ECONOMIC DEPRESSION AND THE MAKING OF 'TRADITIONAL' SOCIETY IN COLONIAL INDIA
1820–1855

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OVER recent years, questions concerning the character and direction of social change in colonial India have become increasingly complex.[1] Until the 1960s, it remained possible to conceive the coming of British rule as representing 'the beginnings of modernisation'[2] and to write Indian history in terms of an 'heroic' struggle to fulfil the civilising mission: 'heroic', in the British sense, because it largely failed. Except among a narrow stratum of elites, Indian society obviously refused the West's invitation to 'usher it into history'[3] and India's culture moved very little towards convergence with the West's.

In the 1960s, however, some historians began to wonder whether the West's invitation had been seriously or honestly offered; and whether India's failure to modernise was not the result of colonial intent. The works of Eric Stokes, Robert Frykenberg and Bernard Cohn emphasised the extreme caution with which British rulers had approached indigenous society and the extent to which the Raj had left large areas of its 'tradition' untouched. For Stokes, 'The First Century of British Rule in India' wrought no major societal transformation; for Frykenberg, the British state in south India remained essentially a 'Hindu Raj'; for Cohn, Benares rural society was subject to no 'structural change'.[4]

During the 1970s, the questioning started to take a new direction. Now, while it was agreed that many of the cultural and societal relations of colonial India did not conform to ideal types of the modern(-ising) or the western(-ising), it began to be doubted that they conformed

[1] I am grateful to Burton Stein for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] As in *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernisation, c.1830–1850*, eds. C. Philips and M. Wainwright (1976).

[3] The phrase, of course, is that of Karl Marx. See K. Marx, *Surveys from Exile* [ed. D. Fernbach]. (1973), 306.

[4] See E. Stokes, 'The First Century of British Rule in India, 1757–1857' in *The Peasant and the Raj*, ed. E. Stokes (Cambridge, 1979); R. Frykenberg, 'The Silent Settlement in South India, 1793–1836' in *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia*, ed. R. Frykenberg (New Delhi, 1977); B. Cohn, 'Structural Change in Indian Rural Society, 1596–1885' in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. R. Frykenberg (Madison, 1969).

237

either to the social relations which had actually existed before the colonial conquest. In the context of south India, for example, Arjun Appadurai and Nicholas Dirks found little in common between the 'official' caste system of the colonial era, with its ideological base in the *Brahmanic* theory of *varnashramadharma*, and the systems of social stratification operating in the pre-colonial era.[5] These last, which perhaps harked back to the principles of the 'segmentary' medieval state perceived by Burton Stein, drew on notions of royal and divine 'honour' to demarcate patterns of relationship which were far less rigid and hierarchic than those of the nineteenth century.[6] 'Caste' before colonialism had been imbricated in a social structure permitting high degrees of group autonomy and mobility, and fostering competition between rival sectarian traditions (of 'the right-' and 'left-hand' and of the *Thengalai* and *Vadagalai* schools of *Vaishnavism*)[7] While, no doubt, *varnashramadharmic* ideology had long existed in Sanskritic scriptural sources, its realisation in the social practices of the colonial south represented a considerable novelty which in no way could be understood as the simple continuity of 'tradition'.

Similarly, in the south no less than the north, the 1970s saw received images of 'traditional' society resting upon a base of self-contained and semi-autonomous 'village communities' beginning to take a severe historiographical battering.[8] Revisionist perspectives started to re-conceive the village as but a 'moment' in much broader and more complex systems of kinship, kingship, trade and settlement, which possessed dynamics and mobilising forces of their own.[9] As Christopher Fuller has argued with regard to the south, it may well have been the dissolution under colonial rule of many of these broader systems, which permitted the village community—or at least the image of the village community—to establish itself as the nucleus of nineteenth-century society.[10]

Or again and relatedly, it started to be questioned whether the classical *jajmani* system—as observed by the Wisers in the last colonial decades— can have reflected a structure of economic relations whose history reached far back into the 'traditional' past.[11] Set against the

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[5] See A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule* (Cambridge, 1981); N. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Cambridge, 1987).

[6] B. Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi, 1980).

[7] B. Stein, *Peasant State*, esp. 173–215; B. Stein, 'Social Mobility and Medieval South India Hindu Sects' in *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India*, ed. J. Silverberg (The Hague, 1969); A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, ch. 1.

[8] C. Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community', *Modern Asian Studies*, VI:3, (1972).

[9] See T. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848–1968* (Berkeley, 1974); R. Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule* (Berkeley, 1971).

[10] C. Fuller, 'British India or traditional India?', *Ethnos*, 3–4 (1977).

[11] W. H. and C. V. Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls* (Berkeley, 1969).

Wisers' observations of a 'non-market' economic system marked by ascriptive hierarchy, custom and rank must be set the findings of many historians—Chicherov, Perlin, Commander, Chaudhuri and Mizushima, to name but a few—that pre-colonial economic systems functioned around negotiated bargaining relations between independent corporate groups and were heavily inflected by competitive and market rationalities.[12]

In the light of these findings, a major concern of nineteenth-century social history became understanding how Indian 'tradition' had been re-defined and structured into society under colonial rule, apparently to a far greater extent than 'modernity' ever had been. Indeed, 'pseudo-traditionalisation' was now taken much better to describe the dominant social processes of the nineteenth century than 'modernisation'.

In pursuit of this understanding, the spotlight very quickly fell on the western ideology of modernisation itself and, in particular, on the way that it approached the question of 'tradition'. Here, the self-referentially 'radical' view of European civilisation taken by much post-Enlightenment thought would seem to have had its corollary in the production of 'conservative' caricatures of non-European civilisations: from Hegel to Marx to Weber, the dynamism, egalitarianism and individualism of 'the West' were weighed and appreciated principally against the supposed enervation, hierarchicalism and corporatism of the 'irrational' East. The Indian past became re-defined as static and mindless 'tradition' to serve as 'the other' to modern Europe's self-flattering understanding of its own history.[13]

Equally, the obsessions of 'modernity' with bureaucratic rationality and 'scientific' forms of knowledge promoted approaches to social categorisation, which froze the mutable relations of Indian society into fixed and rigid patterns and which denied them further rights to change. For administrative and anthropological purposes, castes became 'things', with definable boundaries, constituents and ranks, rather than the loose and changeable congeries of multiplex relationships, which they had been in the past.[14]

In addition to the cultural logic lying behind the modern West's encounter with the East, there was, of course, also a political logic. As

[12] K. N. Chaudhuri, 'Markets and Traders in India during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' in *Economy and Society*, eds K. Chaudhuri and C. Dewey (New Delhi, 1979); T. Mizushima, *Nattar and Socio-Economic Changes in South India in the 18th–19th Centuries* (Tokyo, 1986); A. I. Chicherov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th–18th Centuries* (Moscow, 1971); F. Perlin, 'Proto-industrialisation and Pre-Colonial South Asia', *Past and Present*, XCVIII, 1983; S. Commander, 'The Jajmani System in North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XVII:2 (1983).

[13] R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1989).

[14] B. Cohn, 'The census, social structure and objectification in South Asia' in B. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 1987).

Edward Said has argued, in a political culture whose key value was progress, the image of oriental societies as backward and inherently static served as a ready justification for their colonial domination.[15] And further, as colonial rule removed from them legitimate access to political power over themselves, it was hard to see by what means they could legitimately promote change (that is, generate history) within themselves. Colonial rule required colonised societies to exist in a condition of hierarchically-ordered stasis, and so they came to be.

