Harriss, John. "Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia Revisited." *Arguing about the World: The Work and Legacy of Meghnad Desai*. Ed. Mary Kaldor and Polly Vizard. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 82–98. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849665469.ch-006>>.

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Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia Revisited

John Harriss

Most Indian economists of Meghnad Desai's generation took some interest in agriculture – unsurprisingly so, since they grew up in a country in which agriculture remained the most important sector of the economy (it still accounted for 61 per cent of GDP in 1950–51, and for 76 per cent of employment). Meghnad was no exception to this general rule, and he worked on agriculture at Berkeley before he arrived at LSE. Then, his most significant contribution to work on agriculture in India came in the 1980s when, with the eminent political scientist Susanne Hoeber Rudolph from the University of Chicago and the feisty Bengali economist the late Ashok Rudra, he convened discussions for the Social Science Research Council of New York (SSRC), on the theme of 'Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia'. A book of fine essays, with this title (hereafter *APAP*), based on these discussions, edited by Desai, Rudolph and Rudra, and with contributions by all three of them, together with Donald Attwood (an anthropologist), David Ludden and B.B. Chaudhuri (historians), Ronald Herring and Lloyd Rudolph (political scientists), and the economist the late Sukhamoy Chakravarti, was published in 1984. My purpose in this essay is to explain the context of the work contained in the book, and its significance, and then to reflect upon it in the light of the changed circumstances of the present, after almost thirty years in which India has generally experienced higher rates of economic growth than before, and in which agriculture now accounts for less than 20 per cent of GDP (though, significantly, still for around 50 per cent of all employment).

APAP was the most notable outcome of the initiative taken in the later 1970s by the South Asia Committee of the SSRC to launch work on the political economy of South Asia. As Susanne Rudolph explained in her introduction to *APAP* the working groups on South Asia that were established at that time differed significantly from those that the SSRC had set up before, in the 1960s, to study problems of development. Those earlier groups had been dominated by American political scientists working broadly within the frame of modernization theory and with structural-functional or behavioural perspectives. The South Asia groups, on the other hand, included numbers of

scholars from South Asia, and from the United Kingdom and Canada as well as the United States, and from different disciplines. They also ‘questioned the extent to which the historical sequences, value premises and social forms that dominated development in the West [the processes of ‘modernization’ as it was then understood] were relevant or desirable for Third World countries’; and, unlike those who preceded them, they were expressly concerned with ‘how economic power and exploitation affected development’ (both quotes Rudolph, 1984, p. 1 – the category ‘Third World’ was still current, and defensible, at the time). Rudolph also noted that the South Asia scholars ‘focused on the need to delineate an approach from “within” to South Asian political economy’. They thought that ‘[t]he conceptual assumptions of neoclassical economics, in particular have been exceptionally immune to evidence of social and temporal variation’, and so their idea was to create a research alliance across the social science disciplines, in an effort ‘to approximate a more contextual understanding of economic processes’. They also sought to ‘find scholars who recognized that political economy was known and practiced by John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx as well as Adam Smith’ (all quotes Rudolph, 1984, p. 2). Given the catholicity of Meghnad’s mind and interests, and his immersion in Marxian theory, we may imagine him as a young scholar ready to engage very enthusiastically with the work of the group (it was labeled ‘SAPE 1’ – South Asia Political Economy Project 1) concerned with agrarian power and agricultural productivity – though perhaps to the discomfiture of some of his colleagues in the Department of Economics at LSE who were less inclined to acknowledge the contributions of Marx, or indeed of Mill, to their discipline. His commitment to this interdisciplinary enterprise seems to have presaged Meghnad’s taking over of the leadership, a decade later, of the LSE’s venture of establishing the interdisciplinary Development Studies Institute (now the Department of International Development), which has remained committed to just the sort of approach exemplified by SAPE 1.

