

# Class Relations in Indian Agriculture—III

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*The author, in the course of this article, develops and presents a thesis regarding the class composition of the Indian agricultural population. The thesis is that there are only two classes in Indian agriculture, one of which is termed 'the class of big landowners' and the other 'the class of agricultural labourers'. These two classes are in antagonistic contradiction with each other, and this contradiction constitutes the principal contradiction in our rural society.*

*The thesis implies rejection of the commonly accepted class differentiation in terms of agricultural labourers, poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, landlords, etc. While recognising that this scheme is sanctified because of its formulation and application by Lenin and Mao Tse-tung, the author argues that the scheme is not helpful when it comes to Indian conditions. By 'helpful' is meant helpful from the point of view of practice. In this, the author's idea is the fundamental Marxist thought that the only test of the correctness of theories and the usefulness of concepts lies in their application in practice.*

*The article is being published in three parts. In the first and second parts, already published, the author discussed the concept of the mode of production and certain features of capitalist and feudal relations. This, the concluding part of the paper, presents the author's views on the ruling class in Indian agriculture.*

## IV

### The Ruling Class in Indian Agriculture

IN the endless and inconclusive debate that has taken place in the country about the mode of production in Indian agriculture, the focus has been on the same to be given to an assumed single mode of production. Questions of class structure, class contradictions, and the ruling class, cannot but be involved in any discussion concerning the mode of production, yet they have not received consistent and concentrated attention in these discussions. As such, even those who have taken strong and definite positions on the question of the mode have left many important questions of relations between classes unanswered, or even unasked. It is on the question of what constitutes the ruling class in Indian agriculture and its relations with other classes that we shall concentrate in this Part.

For example, let us consider those who would take a straightforward position that Indian agriculture is a capitalist economy. Thus, consider the position taken in the following words:

"With such a vast class of farm labourers, which consists of the largest class in Indian agriculture, it appears difficult to hold that the Indian agricultural labourer is not an agricultural proletarian, a prototype of the agricultural proletariat in 19th century England, France, Germany, or Russia. Whatever differences may exist in the forms of their payment and their attachment to their employers, it cannot be denied that their basic relationship towards their employer is that of a wage worker. And this relationship alone is crucial and decisive for the

characterisation of Indian agriculture as a capitalist economy." [1]

The above viewpoint obviously implies that, in Indian agriculture, there is a class of capitalists and another class of wage workers. It also implies that the capitalists constitute the ruling class. It, however, leaves open the question of the existence of classes other than capitalists and wage workers. For instance, it says nothing about the existence or otherwise of class of feudal landlords nor about the nature of contradictions, if any, between the capitalist class and this feudal class. Similarly, it says nothing about the existence or otherwise of a class of middle peasants and its relations of contradiction with other classes.

The same is true of the thesis of the mode of production being semi-feudal. This theory, in its particular form as expounded say in [2] has it that the ruling class is a class of landlords, who combine leasing out of land with usury, and whose economic and power interests make them prevent productive investments in land either by themselves or by those subject to their exploitation. This theory does not explicitly rule out the emergence of capitalist tendencies among certain farmers; but, in case of such emergence, the theory implies an antagonistic contradiction between this class of semi-feudal landlords and the farmers revealing such capitalistic tendencies, whether or not the latter constitutes a class of capitalist farmers. The theory, however, says nothing about the class character of those farmers who are neither tenants nor landlords but who cultivate land with family labour. Such farmers, however, do exist in large numbers,

There are others who emphasise the emergence of generalised commodity production in Indian agriculture. They point out that it took place under some "highly specific conditions of stagnation under colonial exploitation" and as a result acquired certain characteristic deformations. Thus, two such deformations mentioned are:

(a) "the colonial economy is internally disarticulated and the circuit commodity exchange is completed not via the imperial centre;" and

(b) "the surplus value is realised and through metropolitan capital accumulation." [4]

Some of them further point at various pre-capitalist constraints of ruling on the labourers to make the unfree sellers of labour power; and therefore conclude that their exploitation cannot be characterized as capitalist exploitation. (See in this regard our discussions about various kinds of unfree labour and the significance of its lack of freedom in Section III.) So of these scholars hold that the import of colonialism on Indian agriculture has been of such a magnitude a significance that the mode of production prevailing in it cannot be understood in terms of the standard categories of feudalism and capitalism; but call for the conceptualisation of new mode; and they have proposed nomenclature "colonial mode of production" for such a new mode. This approach opens up the question of ruling class in agriculture all the more widely as, by its tenets, it rules either a capitalist ruling class or feudal ruling class.