Or at least, so they came to appear in certain of the canonical 'representations' of 'traditional' Indian society produced by colonial 'authorities'. One major problem of treating India's 'traditionalisation' largely or exclusively as the function of Western cultural perceptions is that it does not immediately explain why these perceptions—or misperceptions—should have mattered much to Indians themselves and have become translated into concrete forms of social reality. Why should the often ill-informed and prejudiced views of a handful of extremely distant scholars and administrators, themselves usually far more concerned with audiences in London than in India, have re-structured the social relations of an entire sub-continent? How did they?

And yet there cannot be much doubt that, through certain mysterious processes, somehow they did. By the end of the nineteenth century, the basic structures of Indian society—of caste and village—conformed far more to the colonial stereotype of 'what they had always been' than to what they may actually have been one hundred years earlier. Indigenous discourses of 'rank' and 'right' now focused largely on caste and village, to the exclusion of the older references of kingship, kinship and territory.[16] Indeed, by this time, a new generation of Indian intellectuals was starting to emerge, who would take the colonial definition of Indian tradition as their starting point and, perhaps most famously under Gandhi, re-interpret it as the basis of a national identity for the post-colonial twentieth century.[17] For Gandhi, adherence to caste principles (albeit highly eccentric ones!) and loyalty to the village community defined what it meant to be 'Indian' in the modern world.

In seeking to explain the remarkable power of colonial conventions to re-make Indian society, historians, first and perhaps most obviously, turned to the instrumentalities of the colonial state. Here, through various legal formulations, administrative regulations and offers of

[15] E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

[16] The classic exposition of the (new) discourse of caste rank and village dominance, albeit on the understanding that it represented a 'traditional' discourse, is to be found in M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in India and Other Essays* (Bombay, 1962) and *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, 1966).

[17] For Gandhi's 'affirmative orientalism' see R. Fox, *Gandhi's Utopia* (Durham, 1990).

prescriptive privilege, colonial perceptions of Indian society were actualised in local-level structures of political power sustained by the state. And for a long time so it seemed to some historians (of which this author was one), the British authorities had merely to invent any category, any 'tradition', any privilege that they chose, no matter how preposterous or 'inauthentic', and somebody in Indian society was bound to leap forward to ratify its authenticity and to utilize the powers, however minimal, offered by it.[18] The colonial state appeared to have an almost limitless capacity to 'persuade' Indians of the rectitude of its reasoning, even about their own characters and antecedents, and to coerce them into subscribing to its own mistaken re-inventions of them.

In retrospect, however, this emphasis on the innate power and authority of the colonial state, with its implied corollary of a plastic and passive Indian society, seems inadequate. This is in part, but only in small part, because of the tide or research unleashed in the 1980s by the celebrated Subaltern Studies group, who reveal evidence of far more extensive 'resistance' to colonial authority than had been thought the case. Even admitting all of this evidence, it would be stretching the limits of historical interpretation to breaking point to hold that it sustains a general case that 'the masses' of Indian society existed in a condition of near-continuous and incipient rebellion through the long history of the British Raj; still more than this condition enabled them to preserve the autonomy and authenticity of their culture from colonial 'hegemony'.[19]

On the one hand, for a society supposedly teetering on the edges of mass rebellion, it must be deemed remarkable how small were the extraneous forces of coercion which the British ever needed to hold it 'in thraldom'. Including the white army, the British never numbered more than 90,000 (or 0.03 per cent. of the population) at any time during the nineteenth century. Also, the case is not helped by the extent to which so many of the representations of 'autonomous' and 'authentic' indigenous culture, which we are offered in Subaltern Studies' literature, turn out to reflect the neo-colonial constructed 'traditions' which we noted above.[20] Colonialism was very much a matter of 'hegemony', not

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[18] See D. A. Washbrook, 'The Development of Caste Organisation in South India' in *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change*, eds C. Baker and D. Washbrook (New Delhi, 1975); L. Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXVII:2 (1978).

[19] See *Subaltern Studies*, ed. R. Guha, I–VI (New Delhi, 1982–90): esp., R. Guha 'Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography', VI; also R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1982).

[20] Compare, for example, Chatterjee's treatment of Gandhi as a 'traditional' Indian intellectual, outside the framework of western thought, with Fox's treatment of him as an 'affirmative orientalist'. P. Chatterjee, 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society' in *Subaltern Studies*, III, (New Delhi, 1984); R. Fox, *Gandhi's Utopia*. And compare Chakrabarty's

just 'domination', and a large part of the Subaltern Studies *oeuvre* attests, unfortunately, to its subtlety and pervasiveness.

Rather than just the result of the revelation of resistance, the inadequacy of a 'colonial state'-centred understanding of this trans-formation may owe more to the implications which flow from appreci-ation of the Raj's very 'success' at holding down the sub-continent so cheaply and, relatively, so easily. Upon examination, the scope and apparatus of 'British' law and government, imputed here with the power to re-make society, look remarkably weak and thin. Moreover, it is not at all clear that they can simply or meaningfully be thought of as 'British'.

On the one hand, from the publication of Robert Frykenberg's pioneering study of Guntur District onwards, it has become difficult to hold that the British administration possessed anything like the levels of direct control and authority over local society to which it rhetorically pretended.[21] Its will was deflected, diffused and re-directed through a variety of the local-level power networks on which it was heavily dependent: networks which frequently saw to it that the consequences of its actions were precisely the opposite of those which it intended. As Anand Yang has put it, the colonial state in India represented an extremely 'limited raj' which, in Lord Curzon's celebrated dictum, usually succeeded in achieving 'absolutely nothing'.[22] The very real weaknesses of the supposedly 'mighty and magnificent machine' of colonial government make it hard to believe that it can be credited with directing so profound a social transformation—or anything else.

Although perhaps that very weakness suggests another way in which 'traditionalisation' came about, albeit a way which alters its cultural character. Whenever examples of the functioning of this 'limited raj' are broken open and explored, the significance of the local indigenous elite groups who ran its activities on the ground usually comes to the fore. In south India by the nineteenth century, these were predominantly *Brahmin* groups and they were in an extremely powerful position to influence the state: as translators and 'authorities' they provided it with much of its basic information about the nature of society; and as administrators and bureaucrats, they enforced its regulations. How far was the 'caste-ification' of society, which took place under specifically *Brahmanic* norms, simply the result of their ability now to realise, through the apparatuses of colonial state, aspirations for a general social

conception of hierarchical Indian 'tradition' with the orientalist conceptions of the same exposed by Inden. D. Chakrabarty, 'Trade Unions in a Hierarchical Culture: the Jute Workers of Calcutta 1920–50' in *Subaltern Studies*, III; R. Inden, *Imagining India*.

[21] R. Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788–1848* (Oxford, 1965).

[22] A. Yang, *The Limited Raj* (Berkeley, 1989).

dominance, which they may long have possessed but never before been able to enforce?[23]

Equally, as David Ludden has argued, the break-up of broader 'community' forms of land tenure, and the definition of the village as the only legitimate source of private landholding rights, was pressed from below, in certain southern agrarian contexts, by richer farmers eager to slough off the social responsibilities which went with 'community' membership, at least as much as it was 'imposed from above' by the dictates of the *ryotwari* revenue system of the colonial state.[24] Looked at this way, perhaps these processes of 'traditionalisation' were not so much the direct result of the 'colonial' character of British rule, of its peculiar cultural norms. But rather, and more prosaically, of the way that the weakness of the regime permitted aspirant elites to seize and manipulate state power to their own advantage: an advantage which had the consequence of generating those processes which we have called 'traditionalisation' but which actually, and simply, represented new configurations of indigenous elite power.

