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STATE AND SOCIETY IN MAHARASHTRA  
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

Ravinder Kumar

A Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Australian National University



This thesis is based on my original research and  
is all my own work.

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Dated: 23rd 1 July 1964

### SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

The impact of British rule over India has received considerable attention at the hands of the historian. But there remain important gaps in our knowledge of this impact. These gaps are a result of the historian's failure to discern a causal relationship between the values and objectives of British administrators in India, and the changes stemming from the policies they pursued. In focussing attention on the principles which inspired British administrators, the historian has thrown a flood of light on the premises of British policy. But despite the insight he has gained into the intellectual motivations of British policy, his task remains unaccomplished until he dwells upon the consequences of British rule, and relates these consequences to the social ideals and political objectives which inspired British administrators. Consider an obvious example. The decay of the village communities under British rule is often looked upon as a process independent of the values of British administrators. But the moment it is realised that a consuming belief in individualism and rationalism encouraged British administrators to promote progress and prosperity through destroying the cohesion of rural society, the decay



of the village communities stands revealed as a piece of calculated social engineering rather than an accidental consequence of British rule over India.

Before the British concern for progress and prosperity can be related to the atomisation of rural society, it is necessary to comprehend the institutions and the organisation of society prior to the British conquest. The complexity of Hindu society, and the diversity of conditions in different parts of India, prevent the historian from focussing attention on the country as a whole, and oblige him to embark upon a regional investigation. I have chosen Maharashtra as my field of study. This choice was determined by several factors. Maharashtra comprises a distinct geographical region, and it possesses an historical tradition and a cultural identity peculiarly its own. It was also the birthplace of a religious movement which transmitted the great tradition of Hinduism to the masses, and formed the basis of a polity that successfully challenged the domination of Islam, and constituted the hub of an imperial system which virtually embraced the entire subcontinent before its defeat and dissolution at British hands. Finally, because the polity of Maharashtra was based upon resurgent Hinduism, the institutions of Hindu society flourished there in a fullness of life

which was absent in these institutions in parts of the country subject to Muslim rule.

The vitality of Hindu institutions in Maharashtra was reinforced by a Brahmin ruling family, which buttressed its power through the creation of a landowning aristocracy from amongst its caste-fellows, and through recruiting the bureaucracy from members of its caste. The exercise of political authority by a Brahmin dynasty created a unique situation in Maharashtra. While the values of Hinduism assured the Brahmin caste of a superior status throughout the country, the combination of social status with political power enabled the Brahmins of Maharashtra to enjoy a predominance without parallel in India. This predominance was reflected in the vigour of caste organisations which defined social sanctions and enforced social order. It was also expressed in the moral life of the community and the cohesion which held castes and classes together, despite chronic political instability, and despite the existence of an administration which was not subject to legal or rational restraints.

Both the values and institutions of Hindu society were related to a social order in which prescription and stability rather than progress and mobility formed the concern of the statesman and the administrator. The economic organisation of society was of a piece with these values and institutions.

The idea of economic growth was unknown; and the conduct of economic relations between the State and the individual, and between different sections of the community, through collective bodies like the village community or the caste guild stimulated co-operation as opposed to competition, and reduced inequalities in wealth to a minimum. The community was influenced by values which put a premium on order and stability; and its economic life revolved around institutions which stood in the way of economic growth. These values and institutions interacted with and reinforced one another, and they formed the basis of a society which achieved order through acquiescence in a rigid scheme of social stratification, and attained stability at the cost of economic stagnation.

It is necessary to focus attention on the obstacles to progress in traditional Maharashtra in order to understand the changes which transformed the region in the nineteenth century. These changes stemmed from the gulf in political and economic values between British administrators and their Maratha predecessors. To emphasize this gulf does not imply that all British administrators shared a common outlook, or that they were agreed upon the policies that were to be pursued in Maharashtra. But despite differences in their social visions, the new rulers of Maharashtra were committed to the



promotion of progress and prosperity, and this commitment distinguished them from the administrators of the old order. For instance, Mountstuart Elphinstone, the first governor of the conquered territories, was a conservative in the Burkean tradition. Yet Elphinstone yielded to none in his determination to replace the traditional polity of Maharashtra by a liberal polity; and he was as anxious as the advocates of reform to put Maharashtra on the path of progress and prosperity.

Where the Utilitarian advocates of reform within the British Government differed from the conservative administrators was in their doctrinaire belief in individualism and rationalism; and in their refusal to take any account of the traditional values and institutions of Maharashtra. These differences found their clearest expression in economic policy, and it was in economic policy that the Utilitarians achieved their most signal triumph over the conservatives. Elphinstone's concern for continuity in the midst of change enabled him to formulate a sophisticated policy of reform in the systems of education and administration. But his refusal to make a clean break with the past prevented him from coming to grips with the economic problems which afflicted rural society. Tradition and prescription did not at all concern the Utilitarians. Believing that in the laws of political

economy they possessed an objective insight into social reality, and convinced that progress was dependent upon an individualistic as opposed to a collective organisation of society, the Utilitarians set aside the policies pursued under the Marathas, and prepared the ground for a new order in rural society. This new order rested on the ryotwari system of land-revenue, which established a direct contractual relationship between the peasant and the State, and fixed his dues on the basis of the Ricardian law of rent. Through undermining the cohesion of the village community, and through fixing the land-tax on the basis of the laws of political economy, the Utilitarians hoped to stimulate agricultural production and to raise the level of rural prosperity. They also believed that the growth of individualism and a competitive social environment would result in the emergence of a class of rich peasants whose prosperity and dominance would form a stable base for British rule over India.

The ryotwari system of land-revenue proved to be a disastrous social experiment. The advocates of reform were all too successful in undermining the cohesion of the village community, and in transforming the social climate of village society. They were also able to promote the growth of a small class of rich peasants. But the rise of this class was overshadowed by the growing power of the moneylenders, whose

role in the rural economy acquired a new significance under the ryotwari system, and whose dominance was reinforced by the legal system created by the British Government. The rise of the moneylenders and the decline of the cultivators found expression in the transfer of holdings in land from the latter to the former. This transfer would have been a fruitful change if the moneylenders had taken over the role of capitalist farmers, since they not only possessed substantial holdings in land, but they also commanded the capital resources and the intelligence necessary to exploit rational techniques of agriculture. But their caste values prevented them from becoming capitalist farmers. Instead, they preferred to lease fields to their former owners, and continued to pursue the business of moneylending.

The conflict between the cultivators and the moneylenders led to the agrarian disturbances of 1875, which compelled British administrators to modify their policies and to amend the system of administration they had instituted to promote prosperity in rural society. Behind the abandonment of Utilitarian policies lay a growing belief that the advocates of reform had made a fatal mistake in disregarding the level of social development which prevailed in Maharashtra; and that reform could be creative only if it took into consideration the values and institutions which flourished in a



community. By remoulding the legal system in favour of the cultivator, and by stimulating the flow of rural credit through co-operative credit societies, the British Government sought to undermine the dominance of the moneylenders, and to promote the prosperity of the cultivators. But while these measures curbed the power of the moneylenders, they did not raise the prosperity of the cultivating community as a whole. Instead, the small class of rich peasants created by the ryotwari system exploited these measures to the exclusion of other cultivators, and they were able to establish their dominance over the villages of Maharashtra.

The rise of the rich peasants by the opening decades of the twentieth century held serious political implications for Maharashtra. The Brahmins of Maharashtra, who had dominated the region before the British conquest, maintained their hegemony throughout the nineteenth century, despite the emergence of a group of new Brahmins who subscribed to progress and rationality, and who were opposed to the values of caste and the institutions of orthodox Hinduism. So long as the peasants lived at a level of subsistence, they acquiesced in Brahmanical supremacy. But the moment a rich class arose within the peasantry, it challenged the Brahmin community, and sought for itself a status appropriate to its economic power. The rich peasants' quest for dominance was expressed in a



political movement which first challenged the position of the Brahmins, and then proceeded to attack the British Government. Because of their numerical strength and their economic power the rich peasants had no trouble in undermining the position of the Brahmins, and the transfer of political authority in 1947 signified their triumph over the British Government. Yet the bonds which linked the peasants and Brahmins to a common corpus of religious values prevented the anti-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra from assuming the disruptive characteristics it acquired in States like Tamilnad, where popular and elite values stemmed from conflicting schools of religious philosophy. Because of the existence of an intellectual consensus, once the rich peasants of Maharashtra had captured political power, they were able to forge a creative alliance with the Brahmins, and this alliance underlies the stability of politics in contemporary Maharashtra.

## PREFACE

This thesis deals with the transformation of Maharashtra from a traditional to a modern society. It sets out the transition of a relatively static society into one in which progress and change were pursued as desirable social objectives. Such a transition is of deep interest to the historian, both for the light it throws on the society with which he is concerned, and the insights it reveals into the nature of social change. Assuming this to be so, a study of Maharashtra acquires a heightened interest, since it was conquered from its traditional rulers in 1818 by a State which immediately set it on the path to modernisation. Because of the transfer of political authority into the hands of the British Government, the modernisation of Maharashtra can be studied in a sharpness of definition which does not obtain for societies where this change took place spontaneously.

I am indebted to the Australian National University for awarding me a scholarship which made this study possible, and for financing a field trip to India. I am also extremely grateful to my supervisor Dr D.A. Low, who opened a new intellectual horizon before me through encouraging me to

study the evolution of modern India. I have also been deeply influenced by Professor Partridge's seminars on the sociology of power. Others to whom I owe an intellectual debt are: Dr B.D. Graham, who taught me how to apply the skills of the political scientist to the problems of the historian; Dr Robin Gollan, who instilled in me an appreciation of the analytical tools of the Marxist historian; and Dr Eleanor Searle, whose advice and suggestions revealed to me how much the student of Indian history can learn from the mediaeval historian.

I am deeply grateful to the Director of the National Archives of India for permission to consult the records available with the NAI. I would also like to thank Mr V.C. Joshi, Assistant Director of Archives, whose support and encouragement have been invaluable to me throughout the course of this study. My stay in Bombay was made rewarding on account of the kindness extended to me by Dr P.M. Joshi, the Director of the Bombay Records Office. I am also obliged to Shri N.R. Pathak for permission to consult the unpublished material collected by the Bombay State Committee for the History of Freedom Movement in India. Last, but not the least, I would like to thank Shri D.V. Ambekar of the Servants of India Society, Poona, for extending to me the

hospitality of the Society, and permitting me to consult the private papers of G.K. Gokhale.

I also take this opportunity to extend my thanks to Mrs B. Press, who was so kind as to type out this thesis for me.

Ramdas Kulkarni

23.7.64

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Key to Abbreviated References	xvi
Glossary	xvii
CHAPTER I      INTEGRATION AND CLEAVAGE IN MAHARASHTRA - 1818	1
CHAPTER II     THE POLITICS OF MODERATION	70
CHAPTER III    THE UTILITARIAN DELUGE	138
CHAPTER IV     THE DECCAN RIOTS OF 1875	226
CHAPTER V      RECONSIDERATIONS AND REAPPRAISALS	289
CHAPTER VI     THE NON-ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY	352
CHAPTER VII    THE WHIG BRAHMINs	417
CHAPTER VIII   CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS IN MAHARASHTRA - 1918	477
CHAPTER IX     RETROSPECT	510
Bibliography	537



KEY TO ABBREVIATED REFERENCES

BA	Bombay State Archives
NAI	National Archives of India
DRC	Report of the Committee on the Riots in Poona and Ahmednagar, 1875.
East India Papers	Selections from the Records at the East India House, Relating to Revenue, Police and Civil and Criminal Justice, Under the Company's Government in India, 4 Vols.
DARA	Papers Relating to the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879: Government of India Selections No. 342.
BSCHFM	Source Material For a History of Freedom Movement in India (Bombay State Committee).

## GLOSSARY

Abhangas	The religious poetry composed by the Saints of Maharashtra.
Advaita	A monistic school of religious philosophy founded in the eighth century by the Hindu philosopher Sankaracharya.
Alankar	Belles lettres.
Bhakti	(lit. devotion) Refers to a popular religious upsurge in India which advocated the devotional as opposed to the intellectual realisation of God.
Brahma Samaj	A monotheistic sect in Bengal founded in 1828 by Raja Rammohan Roy. It found its support amongst the westernised intelligentsia of Bengal.
Bullotedars	Artisans who served the village communities of the Deccan.
Dakshina	(lit. gift) The gifts in cash given by the Peshwas to the Brahmins of Maharashtra for the propagation of Hinduism.
Deshmukh	The traditional landed aristocrats of Maharashtra.
Dharmashastras	The religious texts which govern the spiritual and secular life of a Hindu.
Gulamgiri	(lit. slavery) A polemical tract written by Jyotiba Phule, the non-Brahmin leader, describing the condition of the non-Brahmins of Maharashtra.
Hemantotsava	The season of spring.
Huzoor Cutcherry	The office of the principal Collector.
Jatha	A joint family.



Jo Hukam	(lit. whatever the master says) An idiom referring to a sychopantic individual.
Joshi	The term for a Brahmin in Maharashtra. Also refers to an astrologer.
Jyotish	The combined sciences of astronomy and astrology in India between which there was no clear distinction.
Kulkarni	The accountant of a Marathi village.
Kunbis	The cultivating caste of Maharashtra.
Lohar	Blacksmith.
Lokhitwadi	A prefix meaning 'An individual who dedicates himself to the Welfare of the People'.
Mahars and Mangs	Untouchable castes of rural Maharashtra. The Mahars are the watchmen of the village, while the Mangs look after cattle.
Mamlatdar	The executive officer of a district under the Peshwas.
Mayukh	Jurisprudence.
Meerasdar	A peasant who owns land on the meeras tenure, whereby property rights are vested in him subject to payment of Government tax.
Mofussil	The term refers to the country towns of Indian provinces.
Nyaya	Logic.
Rivaj	(lit. custom) Refers to the traditional system of land-tax in Maharashtra.
Ryot	A peasant.
Ryotwari	(lit. of the peasant or ryot) A land settlement in which the peasant enters into a direct contractual relationship with the State.
Shastri	A Brahmin versed in the religious texts.

Sirsoobedar	A provincial governor.
Sootar	A carpenter.
Sowcar	An urban financier.
Swarajya	(lit. self-governing) Refers to the Marathi speaking territories under the Peshwas.
Thulwaheeks	Marathi synonym for meerasdars.
Uprees	Tenants of the village community in Maharashtra.
Vanis	Village moneylenders.
Watan	(lit. land) Refers to a grant in land.



Fig. 124.—THE DECCAN PLATEAU. I, Maharashtra; II, Karnataka; III, Telangana; RD, Raichur Doab; CD, Ceded Districts.



## CHAPTER I

### INTEGRATION AND CLEAVAGE IN MAHARASHTRA - 1818

Maharashtra (lit. the great country) lies in central and western India. It is inhabited by a people who speak the Marathi language, and who possess a distinct cultural and historical tradition, which sets them apart from the rest of the country. Maharashtra covers an area which is bounded by the Arabian Sea on the west, the rivers Narbada and Tapti on the north, and the Malaprabha on the south, while its eastern boundary is defined by geophysical characteristics which demarcate the line of cleavage between the Marathi and Telugu speaking people. Apart from the narrow Concon coast, which lies between the Arabian Sea and the Ghats, Maharashtra comprises a plateau which slopes gradually to the east, but descends precipitously westwards to the coastal plain and the Arabian Sea. From the Ghats, which stretch roughly north to south, long tongues of higher ground run east and divide the plateau into compartments like the plains of Berar and

Nagpur, the basin of the upper Godavri, and the Bhima between Poona and Sholapur<sup>1</sup>.

The physical setting of Maharashtra has conferred certain advantages upon her people which are reflected in their history and in their political traditions. The Narbada and Tapti, which form the northern boundary of Maharashtra, were insurmountable barriers in the path of any invader who proceeded to the Deccan after establishing his authority over the basins of the Indus and Ganges. Even when these barriers had been overcome, the terrain of Maharashtra offered ideal conditions for sustained resistance against an alien army of occupation. Both the Ghats, which run parallel to the coastline, and the tongues of higher ground, which branch off eastwards from the Ghats, are flanked by rich valleys and plains that are dotted by numerous towns and villages. The uplands of Maharashtra therefore offer an ideal setting for military resistance against an alien authority, with abundant sources of supply, and with numerous sites for military strongholds, where power can be organised, both for aggression and for defence. The

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<sup>1</sup>

O.H.K. Spate, India And Pakistan, (London, 1954), pp. 644-6.

entire region is regarded by military strategists to be one of the most easily defensible parts of India<sup>2</sup>.

Because of the geographical setting of Maharashtra, and the cultural and political identity of her people, the region possesses a distinct personality of its own. The ethos of Maharashtra impresses itself forcibly upon the scholar who studies the history and culture of the region. Referring to the individuality of Maharashtra, Spate has summed up the land and its people with remarkable acumen and perception. 'The entire region', he points out, 'bears the imprint of the Marathas: a tough, hardworking, and cheerful peasantry, ably served by an adroit Brahmin elite which maintained close touch with the people'<sup>3</sup>. The uniqueness of the Maharashtrian style of life was just as apparent to Sir Richard Temple, the Governor of Bombay in the 1870s. Speaking of the extent to which the great tradition of Hinduism had influenced Maharashtra, Sir Richard observed: 'But despite (the cultural values which they share with the rest of India) the Mahrattas have always formed a separate people

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2

R. Temple, 'The Maratha Nationality' in Shivaji And The Rise Of The Marathas, (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 6-7.

3

Spate, op. cit., p. 654.

or nation, and still regard themselves as such<sup>4</sup>. What was obvious to Temple in the nineteenth century, and struck Spate in the twentieth, could hardly have failed to make an impression on the sons of the soil, and the personality of Maharashtra is a theme which has excited the interest of the Maharashtrian scholar from the times of Ranade to contemporary intellectual figures like Phatak and Karve and Garde.

### The Historical Tradition of Maharashtra

Behind the personality of Maharashtra lies an historical tradition stretching into the beginnings of the Christian era. During the three centuries which followed the birth of Christ Maharashtra was ruled by a Satvahana dynasty from the capital city of Paithan on the Godavri. Paithan under the Satvahanas was a well known centre of cultural and commercial activity, and the architectural remains of the period speak of a sophisticated and prosperous community. For a couple of centuries after the decline of the Satvahanas chaos reigned supreme over Maharashtra. But the Chalukyas, who came to power in the sixth century, and ruled over the land for the next century and a half, were powerful enough to keep at bay the Emperor Harsha of Kanauj, who had established his sway

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4

Temple, op. cit., p. 1.



over the whole of India north of the Narbada. The Chalukyas were eclipsed in A.D. 780 by the Rashtrakutas, who dominated Maharashtra till the end of the tenth century, and were the most powerful ruling family to establish themselves in the region. The Rashtrakutas were in turn overthrown by a cadet line of the Chalukyas, but political control over the region passed into the hands of a Yadava clan, which was destined to be overwhelmed by the Islamic deluge that swept through the land in the closing years of the thirteenth century.

Though the Yadavas were vanquished by the Muslim invaders from the north, Maratha power was weakened rather than completely destroyed by the Islamic invasion, and basing themselves on their inaccessible mountain strongholds, the landed chiefs of Maharashtra, whose other sources of power we shall presently discuss, were able to maintain a position of semi-independence in relation to the Muslim kings of the Deccan. But while it clung precariously to its traditional prerogatives, the landed aristocracy of Maharashtra was unable to present any serious challenge to the Muslim rulers, and it could not concert any organised opposition to the political dominance of Islam<sup>5</sup>.

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5

Vide The History And Culture Of The Indian People, ed. by R.C. Mazumdar, Vol. II (The Age of Imperial Unity), Chapter XIII and Vol. III (The Age of Imperial Kanauj) Chapter I.

Shivaji, the great hero of Maharashtra, who initiated a 'national' movement against the Muslim kings, was of relatively plebian origin. He saw his opportunity when the Mughal Emperors of the north conquered the Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan, and he exploited the political vacuum they had created to set up an independent State on the twin pillars of resurgent Hinduism and Maratha dominance. Shivaji and his soldiers were Marathas of lowly caste, but his ministers and administrators were Brahmins who comprised an intellectual aristocracy. Shivaji's achievements were many: he inculcated self-confidence in his people; he drilled them into a competent military power; and he laid the foundations of an enduring political community. The polity which he founded was visited by various vicissitudes after his death. But once he had aroused the spirit of independence among the Marathas, it was never extinguished, and the Mughal Empire bled itself to death in a vain bid to vanquish a State that was securely based on the support of the common people and the aristocracy of the region<sup>6</sup>.

Once the Marathas had consolidated their position in the Deccan, the Mughal Emperors were forced to acquiesce in their independence, and to grant them formal recognition.

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6

D. Kinciad, The Grand Rebel, (London, 1937), passim.

The instrument of recognition was negotiated on behalf of a descendant of Shivaji by his Brahmin minister, whose official designation was the Peshwa. The office of the Peshwa grew in importance as the Maratha kingdom gained in strength, and eventually became hereditary, while the king sank into a position of insignificance. In course of time the Maratha power became dominant throughout Maharashtra, with the Brahmin Peshwa controlling authority from his seat at Poona, while the titular kings clung to the shadow of power at the traditional capital of Satara.

At the same time as the Peshwa established his authority over Maharashtra, some of his subordinate chiefs were busy carving out independent principalities from the ruins of the Mughal Empire. Prominent among these chiefs were the Bhonsles who established themselves in Nagpur, the Scindhias who gained control of Gwalior, and the Holkars who seized hold of Indore. The relation between the Peshwa and these Maratha chiefs was a tenuous one. The chiefs were independent. Yet they recognised the Peshwa as the head of the Maratha polity. But while the chiefs accepted the formal suzerainty of the Peshwa, the Peshwa refrained from imposing any restriction on their freedom of action. A Confederacy thus came into existence of which the Brahmin Peshwa, or head, ruled over Poona and the Marathi speaking



(swarajya or independent) territories, while the subordinate Maratha chiefs controlled extensive tracts of central and upper India. Such was the imperial system which supplanted the Mughals, and which attained the height of its glory in the middle of the eighteenth century<sup>7</sup>.

Even before the Maratha Confederacy came into conflict with the British who were establishing themselves around Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, a military reverse at Panipat in 1761 at the hands of the Afghans had shaken the political edifice headed by Poona to its very foundations. But while the Marathas were able to recover from the defeat at Panipat, and applied themselves with renewed vigour to the fulfilment of their political ambitions, they met their Nemesis in the British Government. The first Anglo-Maratha War, which was fought in the 1780s, proved inconclusive. But internal dissensions in 1803 split the Confederacy wide open, and obliged the Peshwa to seek British protection, while British armies inflicted a series of defeats on his over-mighty vassals. As a result the Maratha chiefs were forced to negotiate peace with the British Government, whereby they ceded large pieces of territory, and accepted British political supremacy.

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7

C.A. Kincaid and D.B. Parasnis, A History of the Maratha People, (Mangalore, 1922), Vol. II, Chapters XXXVI to XXXIX, passim.

