, though historians often appreciate the changes wrought by states on human living conditions, the powers of transformation in agriculture come primarily from the activity of

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farming itself. Farms change the land and produce new possibilities for the future. Agriculture articulates broadly with nature and civilisation, but its specificity as a historical phenomenon comes from the character of farming as a social activity. Other kinds of social action occur on the land, so decisions about their conduct are often located consciously within a specific physical setting, but none more than farming. And none is more dedicated to its time and place in the seasons of the year. In many other types of social activity, the land provides symbolism, context. But every act in farming directly implicates the soil, so that nature is an active participant – in a particular place – from which farming cannot be detached, and local conditions shape the conduct and outcome of human activity in farming, in two senses: nature is perceived as an agent in farming by farmers themselves, within culture; and nature also works outside culture – behind its back – because seeds, rain, and soil, like human bodies, have logics to which people must simply adjust. Agrarian cultures accept and rationalise this behind-the-back quality of nature in their famous pragmatism, experimentalism, fatalism, and common sense.

Farming mingles social labour with nature, like the rain with the soil, and, in the process, physical and cognitive aspects of agriculture give the land cultural meaning, conditioning how people think about landscapes. *Agricultural* landscapes emerge over long periods of time from farming activity that conditions the natural world of human aesthetics. Agriculture creates thereby a cultural text for the human experience of nature. Farming defines nature, how it feels and looks in practice. Agriculture is civilisation at work on the land, humanising nature and naturalising the powers that human societies exert upon nature. Territorial concepts, powers, and social forms are built into landscapes to define the land as an agricultural aspect of nature. But agriculture also changes nature to create the physical characteristics of spaces in which people carry on social life, changing over time how people think about their world. Agriculture is humanity sculpting the earth, designing habitats, making a landscape as a kind of architecture, and producing symbolic domains that form the spatial attributes of civilisation.

Farms mark time at the point of contact between human powers and natural forces outside human control. Agrarian history unfolds in the seasons of everyday life in agricultural societies. Farming moves to

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the rhythm of holiday seasons, wedding seasons, rainy seasons, and seasons of fruits, vegetables, and grains; seasons of war, famine, and state pageants; and seasons of opportunity and hunger, which embrace whole territories of civilisation. Seasonal time seems to be cyclical, because ideas about seasons are modelled on patterns of natural repetition. But seasonality is also historical, because its cultural construction moves back to the future, as people predict and gamble based on their remembered experience. The understanding of seasonal patterns comes from observation and past predictions, apprehensions of the future; it encodes memory and evidence from past events. The regularity of seasonal rhythms – which define the calendar of human activities in each farm setting – allows investment to occur in one season with the hope and probabilistic expectation that dividends will accrue in the next. Correct action today creates future dearth or prosperity, depending on what the future brings. Lost opportunities and bad times can hurt for years. Understanding today's condition always requires dredging up the past, to see what went right or wrong. Any loss or accumulation represents the yield of the past. The cyclical quality of seasons thus encourages thinking about the future and the past, together, and calculations of past yield for making future-oriented decisions. Family incomes, state revenues, and capitalist profit depend on the predictability and the unpredictability of price movements across the seasons.

Agrarian time has physical substance and human emotion. Its content arises in part from the influence of seasons on the timing and the outcome of decision-making and in part from cultural experience. We know when we have entered a new kind of territory when the season has a different character, when local wisdom treats the same time of year very differently. The synchronisation of social life with nature means that big decisions must take the season into account; and decisions can affect the future drastically. War, migration, industrialisation, state building, irrigation building, urbanisation, and rebellion represent decisions by many individuals in seasons of their own agrarian space; and decisions accumulate to alter the experience and reality of seasonality. The flood, the famine, the drought, the plague, and all the big events in agrarian life are always connected culturally and experientially to the nature of the harvest and to human entitlements to the fruit of the land. Every year, a harvest consists of perishable produce with a limited, predictable life span, which not

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only feeds people in the present but also influences the future size, health, and activity of a population; and the harvest also determines prices for a period of time. Harvests affect prices very widely even in industrial economies and thus influence social experience and exchange relations throughout society; so that harvests influence the building and repair of cities and also the conduct of war, rituals, weddings, manufacturing, and commerce. Predictions and plans for future production on the farm are tied up tightly with seasonal planning for marriages and other events in the production of kinship and community. Plans for new planting and farm investments are tied up not only with predictions about rain but also with political gossip and economic prognostication. Daily decisions on the farm are inflected by big decisions in capital cities, where rulers need funds and support from the countryside. Historically, therefore, a great many elements influence the size, character, and feeling of agricultural space, in addition to the influence of states, empires, and nations.

Seasons connect farming time to natural time and divinity. Agriculture coordinates heaven and earth. Repetitive seasons – readable in the skies – display signs that forecast and stimulate the conduct and outcome of many kinds of social activity which intersect in farming. Agriculture's seasonality provides a temporal pattern of predictability, calculation, expectation, and planning for agrarian society as a whole. Seasonal uncertainty likewise provides a temporal framework in which to calculate risk and provisioning: it provides a temporal logic for social exertions of control, cooperation, solidarity, and initiatives against catastrophe. Agriculture constitutes a history of experience that informs thinking about survival and prosperity, investment and success. Each season is a day in the life of all the many social institutions that intermingle with farming in agricultural territories.

The physical quality of seasons in South Asia forms a huge transition zone between the aridity of Southwest Asia and the humidity of Southeast Asia. As we travel east from the high, dry Sulaiman slopes, across the arid Peshawar valley, the Salt Range, the Punjab and the Indus valley, and then down the increasingly humid Gangetic plain to the double delta of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, we move from arid lands dotted by fields of wheat and millet to a vast flatland of watery paddy and fish farms. Looking outward from South Asia to the west and east, we see its distinctive pattern of monsoons giving way in Afghanistan to a temperate zone pattern of

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hot summers and cold winters, with less rain all year, and giving way in Myanmar to the humid tropics' cycle of long, heavy rainy seasons with high average temperature and humidity. Chittagong is ecologically on the borderland of Southeast Asia; Kabul lies at the border of Central Asia. The sun moves the months of humidity and aridity that define agricultural time in South Asia. Winter cold and summer heat are more pronounced in the north, where they influence the extent of wheat cultivation, but otherwise do not have major implications for the activity of farming, except at high altitudes. The same crops can be grown in all the plains and valleys of South Asia with suitable inputs of water. Temperature regimes differ somewhat but we find the same seasonal pattern in Kashmir, Assam, the Konkan Coast, and Sri Lanka – all rice-growing regions. North-south differences are less pronounced in South Asia than across comparable distances between Scotland and Italy, Beijing and Hong Kong, or New England and Florida. Everywhere (except at very high altitudes), the calendar and historic rhythms of farming in South Asia are pegged not to temperature but rather to moisture. In general terms that apply to the long expanse of agrarian history, the seasonal pattern can be described as a cyclical narrative, roughly as follows. The physical substance of the seasons organises a vast range of variation in South Asia and sets it apart from other agricultural environments in Eurasia.

In January, the sun heads north across the sky from its winter home south of the equator, as the air dries out and heats up. Days lengthen and winter rains dissipate. April and May are the hottest months when it almost never rains. In June, Himalayan snow-melt gorges the rivers in the north and the summer monsoon begins. The leading edge of the monsoon moves north-west from May through July, from Myanmar into Afghanistan. By late May, the monsoon has hit the Andaman Islands and Sri Lanka, and then it hits Kerala and Chittagong at about the same time. The earliest, heaviest, and longest monsoon season engulfs the far south (Sri Lanka and Kerala), the north-east (from Bihar to Assam and Chittagong), and the central-eastern regions of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand. These are the most tropical regions with the most densely tangled natural forest cover and the most extensive jungles. At the summer solstice, when the sun begins to move south again, the summer monsoon will have touched all of South Asia. But it provides the least rain to the arid western plains and the north-west, which have the shortest, driest rainy season; and it

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brings very little rain to the interior of the central peninsula, which lies in the rain shadow of the Western Ghats. These are dry regions of savannah, scrub, and desert. As the days begin to shorten, from July onward, the rains continue but scatter more and more, week by week, though it can still be raining periodically in October, when a second season of rain begins, called the winter monsoon, which pours unpredictably on the south-east and north-east and often brings cyclones off the Bay of Bengal to attack Andhra and Bangladesh.¹⁰ This fickle second monsoon lasts into January, when five months of dry days begin again.

The seasonal calendar is marked by festivals, astrological signs, and natural phenomena which articulate agriculture with a vast array of social activities. People enjoy the cool of December and January. As the sun moves north and the summer sets in, the sun becomes harsh, hot days accumulate, water bodies evaporate, the earth hardens, and farm work slackens. It is time for travel, migration, and moving herds to water and pasture in the hills; time for hunger, cholera and smallpox, skin and eye infections, malnutrition, dehydration, crying babies, and scavenging; time for trading and transporting, stealing, guarding, and fighting; time for rituals of honour and spectacle, and for building, repair, loans, and debt, sometimes desperate commitments that will influence social relations of agriculture for seasons to come. The dry months of the year are full of preparations for the next rainy season, sustained by the immediate yield of the harvest.

Crops move off the land at different times of the year, but most profusely during the second and third months after the start of each monsoon, and the biggest harvest period is September–December. For example, in the north-east, with its high rainfall running from June into January, there are three major harvest seasons. *Rabi* crops are mostly rice but include wheat, barley, and pulses in Bihar, and the rabi season covers March, April, and May. *Bhadoi* crops, which include millets in Bihar and Chota Nagpur in addition to rice, arrive in August–September. The *aghani* season – called *kharif* in north India – covers November, December, and part of January and brings the great harvest of the year. Winter rice, called *aman*, ‘was incomparably the

¹⁰ Damaging cyclones were recorded in Bengal in 1831, 1832, 1833, 1840, 1848, 1850, 1851, 1864, 1867, 1874, 1876, 1885, and 1942. The worst by far were in 1864, 1867, 1874, and 1942. See Arabinda Samanta, ‘Cyclone Hazards and Community Response’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 September 1997, p. 2425.

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most important and often the sole crop grown in the districts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa' at the end of the nineteenth century, covering almost half the total land under cultivation.¹¹ By contrast, in the dry hills of western India, for the Bhils in the Narmada River basin, at the western tip of the Vindhya mountains, the agricultural year begins abruptly in May, after long, hot months without rain or local work, and now 'people cannot sleep in the afternoon' because it would 'appear indolent, and nature bestows her bounty only on those who bring it their industry as tribute'. Anticipating rain, 'people who had migrated to the plains return home for the start of work' and harrowing and planting start with the rain in June. Harvesting maize and *bajra* millets begins in August, and harvesting *jowar* millets and groundnuts continues through October. In November and December, 'people sell chula, groundnuts, and other cash crops, carrying them to the traders'.¹² After every harvest, crops take new life in the realm of circulation. They assume new material forms as movable measures and as piled-up stores of grain, fruit, pulses, and vegetables, in stocks, carts, trucks, bags, head loads, and shops. Crops become food, cuisine, feasts, stocks, clothing, and adornments; they realise their symbolic potential as gifts, offerings, tribute, largess, shares, alms, commodities, and credit advances. In this realm, in the season of circulation, investments by the buyers of farm produce, made in anticipation of the harvest, when crops were in the ground, seek dividends – because prices drop at harvest time and then rise predictably as the heat prolongs, and, by June, predictions about the coming monsoon also begin to affect prices. Speculators seek returns accordingly. Agrarian wealth arises from the social powers that articulate these two great seasons – of cultivation and circulation – in the life of agricultural produce. The calendar differs for animal and vegetable products, for fish, fruit, and forest products, and for different grains in every region; but everywhere, it moves to the rhythm of the sun, the rain, and the harvest cycle. Commodity prices and markets – and thus profits and revenues for business and government – move along the temporal path of agricultural seasonality; and, today, farm seasons influence the

¹¹ Malabika Chakravarti, 'The Lethal Connection: Winter Rice, Poverty and Famine in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, 18, 1, 1996, 66–95.

¹² Amita Baviskar, 'Displacement and the Bhilala Tribals of the Narmada Valley', in Jean Dreze, Meera Samson, and Satyajit Singh, eds., *The Dam and the Nation: Displacement and Resettlement in the Narmada Valley*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 119–120.

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timing and outcome of elections and set the stage for most major political decisions in South Asia.

In the hottest months, in the season of circulation, as crops move off the land, people also move out in search of work. Families that do not grow enough food on their own land to support their diets for the whole year have always constituted a large proportion of the farm population; and, when farming is done and the heat is intense, many go out in search of sustenance. Their numbers and trajectories vary with the season. In years of plenty, they can find food close to home, and during droughts they go farther afield. But, with predictable regularity, food becomes more costly as labour is let loose from the farm in the hot season. For those who must work for others, this is a time of distress. For those who have powers to employ, it is a time to acquire workers for seasonal off-farm labour; and people with stores of food and money do just that. Today, landowners with year-round supplies of irrigation water from mechanical pumps, wells, and canals in Punjab bring workers all the way from Bihar, and, as we will see, such inequalities in the distribution of capital and labour have had a major influence on patterns of social power and economic development over the centuries.¹³ Historically, seasonal workers have moved in large numbers into warfare, manufacturing, building, and hauling, all perennial options. They transport and process crops in the season of circulation. The expansion and contraction of opportunities for such non-farm work in the hot season is a major determinant of workers' annual income. Dirt roads trampled hard and riverbeds dried up in the hot sun make this a good time to transport workers, grain, animals, and building materials. Haulers, herders, carters, and grazing land are badly needed during the season of circulation. Water and fodder for animals are a problem. Transhumant animal keepers take their flocks to the hills for grazing, and herds moving up and down the slopes for grazing are major elements in mountain ecology, where farming and grazing often compete for land, as they do today in the Siwalik hills and higher ranges above Punjab.¹⁴

Supply, demand, people, goods, and news on the move travel through towns and cities, where social needs, social accumulation, and

¹³ Manjit Singh, 'Bonded Migrant Labour in Punjab Agriculture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 March 1997, 518–19.

¹⁴ Richard P. Tucker, 'The Evolution of Transhumant Grazing in the Punjab Himalaya', *Mountain Research and Development*, 6, 1, 1986, 17–28.

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social power mingle in markets, on the streets, and under the eye of the ruler, engendering conflict and competition as well as negotiation and exchange. Markets and urban centres are places where all the various people of the countryside mingle with one another – causing endless problems – under an umbrella of power held by the people who order the world and receive the riches of the land in return. Holding that power is a magical dream. In the *mangala kavyas* of eighteenth-century Bengal, for instance, the poets ‘sing ecstatically of *vakula* trees in blossom, and cows grazing on the river-banks and water-birds and lotuses and peacocks’, but rustic heroes go to town in search of wealth and crave to be king.¹⁵ In the eighteenth century, when Bijayram Sen travelled from Bengal to Benares, he described each town as a place of temporal authority and also of homage and piety; and in his travelogue, the *Tirthamangala*, divinity and authority dissolve into one another.

He describes, for instance, how the whole contingent stops to pay obeisance to the patron Krishnachandra’s family deity at Gokulganj and [at] the marketplace established by his brother, Gokul Ghoshal, agent to Verelst, president of the Board of Revenue of the East India Company:

One by one we prostrated before all the gods
And came back after offering expenses of worship.¹⁶

The season of circulation is also a time to raise armies and to mobilise demonstrations in towns and cities. The land is free of crops, so gang labour can be organised for clearing jungle, digging wells and canals, and building dams, temples, mosques, monuments, palaces, and forts. When the sun is most unrelenting, bandits are desperate and feed off travellers on the road – this is a popular theme from ancient Tamil literature that rings true today in the tales of Chambal valley gangs who rob passing trains, and in the tales of Phoolan Devi. The hot season is belligerent. Benevolent rulers need force to keep the peace and ambitious rulers can use hungry soldiers to increase their territory.

In late May, all eyes turn to the skies and labour moves back to the land. This time is for preparation and expectation. Cultivation begins with the promise of rain. Work preparing fields for the crops varies in

¹⁵ Edward C. Dimock and Ronald B. Inden, ‘The City in Pre-British Bengal, according to the *mangala-kavyas*’, in Richard Park, ed., *Urban Bengal*, East Lansing, 1969, p. 15.

¹⁶ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, Philadelphia, 1998, pp. 33–4.

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its timing, complexity and demand for workers, animals, and equipment, depending on the crops to be sown, soil to be planted, rainfall timing and quantity, and water supplies from other sources, such as wells, tanks, or streams; and it also depends on the kind of assets that can be invested in anticipation of the harvest in specific places, because rich farmers can afford to make more elaborate preparations, and new technologies allow for new investments before planting begins. Calculating all of these variables, their interaction, and their risks and benefits consumes massive intellectual energy, endless hours of debate, argument, and negotiation during the season of cultivation. Expertise and experience are crucially important and highly valued. The accumulated wisdom of farmers, patriarchs, astrologers, almanacs, scientists, old sayings, magicians, holy men, textbooks, extension officers, radio, and TV pundits all come into play. Prediction and calculation continue each day based on the rains that come and the level of water in rivers, streams, and reservoirs, for it is not only the total amount of rain that will determine the harvest but also the timing of rain and water supply as they affect each type of seed and soil on each bit of ground. Bad signs dictate conservative strategies for farmers living close to the margin. For farmers with extra assets, however, rumours or signs of an impending bad monsoon or war might indicate potential profit during a subsequent season of scarcity and high prices; and this might stimulate a calculated gamble, extra planting. Such gambles often fail. Whatever the expectation of rain, any extra planting or investments in potentially more profitable crops – such as cotton, jute, rice, wheat, vegetables, sugarcane, tobacco, and plantain – often require a loan. As we will see, historically, the expansion of farms into forests and scrublands has typically involved credit extended in the expectation of future yields; and increasing the capital intensity of farming – by the addition of irrigation, fertilisers, machinery, processing equipment, animals, or labour – usually depends upon credit.¹⁷ For farmers living close to the margin, debt may finance the next meal, and poor workers often enter the planting season already in debt because of food loans during the dry months.

¹⁷ With the increasing intensity of cultivation in India since 1970, credit has risen as a percentage of total capital formation in agriculture and allied sectors from 19 per cent to 33 per cent; and compound growth rates rose from 20 per cent during the 1970s to 35 per cent after 1980. K. P. Agrawal, V. Puhazhendhi, and K. J. S. Satyasani, 'Gearing Rural Credit for the Twenty-First Century', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 October 1997, 2717–28, and table 8.

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At planting time, old sayings and common sense generally dictate that farmers must follow conservative strategies, and it is typically seen as being better to secure some returns at harvest time than to lose everything with a bad bet. But old sayings on this subject are so prominent because they are so often disobeyed, and a great many conflicts arise from gambles that go bad – especially, perhaps, in the home – and the ruination of the improvident farmer and his family is a poignant theme in literature.

At the time of urgent investments when summer crops must be sown, gains from the past go to work, and the price of food is high when people are hungry for work. Past losses now hurt the most and farmers who have gambled and failed or lost labour in their households owing to death or migration feel the pain of being unable to carry on without help, which can be humiliating. Conflicts over resources rage at this time of year, especially over water and good land. Fights that stew for years erupt as the time approaches to plough, plant, fertilise, and apply irrigation. Newly acquired assets go to work: cattle purchased at summer fairs; land bought, leased, or conquered; new fields cleared from forest; dams built and channels dug; wealth secured by marriage; the labour of growing children; and a good reputation that builds credit-worthiness on solid standing in the community. Many farmers need advances of seed, food, and cash to accomplish the planting, and advances may or may not enrich creditors, but the commitments they involve do create social bonds that are critical, and often lasting, for both sides. Social commitments within families, communities, sects, castes, and other groups – cemented during ritual events that punctuate the calendar – enable farmers to acquire what they need to plough and plant. Reciprocity and redistribution enter a productive phase: horizontal solidarities and vertical bonds of loyalty and command facilitate planting, and seek returns. Gods also play their part. Supernatural beings take ritual offerings and hear lots of promises. In sacred sites, human fear and hope meet the natural powers that fix the fate of the crop. Omens are discussed. Many interactions that animate the heady season of ploughing and planting bring villagers into town and city folk into villages. In cities and towns, past returns from trade, taxes, and sacred donations seek their productivity on the land. Creditors, tax collectors, landlords, merchants, and lawyers come from town to invest in the crop and to make sure they will get their due.

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Too many rainless days bring despair and high prices. Scarcities that become famines set in after July when past seasons have been bad and food stocks are low. The poorest people must do whatever they can for food, which often means committing themselves or their children in desperate ways – in this context, what we call ‘bonded labour’ can be seen as exploitation and also as protection against starvation. The scattered, unpredictable nature of monsoons in many places, and the possibility of flood or devastating storms in others, make the maintenance of subsistence options in times of dire distress a critical life-strategy for many people.

Rains bring hope, mosquitoes, malaria, flooding, and waterborne disease. As the crops sprout and mature, so do estimates of their yield and the calculation of payments to be made for obligations incurred to do the planting. Farmers, creditors, landlords, and state officials evaluate their potential returns. Speculation and negotiation proceed along with uncertainty about the outcome of the season. The connection is again being forged between the wet and dry months, between seasons of cultivation and circulation, between times of investment and reward.

Crops must be protected as they ripen, and predators take many forms. Conflicting interests – among landlords, farmers, labourers, creditors, and tax collectors – mature with the crop. The immediate labour of village people on the farm itself – required to bring the crop to fruition – becomes most critical as the harvest approaches. Farm labour is needed at just the right time for timely watering, weeding, cutting, hauling, winnowing, drying, and storing the crop. Disruptions to the work at hand during this climactic phase of cultivation can ruin the crop and spoil the future that is planned on predictions of yield. As a result, enmity can take a nasty turn. The reliable commitment of labour to the farm becomes most valuable now; and the real market value of labour increases as the harvest begins. At harvest time, prices fall as labour demand is peaking, and labour demand is particularly high when another crop will be immediately sown, which is often the case in regions that benefit from the winter monsoon; and irrigation often allows a second or third crop to be planted. The most hectic work time hits all the farmers at once in each locality, and, at this time, stability and harmony in social relations – so prized in agricultural communities around the world – become critical for determining dividends for everyone who has invested in the crop. This is also a

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time when conflicts intensify over the division of the crop and over the fulfilment of past promises.

Festivals, rituals, and weddings follow the harvest and bring relief from work and tension. But struggles over the division of the produce follow it into its season of circulation, especially when the yield is worse than predicted and expectations are frustrated. This is a time when tax collectors, creditors, in-laws, and landlords can become nasty. The big harvest festivals mark the completion of the agricultural year and forge the social bonds for another cycle of seasons. Each year influences the next by providing the material and social assets with which all the many participants in agriculture face one another in the negotiations of everyday life. Among these assets, divine blessing is basic, and gods get lots of attention when the harvest is done.

Because the sun controls the seasons, it exerts general control over agricultural time. In popular mythology, Surya drives a chariot pulled by seven white horses, and turns around among the stars to head north in January, moving into the celestial house of Makara (Capricorn). The turn of the solar year occurs during the overlapping months of the summer and winter harvests (between November and February) and is celebrated everywhere in South Asia. But the start of the cultivation year actually falls at the end of the hot season, in June.¹⁸ For all the agrarian states which have pinned their well-being and revenue on seasons of agriculture, financial transactions with the farmers continue throughout the solar cycle and the revenue year has conventionally started with the summer monsoon. The fiscal year – or *fasli* (revenue settlement) year, which is derived from Mughal practice and retained by modern states – runs from the middle of one solar year (July) to the next. In India today, the summer session of Parliament also starts in July, and elections are timed to precede the monsoon, which makes the planting season a time of political promises as well. In the drier parts of South Asia, the harvest from the summer crop is much more prominent than the winter harvest and thus, for the agricultural population, the farming year in effect ends in December, a popular time for marriages. October and November also witness major festivals: Dassara, Durga Puja, and Navaratri. The winter crop

¹⁸ The monsoon's starting date is officially announced in the media and awaited publicly with eager anticipation. Its onset is more predictable than its benevolence: in twenty-five years from 1972 until 1996, it began more than five days before or after 1 June only seven times, though starting dates ranged from 24 May to 18 June.

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season is most prominent in wetter regions and wherever irrigation is abundant, and here there is greater emphasis on festivities in January–February, as in Tamil Nadu, where Pongal marks the new year and also celebrates the harvest. Everywhere, the solar cycle is the basis for calendrical timings for festivals of many kinds which punctuate the social life of agriculture.

The more we investigate agriculture, the harder it is to draw definite boundaries around it. In seasons of farming, farm families and others involved in farming do essential work on and off the land, and what they do in the mosque, in the bank, or at court may be as important as work in the field to their survival and to the harvest. If we define ‘farming’ to include every activity that directly determines what is accomplished on a bit of farmland, then it must include off-farm and non-farm work by farm family members (including all the work inside the household); and it must also include activity by non-farmers that immediately affects farming – such as irrigation-building, negotiating rental arrangements, collecting taxes, making loans, repaying debts, settling property disputes, and mobilising labour. *Farming* thus involves a wide range of social activities, but even defined in this broad way it still constitutes only a small proportion of *agricultural* activity, which is more widely dispersed among many social settings. It is little wonder that vernacular texts in South Asia from ancient times to the present describe ‘agriculture’ very vaguely and broadly, treating ritual and astrology, for instance, as critical features of agricultural knowledge. Modern mentalities may assign prayer, worship, myth, marriage, and pilgrimage to the realm of religion; genetics, hydrology, engineering, medicine, meteorology, astrology, and alchemy to the realm of science; metal working, carpentry, spinning, weaving, and pot making to the realm of manufacturing; and trade, banking, war, herding, migration, politics, poetry, drama, adjudication, administration, and policing each to their separate realms of social activity. But all these are part of agriculture. They contain essential agricultural activity.

Historically, a majority of social activities and institutions in South Asia have had some agricultural aspect or dimension. This is what makes a social space and cultural environment *agrarian*. A region or social space is agrarian not because farming forms the material basis for other activities, but rather because a preponderance of social activity engages agriculture in some way or another during seasons of cultivation and circulation. In this respect, industrialism has overtaken

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agriculture very slowly and partially around the world. Industry and urbanism may be identified with modernity, but vast areas inside industrial, urban countries remain agrarian today; and most of the modern world is in fact agrarian as measured by the use of its land, the work of its populations, and the origins of gross domestic product. Agrarian histories intersect the history of modernity everywhere. South Asian history involves a broad mix of agricultural and industrial activities and a constant mingling of rural and urban environments. But modernity's urban middle classes around the world detached themselves from agrarian life and took history with them, so that agrarian history now seems smaller – more compact, specialised, and marginal – than the political, cultural, and social history within which the urban middle classes find their own past.

To analyse the history of social power in agriculture and its articulation with states and environments, we can look for dispersed activities that constitute agriculture and are scattered across *agrarian space*. For long periods and in large territories of agrarian history, there was little if any organisational power to coordinate agricultural activity in much of agrarian space. Nowhere in the world do we ever find one overarching systemic intelligence holding together all the physical elements and forms of social power that constitute agriculture, even today, even in the most centrally controlled agricultural regimes. Nature's variability discourages any overbearing, non-local control over the intimate, everyday conduct of farming. A single farm – or a slave plantation, or a commune – might be tightly organised, but controlling farming activity minutely in a large territory is impossible. As we will see, the organised effort to establish large-scale institutional mechanisms to control farming locally is a basic project of modernity, and it dominates the process of agricultural development. From this perspective, Moreland was quite wrong, for what he called 'development' in the Delhi Sultanates and Mughal empire was a very different kind of project from the modernisation that he had promulgated as an agricultural officer in the 1920s. Pre-modern projects of development deployed no state power worth mentioning inside the operation of the farm itself. State powers mobilised under British rule were of a much greater magnitude, they had deeper local penetration, and they were designed to influence the operation of individual farms. They had some success. After 1947, national states extended their local powers considerably. Since the 1970s, international financial institutions, most

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notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have sought to supersede the powers of national states in South Asia and elsewhere, by using their financial leverage to open farms everywhere to the discipline of global markets. Institutions of control over production form a large part of agrarian history.

Cultivation and circulation are never haphazard in agrarian space, even in the absence of centralised controls. Regularities form within natural landscapes and interconnected agrarian activities articulate variously self-conscious social powers that organise agriculture in the circumscribed spaces that we can call *agrarian territory*. A single logic or dominant form of social power may not control agriculture in such territory, but the markings of agrarian territorialism can be mapped, and the changing formations of social power can be charted chronologically. Mapping patterns of control and order, including internal resistance and external disruptions, defines the historical geography of agriculture. States help to organise agriculture by forming zones of power that co-ordinate many kinds of social activity that intersect on the farm. But many types of circulating elements inhabit agrarian space. Farms are only the most immediate point of contact between land and labour – the most tangible site of production – and most of what constitutes agriculture circulates far beyond the boundaries of the farm and well beyond boundaries of cultivation. Institutions of many kinds – including those that form the state – organise the movement of materials and activities into and out of farming and thus agriculture.

States exert their powers by defining, enclosing, and regulating territorial units of agricultural organisation. Describing territory and legitimating state authority in agrarian space constitute essential work for state elites and affect the character of social power in farming. We can see documentary traces of this activity from the time of the Mauryas onwards, but the ideas about territory which modern historians routinely impose on the land in South Asia derive from colonial times. As the East India Company drew state boundaries for the Raj, it also ‘settled’ farming regions with laws of landed property and policies of revenue collection that regulated agrarian territory. By 1815, the Raj had settled upon the village as the basic unit of agrarian administration. Within the boundaries of British India, authors enshrined the village community as the core political, economic, and social unit. Initially, this accompanied blatant efforts to discredit

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previous rulers and to eliminate their territorial traces. But, as modern ideas developed about civilisations of the Orient, evidence accumulated that the peasant village community had survived through all the ages of empire and calamity before British rule. Ideologically, the village came to represent a survival of agrarian tradition and the administrative foundation of agrarian modernity. Modern authors then constructed a civilisation territory within the territory of British India, and this defined the national heritage for the peoples of modern South Asia. Nepal, for instance, would not be the territory it is today without a specific set of victories in wars with the East India Company, but today this nation state marks a civilisation territory with an ancient heritage. Modernity invented traditions of civilisation and, within them, village territories, where individual peasant families farmed their own land with their own self-possessed resources. The territory called 'India' became traditional and the village and family farm became its elemental units. The cultural construct called 'India' came to rest on the idea that one basic cultural logic did in fact organise agriculture in all its constituent (village) territories from ancient to modern times. Debates have raged as to whether this unitary logic should be understood in terms of exploitation or consensus, but, within all the national territories of modernity in South Asia, stable, traditional village societies were taken to be territories of ancient agrarian civilisation which had survived basically unchanged over the millennia before colonialism.

The modern invention of civilisation territories continues a very old elite project of using narration to organise agrarian territories. Modern imperialists projected the map of British India back into histories of ancient times to legitimate their authority over all the villages in this agrarian territory and to authorise their own ability to speak for the poor, downtrodden, country folk. Nehru's *Discovery of India*, like the *Akbarnama*, narrates geography and genealogy to inscribe territorial order and authority. The modern master narrative of Indian civilisation thus bestows upon leaders of the modern state the charisma of epic heroes and classical emperors. This narrative begins with Aryans and Vedas and moves on to a 'classical age' led by the Mauryas and Guptas, so that a linear evolution of civilisation defines the land of *Bharat*. In the ancient past, classical traditions came into place which are presumed to have filled out the civilisational space of *Bharat*, so that later migrations into this territory can be seen as 'foreign

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invasions'. After 'foreign conquests' by the Hunas, our civilisation narrative recounts the fall of the Guptas and the onset of a medieval period of political fragmentation and regionalisation, which spans about 1,200 years. Before 1290, we learn, Hindu kings established vibrant regional cultures, but then once again foreign conquerors came from Central Asia and began the epoch of Muslim rule. Still another political fragmentation followed the end of the Mughal imperium, which led to another foreign invasion and conquest – by the British – and thus to all the transformations and disruptions of modernity. In the modern period, the master narrative concludes, the natives in this civilisation territory drove out the British, and, by 1971, popular national movements had created the independent states of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Notwithstanding differences among these states, their official histories agree that their boundaries are inscribed on the land from ancient times. They also agree that basic traditional forms of village society remained intact from ancient to modern times.

The core continuity in this official narrative – that the village represents a constant unit of agrarian order from ancient times to the present – indicates how ideologically important village tradition is for modern states. The scale of conceptual control over agrarian territory exercised in this linear narrative by the people who claim to represent the true legacy of this civilisation also indicates the importance of old empires for modern states. Though this master narrative pertains to the legacy of nations, and describes neither the chronology nor the geography of agrarian history, its rendition of civilising power does indicate some contours of the institutional environment within which social powers have sought to organise agriculture over the centuries. Elites who define civilisation in their own image are also designing agrarian territories in moral, political, and mythological terms. Mythology helps to sustain institutions of social power on the land. Civilising power is controlling, imaginative, mythical, and magical. We can jettison ideas about there being one (or any fixed number of) civilisation(s) in South Asia, and view South Asia instead as a geographical space in which many elements of civilising power have been combined historically, including cities, states, high culture, organised religion, elites, manufacturing, merchants, science, and philosophical reflections on the nature of the universe. Such powers do exert control over agricultural activities and define agrarian space,

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giving agrarian territory subtle substance, because culture instigates powers of control over nature and over work on the farm.

MAPS

Physically, work on the farm is mostly lifting, pushing, pulling, cutting, pouring, hauling, pumping, chopping, digging, and otherwise moving things around. Farms seem to be fixed in space, but even the plants in the ground turn into crops only when they move into the realm of circulation. Historical geography needs to consider not only changing farm areas over time but also the moving elements that must converge at moments-in-space to make farming happen. The powers that people exert to confine these elements spatially and temporally mark agricultural territories; but confinements that form boundaries and borderlands are always porous and partial. Think about water. It defines farm environments of South Asia more than any other physical element. Nature distributes water but does not determine its agricultural geography. Water moving in the sky, on the ground, and under the ground creates the timing and location of aridity and humidity. Farms control water. Farming in South Asia means putting elements in place that will make the most of water when it arrives. Water never stops moving and changing form: it percolates, evaporates, falls, runs, freezes, and melts. Its local supply and its local effects on farms might seem to be simply the product of rain falling on the ground – as the old saying would have it, ‘Farming is a gamble on the monsoon’ – but agriculture is not simply a series of bets about chance occurrences. Irrigated agriculture is a massive social project, in which people in South Asia have engaged since ancient times. Today, the expansion of irrigation by pumping water from deeper and deeper levels and by extending controls over the length of every river is a prime strategy to increase farm productivity. Irrigation defines agrarian space not only by its landscape architecture and physical powers over water above and below the ground, but also by its institutions and social formations. The social institutions that bring drainage and subsoil water onto farmland always implicate elite non-farmers in cities and towns across regions that stretch miles away from the site of irrigation itself. The historical geography of irrigated agriculture includes the physical distribution of surface and sub-surface water, the territorial configuration of institutions that bring that water onto farms, and the move-

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ment of ideas about technology, power, and justice that make those institutions work.

So-called dry farms have no irrigation, but they also depend on complex social institutions that control agricultural elements circulating in territories that surround dry fields and villages. Getting seeds into the ground in time for the rain requires labour, equipment for ploughing, and materials such as seeds and manure which need to be applied in a timely fashion – timing is critical – even if the farmer does not have the necessary resources immediately at hand and nothing is left in store from the previous season to supply these inputs. Seasonal circumstances or chronic shortages often require external finance before ploughing can begin; financing must somehow move into the farm nexus and facilitate the movement of necessary goods and services onto a farmer's land. All farms, moreover, depend on seeds bred over centuries to catch the moisture and make the most of the rain as it moves from the sky down into the ground and evaporates back into the atmosphere. Seeds and seed breeding represent technology for controlling the local effects of water mingled with nurturing elements in the soil. Farmers seek seeds that yield more with less water, grow faster to make the most of scarce water supplies, or, like the primeval arid-zone crop (pearl millet) produce something with almost no rain. The green revolution is based on seeds that can be made to yield much more than older varieties with additional inputs of water and fertiliser; it is an old strategy that is being bent toward increasing productivity with the assumption of higher inputs of moisture and plant nutrition. Seed selection and breeding activities must occur in wide agricultural spaces before they are applied on specific bits of land. Though, in the short run, seeds that a farmer plants might come from the yield of the previous season, promiscuity makes pollination creative and adaptive. Over the years, the selection and breeding of crops must occur within wide zones of pollination in order to be effective for any individual farmer, even as farmers restrict the breeds and breeding in their own fields. Adding organic material to the soil makes the most of water at hand, whether by adding silt and minerals with irrigation water, grazing animals to make grass and stubble into manure, ploughing in organic matter brought from forests, or applying chemicals. These materials come to the farm from outside, and institutional arrangements for their movement are critical in farming. Wooded lands for green manure have very often been

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controlled by communities, rulers, and landlords, rather than by individual farmers. Nomads or transhumant shepherds often bring animals to graze on the fields. Chemical fertilisers come from petrochemical plants, state industries, and multinational corporations. The origin, control, and terms of trade that bring added fertility to the land make a big difference in everyday farm life.

Knowledge is a critical element in farming and brings all the elements together. Many texts therefore implicitly describe territories of social power in agriculture. Ideas moving among farmers create territories of knowledge. An elusive geography of ideas surrounds farmers who need to know how to make the best (or even safest and simplest) gamble with the rains. Each farmer needs to know about soil preparation, seed selection, planting, watering, manuring, and weeding for the specific combination of water, crops, soil, and labour conditions on each farm. Ways of knowing come from generations of learning in wide regions. Every individual calculation and decision on each farm is the result of conversations among many farmers and other people, which accumulate over generations. Textual representations of old forms of agricultural knowledge can be found in Sanskrit texts from the first millennium CE, such as *Varahamihira's Brhat Sambhita*, which give astrologers and people who control powerful mantras and rituals key roles in agriculture. *Brhat Sambhita* verses say that all astrologers must know 'indications of the approach of the monsoon . . . signs of immediate rainfall, prognostication through the growth of flowers and creepers . . . [celestial influences on the] fluctuation in the prices of commodities [and] growth of crops . . . treatment and fertilising of trees, water-divination [etc.]' [no. 16]. Because deities enjoy trees and water [no. 537], the astrologer needs to know signs on the earth that indicate water sources below [nos. 499–561]. He needs to know portents of famine: sunspots are a dire signal, but so too are certain rainbows [no. 29], shapes on the moon's face [nos. 36–8], eclipses [no. 58], dust storms [no. 67], appearances of Venus [no. 105], and comets [nos. 146–51]. The *Brhat Sambhita* introduces its treatment of portents of rain with phrasing that we often find in old texts: 'As food forms the very life of living beings, and as food is dependent on the monsoon, [the monsoon] should be investigated carefully' [no. 230]. Seven chapters consider rain signs, and, just like Tamil proverbs recorded in the 1890s, focus on configurations of the planets and signs such as rainbows, cloud shapes, insect and animal

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behaviour, the sounds and shapes of thunder and lightning, and rainfall during each division of the solar *and* the lunar calendar. Many agricultural proverbs recorded in modern times refer to the wisdom of astrologers, who provided guidance for farmers. In 1802, Benjamin Heyne found a set of instruments in Mysore for measuring rain that were used to compile almanacs and to presage ‘the quantity of rain allotted to each country’; and the *Brhat Sambhita* shows astrologers how to make such rainfall measurements accurately [nos. 245–6].¹⁹ The *Krishiparasa* gives mantras to ward off insect and animal pests from the field, while the *Sarangadharapadhati* describes effective natural pesticides. In the 1870s, Lal Behari Day recorded a range of local curses, omens, and magical powers at work on Bengal farms.²⁰

Geographies of labour mobility also define agrarian territory. For most farmers, most of the time, moving labour onto the land at the right time to do the right thing is no mean feat. Effective control over material and labour matched to specific bits of farmland is never merely a gamble, nor is it determined on a single farm. Patriarchy, labour markets, and other elements in the micro-politics of labour control link together many farms and sites of power in agrarian territories.²¹ Historically, moreover, a vast amount of agricultural production in South Asia has involved moving labour over the land in patterns that are not typical of what we think of as sedentary agriculture. Slash-and-burn farming, long- and short-fallow farming (in which fields are planted over a range of fallowing intervals), and alternating field use for different crops, grasses, and animals have been prominent for centuries. Many farming communities have moved as whole communities around an agricultural territory to define its shifting boundaries and to relocate their farms over seasons and generations. And over the long term, as we will see, migrations of labour and capital have changed the landscape by creating farms where there were none before, and by replacing one type of farm with another. Moving labour onto a particular bit of farmland in each

¹⁹ All references to *Varahamihira's Brhat Sambhita* are to the edition by M. Ramakrishna Bhat, Delhi, 1981.

²⁰ Mazharul Islam, ‘Folklore as a Vehicle of Ethnological Study in Bangladesh’, in Shamsuzzaman Khan, ed., *Folklore of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1987, p. 21.

²¹ See Jens Lerche, ‘Is Bonded Labour a Bound Category? – Reconceptualizing Agrarian Conflict in India’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 22, 3, 1995, 484–515; Ashok Rudra, ‘Local Power and Farm-Level Decision Making’, in M. Desai, S. H. Rudolph, and A. Rudra, (eds.), *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 251–80; and chapter 4 below.

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season is an activity that occurs within wide movements of labour, and all these nested geographies of labour mobility are not necessarily confined by the village or by political boundaries that appear on ordinary maps. Very often, labour moves away from farming activity altogether – into manufacturing, transportation, military, and other occupations – and needs to be brought back to the farm in time for the planting; or, if it moves away permanently, it needs to be replaced, perhaps by using cash remittances sent by children from far away places. Turning income derived from non-farm work and from other investments into assets which can be deployed effectively on the farm has long been a key to prosperity in farming.

Prices define another moving, elusive geography. The cost of farm inputs, the exchange value of outputs, and the quantity of produce that remains in the hands of a farmer at year's end, to be applied the next year – all these are in part determined in wider spatial domains than are defined by the farm, village, cultural region, state, or empire. Farm families are almost never content to consume only what grows on the farm and they are often unable to sustain themselves with their own farm products or income, so that off-farm labour and non-farm products are important for the reproduction of the most self-sufficient farm families, whose local entitlements typically depend upon prices.

Finally, mythologies and sacred geographies define agrarian space, because no farming population has ever believed that activity on the farm itself is sufficient for success in farming. Propitiating deities, paying homage to holy persona, visiting sacred places, and gathering with one's own people to create ritual conditions for success on the farm are essential in agriculture.

Agriculture thus involves the exertion of powers of control over many moving elements – including esoteric knowledge, supernatural beings, human migrations, prices, commodities, and elements of nature – within which farmers apply labour onto the land. Control over the means of production is thus no simple function of property rights, social status, or class structure. Agriculture is an aspect of social institutions and power relations within which farms and farmers work. It is an aspect of civilisation which generates, combines, and focuses physical powers over naturally moving and socially movable objects in production. The historical geography of agriculture is therefore not simply described by the extent of fields and farms, or by the boundaries of states, or by cultural regions, although fields, farm

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territory, and political and cultural powers do mark territorial boundaries in agrarian space.

Agrarian territory is the part of agrarian space that can be effectively bounded, physically and culturally, and marked as a spatial domain for organised social power and activity. Agrarian territory is reproduced over time by the reproduction of social power within *social institutions*. The *state* is a collection of institutions which have central points and figures of authority. *State institutions* are those most directly under the control of people in official hierarchies of authority. There are many kinds of state institutions – military, fiscal, legal, and managerial – and they vary in their ability to organise social power in agriculture. *Social power* in agriculture is by definition distributed unequally, not only in amount but in quality, because it is constituted by effective decisions which direct the movement of the elements that are combined productively in farming. Power meets resistance. Physical power meets physical resistance. Forest growth resists the expansion of farmland. Animals fought back in the Sunderbans and became the scourge of Bengal settlers there. Water constantly resists control and seems at times to want to flood the land and to hide in the earth. Physical force can also be used to overcome resistance from people. But coercion is not the only kind of interaction between *social power* and *social resistance*. The various qualities of social power interact in various combinations, negotiations, alliances, exchanges, accommodations, and forms of conflict. These interactions form patterns within the *institutions of agrarian territoriality*. Because all the moving elements in agriculture resist control, agrarian territoriality – like nationality – is always an on-going project, and movements into and out of institutional territories are constantly problematic. Within agrarian territory, control is always relative. At one end of the spectrum, natural phenomena – such as monsoons, topography, evaporation, photosynthesis, and soil types – resist human control absolutely. Prices, knowledge, beliefs, and migration are nearly as hard to control as the wind, but efforts to control them have long been objects of territorial ambition. At the other end of the spectrum, humans do control things such as cropping patterns, wage rates, marriage choices, occupational options, state institutions, and the like. Such controllable items form the visible landmarks of territoriality in agrarian space.

Institutions define agrarian territory with social routines of control

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over dispersed, moving elements in agricultural production. As we will see, violence is prominent in agrarian South Asia and it is critical in Ranajit Guha's brief treatment of territoriality, which can serve as a benchmark. Guha defines a peasant in British India as a subaltern subject of a semi-feudal regime controlled by landlords, money-lenders, bankers, high castes, and colonial officials. These elites form a 'composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant'. He argues that peasant consciousness appears in 'the general form of peasant resistance', and that territoriality is an elementary aspect (a basic component) of peasant insurgency, expressing resistance and consciousness. Inscribed in peasant thought and action, peasant territoriality facilitates and circumscribes insurgency. It is distinctly subaltern, wholly outside the state, analytically and politically opposed to elite identity and control. Relatively small in extent, peasant territoriality is fluid, anti-geometrical, and logically opposed to modern boundary definitions. Formed in natural landscapes by social networks, sacred places, myths, and personal alliances, territoriality is inscribed in peasant consciousness by social and cultural history, and by old logics of social action that Guha finds manifest in violent uprisings in colonial times. Guha indicates that insurgency is one fleeting rendition of a cultural map that is drawn by many means over centuries of life on the land. He does not, however, explore the history of peasant territoriality. Is it historical, that is, produced by conscious human agency over time, changing, mutable, and recorded in evidence from the past? Guha says that the 'dye of a traditional culture was yet to wash off the peasant's consciousness',²² so it would seem that peasants inherit territory as tradition. But we could propose that histories of various kinds – involving kinship, religion, trade, migration, and states – constructed old territories in the peasant world. Peasant territorialism had utility and meaning in activities other than insurgency, for instance in farming, trade, marriage, war, pilgrimage, and diplomacy. These uprisings were actually part of a long history of territorial conflict on frontiers of intensive agriculture as it pushed into more extensive tribal regimes of cultivation. Peasant insurgencies were violent formations of social power that the mostly tribal insurgents produced to conquer people who were taking away their land. From a

²² Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 6–8, 12–13, 170–1, 333–4.

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long-term perspective within agrarian history, such insurgency under colonialism represents a moment of territorialisation. In the late twentieth century, descendants of the insurgents fight for their land in elections, courts, and international agencies.

Territorial institutions – including caste groups, lineages, clans, tribal groups, village communities, armies, sects, businesses, states, and war – inscribe their identity on agrarian space and constitute social power in agrarian territory. The nation is one such institution. Agrarian history is informed most copiously by the records and other traces (including the sculpting of the land itself) that territorial institutions leave behind. Social institutions may not be able to control monsoons, but they can (1) control elements such as water, finances, and commodities, (2) determine rules for entitlements to means of production, (3) accumulate wealth and finance technologies that increase the total pool of farm assets, and (4) organise power for the benefit of specific groups in agrarian society. Agrarian institutions leave texts behind which indicate that they have changed radically over millennia, in part because of the fluidity, permeability, and reconfiguration of their territories. Mobility across territories seems to be a major threat when seen from inside territorial institutions; from the outside, however, we can see that such mobility provides the very reason for the existence of boundaries between territories and of the powers that define them. The extent of mobility influencing agrarian South Asia has never been confined to the subcontinent, conventional images of Indian civilisation notwithstanding. Interlaced trajectories, networks, circuits, zones, and regions of mobility connect western, eastern, and southern Eurasia from prehistoric to modern times. All agrarian territories in South Asia have distinctive features which have been imparted by their location within zones of mobility that define southern Eurasia by land and sea.

One zone of mobility defines South Asia overland inside inland southern Asia. This zone includes two broad corridors: one connects the Ganga–Brahmaputra delta in the east with Iran and Palestine in the west; the other runs north–south from central Asia into central India and the southern peninsula. These corridors intersect in two strategic regions: Kabul, Herat, and Mashad lie astride corridors that connect south, central, and west Asia; Delhi, Ajmer, and Bhopal lie astride the intersecting corridors that connect Kabul, Bengal, and Gujarat with the Deccan and southern peninsula. Though mountains are often seen

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as natural boundaries to mobility – most prominently, the Himalayas and Vindhya – they do not so much obstruct as channel the movement of elements that influence agrarian history. Travels across Nepal to and from the Gangetic plain have always been less prominent than along routes running through Kashmir; and overland treks from Assam into China are fewer still. But, to the west and north-west, barriers to mobility across the Hindu Kush, Iran, Central Asia, and China have been erected mostly by military force – by Mauryas against Indo-Greeks, Turks and Afghans against the Mongols, and by the British against the Russians. In the east, dense tropical jungles have restricted transportation over the high mountains, but, in the west, battle lines have more effectively determined transport costs along the inland corridors of southern Asia.

A second zone of mobility defines South Asia by sea. Crossing some rivers may be arduous but substantial bodies of water in general represent low transportation costs on routes of gravity and wind. The historical geography of South Asia by sea extends along coastlines from East Africa and the Red Sea across Southeast Asia into China. In each few centuries, technological change has lowered transport costs below their former level, with the most dramatic changes during the latter half of the second millennium. Long-distance and bulk transportation were always cheaper, safer, and quicker along water routes until the advent of the railway. From Roman times onward, waterways connected South Asia with the Mediterranean and South China. In the day of the Delhi Sultans, sea routes spanned Eurasia; by Akbar's time, they crossed the Atlantic and Pacific to connect coastal regions around the world. The coast extended in effect along deltaic waterways north into Bengal past Dhaka and then west up the Ganga as far as Patna. The Ganga also formed a highway up to Agra, along which flowed the Mughal revenue. Along the coast, boats land almost anywhere, moving with monsoon wind. Waterways form open zones of interaction, but some inland areas are much better connected than others to sea routes. From the mouth of the Indus to the Konkan coast, and from Kanya Kumari to Chittagong, inland areas are very accessible to the sea. Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Nepal are isolated from the Indian Ocean. In Myanmar and Malaysia, mountain forests and jungle cut off inland corridors from the sea. Likewise, coastal Orissa and Kerala are relatively isolated from inland corridors.

These connected zones of extensive mobility – rather than any fixed

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territorial expanse of Indic civilisation – have defined a world which has continuously shaped agrarian institutions in South Asia. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro are at the eastern edge of an urban region that was strung along land and sea routes running from the Mediterranean to the Indus. During the millennium before the Mauryas, archaeological and linguistic data describe an extensive zone of settlement and cultural movement running from the Mediterranean to the eastern Ganga basin; and new regions of material culture are indicated by distributions of painted grey ware, black and polished ware, cists, urns, and cairns in the Indo-Gangetic plains and the southern peninsula. Under the Mauryas, data from literature, archaeology, travellers' accounts, and other sources describe networks and centres of mobility running from Iran to Bengal and from the Oxus to the Narmada; and in this inland zone, a political boundary was drawn west of the Indus, dividing Maurya domains from those of the Achaemenids and Indo-Greeks. This boundary – pivoting in the north-west around Taxila and Gandhara, where Panini was born – divided eastern and western regions of southern Eurasia; but mobility across this boundary made it so important politically, and Panini's *Astadhyayi* indicates increasing commercial connections across the inland routes of southern Eurasia under the Mauryas. Mobility across this political divide would shape agrarian history on both sides without interruption from Mauryan times onward.

At the start of the first millennium CE – when Sangam literature was being composed in the southern peninsula – texts to inform history multiplied rapidly east of the Sulaiman Range. This resulted from new powers in agrarian states over the movement of people, goods and ideas. A proliferation of texts resulted particularly from the activity of Brahman literati who moved among and settled in regions of intensive agriculture. Agricultural intensification, state expansion, and cultural production accelerated together under the Guptas, who put an imperial model of civilisation, first invented by the Mauryas, firmly in place. Imperial Gangetic dynasties sanctified the Ganga and made their own core political territory into a heartland of universal authority. In the second half of the first millennium, many dynasties used technologies of power produced by the Guptas to create boundaries in the agrarian lowlands. But inland corridors of mobility across Eurasia remain visible under the Mauryas and Kusanas, under Guptas and Hunas, and they appear again in the tenth and eleventh centuries in

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data that mark the overlapping ambitions of Ghaznavids, Hindu Shahis, Candellas, Later Kalacuris, Paramaras, and Ghorids. Inter-regional political competition to control inland corridors made Kabul and Delhi strategic places around which military competition would revolve from then on. Beginning with the Ghaznavids – then with Ghorids, Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughluqs, Lodis, and Mughals – people who came from west of the Indus increasingly controlled the inland corridors; and, for the Brahman literati in medieval agrarian states, this fact took on the appearance of foreign invasion and rising Muslim power. From an agrarian perspective, however, the transformation of southern Asia during first half of the second millennium looks rather different.

In centuries just before 1300, agrarian territories were expanding in size all across Eurasia, from western Europe to China. Networks of trade connected territories from England to Shanghai, by land across the Silk Road and by sea across the Indian Ocean. Strong, compact, expansive regional states all across southern Asia generated and drew upon assets that moved along the inland corridors and in the maritime zone of the Indian Ocean. For the Paramaras in Malwa (tenth to thirteenth century), Hoysalas in Mysore (eleventh to fourteenth century), Caulukyias in Gujarat (tenth to thirteenth century), Warangal Kakatiyas in Andhra (twelfth to fourteenth century), Devagiri Yadavas in Maharashtra (thirteenth century), Gahadavalas in Kasi (twelfth century), Cahamanas in Rajasthan (tenth to twelfth century), Gangas in Orissa (eleventh to fifteenth century), Kalyani Calukyias in the Deccan (eleventh to twelfth century), Cholas in Tamil country (tenth to thirteenth century), and Senas in Bengal (twelfth to thirteenth century), dynastic wealth expanded along routes that ran north and south overland, to the coast, and overseas. Later medieval rulers, based at the cross-roads of the inland zone, around Delhi, rose to power within the interactive history of regions along the inland corridors. The Delhi sultans facilitated and depended upon widening movements of people and goods by land and sea, which brought travellers, settlers, warriors, and sufis into the subcontinent. All competing states in southern Asia expanded in size and power amidst expanding mobility after 1100. Old agrarian territories continued to grow under the impress of new military and organisational powers brought to bear by late medieval rulers. The Ghorids (twelfth century), Mamluks (thirteenth century), Khaljis and Tughluqs (fourteenth century) worked

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within a vast political region which the Gurjara-Pratiharas had previously built, running south beyond Malwa into the peninsula; and north-south mobility along the inland corridors became even more important for all states south of the Narmada after 1300. The old regional boundaries drawn by Cholas and Calukyas were drawn again by more powerful Vijayanagar, Bijapur, and Bahmani states in the fifteenth century. Territories of agricultural expansion developed continuously in Rajasthan, Bengal, Punjab, Malwa, Orissa, and the Ganga plain as they were incorporated into later medieval states. Babur lived in this world of state power. The powers that built the Mughal empire ran along the full expanse of southern Eurasia.