Yet there may remain problems. In the first place, where did these 'aspirant elites' come from and what sustained their power? Thus far the only source of power considered has been that of the colonial state, which, by general agreement, was weak. But how could a weak state generate the forces to empower the dominance of new elites? Or, put another way, how is it that the state apparatus was 'weak' when in the hands of the British but so 'strong', when in the hands of Indians, that it could drive at least a circulation, and possibly a transformation, in the character of dominant elites?

The paradox, of course, points to the fact that the colonial state was not the only source of power in nineteenth-century Indian society. At least one further source, curiously omitted from most of the debates on 'culture and society', may be seen to have lain in the economy, which was itself undergoing a profound transformation during the colonial epoch. How far it is possible to apply the concept of 'capitalism' to the changing relations of material production and social reproduction in colonial India is a much disputed, and inherently tendentious, question—depending as it does upon a terminology about which there is little agreement. But certain points concerning the material context of the age seem less arguable. India's relations of trade and production were more deeply integrated with those of the world economy; forms

[23] N. Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', paper read at California Institute of Technology, May, 1987; C. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 5.

[24] D. Ludden, 'The Terms of Ryotwari Praxis: Changing Property Relations among Mirasidars in the Tinnevelly District, 1801–1855' in *Studies of South India*, eds P. Kolenda and R. Frykenberg (New Delhi, 1985).

of proprietary right modelled on those of Britain advanced (if slowly and fitfully) at the expense of forms inherited from the pre-colonial past; the balance within the Indian economy between primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, and between pastoralism, cultivation and manufacture, underwent a considerable change.[25] The material bases of Indian civilization shifted, generating new relations of domination and sub-ordination, which are excluded from understandings of 'social and cultural' change only at major cost and are not immediately subsumable into categories derived from the colonial state. How did the processes of class formation, taking place under the colonial regime, affect the definition and functioning of 'tradition'?

And there may be a further set of questions, too, which the his-toriography of 'social and cultural change' has been inclined to neglect. The social processes represented by 'traditionalisation', which rendered society more hierarchic and static, were no doubt of considerable benefit to some groups. But, reciprocally, they must therefore have been of considerable disadvantage to others. *Brahminisation* of the caste system confined the non-*Brahmin* majorities of society to the demeaned and semi-rightless status of *Sudras*; the 'village-ification' of land rights was at the expense of broader kinship and community rights. In the circumstances, it seems reasonable to expect that the imposition of this 'false' colonial tradition would have been greeted with mass resistance and social protest.

Intriguingly, however, this does not seem to have been the case. The middle decades of the nineteenth century were relatively quiet in terms of the contestation of 'tradition'—although not necessarily in terms of the contestation of other features of colonial rule. What makes this quiescence the more remarkable is that later on, towards the end of the nineteenth century, 'tradition' did indeed start to become objec-tionable. A major protest movement arose among 'non-*Brahmins*' to challenge the insulting *Sudra* caste-designation; and a variety of broad cultural movements arose to overcome the atomising consequences of 'village-ification'.[26] By the twentieth century, the colonial version of Indian tradition was in full retreat across the south. But why, then, was it not contested at the time of its initial imposition?

And, further, could this temporary quiescence, and perhaps accept-ance, help to explain that paradox in the self-understanding of 'tradition' that we noted earlier: namely that large sections of Indian society did come to accept the 'false' colonial version as the true version of their own traditional pasts? For it is noticeable that when the non-*Brahmin*

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[25] See C. Bayly, *Indian Society*, esp., ch. 4.
[26] See my 'Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamilnadu' in *State Power and Dominance in Modern India*, eds F. Frankel and M. Rao (New Delhi, 1989).

movement did finally begin to contest *Brahmanic* ideology, it did so from the premise that this ideology had truly represented the historic south Indian past and was not simply a recent and 'false' colonial adumbration. The non-*Brahmin* movement internalised the colonial version of tradition even while protesting at its immorality.[27] But why should it, or rather the non-*Brahmin* society which it represented, ever have accepted as 'true' that which it knew to be 'wrong'?

II

Some clues to colonial India's 'missing' history of class formation and to the dialectics of acquiescence and resistance have started to become available in the most recent historical literature. While the notion of a serious decline, or depression, in the Indian economy has been a commonplace of the historiography since the nineteenth century, the work of Christopher Bayly is the first to spell out its full implications for the character of social change. For Bayly, the crisis, which dominated the second quarter of the nineteenth century, was manifested in consistently low prices (in the south, rarely reaching sixty per cent of their 1800–1820 levels). He sees its causes to lie partially in the deepening impact of international economic forces: the loss of India's overseas textile markets to Manchester manufactures, the general lowering of world commodity prices attendant on the rise of industrial Europe and the pumping of specie out of India to prime Britain's trade with China.

But some of its causes also derived from British political policies: a heavy and extractive revenue demand to meet escalating military expenditures and loss of domestic purchasing power due to the dismantling of Indian armies and court centres across most of the interior. With regard to this dismantling, these armies and court centres had acted as the principal foci of consumption and demand and had spun out complex networks of trading and banking connections, involving and articulating large areas of the internal economy. Their breaking-up greatly reduced the forces of demand, threw out of employment large numbers of erstwhile consumers and cut many long-established banking and trading networks. De-industrialisation and de-urbanisation took place in many areas as an increasing proportion of society was obliged to look to the land and to farming for its subsistence.[28]

Bayly takes the social consequences of the depression to have been to strengthen, or to give, Indian society many of those features of 'backwardness', which the perspectives of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed were part of its long-term character.

[27] *Ibid.*
[28] C. Bayly, *Indian Society*, esp., ch. 4.

Peasant petty commodity production, carried on with limited inputs of investment capital, became near-universalised among the work force, displacing the higher value and more capital intensive forms of production to be found widely at an earlier date. Mobile service and trading groups became fixed permanently to the land, giving society a more static appearance. Elaborate structures of finance and commerce, attached to the old courtly centres, collapsed into little more than systems of peddling. In effect, Indian economic society became simplified and 'peasantised'. This process, of course, also made it ripe for the imputation and imposition of 'tradition'[29]

In many ways, Bayly's general Indian categorisation of the 'peasantisation' and 'traditionalisation' of the period fits the particular circumstances of southern India extremely well. As Sarada Raju has seen, there was extensive de-industrialisation and de-urbanisation; and shortages of money pushed some parts of the economy towards a reversion almost to barter relations.[30] Equally, as Arun Bandopadhyay has recently described, the frontiers of peasant production pushed relentlessly forward, keeping well ahead of levels of population increase and outstripping significant investments in irrigation, which were negligible before the 1850s.[31] Erstwhile mobile groups, of peripatetic warriors, herdsmen and pastoralists, also were 'sedentarised' as a deliberate policy of the state.[32] The social structure began to develop the simplicities and rigidities required by the modern definition of tradition.

Where, however, the south's experience may have differed from that of Bayly's Indian model—or where that model may need modification—concerns the implications of these processes for social, and class, stratification. Broadly speaking, Bayly sees the social effects of the depression as 'flattening' and 'homogenising' the previously complex hierarchies of society. The polities of little kings and warriors had been sustained by alliances right down to the local level, alliances which marked out petty hierarchies and elite statuses. As those polities collapsed, and as the value of the production controlled by their local allies declined, so the once distinct levels of local society became pressed together and homogenised. Virtually everybody in rural society, in effect, became 'a peasant' and many distinctions of rank (once articulated through the terms of village officer status and dominant clan membership) were lost.[33]

In the south, it is possible to see something of this process at work

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[29] *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

[30] A. Sarada Raju, *Economic Conditions in the Madras Presidency 1800–1850* (Madras, 1941).