APAP in its time: the context

India’s agricultural economy, outside some pockets of commercial farming, had stagnated throughout the latter part of the colonial period in the first half of the twentieth century, and productivity was much lower than elsewhere in Asia. The London *Economist*, in its issue of 16 August 1947, at the time of India’s independence, expressed the hope that ‘the energy of the new governments [of both India and Pakistan] will be concentrated without delay on the fundamental question of increasing agricultural production’ (cited by Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, p. 10). As it turned out, however, relatively

little attention was paid to agriculture by the planners of India's economic development until, twenty years after 1947, problems of food supply brought it to the forefront of their concerns. Some leading members of the Congress, the great political movement, now political party, that was the spearhead of India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule, had for long recognized the problem of agrarian class relations in India. At the heart of the problem, in their view, was landlordism – the concentration of economic power in the rural economy in the hands of a small number of very large landholders, usually absentees, who held sway over what was often a hierarchy of tenants with varying degrees of security of tenure – and the highly unequal distribution of landholdings, which meant that very many were uneconomic. The whole made for what Daniel Thorner, a fugitive in India from McCarthyism in his native United States, only a little later described as '[the] complex of legal, economic and social relations uniquely typical of the Indian countryside [that] served to produce an effect which I should like to call that of a built-in "depressor"' (Thorner, 1956, p. 16). With this term he referred to agrarian production relations that made it paying for landlords to live by appropriating rents, usurious interest and speculative trading profits from the impoverished mass of the peasantry – and thereby limited the possibilities of productivity-raising investment in technical change. The landlords had no incentive to invest; the impoverished peasant masses were left with no means of investment.

It was these conditions that the *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* of 1949 sought to change, through radical reform and the establishment of a pattern of village-based cooperative farming. Such ideas continued to be debated through the 1950s and they were put forward again in the 'Resolution on Agricultural Organisational Pattern' that was moved before the annual meeting of the Congress held in Nagpur in 1959. Meghnad Desai himself has argued that the defeat of this Resolution, thanks to the campaigning against it organized by Charan Singh, leader of rich peasants from Uttar Pradesh (and later, briefly, Prime Minister of India in 1979–80), finally marked the failure of the Nehruvian state to resolve India's 'agrarian question', and that this in turn substantially helps to account for the relative failure of planned economic development in the country. The final version of the India's First Five Year Plan (1951–6) did endorse the main recommendations of the Agrarian Reforms Committee, whilst stopping short of a generalized attack on private property, and legislation enacted in various major states between 1950 and 1954 did bring about a major change in the pattern of land ownership across large parts of the country, through the abolition of intermediary rights and tenures (that had been controlled by the tax-farming *zamindars*). But neither these reforms, nor subsequent legislation that was supposed to bring about redistributive land reform, brought about the end of 'landlordism'. In practice it was the larger occupancy tenants – a class of rich peasants – who benefited most from *zamindari* abolition and who increased their political

power (already established within the Congress in the 1930s) and were able to undermine and frustrate further attempts at agrarian reform (as at Nagpur in 1959). Thorner's 'depressor' remained in place.

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

Although the 'green revolution' had both a positive impact on the productivity of Indian food grains agriculture and ultimately a positive impact on poverty, through increased employment and a tightening of rural labour markets – reflected in increasing real wages in agriculture in the 1980s – and especially through lower food prices (Lipton with Longhurst, 1989), the principal beneficiaries were again the rich peasants who were in the best position to take advantage of the new technology. As was said at the time, though the technology of the green revolution was technically scale neutral, it was not 'resource neutral'. Thus it was that Indian scholars, stimulated at first by Ashok Rudra, began to debate the development of capitalist agriculture and the differentiation of the peasantry (along the lines laid out by Lenin with regard to Russia in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin, 1899), on which Meghnad commented in his collection of *Lenin's Economic Writings* (Desai, 1989)). At the same time, however, others – notably Amit Bhaduri – developed ideas about agrarian relations comparable with those of Daniel Thorner, into a more rigorous theory of 'semi-feudalism' (Bhaduri, 1973), providing a stronger theoretical basis for the idea that agrarian power relations blocked the transition to more productive capitalist agriculture. Meanwhile Krishna Bharadwaj in her work on production conditions in Indian agriculture (Bharadwaj, 1974) advanced ideas about what she referred to as the 'compulsive involvement in markets' (Meghnad has always argued with me that it should be 'compulsory involvement') of the mass of smallholding peasant producers in India. With this term she spoke of 'the category of the economically very weak sections of the