Many texts indicate that old agrarian elites experienced their changing medieval context as an age of foreign invasion and conquest. Along the Ganga plain, in Malwa and the Deccan, and south to Kanya Kumari, the end of the thirteenth century marked the end of an age dominated by ruling elites whose institutional powers had descended from the Guptas. Historians have many documents from temples, bards, pundits, and artists that describe invasions of their sacred space and violations of their sacred order. In the view of literary elites, the earlier medieval conquests which had produced their own social power represented morality and cultural florescence; and the new warriors and intellectuals who came from afar – whose networks and identities covered great distances – brought the end of their golden age. But, as we will see, agrarian history is marked by striking continuities in the dynamics of power from the last of the Guptas to the rise of the Mughals. Continuities remain after 1550, but Mughal conquest and administration put in place new territorial institutions. The inland zone of southern Asia was integrated as never before by the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which dramatically increased mobility, east and west. The Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid empires depended for their wealth on networks of trade that linked them to one another by land and sea. Records at Bursa reveal that the bulk of its sixteenth-century eastern imports came from India, including spices but predominantly textiles. Across southern Eurasia, the net flow of manufactured goods and spices moved from the east to the west; and the net flow of precious metals moved in the opposite direction, a reciprocal movement which connected London, Istanbul, Bursa, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Isfahan, Multan, Dhaka, Surat, Hyderabad, and Madurai, as

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well as all the ports of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. As early as the 1470s, the Bahmani sultans organised a trade initiative at Bursa, and Bahmani correspondence with Malwa sultans proposed joint control over sea trade to the west. Inland trade to the west justified great Mughal expense to keep the mountain passes to Kabul open for safe travel. At the same time, the Portuguese brought new crops – among them chillies, tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco, and coffee.

It is most appropriate, therefore, to study agrarian South Asia in the context of an historical geography that is formed not by a closed civilisation territory but rather by extensive, shifting, open corridors of mobility stretching overland to Syria and China and overseas to Europe and the Americas. It is quite inappropriate to imagine agrarian South Asia as being demarcated by boundaries fixed during Maurya, Gupta, and medieval times, and violated thereafter by invading Muslims and Europeans.²³ By 1750, people from western parts of Eurasia had participated in cultures along the coast for more than a millennium; culturally, the South Asian coast, particularly its urban centres, resembled other coastal regions around the Indian Ocean more than it did the Mughal heartland, which was influenced prominently by inland flows across Iran and Uzbekistan. From the start of the Common Era, agrarian elites in South Asia have exercised power and gained wealth within corridors of mobility that criss-cross southern Eurasia, by land and sea, and agrarian history needs to be understood in that light.

LANDSCAPES

Agrarian territories took distinctive forms in six kinds of environments, which we can divide into forty geographical units. All have ancient traces of agrarian activity. They housed medieval agrarian territories of various types, discussed in chapter 2. In chapter 3, we see how in the early-modern period, *circa* 1500–1850, farming territories

²³ Parallels between Muslim and British conquests are very widespread in the historical literature. See, for instance, Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, London, 1990, p. 162, which says that, in the thirteenth century, 'having developed relatively undisturbed by outside influences in the Early Middle Ages, India was now subjected once more to the impact of Central Asian forces . . . [which] new impact can only be compared to that made by the British from the eighteenth to the twentieth century'. The opening lines of J. L. Brockington, *The Sacred Thread: A Short History of Hinduism*, Edinburgh, 1981 (reprinted Delhi, 1992), assert that 'the Mughal period (1525–1761) . . . was basically as much of a foreign domination as the British Raj which followed it' (p. 1).

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were brought together to form agrarian regions – culturally coherent, spatially organised territories of social power – and in chapter 4, we see how these regions were institutionalised, integrated, and differentiated by modernity. Farming landscapes are therefore defined primarily not by their physical or environmental qualities, but rather by the long-term interaction of geography, culture, technology, and social power. Environmentally, landscapes can be divided rather simply between two sets of binary oppositions, according to elevation and humidity, whose combination and transitions define much of the physical setting: mountains versus plains, and semi-arid versus humid tropics. Most farmland lies in the semi-arid plains, including river valleys and plateaux; and almost all of the remainder is in the humid lowlands, which have a higher proportion of population than of farmland. But all the divisions, interactions, and intersections of uplands and lowlands and dry and wet lands occur in historical space and amidst changing conditions of social power which alter the land over time. Rivers change course, deserts expand and contract, dry lands receive irrigation, forests grow and disappear, cropping patterns change, human settlements alter nature, and farms give way to city streets. We need to describe the land in ways that allow us to track changes in ecology and in the human content of agrarian territory. This outline of agrarian landscapes endeavours to combine all the various elements of agrarian territory to define spatial units for the long-term historical geography of agriculture in South Asia. Historically, Gujarat, Malwa, Bengal, Assam, Khandesh, and Berar are at the intersection of landscapes, and they are thus repeated in the list of landscape subdivisions.

Northern river basins

The basins of the upper Indus and its tributaries, the Yamuna, Ganga, and Brahmaputra, form one of the largest expanses of riverine farmland in the world. Soils are mostly alluvium. Farming is challenged and enriched by river drainage from mountains all around. Rivers bring moisture and nutrients, but floods wreak havoc with frightening regularity. In 1784, the whole of Sylhet was under flood water and animal carcasses were floating like boats on the sea as the population fled to the hills.²⁴ In 1875, the notorious Kosi river destroyed all the

²⁴ *Sylhet District Records*, Bangladesh National Archives, vol. 293, pp. 131–57.

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Geographical subdivisions of agrarian South Asia

- I. *Northern river basins*
 1. Punjab
 2. Western Ganga-Yamuna Plain (Delhi-Agra-Mathura)
 3. Central plain and doab (Lucknow-Allahabad)
 4. Eastern Ganga basin (Gorakhpur, Benares, Bihar)
 5. Bengal, Ganga-Brahmaputra Deltas (West Bengal, Bangladesh)
 6. Assam (Brahmaputra Basin)
- II. *High mountains*
 7. Kashmir
 8. Western Mountain Regions (Punjab, Himachal, Uttar Pradesh)
 9. Nepal
 10. Bhutan
 11. Eastern Mountains, (from Assam into Myanmar)
- III. *Western plains*
 12. Indus Valley
 13. Sindh
 14. Rajasthan
 15. Northern Gujarat and Saurashtra
 16. Malwa
- IV. *Central mountains*
 17. Malwa
 18. Bundelkhand
 19. Baghelkhand
 20. Chota Nagpur and Jharkhand
 21. Chhattisgarh
 22. Orissa Interior
 23. Bastar
 24. Khandesh (Tapti Basin)
 25. Berar (Waiganga Basin)
- V. *The interior peninsula*
 24. Khandesh (Tapti Basin)
 25. Berar (Waiganga Basin)
 26. North (Maharashtra) Deccan (Maharashtra; Godavari and Bhima Basin)
 27. South (Karnataka) Deccan (Karnataka; Krishna-Tungabhadra Basin)
 28. Mysore Plateau (Palar- Ponnaiyar-Kaveri Basin, above the Ghats)
 29. Telangana (Krishna-Godavari Interfluve)
 30. Rayalaseema (Krishna-Pennar Interfluve and Pennar Basin)
 31. Tamil uplands (Vaigai, Kaveri, Ponnaiyar, Palar Basins, below the Ghats)
- VI. *Coastal plains*
 32. Gujarat
 33. Konkan
 34. Karnataka

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35. Kerala
36. Sri Lanka
37. Tamil Nadu
38. Andhra
39. Orissa
40. Bengal

farmland in its path; an indigo planter wrote that ‘miles of rich land, once clothed with luxuriant crops of rice, indigo, and waving grain, are now barren reaches of burning sand’.²⁵ The Ganga provided natural routes for transit and shipping to the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. Bounded by desert and mountains, the climate in the riverine flatlands changes gradually from aridity in the west to humidity in the east. Along this gradient, monsoon rainfall and drainage from the hills increase and the dominant food grain shifts from wheat to rice. Since 1960, wheat and rice cropping has overlapped because quick-growing varieties have allowed farmers with adequate irrigation to grow both in rotation, and today almost a quarter of the net sown area in Bihar, West Bengal, UP, Haryana, and Punjab grows wheat-and-rice, which is very rare outside the Indo-Gangetic basins.²⁶

In the north-west, separated by a low watershed from the Ganga basin (in Haryana), the Punjab is a triangular territory formed by the Indus and its tributaries (Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej), and rimmed by mountains in the west and north (Sulaiman Range, Salt Range, Panjal Range and Lesser Himalayas). Rainfall increases with proximity to the northern hills from the Jhelum eastward, and aridity increases to the west and south. Groundwater recharge is most fulsome near the riverbeds and closer to the mountains, and the up-river Punjab also has more alluvial soil. Moving downstream toward the base of the Punjab at the confluence of tributaries with the Indus, rain and groundwater diminish, and soils become brown and then sandy, as the Punjab shades into the arid western plains in Rajasthan and the lower Indus basin. In Punjab, as in general throughout the northern basins, the long-term geographical spread of intensive agriculture

²⁵ Christopher V. Hill, *River of Sorrow: Environment and Social Control in Riparian North India, 1770–1994*, Ann Arbor, 1997, p. 11.

²⁶ Ramesh Chand and T. Haque, ‘Sustainability of Rice–Wheat Crop System in Indo-Gangetic Basin’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 13, 29 March 1997, Review of Agriculture, A-27.

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moved outward from places where drainage is simpler to harness for farming to places where more strenuous controls are necessary. In drier regions like Punjab, this means that intensification expanded from naturally wetter into drier areas; whereas in the flood plains and humid tropics farmers expanded initially from higher and drier parts of the lowlands into the more water-logged areas at the river's edge. Everywhere, agriculture also moved up river valleys into the highlands. In the Yamuna-Ganga basin, the general trend of expansion of intensive agriculture has been from east to west and upland from the lowlands; and, in the Punjab, from north-east to south-west. A major modern stage in this long process of expansion began with the construction of a vast canal network during the nineteenth century; the most recent stage is the spread of motorised pumps and tubewells since the 1960s. The wet lands of riverine Bihar were ancient sites of intensive cultivation; and, since 1880, naturally arid lands in Rajasthan have had the highest rate of increase in cultivated area of any lowland region in South Asia because of new irrigation.

In the eastern regions of the northern basins, Bengal and Assam have the highest rainfall regime; and the great volume of river water and the density of tropical jungles have historically presented the major challenges to expanding paddy cultivation. Today, the density of the human population is often seen as an obstacle to prosperity, but historically it has been more commonly a sign of the great fertility of the land. The Ganga delta shifted eastward over the centuries and in the eighteenth century joined the Brahmaputra in what is now Bangladesh. Agricultural frontiers in Bengal have moved east with the river, south into the Sunderbans, and also, as throughout the northern basin landscape, up from the lowlands into the high mountains. High tropical mountains have always had their distinctive, tribal farming societies, whose interaction with farmers in the lowlands is one of the most complex, difficult subjects in agrarian history, for there is a broad, shifting historical and geographical borderland between hills and plains. Our documentation comes primarily from the plains and indicates constant interaction with upland peoples and constant integration of uplands into agrarian regions centred in the lowlands.

The northern basins are bordered by mountains on all sides, except in Rajasthan. Down the mountains their rivers flow. In the mountains lie reservoirs of timber and grazing land; and the mountains are the homeland for many tribal societies. As we will see, lowland people

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have historically extended their power up-river into their surrounding mountains to colonise, conquer, and annex territory. Rajputs conquered up into Uttarakhand and the mountains above Punjab. From ancient times, upper reaches of the Chambal and Parbati (tributaries of the Yamuna running down the craggy ravines of the Malwa Plateau) were attached to the agrarian economies of the Gangetic plain, though they belong physically to the central mountains and they shade off in the west into the western plains.

High mountains

From the Makran Range in the west, running north across the Sulaimans and Hindu Kush, and curving east across the Karakoram Range and Himalayas to the Naga and Manipur Hills and then Myanmar, a vast high-altitude landscape connects South Asia with Central Asia, Tibet, China, and Myanmar. It is steeply sloping mountain terrain, with sharp valleys and countless rivers, which mark natural routes of transportation and drainage, rushing down into the plains below and leading upward to the high plateaux of inner Asia. Winters are much colder than below in the plains, and summers are much cooler, creating different, complementary ecologies for animals, vegetation, forests, farmers, and markets. As in the lowlands, the climate changes from extreme aridity in the west to heavy rains and humidity in the east, with attendant changes in natural vegetation and agricultural options. Run-off is rapid, snow-melt gorges the rivers in the spring, and erosion is severe. Geologists have found huge boulders from the prehistoric Himalayas as far south as Jaipur, and satellite photos show Himalayan silt spilling from the Ganga under the Bay of Bengal almost as far as Sri Lanka. Forests have always defined a basic natural resource for human settlements in the high mountains. Agricultural territories formed in valleys have extended up the slopes, growing wheat and millets in the west and paddy in the east. Agricultural spaces are connected by valleys and passes and separated by high ridges and peaks, along routes of trade and migration. Large agricultural territories have formed in the Vale of Kashmir, Kathmandu valley, and upper Brahmaputra basin; and in all three, rice is the dominant food grain among a great variety of crops. Great distances and obstacles to travel separate agrarian territories in the high mountains from one another, and these territories are connected more effectively to proximate lowland regions than to one another. In

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the west, Baluch and Pashtu mountain societies live in the corridors between Iran, Afghanistan, the Indus basin, and Punjab. The Brahmaputra upland is so intensely engaged in the history of the northern basins as to form a semi-detached part of that landscape; though it also participates in the history of Southeast Asia and China. Various forms and qualities of attachment to adjacent lowlands define agrarian regions in high mountain valleys. Except for Nepal and Bhutan, all are today political parts of lowland states, but a long period of rebellion in Nagaland and Mizoram indicates a continuous struggle for political autonomy, which is also visible in Baluchistan, Kashmir, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Kathmandu basin has always maintained a separate political identity. Though separated from the Indo-Gangetic lowlands, its institutions of agrarian power still derive from the history of migration and settlement that it shares with the rest of South Asia. All across the high mountains, from the Yusufzai borderlands with Afghanistan to the Chittagong Hill Tracts between Bangladesh and Myanmar, cultural oppositions and separations between peoples of the hills and of the lowlands are typically stark. The term 'tribe' is most often applied in modern times to the smaller-scale social formations that thrive in the small, relatively isolated agrarian spaces of the high mountains.

Western plains

The semi-arid western plains abut the high mountains in the west and they merge so gradually with the northern river basins in the Indo-Gangetic watershed (Haryana) and with the central mountains (in Malwa and Gujarat) that we can see them as a set of expansive, connective zones for the long-term historical movement of people in every direction. Rainfall is very low and spatially the plains are dominated by the aridity of the Thar Desert. In prehistoric times, the river Saraswati ran deep into western Rajasthan before it ran west into its inland delta near the Indus; and Rajasthan, the Indus basin, and Sindh seem to have become increasingly dry over millennia. There is indirect evidence, as we will see, that Rajasthan dried up noticeably during medieval centuries. The scrub-covered, rocky, and scattered Aravalli Hills rise abruptly from the flatlands in the east, providing fortress material and drainage for adjacent valleys. Irrigation, mostly from wells, and good monsoons are more common in the east, where they create good rich farmland for *bajra*, maize, wheat, *jowar* and

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cotton. Soil becomes increasingly sandy to the west; and in the south, grey-brown sandy soil becomes good red loam, creating a naturally favoured zone for farming that runs along a corridor from Haryana through Jaipur and Ajmer into Gujarat. As in all arid regions, people and animals travel often in search of water and wealth, and agrarian life here has always featured nomadism, pastoralism, stock rearing, and migration for trade and conquest. Medieval warriors and merchants – most famously, Rajputs and Marwaris – moved from old centres to acquire more wealth in regions of better farming in the east, north, and south. Dense population centres in the western plains are based on locally irrigated farms, strategic locations on trade routes, and extensions of political power embracing numerous similar centres across expanses of sparsely populated land. Trade connections to bordering regions on all sides and to the sea lanes are critical for the vitality of population centres. Like the camel – its characteristic pack animal – this land has always had a tendency to wander uncontrollably into its surroundings, making its boundaries vague.

Central mountains

This landscape of interlacing mountains, valleys, rivers, plateaux, and plains extends from Gujarat in the west, along the rim of the Gangetic plain in the north, to Chota Nagpur in the north-east, to the Deccan plateau in the south, and to the edges of the Godavari river basin in the south-east. Today it includes all of Madhya Pradesh, most of Bihar south of the Ganga, and all of Orissa outside the coastal plain. Its agrarian regions have formed amidst an interlaced complex of river basins that run in every direction to feed all rivers north of the Krishna and east of the Indus. The Chambal, Parvati, Betwa, and Ken rivers run north from the Malwa Plateau and Bundelkhand into the Yamuna; their valleys form historic highways into the Gangetic plain. The Vindhya and Satpura ranges form the valley of the Narmada river, which, like the Tapti to the south of the Satpuras, drains west into the Gulf of Cambay. The Mahi also drains Malwa into the Gulf, by arching north and then running south. East of Malwa and Bundelkhand, in Baghelkhand, waters from the Maikala, Mahadeo, and Ramgarh mountains send the river Son north-east into the Ganga; they send the Narmada west, the Mahanadi east through Chhattisgarh into Orissa and the Bay of Bengal, and the Wainganga south into the Godavari. East of Baghelkhand, the Ranchi and Hazaribagh plateaux

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dump the Damodar river into the Hooghly and send the Subarnarekha straight into the Bay of Bengal. Ringed by mountains, Chhattisgarh forms a bowl-shaped radial drainage basin, into which streams enter from all sides before joining the Mahanadi and running east into the Bay of Bengal. South of Chhattisgarh lie the dense hills of Bastar and inland Orissa, from which the Indravati drains into the Godavari.

Like the climate in the high mountains and the northern basins, which it parallels geographically, the central mountain climate is dry in the west and wet in the east. In the west, the barren scrublands of the Chambal ravines – on the edge of Rajasthan – run with torrents of mud in the monsoon only to bake into red brick in the summer heat. In the east and south, tropical forests cover Jharkhand, Orissa, and Bastar. As in the high mountains, agrarian history in this landscape is dominated by interactions between mountains and valleys, forests and lowlands, and their respective farming communities. Farms have been cut historically into the forest – dry scrub in the west and tropical jungle in the east – fomenting interactive struggles within and among farmers, hunters, and pastoralists. This is a landscape in which shifting cultivation and tribal populations have been most prominent; and the largest tribal groups live here – the Bhils in the west, the Gonds in the central regions, and the Santals in the east.²⁷ More than in the high mountains – because of better soils, wider valleys, longer summers, and constant invasions by agrarian powers on all sides – the trend in land use and social power here has strongly favoured the hegemony of lowland farming communities and the expansion of more intensive farming regimes among hill people. Farms today show great variety in techniques and options, ranging from irrigated wheat farms in the Narmada and upper Chambal valleys to vast rice mono-cropping in Chhattisgarh, to shifting cultivation in Bastar, and to mixed forestry and millet farming in Baghelkhand. This variety parallels the great variety of social formations, which combine tribal and caste elements more widely and intensely than anywhere in South Asia. Intensive farming is most dominant where soil, water, and states have favoured the formation of a few extensively controlled, homogenised tracts – in

²⁷ K. S. Singh, *People of India, National Series, Volume III, The Scheduled Tribes*, Delhi, 1994, cites 1981 census figures as follows: all the groups of Bhils totalled 7,367,973 in southern Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and northern Maharashtra (p. 118); the many Gond groups added up to 7,388,463, spread over seven states but with 5,349,883 in Madhya Pradesh (p. 294); and Santal groups comprised 4,260,842 people in Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Tripura (p. 1041).

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the Narmada valley (which benefits from deposits of black cotton soil), the upper Chambal valley, the Waiganga valley (Gondwana), and Chhattisgarh. Khandesh and Berar participate in the history of the central mountains, but also in that of the interior peninsula.

The interior peninsula

This semi-arid landscape consists of river basins and interfluvial plains, and its agricultural character derives from lines of drainage, seams of good soil, and underground water tucked away in the rocky substrate of the Deccan Trap. Geologically, these features come from the volcanoes which left behind caverns of underground rock, boulders on the land, and black soil under foot. The Deccan Trap holds water to facilitate labour-intense but rich cultivation under well irrigation. The peninsula is cross-cut by the Ajanta and Balaghat mountains in the north, and its surface is strewn with sometimes dramatic rock outcrops and disconnected mountains. In the south-east, the outcrops become the Nallamalais, Eastern Ghats, Javadi Hills, Shevaroy Hills, and Pachaimalai Hills, which punctuate the descent of the peninsula into the eastern coastal plain. Framed by the Eastern Ghats, south of the Godavari, by the Western Ghats in the west, and by central mountains in north-east, the interior peninsula landscape touches the western plains in Gujarat, where Saurashtra forms the north-western corner of the Deccan Trap.

South of the Tapti and Narmada, all the big rivers of the peninsula drain the Western Ghats and run for most of their distance across predominantly dry, flat plateaux, which slope from west to east behind the Western Ghats, on the north-west-south-east bias of the Krishna-Godavari system. Fertile black soils run in wide seams along the Narmada basin, the upper Godavari river in Maharashtra, and all along the Krishna river and its tributaries in Karnataka, the Bhima, and Tungabhadra. Outside the black soil tracts, the northern Deccan soil is predominantly medium black; and the southern soils in Karnataka and upland Tamil Nadu are mixtures of red with patches of black. All these soils are quite fertile when water is sufficient – which it usually is not – and the blacker the soil is, the better it can produce good crops with meagre moisture.

Getting enough water is the main problem for farmers, because most of this land is in the rain shadow of the western Ghats; and everywhere, monsoons are fickle. Historically, intensive agriculture

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has expanded outward from places that are favoured by rivers and good soils. As in other landscapes, a rainfall gradient runs from west to east, and a north-west–south-east gradient is also inscribed across the peninsula by drainage water which can be used for irrigation. In the Maharashtra Deccan, wells provide most irrigation from underground supplies, even today, after the spread of large river dams and canals. But on the Karnataka plateau and north-east to Hyderabad and Warangal, irrigation from tanks formed by walls built across routes of drainage becomes more important. Tanks multiply further to the south-east. The gradual increase in drainage from north-west to south-east has allowed parallel increases in irrigated acreage, multiple cropping, and population density; but a major hole in this gradation lies in the very dry north Deccan interior and in the Pennar–Krishna interfluvium (Anantapur, Bellary, Kurnool, Adoni, Raichur, Bijapur), where numerous tanks have long supported meagre irrigation and sparse population. As we will see, there is some evidence of desiccation in the driest parts of the interior peninsula since the early nineteenth century.

Agriculture has expanded over centuries into three forest types that distinguish the peninsula from the natural steppe land of thorny shrubs in Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. Originally, dry tropical forest of deciduous trees covered the flatlands. By 1900, it was reduced to more or less tree-covered savannah. Monsoon forests that lost their leaves in the dry season (providing natural manure) once covered the slopes of the high plateaux and eastern Ghats; and they were also once full of teak, most of which is now gone. Rain forest, evergreen, covered the western Ghats historically, and much of it remains. Into each forest type, farms pushed over the centuries, and, overall, the peninsula's north-west–south-east gradient organised the geographical diversity of agro-technological milieus. Pastoralism and long-fallow millet cultivation dominated the driest parts, especially north and west, into the nineteenth century. Shortening fallow and well irrigation enabled more intense dry farming to take over where rainfall, technology, and water table allow. Rainfall and drainage have long made wet paddy cultivation more prominent in the south. Variegated soil and water conditions create various cropping regions, in which millets, cotton, and oilseeds predominate, with patches of intensive well cultivation and irrigated paddy (especially in the south) and also expanses of animal raising and pastoralism, especially in the north.

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Coastal plains

This composite landscape along the sea coast is formed of river valleys, plains, and deltas and their adjacent interfluvial flatlands; everywhere it includes the immediately adjacent uplands and mountain sides, and it is dominated agriculturally by the riverine plains, alluvial soils, and paddy fields. Its mountain border on the west coast and its proximity in the east to the tropical depressions that form the winter monsoon in the Bay of Bengal bring this landscape much more rain than the interior peninsula. On the whole, it is more tropical in appearance, even its driest parts along the Tamil and Andhra coast in the south-east. It is a borderland with the ocean, and this creates a fishery ecology and social life along the beach that is an integral part of its agrarian history, as are the coastal sea trade and connections to sea coasts everywhere in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and Arabian Sea. Some of its constituent territories are also relatively isolated from inland corridors – Chittagong, Orissa, parts of Kerala, and, above all, Sri Lanka – and coastal regions communicate most intensively by sea, often more so with one another than by land with adjacent inland territories. The Tamil and Kerala coasts are thus part of a cultural space that also embraces coastal Sri Lanka, and the cultural traffic between the South Asian littoral and Southeast Asia has been constantly influential over the centuries. Bengal's most prominent historical connections have run along water ways to Orissa, Assam, and Bihar. Migrations are common among these coastal regions, which logically have similarities in diet (featuring more fish) and in occupations, with more fishing communities and water transportation. Rice is the dominant food grain everywhere in this watery landscape.

CHAPTER 2

TERRITORY

The long history of agriculture is of countless ecological interventions that have given nature its civility, and imparted personality to the land, as people have cut down forests, diverted rivers, built lakes, killed predators, tamed, bred, and slaughtered animals, and burnt, dug, and axed natural growth to replace it with things that people desire. Farming occurs in a land of emotion, and agrarian territories need gods, poetry, ritual, architecture, outsiders, frontiers, myths, borderlands, landmarks, and families, which give farms meaning and purpose. Together, brute power and refined aesthetics culture the land, and war is so prominent in old poetry because making a homeland is violent business. In the long span of agrarian history, therefore, a great variety of skills have combined to make nature a natural environment, and agrarian territories have emerged historically much like cuisine. Clearing the land and sculpting the fields create a place for the nurture and collection of ingredients. Skilled labour selects, cultivates, kills, dresses, chops, and grinds. Fuels, pots, knives, axes, hoes, mortar and pestle, and many other implements are involved in making all the daily meals and special feasts that sustain work, family, and community. Like a farmer's home territory, a cuisine's complexity and refinement always develop within networks of exchange and specialisation, because materials, ideas, techniques, and tastes come from many sources; but each cuisine also emerges inside spaces of cultured accumulation and experimentation, in which people experience their place in the world, territorially, as they make their very own set of special ingredients into appropriate foods for appropriate occasions.

Radiocarbon dates indicate that people were inventing agriculture in various parts of South Asia 7500 years before the Common Era (BCE).¹

¹ Carbon-14 dates indicate the indigenous, multiple origins for agrarian communities in the valleys of the Ganga and Belan rivers (in the Vindhya) over the millennia before 7000 BCE, which included plant and animal domestication, changing food habits, seed selection, population growth, and the cultivation of rice (*oryza sativa*). See G. R. Sharma, V. D. Misra, D. Mandal, B. B. Misra, and J. N. Pal, *Beginnings of Agriculture: From Hunting and Food Gathering to Domestication of Plants and Animals. Studies in History, Culture, and Archaeology, Volume IV*, Allahabad, 1980, pp. 30–1.

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Indus Valley cities appear abruptly in the third millennium BCE at intersections of huge zones of farming and pastoralism which left behind archaeological remains over a million square miles running from Iran to Awadh and Afghanistan to Gujarat. The oldest ploughed field yet to be excavated dates to the early Harappan period, *circa* 2600 BCE, and at this time, pastoral peoples also moved routinely in the summer from the high mountains in Baluchistan west into Iran and east into the valley of the Indus. Pastoral encampments dominate early archaeological records in the western plains and mountains. Evidence of permanent farming increases during the Harappan period and clusters along the lower Indus and the old Saraswati river. Painted grey ware sites indicate that the Saraswati retreated steadily and disappeared during the first millennium BCE. Mohenjo-daro was surrounded by small settlements of farmers and herders along networks of trade and migration; and, in post-Harappa centuries, agro-pastoral societies expanded their reach and impact. Today, in Saurashtra, earthen mounds rise up on the land in open spaces between wealthy Gujarati farming villages and contain evidence of agro-pastoral settlement and circulation. Prehistoric herders moved their animals among watery places as some dug in to farm the land and produced variously stable farming communities here and there.

The regulation, extension, and elaboration of social power to organise the interaction of farming and herding formed ancient agrarian territories that come into better view in the last millennium BCE. Ritual was critical; we can see this at Harappa. Vedic hymns indicate that, around 1500 BCE, agro-pastoral people who performed Vedic rituals were moving south from Haryana and east down the Gangetic basin. We can imagine this movement as an extensive pursuit of water and new farmland, but the hymns also record the spread of Vedic rituals among different societies of herders and farmers during an eastward expansion of agro-pastoralism, which eventually moved into the eastern jungles, where it met other farming societies. The hymns tell of the fire god Agni burning his way eastward under the patronage of a human lord of the sacrifice, the *jajman*, who ruled and protected his people. Forty or so generations of farmers must have burned and cut their way into Gangetic forests, carving the rim land and the lowlands of the basin, learning to use iron tools, and inventing a new cuisine full of meat, rice, spices, and vegetables, before documented agrarian history begins in the middle of the first millennium

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BCE, in the region of Magadha, around the sites of Rajagrha and Pataliputra, in Bihar. It is most probable that a spread of Vedic rituals among ancient peoples occurred alongside migrations by Indo-Aryan language speakers moving down the Ganga basin; but the ritual nexus would certainly have embraced ever more diverse populations as the old rice-growing cultures of the humid tropics in the east made their independent contributions to the rise of agrarian culture in ancient Bihar. As agro-pastoralism and warrior migrations connected the eastern Ganga basin to Iran, Afghanistan, and the Indus-Saraswati cultural complex, the people living in the eastern rain forests and the riverine travellers among littoral sites around the Ganga delta and Bay of Bengal must have contributed to the rise of rice-growing farm societies in Magadha. By the end of the first millennium BCE, Indo-Aryan linguistic evidence mingled with Dravidian and other cultural forms in agrarian sites scattered from the Indus to the Brahmaputra and south of the Vindhya to Kanya Kumari. A number of distinctive ritual and social complexes emerged, marked by many regionally specific artefacts, such as megaliths and burial urns in the southernmost peninsula. The absorption of tribal peoples into the ritual complex that slowly evolved from Vedic rites gave rise to numerous animal deities and blood sacrifices missing in early Vedic texts.

When imagining the oldest periods of the agrarian past – for which empirical evidence is steadily increasing, forming a vast puzzle with an unknown number of missing pieces – we must contend with the old view that ancient states evolved with the progress of Aryan conquest, during Aryan elite differentiation, and with the incorporation of native peoples into an Aryan political and social order, described in Sanskrit texts. Most scholars have discarded this narrative but it still appears in many textbooks. There were actually no Aryan *people* as such (defined either as a race or as a linguistic or ethnic group). Rather, what we have is a number of texts that reflect the linguistic elements that scholars classify as ‘Indo-Aryan’; and these texts, spread over many centuries and locations, convey a number of ritual, prescriptive, descriptive, and narrative messages, whose authorship, audience, influence, and cultural coherence remain debatable. Archaeological evidence constitutes an increasing proportion of our evidence on ancient sites, and indicates that a number of connected cultures were developing separately in many parts of South Asia. Various trajectories of historical change can be proposed using avail-

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able evidence; and various indigenous peoples with their own histories in the eastern Gangetic basin, adjacent hills, nearby coastal areas, and across the Bay of Bengal must have played a significant part in the rise of ancient Magadha. Ancient India's many histories intersected, diverged, and travelled independently, so that instead of a linear trend connecting the RgVeda and the Mauryas, we can generate many open-ended hypotheses to account for shifts among various forms of socio-political order. Increasingly complex forms of social organisation – state institutions and imperial dynasties – did evolve in the last half of the first millennium BCE, but the shift that Romila Thapar has described as a general movement from lineage polities to full-fledged states did not constitute a comprehensive evolutionary shift *toward* state formation and *away* from older forms of lineage society. Very old and very new forms of social, political, and economic organisation coexisted and interacted, as they would continue to do for many centuries. Ancient South Asia was a universe of small societies in which some of the more powerful groups left us records to indicate some of their most prominent features. Famous ancient states arose in the eastern flood plain at the intersection of trade routes, and territorial markers in ancient texts indicate sites and peoples around them. One striking continuity between the days of Harappa and of the Mauryan empire is the importance of trade and migration among sites in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean basin.

In this context, agriculture expanded within individually named territories that were called *janapadas* and *mahajanapadas*. The proper names for these kinds of territories appear in epigraphy throughout much of the first millennium. In Magadha and the Maurya heartland, ancient agriculture seems to have been more intensive – combining more labour and supporting more non-farming elites per unit of land – over a larger territory than anywhere else in the subcontinent. Two lines of development converged here. Technological change in metallurgy, irrigation, plant breeding, and farming techniques facilitated more intensive farming; in this, the old rice cultures around the Bay of Bengal and minerals from Chota Nagpur and Jharkhand would have been significant. Alliances among warriors, traders, ritualists, and farmers formed the state institutions that connected settlements to one another, connected farms to sources of iron ore, and disciplined labour (for farming, fighting, building, hauling, mining, smelting, forest clearing, and other work) to produce an expanding agrarian territory

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around the central urban sites of dynastic authority in the eastern Ganga basin. Ancient material and social technologies of agrarian power spread together. State authority and intensive agricultural production moved together and depended upon one another. Dynastic capitals rose along routes of trade and migration across landscapes filled with many types of farming settlements. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* reflects a compilation of elements that pertain to the Maurya core zone over a period of about seven hundred years, down to the time of the Guptas, and indicates that here state institutions did exert direct power in agriculture. But not so much elsewhere. Most agrarian territories that felt the fleeting impact of Maurya power were inhabited predominantly by pastoralists, shifting cultivators, and small settled farming communities. Agro-pastoral societies along the model of the post-Harappa sites in Gujarat must have remained a typical form throughout dry landscapes of the north, west, and central peninsula well into the first millennium. In most *janapadas*, the Mauryan empire seems to have consisted of strategic urban sites on routes of trade and conquest, connected loosely to vast hinterlands.

Independent but connected agrarian histories were under way in many areas during Mauryan times; this is indicated by the many new centres of power that enter the historical record in the first centuries of the Common Era. In Maurya times, Sri Lanka and Cambodia would have formed an outer rim of interconnected, rice-growing territories. Puskalavati, Taxila, and Gandhara arose along the upper Indus and Kabul rivers, along overland trade routes in the north-west. Satavahana inscriptions show new state authorities rising in the peninsula, around Pratisthana in Berar, Girinagara in Saurashtra, Amaravati in the Krishna-Godavari delta, and Vanavasi in the southern Deccan. In the far south, Sangam literature reflects another emerging agrarian culture. Buddhist and Jain texts depict many pre-Gupta urban sites along old trade routes from north to south, which like Kanchipuram thrived in agricultural settings; and, by the second century, we can see Buddhist sites in most riverine and coastal areas in which medieval dynasties would later thrive. In the fourth century, when the Guptas sought to extend their own empire, they faced stiff opposition, and they never did conquer the Vakatakas, who succeeded the Satavahanas in the north Deccan.

The Gupta empire produced a new kind of articulation between state institutions and social power in agriculture. The Mauryas had

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thrown impressive land bridges across many *janapadas*, among islands of farming in the sea of pastoralism, and they concentrated their power in urban sites along extensive routes of trade and transport. The Gupta imperium launched a conquest of the *janapadas* by farming. Mauryas travelled a more extensive empire. Guptas were more down to earth. A Gupta core zone of intensive agriculture expanded westward to include not only Magadha and adjacent Vaisali and Videha but also *janapadas* around ancient Allahabad (Prayaga) and Ayodhya (at Kasi and Kosala). Gupta agrarian power also expanded north and south toward the hills on both sides of the Ganga basin as it embraced a larger number and diversity of farming peoples. Gupta rituals sanctified agrarian kingship. State-sponsored religious institutions (temples), elites (Brahmans), and sacred texts sanctified land as they incorporated local community leaders. Historians have shown how the Gupta system empowered rising elites outside the imperial court in a ritualised state which had expansive capacities for political inclusion. Gupta ritual techniques for alliance-building were adopted widely and adapted to many local conditions from the third century onward. Saiva, Vaishnava, and Buddhist cult institutions combined with state authority to create powerful but flexible agrarian alliances among farmers, warriors, merchants, ritualists, kings, and literati.

Sanctification constituted real social power with tangible benefits for its participants, and its social production and meaning changed over the centuries as sanctity attached to more and more land in culturally distinct, interconnected territories. With scattered evidence from literary sources, we can dimly see how Vedic rituals had helped to organise agrarian power in a world of agro-pastoralism. Vedic ritual pacified conflict between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers and formed stable structures of alliance by sanctifying the performance of ritual and the composition of community. Ancient myths depict battles between herders and farmers as supernatural struggles between *devas* and *asuras*; and ritualistic gambling – performed with the injunction, ‘Play the cow for rice!’ – may represent ‘a sacrificial contest [that] could also be put to work to regulate and sanction conquest, tribute levying, overlordship and generally, state formation’.² Expanding the scope of agrarian territoriality involved the elaboration

² J. C. Heesterman, ‘Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, 3, 1995, 645, 649.

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and adaptation of ritual negotiations in countless new competitive settings in each agrarian landscape. Rituals spread and changed form as they proved effective in creating stable alliances in a world in which communities of settled farmers were certainly a minority.

Pastoralism occupied much of the subcontinent until later medieval times. When Indus Valley urbanism disappeared, its culture dispersed into mostly pastoral surroundings. Rgvedic society was pastoral. The *Mahabharata* depicts a society full of pastoralism. Krishna was born among Yadava cattle herders and many gods have similar origins among hunters and pastoral people. Sangam poetry describes five ecological regions and only one is sedentary. The ancient Tamil mountain, forest, wasteland, and seashore regions were the home of tribes, hunters, gatherers, nomads, and travellers. Hero stones across the peninsula record the pre-eminence of cattle raiding as a political activity in the first millennium. Old Tamil society was probably conquered from the peninsular steppe by nomads called Kalabhras in the fourth century. South Asia is in fact part of a vast historical space in which pastoralism is very prominent, stretching from Mongolia across Central Asia, Syria, and Egypt to the Maghreb and Sahel. In this wider world of arid climates, pastoralism has historically surrounded and permeated agrarian landscapes in which farms cluster around water sources along trade routes. South Asia is a borderland between this world of pastoralism and humid Southeast Asia, where dense forest and intensive agriculture exclude nomads herding large flocks. In the eastern wet lands, rice typifies agriculture, natural forest is very dense, domestic animals breeding was challenged until quite recently by tiger populations, and nomadic pastoralism is quite foreign. But in the west and the peninsular interior of South Asia, dry agrarian space is more like south-west and central Asia, where millets and wheat dominate field crops, thirst and drought preoccupy society, lowland forests are predominantly scrub, herds abound, and nomads pervade agrarian history. Ancient states in South Asia arose at the intersection of these two very different worlds of agrarian ecology.

In the first millennium, the creation of landscapes of settled agriculture moved ahead more rapidly, as agrarian institutions promoted ritual negotiations to solve conflicts among farmers, pastoralists, warriors, merchants, forest dwellers, and many others. Agrarian territories expanded when conflicts could be resolved routinely by stable institutions of social power and authority. War could destroy

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social routines that stabilised territory and routinely allowed the jungle and wild animals to invade farmland that had previously nurtured piety and nobility. Farming communities became increasingly populous and complex as agrarian territories evolved to embrace larger and larger populations of people on the move. War became a cultural institution for negotiating competing interests and preventing war from destroying structures of agrarian stability was a critical secret of agrarian success. In the sixteenth century, the *A'in-i Akbari* and other sources support speculation that nearly 20 per cent of the population depended on fighting for their livelihood, which of course meant travelling much of the time. Armies would pillage some farms to provision warriors who returned with their loot to their own farms when battles were done. The dry season was always a time for fighting; drought sent villages out to fight for food; and armies subsisted in turn on pillaging drought-stricken villages, causing communities to flee to fortress towns or to go out in search of new land. Migrations by whole communities were common and many agricultural sites have thus been settled and resettled, historically, over and over again. Herders heading to the hills in the summer and back down to the lowlands with the monsoon, seasonal worker migrations, people fleeing war and drought, army suppliers and camp followers, artisans moving from town to town, farmers moving into new settlements looking for new land, traders, nomads, shifting cultivators, hunters, pilgrims, and transporters would have added up to perhaps half the total population at almost any point in most regions during centuries before 1800. What we call 'sedentary agriculture', therefore, was not really sedentary. Reigning social powers settled, inhabited, identified with, and controlled territories of agricultural investment and political order, but farmers worked within institutions that embraced many conflicting social forces, many of which were constantly on the move.

Gupta-era institutions developed new capacities to control territory by sanctifying the land and by establishing rules of *dharma* (religious duty) that disciplined labour for the co-ordinated performance of all the activities of agriculture. In Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura was the centre of a Buddhist empire of irrigated agriculture that expanded across the dry north of the island in the first millennium, at the same time as the Guptas began seriously to sedentarise *Bharat*. Maurya conquest had first defined the territory of *Bharat* as a triangle with its

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apex in the eastern Ganga, in the sacred precincts of Magahda, Kasi, and Kosala, and with its base in the fertile parts of Rajasthan. The northern leg of the triangle ran west-north-west up across submontane Punjab and the Khyber pass; and its southern leg ran west-south-west down the Narmada into Gujarat. The western frontiers of ancient *Bharat* thus ran north-south; and at the base of the triangle lay Gandhara in the north and Nasika in the south. The Gupta's version of *Bharat* was concentrated in the agrarian lowlands. Samudragupta's fourth-century Allahabad inscription divides Gupta conquests into four categories, which correspond roughly with the literary geography found in the Puranas. In the territory called *Aryavarta*, the inscription says, rulers were subdued and territories brought under Gupta administration – in the Ganga plain, Naga domains (Bundelkhand and Malwa), Kota territory (around Delhi and Bulandshahr), and Pundravardhana and Vanga (in Bengal). These became Puranic home territories, called *desa*. Here, Gupta cities – Prayaga (Allahabad), Benares, and Pataliputra (Patna) – provided ideological reference points for the sacred geography of *Bharat*. The sanctity of *Bharat* would bolster agrarian power in many medieval territories. But Puranic *desa* did not explicitly include the highlands around the Ganga basin, nor the Indus valley, Punjab, and western Rajasthan. Puranas describe the *desa* of *Bharat* as *Purva-desa*, *Madhya-desa*, and *Aparanta desa*, which embraced the Ganga lowlands, north Bengal, the Brahmaputra valley, Avanti (Malwa), Gujarat, Konkan, and the Deccan around Nasik. Old *janapadas* which lay outside the land of the *desa* would have been frontiers and peripheries of the Gupta regime. The western plains, Punjab, high mountains, central mountains, and coast and interior peninsula outside *Nasika-Konkana* are not called *desa* in Puranas, but rather *asreya*, *patha*, and *pristha*.³

The Gupta imperium fell apart in the late fifth century as new dynasties detached Saurashtra, Malwa, Bundelkhand, and Baghelkhand; as Vakatakas expanded from the northern Deccan into Dakshina

³ In the other three areas of Gupta conquest, the regime seems to have been indirect at best. The Allahabad inscription says that in Dakshinapatha (south of the central mountains), Dakshina Kosala (Chhattisgarh), Mahakantara (inland Orissa), and the lands of the Kalingas (on the Andhra-Orissa coast) and Pallavas (on the Tamil coast) rulers were conquered and restored to their thrones as tributaries. Rulers scattered in the mountains and plains frontiers – who numbered five in the east and north and nine in the west – were forced to pay tribute. In the far periphery, Kusanas, Murundas, and Sakas in the north-west and peoples of Simhala (Sri Lanka) were also said to have paid tribute. See Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *Historical Atlas of South Asia*, Chicago, 1978, pp. 27, 179, 182–3.

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Kosala, Baghelkhand, and Malwa; and as Hunas conquered the lowlands along routes running south and east from the north-western highlands. Puranic authors called this *Kali Yuga*, but the idea that a classical age collapsed with the fall of the Guptas pertains at best to Gupta core regions and their ruling elites. Many historians describe the second half of the first millennium as an age of political fragmentation and regionalisation, but this imagery fits only *janapadas* in *Bharat* and Puranic *desa* in *Aryavarta*. Gupta centres may have been the wealthiest in the subcontinent but most people lived outside Gupta territory. In fact, agrarian history outside *Bharat* comes into much better focus *after* the Guptas, as social powers which had been nurtured in the Gupta realm disperse and develop. Many new regimes now took up the project of protecting *dharmā* and formed a cultural basis for medieval dynasties. As regimes of royalty and ritual multiplied after the fall of the Guptas, they produced new historical documentation. Inscriptions on stone and copper provide raw material for medieval historiography and their interpretation continues to be filled with unresolved debates. Two debates are most important here. One concerns 'the Indian state' in medieval centuries. Should it be understood as bureaucratic, feudal, segmentary, patrimonial, or something else? The other concerns the mode of production, and specifically whether European models of feudalism or Marx's model of the Asiatic mode of production apply in South Asia. Both debates hinge on the effort to reconstruct typical or characteristic institutional forms in medieval South Asia. But instead of looking for 'the medieval state', we can examine the range of institutions that organised social power during the expansion and intensification of agriculture. Instead of describing 'the mode of production', we can try to outline the working of social power in agriculture, keeping in view the great diversity of agrarian conditions.

PEASANTRY

Most information for medieval history comes from inscriptions that record donations of land, animals, and other assets to Brahmans and to temples to support Vedic knowledge, *dharmā*, and rituals for Puranic deities. Donations typically come from named, titled individuals, acting under dynastic authority; and they typically name donors, recipients, protectors, and asset holders, who are often members of

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farming communities. Donative inscriptions often depict the transfer of land entitlements to Brahmans in the name of – or at the behest of – a king. They represent a transactional nexus that involves dynastic royalty (warrior-kings and their families, officials, and retainers), Brahmans (individually and in groups, Vedic scholars, ritualists, and temple administrators), and agricultural communities (farmers, herders, artisans, and merchants). Brahmans are pivotal figures and the most obvious beneficiaries, and in other ways, too, the agrarian power of Brahmans is quite apparent in the second half of the first millennium. As farm territory multiplied and expanded, Brahmans produced more agricultural literature. One elusive persona, Kasyapa (perhaps a mythical authority rather than a single author), wrote that ‘for pleasing the gods and protecting the people, the king should take keen interest in agriculture’, and further he said, ‘Agriculture should be practised by priests, Brahmanas and ministers particularly.’ He tells the king to mine ‘iron, copper, gold, [and] silver’, to have agricultural implements made by ‘expert iron smiths, cutters, and goldsmiths in villages and cities’, and to ‘distribute these among the village people’.⁴ The role of the good king in linking together various agricultural activities is clear in these injunctions, and kings in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and many places in medieval South Asia seem to have followed this advice. Dozens of dynasties emerged from the sixth century onward, complete with centres of production and rising aggregate farm yields where Brahmans recorded, created, and propagated agricultural knowledge.

The *Kamba Ramayana*, *Krsisukti*, *Vrksa Ayurveda*, and *Paryaya-muktavali* are among the texts that describe irrigated tracts in the south, east, and north. The distribution of inscriptions also leads to the conclusion that, in the early-medieval period, the organised social effort to build agrarian territories was concentrated spatially in irrigated tracts in the lowlands, near riverbeds throughout the northern basins, the coastal plains, and the Deccan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Malwa, and Rajasthan. Inscriptions record investments in fixed assets – irrigation tanks, dams, wells, channels, paddy fields, temples, towns, markets, and cities – and transactions in networks of exchange, marriage, ritual, and dynastic authority, which connected settlements to one another. Inscriptions describe a world of kings, Brahmans, and temple deities that constituted medieval agrarian

⁴ M. S. Randhawa, *A History of Agriculture in India*, Delhi, 1986, vol. I, p. 484.

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territory physically, socially, morally, and mythologically. Inscriptional *prasastis* (preambles) narrate dynastic genealogies (*vamsavali*) and map royalty into social territory, and devotional poetry and temples likewise brought the gods into the farming landscape. Medieval Tamil poems such as the *Tevaram* depict a sacred geography of Shiva temples that sanctified the land much more extensively and intensively than did the Sangam poetic accounts of Murugan cult sites in the *Tirumurugattruppada*i or post-Sangam accounts of Buddhist centres in the *Manimekalai* (in the Gupta age). Territorial power and symbolism are more definitely documented in early-medieval literature and inscriptions; and intensive, sedentary farming – particularly using irrigation – required more control over land and labour, as farms advanced forcefully into space inhabited by pastoralists, nomads, forest people, hunters, wild animals, and malevolent spirits. Building agrarian territory was difficult and contested. It was not peaceful. Farms carved up nature, enclosed open land, and commandeered the physical world to constitute civilisation on the frontiers of farming. Taming the landscape meant displacing forms of land use and social life other than those represented by kings and gods, who spread the rule of *dharmā*. Expanding intensive agriculture involved disciplining workers, coordinating their activities, and reorganising the allocation of resources. Medieval inscriptions recorded events in this process – as a technology-of-record – in compact agrarian territories.

Many types of agrarian societies came into being. A general contrast emerged between the wetter eastern landscapes and the coastal plains, on the one hand, and the drier west and interior peninsula, on the other, which was based on broad differences between wet and dry cultivation. In the humid wetlands, wild animals, disease, dense jungle, forest people, and floods posed the roughest obstacles to the expansion of permanent field cultivation. In semi-arid regions, by contrast, the worst battles were waged against pastoral people and warrior nomads, whose income was readily enhanced by raids on farming villages, whose grazing lands were being converted into farmland, and whose herds were being captured and domesticated. In the drier landscapes, settlements were more scattered and pastoral nomad warriors more prominent. Walled towns were more common, and long-distance trade was more visible in dynastic core settlements where military activity was a permanent adjunct to farming. In the wetter landscapes, farmers needed more labour to carve out fields from jungle; the higher

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nutritional output of paddy fields also sustained denser populations and a higher proportion of non-cultivating elites. Dry regions grew millets and, in the north, wheat; their population was thinner and elites depended on trade and wide systems of exchange and expropriation. Wet, dry, agro-pastoral, forest, fishing, and other kinds of settlements were generally mixed together in agrarian territories, which would have at their centre a central place of power and authority. Inscriptions often reflect a cultural hierarchy that distinguished the more cultivated central settlements from surrounding hamlets that were part of the territory but less cultured and privileged.

The medieval states that produced inscriptions had a basic commitment to the expansion of permanent field cultivation as the foundation of their power, and *dharmā* was the moral code that stabilised their territory. The weakness of agrarian territorialism and thus of the rule of *dharmā* is apparent throughout the first millennium, when many wars recorded in inscriptions no doubt reflect a breakdown of territorial institutions during violent conflicts among sedentary farmers, pastoralists, shifting cultivators, hunters, warriors, and forest dwellers. Pastoral and tribal polities often opposed the rule of *dharmā* successfully. But pastoral and tribal peoples also became powerful in lowland territories of settled cultivation and their role was particularly pronounced in the western plains, central mountains, Punjab, western Gangetic basin, and the interior peninsula. Rajput rulers came to recognise Bhil chiefs as allies, for instance, and an 1890 account depicts the central role of Bhil chiefs in Rajput coronation ceremonies.⁵ As permanent field cultivation conquered agrarian landscapes, farm by farm, pastoralism, nomadism, and forest cultivators were increasingly pushed to the margins, and many herders, hunters, nomads, and tribal people also entered agrarian society, becoming labourers, farmers, craft producers, animal breeders and keepers, transporters, dairy producers, soldiers, traders, warriors, sorcerers, and kings. This transformation of the land involved very long transitions and subtle changes in social identity, which further differentiated agrarian societies. It also involved a lot of violence, which can be seen refracted in mythical stories about the conquest of demons by gods. Many *vamcavalis* (introductory invocations) depict battles against tribal peoples who are viewed as enemies of civilised society. The *Ramayana*

⁵ K. S. Singh, *People of India: The Scheduled Tribes*, Delhi, 1994, p. 119.

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was reproduced in many forms, attesting to the wide relevance of its central theme: the struggle and triumph of civilisation in a land of demons and *mlecchas* (barbarians). The Mughals would take special precautions to protect farmers against hill tribes as they pushed farming into the higher valleys. As agricultural territories expanded and multiplied, they came to include more diverse populations, not only many different kinds of farmers (including families who worked their own plots and families who used others to cultivate their fields) but also non-farming groups whose work and assets were essential for farming (artisans, cattle herders, hunters, transporters, traders, collectors of forest produce, well-diggers, priests, engineers, architects, healers, astrologers, and mercenaries). Many people who came to work in agricultural sites came from lands that were being newly incorporated into agrarian territory. Without the skills, assets, and labour of erstwhile outsiders, agricultural expansion could not proceed, and their incorporation was a major social project. Open spaces around all farming settlements also provided plenty of opportunity for groups to set out on their own to establish independent communities.

Medieval agrarian space came to consist of (1) hundreds of small agrarian territories with permanent field cultivation, diverse, changing populations, and dynastic core sites, (2) thousands of scattered settlements of farming families in the hills and plains, on the outskirts or margins of dynastic territory, and (3) vast interstitial areas in which farms were absent or temporary, featuring dry scrub-forest or dense tropical jungle and filled with tribal societies and polities. Almost all of our documentation pertains to the dynastic territories of agrarian expansion. This land was endowed with the best supplies of everything needed for agriculture. It was prize territory and required the most intense internal controls and protection. Medieval kings concentrated on controlling this land, to protect their people and prosperity, which involved coercion as well as cultural powers to inculcate deep beliefs in principles and values that sustained agrarian order. Around core dynastic sites swirled all the activity of territorial expansion; and, as populations in core sites increased in number, some of their number would strike out to expand agrarian power. They formed scattered settlements that became new dynastic centres, conquered other farming communities, and fought for land and labour with pastoral and forest peoples. Non-farming populations in the hills and plains

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often settled down to farming in the lowlands, forming their own distinctive communities. A separate agrarian history unfolded in the high mountains, of which we have little record.

In this diversity of agrarian social forms, a 'peasantry' is hard to define. Unlike Europe, South Asia contained tropical conditions suitable for intensive paddy cultivation, expanses of arid and semi-arid plains, high-quality soils that could produce nutritious millets with relatively small labour inputs, vast tropical mountains and jungles, and large areas dominated by pastoralism – all of which sustained very different types of agricultural expansion and intensification, leading to various configurations of agrarian society. In South Asia, there was no analogue to the Roman empire or Catholic Church under which a feudal nobility could establish itself and define the peasantry as a category of subordinate subject. Unlike China, agrarian states in South Asia evolved significantly within, among, and out of pastoral cultures and they integrated pastoral and forest people into forms of agrarian society that were not embraced by the classificatory system of a single imperial (and ethnic, Han) heritage. Modern images of the peasant that come from western and eastern Eurasia – which describe a rude rustic living under the jurisdiction of urban elites who embody high culture and civilisation – do not fit medieval South Asia.

The term 'peasant' can be useful to refer in a general sense to family farmers, and in doing so I do not mean to endorse the theory of peasant family farming – developed by A. V. Chayanov to counter V. I. Lenin's account of peasant differentiation during capitalist development in Russia. Rather, I intend to highlight the role of kinship and farm families in agriculture; and we will see later in this chapter that the elaboration of kinship organised much of medieval agrarian space in lineages, clans, castes (*jati*), sects, and the four ritual ranks (*varna*) of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, which embraced farmers and kings. The peasant as a family farmer has no fixed class status. Class divisions between peasants and lords took many forms and medieval farmers were encumbered by many types and degrees of subordination, ranging from mere tax or rent obligations for land entitlements to intimate personal servitude. Institutions of control and subordination are the subject of the remainder of this chapter. The most intense subordination of farm families appears to have arisen where very low Sudra and untouchable caste (*jati*) groups worked under Brahman and Kshatriya domination in the rice-growing Gupta

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core territories and in early-medieval lowlands along the coastal plains. But this is not a general pattern. Farm families entered the ranks of local ruling elites in many regions of militant peasant colonisation. In agro-pastoral and tribal settings, family farming was a communal enterprise which included military control over mobile resources and shifting farm territories.

