Chapter 9: Colonialism and the Countryside

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Why was the jotedar a powerful figure in many areas of rural Bengal?

The jotedars, a class of rich peasants described in Francis Buchanan's survey of Dinajpur in North Bengal, became powerful because by the early nineteenth century they had acquired vast areas of land, sometimes several thousand acres. Their strength rested on more than landholding: they controlled local trade as well as moneylending, which gave them immense power over the poorer cultivators of the region. A large part of their land was cultivated by sharecroppers (adhiyars or bargadars), who brought their own ploughs, laboured in the fields, and handed over half the produce after the harvest. Within the village, the jotedar's power was actually more effective than the zamindar's. Unlike zamindars, who often lived in distant urban areas, jotedars lived in the villages and exercised direct control over a large section of poor villagers. They resisted the zamindar's efforts to raise the jama (revenue demand) of the village, prevented zamindari officials from carrying out their duties, mobilised ryots dependent on them, and deliberately delayed revenue payments. When zamindari estates were auctioned for non-payment, jotedars were often among the purchasers. They were most powerful in North Bengal, and similar rich peasants elsewhere were called haoladars, gantidars or mandals.

Q2 How did zamindars manage to retain control over their zamindaris?

Faced with an exorbitantly high revenue demand and the threat of their estates being auctioned under the Permanent Settlement, zamindars devised ingenious strategies to survive. The main device was fictitious or benami sale. The Raja of Burdwan, for example, first transferred part of his zamindari to his mother, since the Company had decreed that the property of women would not be taken over. His agents then manipulated the auctions: revenue was deliberately withheld so that unpaid balances accumulated, and when an estate was put up for sale, the zamindar's own men outbid others, bought it, and then refused to pay the purchase money. The estate had to be resold, and the process was repeated endlessly, exhausting the state and other bidders, until the estate was finally sold back to the zamindar at a low price. Between 1793 and 1801, four big zamindaris of Bengal, including Burdwan, made benami purchases yielding as much as Rs 30 lakh, and over 15 per cent of auction sales were fictitious. Zamindars also used force: when outsiders bought estates, their agents were often attacked by the former zamindar's lathyals, and ryots themselves, bound by loyalty and a sense of being his proja (subjects), resisted the entry of outsiders. By the early nineteenth century the price depression ended, revenue rules became more flexible, and the zamindars who had survived consolidated their power.

Q3 How did the Paharias respond to the coming of outsiders?

The Paharias of the Rajmahal hills considered the entire region to be their land, the basis of their identity and survival, and they fiercely resisted the intrusion of outsiders. From their base in the hills they regularly raided the plains where settled agriculturists lived; these raids were a means of survival in times of scarcity, a way of asserting power over settled communities, and a way of negotiating political relations. Zamindars on the plains often had to purchase peace by paying a regular tribute to the hill chiefs, and traders paid tolls for permission to use the passes the Paharias controlled. This fragile negotiated peace broke down in the late eighteenth century, when the British aggressively extended settled agriculture and encouraged forest clearance. As forests and pastures shrank, the Paharias raided settled villages more frequently, carrying away grain and cattle. The British first launched a brutal policy of extermination in the 1770s, hunting and killing them. In the 1780s Augustus Cleveland proposed pacification, offering Paharia chiefs annual allowances in return for keeping order; many chiefs refused, and those who accepted lost authority within their community. The Paharias ultimately withdrew deep into the mountains, carrying on a war with outsiders, and viewed every white man, including Buchanan, with suspicion and distrust.

Q4 Why did the Santhals rebel against British rule?

The Santhals had been settled as pioneer cultivators in the foothills of Rajmahal, and by 1832 a large tract was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh and declared to be their land, where they were to practise plough agriculture and become settled peasants. Their settlements expanded rapidly, and as cultivation grew, so did the revenue flowing to the Company. But the Santhals soon found that the very land they had cleared and brought under cultivation was slipping out of their hands. The state levied heavy taxes on the land they had reclaimed, moneylenders (dikus) charged them exorbitant rates of interest and seized their land when debts remained unpaid, and zamindars began asserting control over the Damin area. Caught between the demands of the colonial state, the oppression of moneylenders and the encroachment of zamindars, the Santhals concluded by the 1850s that the time had come to rebel in order to create an ideal world of their own in which they would rule. This led to the Santhal Revolt of 1855-56, led by figures such as Sidhu Manjhi. After the rebellion was crushed, the colonial state created the Santhal Pargana, carving out 5,500 square miles from the districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum, hoping that a separate territory with special laws would conciliate them.

Q5 What explains the anger of the Deccan ryots against the moneylenders?