As we explained in Part I, we believe that what is important is

the point of view of practice is the identification and characteristics of the ruling class and location of the principal contradiction in our agriculture.<sup>1</sup> It is in this task that our arguments of this Part are oriented. Of course, we can do no more than present just a sketch of an answer to the problem posed above. To deal fully with the problems of identification of the classes and analysis of their contradictions—principal and subsidiary—would call for a much greater amount of work than is behind this article.

#### CLASS OF THE LANDOWNERS

We would venture to argue that, in peasant agriculture, it is not possible to locate any contradictions between two landowners who may reveal many capitalist features and those others who may operate along broadly feudal lines. As such, it is not possible to speak in terms of two different classes in our agriculture—one with a capitalist orientation and the other feudal orientation.<sup>2</sup> There are of course individual farmers who operate in any respects like capitalists; e.g., many some or all of the criteria set out by us in Section II. There are others who operate in many respects like feudal landowners. But they do not have any contradictions between them.

Further, it would be misleading in our view to try to demarcate one section of farmers to be called 'landlords' and another section to be called 'rich peasants'. As is known, in the classical analysis, landlords are defined as those who do not themselves work on land or either lease out their land totally or cultivate it exclusively with hired labourers. Rich peasants, on the other hand, are those who actively participate in cultivation but depend primarily on hired labourers. This distinction under peasant conditions does not carry the significance it carried in Lenin's Russia, or Mao Tse-tung's China. In India, because of the caste factor, participation or non-participation in cultivation is of a different significance. Thus, even very small and impoverished landholders belonging to the upper castes would not participate in cultivation, if depend on tenants or labourers. On the other hand, with the introduction of mechanisation, even operators of very large farms in some parts of India sometimes participate physically in cultivation. (In certain areas of Punjab, too, the women members of families owning several hundreds of acres of land drive their own tractors.) There

is no contradiction between big farmers who participate to some extent in actual cultivation and those who do not. On the other hand, it would not make sense to combine together in the same class an owner of 2 acres of land who does not cultivate land himself and another owner of 200 acres who cultivates with the help of a large force of workers.

There would also be no analytical advantage in trying to distinguish between lessors of land and lessees of land (landlords and tenants) as two different classes. Under Indian conditions there are not many pure landowners; most middle or big-sized farms are part-owners and part-tenants. And many studies have established that such part-tenants do not suffer any disadvantages but actually enjoy certain advantages from the part-tenancy.

We may clarify that we are talking of two different kinds of non-contradictory co-existence. The first is the co-existence of some traits typical of capitalists and some other traits typical of feudal landowners in the same farmer. The second is the co-existence of different farmers with different combinations of such traits in the same region, or in the same village, or even in the same family with no contradictions among them.

Coming to occupations, we may recognise the following different exploitative activities made possible by the economic power derived from land ownership: (a) cultivation with the help of hired labourers; (b) leasing out of land to tenants; (c) usury; (d) trading in grains and other commodities; and (e) investments in various kinds of productive as well as unproductive activities in industries and services related to agriculture and the rural society, e.g. milling, husking, oil crushing, sugarcane crushing, dairy farming, transportation, organising and funding of local religious, cultural and political organisations, etc. In the matter of these occupations, too, there are the same two kinds of non-contradictory co-existence. Thus, the same person may pursue any two or more of the above occupations; and different persons with different combination of occupations may co-exist without any contradictions among them in the same region, in the same village society, or even in the same family.<sup>3</sup>

While these different occupation holders do not have any contradictions among themselves, all of them together

have serious contradiction of interests with the vast majority of the agricultural population. The vast majority of the agricultural population is the subject of exploitation by these people, in the sense that the surplus value generated by that section of the population gets appropriated by these people through the channels of wage labour employment, tenancy, usury and trade. As such, we venture to put forward the hypothesis that the exploiters in these different activities constitute a single class. It would be analytically meaningless and create difficulties for practice to try to demarcate one section of this class as 'capitalist' (or semi-capitalist) and another section as 'feudal' (or semi-feudal). This class is a single class with some unevenly developed characteristics of capitalist relations and some unevenly decaying pervasive persistence of various traits of feudal relations. It is a hybrid class: part feudal, part capitalist.

We shall tentatively call this class the 'class of big landowners', in recognition of the fact that the economic basis of their capacity to exploit is provided by land-ownership.<sup>4</sup> It does not really matter what name is given to this class as long as one takes care not to confuse the fact that it is neither capitalist nor feudal.<sup>5</sup> What is more important, there is no means of weighing the set of capitalist features revealed by this class against the set of its feudal features and deciding which set dominates. Also, we deny that there is any means of establishing the set of capitalist features are increasingly replacing the feudalistic ones or not. We shall explain ourselves on these two important points below.