The term 'peasant' makes the most sense when agrarian social strata are clearly defined by states and when status depends upon strictly ranked entitlements to land. This situation became more common in the second millennium. It began earlier in territories of warrior colonisation, for example, by Gurjara-Pratiharas, when conquest formalised the ranks of lord and peasant. After 1500, social ranks in some parts of South Asia came increasingly to resemble Europe, and after 1820, European categories came into vogue under British rule. In the twentieth century, many political activists call themselves 'peasants', modelling their usage on revolutionary Russia and China. As we see in chapter 4, this usage appears primarily in tenant struggles against landlordism, where ranked entitlements to land are at issue. In that context the term is ideological and normative, rather than being accurately descriptive. As a translation of *kisan*, 'peasant' has been deployed where 'landholder', 'farmer', 'village petite bourgeoisie', or even 'tribal' could also apply; and it is usually more accurate to refer to so-called peasant groups by the ethnic or *jati* terms that they use to refer to themselves. *Rai'yat* (or ryot), which might also translate as 'peasant', attaches to people with various types of entitlements and class positions, as we will see. No term translates strictly as 'peasant', carrying precisely the same cultural connotations, in any South Asian language. As a result, we can aptly consider the rise of the *utility* of the category of 'peasant' in South Asia as a product and component of modernity and use this term to discuss the power position of small farmers and tenants in opposition to landlords and states.

The term 'gentry' is not widely used in South Asia but it does have utility. Multi-caste agrarian farming elites were formed by the interaction of state elites with local patriarchies and by expanding family alliances, upward mobility, and the imposition of state-enforced, ranked entitlements to land. The term 'gentry' has had no place in official terminology in South Asia, as it has had in China, but an important sector of the village farming population in South Asia more resembles Chinese gentry than European peasants. I consider the

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gentry to consist of relatively high-status local land-owning groups that marry their own kind and form alliances with other high-status families to expand their horizons as they redefine their ties to the land. Gentry families are privileged as mediators with state authorities; and, because of their land holding, education, and urban connections, they are active in commercial networks. This agrarian status elite is always open to new recruits. It is rural and urban, economic and cultural, social and political. A gentry first arose in the context of Gupta state rituals, which produced dominant caste alliances that came to control agrarian assets of all sorts, including the labour of subordinate *jatis*. The idea of a locally dominant caste cluster maps with rough equivalence onto my sense of what a gentry is; though a gentry does not need caste ideology, because other modes of status marketing can serve the same purposes.

DHARMA

Inscriptions indicate that, in the sixth century, royal Gupta lineages had settled down in all the regions of the Gupta realm and may have been settling the frontiers of *Aryavarta*. Ambitious lineage leaders may have loosened their ties to the capital as they moved further afield, carrying with them the apparatus of Gupta power. In frontier regions, they would have needed local allies, who may have undermined their attachment to the Gupta dynasty. Gifts of land by kings and their officers to temples and Brahmans – to sustain classical learning, the rule of *dharma*, and the worship of Puranic deities – became a hallmark of new dynasties at the end of Gupta hegemony, from the sixth century onward. The Maukharis appear in the western reaches of the Gupta heartland, around Kanyakubja (Kanauj), in what would later become Awadh, and Pusyabutis emerged in the western Yamuna basin and Haryana. Dynastic core sites thus moved still further west from the ancient heartland of *Bharat* and so did land grants to Brahmans, which multiplied with the founding of new regimes and capital cities. In the seventh century, it is said, Harsha moved the Pusyabuti capital to Kanyakubja to better defend the plains against the Hunas, but his move also signalled the rise of the western parts of the Ganga basin as a new agrarian core for his dynasty. This event was marked by a land grant to two Brahmans. The grant was made by a soldier serving Harsha and protected by the *janapadas* in

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Harsha's realm, to represent the support of local community leaders. New dynasties and donative inscriptions also multiplied in territories very far from Gupta lands. On the northern Tamil coast, the Pallavas of Kanchipuram stepped up their donations during the Gupta decline. Many new dynasties marked territories in sites of intensive cultivation: in Kashmir, the Karkotas of Srinagar; in Bengal, Later Guptas, Sasankas of Karnasuvarana, and Palas of Gauda (at the top of the delta); in Malwa, the Paramaras of Ujjain; in Malwa and adjacent Deccan and Gujarat, the Kalacuris of Mahismati; in Berar (Vidarbha), the Rashtrakutas of Acalapura; in the Krishna-Tungabhadra doab in the south Deccan, the Calukyas of Vatapi; and on the south Tamil coast, the Pandyas of Madurai and Cholas of Tanjavur.

At least forty new dynastic lineages were proclaimed during and soon after the sixth century, and from the seventh century on they typically construct elaborate genealogies for themselves to trace their origins to mythical progenitors. Migrations of Brahmans, Gupta princes, and Gupta generals may have influenced these early-medieval trends, but most new dynasties sprang up outside *Aryavarta*, and even peoples who had repulsed the Guptas later adapted technologies of power which Guptas had developed. Between 550 and 1250, the interactive expansion of agricultural and dynastic territories produced the basis for all the major agrarian regions of modern South Asia. This is the crucial formative period for agrarian history in the subcontinent. Though agricultural conditions, techniques, and social relations varied across regions, and though trends in the high mountains, western plains, and central mountains are not well documented, some basic elements which pertain to many if not most agrarian territories in this period appear in data from places where major dynasties were firmly established. We know most about elements that form the explicit subject matter of the inscriptions: kingship, Brahman settlements, and temples.

The ritual and architectural complex now called 'the Hindu temple' emerged in full form in the later Gupta period and its elaboration and spread from the sixth to the fourteenth century provide us with dramatic medieval remains, from Mahabalipuram to Khajuraho. Medieval inscriptional records appear predominantly in temple precincts, which were central nodes for the accumulation of power in early-medieval kingdoms. By the tenth century, old theories and practices of kingship had been widely adapted in many new medieval territories.

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As in Rama's mythical realm in the epic *Ramayana*, protection and prosperity were signs of a good king; and piety, chastity, and wealth all came together under kings who nurtured *dharma*. This theme forms a continuity with very old ideas about kingship, as Kasyapa's advice that 'the king should take keen interest in agriculture' resonates with a Tamil poet's advice to a Pandya king, probably in the first centuries CE. Many medieval kings followed this advice, most spectacularly in Sri Lanka.

Oh great king, if you crave wealth in the next world
and yearn to vanquish other kings who protect this world
and thus to become the greatest among them
hearing songs of praise to your glory,
listen to me to learn what deeds guarantee these rewards.
Those who give food give life to living beings
who cannot live without water.
Food is first for all living things, made of food,
and because food is but soil and water mingled together,
those who bring water into fields
create living beings and life in this world.
Even kings with vast domains strive in vain, when their land is dry
and fields sown with seeds look only to the sky for rain.
So Pandya king who makes dreadful war, do not mistake my words:
quickly expand watery places that are built to bring streams to your land!
For those who control water reap rewards
and those who fail cannot endure. ⁶

Water and ritual were critical for medieval kingship. So were innovation and adaptation. The kings who built medieval temples nurtured forms of *dharma* with distinctively medieval substance. In contrast to ancient prescriptions, medieval texts do not insist that a king be a kshatriya and, in much of the subcontinent, medieval caste (*jati*) ranking developed without the presence of all four *varnas*. *Rajadharma* still meant protecting *dharma*, but *sastras* (sacred texts) now prescribed that kings protect local customs, so that kings could enshrine as *dharma* virtually any form of social power and style of social ranking. Land grants to temples and Brahmins confirm the adaptation of cosmic law for local purposes, by bringing Brahman powers of ritual sanction to bear in new agrarian territories to sanctify patterns of social power in Puranic temple worship. Temples were ritual and also political institutions. They incorporated many different

⁶ *Purananuru*, No.18, lines 13-30.

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groups who were clearing and planting the land, building towns, and contracting transactional alliances, which are recorded in the inscriptions.

The *Manusmriti* says that *dharma* includes a sacred right of first possession for the people who clear the land, even if they have taken use of the land away from others – for example, hunters and pastoralists – which would often have been the case. Protecting this right was a bedrock of royal authority. But beyond this, a king's ambition extended over his neighbours (*samantas*), as the Pandyan poet indicated. Homage, tribute, and services from subordinate rulers (*rajās*) were prizes for kings who took titles like *Maharajadhiraja* (Great King of Kings) and *Paramesvara* (Supreme Lord). In the methodology of medieval kingship, gifts to Brahmans and temples measured and dramatised royal power. In Sri Lanka, the same method channelled massive patronage to Buddhist monks and monasteries from the second century BCE; and irrigation, paddy cultivation, and monastic property expanded together until the fourteenth century. Like monasteries, temples managed by Brahmans often owned tracts of irrigated land, and individual Brahmans and Brahman settlements (*brahmadeyas*) often received grants that comprised royal investments in irrigation. Like monks, Brahmans meant prosperity. They attracted people to agrarian sites who had skills and assets needed for expansion. A proliferation of texts on agriculture, astrology, medicine, and related sciences and on temples and irrigation in the lowland areas that were most favoured for Brahman settlement indicate that a Brahman intelligentsia was busily working in many fields other than ritual and Vedic studies. Even esoteric learning could be useful in constructing an agrarian order. Shankaracharya's philosophy, for instance, concerns the disputation of sacred authority. Intellectual innovations in doctrine and ritual enabled local cults to be woven together into expanding Puranic traditions. Great temples multiplied with royal patronage. So did their poetic publicity. The greatness of the gods enhanced the glamour of royal patrons. Rich centres of temple worship combined in their precincts many of the technical skills – controlled by Brahmans – that were needed to develop agrarian territories, from architecture and engineering to law and financial management. Building a great temple or monastery attracted Brahmans and monks and provided a theatre of royal grandeur; here a king could make alliances and enjoy dramatic

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displays of submission. Great kings built great temples and commanded the services of the most learned Brahmans.

A donation to Brahmans, monasteries, monks, or temples represented an investment in agrarian territoriality. Inscriptions, typically carved on a temple wall, served as contracts and advertisements. The more popular a place of worship became – the more praised in song, and the more attractive for pilgrims – the greater became the value of its patronage. The rise of *bhakti* (devotional) movements enhanced the virtue of pilgrimage, increased the number of worshippers, and raised the value of temple donations. Making donations became increasingly popular among aspiring groups as a means of social mobility, as temples became commercial centres, landowners, employers, and investors. The rising value of temple assets increased the value of membership in communities of worship. Increasing participation in temple rituals made them more effective sites for social ranking: temple honours were distributed according to rank, and all worshippers were positioned in ranked proximity to the deity. Rulers came first. Popular *bhakti* devotional movements generated more popular religious participation, more ritual power for dominant local groups, and more glory for kings (even when temples were not centres for royal cults, which they sometimes were). Devotionalism produced a populist ideology for alliances among dominant agricultural lineages and warrior-kings, and formed communities of sentiment among disparate groups involved in agricultural expansion.

Temples were divine sites for enacting social rank among devotees who protected *dharma* and sustained ritual; and, like kingship, rituals changed as people brought gods into changing agrarian contexts. A wide diversity of rituals brought rain, secured crops, drove away disease, delivered healthy babies, and bolstered dynasties; but among all the rituals – by all kinds of spiritualists and officiates, from all kinds of social backgrounds, in all manner of locations – those by Brahman priests for Shiva, Vishnu, and their relatives produced most surviving documentation, because of their lasting, widespread influence. Impressive temples came to mark agricultural territory, towering over the land as sacred landmarks. For many centuries, Brahmanic rituals had evolved as a potent force in social ranking and alliance-building, and specifically for ranking dominant groups in relation to royalty; and it appears that, with the expansion of temple worship and popular devotionalism, the principles and practices of

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ritual inclusion and participation provided a template and methodology for the construction of social power in agrarian territories where the most powerful people traced their sacred genealogies to the gods of the Vedas.

Ritual powers which had been confined to Vedic ritual space were generalised within farming households, communities, and kingdoms. Brahman communities spread and Brahman models of social order spread with the influence of temples and temple patrons. In communities of temple worship, the roles and terms of Vedic ritual assumed new, mundane meanings. It seems, for instance, that the Vedic *jajman* was transformed into a person who controls the resources needed for temple ritual, which came to include not only food and animals but also the services of workers. Hence a *jajman* would be the pivot of power in circuits of redistribution and in what would be called 'the *jajmani* system', in which village land-owning elite families receive labour and assets from subordinates throughout the agricultural year and distribute produce from their land to workers at harvest time. Inscriptions also support the inference that agrarian territory became bounded by *dharmā* as ritually ranked circles of marriage and kinship evolved into ranked caste groups (*jatis*). Coercion was certainly involved in the creation of these caste societies, but the practice of ranking *jati* groups according to the principles of *varna* would also have been attractive for many groups. The adoption and enforcement of caste norms consolidated and expanded caste social space as it organised agriculture and sustained agrarian states.

Religious rituals of social ranking enabled families to form political alliances by providing measures of their respective status within agrarian territory. The labour, land, and assets of low-ranking *jatis* were organised for production by being subordinated to the power of dominant caste families, who carved out territories in strategic transactions with Brahmans, gods, and kings. Dominant caste alliances thus formed medieval agrarian territories at the intersection of kingship and local communities. The expansion of caste society appears to have been a top-down process, which included but did not necessarily depend upon everyday coercion. It might be best characterised as an evolving caste hegemony, in which the coercive features of social power were hidden by an ideology of *dharmā* that became widely accepted as it provided everyone with a place in the ranks of agrarian entitlement. Inscriptions further support the proposition that *jati*

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ranking was propelled by strategies of alliance among rising powers in agrarian society. New dynastic realms and agrarian territories were places for social mobility where the building of ranking systems made good sense. Dynastic lineage leaders and Brahmans were critical actors in creating these systems of social difference, status, rank, and power, which enabled powerful non-Brahman families to become gentry.

Temples and Brahman settlements were sites of honour around which to form ranks of privilege. Like kings, Brahmans acquired their social rank historically. Building dynastic territory was a complicated process that involved innovation, risk, improvisation, and experiment; and the wide open spaces of medieval times enabled people to become Brahmans as well as Rajputs, Kshatriyas, Marathas, and Sat-sudra gentry. To become Brahman meant to be accepted as Brahman, patronised as Brahman, respected as Brahman; thus one came to command the skills, social status, and kinship of Brahmans, according to scriptures that allow people to become Brahmans through their deeds. Controls over access to Brahman status were strict, so that entering Brahman ranks would have been difficult. But the widespread establishment of new Brahman settlements – duly recorded in the inscriptions – provided many opportunities for new Brahman lineages and clans to be formed. Founders and protectors of Brahman settlements, builders of temples, and donors who financed temple rituals were the moving force behind the Brahmanisation of agrarian territories. Land grants to temples and Brahmans are therefore less an indication of traditional Brahman power or peasant subordination than a reflection of alliance-building by aspiring agrarian elites who used ritual ranking to lift themselves over competitors and institutionalised their status by patronising gods and Brahmans.

Giving land increased the status of a donor and allied ‘protectors’ of the grant, who are also often named in inscriptions; by extension, these donations elevated all their kin. As kinship circles formed around the lineages that fed gods and Brahmans, whole sets of kin groups, forming as high-status, non-Brahman *jatis*, elevated themselves above others in temple ritual and agrarian society. This may explain why leaders of *janapadas* in Harsha’s realm protected a gift of land to Brahmans, and why one of his generals made the gift under Harsha’s authority. In the open spaces of Rashtrakuta power, one inscription records a gift of 8,000 measures of land to 1,000 Brahmans,

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and 4,000 measures to a single Brahman. Similar generosity is evident in many places in the medieval period. In each specific context, a donative inscription appears to mark an effort by a non-Brahman power block to enhance its own status and that of its local allies. Such gambits were not without risk and opposition. Raising the status of some groups lowered others, and Brahman settlements created ranked entitlements in everyday social transactions. Brahmans did not usually farm land themselves and they were entitled by grants to receive the produce of farms, including taxes; so they became a significant social force, protected by royal power, and also a landed elite whose well-being depended upon the control of other people's land and labour. Brahman lords of land became a model for other elites. Brahmanisation sustained the rise of landed elites and aspiring royalty, whose superior claims to land and labour were legitimated by their patronage and protection of Brahmans.

A small but significant set of inscriptions records opposition to Brahman settlements, to their collection of taxes, and to their claims on local resources such as pastures, often contained in grants. Most opposition seems to come from leading members of local farming communities. The authority of kings who patronised Brahmans was clearly not accepted by everyone in medieval societies; and the authority of Brahmanical kingship spread slowly – often violently – into the vast spaces that lay outside its reach in early-medieval centuries. In many instances, land grants appear to mark frontiers of royal power, and here the most resistance might be expected. Even where local society did accept the ritual and social status of Brahmans, fierce competitive struggles might flare up over land grants. Some opposition to Brahman settlements certainly came from local competitors who were fighting against the families who sought to elevate themselves by patronising Brahmans with land grants. In the ninth century, local conflicts of this kind accompanied new Brahman settlements on the Tamil coast, where they were an old and widely accepted feature of agrarian territoriality. The open spaces of Rashtrakuta ambition were another matter. Inscriptions from the northern peninsula warn that violence and curses will be heaped upon opponents of Brahman land grants, and texts proclaim that people who murder Brahmans will be punished harshly, which implies that such murders did in fact occur. But striving lineages also had options other than revolt, for, as Bhishma says in the *Mahabharata*, 'If the king disregards

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agriculturists, they become lost to him, and abandoning his dominions, [they] betake themselves to the woods.⁷

Territories of permanent cultivation, irrigation, worship, pilgrimage, dynastic authority, temple wealth, *jati* ranking, caste dominance, and Brahman influence grew together. Inscriptions depict idioms of territoriality as they pinpoint the location of a royal donor, the ranks of officials involved in a grant, the status of local protectors, and the names of religious personnel and institutions. Power relations in agricultural expansion were thus more complex than we can see using a simple division of the agrarian world between the state and society. There was more at work in the medieval political economy than interaction between kings and peasants or dynasties and villages. The most important social forces within medieval states worked the middle ground between rulers and farmers, where leaders of locally prominent families made strategic alliances that constituted dynastic territory. An agrarian gentry thus emerged as a constituent of royal authority. The constant rhetorical and ritual elevation of the king above all others mirrored and mobilised social ranking; it served the cause of gentry mobility. The superiority of rulers served all subordinates by elevating them above lower orders in their relative proximity to the king. When an aspiring warrior family elevated itself by declaring a new dynasty, it benefited the whole clan and their home locality. Inviting Brahmans to live in its territory, generating for itself a cosmic lineage, building temples, and adopting royal titles and rituals, the new king would pursue allies. In this pursuit, recognition by an established, superior king could be a boon. Kings would thus extend their domains by forming unequal alliances with *samantas*, whose subordination would raise their local status. Subordinate rulers could then support or protect a grant in the great king's name, to enhance their status further. A rising dynasty would then accumulate its own subordinate *samantas* on the periphery of its core territory, while subordinate rulers on the frontier would improve their position at the same time. Core regions of agrarian expansion would expand as emerging leaders allied with regional dynasties, and leaders on the frontiers of several royal territories shifted loyalties or combined them. A successful *samanta* might seek to overturn his master, so the

⁷ Harbans Mukhia, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' in Herman Kulke, ed., *The State in India, 1000-1700*, Delhi, 1995, p. 128.

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advice of King Lalitadiya of Kashmir (in the eighth century) makes good sense: 'Do not allow the villagers to accumulate more than they need for bare subsistence, lest they revolt.'

The early-medieval period – from the sixth to thirteenth century – laid the foundations for later agrarian history in many ways. New forms of social life emerged in many places at the same time. What M. N. Srinivas called 'Sanskritisation' evokes part of the process, because social groups and institutions were being formed around models of behaviour, identity, aesthetics, and patronage codified in Sanskrit texts. Brahmans were key people because they sanctified social rank and political alliance. Rising families wanted to hire Brahman genealogists and court poets, patronise Brahman and temples, endow feeding places for mendicants and pilgrimages, stage festivals, feed saints, and join the activities that united gods, priests, kings, and farmers. All this occurred as farmland was expanding and as peasant farmers, nomads, pastoralists, hunters, and forest tribes were slowly changing the substance of their social identity, over many generations, as people became high-caste landowners, kings, protectors of *dharma*, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, superior Sudras, inferior Sudras, Untouchables, and aliens beyond the pale. Such transformations obscure the ancient identity of the people who propelled medieval agrarian history, but the result was that gentry castes filled the ranks of landowners and ruling lineages. Many of these groups remain powerful in their regions in modern times. They became Kunbi, Vellala, Velama, Reddy, Kapu, Kamma, Nayar, and other landed castes. The ancient social background of some dynasties can also be dimly perceived. Hoysalas came from Melapas, hill chiefs in the Soseyur forests. Udaiyar and Yadava dynasties descended from herders. Tevar kings descended from Marava and Kallar hunters. Marathas had ancestors in the hills. Gurjaras certainly had a pastoral past. Rajputs did not have one original identity but emerged from histories of warrior ranking and mythology, and many had ancient pastoral and tribal roots. All these transformations are entangled in the politics of religious leadership, devotion, and loyalty; and every state in the history of South Asia has afforded special privileges – including tax exemptions – to religious institutions and religious leaders. Many social movements that moderns might call 'religious' might be better understood as formations of agrarian territorialism, as we will see in chapter 4.

Geographically, early-medieval territories seem to have concen-

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trated in the riverine lowlands. Here the influence of Brahmans and medieval Sanskritisation was most compelling. In scattered rice-growing and irrigated lowlands, aspiring elite families patronised Brahmans and Puranic deities as they fought to control prime farmland and to create their own sacred rights of first possession. Mapping agrarian territories which are documented by inscriptions is not easy because transactions recorded epigraphically occurred within a moving constellation of dynastic donations that has not been mapped comprehensively. This medieval territoriality was defined not by fixed boundaries but rather by its individual transactions, and such transactional territory can remain firmly in place only as long as the transactional system that defines it. But the agrarian elites that came into being within medieval polities – through their participation in this transactional system – remained in power in many locations of intensive medieval agriculture for centuries to come. In the nineteenth century, for instance, a local official reported from the old Gupta core region in Saran District, Bihar, that ‘Brahmans, Rajputs, and Bhumi-hars were the only castes that figured in the “actual life” of the district’.⁸ In early-medieval times, such groups were coming into existence, their social identities were being produced transactionally, and the inscriptions perpetuate their reputation.

Medieval kingdoms were composed of networks of transactions rather than bureaucratic institutions of a kind that would define later agrarian territories of revenue and judicial administration. In the 1950s, K. A. Nilakanta Shastri argued that the Cholas had built an ‘almost Byzantine royalty’, and since the 1960s, R. S. Sharma has argued that post-Gupta states in general represent a form of feudalism. Historians have developed alternatives to these models, but they have not replaced them, and today there is no consensus concerning the nature of medieval states. But inside dynastic domains, inscriptions indicate that agrarian territories were small, consisting of settlements linked together by locally dominant caste power. Inscriptional terms mark transactional space by using titles for individuals and groups and by using place names attached to the people in transactions – terms such as *nadu* or *padi*. The *nadu* in modern ‘Tamil Nadu’ is a territorial marker from medieval inscrip-

⁸ Anand Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793–1920*, Berkeley, 1989, p. 44.

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tions which designated a tiny region that was defined by its ritual, land, water, kinship, and royal transactions. The term appears most often in references to leaders of the *nadu* who engaged in donative transactions with temples and Brahmans. In later centuries, it acquired more expansive meanings; but medieval *nadus* along the Tamil coast were composed of core settlements along routes of drainage, where Brahmans and temples received land grants, and they were connected to one another by donative transactions and surrounded by vast tracts of land which was not controlled by dominant groups in core *nadu* sites.

Where inscriptional sites of agrarian power have been mapped, they cluster along rivers, so it appears that the nexus of power that they reflect concentrated on the control of riverine farmland. Over time, Brahman influence spread widely, and Brahmans and allied gentry and service castes became mobile state elites. Locally, gentry caste power dug in and expanded steadily. Based in prime locations along rivers and trade routes with clusters of temple towns and old dynastic capitals, caste communities incorporated tribal, hunting, pastoral, and nomadic groups into the lower echelons of society, where the new entrants retained much of their character, redefined in caste terms. Tribal deities entered the Puranic pantheon, adding cultural complexity and expressing the richness of agrarian territories. The social and cultural character of agrarian regions emerged in later centuries, but medieval territoriality left its traces and imparted distinctive qualities to localities by giving special importance to Brahmans, temples, and high-caste gentry. Where we do not find medieval donative inscriptions – as in Punjab, in Jat territories in the western Ganga plains, and in the mountains – the population and cultural importance of Brahmans remains comparatively small in agrarian societies today. Inscriptional territories concentrate in eastern and central Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, western Maharashtra, and along the coastal plains. Brahmanism seems less deeply rooted in other areas, where other types of social power were more prominent in the later formation of agrarian territories.

CONQUEST

One Candella inscription announces that Anand, brother of Trailokyavarman, reduced to submission ‘wild tribes of Bhillas, Sabaras and

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Pulindas'.⁹ Conquering tribes and expelling them from the land is a major theme in genealogy and epigraphy. Warrior lineages expanded in number and influence after the Guptas, creating and conquering agricultural territories, and preserving their victories in inscriptions, epic poetry, folklore, and hagiography. From the eighth to the eleventh century, Gurjara-Pratiharas conquered along western plains and northern basins, moving into the central mountains and high mountain valleys. Along the coast of the southern peninsula, Pandya, Chera, and Chola lineages repeatedly conquered each others' territory. Many warriors planted settlements of warrior-farmers along routes of conquest. From the eighth to tenth century, Rashtrakutas migrated and conquered territories all across the north Deccan, Gujarat, and Orissa. The Vakatakas emulated earlier Satavahanas and expanded outward from Vidarbha (Berar); they split into four branches, with shifting capitals spread from Chhattisgarh across the Deccan to the upper reaches of the Bhima river basin. In the sixth century, Kalacuris appeared in the north Deccan territories of the Vakatakas; in the eighth, inscriptions show them in Tripura, near the head of the Narmada river; and as late as the thirteenth century they appear in Bengal. Chola armies conquered northern Sri Lanka, leaving a population of colonists behind. Calukya lineages had bases in Vatapi along the upper Tungabhadra river in the seventh and eighth century, and in Kalyani, well to the north, in the eleventh and twelfth. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, Vijayanagar dynasties expanded from the vicinity of old Vatapi across the southern Deccan and eastern plains; and they shifted their capitals into coastal lowlands as they broke up into smaller dynasties in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Under Vijayanagar, Telugu warrior clans conquered territory all along the south-eastern coastal plain.

This is only the start of a list of medieval conquests that barely begins to indicate how widely they influenced agrarian territoriality. Conquest colonisation exerted its influence quite separately from territorial *dharmā*, but together they produced agrarian territories that expanded to become agrarian regions. Conquering colonists knitted together many small-scale domains of localised, dominant caste power; they connected new frontiers and old dynastic sites. Activities

⁹ Brajadulal Chattopadhyay, 'Political Processes and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India', in Kulke, *The State*, p. 219.

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depicted in Harsha's seventh-century inscription are typical of many events in this process. Many donative inscriptions reflect similar activity by subordinate officers and local leaders, for whom gifts to Brahmans and temples represent incorporation into conquest territories. Conquest created ranks of warriors above the locally dominant castes; and superior entitlements created by conquest moved agricultural wealth along trade routes of warrior power in the form of tribute and temple endowment. Warriors used agrarian wealth from one location to support conquest in others; and traders, pastoralists, and warrior-farmers moved agrarian wealth among sites. These transfers of wealth employed monetary instruments and commercial intermediation, which are most visible in the inscriptional evidence as they pertain to temple endowments. Conquest and trade went hand-in-hand with religious endowments and investments in farming.

Warriors created territories of authority in which their officers could establish local roots within communities, where they distributed local entitlements to kin, allies, and subordinates. Distant localities were connected to one another by the social networks that formed along routes of conquest and extended the reach of conquering clans. Local caste elites were assimilated into extensive realms of clan power as subordinates, dependants, and rising stars. Some warrior clans created a non-farming nobility living high in fortress towns, looking down on farm communities; these became landmarks on agricultural landscapes, as prominent as temples and other sacred places. Warrior competition among siblings in each successive generation would send another wave of fighters out to conquer new territory; in this enterprise, these clans faced one another on the battlefield, so that battles among warriors became a dominant motif in hagiographies, genealogies, and local lore about the land. The exploits of great men became material for epics, rumours, gossip, and popular songs, landmarks in local history.

Two broad geographical zones of warrior influence can be roughly discerned. One was formed by clans that became Rajputs – Gurjaras, Cahamanas (Chauhans), Paramaras (Pawars), Guhilas (Sisodias), and Caulukyias (Solankis) – who conquered from the eighth century onward across the western plains, northern basins, adjacent high mountain valleys, and central mountains. Local leaders rose up to ally with and to join the ranks of conquering clans, by imitation, alliance, genealogical invention, inter-marriage, and combinations of these

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strategies. Rajput rulers protected *dharma* and became ideal Kshatriyas. Brahman settlements and temple rituals were not as important for Rajput royalty as warfare, genealogies, hagiographies, and court ceremonies. Their lineages measured their status in victories, alliances, marriages, and accumulations of tribute in their palaces, forts, and market towns – including Brahmans and temples. Nobles endowed temples and employed Brahmans as ritualists and servants, but it was more their devotion to battle, to their own clan, and to the rules of martial kingship that measured their devotion to *dharma*. In warrior territory, the ritual ranking of agrarian society followed the logic of warrior lineages, stressing military alliance, victory, service, and publicly demonstrated powers of physical command and subjugation. Agrarian social power concentrated much less in a local landed gentry and much more in warrior lineages. Genealogies became records of rank and they proliferated across the entire span of the medieval epoch to mark the expanding area of Rajput influence. Surajit Sinha has shown that ‘state formation in the tribal belt of Central India is very largely a story of the Rajputisation of the tribes’.¹⁰ The interaction of expansive Rajput lineages with locally powerful Jat clans produced a militarist pattern of agrarian development in the western frontiers of old *Bharat*, where agrarian power focused on fortified villages and strategic hill towns.

A second warrior zone lay south of the Vindhya in Khandesh, Berar, Maharashtra, central mountain valleys, and the interior peninsula, where warriors were attached to agricultural communities and concentrated power in their own hands but followed no single dominant model such as that of the Rajputs. Instead – from the time of the Satavahanas, Vakatakas, and Rashtrakutas, to that of the Yadavas, Calukyas, Hoysalas, Kakatiyas of Warangal, Sultans of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, Udaiyars and Sultans of Mysore, and the Marathas – dominant social powers in agriculture arose from and mingled with the evolution of peoples living in and drawn from pastoral, hunting, and mountain populations. Standing to fight became part of farming. Running off to war became part of the agricultural routine. In the

¹⁰ Surajit Sinha, ‘State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India’, Presidential Address, Section on Anthropology and Archaeology, Forty-ninth Indian Science Congress, 1962, reprinted in Kulke, ed., *The State*, p. 305. See also Surajit Sinha, ‘Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movements in South Manbhum’, *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology* (University of Calcutta), 8, 2, 1959, 9–32.

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interior peninsula, extensive tracts of dry land were open for cultivation for the people who could fight to keep it; and throughout medieval centuries, cattle, manpower, centres of trade, strategic positions, and places with good water and access to valuable forests were more valuable assets for aspiring warrior lineages than most farmland, except in the stretches of deep black soil along the big rivers that were perpetual sites of warrior-peasant competition. The dominant agrarian castes were both warriors and cultivators. In the Maratha Deccan, for instance, expanses of open land that were available in the sixteenth and seventeenth century allowed many warrior-farming lineages to carve out local territory for themselves. A lineage leader would become a *patel* (village headman); and then, by combining his military power with strategic alliances, he could become a *deshmukh* (headman) for a circle of villages, a serious player in regional politics. In the context of constant local military competition and shifting alliances, there was little scope for the rise of an agrarian gentry until warrior-farmers could control an area long enough to institutionalize their elite status, which eventually did occur later in the medieval period in Maratha core areas, as well as among Vokkaligas and Boyas in Karnataka, and among Reddy and other locally dominant Telugu castes in Telangana.

In the eleventh century, warriors came on horseback from Afghanistan and Central Asia to engage warriors in the lowlands and they swept across the subcontinent to connect the zones of warrior colonisation north and south of the Vindhyas, which had been until then quite separate. They pushed into historical spaces of conquest colonisation that were many centuries old. The military competition that ensued increased the influence of conquest colonisation on agriculture as a whole by increasing the number and force of warriors. Because temples, cities, and irrigation represented authority and prosperity, they were natural targets in war.¹¹ Warriors often dislocated farming communities when they attacked their enemies. The great eleventh-century irrigation builder, the Paramara Raja Bhoj, had built a wall to form a huge irrigation reservoir at Bhojpur, near Bhopal, and armies of the Sultan of Mandi, Hoshang Shah, later cut the dam to destroy the lake, killing the irrigation. This kind of warfare discouraged heavy investments by farmers in fixed agricultural assets

¹¹ Richard H. Davis, 'Indian Art Objects as Loot', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, 1, 1993, 22–48, and 'Three Styles in Looting India', *History and Anthropology*, 6, 4, 1994, 293–317.

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such as irrigation works, unless they could be protected by local arms, as wells could be, which helps to explain their popularity in all the regions of conquest colonisation. A militarisation of farming occurred in all the dry regions where wells are most important. By the fifteenth century, professional armies had established their military superiority over the local hordes of warrior-peasants, but no state could destroy the independent warrior lineages which had fought successfully to control local territories. In wide fields of warrior-farming, lineages expanded their cultivation and coercive power at the same time under medieval dynasties. Warrior Jats colonised Punjab and the western Ganga basin and formed agrarian mini-polities which became regional states in the eighteenth century. Stable centres of professional military power emerged in many territories in the interior peninsula, some, as on the Mysore plateau, with old formations of caste dominance endowed with all the institutional traditions of royalty and Brahman patronage.

Conquest colonisation made much of agrarian space a constant battleground, and the careers of the Vijayanagar and Maratha empires reflect important features of this aspect of agrarian history. In a region of Telugu conquest, Vijayanagar, 'the city of victory', was built in the fourteenth century in old agricultural territory near the old Calukya centre of Vatapi, along the upper Tungabhadra river. Endowed with magnificent irrigation, the city accumulated so much warrior wealth that Portuguese visitors took it to be richer than Paris, with its great temples, royal cult, and vassals arriving at festival time with mountains of tribute. Fighters led by *nayakas* (commanders) spread Vijayanagar's dominion outward in waves of conquest colonisation, creating the first empire to embrace all the land south of the Krishna. Telugu warrior-peasants opened up new land for dry farming along the eastern coast – in dry stretches filled with deep black cotton soil between old riverine clusters – and these colonies would sustain a vast expansion of cloth manufacture for world markets in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when Nayakas became kings. Vijayanagar itself was destroyed, however, by sultans at Bijapur, another old site in the former Calukya realm. The city of victory had disappeared completely by the end of the seventeenth century.

In 1640, Shivaji was married in Bangalore at the court of the Bijapur sultan, whom his father, Shahji, served as a general. Shahji's *jagir* (assigned revenue territory) near Pune became Shivaji's patrimony and

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a base for his later military expansion. In his day, good rainy seasons and peaceful times saw farmers expanding cultivation, though even in good years they would go off to war during dry months. Building in one place accompanied destruction elsewhere. Droughts would routinely drive more farmers out to fight, loot, and colonise. The great fortresses that became great cities – like Vijayanagar – could disappear without a trace, because their ruling lineages and urban populations would move overnight to other sites. New cities and towns rose on ruins everyday in the world of warrior-peasants and military entrepreneurs. One story goes that in the seventeenth century, on the fringes of Maratha power, in the southern Deccan,

Doda Mastee and Chikka Mastee, two brothers with their families and cattle, came from the north and built two houses. They cleared the jungle around and maintained themselves by cultivating the soil. They invited inhabitants from other parts, advancing them money to increase the cultivation. The brothers next built a fort and gave their village the name Halla Goudannahally . . . In time the brothers quarrelled because the younger brother Chikka Mastee made a tank which endangered the village. Doda Mastee being displeased with his brother's folly removed and built north of the first village another village called Goudannahally and all the inhabitants moved to the new village . . . Halla Goudannahally was in the meantime inundated by the water of the tank.

Building and breaking, moving and settling – these are old themes, but the story elides a suspicion that Doda Mastee broke the tank of his younger brother to force the villagers into his new settlement. Building a new settlement often entailed violence, much like planting new fields meant cutting down the jungle. In 1630, when villages in his revenue territory (*jagir*) lay waste from famine, Shivaji's guardian, Dadaji Kondev, 'set about repopulating and developing the *jagir*', for which purpose 'Deshpandes were seized and taken in hand, [and] the refractory among them were put to death'.¹²

From the eighth century onward, conquest colonisation is well enough documented to allow us to distinguish different types, which can be identified by their association with specific groups. (1) Some professional warrior lineages emerged from ancient roots at the margins of old agricultural societies, from pastoral and hunter peoples for whom extensive mobility and killing were ancient skills. These warrior specialists conquered agricultural communities and formed a nobility. For simplicity, we can call this the Rajput pattern, with its

¹² Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 60.

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various spin-offs and variants that arose with emulation and alliance-building among other warrior groups. (2) Some warrior lineages came from the ranks of dominant caste farmers who had formed a military force and allied with professional warriors, often serving under them. Conquering widely, these fighting peasants would retain their local agrarian base. If successful, they could spread their power by alliance and conquest across territories dominated by allies in similar warrior-peasant castes. This is the outline of the Maratha pattern, which had a long history in the Deccan before the rise of Shivaji. (3) A warrior lineage could split off from a dynastic authority, using symbols and alliances derived from that dynasty to lead fighting colonists into new territories, to conquer, displace, and/or assimilate local tribes and others, and thus to form new agricultural communities and new agrarian territories. This pattern, exemplified by the Mastee brothers, also typified Telugu colonists in the black soil tracts of the Tamil country. (4) Warrior-farmers could simply conquer and settle new territory, dividing the land among the lineages. The conquering group itself would form the bulk of the agrarian population in this territory. Kings would rise within it and clans would differentiate over time into many ranks. Groups would splinter off for new colonisation. This pattern – typified by the Jats – may be the most common of all and probably dominated the hills and valleys of the central mountains, for instance in Gondwana, Chhattisgarh, and other areas of tribal Rajputisation. It also typifies lowland warrior-farming groups such as the Maravas and Kallars, in southern Tamil country, including the Piramalai Kallar studied by Louis Dumont.

Late-medieval warrior lineages – from the Ghorids to the Mughals – followed the Rajput model, which was also prevalent in various forms in Central and West Asia. As they subsumed other warriors under their authority, they increased the power of subordinates such as Shivaji who could form local alliances with warrior-peasant lineages. Sultans had less interest even than Rajputs in farming themselves, living among farmers, or tinkering with production locally. They conquered warriors who already ruled over agrarian territories. They lived in fortress towns and their movements connected all the old fort-centres of warrior colonisation not only to one another but also to urban centres across inland corridors of southern Asia from Dhaka to Istanbul. Like their predecessors, the sultans brought retinues from their homelands and new technologies of power, and they encouraged

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migrants from their home territories to settle in their new dominions, primarily in the established urban centres but also on agricultural frontiers, where, like the Brahman settlements of the early-medieval period, *ulema* (learned men) and Sufis provided erudition and leadership for agricultural expansion in the Indus Valley, Punjab, the western Gangetic plain, the Deccan, and eastern Bengal. Again, new skills and productive powers came into agrarian territories with new ruling elites. This was like the dispersion of productive powers that followed the end of the Gupta empire, but on a much greater scale, with more dramatic consequences, and with more detailed documentation. With warrior-sultans from the western reaches of southern Asia came architects, accountants, scholars, genealogists, bureaucrats, poets, scientists, merchants, bankers, musicians, and the entire cultural heritage of Persia. The centre of gravity in Persian cultural history moved into South Asia, where a Persian lexicon and technologies of power organised a widespread reintegration of agrarian territories. New strata of non-farming elites were formed by sultans who granted their subordinates entitlements to revenue from the land. Again, royal patronage fed the rise of new agrarian elites.

Sultanic regimes continued and reinforced long historical trends in conquest colonisation. Muslim rulers did not dramatise political alliances in temple ritual, but they sustained temple authority in agrarian territory. Old land grants to temples remained in place. New royal donations were added in the form of the tax remissions. Victorious sultans defeated old defenders of *dharmā*, and this again brought Kali Yuga to mind for some Brahmans; some fled into mountain valleys and into rapidly expanding agrarian territories around Kathmandu. Sultans brought superior military technology into the field, which altered the competitive environment of conquest colonisation. Defeated warriors launched new waves of conquest, extending warrior power from the Deccan and the Ganga basin into deltaic and coastal regions. But imperial expansion still depended upon unequal alliances with subordinate rulers, who increased their own status by hitching their fortune to victorious sultans. Sultanic regimes developed institutions of military bureaucracy that focused authority on the emperor's family, relatives, and his highest ranking allies, who formed the imperial nobility; and, from the time of Akbar's marriage alliance with Rajputs, the imperial wedding became a ritual of the highest statecraft. Rajput, Maratha, and other protec-

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tors of *dharmā* formed a new nobility under the umbrella of sultanate regimes and increased their investments in temples; so that temple ritual and Hindu court culture flourished under the sultans. Akbar's and Dara Shukō's experiments in religion reflect a continuing effort to articulate political alliance-building with philosophical speculation; and rituals of theological disputation at Akbar's court remind us of the medieval innovations in religious thought and performance which accompanied the incorporation of new groups into agrarian regimes. Outside the court, eclectic mysticism and devotionism expanded their reach. Brahmans were in high demand in the apparatus of imperial taxation and law, and their occupational horizons expanded. More than ever, building accompanied destruction under the sultans, in the expansion of urbanism and in the expansion of agriculture. When Akbar's troops marched into Bengal, they brought in train tools and men to clear the jungles to expand cultivation. Sufis came into the eastern delta to open the jungles to farming. To protect strategic mountain routes of trade, Mughal armies conquered and settled many sites of agrarian expansion, including Kashmir. Aurangzeb began his famous 1665 *farman* (edict) on administration with words that echo Kasyapa and the Pandyan poet: 'the entire elevated attention and desires of the Emperor are devoted to the increase in the population and cultivation of the Empire and the welfare of the whole peasantry and the entire people.' Aurangzeb reiterated the *Manusmṛiti* on the sacred right of first possession when he declared that, 'whoever turns (wasteland) into cultivable land should be recognised as the (owner) malik and should not be deprived (of land)'.¹³

PATRIARCHY

Families passed the right of first possession from one generation to the next. At the base of medieval states and at the apex of early-modern empires, family formed a core of social power and experience. In agrarian territory, kinship formed basic entitlements to means of production. Kin groups joined together to clear land, build fields, dig wells, and cultivate. Settlements and communities formed around collections of kin. Marriage networks connected villages. Families

¹³ Mukhia, 'Was There Feudalism?', pp. 127, 201.

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pushed the frontiers of farming and fought for control of agrarian space within realms of ritual and conquest. Kinship underlay class and caste; and, in state institutions, market networks, and community organisation, kin formed the most powerful bonds of alliance, allegiance, loyalty, and solidarity. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are fundamentally family dramas and the *Manusmriti* is obsessed with the implications of marriage for caste ranking. During medieval centuries, family histories, emotions, rituals, intrigues, conflicts, and loyalties permeated agrarian life and territoriality, from family farm to imperial court. Family suffused all the institutions of entitlement. On the Tamil coast, for instance, the word *pangu*, meaning 'share', came to refer both to an individual's share in family property and to a family's share of village assets, so that *pangali* referred to relatives and also to shareholding landed gentry families in a farming community. The term *kulam* likewise referred to a household, lineage, clan, and local caste group (*jati*); and *nadu* meant an agrarian space (as opposed to *kadu*, forest) defined as the domain of authority of its most prominent family leaders (*nattar*). The inscriptional corpus is substantially the record of transactions among the heads of families who built agrarian territory, built dynasties, and travelled in search of new land to conquer and farm.

Kin followed the lead of earlier generations to create expansive domains of kinship which became localities, kingdoms, and empires. Along riverine tracts of irrigated agriculture where medieval inscriptions were most densely distributed, families sought control over expanses of farmland, grazing land, forest, and water supplies. Succeeding generations spread their power from one bit of cultivated ground to the next and prominent gentry families and an expanding set of kinfolk produced small, compact domains of dominance. Marriages formed dense links among dominant families in adjacent settlements, which became related to one another in patterns that resembled the patchwork of paddy fields. In such settings, the norms and practices of kinship strongly stressed local alliances among families and they formed intricately graded ranks within gentry strata of society. Marriage also marked divisions between local elites and groups who were barred from owning land, who served the gentry as dependent servants and farm workers. These distinctions took many forms within the idioms of caste society. But in general the formation of solid traditions of local gentry and rural elite dominance entailed

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the reproduction of a genealogical connection to celestial and royal authorities who legitimated their patrimony.

In this context, agriculture became a deeply patriarchal enterprise. Senior men ruled junior men and senior women lorded over their inferiors. Family ranking elevated all members of higher families, men and women, according to their lineage, clan, *jati*, *varna*, wealth, sect, office, or other mark of status rank. Patriarchy is a kind of power – never absolute, uncontested, or unaffected by other kinds of power – wielded by men by virtue of their rank in society, and agrarian patriarchy defined agricultural territory as a domain of ranks, entitlements, leading families, and family heads. In the ancient text *Milindapanho*, Nagasena explains to King Menander that the people he calls ‘villagers’ (*gamika*) are in fact the patriarchs who head the village families:

Now when the lord, oh king, is thus summoning all the heads of houses (*kutipurush*), he issues his order to all the villagers but it is not they who assemble in obedience to the order; it is the heads of the houses. There are many who do not come: women and men, slave girls and slaves, hired workmen, servants, peasants (*gamika*), sick people, oxen, buffaloes, sheep and goats and dogs – but all those do not count.¹⁴

Many men and women did not come – only the ‘heads’ or the leaders of families came. Such scenes have been re-enacted millions of times. Of course, the lord, the king, and the sultan are also heads of families, men of superior rank among kinsfolk and subordinates. Many medieval inscriptions depict the ranks of patriarchs being formed and reformed among men who head families at various levels of power. Family rank came to entail entitlements, which became glossed as ‘property rights’, but property in practice amounted to power over assets substantiated by and reflected in family rank. Property was also parcelled out within families to members according to rank. Agrarian territory came to be composed of proprietary units formed among families led by their senior men. From early-medieval times, inscriptions indicate that property entitlements were often individualised and transferred in market and political transactions; but property was also defined and protected by social powers in communities and territories. The inscriptional authority of the local protectors of grants to Brah-

¹⁴ Quoted in Irfan Habib, ‘The Peasant in Indian History’, in Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History, Towards a Marxist Perspective*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 134.

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mans and temples indicates that powers of entitlement depended upon recognised leadership in *janapada*, *nadu*, *padi*, *desa*, *grama* (village), *ur* (village), and other kinds of named territories. Dynasties were established as patriarchies at the apex of territorial ranking systems; and states were thus composed of nested, ranked sets of family entitlements, defined by transactions among patriarchs in systems of ranking which are depicted in the inscriptions.

Patriarchy formed a dynamic, productive power which connected intimate family life with wide historical trends. Family is most often assumed to be a cultural constant within the realm of tradition. Scholars tend to think of kinship as a durable structure that is reproduced innocuously in private life. But family is an engine of change in politics and in struggles over resource control at every level of society. Marriage decisions, rituals, and alliances became politically important in ancient times as lineage leaders began building early state institutions. Elite matrimony became a political event of the first order. Competition among sons generated expansive political domains as younger sons went out in search of new territories, and, in early-medieval centuries, dispersions of ranked lineages created wide nets of alliance and competition. Medieval inscriptions record transactions among patriarchs, articulate ranks among them, and thus encode episodes in family history that formed agrarian territory and dynastic genealogies. Temple rituals articulate alliance, loyalty, devotion, and competition among units of patriarchal power and kinship. Many if not most groups with collective identities in South Asia use some form of genealogical reckoning to express family feelings and histories. Ancestral patriarchs and mythical progenitors populate origin stories. In the dense forest of north Bihar, in the eighteenth century, a Kayasth named Dullah Ram founded the village of Changel, and local lore preserves the story that he obeyed a dream and found a horde of gold coins near the temple to the mother goddess, which he duly dug up 'and his descendants lived happily ever after'; whereas the more prosaic truth is that Dullah Ram and his kinsfolk founded the village by usurping the land and subjugating the labour of the local tribal population that worshipped the mother goddess there.¹⁵ Landless Buinhya workers in south Bihar recount the victories of their heroic

¹⁵ Arvind N. Das, 'Changel: Three Centuries of an Indian Village', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 15, 1, 1987, 4-5.

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progenitor, whose valiant exertions clearing and turning the jungle into farmland dignify their subservient labour today.¹⁶ Vellala gentry on the north Tamil coast trace their origins to a royal Chola ancestor who migrated north with 48,000 Vellala families, conquering Kurumba hunters. Genealogies from Mysore and Andhra begin with great patriarchs. So do family histories among Rajputs and other royal families across the northern basins. A group that calls itself 'rulers of the hills' (Malaiyalis) traces its descent from ancestors who migrated up from the Tamil lowlands with their gods in hand at the sharp end of enemy spears. Countless genealogies depict patriarchs as founding fathers who begin the chain of succession and entitlement that runs down over generations. Ancestral personalities become icons of group identity. Their exploits become collective accomplishments. 'Our history' for many groups became a story of family feelings forged by lore and worship, beginning with great patriarchs whose offspring populated the land. As if to replicate earth in heaven, the Puranic pantheon filled up with marriages and families of gods. Earthly kings became descendants of Vedic divinities. Cosmic and mundane genealogies together defined social identities around powers and sentiments that linked families to one another in territories of divinity and heritage. Temples embodied the cosmic power of gods in the territory of patriarchs.

Caste – *jati* – defined units and idioms of family alliance and ranking within *varna* ideologies, but patriarchy also transcended caste and escaped the rule of *dharmā*. Warrior-kings connected disparate, distant territories to one another, and the rule of *dharmā* could organise only parts of these expansive territories. In the sixth century, groups outside the ranks of caste society comprised the bulk of the population and, though *dharmā* did subsequently expand its reach by various means, people outside caste society – whether beneath the lowest of the low or outside the pale altogether – remained numerous. Though excluded from temples and other rituals in respectable gentry communities, low castes and non-castes lived in agricultural territory. Because the power of caste society expanded downward from the top ranks and outward from centres of ritual and conquest, groups at the lowest ranks and on the margins of dominant caste control comprised

¹⁶ Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1990.

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a moving borderland between caste society and its surroundings. Outsiders in and around localities of high-caste control were critically important for the vitality of every agrarian locality, and many did enter into the rituals of *dharmā* in various ways, but many also remained outsiders. Such people continued to arrive in every agrarian territory with new waves of migration and conquest colonisation throughout the first and second millennia. Idioms and practices of patriarchal alliance allowed for the loose inclusion of countless groups within transactional territories formed by systems of market exchange and political ranking. Lineage and clan leaders among tribal groups, merchant patriarchs from distant places, travelling artisan headmen, nomadic chiefs, and military commanders from virtually any background could form alliances with locally dominant caste patriarchs based not on their caste ritual rank but rather on the mutual recognition of their respective patriarchal powers. Heads of households and heads of state could negotiate as patriarchs because they could rely on one another to command the labour and allegiance, assets and loyalty of their kinfolk. This produced trust, confidence, and stability in transactions that relied upon payments in the future for promises in the present, whether loans, contracts, or agreements to pay taxes in return for entitlements to land.

Patrimonial entitlements thus defined property rights and powers over labour independently of the rituals of caste and temple worship; and transactions that formed proprietary entitlements also produced state revenues as well as profits and capital for the market economy. Medieval inscriptions depict very complex market transactions, and in many cases temple donations also represent tribute. In payments of tribute, conquerors, kings, and financiers took payments from local patriarchs in transactions that constituted ranks of patriarchal entitlement. Routines of tribute collection became systems of taxation as they became routinised and acquired ideological legitimacy in agrarian cultures as instruments for transactional ranking and entitlement. Within the rituals of taxation, *dharmā*, markets, and conquest, patrimonial property became securely established as a foundation for agrarian authority.

As disparate groups with different backgrounds settled in agrarian territory and worked with one another over generations, they developed complex etiquettes of rank, deference, and residential segregation, expressed in housing, personal habits, marriage, clothing,

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language, ritual, literature, and cuisine. Agrarian societies were not conceptualised by their participants as being composed of *jatis* working within a unified ritual order of caste ranking or *dharma*; so there is no 'caste system' described in the records of medieval agrarian communities. Creating a system of ranks to include all participants in any local society was actually beyond the scope of *dharma*. The adaptive and inclusive capacities of temple and caste ritual could not keep pace with the expansive diversity of agrarian social space. Local societies came to include not only Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Muslims, Christians, and tribals, but also many groups who did puja but were excluded from temples, who observed ritual ranks among themselves but were excluded from the territories controlled by dominant agrarian castes. Vast open space and towns sprouting up here and there allowed many groups to establish settlements with their own local rules of ranking and alliance, within which they lived and from which they engaged in social relations of great importance to their livelihoods with groups elsewhere who followed different rules of ranking. Settlements of people who followed mutually incompatible systems of ranking could not relate to one another on the basis of either ranking system; and transactions among such groups included barter, exchange, employment, patronage, alliance, conquest, and subordination. *Dharma* could not define this kind of transactional territory, but patriarchs could always represent their own people in relations with others. Genealogies that begin with founding patriarchs produced legitimate authority for the headmen of prominent families, for community leaders, for village elders, and for the family heads who were members of village councils called *panchayat* or *shalish*. Thousands of little social groups occupied and partitioned agrarian space and acquired names and genealogical histories as they interacted with one another. Some became part of a caste structure in agricultural settlements, but many stood apart. Many hunters, tree cultivators, herders, fisher folk, harvesters of the forest, merchants, artisans, miners, diggers of tanks and wells, tribal groups, and peasants formed their own little ethnic communities outside territories of dominant caste authority. Their headman patriarchs represented these groups in their relations with one another and received recognition and entitlements as the natural leaders of their communities.

The politics of patriarchy also propelled a medieval transition that came with the second millennium. From the eighth to the thirteenth

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century, patrilineal warrior clans with backgrounds in pastoral nomadism conquered farming communities all across south, central, and south-west Asia. In the vast territories of the warrior clans, competition by junior members and collateral branches propelled expansion and conflict. Marriage formed ranks and alliances among all the warrior lineages, and when warriors did marry into agrarian communities they formed new ranks in which the sons of kings remained superior to the sons of the soil. In the early centuries of the second millennium, Ghaznavids, Ghorids, Khaljis, and Tughluqs expanded into lowland territories of military competition among Yadavas, Calukyas, Paramaras, Sisodias, and others. These specialised, warrior groups had much in common. They unified their own forces by kinship and ritual practices that formed extensive family ties. They made alliances by marriage. They conquered farming groups to rule and protect them. They lived in fortress towns and formed an elite stratum ranked above the kin networks of farmers. They formed hierarchical alliances among superior and inferior families, lineages, and clans. Their family ranks within military hierarchies allowed for strategic calculations in political hypergamy. They gave 'subaltern' a distinctive meaning: subalterns among warrior clans were junior patriarchs in the ranks of lineages and dynasties. A son born to a ranking lineage member inherited a family position that provided a specific set of options for the ranking of his own family as the son became a patriarch himself. Alliances gave subaltern families leverage in their struggles to maintain and to improve their position. Becoming a subordinate ruler raised the subordinate family's rank in relation to peers and competitors. Accumulating subordinate patriarchs (*samantas*) under one's own authority was the very definition of a king. Among the warrior clans, daughters married up – to express the subordination of a patriarch and to seek upward mobility for the family – and sons married down, to express the superiority of a patriarch by the stature of his allied subalterns. Patriarchal polygamy expanded the possibilities of subordinate alliance-building, as women became hostages to fortune and some became the mothers of kings. In these settings, *pardah* (female seclusion) and *sati* (widow immolation) became auspicious expressions of female purity, piety, devotion, and heroism. Strength and sacrifice sustained one another. In the political institutions formed by competitive alliances among warrior patriarchs, subordination was a moment of power in which all alliances were built

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upon measurable inequalities of rank. Dominance rested upon extensive alliances with subalterns whose movement up in ranks often meant challenging superiors in war. War and marriage, militarism and family ties, rank and alliance, negotiation and resistance – all together formed patriarchal power in the warrior clans.