[31] A. Bandopadhyay, *The Agrarian Economy of Tamilnadu* (Calcutta, 1991), ch. 6.

[32] C. Bayly, *Indian Society*, ch. 4.

[33] *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

in the bottom levels of peasant society, where distinctions between lineages and adjacent caste clusters, and between warriors, farmers, artisans and pastoralists, tended to break down to produce a more homogenous community of petty cultivators.[34] However, if the upper levels of rural society are examined, no such 'levelling' process would seem to have taken place. Indeed, social relations appear to have been moving in the opposite direction.

As revenue re-surveying operations from the 1850s subsequently revealed, it was during this earlier period that leading families secured control of most of the best lands in their villages. In the Madras Deccan districts, for example, prominent village *Reddis* increased their share of the highest quality 'black-soil' lands from twenty to over sixty per cent of the total.[35] Various forms of privileged revenue right also became more narrowly distributed. In Tanjore district, one family (with major representation in the local bureaucracy) acquired rights in thirty-five per cent of the villages in the district.[36] Another family, with extremely recent and tenuous claims to pre-eminence, consolidated 'interests in' into 'ownership of' 6,000 acres of highly productive wetlands.[37]

This shift in the distribution of assets also went hand in hand with an increase in the security of local notables and a strengthening of their authority over society. As Eugene Irschick has recently seen, in Chingleput district the recognition of superior claims to rights by certain *Vellala* notables terminated long-term pressures from below on their possession of the land and greatly weakened the position of 'inferior' castes in relation to them.[38] In Tanjore and Malabar districts throughout this period, high caste families who had 'run away' during the troubles of the late eighteenth century were being encouraged to return and re-take possession of their lands from the low caste families who had occupied, and cultivated, them, sometimes for as long as two generations. The 'dispossessed' were driven back into the multitude of landless and semi-landless paupers who now constituted the majorities

[34] It was the consequent tendency of previously 'non-landed' pastoralist and service groups to take up petty cultivation, which may be seen to have increased cultivated acreages well ahead of population. See my 'The Commercialisation of Agriculture in Colonial India: Production, Subsistence and Reproduction in the "Dry" South, c1870–1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXVII: 3 (1993).

[35] *Idem.*

[36] H. S. Thomas, *Report on Tanjore Remissions in Fasli 1294. (A.D. 1884–85)* (Madras, 1885). Tamilnadu Archives.

[37] This was the 'Pundi' family of Udaiyans from Vandiyar. During the disturbances of the 1780s, they had become pattucdars (revenue contractors) for an extensive tract of depopulated land. Somewhat mysteriously, these contractual rights were converted into 'mirasi' [proprietary] rights during the early years of British rule.

[38] E. Irschick, 'Order and Disorder in Colonial South India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXIII:3 (1989).

of village society.[39] Further, all over the south large quantities of landed resources, dedicated to the gods but shared broadly by the agrarian community, were turned into the exclusionary possessions of temple 'trusts', increasingly under the control of selected local notables.[40]

The concept of 'levelling' would but very inadequately describe the social process to which the agrarian south was subject in the second quarter of the nineteenth century: the bottom segments of society may have been pounded flat, but the top segments grew taller yet. The privilege of dominant elites was greatly enhanced and, with the possession of land playing a larger part in it, the nature of elite authority itself was coming to shift towards a basis in class. These changes were also manifested in the kinds of 'tradition' which the south now developed. These evoked less a 'peasant' past of community and egalitarianism than a royal and divine past of dominance and hierarchy.[41] Privileged rights, which previously had circulated widely through society (and often had been bought and sold) now were deemed the direct 'gifts' of gods and kings, permanently and exclusively in the possession only of those families who had initially received them. The principle of heredity increased its authority over those of acquisition and achievement in the determination of elite status. Equally, as noted before, 'caste' relations became subsumed beneath the *Brahmanic* theory of *varnashramadharma*, which imposed on them the most rigid and static of hierarchies.

As southern society became 'traditionalised', so it became noticeably more stratified. The nature of its stratification, however, was extremely curious. On the one hand, deepening insertion into the world economy and the growing importance within it of the possession, or 'ownership', of land, appeared to make dominance a product of capitalism—and hence a function of class. But, on the other hand, elite status itself became increasingly defined in relation to heredity and caste, which suggests an altogether different basis to power and authority. How did the two become interwoven? And, to return to a previous issue, why did not the masses of society, who were plainly the chief victims of the new social design, not raise more protest against it while it was in the process of creation—rather than half a century later?

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[39] See my 'The Golden Age of the Pariah' in *Labour and Dalit Movements in India* (New Delhi, forthcoming).

[40] Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, ch. 3.

[41] On the 'communitarian' logic of southern society, see B. Stein, 'Politics, Peasants and the Deconstruction of Feudalism in Medieval India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, XII:2, 3, (1985).

III

To appreciate the logic of the south's 'traditionalisation', and of the peculiar kind of colonial capitalism which it reflected, it may be necessary to consider not only the economic imperatives released by the depression, but the way that they worked in relation to the institutions of the colonial state. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the Company state launched a major 'revenue offensive' against agrarian society.[42] The immediate reasons for this were rapidly rising military expenditures and the immediate excuse was the invocation of an (invented) theory of oriental despotism under which, supposedly, all land belonged to the state. However, given that 'the state' was also 'a Company', and heavily engaged in commercial activities, the formal reasons and excuses can be understood in a different light. The offensive served generally to increase the share of surplus extracted from the peasantry, which ultimately went as returns to capital. Indeed, as Eric Stokes and Sugata Bose have shown, in other parts of India where *zamindari* rights had been created, to constitute forms of proprietary right between the peasantry and the state, the period was marked by a 'rental offensive' which directly raised returns to landlord capital.[43]

As I have argued elsewhere, certain aspects of 'traditionalisation' may be understood as functions of the revenue offensive. The colonial state's principal concern at this time was to allocate responsibility for tax payment and to fix assets in such a way that they could easily be seized and liquidated for the redemption of debt. 'Traditional' forms of property right, which emphasised principles of heredity over market acquisition, served the state's needs nicely. The circulation of wealth within Indian society was immobilised, so that realisable assets could not disperse and disappear. And the state's claims to those assets were guaranteed by the establishment of the convention that payment of tax revenue and debt represented the first call on all private wealth, against which the prerogatives of 'traditional' right could not stand.[44]

But such a functionalist formulation of the matter may miss other aspects of the 'traditionalisation' process, several of which by no means reflected the Company state's needs and against whose implications it fought several battles. Most of these battles centred on the issues of

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[42] See N. Mukherjee, *The Ryotwari System in Madras* (Calcutta, 1962), chs. 5, 10.

[43] S. Bose, *Agrarian Bengal* (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 2; E. Stokes, 'Agrarian society and the Pax Britannica in northern India in the early nineteenth century' in E. Stokes, *Peasant*.

[44] See my 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XV:3 (1981).

privileged tenure or *inam* rights, which themselves provided the material underpinnings of 'traditional' social relations.