Though the war of 1803 shattered the Maratha Confederacy by placing the Peshwa and the Maratha chiefs under British tutelage, both the Peshwa and his vassals refused to accept the verdict of their second encounter with the British as decisive. The initiative for the third and final Anglo-Maratha war came from the Peshwa, despite the fact that in 1803 he had placed himself voluntarily under British protection. Spurred by memories of past glory, in 1816 he placed himself at the head of a Maratha combination which sought to rid the country of British control. However, his attempt to assert his independence ended in military disaster at Kirki near Poona in 1818. Under the terms of the peace settlement, the Peshwa retired as a state prisoner to Bithur near Benaras, while the territories under his control were taken over by the British Government<sup>8</sup>.

#### The Bhakti Upsurge and Social Consensus in Maharashtra

The factors of geography and environment which enabled Maharashtra to offer effective opposition to Islam, and fashioned her into the base of resurgent Hinduism, and the hub of a polity which at one stage virtually controlled the entire subcontinent, have received considerable emphasis at

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<sup>8</sup>

Ibid., Vol. III, Chapters LVII to LXI, and LXV to LXVIII.

the hands of the historians of Maharashtra. It would be wrong to deny that to an extent these factors moulded the personality of Maharashtra, and that they helped her to hold out against and to vanquish Islam. But it would be equally incorrect to maintain that her physical environment alone explains the resistance which Maharashtra was able to offer to the spread of Islam. The key to the vigour of Maharashtra lies in the secular and spiritual values which inspired the Maharashtrians, and which stemmed from a religious upsurge that coincided with the advent of Islam in the Deccan. This religious upsurge imposed a social consensus upon Maharashtra through affiliating the elite castes, like the Brahmins, and the lower and middle castes, like the mahars and kunbis, to a common corpus of spiritual values. By resolving the tension between the elite castes and the rest of the community, Maharashtra was able to bridge a gulf which bedevilled Hindu society elsewhere, and prevented it from offering effective resistance to Islam. The resolution of caste tensions released a flood of creative energy which expressed itself in the political designs of Shivaji, and the imperial vision of the Peshwas.

The seminal intellectual influence on the Brahmin castes of Maharashtra was the advaita philosophy of Sankara,



who lived in the eighth century<sup>9</sup>. Sankara's advaitavada was the most dominant school of orthodox Hinduism, and its vitality lay partly in its intellectual sophistication, and partly in the monastic order organised by its founder to provide a firm institutional basis for his ideas. However, the concepts advanced by Sankara were not directed towards social groups outside the Brahmanical pale, so that the values of Hindu orthodoxy did not in the first instance influence the lower and middle castes. As a result of Sankara's proselytising activity the community was divided into a small Brahmin elite, whose values were firmly anchored to advaita, and a host of lesser castes, which were only marginally influenced by the high culture of Hinduism. The integration of the lower castes with the Brahmin elite was a task to which a remarkable coterie of religious leaders, the so-called Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra, addressed themselves in the centuries following the spread of Sankara's ideas among the Brahmins. The earliest figures in this movement were Jnaneshwar and Mukundraj, who lived in the twelfth and

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S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, (Cambridge, 1951), Vol. I, pp. 73-4. Also see F. Warden, 'On the Customs of the Gosavees', Appendix B, pp. 67-71, in A. Steele's Summary of the Laws and Customs of Hindoo Castes Within the Dekhun Provinces Subject to the Bombay Provinces, (Bombay, 1827). This is henceforth referred to as Steele's Summary of the Laws and Customs of the Hindoo Castes.



thirteenth centuries<sup>10</sup>. Mukundraj was a Brahmin by caste, a devotee of Shiva, and he wrote a number of philosophical works in which he expressed in simple Marathi poetry the advaita philosophy of Sankara. In deliberately choosing Marathi, the language of the common people, instead of Sanskrit, the language of the intellectual aristocracy, for his philosophical writings, Mukundraj set afoot a movement which aimed at influencing social groups below the Brahmin elite. Jnaneshwar, who was also a Brahmin, was even more successful than Mukundraj in spreading the great tradition of Hinduism among the lower and middle castes of Maharashtra. The most important literary work of Jnaneshwar was a commentary on the Bhagawada Gita called the Jnaneshwari. In expounding the Gita for the common man, Jnaneshwar took as his principal theme the value of bhakti or devotion to God, and he is therefore regarded as the founder of the bhakti school of Marathi poetry. He is in fact the coryphaeus of the devotional movement, which honoured Shiva as well as Vishnu, the two principal Gods of the Hindu pantheon, and followed Sankara in its philosophical approach. Since Jnaneshwar started his spiritual career as a devotee of

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See S.M. Edward's introduction to J. Grant-Duff, A History of the Marathas, (Oxford, 1921), Vol. I, p. lxi.

Shiva, and he was deeply influenced by the advaita doctrine of Sankara, his advocacy of the essentially Vaishnava principle of devotion as a means to salvation was probably due to the influence of Ramanuja, a Vaishnava philosopher of the eleventh century, who is believed to be the leading opponent of the views of Sankara. It is conceivable that Jnaneshwar belonged to the Bhagawata cult, which recognised the worship of Shiva and Vishnu as equal and one, and that the whole devotional movement of Maharashtra is derived from this source<sup>11</sup>.

Though it was initiated by Brahmins of high caste, the bhakti movement soon passed into the hands of lowly born individuals like Namadeva, a contemporary of Jnaneshwar, who was a man of the people, and who expressed religious and philosophical ideas through a simple and moving devotional poetry which exercised a tremendous influence on the unsophisticated peasants of Maharashtra. The entire movement, and the poetical literature which it inspired, was suffused with a romantic glorification of devotion to God. Besides preaching the superiority of devotional as opposed to intellectual realisation of God, the bhakti saints tried to cut

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11

B.N.K. Sharma, 'The Vaishnava Saints of Karnataka', in The Cultural Heritage of India, (Calcutta, 1950), Vol. IV, pp. 349-55.

across the obstacles which stood in the way of communication between the Brahmins and the lower castes, and to demolish the barriers which debarred the latter from access to spiritual salvation. But although they advocated the revolutionary doctrine of the spiritual equality of the different castes, the bhakti saints desisted from attacking secular distinctions of caste, partly in the interests of social harmony, and partly out of indifference to the material world. Their attitude finds eloquent reflection in the poetry of Namadeva, who wrote with such compassion and feeling that he inspired a whole group of minor poets from the plebian castes, of whom Samvatya the gardener, Narharid the goldsmith, Goa the potter, and Chokamela the mahar deserve special mention. In their attempt to establish a spiritual democracy, the bhakti saints rejected the elitist assumptions of orthodox Hinduism, and they boldly advocated the idea of salvation for every individual, whatever might be his station in the scale of caste, and howsoever humble might be his status in life:

One and all have a right to benefit from my teachings [wrote one of the bhakti poets]...There is no restriction here. All the varnas (castes) can benefit from it. Brahmins, Shudras, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and even Chandalas have an equal right here. Vaishnavas feel that all distinction and discrimination is a delusion, i.e. inauspicious. One who describes the caste of the Vaishnavas will fall in the worst of hails...He



is no Brahmin to whom God's name is not dear, nor the dancing of the Vaishnavas...One who straight-away on uttering the name of Rama-Krishna has before him his image, though born an untouchable, is a Brahmin indeed...<sup>12</sup>

Through their doctrine of spiritual egalitarianism the Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra were able to spread the high culture of Hinduism among social groups outside the Brahmanical pale, and as a result of their teachings the Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes came to be influenced by a common corpus of religious values, and were drawn close to each other through the pursuit of common spiritual and secular objectives.

The first phase of the bhakti movement ended with Namadeva and his immediate associates. During the period which followed no outstanding literary work was produced, and the creative legacy of the time is negligible. The reason for this decline in creativity is foreshadowed in the hymns of Namadeva, which contain references to a foreign invasion, and to a Padshah or Muslim ruler. The Muslim invasion of the Deccan had commenced, disturbing the tenor of life in Maharashtra, and creating social chaos and political disorder.

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12

Quotation taken from D.K. Garde's unpublished doctoral dissertation on 'Social and Political Thought of the Saints of Maharashtra', Allahabad University, 1956.



The cohesion generated within Hindu society by the bhakti movement helped it in withstanding the impact of Islam. But since the teachings of Namadeva and his associates were of a passive quality, and more concerned with the spiritual than with the secular world, no active response to Islam was immediately forthcoming. Throughout the three centuries of Islamic predominance over Maharashtra, the majority of the community was forced to acquiesce in the political supremacy of Islam, and its energies were wholly absorbed in maintaining its religious and cultural identity. However, the political apathy of the majority was not shared by some enthusiastic individuals, whose ancestors had bequeathed to them traditions of daring and adventure. Such individuals realised that the narrow social base of Muslim rule, and the cohesion of the Hindu community, could be exploited to establish a polity based on resurgent Hinduism. Their hopes were reinforced by the antagonism aroused in the Hindu community by the bigotry and intolerance of the Muslim rulers, which induced them to listen eagerly to religious leaders who could expound the classical tales of Hindu chivalry, and narrate accounts of divine intervention on behalf of oppressed Hindus who had remained faithful to their religion. Once the Islamic impulse had spent its vigour, Maharashtra was ready for a religious upsurge that would recall the past glories of

Hinduism, and through invoking the traditions of an heroic age, fan the embers of her martial ardour. In response to this need there appeared a religious revival which expressed the sentiments first voiced by Jnaneshwar and Namadeva with a militancy, and a concern for secular values, that were conspicuous by their absence in the first phase of the bhakti movement. The outstanding leader of militant bhaktism was Ramadasa, who replaced the cymbals by the sword as the emblem of the movement, and whose teachings attempted to inspire a polity based on resurgent Hinduism<sup>13</sup>.

Ramadasa transformed the bhakti movement into a religious force appropriate to the assumption of an offensive against Islam. What Maharashtra next required was a secular leader who combined in his person military and political qualities of genius.

It found such an individual in Shivaji<sup>14</sup>.

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R.D. Ranade, Pathway to God in Marathi Literature, (Bombay, 1961), pp. 284-333.

14

M.G. Ranade, 'The Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra', in Rise Of The Maratha Power, (Bombay, 1901, rep. 1961), p. 64. My interpretation of the bhakti movement as the consensus factor in Maharashtra arises partly out of a perusal of the extensive literature available on the subject, and partly out of discussions with Irawati Karve, S.V. Dandekar, D.K. Garde and N.R. Pathak; responsibility for the shortcomings of this interpretation rests solely on me. Irawati Karve, for instance, claimed that 'because of the impact of the

## The Structure of the Maratha State

The polity erected by Shivaji on the foundations laid by the Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra was characterised by several interesting features. The task confronting the ideological founders of Maharashtrian unity consisted in bridging the gulf between the values of elite castes and the lower and middle castes. It was accomplished successfully by the bhakti saints, who popularised the high culture of Hinduism through a poetical literature directed at the unsophisticated sections of the community. But despite the social consensus created by the bhakti movement, which enveloped the peasant and the Brahmin in the fabric of common values, it required political leadership of an unusually high quality to knit the conflicting elements of Maharashtra into a cohesive polity.

Long before the Muslim conquest of the Deccan, there flourished under the Hindu rulers of Maharashtra a class of territorial chiefs called deshmukhs who exercised judicial and executive powers over the districts under their control<sup>15</sup>.

bhakti saints one could get a better exposition of Sankara's advaita from an illiterate peasant woman in Maharashtra than from an academic philosopher'.

15

Papers From The Records of the East India House Relating to the Revenue, Police and Civil and Criminal Justice. Under the Company's Government in India, Vol. IV, (London, 1826). See



Whether they were petty rulers whose decline had resulted in the establishment of the first regional kingdoms in Maharashtra, or the representatives of a central authority who had gradually usurped hereditary status, is often difficult to say. But whatever may have been their origin, when the Muslims first invaded the Deccan in the thirteenth century, they found the deshmukhs firmly entrenched in the countryside, and the legitimacy of their authority found widespread acceptance in the rural areas. So strong was the deshmukhs' hold over the peasants, that when the Muslim rulers tried to consolidate their position by appointing agents for the collection of the land-tax who were responsible solely to them, the authority of these agents was not accepted by rural society, which rallied round its traditional leaders, the deshmukhs. The Muslim rulers were therefore obliged to purchase the loyalty, and the co-operation, of the deshmukhs by granting them a proportion of the land-tax as the rewards of their office, and only then could they impose their authority on the rural communities. As a result of this arrangement the deshmukhs lost some of their prerogatives in return for a secure position. Yet they remained a

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Memoranda by J. Briggs and H. Pottinger enclosed in W. Chaplin's Report dated 20 August 1822. These papers are henceforth referred to as EAST INDIA PAPERS.



powerful class, not only under the Muslim rulers of the Deccan, but also under Shivaji and the Peshwas. That the deshmukhs were an important social group in Maharashtra both under the Muslim rulers, and under their Hindu successors, is proved by the solicitude with which the British Government handled these old landed families after 1818<sup>16</sup>.

The conflict between the State, as represented by the revenue collecting bureaucracy, and the landed aristocracy, became the principal feature of the polity after the Muslim conquest, and the stability of the political order rested on the maintenance of a precarious balance between these two counterpoised institutions. So long as authority at the centre of the political system was vested in an efficient ruler, the deshmukhs were kept in control; but the moment the central authority weakened, they became free of all restraint, and reasserted their independence. The interests of the deshmukhs conflicted with the interests of any existing or potential centralising authority, and made them resist any attempt at the political unification of the region, whether it was made by an alien element like the Muslims, or by a standard bearer of resurgent Hinduism like Shivaji.

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16

EAST INDIA PAPERS, Vol. IV, Report on the Mahratta States by Mr. Elphinstone dated 25 October 1819.

The difficulties faced by Shivaji in unifying Maharashtra bear witness to the deshmukhs' desire for an independent status, for before he came in conflict with the Muslim rulers of the Deccan, the traditional landed families of the region offered the most bitter opposition to his design<sup>17</sup>. Because of the resistance offered by the deshmukhs, Shivaji realised how important it was for his authority to be buttressed by a class of administrative agents who owed their position to his power. As the area under his control widened, he installed in positions of responsibility, and as a counterpoise to the old landed aristocracy, Deshasth Brahmins trained in the business of administration by his astute Brahmin minister, Dada Kondev. The vital role played by the bureaucracy in keeping the deshmukhs under control was equally apparent to the Peshwas, and when they assumed control of the State, they displaced the Deshasth Brahmins in the administration by Chitpavan Brahmins, who belonged to the same caste as Balaji Vishwanath, the first Peshwa, and could therefore be expected to serve the new ruling family with unflinching loyalty<sup>18</sup>.

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17

G.S. Sardesai, The Main Currents of Mahratta History, (Bombay, 1949), pp. 74-7.

18

R.E. Enthoven, The Tribes and Castes Of Bombay, (Bombay, 1920), Vol. I, p. 242.

To place their authority on a firm basis, the ruling families of Maharashtra not only recruited the bureaucracy from social groups on whose loyalty they could depend implicitly, but they also created new territorial lords who owed their position wholly to their generosity. As a result, by the time the British conquered the Deccan in 1818, two groups of territorial lords had been superimposed upon the old deshmukh families whom Shivaji had subdued in the first instance: namely, those who held grants from Shivaji, or from the Satara Rajas, issued during the time of troubles when the Maratha State was engaged in a war of survival with the Muslim rulers, and those whom the Peshwas had raised to the status of territorial chiefs in a bid to consolidate their authority. To the first group belonged chiefs like the Naiks of Sunda<sup>19</sup>, while the second comprised landlords like the parvenu Patwardhans who had, by 1818, risen from comparative obscurity to the ownership of the largest landed estates in Maharashtra in the brief space of fifty years<sup>20</sup>.

While they presented a perpetual threat to the integrity of the State, the deshmukhs also performed a useful social

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Sardesai, op. cit., p. 80.

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K. Ballhatchet, Social Policy And Social Change in Western India (1817-1830), (London, 1957), p. 52.



function, for with their traditional ties with the villages of their districts, and the influence they exercised at the Poona Court, they were able to prevent the excesses likely to be perpetrated by an administration that was not subject to any legal and rational restraints. Long residence in a district familiarised the deshmukhs with the sentiments of the rural masses, and with their conditions of existence, so that they acted as listening posts through which Poona could acquaint itself with the temper of the peasantry and gauge its reactions to its revenue policy. As against these 'natural' leaders of rural society, the bureaucracy created by the Peshwas for controlling the swarajya territories was simple in conception. The State was divided into revenue divisions, each one of which was placed under an officer called the mamlatdar, who also exercised judicial and magisterial authority. The appointment of the mamlatdar rested with the Poona authorities, though the selection of the subordinate officers under his charge was often left to his discretion. In the peripheral districts an officer called the Sirsoobedar stood between Poona and the mamlatdars. The Sirsoobedar's functions were ill-defined, and his prerogatives and duties varied. In the Carnatic he possessed gubernatorial authority, appointing his own mamlatdars, and bearing personal responsibility for the collection of revenue.



In the Kandesh, on the other hand, he exercised general superintendence, although the mamlatdars conducted their business under the direct control of the Poona authorities<sup>21</sup>.

The mamlatdar was the lynch-pin of the bureaucracy, and he was consequently chosen from families whose antecedents were either known to the Peshwa, or to a prominent member of his court<sup>22</sup>. When appointed to a new district, his first concern was to acquaint himself with the prominent individuals of the area, including the deshmukhs and hereditary officers, whose intimate knowledge of the region supplemented the information concerning revenue problems with which he equipped himself from the Poona secretariat before departing for his administrative charge. When the question of levying a land-tax on the rural areas arose, the mamlatdar's negotiations with the Patels or the headmen of villages were always conducted through the deshmukhs, whose traditional ties with rural society facilitated the evaluation of an equitable assessment. On the one hand, the mamlatdar manoeuvred to procure the maximum return from the peasantry by way of the

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EAST INDIA PAPERS, Vol. IV, Report on the Mahratta States by M. Elphinstone dated 25 October 1819.

22

EAST INDIA PAPERS, Vol. IV, see Report on the Revenue Administration of the Peshwa's Territories during the Administration of Nana Furnavees by J. McLeod dated nil.

land-tax, while on the other, the headmen of villages did their best to deny the State of as much of its legitimate dues as they could. In the conflict between the mamlatdars and the village headmen, since the former were supported by the superior power of the State, and because they were not subject to any legal and rational restraints, it is conceivable that the direct imposition of the mamlatdar on the peasants would have led to oppressive taxation, ruinous alike for the prosperity of the State and the community. But the interposition of the deshmukh, who received a fixed share of the revenue collected by the State, yet had strong traditional ties with the rural communities, normally ensured an equitable settlement of the land-tax. Nevertheless, if the mamlatdars insisted upon a revenue demand which was excessive, it was open to the village communities to appeal to Poona through the deshmukhs, whom they regarded as their patrons. The existence of an alternative channel of communication between the rural communities and Poona exercised a salutary effect on the mamlatdars, and prevented them from oppressing the peasantry.

While the balance of authority and responsibility between the bureaucracy and the landed aristocracy ensured the smooth functioning of the administration under a capable ruler, the tensions latent within it erupted into the open

the moment a weakening of the controlling hand at Poona undermined the power of the mamlatdars. Whenever this happened, it was at the peripheries of the swarajya territories rather than in the districts surrounding Poona that the worst symptoms of disequilibrium manifested themselves. In one such district, for instance, British administrators discovered that the peasantry was being forced to pay four per cent over and above the normal revenue by way of extra cesses and illicit taxes<sup>23</sup>. The greater number of these taxes originated in the time of troubles following the fateful defeat at Panipat and the death of the third Peshwa, Balaji Baji Rao. He was succeeded in 1761 by Madhav Rao, who was a minor and whose ministers left affairs of state in the hands of local officers, who thought it expedient to let out villages to temporary tax-farmers who might give rent for them. The latter in turn indemnified themselves by taxing the peasantry over and above the established rates, to which they added the levy of compulsory feudal service. The tax-farmers exercised considerable ingenuity in devising means to extract the maximum from the peasant. Thus it was legitimate for them to

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23

NAI (National Archives of India). J.M. Davies' Report on Illicit Taxes in Thana dated 8 October 1836: Home Dept., (Rev. Br.) Con. No. 14 dated 27 February 1837.



compensate themselves for fluctuations in the market prices of crops by fixing a rate at which the commutation of the assessed grain would be levied, and if in a year of scarcity the market price rose considerably above the fixed price, the tax-farmer demanded an additional cess (kusser) to secure for himself an equitable share of the profits. In principle kusser was unobjectionable; but once levied it continued ever afterwards as a part of the cultivator's normal burden. Of a similar nature was the puttee tax through which the tax-farmer in some dubious fashion saddled the expenses of administering the village on the peasantry. Last came a species of feudal villeinage called vet, which involved the right to demand free services on various occasions:

There is [observed a British civilian] something reciprocal in feudal institutions which, conveying as they do a sense of servitude and degradation in the lower orders, nevertheless gives one the idea of protection afforded in lieu of personal service; and one is the less apt to disparage the system when it is considered that a reciprocity of aid and protection was all that bound society in those dark ages. "Vet", however, partakes of nothing of this character. It consists of laborious service, rendered at the will of one who, far from possessing the right to protect from outward invasion, comes among them as their acknowledged task-master...There is something repulsive in the idea to such a person being allowed to impose a capitation tax...in lieu of a service which he never had better right to demand than that expressed by tyrants<sup>24</sup>.



The dependence of administrative order upon a precarious balance between the bureaucracy and the landed aristocracy was a basic weakness of the Maratha polity, since the slightest political upset at Poona could throw the whole system into confusion and transform the deshmukhs from the patrons of rural society into the oppressors of the peasantry.

### Rural Social Organisation

The instability of the administrative system of the Marathas would suggest that the villages of the Deccan were subject to frequent fluctuations in fortune as a result of changes in the balance of power in Poona. But life in rural society was not seriously affected by political transformations in Poona, because of the limited role played by the administration in shaping the climate of the countryside, and because of the existence of institutions within the villages which conducted their affairs with skill and competence, and successfully resisted the attempts of the State to interfere in the affairs of the community.

Even the appearance of a Maharashtrian village set it apart as a miniature world, self-sufficient in itself, and geared to a style of life calling for a minimum of contact

with the outside world<sup>25</sup>. It was located on a smoothly rolling mound in close proximity to a stream, and surrounded by the fields which the villagers cultivated. From a distance it had the appearance of a mass of crumbling grey walls, with a few stunted trees growing out amongst them, and here and there a structure standing out more conspicuously than the rest. All this was enclosed by a mud wall of irregular shape, and pierced by rude gates of wood at two or more points. On entering such a village things appeared no more prepossessing than from the outside. There was a lack of order in layout. The crumbling walls would turn out to be the houses of the villagers, which were made of calcareous earth with terraced tops of the same material. These dwellings were constructed without any attempt at regularity. They had narrow and crooked lanes winding amongst them and dividing them into groups of three or four. While conforming to a basic structural pattern, the homes of the richer cultivators would be slightly larger in size and different in outward appearance from those of the poorer cultivators. But the most conspicuous structures in the village were the

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T. Coats, 'Account of the Present State of the Township of Lony', Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, III, (London, 1823), pp. 183-250. Henceforth referred to as Coats' Account of Lony.

chowrie, or the municiple hall, where the public affairs of the village were debated; and the temple, built either by a rich and repentent Patel, or by a philanthropic deshmukh, in the hope of commuting their earthly sins. Conspicuous, too, were the dwellings of the untouchable castes like the Mahars and the Mangs, who were prevented by social taboos from coming into physical contact with the rest of the villagers, and who consequently resided in little hamlets outside the walls of the village.