Dharma could not produce stable alliances among these groups, because warring medieval patriarchs invoked the names of many different gods in prayer, and the rituals of war gave losers the option of moving out to look for other farmers and warriors to conquer. Moving out from Central Asia, Turk and Afghan warrior clans pushed Rajputs down the Ganga basin, into high mountain valleys and into the central mountains; and they pushed Telugus up the Tungabhadra basin toward Vijayanagar, and Telugu Nayakas into the Tamil country. In all the regions of later medieval warrior competition, marital and martial techniques of social ranking provided a cultural basis for new, sultanic regimes. Rathore Rajputs married daughters to sultans before Akbar's time, and almost all the great Rajput patriarchs would marry into the Mughal nobility, strengthening Mughal power and opening wide avenues for mobility and advancement for Rajput clans, and at the same time opening a status division between rising Rajput nobility and lesser Rajput and Thakur lineages. One Rathore princess married Prince Salim. He became Jahangir and she bore a son who became Shah Jahan, as lesser Rajputs lineages declined. In the eighteenth century, Qazi Muhammad Ala said that ordinary chiefs (*rausa*) 'are now called *zamindars*'.¹⁷

In late-medieval times, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, new institutions of patriarchal ranking evolved; they formed a cultural context of sultanic secularism, which contained many kinds of canon, idioms of ritual, and moral systems under the umbrella of sultanic authority. Sultans rose above all patriarchs. Their regimes compiled the small agrarian territories of the early-medieval period into regional forms with distinctively early-modern characteristics. By the seventeenth century – most dramatically in Maharashtra and Punjab – alliances among imperial, military, fiscal, and agrarian patriarchs produced regional patriarchies. Great patriarchs like Shivaji and Guru Nanak formed the basis for regional identities of a new kind. Rights of first possession expanded metaphorically to include collective rights

¹⁷ Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, p. 149.

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for all the people of the dominant castes assembled under a great patriarch to rule their homeland. This early formation of territorial and ethnic nationality emerged from the expansive powers of patriarchal authority produced under sultanic regimes as it absorbed intense attachments to the land among dominant caste farm families and local conquest regimes.

When Rajputs and Mughals married, they tied together two traditions of patriarchal power which, though expressed in different spiritual idioms, had basic commonalities that formed a coherent logic of ranking, competition, and alliance. Mughal sultans became apical agents and icons of ranking for all patriarchs below. In the Mughal regime, mosque, temple, or church could mark communities of sentiment; sacred genealogies could be reckoned from Rome, Palestine, Arabia, or *Aryavarta*, because the Mughal institutions of patriarchal power – within which patriarchs ranked one another and held patrimonial entitlements – superseded and encompassed the ideology of *dharmā*. No religion constrained a sultan's power to confer rank on subordinates. A sultan's status arose from rituals of conquest and entitlement whose authority went back to the days of the Gurjara-Pratiharas. Sultanic power reached its height under the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman dynasties, but its logic was not contained by Islam. Hindu practitioners included not only the Rajputs but also the Rayas of Vijayanagar, who were in effect sultans of the south. The English East India Company used sultanic authority for its own Christian imperialism. Thus the expansion of Muslim dynastic power in South Asia should not be conflated with the expansion of Islam: the Mughal imperial system set itself apart from all its predecessors by making the rituals and conditions of patriarchal entitlement more agnostic than ever before.

Social ranks defined by Mughal imperial titles inflected the idioms of social rank almost everywhere in South Asia, influencing group identity subtly and pervasively. From village and caste headmen to hill chiefs, to merchants and bankers and artisans; and from Rajputs, and titled officers called *zamindar*, *nayaka*, *chaudhuri*, *ray chaudhuri*, *jagirdar*, *palaiyakkarar* (Poligars), and *raja* to all kinds of tax farmers – positions of leadership, authority, and political mediation in state institutions became focal points of social identity formation. Mughal entitlements and modes of patriarchal ranking entered family strategies of marriage alliance and thus influenced kin-group formation at many

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levels of society. In the Mughal system, patrimonial entitlements depended upon personal recognition by a superior patriarch under the authority of the sultan. In families, occupational groups, sectarian organisations, and caste and tribal societies, an officially recognised headman had to attain his status – at a price – in rituals of state. The darbar (sultan's court) became a centre of transactions that defined agrarian territories, locally and regionally, in the ranks of all the patriarchs. Moving down the ranks, superiors granted honours, titles, and entitlements to those below. Moving up the ranks, inferiors paid tribute, service, and allegiance to those above. State revenues were collected in return for honours and titles conferred by state authorities; and the increasing value of these revenues accumulated at the higher ranks as they fed the evolution of early-modern states. At the lowest echelons, peasant patriarchs paid for titles to land.

From 1500 onward, the agrarian utility and spread of money also increased along with supplies of precious metals and sultanic currencies. Money could buy a wider variety of entitlements to resources within disparate agrarian territories connected by systems of sultanic ranking that were open to participants of all sorts. Aggressive patriarchs bought and fought their way into positions of power in agrarian territories; they became military officers and revenue intermediaries entitled to collect local revenues from local headmen. A diffusion of imperial titles and ranks facilitated a broader commercialisation of the agrarian economy that was also propelled by the military integration of ecologically diverse agricultural territories and by increasing state demand for cash payments, as we will see in the next chapter. Buying titles and official positions of rank became a basic patriarchal strategy. This further accelerated a broad shift away from *dharmā*, caste, and Brahman ritualism as the most prominent means to secure assets in agrarian territories, though technologies of temple ritual also expanded their territorial reach under sultanic regimes. The pace of temple building and temple endowment accelerated steadily after 1500, as patriarchs with state entitlements and commercial assets sought additional resources through investments in temples.

Politically and socially, any group could be defined by its representation at court (darbar). Though temple and caste rituals extended their reach, darbari (courtly) dramas had wider powers of incorporation and entitlement. Transactions that defined agrarian territory came increasingly to focus on key people who provided states with revenue.

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Mughal revenues fattened the nobility and fuelled the war machinery, and, like other acts of submission, paying revenue constituted entitlements for patriarchs who paid to secure positions of power. Because revenue payments secured patrimonial property at every rank – right down to the lowest levels of the peasantry – it is understandable that a myth emerged among Europeans that the sultan owned all the land in India: who would counter this claim when all patriarchs held their property rights by submission to the Emperor? In this political culture, acts of resistance and rebellion were also acts of negotiation and strategic positioning. Patriarchs faced opposition all around – in the land, unruly nature; in the home, unruly women; in the fields, unruly workers; in the villages, unruly peasants; in the forests, unruly tribes; in the provinces, unruly *zamindars* and rajas – and negotiations among patriarchs always had to take into account resistance from below and demands from above. Patriarchal expectations for obedience and loyalty often met frustration. Many new, assertive identities formed around rebellious patriarchs who, like Shivaji, had official entitlements to represent ‘their people’ in transactions with higher authorities.

The Mughal regime brought more kinship groups under one system of ranking and military alliance than any before. All its constituent groups became designated by terminologies that in effect formed an ethnic typology. Ethnic identities, based on combinations of language, religion, and region, emerged dramatically among Rajputs, Marathas, and Sikhs, but also in many other places at lower registers. Competitive alliance formation raised the most powerful agrarian patriarchs up into the status of regional leaders. Shivaji inherited a *jagir* that his father obtained under Ahmadnagar and he continued the project of constructing a multi-*jati* Maratha warrior-farming elite by acquiring titles from other sultans in the Deccan. Over several generations, in a long process of competitive alliance-building, conquest, and institutional formation, Marathas built a state that became deeply involved in the enforcement of family ranking and in regulating female behaviour, as warrior patriarchs set about defining Maratha territory and identity. The subsequent preoccupation of Maratha hagiographers with Shivaji as the ideal ruler not only reflects the capacity of Muslim states to nurture Hindu leadership, but, more importantly, it represents the creation of a semi-deified patriarchal icon around which new collective identities were formed, combining ethnicity, language, and religion.

The long-term interaction of family and statecraft produced geogra-

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phical patterns in regional styles of kinship within agrarian territories. Irawati Karve once argued that more extensive and intensive kinship territories typified the northern plains and southern peninsula, respectively, with Maharashtra being a bridge between the two,¹⁸ but Bina Agarwal's more detailed analysis of kinship practices and women's land rights reveals three broad zones of kinship in South Asia. In each zone, kin groups form distinctive types of territory and regions are characterised by the prevalence of the kinship strategies pursued by prominent land-owning groups, most importantly dominant castes. The position of women is a critical feature of these kinship and territorial regimes.

- (1) The north-east high mountains, the southern peninsula, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.
'In all of these, women marry either in their natal villages or in nearby ones, and close-kin marriages are preferred. There is no adherence to purdah, and the overall control of female sexuality is less than in other parts of the subcontinent. Women's labour force participation varies between medium and very high.'
- (2) The western plains and northern basins.
In Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, 'village endogamy is typically forbidden, marriages are often at some distance from the natal village (especially among the upper-caste land owning communities), close-kin marriages are usually taboo, purdah is practised, control over female sexuality is strict, and women's labour force participation rates are low'. Though in Pakistan and Bangladesh, 'village endogamy and close-kin marriages are permitted, and women's inheritance rights are endorsed by Islam . . . female seclusion practices negate these advantages to a significant degree'.
- (3) The central mountains, Maharashtra, and West Bengal.
'Village endogamy is not common but neither is it usually forbidden, and women in many communities do marry within the village or nearby villages. Some communities do allow close-kin marriages. Purdah is practised in some communities and not others.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organisation in India*, Poona, 1953.

¹⁹ Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 368–9.

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Agarwal stresses that tribal kinship patterns, most prevalent today in the mountains, differ significantly from those in the agrarian lowlands, especially in the amount of sexual activity allowed for women outside marriage. Historically, groups called 'tribes' are *by definition* those that have been relatively isolated from lowland agrarian states in modern times and therefore distant from the enforcers of *dharmā*. Tribal groups interact with caste societies and economies but they have also been kept apart, especially in the tropical high mountains in the north-east. Agarwal notes that the prevalence of tribal communities in the central mountains and their territorial admixture with non-tribal communities creates the mixed character of her third kinship zone.

The broad division portrayed by Karve and Agarwal is between extensive and intensive strategies of kinship alliance, which appear to predominate according to the respective influence of warrior colonisation and territorial *dharmā* in pre-modern centuries. There is also an overlap between forms of kinship territoriality and the prominence of irrigated agriculture, rice cultivation, medieval inscriptions, and pastoral nomadism. In general, when we move from low-lying riverine tracts of the early-medieval gentry, where older inscriptions cluster, into drier areas dominated by warrior-farmers, we see a transition from more intensive to more extensive kinship practices. In this same transition, we see a shift in the gendered substance of patriarchal power. Matrilineal descent was prevalent only in Agarwal's first zone, which also contains territories of intensive kinship where women live within a small circle of kin for their whole lives. By contrast, in extensive kinship regimes, women pass between distant kin groups as icons of family honour and agents in marital alliances. Maharashtra contains both kinds of kinship territory, and also transitions not only between tribal hills and caste lowlands but between coastal regions of more intensive medieval wet farming and interior regions of more extensive dry farming. So Maharashtra is not so much a transition zone between cultures of the north and south, described by Karve, as a mix of practices that characterise different types of agrarian territory. A separation of irrigated lowlands from dry uplands also divides coastal Andhra from its interior and the Kaveri basin in southern Karnataka from the Deccan; and more intensive kinship patterns usually pertain in the wetter regions. In general, the distribution of more intensive forms of kinship even today coincides with that of

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more intensive farming in pre-modern centuries. Extensive regimes, like warrior power, spread widely over time. Extensive kinship strategies concentrate today in territories which have more pastoral nomadism and warrior colonisation in their agrarian history. In Maharashtra, Bihar, Bengal, Bangladesh, and elsewhere, extensive warrior patterns of kinship were imposed upon more intensive local strategies, creating elite alliances and models of status which diffused downward like the powers of *dharma*. Extensive kinship patterns would have helped to extend the agricultural frontier in the east, and more intensive kinship forms perhaps developed in old pastoral areas that became characterised in modern times by more intensive irrigated farming, especially in Punjab. A mixing of kinship forms occurred everywhere with the rampant migratory resettlements of the early-modern period. In the Tamil country, Telugu warriors settled tracts between river valleys and some have retained extensive kinship strategies and even observed *purdah* until recently.

Despite all the imperfections in the fit between old farming regimes and kinship, we can see that intensive kinship alliance-building is a good strategy for protecting family property in local communities and territories. Family alliances that formed the local gentry also produced the funds and controlled the labour which built up early-medieval irrigation and paddy cultivation. Patriarchs sought to control contiguous territories for the expansion of succeeding generations. Marriages formed dense links among dominant families, who became related to one another like their paddy fields, as sustenance flowed from one family to another and from one generation to the next. Families partitioned social space into contiguous kinship territories, which became more diverse by the inclusion of new groups into *jatis* and by the fissioning of lineages, but retained an intricately kin flavour. In riverine lowlands, kinship stressed local alliances among families and formed intricately graded ranks within gentry strata. Families maintained a genealogical sense of descent from medieval kings, but domestic patriarchy concentrated on markers of status within local communities. The marriage of sons and daughters was normatively contrived within finely graded social strata, within close proximity to the natal village, and within an existing nexus of family ties. Agricultural communities and regions were organised around webs of intensive, intersecting family alliances. On the Tamil coast, it would not be uncommon for people to be related to one another in several ways at

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once, as a result of cross-cousin marriages over generations. The language of family permeated all the institutions of agrarian patrimony, as the meanings of *pangu*, *pangali*, *kulam*, *nadu*, and *nattar* attest. Institutionalised among dominant castes, the intensive pattern of kinship and its idioms of village share-holding also became typical among agricultural workers and other groups in irrigated regions of the medieval era. In this setting, appropriate female decorum is a community as well as a family concern. Husband and wife are most often reckoned as kin from birth, sharing the same agrarian home-space. A wife's devotion to her husband does not need to conflict with loyalty to her father; and, though she leaves her father's house at marriage, she in effect never leaves home. Migration brought similar types of family networks into being in nested agglomerations of family ties that came to characterise the paddy-growing lowlands.

In the dry territories of nomadism and in domains of conquest colonisation, by contrast, and particularly among warrior colonisers such as the Rajputs and Jats, a woman's transition from daughter to wife came to mean moving into the household of a stranger whose superiority to her father was dramatised in the marriage itself. Patriarchal strategies of marriage alliance designed for upward mobility put women in a difficult, intermediary position, as marriage helped to extend lineage power out over territory in a pattern like that of the banyan tree. Expressions of family power focused on the wife as the icon of her family's honour and rank. Multiple marriages expanded the power of a great patriarch, his wives being ranked as representatives of their fathers. A woman's devotion to her in-laws always conflicted in principle with loyalty to her parents and siblings. Personal, intimate, ritualised expressions of devotion to her husband as opposed to her father were built into the disciplinary activities particularly of her mother-in-law, who had survived this same transition. But the status of wife and mother in a superior family could also open up new opportunities for her natal kin and their offspring; so that serving her husband would most likely be her father's most fervent desire, because pleasing her husband would be the best way to improve her natal family's prospects. *Purdah* and *sati* became particularly widespread as auspicious expressions of female purity, sacrificial devotion, sacred heroism, and divine power. Extreme controls over female sexuality enhanced family honour in a culture of heroic sacrifice and harsh discipline. *Sati* became divine at landmarks of

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heroism which marked warrior territory. Forts and palaces enshrine the valour of great men. Perched high above Ajmer on a rocky mountain ledge, Prithvi Raj Chauhan's fort has today become an icon of militant Hindu nationalism. At Mandu, it is said, hundreds of palace women became *sati* as the sultan marched his troops to death in battle. At Mandore, in 1459, Rao Jodha 'took an extreme step to ensure that the new site proved auspicious' by burying alive one Rajiya Bambi in the foundations of the new fort, promising that 'his family and descendants would be looked after by the Rathores'.²⁰

²⁰ Dhananjaya Singh, *The House of Marwar*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 33.

CHAPTER 3

REGIONS

In the fourteenth century, South Asia became a region of travel and transport connecting Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. This redefined the location of all its agrarian territories. In the wake of the Mongols, overland corridors of routine communication extended from the Silk Road to Kanya Kumari and branched out to seaports along the way. Connections among distant parts of Eurasia became numerous and routine. New technology, ideas, habits, languages, people and needs came into farming communities. New elements entered local cuisine. People produced new powers of command, accumulation, and control, focused on strategic urban sites in agrarian space. By 1600, ships sailed between China, Gujarat, Europe, and America. Horses trotted across the land between Tajikistan and Egypt, Moscow and Madurai. Camels caravaned between Syria and Tibet, Ajmer, and Agra. A long expansion in world connections occurred during centuries when a visible increase in farming intensity was also reshaping agrarian South Asia. In the dry, interior uplands, warriors built late-medieval dynasties, on land formerly held by pastoralists and nomads; and sultans established a new political culture, whose hegemony would last to the nineteenth century. Slow but decisive change during late-medieval centuries laid the basis for more dramatic trends after 1500, when agricultural expansion accelerated along with the mobility and the local agrarian power of warriors and merchants. Regional formations of agrarian territory came into being, sewn together by urban networks, during a distinctively early-modern period of agrarian history, whose patterns of social power, agricultural expansion, and cultural change embrace the empires of Akbar and the East India Company.

FRONTIERS

As we have seen, early-medieval farming concentrated production, population, and political power in lowland riverine sites where perennial drainage and predictable rains supported intensive land use,

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stable food supplies, Brahmans, temples, and kings. From Mauryan times onward, wells, dams, channels, and tanks (walls of earth and stone built across routes of drainage to irrigate the land below) marked sites across the northern basins, the eastern coastal plains, and northern Sri Lanka. After the Guptas, inscriptions indicate that irrigation building accelerated in all these areas and that it reached a crescendo in the thirteenth century, which corresponds with the rise and peak of medieval dynasties, temple building, and epigraphy. By 1100, inscriptions indicate that wet and dry cultivation were expanding into new areas. This did not involve major technological change but did alter the geography of agriculture significantly. On the whole, it seems, sedentary farmers preferred to clear drier land – which could be irrigated by various means, most prominently by wells – rather than pioneering in densely forested tropical foothills and high valleys. Intensive agriculture expanded into the drier up-river and interfluvial lands much more rapidly than into heavily wooded hills and tropical jungles. In the process, pastoral nomadism was displaced and its human and animal resources steadily absorbed into agrarian societies, which thereby enhanced their abilities to engage in long-distance trade, use dry land productively, and make war. The proportionately greater influence of formerly pastoral peoples in agrarian societies in the dry interior – from Kabul and Punjab down to the southern Deccan – became a major mark of their cultural distinctiveness.

Tribal communities had a huge world mostly to themselves in tropical and subtropical jungles full of wild animals, wood, fruits, herbs, spices, and many other items for local use and trade in the high mountains, central mountains, and Western Ghats. We have no statistics, but the population and land area committed to shifting, swidden plots – ‘slash-and-burn’ cultivation, called *jhum* in many areas, but also *bewar*, *marhan*, etc., and practised in a great variety of ways – surely must have increased over the centuries. *Jhum* was the first kind of cultivation to influence forest growth in the eastern Ganga basin, Bengal, and the central mountains, and in many places, the only kind until the nineteenth century. *Jhum* sites formed territories of rotating cultivation over expanding stretches of forest and they supported complex systems of exchange and interaction among different kinds of agrarian societies. The social formation of *jhum* and of permanent field cultivation, respectively, came to be characterised by the contrast between caste and tribal societies and, eventually,

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between hills and plains; the two systems maintained their social distance and otherness, even as they interacted and overlapped. Sedentary farmers tended, in the long run, to usurp tribal territories, however, and in a broad sense these two forms of agrarian society were in competition for land, labour, and natural resources. Well into the nineteenth century, this competition was usually invisible, because *jhum* cultivators could move further afield as farmers encroached upon the forest, moving onto land already clear for *jhum*. In 1885, when W. W. Hunter, as Director-General of Statistics in British India, sent a circular to district officers to ascertain techniques of 'land reclamation', he received responses that describe the interaction of peasant and tribal cultivators in Maldah, Gonda, and Nimar, which lie on the eastern, northern, and western rim lands of the central mountains. Typically, the Maldah collector said of Santals: "Their habit is to clear the jungle and then make the land fit for cultivation. As soon as they have done this they sell their holdings to Muhammadan cultivators and spend the price of it in feasting and drinking and move to clear new pieces of land."¹

Sedentary agrarian society – especially landlords, overlords, and financiers – did not always pay for the land, of course, and encroachments into tribal land did cause conflict in medieval times. As we have seen, many inscriptions depict the conquest and absorption of tribal cultivators by sedentary communities. But, as long as forest lands remained in abundance, *jhum* cultivators could move away, deeper into the jungle. In general, this involved relocations at higher elevations, up the slopes away from advancing lowlanders; and eventually tribal societies were confined predominantly to mountain forests.

In 1798, Francis Buchanan described *jhum* cultivation near Chittagong, and its moving borderland with rice farming on the coastal plain:

During the dry season, the natives of these places cut down to the root all the bushes growing on a hilly tract. After drying for some time the bush wood is set on fire, and . . . as much of the large timber as possible is destroyed . . . The whole surface of the ground is now covered with ashes, which soak with the first rain, and serve as manure. No sooner has the ground been softened by the first showers of the season than the cultivator begins to plant. To his girdle he fixes a small basket containing a promiscuous mixture of seeds of all the different plants raised

¹ Dietmar Rothermund, 'A Survey of Rural Migration and Land Reclamation in India, 1885', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 4, 3, 1977, 233.

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in Jooms. These plants are chiefly rice, cotton, Capsicum, indigo, and . . . fruits. In one hand the cultivator then takes an iron pointed dibble with which he strikes the ground, making small holes . . . Into these holes he with his other hand drops a few seeds . . . as chance directs, and leaves the further rearing of the crop to nature.²

Buchanan goes on to say that perennial farming along the Chittagong lowlands had not supplanted *jhum*, and that some paddy fields were so new that they were still pocked with huge tree stumps. In the mountains, he reported *jhum* to be the only cultivation. The cultural contrast between hills and plains people emerged for him starkly in the fact that highland farmers were not Muslims; they worshipped what Buchanan called a form of Shiva. This indicates a more general pattern: hill peoples developed sophisticated agrarian territories in highland forests and jungles where they remained culturally independent of the agrarian lowlands. This was true in the mountain borderlands of the Deccan as well, where forest rajas ruled the land until they were uprooted by warriors and farmers under the Maratha regime.³

In the 1880s, *jhum* land was still being steadily converted into permanent cultivation all around the vast expanse of the central mountains. All along the northern basins, permanent farming communities seem to have moved much more slowly into the tropical forests than into the drier plains and high valleys. The *A'in-i Akbari* indicates that, in 1595, high-quality rice was being grown on the banks of the Ghagar and Sarju rivers up to Dugaon and Bahraich, when wild elephants filled the land north of the Sarju, along the Rapti and Gandak, and around Gorakhpur. Paying bounty for wild elephants was still a significant item of state expenditure in Sylhet in the 1770s, and the village of Changel, in northern Bihar, was typical of that region in being 'settled' by permanent cultivation only in the eighteenth century. Farmers expanded wheat, pulse, and millet cultivation into the lightly wooded land in the western basin around Agra centuries before they cut down forests south of the Yamuna and in the uplands of the Gomati, which remained jungle in 1800. The drier west of the Ganga basin had many advantages. Not only was it easier to

² Francis Buchanan, 'An Account of a Journey Undertaken by Order of the Board of Trade through the Provinces of Chittagong and Tipperah in Order to Look Out for the Places Most Proper for the Cultivation of Spices, March-May, 1798', quoted in Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 236-37.

³ Sumit Guha, 'Forest Politics and Agrarian Empires: The Khandesh Bhils, c1700-1850', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 33, 2, 1996, 133-55.

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clear and plough, but plenty of land lay all around for animal grazing, and trade routes extended in every direction. Uplands were more attractive when they were more temperate, suitable for seasonal grazing, free of malaria, and strategically situated. Valleys into the high mountains of the Indus basin were prominent agrarian sites in ancient and early-medieval times. Taxila and Gandhara were core sites under the Mauryas. Kashmir, Kangra, and Champa have many medieval inscriptions. When the Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang visited Punjab in the seventh century, he did notice fertile land around towns in the upper doabs, but he described in more detail the splendid orchards and fields in submontane tracts and all along water courses in the hill valleys. The flatlands in the upper Punjab doabs do not seem to have been heavily farmed in the first millennium. The absence of inscriptions in what would later become the heartland of agrarian Punjab may explain its relatively low Brahman population and lack of Brahmanical cultural influence, as compared with Kangra and Champa. Early-medieval dry farming developed in Sindh, around Multan, and in Rajasthan, where the Persian wheel and step wells are attested by Kasyapa's *Krsisukti*. From here, Jat farmers seem to have moved into the upper Punjab doabs and into the western Ganga basin in the first half of the second millennium. We have noticed previously that the prehistoric Saraswati once ran into Rajasthan, and the surface desiccation and deepening of groundwater that are indicated by its disappearance seem to have continued to make the lower Indus basin and western plains increasingly drought prone across the first millennium. This would have encouraged Jats to move with their herds toward the hills, into western Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, to farm land where more water was within reach of their wells. Jat migrations would have accompanied a slow conversion of lineages from pastoralism to farming and the extension of Rajput conquest colonisation. All these trends combined to open new agricultural territories from Panipat to Sialkot along very old trade routes running from Kabul to Agra. By the sixteenth century, Jalandhar and Lahore were thriving towns surrounded by lush farmland. By this time also, behind the Salt Range, Paxton clans had moved down along the Kabul river to build farming communities around irrigation in the Peshawar valley.⁴

⁴ See Romila Thapar, 'The Scope and Significance of Regional History', in Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Hyderabad, 1978, pp. 361-77; and Robert Nichols, 'Settling the Frontier: Land, Law, and Society in the Peshawar Valley,

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Wheat lands expanded west of the Ganga and in Punjab doabs astride trade routes and around old trading towns where distinctively urban commercial and administrative groups were already prominent, above all Khattris. As farmland expanded in spaces between the plains and high mountains, new opportunities for trade arose at ecological boundaries, and this stimulated more commercially oriented production and processing. By the sixteenth century, tobacco, sugarcane, honey, fruits, vegetables, and melons fed Punjab commercial life, along with profits from sericulture, indigo, and all the elements of cloth manufacturing. Down river, Multan featured cotton, opium, and sugarcane. Similarly in Gujarat, where early-medieval farming seems to have clustered along rivers and trade routes that connected the Maurya heartland with the Persian Gulf, mixed irrigated and dry cultivation expanded into forests and plains, toward the mountains, again producing more ecologically diverse farm territories that stimulated more commodity production. In the sixteenth century, ship builders worked in Broach, Surat, Navsari, Gogha, and Daman; on the plains running up to the Vindhya, Satpur, and Aravalli, farmers grew sugarcane, fruits, and melons; and farms produced all the elements of cotton and silk cloth manufacture. As in Punjab, trade routes in Gujarat also ran across various territories endowed with complementary natural resources. More ecological diversity in farm territories encouraged commodity crop specialisation and a combination of agrarian activities developed that formed the basis for textile industries.

Along the coast from Gujarat south to Kanya Kumari and north-east to Bengal, the expansion of farm territories connected the sea and mountains, and sites along the coast were also connected to one another by water routes. Coastal territories collected commodities from forests, fisheries, and wet and dry farming, as intensive agriculture expanded inland. Ship building depended upon tall timbers from the uplands, and mountain products such as pepper and other spices were prime commodities for the overseas trade. From the twelfth century onward, farmers were also moving upland to clear dry lands and build new irrigation along the Kaveri, Krishna, and Godavari rivers. Like the Kongu region in the Kaveri basin – around Coimba-

1500–1900', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1997. This and the paragraphs below draw heavily on Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of Mughal Empire: Political and Economic Maps with Notes, Bibliography and Index*, Delhi, 1982.

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tore – the up-river tracts in Andhra, Maharashtra, and Berar were rich with black cotton soil. Dry farms in the interior combined with old farm societies along the irrigated coast to produce all the raw materials for the textile industry and to provide profitable sites for weaving. One community of weavers migrated from Saurashtra to set up operations in Madurai, and the mobility and versatility of many professional weaving communities in the peninsula came from their experience in the dry zones of military competition, trade, and agricultural expansion which tied together the black cotton soil of the upland interior and the corridors of the sea trade during late medieval centuries.⁵

In Bengal, dense tropical forests posed a formidable obstacle for farmers, and farming frontiers moved steadily south and east, deeper into the delta, as they also moved north-west into Chota Nagpur and north-east into the Brahmaputra basin. Gupta-era inscriptions appear at the top of the old delta in West Bengal. Pala and Sena epigraphy has a somewhat wider distribution in the lower delta. But before the fourteenth century, land grant inscriptions still concentrated on the relatively high ground to the north, east, and west of the low, deltaic flood lands. In the fourteenth century, the shift of the Ganga delta to the east encouraged farmers to move in that direction, but, in 1605, sites of Mughal documentation still clustered in the north and west, though they also extended to the Meghna river and clustered again around Dhaka. The expansion of cultivation from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century moved farming closer to the sea and into the mountains. It created a rich, expanding zone of interaction between sea lanes, mountains, and the northern basins, along the riverine highways.⁶

Everywhere, conquest colonisation added muscle to agrarian expansion. Pastoral and hunting peoples were conquered. Raja Bhoj built his massive tank near Bhopal in the eleventh century. The Kakatiyas made Telangana into land of tank irrigation in the thirteenth century; and one of their tanks, near Warangal, drains 80 square miles.⁷ In the fourteenth century, warriors from Afghanistan and Turkestan fought

⁵ Mattison Mines, *The Warrior Merchants: Textiles, Trade and Territory in Southern India*, Cambridge, 1984; Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Weavers, Merchants and States: The South Indian Textile Industry, 1680–1800', Harvard University dissertation, 1992.

⁶ B. M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, Tucson, 1970; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 17–27; Habib, *Atlas*, Map 11.

⁷ Cynthia Talbot, manuscript of chapter 4 of forthcoming book on medieval Andhra and

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their way into rapidly expanding agrarian territories and built rocky fortress towns in the uplands and dry plains which became new centres of coercive power along trade routes. Fort-cities arose at Kota (1264), Bijapur (1325), Vijayanagar (1336), Gulbarga (1347), Jaunpur (1359), Hisar (1361), Ahmedabad (1413), Jodhpur (1465), Ludhiana (1481), Ahmadnagar (1494), Udaipur (1500), and Agra (1506). Delhi began its long career. Accounts of famine, plague, and food scarcity also begin to multiply, clustered around new warrior capitals. Reports of death and distress indicate that disease also migrated across Eurasia and that hard human costs were paid for war. New dynasties increased population density in fortress and town in dry landscapes with erratic seasons and precarious water supplies; and deadly sieges, droughts, and disease led to the abandonment and destruction of numerous centres, grand examples being Vijayanagar and Fatehpur Sikri. Nonetheless, after 1300, major new urban sites became permanent and they marked a new kind of territoriality, which focused on the sultan's darbar. Regions of warrior power formed around capitals that became sites for the articulation of commerce, war, industry, and farming, and also of regional identities and *dharma*. Warrior states built roads and carried their demands for revenue across old divisions among agrarian territories; and they founded and protected sites of trade at ecological boundaries and along old trade routes. Most importantly, their conquests and demands for tribute connected the dry interior regions, coastal plains, and ocean ports; so they integrated agrarian spaces that ran up to the mountains and down to the sea, and these connections made agrarian territory more commercially active. Sultans also invested in the fertility of the land. When Firoz Tughluq built the Western Jamuna Canal along old riverbeds north of Delhi, he began a tradition of large-scale state investments in irrigation that would make his capital a model for a new kind of agrarian urbanism – a site for intersecting, often conflicting interests among warriors, farmers, and financiers, who all invested in agriculture on an increasingly commercial basis within the framework of institutions of state revenue collection.

⁴The Making of Andhradesh', South Asia Seminar presentation at the University of Pennsylvania, 29 October 1997.

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SULTANS

From the fourteenth century onward, it becomes increasingly relevant for historians to ask if state power was being used to coerce commercial cropping and if warriors were impoverishing peasants with increasing (and often violent) demands for revenue. Many historians have answered 'yes' to both questions, but some qualifications and further research are necessary. Certainly, subsistence-first farming strategies would have prevailed in peasant societies, but the idea was also prominent that agriculture can be profitable and provide state revenue at the same time. When peasants paid warriors, they certainly incurred a loss, but did they gain anything? There is a tendency to see late-medieval history in terms of war and conquest, but Ibn Battuta was perhaps as typical of the age as Khaljis and Tughluqs; and in the fourteenth century, though warriors did use force to collect taxes, there was also commercial revenue in farming communities over and above what would have been necessary to pay taxes. Ibn Battuta – like Abu-l Fazl and Hamilton Buchanan – viewed his world in commercial terms and, standing outside the state, he does not indicate that coercion was needed to generate commodities. At each stop in his journey, he observed everyday commercialism. 'Bangala is a vast country, abounding in rice,' he wrote, 'and nowhere in the world have I seen any land where prices are lower than there.' In Turkestan, 'the horses . . . are very numerous and the price of them is negligible'. He was pleased to see commercial security, as he did during eight months trekking from Goa to Quilon. 'I have never seen a safer road than this,' he reported, 'for they put to death anyone who steals a single nut, and if any fruit falls no one picks it up but the owner.' He also noted that 'most of the merchants from Fars and Yemen disembark' at Mangalore, where 'pepper and ginger are exceedingly abundant'. In 1357, John of Marignola, an emissary to China from Pope Benedict XII, also stopped at Quilon, which he described as 'the most famous city in the whole of India, where all the pepper in the world grows'.⁸ Though we inherit most commercial evidence from coastal sites, similar observations could have been made along trade routes that connected inland ecological zones where exchange economies thrived. In the more sparsely populated open spaces of the interior – away

⁸ M. S. Randhawa, *A History of Agriculture in India*, Delhi, 1986, vol. II, pp. 68–9.

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from the sea – forced revenue collections were part of war for participants on all sides, including peasants, who fled, fought, and farmed for subsistence or profit, as the season allowed. Inscriptions from the Tamil coast indicate that monetary instruments were being used to establish entitlements to agrarian assets by the ninth century; and over the centuries, as more families bought the materials for their own subsistence by exchanging goods and services, farmers sold more and more. Coercion did abound in agriculture, to be sure, but by the sixteenth century the militant Mughal tax machine forced its way into agrarian territories which already had active money economies and substantial commercial farming. The cotton textile economy gave even rugged warrior-peasants in black soil tracts an abiding interest in commodity production. Patriarchs in farming communities could secure their entitlements to land and labour by paying tribute, and under the Mughals, if not before, the revenue system itself had become a major source of agrarian profit. Commerce and taxation evolved together and supported one another in violent territories of agricultural expansion.

Trends that begin to assemble the elements of modern agrarian environments are sufficiently visible in the sixteenth century to justify using the phrase ‘early-modern’ for the period *circa* 1550–1850. Doing this simply highlights some particular features of historical change during this period, which are better documented from Akbar’s time onward, though some began much earlier, most importantly urbanisation. Abu-l Fazl mentions 180 large cities and 2,837 towns, and bigger cities embellished more powerful states. Urban sites had always accumulated various kinds of powers within agrarian landscapes but, after 1550, transactions that harnessed moving elements in agriculture were tied more extensively to darbars and markets. Hierarchies of central places also emerge more clearly from Mughal times onward. Cities that defined early-modern territories include Dhaka, Calcutta, Lucknow, Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Multan, Surat, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Madras, Cochin, and Trivandrum. Some elements that define modern cultural regions – linguistic, literary, ethnic, and religious – were already in place in 1500, but regions become more clearly institutionalised in the following centuries. Forts and armies created strategically dominant sites for stabilising regional cultures. First Devagiri and then Ahmadnagar, Aurangabad, Junnar, and Pune defined an emerging Marathi linguistic and cultural area

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within regional networks of peasant-warrior alliance and religious pilgrimage; and Marathas refer to *maharashtradharmā*, 'the *dharma* specific to Maharashtra'.⁹ By the seventeenth century, Warangal, Golkonda, and Vijayanagar redefined 'Andhra *desa*' as a land that included both the coast and the dry interior, which was called 'Telugu country' for the first time in the fourteenth century. The Hoysalas built a new, lasting centre of power in a new Kannada heartland at Dvarasamudra, named for its irrigation tank (Sanskrit = *samudra*) and poised above the Mysore plateau and the upper Kaveri basin.¹⁰ There is a telling eighteenth-century map in the British Museum that depicts Mughal territory as strings of urban sites connected by routes of transportation, running from Kabul to Bengal and Berar. In each central place, a Mughal official would have drawn a similar map in his mind to connect his own headquarters to all the towns subordinate to his authority . . . and so on down the line . . . down to little villages. Around these sites of accumulation and mobility, regional networks of agrarian territory took physical and institutional form in hierarchies of power, authority, and influence.

In 1790, East India Company officers drew identical maps of their own territories. This kind of linear, transactional, urban territoriality had an increasing impact on agrarian space from Akbar's time onward, and it provoked new forms of documentation to suit environments of inter-city mobility and communication. Inscriptions declined in number and significance. Portable paper documents dominate the historical record after 1550. The new records come not only from ritual sites but also from specialist accountants, surveyors, preachers, travellers, merchants, and tax collectors; and they are composed in many languages. These records touch upon agriculture over much wider spaces in more standard terms than did their medieval predecessors. They are concerned above all with trade and revenue. Though localised in detail, early-modern agricultural data can be compiled to form general impressions. The old inscriptional corpus represented an agricultural archipelago of core sites separated by empirically empty space; its transactions were disconnected from one another. Thus there is no compendium of inscriptional data that covers even a fraction of the area covered by Abu-l Fasl's *A'in-i-Akbari*. Early-modern states

⁹ Sumit Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 147, 1995, 101–27.

¹⁰ Cynthia Talbot, 'The Making of Andhradesh'.

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produced increasingly detailed, comprehensive data on the conduct of farming, during more widespread, regular, and financially complex state revenue transactions; and not only in Mughal domains. In Karnataka, 'black books' came into vogue for accounts in monastic and landlord estates. Local chronicles in Assam record the first manpower census in 1510, and Ahoms started a land survey in 1681.¹¹ In the seventeenth century, a number of different institutions – states, temples, monasteries, *waqf* endowments, businesses, and landed estates – generated texts to indicate that statistical accounts were becoming more popular in asset management. Mughal revenue and monetary records reflect a general rise of statistical accounting. The *A'in-i-Akbari* measured agricultural production, manufacturing output, and trade by the value of state revenues; it converts territory into exchange value. These accounts were disciplinary devices to track people and their obligations. Institutional accounts had been produced earlier, for specific transactions and endowments, as in the twelfth-century accounts of the Chola emperors who recorded all the costs and rights involved in royal temple construction. Vijayanagar inscriptions use tabular statistics in the fourteenth century and later separate numbers from text in tabular accounts using standardised units of measure. By the sixteenth century, accounting, coinage, cash calculations, commercial entitlements, and tax discipline all travelled together among urban centres of state power. They produced new landscapes of knowledge and agrarian textuality as they organised territory into regions of value and hierarchy.

The *A'in-i Akbari* stands alone, however. It did not become a template for imperial accounts and seems never to have been up-dated or replicated. Personal devotion to Akbar motivated Abu-l Fazl, and Akbar ruled a personal empire as he moved among its urban centres. His domain was transactional, built upon personal alliances, and, however wide spreading, it never produced a revenue bureaucracy. Our documentation concerning seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revenue conditions actually improves in the late eighteenth century when the English East India Company did retrospective assessments. It seems that Mughal tax demands peaked under Aurangzeb but Company officials could not reconstruct a good record of taxation

¹¹ Amalendu Guha, 'The Medieval Economy of Assam', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 1982, p. 485.

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before 1700. It is reasonable to conclude that recorded rates of taxation which we find dating back to the *Arthashastra* and running down to 1700 – including the *A'in-i-Akbari* – represent normative guidelines for official activity more than accounts of regularised assessments and collections. This is not to say that taxes were not collected or assessed with any regularity – medieval inscriptions are replete with tax accounts – but rather that there was an empirical gap between *local* tax practices and *regional* documentation, which continued through the eighteenth century and which early-modern state officials worked hard to eliminate, including, no doubt, Abu-l Fazl. Eighteenth-century states produced substantial evidence to indicate that they were systematising agrarian taxation, and extending and regularising procedures which had been instituted under the Mughals. The *Risala-i Zira't* ['Treatise on Agriculture'], commissioned by the Company in 1785, describes a process of standardisation in regional revenue practice in Bengal which had been going on for perhaps fifty years; though state taxation and accounting were much older than this and though even this standardisation was probably more normative than regulatory.¹² The Company continued to standardise a revenue system, and its territories were defined as regions of official knowledge, regulated state income, and government authority. Maratha, Mysore, Sikh, and other regimes did the same.¹³ As the Company built its tax routines, it utilised ideas and techniques which had been practised and circulated among state intellectuals across Eurasia for several centuries, and Company intellectuals added some new ideas from England. Persian techniques for assessment, accounting, and granting entitlements moved through Mughal domains into Bengal and thus into Company blueprints for *zamindari* revenue settlements there. Mughal and European practices mingled in eighteenth-century Maratha territories, where they produced detailed village accounts, and Maratha practices travelled with Brahman accountants via Mysore and Hyderabad into Company survey and revenue offices in Madras.

¹² See Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, New Delhi, 1933, pp. 259–94.

¹³ This trend is not confined to South Asia. From about 1450 to 1830, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, France, Russia, and Japan 'all exhibit tendencies . . . toward political consolidation, administrative centralization, cultural integration, and social regulation. The dynamics underlying these developments are related to economic growth, military competition, accumulation of institutional expertise and intellectual support for political order.' Victor Lieberman, 'Transcending East–West dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas' (The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia, 1400–1800), *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3, 1997, 463–507.

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English debates about land revenue and land rights adapted old ideas from many sources to build colonial understandings of agriculture. Company intellectual practices drew upon many other regimes and its agrarian discourse was thus more distinctively early-modern and broadly Eurasian than narrowly British or even European.

Early-modern texts focus their attention on the power of absolute rulers and on the rights, titles, and obligations of ranked individuals in revenue transactions that delivered agrarian wealth into the treasury. Early-modern *imperial* taxation, as it affected most villages, seems in general to have been more in the nature of tribute, being coerced, irregular, and arbitrary. *Taxation* itself was ancient, going back to the Mauryas. But imperial taxation had never been widely routinised, legitimised, and integrated within *local institutions* that contained most tax transactions until the late eighteenth century. Inscriptions indicate that early-medieval agrarian territories were defined transactionally by various transfers of wealth among farming localities through state officials, merchants, and temples. Transactions between villages and kings secured local entitlements, and these are the main business for many inscriptions. Payments for local goods and services and the transfer of local entitlements generated income for local gentry; and they in turn paid *samantas* and *rajas* to maintain their own local authority. Such payments by local leaders to secure local entitlements increased steadily after 1300. The Mughal imperial system collected wealth from a great many localities through powerful intermediaries – *zamindars* and *rajas* – as Mughal *jagirdars* inserted themselves militarily into existing territories of payment-for-entitlement. Empire evolved as a many-layered cake of authority and entitlement.¹⁴ The people at the top did not have much to say about what went on at the bottom. They focused rather on funnelling more wealth to the top and on regulating transactions above the ranks of *raja* and *zamindar*. Mughal records never did dig below the level of *zamindars* or keep track of payments moving up the hierarchy from villages and towns, to regional centres, to the imperial capital. Eighteenth-century states developed this capacity. Records from Maratha, Sikh, and Company capitals enumerate local payments-for-entitlement and could track payments to regional authorities; and some regional authorities could

¹⁴ This phrase comes from Richard Danzig, 'The Many Layered Cake: A Case Study of Reform of the Indian Empire', *Modern Asian Studies*, 3, 1, 1969, 57–96.

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even regulate local systems. But such local administrative powers in wide-spreading revenue transactions were tenuous and eighteenth-century wars made them more costly to maintain. Before 1800, it seems, Marathas did the most local administrative regulation. The Company's Native State treaties and early *zamindari* settlements continued the conventional practice of collecting revenue through intermediaries who were granted open-ended local authority in return. This kept down central costs of imperial administration and it also had the advantage of rewarding subordinate allies with the incentive to raise the value of their own territories, and thus to expand the extent of their own revenue collections. It was only after 1800 that Sikh and Company regimes developed the power to regulate the activity of subordinate authorities in local systems of payment-for-entitlement.

The Mughals provided a basic vocabulary for this early-modern state project. Mughal terminology spread widely to designate ranks and terms of revenue payment. That regional norms for taxation and entitlement were coming into vogue during the eighteenth century is suggested by the frequency with which ideas such as 'illegal exactions' appear in revenue disputes. This idea reflects a discourse of disputation, resistance, and critique concerning contested rights and entitlements in the revenue ranks. The various regional systems display similarities that derive from pervasive Mughal influence. What the Company called a revenue 'farm' was a contract to collect taxes from a specific territory in return for a share of collections; and this was considered an irregular if not immoral arrangement almost everywhere. It was considered to be a degraded practice because Mughal rules stipulated that taxes be fixed and collected not by speculators but rather by ranked officers at official rates. Taxes were to be collected within a *fasli* year. From a Persian term for 'crop' and 'cropping year' the Mughal *fasli* year ended with the last tax payment from the last winter crop (however small), in mid-April. Other important terms in the revenue lexicon – *jagir*, *zamin*, *rai'yat*, *inam*, *watan*, and *miras* – were attached to official revenue roles and personalities. The holder of a *jagir* (*jagirdar*) was a state official who collected revenue from a large territory to pay the emperor. This role defined the Mughal nobility and provided leadership for regional successor states. A *zamindar* paid revenue to a *jagirdar* and received revenue in turn from *rai'yats*. When Anglicised in the Company's revenue discourse, 'zamindar' and 'ryot' were understood to represent not only roles in

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the revenue system but also types of property rights in land; and they were translated as 'landlord' and 'peasant', respectively.

The Company's big agrarian debate concerned the practice of collecting revenue from zamindars and thus confirming their entitlements. Company officers found an alternative procedure only after 1792, when they broke into dry territories which had been pioneered by warrior-peasants in the late medieval period. Here, in Kongu and Rayalaseema, the Company acquired territory in which Mysore sultans had broken into the local nexus of payment-for-entitlement and thinned the ranks of zamindars. Maratha and Sikh regimes did much the same, but in most of the Ganga basin and Bengal, along the coast, and in the hills, the title 'zamindar' had been attached to rajas, lineage leaders, and tribal chiefs who were deeply entrenched locally; or it had been acquired by financial middlemen, revenue farmers, and warrior entrepreneurs. Because Company officers believed that the Mughals had managed an imperial bureaucracy, they looked for one traditional, authentic 'native' practice which assigned specific entitlements to each peasant or tenant, but they found many instead. Over time, other terms for 'farmer' or 'peasant' – such as *kisan* (Hindi) and *krishak* (Bengali) – entered the Company's lexicon by identification with *rai'yat* and also came to be translated as 'tenant' in *zamindari* areas. This set of terms has caused endless confusion ever since, because Company officials defined each rank in the revenue hierarchy as a kind of property right and failed to situate each term in its local context, where it had meaning in practice. British officers did not know that they were dealing with an agrarian world bigger and more varied than Europe; their analysis was geared rather to the scale of England or France. But, as empire builders, they were determined to create firm bureaucratic, legal definitions for these terms; and to this end they made their official definitions and projected them back into history to fabricate authentic native practices, based on classical tradition. In actual agrarian societies, a *rai'yat* (ryot) could be a gentry high-caste landowner who used servile labour to cultivate his fields or a landlord, or a tenant, or a self-cultivating, independent warrior-peasant. Similar variations in social content obtained for all the official revenue roles which were codified bureaucratically in the regions of Company administration.

The terms *inam*, *watan*, and *miras* represent important features of early-modern systems of payment-for-entitlement. These were heredi-

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tary rights to resources held by people of stature within local society; and they were bought, sold, accumulated, and otherwise deployed to build local (and sometimes wider) estates. Gifts of lands to temples and Brahmans became *inam* and *miras*, and often took the form of tax exceptions or privileged, low-tax, land rights. In Maratha regions, a *watan* was a bundle of rights to land, services, and tax payments, which defined agrarian nobility and gentry families in agrarian communities. These terms represent transactional entitlements in the complex of payments and obligations which formed alliances among elites at the local, regional, and imperial levels of authority. Company officials who were seeking to build an impersonal bureaucracy could see this kind of personal right to revenue only as a nuisance and as a violation of the principle that, in India, the emperor owned the land. But now we can see that early-modern states were composed of small agrarian territories whose old, local entitlements were being redefined as they were being incorporated into imperial hierarchies. These revenue systems entailed public, symbolic enactments of political ranking. State rituals at critical moments in the *fasli* year constituted authority, locally and regionally; and these rituals included payments that moved up the ranks to accumulate in capital cities. Subalterns in the revenue ranks paid superiors for entitlements in acts of ritual deference that formed power positions in agrarian territory; and some of the cash that travelled up the ranks came to be counted as state revenue.

Historians have focused attention on the wealth that accrued to the Mughal nobility and to the British Raj, but, as tokens of value travelled up the ranks, tokens of value also travelled down: money went up, entitlements came down. Transactions at low levels controlled most of the moving elements that mingled on the farm. Payments by family patriarchs confirmed their status in communities. Payments by the headmen of villages, *muhallas* (urban neighbourhoods), castes, and sectarian and occupational groups confirmed community identity and leadership. Payments to temples, dynasts, Brahmans, and community leaders confirmed farmers' rights to land, labour, water, and credit. In early-modern times, payments that came to be called 'taxation' or 'rent' (depending upon who received them) became increasingly complex, numerous, and necessary in farming communities. These transactional markers of subaltern status did not always involve paying cash – they could mean payments of goods and services – but,

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from Mughal times onward, local entitlements came to rest increasingly upon payments of cash that moved out of localities to join streams of revenue flowing into regional capitals. The *rai'yat* subaltern paid for powers over land and over people of lesser rank. The *rai'yat* – whether he farmed the land with his own hands or not – paid revenue which confirmed his status as a local patriarch in a local population of rate payers. In the rituals of revenue, states did not suppress or even undermine other kinds of power; indeed, the *sarkar* (ruler) depended upon the local powers of subalterns in the revenue ranks to realise the revenue. *Inam*, *miras*, and *watan* were some of the terms that marked local sites of transactional power. Personalities of influence and honour acquired these titles to build the local revenue foundations of early-modern states. This form of property eventually became archaic in modern bureaucratic regions of agrarian administration.

LAND

In the early-modern period, as more wealth became revenue, a distinctive political economy emerged at the articulation of state institutions and farming communities, during a gradual shift in material conditions and agrarian cultures. The land itself took on new meanings. The value of farmland became the measure of agrarian territory. Land taxation increased sharply under the Mughals, again in the eighteenth century, and again under the Company. The British increase was most dramatic if not the most violent or disruptive. After 1857, however, land revenue declined in real terms and also as a proportion of state revenue, though state power continued to increase. The Indian National Congress demanded an absolute reduction of the land tax, and after 1947 it fell below zero. State power still increased, but states now turned revenue back to farmers and state subsidies had surpassed land revenue by 1970. Uniquely then in the early-modern period, agrarian taxation funded many upward trends – in the power of state institutions, in the size and wealth of state elites, in urban populations, in monumental building, in artistic and ritual patronage, and in the speed and volume of communication and transportation (including the railway) – all of which were sustained by payments to the state from agriculture. At the same time, state institutions defined entitlements on the farm more widely and forcefully. From 1556 to 1860, struggles to collect revenue and to enforce state power over land

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rights produced rampant warfare; and the rising real value of land revenue financed Mughal imperial grandeur, rebellions against the Mughals, eighteenth-century wars, and British conquest. Historians have explained the rising revenue trend primarily as a consequence of state action, and military coercion, in particular, has been assigned a central role. Agrarian factors need more consideration.

By 1600, the accumulation of wealth on major routes made strategic sites well worth fighting for. Defending, ruling, protecting, and taxing central places became more valuable and contentious as cities and towns came to include a higher proportion of liquid assets generated by trade, manufacturing, and revenue transactions. Taxes collected in town, like the food and cloth in the market, reflected the character of agrarian territory. Urban officials and merchants drew upon the wealth of the land, and what the East India Company would call 'land revenue' actually included taxes on a variety of assets. As we have seen, rights to land were not just powers over dirt; they formed membership and rank in farming communities and represented a family's entitlement to community resources. Payments-for-entitlement were thus constituents of agrarian society and tools of territoriality. The meaning of 'taxation' changed radically in the nineteenth century but, before 1850, the land whose tax value increased so sharply certainly did include its old community constituents. In retrospect, it was quite sensible then for the British to think of payments that marked *agrarian territoriality* as being a state charge for rights of *land ownership*, because the people who had titles in territory made payments-for-entitlement to state officials. Weavers, merchants, iron-smiths, bankers, herders, and many others also paid taxes. But, except in larger urban settings, non-farmers seem to have paid for entitlements mostly through patriarchs at the apex of local society who were also official mediators in state revenue transactions – *rajas*, *zamindars*, *deshmukhs*, *patels*, village headmen, and the like. As agrarian sites became more valuable, the value of this role increased along with the price to be paid for performing it.

In the territories in which state taxation increased most dramatically – and left the best records – trade and urbanism were also enhancing the commercial value of land by stimulating demand for agricultural commodities. Indigo and other dyes, animal products, ginger, turmeric, tobacco, toddy and arrack, silk, grapes and melons, fruits and vegetables of all kinds, saffron, sugarcane, oilseeds and oils, peppers

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and spices, chillies, opium, pulses, rice, wheat, cotton, and palm and other tree products head the list of commercial crops that pushed up land values. Commodity production depended on farm assets that needed protection, not only irrigation works and wells but also trees, terraced fields, and processing equipment such as oil presses, Persian wheels, looms, and forges. Manufacturing increased at the same time, most prominently in textiles, and it is important to keep in mind that all the elements in textiles were agricultural products, so that all the labour that cleaned, spun, wove, dyed, washed, and carried the input and output of the textile trades also added value to farms. Expanding agricultural production increased demand for manufactures, from cooking pots and ploughs to houses, jewellery, and armaments. Direct and indirect commercial investments in agriculture – in manufacturing, irrigation, and commodity markets – increased along with investments in revenue finance, as military competition for taxation drove up the revenue value of farms in financial markets. Much of the liquid capital for agricultural expansion moved through the very same transactions that provided revenue. Temples invested in irrigation. Warriors and financiers advanced loans and granted revenue reductions to increase the stability, intensity, and market value of production. Advances to farmers came increasingly from state authorities who thereby sought to secure their own share of the crop. (These advances were called by various names, such as *taccavi* in Madras.) Remember the Mastee brothers. Their tale includes the assertion that they advanced cash to farmers to lure them to the new village. We will see that *zamindars* in Chittagong also advanced cash to expand farming. Urbanisation circulated capital from trade and manufacturing through various circuits of investment in farming. Investing in irrigation paid solid dividends, whatever the source of the capital, and we can see from medieval inscriptions and nineteenth-century British sources alike that the building and repairing of irrigation tanks relied on capital raised in a host of ways, including the use of temple funds. As the money supply increased after 1600, it pushed up the cash value of farm assets and taxes at the same time in communities endowed with commercial connections, commodity crops, irrigation, and investors. Land in these places became well worth protecting and paying to keep in the family.