As the Company state had expanded across the south in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, it had encountered an agrarian structure defined in terms of extensive 'immunities' to land revenue payment. These went under a wide variety of local names but, for convenience, will hereafter be termed *inam* (after Persian and British usage). *Inams*, of one kind or another, were held by a wide variety of village officials and servants, by principal landholders and notables, by *Brahmins* and holymen, and by temples and *maths*. Their origins remain the subject of lively debate in the historiography of the medieval south. Burton Stein sees them deriving from the 'communitarian' institutions of the southern peasantry, and representing gifts or offerings to religious and secular elites.[45] Nicholas Dirks, by contrast and following more the established conventions of southern history, views them as the products of 'kingly' politics, representing the mechanisms by which pre-colonial royal states procured loyalty and support and satisfied clients and followers.[46] Whatever their origins, *inams* certainly were used as the currency of royal politics in the closing pre-colonial decades although, by then, they had also acquired another function. In the highly commercialised economy of eighteenth-century south India, certain types of *inam* were widely bought and sold as valuable properties and potential stores of wealth.

In the period from 1790 to 1810, the in-coming Company state broadly recognised the provenance of *inam*, and of privileged rights of all kinds. Its principal concerns at this time—an era marked by warfare and social disturbance—were to achieve as quick a settlement with agrarian society as possible and to restore agricultural production. To these ends, while cutting out large numbers of warriors and petty kings who were deemed 'unsettleable', it sought a ready accommodation with rural elite groups nearer to the land and to the direction of cultivation, and with 'religious' authorities. The *inam* rights of such groups were generally recognised in a 'silent settlement' which bound the interests of much local elite privilege in with those of the new state.[47]

Robert Frykenberg has seen this arrangement guaranteeing long term continuity in the relations of southern society across the divide between the pre-colonial and colonial periods. However, in one regard at least, the 'silent settlement' already presaged significant change. Definition and protection of *inam* right was passed by the Company state to the new courts of 'Anglo-Hindu' law established by Lord

[45] B. Stein, 'Politics, Peasants'.
[46] N. Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, pt. 2.
[47] R. Frykenberg, 'The Silent Settlement'.

Cornwallis. These immediately altered the character of the right by construing it, not in relation to the dynamic and contestatory processes of community, kingly-state and market formation, but in relation to the static principles of ancient precedent, hereditary succession and caste hierarchy. Most forms of *inam* were held to represent properties or trusts, bequeathed by an originatory act or 'from time immemorial' to particular persons, families and institutions, and to be 'encumbered' and inalienable.[48]

The reasons for this re-interpretation of 'right' have formed the focus of much debate. The proclivities of a judiciary drawn from the English gentry, with its own beliefs in the primacy of genealogy, the immutability of common law right and the importance of social deference undoubtedly played their part. Never was this clearer than in the way that rules for the 'proper' administration of temple endowments were drawn up in a terminology—replete with references to 'ministers' and 'congregations'—which came straight out of the Church of England.[49] Equally, 'accidents' of documentation played their part. As Bernard Cohn has argued, English culture gave precedence to written over oral forms of authority, and documentary over non-documentary sources of right.[50] *Mirasidari* elites able to produce documents outlining their 'ancient' privileges, 'gift' *inamdars* with *sanads* of appointment and *Brahmin* priests, able to cite the canons of Sanskrit scripture, found their cases carrying much more weight in the courts than those of people without the appropriate papers.[51] Further, in certain ways, there seems an elision of social perception—or at least aspiration—between a number of Tamil elite groups and their new English masters. The ideal of a peasant society meekly paying its dues and deferences and keeping 'to its station' was a property common to *Brahmin*, *mirasidar* and English gentry pretension.

The concentration of debate on the intellectual origins of the new 'colonial' version of traditional right, however, may have obscured full appreciation of the social and political effects of its construction. It was not only that certain types of *inam* and claim to right were validated and strengthened by the support of the colonial law: it was also that others were invalidated. Claims not cast in the approved forms—often claims which contested the privilege of the approved forms—were delegitimated and taken out of 'tradition'. Hosts of claims to a share in the agricultural product—especially from tenant-, labouring- and village

[48] See N. Dirks, 'From little king to landlord', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXVIII:2 (1986); E. Irschick, 'Order and Disorder'.

[49] A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, chs. 3, 4.

[50] B. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command' in *Subaltern Studies*, IV (New Delhi, 1986).

[51] See my 'Law, State and Agrarian Society'.

servant groups 'below' the enfranchised *mirasidars* and 'personal' *inamdars*—were abrogated in a way which fundamentally shifted the balances of the social structure.[52]

Nor was this to be the only transformation affecting *inam* right. In the next generation, the character and purposes of the Company state changed rapidly, as did the material context in which *inam* right was set. By the 1820s, possessed of overwhelming military strength in the south and of an army which needed to be both paid and used, the Company's concerns turned from settlement and restoration to surplus extraction and expropriation. The weight of the revenue demand escalated in inverse proportion to the depression-hit south's ability to pay: rates of per acres assessment, set in the high-price years of the early nineteenth century (and, often, on the basis of inflated estimates of productivity) went unrevised.[53] The demand was enforced by military methods of coercion, which, as the *Torture Commission* of 1855 revealed, rendered the concept of the British civilising mission somewhat prob- lematic.[54] Whatever may have been the case, both earlier and later, there can be little doubt concerning the strength of state power at this time—albeit a power very narrow in its focus and largely negative in its economic consequences. Southern society was bludgeoned and robbed with a remarkably single-minded purpose.

One effect of the 'revenue offensive' was to consolidate the village community as the basic unit of rural society and politics. Previous south Indian state systems, as they grew powerful, had sought to break down intermediary layers of warrior-clan and peasant community organisation between their treasuries and the village base. The scope and shape of peasant social institutions had long varied inversely with the power of emperors and sultans.[55] None, however, had ever succeeded in eli- minating intermediary authority on the scale now achieved by the British; nor in isolating the village so completely as the central arena of 'material' politics. The *ryotwari* revenue system progressively swept aside the taxation and rental functions of clan-chiefs and *zamindars* (in many cases, even after they had been supposedly 'permanently settled') and carried its claims for a preponderant share of agricultural surplus to the village boundary.

Significantly, however, not even in these years or irresistible military

[52] For example, the courts refused to recognise the claims of labourers to share-rights in the crops that they cultivated. See D. Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985), ch. 6; also my 'Law, State and Agrarian Society' and 'The Golden Age of the Pariah'.

[53] N. Mukherjee, *Ryotwari System*, ch. 10; A. Bandopadhyay, *Agrarian Economy*, chs. 6, 7.

[54] See Government of Madras, *Report of the Commissioners for the Investigation of Alleged Cases of Torture in the Madras Presidency* (Madras, 1855).

[55] This is a major theme of B. Stein, *Peasant State*.

power did the state get much beyond the boundary. Allocation of the demand between rural families remained very much an intra-village affair, brokered by village officers and notables. Ability to deflect or reduce the revenue burden determined the difference between wealth and poverty, sometimes between survival and starvation, and made the village arena a central focus of 'indigenous' political economy and concern over property right.[56]

It also made the village a rare field for the exercise of 'entre-preneurship' in an otherwise depressed, dislocated and 'colonised' economy. Through their ability to manipulate the revenue demand inside the village, local officers and notables were able to accumulate for themselves substantial quantities of rights and lands. The *Reddis* of the Madras Deccan, whom earlier we noted trebling their holdings of the best black-soil lands across this period, were all hereditary 'village officers' with a strong hold on the allocation of the revenue demand and the written records of local rights.[57] It was, above all, through the functioning of the revenue system, rather than the development of the economy, that rural society became increasingly stratified in this era.