The anger of the Deccan ryots stemmed from the sense that moneylenders were behaving unjustly and violating the customary norms that had earlier regulated their relationship. Moneylending was widespread even before colonial rule, but one general norm held that the interest charged could not exceed the principal; this defined what counted as 'fair interest'. Under colonial rule this norm broke down: in one case investigated by the Deccan Riots Commission, a moneylender charged over Rs 2,000 as interest on a loan of only Rs 100. The ryots came to see the moneylender as devious and deceitful, manipulating laws and forging accounts. Moneylenders refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, bought the peasants' harvest at low prices without crediting it to their accounts, and ultimately took over their land, carts and cattle, forcing them to hire back their own animals through deeds of hire. When the British passed the Limitation Law of 1859, limiting a bond's validity to three years, the moneylender turned it around by forcing the ryot to sign a fresh bond every three years, entering the unpaid principal and accumulated interest as the new principal. What finally infuriated the ryots was that, after the cotton boom ended, the moneylenders insensitively refused further loans even as the revenue demand rose. Deeds and bonds thus became hated symbols of a new oppressive order.

Q6 Why were many zamindaris auctioned after the Permanent Settlement?

After the Permanent Settlement came into operation in Bengal in 1793, the East India Company fixed in perpetuity the revenue each zamindar had to pay, and the estates of those who failed to pay were to be auctioned to recover the dues. In the early decades after the Settlement, zamindars regularly defaulted and unpaid balances accumulated, so that over 75 per cent of the zamindaris changed hands in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Several reasons explain this. First, the initial revenue demands were pitched very high, because the Company, knowing the demand was fixed for all time, wanted to capture in advance any share of future increases in income from rising prices and expanding cultivation. Second, this high demand was imposed in the 1790s, a period when agricultural prices were depressed, making it hard for ryots to pay their rent and therefore hard for the zamindar to pay the Company. Third, the revenue was invariable and had to be paid punctually regardless of the harvest; under the Sunset Law, if payment did not arrive by sunset on the fixed date, the zamindari was liable to be auctioned. Fourth, the Permanent Settlement initially curbed the zamindar's own power to collect rent and manage his estate: his troops were disbanded, his customs duties abolished, and his cutcheries (courts) placed under a Company-appointed Collector, so he lost control over local justice and the police. Rent collection remained a perennial problem, as bad harvests, deliberate delays by ryots, and the resistance of rich jotedars and mandals all made it hard to collect dues, while prosecuting defaulters was slow, with over 30,000 suits for arrears pending in Burdwan alone in 1798. These pressures together caused mounting arrears and the auction of many estates.

Q7 In what way was the livelihood of the Paharias different from that of the Santhals?

The livelihoods of the Paharias and the Santhals represented two contrasting ways of life, often summed up as the battle between the hoe and the plough. The Paharias, who lived around the Rajmahal hills, practised shifting cultivation and subsisted on forest produce. They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth, and on these patches, enriched by the potash of the ash, they scratched the ground lightly with hoes to grow pulses and millets for their own consumption. After cultivating a patch for a few years they left it fallow to recover its fertility and moved on to a new area. From the forest they gathered mahua flowers for food, silk cocoons and resin for sale, and wood for charcoal, and the fallow lands provided pasture for cattle. Their life as hunters, food gatherers, charcoal producers and silkworm rearers was thus intimately tied to the forest; they lived in hutments amid tamarind groves, regarded the whole region as their own, and resisted outsiders, even raiding the plains. The Santhals, by contrast, were pioneer settlers who represented the power of the plough. Invited by zamindars and British officials to reclaim land, they cleared forests vigorously, ploughed the soil and settled down as peasants, especially within the Damin-i-Koh demarcated for them by 1832. Unlike the Paharias, they gave up their earlier life of mobility, took to permanent settled agriculture, and cultivated a range of commercial crops such as rice and cotton for the market, dealing regularly with traders and moneylenders. Where the Paharia economy was mobile, forest-based and oriented to subsistence, the Santhal economy was settled, plough-based and drawn into the commercial market.

Q8 How did the American Civil War affect the lives of ryots in India?