The capitalist traits which may be discovered in many (but certainly not in all) of the members of this class are concerned with the pursuit of profit through productive investments. These investments may take the form of direct investment in land and machinery and technological inputs or production loans to tenants for enabling them to go in for improved methods of cultivation. The feudal traits are of two kinds. The first kind relates to the utilisation of the surplus for non-productive purposes: investment of capital in such unproductive channels as speculative trade and usury and the funding of local religious, cultural, or political organisations. The second kind resides in the generation of surplus in different processes of exploitation of labour that

is not free. Arguments and evidence have been advanced in [5] which we believe decisively reject the idea that big landowners as a whole refrain from making productive investments. That different extra-economic constraints operate on the owners of labour power will perhaps not be denied by many.

In our understanding, these two sets of traits, capitalistic and feudalistic, mentioned above, are such as not to be comparable or exclusive. The volume of investment in productive channels can of course be compared with investment in unproductive channels. One may weigh one against the other and decide which is more important. If productive investments have to increase, unproductive investments have to decrease, and vice versa. However, these two channels are not competitive and mutually exclusive, since for a complex of economic, social and political reasons the appropriators of surplus seem to prefer to distribute their investments in different channels, some productive and some unproductive.

There is, however, no means whatsoever of comparing the importance of capitalist traits in the form of productive investments and the feudal traits in the form of exploitation of unfree labour. The lack of freedom of the labourers does not in any way hamper productive investments; as a matter of fact, assured supply of labour at a low wage can be a favourable factor for productive investments; on the other hand, productive investments by themselves do not, in Indian circumstances, lessen the non-economic constraints on labour and make it more free. Labour can become more free only to the extent that the labourers' dependence on the rural rich for subsistence is lessened and their life is freed from the whole complex world of feudal values, traditions and social stratifications. Such freedom cannot result from the scale of productive investments that are taking place in agriculture, given the vast supply of unemployed and underemployed labourers and the crushing strength of the caste and tradition-ridden feudal social values and structures.

Therefore, while the class of big landowners has been making far from negligible volumes of investment with a view to increasing production in agriculture, the volume of investments in unproductive channels by the same class has also remained high. Also, the productive investments have not had

much significant effects on the constraints on labour which is remaining unfree in different degrees. Hence it cannot be said that the class of big owners is passing through a period of transition from a feudal class to a capitalist class. Capitalist relations are emerging but it cannot be said that this is happening at the expense of feudal relations.

It is our thesis that this class of big landowners constitutes the ruling class in our agriculture. As mentioned before, the class includes as members farmers cultivating land with hired labourers, farmers leasing out whole or part of their land to tenants, farmers who lease in land from small owners to enlarge the size of their farming business, farmers participating in cultivation and those not participating, agricultural and professional moneylenders, traders, and people who combine two or more of these occupations in their activities. There is no other class of 'feudal landlords' or 'capitalist landlords' or 'rich farmers' outside and distinguishable from this one class. Also, it requires to be emphasised that this class has got members who have risen from the ranks of the peasantry as well as members who were intermediary landlords before the abolition of Zamindari and also those who were, or still are, absentee landlords. Given this, one cannot say, as has been a staple argument among writers on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Indian agriculture, that there are two alternative paths of capitalist development open to us, one from above and the other from below, the so-called progressive American path and the so-called reactionary Prussian path. As is well known, it is Lenin [6] who originated this idea of two paths; the first path involving the break-up of large estates and capitalist farmers rising from the ranks of peasants; the second path involving the transformation of feudal estates into large capitalist farms.

#### CLASS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

We may now turn to examine the classes that may be recognised in the rest of agricultural population. There should be no difficulty in recognising the existence of the social group of landless labourers. The social group of 'poor peasants', as defined by Lenin and Mao Tse-tung, as possessors of tiny bits of land, whether owned or

lessed in, whose principal source of income is working as labourers for other farmers, pose some problems however. A peculiar characteristic of the agrarian relations in India is the fact that even many small farmers go in for the hiring of labourers to work on their tiny holdings and this is true even of many who themselves work as labourers for wages. As such, possessors of marginal holdings plus working as labourers, do not between them define a homogeneous class under Indian conditions. Any hiring of labour involves exploitation of labour; and therefore small farmers who hire labour will have contradictions with the labourers whom they hire. On the other hand small farmers who do not hire labour, do not have any contradictions with other agricultural labourers. Hence we suggest that landless agricultural labourers and landed labourers with no qualification that they do not hire other labourers to any considerable extent may be treated as belonging to the same class; but farmers who hire other labourers on their farms to a considerable extent, however small, have to be excluded from this class.