But the revenue offensive did not only promote the 'village-ification' of society. It also, albeit by complex and indirect means, can be seen as responsible for its wider 'traditionalisation' as well. Needless to say, the imperatives of the offensive soon began to run up against the walls of 'immunity' represented by *inam* right and to provoke a rapid change of attitudes in certain sections of the bureaucracy. What had seemed necessary and just in the conditions of 1790 to 1810 now appeared unwarranted profligacy in the circumstances of 1825 to 1850. With political supremacy assured, population increasing and cultivation extending, the services of most classes of *inamdars* no longer were so essential to the state. Yet, across the various districts, anywhere between twenty-five per cent and fifty per cent of cultivation, usually on the best lands, were under some species of *inam* immunity and protected from the revenue demand.

The revenue offensive began to question and to probe the prerogatives of *inam*. By order of London, after 1824 no new *inam* grants were to be made. Certain types of *inam*, which depended more on the recognition of 'local custom' than documentary authority, were steadily phased out. General reductions on the revenue demanded from Brahmin holders of 'government land', for example, began to disappear in the 1830s. Equally, the privileges of *mirasidars* in wetland areas to enjoy a share of the produce of non-*mirasidari* cultivators (or of the revenue, as the bureaucracy saw it) and to control access to village lands, were

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[56] See R. Frykenberg, 'Village Strength in South India' in R. Frykenberg, *Land Control*.
[57] See my 'Commercialisation of Agriculture'.

challenged.[58] Even the revenue immunities enjoyed by temple lands did not escape. Notionally, revenue and rents were collected from lands pledged to temples and used for a wide variety of purposes, from maintenance of fabric and ceremonies, to feeding the poor, to investing in joint-projects of economic development with devotees and worshippers. On the claim that the state had supervisory functions over their administration, the Company bureaucracy seized direct control of many temples. Its officers then reconstrued the notion of 'legitimate' temple expenditures in order to reduce them, particularly to reduce their contribution to welfare and economic development, and either passed back the resulting surpluses to the regular revenue account or used them for their own projects.[59]

During the 1830s, the Board of Revenue also sent out general orders to its district Collectors to scrutinise carefully all 'personal' *inam* titles with a view to uncovering as many 'false' and 'fraudulent' claims as possible. As the precise terms on which *inam* titles could be validated were by no means crystal clear anyway, this opened the door to extended investigations which challenged and 'resumed' to the revenue department considerable quantities of what had been thought of as *inam* property. In two districts in the 1840s, energetic young Collectors took the Board's instructions as a general licence to question many forms of *inam* right derived from erstwhile military service. In Cuddapah and Nellore, large numbers of *inamdars* protested that the bureaucracy, rather than seeking to disprove particular claims, had insisted that all claims were to be re-scrutinised and had to be re-proved anew—which threatened to abrogate the great majority of their rights at a single sweep.[60]

If that was the intention of the Board of Revenue, the developments in Cuddapah and Nellore soon terminated it. Major riots broke out in defence of *inam* rights and post-pacification southern society was brought to a rare condition of open revolt.[61] But the revenue offensive, in any event, had already started to be turned by resistance of a less dramatic, but no less effective, kind. In the wetland areas, *mirasidar* groups regularly organised cultivation and revenue strikes, which forced local officials into compromises and which successfully defended their privileges.[62] Further, a major rift began to develop inside the colonial state

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[58] See D. Ludden, *Peasant History*, ch. 4; E. Irschick, 'Order and Disorder'.

[59] A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, ch. 3; F. Presler, *Religion Under Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, 1987), chs. 2, 3.

[60] Government of Madras, *A Collection of Papers Relating to the Inam Settlement of Madras Presidency* (Madras, 1906), 12–14.

[61] *Idem.*

[62] See, for example, D. Ludden, *Peasant History*, chs. 4, 6; E. Irschick, 'Order and Disorder.

itself over the rights of *inam* and property as opposed to those of the state.

What English courts of law have construed as a right, still more a 'sacred' property right, they are most unlikely ever to give up—and least of all to a self-styled 'despotic' regime. The courts validated and stoutly defended large numbers of *inam* claims against the attempts of the bureaucracy to abrogate them. Indeed, they frequently declared the de facto actions of Collectors and revenue bureaucrats illegal and unwarranted and handed out awards against them of compensation and restitution.[63] Relations between the judicial and executive branches of the Company service became poisonous: with the latter regularly denouncing the former in its despatches; and the former launching a pamphlet war against 'state despotism', which represented perhaps the first stirrings of a 'modern' political consciousness in Madras.[64]

The revenue department's offensive against *inam* rights plainly failed and, by the 1850s and in the context of rather different economic conditions, was brought to an unceremonious end. A general review of the revenue system was set in motion, with the specific object of reducing a weight of taxation which was generally agreed to be penal and destructive.[65] Further, an *Inam Commission* was established to 'modernise' such rights by transforming them from revenue immunities into real properties in the land.[66] The struggle over them, however, may be seen to have had lasting consequences. It generated a particular 'rhetoric of right', and sets of relations of domination and subordination, authority and defiance, and acquiescence and resistance, which go a long way to explaining the processes which 'traditionalised' southern society.

IV

The extremely distinctive ways in which the courts validated—and invalidated—*inam* rights very quickly had a general affect on the way that all claims to right and privilege came to be cast. Claims put forward in terms of the prerogatives of acquisition, achievement and 'history' failed; those in terms of antiquity and heredity at least had a chance of success. South Indian society did not take long to learn the lesson and to develop its own rhetoric of right accordingly.

[63] See my 'Law, State and Agrarian Society'; D. Ludden, *Peasant History*, ch. 6; E. Irschick, 'Order and Disorder'.

[64] See J. B. Norton, *The Administration of Justice in South India* (Madras, 1853); and *Reply to a Madras Civilian's Defence of Mofussil Courts in India* (London, 1853).

[65] See my 'Law, State and Agrarian Society'.

[66] See *A Collection of Papers ... Inam Settlement*.

In the Sri Parthasarathi temple in Madras city, for example, initial reactions to the new legal terms of temple administration, which imposed a Scriptural interpretation of caste hierarchy onto a community previously riven along the lines of *Vadagalai-Thengalai* ritual factionalism, may have been contentious. Petitions drawn up in terms of the old criteria of legitimacy continued to be presented through the early years. But, as Arjun Appadurai has seen, by the 1840s the new rhetoric of right was starting to take over. Petitioners (the very same petitioners) who previously had couched their claims in ways which denied the authenticity of a uniform *Brahmanic* caste hierarchy, now couched their claims in ways which accepted it. Their new pleas centred only on the extent to which their own given place within that hierarchy was 'mistaken' and too 'low', and should be raised to a 'higher' level which would give them greater rights.[67] Elsewhere in Madras, and around other temples, the cleavage between right-hand and left-hand castes, which had dominated social relations for centuries, similarly underwent a rapid 'disappearance'.[68] The new language of caste contention focused on disputes within the *Brahmanically*-validated hierarchy.