The bulk of the village community comprised cultivators belonging to the kunbi caste, who were subdivided into thulwaheeks, or hereditary cultivators, and uprees, or cultivators without any prescriptive rights in the soil. The thulwaheeks were descendents of the first settlers of the village, who had in periods of remote antiquity moved over in jathas, or family groups, to new sites, and had apportioned the available arable land between themselves, the holdings of each jatha receiving the family name to distinguish it from other fields. The original jatha estates were held jointly by the family, which was responsible as a body for the payment of the land-tax. If the owners of one of the shares in a joint estate let his land fall waste, the family assumed responsibility for his share of the State's dues, and the fields belonging to him were taken over for cultivation.



Similarly, if the member of a jatha died without an heir, his portion was divided among the surviving relations. He was again free to dispose of his patronomic, but the share was not permitted to pass out of the family if a co-sharer was willing to buy it. Only in cases where no one in the family wanted to purchase the field did it pass on to an outsider, who now entered the jatha on the same terms as the original incumbent, but was referred to as a birader bhaus or legal brother, instead of ghar bhaus or house brother. The institution of jathas facilitated revenue arrangements between the village and the political authorities. For a representative of the eldest branch in each jatha looked after the interests of the entire family and collected the dues from the younger branches, while the senior branch of the seniormost jatha furnished the individual who functioned as the headman of the village<sup>26</sup>.

By the time the Peshwa Baji Rao II surrendered the Poona territories to the British Government in 1818, the jatha system had lost some of its cohesion, partly through inbuilt tensions, but partly also through the attempts of the Poona authorities to undermine the autonomy of the jathas in the

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BA (Bombay State Archives). H.R.D. Robertson to W. Chaplin dated 17 October 1820: R.D. (Revenue Department), Vol. 26/5 of 1822.



management of revenue affairs. Such attempts were inspired either by the desire to enhance the revenues of the State, or to ensure that a fair share of the village produce went to its coffers. It is difficult to surmise how far the bureaucracy of the earlier Peshwas had at all succeeded in disrupting the cohesion of the rural communities, but the failure of the Poona Government to undermine the autonomy of the jathas is eloquently reflected in the fate of the kamal survey of the 1760s introduced under the Peshwa Madhav Rao. Despite the care with which this survey was conducted, the rentals based upon it were never applied, because in their place the rural communities substituted the rivaj, or customary rates, which differed significantly from the kamal findings. This substitution is open to the interpretation that the kamal survey only aimed at providing the mamlatdars with an idea of the productive capacity of holdings in the villages of the Deccan; but such an hypothesis is difficult to maintain since the kamal survey showed the traditional system to be shot through and through with glaring inconsistencies. All this can be illustrated by a comparison of the kamal and rivaj surveys of any particular village. In the village of Oswaree Khuro in Poona district, for instance, the fields Pandru and Wursola contained a chovar of land each, and were therefore taxed an equal amount by the rivaj survey, although they were

found to possess different productive capacities by the kamal survey, which took both the quantity and the quality of the soil into consideration. A comparison of the fields Dhuljote and Amberket in Oswaree Khuro shows the rivaj survey in a worse light, with the discrepancy between the actual and assumed productive capacities being even greater<sup>27</sup>.

Despite the ability of the jathas to resist the attempt of the Maratha bureaucracy to regulate the internal distribution of the land-tax in the village, the institution no longer functioned in full vigour at the time of the British conquest. Such memories as the villagers had of the jathas found expression in the practice of entrusting the seniormost family in the village with the responsibility of collecting the land-tax from the cultivators, even though joint responsibility for the payment of the tax was no longer rigidly enforced. The members of the family chosen to represent the village were styled Patels, and the seniormost among them was called the chief or mukkadam Patel. Long after the founding of the village, thulwaheeks descended from the Patel family considered themselves higher in status than other thulwaheeks, though their claims were not buttressed by any other social or economic privileges. The crucial difference within the cultivating community lay

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BA. R.K. Pringle to H.R.D. Robertson dated 20 November 1823: R.D. Vol. 10/94 of 1823.

between the thulwaheeks and the uprees. The former had an indisputable right of cultivating their holdings so long as they paid the land-tax; they could also sell or mortgage their property with the concurrence of the other members of the family. By contrast, the upree's connection with the village was tenuous. He leased the deserted holdings or the arable waste of the village, either on an annual basis, or on a lease running concurrently for a number of years.

The significant differences between the thulwaheeks and the uprees were expressed in social rather than in economic distinctions. They were related to contrasting styles of life rather than to sharp economic differentials. In the village of Ambola, for instance, the holdings of uprees like Suntoojee Scindiah and Kundojee compared very favourably in area and productive capacity with the holdings of the thulwaheeks of the community<sup>28</sup>. Besides, thulwaheeks like Beerjee Scindia and Ambajee Scindiah, whose fields possessed the same productive capacity as the holdings of the aforementioned uprees, paid a heavier land-tax as their share of the total village rent. Why they did so is easy to understand

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BA. 'Tabular View of the Distribution of Village Lands in the Village of Ambola, Poona Collectorate', Appendix to Major Sykes' Report on Poona District dated nil: R.D. Vol. 154B of 1826. Henceforth referred to as Sykes' Account of Ambola.



once the difficulty in obtaining uprees for employment on deserted holdings is appreciated. As opposed to the uprees, who wandered from one village to another in search of better leases, the thulwaheeks were deeply attached to their fields, and refused to migrate to a new village so long as they could make a bare subsistence in one place. Their attachment to their holdings did not stem solely from an acquisitive instinct; it also flowed from a desire for the social privileges which the thulwaheeks enjoyed in the rural community, and the prestige which the possession of a watan (right in land) bestowed on its owner in an agrarian society. The thulwaheek was a member of the village council, and had an active voice in its deliberations; he had a right of pasture in the village common; he did not pay any house-tax so long as he possessed only one dwelling in the village; he was exempted from a tax paid by other castes on marriage, as well as from a dispensation fee for marrying a wife who had been repudiated, or was a widow; and, most important of all, he and his wife were entitled to precedence over the upree at marriages and upon other ceremonial occasions in the village.

The lack of sharp differences in incomes in the village imposed a tranquillity upon rural society which exercised a decisive influence on the social behaviour of the cultivators. The kunbis were mild and unobtrusive, and they abhorred



a want of gentleness in others. Yet for all their gentleness they had a latent warmth of temper, and if oppressed beyond a certain point they could turn fiercely upon their tormentors. The kunbis were not outstandingly astute, but neither were they wanting in intelligence. A sympathetic observer would have found them well informed about matters relating to the business of agriculture, and the concerns of the little community of the village would immediately hold their interest. 'On the whole', a British civilian observed, 'they are far better informed than the lower classes of our population, and certainly far surpass them in propriety and orderliness of demeanour'<sup>29</sup>. That such portrayals of rural harmony are not over-drawn is clear from the statistical account we have of the village of Ambola<sup>30</sup>. Of the cultivating families in the village, 60 per cent had fields ranging from 15 to 30 beeghas. Holdings of this size made for a reasonable living by the standards of the time, although, as we shall presently see, they provided no insurance against involvement in debt. The three substantial cultivators in the village were the Patel, Baboo Rao Scindiah, and Marojee Scindiah and Bapujee

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<sup>29</sup>

BA. See Major Sykes' Report on Poona District dated nil: R.D. Vol. 154B of 1826.

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Vide Sykes' Account of Ambola.

Scindiah, each of whom had a holding that was 60 beegahs in extent and thrice as large as that owned by the majority of the peasants. At the opposite end of the social scale stood kunbis like Amruta Scindiah and Hykunt Scindiah, who found it virtually impossible to keep body and soul together on the profits derived from their fields. By and large, however, rural Maharashtra presented a picture dominated by a grey and anonymous mass of kunbis who held the balance between a few substantial cultivators on the one hand, and a fringe of impoverished peasants on the other.

For all that the economic condition of the great body of cultivators was far from satisfactory. A stranger to the rural scene would have emerged with an unduly pessimistic notion of the actual state of affairs, since the cultivators were quick to suspect in any enquiry concerning their assets a potential enhancement of the tax burden, and therefore presented an over-drawn picture of their fiscal obligations. But the kunbis were by no stretch of imagination rolling in wealth<sup>31</sup>. We get an accurate idea of the condition of the country districts from a close look into Lony, a largish village atypical only because it stood close to Poona. Of

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31

Sykes' Report on Poona District dated nil: R.D. Vol. 154B of 1826.

the 84 cultivating families residing in Lony, as many as 79 were indebted to the four Jain and two Marwari vanis, or money-lenders of the village. While the total debt, a sum of Rs.14,532, was a very formidable sum, it was split up into small loans ranging from Rs.50 to Rs.200. This, however, does not take account of debts of Rs.2,000 and upwards contracted by the two or three very substantial landed families which resided in Lony<sup>32</sup>. These debts had generally been contracted to defray the expenses of marriage, or to purchase seed, food and stock. Each kunbi kept a running account with his vani, taking a receipt for such sums as he paid from time to time. By a widely accepted convention interest accumulated only till it equalled the principle. Relations between the peasants and their creditors thus appear to have been conducted on an equitable basis, but it would be legitimate to have reservations about how the system worked in practice. For despite a natural liveliness of the mind, the kunbis were not very shrewd in managing their fiscal affairs. The contest between them and the vanis was all the more unequal since they were pitted against individuals whose caste values made them grasping, and who specialised in moneylending. However, the portrayal of the relationship between the

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32

Vide Coats' Account of Lony.



cultivators and the vanis as one of tension and conflict would be untrue to the social temper of the time. For the business of agriculture involved intimate co-operation between two groups: the kunbis, who provided land and labour, and the moneylenders, who assisted with seed and capital. As a result of such a partnership the produce of the cultivator was mortgaged even before it was reaped to satisfy the various demands he had to meet. But since this process had worked out its own rationale, and the vani had neither the inclination nor the means to appropriate the holdings of the kunbi, the latter's dependence upon him for capital was not as tragic a feature of the rural economy as it became subsequently.

The kunbi's real strength lay in that the distribution of social power within the village served to redress the imbalance between the cultivators and the vanis. Of the institutions which wielded influence and controlled authority in the village, the most significant were the patelship and the panchayat. The Patel, as already indicated, was a representative of a senior jatha whose position as the head of the village had been endorsed by the State. He therefore combined in his person legal and traditional authority which made him the most important individual in the village, and



invested him with sweeping powers of initiative<sup>33</sup>. Like Baboo Rao Scindia of Ambola, most Patels were among the substantial landholders in their communities, over and above which they enjoyed a quantity of free-hold land as remuneration for their duties. So important was the Patel's office, and so onerous the maintenance of its style, that many an incumbent who had fallen upon evil days was reduced to selling an office he could not occupy with dignity. Yet the property and prerogatives attached to the patelship were considered so unalienable, that very often only a part of the rights of his office were sold. Such a convention gave rise to the existance of two or even more Patels in a village, with the seniormost among them retaining the rights of precedence.

The most important role played by the Patel was to represent the interests of the cultivating community in the consultations between the mamlatdar and the deshmukh which led to the fixing of an annual revenue demand on the village. But in his dual capacity as a traditional leader of village society and the official headman of the village, the Patel

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33

R.N. Goodine's 'Report on the Village Communities of the Deccan' dated 10 October 1845: Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, No. IV. Henceforth referred to as Goodine's Report on Deccan Communities.

was also entrusted with the task of extending the cultivated area by encouraging uprees to settle in the village. He did this by offering potential tenants attractive terms: either on the basis of the cowl tenure, whereby the upree paid a fraction of the rent in the first year with annual increases leading to the full rent in the sixth, or through the muckta tenure, whereby tenants were encouraged to clear the arable waste on payment of a very nominal rent. More significant still was the Patel's prerogative to grant thulwaheek status to those who wanted to purchase and not just rent land in the village. In bestowing such rights, however, he had to consult all those who had a permanent stake in the community. Such requests were therefore debated in the chowrie by the Patel and the thulwaheeks of the village. A grant signifying the admission of a peasant called Kosajee into their ranks by the Patel and the thulwaheeks of the village of Multan vividly evokes the temper of such deliberations:

We [the Patels and the thulwaheeks of the village] being present, you Kosajee son of Kosajee Patel Taruh of Sowkee came and presented a petition if a letter of inheritance (meeras puttah) were granted for lands in the above village that you would labour and secure their prosperity. Having approved of your petition we give you...the field called San...

We the village authorities have granted you this from our free will and pleasure...You and your

children's children are to enjoy this right...<sup>34</sup>  
(Emphasis added)

In admitting Kosajee to the membership of the community the Patel of Multan is thus revealed as taking a decision backed by popular sentiment in the village. Since the Patel's prerogatives flowed in a large measure from the acceptance of his authority and his leadership by the cultivators, it is clear that similar consultations lay behind every important decision taken by the village, whether it was a question of admitting a new member to the community, or the erection of a new chowrie, or the adoption of an extra levy to meet a call for additional taxation by the mamlatdar in an emergency. Harking back once again to Ambola, it follows from the distribution of holdings in this village that Patel Baboo Rao Scindiah would have proved completely ineffective in the performance of his duties if, even in the most trivial of issues affecting the interests of the community, he had not taken into confidence individuals like Madjee Scindiah and Raja Rao Scindiah, whose holdings in land were just as extensive as his, and whose voice in the village councils

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Translation of a Meeras Puttah (sale deed) by the Patel of Multan dated July 1814: Appendix to Section 11 of Major Sykes' Report on the Poona District: R.D. Vol. 154B of 1826.



consequently carried great weight<sup>35</sup>. This is not to deny the special privileges which the Patel enjoyed by virtue of his position. For instance, even though the decision to accept a new member in the village was a collective one, its formal sanction depended upon the payment of a special cess called the meeras puttah by the new incumbent to the Patel<sup>36</sup>. But it is to be borne in mind that the Patel was not a law in himself, and that he was guided and influenced in his decisions by the sentiments of all those cultivators who had a permanent stake in the village.

Indicative too of the manner in which the collective voice of the cultivators in the village was brought to bear on the tasks of village administration was the working of the panchayat (lit. council of five), or the judicial institution around which the life of the rural communities revolved. Being the most important person in the village, the Patel was invariably approached by the individuals concerned when a dispute arose over any of the whole range of issues which can plague a rural society<sup>37</sup>. The Patel in the

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<sup>35</sup> Vide Sykes' Account of Ambola.

<sup>36</sup> See Goodine's Report on Deccan Communities.

<sup>37</sup> EAST INDIA PAPERS, Vol. IV, W. Chaplin to M. Elphinstone dated 25 June 1819.



first instance attempted to settle the dispute by himself. But if he failed, the disputing parties were referred to a panchayat or ad hoc council of the most intelligent and influential kunbis of the village. The panchayat was run along simple lines. The members gathered in the chowrie or in the open to hear the disputing parties argue their cases, and to examine such witnesses as chose to appear. Once all this was over, the panchayat, after debating the whole issue, drew up an award which was communicated to the Patel for execution. The panchayat's advantage over formal judicial institutions lay in the identity of feeling and sentiment between the abritrators and the disputants. Since its awards were shaped by values which were shared by all members of the cultivating community, they were readily accepted by the kunbis. However, the panchayat was by no means an ideal institution for solving disputes within the village. For apart from the dilatoriness inherent in its constitution, it did not possess the means to execute its awards, and was in this respect completely dependent upon the Patel. Besides, it was not designed to resolve complicated cases, and often permitted matters to drift until some circumstance prevented the necessity of coming to a decision<sup>38</sup>.

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EAST INDIA PAPERS, IV, Borraidale's Note on Panchayats dated nil.

Since the panchayat was the only judicial institution in rural society, and because it was completely dominated by the cultivating community, the vanis in the villages of the Deccan were unable to exploit the kunbis despite the control they exercised over the rural economy. The vanis could always refer a recalcitrant debtor to a panchayat. But since the members of the panchayat were chosen from amongst the kunbis, they could be trusted to give decisions which showed far more than legitimate concern for the interests of the cultivators. All this was particularly true in debt cases involving a Patel or a substantial peasant. But even otherwise the vani had no chance of recovering a debt unless he secured the assistance of some powerful landed chief who could influence his debtor. More frequently, he took to incessant importunity, and by literally throwing himself on the threshold of his debtor and refusing to budge till the debt was repayed, he sometimes succeeded in his objective<sup>39</sup>.

### The Values of Village Society

Besides the cultivators who tilled the soil, and the vanis who played an important role in the economy, each

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EAST INDIA PAPERS, IV, see W. Chaplin to M. Elphinstone dated 25 June 1819.

village in the Deccan contained a number of Brahmin families which made an important contribution to the life of the community. Both in their physical appearance and in their intellectual sophistication, the Brahmins stood as a group apart in the village, marked out from the kunbis and other castes in 'being fairer, better dressed, and more virtuous in their manners'<sup>40</sup>. The two hereditary offices which they monopolised in every village were those of the joshi or the village priest, and the kulkarni or the accountant. These offices admirably suited the style of life of the Brahmins, and conferred on them considerable power and influence. Next to the Patel, the kulkarni was the most important individual in the village, since he kept a record of the dimensions of the holdings of the cultivators, the rents they paid to the State, and the conditions on which the land was held. The nature of his office, coupled with the fact that he was one of the few educated individuals in the village, invested the kulkarni with an importance far exceeding his formal status. To enhance his influence, the kulkarni would often engineer a split between the numbers of the cultivating community, and lead a group of kunbis in opposition to the Patel of the village. The influence of the

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Vide Coats' Account of Lony.



Brahmin families also stemmed from the fact that the joshi, who looked after the temple that was the pride of any respectable village, and attended to the day-to-day ritualistic needs of the villagers, provided the only link between the kunbi and the great tradition of Hinduism. Admittedly, the joshi did not represent the best in Brahmanical sophistication, and his naivety and narrow vision could disillusion British civilians who had been brought up upon stories of Brahmanical subtlety and perception. But through giving local expression to the high culture of Hinduism in the idols of the Marutis and the Mahadevs and the Bhairavs which adorned the village temple, he served to anchor the loyalty of the kunbi to the only tangible embodiment of Hinduism which the latter saw around him. Such bonds were reinforced on occasions of births, deaths, and marriages, and the myriad religious ceremonies which characterised rural life, when the joshi presided over the prayers offered to the Gods, and invoked them to accept the offerings of the lesser castes not wholly outside the pale<sup>41</sup>.

Yet the joshi did not rank as high in the rural community as his caste status and his formal position would lead one to assume. This was so because his dependence upon his caste

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Ibid.

status for a livelihood lowered him in the eyes of the community. But the insignificance of the joshi can also be attributed to some other influences. Since the high culture of Hinduism expressed itself in a language (Sanskrit) which the bulk of the community could not follow, and since it dealt in concepts which were not meant for mass consumption, the kunbi's interest in this culture was purely mechanistic. The joshi, through whom this interest was kept alive, was merely regarded as a functional member of the village, who presided over marriage ceremonies and obsequies instead of fabricating pots and pans, and his ranking as an artisan or bullotedar (of which more later) of the third and lowest category indicates the status he held in the village community<sup>42</sup>.

The spiritual life of the kunbis was moulded neither by Brahmanical values, nor by the joshis who claimed to represent these values in the villages of the Deccan. The spiritual wants of the kunbis were satisfied by the Jnaneshwari, and by the abhangas of Tukarama and Namadeva, whose simplicity and philosophical insights combined to exercise a great influence on the peasants. What linked the kunbis to the

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BA. Report by T.W. Langford on Bullote taxes in the Bombay Presidency dated 30 March 1840: R.D. Vol. 98/1182 of 1840.

great tradition of Hinduism was the literature of the bhakti movement, which had remained alive in folk memory through communication by the spoken word from one generation to another; what embodied for them the high culture of Maharashtra were the shrines of bhakti gods like the temple of Vithala of Pandharpur, to which thousands flocked every year to establish communion with the object of their devotion. The annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur brought together high and low castes, and peasants from remote villages, and it served as an institution for the transmission of religious values, and the spread of social cohesion. On the road to Pandharpur the chaste Brahmin from Wai rubbed shoulders with the kunbi from the Nagar territories, while a substantial Patel tried, not very hard for the nonce, to avoid polluting contact with an untouchable hurrying to the temple of Vithala. But whether Brahmin or Mahar, or kunbi or vani, on the road to Pandharpur everyone recited the same abhangas in the praise of the bhakti Gods:

So I was getting to know my Maharashtra anew every day [writes a Maharashtrian sociologist of the Pandharpur pilgrimage]. I found a new definition of Maharashtra: the land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage. When the pilgrimage started from Poona, there were people from Poona, Junnar, Satar etc. Everyday people were joining the pilgrimage from Kandesh, Sholapur, Nasik, Berar. All were Marathi speaking people - coming



from different castes, but singing the same songs, the same verses of the Varkari cult...<sup>43</sup>

However, it was not necessary to go to Pandharpur to gain initiation into the bhakti cult. For all over the countryside there flourished lay groups of devotees, held together by a guru or spiritual leader, which met in the village chowrie to recite their favourite abhangas and ponder over the meaning of earthly existence and the fate that lay beyond. Often, too, a wandering mendicant who had dedicated his life to the service of the Gods of Pandharpur would visit the village, and hold a kirtan or religious assembly to which all the villagers would flock, for Vithala made no distinction between Brahmin and Shudra and rich and poor, but welcomed all to his fold. Thus advaita became a household concept in Maharashtra, and linked the Marathi speaking world in a close texture of values which transcended the tension between castes and regions and formed the basis of a popular culture flowing out of the great tradition of Hinduism<sup>44</sup>.

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I. Karve, 'On The Road', in The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XXII, No. I, p. 22.

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Information regarding the organisation of the Varkari sect was obtained from S.V. Dandekar in an interview dated 22 December 1962. Professor Dandekar, a philosopher, is a well-known figure in the Varkari movement.

While the integrative influences converging from the villages of the Deccan to Pandharpur, the spiritual capital of Maharashtra, linked the rural communities to a common corpus of religious values, institutions within the villages cut across these influences to preserve the distinctive character of the village community, and to set it apart as a self-contained unit. The most important of such institutions were the bullotedars. The bullotedars were artisans hailing from different castes who possessed hereditary rights of service in the village, and who were compensated by the village community according to well recognised scales of remuneration for the performance of these services<sup>45</sup>. The most important bullotedars were those who contributed directly to the business of agriculture, and served the kunbi: the sootar, who fabricated the wooden implements of the cultivator, and kept them in a state of good repair; the lohar, who fashioned and repaired the ironwork associated with these implements, but could also press his skills to the tiring of a cart or the shoeing of a horse; and the chamar, who made the leather holders, whips, ropes and bands required by the peasants. Also ranked as bullotedars, though they were

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BA. T.W. Langford's Report on the Bullote taxes dated 30 March 1840: R.D. Vol. 98/1182 of 1840.

not artisans, were the Marhars or the untouchable watchmen of the village. There were at least a dozen Mahar families in a normal village, and despite their low social ranking, they possessed great weight in the rural world, since on them rested the important task of preventing encroachments on the boundaries of villages, of which they had an accurate knowledge handed down to them by tradition. The Mahars also served as the ears and eyes of the community, always on the alert for any unusual occurrence which might spell danger for the village<sup>46</sup>.