It is important to make this reservation, as under Indian conditions a large section of small land-holders indulge in cultivation almost exclusively with the help of hired labourers because of various considerations — including caste and other feudal values and taboos. Such small holders cannot be regarded either as rich peasants or as poor peasants, if one has to go by Lenin's definition of these two classes. They are economically too weak to be treated together with those big land-holders who have to depend on hired labour because their family labour is insufficient for the purposes of their farm. On the other hand, they are exploiters of others' labour and, as we cannot be treated together with those whose principal source of income is their own labour power. Our suggestion is to treat them as not belonging to any class whatsoever.

A standard class concept, which encounters in any class analysis of the peasantry along Marxian lines, is that of the so-called middle peasants. This class is defined as those who will hire out their labour or hire in outside labour. That is, they are neither exploiters of labour nor owners of exploited labour. We suggest that, under Indian conditions, it would be best to look for a social group that will

only the above definition of middle peasants. For one is not likely to encounter many farmers who neither hire labour nor hire out labour. If farmers are arranged in an order according to the proportion of family labour that is hired out, one would find that at the time the hiring out phenomenon is to become insignificant (that is, at the time the proportion of family labour hired out approaches zero), all farmers have become substantial parts of outside labour. That is, by the time peasant families have reached a point when they do not make their living by wholly or partly substituting their labour to exploitation they are themselves become exploiters of the labour of other owners of labour power.

As a way out of the problem, created by the same farmers hiring out family labour and at the same time hiring in family labour, has been suggested is to consider the net effect.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if a farmer hires out part of family labour than hires in outside labour, he is defined as a net seller of labour power; and when the relation is opposite he is a net purchaser of labour power.

Even with this approach, it would be difficult to discover a group of middle peasants as there would not be many with a net labour hiring position would be zero. Our more fundamental reservation about this approach, however, is that social groups so defined will not be considered classes as these groups would include members who shall have exploitative relations with other members of the same group. Netting is an arithmetic operation: members can be netted, by subtracting member with a negative sign from member with a positive sign. But we do not know how a relation of exploitation can be netted.

Thus consider a farmer who hires out for 100 days and hires in for his own farm for 50 days as a landless labourer. By the netting approach, both of them would be netted together. The fact would remain that the first member would be an exploiter of the second; to treat them as members of the same class would deprive the class, so defined, of any sharpness as an instrument of analysis of social contradictions and of resultant social dynamics.

We would now argue that tenancy must be regarded a factor of imperialism from the point of view of class

analysis. As far as better off tenants are concerned, it was seen in the studies [7] and [8] that they are not distinguishable in their economic behaviour from owner cultivators. As a matter of fact, some of the members of the ruling class of our definition would be having a part of their land leased in and therefore would be part-tenants. Poor tenants indeed suffer disadvantages in their economic activities in comparison with owner cultivators. But poor tenants are not much distinguishable from labourers. A poor tenant working under the direction of his landlord, with means of production largely supplied or advanced by the landlord, is not very different in his functions or status from a labourer; the relation between such a landlord and such a tenant can be just as capitalistic as that between an employer and a labourer can be under Indian conditions. By contrast, the absentee landlord's relation with an attached farm servant who looks after his farm, lasting over an indefinitely long period, with unspecified terms and conditions and unlimited duties and obligations, can be rightfully regarded as feudal.<sup>3</sup> Thus, no analytical advantage is to be gained from regarding tenants and non-tenants as classwise different, whether in the poor farmer category or in the rich farmer category. We shall treat poor tenants as belonging to the class of labourers; on the other hand, we shall treat big-sized farmers with some land leased in as belonging to the class of big landowners.

It is our thesis that, in Indian agriculture today, one can distinguish only two classes, the two defined above: a class of big landowners and a class of agricultural labourers (including landless labourers, bonded labourers, and poor tenants who do not hire other labourers). There are members of the working population in agriculture who do not belong to these two classes. In our view, they do not constitute or belong to any class or classes. That is because, farmers so placed have on the one hand contradictions among themselves; on the other, they do not have clear-cut contradictions with members belonging to the two classes defined above. It is the diffused nature of the contradictions affecting the members of the residual category which prompts us to treat them as not constituting any class or classes. It is the concentrated and clearly defined nature of contradictions of the members

of the two social groups defined above that makes us treat them as classes.