Coercion and violence increased land revenue, but not only for state officials. Mughals fought for revenue, tax collectors fought for it, and the East India Company fought for it; but, as more people paid more

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for land, more people also fought back to resist claims from above and to expand local claims. Physical fighting distinguished the etiquette of early-modern payments-for-entitlement. Revenue transactions combined negotiation, ritual, status marking, gambling, entrepreneurship, and brute struggles. Fighting and paying for land became inescapable as agrarian space filled up, and subaltern resistance became more common as standing to fight and paying for rights became unavoidable. The option of flight into the forest became less and less attractive as open land for new settlement disappeared. By 1850, Bhisma's old adage had become archaic, because even wooded lands were no longer open space for escape and colonisation: states taxed them and communities controlled them. Creating such domains of local control involved a lot of fighting and paying for entitlements, as the vast, open frontiers of agrarian expansion which had characterised the medieval period closed down. Early-modern imperialism enabled agrarian communities to redefine local territoriality. Wide-spreading transactional hierarchies marked empires in which every level in the ranks took payments from below and all the ranks spread out to control more and more land. The many-layered cake of imperial revenue increased the total value of state income, funnelled more wealth to the higher levels, and also expanded the agrarian base. Land values rose with more competition. State officials added force to the extension of cultivation and to the appropriation of open land by local subordinates. Agricultural communities defined territory by enclosing the land, carving it up, fighting, and paying. Empty land vanished as landscapes filled up completely with territories of entitlement. Agricultural land came to include all the land for which communities made claims with taxes, rituals, battles, and lore.

Using *A'in-i-Akbari* statistics, Shireen Moosvi estimates that the gross cropped area in the Mughal heartland in the northern basins and western plains covered 61 per cent of the total land area that would be covered with farms in 1910.¹⁵ This temporal comparison is not exact because Mughal data – like all such data before 1870 – do not measure *cropped area* but rather *land in the revenue category* of 'cropped land'. Early-modern assessments measure not cultivation, crops, or yields, but rather a kind of land value in systems of payment-for-entitlement.

¹⁵ Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c.1595: A Statistical Study*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 39–73.

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With this in mind, it is still useful to note that Moosvi's ratios comparing figures for 1595 and 1910 run from an average of 85 per cent for Agra, Bet Jalandhar, Baroda, and Surat, to 29 per cent in Champaner and Rohilkhand, and down to 8 per cent in Sindh Sagar, indicating that much more of the land was being farmed in politically central, commercially well-connected parts of the Mughal domain, and that relatively *less* subsequent expansion of farmland was possible in core Mughal areas. Such core areas, pulsing with trade and manufacturing, provided most Mughal revenues. James R. Hagen argues that, in the lowlands and adjacent hills of the Gangetic basin and Bengal, roughly 30 per cent of the *total area* was occupied by farms in 1600. He estimates that this figure increased to 50 per cent in 1700, remained at 50 per cent in 1800, and rose to 65 per cent in 1910 and to 70 per cent in 1980. These estimates suggest that farm acreage expanded over 40 per cent of the total land area between 1600 and 1980, with half the increase occurring by 1700, another huge increase in the nineteenth century, and very little in the twentieth century.¹⁶ Much *more* expansion was possible after 1600 in naturally well-endowed areas that were *less* developed in Akbar's time. Outside Bet Jalandhar, for instance, the Punjab lowlands were barely cultivated in 1600, and in 1800 most land south of the hills remained open for grazing. Between 1850 and 1939, the government built 20,886 miles of canals in Punjab, and by 1945 canals irrigated 15,688,000 acres, much of it for more than one crop each year. Regional disparities in the pace and timing of agricultural expansion typify agrarian history and are critical for an accurate understanding of the agrarian content of modernity. As Punjab was booming, some old areas of agricultural prosperity were hitting a resource limit.

In 1595, outside Mughal territory, higher proportions of farmland to total arable would certainly have pertained in old core areas of riverine cultivation along the coast and in the Ganga basin. Moosvi's figures for Baroda and Surat probably reflect conditions in many parts of the coastal plains, especially along riverbeds and in the deltas, except in Bengal. As Hagen's estimate suggests, the overall increase in farmland would have been smaller in the eighteenth century, during wars, plagues, and famines that were particularly bad in the later

¹⁶ James R. Hagen, 'Gangetic Fields: An Approach to Agrarian History Through Agriculture and the Natural Environment, 1600-1970', Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, 1988.

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decades. Bengal took decades to recover from the 1770 famine. W. W. Hunter reported that 35 per cent of the total population and 50 per cent of the farmers died in that year, and that depopulation continued in later years amidst *zamindar* feuds to attract tenants to their estates. Decades of strong expansion seem to have preceded the famine, however, as indicated by a surge in temple building after 1730 by *zamindars* and businessmen.¹⁷ In the Krishna–Godavari and Kaveri deltas, late-eighteenth-century wars broke irrigation works, deprived tanks of repairs, and displaced communities, which took a lot of land out of cultivation; and all along the eastern coast the expansion of rice farming in the decades 1800–1850 involved the reclamation of old fields. In 1850, wide areas open for new cultivation did remain in Bangladesh, Assam, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sindh, and the western Ganga basin. New large-scale irrigation then produced new farmland in the Indo-Gangetic plains and in the deltas of the Kaveri, Krishna, and Godavari rivers. But, in territories that were heavily farmed in 1850, there was very little expansion thereafter, although even this incremental change would have further displaced hill peoples and forest ecologies in the central mountains, the high mountains, and the Western Ghats.

A rough summary of the overall trend begins with the impression that less than half of all the farmland in 1900 had been farmed in 1600. Though the oldest fields were ancient, most of the land being farmed in 1600 had come into cultivation during *eleven* centuries after 500. Over half of the farmland in 1910 was thus created during just *three* centuries after 1600. This implies a substantial increase in the pace of new cultivation. In 1800, dry and upland tropical areas were still sparsely farmed and held substantial populations of pastoralists and shifting cultivators. In the nineteenth century, dramatic increases occurred in dry cultivation, irrigation building, and forest clearance; and modes of resource scarcity and competition came into being which have continued to the present day. After 1850, agrarian unrest increased with competition over land, water, and rights amidst the final enclosure of farming frontiers. After 1880, ecological change and human dislocation caused by the expansion of farming concentrated in the higher altitudes and in the dry western plains. From 1880 to 1980,

¹⁷ Hiteshranjan Sanyal, 'Social Aspects of Temple Building in Bengal: 1600 to 1900 AD', *Man in India*, 48, 1968, 201–24.

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the highest rates of increase in the ratio of total farmland to total land area appear in Tripura (9.03), Sikkim (6.98), Nagaland (4.05), Assam (3.33), Rajasthan (3.26), Mizoram (2.88), Arunachal Pradesh (2.71), and Orissa (2.06). Low figures running from 1.03 to 1.22 appear in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Kerala.¹⁸ After 1880, agricultural expansion was very substantial (with new irrigation) in dry regions of Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat, Karnataka, northern Sri Lanka, and Sindh, and (with forest clearance) in all tropical uplands, including Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. But the most dramatic change in modern times has been on the farthest frontiers of medieval and early-modern agrarian territories, in the tropical high mountains and Assam. The colonisation and clearing of forests in these areas by people and states moving up from the lowlands accelerated under the Mughals and again under the British. Rapid acceleration began with the expansion of the railway, but it peaked only after 1950. The percentage of land under cultivation in the high mountains remains low even today, so that agricultural expansion at high altitude still has a long way to go. But the rapid proportional increase of farm acreage in the uplands, along with forest cutting for other purposes, helps to explain the rapid increase in conflict over mountain land in the twentieth century. A dramatic reduction of the high forest cover has produced a sense of crisis over the sustainability of mountain ecologies.

Demography and technology do not account for the upward pace of agricultural expansion after 1600. Population increase may have moved in harmony with trends in total farm *output*, but farm *acreage* moved ahead more rapidly than population. Rates of population growth rose after 1800 but jumped to their current pace only in the 1920s. Technologies did change in the late nineteenth century, when large irrigation works, railways, and road building opened up new areas to cultivation. But irrigation building moved along throughout the medieval and early-modern period, and irrigation tank and well digging led the expansion of farming in the peninsula after 1500, as recounted in the story of the Mastee brothers. Few new tanks were

¹⁸ This paragraph is based on calculations from district data compiled by John F. Richards and his colleagues for the period 1880–1980. See J. F. Richards and E. P. Flint (R. C. Daniels, ed.), *Historic Land Use and Carbon Estimates for South and Southeast Asia, 1880–1980*, Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Experimental Sciences Division, Publication No. 4174. Data are available on the internet.

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built after 1800, and a good proportion of the new irrigation in the nineteenth century put new water into old canals. Wells continued to be dug at a steady pace and remained the major source of new irrigation in dry regions, right down to the present day. Like demography, technological change became a driving force in agricultural expansion only at the end; and new kinds of irrigation, seeds, and chemicals have been most important in productivity increases *per acre* since 1950. The long expansion after 1600 came primarily from the transformation of agrarian territoriality. States fought to enclose territory to extract more wealth as revenue; in this effort, innovations in military technology did affect agricultural trends. At the same time, local farming communities enclosed land around their settlements to secure entitlements in the face of commercial opportunities, state demands, competition from other communities, and declining land availability. In the local context, demography would have had an influence on the rate of expansion. Agrarian struggles of the early-modern period were not so much about revenue as about territory. They brought all the farming landscapes under the control of states and local communities during centuries that span Mughal and Company rule.

A modern state environment for agrarian history thus began to emerge from the sixteenth century onward. At the highest level, an imperial state extended its authority over a vast terrain that was defined by a network of urban centres, inter-city routes, and state elites. At a second level, elites in regional capitals and local men of substance formed networks of alliance within regional state institutions. Elites at these two levels confront one another continuously. Today, they articulate regional politics and nationality. In the seventeenth century, Mughals brought the Punjab and Deccan into the imperial fold and Sikh and Maratha warriors defined regional movements, representing alliances among warrior-farmers in dispersed territories of conquest colonisation. Here and elsewhere, early-modern farming communities fought to control land and labour in the framework of regional networks and alliances, and agrarian regions emerged in territories defined by dominant social powers in agriculture. The cultural setting of farming also became more regionally defined by the homogenising power of early-modern states.

Violence punctuated the early-modern evolution of agrarian regions. State violence helped to advance agricultural expansion, as

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when Mughals armies cleared jungles and subdued hill tribes. All agrarian states conquered nomads and pastoralists, hastening their integration into the urban economy and agricultural communities. With Rajput, Mughal, Maratha, Sikh, and Company conquest, the sedentarisation of hunting, herding, and tribal populations continued, along with the expansion of farming into forests. In the central mountains, for instance, from the rim of the northern basins to the Satpuras and Orissa, tribal groups in the uplands were increasingly brought into state systems that included lowland peasant farmers in caste societies. Dominant groups extended idioms of caste and applied institutions of ranked entitlements to create official community leaders and to form transactional hierarchies that would connect ethnically diverse local communities in regional revenue systems. New agrarian territories were thus formed of diverse, endogamous, ethnic groups, living and working separately in their own ecological settings, spreading across the hills and valleys. Formerly independent Bhils, Gonds, and others were subsumed within an overarching military power structure erected by Marathas and expanded by the British. Formerly independent rulers of the hills entered agrarian states and farming communities. Violence occurred at many moments in such transformations of social identity and power. Efforts to enclose territory triggered militant migrations that made it more difficult to enclose territory without violence. The rapid expansion of agriculture and state power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced new agrarian territories and changed the composition of many more, provoking violence along the way. Mobility increased to such an extent that state elites sometimes coerced workers and farmers to keep up the cultivation. Migrants came from south-west and central Asia into Kashmir, the northern basins, and Bengal, where they pushed farming into the jungles and the hills. Warriors and farmers cleared Rohilkhand, Gorakhpur, Gaya, and other forested upland tracts along the Ganga basin. They expanded into the high mountains and Nepal; while in Nepal, states pushed from Kathmandu westward, creating a new region of farming and of military conflict at high altitude. Colonists moved across Myanmar and into the Brahmaputra basin. Cooch Behar became a borderland between Ahoms up-river and new settlers from the west and south; farmers high in the adjacent mountains kept their autonomy. Assam has been a zone of conflict among agrarian groups ever since. Jat lineages conquered and settled

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across Punjab. Bhojpuri peasant soldiers fought in armies across the northern plains and the Deccan. Lodis migrated from the north into the Narmada valley. Farming expanded with conquests in Khandesh, Berar, the upper Godavari basin, Telangana, and the realms of Golkonda and Hyderabad. The upper Kaveri basin became a rich agricultural territory under the Udaiyar Rajas, Hyder Ali, and Tipu Sultan. The southern band of dry lands of Rayalaseema running across the peninsula from Bijapur to Chandragiri seems to have witnessed an exceptionally rapid growth of tank-fed millet and cotton farming under the rule of Bijapur sultans and the later Nayakas.

Considerable violence accompanied the creation of new intermediary positions in the ranks of state institutional authority. *Jagirdars* had to secure their own powers to collect revenue, as did *zamindars* and lesser authorities. The cash value of a territory would increase when subordinate and intermediary positions in the revenue ranks were filled by wealthy, well-connected people who could collect and transmit revenue effectively. These intermediary positions became more valuable as territories developed economically; and such development also stimulated and financed defections and rebellions. Subordinates would fight to deepen their control over local resources to support a drive for political independence, as best exemplified by Murshid Quli Khan, who pressed heavily on his *zamindars* between his appointment as Subahdar of Bengal in 1705 and his death in 1727. Local and regional struggles for independence from higher authorities were at the same time struggles for territorial control at lower levels. This basic feature of modern nationalism can be seen in the regional states of the eighteenth century. If successful, strategic manoeuvres in the regions of imperial states produced an independent ruler whose capital city grew in wealth and status, as did that of Murshid Quli Khan. His regime fostered 'a sharp rise in the number of temples built by businessmen . . . [who] came to constitute 32 per cent of the total number of temples, while the contribution of the zemindars fell from 87 to 60 per cent'.¹⁹ This chain of events was repeated many times in the eighteenth century. Subaltern insurgency and secessionist struggles – though anathema to empire – could actually improve local agrarian conditions and work to the benefit of local elites, despite the cost of war. Imperial fragmentation thus did not contradict economic growth

¹⁹ Sanyal, 'Social Aspects of Temple Building', p. 207.

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in the eighteenth century any more than it did in the twentieth century.

Battles for autonomy and supremacy waged by sultans, *jagirdars*, *zamindars*, rajas, *nawabs* (Mughal governors), and the English East India Company could engage peasant and warrior allies by contributing force to local struggles for control over the land around farming villages. Regional struggles for autonomy and imperial struggles for supremacy both needed local allies in agricultural communities and added muscle to local fights for village land. In Mysore, Maharashtra, Malwa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kashmir, and the central mountains, Mughal successor states arose from alliances between former imperial nobility and rising warrior-peasant elites who exercised a powerful hold over state revenues locally. In the wet lowlands, along the coast from Gujarat to Bengal, and in Bihar, the eighteenth-century imperial nobility allied instead with medieval gentry, rajas and merchant financiers who capitalised their position in the ranks within expanding networks of trade, revenue, and manufacturing. In the 1740s, the Company's pursuit of agrarian wealth began along the coast around Calcutta and Madras, where it confronted a confusing set of claims to revenue and proprietary authority that derived from medieval land grants, Mughal authorities, and regional states. In this context, the official status and wealth of the entrepreneurial revenue intermediary (the revenue farmer), who came equipped with his own military power, rose with his ability to deliver the revenue, by whatever means necessary. Company *sarkar* arose in this competitive climate of agrarian struggles and revenue finance.

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In the evidence from early-modern centuries, we can see substantial shifts in the discourse of agrarian identity and territoriality. As more local wealth became state revenue, local leaders entered the ranks of empire, and farming communities became institutions of entitlement within regional systems of imperial power. New positions at the low end of the revenue ranks defined power over property that was becoming more commercially valuable under the twin disciplines of market exchange and state authority. Terminologies indicate the change in the nature of territoriality. The term *zamindar* came to have widespread utility for local leaders and for revenue intermediaries of

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various kinds, and, in contrast to the term *raja*, it denoted a person whose authority depended upon payments-for-entitlement. But a *raja* also had to pay for his independence and this status also came to be fixed as a rank within a region of state authority rather than being a claim within medieval ritual networks of *samantas* and *maha-adi-rajās*. At lower levels, similar changes occurred. In medieval Tamil parlance, *kaniyatchi* denoted a village sharehold, most basically, in land (*kani*); and its holder, a *kaniyatchikarar*, was a patriarch among the local gentry. This inscriptional term was displaced in eighteenth-century documents by *zamindar* and then by another Persian term to denote hereditary rights – *mirasidar* – before being displaced after 1800 by ‘ryot’, taken from the Mughal lexicon to denote an individual tax-paying property owner who had a receipt for revenue payments that constitutes an official title to land, a *pattah*. These displacements indicate a shift from early-medieval forms of collective community entitlements, to a ranking system of entitlement and inheritance under the Mughals, and to a private property system under the Company. Through all these displacements, the Brahman and Vellala gentry retained control in farming communities as they climbed the official ranks, like the Medai Delavoy Mudaliar, who became the Nayaka governor in Tirunelveli, and expanded their commercial horizons, like Ananda Ranga Pillai, who became Dupleix’s *dubash* (bilingual agent) at Pondichery.

Articulations of social power and state authority created regions of community. In Bundelkhand, senior Rajput lineage leaders became *rajās* under the Mughals as lesser lineage brethren (*thakurs*) formed the regional ranks of *zamindars*. Each lineage ruled over a local community of farmers in subordinate castes of Lodis, Kurmis, Kachhis, Ahirs, and Gujars. Among these latter groups, Kurmis seem to have been most prosperous in the nineteenth century, and they included families with *zamindari* entitlements; but, at the same time, some Ahir families formed special family ties with Rajputs and consequently enjoyed special patronage. In this complex of ranked communities, individual villages were composed of several settlement clusters linked across Bundelkhand by inter-marriage, land owning, and labour movements. A region of community sentiment thus formed as Bundela Rajputs colonised from west to east. In the process, Thakur power increased in the older regions of colonisation; so that during the 1857 rebellion even the most prestigious Rajput lineages in

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the east had little influence on events in the western districts adjacent to Malwa.²⁰

In Bengal, Francis Buchanan witnessed one phase in the regional formation of Chittagong. It began with Mughal conquest, in 1666, when Mughal troops cut jungles to promote farming, and one *sanad* (grant) gave a single grantee 166.4 acres of jungle to be cultivated for the support of a mosque, ordering that he 'must assiduously pray for the survival of the powerful state'. By 1780, Mughal authorities had made 288 grants of tax-free land in the Chittagong region to support mosques and shrines, in the same vein as temple grants in medieval inscriptions. The titles of the men who were endowed with such grants indicate that 28 per cent (*chaudhuris*, *ta'alluqdars*, and *khans*) were men of substance in Chittagong when they received the grants; other endowments went to religious leaders and holy men, the largest category being *shaikh* (31 per cent). These recipients were land clearance entrepreneurs. They contracted with *zamindars* to finance cultivation; and *zamindars* then advanced funds to peasant farmers, receiving crops and labour in return. Here we see the beginnings of the intricately ranked entitlements to the land that typify the agrarian frontiers of Bengal. By 1798, regional agrarian society in Chittagong had three distinctive types of community.²¹ Elite *zamindars*, mostly Hindus, lived in the city, along with a large population of urban port workers and merchants. In the flatlands, up to the base of the hills, rice paddy fields were cut from jungle, dotted with mosques and shrines, and worked by Muslim peasants under Muslim men of substance who descended from the original contractors. Non-Muslim *jhum* cultivators had their own communities in the hills, in the path of lowland expansion. Today, descendants of these people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are embroiled in conflict with the government of Bangladesh from a position that is strictly defined as culturally distinct from the national community of Bengalis.

In Maratha and Sikh territories, militant agrarian patriarchs fought to enhance their local claims and to enclose open space in the lowlands and adjacent mountain valleys. At the same time, urban elites accumulated assets in centres of state power and long-distance trade. Status ranks came to be pegged to the titles that formed regional alliances

²⁰ Tapti Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 199–233.

²¹ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 243–51.

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among locally dominant warrior-farmers. Beginning with Shivaji, warrior-peasant alliances displaced Mughal imperial elites but used Mughal-derived ranks to organise competition and collaboration. Conflicting demands on local land and revenues generated minute record-keeping and adjudication that elevated the status of Brahmans within the Maratha state. Dominant warrior-peasants became the local protectors of a Maharashtra-*dharma* that blessed dominant caste control in villages under the Maratha military. In Punjab, Sikh religious law enshrined the rule of *misls* (military bands) in local domains of Jat control. In both regions, an increasing proportion of entitlements were being held by the allies and superiors of the village patriarchs, in towns where forts, godowns, bankers, cantonments, scholars, and courts defined regional dominions. Villages became sites of agrarian expansion, nested within regions of military alliance; religion and language became tokens of regional identity. In these territories, we find the most extensive development of village-level record-keeping and administrative institutions. Maratha records were adapted locally all across the dry interior from Pune to Rayalaseema to Mysore and Coimbatore, in other areas of warrior-peasant colonisation.

In Bundelkhand, Chittagong, Punjab, Maharashtra, and elsewhere, we can see regional ethnicities forming inside early-modern territoriality. Jat, Sikh, Maratha, Muslim, Bengali, Rajput, Thakur, Ahir, Ahom, and other identities formed within ideologies of alliance; and they became more territorialised within the ranks of early-modern states, as farmers, warriors, merchants, and revenue intermediaries allied within networks of urban influence to form agrarian regions of community sentiment. In some cases, a dominant ethnic stratum emerged above ethnically diverse localities, such as the Bundela Rajputs. Hindu zamindars spread across Muslim peasant villages in eastern Bengal. In the old Gupta homeland, Brahmans, Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasthas, and Baniyas comprised a powerful zamindar class, while the more substantial cultivators were Ahirs, Kurmis, and Koeris, who in turn employed lower-caste groups. Elsewhere, dominant caste groups formed ethnic mini-polities. Rajputisation among tribal groups produced ethnic kingdoms in the central mountains. Kallars, Nayakas, and Maravas formed compact territories of early-modern kingship, dominated by their lineages and clans in the Tamil country. Early-modern states confirmed and enhanced the power of local ethnic

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configurations, encouraging their control of territory for the expansion of farming and state revenue. The ethnicity of power thus informed state discourse and strategy. Abu-l Fasl listed zamindars by ethnicity, showing that the parganas of Delhi subah were divided territorially among Brahmans, Tyagis (cultivating Brahmans), Rajputs, Jats, Gujars, Ahirs, and Muslims. The British continued this practice, as indicated by Francis Buchanan's stress upon the religious affiliation of the groups in Chittagong. Localities became politically identified with dominant groups at the base of early-modern states.

Patterns of agrarian culture were formed in regions of state authority. Folklore surrounding dominant groups like the Rajputs inscribed their supremacy on the land. Identities became entrenched in regions of community. In common parlance, cultivating groups would often assert that only they know how to farm the soil of their home territory correctly, or how to raise a symbolic crop such as rice, millet, or cotton properly. Social identity, expertise, and control were packed into territoriality; and regions of popular culture were formed by the circulation and experience of myth and memory in drama, poetry, and song. Popular sayings collected in Tamil and Telugu at the end of the nineteenth century often assert that only the dominant farming castes know how to farm properly and that both Brahmans and low castes make bad farmers. Farming is in the blood, as Vellala farmers reported to the officials who were collecting popular ideas about farming. The power to farm (*velanmai*) is in farmers' nature (*kunam*). In this view, the land does not so much belong to its owner as constitute a farmer's being and community. Composite formations of agricultural knowledge, identity, ritual, honour, and authority composed ethnic territories that became ecological, ideological, emotional, poetic, and sacred, all at once. Local dominance by politically well-connected families and castes defined the cultural identity of land. This is another precursor of modern nationality.

As groups of various kinds preferred, gravitated to, and concentrated in specific types of location, some groups – such as *jhum* cultivators in the tropical highlands and pastoral nomads in the arid plains – were also pushed into circumscribed territories. Exclusion, marginality, dependency, and poverty thus attached to people and places that were identified with each other. Places with specific natural qualities became associated with specialist inhabitants. Forest dwellers, fisher folk, even rice and wheat farmers were attached physically and

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culturally to natural settings, with their own cuisine, rituals, folklore, and aesthetics. Near Kanya Kumari, a group called Shanars specialised in palmyra tree cultivation and settled in sandy tracts that were not good for farming but were excellent for growing palmyras. In Bundelkhand, the Ahirs lived in villages along rivers and in ravines where forests gave them access to farm and grazing land. A geographical concentration of groups that specialise in specific types of work using specialised skills and knowledge became typical in many localities and regions. Such spatial concentration of groups on the land resulted not only from group preferences but also from battles that partitioned the landscape to form social and territorial boundaries at the same time. The Shanars and Ahirs were not allowed to own the best agricultural land, which was controlled by Thakurs and Vellalas, whose superiority was also expressed in the richness of their farms. Low-caste and tribal farmers were pushed to ecological margins by more powerful groups, and violence quite often marked borderlands between forest and farm. Battles over territory marked the moving frontier of cultivation. Forms of territoriality that Ranajit Guha sees in peasant insurgencies took shape at this borderland where fighting farmers fought for territories of collective identity.

Urban centres had their own kind of people, although urbanism did not always include sharp distinctions between city and country. Abu-l Fasl did not see Mughal territory as being clearly divided among villages, towns, and cities – and neither did early East India Company officials – because the stature of a place depended on who lived there, and major sites of revenue collection, state authority, and economic importance had a decidedly rural appearance. As a result, it is difficult to measure exactly how urban – or rural – South Asia really was. Indeed, this dichotomy is actually misleading. The British practice of dubbing virtually any site outside a capital city a ‘village’ or at best a ‘town’ obscures the composition of agrarian landscapes, as does the modern habit of associating ruralism with illiteracy and subsistence farming, in contrast to elite, industrial, cosmopolitan cities. Manufacturing and commercial assets, educated elites, and political power often concentrated in settings that British observers called ‘rural’ and labelled ‘villages’. Perhaps the absence of fortifications and monumental architecture led Company officials to assume that a place was rural. Monumental, fortified centres marked the western plains, Gujarat, the Mughal heartland, and the peninsular interior; and they

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were common among ports along the coast, but not so much in other regions. Urbanism often blended aspects of city and country. Manufacturing and commercial activities were usually spread out among a number of nearby residential settlements. Production was most often organised in clusters of centres at walking distance from one another, rather than being stuffed into fortifications and city walls. Economic specialisation was organised largely within endogamous identity groups (defined by *jati*, sect, and ethnicity), each living in their own separate neighbourhood, so that complex economic interdependence – such as in the textile industry – involved extensive commercial interactions among many settlements, which clustered together along routes of trade. In 1805, in Rayalaseema, one of the driest and by its appearance most ‘rural’ of regions, about a third of the population was engaged in mercantile, manufacturing, transportation, and related occupations. State revenue was routinely collected in cash, and most farming households depended on loans and non-agricultural income from various sources. Dozens of places have such a predominance of non-agricultural occupations that they look distinctively ‘urban’. In all the regions that produced cotton cloth for the overseas trade – Punjab, Gujarat, Bengal, and the south-eastern plains, including Rayalaseema – exports emerged from a widespread manufacturing network in which cotton farming, cleaning, spinning, weaving, bleaching, dyeing, packing, and shipping were each typically done in different places where families could readily move among various activities, in and out of agriculture, in regular adaptations to seasons of rain, war, and price fluctuations. These were among the great industrial regions of the early-modern world, and they produced the bulk of cotton cloth in world markets in 1750.

Urbanism was spread out, dispersed, and embedded in agriculture. Bulls could plough the land and pull carts when the land was dry and hard. Seasonal migrations to work, trade, and fight were very common, so the physical and occupational mobility that we identify with urbanism in modern times typified large parts of the early-modern countryside. Concentrations of urban activity clustered along river routes and at river crossings, but then they also spread out over adjacent land. An urban location in the central place hierarchy of an early-modern region was defined not so much by its physical appearance as by the rank of the officials in it and by the character of the elites who gave it distinction. A state revenue headquarters could

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include a large population that was spread among many settlements, and small centres could become important sites of revenue collection. Central sites such as temples, shrines, and monasteries were often set apart and situated among the fields that supported them. Many important places had a rustic appearance.

Detailed data from the Tamil country show that, in 1770, the great urban centre of Kanchipuram was actually a constellation of settlements, temples, and monasteries, supported by hundreds of land grants spread all over the southern coastal plains. The urbanism of Kanchipuram came from its symbolic and economic centrality, not from its enclosure of a large population within a dense city space. Near Kanya Kumari, along the Tambraparni river, many sites of revenue collection that the Company called 'villages' in a census of 1823 had small populations but substantial concentrations of manufacturing, processing, and commercial activity as well as very high population densities. After all, when a small place became sufficiently wealthy, its leaders would want to make it a separate revenue jurisdiction – to declare their local independence – so that small territorial units of social power proliferated in fertile lands and in booming commercial and manufacturing regions. Ambasamudram, a centre on the Tambraparni river, had sixteen subordinate villages in its jurisdiction in 1477 but only three in 1823, by which time it had a population of only 3,952, because in the interim it had spawned more and more independent sites of local political authority. Some of the smallest 1823 census sites in Tirunelveli had high concentrations of looms, mat frames, gunny frames, toddy shops, arrack shops, and other commercial assets, in addition to artisan and merchant castes. The urban centre of the Tirunelveli region consisted of three close-by urban centres, each with its own identity, a temple town (Tirunelveli), a fortress town (Palayamkottai), and manufacturing centre (Melapalayan). These three centres were not administered together until 1993. This sprawling composite urban site was broken up in all the census operations before 1991 and thus it was empirically hidden as an urban feature of the landscape. This Tirunelveli urban complex included about 25 per cent of the population in the central river valley in 1823, but was buried under the quaint category of 'mofussil town'.

Agrarian South Asia seems not to have been nearly as rural as British observers led us to believe; and early-modern urbanity was more rural than we might imagine. The economic simplicity of the

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pre-modern countryside is largely a fiction of modern urbanites. We get a more accurate picture if we imagine many localities with urban economic, social, and cultural characteristics strung together by networks of mobility to form urban agglomerations of various sizes. Urbanism lay inside agriculture rather than being set apart and its internal transport system moved at a walk or a boat's pace. It did not confine labour in tightly bounded city spaces, separating workers from everyday farming activities. It relied on the proximity of non-agricultural workers to local supplies of food and raw materials. Its manufacturing was closely connected with agriculture, not only economically by exchange relations, but spatially by locational decisions that formed localised proximity among specialised producers, resources, and markets. Then as now, the movement of labour among economic activities animated urbanism. But then, the locational advantages of specific urban sites were formed socially by residential decisions among groups who partitioned the landscape into what we can call ethnic territories, each composed of specific combinations of social groups. The availability of open land for new settlements and the mobility of the population discouraged concentrations of capital and labour inside city walls, so that efforts to attract and hold labour and capital in particular places were very prominent political activities; the accumulating attractions of a place constituted its urbanity.

Regions of urbanism, ethnicity, empire, literature, and territoriality made the land look very different in 1800 than it had looked in 1200. We have some evidence to suggest the quality of the change in the way that people thought about the land; for example, the history of the Tamil term for 'forest' – *kadu* – indicates something about cultural change in agrarian societies in the peninsula. In Old Tamil poetry, composed around the turn of the Common Era, *kadu* meant 'burning ground', and the land was so full of forest that the poets needed many words to capture its meanings. Three of their five poetic milieus were forest: *kurinji* was tropical mountain forest; *mullai* was deciduous woods along hillsides, where animals threaten travellers; and *palai* was dry flatlands, thick with prickly scrub and robbers (that is, hunter-pastoralists). Only one milieu had comfortable domesticity: the irrigated villages (*marutam*), watery lowlands like those along the Tambraparni or in the Kaveri delta. By early-medieval times, the Tamil landscape had been simplified textually into a stark dichotomy between *nadu* and *kadu*, where *kadu* meant the untamed, rugged,

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forest without cultivation or civility, while *nadu* denoted agrarian territory, which dotted the coast. A series of cultural identifications were thus established. The *kadu* was wild, inhabited by unruly folk who needed to be brought into the orbit of royal authority. The *nadu* was civilised, controlled by Brahmans and Vellalas; it had trading towns, irrigation, temples, gods, and ceremonial order. The agricultural borders of wet lands, dry tracts, or small settlements (in the dry tract) could also be referred to as *kadu*, which term became a part of many place names to indicate original settlement in the forest. Kings and chiefs sought to incorporate the land and people of the *kadu* into their domains. Wars of conquest and incorporation brought labourers from the *kadu* into the ambit of the *nadu*, people of the *kadu* being hunters, pastoralists, and long-fallow farmers. Many medieval Tamil chiefdoms depended on pastoral people, whose names and settlements populate the inscriptions. But such political settings and their ecologies were wiped out by agricultural expansion, causing striking discontinuities between the composition of medieval and early-modern territory. By 1700, the political power of pastoralists had diminished to nothing. By 1800, Tamil language formulations of agricultural knowledge differed both from their medieval antecedents and from their Malayali, Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi contemporaries, not only because of linguistic change, but also because Tamil farmers ignored the tropics to the west, destroyed pastoralism which survived in the northern peninsula, and were bent on destroying the long-fallow dry regime that still survived on the Tamil plain and dominated much of the Tamil uplands. Linguistic cultures made sense of particular types of agrarian space.

After 1300, probably after 1500, *kadu* took on the meaning of 'dry land', whether cultivated, fallow, or waste, and by 1800 this meaning was prominent. Dry farming – using strong bulls to plough deeply and to lift deep well water to nourish garden crops – increased the relative value of dryland. In addition, many of the best dry land farmers in the Tamil country were immigrant Telugus, allied with Nayakas from Vijayanagar, who typified the political landscape of the eastern coast after 1500, ruling the country from their rustic forts. *Nadu* lost its specific territorial meaning to become merely a term for 'country', like *desh* or *desa*, a usage that is now enshrined in Tamil Nadu. By 1800, the Tamil vocabulary had formed a basic contrast between dry farmland (*kadarambam* = *kadu* {dry land} + *arambam*

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{tract}) and wet land (*nirarambam* = *nir* {water} + *arambam*), and thus between dry cultivation (*punsey*) and irrigated agriculture (*nansey*). The superiority of irrigated land is clear because *punsey* connotes meagreness and *nansey*, goodness. But the forest – *kadu* – had by now changed its cultural form and moved from the exterior, to the periphery, and to the centre of the Tamil agrarian lexicon. As it became more central, its meaning became more varied. In proverbs collected in the 1890s, it refers to forest, waste, open pasture, closed pasture, dry farmland, or dry field. Subba Rao, the editor of a collection of agricultural sayings, avers that *kadu*, ‘translated as “forests” must also be taken to include pastures’, and he continues, ‘in these days, *as the country is filling up*, these should no longer be the wild common-grazing grounds on which hitherto dependence has been placed, but also *enclosed and cultivated pasture fields*’ (emphasis added).²²

In the land of *kadu*, the animal economy had been domesticated within the confines of farming villages, and the separate cultural space of pastoralists had totally disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century. On the saying, ‘To ruin a *kadu*, let loose goats,’ Subba Rao comments: ‘the destructive results of grazing sheep and goats are alluded to, though here again the word *kadu* may either be the jungle or the field with a crop on it’, because goats eat the field stubble that could fertilise the next crop as surely as they destroy open pasture or wild scrubland. Subba Rao’s mention of ‘enclosed and cultivated pasture fields’ indicates a feature of *kadu* that also appears in eighteenth-century revenue surveys, which show enclosed pasture as being included in taxpayers’ land. A number of proverbs from the 1890s prescribe ‘fencing in’ land, and, where these do not refer to fencing small garden plots watered by wells (normal practice today), they clearly advise the enclosure of land that had previously been open for common access. One saying can be rendered, ‘Look at the *kadu* of a man who has closed it off (from use by others) and you will see the cattle of a man who knows how to graze livestock properly.’ Likewise, another reads, ‘Sow your seeds and shut the door.’ People should not be allowed to use dry land as common land. In the 1800s, dry land,

²² Tamil sayings come from C. K. Subba Rao, *Tamil Sayings and Proverbs on Agriculture*, Madras, Madras Government Agriculture Department Bulletin No. 34, 1896. Telugu sayings come from C. Benson, *A Collection of Telugu Sayings and Proverbs Bearing on Agriculture*, Madras, Government Press, 1897.

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forest, and livestock became sufficiently valuable and private property rights well enough established that forceful enclosure became desirable for dominant caste farmers to keep the neighbours' animals off their fields, to keep their own grazing land for themselves, and to make proprietary claims on village commons.

The property value of *kadu* came from two main sources. As pasture, its value derived from livestock. One old saying reads: 'Rich *kadu* make strong cattle; strong cattle make prosperous people; prosperous people make rich temples; rich temples make rich kings.' In 1802, Benjamin Heyne reported that, in upland Karnataka, cattle were the farmer's most valuable asset, without which he was ruined: 'it is the last of his property arrested by his creditors and if he owes anything to the *sarkar* they will be seized but never actually taken from him.'²³ Sayings in Tamil and Telugu villages indicate the second major source of *kadu* value. A Telugu saying reports, 'there is no want in a house where the spinning wheel and churn are at work'; and the Tamil saying argues, 'there is no famine (*panjam*) for a man with milk and cotton plants.' Cotton is an archetypal dry land (*kadu*) cash crop. Rivalled after 1880 by oilseeds and groundnuts, cotton was never surpassed as the prime crop for the best black soil. Among dry crops, cotton is the one that Tamil sayings have yielding 'potfulls [of money]' and cash (*panam*). It is labour intensive and thrives with the deep ploughing of rich black soil (*karisal*). It wants strong bulls, well fed. Closely associated with the rearing, buying, and grazing of bulls and cows throughout the peninsula, cotton farmers provided the raw material for cloth exports, and then for raw cotton exports which doubled every few decades after 1840. Cotton cultivation underlay the expansion of cotton manufacturing in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Dry land used for commercial production encouraged the privatisation of dryland property rights, so that *kadu* became entangled in the politics of agricultural commodity production.

The prominence of commercialism in agrarian life produced a body of everyday wisdom concerning the role of markets and moneyed men in farming. In general it seems that kinship, religious rituals, alliances among dominant families, ethnic or caste identities, and royal authority were valued as intrinsic to agriculture, so that commercial

²³ Benjamin Heyne, 'Correspondence to Captain Mackenzie, Superintendent of the Mysore Survey', National Archives of India, Foreign Miscellaneous Series, No. 94, 1802, p. 78.

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exchange and calculations within this set of social relations seemed quite natural; but, at the same time, professional money lending and financial speculation seemed exogenous if not anathema inside farming communities. A cultural opposition between landed and commercial groups is reflected in the division between 'left hand' and 'right hand' castes in the Tamil country, and it pops up repeatedly in Tamil proverbs, which posit a natural enmity (*jenmapakai*) between *velanmai* (the power of farming) and parsimony, cost accounting (*settu*) as well as merchants (*setti*). The cultural power of the farmer (*velanmai*) is said to be lost when he adopts the merchant's habits or succumbs to merchant control: 'The man who takes a loan to farm is like a tree climber who lets go with his hands.' The conflict here is between farmers and merchants – two sets of prominent caste groups in agriculture – not between farmers and the profit-making, for profits had long been part of *velanmai*. These sayings represent the pride and fear of dominant caste landowners who are already enmeshed in commodity production.

Commercialism was deeply entrenched in agricultural discourse in many regions during the early-modern period. In the Tamil country, all varieties of land and capital assets became known in local parlance for their commercial value. In the Tirunelveli region, revenue records show a series of equations among types of land, their produce, their market value, and their revenue assessment. Dry land (*punsey*) typically produced millets, oilseeds, pulses, and cotton; and it varied in value according to its soil type. The best black soils were controlled by the most powerful warrior-farming castes, Nayakas and other Telugus, who had the strongest bulls and the richest granaries. The middling red soil territories were held predominantly by Maravas, the second tier in the hierarchy of warrior-farmers. Tracts full of the worst sandy soils were held by lower castes, mostly Shanars. Dry lands had their own modalities of revenue assessment and market evaluation. Officials measured the area of cultivation with a *sangili* (chain) or in rods. The length of the measuring device differed from place to place, but everywhere in the peninsula people seem to have talked about dry land in terms of its linear area – a practice that may have come from estimates of land area by the number of rows a team of bulls could plough in a day, a method reported by Heyne in Mysore. Everywhere in the south, dry land also appears to have been assessed for revenue purposes according to cultivated area (not by the

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crop) and by soil type, in cash. Tax-related agricultural knowledge preserved by Company records indicates that Tamils systematically distinguished wet and dry land as objects of commercial evaluation and taxation. Dryland taxes were collected in cash, in the manner of customs duties. Wet fields (*nansay*), were taxed predominantly in kind, on the assumption that they produced rice. Wet land gained in value from irrigation, not soil type, which was not recorded. Cultivated area was not so important as grain output, so that land was measured for assessment by the volume of seed sown upon it, not by its linear area. The term for 'land tax on wet land' was, appropriately, *varam* (share), and social power in the wet lands derived from shares of the paddy crop.

Like the state's share in the crop, shares in village land (*pangu*) that measured stature in the community had acquired market value long before 1800. Garden cultivation, tree crops, houses, shops, and a long list of commercial as well as artisan assets were counted, taxed, and described in commodity terms in the eighteenth century. As *kadu* travelled from the periphery to the centre of farming, the landscape as a whole was commodified. By 1800, markets permeated agrarian life.

ADMINISTRATION

The centralisation of state power increased under early-modern regimes. But even powerful rulers like Murshid Quli Khan or Tipu Sultan did not control the everyday activity of all their local officers, and neither did the East India Company. These regimes focused on standardising the institutional transactions that brought revenue from villages to the capital and sent orders back out into the country. States became more bureaucratic and centralised as transactions became more rule driven, less personal. By 1700, rulers in distant parts of the world used very similar administrative technologies, so that agrarian societies experienced empires similarly in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Local officials would be well known to farmers. In regular contact with village leaders, they exerted influence in local affairs. Regional royalty lived in town. They would discipline the local officers now and then, either personally or through intermediaries, and they could be appealed to occasionally. Imperial potentates lived at a great distance. Their identity, composed substantially of rumour, ritual, and myth, was abstract. In such political settings, empires

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increased their power by standardising state operations and cultivating loyalty. The general strategy was to use one's own men to discipline all those who carried state authority, so officials would carry out instructions from above and transmit revenue from below without being closely monitored. Rulers improved transportation to speed the flow of information and troops, as standardisation spread cultural commonalities among the men who organised the state. Centralising states thus defined territories in which administrative elites acquired common languages and identities. A status culture of elite sentiment formed among intermediary groups in regional states, rooted locally and also connected to the capital.

State discipline and ritual conditioned the identities, interests, and sentiments of key people in the countryside and produced regions of agrarian politics. But agrarian conditions limited what states could accomplish. Early-medieval dynasties had spawned local gentry who were similar in outlook and loyalties, and late-medieval conquerors had spread their influence far and wide, but, under medieval conditions, no ruler could contain agrarian forces of political dispersion. The Mughals increased the density and reach of agrarian territories under their standard; and, amidst increasing competition for land, successor states did the same, deepening the discipline of revenue institutions and broadcasting the Mughal vocabulary from places such as Arcot, where Mughals had never trod. When the Nawab of Arcot allied with the East India Company to bring revenue from as far afield as Kanya Kumari, Kurnool, Vizagapatnam, and Malabar, an administrative elite of Marathi and Tamil Brahmans fanned out in a new administrative territory, which soon became Madras Presidency. Likewise in Bengal, Punjab, Awadh, Maharashtra, Mysore, and Kerala, eighteenth-century states built regions of ritual, intrigue, and alliance. But farming communities also fought for the land as regional states cast their net, and the interaction of local and imperial power became a central theme in the agrarian history of modernity.

Today, local territorialism is still intense in South Asia and, in part, it reflects a local resistance to the centralising state. But it also reflects a legacy of empires which have fostered local power to secure local loyalty, producing nested layers of territoriality. Imperial strategies of this kind flourished in the transactional environment of early-modernity and shaped British rule. In Eurasia, they have long facilitated rough-and-tumble imperial expansion and stability – even as they

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limit a state's ability to centralise – amidst countless, particularistic identities, loyalties, and attachments to land. In South Asia, as in Central Asia and the Middle East, lineage and clan organise many localising loyalties. As in Southeast Asia and China, tribal societies formed separate territories in tropical forests and mountains. Sectarian, ethnic, and caste solidarities added to the intricacy of localism over centuries of migration and resettlement, as different groups concentrated in their own particular places. Micro-ethnicities developed strong local attachments to landscapes that were carved into homelands for hundreds of thousands of groups that clustered together on the land. Urbanisation generated new kinds of localities. As a result, differently composed agrarian societies developed in differently endowed agrarian territories. By 1700, for instance, agrarian urbanism along the coast had developed strong attachments to the Indian Ocean world of commercial activity, whereas in the interior regions, from Kabul to Mysore, urban society was much more attached to the authority of warrior-sultans. Imperial incorporation became more difficult for the Mughals as they pushed away from their own homeland into their southern periphery, where the military culture of the Mughal–Rajput nobility could not generate firm loyalties among Marathas. In Bengal, business interests entangled with European companies around Calcutta and Murshidabad became the financial basis for a post-Mughal regime. In all the eighteenth-century states, commercial networks sustained the rising power of men whose shared sentiments, mentalities, interests, and identities were based on the urban, mercantile, political economy of their own local home territories. From the 1740s, when the Company began fighting its way into regional revenue systems around Calcutta and Madras, its most critical allies were elites who combined commercial wealth and state authority in settings of agrarian urbanism. The Company used its own men to discipline its subordinates but, like the Mughals, it also had to incorporate a great diversity of localities to build an imperial polity.

By 1820, the Company had replaced the Mughals, but even the modernisation of British India after 1860 did not erase the localism which the Company had built into its empire. It began in the 1740s, when the Company forced itself into revenue transactions around Madras and Calcutta, receiving revenue from local contractors who also conducted trade, finance, and military business on its behalf. These men had independent power. Some were Company merchants

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acting as free agents. Some were businessmen and bankers with investments in trade and revenue (portfolio capitalists) – entrepreneurs working at the broad intersection of states and markets.²⁴ But at lower levels, people who paid revenue worked in the ranks of local officials and community leaders. Many revenue interests focused on the land, and many people sought to entrench their own position by paying for entitlements. Decisions by men of rank at all levels influenced the formation of modern agrarian polities, even as the British imagined their Indian empire to be purely the product of their own power. Tipu Sultan, Poligars, Marathas, Pindaris, Sikhs, Afghans, Gurkhas, and rebels in 1857 fought hard for territory; they formed a zone of high military resistance to the Company that stretched from the tip of the peninsula up through the Deccan, Malwa, Bundelkhand, Awadh, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Nepal and into the high mountains bordering Afghanistan. Warriors against the British were also involved in local military struggles when the British arrived demanding tribute and subordination. They saw the British as a part of their own political environment, in which warriors were most concerned with their own position. Forming unequal alliances to secure subordinate rank in a new imperial system could improve one's position, and many warriors, kings, local officials, and community leaders took this option rather than fighting to the end. Many had done the same before. Rulers of Native States mostly followed this path of strategic alliance. Some, like the Nizam of Hyderabad, became crucial military allies for the Company. Scholars have not yet paid much attention to the reasoning behind these fateful decisions, or to their political context or historical implications.

When the Company captured territory, it moved immediately to settling the revenue and to writing legal codes and administrative policies to standardise revenue transactions. Local men of rank were forced to come to terms with the new *sarkar*. Taxes ascended the official ranks and entitlements descended from the *sarkar* to the village. The results varied wildly from one part of the new empire to another, in part because British India took more than a century to complete. Imperial expansion began in 1757 (with the acquisition of Bengal and Bihar), rushed ahead from 1790 to 1820 (Madras Presi-

²⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 25, 4, 1988, 401–24.

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dency, Northwestern Provinces, Bombay Presidency), added more territory before 1857 (Punjab, Awadh, Sindh, Central India, Lower Burma), and finally subdued Awadh and other sites of rebellion (including Bundelkhand) after 1857. Old regimes left many different kinds of entitlement behind; administrative politics varied within British regions; and policies changed with Company charter renewals in 1793, 1813, 1833, and 1853. The process of settling the revenue changed in character with change at the top and the bottom of the imperial hierarchy; after 1870, major differences in agrarian policy and law remained, among and within regions. The Native States and Nepal had their own rulers, who inherited eighteenth-century territories. Though the British intervened regularly in the Native States, their official autonomy prevented deep British meddling in the organisation of agrarian administration. Hyderabad, the largest Native State, is a case in point. Its nobility was confirmed in control of the countryside by the Nawabs, despite pressure to raise more state income and to recognise tenant rights; and the ossification of this landed aristocracy became the context for the Telangana peasant revolution in the 1940s. Even the dozens of tiny states in Gujarat and Rajasthan retained their own property systems down to the 1950s.

Inside British India, local influence on the agrarian system came from several directions. Most basically, local personnel entered the administration, bringing with them old identities, roles, and skills. Key people in the country became influential, especially men of rank. These were patriarchs with entitlements confirmed by official honours and by past revenue payments. They had serious local problems that needed tending to. Many were involved in conflicts over entitlements when the British arrived. Armies and gangs were loose and demanding tribute. Competitors were fighting for pasture, forest, and open land around farming settlements. Dams, channels, tanks, and fields were broken. Farm workers were being scattered by local distress and running off with the season, which made farm labour unpredictable and costly. Local men of substance wanted the new government to settle such matters in their favour. Revenue settlements became political negotiations with the people deemed by the British to be most legitimately entitled to pay for revenue in return for titles to land.

Land settlements comprised a formal code of unequal alliance between the new *sarkar* and local leaders, a legally binding template

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for subsequent transactions, not only for tax payments but also for dispute resolution, reassessment, and policy reform. Land settlements formed a legal constitution for an agrarian Raj. The *sarkar* became part of the local agrarian order. Like their predecessors, the British defined an agrarian citizenry by their official transactions with household headmen, whose proprietary entitlements the state would define, document, legitimate, regulate, protect, and, of course, tax.

Between the 1780s and 1820, working in London and with urban intellectuals in Calcutta and Madras, Company officers developed the ideas that would create a unified theory of British rule and help the administration adapt to regional and local circumstances. Orientalist scholars saw Europe and India as comparable, related civilisations; so, as in Europe, also in India, classical texts held the key to basic cultural principles. William Jones and his contemporaries dismissed Muslim rulers as invaders and tyrants; when the Company was fighting Tipu Sultan, the Company erased the legitimacy of Muslim authority in its theory of agrarian governance. The Company established itself as the protective ruler of a land of Hindu tradition. This was in some sense a recuperation of the idea that the righteous ruler is a protector of *dharma*, and, like medieval kings and Marathas, the Company defined *dharma* in its own terms. Jones found the essence of India in Sanskrit texts, especially in texts on *dharma*. The principle was quickly established that diligent investigations could reveal all the salient facts about the real India to inform British governance, and it was determined that agrarian India was everywhere organised by the rules of caste society and by principles of *varnashramadharma* that represented traditional norms and a spiritually sanctioned social order. Around 1810, we can see a shift in the organisation of Company accounts of the rural population: they were subsequently compiled according to the rank order of castes (*jati*) within the *varna* scheme (Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra), even where this set of categories had not been applied in earlier English accounts and was not in vogue in local society. In the Company scheme, Hindu and Muslim law codes needed to be kept separate, and Muslims treated separately. Family law and proprietary institutions needed to be adjusted by the Raj to suit the traditions of the people, whose literary elites, mostly Brahmans, were the experts on tradition. Orientalism provided a flexible tool for weaving together revenue settlements and for adjusting colonial *dharma* to local conditions.

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In 1793, the Act of Permanent Settlement granted a new kind of entitlement to zamindars in Bengal, in return for high, fixed cash payments, collected strictly on schedule. Defaults would trigger the transfer of zamindar titles at auction. These men were thus made legally into landlords with ownership rights over and above the tenants who paid rent to cultivate zamindari property. As we will see, more ranks were formed within this two-tiered zamindari scheme, but, from the state's point of view, zamindars were the legal owners of land and all subsidiary rights accrued to people living on their estates. Some estates were large, territorially compact, and stable, sometimes based upon old royal lineages; and others were small, fragmented, and spread over many scattered plots and villages, cobbled together from the bits and pieces of revenue farms or lineage holdings. In 1801, some zamindars were also anointed in Madras Presidency under the authority of the 1793 Act, and here they had virtually all been rulers of large, compact territories of conquest colonisation. Such men became the agrarian foundation for the new regime in Bengal, Bihar, and the central Ganga basin, where they used their existing powers and Company authority to claim all the land within British territory. The character of their social power and the fate of their family fortunes were quite diverse. They included old rajas, former state officials, bankers, and revenue contractors. Some ruled their estates as real lords of the land and others merely had their men visit the villages now and then to collect the rent. Some held onto zamindar titles for many generations; some lost them by default within a few years; and, everywhere, the turnover of zamindar landownership in decades after 1793 moved property rights around quite considerably. But all these were men of high social status and rank; and in the regions that came to be defined by zamindar institutions, they formed a class that was capable of sustaining the Company's revenue. When one defaulted, another zamindar could always be found to pay the revenue. In the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, however, though warrior rajas in territories of conquest colonisation did come forward to become zamindars, they controlled but a fraction of the total revenue. The term 'zamindar' had been used in the eighteenth century to designate virtually any person who paid revenue for land, but the 1793 Act stipulated that ranks must exist to separate landlords and tenants, and they often could not be found. Some influential Company officers also craved to enhance the revenue, eliminate revenue intermediaries, and

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extend state power into the villages beyond what was possible under Permanent Settlement and zamindari property law. With such motives, Thomas Munro and his allies resisted the broad application of the 1793 Act in Madras. Munro fought for twenty-five years against the imposition of the Calcutta system; and, at the same time, Utilitarians and Evangelicals savaged the Orientalists. New renditions of ancient tradition were thus contrived to justify new revenue policies.

To liberate Madras Presidency from Calcutta's Permanent Settlement, Munro argued that collecting taxes directly from ryots in their villages would lower tax rates for farmers and also increase government revenue. But, to legitimate his land settlements, he had to show that they also served the principles of native tradition, that they followed indigenous precedents. He compiled evidence for *The Fifth Report on East India Company Affairs* to prove that ryotwari, not zamindari, better suited British India. To win his case, Munro had to discredit officials such as Francis Ellis, who had textual and ethnographic evidence to show that Munro was wrong. Ellis had studied old gentry villages along the coastal plain, whereas Munro had studied warrior-peasant dry villages in Rayalaseema and Kongu. Ellis argued that, yes, the village was the basis for traditional social order, but, no, peasants did not traditionally own their own land individually; rather, they held the land as community property, with each family having a set of shares in all community assets. Munro would have nothing of this. He insisted that ryots were all individual peasants, as much individualists as English farmers; that they had always been family property owners who lived in their own village societies, regulated by caste tradition; and that only extortionate Muslim overlords like Tipu Sultan had forced them to accept revenue intermediaries and zamindars standing between themselves and the ruler. Munro vanquished Ellis, became governor in 1820, and established ryotwari as the definitive legal basis for land settlements in Madras. His formulations became official wisdom, and they radically homogenised the agrarian landscape. His stereotype of the village as 'a little republic' dates from 1806. Published by Mark Wilks, in 1810, during the campaign to write *The Fifth Report*, it would be a pillar of modern administration. Its most famous reformulation came in a minute by Charles Metcalfe for the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, in 1830, which had a powerful influence on Karl Marx. It reads in part as follows:

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The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo, Patan, Mogul, Mahratta, Sik, English are all masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same . . . If a country remain for a series of years the scene of continued pillage and massacre, so that villages cannot be inhabited, the scattered villagers nevertheless return whenever the power of peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away, but the succeeding generation will return. The sons will take the place of their fathers; the same site for the village, the same position for the houses, the same lands, will be occupied by the descendants of those who were driven out when the village was depopulated.