Though this account does not exhaust all the categories within the bullotedars, of which every village in the abstract possessed twelve, enough has been said to indicate how the technical skills required for agriculture were found within the village, making it a self-contained community. But what was the ranking of the different bullotedars? and how were they remunerated for the services they performed? A consideration of these questions throws interesting light on the corporate sentiment that prevailed in the village, and the gulf between the formal status of an occupation on the basis of caste, and the monetary rewards associated with that particular skill. The bullotedars were not paid individually by the

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See Goodine's Report on Deccan Communities.



villagers for the services they performed; instead, they were allocated approximately one-eighth of the gross annual produce of the village. The fraction of this sum received by individual artisans was determined by the practical utility of the services they performed, and bore no relation to their social status on the basis of caste. Thus bullotedars of the first category, who received the maximum remuneration, not only included low castes like the sootar and the lohar, but also the untouchable Mahar. On the other hand, the Brahmin priest who claimed to belong to the highest caste of all, and attended to the idols of the village gods in substantiation of this claim, was ranked as a bullotedar of the third and lowest category, and was hard put to make both ends meet. Yet by and large the bullotedars made fairly substantial incomes from their skills, and in a middle-sized village like Kurmalla in Sholapur district, artisans of the first category had an annual income of Rs.24, which placed them in the same economic scale as the majority of the thulwaheeks, though their social status was in no way equivalent to that of cultivators possessing watan rights<sup>47</sup>.

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Vide Langford's Report cited in fn. 45 above.

### Urban Social Organisation

The villages of the Deccan have been shown to be isolated social units, regulated by institutions and values that reigned supreme within the village, and fashioned the moral and material climate which governed the life of the peasants. It has also been demonstrated how the impact of external agencies like the bureaucracy and the Gods of Pandharpur upon the village was cushioned and circumscribed by institutions within it: the jathas successfully defying the attempts of the bureaucracy to determine the distribution of the land-tax within the village, and the joshi legitimising the obscure village Gods as members of the Hindu pantheon as a counterpoise to the levelling and integrating influence of the bhakti cults of Pandharpur. However, since Maharashtra contained cities of the size of Poona, not to speak of pergunnah towns which served as market centres for clusters of surrounding villages, it would be a mistake to regard the village as a wholly isolated unit, and to dismiss links between urban and rural society as completely insignificant.

The economic organisation of urban and rural life served to strengthen ties between the city and the village, and it established a relationship of interdependence between

the sowcars, or urban financiers, and the village communities. These relations were geared to the dispersal of certain castes like the Marwari and Gujarati vanis, and they were shaped by the commercial style of these social groups. The Gujarati vanis, of whom there was a large concentration in Supa near Poona, had migrated into Maharashtra during the first quarter of the seventeenth century, when Surat was the chief centre of trade in western India. They first came as itinerant dealers in foreign spices, but after a time settled down, and took to moneylending, and became rich and influential. Two centuries later, they were still regarded as aliens by the kunbis, and for their own part went back to Gujarat to contract marriages or to perform important religious ceremonies. Except for a few rich bankers and traders in Poona, most vanis from this caste were widely dispersed in the country districts<sup>48</sup>.

The elite among the commercial castes were the Marwari vanis, who had moved into Maharashtra after the Gujarati vanis, and were looked upon by the cultivators as aliens who took hoards of money to their homeland, and as Jain heretics, whose temples were often taken over for the worship of local



or Brahmanical gods. From the township of Vambori in the Ahmednagar district, which was the seat of a large Marwari community and the centre of their exchange and banking business, individual Marwaris fanned out into the pergunnah towns, and from thence to isolated villages, enmeshing the countryside and establishing a monopoly over the moneylending business. They began life in a humble capacity as clerks and servants of established moneylenders, but the moment they had put aside sufficient capital, they moved on to a village or township that had not been opened up, and soon commenced playing an important economic role in the life of the community. The Marwari lender's chief characteristic was a strong acquisitive instinct, to which he added ruthlessness and a disregard for local sentiment. Because of the shrewdness which formed part of his caste style, the Marwari could always outwit the kunbi who was his client in the rural areas. But he was unable to exploit the kunbis because of the control exercised by them over the levers of power in the village. In the small townships, which served as markets for the agricultural surplus of the villages, and in cities like Ahmednagar and Poona, however, the Marwari came into his own. If the Patel of a village was unable to collect the land-tax which he had contracted to pay to the mamlatdar, and this happened frequently, he turned to a Marwari financier or

sowcar in the nearest market town to secure assistance in fulfilling his obligations, and pledged the joint credit of the village for a loan. Debts contracted in this fashion are to be distinguished from transactions between the kunbi and the vani in the village, since they did not fall within the jurisdiction of the village panchayat, and because they enabled the sowcar to control the surplus of the village without involving himself in the actual business of agricultural production. Both in the scale of his financial dealings, and in the magnitude of his capital resources, the sowcar stood apart from his caste-fellow, the village vani. Even obscure little pergunnah towns like Nandoobar and Sultanpoor near Dhulia could boast of sowcars who had between themselves lent Rs.200,000 to the Patels of the surrounding villages. Most of this money was provided by a few leading Marwaris: solid men like Ganpat Moorar, who had disbursed Rs.27,500 in all, of which a characteristic item was Rs.4000 loaned to the Patel of Dehwally; or relatively small sowcars like Dharamdas Sambhaldas, whose total claims amounted to Rs.4000, of which a sum of Rs.400 had been lent to the village of Bullair<sup>49</sup>.

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BA. H.T. Graham to G. Giberne dated 3 October 1828: R.D. Vol. 53/520 of 1833.

Because of the importance of their role, and their financial standing, the Marwaris commanded considerable influence and prestige in urban society, despite their low ranking in the scale of caste. This, however, was not true of the artisan castes, which were engaged in productive as opposed to commercial activity. The gulf between the commercial and the artisan castes was virtually impossible to bridge. For despite the concentration of industry in the urban centres, a middle-sized town like Mulligaum in Kandesh district boasting of as many as 42 weavers, 32 goldsmiths, 44 oil-pressers, and 31 dyers, the unit of production was the individual household which was limited both in size and economic strength<sup>50</sup>. The technical factors which prevented artisans from bettering their lot, and improving industrial organisation, were reinforced by a system of taxation that stood in the way of the accumulation of capital through trenching heavily into profits. It is significant that such a pattern of taxation was a result of widely held concepts of social equity rather than of deliberate acts of State policy; for it follows that economic progress and social mobility through the accumulation of capital were notions

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BA. J. Briggs to W. Chaplin dated 5 November 1821: R.D. Vol. 26/50 of 1822.



alien, if not actually repugnant, to the social climate of the time. The procedure for the levy of pandraputty or mahturfa tax brings the quality of this climate into sharp relief<sup>51</sup>. The mohturfa was levied on all the trading and artisan castes, and it was customary for the representative of the State to demand a consolidated sum from the head of the caste in question, leaving him free to arrange the distribution of this consolidated sum on his caste-fellows. While the leading members of a caste could, in the circumstances, have conspired to transfer an inequitable share of the total burden of tax on their less prosperous castemen, the normal practice was for individual members of the caste to pay according to their ability (as determined by the collective will of the community) to make good the total sum to be subscribed to the public treasury. What this meant can be appreciated through an investigation into the affairs of the caste of weavers in Mulligaum. Comprising 42 souls in all, the Mulligaum weavers paid a total mohturfa of Rs.330 to the State. Of this sum the major share was contributed by the 31 moderately prosperous weavers who paid Rs.8 each; however, the three most flourishing weavers in Mulligaum

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BA. T.W. Langford's Report on Mohturfa taxes dated 31 January 1840: R.D. Vol. 97/1181 of 1840.

contributed Rs.48 to the common fund, while members of the caste who had not succeeded in establishing their business on a firm basis were required to make only a token contribution of Rs.2 each<sup>52</sup>.

The principles informing the levy of the mohturfa illustrate the collective basis of urban social organisation, and the popularity of social values which looked upon the accumulation of capital with disapproval. Taken in combination, these two factors were responsible for preventing social mobility, and they resulted in a social order in which the status and the standard of material comforts enjoyed by the individual were determined on grounds of prescription, rather than by the quality of the effort he put into his work. The foundations of such a society were provided by the institution of caste, which pinned the social order firmly to a static pattern, and mitigated the tension between mutually exclusive social groups by directing their allegiance to a common corpus of secular and spiritual values. Caste was the bed-rock of society. In conception caste was simple, denoting an endogamous group with a specific area of dispersion and a distinct style of life. But from it stemmed a complex

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BA. J. Briggs to W. Chaplin dated 5 November 1821: R.D. Vol. 26/50 of 1822.

social structure comprehensible only through the values which shaped social life in Maharashtra.

At the apex of the social hierarchy in Maharashtra stood a cluster of Brahmin castes<sup>53</sup> of which the two most important groups were the Deshasths and the Chitpavans. The Deshasths enjoyed a clear numerical preponderance over other Brahmin groups, and they regarded themselves as the first settlers in the region. They also believed that while all Brahmins were superior, they were even more superior than the rest. Upon the Chitpavans, who had shot into prominence after the eclipse of the house of Shivaji had raised a member of their caste to the first position in the land, they looked down with scarcely veiled contempt as parvenu elements, barely fit to associate on terms of equality with the noblest of the 'twice-born'. A Chitpavan who was invited to a Deshasth ceremonial was a privileged individual, and even the Peshwa could be refused permission to bathe in the ghats reserved for Deshasth priests when he made a pilgrimage to Nasik to rid his person of a very heavy accumulation of

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I am indebted to Irawati Karve for the concepts of 'castes' and 'caste-clusters'. See her Hindu Society: An Interpretation, (Poona, 1961), pp. 9-10.



earthly sins<sup>54</sup>. The Deshasths were closely integrated into the texture of rural society, and as kulkarnis and joshis they featured far more prominently in the eyes, if not the affection, of the rural communities than any other Brahmin group. Before the rise of the Peshwas the Maratha bureaucracy was almost entirely recruited from their ranks; but Balaji Vishwanath's accession to power shattered their monopoly over the bureaucratic cadres, even though as kulkarnis, and occasionally as deshmukhs, they were still a force to be reckoned with in the land. It was the Chitpavans, characterised by greater intellectual agility and political acumen than their slow country cousins, who dominated the bureaucracy prior to the British take-over; and it was the Chitpavans again who set the pace for the intellectual life of the community, and shaped the sanctions which moulded the mores of the entire caste structure. True, there were Chitpavans steeped in the unlovely intrigues of court life who struck even the sympathetic British civilian as 'intriguing, lying, corrupt, licentious and unprincipled'; but the caste was better represented by administrators of integrity like Nana Furnavees and Ramashastri; or advaitists like

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Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. XVIII, Ahmednagar District, (Bombay, 1885), pp. 50-63. Also see Enthoven, op. cit., pp. 242-4.

Mulhar Shrotee, the most highly respected Brahmin in Maharashtra; or distinguished scholars like Raghu Acharya Chintamun, a tragic but nonetheless attractive figure, who bridged the gulf between old and new, and was chosen by the British Government to preside over the college of Sanskrit studies established in Poona upon the ruins of the traditional order<sup>55</sup>.

The control of political power by the Chitpavan Brahmins in the person of the Peshwa, and the intellectual hegemony which they exercised as the 'intelligentsia' of Hindu society, combined to create a degree of Brahmanical dominance over Maharashtra to which there existed no parallel in the rest of India. This dominance found expression in two directions: in institutions like the Dakshina; and in a working alliance between the Poona Government and members of the Chitpavan caste. The Dakshina (lit. gift) was the means through which the Peshwas extended support to the Brahmins as the custodians and propagators of the traditional values of Hinduism<sup>56</sup>. It involved the distribution of large sums of

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<sup>55</sup> H.R.D. Robertson to W. Chaplin dated 10 December 1823: Appendix in R.D. Choksey, The Aftermath, (Bombay, 1950), pp. 220-5.

<sup>56</sup> BA. W. Chaplin to Bombay Government dated 15 April 1820: Pol. Dept., Diary No. 482 of 1820.

money as charity to scholarly but impecunious Brahmins who came to Poona at a fixed time of the year and were examined by a body of Shastris or learned Brahmins who ascertained their mastery over the sacerdotal and metaphysical texts of Hinduism. The Brahmin community looked upon the dakshina as an institution of fundamental importance, and in return for the recognition accorded to the Brahmanical role, it extended full support to the regime of the Peshwas:

A knowledge of the Hindoo Shasters [the Brahmins asserted later on when this privilege was threatened] is of the utmost importance, and...the Shasters are indisputably necessary so that those who study them are entitled to the Dakshinnah as a gift which has been from a remote period continued, and many being thereby incited to the study of Hindu science have ultimately become eminent by their great learning...<sup>57</sup>

The Peshwas not only distributed the dakshina, but they also supported institutions directly concerned with the transmission of values among the Brahmins. Throughout Maharashtra there existed pathshalas or schools which were run exclusively for upper caste pupils, and where each generation of Brahmins communicated to the succeeding generation the orthodox values of Hinduism. How extensive was this system, and how seriously the Brahmins took the task of keeping alive



their intellectual traditions, is evidenced by the fact that in Poona alone there were 164 pathshalas where the classical texts of Hinduism were taught to young Brahmins through the medium of Sanskrit. Instruction in these pathshalas was given free of charge, since the shastris were not permitted to exploit their knowledge for the sordid business of earning a livelihood. But if tradition obliged the Brahmins to impart instruction gratis, it also imposed upon the State the duty of providing for their subsistence; which explains the frequency of grants like the one made by the Peshwas to the renowned pandit Vithal Upadhaya of Pandharpur for running a Sanskrit college<sup>58</sup>.

The dominance of the Brahmin castes was an important factor in promoting cohesion and order in urban society. As the intellectual leaders of the community, and the guardians of the values of Hinduism, the Brahmins pursued the good life through voluntary restraints on their social behaviour. But that compliance with tradition which was self-imposed in the case of the Brahmins had to be enforced on the unsophisticated castes by the authority of caste assemblies and caste heads and shastris versed in custom and law. The caste

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58

BA. H.D. Robertson to W. Chaplin dated 2 January 1824: Gen. Dept. Vol. 15/73 of 1824.

assemblies debated all matters affecting the interests of the caste. The Poona Brahmins, for instance, met frequently to discuss disputed points of custom, or novel problems confronting the community, on the initiative of leading shastris like Neelkunth Shastri Thuthe or Waman Shastri Sathe. In questions affecting only one Brahmin caste the entire cluster could attend the proceedings, but only members of the sub-group directly concerned were permitted active participation. The larger assemblies which met to consider issues concerning the entire community were lively centres of discussion and debate:

There were present [runs an eye witness account of one such meeting] Mulhar Shrotee, the most highly respected Bramin in the country; Nilcunt Shastree Thuthey and Wittal Oopaddea of Pundharpur, esteemed the most able men, and the most deeply versed in the whole of the Deccan in the learning of the shasters, who have instructed and still instruct many young Bramins; Raghoo Achayra, an eminent scholar, the Principal of the school at Poona; Hurbhut Caseekur, a beneras bramin of great celebrity; Chintamun Dixit, Ganesh Shastree of Rajapur; and many other eminent shastrees from all quarters. The number of persons assembled was least five hundred, and the streets leading to the Boodwar Palace was filled with people curious to know the result of discussions regarding suttees, and the right of sonars to perform certain Brahmanical ceremonies, which last was also a question appointed to be determined at the meeting<sup>59</sup>.

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H.D. Robertson to W. Chaplin dated 10 December 1823: reproduced in Choksey, op. cit., pp. 220-5.

Through the absence of a sophisticated membership, caste assemblies in the middle and lower ranks of the social hierarchy lacked the popular base of the Brahmanical congregations, and the power to make decisions in such assemblies was vested in a small group of individuals rather than in the ordinary members. Brahmin assemblies worked on the basis of consensus, while in the middle castes power was vested in an 'elective' head who took into account the views of the leading members before deciding upon a course of action. Castes located at the bottom of the social scale, however, were subject to the will of an hereditary head who imposed his authority on the basis of the traditional domination he embodied in his person. Yet the caste head was nowhere a law unto himself. For he consulted the shastris on all intricate points of custom and convention, and accepted their advice as reflecting values to which high and low castes subscribed with equal enthusiasm. In this manner caste assemblies, which were instruments of social cleavage, served to impart cohesion to the community<sup>60</sup>.

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Vide Steele's Summary of the Customs and Laws of Hindoo Castes, pp. 130-49. Steele's account is based on information obtained from the Poona Shastris as well as from the heads of different castes in the city.



Integration and cleavage were the twin foundations of stability and order in Maharashtrian society. Integration flowed from the great tradition of Hinduism, and from its popular derivatives, the bhakti cults, which linked remote peasant communities and urban caste clusters in a close relationship and gave meaning to the life of the individual and established his social identity: it also stemmed from the political and economic institutions which set up a chain of command between the Peshwa and the kunbi through the bureaucracy and the deshmukhs, on the one hand, and the urban and rural commercial castes, on the other. Cutting across these integrative influences, which embraced the whole of Maharashtra, there existed factors and institutions that split the Marathi speaking world into small and self-contained social units: the village community, with its thulwaheek council, its bullotedari orders and its local Gods; the urban castes with their deliberative assemblies and distinct styles of life; the physical isolation of rural communities from one another, and from the urban world; and finally, the prevalence of values which supported a rigid and highly differentiated society despite voicing a mild protest against its worst features. All these influences combined to conjure into existence a polity whose stability was geared to its over all structure rather than to the relative position of any

specific caste. Because of the structure of this society, the substitution of a new for an old social group at its apex did not lead to any radical changes, except possibly for the introduction of a tension between the dominant elite and the rest of the community. The stability of such a society was reinforced rather than weakened by the conflict, and the clash of interest, between caste and caste, and social group and social group, and the consequent jockeying for positions of power and influence contributed to rather than detracted from the over all state of equipoise.

But this equipoise was undermined by the political and intellectual forces that were to impinge on Maharashtra after 1818: and in the nature of these forces, and their impact upon the recipient society, lie the clues not only to the social changes which took place in the nineteenth century, but also to the emergence of the powerful caste lobbies and the rich peasants who dominate the political scene in Maharashtra today.

## CHAPTER II

### THE POLITICS OF MODERATION

With the fall of Baji Rao Peshwa in 1818 the British Government of Bombay assumed control over territories which had for a century constituted the hub of a far-flung imperial system in India. I have already focussed attention on the political system and the social organisation which prevailed in this region prior to 1818, and I have highlighted the factors of conflict and consensus, and the patterns of social dominance, which flourished in the community. The most striking feature of Maharashtra was the consensus which bound high and low castes in a close intellectual relationship. This consensus stemmed from the dispersal of the Brahmanical values of advaita among the lower and middle castes in the form of the bhakti movement. The spread of the bhakti cult through a folk literature which ranged from the compositions of Jnaneshwar to the abhangas of Namadeva and Tukarama had a forceful impact on Maharashtra. The religious and literary activity of the bhakti saints not only narrowed the gulf between the



different castes, but it was also instrumental in shaping an ethos from which the heroic figures of Maharashtra drew their inspiration, and in creating a political climate which has been equated with the spirit of nationalism in Maharashtra<sup>1</sup>. Besides being linked to the kunbis and other inferior castes through the bhakti movement, the Brahmins of Maharashtra enjoyed a political and social dominance to which there hardly existed any parallel in the rest of India. This was particularly true of the Chitpavan Brahmins, who had come to occupy many important offices of State, and who were in addition awarded substantial grants in land, after the accession to supreme power of their caste-fellow, Balaji Vishwanah Peshwa<sup>2</sup>. Of the significant concentrations of power, namely, the religious order, the bureaucracy, and the landed aristocracy, the Chitpavan Brahmins virtually controlled all three. Their caste status assured their spiritual dominance and their intellectual leadership: their political hegemony stemmed from the existence of a Brahmin ruling dynasty: finally, in order to bolster and legitimise their position, the Peshwas had created a Brahmin landowning

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See M.G. Ranade, 'The Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra', in his Rise of The Maratha Power, (reprinted Delhi, 1961), pp. 64-76.

2

R.E. Enthoven, The Tribes And Castes Of Bombay, (Bombay, 1920), Vol. I, p. 242.

aristocracy which formed the coping stone of a social order in which the Brahmanical style of life set the pace for the rest of the community.

### The Conservatism of Elphinstone

The task of pacifying Maharashtra presented Mountstuart Elphinstone, who was entrusted with the administration of the newly conquered territories, with a host of novel and pressing problems. Elphinstone's solutions for these problems were shaped by his intimate knowledge of Maharashtra under the Peshwas, and by his faith in the moral basis of politics. He had joined the East India Company in 1795 as a junior civilian, and after serving for a few years at Benaras in an administrative appointment, he entered the 'diplomatic' service, and thereafter represented the Company at the courts of Indian princes like the Raja of Berar and the Scindhia. In 1811 Elphinstone was appointed the Resident at Poona, and as the agent of the power with which Baji Rao had contracted a 'subsidiary' alliance, he virtually controlled the political destinies of the Peshwa's territories. Elphinstone's tenure as Resident at Poona gave him a deep insight into the political and intellectual life of Maharashtra. But at the same time it prevented him from acquiring that experience of problems of land-revenue administration which civilians

employed in executive posts acquired. The result of this lack of experience, as we shall presently see, was that he was unable to apply to problems of land-revenue administration the insight and depth of comprehension which informed his policies in other spheres. However, when the indirect control exercised by the East India Company over Maharashtra after the subsidiary alliance was transformed into direct control, Elphinstone was a logical and inevitable choice as the first Commissioner of the Deccan.