Before the 1860s, about three-fourths of the raw cotton imported into Britain came from America, and British manufacturers had long worried about this dependence. When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, a wave of panic spread through Britain's cotton circles: raw cotton imports from America fell to less than three per cent of the normal, from over 2,000,000 bales in 1861 to just 55,000 bales in 1862. Frantic messages were sent to India to increase cotton exports, and India, with its suitable soil, favourable climate and cheap labour, was seen as the alternative source for Lancashire. This had a profound impact on the Deccan countryside. Cotton merchants in Bombay received advances from export merchants and passed credit down to urban sahukars and rural moneylenders, so that the ryots suddenly found access to seemingly limitless credit. They were offered Rs 100 as an advance for every acre planted with cotton, and sahukars eagerly extended long-term loans. Between 1860 and 1864 cotton acreage doubled, and by 1862 over 90 per cent of Britain's cotton imports came from India. But these boom years did not bring prosperity to all: while some rich peasants gained, for the large majority cotton expansion meant heavier debt. The reversal came after 1865, when the Civil War ended and American cotton production revived, causing Indian cotton exports and prices to fall. Export merchants and sahukars, no longer confident, closed down operations, restricted advances and demanded repayment of outstanding debts. At the very same time the revenue demand was raised dramatically, by 50 to 100 per cent in the new settlement. With prices falling, cotton fields disappearing and moneylenders now refusing fresh loans, the ryots were plunged into acute distress, and their accumulated grievances erupted in the Deccan revolt of 1875.

Q9 What are the problems of using official sources in writing about the history of peasants?

Official sources such as revenue records, survey reports and the findings of enquiry commissions are invaluable for reconstructing the history of peasants, but they must be read with great care because they reflect official concerns and interpretations rather than the peasants' own perspective. A clear example is the Deccan Riots Commission, which was set up after the 1875 revolt and whose report was presented to the British Parliament in 1878. The Commission was specifically asked to judge whether the level of government revenue demand had caused the revolt, and after presenting its evidence it concluded that the government demand was not responsible, placing the blame instead on the moneylenders. This kind of argument recurs throughout colonial records and reveals a persistent reluctance on the part of the colonial government to admit that popular discontent could ever arise from government action. The Fifth Report of 1813 presents a similar difficulty: intent on criticising the maladministration of the Company, it exaggerated the collapse of traditional zamindari power and overestimated the scale on which zamindars were losing their land, whereas later research into zamindari and district archives shows that zamindars often retained their estates through ingenious methods. Even Buchanan's detailed journals cannot be read innocently, for he was an employee of the East India Company, travelled with specific instructions, and judged landscapes through the commercial priorities of the Company and Western notions of progress, so his assessments differed sharply from those of the local inhabitants. The lesson for the historian is that one must always ask who wrote a report and why, and that official sources must be juxtaposed with newspapers, unofficial accounts, legal records and, wherever possible, oral sources before generalisations are drawn.

Q10 On an outline map of the subcontinent, mark out the areas described in this chapter. Find out whether there were other areas where the Permanent Settlement and the ryotwari system were prevalent and plot these on the map as well.

On an outline map of the subcontinent, mark the three regions the chapter deals with. In the east, mark Bengal, showing Burdwan (present-day Bardhaman) and Dinajpur in North Bengal, which illustrate the Permanent Settlement and the rise of the jotedars. Also in eastern India mark the Rajmahal hills with the Damin-i-Koh and the Santhal Pargana (carved from the Bhagalpur and Birbhum districts), the land of the Paharias and the Santhals. In the west, mark the Bombay Deccan, locating Poona (present-day Pune), Ahmednagar and the village of Supa, where the ryotwari settlement operated and the 1875 revolt broke out. To show the wider spread of the systems, label the Permanent Settlement region of Bengal (which extended to neighbouring Bihar and Orissa), and plot the ryotwari areas of the Bombay Deccan and the Madras Presidency in the south. Mark only places and regions named in the chapter or verifiable from an atlas; do not invent additional sites.

Q11 Francis Buchanan published reports on several districts of eastern India. Read one report and collate the information available about rural society, focusing on the themes discussed in this chapter. Highlight the ways in which historians can use such texts.

For this project, choose one of Buchanan's district surveys of eastern India (for example his account of Bhagalpur) and read it closely, noting down what it tells us about rural society under the themes of this chapter, such as land use, forest clearance, shifting versus settled cultivation, the position of hill folk like the Paharias and Santhals, and the search for minerals and commercially valuable resources. Then write up how a historian can use such a text, remembering that Buchanan was an employee of the East India Company who travelled with specific instructions and judged the countryside by the Company's commercial priorities, so his observations must be read critically and checked against other sources rather than taken at face value.

Q12 In the region where you live, talk to the older people within a rural community and visit the fields they now cultivate. Find out what they produce, how they earn their livelihoods, what their parents did, what their sons and daughters do now, and how their lives have changed over the last 75 years. Write a report based on your findings.

For this field-based project, visit a rural community near where you live and interview some of its older members, also walking through the fields they cultivate today. Record what crops they now grow and how they earn their living, what their parents did for a livelihood, and what their sons and daughters do now, so that you can trace how patterns of work, landholding and income have changed over the last seventy-five years. Organise your findings into a report, comparing continuity and change across the generations, much as the chapter traces agrarian change over time through the experiences of cultivators.