As colonial conquest moved ahead, many bouts of research and debate about tradition and policy moved from villages to capitals, to Parliament, and back again; so that as the *sarkar* pushed up its revenue, year by year, land settlements came to include the ideas and interests of many local men with expert knowledge, authority, and influence, especially Company officers, landowners, and the urban intelligentsia. The empire institutionalised authority at three levels. Local authority lay in the village, the taluk (township), and the district (county). Regional authority accumulated in provincial and Native State capitals. Imperial authority descended from London, Calcutta, and New Delhi. Documents produced by and for the higher levels took pride of place in the colonial archive, and this imperial perspective became most compelling for nationalists and national historians. Documentation at the lower levels pertains more directly to agrarian communities and gathers dust in provincial and district record rooms. The character of all the colonial records changed over the nineteenth century as the railway, steamship, printing industry, science, and imperial bureaucracy developed modern powers over agrarian administration. Agrarian South Asia was steadily homogenised empirically as London sent standard forms to be filled out by bureaucrats in every locality of the realm. Administrative practice and law involved debate at each level. For people in farming communities, the lower levels were most powerful, but these did not get much attention in provincial and imperial capitals, where localities appeared to be identical sites for the implementation of policy. National cultures came into being in big cities and initially connected provincial capitals to one another and to London; this produced a two-tier imperial polity, in imperial and provincial public arenas, from which national movements spread into

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the countryside. Modern political history has been understood primarily as a process operating at the higher levels of empire and nationality, from which it moved out into the villages.

But power also moved in other directions. The logic of land settlements allowed the majority of early-modern patriarchs to reproduce their own local authority in agrarian territories that were not actually as homogeneous as they appeared to be in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and New Delhi. Imperial and national policy makers did not control agrarian governance as much as they imagined, and local struggles often determined the character of local institutions. In the western regions of the northern basins, militant lineages of warrior-peasants, most prominently, Jats, fought to free their entitlements from zamindars. In Punjab, where zamindars had been removed under the Sikh regime, the Company settled quickly with the locally dominant Jat lineages in 1848. The wars in 1857 have been studied primarily as an anti-imperial struggle, but locally they also involved battles for control of agrarian territory across a huge area spanning eastern Punjab, Awadh, Bundelkhand, and Malwa. Here as elsewhere in the zone of high military resistance, warriors fought not only *against* the Company but also *for* control of territory; they fought the Company because it threatened their rank, status, entitlements, and income – their identity and position in agrarian society. These struggles and many more accentuate the political character of land revenue settlements and the imperial importance of stabilising property entitlement by giving it to the strongest local contenders. After 1857, in Awadh, the biggest landed aristocrats were confirmed as the rulers of the countryside. Adjusting policy to garner loyalty among key people in the country stabilised the empire, and the local social forces that spoke to the state most effectively in the nineteenth century have remained prominent ever since.

Agrarian regions took a more definite shape as the empire subsumed every locality within its homogenising intelligence and provincial governments assumed responsibilities not only for collecting revenue and maintaining law and order but also for administering development. A transition is visible in the middle decades of the nineteenth century toward a more modern, bureaucratic, centralised empire, more involved in managing its agrarian resources. By the 1840s, Parliament was gathering information routinely from the provinces for compilation and analysis in London. An imperial picture of

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agrarian India was taking shape as the Great Trigonometrical Survey was claiming comprehensive accuracy in mapping.²⁵ Parliament investigated bonded labour and means to make improvements in cotton cultivation. In the 1840s, when prices were low and complaints were increasing against Company officials for coercive tactics in revenue collections, questionnaires considered administrative and legal reform and sought means to expand British investments in India. In Madras, the Torture Commission concluded that native officials needed to be replaced with more obedient, well-trained, British bureaucrats. In Calcutta, officials responded to entreaties from sugar planters in Trinidad by sending shiploads of indentured plantation workers to replace freed slaves. In London, arrangements were made for major capital investments in Indian railways and Arthur Cotton was arguing for big state investments in irrigation. In all this flurry of activity during the 1840s and 1850s, we can see early examples of a modern discourse on agricultural development. It began to project a power to transform agrarian conditions that moved out from London to provincial capitals and into the villages. In the global perspective of empire – which we can see in 1844 Parliamentary hearings that considered what to do about the threat posed by boll weevils in Georgia, and concluded that increasing cotton supplies from India and Egypt was the only answer – modern science and technology travelled from Europe to the East, as raw materials and workers moved in the opposite direction; and British India became a unified agricultural territory for analysis and improvement, under the gaze of a hierarchically structured, scientific system. As surveyors set out to map every inch of India, detailed lithograph maps appeared in British books with accounts of economic products and business opportunities. During Lord Dalhousie's tenure as Governor-General (1848–1856), 'rural India', 'Indian agriculture', 'peasant India', and 'village India' became objects of discussion, not only in official accounts but also in journalism and social theory, as in the work of Karl Marx.

Provincial governments turned this new information into programmes of improvement, and their political institutions most clearly shaped modern agrarian polities, because provincial capitals constituted the effective apex of authority on most agrarian issues. Provincial

²⁵ Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, Chicago, 1997, p. 304.

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boundaries marked territories of law, transportation, local languages, and irrigation building. Each province had its own terms for entitlements, which defined its agrarian citizenry. In Bengal, Bihar, Awadh, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and the Central Provinces, the men who mattered most for the state in the country were the large landlords: zamindars, talukdars, malguzars. In the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, Sindh, Assam, Arakan, and lower Burma, they were instead substantial ryots and village leaders. In Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh, they were smaller zamindars and leaders of joint proprietary communities, organised around kinship units (*biradari*). All the administrative territories of modern agrarian political history were inscribed on early-modern regions in which the legacy of the Mughals is apparent. Where strong military alliances had succeeded the Mughals in the eighteenth century, Native States appeared (in Rajasthan, Malwa, Bundelkhand, Baghelkhand, Saurashtra, Kashmir). Where successor states maintained Mughal zamindari ranks, zamindar settlements emerged under the British (in northern basins and central mountains – Bengal, the United Provinces, and Central Provinces). Where Mughal successor states broke through the ranks of zamindars to form direct connections between regional rulers and agricultural communities, the Company followed suit: here we find joint property communities (Punjab) and village Ryotwari settlements (Bombay and Madras). Big states on the Mughal periphery became independent states (Nepal) and Native States (Hyderabad, Trivandrum, Mysore).

More than a third of the land area of South Asia came by treaty into Native States and independent dynasties. Though they came under heavy-handed influence and pressure from the British, these rulers had the power to create their own agrarian institutions. Native States concentrated in areas that were distant from the central sites of Company power in the eighteenth century; in these regions, Company authority would have been most expensive to establish and maintain. They were also most prominent in the zone of high military resistance, in the peninsular interior (Hyderabad and Mysore), in Rajasthan and adjacent areas of Saurashtra, in a ring of the central mountain landscape running from Malwa to interior Orissa, and in the high mountains (Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim). These were also areas that were dominated politically by on-going conquest colonisation at the time of British accession. The archives of Native States are quite unlike those of British India, so the documentary basis for writing the

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agrarian history of South Asia remains highly fractured and disparate even in modern times. British territory (that is, land outside the Native States in British India) has been the main object of historical studies. A very old historical separation of different kinds of agrarian regions has thus remained even under the homogenising force of modernity; and it was only partially overcome by the profusion of integrating technologies, from the railway and monetary system to English education and electronic media. Regions such as Rajasthan, Kashmir, and Telangana, which have good documentation for agrarian history under the Mughals, virtually drop out of agrarian historical research after 1800. Other areas – like Assam, the Central Provinces, and Uttarakhand – become visible as never before under the British. The high mountains in the north-east and north-west remained under separate administrative agencies, separated from lowland administrations. Sri Lanka and Myanmar came under Colonial Office administration rather than under the India Office in London – and their historical literature has been fully detached from the history of British India. Strategic areas of special administration in the eastern and western high mountains generated records that are also detached physically and thus historiographically from other regions. As a result, it is quite impossible to write a modern agrarian history that is both comprehensive and sensitive to all the regions.

A very sketchy picture of the institutional geography that organises modern agrarian history can be achieved, however, by superimposing colonial settlements on farming landscapes. Native and independent states are prominent in the high mountains (Kashmir, Nepal and Terai, Bhutan), the western plains (Sindh, Rajasthan [Jaisalmer, Marwar, Mewar, and Ajmer], northern Gujarat, Saurashtra, and Malwa), the central mountains (Baghelkhand, Chota Nagpur, Jharkhand, interior Orissa, Bastar), and the peninsula interior (Mysore, Hyderabad). Regions of special administration were established in the high mountains in the west and east (in Baluchistan, Himachal, Kangra, Uttarakhand, along the Karakoram Range, and in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam). The areas for which the most continuous, accessible historical record is available from medieval to modern times are those that came under direct British administration, and their institutional geography divides roughly into two groups of territories. Zamindari and malguzari regions covered the northern river basins and the valleys and plains in the central mountains. Here, agrarian

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colonialism meant landlordism (in western Punjab, Ganga basin, Bengal, and Assam, and also in many western mountain regions, in Uttarakhand, the Indus valley, Sindh, and Bundelkhand). The expansion of cultivation and legal struggles produced various admixtures of private farmer and peasant holdings, which became ever more prominent in territories of (later) *malguzari* settlements in the Central Provinces (Chhattisgarh, Khandesh, and Berar). Regions of *ryotwari* and *mahalwari* (village) settlement covered the peninsula, including most of the coast and the interior (Madras and Bombay Presidencies), and also Myanmar, Ceylon, and eastern Punjab. These regions had some zamindars and Native States, but the British regime for the most part enforced individual farm property rights. Here, the land of individual owners – *ryots* – was assessed individually and revenue was collected in return for a *pattah* that became a title to private property. In Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and the Nagpur territories (across Chhattisgarh and much of the central mountains), the British applied a motley combination of *zamindari* and *ryotwari* modes, depending largely on local circumstances. Like all *ryotwari* and *mahalwari* revenue settlements, these were temporary; that is, the amount due to the state would vary according to periodic assessments by state officials.

CHAPTER 4

MODERNITY

In the nineteenth century, industrial empire brought new force into the transformation of agrarian regions. Britain controlled the corridors of mobility in southern Eurasia. English became the imperial language. A new rupee homogenised the money supply.

In 1800, cowry shells from the Andamans were the currency in Sylhet, and dozens of different silver, gold, and copper coins filled markets from Surat to Chittagong. Money changers worked every corner. But in the 1820s, the Company's silver rupee set the monetary standard and market prices began a tumble that lasted thirty years. In these hard decades, markets contracted along routes of imperial expansion, real taxation increased, seasons of scarcity were common, and overseas cloth exports died. The Act of 1793 had established a permanent settlement with no survey, no records of rights, and no definite method of assessment; after 1820, zamindari settlements required the recording of rights, annual assessments of cultivated land, and periodic reassessments. Almost everywhere, routine revenue collections provoked struggles and dislocations. When indigo stocks crashed on the London exchange, Bihari peasants lost their income and tenants lost their land. The Torture Commission in Madras reported routine beatings by revenue officers. Company critics multiplied in London but could not quite topple the old regime before rebellions killed the Company in 1857. Crown rule ended an imperial crisis. Prices had begun moving upward again by 1855, and decades of inflation then steadily lowered the real cash burden of revenue and rent. Land became more attractive for investors as a veneer of modernity covered British India. An imperial system of weights and measures, administration, and law spread along with commodity production in every region, as open land for new farms disappeared. Horrible famines marked the decades from 1860 to 1900, but a long upward price trend stimulated commercial agriculture until the crash in 1929. Then, the great depression introduced two decades of disruption and radicalisation; and it also made the elimination of village poverty and the protection of internal markets a central concern for

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nationalists. After independence, national governments embraced all regions with projects of national development. Today, we look back over a long modern century in which farming communities have engaged a world of states, capitalism, and nationality.

MOFUSSIL

Mofussil:

‘The provinces,’ – the country stations and districts, as contra-distinguished from ‘the Presidency’; or, relatively, the rural localities of a district as contra-distinguished from the *sudder* or chief station, which is the residence of the district authorities.¹

The British imperial state defined the agrarian economy for rational, centralised management. In the 1790s, surveyors like Hamilton Buchanan had begun to assess potentials for agricultural exports. The first British missions to the interior of Ceylon went to assess the potential for British investment in exports. From the early 1800s, imperial policies deliberately depressed Indian cloth exports, encouraged British cloth imports into India, and promoted Indian exports of opium, cotton, and indigo, and later tea, coffee, leather, rice, wheat, jute, and rubber. By 1840, the *Parliamentary Papers* published detailed accounts of economic matters in many regions of Asia and the Americas. Of all the national economies of the western world, the British economy depended most on agricultural imports and least on the buying power (thus the income) of its own farmers.² Agrarian regions in South Asia acquired export identities. Opium from Bengal and Bihar became the linchpin of the China trade. The City bankers who raised capital for railways in India worked with Parliament to boost cotton exports from Bombay, Madras and Egypt in order to address cotton supply problems at Manchester caused first by boll weevils and then by impending civil war in Alabama and Georgia. Berar became cotton country, alongside Egypt. Assam, Darjeeling, and Sri Lanka became tea country, as British planters took mountain land away from hill farmers by buying it from the government and acquired labour supplies from Bihar and Madras to build their new

¹ *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, edited by Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, first published 1886; new edition 1985, p. 570.

² Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846–1919*, London, 1994, p. 168.

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plantations. Mysore coffee was first a peasant crop, but British plantations took over the hills to produce coffee exports. As the Malnad became coffee country, warrior races manned the imperial army. Nepal and Punjab exported Gurkha and Sikh fighters, as Bihar exported landless workers. Bhojpuris came to Calcutta to board ships for Trinidad, as Caribbean sugar planters lobbied in London against loud critics of indentured labour. Workers imported from India came to many sites of British export production in Africa, Fiji, and Malaysia. Agrarian South Asia exported labour, raw materials, and processed goods for world markets, and the list grew longer as time went by to include rice, wheat, jute, hides and skins, pulses, and many other products, as well as workers from virtually every agrarian region.

In this context, a shift occurred in the character of the state's interaction with farming communities and also in the character of social power in agriculture. In 1840, an old kind of territoriality still prevailed, composed of transactions among key people on the land. The Company collected taxes from its local allies and subordinates, and gave entitlements in return. Transactional territories were formed among patriarchs whose names and social identities are prominent in the local records of early British rule, when the internal and external boundaries of empire remained in flux. By 1880, modern, administrative territories had emerged in the pacified lands of British India. Farmland was surveyed and demarcated. Maps recorded the boundaries of plots, estates, villages, roads, forests, and public property. State bureaucracy and law defined entitlements to land, labour, and capital. Industry defined a new kind of territory: railways formed scaffolding for new military, urban, and commercial structures, and the Indian Civil Service was dubbed 'the iron frame' of empire. World markets for Indian commodities expanded and commodity production became much more visibly part of everyday agricultural life, especially along the railway. Urbanism accelerated most rapidly along these same tracks, because all the people and institutions that connected the world economy to farming villages clustered in cities and towns, most of all at terminal points by the sea. In colonial cities that were among the biggest in the world, British and Indian elites defined modernity, each in their own terms.

Village folk also played key roles in making modern institutions. Moving out – like the Mughals – from their fortress towns, the

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Company had called suitable men to settle the revenue, and everywhere patriarchs had come forward. For these men, settling with the British never meant voting in favour of colonialism, much less giving up their independence; rather, it meant dealing with the *sarkar* to bolster entitlements. Settling with the Company did not diminish the old potency of ritual, *dharma*, kinship, credit, coercion, and social status; and the *sarkar* actually needed powerful local allies to collect its revenue and maintain law and order locally. Many armed rulers and peasants did fight *against* subordination to the British as they battled *for* local and regional power in agrarian territories, and these struggles continued throughout British rule and beyond. Company settlements and assessments typically met resistance. Yet, in the accumulation of negotiations and struggles, imperial needs for revenue and stability eventually met local needs for entitlements and protection; and, little by little, enough key people in the country aligned their ambition with the Company to establish a new regime.

The new state came to be quite different from its predecessors. The white elite with its peculiar language and dress, detached itself from agrarian society. Its laws were foreign, penned in English, and purported to adapt, even to perfect, ancient principles. The *sarkar* demanded taxes in cash and set tax rates without reference to seasonal variation in the harvest. Government refused to see the local complexity and variability of entitlements. Instead, it enforced crude codes of property ownership that separated individual rights from group claims to the shifting sets of elements that formed bundles of agrarian patrimony. Legally, it even detached land ownership and taxation from family status and community rights, obligations, and membership. This state also claimed to have a supreme right of ownership over all land, so that failure to pay its cash revenue on time justified the official auction of land deeds to other taxpayers. The British were parsimonious rulers, apparently ignorant of the ancient power of royal generosity. They did not like to give out advances to finance farm operations at the start of the season. *Sarkar taccavi* loans did continue – and could be substantial, as we see below – but they became rare and lost the quality of personal honour. British rulers withdrew from patronising temples, mosques, and rituals, and from entertaining local nobles at court. Christian rulers did not respect or patronise *darbari* patriarchy. Religious patronage boomed, but it now assumed a new kind of private status, detached from the official operations of the

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state. Tax collectors did not respect the social rank of taxpayers or give indefinite extensions or special dispensations in recognition of social status. Government eventually even eliminated tax-free land grants, old symbols of rank and sources of respectable income. Invisible legislators in mythical London dictated rules and procedures that local authorities seemed helpless to change. District Collectors, who had autocratic powers of enforcement, seemed impotent to change the rules to suit local interests. To change government policy, influential men had to present their case in district towns and in provincial capitals, where making personal connections with officials became more complex and costly than ever. Specialists for this purpose became more numerous. Representing landed interests in town became a speciality for the sons and retainers of the gentry and zamindars. Already in 1784, when Sylhet zamindars were still waging wars for land on the battlefield, they retained vakils (pleaders) in Calcutta to argue cases in court against the English Collector. The 1881 census counted 357 vakils in the tiny district town of Tanjore in Madras Presidency. Landowners in all districts made regular representations to Boards of Revenue, and pleading for landowners and publicising their difficulties became a good profession. By the 1840s, landowners' associations were hard at work in the provincial capitals, and in the 1880s, landowners and their representatives filled Local and District Boards in every province. In 1892, the Tax Payers Association became the District Association in the Kistna District of Madras, reorganised along the lines of the Indian National Congress. By 1900, landowner demands for lower taxation had become a permanent agrarian plank for the Congress.

Land ownership became a qualification for a peculiar kind of imperial citizenship whose character derived from the political position of property rights in each region. Property owners participated actively in state institutions. They had official standing – status – in the state. Their disputes filled Company courts, as the cost, conditions, definition, expansion, and protection of landed property rights became the central issue in agrarian politics. English education expanded opportunities for landed families. Family status now depended upon property, wealth, and profession, in addition to other symbolic assets; though family connections remained critical assets, they declined as criteria for status in the state. Fathers passed the village offices of headman and magistrate down to their sons, and, in zamindari estates,

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relatives of the owner and his minions formed the local elite; but a broader based agrarian citizenry formed politically as the state acquired more power to adjudicate and appoint without reference to heredity. Lawyers and politicians emerged as actors in agrarian politics. Even tenants became people endowed with rights, in legal theory and practice, so that zamindari became one kind of property right among others, sandwiched between the state and peasants. Bureaucracy displaced family ties and old modes of social ranking. Unlike previous rulers, the Anglo *sarkar* would not marry their sons to the daughters of subaltern allies. State transactions were shorn of their family and their commercial elements. State offices ceased to be hereditary property and marketable commodities. Buying offices or state favours became illegal. Old, respected practices for pressing personal influence continued, but their official status changed with the invention of 'corruption'. The portfolio capitalist – part banker, entrepreneur, warrior, tax collector, and nobleman – disappeared. Transactions between the state and landowners shrivelled in their cultural content, along with the substance of entitlements, as locally dominant families became less involved in the overall construction of agrarian authority, now monopolised by a bureaucratic state. Agrarian patriarchs were reduced to dealing with the state on a narrow set of issues concerning taxes, rights, and the value of land. Land had been but one feature of agrarian territory; now it was everything. It became a domineering commodity that defined the nature of social relations in farming communities and power relations between farmers and the state. The power of money also increased dramatically as entitlements to land came to rest solely on the ability to pay taxes and rents – no exceptions. The best a Collector would do in response to personal pleas for tax relief was to grant a remission for reasons of general distress. The power of professional money men increased further because the higher cost of growing commodity crops had to be met before the harvest, which entailed debts, mortgages, and accumulating interest. It became more common for people to lose their land for failure to pay cash on time either to the *sarkar* or to the *sowkar* (banker or moneylender). Finance became more critical as a moving element in agriculture because now it could buy entitlements protected by the state independently of the will of communities or dominant families. Money could buy power independently of family rank.

This new institutional environment evolved and expanded slowly.

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Each decade, it encompassed more territory, and on its frontiers the old rules still applied, as old rajas, zamindars, and farming communities brought new land under the plough. Old entitlements were smuggled into new properties and many old modes of power were codified, surveyed, and legalised. The British respected rights of first possession and many grants by previous rulers. Old *mirasidar* rights to tenant land became ryot property in Madras, and, in Maharashtra, rentier *khot* claims were included within ryotwari *pattabs*. B. H. Baden Powell reported that, in 1880, 20 per cent of all ryotwari land in Bombay Presidency included landlord and rent-free *inam* elements.³ 'The multilayered complexity of hereditary revenue rights was only partially transformed by colonial administration during the 19th century', and many former titled officers called *jagirdars*, *sardars*, *inamdars*, *deshmukhs*, and *deshpandes* kept revenue estates inherited from Maratha days.⁴ Old rates of assessment also entered the new tax regime. Favourable rates and concessions continued which had been granted to local elites and officials. Religious institutions of all sorts retained their land, not because the Company was generous, but because local power was most often decisive in shaping the details of revenue practice. Initially, locals even set the rates of assessment and procedures for collection. Company officials did not understand all the factors that impinged upon farm yields and, greedy for revenue, they often assumed high, stable productivity and ignored seasonal fluctuations when assessing the value of land. This produced steep, regressive tax schedules, which assessed poor dry lands and poor peasants at proportionately higher rates than the best irrigated land and rich landowners. The Company thus followed the same logic that pertained within zamindari estates in the northern basins: high-status tenants with better land exerted more influence and paid lower taxes. But the Company never knew exactly what land was being taxed, where it was, and how it was being used; this was not ascertained before the plot-by-plot surveys, after 1870.

Under the Company, the 'revenue village' became the elemental unit of administration, and it became so everywhere in South Asia. But villages were also territories of social power outside the state, and,

³ Neil Charlesworth, 'The Myth of the Deccan Riots of 1875', in David Hardiman, ed., *Peasant Resistance in India, 1858-1914*, Delhi, 1993, p. 216.

⁴ Donald W. Attwood, *Raising Cane: The Political Economy of Sugar in Western India*, Boulder, 1992, p. 102.

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even today, there is a persistent discrepancy between what the state calls 'a village' and what villagers think.⁵ Initially, powerful locals determined where one revenue village ended and another began, and until the 1870s many struggles for land occurred outside official view. Because official status accompanied land rights, people with rights to land had various degrees of power to define those rights in practice, and boundaries remained fuzzy between local politics, society, law, police, and administration. The making of modern institutions that delimit precisely the content of property rights took a long time and entailed a long set of shifts in power relations between localities and the imperial state, which altered modes of power in agrarian territories across the nineteenth century. Like the Mughals, the British initially provided military muscle for prominent local families in competition for resources, and these families in turn stabilised the *sarkar* at its base by forming local proprietary institutions through which the state could realise tax revenues and codify its regime. The property system that emerged has long outlived British rule as the foundation of agrarian politics in modern South Asia. It includes many simmering conflicts that periodically boil up violently during bad seasons, even today. But records of local conflicts over land indicate that, during the settlement process itself, there was a formal regime of proprietary politics at work in each agrarian region. Some rules and rights came from the old regime into British rule but, with the arrival of the British and the disappearance of open land for new colonisation, the rules changed. Money and litigation gave local contenders new leverage. As a result, during revenue settlements, surveys, tax collections, petitions, demonstrations, riots, battles, and policy revisions, claimants to land formed agrarian polities within British India. Lawyers and bureaucrats formed a class of mediators and representatives for conflicting agrarian interests. Little by little, warfare on the land faded away and struggles inside agriculture assumed their modern civility.

By 1900, proprietary institutions enjoyed a substantial hegemony. Since then, agrarian struggles have worked within the framework of individual private property rights, though some tribal movements have asserted collective rights and sought legal protection for tribal territories. Even communists have fought to expand the scope of

⁵ Shapan Adnan, *Annotation of Village Studies in Bangladesh and West Bengal: A Review of Socio-Economic Trends over 1942–88*, Kotbari Comilla, 1990, p. 35; and E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley, 1984.

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private property. The village has also remained the accepted micro-territory of public authority and agrarian politics. Civility in agrarian polities does break down, as we can see today in Kashmir, Bihar, Telangana, Nagaland, and Sri Lanka. Violent struggles continue in village life. State violence always lurks inside civil institutions. But for a century now, property conflicts have had a remarkably civil demeanour in most regions and localities, and the institution of private property has never been the object of sustained political assault. Modern agrarian struggles focus rather on the redistribution of rights, and the normative trend is toward wider, more equitable distribution, toward the creation of more individual holdings and more private rights. A consensus would seem to hold across a wide political spectrum that the ideal agrarian condition is one in which farm families in village societies privately own and work their own land, endowed with all the finance, implements, and inputs necessary to increase productivity, under state protection. This model guides land reform, economic planning, the green revolution, and party politics. On the Left, 'land to the tiller' encodes a struggle to end feudalism and to fulfil Jawaharlal Nehru's promise to 'remove gross inequalities' from Indian society. On the Right, private property is a bedrock of tradition. Public protection for private property is certainly one major pillar of the legitimacy of the modern state in South Asia, including the colonial state; because of this, legitimate political activity inside state institutions has dominated politics rather than struggles to overthrow existing institutions of law and governance.⁶ True, state institutions provide a framework for repression and privilege; but they also support striving, patronage, collective mobilisation, and conflict resolution. Peasant struggles have primarily had private property in view. The architect of zamindari abolition in Uttar Pradesh, Charan Singh, understood this well when he said this in 1957:

The political consequences of the land reforms are . . . far reaching. Much thought was given to this matter since the drafters of the legislation were cognisant of the need to ensure political stability in the countryside. By strengthening the principle of private property where it was weakest, i.e. at the base of the social pyramid, the reformers have created a huge class of strong opponents of the class war ideology. By multiplying the number of independent land-owning peasants there came into

⁶ For national politics, see Shashi Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920-1947: The Colonial State, the Left and the National Movement. Volume II: 1920-1934*, New Delhi, 1992; and Bhagwan Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920-1947: The Colonial State, the Left and the National Movement. Volume I: 1934-41*, New Delhi, 1992.

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being a middle of the road stable rural society and a barrier against political extremism.⁷

There is still much to learn about the history of this hegemony. Until now, scholars have relied upon theories of colonial encounter, and we can see in the literature two sets of images, whose elements can be combined. One depicts a juggernaut of western modernity rolling over traditional Eastern communities, which were mauled, transformed, modernised, or shocked into rebellion and resistance, though some of their cultural features did manage to survive – and among these survivals, caste, patriarchy, and religious identity are most conspicuous. Another set of images depicts colonial alliances being made between British and Indian elites, which combined old and new forms of power to create a new kind of agrarian environment. The first set of images resonates with cultural ideas like those of Radhakamal Mukerjee and more broadly with theories that render societies in terms of structures and ideal-types. Historians have used it to explain social disruption and peasant upheavals under colonialism.⁸ The latter set of images, by contrast, reiterates Nehru's argument that 'the great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due, not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue'. This imagery of class alliance and exploitation spawned the idea of a semi-feudal mode of production which cannot move into full-fledged capitalism because it depends on feudal forms of power (caste, patriarchy, and direct coercion) but also cannot remain fully feudal because it needs and feeds the capitalist economy and modern state. Scholars have used this class imagery to explain the rise of political parties, persistent underdevelopment and inequality, and the general condition of subaltern domination.⁹ Both kinds of imagery of colonial encounter render the mofussil an abstraction, a place without history, a set of structures and forms of power without internal

⁷ Charan Singh, *Agrarian Revolution in Uttar Pradesh*, Allahabad, 1957, p. 41, quoted in Peter Reeves, *Landlords and Government: A Study of Their Relations Until Zamindari Abolition*, Bombay, 1991, p. 295.

⁸ See, for example, Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of the Social History of Maharashtra*, London, 1968; and Hardiman, ed., *Peasant Resistance*, pp. 1–13.

⁹ David A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*, Cambridge, 1976; Amit Bhaduri, *The Economic Structure of Backward Agriculture*, London, 1983; and Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency, in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 6–8.

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conflicts and dynamics that interacted with the moving force of colonialism.¹⁰ But evidence from a century of disparate colonial encounters indicates that agrarian societies were all in flux at the time of their incorporation, quite independently of British intervention. From the beginning of British rule, local struggles – to establish entitlements, expand cultivation, increase commodity production, and intensify land use – shaped the form of the colonial state and influenced its operation in the countryside. At first, property entitlement and revenue collections were the main connection between the empire and its villages, and we have seen how pre-modern territoriality was embedded in ranking and ritual activity that crossed the line between village and state. Local entitlements continued to depend on the conversion of material resources into symbolic forms such as patriarchal rank, money, and temple honours, and this produced many kinds of entitlement to the elements of landed property, which remained as the modern state drew legal and bureaucratic lines between village society and the state. Legally, the state separated property in land from social powers over labour, ritual, water, and forest. It homogenised territory by propagating an abstract appearance of modernity. But country folk brought official abstractions down to the ground, and countless local histories of the emergence of modern institutions still hide in the archives, out of public view. District records maintained in Collectors' offices contain the most detailed information on struggles over land, labour, and capital before 1880; and detailed court, police, and administrative records that form provincial archives are supplemented after 1920 by local academic studies.

Historically, neither imperialism nor agrarian society was a unitary structure, and many features of modernity which appear to be impositions of colonialism or inventions of British India were a much longer time in the making. Certainly, the British did codify private property and induce commodity production, but they did not need to invent

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee has rearranged the elements and combined these two sets of images by separating a 'feudal mode of power' that is 'characterized fundamentally by sheer superiority of physical force . . . founded on conquest or some other means of physical subordination of a subject population . . .' from a 'communal mode of power' that 'exists where individual or sectional rights, entitlements, or obligations are allocated on the authority of the entire social collectivity'. See his 'More on Modes of Power and Peasantry', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 311–50, reprinted in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York, 1988, pp. 351–90 (quote: p. 358).

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either one, because both have longer histories going back to medieval times. Theorists of tradition have long claimed that a lack of private property in South Asia derived from a monopoly of land ownership by the state and from collective social controls in village communities, and that caste, sect, and other forms of cultural collectivity in village society thwarted capitalist individualism and the privatisation of property. A stark theoretical opposition has thus emerged between Europe's competitive, individualist rationalism and Asia's collective, traditional, peasant community consciousness. But early-medieval inscriptions document strong communal, village institutions and *also* individually owned *family* property in farming communities. Early-modern records show many kinds of community arrangements for sharing, dividing, and reallocating land among fiercely independent, possessive families. Such arrangements still remain today. In Andhra Pradesh, villagers distribute risk by sharing costs and responsibilities in agriculture. In the Paktunistan, land redistribution among clans (*wesh*) continued until 1960. Such local institutions entail conflictual negotiations, agreements, and diplomacy among *families* who have individual entitlements to land, whose self-interested family members depend upon and constitute their family's power and position in the community. Kinship involves constant inter-family negotiations that facilitate competitive enterprise. In Gujarat, village women chat regularly in circles of kin to maintain co-operative alliances among their families. In coastal Andhra, village elders typically attest to and adjudicate rental agreements between private parties, and caste and kinship form bonds of trust in oral contracts that are pegged to market prices. Village community institutions such as the *panchayat* and *shalish* resolve conflicts among families amidst cross-cutting solidarities and in the face of competing, private interests. We thus see in contemporary and historical evidence that agrarian communities are typically held together as their internal diversity and conflict are combined with co-operation and accommodation in social networks of agrarian activity; and that few agrarian communities form solid collective identities with closed, unitary moral economies.

Farming communities did participate in rebellions that erupted from the everyday stresses and strains of oppression, social change, and resource competition. At moments of mass mobilisation, peasants may appear as a collective or a communal mass rising up against their rulers, and self-absorbed British observers certainly thought that

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peasant upheavals were Indian assaults on the existence of their government. But in South Asia, agriculture is not a collective peasant enterprise, except in some tribal societies, and peasants are not a unitary mass, even during upheavals. Rebellions before 1857 were primarily wars for territory of a sort that had been waged for centuries; after 1857, they became political struggles inside the framework of the state. It is only in tribal societies that old collective identities have been organised routinely as collective political opposition to the modern state itself. Forest, *jhum*, and other modes of tribal cultivation were accomplished by multi-family collectives, and tribal communities were not typically integrated in the ranks of entitlements and revenue transactions that defined the older agrarian states. After 1800, tribal groups retained distinctive farming communities even as they mingled with non-tribal societies and were pushed into the hills. Forest tribes and farmers had always flourished in the mountains, where they came under attack by the state and its associated agrarian interests. To manage conflict in tribal territories, states recognised tribal enclaves like the Daman-i-Koh around the Rajmahal Hills in Jharkhand; and thus *modern* tribal enclaves, created by the state, became territories for the evolution of *modern* tribal identities. Battles over tribal land arose typically from the aggressive extension of property claims by the state, zamindars, farmers, and moneylenders in tribal territories that were defined as such both by tribal communities and the state. Conflict increased with the rapid expansion of cultivation, and, in the nineteenth century, tribal warriors sometimes fought to the death for collective independence.

What we see in all the records of agrarian turmoil is not so much broad popular resistance to the colonial imposition of western-style private property rights and commodity production as a gradual, conflictual invention of new state institutions to enforce private property amidst on-going local struggles for entitlement. The new state now invested rights legally in individuals rather than in families. It defined land as a commodity. This particular form of entitlement was indeed a nineteenth-century invention. It became hegemonic as it was applied in practice at the intersection of empire and farming communities and as state institutions were embedded within agriculture. Across the nineteenth century, rebellions that demonstrate a radically communitarian opposition to private property rights did break out during the subjugation of tribal communities, as the expan-

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sion of lowland farming and state power turned tribal land into private property. After 1857, however, agrarian struggles in general ceased to be struggles for political autonomy or territorial supremacy. Instead, they sought private benefits for individuals, families, and kin groups within the framework of state institutions. They focused on everyday issues, above all secure possession of land, labour, and capital. Ever since, members of farming communities have mobilised publicly thousands of times to advance their claims to the many specific elements that comprised legal entitlements, such as fair rates of taxation and rent, better prices for inputs and outputs, occupancy rights, access to roads, forests and temples, and freedom from violence at the hands of landlords, state officials, and village patriarchs.

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Modern institutions took shape at the higher levels of Company authority, in major cities and towns, and gradually worked their way down the hierarchy into small towns and villages, where they met their local fate. Their personnel concentrated in urban centres on routes of trade and administration, and, though historical maps depict blocks of territory being added to British India at each phase of military expansion, this is misleading because, historically, empire had a more linear quality. It spread along routes into the interior, out from imperial centres into remote locations. This had important consequences locally, because earlier sites of Company authority became bases for later expansion and remained higher-order centres in hierarchies of power. Company revenues and profits first concentrated in old centres near the coast. Then the railways connected ports to interior centres along lines of commercial investment and commodity production, so that sites on the railway became nodes for the expansion of modern institutions, including law, bureaucracy, police, schools, the military, science, industrial technologies, and nationalism. The older, bigger colonial centres contained more English people and things and they had closer connections with Britain; this enhanced their prestige and provided privileges for residents of larger centres. A central place hierarchy was built permanently into the geography of modernity. The main corridors of empire ran up and down the coast from Bombay and Madras, and inland along the railway into Berar, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and the Deccan; they ran up from Calcutta

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across the northern river basins into Punjab and Assam; and they also ran up from Karachi and Surat along the Indus basin into Punjab. Other interior and upland regions became distant hinterlands. The urban corridor from Calcutta to Peshawar held a preponderance of imperial personnel and assets; this became the imperial heartland and the central zone for state-sponsored agricultural development. The imperial scaffold is still visible today in the routes of the main trunk lines, in the location of national capitals, and in the central place hierarchy, as well as in the geographical distribution of wealth and political power. Localities far from the railways are still disadvantaged in the flow of goods and services. Lesser towns and villages still occupy the hinterland, and the high mountain interior regions still remain cultural and political frontiers for the expansion of lowland states. By 1900, modern institutions were established throughout the agrarian lowlands and were moving into the uplands of the central mountains; but their expansion into the higher uplands was slow and spotty, and much of the high mountains away from Kashmir, Darjeeling, Simla, and Kathmandu remain remote even today. Every locality has its own position of rank in modernity's spatial arrangement of inequality, and, most importantly, urban-rural divisions are marked constituents of modern social identity.

An appropriate date for the arrival of modernity among farmers, pastoralists, and forest dwellers might be the day when the land was surveyed, plot-by-plot, drawn into survey maps, and printed in books to regulate the allocation of property rights. This activity began in the 1850s and spread rapidly between 1870 and 1920. The resulting records still exist and in addition to property rights they record agreements between officers and villagers for the maintenance of irrigation works and the protection of local forests. In Punjab, they also record the membership of land-owning lineages, and thus vestiges of old transactional territories. Everywhere, they record the names of landowners and village officers. As these records were being produced, the state was also building a vast new network of new canals in Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh and a massive bureaucracy for census-taking, agricultural surveillance, and other purposes, including the regulation of forests. Though forests were not measured internally until later, their boundaries had been surveyed by 1920, by which time the state had demarcated all the land that it claimed as its own property, all the woods, seashores, and riverbeds, drainage runs for

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irrigation tanks, other uncultivated land not included in *pattahs*, transport rights-of-way, and public space in cities, towns, and villages. State regulation of public space had begun long before – by 1800, the Company regulated access to land and roads in Madras and Calcutta, and in 1850 it could enforce laws that allowed Untouchables to walk the streets in district towns like Tirunelveli – but in the 1870s government had just begun to enforce its claim to forest land outside the reach of lowland farmers. By 1920, public lands had been demarcated; and every bit of private property had been surveyed, demarcated, and recorded within British India. The state could now register (and tax) all legal transfers of real estate.

After 1870, agrarian citizenship came into being within the agrarian polities of British India, and it entailed much more than holding a *pattah* and haggling over land rights and revenue. The orderly representation of rural interests became a distinctively modern political power as the state became a managerial institution within agriculture, a source of authority in allocations of labour, technologies, water, and finance. In the 1880s, District and Local Boards institutionalised the role of local notables in the administration and funding of state projects that became *public* activities with a high social profile. By this time, many rural men of means were already involved in privately funding education, publishing, and public works, and the public sphere in the *mofussil* developed largely with financial support from landed families. Government embraced landed interests instinctively. When agriculture departments invented and propagated new seeds, animal breeds, and farming techniques, they concentrated their efforts on the most profitable commercial crops, especially sugarcane and cotton; and when government built irrigation and promoted cooperative societies, the benefits went primarily to commercial producers. Ideologically, all these efforts served the public good. Then, in the 1870s, murderous cyclones in Bengal (1874) and horrible famines in all the semi-arid regions (1876–8) raised the issue of the state's liability for civilian calamity, and British responsibility for public health and welfare became a hot topic of public discussion, as Indian organisations began to press for official representation in government. The scope of state responsibility expanded very quickly, and in 1888 the *Report on the Conditions of the Lower Classes of the Population in Bengal* (the Dufferin Report) used the first detailed empirical studies of 100 sample villages 'to ascertain whether there is any foundation for

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the assertion frequently repeated that the greater part of the population of India suffers from a daily insufficiency of food' (p. 12).¹¹ This was a critical moment for the emergence of modern development discourse: modern institutions began to mobilise public opinion around agrarian issues and urban leaders began to stake their legitimacy on service to a public that was predominantly rural. At this point in history, a new question arises: who are those folks, out there in the country, who shape political discourse and mobilise the public?

Developmentalism attained instant cultural hegemony as local demands for state investment in agriculture became morally and politically compelling in imperial circles. State-sponsored development may perhaps be intrinsic for all modern states, even colonial empires, because modernity demands progress and makes the state the ultimate guarantor of public well-being. Modern political struggles revolve around who will be served by the state, what sectors of society are most important, and which claims on the exchequer are most urgent. By 1880, the spectre of class war had been let loose in Europe and the idea was already established that state investments in public welfare would stabilise national enterprise; this idea would become increasingly prominent in the twentieth century. The critique of the negative impact of British policy on Indian well-being thus became an elementary aspect of Indian nationalism, and the inadequacy of imperial development efforts has received considerable academic attention. Nationalist critics were surely correct to say that, overall, the British drained wealth from India, depressed India's industrial growth, and restricted opportunities for Indian employment and investment outside agriculture. Nationalist critics also chided British rulers for excessive taxation and inadequate attention to agricultural improvement. Since 1970, scholars have expanded this critique to include the negative ecological impact of railways (which blocked drainage to provoke malaria epidemics), canals (which waterlogged the soil to produce poisonous salinity), and deforestation (which induced erosion and displaced forest people). But many continuities are striking from the 1870s to the present day in state efforts to increase aggregate agricultural output, expand commodity crop production, and secure the profitability of agriculture for investors. State development expen-

¹¹ Quoted in Willem van Schendel, 'Economy of the Working Classes', in Sirajul Islam, ed., *History of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1992, vol. II, p. 528.

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diture increased after 1870, declined after 1920, and rose to new heights after 1947, but all modern states have faced public critics who say the state is not doing enough, and all states have publicised and praised their own development efforts. From the first famine commission report, in 1878, to the latest five-year plan, in 1997, states have sought to improve their own public image as developers and they have conducted regular inquiries on the cause and extent of development problems.

An assessment of the impact of state development activities is well beyond the scope of this book. But some points are relevant. Famine was the first policy issue that separated modern development from the long history of state-supported agricultural expansion. Prominent years of famine mortality clustered in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s; then again in 1918–19, and again in 1943–4, 1966–7, and 1973–5. All these famines (like droughts and cyclones) affected some regions more than others and can be considered in the context of other regional disparities (about which more below). Until 1920, famine mortality clustered in dry regions, especially in the Deccan, western plains, and central peninsular. As we will see, these famines must have been aggravated by ecological stress and decay in community-financed irrigation, some of which was mitigated in later decades. After 1870, government invested heavily in irrigation and instituted famine prevention measures, but government irrigation mostly benefited commercial farmers and the impact of government activity on reducing mortality is unclear. Most new irrigation was built by farmers who invested in wells for commercial farming, and, though state famine policies may have helped to reduce peaks in mortality, very high levels of everyday hunger, mortality, and morbidity continue to plague the dry famine zones even today. In the 1940s, 1960s, and 1970s, famine and near-famine scarcities hit Bengal, Bihar, and Bangladesh, regions that have also been seriously deprived relative to others by modern development regimes; here, too, famine struck regions most heavily that were most precariously sustained against the vagaries of the monsoon, depending on unirrigated winter rice.¹² Before 1950, the largest government investments in irrigation came to western Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, where dividends to the state and to commercial

¹² Malabika Chakravarti, 'The Lethal Connection: Winter Rice, Poverty and Famine in Late 19th Century Bengal', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, 18, 1, 1996, 66–95.

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interests were high, but there is still an academic debate today as to whether the UP canals were, on the whole, *counter-productive* because, in addition to spreading intensive cultivation, they also spread malaria and waterlogging. After 1950, disproportionate government irrigation benefits also accrued to western regions. Since 1975, there have been no major famines anywhere, and monsoons have been better than average. This does not diminish the continued importance of public investment, however, which has still not eliminated hunger or the threat of mass starvation; and development expenditures have still not benefited poor people and poor lands in proportion to their share of the total population.

Development constitutes a more complex historical subject than any list of costs and benefits could ever indicate, however, because the discourse and practice of development encode a modern state's relationship with its people, and the Dufferin Report suggests imperial anxiety at the height of empire over state responsibility for malnutrition. Though famines can be called natural calamities and poverty can be explained away, everyday starvation threatens the legitimacy of a modern state. Development anxiety suffuses modernity. Tools have been honed to measure the nutritional status, health, wealth, and well-being of every individual and the media have broadcast scathing attacks on the reputation of rulers based on the implications of their policies. As British rule weakened politically after 1920, it became less capable of improving local conditions, which weakened it further, and nationalists increased their own credibility by attacking government. Congress won the loyalty of locally prominent men by convincing them that they had much to gain from a Congress regime, beginning with lower taxes and rents. The Krishak Praja Party stood for lower rents and more secure land tenures in Bengal. No-tax and no-rent agitations attracted agrarian support and sketched a blueprint for the nation's relationship with farmers after independence. In the 1940s, the Congress and Muslim League formulated plans for national development which evolved during depression and war and envisioned an even stronger role for the state, and, since 1947, development projects have expanded the political base for governments.

After 1947, populist discourse and far-reaching government activities to increase agricultural productivity made development increasingly egalitarian and democratic. The colonial government had nothing like the power of national states today to bring tailor-made

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packages of technology and inputs to farmers in the village. In addition, of course, farmers could not vote before 1947. But continuities since 1870 are impressive and are not confined to the proclivity of states to build large-scale irrigation dams to bring water to vast agricultural tracts from one central source under state control. Development has a firm agrarian base. Under the British, as today, state projects to improve agriculture were designed to benefit landowners on whom their success depended. William Moreland reflected an official agrarian mentality in the British empire when he said that non-productive landlords exploited peasants and undermined agriculture. This sentiment has been reiterated many times, and in 1940 even the Tenancy Committee in Hyderabad argued that giving more land and finance to peasants would serve economic as well as political ends.¹³ Thomas Munro and Henry Lawrence had also argued that, to improve agriculture, the state must invest in its farmers.

The discourse and institutions of agricultural development made a place for *farmers* (also called agriculturists) – as distinct from landowners – in the modern state. Because states need to mobilise social power to increase production, they need farmers who can use their own private means to supplement state expenditure effectively. For Munro, mobilising the peasantry simply meant keeping taxes low, eliminating speculative middlemen, and securing private property, all of which, he argued, would encourage investment. By the 1850s, more ambitious arguments for state-sponsored irrigation had taken hold. To increase its revenue, proponents argued, government should build new irrigation to open new, more valuable, secure cultivation. Early state projects in the Kaveri and Krishna–Godavari deltas showed that investments could bring the promised revenues; and later famines gave the state other reasons to invest in irrigation. Huge irrigation works were installed in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab, as ancient morals took modern form. The Tamil poet advised the Pandya king to expand irrigation, and the modern state also needs to spread water upon the land. To repay its investments, the state needs revenues; and families who most directly profit from state investments, who combine land, labour, and capital to increase production, are best able to repay the state. These same people are the leaders of their communities. Agrarian patriarchs have authority and political connections. In

¹³ Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–1951*, Delhi, 1981, pp. 11–12.

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the nineteenth century, old political imperatives which had long compelled rulers to grant wealth and authority to powerful local men were thus joined with development ideas within a framework of private property to form a new kind of agrarian citizen, the farmer who invests in his land. This new citizen would displace his predecessors, the village landowner and landlord, when the old gentry drifted away from agriculture into urban occupations during the twentieth century.

Local power influenced development policy and its impact. Local resistance made it costly to raise tax rates on old farmland, and even nominal increases were minimal after 1870, as inflation reduced the real value of taxes and new state revenues came primarily from sources other than land, such as stamps, fees, and duties. After the early settlements, new land taxes had come primarily from new cultivation, from formerly 'concealed cultivation', and from increasing assessments on land pegged to its increasing value. Local resistance to any kind of tax increase became more and more public until, by 1920, taxes were the central issue in Congress agitations in prosperous farm regions, most famously, in Gujarat. Demonstrators shouted that the state must hear the farmers' complaints and redress grievances, a demand with a long pedigree, not so much in Delhi and London as in provincial and district headquarters. Provincial regulations concerning inheritance, land alienation, debt recovery, and tenancy multiplied after 1870 to strengthen people who invested *directly* in farming, which benefited the well-endowed farmers in ryotwari tracts and many tenants in zamindari regions.

The impact of state policy on landlordism became more and more ambiguous. The British government remained committed to landlord property to the end, but zamindari estates also obstructed the increase of modern state power and revenue, and peasants became the best investment for government on political and economic grounds. On permanently settled land, state revenue increases were out of the question, and new cultivation was hard to locate and tax on zamindari estates. Legally and politically, therefore, though government supported zamindars, talukdars, and malguzars, tenancy legislation and the expansion of police jurisdictions, forest controls, and other official interventions into zamindari estates undermined zamindari autonomy. Zamindars were among the greatest beneficiaries of irrigation works in the Krishna–Godavari basin, and Ganga canals enriched talukdars in

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Awadh. Government had no qualms about investing in zamindari areas to expand new cultivation, even though this had the effect of increasing landlord power, to the chagrin of people like William Moreland, who pointed out that zamindars did not invest very much in farming. Overall, however, government did not invest much in any of the permanently settled regions. The majority of zamindars raised most of their income from rent and money lending, keeping their distance from farming; and by the twentieth century we see a general movement of landlord income away from farming. Zamindars' children moved to the city to pursue education, employment, and professional careers. This trend was most important for Calcutta, where zamindari descendants, heirs, employees, and representatives – many impoverished as the generations passed – filled the ranks of the *bhadralok* (the respectable people of the middle classes). Some of the early nationalists who came from this milieu, like R. C. Dutt, criticised the British for undermining zamindari property rights, while other nationalists pushed for tenant rights. Conflicting interests in the political culture of zamindari thus entered modern politics, and the ambiguity of British policy toward zamindars echoed among nationalists who sought political support from zamindars and tenants at the same time.

State investments nurtured localities of expanding commercial cultivation along routes of imperial expansion. Development became synonymous with empire. Big cities along the railway grew faster than smaller cities and towns, and areas well endowed with huge state irrigation advanced rapidly over others. These two factors combined to increase regional wealth in Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh compared with old imperial territories in Bihar and Bengal. Towns boomed in the cotton-growing and sugar-farming irrigated tracts in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and along the Tamil coast, in contrast to regions of declining tank irrigation in the driest parts of the Deccan, Rayalseema, Bihar, and Bengal. Ecological distress became most visible in the driest Deccan districts, as lush new irrigated colonies were opening up in Punjab and western UP. In 1911, the shift of the imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi symbolised a long movement of imperial investment. Modernity's most politically and economically powerful agrarian macro-region in South Asia expanded across Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and western UP; it has been consistently favoured by state investments relative to other regions since 1870.

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As agrarian regions acquired economic identities, the mobilisation of power on farms became more intricately entangled with the urban public sphere. Local conflicts involving landlords, tenants, rural financiers, farmers, and government officials moved from village to town as fast as rumour. Debates in London and decisions in capitals travelled to distant villages with a telegram. Regions of agrarian politics centred on district headquarters and provincial capitals. After the Deccan Riots Commission published its report in 1878, laws were passed to protect landowners against foreclosure, and governments used the registration bureaucracy to prevent the transfer of land to non-farming moneylenders. Tenancy laws were passed to regulate the rights of farmers in zamindari estates. State officials sought to protect the property of plantation owners, ryots, tenants, and zamindars, and these property rights often conflicted with one another as well as with the rights of tribal groups and even of the state itself.

There was no single imperial intelligence to guide government activity in all these conflicts, and agrarian politics emerged during the formulation of provincial solutions to local problems. The state drew lines around tribal forests to facilitate direct administration, creating separate political territories, while regional politics developed around the administrative centres in which the middle classes settled and landowners invested. In 1883, for instance, Krishna–Godavari irrigation effectively irrigated 24,592 double-cropped acres, and, by 1897, double-cropping covered 163,481 acres, enriching zamindars, ryots, and bankers and business families, who invested in towns. Territories that benefited most from state investments saw the fastest growth of middle-class activity, and, in 1881, 241 vakils worked in Godavari District, more than in Madras, the provincial capital.¹⁴ As agricultural labourers became urban workers, they often moved back and forth from city to village from season to season; and it seems that smaller towns had an edge in the expansion of non-farm employment, especially along the railway, where towns became entrepôts for the agrarian hinterlands. The circulation of capital between town and villages produced a critical and often conflictual power relationship between finance and farming, which preoccupied the modern state

¹⁴ G. A. L. Satyarani, 'Commercialization of Agriculture and its Impact on the Socio-Political Awakening in the Godavari and Krishna Districts of the Madras Presidency, AD 1858–1914', Ph.D. dissertation, Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, 1989, pp. 295–7.

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because of its importance for economic development and political stability.

Politically, only the biggest cities were important at the imperial level, but, regionally, every major town had a middle class that performed mediating roles between farmers, the state, and commodity markets, as teachers, lawyers, bankers, brokers, investors, merchants, technical experts, and officers in state agencies dealing with roads, railways, forests, medicine, construction, irrigation, plantations, mining, and eventually hydro-electric power and other projects. The size and influence of the middle class grew with state penetration into agriculture; locally, every state activity generated political feedback into urban centres. The reservation of forests, for instance, produced countless law suits by zamindars who claimed forest lands on the borders of their estates: middle-class bureaucrats, lawyers, and zamindar sons and retainers were involved in these conflicts – on all sides – in towns and cities. Resistance to the plot-by-plot measurement of village lands was localised but widespread, and politically most visible in zamindari estates, where tenant land rights undermined zamindari power. In Bengal, the boundaries of villages had been matters of local custom until the surveys of the 1860s. In Bihar, zamindars blocked state surveys of tenant lands, and in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere surveys moved along slowly and unevenly, encouraged and stymied according to the relative influence of zamindars and tenants. Every agrarian dispute rippled into town. In the 1840s, the Calcutta intelligentsia debated what to do about distress in the indigo fields. Taxpayers' associations multiplied. In the 1870s, the government created District and Local Boards to advise Collectors on local policies. Regional agrarian polities thus developed as territories of political interaction around agricultural communities, mediating their entanglement with the imperial state.

MOBILISATION

By 1900, agrarian polities had emerged from the combination of modern state institutions and local struggles over land, labour, and finance. These territories of social power and mobilisation have been submerged in historical writing by imperial and national trends, but they form the basic geography of agrarian political economy and culture in the twentieth century. Constituted legally in land settle-

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ments and politically by administrative boundaries, they took shape during the long closure of agricultural frontiers, as locally dominant landed groups and their opponents and competitors acquired professional and political support in the public sphere. Expanding urban economies provided new frontiers for rural ambition and for labour mobility as the world economy and the imperial state extended their powers over agrarian resources through urban centres. Social power and strife in the villages travelled to town as urban influence radiated outward into the countryside, creating distinctive political cultures overlaid by imperial and national politics. National politicians needed regional allies who needed local bases of support, and local movements worked their way up the political system. As Charan Singh knew very well, local agitations could become mass movements that could challenge national elites, and, after 1920, loud calls for radical change became frequent and insistent. They came from all levels of society. The British had incorporated influential landowners into their early settlements, but the subsequent expansion of agriculture and commodity production changed power equations dramatically in every locality. By 1920, Congress leaders faced many conflicting interest groups in every region and sought to incorporate them all into a single national project. But each agrarian polity imbued 'the nation' and 'independence' with its own distinctive meanings.

Punjab is the best known agrarian polity because particularly tight connections developed there between the state and farmers. A Punjab school of colonial policy took hold after annexation in 1849 and, during settlements, officials codified local powers vested in the community of village landowners. Officially, the Punjab village became a proprietary body composed of land-owning lineages. Administrators endeavoured to reach agreements about the limits of villages to ascertain the frontiers of agricultural expansion at the time of the settlement, because here, as elsewhere, the state claimed all the land on which taxes were not paid and villagers also claimed the woods, grazing land, and cleared land surrounding their fields, which they gleaned for fuel, fodder, water, and food. By paying taxes on farmland, farmers could avoid state expropriation and use the state to support their own claims to land. By clearing new land for farming, they could establish new rights and perhaps avoid taxes until a new official survey was undertaken. The incentives for expanding cultivation onto new ground produced many local conflicts as the claims of

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farmers clashed with one another, as farm communities claimed the land of pastoralists and forest cultivators, and as the state, zamindars, tenants, and ryots asserted rights to newly cultivated land. The cultural character of villages in Punjab changed as collective arrangements for local defence became unnecessary and as the joint interests of lineages came to focus instead on privatising family control over land and labour. Weaker families could secure their rights against stronger neighbours by acquiring private property rights, even though collective village resource sharing did benefit weaker community members by spreading the cost of crop failures and protecting the village commons. Stronger landowners also benefited from community resource sharing, but they also had the most to gain by establishing exclusive rights to the most valuable village land. Village headmen and zamindars could use their local authority and official position to increase their private land holdings by hiring labour to bring more land under their personal cultivation. There were thus good reasons for rich and poor landed families alike to value *both* community solidarity *and* individual property, and, in Punjab and elsewhere, solidarities *among* dominant families enforced their *individual* privatisation of landed property.