The administrative policy which Elphinstone outlined for the Deccan stemmed in equal parts from his acquaintance with the Maratha system of administration, and from his cautious approach to innovation and reform. He believed in the enduring quality of values and institutions, and was convinced that they could be changed only slowly and gradually. Despite his flirtation with radical ideas at an early age, when 'he wore his hair long in imitation of the French Republicans, and was fond of singing "Ca ira"<sup>3</sup>, he remained all his life a Whig of the old school, who saw the supreme test of statesmanship in the politics of moderation, rather than in reform designed to bring about sweeping

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T.E. Colebrooke, Life of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone, (London, 1884), Vol. I, p. 6.



changes. His natural ability to discern, and to appreciate, the intellectual quality of a traditional society was heightened by the training he received from individuals like Samuel Davis, the magistrate at Beneras, and his mentor in the Indian Civil Service, who was a distinguished scholar in Sanskrit, and who compiled the first scientific account of the astronomy of classical India. Elphinstone's vision, however, was not shaped by a romantic yearning for the past. Instead, it stemmed from a recognition of those enduring qualities in a community which mould its personality in a unique way. Elphinstone's ability to grasp the moral foundations of a society, and his vision of social progress, find eloquent reflection in entries in his Journal which speak of his concern over the controversies preceding the passing of the first English Reform Bill of 1832:

Yesterday I found the club in a hustle [he observes] from the news of the Duke of Wellington's resignation, in consequence of being in a minority on the Civil List. The sentiments expressed were neither those of satisfaction nor regret, but of wonder who would succeed, and of anxiety as to the result... The first expectations that present themselves for the future are that the Whig ministry, which we may suppose will be formed, will be embarrassed by its pledge in favour of retrenchment, which to any great extent is impracticable; and of reform, which beyond due limits would be perilous in the extreme. Many well intentioned but ill informed persons, who may favour it at first, will be driven by this to join the Radicals, to whom the Whigs are always objects of detestation. The Ministry will sink, and with it all confidence in moderate reformers;

power will either pass directly into the hands of violent reformers, or will come to them with more tumult and danger after having been for a time entrusted to ultra-Tories. Universal suffrage, preponderance of democracy, might be expected to follow, and to be accompanied by the annulment of the national debt...and other revolutionary measures ...No contingency can render it safe or wise to withhold reform, or to delay making the necessary alterations in parts of the constitution, while there is sufficient attachment to the whole to prevent it being subverted during the operation.<sup>4</sup>

His reaction to the political storm which threatened the English constitution in the 1830s demonstrates that Elphinstone was not a blind opponent of change. He believed innovation and reform to be essential parts of the social process. In the development of a community, ran his argument, institutions and values which had once satisfied a genuine need often became completely purposeless. When this happened it was foolish and even dangerous to oppose their abolition. For mere antiquity was insufficient to preserve inveterate abuse, and it was no defence of an outmoded order that it was an inheritance from the past. Those who subscribed to a rigorous conservative position were guilty of extending support to the prescriptive order as though it had been a divinely ordained and unconscious growth. They refused to believe that values and institutions owed their

creation to specific social needs, and that throughout the course of human history they had been subject to modification according to changing social exigencies.

Because he held a sophisticated view of progress, Elphinstone was prepared to initiate reform in response to the law of change which determined the course of human development. But he was convinced that arbitrary reform, which took no account of tradition, would only succeed in undermining the moral order which gave stability and cohesion to a community. The task of the reformer was therefore to reaffirm the enduring moral principles in new circumstances, while he aimed at the maintenance of a fine balance between progress and stability. Reform ought to reconcile the conflicting principles of conservation and correction, for those who set out to reform a society assumed that some of its attributes were worthy of being preserved. True reform accepted the moral foundations of a society, and sought to establish their supremacy in the midst of change. It also made use of the existing institutions, and even in modifying them attempted to reinforce their spirit, and to preserve their style. True reform embodied the prescriptive social order shorn of obsolete forms and stultifying excrescences.

Since Elphinstone was intimately acquainted with the political system of the Peshwas, and because he was opposed



to reform which was initiated in defiance of the prescriptive order, as Commissioner of the Deccan he asked himself a series of question which would hardly have bothered a less experienced, or a more impetuous, individual. What was the most expedient policy to be pursued in the conquered territories? To what extent were the old methods of administration to be incorporated in the new? How were dominant groups like the Chitpavan Brahmins and the landed aristocrats to be treated? To what extent were their privileges to be recognised by the new order? What would be the fate of the village communities? Would there be any encroachments upon their autonomy? and was it at all necessary to devise a new pattern of authority in the villages of the Deccan? Finally, how was the State to look upon the prevailing moral order, which supported the institution of caste, and legitimised differences in secular and spiritual status?

If Elphinstone had subscribed to the values of Hinduism, and if he had approved of the political and social institutions of a traditional State, it would have been easy for him to provide forthright answers to the aforementioned questions. But since he disapproved of Brahmanical values, and desired progress, the creation of a new order in the Deccan presented him with a serious dilemma. His views on the moral foundations of Hindu society, as it flourished in Maharashtra, were

clear and unambiguous. A set of values which sanctioned the temporal and spiritual superiority of the bigoted Brahmin was highly offensive to Elphinstone. In such a situation, so he believed, measures of reform seeking to strengthen the moral foundations of the community would have heightened social injustice and political iniquity. What was desirable in the circumstances was the propagation of a new code of social ethics, and the creation of an appropriate set of social and political institutions. However, Elphinstone's conservative cast of mind prevented him from embarking upon so drastic and so comprehensive a programme of reform. He therefore tried to transform the existing institutions of Maharashtra into instruments for its modernisation.

Elphinstone's attempt to exploit **existing** institutions for the infusion of new values in Hindu society is reflected in his decision to continue the patronage which the Peshwas had formerly extended to the Brahmin community through the distribution of the dakshina. This decision was taken out of political calculation, and it did not stem from any sentimental concern for the welfare of the community, since Elphinstone had no illusions about the Brahmins, and regarded them as narrow and bigoted in their attachment to their privileges. What prompted Elphinstone to continue the dakshina was the important role that the Brahmins had played in

Maharashtra prior to 1818. The existence of a Chitpavan ruling dynasty had heightened their dominance to an extent which had no parallel in the rest of India, and the distribution of the dakshina had been merely one of the means through which the Peshwas had signified their approval of Brahmanical hegemony, and of the values of Hinduism. True, under Baji Rao the dakshina, which in the palmy days of the Peshwas had amounted to Rs.1,000,000, was reduced to a modest figure. But despite his straitened circumstances, the last Peshwa had distributed small sums of money to no less than 50,000 Brahmins, over and above awarding substantial prizes to pandits and shastris who distinguished themselves by their proficiency in the sacred texts of Hinduism. The former rulers had thus maintained a class of individuals whose time was devoted to the study of religious literature, and who kept alive the intellectual traditions of the community<sup>5</sup>.

Though the dakshina represented an alliance between the State and the intellectual leaders of the community, and reinforced the values of Hinduism, Elphinstone refrained from abolishing it despite the fact that it held no 'moral' significance for the political order which prevailed in the

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BA. (Bombay State Archives): Minute by Governor of Bombay dated nil: G.D. (General Dept.), Vol. 8/63 of 1826.



Deccan after 1818. He even refused to alter the agency through which the dakshina had been distributed under the Peshwas. A committee of five prominent Poona shastris, headed by Raghu Acharya Chintamun, was appointed to scrutinise the lists of Brahmins who had enjoyed State patronage in former days; to examine them in their respective fields of expertise; and to diminish or to increase their bounties according to their scholarly attainments. In the first year in which the dakshina was distributed under British aegis, the committee of shastris submitted a list of 2,665 Brahmins, and recommended that they be paid a total sum of Rs.75,000, which was reduced to Rs.45,000 by the government<sup>6</sup>. Elphinstone regarded the continuation of the dakshina as more than a sop to the susceptibilities of the Brahmins, and a concession to the religious prejudices of the Hindu community. The dakshina, he argued, could be exploited to weaken the hold of traditional values on the Brahmins, and to lead them to explore the new and exciting intellectual horizons which had suddenly opened up. For once British rule had consolidated itself, 'the dakshina might still be kept up, but most of the prizes, instead of being conferred on proficients in Hindu divinity,

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BA. W.Chaplin to Bombay Government dated 15 April 1820: P.D. (Political Dept.), Diary No. 482 of 1824.

might be allotted to those more skilled in more useful branches of learning - law, mathematics, etc., and a certain number of professors might be appointed to teach these sciences,<sup>7</sup>.

The Hindu College set up in Poona by Elphinstone was equally informed with the view that the most effective means of winning over the Brahmins to western values lay in the creation of an educational institution which would gradually shift its interest from a study of Hindu religious texts to an examination of the rational disciplines of the West. Established with the object, in the first instance, of imparting a catholic education to 'young men of the caste of Brahmans in the several branches of science and knowledge which usually constitute the subjects of study of the learned Indians'<sup>8</sup>, the College incorporated Chairs in Advaita, the Shastras (religion and justice), Vyakaran (grammar), Nyaya (logic), Jyotish (astronomy), Vydic (medicine), and Alankar (belles lettres), apart from junior professorships for the study of the Vedas. Elphinstone had no illusions about the

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Minute by Mountstuart Elphinstone in G.W. Forrest, ed., Selections From The Minutes And Other Official Writings Of The Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone, pp. 334-5.

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BA. Address by W. Chaplin on the opening of the Poona Hindu College on 10 April 1821: G.D., Vol. 10 of 1821.

values which the Hindu College would disseminate in the community:

But we must not forget [he pointed out] that we are forming, or rather keeping up with no modifications, a seminary among a most bigoted people whose knowledge has always been in the hands of the priesthood and whose science itself is considered a branch of religion. In such circumstances, and supporting the expenses from a fund devoted to religious purposes, I do not think we could possibly have excluded the usual theological professorships without showing a hostility to the Hindu faith which it was our object to avoid, and irritating those prejudices of the people which it was the professed desire of the institution to soothe or remove.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the tenacity with which the Brahmins clung to their traditional values, Elphinstone was anxious to prepare them for the changes which lay ahead, and Raghu Acharya Chintamun, the Mukhya Shastri (Principal) of the Hindu College, was instructed to 'direct the attention of the College principally to the Shastras as are not only most useful in themselves, but will prepare their (i.e. the scholars') minds for the gradual reception of more useful instruction at a later time'<sup>10</sup>. To ensure this objective, only those scholars were admitted to the Hindu College who

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BA. Minute by the Governor of Bombay dated nil: G.D., Vol. 8/63 of 1824.

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BA. W. Chaplin to Bombay Government dated 24 November 1821: G.D., Vol. 10 of 1821.



knew enough Sanskrit to commence straightaway with the study of the Shastras or Vyakaran or Alankar. Besides, while the study of the Vedas was not actively discouraged, it was held inferior to that of the Shastras, and no scholar was permitted to devote his time and attention exclusively to them. A Brahmin who chose to study the Vedas had to study the Shastras as well, and his proficiency in the latter was held to be his main qualification. A strong emphasis on the practical as opposed to the metaphysical, pervaded the whole system, and Elphinstone had every intention of heightening this emphasis with the passage of time. As he argued, once the Hindu College had won a place in the affections of the Brahmin community, it would be easy to modify the courses of instruction it offered, and transform it into an effective instrument for the dissemination of western values.

While he was anxious to prevent the alienation of the Brahmin intelligentsia, Elphinstone did not overlook the institutions or the problems of popular education. Although in urban areas like Poona, Ahmednagar and Nasik the Brahmin community maintained a network of well organised schools, there was no regular provision for the education of the rural masses even in the immediate vicinity of the capital<sup>11</sup>. The

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BA. Col. Sykes' Report on the Deccan dated 1826: R.D., Vol. 154B of 1826.

few schools which did exist in the country districts were wholly inadequate to the needs of the rural population. Yet even if these schools had been more numerous, it is doubtful whether the kunbis would have made any use of them, since their poverty compelled them to send their children to work at an early age, and caste values led them to believe that proficiency in letters was not for them. Literacy in the rural districts was practically confined to the Brahmins and the vanis, and pupils in the rural schools learned little apart from the rudiments of arithmetic and the mythological lore which exercised so powerful a hold over the imagination of the people. But despite the lack of incentive for the peasants to educate their children, contemporary observers were agreeably surprised to find how 'extremely fond parents are of getting their favourite and eldest son taught'<sup>12</sup>. If a Brahmin teacher resided in a village, then the kunbis of the neighbourhood would take advantage of his presence, and send their children to be instructed by him. It was again not unusual for the prosperous kunbis to engage a Brahmin teacher to reside in the village. Finally, the employment of learned Brahmins by the rich as private tutors for their sons was common practice.

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BA. H.D. Robertson to Bombay Government dated 20 July 1824: E.D. (Education Department), Vol. 1 of 1825.

All this underscores the limited opportunities for education open to the kunbis, and emphasises the extent to which the Brahmins exercised intellectual dominance over the rest of the community. In the city of Ahmednagar, for instance, out of a total of 36 schools, 18 were meant exclusively for Brahmin children, and offered specialised courses in the Vedas and the Shastras. The total number of school going children in Ahmednagar was 571, out of which 275 were Brahmins. Other social groups which found significant representation in the schools were the kunbis and the Muslims, of whom there were 64 and 90 respectively. The rest of the children came from inferior castes like the sonars (goldsmiths), the weavers, the oil-makers etc. A caste breakdown of schools teachers is even more revealing of the extent of Brahmanical dominance, since 26 out of 36 schools teachers hailed from the Brahmin caste<sup>13</sup>.

Elphinstone was determined to organise popular education along lines which would take into consideration the intellectual achievements of the West, and destroy the Brahmin monopoly over the teaching profession. He found an excellent instrument for the execution of his educational policy in the

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BA. H. Pottinger, Collector of Ahmednagar, to Bombay Government dated 18 August 1824: E.D., Vol. 1 of 1824.



Bombay Education Society. Founded in 1815, the Bombay Education Society concerned itself, in the first instance, with the education of European children, seeking to bring them up in 'pious attachment to the principles of Christianity'. Because of its proclivity for religious education, the Society was ill-equipped to popularise education among members of the native community. But as soon as Elphinstone became Governor of Bombay, he gave a new turn to its activities. Through the support and encouragement which he extended to it, a branch called the Native Education Society was founded in 1820, with the object of putting mass education on a sound basis through the acquisition of existing schools, and the establishment of new ones. The Native Society further aimed at providing these schools with teachers trained in the English language and the western sciences<sup>14</sup>.

At Elphinstone's instance, the Native Education Society presented a memorandum to the Bombay Government in which it spelt out the need for directing popular education along lines which would throw open the minds of the lower and middle castes to the world of science and rationality. By

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Extract from First Report (1824) of the Bombay Native Education Society in R.V. Parulekar and C.L. Bakshi, Selections From Education Records, Bombay, Vol. II, (1815-1840), (Bombay, 1955), pp. 43-5.

contrast with the Brahmin castes, the memorandum pointed out, the non-Brahmin community could not boast of a scholarly tradition, nor did there exist any texts in the Marathi language, with which alone were the non-Brahmins familiar, that could form the basis of a sound secular education. To fill in this lacuna, it was necessary to translate into Marathi didactic works 'which without interfering with the religious sentiments of any person, may be calculated to enlarge the understanding and inspire the character'<sup>15</sup>, and the Native Education Society drew up for this purpose a list of books embracing fields as diverse as Newtonian physics and the origin of man in the light of scientific knowledge<sup>16</sup>. Behind this attempt to revolutionise popular education lay the belief that since the lower and middle castes did not possess any intellectual traditions of their own, they were open to immediate conversion to rational values. The only possible opposition to such a scheme could come from the old style Brahmin teachers, who diligently fed their pupils on a diet of religious bigotry and superstition. To obviate this

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BA. Letter from G. Jervis, Secretary to the Bombay Native Education Society, to Bombay Government dated 4 October 1823: G.D., Vol. 8/63 of 1824.

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See Lists of Elementary texts and books compiled for translation by the Bombay Education Society in ibid.

difficulty, the Education Society proposed to set up centres which would train teachers in the new pedagogic techniques. Once a cadre of teachers trained in the English language and the western sciences had been created, it would be easy to spread among the masses values which would transform them into advocates of progress and rationality, and anchor their loyalty to the new order in Maharashtra. The implementation of this programme, the Society noted in conclusion, was dependent upon the moral and financial support of the State. But the government could refuse such support only at the express risk of creating moral chaos and social disintegration in the community:

With means so disproportionate [ran the Society's memorandum] the Committee are immediately prompted to look towards the Government for pecuniary assistance; the more especially as it has shewn such readiness hitherto to support the views of the Society. From the dissemination of education, the cultural and moral improvement of the human mind, there are consequences as truly advantageous to the governing as the governed; and it is not without any presumptuous feeling the Committee express their opinion, that it appears more beneficial and glorious to check at first the propensities and ignorance and vice, by affording subjects the means of judging between right and wrong, then eventually to make a display of that power with which providence has entrusted the British Government, for the suppression of crime and the maintenance of order.<sup>17</sup>

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See fn. 15 above.



For Elphinstone, who supported the Native Education Society and the Hindu College with equal fervour, the spread of rational education among the Brahmins and the kunbis was an instrument for the modernisation of Maharashtra. He sought to transform the Deccan into a progressive community, which would respond creatively to the stimulus of the West, and reshape its ethos in the spirit of rational enquiry which it would imbibe under British aegis. However, even more significant than Elphinstone's objective was the policy he outlined for its realisation. This policy was based on a deep insight into the varying extent to which traditional values had influenced different sections of the community. The Brahmins, Elphinstone reasoned, clung with great tenacity to an intellectual and social order which assured them of their predominance. On the other hand, the kunbis had no special regard for a system which imposed an inferior social role on them. Because of this, the Sanskrit and Marathi institutions established by Elphinstone had different attitudes towards prescriptive values. Since they were firmly attached to their traditions, Brahmin pupils were to be led slowly from their commitment to advaitic values to an appreciation of the achievements of western science and philosophy. The task vis-a-vis the kunbis, and the non-Brahmin castes in general, was more simple. For the non-Brahmin community had neither

any articulate consciousness of a great tradition, nor any memories of social or intellectual dominance. Besides, unlike the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins were not to be initiated into the subtleties of science and rationality. As of old, once the projected revolution in values was consummated, it was still the Chitpavan rather than the vani and the kunbi who would set the intellectual style of the community. But in addition to the advaitic quality which shaped its basic pattern, the Maharashtrian ethos would then take account of the world of science and rationality.

#### The Administration of Land Revenue

The eradication of social values which supported Brahmanical predominance was only one of the many problems confronting Elphinstone in the Deccan. Questions relating to the state of the rural economy, and the economic policies to be pursued by the State, pressed down upon him with an urgency that was even more compelling. The hub of the economic order in Maharashtra was the land revenue system, which not only provided the State with a major share of its income, but made a decisive impact on the prosperity of rural society. The basic question to be answered by Elphinstone was: How would the gross agricultural produce from the land be distributed between the kunbi who tilled the

soil, and the hierarchy of intermediaries, and the State, who subsisted on the fruits of his labour? The answer to this question hinged on the proportion of the gross produce claimed by the State as its share. An equitable tax on land could result in increasing prosperity for rural society: an oppressive one could lead the community to chronic poverty and a decreasing standard of living.

When he took over the Peshwa's territories, Elphinstone found the administration of the land-tax in a state of complete confusion. The social organisation prevailing within the villages of the Deccan, and the counterpoised institutions of the bureaucracy and the land-owning aristocracy, had made sure of an element of rough and ready justice in the collection of the land-tax, so long as a watchful Peshwa presided over the destinies of the State, and a modicum of control flowed down from the apex of the system at Poona to its base in the country districts. But under Baji Rao Peshwa discretion was thrown to the winds, and a host of arbitrary practices adopted, which destroyed the checks and balances that had characterised the system as it was originally conceived. The office of the mamlatdar, for instance, was no longer conferred on experienced administrators, who could be recalled if their conduct proved unsatisfactory. Instead, it was put to annual auction among the Peshwa's



attendants and favourites, who were expected to bid high for the office, and fell out of favour if they failed to do so. A mamlatdar appointed in this fashion had neither the time to enquire into the resources of the district under his charge, nor was he interested in promoting peace and prosperity. He normally let out the district at an enhanced rate to revenue-farmers, who repeated the operation until it reached the patel in the village. A mamlatdar who purchased revenue rights over a district became absolute master over it for the term of his lease, and no complaints could be lodged against him through the traditional leaders of rural society. If the patel, mindful of his role as the head of the village community, refused to farm the village at an exorbitant rate, the mamlatdar entrusted the collection of the tax to his personal attendants, who performed their duties with a lack of consideration that imposed intense suffering on the kunbis<sup>18</sup>.

Immediately after the conquest of the Deccan, Elphinstone tried to revive the old system of revenue administration, purging it of the anomalies which had crept into it under Baji Rao Peshwa. The straggling revenue divisions of the

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EAST INDIA PAPERS, Vol. IV, Report on the Maratha States by Mountstuart Elphinstone dated 25 October 1819. Henceforth referred to as M.E.'s Note on Maratha States.

former administration were regrouped into compact districts, each yielding from Rs.50,000 to Rs.75,000. These districts were placed under native mamlatdars who were in turn subordinated to the control of European officers called Collectors. The mamlatdars were instructed to abolish the practice of farming the revenue, and they were required to settle the land-tax in negotiations with the Patels and the principal kunbis of the villages concerned. They were to levy the tax according to the actual area of cultivation; to make the assessments light; to impose no new taxes; and to abolish none unless they were arbitrary and harmful. But above all they were to introduce no innovations<sup>19</sup>. All the mamlatdars worked on the principle of village settlement, though some, under instructions from their Collectors, executed it with greater rigorousness than had ever been attempted by their Maratha predecessors. W. Chaplin and H. Pottinger, the Collectors of Dharwar and Ahmednagar respectively, settled the revenue with the Patel for an entire village, and then proceeded to distribute the tax among the cultivators, giving each of them a deed or puttah which set out his fiscal obligations to the State. Grant at Satara, and H. Robertson at

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19

Mountstuart Elphinstone to Lord Hastings dated 18 June 1818: Reprinted in R.D. Choksey, The Aftermath, (1818-1826), (Bombay, 1950), pp. 153-76.

Poona, settled the tax with the Patel, and gave him a puttah for the same, but only after they had ascertained the amount required of the cultivators, and had enquired of the cultivators informally whether they were satisfied with the arrangements<sup>20</sup>.

Despite Elphinstone's attempt to revive the Maratha administrative system as it had flourished prior to Baji Rao Peshwa, and despite his efforts to restore the authority of the traditional leaders of the village society, the disintegration of the old order was well nigh inevitable. The new concepts of bureaucratic control and responsibility which Elphinstone applied to the tasks of administration were in effect quite revolutionary. The office of the mamlatdar, for instance, completely changed after the take-over. From an autonomous official with wide powers of initiative, the mamlatdar was transformed into a supine instrument of the Collector's will, with his actions controlled by a precise set of bureaucratic regulations. The deshmukha, who exercised traditional domination over rural society, suffered a similar eclipse. The majority of British officials regarded them as parasitic, and were reluctant to utilise their services in

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Vide M.E.'s Note on the Maratha States.



the administration of land revenue<sup>21</sup>. Finally, the Patel suffered a drastic diminution in authority. He could no longer attract cultivators to his village on preferential leases; nor could he grant a field to a kunbi 'from his free will and pleasure...'<sup>22</sup> While legal restrictions on the Patel's prerogatives made deep encroachments on his traditional domination over rural society, the attempt of some Collectors to go over his head, and to negotiate puttahs with individual peasants, fatally weakened the ties of association between the members of the village community. Collective sentiment in the village resided in the fact that its total burden of tax was distributed among its members by the Patel and the principal cultivators without reference to any outside authority. Admittedly, even before 1818 attempts had been made to establish a direct connection between the kunbi and the State. But the weakness of the Maratha bureaucracy, and the strength of the village community, had combined to prevent the State from exercising so direct and decisive an influence over individual members of village

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21

Ibid.

22

BA. Translation of a Meeras Puttah (Sale Deed) by the Patel of the village of Multan dated July 1814: Appendix to Section II of Major Sykes' Report on Poona: R.D., Vol. 154B of 1826.

society. The rivaj or customary rates of tax, which represented the 'collective will' of the village community, had therefore always triumphed over revenue settlements like the kamal survey of Madhav Rao Peshwa instituted in the 1760s to set the finances of the Poona Government in order.