Similarly, petitions in defence of personal *inam* rights tended progressively to drop de-recognised criteria and to dress themselves up, however implausibly, in the language of ancient and hereditary privilege. In one particular case, the invented character of this 'tradition' stands out most clearly. Puddukottai 'state' passed into the Madras presidency in a highly unusual condition, retaining the paraphernalia of a 'princely' kingdom but with its laws subject to direct British administration. Here, in the mid-nineteenth century, the power of its royal house to redistribute *inam* grants was still etched in living memory. But members of the local 'gentry' appealed to British judges that their privileged rights were derived from hereditary kinship criteria and hence were neither resumable nor re-distributable by the state.[69]

The apparent facility of south Indian society to transform its 'tradition' and rhetoric of right along lines prompted by the colonial power may seem remarkable—and suggestive of at least 'oriental dishonesty' (as the bureaucracy tended to see it) and, at worst, unbridled opportunism.[70] However, in the economic and political context of the time, it can better be understood as an action born of 'resistance' and essential to social survival. Under the pressure of the revenue offensive and the doctrines of the despotic state, the defence of *inam* right was one of the

[67] A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, chs 4, 5.
[68] Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, Madras city was riven by repeated outbreaks of right-hand/left-hand rioting. But, from the 1840s, the rioting simply ceased. See H. D. Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras* (Madras, 1913).
[69] N. Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, 335–36; also his 'From little king to landlord'.
[70] See N. Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, 335–36; also, R. Frykenberg, 'Village Strength'.

few available means of preserving resources, property and some kind of social continuity. Had the revenue bureaucracy had its way, south Indian society would, indeed, have been 'levelled' and 'flattened' to the ground.

The division within the structure of the colonial state between judiciary and executive offered a mechanism which indigenous society could use to protect itself. Moreover this mechanism involved the use of forms of rhetoric which, if selected and reinterpreted from those found in pre-colonial society, were not wholly without precedent there: *Brahmins* and 'gentry' elites had used them in the past, if never so exclusively and authoritatively. The truly novel element in the situation was the despotic pretension of the colonial state, which had no precedent in practice (and little even in rhetoric) in the history of the south. Against the novelty of that pretension, south Indian society might better be seen as creatively using history in order to defend itself.

Moreover, the very processes by which southern Indian society was obliged to defend itself through, and in relation to, the law imposed on it also an obligation actively to participate in the construction of its new traditions. Unable to effect a general abrogation of *inam* rights, the revenue department pursued a policy of particularistic interrogation. It challenged specific rights on the grounds that they did not meet the validatory criteria of antiquity, heredity or conformity to the caste hierarchy established by the courts. If rights could be shown not to have been 'ancient' or held in unbroken hereditary succession or reflective of established caste propriety, they could be resumed by the state.[71]

This interrogation tightened the definition of 'tradition' and constructed a bizarre ontological context within which state–society relations were to be conducted. In the courts, it was now not 'modern' western intellectuals who told south Indian society that it had no history and was 'traditional'. Rather, through the legal processes of petition, it was south Indian society which had to represent itself before the tribunals of colonial 'justice' as having been, indeed, changeless, static and 'traditional'; and to convince often-sceptical bureaucrats and judges that its structures of privilege and right did, indeed, date back directly to ancient precedent and 'time immemorial'. The penalty for admitting the possibility of change—of history—was the immediate loss of rights and privileges to the revenue coffers of the state. If necessity is the mother of invention, there can have been few cases of the invention of tradition born out of a greater necessity than this.

Furthermore, it was an invention whose influence soon came to reach outside and beyond the courts and to promote a wider re-

[71] See Government of Madras, *A Collection ... Inam Settlement.*

conceptualisation of relations with colonialism and within colonial society. The Indian lawyers who were involved in its construction enjoyed a much broader role as spokesman for Indian society at large in its dealing with the British Raj; and the petitional style of politics dominated 'modernising' India's first attempts at self-liberation later in the nineteenth century. In those attempts, the prerogatives of 'tradition' were frequently invoked against the interferences and threats of the colonial state: to protect, for example, 'religious' customs, joint-property forms and certain structures of gender relations.[72] India's claims to autonomy and an important part of her sense of 'nationhood' were ultimately derived from the premises of her new tradition.

In the colonial situation of South India, then, 'resistance' proceeded much less by sacrificing effective 'domination' to the preservation from Western 'hegemony' of cultural autonomy and authenticity.[73] Rather, and taking strategic advantage of contradictions within the colonial regime and the ideology of 'modernity', autonomy and authenticity (whose historical meaning is unclear) were frequently sacrificed to limit the effects of domination. A neo-colonial constructed 'tradition' of irresumable *inam* right and Anglo-*Brahminised* 'Hinduism' preserved southern society—and economy—from the full impact of the revenue offensive and state despotism.

But just as the real historical dynamics of 'resistance' did not leave culture unchanged, so too they did not leave the structures of social relations untouched. The struggle to protect *inam* rights was, by its nature, a struggle to protect particularistic privilege. Further, it was only partially successful: some rights, which met the novel criteria of official tradition, were saved but many others were not. The economic consequences of this 'resistance' were, as we have noted, to constitute considerable concentrations of wealth and property in certain narrow sections of society—concentrations which stood out starkly in comparison to the situation of growing numbers of the now-rightless masses. Indeed, the success of the former was very directly at the expense of the latter. The price of the partial protection of *inam* right was deepening social stratification and Robert Frykenberg seems seriously mistaken in supposing that the *inam* settlement reflected a fundamental continuity between pre-colonial and colonial society.[74] But in one regard, however,

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[72] The first attempts at 'popular' nationalist mobilisation, particularly those of B. G. Tilak in Maharashtra in the 1890s, strongly emphasised the defence of 'traditional' social relations. See R. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokmanya* (Berkeley, 1975); also R. O'Hanlon, 'Issues of Widowhood' in *Contesting Power*, eds D. Haynes and G. Prakash (New Delhi, 1991).

[73] Pace R. Guha, 'Dominance without Hegemony'.

[74] R. Frykenberg, 'Silent Settlement'.

his interpretation does highlight a feature of the transformation, which now becomes problematic and requires explaining.

The 'masses' of society remained remarkably 'silent' while their own claims to right were dismantled and while the new configurations of elite power and prestige were established over their heads. Although there was some subsidiary litigation around the rights of *inamdari* and *mirasidari* 'tenants' and of labourers to customary shares in the crop, it was limited and almost entirely unsuccessful.[75] Yet, in the wake of its failure, there were no major uprisings of outrage and protest against the new pretensions of the privileged. Certainly, there were no uprisings on the scale of those led by the elites themselves in Cuddapah and Nellore when their rights were generally questioned; nor long-term resistances such as those mounted by *mirasidars*, through rent and cultivation strike, when their privileges were threatened. In fact, one of the ironies of the situation was that many lesser cultivators rallied to the causes of these 'greater' *inamdars* and *mirasidars*, which helped them to succeed: even though that 'success' guaranteed their own subordination.

To appreciate the reasons for this 'silence' and apparent acquiescence in intensifying elite domination, it may be necessary again to consider the material logic of depression and revenue offensive. It was not merely 'surplus' and 'profit' that were put at risk, but subsistence and social reproduction too. Official rates of assessment on 'government land' could often be higher than the depressed value of annual production. High quality lands were driven out of production in favour of lower quality lands which bore lower rates of assessment. State expenditure even on the maintenance, let alone development, of irrigation resources was negligible. Private capital investments on government land, when discovered, brought instant increases in revenue assessment to penal levels.[76] The logic of Company revenue policy spread devastation and agricultural regression in its wake. Without the immunities provided by *inam* rights, south Indian society in this era might well have faced a serious crisis of social reproduction—as some critics of the Company regime in the 1840s actually thought it was.