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

This, then, was the historical conjuncture and the intellectual context in which Desai and others of the SSRC’s SAPE 1 began in the later 1970s to discuss agrarian power and agricultural productivity. As Susanne Rudolph says in her introduction to *APAP*, ‘The central problematic ... was how local power structures impinge upon levels of and changes in agricultural production or productivity. The focus on local agrarian structures quickly expanded to suggest the relevance of translocal forces as well. But the question remained, do some [local] power relations obstruct productivity? Do others facilitate it?’ (Rudolph, 1984, p. 12). The group was concerned with such questions as that of the persistence or not, in the context of the increasing commodification of Indian agriculture and the possible or actual development of agrarian capitalism, of the production relations described by Thorner as ‘the depressor’ and theorized by Bhaduri as ‘semi-feudalism’. In other words, did the particular concentration of economic power in the South Asian countryside, reflected especially in inequalities in landholding, still constrain the development of agricultural productivity, or not? In the context of ‘green revolution’ did the historically often-observed inverse relationship between farm size and productivity – perhaps resulting in part at least from the ‘compulsive involvement’ in markets of small producers – still hold, or not? How did agrarian power structures vary across the region, with what consequences, and how were they changing?

***APAP*: arguments and their significance**

APAP is an enormously rich book, its content ranging from Meghnad’s own paper, concerned as he says, with the refinement of concepts, and which presents a model of an agrarian economy focusing on struggles for shares in the economic surplus, to B.B. Chaudhuri’s overview of his own and others’ historical research on ‘Rural power structure and agrarian productivity in Eastern India, 1757–1947’ and to Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph’s first

formulation of their idea of ‘bullock capitalists’ in their essay on ‘Determinants and Varieties of Agrarian Mobilization’. For me, however, two themes, or sets of arguments, stand out. The first has to do with theory and methodology. The collection as a whole emphasizes the importance of locality (whilst not neglecting the importance of translocal influences), and in doing so it brings out the importance of specific histories. As Meghnad wrote ‘given the uneven regional development of different parts of South Asia, a production of ecological and historical forces, it is incorrect to put a single label on the entire subcontinent’ and ‘when it comes to analyzing local situations, sufficient attention has to be paid to the historical background’ (Desai, 1984, p. 176). This is an unexceptionable sort of statement, but should be read with reference to the context of the literature of that moment: many of the contributions to what was called at the time ‘the mode of production debate’, concerned with the development of capitalism, or not, in Indian agriculture, were marked by a formulaic, generalized history (Harriss, 1980). *APAP* as a whole, in contrast, shows the unevenness of the commercialization of agriculture across different regions of India, the acute difficulties of generalization and the bluntness of universalizing theory. Marxist theory was not spared, but the authors addressed, notably, the limitations of neo-classical economics. *APAP* demonstrates (especially in the papers by Rudra and Chakravarti) the persistent empirical divergence from neo-classical assumptions: ‘the absence of a competitive labour market, the absence of free contractual labour, differential prices to big and small farmers, and fragmented credit markets’ (Rudolph, 1984, p. 8). Of course, mainstream economists have done a great deal of work over the last twenty five years to take account of and to explain these ‘divergences’, but the recognition of the importance of history that the authors involved in *APAP* advocated has generally become much more established since the time they wrote. Two economists, Kenny and Williams have, for example, reviewed developments in economic growth theory, and in the empirical understanding of economic growth, and concluded that ‘more energy should be directed toward understanding the complex and varied inner workings of actual economies rather than trying to assimilate them into abstract universal models’ (Kenny and Williams, 2001, p. 16) – implying the value of substantive historical analysis (or, as they say ‘historically-situated interpretations of the growth experience’ (Kenny and Williams, 2001, p. 13)). More recently Woolcock, Szreter and Rao (the first and third of whom are from the World Bank) have argued forcefully for taking history seriously in regard to thinking about development policy. As they have said, the recognition of the importance of institutions in so much recent research in economics – though it was also exactly the subject of *APAP* – ‘has led inexorably to the conclusion that “history matters”, since institutions clearly form and evolve over time’ (Woolcock, Szreter and Rao, 2011, p. 70). So in significant ways *APAP* was ahead of its time. Contributors I think shared the view expressed

by Susanne Rudolph that while the development of common frameworks was much to be desired, the impulse to generalize should be resisted (1984, p. 17). This is a mantra that has been taken seriously in the best work by institutional economists – by those who do take history seriously (Hodgson, 2001).