Although his lack of experience in the administration of land-revenue prevented him from formulating a clear-cut policy of land-taxation, Elphinstone's belief in a rational system of administration led him to support the view that it was necessary for the peasant's fiscal obligations to the State to be defined precisely and equitably by the political authority, instead of being left to the whims of the patels and the principal cultivators of the village. The attempt to establish a contractual relationship between the State and the peasant or the ryot (as he was also called) was a stupendous undertaking, since it involved the setting aside of the village community, and the rivaj rates, which had for so long determined the tax on the land. A revenue system which revolved around such a principle was bound to result in the atomisation of rural society, since it would undermine the collective responsibility for the land-tax which held the cultivators of a village in ties of close association. Elphinstone's belief in the superiority of a revenue system in which the peasant's fiscal obligations were fixed by the

State instead of the village communities, stemmed from the suspicion that in computing the rivaj rates the patel and the principal cultivators of the village transferred an inequitable share of the total village rental on the poor cultivators. Whether this suspicion was justified is difficult to say. But the attempt to do away with the traditional practice of letting the village community distribute the total tax among its members only added to the prevailing confusion. For, while it was easy to determine the total revenue that could be demanded of a village, it was extremely difficult to devise an equitable breakdown of this demand into the shares of individual villagers. A host of complications presented themselves when such a decision was taken. What was the proportion of agricultural produce which the State could claim as its own? What was the criterion on which this share was to be based? How was this criterion to be applied? Even if satisfactory answers were found to all these questions, there remained the apprehension that a sudden rise, or fall, in the fiscal obligations of a particular class of cultivators could spell ruin for rural Maharashtra.

The problems confronting the British administrators in Maharashtra did not admit to any simple answer, and an impetuous attempt at reform in the system of revenue



administration by John Briggs, the Collector of Kandesh, merely demonstrated the pitfalls that could trap the unwary<sup>23</sup>. Briggs had a particularly difficult charge: a wild and desolate district, infertile and inhospitable, and supporting a thin population of which the untamed Bhil tribes formed an important element. He found the revenue management of Kandesh in complete disarray. The kulkarni's accounts were incoherent and undecipherable. Even in the same village no two fields were measured by an identical unit, and the classification of soils was incredibly complex and intricate. Immediately after the conquest, Briggs restored to the stock expedient of settling the revenue with the patels of different villages. But Briggs' reliance on traditional practice proved a broken reed when a partial failure of crops obliged him to remit part of the revenue. Since he had settled the land-tax with whole villages instead of individual cultivators, it was impossible for him to ensure that the remission of revenue was actually passed on to the ryots, instead of being appropriated by the patel and the principal kunbis.

To eliminate the difficulties inseparable from the traditional system of revenue administration, Briggs decided

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BA. J. Briggs, Collector of Kandesh, to W. Chaplin dated 9 November 1821: R.D., Vol. 26/50 of 1822.

to do away entirely with the rivaj survey, and to substitute in its place a direct contractual relationship between the kunbis and the State. According to the rivaj survey in Kandesh, cultivable land was divided into three categories: patusthal, or land irrigated by public waterworks; motusthal, or land irrigated by private wells; and zorayet, or unirrigated land. Rates on patusthal land were levied on the basis of the actual crop grown, while in the case of land belonging to the second and third categories, the assessment was based on the quality of the soil, and the area of a particular field. Briggs considered the practice of taxing patusthal land on the basis of the actual crop grown as highly objectionable, since such a mode of assessment did not offer any incentive to the ryot to cultivate the better variety of crops. The additional profit a ryot might hope to make on a superior crop was appropriated by the State in the form of an enhanced rate. The ryots of Kandesh, consequently, frequently turned to the cultivation of inferior crops merely to escape the unwelcome attention of the official assessor:

In addition to the chance of under- or over-assessment [Briggs pointed out] is the circumstances of the ryot not being free to cultivate what he chooses, in consequence of the difference of rates in the different kinds of produce: for the extra rates on the superior sorts of cultivation naturally drive him to rear the poorer kinds in preference to the more valuable production of sugar and rice, which are not only

precarious in their returns, but are taxed at so much higher a rate than crops of an inferior value. Admitting this to be the case, it seems that the system is considerably defective...It is, therefore, advisable to equalise the rates of patusthal lands...<sup>24</sup>

Besides abolishing a system of assessment which discouraged the ryots from showing any enterprise and initiative, Briggs reduced the 68 scales of tax on motusthal land to eight, and the 122 scales levied on zorayet land to 11. A settlement based on these principles was introduced in Kandesh in 1821.

Even before the new survey could be appraised on the basis of its results, W. Chaplin, now Commissioner of the Deccan, had sounded the tocsin. Chaplin's objection to Briggs' survey stemmed from his desire to 'abstain for the present from making any considerable change in the former revenue system, beyond that of removing such abuses as are obviously calculated to affect the prosperity of the country'<sup>25</sup>. Like Elphinstone, whose conservative proclivities he shared, Chaplin was not against the idea of a new survey as such. But his extensive experience as a revenue officer under Sir Thomas Munro in Madras had convinced him of the inexpediency of a survey that was not based on 'known and

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<sup>24</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>

BA. W. Chaplin, Commissioner of the Deccan, to J. Briggs dated 3 January 1822: R.D., Vol. 26/50 of 1822.



fixed principles that had already been approved by experience.<sup>26</sup> When Chaplin turned to examine the premises on which Briggs had based his survey, he found them lacking in objectivity, and wanting in consideration for prescriptive rights and privileges. He was willing to concede that the practice of taxing patusthal land according to the quality of the crop grown was harmful for agricultural production, and subversive to the principle of incentives. But it was open to question whether Briggs' decision to substitute for the complex rivaj scale a single rate of tax, which represented the average of the rates formerly in force, led to any improvement over the previous state of affairs. Adverting next to the new categories in soil classification which had replaced the old ones in motusthal and zorayet lands, Chaplin observed that if the new classes were based on correct data, there could be no doubt that the simplicity of the new system would constitute an improvement:

But how have this data, [he wondered] the acquirement of which in other countries has occupied many years ...been ascertained and verefied; surely not in a single year of labour of the mamlatdars and their deputies. (The) classification and assessment of fields, which is everywhere so nice and difficult a process, is not to be well accomplished by such easy means and such unprincipled agents; and the

basis of the system being therefore imperfect, if not incorrect, the superstructure will be entirely liable to totter to its fall...<sup>27</sup>

The elucidation of a practical revenue policy, Chaplin pointed out, involved far more than the definition of objective survey principles, and their rigorous application to rural society. Before they could form the basis of administrative policy, even the most desirable of principles had to take into account questions of expediency, and to make allowances for prerogatives whose antiquity had invested them with the dignity of inalienable rights. Thus the principle that the tax on a field ought to be determined solely with reference to its productive capacity sounded excellent in theory. But was it expedient to follow it rigorously when its application led to a sudden and violent fluctuation in the burden of tax on a ryot? Chaplin referred to the sturdy kunbi of the village of Ootran who

owned 50 beegahs of land, of which about 10 beegahs was rated in the first class,  $\frac{2}{5}$ ths in the second class, and  $\frac{2}{5}$ th in the third class, and the whole assessed accordingly. By the new valuation the whole 50 beegahs...have been raised to the first or second class, and the rent by that rule increased 50 or 100 per cent...It is possible that the whole of the 50 beegahs may be of equally good quality, and that the present rate, considered without reference to other circumstances, may be equitable. But the ryot in question has all along been enabled

only by the moderation of rent to hold so much land...The rent now being raised to the full, he must of course throw up his land.<sup>28</sup>

Two distinct, though not necessarily conflicting, issues were at stake in a revenue settlement. First, the elucidation of a rational body of principles, on whose basis the claims of the State and the ryot could be equitably determined; and secondly, the need to avoid any drastic alterations in the traditional distribution of the land-tax. For Chaplin these principles were of equal importance. Briggs' survey, of course, had failed on both counts, and as Chaplin had forecast, threw the revenue management of the entire district into complete disorder. What the Commissioner found in the village of Bhanmod, for instance, was characteristic of the effects of the new survey. The total sum for which Briggs had settled Bhanmod was equitable, and in keeping with past assessments. But when Chaplin proceeded to the village to see how it had fared under the new survey, he was confronted by an angry group of 60 to 70 ryots 'who were loud in their outcry against the new classification and assessment',<sup>29</sup>, since their burden of tax had been raised by

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<sup>28</sup>

BA. W. Chaplin, Commissioner of the Deccan, to J. Briggs dated 22 January 1822: R.D., Vol. 26/50 of 1822.

<sup>29</sup>

Ibid.



50 to 60 per cent. As against the ryots who complained bitterly against the new survey, 46 ryots of Bhanmod had their assessments halved, and were only too pleased with the new arrangements. Since the dislocation caused in Bhanmod was typical only of those villages where the total assessment had not been altered, it is easy to imagine how the new settlement affected villages whose rental had been raised. Briggs' survey thus demonstrated the fallacy of the belief that the land-tax could be determined on the basis of 'objective' principles which completely disregarded the traditional assessment:

It must be considered a revenue axiom [Chaplin concluded] that no settlement that is not conducted with the general assent of the village authorities and the great body of the ryots can possess any stability. The classification and assessment of the lands must therefore be made in a great measure by the corporation of each separate village. To assist in determining the evaluations, the Patels and the kulkarnis, and a few of the principal ryots of the adjacent villages should be assembled and consulted. All these persons assembled together, and aided by an intelligent and experienced Karkoon from the district, and another from the Huzoor Cutcherry, might inspect and class each field with reference to its quality...(The) evidence of the ryots themselves, checked as I have suggested, will in general furnish the means of discovering pretty accurately what were the former rent and produce of the field, which point being determined, its classification may be safely left to the patel and the principal ryots.<sup>30</sup>

The problems which Briggs confronted in Kandesh were not unique to his Collectorate. And although the consequences arising out of his survey discouraged other Collectors from embarking on any hasty surveys, it was clear that the rivaj rates could not for long form the basis of the land-tax under the new administration. Conservative administrators like Chaplin had no categorical answer to the question how the profits of agriculture could be equitably distributed between the peasants and the State. But their diffidence was not shared by individuals like Robert Keith Pringle, a young civilian in charge of the talukas of Pabul and Sewnare in the Collectorate of Poona in 1822, who had studied Ricardian economics under Malthus, the Professor of Political Economy in the East India College at Haileybury. Confident in his knowledge that political economy had a scientific explanation of agricultural profits in the Ricardian law of rent, Pringle launched a frontal attack on the administrators who sought to keep alive the spirit of the old Maratha revenue system. Unlike Elphinstone and Chaplin, who regarded the village community as an institution which formed the hub of the rural order, and was hence worthy of preservation, Pringle pointed out how the prevailing social organisation in rural society merely served to cloak the domination of the patel and the principal cultivators in the village. The kamal survey of

Madhav Rao Peshwa, Pringle argued in his criticism of the 'revenue axiom(s)' set out by Chaplin, had been designed to absorb all the rent of the land, leaving to the cultivator the wages of labour and profit on the capital he had invested. But Madhav Rao's attempt to devise a rational basis for the land-tax had provoked the hostility of the dominant groups in the village, which had exploited the rivaj rates to transfer a preponderating share of the village rental on the shoulders of the poorer cultivators. These dominant groups had proved far too strong for the Maratha bureaucracy, with the result that although the mamlatdars were able to use the kamal survey as a guide in levying the total village rental, they had never succeeded in breaking through the domination of the Patel and the principal ryots, and in imposing the kamal rates on individual cultivators<sup>31</sup>.

To prove the dominance of the patel and the principal cultivators over the village, Pringle turned to an examination of the principles and practice of the rivaj survey. The unit of measure according to the rivaj was the chowar, which paid a standard assessment irrespective of the quality of the soil. The chowar was not a fixed unit, and its

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<sup>31</sup>  
BA. R.K. Pringle to H.D. Robertson dated 20 November 1823: R.D., Vol. 10/94 of 1824.



dimensions, so it was believed, varied inversely with the quality of the soil, thus bringing about a measure of equalisation in the assessment. However, the kamal survey, which took into consideration the quality of the soil, and employed a standard beegah, had shown this to be untrue. To take an example, the estate of the Mallee jatha in the village of Oswaree amounted to  $4+1/40$  chowars, while that of the Indoree jatha embraced five chowars, and their rivaj or customary assessments therefore stood in the proportion 17:20. But the kamal survey showed that the holdings of the Mallees were of a superior quality, and it fixed the assessments of the two jathas in the proportion 275:234. Since the Mallees had paid a lighter rental under the rivaj, they could hardly be expected to be over fond of the kamal survey. It is equally clear that the Mallees had formerly exploited their social position in the village to secure preferential treatment for themselves in the distribution of the rivaj rental.

The dominance of the patel and the principal cultivators over the village community, Pringle argued, could only be undermined through a survey based on entirely novel principles. The rivaj rates, it was obvious, constituted a reflection of their dominance, and it would be fatal, as Chaplin had suggested, to take any note of them at all.

Rent, as defined by Ricardo, provided an objective criterion for the determination of the share of agricultural produce which the State could equitably claim as its own:

The character which land revenue has always borne throughout India [Pringle concluded] is essentially that of rent, and not a personal or property tax. It ought not to be equal to all individuals, nor vary with the circumstances of individuals. But ought to be regulated only by such incidents as affect rent; and the circumstances which affect rent are the powers of production and the value of the produce. The rent payable to government should depend upon these, and the net profit of the ryot should be the same in all lands, and under all circumstances...To regulate the respective rights of government and its subjects under this principle appears to have been the object of the different systems of administration under every Indian Government...<sup>32</sup>

In the discussions over revenue policy arising out of Briggs' abortive survey of 1821, Pringle's was a lone voice pitted against powerfully entrenched conservative administrators, who were anxious to preserve the traditional institutions of rural society, and who looked upon former methods of government with sympathy. Both of Pringle's immediate superiors, Henry Robertson, the Collector of Poona, and William Chaplin, the Commissioner of the Deccan, refused to support the revolutionary idea which he had put forth as the basis of a new revenue system. Robertson took his stand on

the principle that 'in the present situation of our government in the Dekhun, the ascertainment and preservation of rights, laws and customs of society subject to our control should be our first concern...' He repudiated Pringle's interpretation of the kamal survey, and debunked the view that the State had traditionally stood forth as the supreme landlord in the country. The kamal survey, Robertson believed, had been instituted in order to determine the resources and the tax bearing potential of the countryside. Its rates were never intended to supersede the rivaj, and they were never meant to be applied to individual cultivators or particular estates. What had prevented the application of the kamal rates was not the opposition of any dominant group in the village, but the fact that they had rested on very shaky grounds. In assessing fields, the kamal had only taken the quality of the soil into consideration, neglecting a host of other very important factors like proximity to markets and the state of communications:

By the kamal [Robertson pointed out] the same quantity of land is rated at different values. By the old custom of the villages, variable quantities of land are rated at the same value, ...By the algebraical process of alteration, these data would produce the same result. But... you will perhaps admit that the accuracy of the particulars of the one is not to be put in competition with that of the other. The kamal rates were things of theory. They were the same in every village and in every talook. They were an



estimate in general terms of what the assessment of lands of different qualities might be. They may therefore be termed accurate on the whole, but erroneous in detail. To say that the kamal rates were not applicable to particular estates or fields is not to prove that the realisations from such particular estates according to the old village rivaj was actually fair - but if we reflect on the constitution of village society, there is every reason to believe that the burdens of the corporations were originally equally distributed, however much the improvement of their lands by some holders may have enhanced at a subsequent period their apparent value...<sup>33</sup>

Since the principles of the rivaj survey had been obscured with the passage of time, both Chaplin and Robertson agreed with Pringle on the need for a reinvestigation into the resources of the countryside. A new survey, they believed, would furnish the authorities with a complete record of the productive capacity of the villages, and of the holdings located in the villages, and it would set the basis for a relationship between the State and the kunbi in which the rights and obligations of both parties would be clearly and equitably defined. However, while the conservative administrators supported the idea of a new survey, they differed from Pringle over the advisability of the adoption of a purely theoretical criterion for the regulation of the cultivator's dues to the State. It was a fallacy, they

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<sup>33</sup>

BA. H.D. Robertson to R.K. Pringle dated 22 December 1823: R.D., Vol. 10/94 of 1824.

believed, to assume that these dues could be determined solely by reference to the productive potential of holdings, since the 'rent which the assessment is intended to fix is that of government, not that of the ryot and his tenant;... the government rent should be that which can be produced by the ordinary means of cultivation in ordinary seasons...'<sup>34</sup>

In fixing the assessment, account had therefore to be taken of the actual produce and collections over a period of time. Because the collection of the land-tax under the Marathas had not been based on any consistent principle, reliance on past realisations could, in certain instances, prove to be a treacherous guide. But the detailed investigations to be conducted independently, and simultaneously, would provide a useful check in cases involving gross injustice. Once a survey based on such principles had been accomplished, the ryots could be made to enter engagements severally for their rents, and collectively for the rents of their villages. At the same time, the State could reserve to itself the prescriptive right of levying extra assessments to make good losses in revenue arising out of individual failures.

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Circular letter to the Collectors of the Deccan by W. Chaplin dated 13 September 1824: R.D., Vol. 18/102 of 1824.

Clearly, then, Chaplin and Robertson were no apologists for the status quo. They eschewed reform in the system of revenue administration, as they eschewed it in other spheres, only to the extent that it involved a complete departure from traditional practice. A revenue survey which was designed to remove obstacles in the way of rural progress, and which did not completely disregard the rivaj rates, had the full support of Chaplin and Robertson. But despite their regard for traditional institutions, and the caution with which they formulated their proposals, it is obvious that they were advocating the establishment of a new, and in some respects revolutionary, relationship between the ryot and the State. The land-revenue system advocated by Chaplin and Robertson was not only dependent upon the creation of a legal and rational bureaucracy, but it was also designed to result in the atomisation of rural society.

How far-reaching were the changes advocated by Robertson and Chaplin was made clear by some administrators who attacked their proposals from a rigorous conservative standpoint. G. More, the Secretary to the Bombay Government, voiced his opposition to a revenue survey in any form whatsoever because of the dislocation it would cause in the rural economy by suddenly raising, or lowering, the fiscal obligations of the ryots. He simultaneously emphasised the inadvisability



of setting any fixed standards for the payment of tax by the ryot. The efficiency with which a ryot cultivated his field varied so much from one year to another that it was impossible for him to pay a fixed land-tax, and even if the rates of tax were computed on the basis of a scientific survey, the revenue officers would have to resort to the traditional expedient of negotiating the land-tax with the village officials annually<sup>35</sup>. F. Warden, a member of the Bombay Executive Council, raised even more fundamental objections to a revenue survey. Warden looked upon a survey as an 'inquisitorial' probe into the rights and privileges of the peasants. The State, he believed, lacked the moral authority to carry out such a probe. Besides, the institution of a ryotwari, as opposed to a village, settlement involved a radical departure from the administrative system of the Marathas, and it was in conflict with the spirit of moderation which informed Elphinstone's policy of modernising Maharashtra<sup>36</sup>.

The difference of opinion over revenue policy between a Utilitarian like Pringle, and conservative reformers like

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BA. Memorandum by G. More dated 13 September 1824: R.D., Vol. 18/102 of 1824.

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Memorandum by F. Warden dated nil: R.D., Vol. 18/102 of 1824.

Chaplin and Robertson, revolved around fundamental questions of innovation and reform, and stemmed from conflicting social visions. Similarly, the objections advanced to the institution of a survey, even on 'traditional' principles, by More and Warden served to illustrate the extent to which in the peculiar circumstances of the Deccan supposedly conservative administrators could espouse the cause of change. Amidst all this conflict of opinion, Elphinstone was unable to formulate a policy with the clarity and sophistication which had characterised his policy for transforming the intellectual climate of Maharashtra. His failure to seize the initiative in revenue administration was partly a result of the nature of the problem, since it was impossible to set out a revenue policy without a thorough investigation into the rights and obligations of the peasants. But it was equally a consequence of his unfamiliarity with economic problems, and with questions affecting revenue administration. Be that as it may, Elphinstone's vision of social progress, and his belief in the inevitability and the desirability of change, led him to support the views of Chaplin and Robertson. The strongest argument in favour of a new survey, he observed, was the chaos which characterised the revenue administration of the Deccan. In a flourishing community it would be pointless to embark upon a new survey. But the Deccan was in a hopeless state.

The rivaj rates had fallen into complete disarray as a result of the iniquitous practices of the revenue farmers employed by Baji Rao Peshwa. The disorder which they had inherited from the previous regime obliged British revenue officers to make their annual settlements in complete ignorance of the resources of the country. Their settlements therefore combined the worse traits of a traditional bureaucracy with all the disadvantages of a rational administration. If British revenue officers had a careful survey to guide them in the settlement of the land-tax, their rates would be less arbitrary, and less harmful for rural prosperity, than they had proved in the years immediately following upon 1818. Of course, the important question whether the settlements were to be ryotwari or villagewise could be settled only in the concluding stages of the survey, and in the light of the evidence that it would bring forth. 'The survey must be ryotwar...that is, it must be based on an inspection of each field'. Elphinstone summed up. 'Which mode of settlement to adopt is a question for further decision. The one which I had the honour to propose for adoption when the survey should be completed was the mauzewar (villagewise)...'<sup>37</sup>

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BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 26 October 1824: R.D., Vol. 18/102 of 1824.



In the administration of land revenue, as in education, moderation in change, and concern for the gradual evolution of institutions, was the main theme of Elphinstone's policy. The worst features of the Maratha revenue administration were to be abolished; yet the spirit of the former system would have its due place in the new order. The contradictions between the kamal and the rivaj were to be resolved through a new survey: but the principles informing this survey would not violate established revenue practice. The kunbi would henceforth pay a land-tax based on objective criteria: however, his prescriptive rights would not be trampled upon in the process. Elphinstone thus sought to secure the best in both worlds, and to preserve in the new order being shaped under his aegis facets of the old that were of enduring value.

Yet the old order was bound to undergo radical modification because of the values which inspired Elphinstone, and which differed radically from those to which his Maratha predecessors had subscribed. In the circumstances of direct British rule over Maharashtra, it was beyond human ingenuity to bolster the position of the patel and the deshmukh and the mamlatdar. Their status in former days had stemmed from the fact that their powers and obligations were not precisely defined, and they were not subject to any rigid controls. Any attempt to transform them into the instruments

of a rational and legal bureaucracy was bound to interfere with their freedom of action, and to undermine their dominant position. Elphinstone's attempt to reinforce the village community was equally futile, for the village community was an institution that could flourish only in a traditional, as opposed to a modern, State. Modernisation was thus bound to result in the destruction of the institutions, and the disruption of the social organisation, which had imparted stability and cohesion to Maharashtra under the Peshwas.

#### The Elphinstone Code of 1827

For despite chronic political instability and arbitrary government, the dominant note in Maharashtra at the time of the British conquest was struck by cohesion and order rather than by disunity and chaos. This is not to deny that even a conservative like Elphinstone found much that was reprehensible and objectionable in the institutions and values which flourished in the Deccan under native rule. This is merely to emphasise the undercurrent of stability characterising the social climate of the Peshwa's territories. The climate of stability reinforced the reluctance of conservative administrators like Elphinstone to embark upon sweeping programmes of political reform, for it pointed, so they believed, to factors of enduring value in the community.