This is no matter of semantics. By saying that there are only two well-defined classes in our agriculture, what we are in effect saying is that in our agricultural economy the most important contradiction is the one between the elements that we have described as forming the class of big landowners and the elements that we have described as forming the class of agricultural labourers. Contradictions between members of any one of these two classes and people working in agriculture but not belonging to either of these two classes are of a subsidiary nature. Development of the forces of production may be expected to give rise to an aggravation of the contradictions between these two classes; on the other hand, only struggle between these two classes can provide the motive force for any changes in the agrarian structure.

#### IMPERIALISM AND THE RULING CLASS

It is interesting and important in this connection to understand the nature of the relation between this ruling class in agriculture and 'imperialism'. By 'imperialism' is meant the capitalist class forces of the countries of Western Europe and America. This is because it has often been maintained that imperialism has actively contributed to the preservation of feudal domination over the agricultural economies of the developing countries.<sup>4</sup> Stated in this way, the proposition amounts to saying that imperialism has been effectively preventing the emergence of capitalist class relations in agriculture.

It would seem that this proposition cannot be regarded as true of India of the present day. What is indeed an indisputably true proposition is that imperialism has all along, both before and after political independence, given all possible support to the domination of the entire rural population by whoever happened to be the ruling class in agriculture. During the pre-independence period, this ruling class in the rural sector was very largely feudal and it is true to say of that time that imperialism was buttressing the class rule of the feudal landowners. But the ruling class in India at present is one that cannot be described any more as feudal and in lending support to the class of big landowners it cannot be said that imperialism is supporting a

June 17, 1978

feudal class against an emerging capitalist class.

In particular, it would not be true to say that imperialism has been actively engaged in preventing the development of productive forces in agriculture. The facts point in exactly the opposite direction. The facts are that imperialism, through its agents in the form of experts, advisers, consultants, etc. of the aid-giving agencies of America and the other imperialist countries, have been directly responsible for making the Government of India adopt a policy of leading all support to that section of enterprising landowners who, on their own or under persuasion by the same agents, were prepared to go ahead with a programme of modernisation of agriculture. It was a Ford Foundation Team that originally mooted the idea of the IADP — The Intensive Area Development Programme. It has been foreign experts and agencies that have brought to the country the idea of a fertiliser — HYV seeds — irrigation-based agriculture. It is the same lobby that has been actively promoting the ever-increasing use of tractors, harvesters, and other machinery in different parts of the country.

The interests of Imperialism, in so promoting the development of agriculture through technological transformations, is a complex subject into which we propose not to enter now. There are some easy direct explanations for the interest. The use of machinery and other modern inputs, such as fertilisers and insecticides, directly involves the import of these products from the imperialist countries or import of capital goods and raw materials for the domestic manufacture of these products.<sup>9</sup> But this direct interest in expanding the market for this range of products contains only a part of the explanation. There are other social and political reasons for imperialism to be interested in promoting development of agriculture on that narrow base provided by the ruling class of big landowners.

#### APPARENT AND REAL CHANGES

We may now take a view of some of the important changes that are taking place in the country's agrarian conditions from the point of our thesis regarding the two principal antagonistic classes in agriculture as well as of some peculiar features which are not changing. One important change that has drawn the attention of all students of Indian agriculture is the remarkable

increase that has taken place in the number of agricultural labourers. A second important development is the large-scale eviction of tenants which is taking place as reported from different parts of the country.<sup>10</sup> To what extent do these changes indicate a quickening pace of development of capitalist relations in our agriculture?

To the extent tenants indicate feudal relations and labourers indicate capitalist ones, relative or absolute decrease in the number of tenants and increase in that of labourers would indeed indicate a shift from feudal relations to capitalist ones. However, under Indian conditions, tenants do not *per se* indicate feudal relations and employment of wage labour *per se* do not indicate capitalist relations. As such, these changes in the number of tenants and labourers *per se* do not indicate any strengthening of capitalist relations at the cost of feudal relations.

It is our view that eviction of tenants and increased use of hired labourers in cultivation is primarily a reaction of the landowners to tenancy legislations and agrarian movements which hold a threat to the owners of losing their land to tenants. It has been held by many observers that this trend also indicates landowners having become more profit-oriented and farming having become an attractive business proposition. That a very large proportion of landowners have become profit-oriented is no doubt true, just as farming having become a profitable business is true. But we are not sure that this explains the reported large-scale change-over from tenant cultivation to cultivation with the help of hired labourers. That is because there is ample evidence that tenant cultivation can be so oriented as to give full scope for capitalist enterprise; and it has not been established that, given such an orientation, tenant cultivation yields any less profit to the landowner than cultivation with the help of hired labourers. (See once again the studies [7] and [8].)