The second important set of arguments is that which provides substantive answers to the central problematic that *APAP* addresses. Against the powerful argument that “‘semi-feudal’ configurations [or “the depressor”] block the transition to a technically progressive capitalist agriculture’ – an idea that was taken very seriously at the time by the Planning Commission’s *Task Force on Agrarian Relations* – the central finding of *APAP* was that ‘the relationship between power structures and productivity [is] highly variable’ (Rudolph, 1984, p. 12–13). Chakravarti, Chaudhury and Herring (the latter in what is perhaps the most significant single contribution in the book) all advanced empirical evidence refuting the semi-feudal thesis. Herring summed up his own review of evidence and argument, saying that:

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

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

Generally, the argument of the book was that the association between power and productivity is shaped by variations in regional and ecological circumstances; and it was concluded (at least by Susanne Rudolph) that ‘the case for altering the power structure has to rest mainly on political and equity grounds [not on grounds of its contribution to agricultural growth]’ (Rudolph, 1984, p. 15). Herring argued, perhaps even more provocatively, that

‘in a modernising agricultural sector, land control becomes less determinative of both political and economic power’ (Herring, 1984, p. 203). These are arguments that I want to consider further in the context of what has been happening more recently in Indian agriculture.

APAP reconsidered

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

It is extremely difficult, indeed, given the considerable variance in the performance of the agricultural economy from year to year – due to the highly uncertain climatic conditions characteristic of most of India – to draw clear-cut conclusions about growth trends, and much depends of course on which years or groups of years are taken for comparison over time. Still, there is no doubt about the fact that the growth of agriculture has lagged behind that of the rest of the economy. That this has been particularly marked in the period of high overall growth after 2003 was recognized both by the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, in speeches made in June 2010 (see *The Hindu*, 18 June and 20 June 2010). Both regretted that agriculture had been growing at a rate of only about 2 per cent per annum, as against the target of 4 per cent per annum set in the Eleventh Plan, and both spoke of the need to raise the growth rate. The estimates made by Bhalla and Singh (Bhalla and Singh, 2009) of the annual compound growth rate of value of agricultural output show this as having increased at the rate of 3.37 per cent per annum in 1990–3 over 1980–3, but at only 1.74 per cent in 2003–06 over 1990–3. Panagariya (Panagariya, 2008) has more bullish estimates but still shows the agricultural growth rate in 2000–2006 as having been lower than in the period 1951–65. The noted agricultural economist A. Vaidyanathan argues, however, that ‘[r]igorous statistical tests on official time series do not provide strong corroboration of a progressive deceleration of agricultural growth’ (Vaidyanathan, 2006, p. 4011). But he points out as well that these data also show that the average of annual changes in total output, area and yields are lower, and much more volatile, over the fifteen years after 1989

than they were in the preceding period of twenty years. The problems of the agricultural economy over the recent past are strongly attested, quite apart from the evidence that is found in the apparently increased incidence of suicides amongst farmers (for a qualified view of which see Gruere and Sengupta, 2011).

What seems to have happened is that the productivity gains of the green revolution were pretty much exhausted before the end of the 1980s, with yield levels having reached a plateau, while the costs of cultivation continued to climb. This was, in part, because of the necessity for farmers to use increasing amounts of increasingly costly and increasingly ineffective plant protection chemicals, and fertilizers, while in major areas of agriculture dependent upon groundwater irrigation rapidly retreating water tables also increased the costs of cultivation (Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004). Public investment in agricultural infrastructure and research had declined (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010), and alongside it, private investments as well (they have generally gone in tandem with public investments). Neither the earlier mode of state intervention in agriculture, however, nor the more recent liberalization policies, effectively addresses fundamental problems having to do with the inefficient and often wasteful use of agricultural resources – including the failure to use irrigation water efficiently, partly because of neglect of the maintenance of irrigation structures and limitations of their design; excessive use of chemical fertilizers; and degradation of soils. There is a long history of poor use of key agricultural resources in India, by comparison with China and elsewhere in East Asia. This was a theme developed years ago by Myrdal in his monumental *Asian Drama* (Myrdal, 1968). In the early 1950s, Myrdal showed, the overall productivity of agriculture (in relation to land) was roughly twice as high in China as in India – and it remains so still. In 1999–2000 yields of rice per hectare in China stood at 4.1 tonnes, while in India they were just under 2 tonnes (and still only 2.1 tonnes in 2009–10). The problems of agricultural productivity are connected with institutional weaknesses, as in irrigation management – which is also generally much more efficient in East Asia – and in credit and marketing organization, that are in turn compounded ‘by government policies for [subsidized] pricing of water, electricity, fertilizers and credit which induce demand growth far in excess of available supplies ... and encourage inefficient use of scarce agricultural resources’ (Vaidyanathan, 2006, p. 4013, see also Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004). And, it should be added, disproportionately benefit wealthier farmers in richer states such as Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. Tackling such problems calls for more than just increasing public investment (see also Vaidyanathan, 2010, chapters 4 and 5).