As Jat lineages expanded family control over agricultural territory, their sons became prime recruits for the imperial army. This made Punjab even more politically important and brought more public investment and military salaries and pensions into the country. Starting in 1887, irrigation along the Chenab river opened new lands to intensive cultivation in state-run canal colonies, and Punjab became the most prolific regional exporter of agricultural produce, which it remains today. Jat farm enterprise supported the power of lineages, and vice versa, in agrarian territories that received more state attention, finance, and intervention than any other. The combination of Jat family farming, lineage political organisation, and state intervention in agriculture produced a booming regional economy and an agrarian polity characterised by militant collective action by land-owning lineages.

Initially, in each village, settlement officers had parcelled out rights to individual farms, collective 'common lands', and external lands used by pastoral peoples; in doing so, Punjab administrators produced new village proprietary groups by lumping together lineages even when they had no previous relations to one another. Early land administra-

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tion thus encouraged local alliances across lineages, based on village entitlements; and, despite the official collectivity of the Punjab village, Punjab landowners had privatised all the commons by 1900. Government canal colonies became the first modern plan for agricultural expansion that involved the large-scale relocation of farmers and creation of new farm communities. This kind of state-planned agrarian colonisation has been accomplished many times since, in different parts of the world, and it always creates communities that live and work in unusually close quarters with state bureaucracies. In Punjab, canal colony farmers were also beneficiaries of state policies to support dominant caste groups who were critical in the military. Moving loyal, productive families into new frontiers of farming was intended not only to increase agricultural production but to expand the Punjab political system, as the state pushed more deeply into Punjab community life. Individual farm plots granted in the colonies were very large and provided ample scope for investment and family expansion, in return for relatively low rents. By 1897, along the Rakh and Mian branches of the Chenab Canal, the Punjab government had granted 341,998 acres to officially defined 'peasant' families who owned one square of about 27 acres each; 30,473 acres to 'capitalist' farmers holding from five to one hundred squares; 36,630 acres to 'yeomen' farmers with up to three squares; and 6,313 acres to 'military' grantees holding up to three squares.¹⁵ These grants echoed the political logic of old land grants to temples and mosques. They also subsidised a rapid growth in the area of farmland planted with food and fodder crops, which further hastened the disappearance of common lands for grazing. In the Fazilka canal tract, cultivation expanded 48 per cent between 1886 and 1897 and the number of cattle almost doubled. Everywhere in Punjab, commons land (*shamilat*) had gone into private hands even before legal privatisation because powerful families would take possession of valuable portions as the village paid the revenue. As irrigation, cotton, and sugarcane spread over the land, 'the traditional pattern of land-use and institutional order inevitably changed under the impact of increased cultivation'.¹⁶

¹⁵ N. Gerald Barrier, 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government of India to Agrarian Unrest', in Hardiman, *Peasant Resistance*, p. 231.

¹⁶ Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul, *Common Lands and Customary Law: Institutional Change in North India over the Past Two Centuries*, Delhi, 1996, p. 120; also pp. 68, 89, 104, 112, and 118.

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By 1900, Punjab agriculture had become a serious state concern. More state investments justified more state control, and the Punjab Land Alienation Act prohibited the sale of land or its transfer in foreclosure to anyone who did not belong to an 'agricultural tribe'. The state defined ethnic divisions by religion and caste with its census operations and ethnographic surveys; and now it used these divisions to regulate credit markets. The purpose of this legislation was to keep land in the hands of families who had a racially coded capacity for farming, but it also institutionalised ethnic identities and solidarities among dominant caste lineages. Families passed land from one generation to another, and, likewise, military honour ran in families. Rituals and genealogies recorded at temples, shrines, and *gurudwaras* (Sikh temples) defined lineages. Now descent and ethnicity also became the basis for participation in land and credit markets. Urban groups protested their exclusion and this opened a political split between farming and commercial interests defined officially by caste, tribe, and religion. During the nationalist movement, these divisions were mapped onto political oppositions between Muslim farmers and Hindu merchants in the western districts, as financial wealth accumulated within the Muslim 'agricultural tribes'. Tight connections between farming and state administration, especially in the canal colonies, also made everyday farming more inherently political in Punjab than anywhere else. As the Chenab colonies were filling up, bureaucrats tightened their control over access to land, and, in 1907, protesters confronted the state in demonstrations that attracted the attention of Lajpat Rai, the head of the Arya Samaj. His participation at a Lyallpur meeting punctuated a long modern history of entanglements between urban nationalists, religious reformers, and agrarian interests, which runs down through the rise of the Akali Dal and the Muslim League, the Partition of British India in 1947, and the subsequent demands for a separate Haryana and independent Khali-stan. In Punjab, the meaning of the nation was suffused with solidarities among dominant farming castes, above all, Jats, and the cry for independence has been repeatedly raised to carve out territories within which state power and Jat family power might be more effectively combined. Since 1906, the mobilisation of religious identities has endeavoured to harmonise the disparate interests of rustic farmers, urban financiers, and professionals within communal solidarities, as Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh political movements have produced separate

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state territories in the Indian Punjab, Pakistani Punjab, and Indian state of Haryana.¹⁷

Farmers in the old Punjab now live in separate polities, carved by state and national boundaries. In each, the politics of lineage power produced an ethnically and religiously defined agrarian citizenry. Title to land is legal but also genealogical, enforced by states but also by the lineages. The green revolution and national planning have accentuated state interests in agriculture and provoked political movements whose strength is augmented by the fact that Punjab produces critical food supplies for India and Pakistan. In 1992, Punjab and Haryana together held 9 per cent of India's population, 8 per cent of its cultivated acreage, and 17 per cent of its food grain. In India, only Punjab and Haryana have large food crop surpluses to export to other states: Punjab has proportionately six times as much food as it has people, and Haryana three times. Their food stores sustain India's food security. Since 1960, Punjab and Haryana have also had the highest growth rate in the value of their overall agricultural produce (at 4.89 per cent and 4.14 per cent, respectively), though recent evidence indicates a relative decline since the 1980s (and serious trouble in parts of Punjab, as a result of waterlogging).¹⁸ In addition, very substantial farmers own this prime farmland. In India as a whole, 73 per cent of all farmers work holdings of less than 1 hectare. In Punjab, this figure is 45 per cent, and in Haryana, 61 per cent.¹⁹ Here we also find an agrarian culture dominated by aggressively capitalist owner-cultivators, the backbone of the green revolution in India and Pakistan, and some of the most successful farmers are now mobilised for globalisation. Gurpeet Khehra is one of these agro-tycoons. Thirty-three years old, with a Ph.D. in tissue culture from Britain, he invested Rs 400,000 in Israeli drip irrigation and received Rs 2 million in 1997 from crop sales and research fees. He grows strawberries on 50 acres, raises vegetables for export and plans to buy a fast-food franchise and build a Rs 7.5 million research laboratory. Other tycoons have bigger farms:

¹⁷ K. L. Tuteja, 'The Punjab Hindu Sabha and Communal Politics', in Indu Banga, ed., *Five Punjabi Centuries: Policy, Economy, Society and Culture, c.1500-1990. Essays for J. S. Grewal*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 126-40.

¹⁸ Statistics from Government of India, *Area and Production of Principal Crops in India* (various years), Ministry of Agriculture, New Delhi. See also Bharat Ahluwalia, 'Land of Five Tears', *Outlook*, 4, 51, 28 December 1998, 47-51.

¹⁹ Amita Shah, 'Food Security and Access to Natural Resources: A Review of Recent Trends', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 26, 28 June 1997, A46-54.

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J. B. S. Sangha, for instance, has 6,000 acres under potatoes; and A. S. Dhinda, has 700 acres of flowers, which yield 70 tonnes of seed and half a million dollars in export earnings to the United States.²⁰

Poor Biharis work on rich Punjabi farms. As Punjab exports food, Bihar exports hunger. In Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur districts in 1981, researchers counted over 400,000 farm workers who had come from northern Bihar districts, almost all members of low castes. Workers also came from tribal Chota Nagpur, where recruiters had gone to bring them for the employers who bid for them at auction. Though this illegal trade had ceased by 1991, rich Punjabi farmers were still advancing huge sums to bring Biharis to work in their fields; when official investigations found some workers being held in bondage, they were released to local authorities.²¹

In all other regions, too, agrarian ethnicities have been attached to the land, and symbols of class and social status have formed the regional vocabularies of agrarian politics. State-defined property rights are culturally charged, and entitlements to resources adorn individuals and families like regalia. Legal and administrative codes enhanced and institutionalised the social value of symbols of respect and honour by inscribing local ranks of status into the everyday operation of the state. Individuals and families have long gained access to the means of production by social alliances celebrated in rituals – above all, marriage – that reproduce social power in dialects of ethnicity, *jati*, *varna*, and sect. Combining land, labour, and finance in agriculture still depends on the accumulation of symbolic assets. The modern state intervened by legalising customs in civil law; by codifying castes and tribes; by enumerating population according to ethnic categories of race, tribe, caste, and religion; by measuring social conditions and stereotyping groups by ethnic category, so that Jats, for instance, officially became the best farmers in India, and Muslims and Hindus are always opposed to one another in government discourse; and by creating ethnic entitlements within the state itself, sometimes officially, as in the case of Sikh regiments in the army, and sometimes tacitly, as in the case of the vast Brahman corps of bureaucrats and state intellectuals. As employer, patron, and supreme arbiter of social status and entitle-

²⁰ Ramesh Vinayak, 'Futuristic Farmers', *India Today*, 1 June 1998, 39–42.

²¹ Manjit Singh, 'Bonded Migrant Labour in Punjab Agriculture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 11, 1997, 518–19; and see Manjit Singh, *Uneven Development in Agriculture and Labour Migration: A Case of Bihar and Punjab*, Shimla, 1995.

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ment, the state became the master institution for the production, regulation, and accumulation of cultural capital as it increased its material power over economic and social mobility. Brahmans became prominent everywhere in higher education, administration, law, engineering, medicine, sciences, and journalism, and also in the Indian National Congress, along with a few other high-caste groups, including Kayasths and Baniyas. In effect, the British became an imperial caste, marrying among themselves, living in their own settlements, dressing alike, and eating together. Brahmans became the national caste in British India.

Every region developed its own particular set of politically important groups; its own cultural profile of social rank, dominance, and conflict; its own ethnic flavour, reflected in its cuisine, crafts, dialects, and voting patterns. Medieval core territories in the northern basins in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar had the highest percentage of Brahmans at every level in agrarian society. Today, Uttar Pradesh contains 40 per cent of all the Brahmans in India. Before 1950, Brahmans, Muslims, and Rajputs were the great zamindars and talukdars of central and eastern UP. Rajputs, Brahmans, and Bhumihars ruled agrarian Bihar. Beneath their dominance, Goala (Ahir), Kurmi, and Lodis were prominent tenants and farmers all along the Ganga basin. In western UP, Rajasthan, Malwa, and the Central Provinces of British India, the Brahman, Jat, Rajput, Maratha, and Muslim rajas and zamindars each had their own tracts. The Bengali *bhadralok* came from the respectable classes of high-caste zamindars and their retainers, from estates where tenants were Muslims and middle-caste farmers, who in turn had lower-status landless workers under them in the villages. Three major tenant castes dominated localities in nineteenth-century West Bengal: Sadgop, Kaibartta, and Aguri. They had colonised their territories before Permanent Settlement, and in the twentieth century their power was challenged by upwardly mobile caste groups (Mayra, Chasadhoba, Jogi, Namasudra, and Pod).²² The urban homes of the *bhadralok* and the factories in Calcutta obtained low-caste Bihari workers from the countryside. In Assam, the Ahom, Koch, Kalita, and Rajbangshi had their territories and faced waves of immigrant Bengalis. Meanwhile, Gujarati Kunbis, Maratha Kunbis, Malayali Nayars,

²² Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste, Class, and Census: Aspects of Social Mobility in Bengal under the Raj, 1872-1931', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, 5, 2, 1981, 93-123.

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Telugu Kammās, Kapus, and Reddys; Kannadiga Vokkaligas, Lingayats, and Boyas; and Tamil Vanniyas, Vellalas, Kallars, and Maravas – and all the other dominant farming castes – had their own local territories in regions over which a tiny population of Brahmans held the highest positions in native society under British rule. In Native States, ruling families and allies formed ethnic elites, some very small, like the Muslim dynasty in Hyderabad and Hindu rulers in Kashmir.

The public pronouncement of the name, population, and status of each group became a feature of its social identity within the territory of the modern state, particularly during census operations.²³ From the first imperial census, in 1871, social movements emerged in which culturally subordinate groups made claims to higher social status and *at the same time* to superior entitlements under the protection of the state. Directed particularly against the supremacy of the British, Brahmans, and Rajputs, social movements sought to raise the status of lower-ranked groups and to eliminate disabilities that came with their lower status, such as exclusion from temples, universities, and public office. These movements had much in common with the group pursuit of social mobility in earlier centuries.²⁴ But commercialisation and urbanisation fuelled many new kinds of mobility and the modern state opened new institutional possibilities. An early example comes from 1850, when low-caste workers moved into Tirunelveli more frequently and their mobility challenged high-caste control over urban space. When battles broke out over Pariah funeral processions, the military stepped in to enforce public access to the streets.²⁵ The modern state acquired powers to regulate access to land, roads, temples, water, electricity, sanitation, education, and a great many other resources; and to coerce and protect people almost everywhere in society. Modern social movements were thus directed at the state, seeking official recognition, protection, and the improvement of group status

²³ The last official counting of castes was in 1931. See *Census of India, 1931*, vol. 1, part 2, Imperial Tables, table XVI, 'Race, Caste, Tribe'. Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *Historical Atlas of South Asia*, Chicago, 1978, p. 108, has excellent maps of 1931 census data; so does S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in Maps: A Geographical Analysis of Resource Distribution in West Bengal and Eastern Pakistan*, Bombay, 1959.

²⁴ Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal', *Journal of Asian Studies*, February, 1971, 315–39.

²⁵ Robert E. Frykenberg, 'On Roads and Riots in Tinnevely: Radical Change and Ideology in Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century', *South Asia*, 4, 2, 1982, 34–52.

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and entitlements. They reflect changing social relations and also the changing character of the state, whose elites can use public force in various ways. These movements have often involved serious social conflict, and, in British India, regional systems of order and conflict created political environments within which various versions of nationalism developed. Some of these local conflicts have received wide attention – for example, the breast cloth controversy in Kerala, the cow protection movement in Uttar Pradesh, Kshatriya movements in Gujarat and Bihar, and temple entry movements in Tamil Nadu – but they all have local idioms and specific ethnic contexts attached to the land. Many revolve around religious institutions and include theology, sectarianism, and mass devotion, which give agrarian polities like Punjab an air of exalted passion. Among low castes and especially Untouchables, conversions to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism expressed social movements against upper-caste *dharmā*. In 1900, a prominent Brahman official in Madras, S. Srivinasā Raghava Aiyangar, reported officially that Pariahs could make no progress without leaving Hinduism,²⁶ and at the end of his life B. R. Ambedkar came to the same conclusion, launching a Buddhist movement which has remained strong among Dalits in Maharashtra. In Punjab, Mangoo Ram led the Ad Dharm movement to liberate Untouchables within a Hindu sectarian framework.

As in Punjab, elsewhere too, environments and ecologies also changed dramatically as farmers pushed agriculture to the limit. In the Maratha Deccan, registered cultivation increased 67 per cent from the 1840s to the 1870s, with many taluks showing rates of increase over 100 per cent and a few over 200 per cent. Population growth also accelerated after 1820 but registered farmland grew at annual rates running from 2 per cent to 9 per cent, indicating a drive to bring land under the plough and to pay for its ownership. Prices for cotton soared in 1860, which further encouraged ploughing, planting, and property acquisition. This resulted in a substantial increase in loan activity, farm debt, and conflicts over land, both among farmers and between farmers and financiers. Many precarious dry farms came into being as poor farming families ploughed up marginal land with bad soil in areas of low rainfall. In the Deccan, water for new well

²⁶ G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 197.

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irrigation lay deep in rock and could be tapped only with a considerable investment. Without irrigation, on the old margins of cultivation, land was rapidly desiccated by exhaustive cotton crops and hungry herds, especially goats. As a result, the cotton boom ended abruptly in Khandesh and proved temporary in much of the Deccan. Already in the 1830s, officials had warned that high taxes on poor lands were forcing farmers to assume debts that they would not be able to repay during inevitable bad years of drought and/or depression. After 1850, debt caused many conflicts. In two districts in western Khandesh (Poona and Ahmadnagar) between 1851 and 1865, the annual number of court disputes over land rose from 98 to 689 and from 75 to 632, respectively. In 1875, when a combination of a price slump and drought hit these districts, Maratha farmers attacked Marwari moneylenders, tearing up their debt agreements. (Perhaps they had heard about the Mahadev Kolis who had cut off Marwari noses and burned account books along with moneylender houses in 1872.)²⁷ After the 1875 riots, the rains failed, and in 1876–7 famine struck. Virtually every Deccan district suffered massive mortality, but the Famine Commission found that landless labourers, artisans, and poor tenant farmers died in the highest proportion. The victims of starvation were thus not the militant Maratha farmers who had attacked Marwari bankers during the Deccan riots, but rather poor people who had been deprived of entitlements during the privatisation of village land as the sorely indebted Maratha farmers expanded their holdings. Similar crop failures had occurred in 1824–5 and 1832–3, when government had provided no relief, but famine came in 1877 because the local safety net had disappeared which had previously been provided by village common lands, by hereditary family rights in villages, and by open lands outside village control. The animal population dropped as open land was lost to grazing. Herders went to the hills and drought killed animals in large numbers. The 1877 famine emerged from a combination of price slump, crop failure, and animal death that killed local demand for labourers and artisans, cutting exchange entitlements to food for people without land to feed their families.²⁸

²⁷ David Hardiman, 'Community, Patriarchy, Honour: Raghu Bhanagare's Revolt', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 23, 1, 1995, 88–9. For more detail on Deccan riots, see David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 202–20.

²⁸ Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818–1941*, Delhi, 1985, pp. 56–9, 66, 70–2.

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Between 1876 and 1878, one quarter of the population also died in Bellary District. The semi-arid peninsula – from Gujarat across Berar and Khandesh and throughout Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra, and the Tamil coast – had begun to feel the ecological and social costs of the race to privatise land and to expand cash cropping. Farmers continued to cut down trees and scrub, pushing tribal farmers and herders into the hills, privatising control over food, fodder, fuel, and raw materials, as competition for land and struggles for income confronted the limits of the land. In this agrarian landscape, a prosperous farm locality required ample supplies of water to compensate for the meagre, fickle monsoon, and farmers needed financing to bring land, labour, and water together. Stable irrigation represented solid investments, and, in Gujarat, private wells and government dams multiplied along routes of drainage and across the extensive water table, producing a substantial class of Gujarati Kunbi farmers who became the heart of the Congress agitation in the region. Even where water was not available, farms multiplied and landed property increased in social value beyond what might seem rational on economic grounds. In 1926, Harold Mann described ‘land hunger’ in the Deccan to the Royal Commission on Agriculture by saying, ‘The man would rather get Rs. 10/- a month by cultivating his own plot, rather than getting Rs.15/- a month and work for somebody else.’²⁹ Farming was a matter of honour and power for peasant patriarchs, and even a small bit of land that paid low economic returns could provide more subsistence stability than agricultural labour. Owning some land maintains family status for marriage alliances within the landed castes. Even small amounts of poor land can provide some subsistence and collateral, so that poor peasant families would logically work marginal lands very hard to sustain themselves and to pay off their loans by selling cash crops. In the dry peninsula, the overall expansion of cultivation was driven substantially by such poor peasant families; they provided a huge aggregate demand for rural credit and they produced a large proportion of the cash crops that went to market, particularly cotton, groundnuts, oilseeds, castor, linseed, and sesame.³⁰

²⁹ Sumit Guha, *Agrarian Economy*, p. 155.

³⁰ David Washbrook, ‘The Commercialization of Agriculture in Colonial India: Production, Subsistence and Reproduction in the “Dry South”, c. 1870–1930’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 28, 1, 1994, 129–64; Sumit Guha, ‘Family Structures, Property Relations and the Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Presidency’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 20, 3, 1993, 151–70.

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Today, in the dry peninsula interior – from eastern Maharashtra, Berar, and old Vidarbha in the north, to Rayalaseema in the south – the limitation of the green revolution to irrigated land is most apparent, the contrast with prosperous Punjab could not be greater, and the pride of the peasant patriarch can turn tragic. In 1997–8, 200 poor farmers, burdened with huge debts in order to plant cash crops (mostly cotton, but also pulses), committed suicide when faced with crop failure, foreclosure, and destitution.³¹ In the first three months of 1998, twenty farmers killed themselves in the northern Karnataka districts of Bidar, Raichur, Gulbarga, and Dharwad, where tur dal prices had been booming since 1990. Prices crashed in 1997, sending many farmers to the moneylenders, and then heavy commitments of new debt and of leasing in new land for expanded cultivation met drought, floods, and pests, which killed the crop.³² These farmers and fathers of small children usually kill themselves by drinking pesticide, a symbol of a green revolution that left them behind.

Juxtapositions of growth and decline, wealth and poverty, vigour and sickness, became typical of modern agrarian landscapes. Central sites of agrarian power developed around places of capital accumulation, commercial expansion, and new irrigation. Taking a broad, aggregate perspective, we can see a steady growth of urban sites along railways and at ports; these became the expansive core of agrarian politics and their prominence increased steadily in the twentieth century. Among regions, Punjab is a growth region above all others, from the later decades of the nineteenth century to the present, followed by western Uttar Pradesh, adjacent Rajasthan, and Gujarat, which have caught up with Punjab since the 1970s. Already in the 1920s, observers had noted the contrast of this region's growth with relative decline in Bengal and Bihar; it became a subject of sustained discussion again in the 1970s, when its relevance for development policy added weight to explanatory arguments. Some early analysts thought that population growth dragged the eastern regions down and favoured the west as a place for new investments. Some explained disparities by citing the natural proclivities of the farmers, which seemed to raise productivity wherever Jats were more numerous. Such factors have now been discounted in favour of two others: landlordism

³¹ Samar Harlarnkar, 'Harvest of Death', *India Today*, 8 June 1998, 33–37.

³² Muzaffar Assadi, 'Farmers' Suicides: Signs of Stress in Rural Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33, 14, 1998, 747–8.

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and irrigation. In the east, social structures and land tenures were more prominent that took funds away from farming into urban investment and did not benefit agricultural productivity. Eastern regions of the northern basins thus provided the empirical basis for theories about the causal role of semi-feudalism in economic backwardness. Government expenditure on irrigation was also much more prominent in the west, adding massive new stores of capital assets to farmlands from which landlord classes took a relatively small share of the proceeds for unproductive urban expenditure. The western parts of the northern basins became the land of agrarian capitalism despite the fact that landlordism and Brahman and Rajput feudal power remained strong in its zamindari and talukdari domains.³³

Regional contrasts are less stark in the peninsula, but the mobilisation of agrarian capital still focused on urban centres and around irrigation, and government investments were always an important variable. In nineteenth-century Khandesh, Berar, and other black soil tracts, substantial landowners went deep into debt but sold enough cotton to finance their own independent operations, as they accumulated cattle, dug wells, hired labour, and expanded investment in agricultural finance and local politics. By contrast, in many places across the dry south of the Maratha Deccan, Karnataka, Rayalaseema, and Telangana, and along the Tamil coast, irrigation tanks declined along with community and state investments in tank repair, and other sources of irrigation did not take their place. Good soil might sustain subsistence during a time of low prices but a good well would be needed even to keep the bulls at work in dry years. In southern Andhra, the gap between the rental value of irrigated and dry land steadily increased from 1850 to 1990, and dry land got progressively poorer by comparison.³⁴ Everywhere, government investments made a critical impact on patterns of capital accumulation. The Bombay government made *taccavi* advances to enable property owners to dig wells, and in 1877–8 most of the Rs 300,000 in *taccavi* was for digging wells. During famine years in 1899–1902 and 1918–19, about a

³³ Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth in India during the Period of British Rule', *Bengal Past and Present*, 95, 180, 1976, 247–89; Eric Stokes, 'Dynamism and Enervation in North Indian Agriculture: The Historical Dimension', reprinted in David Ludden, ed., *Agricultural Production and Indian History*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 36–52.

³⁴ M. Atchi Reddy, *Lands and Tenants in South India: A Study of Nellore District, 1850–1990*, Delhi, 1996, p. 181.

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quarter of the *taccavi* loans, which totalled Rs 35 million, were specifically for digging and repairing wells. In the 1860s, government also began to build canals, and famine rapidly increased their economic and political value. The first big, modern irrigation project in Bombay Presidency began as a work of famine relief in 1876 and went into operation in 1885, with a capacity of 113,000 acres. Much smaller than the Chenab colonies, this and later projects disappointed Bombay government because farmers did not use (or pay for) all the water that canals made available. But those who did use the water became agrarian entrepreneurs in the regional sugar economy, backed up with urban finance capital, which combined private and government funds. By the 1930s, cooperative credit and sugar factories enhanced the position of sugar growers in river-irrigated Maharashtra, where political struggles in the twentieth century have centred squarely on the project of bringing sugar financing, sugar refineries, and cane farming into harmony, and where rich farmers have formed the heart of the agrarian polity.³⁵

As in Punjab and Maharashtra, in many other regions agricultural capital accumulated locally among substantial landed families in areas of expansive cash cropping and new irrigation. Urban financiers and foreigners like the Marwaris faced village landowners who had close allies in town and who had ancestors among medieval gentry and conquering warrior clans. The Yusufzai, Gujars, Lodis, Jats, Rajputs, Yadavs, Thakurs, Maratha Kunbis, Maravas, and Nayakas shared a warrior heritage; while the Gujarati Kunbis, Gounders, Vellalas, Brahmans, Kammas, and Reddys shared a gentry past. Families invested in agriculture within circuits of cultural capital. Religious rituals, temple, mosque, and shrine were sites for alliance-building and symbolic capital formation. As the sons of landowners became middle-class educators and political figures, they projected their identities into regional polities. Regional language and cultural identity movements which have been so prominent in the twentieth century owe much of their original strength to the ability of prominent landed families to project their own values and heritage out from farming localities into regions of public representation and state administration. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, this involved a radical displacement of Brahmans from their position of cultural authority in the British adminis-

³⁵ Attwood, *Raising Cane*, pp. 50–1.

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tration. Literary erudition in vernacular languages became the mark of a true native, a son of the country, and universities became not only vehicles for upward mobility but also key sites for cultural production. Struggles to elevate the non-Brahman castes produced new cultural capital for landed castes, who thus improved their stature in agrarian politics. Among Marathas, Yadavs, Lodis, and others, becoming Kshatriya improved their social standing, while other groups adopted more Brahmanical modes of ritual, eating, dress, and exclusion. Social mobility and capital accumulation sustained and rewarded movements for caste uplift. In Madras Presidency, non-Brahman landowners held most official positions in all the districts and a study in 1901 showed that, among the parents of students in colleges and secondary schools, landowners accounted for about 36 per cent and government officials for another 40 per cent, most of whom would have been from landed families. Large zamindars like R. V. K. M. Rao, the Raja of Pithapuram, with 400 square miles of land, much of it under the Godavari dam, were prominent financiers of the Telugu movement for non-Brahman caste uplift, education, and cultural revival, whose main supporters, like B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, came 'from rural rather than urban backgrounds. Many possessed vast lands in the villages, even though they were residing in town' where they took up professions in law, education, and medicine.³⁶ Landed magnates were equally prominent in the non-Brahman movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, as they were in the cultural politics of all the provinces of British India.

Popular movements to promote regional linguistic and cultural identity tended to naturalise the social power of landed families over labourers during a period of history in which labour control became a more difficult and complex project. Political efforts to improve the condition of the poorest, lowliest, landless workers, tribals, and women were subsumed within regional efforts by landed groups to project their own patriarchal values and identity onto regional polities. Agrarian Punjab became synonymous with the cultural identity of landed Jats. Similarly, Rajputs defined Rajasthan and Marathas gave birth to Maharashtra. Vellalas, Vanniyas, Gounders, Kammas, Velamas, Kapus, Lingayats, and Vokkaligas played similar roles in Tamil Nadu, Andhra, and Karnataka. Cultural movements spear-

³⁶ Satyarani, 'Commercialization of Agriculture', pp. 321-48.

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headed by landed families from higher non-Brahman castes, lauding traditional culture and fighting against the dominance of the British and the Brahmans, consolidated dominant landed caste control over local communities, where modernity posed a distinctive set of problems and possibilities. Most basically, the terms of labour control were in tumult as farmers needed to bring more labour into production, more regularly, with each passing year. From medieval times, superior status had distinguished the families that combined labour, land, and finance on the farm; for these families, the internal bonds of family ranking and solidarity were supplemented with paternalistic powers over low-status landless labourers, artisans, and service workers. This created various types of bonded and client labour, which were virtually universal in areas of intense cultivation in 1800. The subsequent rapid expansion of farmland and commodity production increased labour demand; government withdrew from the enforcement of bondage; urbanisation dispersed the sites and jobs demanding workers; land privatisation stripped hereditary entitlements from all landless families; and the state bureaucracy invaded the local domain of landowner authority. Clientage and bonded servitude did not disappear. A poor family might actually prefer it to the freedom to starve, and employers might enforce clientage to guarantee labour at peak seasons. At the same time, however, workers might be forced to look for wages by the disappearance of gleaning rights to village land, or they might run away to find better jobs. The impulses that altered labour relations therefore pushed and pulled in different directions, as *dharma* and coercive power continued to structure labour markets. Dominant caste supremacy in modern cultural and political movements certainly did help to solve their local problems of authority in the social relations of labour control, especially when combined with powers of patronage and agrarian finance.

Debt proved to be a powerful, flexible mechanism for lowering the cost of getting workers to the point of production, not only landless wage workers but also men, women, and children from farming families that lacked enough land to support themselves. Landowners were typically the major employers and sources for subsistence and farm loans in a village;³⁷ and there is evidence that in some commercial

³⁷ Ashok Rudra, 'Local Power and Farm-Level Decision Making', in M. Desai, S. H. Rudolph, and Ashok Rudra, eds., *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 251-80.

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farming areas, land was moving out of the hands of old gentry into the portfolios of investors for whom farming became more of a business, and for whom local credit markets would have been profitable.³⁸ Current figures on institutional debt (as a proportion of the gross value of farm output) indicate that, even today, rolling over short-term credit remains a good source of power in agrarian localities.³⁹ Financial powers over workers were also stretched to cover great distances, as we have already noticed in the case of migrant labour from Bihar to Punjab. Indentured workers travelled to British territories in Africa, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Fiji, and the Caribbean, and many families came to depend for subsistence on circuits of migration that moved among plantations, urban centres, factories, or commercial farms.

Capitalist farming thus developed a strong attachment to family subsistence farming, in which women and children bear the burden of production when the men are gone.⁴⁰ Seasonal and circular migration for work in the plains has long provided staple income for many families in the high mountains, most prominently the Gurkhas. In 1876, famine drove workers from the plains to the coffee plantations in the Malnad of Karnataka, and this became a seasonal trek. In Berar, the Jabalpur settlement officer reported in 1894 that Gonds 'flock with their families at the spring harvest to the wheat fields . . . to eke out their subsistence by working as labourers' and farmers often grew a special crop of low-cost grain to feed them, because the wheat they were growing to sell in the market was too valuable for the workers to eat.⁴¹ Market crops – sugarcane, cotton, jute, rice, wheat, tobacco, plantains, tea, and indigo – are much more labour intensive than subsistence crops, especially millet, which they steadily displaced during the expansion of commercial farming. Digging wells and building irrigation, railways, and towns added new demands for mobile labour. Privatisation of village land cut off artisans, servants,

³⁸ Haruka Yanagisawa, *A Century of Change: Caste and Irrigated Lands in Tamilnadu, 1860s-1970s*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 126–94.

³⁹ In India, the ratio of short-term credit from all institutional agencies to the total value of agricultural output rose from 9.9 in 1970 to 19.1 in 1995. Compound growth rates in this ratio were 3.93 per cent in 1970–79 and 2.43 per cent in 1980–94. K. P. Agarwal, V. Puhazhendhi, and K. J. S. Satyasai, 'Gearing Rural Credit for the Twenty-First Century', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 42, 18–24 October 1997, table 7, p. 2723.

⁴⁰ Gail Omvedt, 'Migration in Colonial India: The Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 7, 2, 1980, 185–212.

⁴¹ Crispin N. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India, 1820–1930', Ph.D. dissertation, Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge, n.d., p. 227.

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tribal farmers, and pastoralists from old subsistence resources. By 1900, over half the rural population depended for their living on work for others and/or on farming small plots that did not yield enough for subsistence. A broad social division thus developed between those families who were net buyers and net sellers of labour, respectively. This did not amount to an increasing differentiation of classes because the overall percentage of *landless* families may have been much the same in 1900 as it was in 1800, and the overall distribution of farmland does not seem to have become very much more unequal. The trend is rather toward an increasing number of tiny holdings, too small to support a family for the whole year, and toward a vast increase in the number of people who had to work for others for a wage even though their families might own some land.

In the middle sections of the peasant population, families lost land and bought land, subdivided and rebuilt joint holdings, and rented in and rented out land, losing here and gaining there – which makes any strong empirical trend in land ownership hard to find before 1950. But commodity production and privatisation did change the nature of relationships between families needing workers and families needing work. Small farmers, artisans, and petty traders moved back and forth between these two groups, and kinship groups and castes included families of both types, but a serious division of agrarian society developed which separated families with firm entitlements to food (secured by landed property) from insecure families (who depended on employment to survive). This division helps to explain the social distribution of famine mortality in the Deccan in the 1870s and in Bengal and Bihar in the 1940s and 1970s. Regional cultural and political movements that promoted ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities emerged as locally successful landed employers made their powers of patronage emblematic of solidarity among landowners, employees, and clients. Local leaders of agrarian society thus came to speak for the poor as they became the leaders of movements for social uplift, representing their own identity as that of all the people whose well-being they promoted with their patronage and political activism.

Though, broadly speaking, the social trends that separated landowners from others and the political trends that produced regional identity movements were similar in zamindari and ryotwari areas, everywhere, landlordism nurtured more radical agrarian politics and more polarised conflict. Tenants fought long and hard for rights to

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land against entrenched landlord power within a modern institutional setting that sandwiched the zamindars and their legal peers between the tenants and the state. The extreme case of state protection for landlords was Hyderabad, which gave tenants the least legal protection, provided no institutions for conflict resolution or reform, and eventually spawned a revolutionary peasant war against landlords and the state. Suppressing this revolution was a major military challenge for the new Republic of India, and smouldering class war remains the status quo in rural Telangana today. In British India, state power was more flexible and ambiguous in its support of zamindars. Tenants controlled labour, capital, and farming operations during the expansion of cultivation and commodity production; and significant legal powers accumulated in the hands of prominent tenant families in locally high-status social groups, very much along the lines of change in ryotwari tracts. Ranks beneath zamindars became many layered and hotly contested. Though activists and scholars have used the word 'peasant' to designate tenants who led struggles *against* landlordism and *for* property rights, local inequalities were at least as complex here as in ryotwari territories. In Bengal, for instance, the Dufferin Report indicated that, in 1880, 39 per cent of the total population depended significantly for its subsistence on labour alone,⁴² and the proportion of landless families appears to have remained fairly stable until 1947. Even depression and famine in the 1930s and 1940s did not dramatically raise the percentage of landless families above roughly one-third of the total.⁴³ But relations among claimants to land changed dramatically with the expansion of cultivation and commodity production.

In 1800, observers guessed that only about 30 per cent of the cultivable acreage in Bengal was being farmed; by 1900, farms had filled all the lowlands of Bengal, moving into Assam and into the hills on all sides of the deltaic tract, from Chota Nagpur and Orissa to Sylhet and Chittagong. In Bihar, Bengal, and Assam, the local struggles to expand cultivation which defined agrarian polities first pitted settled farming against tribals and *jhum*. From Mughal times, and increasingly after 1750, conflict had occurred between states, farmers, and forest people in the lowlands, foothills, and even the high

⁴² Schendel, 'Economy of the Working Classes', p. 552.

⁴³ Sumit Guha, 'Agrarian Bengal, 1850-1947: Issues and Problems', *Studies in History*, 11, 1 NS, 1995, 133.

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mountains. Violence occurred in the central mountains from Gujarat to Bastar, but the major sites of persistent agrarian war involving tribal peoples clustered around Bengal – some continue even today. Conflicts with the largest tribal group, Santals, mark the historical frontier of permanent cultivation. Santals cultivated the forest on the fringe of settled villages in the eastern Ganga basin and in adjacent regions. They numbered among those groups that have a claim to be indigenous though they also have complex histories of migration and resettlement. Santals interacted regularly with farming communities in the lowlands. They cleared land in the jungle with fire and axe, making the extension of perennial farm cultivation much easier for lowland farmers. But before the nineteenth century it appears that Santals did not participate as groups in rituals of rank in agrarian states; so they did not obtain official entitlements to land based upon ranked subordination in official hierarchies. Like other tribal groups, they maintained their own separate social structures and hierarchies, their own rituals of rank. As revenue-paying farmers and zamindars moved into *jhum* lands to expand agricultural territories, Santals were steadily pushed into the forest. By 1850, they had moved out of districts in Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Bihar, and Bengal, following skirmishes in 1811, 1820, and 1830.⁴⁴ In 1823, under official protection, large Santal settlements ringed the Rajmahal Hills, in the Daman-i-Koh, ‘the skirt of the hills’, where, by the 1840s, 83,000 Santals lived in government territory, legally free of zamindar control. Here, Santal leaders sought to establish a permanent homeland free of constant meddling by foreign moneylenders and Company officials. Under the full moon on 30 June 1855, 10,000 Santals are said to have heard a young leader named Siddhu declare his vision from god that Daman must be ‘cleared of all outsiders, that moneylenders and policemen be immediately slaughtered, and that Superintendent Pontet be also slain’. In the ensuing war, Company troops and zamindars massacred Santals and their low-caste peasant allies. Mundas around Ranchi and many other smaller groups also waged similar wars to create independent territories in the nineteenth century. None succeeded, but their legacies live in today’s regional political movement for regional autonomy in Jharkhand, ‘the land of

⁴⁴ V. Raghavaiah, ‘Tribal Revolts in Chronological Order: 1778 to 1991’, in A. R. Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggles in India*, Delhi, 1979.

jungles'.⁴⁵ As Santals were driven back from the moving borders of zamindari land, the state instituted tribal territories to segregate forest peoples in Bastar, other parts of the central mountains, and regions of the high mountains. This officially segregated the regional histories of the high mountains of the north-east and created the basis for separate national identities in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. As farmers pushed from Bengal into Assam, conflicts among farmers and plains tribals also occurred, and today conflict is raging in Assam that pits Ahoms against Bengalis and Bodo warriors fighting for a homeland.⁴⁶

Inside zamindar territory, expanding cultivation was primarily the work of peasant farmers and superior tenants who combined labour and finance to create new farms and thus produced rights of first possession. A zamindar had many ways to exert power over tenants – legally and otherwise – and these remained until Zamindari Abolition in the 1950s. But expanding cultivation always entailed two distinct moments of power: the *physical* extension of farming and the *political* extension of zamindari property rights. By extending cultivation, tenants made claims to property that zamindars had to subordinate to their own claims, both within the territories of their accepted authority and also outside older zones of cultivation. Collecting rent from tenants was always a political activity that reinscribed ranks into rural society, season after season. Struggles over rights to old farmland might allow tenants to entrench their legal position, as they increased the value of their own land, resisted zamindar claims to rent, or bought tenures. Legal activity formed a basic feature of zamindari politics from the 1760s onward; and Acts of the Bengal government revised the terms of zamindari property law in 1819, 1822, 1859, 1865, 1869, 1876, 1884, 1885, 1886, and 1894. In 1925, the 1819 Patni Regulation Act was still being interpreted by the High Court in legal disputes concerning transfers and encumbrances.⁴⁷ After 1859, the state insisted that tenant rights be recorded, which gave tenants new leverage. The comparative strength of tenants in different zamindari territories is indicated by their relative success in getting rights recorded and payments acknowledged in receipts. In Bihar, their

⁴⁵ Arun Sinha, *Against the Few: Struggles of India's Rural Poor*, London, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Sanjib Baruah, '“Ethnic” Conflict as State–Society Struggle: The Poetics and Politics of Assamese Micro-Nationalism', *Modern Asian Studies*, 28, 3, 1994, 649–71.

⁴⁷ *The All-India Reporter*, Calcutta Section, Nagpur, 1925, p. 962.

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position was poor; but in Bengal, the relatively open frontier strained zamindar power, except in old kingdoms like Burdwan. Zamindars always met resistance when they endeavoured to extend their rights over new cultivation, and where open land for peasant colonisation was most abundant, zamindars faced the most difficult challenge. In such areas, a rent-seeking zamindar might most profitably acquire new revenues by allowing effective ownership to devolve into stratified farming communities in which moneylenders and larger tenants established superior rights over farming families. This was typical in Bengal, particularly in the east, north, and south.

The Mughal revenue lexicon entered Company land law and encoded the micro-politics of zamindari property until the 1950s. Broadly speaking, the terms in disputes were as follows. The land outside zamindari territory, *khas* land, belonged to government, which could lease it to farmers or zamindars at will. Extending cultivation onto *khas* might enable a peasant to establish a private right directly with the state; and this was not uncommon – it became increasingly so in the malguzari regions of the Central Provinces. The *sir* land belonged to the zamindar as personal property, for his own cultivation (often with hired labour or under lease to tenants) and here the owner did not need to grant any subordinate entitlements to farmers. The British called this ‘the home farm’ and it remained zamindar private property even after Zamindari Abolition in the 1950s. Tenant entitlements were of two broad classes: *khudkasht* tenants farmed land inside their own village territory, in which they had rights of first possession or permanent occupancy rights, which derived from the (genealogical) claim that they had brought the land under cultivation themselves; and *pahikasht* tenants cultivated land outside their own villages on temporary leases. In everyday agriculture, the distinction between *khudkasht* and *pahikasht* was like that between *ulkudi* and *parakkudi* (intra-village and extra-village) rights in ryotwari villages in the Tamil country; and some version of this distinction seems to have pertained in most regions. It specifies a domain of ambiguous authority exercised by farmers inside village territories over land not cultivated by villagers themselves. These areas on frontiers of village cultivation – lands held by various groups under various local tenures – were open for the most serious proprietary contestation everywhere. Villages retained legitimate authority over this land and *outsiders* farmed land which *belonged to the village*

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under the authority of the zamindar. This power *within villages* indicates that zamindari entitlements represented a three-way relationship between the state, zamindars, and villagers, who were composed in turn of powerful tenants, farmers, elders, moneylenders, and other important local patriarchs. In the Company's terminology, a *khudkasht* tenant had 'occupancy rights', whereas a *pahikasht* tenant did not. A zamindar had much more discretionary power over *pahikasht* tenants, whose rights to land were not under village protection. Zamindari recognition of *khudkasht* rights was not always voluntary. Some *khudkasht* farmers had received *farmans* from the Mughals or from Nawabs in Awadh and Dhaka, which were confirmed by the Company.

Struggles over occupancy rights marked zamindar efforts to extend their power over villages on the moving frontiers of cultivation. European indigo planters entered the fray early in the nineteenth century when they purchased zamindar and tenant rights for indigo cultivation in northern Bihar and Bengal. With local powers over land, marketing, and finance, European planters in effect robbed peasant farmers of occupancy rights and combined debt servitude with coercion. Slumping indigo prices from 1839 onward increased pressure on tenants, and finally, in 1860, a tenant strike drove the indigo planters out of Bengal. This event revealed that zamindars had much more power in Bihar, where indigo planting continued until 1930. Sugarcane farmers in Gorakhpur District, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, suffered much the same combination of powers that oppressed indigo farmers. But on open frontiers of cultivation, zamindar and tenant rights were subject to constant local modification and political renegotiation. Whoever controlled the means of production locally had a political advantage in the formulation of property rights. Though custom and coercion played their role, so did law; and legal disputes reveal that all the conflicting interests that pertained in ryotwari regions also embroiled zamindari land, including conflicts between farmers and financiers and between competing village claimants to family property. Only, here, zamindars perched above the tenants. In Bengal, Bihar, and eastern UP, it seems that, symbolically, a zamindar's power to take fruit from bearing trees on tenant land symbolised his superior land rights, even if he could not enforce claims to rent.

Cash crops provided new opportunities for both zamindars and tenants. Jute played a role in Bengal similar to that of cotton and

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groundnut in the Deccan, as poor families held precariously onto subsistence by growing jute for world markets, living in debt, working family labour on tiny plots, and moving here and there to work for wages. At the same time, jute marketing, financing, and processing provided opportunities for capital accumulation. By 1901, Bengal supplied almost all the jute in world markets, and jute covered 30 per cent of the cultivated land in Rangpur, 27 per cent in Tippera, and nearly 20 per cent in several other districts. Zamindars were often in a good position to accumulate capital in trade and credit markets. This added to zamindar income even as real rental income declined; but the expansion of cultivation and cash cropping also enabled tenants to obtain credit, profit, and occupancy rights. Even in Gorakhpur, on the upland frontier in eastern UP, 'there was an abundance of unoccupied cultivable lands' in the nineteenth century; and, though most of the profits from sugar cultivation may have been captured by zamindars, moneylenders, middle men, merchants, and refiners, tenants increased their occupancy holdings after 1870.⁴⁸ Occupancy rights expanded more broadly in Bengal.⁴⁹ Legal reforms institutionalised this trend, but its micro-politics were embedded in the dynamics of agricultural expansion. In 1779, the Collector in Sylhet had reported that land was being cleared for cultivation by extended family groups, including several generations of in-laws and distant relatives, and he opined that conflict among families had reduced the rate of land reclamation. Collectors tried to resolve conflicts that impeded the expansion of revenues, and one claimed to have heard over 2,000 boundary disputes in the early 1780s. In 1783, he gave this account of why all his work did not bring in more revenue:

cultivated lands which constituted but a very small proportion were only considered the property of the Zamindars . . . as to the waste of jungle lands they were in the most profuse manner bestowed as Charity . . . nor was any Register kept of such gifts [and] in consequence of this liberality there is not a person . . . not even of the most inferior rank in Sylhet who is not possessed of Lackerage land of some denomination or other and the best richest lands are exempt from Revenue.⁵⁰

Facing the Company's claim to own all the jungle as *khas*, 'the land

⁴⁸ Meena Bhargava, 'Landed Property Rights in Transition: A Note on Cultivators and Agricultural Labourers in Gorakhpur in the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Studies in History*, 12, 2, NS, 1996, 248–50.

⁴⁹ Sumit Guha, 'Agrarian Bengal'.

⁵⁰ Sylhet District Records, National Archives of Bangladesh, vol. 292, p. 10.

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hungry [zamindar] proprietors [in Bengal] began grabbing jungle land adjacent to their estates by getting them cleared and settled', so that *lakhiraj* or rent-free lands spread across the open frontier. By 1900, virtually the entirety of the lowlands lay under cultivation, except the Sunderbans, and the most prominent forms of entitlement were *patitabad*, that is, tenancies granted 'for the reclamation of cultivable waste'.⁵¹ When land came under secure cultivation, a zamindar would claim that he had made a grant of rent-free land to the tenant as an investment, to facilitate reclamation, and he would seek to resume rent collections after a stipulated period of time. Conflict with cultivators and local financiers would then begin, with everyone claiming their share and their rights. Where a zamindar had strong support and control over village leaders, he could succeed. Toward this end, the Burdwan Raj invented a form of tenure, called *patni*, which replicated zamindari property rights locally, and he thereby produced commercially valuable rights that could generate a local fund of rent for people who financed cultivation. Many kinds of subsidiary rights multiplied beneath the umbrella of zamindari, and local financiers acquired layer upon layer of rights. In Chittagong, as many as sixteen levels of rights existed between the farmer and the zamindar. There, a tenant (called a talukdar) on *noabad* (newly cleared) land would take a *pattah* from government and issue a secondary (*abadkar*) *pattah* to a talukdar who would settle the land with peasant farmers.⁵² We have seen that such derivative entitlements had a very long pedigree.

The local powers that combined labour and finance on the farm strengthened local claims to land, and the hold of zamindars weakened whenever open lands came under peasant ploughs. Political struggles over tenant rights in Bengal led to reams of legislation. Court conflict produced major zamindari reform Acts in 1859 and 1885. In 1873, a ruling by a district judge in their favour encouraged a group of Muslim tenants in Yusufshahi to form an Agrarian League to defend tenants in Pabna District against additional rent claims, 'illegal cesses' (*abwabs*), and threats to their occupancy rights. Led 'by men of considerable means such as the petty landlords like Ishan Chandra Roy of Daultapore, the village headmen like Shambhunath Pal of

⁵¹ Sirajul Islam, 'Permanent Settlement and Peasant Economy', in Islam, *History of Bangladesh*, vol. 2, pp. 257–62.

⁵² Binay Bhushan Chauduri, 'Commercialization of Agriculture', and Sirajul Islam, 'Permanent Settlement', in Islam, *History of Bangladesh*, pp. 257–62, 374.

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Meghoolla, and jotedars [major landed tenants] like Khoodi Mollah of Jogtollah', the League's demonstrations to raise support for their cause and to pressure zamindars evoked critical reactions from zamindari interests in Calcutta. But Pabna landlords who fought the League impoverished themselves in the process and the number of perpetual leases jumped up from 627 to 1,633 in the years between 1873 and 1877.⁵³ This was an omen. In the following decades, movements for secure tenure, lower rents, and restricted zamindar powers welled up under the leadership of high-caste and well-to-do tenants whose families were among those most responsible for increasing cultivation and expanding commodity production. Tenant activists and zamindar allies later moved into regional politics along lines parallel to the Marathas, Jats, Kammas, and Vellalas.

The issues, leadership, and legality of the tenants' struggle remained much the same even as the scale and organisation of their politics expanded. Mobilising was dangerous because tenants could lose everything if the zamindar won, and zamindars had many friends in town. In Bihar, solidarity among upper-caste zamindars and local managers and a scarcity of open land left tenants little room to manoeuvre. Bihar peasants combined fight and flight to make Bihar the largest region for poor peasant out-migration and the most radical ground for peasant movements in the northern basins. Class war developed between the upper and lower castes on zamindari estates, and it continues in village Bihar even today. In Bengal, by contrast, the trajectory of tenant power moved steadily upward as political opportunities increased for the advancement of subordinate property rights. In the east of Bengal, the fact that almost all zamindars were Hindus, whereas tenants were Muslims, produced a symbolic repertoire for popular mobilisation by which leading local families projected their own cultural identity and authority outward into the broad struggle between landlords and tenants. Members of the upper-caste Hindu *bhadralok* projected their own cultural identity out over all of agrarian Bengal, beginning with the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay; Muslim tenant leaders did the same, beginning with the organisation of the Agrarian League in Pabna. Zamindar and tenant supporters rejected each other's claims to represent Bengal, and by 1906 their competitive

⁵³ Kalyan Kumar Sen Gupta, 'The Agrarian League of Pabna, 1873', in Hardiman, *Peasant Resistance*, pp. 111–25.

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mobilisation had begun to open up a conflict between political groups that was identified publicly as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims. After the death of C. R. Das in 1926, possibilities declined for alliances across the political divide, and the Indian National Congress national strategy of accommodating landlords prevented it from taking up the tenant cause and winning a majority of seats in the Bengal Legislative Council. After 1937, zamindari power was in effect destroyed and Fazlul Haq, leader of the Krishak Praja Party, joined the Muslim League. In 1941, he raised the call for Pakistan and, in 1947, what they called 'partition' in Calcutta was hailed in Dhaka as the arrival of a peasant utopia, a land free of zamindars.

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National independence partitioned South Asia in 1947 and again in 1971. It built new walls against inland mobility. National leaders in their capital cities led the new expansion of urbanism that distinguishes our contemporary agrarian age. The influence of urbanisation today goes well beyond the sprawling impact of huge cities that rank among the world's largest and fastest growing, because, regionally, urban growth is almost inverse to the urban population. Where urban centres were least prominent in 1901, their local expansion became most far-reaching, and the upward trend has accelerated. The percentage of India's population living in urban centres increased by just over 1 per cent (from 11 per cent to 12 per cent) during the first three decades of the twentieth century, by 6 per cent during the next three (1931-1961), and by 8 per cent during the next three (1961-1991). This trend appears in all countries except Sri Lanka, which started with a relatively big urban population (12 per cent in 1901) and now has less than twice that proportion (22 per cent in 1991), whereas India's 1991 figure (26 per cent) is 2.4 times what it was in 1901 (11 per cent). Recent acceleration is quicker in Pakistan, where the urban population increased 70 per cent faster than India's after 1961 to reach 33 per cent of total population in 1991. Nepal's small urban population (9 per cent in 1991) has grown as fast as Pakistan's since 1961.⁵⁴ Bangladesh is the most dramatic case. In 1961, its population was only 5 per cent urban, which was only double the 1901 figure. It grew 400

⁵⁴ Schwartzberg, *Historical Atlas*, pp. 114, 280.

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per cent after 1961 to reach 20 per cent in 1991; in the early 1980s, the urban growth rate hit 10 per cent per year. Some of this increase resulted from reclassification. The 1981 Bangladesh census 'extended the definition of urban areas to include small administrative townships and economically significant production and marketing centres . . . which had certain significant "urban" characteristics'. The number of urban centres increased from 78 in 1961 to 522 in 1991, and today more than 500 urban centres have populations of less than 5,000, while the four largest cities contain almost half the urban population, nearly 7 million people.⁵⁵ As we have seen in the case of Tirunelveli, such reclassification might actually compensate for previous underestimates of urbanism; and the jump in urban population in the 1980s may well represent a realistic recognition of more rapid urbanisation in smaller centres than was previously recognised in earlier censuses.

Strung along rail lines and roads, pulsing with trains, buses, cars, trucks, cycles, rickshaws, animals, carts, schools, and businesses, thousands of urban centres, large and small, are pushing the intensification of land and labour use in all agrarian regions, as farmland is built over, fields are pressed for more production, and families are leaving agriculture. Between 1901 and 1951, the workforce became more agricultural in South Asia (cultivators and labourers in undivided India increased from 69 per cent to 73 per cent of the male workforce),⁵⁶ but the trend has moved in the opposite direction since the 1950s, and today farming accounts for only 57 per cent of the total workforce in Bangladesh, 63 per cent in India, 50 per cent in Pakistan, and 43 per cent in Sri Lanka.⁵⁷ During *three* decades after 1950, livestock, net cultivation, and built-up land increased as much as they had during *seven* previous decades, while forest cover declined at about the same rate and population grew about 15 per cent *faster*.⁵⁸ Some of today's patterns of change date back to the nineteenth

⁵⁵ Shapan Adnan, 'Fertility Decline under Absolute Poverty: Paradoxical Aspects of Demographic Change in Bangladesh', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33, 22, 30 May 1998, 1338 and 1347, n.4. Schwartzberg has different figures for Bangladesh.

⁵⁶ J. Krishnamurty, 'The Occupational Structure', in Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India, II, c.1757–c.1970*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 535.

⁵⁷ It is 93 per cent in Nepal. Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 51, citing World Bank statistics.