As to growth in the number of labourers, it would be wrong in our view to treat it as indicating a process of proletarianisation of the rural poor. The swelling numbers have been partly (but only partly) caused by the evicted tenants joining the ranks of labourers along with such small landholders who might have been forced to sell or lease out their land because of their inability to cultivate by themselves their holdings and make it an economically viable proposition. One

can think of a number of other factors leading to the same result. Thus the natural increase in the number of landowners' family members and the lack of alternative employment opportunities for them is one. A second is the attraction of small farmers' households not getting employment on the family farm. A third could be artificial and other workers not getting employment in their traditional occupations. We feel sympathetic to the view that the process indicated by the growing number of labourers is more one of 'immiseration' of the rural poor than one of its 'proletarianisation'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet another feature of the pre-agrarian conditions in India, which requires to be examined from the point of view of our thesis regarding the two classes, is the fact that India agriculture continues to be dominated by small-scale farming. Petty mode-production having been mentioned by Marx as a characteristic of feudalism and increasing concentration of landholdings in the hands of big landowners being regarded as a characteristic of agrarian capitalism by Lenin, it is a very fact that small farmers have continued to be numerically preponderant and the land cultivated by small farmers has also not got reduced. It made many students of the subject conclude in favour of the mode of production remaining feudal or pre-capitalist. However, as we have argued in Section II, when thinking of concentration of land, one ought to think of the value of land rather than the surface area of land; and concentration has indeed increased when land is measured in value units. It is reported from various parts of India that the market for land-sale is practically 'frozen' (See e.g. [9]). However unscrupled, small farmers prefer to hold on to their small holdings, and what this proves uneconomic they lease land out to bigger landholders; it would seem to be the last resort. *there are ceilings on ownership holdings, but none on leaseholdings.* As the land-lease market is not free in the way the land-sale market one could expect to see the emergence of large-scale farming with a mix of owned and leased land. Such large-scale farming is indeed emerging alongside with increasing mechanisation, in many parts of the country.

It would, be a mistake however, attach excessive importance to the lease sale as such or even to the associated mechanisation. It would be a mis-

I think that the nature of class contradictions would be necessarily different in areas where there is large-scale mechanised farming and areas where such farming is exceptional. The big landowners of one area may be less measured in terms of their holdings or capital assets, than those of other areas. This would not make any difference to the fact that it is the great landowners who are the principal exploiters of the mass of landless and landless labourers and poor tenants both the areas.

In the same way, the nature of the contradictions between the class of big landowners and the class of agricultural labourers would seem not to depend at all on the degree of monetisation of wages and rents. This requires to be emphasised, as monetisation of the exchange between the exploiter and the exploited has been regarded as one of the characteristic features marking the passage from precapitalist modes to the capitalist mode of production. Marx has written extensively on the subject and Marxists have also attached a lot of importance to it in discussions about transition from one mode to another, the key line being "Historically, the growth of money rent signifies the beginning of a process of feudal disintegration" (see Note 5 in Part II).

It is, doubtful, however, if under such conditions the degree of monetisation of wages and rent holds the same significance as it did in the history of development of capitalism in Western Europe. Wages to agricultural labourers in India are typically paid as a combination of cash and kind. Rent is naturally paid in kind. The tenancy arrangement is one of share-cropping. But fixed rents do exist and also fixed rents in kind. It is not being said that one cannot find any explanation of the medium of payment in terms of cash and kind in any particular case.<sup>1</sup> But it would be difficult to take a view that, under such conditions, kind rent and kind wages per se indicate less developed class relations.

Such kind wages permit the employer to cheat the labourer by the use of false weights. It also permits the employer to pay the labourer as and when he needs grains for purposes of consumption and thereby obtain the benefit of keeping accounts for the year and exploit the opportunity of mixing accounts by mixing up wage bills and credit accounts. On the other hand, in conditions of rising prices, it is to the economic advantage

of labourers to receive wages in kind. Thus kind wages work both ways and increasing proportion of cash in the wage basket may not by itself indicate any particular nature for the relation between the two classes of big landowners and agricultural labourers.