How important, then, is agrarian power now, in accounting for the problems of agricultural productivity? How has the agrarian structure of India changed over the last quarter-century since the publication of *APAP*? A starting point in

answering these questions is in the following three (interlocking) propositions (after Harriss, 2010, p. 144–7):

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

Some of those who contributed to the ‘mode of production’ debate of the 1970s thought that the differentiation of peasant classes – towards the establishment of an agrarian capitalist class and a substantial rural proletariat – was proceeding apace, but with the advantage of hindsight it is clear that Byres’ argument that what was taking place was rather ‘partial proletarianization’, with small and marginal producers continuing to reproduce themselves, was substantially correct (Byres, 1981). The Indian agricultural economy is still characterized by extensive small-scale, household-based production. The distribution both of ownership and of operational holdings is distinctly pear-shaped, and what are described as ‘marginal’ operated holdings (of one hectare, or less, in extent) now account for 70 per cent of the total. Most such holdings are unlikely to be capable of ‘providing enough work or income to be the main livelihood of the household’ (Hazell, Poulton, Wiggins and Dorward, 2007, p. 1). The point is proven in findings of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies from village surveys in Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra that it was virtually impossible in 2005–06 for households with operational holdings of two hectares of land or less (who account for all but a small share of all the cultivators in the country), to earn an income sufficient for family survival. The net annual incomes from crop production of very many households were actually negative (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). Household reproduction takes place now as a result of migration (both rural-urban and rural-rural, and short-term and long-term), of the remittances associated with it, and of increasing employment outside agriculture but still within the rural economy (though the levels of such employment have not grown very strongly in the recent past, and much of it probably is driven by distress). Some estimates suggest that there may be as many as 100 million migrant workers in the country, though a more reliable estimate from the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector is that the number of seasonal migrants is of the order of 30 million. As Bernstein has argued, more generally, the dominance of capital today is no longer expressed in ‘classic’ capital-labour relations. There are, he suggests, ‘classes of labour’ pursuing their reproduction ‘through insecure and oppressive – and typically increasingly insecure – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure

“informal sector” (“survival”) activity, including farming’ (Bernstein 2008, cited by Lerche, 2010, p. 65).

The differentiation and polarization of peasant classes has, therefore, nearly frozen. Estimations made by Vikas Rawal (Rawal, 2008), using data from the 59th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) for 2003–4 show that 31 per cent of rural households across the country as a whole own no land at all, and another 30 per cent own less than 0.4 hectare (or about one acre of land), while only a little over 5 per cent of households own more than three hectares (and just 0.52 per cent own more than ten). Still, the absolute numbers and the relative share in the rural population of households without land – which have for long been considerable – have been increasing, so differentiation has not quite frozen. The data from 2003–04 are not strictly comparable with those from an earlier round of the NSS, for 1992, but Rawal suggests that they show an increase of as much as six percentage points in landlessness, while inequality in land ownership also increased. Over most of the country, however, ‘landlordism’, as I defined it earlier, has unquestionably declined. The share of leased-in land in the total operated area, according to the NSS, declined from only 10.7 per cent in 1960–61 to just 6.5 per cent in the *kharif* (summer) season of 2002–03. Traces of classic landlordism remain, however. The dependence of very many in the rural economy upon borrowing money at usurious rates of interest has almost certainly increased again in recent years, as a result of financial liberalization (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010), and those who are able to secure surplus product can still make speculative trading profits. Inequality in land ownership still gives considerable power locally – economic, social and political – to the relatively small numbers of larger landowners and the increasing numbers of capitalist farmers. How, then, can I argue that ‘land is no longer so important as the basis of status and power’?