⁵⁸ For data on thirteen countries in South and Southeast Asia, 1880–1980, see J. F. Richards and E. P. Flint (R. C. Daniels, ed.), *Historic Land Use and Carbon Estimates for South and Southeast Asia, 1880–1980*, Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Experimental Sciences Division, Publication No. 4174. Data from this study are available on the internet.

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century. Nearly 1 million people moved into Chota Nagpur from Bihar districts in the twenty years after 1950, as tribal lands were being hacked into industrial sites and mines. Rapid in-migration by farmers and workers has similarly transformed other tribal regions and all of Assam.⁵⁹ Every season of distress swells urban centres. Famines and severe scarcities in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s brought hungry families into Calcutta, Dhaka, and Patna. Dry seasons bring landless workers and poor peasants into Bombay, Delhi, Madras, Ahmedabad, and other cities. After partition, uprooted Punjabis flooded Delhi, many Muslims from India resettled in Karachi and Lahore, and Bengali zamindars retreated to Calcutta, following the path of previous generations. Social mobility also adds to urbanism. After 1950, Dhaka bulged with the rapid self-creation of a new middle class, straight from the village, its energies focused on the university and on careers in government, business, and professions. Nellore District, north of Madras, indicates rural trends. In its villages, real rental rates for land rose by a factor of nine during seventy-seven years between 1850 and 1927, and then doubled again during the fifty-five years from 1927 to 1982. The proportion of rent to output also increased, especially after 1940, and this rental income fuelled social mobility and urban investments. For rent receivers, occupational change 'was mostly a one-way process' leading 'from cultivation and traditional services to business, professions, and [other urban] employment'. The residential trajectory led 'from the native village to a small town, [to] the district headquarters and then to cities'.⁶⁰

The same trajectory also leads to Europe, Australia, the Persian Gulf, Malaysia, Britain, and the United States. Though it is rare for the people who move out of manual labour to move back to the farm, manual workers who go to the Persian Gulf or Malaysia often do return to their village with income to invest in houses, land, and business. Overseas workers from Sylhet, Sri Lanka, and Kerala are significant actors in their local agrarian economies, and young workers fill the airports on their way to and from their distant sites of home life and overseas employment. As we have seen, international agrobusiness has also established investment centres in profitable farm tracts. Migration, markets, reinvestment, urbanisation, and social

⁵⁹ K. S. Singh, 'Agrarian Dimensions of Tribal Movements', in A. R. Desai, ed., *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence*, Delhi, 1986, pp. 147–8.

⁶⁰ Reddy, *Lands and Tenants*, pp. 93–6, 159.

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mobility by many groups have formed complex links between farms and the world economy. Brahmans, merchants, and other elites play a central role. Urban investors were drawn to irrigated land in the Tamil country from the start of the twentieth century; by then, village Brahmans were already using their rental income to move to town, and selling their land to reinvest in urban careers. By 1925, in Lalgudi Taluk, Tiruchirappalli District, Brahman land was shifting into the hands of non-Brahman business, farming, and labouring castes. This slowly but steadily changed the composition of farming communities and increased the salience of distinctions between local and absentee owners, between poor peasants and rich investors.⁶¹ After 1950, Brahmans almost everywhere were abandoning agriculture and leaving villages where their ancestors had received land grants and rental income. Along with other high-caste groups among the old agrarian gentry – especially Kayasthas, Rajputs, and Baniyas – Brahmans moved out of old zamindari estates into cities across the northern basins and western plains. They left rural Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and the Konkan coast for Madras, Bangalore, and Bombay. By 1980, many old *agraharams* (Brahman settlements) were abandoned. This Brahman migration became a subject for literature and drama and for films such as *Pather Panchali*.

After 1947, national politics, policy making, and intellectual production became the work of urban elites whose primary task became national development. State development spending soon outgrew the treasury and attracted finance from foreign states and international institutions, as capital accumulation picked up in the 1950s after two hard decades of depression, war, famine, cyclones, and political disruption. Imports, exports, and overseas migration also picked up. Agrarian participation in the world economy was adjusted to the new international system. Primary products declined in value in comparison with the output of industry. Under national control, only tea maintained its world position. Partition disrupted the jute economy of Bengal, separating processing plants in the west from farms in the east, and it proved easier for India to grow jute than for Bangladesh to compete with India for shrinking international sales. India's national policies turned its agricultural markets inward to meet vast urban and

⁶¹ H. Yanagisawa, *A Century of Change: Caste and Irrigated Lands in Tamilnadu*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 163–4.

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industrial demand. Inside the countries, overall economic trends have favoured non-agricultural sectors, and dividends from growth have disproportionately favoured urban sites, educated groups, commercial classes, and government. Families have set their sights accordingly. At the same time, however, farming communities have remained the foundation of economic growth and political power, because these industrialising economies still remain overwhelmingly agricultural. So, as national leaders in government, industry, and academia have detached their own existence from everyday life on the land, they have also necessarily forged new kinds of relations with the countryside. Politically, the work of building urban–rural alliances animated all the nationalist movements going back to the 1920s, but national development allowed for radical departures as competing urban leaders sought rural support. In every state, government funding for development has been directed toward enhancing the productive powers of the owners of land, who became the backbone of national initiatives to increase production.

Struggles over land and other resources have become more intense over the decades; their legal and political basis had been established by the mid-1960s. In Pakistan, the old landlord class maintained control and the great barons like the Bhuttos of Sindh still retain their vast estates as they lead national political factions. In Bangladesh, the old landlord class disappeared and major tenants became major land-owners. In Sri Lanka and in most of India, individual villagers became the landed electorate, and the best-endowed among them became the core of the green revolution. Where the rising power of tenants met the established power of landlords – each with their advocates in state capitals – the legal reconstitution of agrarian polities in the 1950s and 1960s involved major political struggles. The universal franchise gave the strength of numbers to the tenants and, in this context, Charan Singh (1902–1987) became an architect of India's national system of agrarian alliances. From a Jat family in Meerut District in western Uttar Pradesh, he rose through the Congress ranks, supporting tenant rights, and in 1939 he published his proposals to abolish zamindari. Working against the vein of early Congress policy and fighting formidable landlord influence, he mobilised support for zamindari abolition in UP, implemented reforms, and then prevented tax increases on farmers. His central argument was that 'cultivators in Uttar Pradesh form the largest percentage of any state in India . . . and

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constitute 77 per cent of the rural electorate', and he worked to make farmers into an aggressive political force.⁶² Land reform in other states also followed the logic of state electoral politics.

Everywhere in South Asia, localities assumed an official, institutional form: village communities were organised around socially dominant landed families within the jurisdiction of urban centres that house government offices. All the national regimes re-constituted the village as a natural *social* order to be modernised by the market *economy* and protected by state *politics*. Scholars further naturalised the agrarian social order in theories of culture and modernisation. By 1972, however, when the waves of tumult that established the new regimes had passed – when, in one year, the Dalit Panthers, the first farmers' organisations, the Self-Employed Women's Association, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, and the All-Assam Students' Union were all formed – it became clear that official institutions faced rampant opposition from many sectors of society. Conflict, inequality, oppression, resistance, and state politics became more visible as constituents of village society. In India, after thirty years of planning and slow, steady growth in agriculture (about 2.5 per cent annually),⁶³ a Home Ministry study concluded that 'the persistence of serious social and economic inequalities in the rural areas has given rise to tensions between different classes', and some tensions had by then produced serious political violence. A Maoist rebellion in Naxalbari, West Bengal, in 1967, spawned the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969, which spread in fragments to Bihar and Telangana, becoming what People's War Group spokesman Var Vara Rao has called 'an alternative to parliamentary politics'.⁶⁴ From the late 1960s, many locally organised movements rocked villages as the Congress Party lost control of state governments in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal.⁶⁵ In Tanjavur, Bihar, Telangana, and elsewhere, village massacres became news items. The violence predominantly pitted low-caste and Untouchable tenants and agricultural workers and tribals against landowners and financiers supported by the police, military,

⁶² Terence J. Byres, 'Charan Singh, 1902–1987: An Assessment', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 15, 2, 1988, 157–70.

⁶³ This is figure for the period 1962–1983. See G. S. Bhalla and Gurmail Singh, 'Recent Developments in Indian Agriculture: A State Level Analysis', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 March 1997, A-3.

⁶⁴ *Indian Express*, 23 May 1997 (worldwide web on-line edition).

⁶⁵ Schwartzberg, *Historical Atlas*, p. 277.

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and courts, so that subaltern wrath was often turned against the state. In Tanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, one village organiser reported that, having surrounded the police vans, in 1968, 'Several heads would have rolled on the field, blood would have flowed like the Kaveri in flood, if only we had not been restrained by higher-ups.'⁶⁶ Quiet, unorganised, conflict may have also increased in agriculture in the past fifty years. In Nellore, the number of landowners grew after 1950, mostly in the category of marginal farmers who had less than 2 hectares, and the number of written rental agreements declined because conflicting parties sought to avoid the courts. At the Home Ministry, policy makers looked for ways to address the tensions that underlay the apparent loss of the modern state's agrarian legitimacy, and, not surprisingly, nine of their recommendations sought to protect tenants, one proposed land reforms to limit family (rather than individual) holdings, one sought to protect tribals from moneylenders, and one called for a minimum wage for agricultural labourers. Echoing Charan Singh, the report concluded that a failure to tackle the problem of inequality 'may lead to a situation where the discontented elements are compelled to organise themselves and the extreme tensions building up with the "complex molecule" that is the Indian village may end in an explosion'.⁶⁷

Village stability remains a state project within modernity; dating back to the early days of Company Raj, it still preoccupies governments and non-governmental organisations that promote political order along with economic growth and public welfare. Grassroots movements have multiplied and exerted their influence inside and outside the electoral system since the 1970s and they have come to represent many contending forces within agrarian societies. At the same time, however, the idea of traditional village society stabilises the modern state as well as the local power of landed patriarchs and protectors of *dharmā*. Land reforms to increase the number of land-owning families have been a popular policy mechanism for securing stability, expanding equity, and stimulating production in the face of increasing competition for land; and they have continuously pitted the

⁶⁶ Mythily Shivaraman, 'Tanjavur: Rumbblings of Class Struggle in Tamil Nadu', in Kathleen Gough and Hari P. Sharma, eds., *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York, 1973, p. 246.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, 'The Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tensions', in Desai, *Agrarian Struggles*, pp. 36–43.

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interests of large landowners against the power of all others who aspire to own land. Also in a vein of modern thinking going back to the nineteenth century, states have regulated landlordism and agricultural finance, with the idea – following Moreland and Nehru – that gross inequalities are ‘substantive obstacles to an unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside agriculture’.⁶⁸

In India between 1960 and 1990, state policies and land competition shrank the proportion of cultivated land in operational holdings over 10 hectares from 31 per cent to 17 per cent, while holdings of less than 1 hectare increased by roughly the same proportion, from 19 per cent to 32 per cent. A huge population of small landlords and substantial farmers emerged from the ranks of former tenants and ryots. The predominance of medium-sized landowners increased because tiny farms multiplied as large farms dwindled and medium-sized farms (with operational holdings of between 2 and 10 hectares) kept roughly the same proportion of total farmland (about 50 per cent).⁶⁹ The picture varies significantly across regions. Very much smaller farms typify wetter regions in eastern and southern India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, and larger farms cover the drier regions of canal and tubewell irrigation in Pakistan and adjacent India. In India, land holdings bigger than 2.6 hectares comprise the highest percentage of land holdings in Rajasthan and Punjab (30 per cent), and also in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana (20 per cent). They play the least important role in Assam (4 per cent), Bihar (4 per cent), Tamil Nadu (3 per cent), West Bengal (1 per cent), and Kerala (0.5 per cent). Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa fall in between, averaging 10 per cent. Uttar Pradesh resembles Bihar in that only 3 per cent of the total holdings are bigger than 2.6 hectares,⁷⁰ and the resemblance increases in the east, which has 49 per cent of all the farms in Uttar Pradesh that are smaller than 1 hectare. In this as in other respects, western UP more resembles Haryana and contains 40 per cent of all Uttar Pradesh land holdings between 4 and 10 hectares.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Terence J. Byres, ‘Political Economy, the Agrarian Question, and the Comparative method’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 22, 4, 1995, 569.

⁶⁹ Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, *India’s Agricultural Sector: A Compendium of Statistics*, Mumbai, July 1996, table 1.

⁷⁰ Shah, ‘Food Security and Access to Natural Resources’, pp. 50–4.

⁷¹ Zoya Hasan, ‘Shifting Ground: Hindutva Politics and the Farmers’ Movement in Uttar Pradesh’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, July 1994, p. 176.

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Substantial farmers who combine political and economic power at the local and the state level account for much of India's agricultural growth and preoccupy growth-oriented development strategies. Between 1962-5 and 1992-5, the highest annual rates of growth in farm output came in Punjab (5 per cent), Rajasthan (4 per cent), and Haryana (4 per cent). These are also regions in which dominant farmers, mostly Jats and Rajputs, make the strongest political claim to represent their regional cultures. India's north-west quadrant, with the most large farmers and highest per capita state investments in irrigation, had the highest overall growth rate, averaging 3 per cent. Eastern states averaged 2 per cent. Central (2.7 per cent) and southern states (2.6 per cent) fell in between, while Kerala (1.7 per cent), Orissa (1.6 per cent), and Bihar (1.0 per cent) had the least growth.⁷² Everywhere, politically well-connected and organised farmers acquire state subsidies for capital-intensive cultivation and their local capital accumulation depends on state-managed electrical supplies, on state prices for petrol, pump sets, tractors, pipes, fertiliser, and hybrid seeds, and on state procurement prices, transport costs, bank charges, and credit conditions. They have thus led the mobilisation of farmers movements. Sugar growers, for instance, led the cooperative movement in Maharashtra from the 1920s onwards and they have also led farmer agitations in Maharashtra and elsewhere since the 1970s. In Uttar Pradesh, under the flag of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, farmer-activists made headlines in 1988 when they 'laid siege to Meerut . . . in pursuit of demands for higher sugarcane prices, lower farm input prices, waiver of loans, higher rural investment and a lowering of electricity and water rates'.⁷³ Whereas the old-style peasant movements focused on land rights, the new farmer movements that arose in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Gujarat in the 1970s and 1980s have used roadblocks, marches, and votes to demand better prices and assert 'village interests' against 'urban bias'.⁷⁴

Such grassroots movements express the identity of agrarian regions in the idioms and institutions of nationality and, since the 1920s, the

⁷² Bhalla and Singh, 'Recent Developments', A-3. Also A.Vaidyanathan, 'Performance of Indian Agriculture since Independence', in K. Basu, ed., *Agrarian Questions: Themes in Economics*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 18-74.

⁷³ Zoya Hasan, 'Shifting Ground', p. 166.

⁷⁴ Tom Brass, 'Introduction: The New Farmers' Movements in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21, 3, 1994, 3-26. For details, see Dipankar Gupta, *Rivalry and Brotherhood: Politics in the Life of Farmers in Northern India*, Delhi, 1997.

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expansive local powers of landed groups have defined *national* agrarian regions in political, cultural, and economic terms. Constitutionally, agriculture is a state subject in India, and agrarian politics is most visible at the state level. New farmers' movements are prominent only in states where capitalist farming has provided a sizeable class of landowners with a coherent set of economic and political demands, where poor farmers from allied castes are willing to march behind their richer neighbours. By contrast, state political culture in Bihar has become a battleground for caste armies representing landlord, peasant, and landless workers; and the limitations of land reform in the state reflect the persistent power of the landed upper castes. The consistently different pattern of electoral outcomes in eastern and western Uttar Pradesh arises primarily from the relative voting power of competing castes in the agrarian electorate. In Maharashtra, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, too, the landed upper castes have invested state political cultures with their own identities. In Bangladesh, landed Muslims did the same, beginning in the 1950s, when famine conditions lingered and Pakistani efforts to procure food supplies met resistance from the large landowners (*jotedars*), who blamed Hindu traders and promoted communal animosity. As in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, a native language movement announced the arrival of the landed rural elite into the Bengali urban middle class; and by 1954 the Muslim League had been permanently displaced from East Pakistan.⁷⁵ The Awami League led a movement for regional representation based on rural votes, and, when war began, urban middle-class patriots looked to the peasantry for inspiration. Rustic Bengali warlords who fought for freedom became a lasting political presence in Bangladesh, and, since 1980, Islamicist politicians have struggled to reproduce agrarian patriarchy in the name of the nation. Similarly, agrarian patriarchs in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra have supported the rise of Hindu chauvinism (*Hindutva*) and promoted traditional values to fight off struggles for equality by women and low-caste workers. Today, both Hindu and Muslim traditionalism seems to have their most decisive political support in the countryside among landed protectors of

⁷⁵ A. H. Ahmed Kamal, 'The Decline of the Muslim League and the Ascendancy of the Bureaucracy in East Pakistan', Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1988.

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established social ranks who face the challenge of upward mobility and resistance from their status inferiors.

Economically, farmers also propel regional trends, as we have seen; and, to add another, very recent example, agricultural growth has now decelerated in northern Tamil Nadu with economic liberalisation, pushing landed families to accumulate capital in urban match factories, gem cutting, textile plants, leather tanning, metal working, and tool and dye making – all in response to state policies geared to increasing Indian exports for world markets. At the same time, urban agro-industrial investors are pursuing strategies of backward linkage to secure their raw materials from the village. The result is that capital is moving up from villages into towns and down from cities into towns and villages, creating a more and more intricate web of connections between the village economy and the world economy.⁷⁶

For people who lack property and money power and who must therefore work for others – including most women in agrarian society – villages remain the everyday site of power in agriculture. Competing locally for wages from their social superiors and patrons, low-status workers have developed strategies that seek to secure their well-being but also to prevent class alliances across regions. Work is seasonal and working conditions depend on employers in specific settings. Workers seek stable relations with employers, which is more and more difficult as labour is defined in more strictly market terms. With the vast proliferation of tiny holdings, fewer farmers can employ non-family workers with any regularity and more peasants must send their own families out for wage work. Poverty among poor peasants and ambition among substantial farmers combine to make labour contracts increasingly short term and job specific, giving employers more flexibility and workers more insecurity. This same cold logic also erodes loyalty among workers toward employers who need them desperately at critical times, especially to intensify commercial cultivation. As workers are more likely to flee and fight for better conditions, capitalist farmers are more tempted to use non-market means to keep workers at work. In theory, capitalism may mean open labour markets, but it also permits coercion to lower costs and to keep labour in place; at the same time, social and political pressure can undermine

⁷⁶ Barbara Harriss-White and S. Janakarajan, 'From Green Revolution to Rural Industrial Revolution in South India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 25, 1997, 1469–77.

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these coercive powers, depending upon conditions within specific environments. In Haryana, for instance, according to an investigation published in 1991, the monopoly of Jat farmers over state power allowed village employers to employ bonded labour and physically to prevent workers from taking jobs elsewhere, with political backing from the state government; while in nearby Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh, competitive politics among employers allowed workers' wages to rise in response to outside employment opportunities.⁷⁷ In rural West Bengal by contrast, low-caste and tribal farm workers typically live inside the boundaries of village societies where debt, rent, patronage, and social constraints hold them in check and keep their wages down. In Tamil Nadu, low-caste workers routinely get higher wages by moving out into wide circuits of labour migration – to the Persian Gulf and Malaysia – only to suffer the same constraints when they return to live in their home village, where labour discipline involves social intimidation and upper-caste control of village roads and water. In Kerala, despite high minimum wages and relatively free labour conditions, the number of days that employment is available for agricultural labourers is very low, keeping wage income at near starvation levels for many workers.

The institutions of village politics that are bolstered by respect for tradition and by the values of local self-government anchor everyday social power in agriculture. Modern states also rest on the foundation of village administration and stability. This makes widespread class action or broad union movements against village-based landed interests almost impossible. In South Asia, local labour action is the norm, and no workers' party has yet mobilised farm labour across distant agrarian regions. Instead, broad social and political movements seek to improve living conditions for people who live with subaltern entitlements by forming solidarities across dispersed, local settings. These 'new social movements' do not fit into the older categories of class and national politics, but they do reiterate earlier movements as they expand their political possibilities by including a greater diversity of peoples, localities, idioms, and concerns. They all mobilise collective identities in a manner that resembles nationalism. In fact, from the

⁷⁷ Partha N. Mukherji, *Report of the Study Group on Social Constraints on Rural Labour*, National Commission on Rural Labour, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1991, cited in Jens Lerche, 'Is Bonded Labour a Bound Category? – Reconceptualising Agrarian Conflict in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 22, 3, 1995, 484–515.

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perspective of agrarian history, nationality appears merely to be one collective identity among countless others. Though its proponents sought to subordinate other identities during their acquisition of state power, they failed, because nationality has been defined primarily by the upwardly mobile urban middle classes and allied landed groups. As soon as national regimes were stabilised, many forms of conflict became visible which had been developing alongside struggles for national independence. The limits of national movements became more apparent. Even communist parties in South Asia had come to rest on a landed peasant base, and to the extent that they mobilised landless workers, they did so within a national idiom that failed to dislodge the dominance of landed patriarchs and to represent disenfranchised and marginal groups, including tribal peoples and women. In the context of national movements, however, many other *social* identities had also been mobilised, and they forged various *cultural* relations with nationality in the idioms of caste, gender, sect, religious community, and ethnicity. These movements have confronted landed power in the villages by various means. In the early 1980s, for instance, one Dalit official reported that, with local activism, 'atrocities have increased', and he explained that, 'when status changes, consciousness comes, conflict increases', but progress 'starts with elections'.⁷⁸ Outside electoral politics, the new social movements have expressed a wide spectrum of *political* alternatives that run the gamut from the violence of the People's War Group in Telangana and of Naxalites in Bihar, to the symbolism of the Neo-Buddhist movement begun by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to the poetry of the Dalit Panthers, to the cultural separatism of adivasis and the legal activism of environmentalists and the women's movement.

Since 1980, global networks have visibly altered agrarian territoriality. Since the World Bank and IMF in effect rewrote national economic policies, superseding national governments on critical matters of pricing and state expenditure, the World Trade Organisation has made Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights a major agrarian issue, and multinational firms have worked hard for control of South Asian markets and materials. Struggles over the moving elements of agriculture now proceed simultaneously in local, regional,

⁷⁸ Marguerite S. Robinson, *Local Politics: The Law of the Fishes. Development through Political Change in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh (South India)*, Delhi, 1988, pp. 258, 264.

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national, and international arenas. International labour migrations also affect economies, social relations, and politics in many agrarian regions, as a result, vernacular movements have entered global networks that challenge the authority of national states, the most dramatic example being the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, in Sri Lanka, whose struggle for a compact homeland along the coast is sustained by activism in South Africa, England, the USA, and Canada.

The struggle over the Narmada Dam indicates some contours of a new formation of agrarian locality in the age of globalisation. Designed before Indian Independence, organised by the Government of India, and financed significantly by the World Bank, the Narmada Dam project was to include 30 large, 136 medium-sized, and 3,000 small dams along the mountainous course of the Narmada river, mostly in Madhya Pradesh. It would irrigate lowland farming tracts, mostly in relatively rich commercial farming tracts in Gujarat. Its artificial lakes would submerge villages housing about 200,000 people, many of whom are Bhils. Popular opposition to the project arose from media accounts of dislocation and hardship imposed upon tribals and the landless poor. Urban activists came to investigate, lead protests, file court cases, and broadcast news to rally opposition that spread overseas as it was translated into the global discourse of environmentalism and human rights. In Europe and the United States, opposition to Narmada – like the much smaller Chipko Movement before it, against commercial logging in the Himalayas – attracted activists with global vision; in their hands the Bhils' plight was submerged by the global decimation of forests and wildlife, by environmental degradation in India's fisheries and around Chernobyl, and by the oppression heaped upon tribal minorities generally, including Iraqi Kurds.⁷⁹ Eventually, the movement forced the World Bank to withdraw its support and to reassess funding for all huge dam projects (though the Government of India vowed to continue the work). Today, American college students watch BBC videos about the Narmada struggle along with films about rural women's agitation for liquor prohibition in Andhra Pradesh and about human rights abuse in China. In South Asia, local agrarian histories are now moving into the future on a widening world stage.

⁷⁹ See 'India: Cultures in Crisis', special issue of *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 13, 2, 1989.

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Because there are too many relevant titles, I limit citations to monographs and anthologies, as much as possible, and cite later work that supersedes earlier scholarship. I omit some citations which have appeared previously in the footnotes. The lists of titles are alphabetical by authors, and each author's titles are listed chronologically. A fuller bibliography, which I will update and expand, appears on my homepage: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/>.

Intellectual history

Agriculture became an official topic for scholarly analysis under Company Raj. The most useful monographs on agrarian ideas in the Company period are S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge, 1968), Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Paris, 1963), Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire* (Delhi, 1989), and Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959). For the later Raj, see B. R. Tomlinson, *The Political Economy of the Raj, 1914–1947: The Economics of Decolonization* (New York, 1979) and Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of the Indian National Leadership, 1880–1905* (New Delhi, 1966), which is supplemented by Bipan Chandra's editing of M. G. Ranade, *Ranade's Economic Writings* (New Delhi, 1990). For post-1950s official thought, see A. M. Zaidi and S. G. Zaidi, *The Foundations of Indian Economic Planning* (New Delhi, 1979) and A. Moin Zaidi, ed., *A Tryst with Destiny: A Study of Economic Policy Resolutions of the INC Passed During the Last 100 Years* (New Delhi, 1985).

Histories of historical writing, with reprints of scholarly classics, are appearing in the series entitled *Oxford in India Readings: Themes in Indian History*, from Oxford University Press, Delhi – see especially the volumes edited by Sugata Bose, *Credit Markets and the Agrarian Economy of Colonial India* (Delhi, 1994), Sumit Guha, *Growth, Stagnation, or Decline? Agricultural Productivity in British India* (Delhi, 1992), David Hardiman, *Peasant Resistance in India, 1858–1914* (Delhi, 1992), David Ludden, *Agricultural Production and Indian History* (Delhi, 1994), Gyan Prakash, *The World of the Rural Labourer in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1992), Burton Stein, *The Making of Agrarian Policy in British India, 1770–1900* (Delhi, 1992), and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Money and the Market in India 1100–1700* (Delhi, 1994). The new Oxford series *Readings in Early Indian History* has opened with a volume edited by Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* (Delhi, 1997), whose introduction is a history of relevant scholarship.

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Four scholars have had the most profound personal impact on historical writing about agrarian history before 1800: D. D. Kosambi, Romila Thapar, R. S. Sharma, and Irfan Habib. D. D. Kosambi put ancient studies on a material footing that made agrarian issues prominent, and he integrated history with culture, myth, and archaeology; see *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956), *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay, 1962), *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India* (London, 1965), and *Ancient India: A History of Its Culture and Civilization* (New York, 1966). Romila Thapar spans ancient and medieval history and her work centres on social history and society–state relations in the first millennium BCE; see especially *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi, 1978), *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-first Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley* (Bombay, 1984), *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi, 1992), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay, 1995), and *The Tyranny of Labels* (New Delhi, 1997). R. S. Sharma also covers ancient and medieval history but his most important work is on feudalism and post-Gupta transitions: *Indian Feudalism* (Delhi, 1980), *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Delhi, 1983), *Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India* (New Delhi, 1983), and *Origin of the State in India* (Bombay, 1989). Irfan Habib, his students, and his colleagues at Aligarh Muslim University are the central intellectual force in Mughal history. His scholarship covers the second millennium and he is the key figure in debates about agrarian political economy in the early-modern period. See *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556–1707)* (Bombay, 1963), *An Atlas of Mughal Empire: Political and Economic Maps with Notes, Bibliography and Index* (Delhi, 1982), *Interpreting Indian History* (Shillong, 1988), and *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perspective* (Delhi, 1995).

Southern regions of medieval history have a distinctive literature, which is more centred on the social networks of power and authority in agrarian territory. R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early-Medieval Sri Lanka* (Tucson, 1979) is the foundational study of Sri Lanka. Burton Stein's *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980) and *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge, 1989) anchor recent debates on south India; on the cumulative impact of Stein's work, see *South Asia Research* (17, 2, 1997, 113–39).

For the period after 1800, a bibliographical essay that I wrote in the early 1980s considers about 375 titles published before 1981 and remains useful: 'Productive Power in Agriculture: A Survey of Work on the Local History of British India', in Meghnad Desai, Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, and Ashok Rudra, *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1984, pp. 51–99). Today, modern agrarian history seems more coherent than it did then. Six scholars have led the most influential trends. Bipan Chandra represents a national, political history that carries Irfan Habib's mode of class analysis into the twentieth century. See his *Modern India* (New Delhi, 1971, 1976), *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (New

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Delhi, 1979), *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (New Delhi, 1988), *Essays on Contemporary India* (New Delhi, 1993), and *Essays on Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, 1993). Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri is a historian of the Bengal Presidency who exemplifies scholarly work on linguistic regions combining economic, social, and political history, and describing systems and trends of commercial production. See *The Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1964), 'Agricultural Production in Bengal, 1850-1900: Coexistence of Decline and Growth', *Bengal Past and Present* (88, 1969, 152-206), 'The Story of a Peasant Revolt in a Bengal District', *Bengal Past and Present* (92, 2, 1973, 220-78), 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947', *Indian Historical Review* (21, 1, 1975, 105-65), 'The Land Market in Eastern India, 1793-1940, Part I: The Movement of Land Prices, and Part II: The Changing Composition of Landed Society', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (12, 1 & 2, 1976, 1-42, 133-67), 'Movement of Rent in Eastern India, 1793-1930', *Indian Historical Review* (3, 2, 1977, 308-90), 'Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India 1757-1920', in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta, eds., *India's Colonial Encounter: Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes* (New Delhi, 1993, pp. 65-120) and 'The Process of Agricultural Commercialisation in Eastern India during British Rule: A Reconsideration of the Notions of "Forced Commercialisation" and "Dependent Peasantry"', in Peter Robb, ed., *Meanings of Agriculture: Essays in South Asian History and Economics* (New Delhi, 1996, pp. 71-91). A. R. Desai is a sociologist who has pioneered studies of changing social structure and attendant agrarian conflict and peasant struggles, from the nineteenth century to the present; see *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay, 1948) and his edited volumes, *Rural Sociology in India* (Bombay, 1961), *Peasant Struggles in India* (Delhi, 1979, 1981, 1985) and *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence* (Delhi, 1986). Ranajit Guha has led the group of scholars published in the series *Subaltern Studies: Essays on South Asian History and Society*. See *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), the six volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, which he edited between 1981 and 1989, and David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds., *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha* (Delhi, 1994).¹ Dharma Kumar concentrates on the economic history of the Madras Presidency and specialises in the empirical critique of propositions about agrarian class structure: see *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge, 1965), and *Colonialism, Property, and the State* (Delhi, 1998). She has also led the historical study of the market economy and development as editor of the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* and *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 2: c.1750-c.1970* (New Delhi, 1983). Eric Stokes focused on the northern basins in the nineteenth century. He positioned himself theoretically at the intersection of political economy and social history, and he set the standard for detailed empirical

¹ There is a web site for everything related to *Subaltern Studies*: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/areastudies/subaltern/ssmap.htm>.

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research that integrates the study of agrarian social change with the politics in British India; see *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978) and C. A. Bayly, ed., *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857* (Oxford, 1986).

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Histories of ideas that influence agrarian knowledge in the countryside have also begun to emerge in fragments. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1992-1996* (Berkeley, 1996), reconstructs some elements of one local sub-culture. Mentalities of agrarian subalternity preoccupy Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983) and many authors in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. Walter Hauser has documented the work of one important intellectual in

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Approaches to agriculture

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Development is the most broadly integrative theme, but only a small portion of work describes farming in its local or even regional environment. Putting Marx's ideas into specific agrarian settings has enabled scholars to theorise a diversity of modern agrarian transformations in South Asia. See particularly Ashok Rudra, *Political Economy of Indian Agriculture* (Calcutta,

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1992), 'Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production in Non-European Societies', *Journal of Peasant Studies* (15, 3, 1988, 373-94), 'Local Power and Farm-Level Decision Making', in Desai, Rudolph, and A. Rudra, *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1984, pp. 251-80), *Agrarian Relations in West Bengal: Results of Two Surveys* (Bombay, 1983), and (with Pranab Bardhan), *On the Interlinkage of Land, Labour, Credit Relations in Agriculture: An Analysis of Village Survey Data in East India* (Calcutta, 1978). Rudra's essay, 'Emergence of the Intelligentsia as a Ruling Class in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* (21 January 1989, 151-5), also put historians themselves into agrarian history by arguing that, 'In the last two decades, the intelligentsia has emerged as a member of the ruling class coalition in India, the other two classes being the big industrial capitalists and big land owners.'

My approach in this book is also influenced by Amartya K. Sen's *Poverty and Famine: An Essay in Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York, 1981) and by Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, eds., *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (Cambridge, 1994). See also Tim Mitchell's article, entitled 'The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics', *American Political Science Review* (85, 1, 1991, 77-96). Intersections of ecology, environmentalism, ethnography, politics, and history are stimulating the most promising scholarship today, and, in this respect, this book comes at the start of a new period of agrarian studies. For provocative research, see Anil Agarwal and others, *The Fight for Survival: People's Action for Environment* (New Delhi, 1987); Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India* (Durham: forthcoming); David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (Delhi, 1995); and Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Delhi, 1995).

Regions have their own approaches to the agrarian past. In the same way that southern France and the southern USA have inspired agrarian literature that reflects their own cultural heritage, so has Bengal. Although Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Maharashtra are well served by agrarian historians, authors from the old Bengal Presidency have shown the most profound rural attachments going back to the early nineteenth century. Only Bengal has its own regional agrarian history in the *New Cambridge History: Sugata Bose, Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge, 1993): whose bibliographical essay is the best guide to the literature. A new cluster of Bengal research is emerging around tribal and forest issues; see Mark Poffenberger, 'The Resurgence of Community Forest Management in the Jungle Mahals of West Bengal', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, Imperialism* (Delhi, 1995, pp. 336-69), and K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Delhi, 1999). The only substantial compilation of village studies for any region of South Asia is Shapan Adnan, *Annotation of*

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Long-term history

On pastoralism, the most important reading is in the special issue of *Studies in History* (7, 2, 1991) edited by Shereen Ratnagar, and the most insightful monograph is Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities in Western India* (Delhi, 1989). On pre-history, see *Ecological Backgrounds of South Asian Prehistory*, edited by Kenneth A. R. Kennedy and Gregory L. Possehl (Ithaca, 1975); and Gregory L. Possehl, *Variation and Change in the Indus Civilization: A Study of Prehistoric Gujarat with Special Reference to the Post Urban Harappan civilization: A Recent Perspective* (New Delhi, 1993). Romila Thapar's *From Lineage to State* is the best general view of ancient transitions and M. S. Randhawa, *A History of Agriculture in India*, 4 volumes (Delhi, 1986), has details on farming from earliest times. For medieval history, first see Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi, 1995); B. P. Sahu, *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* (Delhi, 1997), and Herman Kulke, ed., *The State in India, 1000–1700* (Delhi, 1995); then see three important collections: R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal, eds., *Tradition, Dissent, and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (Delhi, 1996); Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 1: c.1200–1750* (Cambridge, 1983); and Irfan Habib, ed., *Medieval India 1: Researches in the History of India, 1200–1750* (Delhi, 1992).

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Regional coverage is very uneven for medieval centuries. On Assam, see Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Policy, Economy* (Calcutta, 1991). For early Gujarat, see A. K. Majumdar, *Chaulukyas of Gujarat: A Survey of the History and Culture of Gujarat from the Middle of the 10th to the End of the 13th C.* (Bombay, 1956). On Nepal, see D. R. Regmi, *Medieval Nepal* (Calcutta, 1965–1966) and *Ancient Nepal* (Calcutta, 1969). On Orissa, see Hermann Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi, 1993), and Shishir Kumar Panda, *The State and Statecraft in Medieval Orissa under the Later Eastern Gangas (A.D. 1038–1434)* (Calcutta, 1995) and *Medieval*

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Orissa: *A Socio-economic Study* (New Delhi, 1991). On Sri Lanka, see R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough* (Tucson, 1979) and W. I. Siriweera, *A Study of the Economic History of Pre-modern Sri Lanka* (New Delhi, 1994). For Bengal and the north-east, see especially Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, 1994); Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (down to A.D. 1538)* (Dacca, 1959); R. C. Majumdar, *Expansion of Aryan Culture in Eastern India* (Imphal, 1968); Barrie Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* (Tucson, 1970); M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal, 1201-1576* (Karachi, 1963); and M. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study* (Dacca, 1965) and *Trade, Technology, and Society in Medieval Bengal* (Dhaka, 1995). For mountain surroundings, the key work is Surajit Sinha, ed., *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Precolonial Eastern and North Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1987), which also treats Rajputisation.

On Rajasthan, Rajputs, and Rajputisation, see B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval Rajasthan', *Indian Historical Review* (3, 1, July 1976; 59-82); Richard Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule* (Berkeley, 1971); Satya Prakash Gupta, *The agrarian system of eastern Rajasthan, c.1650-c. 1750* (Delhi, 1986); D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties: A Study of Chauhan Political History, Chauhan Political Institutions, and Life in the Chauhan Dominions, from 800 to 1316 A.D.* (Delhi, 1975); and Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords, and Peasants: Rajasthan in the Eighteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1990). On Maratha territories, Sumit Guha's forthcoming book, entitled *Environment, Ethnicity and Politics in Western India 1350-1991* (Cambridge) will be the fullest monographic study, but Maratha records have sustained many good books. See especially D. K. Dhekane, *Agrarian System under Marathas* (Bombay, 1996); Hiroshi Fukazawa, *The Medieval Deccan: Peasants, Social Systems and States (1500-1700)* (New Delhi, 1991); Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600-1818* (New Delhi, 1993) and *Marathas, Marauders, and State Formation in Eighteenth-century India* (Oxford, 1994); and Andre Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge, 1986). For the Indo-Gangetic basin see Muhammad Taqi Amini, *The Agrarian System of Islam* (Delhi, 1991); Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early-Medieval India* (Calcutta, 1990); Iqbal Husain, *The Rubela Chieftaincies: The Rise and Fall of Rubela Power in India in the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi, 1994); Sunanda Kar, *Agrarian System in Northern India from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century* (Bombay, 1990); Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge, 1990); Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History* (New Delhi, 1993); and M. C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of North India* (Bombay, 1966).

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Early modern themes

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M. Athar Ali gives a good account of the inland geography of early-modern South Asia in his 'Political Structures of the Islamic Orient in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in Ifran Habib, ed., *Medieval India 1*, (Delhi, 1992, pp. 129–40); and, for a wider view, see David Ludden, 'History outside Civilisation and the Mobility of Southern Asia', *South Asia* (17, 1, June 1994, 1–23). For an Asian perspective, see *Emporia, Commodities, and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c.1400–1750*, edited by Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart, 1991); and, for a global view, see Alan Smith, *Creating a World Economy: Merchant Capital, Colonialism and World Trade, 1400–1825* (Boulder, 1991).

The linkages between overseas traders and port city hinterlands imparted a distinctive historical identity to coastal regions. See especially Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650–1740* (Delhi, 1986), and *Maritime Trade, Society and European Influence in South Asia, 1600–1800* (Brookfield, 1995); Ashin Das Gupta and M. N. Pearson, eds., *India and the Indian Ocean: 1500–1800* (Calcutta, 1987); Indu Banga, ed., *Ports and Their Hinterlands in India, 1700–1950* (New Delhi, 1992); and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990). On overland trade, see Stephen F. Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 1994).

The substance of networks that connected agrarian regions with the world economy are explored in B. R. Grover, 'An Integrated Pattern of Commercial Life in the Rural Society of North India during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Proceedings of the 37th Session of Indian Historical Records Commission* (1966, vol. 37), reprinted in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Money and the Market in India 1100–1700* (Delhi, 1994, pp. 219–55); Frank Perlin, *Invisible City: Monetary, Administrative, and Popular Infrastructures in Asia and Europe, 1500–1900* (Aldershot, 1993), and *Unbroken Landscape: Commodity, Category, Sign and Identity: Their Production as Myth and Knowledge from 1500* (Aldershot, 1994); Prasannan Parthasarathy, 'Weavers, Merchants and States: The South Indian Textile Industry, 1680–1800', Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University (1992); John R. Richards, ed., *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham, 1983); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Merchants, Markets, and the State in Early Modern India* (Delhi, 1990); and Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (25, 4, 1988, 401–24). Bernard S. Cohn provides a good framework for regional history in three essays, reprinted in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1990): 'Networks and Centres in the Integration of Indian Civilization' (pp. 78–87), 'Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History and Society' (pp. 100–36), and 'Political Systems in Eighteenth-Century India: The Benares Region' (pp. 483–500).

Regional studies fill out the picture of early-modern conditions. In addition to studies of Rajasthan, cited above, see Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the*

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On pre-modern urbanism, I recommend that readers start with Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, 'Urban Centers in Early Medieval India: An Overview', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, *Situating Indian History* (Delhi, 1986, pp. 8–33). For case studies, see Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison, eds., *The City in South Asia: Premodern and Modern* (London, 1980); Indu Banga, ed., *The City in Indian History: Urban Demography, Society, and Politics* (New Delhi, 1991); Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, *Surat in the Seventeenth Century: A Study of Urban History of Pre-modern India* (London, 1979) and *Poona in the Eighteenth Century: An Urban History* (Delhi, 1988); and Hameeda Khatoun Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India, 1556–1803* (Bombay, c.1968), and *Urbanisation and Urban Centres Under the Great Mughals, 1556–1707, An Essay in Interpretation* (Simla, c.1972).

My discussion of early-modern trends in this volume draws heavily on my own research on the peninsula published in *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985; Delhi, 1989); 'Archaic Formations of Agricultural Knowledge in South India', in Peter Robb, *Meanings of Agriculture* (New Delhi, 1996, pp. 35–70); 'Caste and Political Economy in Early-Modern South India: The Case of Tinnevely District', in B. Stein and S. Subrahmanyam, *Institutions and Economic Change* (Delhi, 1997, pp. 105–33); 'Urbanism and Early Modernity in the Tirunelveli Region', *Bengal Past and Present* (114, 218–219, 1995, 9–40); 'Patriarchy and History in South Asia: Three Interpretive Experiments', *Calcutta Historical Journal* (17, 2, 1995, 1–18); 'Orientalist Empiricism and Transformations of Colonial Knowledge', in C. A. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament* (Philadelphia, 1993, pp. 250–78); 'India's Development Regime', in Dirks, *Colonialism and Culture*, pp. 247–87; 'World Economy and Village India, 1600–1900: Exploring the Agrarian History of Capitalism', in Sugata Bose, *South Asia and World Capitalism* (Delhi, 1990, pp. 159–77); 'Craft

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Production in an Agrarian Economy, India, 1750–1900', in Michael Meister, ed., *Making Things in South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 103–13); 'Asiatic States and Agrarian Economies: Agrarian Commercialism in South India, 1700–1850', *Calcutta Historical Journal* (13, 1–2, 1989, 112–37); and 'Agrarian Commercialism in Eighteenth Century South India: Evidence from the 1823 Tirunelveli Census', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (25, 4, 1988, 493–519), reprinted in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (Delhi, 1990, pp. 215–41). I have also used 'The Economy of the Ceded Districts, 1800–1828', an unpublished manuscript by Sourindranath Roy compiled from documents in the National Archives, New Delhi.

Modern issues

For a broad view of economic history, see B. R. Tomlinson, *The Economy of Modern India, 1860–1970* (Cambridge, 1993), a compact analysis and excellent guide to the literature. For a wide range of specialised essays, see Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 2* (New Delhi, 1983), and the issue of *Modern Asian Studies* (19, 13, 1985) on the *Cambridge Economic History*. Sumit Guha, *Growth, Stagnation, or Decline?* (Delhi, 1992) presents one important scholarly debate, with classic reprints; for other debates, see Neil Charlesworth, *British Rule and the Indian Economy, 1800–1914* (London, 1982). There is no book that compares long-term regional trends, despite the brilliant, pioneering work by Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Eric Stokes published in *Bengal Past and Present* (95, 1, 1976): 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth in India during the Period of British Rule' (pp. 247–89) and 'Dynamism and Enervation in North Indian Agriculture: The Historical Dimension' (pp. 227–39), which is reprinted in David Ludden, *Agricultural Production and Indian History* (Delhi, 1994, pp. 36–53). Studies of economic development are pushing in this comparative direction, however; see Ambica Ghosh, *Emerging Capitalism in Indian Agriculture: The Historical Roots of Its Uneven Development* (New Delhi, 1988); Manjit Singh, *Uneven Development in Agriculture and Labour Migration: A Case of Bihar and Punjab* (Shimla, 1995); and Surendra Singh, *Agricultural Development in India: A Regional Analysis* (Shillong, 1994).

Comparative studies of agrarian change are still thwarted by the absence of full economic histories for all the regions. There is none for Uttar Pradesh, and most regions, even Punjab, are not fully covered. Two good books on UP focus on a small set of relevant issues: Ian Stone, *Canal Irrigation in British India: Perspectives on Technological Change in a Peasant Society* (Cambridge, 1984); and Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: The United Provinces under British Rule, 1860–1900* (v. 1) (Berkeley, 1972). For Madhya Pradesh, the most useful research is by Crispin Bates, beginning with his 1984 Cambridge dissertation, entitled 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India, 1820–1930', and his two articles, 'Class and Economic Change in Central India: The Narmada Valley 1820–1930', in

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Clive Dewey, ed., *Arrested Development in India: The Historical Dimension*, (Riverdale, 1988, pp. 241–82), and ‘Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India: The Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour’, *Modern Asian Studies* (19, 3, 1985, 573–92). On Bihar, Arvind N. Das makes forceful arguments in *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-economic Change in Bihar, 1900–1980* (New Delhi, 1983), *The Republic of Bihar* (New Delhi, 1992), and *The State of Bihar: An Economic History without Footnotes* (Amsterdam, 1992). There are good specialised studies of Sri Lanka: Jean Grossholtz, *Forging Capitalist Patriarchy: The Economic and Social Transformation of Feudal Sri Lanka and Its Impact on Women* (Durham, 1984); and Asoka Bandarage, *Colonialism in Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of the Kandyan Highlands, 1833–1886* (Berlin, 1983). For Nepal, Mahesh Chandra Regmi’s two books are fundamental: *Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th-century Nepal* (New Delhi, 1978) and *An Economic History of Nepal, 1846–1901* (Varanasi, 1988). For Gujarat, Gita Bajpai, *Agrarian Urban Economy and Social Change: The Socio-Economic Profile of Select Districts of Gujarat, 1850–1900* (Delhi, 1989) and Marcia F. Frost, ‘Population Growth and Agrarian Change in British Gujarat, Kaira District, 1802–1858’, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania (1995), are richly detailed, but the lack of a new general history makes me turn to M. Desai, *The Rural Economy of Gujerat* (Bombay, 1949). On nineteenth-century Orissa, see J. K. Samal, *Agrarian History of Orissa under the British Rule* (Delhi, 1993) and Nabin Kumar Jit, *The Agrarian Life and Economy of Orissa: A Survey, 1833–1897* (Calcutta, 1984). The Bombay Deccan is well covered by Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818–1941* (Delhi, 1985). M. Mufakharul Islam’s new study of Punjab is meticulous: *Irrigation, Agriculture, and the Raj: Punjab, 1887–1947* (Delhi, 1997); and Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton, 1988) covers a somewhat wider range of issues. For Bengal, Sugata Bose’s *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure, and Politics* (Cambridge, 1986) is the fullest monograph and his *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* is the best overview and guide to the literature. The new *History of Bangladesh 1704–1971, Volume Two, Economic History*, edited by Sirajul Islam (Dhaka, 1997) will perhaps stimulate other interdisciplinary collections that focus on specific regions. The model regional monograph remains Christopher John Baker’s *An Indian Rural Economy: The Tamilnad Countryside, 1880–1955* (Oxford and Delhi, 1984). For the earlier period in Tamil Nadu, see Arun Bandopadhyay, *The Agrarian Economy of Tamilnadu, 1820–1855* (Calcutta, 1992).

Historians have so far provided the best empirical context for local studies in Bengal, Bihar, the Deccan, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. A few monographs have *both* a local *and* a long-term agenda within a broadly comparative, regional perspective: M. Atchi Reddy, *Lands and Tenants in South India: A Study of Nellore District, 1850–1990* (Delhi, 1996); Arvind N. Das, *Changel: The Biography of A Village* (New Delhi, 1996); Tom Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848–1968: Social and Economic Change in a*

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North Indian Village (Berkeley, 1974); David Ludden, *Peasant History* (Princeton, 1985; Delhi, 1989); and M. S. S. Pandian, *The Political Economy of Agrarian Change: Nanchilnadu, 1880–1939* (New Delhi, 1990). The local characteristics of agrarian regions are emerging primarily from an accumulation of regional studies that concern politics, economy, society, and culture, but tend to obsess on colonialism and nationality; this weighs the literature most heavily toward the study of agrarian administration, development, and politics. Histories of agrarian *social* and *cultural* change have emerged substantially from studies of social movements, for which the best summaries are Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (Delhi, 1983) and G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (Delhi, 1997). One recent volume has compiled local studies across regions – Peter Robb, Kaoru Sugihara, and Haruka Yanagisawa, eds., *Local Agrarian Societies in Colonial India: Japanese Perspectives* (Richmond, Surrey, 1997) – but focused, thematic studies hold the most potential for comparative history. One compelling effort is Alice W. Clark, ‘Analysing the Reproduction of Human Beings and Social Formations, with Regional Examples over the Last Century’, in Alice W. Clark, ed., *Gender and Political Economy* (Delhi, 1993, pp. 113–45).

Rebellion and resistance invite cross-regional comparison and provide mountains of evidence on the character of agrarian politics; conversely, geographical, temporal, and institutional contexts condition all agrarian upheaval. Telangana is a glaring example of regional particularity. For its administration, see S. Bhanumathi Ranga Rao, *Land Revenue Administration in the Nizams’ Dominions, 1853–1948* (Hyderabad, 1992). The first phase of its revolutionary history began as the first radical phase of peasant politics came to end in British India; see Carolyn M. Elliott, ‘Decline of a Patrimonial Regime: The Telangana Rebellion in India, 1946–51’, *Journal of Asian Studies* (34, 1, 1974, 27–47); Barry Pavier, *The Telangana Movement 1944–1951* (Delhi, 1981); and I. Thirumalai, ‘Peasant Class Assertions in Nalgonda and Warangal Districts of Telangana, 1930–1946’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (31, 2, 1994, 217–38). The discourse and experience of revolution became uniquely embedded in its agrarian culture; see Devulapalli Venkateswara Rao, *Telangana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution: A Critique of ‘Telangana People’s Struggle and Its Lessons’ Written by P. Sundarayya and of ‘Postscript’ to the Book ‘The Great Heroic Telangana Struggle’ Written by Chandra Pulla Reddy* (Hyderabad, 1982); Arutla Ramachandra Reddy, *Telangana Struggle: Memoirs* (New Delhi, 1984); and Vasantha Kannabiran et al., *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People’s Struggle* (London, 1989).

Eric Stokes (*The Peasant and the Raj*, Cambridge, 1978) stressed that rebelliousness needs to be explained in its time and place, and many studies locate agrarian resistance within regional power structures: for instance, Conrad Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and Its Genesis* (New Delhi, 1987); Jagdish Chandra Jha, *The Bhumji Revolt, 1832–3: Ganga Narain’s Langama or Turmoil* (Delhi, 1967); and Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt, Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh, 1886–1922* (New Delhi, 1984).

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But the historical meanings of 'revolt', 'revolution', and 'resistance' also merit attention; on this, see T. J. Byres, *Charan Singh, 1902–87, An Assessment* (Patna, 1988) and Charan Singh, *Agrarian Revolution in Uttar Pradesh* (Allahabad, 1957), for revolution from above; and Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* (Armonk, 1993) for popular redefinitions.

Definitions destabilise across regions, periods, and social contexts; and comparisons yield empirical patterns that challenge theory. Gujarat, for instance, could not be more different from Telangana. David Hardiman has explored Gujarati resistance in his *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District, 1917–1934* (Delhi, 1981), *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi, 1987), and *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India* (Delhi, 1996). In this land without zamindars, the term 'peasant' covers a spectrum from very rich commercial farmers to the poorest family farmers, near-landless workers, and tribal communities, and 'revolt' could be said to have many distinctively Gujarati meanings in practice. On the social and economic background of Gandhian politics, see Crispin Bates, 'The Nature of Social Change in Rural Gujarat: The Kheda District, 1818–1918', *Modern Asian Studies* (15, 4, 1981, 415–54), and Gita Bajpai, *Agrarian Urban Economy and Social Change* (Delhi, 1989). On farmers' politics, see E. J. M. Epstein, *The Earthy Soil: Bombay Peasants and the Indian Nationalist Movement, 1919–1947* (Oxford, 1988); on other leadership, see Ghanshyam Shah, *Politics of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Adivasi and Harijan Leaders of Gujarat* (Bombay, 1975). On the premier agrarian leader of the region, Sardar Patel, see *The Collected Works of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel*, edited by P. N. Chopra (Delhi, 1990).

Colonialism is the definitive institutional context of peasant life for many historians – see especially Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1997) – but it is obviously only part of the picture. Subalterns work within many institutions that set the terms of their struggles, and differences among local settings are significant. In this book, I focus on regional patterns, on the contrast between intensive agriculture and tribal cultivation, and on institutions that define modern subalterns in zamindari and ryotwari terms. Legal institutions distinguish tenant struggles from tribal revolts, and they also help to explain differences between rebellion in Telangana and Gujarat (or Punjab and Bihar). Landlordism has been more particularistic, culturally complex, and changeable than I indicate here. See C. J. Baker, 'Tamil Nadu Estates in the Twentieth Century', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (8, 1, 1976, 1–44); Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Ann Arbor, 1993); Stephen Henningham, *A Great Estate and Its Landlords in Colonial India: Darbhanga, 1860–1942* (New Delhi, 1990); T. R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1979); Nilmani Mukherjee, *A Bengal Zamindar: Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara and His Times, 1808–1888* (Calcutta, 1975); Pamela G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1996); N. G. Ranga, *Economic*

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Local power relations differed significantly even among sites of sugar production, which were all marked by strict subordination of farming to capital and of labour to management. In Maharashtra, farmers owned land and expanded their control of investment. In eastern UP, they could not. See Donald W. Attwood, *Raising Cane: The Political Economy of Sugar in Western India* (Boulder, 1992) and Shahid Amin, *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur: An Inquiry into Peasant Production for Capitalist Enterprise in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1984).

How does colonial capitalism transform agrarian societies? This remains a critical question for comparative history. On a world scale, it may be that, in the Americas, investors could use the state to remake plantation societies in the interest of world capitalism – see Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labour in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 1998) – but, in Asia, capital acquired commodities for world markets without providing Europeans much direct power in agrarian localities. Capitalism and colonialism, like modernity and nationality, varied substantially across agrarian environments; and by sorting out their historical patterns we can better appreciate their local substance and global reach. The distinctiveness of hills, forests, and tribal environments is now receiving more attention. See Tarasankar Banerjee, ed., *Changing Land Systems and Tribals in Eastern India in the Modern Period: Report of a Seminar Held at Santiniketan, 6–7 March 1986* (Calcutta, 1989); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Delhi, 1989); J. C. Jha, *The Indian National Congress and the Tribals, 1885–1985* (New Delhi, 1985); Govind Ballabh Pant, *The Forest Problem in Kumaon: Forest Problems and National Uprising in the Himalayan Region (With a Commentary by Ajay S. Rawat)* (Nainital, 1985); Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa, 1920–1950* (Delhi, 1993); Archana Prasad, 'Forests and Subsistence in Colonial India: A Study of the Central Provinces, 1830–1945', Ph.D. dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (1994); and Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860–1914* (Delhi, 1996). On Santals, see Suchibrata Sen, *The Santals of Jungle Mahals: An Agrarian History, 1793–1861* (Calcutta, 1984) and also P. K. Bhowmick, *Dynamics of tribal development* (New Delhi, 1993); A. B. Chaudhuri, *State Formation among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity* (New Delhi, 1993); and B. K. Sharma, *Habitat, Economy & Society of Tribal Core: A Case Study of Damin-I-Koh* (New Delhi, 1992). On Bastar, see Nandini Sundar, *Subal-*

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