Behind the stability characterising Maharashtra in 1818 lay the vitality of caste institutions, and the 'popularity' of caste values, which combined in a singular fashion the contradictory functions of differentiation and integration. Testifying to the important role played by caste organisations in the life of the individual, Elphinstone observed: 'The influence of caste and public opinion as associated with religion is very strong; and the censures of the priest have perhaps in general more weight than the terrors of the magistrate'<sup>38</sup>. Perhaps the key to the vitality of caste institutions in the Deccan lay in the accident of Brahmanical rule, and in the sagacity of groups like the shastris of Poona, who conducted the affairs of the Brahmin community with discretion and restraint, and in addition advised and guided the lower castes in their secular and spiritual concerns. All this resulted in orderly social behaviour, and in the absence of serious friction between high and low castes. Elphinstone, for instance, was struck by the (relatively) high standards of public morality in the Deccan, and by the entire absence of that social violence and moral anarchy which characterised life in so many parts of India, including territories under British control:

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<sup>38</sup>

BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 22 December 1824: R.D., Vol. 14/204 of 1825.



Judging from the iniquity [he pointed out] with which crimes might be committed...we should be led to fancy the Maratha country a complete scene of anarchy and violence. No picture, however, would be further from the truth...It is most important to ascertain the causes which kept the country in a state superior to our oldest possessions (Bengal) amidst all the abuses and oppression of a native government...

The Maratha country presents in many respects a complete contrast to...(our territories in Bengal). The people are very few compared to the quantity of arable land; they are hearty, warlike, and always armed till of late years; the situation of the lower orders was very comfortable, and that of the upper prosperous...All the powers of the State were concentrated in the same hands, and their vigour was not chastened by any suspicion on the part of the government or any scruples of their own...(Men) knew that if they were right in substance, they would not be questioned about the form...The mamlatdars were considerable persons, and there were men of property and consideration in every neighbourhood; Enamdars, Jagheeradars and old Zamindars. They were associated with the ranks above and below them, and kept up the chain of society to the prince; by this means the higher orders were kept informed of the situation of the lower, and as there was scarcely anyone without a patron, men might be exposed to oppression, but could scarcely suffer from neglect.<sup>39</sup>

Here then, according to Elphinstone, were vital pointers to the structure of a bureaucracy that could enforce peace and order in the conquered territories. The highest body in the line of command under government could either be a court, or an individual, vested with general control over the various branches of the administration. This court had to be

frequently in circuit, and it had to be responsible for the general superintendence of the system, rather than be made to pay detailed attention to any part of it. Under the court would be appointed powerful Collectors, entrusted with supreme authority over the districts under their charge, and possessing extensive powers over the native administrators subordinate to them.

Though the bureaucracy to be erected under British aegis could profitably emulate features of the administrative system which had ensured peace and order under the Peshwas, it was clear to Elphinstone that both the powers and the responsibilities of the various public offices had to find precise and legal definition. Similarly, it was necessary to collate the religious and customary law which had guided the proceedings, and shaped the decisions, of indigenous Courts of Law in the form of a simple and comprehensible code. Elphinstone therefore sought to frame a body of regulations which would form the basis of a legal and rational bureaucracy, and present the customary laws in a clear and intelligible form. The Benthamite inspiration behind such an objective hardly needs any emphasis. But Elphinstone's Benthamism was tempered with a regard for tradition, and a concern for continuity in the processes of change. He described the great legislator as 'a man of first rate ability, but also of first

rate eccentricity; which, both in his doctrines and in his personal habits, probably arises from his little intercourse with the world'<sup>40</sup>. It was all very well to advocate, as Bentham was wont to advocate, a simple and rational body of law which made a clean sweep of ill-defined and outdated laws. But, Elphinstone pointed out, 'foreigners should certainly be cautious how they made a code for a nation which they imperfectly know'<sup>41</sup>. Hindu law was cluttered up with the most glaring inconsistencies, and it was imprecise to a degree which defied comprehension. Yet the people of the country were deeply attached to the legal system which they had inherited from their forefathers. The creation of a new body of laws would not only confuse them; it would lead them away from habits of thought and action which had effectively guaranteed the social peace under the Peshwas.

Such then was the inspiration behind the investigation into The Laws and Customs of Hindoo Castes Within the Dekhun Provinces<sup>42</sup> conducted in the 1820s by the Bombay civilian,

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Mountstuart Elphinstone to Edward Strachey dated 3 September 1823: quoted in Colebrooke, op. cit., II, p. 114.

41

Ibid.

42

A. Steele, Summary of the Laws and Customs of Hindoo Castes Within the Dekhun Provinces Subject to the Provinces of Bombay, (Bombay, 1827).



Arthur Steele, at Elphinstone's behest. Similar motives determined the creation of the Regulation Committee set up to draft a new Code for the Bombay territories. In his instructions to Steele, Elphinstone spelt out the difficulties which would confront a latter-day Manu, and stressed the objectives he had in view. The Shastras, from which Hindu pandits derived their legal sanctions, were a collection of texts which were inconsistent and vague, and obscured by the interpolation of later commentaries. To make matters worse, in many instances shastric law had been substituted by customary practice which was based on pragmatic criteria and the convenience of different castes and communities. In such circumstances, Elphinstone pointed out, two alternative courses of action could be adopted: one could either formulate a completely new code based on general principles, or compile

a complete and consistent code from the mass of written law and the fragments of tradition, determining on general grounds of jurisprudence those points where the Hindu books and traditions present only conflicting authorities...The first of these courses, if otherwise expedient, is rendered completely impracticable here by the attachment of the natives to their own institutions, and by the degree to which their laws are interwoven with their religion and manners. The second plan is, therefore, the only one which it is in our power to pursue...<sup>43</sup>

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BA. Minute by the Governor of Bombay dated 25 April 1823: J.D. (Judicial Department), Vol. 56 of 1823.

Now the Regulation Committee set up by Elphinstone to draft a new code reconciled 'Maratha mamool with Jeremy Bentham' is best illustrated in a discussion in the Bombay administration over the powers of the judiciary and the executive. In violation of Indian tradition, Cornwallis in Bengal had made the judiciary completely independent of the executive, with consequences which British administrators in India had come to recognise, and to apprehend, in the 1820s. But despite the unhappy experience of Bengal, the Regulation Committee wanted to make the judiciary in Bombay supreme by investing it with the authority to interpret the Regulations on questions affecting the powers and jurisdiction of the Courts of Law<sup>44</sup>. Charles Norris, a member of the Regulation Committee, argued the case for an independent judiciary along familiar Whig lines. Since the Regulations comprised a compact between the State and its subjects, he reasoned, neither party ought to have the right to interpret the meaning of this compact, least of all the party which had framed it. Even if the equity of the issue was over-looked, political considerations favoured the supremacy of the judiciary. Regulations had often to be applied in

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BA. Regulation Committee to Bombay Government dated 22 February 1823: J.D., Vol. 42/51 of 1823.

circumstances which antagonised important sections of the community. However, by pointing to the fact that the sanctions for such action had been provided by the judiciary, the executive could escape the opprobrium which would otherwise have discredited it in the eyes of the people. In conclusion, Norris turned to examine the argument that a strong executive led to simplicity and efficiency in the business of administration. This argument, he observed, was devoid of any force whatsoever, since the rulings pronounced by the Courts of Law on various questions would yield a body of knowledge which would enable the executive to act in conformity with the law of the land. Of course, it was always open to the executive to pass new regulations to meet specific situations, and in fulfilment of its political objectives. But the interpretation of these regulations ought to rest with the Courts of Law<sup>45</sup>.

The stand taken by Norris was disputed by Elphinstone, and by members of the Bombay Executive Council, who had seen the disastrous consequences stemming from the Whiggish edifice of government erected by Cornwallis in Bengal. As G.C. Pendergast, a member of the Executive Council, pointed

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BA. Memorandum by Charles Norris dated nil: J.D., Vol. 42/51 of 1823.



out, Norris was guilty of confusing between 'laws' and 'regulations'<sup>46</sup>. Laws dealt with the right of individuals to the ownership of private property, and unless English principles of government were to be completely abandoned, the supremacy of the judiciary in this sphere was to be unquestioned. The regulations, on the other hand, set out the duties of the Courts of Law and defined the extent of their powers. If the Regulation Committee's concept of judicial supremacy was accepted, then in a conflict between a higher and a lower Court the latter would sit in judgement over a case in which it was itself a party. The absurdity of such a situation was patent, and it would be to the advantage of the administration as a whole if the executive was invested with the authority to resolve such disputes. Elphinstone extended his support to the arguments of Pendergast. 'What I would recommend, therefore,' he suggested, 'would be, that the Sudder Awawlut's (Supreme Court's) decisions in the interpretation of the Regulations be final in all cases when the question did not relate to an extent of its

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BA. Memorandum by G.C. Pendergast dated 9 March 1823: J.D., Vol. 42/51 of 1823.

authority, but that in such cases, a reference should be made to the Government...<sup>47</sup>

But if Elphinstone was reluctant to invest the judiciary with supreme authority, he was equally unwilling to transform the executive into a Juggernaut. His Whig vision of the executive and judiciary as counterpoised and evenly balanced institutions led him to veto the Regulation Committee's attempt to invest the Collectors with complete authority in the administration of land-revenue. The Regulation Committee was in favour of granting discretionary authority to the Collectors because of the difficulties involved in fixing the pitch of the land-tax. The problem of defining an equitable assessment was, of course, a very real one. For although in theory it was easy to fix the State's share as a certain proportion of the gross produce of the land, the application of this principle presented grave difficulties. If the jurisdiction of the Courts of Law was extended to disputes between the kunbis and the State over the land-revenue, then the kunbi would always contest the collector's evaluation, knowing full well that it was impossible for the Collector to substantiate his position

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BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 14 March 1823:  
J.D., Vol. 42/51 of 1823.

before a Court of Law. It was to obviate this difficulty that the Committee proposed to invest the Collector with the authority to confiscate the holdings of 'obstreperous' kunbis in order to lease them to more accommodating cultivators:

Probably the ultimate authority [the Committee pointed out] for decision between the Collector and the cultivator must be arbitrary. Native arrangements have ever been so in fact however nominally modified; and it is not obvious that the state of proprietary landed interest admits of any other interpretation of the State's rights.<sup>48</sup>

Elphinstone, however, would have nothing to do with so arbitrary a proposal. Even if the former officers of State had exercised such a power, he observed, a Collector armed with similar authority was capable of far more mischief because of the greater concentration of power in the hands of the bureaucracy under British aegis. No doubt the proposal secured the interests of the State, but 'it would not be equally efficacious in protecting those of the ryot, left no resource in the event of excessive demand from the Collector, but that...of giving up his land'<sup>49</sup>.

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48

BA. Regulation Committee to Bombay Government dated 17 August 1821: R.D., Vol. 16/99 of 1824.

49

BA. Bombay Government to Regulation Committee dated 17 August 1821: R.D., Vol. 16/99 of 1822.



Elphinstone's ability to salvage those enduring features of the Maratha administration which embodied the ingrained habits of the people, and to weave them into the texture of western institutions, is particularly well reflected in the judicial edifice which he erected for the Deccan<sup>50</sup>. His approach to the problem of ensuring cheap and effective justice for the people was simple and ingenious. He believed that a majority of disputes between the kunbis concerned trivial issues, and could best be settled through institutions with which they were thoroughly familiar. It would, therefore, be a mistake to abolish the panchayats through which a majority of rural disputes had been traditionally resolved. Yet panchayats could not be expected to dispense justice according to British notions of social equity. He therefore superimposed upon them an imposing structure of western style Courts of Law which dispensed justice according to western legal values.

If Elphinstone upheld the panchayats, he did so because he regarded them as an organic part of the community, and not because he had any romantic illusions about them. 'I kept

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BA. Bombay Government to Regulation Committee dated 7 February 1824: J.D., Vol. 48 of 1822.

up panchayats because I found them<sup>51</sup>, he told his friend and confidant, Edward Strachey. He was aware of their dilatory methods of procedure; their inability to execute their own awards; and of corruption among their members. But he also recognised the fact that despite these defects the panchayats were popular with the rural masses, who referred to the institution as Punch Prumaishwar (The Voice of the Punch is the Voice of God). Behind the popularity of the panchayats, he argued, lay the inability of a traditional State to administer cheap and effective justice to its subjects. Realising the limitations of their power, Maratha administrators had left it to the people to procure justice for themselves through institutions which owed their conception to popular initiative. As a result, these institutions had become a part of the social order, and their abolition would impose suffering and misery on the kunbis who looked upon them as their sole protection against injustice and oppression.

The role of the panchayat in the new judicial system was spelt out at length in a draft regulation. The preamble to this regulation stressed the need for panchayats in order

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Mountstuart Elphinstone to Edward Strachey dated 21 April 1821: quoted in Colebrooke, op. cit., II, p. 124.

to secure the 'easy and amicable settlement of disputes of a civil nature...'<sup>52</sup> As in former times, there was to be no restriction on the complexity of cases that could be brought up before a panchayat, so long as the disputants were agreed upon the need for such arbitration. The membership of a panchayat was to be decided upon by the disputing parties, but no individual would be compelled to become a member of a panchayat, unless he was the patel, or the kulkarni, of the village concerned. Such a stipulation was made because although nothing could be gained by imposing the institution on the ordinary kunbi, the village officers were obviously under a moral obligation to devote a part of their time to public business. Finally, a panchayat was free to give its award either orally, or in writing, but a higher Court of Law could take cognisance of its decision only if it was written down in a prescribed form. A proper award made by a panchayat could not be set aside by any executive authority, but a disputant was at liberty to appeal to a higher Court if he had reason to believe that he had been denied justice. Such a limitation on the authority of panchayats was essential to provide safeguards against

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BA. Draft of Regulation Concerning Panchayats dated 17 August 1821: J.D., Vol. 48 of 1822.



corrupt or partisan decisions. 'Although it is essential that awards should be final...' the Committee pointed out, 'yet it is necessary to guard against injustice arising out of wilful impartiality on the part of arbitrators, and this can best be done by a suit to set aside the arbitration.'<sup>53</sup>

Even the regulation institutionalising the panchayat made it clear that the higher Courts of Law were to draw their sanctions from western notions of justice and equity, and that the panchayat was important only to the extent it represented the integration of a popular institution in the new judicial hierarchy. Taking its cue from the Benthamite belief that cheap and efficient justice could best be administered by the delegation of original authority to Subordinate Courts, and the retention of powers of supervision and control in a Supreme Court, the Regulation Committee envisaged a three tiered judicial system, which corresponded to Bentham's three grades of Courts - the parish Court, the district Court, and the provincial Court. The coping stone of the judicial system was provided by a Sudder Adawlut (Supreme Court) vested with supreme civil and criminal jurisdiction over the entire territories. In its civil capacity the Sudder Adawlut could hear appeals against the

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Ibid.

decisions of the District Courts, while in its criminal capacity it could superintend matters relating to the administration of criminal justice by the magistrate-collectors. The Adawlut was in addition authorised to appoint Puisne Judges to hold Courts of Circuit for the trial of capital and other criminal offences. While on circuit, the Puisne Judges were expected to inspect the criminal proceedings in the Courts of magistrates, and to guide them in the interpretation of the law.

The District or Zillah Court was the hub of the judicial system. The Zillah Judge presided over two different Courts, the one possessing civil, and the other possessing criminal jurisdiction over the district. In his civil capacity the Zillah Judge was competent to try all cases of a civil nature in his district. Besides, his jurisdiction extended to appeals against original suits tried by judicial officers subordinate to him. Superintendence over the lower Courts, rather than attention to original cases, was the main responsibility of the Zillah Judge, for to quote the Regulation Committee, 'we are disposed to relieve the Zillah Judge as much as can conveniently be done from the cognisance of original suits...in order that he may have the leisure to superintend and regulate the proceedings of the inferior

courts...'<sup>54</sup> The Zillah Judge was equally powerful in the dispensation of criminal justice, since he was competent to try 'all natives and other persons not British subjects committing any offence within the Zillah,'<sup>55</sup>. Under him came Assistant Judges whose duties were set by the Zillah Judge, and who retained the right to supervise their conduct and to hear appeals against them.

The rung of the judicial hierarchy immediately below the Zillah Court represented the first step towards the integration of two different judicial systems, of which the institutionalised panchayats represented the culmination. To try civil cases not involving persons of European descent, the Zillah Judge could appoint Native Commissioners of Justice, whose original jurisdiction extended to cases involving sums less than Rs.500. These Native Commissioners were appointed to relieve European judicial officers of the more trivial cases, which prevented them from attending to serious disputes. 'The greatest inconvenience to the judicial system throughout India', the Regulation Committee pointed out, 'has been the wide range of suit which could

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<sup>54</sup>

BA. Draft of Regulation Concerning the setting up of a Judiciary dated nil: J.D., Vol. 48 of 1822.

<sup>55</sup>

Ibid.



only be tried by European agency, providing an accumulation, and, in some instances a stagnation of business in the chief courts of the Zillah...<sup>56</sup> In answer to this problem, the Native Commissioners of Justice were expected to act in three different capacities: first, to decide cases referred to them directly; secondly, to look into cases referred to them by the Zillah Judges; and thirdly, to investigate appeals against the decisions of the panchayats.

The differing concepts behind the institution of the Native Commissionships and the Zillah Courts were brought into sharp focus in a debate within the Bombay Government concerning the right of pleaders to represent disputants. The Regulation Committee made short shift of the argument that pleaders encouraged litigation, and that they defeated the ends of justice by diverting the attention of the Courts from the real point at issue in a dispute. Whenever formal Courts of Justice were established, the Committee pointed out, the means of litigation formerly dispersed over a number of panchayats were brought within the ambit of a single institution, creating the illusion of increased social conflict. Once such Courts were established, the disputing parties had to be permitted to have their cases represented

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<sup>56</sup>

Ibid.

by legal agents, both on grounds of convenience and the complexity of the legal procedures involved. In other words, whether they were regarded as good or evil, pleaders were an inevitable consequence of the establishment of western style courts of law. The practical question was whether the judicial system would not work better if some sort of control was exercised over the pleaders. 'We propose, therefore,' the Committee stated, 'to limit pleaders so far as to ensure their being qualified for their duty...'<sup>57</sup> But while this was to be true of the Zillah Courts, any person could act on behalf of a defendent before a Native Commissioner, who was supposedly guided by popular notions of justice and social equity.

The tentative Regulations drafted by the Committee formed the basis of the Elphinstone Code of 1827. This code reveals Elphinstone's deep insight into Hindu society, and it forms an eloquent tribute to the catholicity of his statecraft, and the sophistication of his social vision. Elphinstone is to be distinguished from rigorous conservatives who wanted to leave the social fabric of Maharashtra undisturbed, and from reformers in a hurry who saw no obstacle in the rapid modernisation of the community. His

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<sup>57</sup>  
Ibid.

cautious approach to reform led him to a sensitive awareness of the tasks confronting the British administration in India, and his belief in the moral basis of politics made him see the intimate connection between the patterns of dominance in Hindu society, and the social values to which the community owed its allegiance. The Brahmin steeped in centuries of a stultifying intellectual tradition, so Elphinstone believed, could not be transformed over-night into an individual who was 'English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'<sup>58</sup>. Nor could the Maratha polity be suddenly converted into a modern State.

Elphinstone's policy of gradualism exercised a decisive influence on social change in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. His attempt to exploit traditional institutions for the propagation of western values had a profound effect on a community characterised by a remarkable intellectual consensus. Instead of inducing the deep cleavages which a drastic policy of reform would have necessarily created, the policy adopted by Elphinstone converted an influential section of the Brahmin intelligentsia to western values

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Minute by Lord Macaulay dated 2 February 1835: Selections From Educational Records, Part I, 1781-1839, ed. by H. Sharp, pp. 107



without alienating it from the rest of Hindu society. As a result, the consensus which had flourished prior to 1818 was not undermined, and caste antagonisms in Maharashtra never assumed the intensity which characterised them elsewhere. In handling institutions like the village community, however, Elphinstone committed himself to a course of action which destroyed the cohesion originally characterising the villages of the Deccan, and led to the atomisation of rural society. The disintegration of the village community was inevitable because in questions concerning the structure and guiding principles of the administration, the gulf in values between him and his Maratha predecessors was far too wide to be bridged by a compromise. This breakdown of integration in rural society led to the agrarian disturbances of 1875, which were as much a consequence of the measures of change sponsored by Elphinstone, as they stemmed from the Utilitarian deluge which engulfed Maharashtra after his departure from the scene in 1828.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE UTILITARIAN DELUGE

Elphinstone's vision of a gradual transformation of the political institutions and social values of Maharashtra exercised an irresistible appeal over administrators brought up in a conservative political tradition. But it also embraced deep-rooted contradictions. The point at issue was the relevance of 'natural' innovation in a situation where the reformer did not subscribe to the values of the society with which he was concerned. In such circumstances he could hardly avoid coming face to face with problems which did not admit of a Burkean solution. The alternatives before him were an abject surrender to gross forms of social dominance and political tyranny, or the creation of an entirely new institutional framework for shaping the processes which determine the good life in society. Yet Elphinstone refused to accept the existence of such a dilemma. Consequently, throughout the decade he ruled over the conquered territories, he had no answer to a host of urgent problems because of his refusal to accept without reservations the

Maratha institutions he had inherited from the Peshwas, or to implement the policies in which he reposed confidence<sup>1</sup>.

However, there are limits to which compromise can be transformed into a grand principle of politics; and the impact of the reforming tide which swept over Maharashtra after Elphinstone's departure stemmed, in equal parts, from his fruitless endeavour to hold back the flood, and from the refractory nature of the problems facing the new rulers.

The problems which confronted Elphinstone find their clearest expression in the question of land-revenue administration, which was the subject of continuous debate throughout his tenure as the Governor of Bombay. The issues at stake here were extremely significant for the future of Maharashtra. Was the kunbi to be alienated from the village community through the institution of the ryotwari system? Did there exist a class of rich peasants in rural Maharashtra which dominated the village community and exploited it to its own ends? Were rationality and objectivity to ride roughshod over custom and tradition as principles informing the new administration? In the answers given to these questions by different administrators lay conflicting ideological

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For an analysis of Elphinstone's attitude towards Maratha institutions and values see Chapter II.



preconceptions and rival concepts of the objectives of British rule in India.

A significant difference in values separated the conservative administrators like Chaplin and Robertson from Utilitarians like Robert Keith Pringle, who had come under the influence of Malthus in the East India College at Haileybury. Pringle scoffed at the timidity of the Burkean reformer with his concern for continuity in the processes of social change. His atomistic approach to social problems stood at variance with Elphinstone's view of society as a polity embracing conflicting groups and interests in a state of over-all equilibrium. Instead of looking at social phenomena through institutions like class or caste, the Utilitarians focussed their attention on conceptually isolated individuals, and inferred the attitudes and proclivities of larger social units from the insights thus gained into the social process. The result of such an approach was a strong emphasis on the discreteness of the individuals who made up a society. To their atomistic view of social phenomena, the Utilitarians added a belief in the effectiveness of rational action. They held that once a precise and logical solution had been devised for a particular problem, all that remained to be done was to apply it rigorously to the affected parts of the polity.