The proposition should certainly not be overestimated, but there is now a strong tendency for rural power-holders to invest outside agriculture, and in education, sometimes so as to secure employment in the public sector (see, for example Rutten, 1995 on the former, and Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008, on the latter). In other cases, as the profitability of agriculture has declined, or as a result of the ways in which members of landowning higher castes have sought to secure their continuing status distinction, there has been a tendency for them to move out of agriculture (Mayer, 1996 and Harriss, 2006 on the former and Gidwani, 2000 on the latter). Alongside these developments has come about the emergence of a new and very different generation of local leaders, as Krishna (Krishna, 2003) has explained with regard to rural Rajasthan, from amongst the educated but often unemployed younger men, including some from a *dalit* background. The class power of rich farmers coming mainly from upper-middle castes appears to have declined significantly since the Rudolphs wrote about it (using their terminology of ‘bullock capitalists’) in *APAP*. ‘Farmers movements’ that strongly represented the interests of the most intensively

commercialized producers became a major factor in Indian politics in the 1980s (Brass, ed., 1995), but have declined substantially since the early 1990s. The fact that they are so divided, notably over reactions to the globalization of the Indian economy – supported by the Shetkari Sanghatana, one of the biggest farmers’ organizations, and vehemently opposed by others, especially by the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), which has been a darling of the anti-globalization movement internationally – does not help their case.

Jonathan Pattenden, from a village study of the KRRS, has shown that all the conditions that had been conducive to KRRS mobilizations in the 1980s started to break down by the middle of the 1990s. The intensification of commercial agriculture had created circumstances that provided for cross-class mobilization, and the burying of caste and class differences, for the time-being, by conflict between the peasantry generally, and the local state and merchants. At the same time the profitability of agriculture made available resources – notably of time, for richer peasants – for engaging in mobilization activity. The decline in the profitability of agriculture changed all of this. Non-agricultural activities and incomes became much more important and those more influential people who had been the local leaders of the KRRS became interested rather in ‘gatekeeping activities’ – roles in which they mediate between other people and the state, and are able to use these roles to secure resources for themselves (for example, from the allocation of ration cards). The significance of such roles – and the opportunities opened up by them – have been enhanced by political decentralization through *panchayati raj* and increasing political competition. In sum: ‘[t]he sense of togetherness that had accompanied the KRRS’s rise had been replaced by a growing social fragmentation with people “looking after themselves”’ (Pattenden, 2005, p. 1982). I would add that this account of changes that have taken place in rural Karnataka substantiates my point that land in itself is no longer so much the basis of power and status.

The collective class power of the rich peasantry/big farmers of India has diminished over the last two decades, therefore, while the ties of dependence upon them of poorer people, usually from lower castes, have unquestionably been weakened. Empirical examples of this come from village studies in the very diverse settings of Tamil Nadu, where *Dalit* labourers are no longer dependent in the way they were thirty years ago on the dominant landowners, and real wages for agricultural labour have at last broken through long-running stasis (Harriss *et al.*, 2010), and Bihar. In the latter case Singh concludes from his village study that: ‘[t]he importance of land as a factor of livelihood and dominance is decreasing and other factors of production are becoming more important ... more and more people are losing interest in village affairs. The urge to dominate over the lower castes always had a political-economic angle, and once the locus of the economy has partially shifted away from the village, the tendency to dominate is beginning to wither away’ (Singh, 2005, p. 3173). Reports of the local impact of what is now called the Mahatma Gandhi

National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, that gives rural people the right to up to 100 days of employment in public works, further underline these points. Even if a significant share of the public resources devoted to the scheme are diverted through corruption, the fact of the right to and of the availability of such employment contributes significantly to the countervailing power of labour, and can push up rural wages (e.g., Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj, 2010). In some cases this may have a negative impact, of course, on agricultural production and productivity because it can lead farmers to take land out of cultivation. Still, it is quite clear that local agrarian power is not what it was at the time when Meghnad and his colleagues of SAPE 1 met to discuss and to write about agrarian power and agricultural productivity.

But there is still a link between agrarian power, much modified though it now is, as a result of the changes that have taken place in India's economy, polity and society, and agricultural productivity. The fundamental problems, across the country as a whole, of the wasteful and inefficient use of agricultural resources, that I referred to earlier, do substantially reflect the continuing political weight of the 'farm lobby', diminished though it may be. Successive governments, nationally and at state level, have continued to find it extremely difficult to reduce the burden of subsidies that, as Vaidyanathan put (Vaidyanathan, 2006), 'encourage inefficient use of scarce agricultural resources'. Those who are locally powerful continue to manipulate, for example, the use of irrigation water, and the management of irrigation structures in ways that are wasteful and inefficient. The paradox (as it seems) that agrarian power undermines agricultural productivity remains, in this way, as powerful as ever it was.