A related, peculiar, feature of Indian agriculture is the lack of any correlation between monetisation and scale of operations. In the words of an author, "An important feature of our agrarian economy is not only the preponderance of tiny holdings but also the fact that there is no strict correspondence between commercialisation and large-scale cultivation. While such a correspondence is noticeable in respect of cotton and groundnut, the contrary is the case in respect of sugarcane and jute. While small holdings (below 5 acres) constitute roughly 40 per cent of the total area under sugarcane, big holdings (25 acres and above) constitute less than 14 per cent. In jute cultivation, the proportions are roughly 32 and 13 per cent, respectively". [14]

#### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

We may now turn to the important question of the political implications of our thesis of there being in Indian agriculture only two classes in antagonistic contradiction with each other. Political strategists thinking on Marxist lines have tended to postulate, by way of an axiom as it were, the existence of two dominant classes, one feudal and one capitalist; and further, once again by way of axiom, one has postulated antagonistic contradictions between these two assumed classes. It has also been an axiomatic position to take, that the capitalist forces are progressive, whereas the feudal forces are reactionary. It is no empirical analysis of the facts of our social life that has led to this axiomatic approach to political analysis but uncritical reading of the history of capitalist development in Western Europe. The political line that follows for those who believe in progress has been to support the assumed capitalist forces against the assumed feudal forces in an assumed struggle between the two, and in doing this to think of an alliance of the entire peasantry from landless labourers upto capitalist farmers against the feudal landlords.

If our thesis be correct, then landowners showing some more capitalistic traits and other landowners revealing more of feudalistic traits belong to one and the same class, thus the above

political line means nothing other than supporting one not clearly definable section of the ruling class against another not clearly definable section of the same ruling class and rallying the rest of the peasantry in support of this ethereal capitalist farmer class against this phantom feudal class.

This makes impossible any viable sustainable class struggle. For, this political line underestimates the antagonistic contradiction between the class of agricultural labourers (as defined by us) and those sections of the ruling class who may be revealing in a transient manner, some capitalistic traits. It further posits an antagonistic contradiction where no such contradiction exists — viz, between the hypothetical capitalists and hypothetical feudal landowners. A political line that would be based on such an understanding of class relation cannot but objectively betray the interests of the peasantry not belonging to the ruling class, in particular the class of agricultural labourers. And this is what has happened in actual fact. Peasant movements, led by the political parties of the country, have by and large benefited the middle and rich peasants but not the landless or the landed labourers. The movements have been mostly for the betterment of the terms of tenancy and rarely for wage increases for labourers. Among the tenants, the beneficiaries have been principally middle-sized mixed farmers and not the poorest tenant farmers. It may be kept in mind in this connection that, in the country as a whole, 50 per cent of the tenanted land is cultivated by holders above 10-acre sizes.

The line of political action that would follow from our thesis is one of struggle by the class of agricultural labourers against the class of big landowners, without making any reservation on account of some members of the ruling class revealing more capitalistic traits than some others. Tenancy as such would not be an issue, but wage would be. Tenants' cause would be championed only in the case of poor tenants and care would be taken to ensure that measures to protect the tenant do not amount to strengthening the stronger tenant against the weaker landowners.

#### Notes

- 1 We are using the well-known concept elaborated by Mao Tse-tung in his work "On Contradictions".
- 2 Among others who have made this point is Alavi. [4] who writes: "None of the participants in the debate have demonstrated that

there is any conflict between the new rural capitalist class and the feudal landlords, if they can be structurally distinguished at all."

3 The phenomenon of big landowners making investments in a multiplicity of channels and participating in various activities at the same time, has been observed and commented upon by many students of the rural society in India e.g. in [10], [11], [13], etc as has been seen in Notes 9 & 10 of Part III. Where we differ from the "semi-feudalist" like Bhaduri, "Fascist Chamberlain" etc is in that we do not believe that any channel of investment is being left unutilised for other channels being more lucrative. This may be true of particular big landowners, but not true of the entire class of big landowners. It is not generally true that investments are not being made in improved methods of cultivation because usage of trade are more lucrative. Such characterisation of the rural economy as the following was, no doubt, true some time back in the past; but it is no more a valid general statement: "The high nominal rate of return on moneylending meant that the real rate of return would be fairly high. The growth of commerce and exchange within such a structure merely meant that the profitability of investing in the traditional fields was enhanced. In short, all the evidence to date indicates that the rate of surplus extraction on the traditional pre-capitalist basis was so high that there existed no incentive on the part of any rural class investible funds, to change the organisational basis of agricultural productive investment in the land." [12]

4 The Bengali term 'jotedar' corresponds closely to the concept of the class we are defining. The very fact that village people themselves use the single term 'jotedar' to denote persons with various different occupations who rule the rural society (since the abolition of zamindari) shows that popular wisdom recognises the non-contradictory nature of the interests of the different members of the group of persons and revenues that they constitute a single force vis-à-vis the rest of the society.