In this context, hardly surprisingly, cultivation and production tended to concentrate on *inam* land. Petty cultivators found it extremely difficult to survive without access, even as temporary and unprotected tenants, to 'validated' *inamdari* land; and, as high value and labour intensive cash-cropping tended to be concentrated here as well, labourers needed work on *inamdari* holdings. In effect, and as many Collectors of the

[75] As in D. Ludden, *Peasant History*, ch. 6.
[76] See A. Bandopadhyay, *Agrarian Economy*; D. Ludden, *Peasant History*, chs 4, 5; N. Mukherjee, *Ryotwari System*, ch. 10.

time ruefully admitted, *inam* land came to form the hub of local cultivating economies with government land used sparsely and often only under direct duress.[77]

The social consequence of this was, in many ways, to structure a kind of *inamdari* paternalism and hierarchy into agrarian relations on a much more extended scale than ever before. As the highly mobile and commercially-orientated rural society of the pre-colonial era gave way to the settled and more subsistence-orientated peasantry of the depression era, so the role of local elite groups in dictating and dominating regimes of material production and social reproduction tended to become enhanced. In the Madras Deccan, in the process of trebling the rich *inam* lands under their control, big *Reddis* took into their own houses the grain stores of their whole local communities— doling out wages, credit and subsidies to large numbers of tenants, clients and labourers.[78] In wetland areas, the relationship between 'dependent' and 'independent' *mirasi* tenants underwent a change, as more and more land was cultivated by peasants without implements and bullocks of their own who could provide only labour and had to borrow everything else (including pre-harvest subsistence) from their *mirasidar.*[79]

In these circumstances, where protection of *inam* right from the avaricious grasp of the state had logical priority over the internal distribution of the resources covered by that right and where an *inam*-centred economy offered the formally 'rightless' some means of livelihood and subsistence, which was better than anything that they could find outside, the apparent acquiescence of the 'dispossessed' in the new order does not seem so difficult to understand. Against the despotic revenue state, all of agrarian society shared a common interest; and elite 'paternalism' offered some rewards for abandoning claims to an economic 'independence' which now promised more risk than profit.

This paternalism, itself, began to generate its own custom of rights, in the claims of personal clientage and dependence, which displaced older conceptions of right, based on the autonomous privileges of clan, craft and occupational groups to a fixed share of the social product. And, by the mid-nineteenth century, the politics of 'poverty' were plainly coming to be played out in these terms, of insistent demands for patronage and support, rather than of independent claims to

[77] See my 'Commercialisation of Agriculture'; also, B. Stein, 'Does Culture make Practice Perfect?' in *All the Kings' Mana*, ed. B. Stein (Madras, 1984); also N. Mukherjee, *Ryotwari System*, 214.

[78] See my 'Commercialisation of Agriculture'; also my 'Economic Stratification in Rural Madras' in *The Imperial Impact*, eds A. Hopkins and C. Dewey (1978).

[79] C. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy 1880–1955* (Oxford, 1984), 168–200.

'right'.[80] In effect, the elongated social hierarchies and exaggerated social deferences promoted by the south's new 'traditions' were under-pinned by changing relations of material production and social repro-duction, as much as of culture'.

V

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the economic depression, the revenue offensive and the neo-colonial reconstruction of 'tradition' had done their work. Out of a once highly mobile, commercialised and contentious society, they had created, albeit by complex means, an agrarian structure marked now by the appearance of 'feudal' hierarchy. In south India, as in many other parts of the world, the first consequence of the rise of western dominance over capitalism would seem to have been the enlargement of 'serfdom'. However, beginning also in the middle of the nineteenth century, the dynamics of international capi-talism, and the responses to it of colonial states, underwent a change.

With the expansion of markets created by the building of the railways and of the Suez canal, the economic depression started to lift. The colonial state (brought now under immediate parliamentary direction) reviewed both its ideological stance and its economic priorities. The affectations of 'oriental despotism' dropped away to be replaced by a more consistent recognition of real private property rights in land, even so-called government land. Equally, economic policies moved away from the simple extraction of revenue and exploitation of Company monopoly rights and towards the promotion of a more general com-mercial expansion.[81] The effective weight of the revenue burden declined rapidly and, with it, the significance of *inam* immunity. During the 1860s, *inam* rights were converted into regular rights in landed property, alienable and transferable and scarcely distinguishable from ordinary rights. The colonial age of *inam* was over—and very noticeably, so too was the uncontested legitimacy of the cultural 'tradition' which had grown up with it.

While *Brahmins* and other elites, whose privileges had been enlarged by it, still clung to its tenets—and even generalised them into the bases of Indian national identity—many elements in southern society started to become more questioning. As noted previously, the south was galvanised by movements which sought to challenge the deferences and prerogatives of 'tradition'. Self-conscious 'non-*Brahmins*' disputed (once more) the authority over them of *Brahmins* and of hierarchical schema

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[80] See my 'Country Politics: Madras 1870–1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, VII:3 (1973).
[81] C. Baker, *Rural Economy*, ch. 6.

of caste. A variety of identity movements emerged to break down the atomism caused by 'village-ification' and to create (or re-create) broader communities defined by ties of 'blood', which harked back to the clan past.[82] Very often these latter movements also contested hierarchy by claiming for all their members privileges once enjoyed only by elite families within them: *Gounder Vellala* and *Maravar* community movements, for example, expanded the prerogatives of kingship as defining characteristics of their entire blood-lines and sponsored the development of a new (or re-newed) ideology of corporate 'dominance' over the countryside.[83] A 'new' cultural tradition—or tradition of culture—asserted (or re-asserted) itself to reflect the changing context of social, political and economic relations in the later colonial age.

But in at least two regards, the experiences of the era of depression and of colonial 'despotism' continued to mark the ways in which questions of right, morality and identity were construed and to give testimony to the irreversibility of history. In the first place, those movements which now contested *Brahmanic* caste hierarchy and the particularities of privilege never doubted, as did their forebears in the pre-colonial age, that such hierarchy and privilege had a 'true' base in history. Whereas then, *Brahmin* pretension might have been swept aside or modified by the generation of alternative Hindu traditions based on *bhakti* devotionalism and popular heterodox practice, now non-*Brahminism* started from the premise that *Brahmins* had established their authority over 'all' of Hinduism. Non-*Brahminism* accepted the 'Anglo-Hindu' notions both that Hinduism existed as a single organised religion and that, for at least the last two thousand years, *Brahmins* had possessed authority over it. Its dispute was with the moral status and implications of this fact: not with its status as an historical and cultural 'fact' in the first place.[84]

And second, non-*Brahminism*'s case for altering this fact in the future centred not, as it might have done in the pre-colonial era, on the imperatives for the re-distribution of 'honour' created by changing relations of wealth and power, but on the prerogatives of 'tradition' itself. The social critique offered by the non-*Brahmin*, and many other 'caste' movements, focused on the notion that Brahmin hierarchy and privilege were the products, not of 'original tradition' but only of 'history' and 'change'. The critique argued, in a way colonial jurists would readily have understood, that a primal, pre-Aryan social condition had existed, which was the 'true' seat of rights from time immemorial and which 'history', in the form of the Aryan conquest,

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[82] See my 'Caste, Class and Dominance'.
[83] B. Beck, *Peasant Society in Konku* (Vancouver, 1972); C. Baker, *Rural Economy*, 267–74.
[84] See my 'Caste, Class and Dominance'.

had illegitimately abrogated. The non-*Brahmin* movement sought a revolution 'backwards' into a past as immemorial as any English common lawyer could have conceived.[85]

In reducing the scope of claims to right almost exclusively to the provenances of 'authentic tradition', and thus in de-legitimating history, colonialism, not only immobilised, dominated and exploited Indian society, it also entrapped Indian culture and self-conception in an ontological net from which even those seeking to overturn its consequences have found escape extremely difficult.

[85] *Idem.*