Is there, then, still a case for redistributive land reform? The major left parties, the most important of them being the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), and the (now banned) Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)), all continue to advocate the case for such 'land to the tiller' reforms. The CPI(M) argues in its current programme that the first task of a People's Democratic government in regard to agriculture remains to '[a]bolish landlordism by implementing radical land reforms and give land free of cost to the agricultural labourers and poor peasants'. The CPI(Maoist) – hostile to the CPI(M) though it is – argues in its *Party Programme* that the 'principal contradiction' in India remains that 'between feudalism and the broad masses of the people'. The central class contradiction in India, that must be resolved in order to bring about progressive social change, beneficial to the majority, is that between landlords and the mass of the peasantry. In support of this argument the *Programme* advances the following:

Despite the hoax of all land reforms, 30% of the total land is concentrated in the hands of landlords, who constitute only 5% of the population, while middle peasantry constitute about 20% of the rural population, whereas rich peasantry constitutes 10%. 65% of the total peasantry are landless and poor peasants, who own either no land at all or meager land. Extreme forms of semi-feudal

exploitation are still prevalent in the countryside. The major prevailing forms of such exploitation are extortion of their produce through share-cropping, which is robbing them of their produce up to 50%, bonded labour, usurious and merchant capital and other forms of extra-economic coercion.

Consequently one of the primary tasks of the new people's democratic state, to be established by revolution, will be to 'confiscate all land belonging to the landlords and religious institutions and [to] redistribute it among the landless poor peasants and agricultural labourers on the slogan of "land to the tillers"'.

Vikas Rawal, from his study of household level data from the 48th and 59th rounds (Rawal, 1992 and 2003–04) of the National Sample Survey, on landholdings – and whose calculations, cited above, on the distribution of ownership holdings, lend support to some of the figures given by the CPI(Maoist) – provides a careful argument to show that there is still a potential for redistribution, even after decades in which there has been an enormous amount of subdivision of holdings (as Geof Wood has described from Bihar, personal communication). Rawal provides 'ballpark estimates', on the basis of the admittedly crude assumption of a uniform ceiling on ownership holdings of twenty acres, to show that 'there is about 15 million acres of ceiling surplus land in India'. As he goes on to say 'this is more than three times the total amount of land that has ever been redistributed under land reform programmes in all states' (Rawal, 2008, p. 47). This is not to say that there is a large potential for redistribution, given the fact that only a very small proportion of agricultural land in India has been redistributed hitherto, but still, it goes to lend weight to Michael Lipton's conclusion in his recent comprehensive restatement of the case for land reform, that '*in South Asia*, still containing half the world's poor, 10 ha is in most countries a large owned farm [and] *there is scope for some further land reform*, but land shortage and growing [though still, surely, seriously inadequate – JH] non-farm work opportunities may largely limit it to creating tiny "home-gardens" for increasingly part-time rural farmers' (Lipton, 2009, p. 9, emphasis added).

Case there may be, for continuing to press for redistributive land reform, but there is little sign of political mobilization to make claims for it, even on the part of the CPI(M) which has been responsible for such success as there has been in India in bringing about reform, in its two bastions of Kerala and West Bengal. And now the CPI(Maoist), whilst it continues to hold to the programmatic statements cited earlier, appears in practice to have shifted its focus to struggles over the dispossession of especially tribal people in Central India, to make way for infrastructural, industrial and mining projects (Harriss, 2011). Susanne Rudolph's conclusion in *APAP* that 'the case for altering the power structure [presumably, through land reform, JH] has to rest mainly on political and equity grounds' might actually be amended, because land reform would contribute to weakening the influence of the 'farm lobby' that is partly responsible for the persistence of conditions in India that undermine

agricultural productivity. There is no indication, however, that the case has any real political traction. Agrarian power will finally be reduced rather by the development of the non-agricultural economy, by the opening up of more employment opportunities outside agriculture (the lack of which is the great limitation of India's remarkable economic growth of recent years), and by the deepening of substantive democracy as decentralized democratic institutions become more powerful.

Times have changed since *APAP* was written, on the cusp of major transformations in the Indian economy, which it did not – of course, and understandably – anticipate. But still, its assessments of the trends in the agricultural economy at the time it was written, and of changes in agrarian relations, were in many ways remarkably prescient.

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