5 On this point of 'neither feudal nor capitalist, too, we are not alone. Thus, Thinner [10] writes: "In my view it is not helpful, it may even be misleading, to conceive of agrarian India in terms of an evolutionary sequence from feudalism to capitalism to socialism." And "in parts of the Punjab, in western Uttar Pradesh, in Gujarat, and in Andhra, we find numerous cases of larger peasants who carry on their production in genuine capitalist style, that is, by relying on regularly hired free labourers to grow crops for sale in organised markets with the aim of realising profits. But these self-same peasants may at the self-same time be

obtaining part (perhaps even the major part) of their income from renting out land, lending money or grain, or trading in agricultural commodities." Usha Patnaik wrote: "Because it is impossible to categorise this type of an agrarian structure, the outcome of imperialist impact, as 'feudal', there is no reason to categorise it, by default, as 'capitalist'." [12] This double negative is of course the starting point for those who speak of a 'colonial mode of production', who reject both the feudal and the capitalist characterisation and argue that 'colonialism must be understood in terms of a specific mode of production, neither feudal nor capitalist, though resembling both at different levels.' [4] The greater part of Marxists in India, however, continue to think in terms of two distinct classes. The following view of a leading Marxist and an important political leader till his dying days is typical: "The class of non-cultivating proprietary right-holders who continue to take substantial rents from the working peasantry and the proprietors who 'cultivate' by hiring labourers should not be lumped together because the two are distinct social categories — the former being feudal and the latter capitalist. While the former is a dying remnant of the past, the latter is the growing new." [14] On this we elaborate the following comments of Alavi [4]: "we encounter, all too often, a *a priori* assumption that there is a conflict of interest between the so-called 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal' class of landlords and the bourgeoisie. Such assumptions are premised on a conception of the co-existence, in dialectical opposition, of a 'feudal mode of production' and a 'capitalist mode of production', so that such a class conflict is assumed to exist, *a priori*. Facts are forced into the mould of theoretical assumptions and examples of political competition that do not necessarily fit with such an explanation, are nevertheless examined as examples of conflicts between the bourgeoisie, Congress and opposition parties and groups which, by definition, are designated 'feudal'.

6 Usha Patnaik [10] takes this approach of defining classes in terms of net hiring in or net hiring out of labour. She dismisses the problem raised by hiring of labour by small farmers by saying that 'clearly one has to take net concepts. It is difficult however to share her confidence in treating as obvious what is in effect a most original conceptual innovation: the netting of relations as if they were values! Neither Lenin nor Mao Tse-tung spoke about any netting. That, of course, is an argument for us to be against conceptual innovations, but conceptual innovations should not be presented as if they represent obvious truths.

7 Alavi [4] writes: "The idea of a 'rural proletariat' can all too easily

suggest an analogy with the industrial proletariat on the one hand and a sharp distinction between it and the other poor peasants, e.g. as share-croppers in a feudal mode of production. In fact, the situation of the rural wage-labourer is little different from that of a share-cropper and the distinction of both stands is marked on a contrast to that of the urban proletariat. The feature that is common to both categories is *not* peasantism in their direct and personal dependence on their landlord. " Usha Patnaik [3] writes: "From the available evidence, the difference between the two relationships — landlord/share-cropper and big landowner/tenant, seems to have been a difference of degree rather than of kind. The same landowner might combine the two modes of exploitation and generally use the same primitive technical level character-bulk." B.S. Alavi and Usha Patnaik's emphasis is that under Indian conditions employment of wage labour is just as pre-capitalist a relation as the relation of a share-cropper to his landlord. Our own emphasis, however, is that while *that* above is an *undoubtedly* true, it would be equally true to say for the recent times that the relation of a landlord to his share-cropper is not as capitalistic as the relation between an employer and a labourer. Thus Hamza Alavi [4] writes: "The 'pariahism, far from holding out a promise of bringing about a revolutionary transformation of the social relations of production in colonial agriculture (as a separate mode of production in antagonistic contradiction to them) creates them and reinforces them'.

8 The following words of Alavi [4] support our view: "We find instead that the big farmer strategy has served the interests of the best peasantry both Indian and foreign, so far as it provided the means for an increase in the marketed surplus of agricultural commodities. The interests of the foreign imperialist bourgeoisie, the indigenous bourgeoisie, and the landlords and peasants coincide, in that respect at least" and "That development, however, has been possible only within the framework of the colonial relationship and the metropolitan industrial production (and the dependent indigenous industrial production) that has made available the new technological resources." Here again, there is a structural correspondence of interest rather than a source of structural conflict."

9 See Vyas [9] and Banopadhyay [18] about the phenomenon of an increase in the number of labourers.

11 Vyas [9] argues on this point in the same way as we do.

12 Thus one can indeed find satisfactory explanations in terms of economic interests for the late emergence of fixed cash rent in certain cash crops areas, e.g. Banopadhyay [17] and Bhattacharya and Das [19].