Pringle's advocacy of a ryotwari system stemmed from his belief in Ricardian economics and in utilitarian ideals. He was convinced that the collective sentiment prevailing in the village, which received nourishment from joint responsibility for the payment of the land-tax, and in turn perpetuated the dominance of the village officials and the principal ryots, was the one great obstacle in the economic progress of rural society. A clean sweep had therefore to be made of the Maratha revenue system since it sapped the cultivator's will to improve his position through the exercise of individual initiative<sup>2</sup>. In its place a legal and rational relationship between the kunbi, as a tenant, and the State, as the supreme landlord in the country, ought to be established. The State's share of the gross agricultural produce would then be the rent payable to a landlord, leaving the wages of labour and the profits of capital to the individual who cultivated the soil. In 1823, when Pringle first proposed the idea of utilising the 'net surplus' criterion for a new land-revenue system, both Chaplin and Robertson expressed strong opposition to his scheme. Robertson, in particular, argued that the doctrine that the

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BA (Bombay State Archives). R.K. Pringle to H.D. Robertson dated 20 March 1823: R.D. (Revenue Department), Vol. 10/94 of 1824.

State stood as the supreme landlord in the country would subvert the traditional rights of the thulwaheeks, or the meerasdars, and would unleash a disastrous social revolution upon the rural areas. The thulwaheeks, who were descended from the jathas of old, had a clear proprietary right in the soil. This was obvious from the value attached to their tenure, which stood distinct from that of the uprees. It was also proved by the numerous sales of landed property which had taken place in the region before the British take-over. To protect the proprietary interest of the meerasdar, Robertson would have him pay the land-tax for all the fields which stood in his name, even if some of them were not taken under cultivation in a particular season:

The grounds upon which Government has a demand of right upon meeras land [he pointed out] arise from the nature of the tenure, i.e. the usufractory right of such land being exclusively vested in certain individuals and families, and Government being bound, if it acts justly, not to infringe this right, so long as those enjoying it perform the conditions concomitant on its acquisition... Tell a meerasdar who endeavours to be freed from the assessment of the waste land - "You must resign your title to the usufractory possession of a portion of your good, bad and indifferent land of your whole estate, yielding a rent or tax equal to that portion left waste for which you did not pay tax," and remark his answer, "How can I do this? How can I part with my land?"<sup>3</sup>

Although his conservative views predisposed him to the position adopted by Robertson, Elphinstone was struck by Pringle's brilliant analysis of the kamal survey, and by the clarity with which he had outlined the principles which could inform a new revenue policy. Elphinstone was also aware of the Utilitarian influences to which the Court of Directors was exposed in the person of James Mill as the Chief Examiner of the East India Company. Since the revenue despatches from England were filled increasingly with short disquisitions on the virtues of Ricardian political economy, it was hardly surprising that he should appoint Pringle as the Superintendent of the 'Revenue Survey and Assessment of the Deccan'. At the same time, Elphinstone did not shed his distrust of measures which could provoke a social upheaval, or disturb traditional rights. In entrusting Pringle with the survey of Indapur, a taluka in the Collectorate of Poona, he consequently struck a note of caution to check his protege's exuberance<sup>4</sup>. The rights of the meerasdars, he said, would be the main concern of the survey, since they constituted the hub of the rural communities. The proprietary rights of the meerasdars were based on indisputable grounds of prescription,

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<sup>4</sup> BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 14 August 1826: R.D., Vol. 13/145 of 1826.



and they could not claim as a matter of right any remission in tax if they left a part of their estate uncultivated. However, to adhere rigidly to such a formula would place them under a grave handicap, especially since the Patels in former times had taken into consideration the actual condition of cultivators before distributing the village rental amongst them. Elphinstone settled the question by a characteristic compromise. 'My present opinion is', he stated, 'that it will be most expedient to allow meerasdars to throw up such portions of their land as they think proper; and to make a corresponding deduction in their payments until they shall be able to resume the land, which for a certain period at least, they should retain the right to do so'<sup>5</sup>. Elphinstone then proceeded to enunciate the principles on which the new survey was to be based<sup>6</sup>. Instead of advocating the 'net produce' criterion favoured by Pringle, he recommended a two stage process. In the first instance, a rough assessment of each village was to be made on the basis of the rentals levied in the past. Next, this amount was to be apportioned among individual cultivators, though in doing

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Ibid.

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Vide instructions enclosed in the minute of Governor of Bombay dated 14 August 1826.

so the surveyors were to take into consideration the productive capacities of different holdings, and the views of the ryots on what they could equitably pay, 'but with such allowance in forms of privileged tenures as have been enjoined in the orders of Government...'<sup>7</sup>

### The Pringle Survey

The taluka of Indapur to which Pringle first turned his attention as the Superintendent of the Revenue Survey was in many respects typical of the Deccan countryside in the 1820s. The first attempt at reducing its revenue affairs to order had been made by Malik Ambar during Muslim hegemony over the Deccan. The tankha settlement introduced by Malik Ambar in 1620s was a cash rental based on a third share of the gross produce. The distribution of the tankha on individual estates in the village was left to the members of the village community. When the Marathas established their sway over Indapur, no attempt was made to disturb the tankha until 1784-85, when the kamal survey launched under the Peshwa Madhav Rao was extended to the taluka. The kamal, unlike the tankha, was based upon an evaluation of individual holdings in the villages. It was undertaken for two reasons: to

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Ibid.

ascertain the productive capacity of the district in order to furnish the State with an accurate record of its resources; and to effect an increase in the public revenue. The kamal was unfortunate in its repercussions. Though the resources of Indapur had increased considerably since the institution of the tankha, the surveyors of Madhav Rao over-estimated its potentiality, and in raising the rental of the taluka from Rs.1,22,000 to Rs.2,22,000, they imposed a crippling burden on the cultivating classes<sup>8</sup>.

The kamal assessment of Indapur remained a fictitious objective. Its failure led the Government of the last Peshwa to farm out villages to individuals who were willing to undertake the collection of tax from the ryots. But in delegating this responsibility to revenue farmers who were free of the restraints to which the bureaucracy was subject, and who had no traditional ties with the rural communities, the Poona Government aggravated the seriousness of the situation. For the revenue farmers levied cesses over and above the standard assessment, in order to ensure quick and high profits for themselves. Their excesses had virtually depopulated Indapur, when in 1807 the Poona authorities tried to reestablish the

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Report on the taluka of Indapur by Col. J. Francis dated 12 February 1872: Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, New Series, No. CLI.

deserted villages through a system of leases (Istawa) providing for a small and annually increasing rent over a period of nine years, when the kamal rates were to be reached. However, so thoroughly had Baji Rao's farmers carried out their destructive role that even the istawa leases failed to attract the ryots to their villages, and the Poona authorities were experimenting with one expedient after another when hostilities broke out and the Deccan was ceded to the British Government.

When the new rulers of Maharashtra assumed charge over Indapur in 1818, its revenue administration had not recovered from the disastrous expedient to which Baji Rao had taken recourse in a desperate bid to bleed the countryside of its resources. The situation was further complicated by a succession of bad harvests in the 1820s, which necessitated large scale remissions in revenue. But the new administration's troubles were partly self-created, since in their ignorance of the productive capacity of the taluka, British civilians believed that the kamal assessment was a reliable guide to the amount of tax which could be realised from the peasants in normal seasons. The difficulties facing the new rulers were heightened by the social dominance of the Patel and the principal cultivators in the rural communities, which existed despite the absence of clear cut economic cleavages



in village society. Misled by the inflated figures of the kamal survey, British civilians at first imposed very high rentals on the Indapur villages, which it was the responsibility of the Patels to collect for the State. As a result of the high rentals, the Government was compelled to grant annual remissions in revenue. These remissions were particularly large in bad seasons, when a complete or partial failure of crops reduced the great majority of ryots to a miserable plight. But the tragedy of the situation lay in that the remissions, instead of alleviating the misery of the poor cultivators, were more often than not swallowed up by the Patel and the dominant cultivators, to whom the revenue officials were compelled to entrust the ryotwar distribution of the concessions accorded by the government<sup>9</sup>.

The corruption fostered in the village communities by the annual remissions in revenue was brought to the notice of the Bombay Government by R.K. Arbuthnot, a young civilian in charge of Indapur. He pointed out that at the root of the problem lay the 'present high rates of assessment throughout the country', which led the ryots to believe that the annual remission in land-tax was a normal feature of the revenue

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BA. R.D. Mills, Collector of Poona to Bombay Government dated 23 September 1828: R.D., Vol. 6/212 of 1828.

system. Through perpetuating such a system the Government not only played into the hands of the dominant groups in the village, but it undermined the collective sentiment which formed the basis of the village community, and encouraged rich and poor peasants alike to enter into an alliance to defraud the State of its share of the agricultural produce:

The system of granting large remissions in reference to the quality of crops [Arbuthnot pointed out] ...is of so bad an effect, that I feel very averse to putting it in practice to any great extent: for as soon as it is understood that Collections are to be made on this principle, it becomes the object of everyone to deceive the Government...When it is generally understood that all of one family assist each other in their concerns and that if the crop of one should particularly fail, he has recourse to his neighbour to lend him for this year, in expectation, that he will be called upon in his turn in the following, there appears no injustice, where the assessment is moderate in insisting on it being paid, nor is it likely to produce injury throughout the country. (Emphasis in original)<sup>10</sup>

The confusion stemming from an inadequate knowledge of the resources of Indapur was heightened by the chaos arising out of the changes which had crept into the social organisation of rural society during the century preceding the British conquest. Villages in Indapur taluka were divided into sthuls or estates, and these estates were further apportioned into teekas, several of which were held by the

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BA. R.K. Arbuthnot to H.D. Robertson dated 1 March 1827: R.D., Vol. 20/174 of 1827.

same ryot, often in different estates. The cultivable land in the village was also divided into areas of ghutcool tenure and meeras tenure. The cultivating community comprised meerasdars and uprees, the former being organised into jathas or family groups, each one of which was made up of the meerasdars of a family, and of such adventitious members as were incorporated into it by purchase of land or otherwise. The sthul and jatha were originally corresponding and co-extensive designations. But in the 1820s the same jatha often held fields in different sthuls, and the same sthul was frequently held by different family groups. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the meerasdars could on occasions occupy ghutcool land, and the uprees cultivate the plots of meerasdars, with sometimes each holding portions of both. All this was hardly designed to simplify the task confronting Pringle as the Superintendent of the Revenue Survey<sup>11</sup>.

In order to reduce the confusion that had crept into the administration of revenue to a semblance of order Pringle created a survey machinery staffed by 'a number of Brahmans ...for surveying and assessing the land, the surveyors having

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BA. R.K. Pringle to Bombay Government dated 28 July 1827: R.D., Vol. 28/1811 of 1827.

over them Brahman assessors, and the assessors' work being supervised by Head-Assessors, who were also Brahmans. Over the whole department was a Huzoor Cutcherry, composed of twelve Brahmans and an English gentleman (Pringle)...<sup>12</sup> The employment of Brahmins in the revenue department was no innovation in Maharashtra. But in another direction Pringle made a significant departure from traditional principles of revenue assessment. The land-tax in India had been based on the exaction of a certain share of the gross produce of the soil by the State. British administrators like Sir Thomas Munro, who gave the problem their close attention, both accepted and acted upon this principle. However, Pringle rejected the traditional mode of assessment as based on faulty premises, since it made no distinction between rent, which was the landlord's share of agricultural produce and a consequence solely of the superior fertility of the soil, and the profits of capital and the wages of labour, which it would be wrong to deny to the cultivator. The proportion of the gross produce which could be levied without absorbing the rent and trenching upon profits varied with the fertility of the land, decreasing progressively from the superior to the

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BA. R.K. Pringle to Bombay Government dated 6 September 1828: R.D., Vol. 225 of 1828.



inferior soils. Pringle was willing to accept that the settlements of Munro in Madras had in all probability left a fraction of the rent to the cultivator even on the inferior soils. But to concede this did not involve an acceptance of traditional principles of assessment, which were concerned solely with the gross produce of the soil:

It is obvious that the surplus which remains from the gross produce of the land [Pringle pointed out] after deducting all expenses is the fair measure of its power to pay an assessment. But as that surplus varies in its relation to the whole produce in different soils, any tax proportional to the latter only must be unequal...(This) inequality by creating an artificial monopoly in favour of the soils yielding the greatest proportion of net produce...will have a tendency to check production ...It has always appeared to me...(therefore) that, as the net produce is the only accurate standard of exaction, and as in proportion the assessment is regulated by it, it will be distributed in the manner most favourable to the general wealth and prosperity of the community, it ought therefore to be distinctly recognised as the basis of our operations...<sup>13</sup>

Having defined the principles of a rational revenue policy, Pringle instructed his Brahmin subordinates to apply them to the task of surveying Indapur. The entire survey was carried out in three distinct stages. In the first instance, the surveyors measured the holdings of the ryots; next, the assessors classified the fields so measured; and

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<sup>13</sup>

Ibid.

finally, the data collected by the surveyors and assessors was utilised by Pringle to calculate the net produce of soils of different fertility. The actual rental was then fixed as a standard proportion of the net produce of different soils.

In presenting the results thus obtained to the Bombay Government, Pringle emphasised the fact that he had left the natural advantages of different soils completely unimpaired; and that his survey enabled a landlord to levy a rent which increased progressively from the worst to the best soils. The settlement was, of course, fatally dependent upon the accuracy of the data from which the net produce was calculated. But Pringle found no reason to doubt the honesty of the surveyors and assessors, or to question the accuracy of their findings. The crux of the problem was the effect of the new survey upon the traditional distribution of tax amongst different classes of cultivators. Pringle was struck by the drastic changes which the survey had produced in the fiscal obligations of individuals, and of entire villages. But, he argued, these were consequences for which the Government ought to have been prepared. If the assessment on individual cultivators had been equal and equitable under the former system, there would be no need for a new survey. If it was unequal, a survey based on objective principles would inevitably change the

relative position of different cultivators in regard to their rental obligations to the State.

Pringle treated the rationality of the principles informing his survey as **axiomatic**. Yet he realised that 'this (survey) is not a mere question of political economy, and that, affecting as it does the rights and interests of a large portion of the community, it must be considered on broader and more general grounds'. He had no apprehensions about cultivators on whom the burden of land-tax had been reduced by the survey. But the position of cultivators whose rental had been increased required serious consideration. For although it was desirable to equalise the pitch of the assessment on different peasants, such an argument could never be put forth as an excuse for the violation of prescriptive property rights. It was in this context that alterations in rentals impinged upon the position of the meerasdars, who possessed a clear proprietary interest in the land. Pringle pointed out that as the idea of a survey in the Deccan had gained ground in official circles, it was assumed by the conservative administrators that the assessment on meerasdars would in no circumstances be increased, since an increase in rental meant an encroachment on their property rights. Yet he failed to see any characteristic in the tenure of meerasdars which entitled them to such indulgence:



I am at a loss to discover [he pointed out] the grounds on which this notion of the right of meerasdars to exemption from increased payments on a general revision of the assessment was originally taken up. I have looked in vain for any confirmation of it in the numerous notices and regarding the rights and immunities of this class...I have looked for it in vain in the deeds by which the land is transferred...I can find no trace of it in the management of our predecessors...I have frequently conversed on this subject with intelligent natives...and I have never heard from them but one opinion...Arbitrarily to raise the assessment of an individual meerasdar beyond that of his fellows would be an outrage to public feeling. But they have no conception of the existence of any contract to prevent Government...from causing it to be apportioned on the fields either of meerasdars or uprees in any way which in its wisdom it may think fit.<sup>14</sup>

However, none of the crucial questions were raised by the Indapur survey since it reduced the fiscal demands of the State on the meerasdars. It was the uprees rather than the meerasdars who were adversely affected by the new arrangements. But Pringle held that since the uprees cultivated land on an uncertain tenure, they had no reason to expect a continuation of the attractive rentals they had enjoyed formerly, and were at liberty to fend for themselves elsewhere. Pringle's cavalier attitude towards the uprees did not stem from any opportunistic motives; and he knew that he could be bargaining for a decrease in the area of cultivation as an immediate consequence of the survey. But this did not

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<sup>14</sup>

Ibid.



impair his confidence in his survey. For he did not believe that an extension of cultivation was desirable in all circumstances. The idea of attracting uprees on low rentals was in his view ill-conceived and mischievous. It encouraged a ruinous competition against the meerasdars, and promoted inefficient and slovenly cultivation on the part of the uprees. 'Like the Poor Law in England', Pringle pointed out, 'it is a system which sets out upon the principle of making the poor rich, by making the rich poor, and ends by making paupers of all'<sup>15</sup>.

The cogency with which Pringle set out the principles underlying his survey finds eloquent reflection in the fact that Sir John Malcolm, who had succeeded Elphinstone as Governor of Bombay in 1828, and was known to be even more cautious in his approach to innovation and reform than his predecessor, was completely overwhelmed by the logic and rationality of his arguments, and immediately sanctioned the extension of the survey to other districts in the Deccan. As Malcolm put it, the reasons put forth by Pringle for fixing the assessment as a proportion of the net instead of the gross produce of the land were so convincing that 'I must believe it to be rather apparently than actually the case that the

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<sup>15</sup>

Ibid.

assessments were at any time not so fixed<sup>16</sup>. Malcolm also conceded that the faulty execution of any one of the intricate processes of survey and assessment could affect the Pringle settlement fatally. But he saw no reason to doubt the accuracy of the operations carried out in Indapur. On the contrary, he looked forward to the prospect of increased prosperity in the countryside as the operations gained momentum. 'Without...(the survey) we proceed in darkness. With it we have light', he stated.

The minuteness of our acquaintance with the receipts, the rights, and the condition of every individual instead of limiting our liberality, enables us to give it a just direction, and so to render the benefits we confer on the community real blessings for their being given with a discrimination that ensures their happy operation.<sup>17</sup>

#### The Kunbis' Reaction to the Pringle Survey

The Pringle Settlement was introduced in Indapur in 1830 in a remarkable mood of optimism. Yet it embraced one disturbing feature which would from the outset have raised doubts in the mind of an individual less doctrinaire than Pringle. It has already been observed that he believed that

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<sup>16</sup> BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 18 November 1828: R.D., Vol. 225 of 1828.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the more substantial peasants in the village dominated the community and exploited the rivaj survey to their selfish ends. Pringle's case for a new survey, and for a ryotwari as opposed to a village settlement, rested on the supposition that the dominant cultivators had formerly paid a ridiculously low rental to the State. But as the results of the survey poured in, Pringle observed to his astonishment that the tax-burden on the meerasdars, whom he regarded as the exploiters of rural society, would be reduced instead of being increased under the new system. In the Pabul and Sewnair talukas of the Poona Collectorate, for instance, the rental on the meerasdars was reduced from Rs.3,55,827 to Rs.2,67,196, representing a diminution of 20 per cent in the total rental<sup>18</sup>. If Pringle had been less confident of the principles underlying his survey, or of the honesty of the agents employed for its execution, such a drastic alteration in the burden of tax on the meerasdars would have shaken his confidence in the Settlement. But he was above all doubts. Executing a neat sleight of hand, he explained away the diminution in tax on meerasdars on the grounds that they had

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BA. Collector of Poona to Bombay Government dated 1 April 1830: R.D., Vol. 7/287 of 1830.

formerly over-taxed themselves in order to attract uprees to the ghutcool lands of the villages on low rents.

Nevertheless, because they were so important a social group in rural society, Pringle found the reduction in the burden of tax on the meerasdars a convenient consequence of the survey. Ever since the question of a survey had been broached in official circles, conservatives like Chaplin and Robertson had been apprehensive, largely because of Pringle's analysis of the distribution of power in the village community, that an assessment based on rational criteria would raise the burden of tax on the meerasdars, and would encroach upon their prescriptive property rights. But Pringle was now able to turn on his critics and claim that the new survey had reinforced, and not weakened, the position of the meerasdars:

There is [Pringle observed] no class of the community which will benefit so much by the survey (as the meerasdars). Indeed, were it otherwise, I should entertain much greater doubts of the advantages than I do. I am fully sensible of the importance, with a view to the welfare of society, and every purpose of good government, of maintaining and promoting that independence of spirit, elevation of character, and attachment to the soil, which is the result of proprietary rights... So far from advocating any system which will lead to annihilate them, I should be glad to see them extended to a much wider sphere than they at present occupy.<sup>19</sup>



The real test of the survey, however, was the reaction it evoked among the poor but numerically more significant cultivating classes: and so far as they were concerned, it soon became obvious that the experiment launched with such hopes was doomed to failure. Early in 1830 reports poured into Poona of the great difficulty the Assistant Collector of Indapur was experiencing in persuading the ryots to cultivate their fields under the new Survey rates<sup>20</sup>. Far more ominous was the virtual desolation of the villages of Indapur through the large scale migration of the kunbis to the neighbouring territories of the Nizam in a bid to escape the rigours of the new settlement. The peasants had virtually voted against Pringle with their feet! The elements too joined in a conspiracy against Pringle, since there was a partial failure of the monsoon in 1830. But the state of the government rent-roll made it clear that the vicissitudes of the weather had been reinforced by an ill-conceived revenue policy to precipitate a disastrous situation. In 1829 Indapur had been assessed at Rs.58,702, and actually yielded a revenue of Rs.42,299. Pringle had assessed the taluka at Rs.91,569. But so many peasants had fled from Indapur after

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BA. Collector of Poona to Bombay Government dated 1 April 1830: R.D., Vol. 7/287 of 1830.

the introduction of the Pringle rates that even the wildest optimist could not have forecast a collection exceeding Rs.16,410 in 1830. The Collector of Poona was reluctant to pronounce upon the validity of the survey at so early a stage. But he advocated the reintroduction of istawa leases in order to persuade the kunbis of Indapur to return to their villages.

Faced with a virtual collapse of the survey through the intransigence of the ryots, Pringle turned to the defence of his settlement policy. He touched upon the extensive enquiries into the rights of the ryots and the nature of their tenures carried out under the survey, and referred to the impressive bulk of statistical data upon which the calculation of the net produce, and of the assessment, was based. To claim infallibility in the prosecution of so intricate and involved an operation would be foolhardy. But, Pringle insisted, it was easy to see how a measure having for its object the correction of inequalities in assessment was bound to provoke the opposition of those whom it had affected adversely. The ryots' resistance to the settlement ought not therefore to shake the Government's confidence in its accuracy:

For I am persuaded [Pringle observed] that in the opinion of the majority of the people...the magnitude and importance of this work are fully appreciated, and held to be worthy of the government by which it was undertaken. It is certainly

looked upon with hope,...and will come to be recognised and relied upon with confidence, as the character of their privileges over a point so interesting to our Indian community as the adjustment of the land-tax and the rights and claims connected with it become increasingly clear...<sup>21</sup>

The extent of the failure, however, was too calamitous to be dispelled either by pious platitudes or by a reiteration of the principles informing the survey operations. Administrators like Robertson, who were brought up in the conservative traditions of the Elphinstone school, had always been sceptical of Pringle's ability to exploit the Ricardian concept of rent as the basis of a new revenue system. They now set out to demonstrate how the survey had disastrously altered the rental structure of different villages and seriously affected the fortunes of different classes of cultivators. From actual enquiries in surveyed villages, they were able to pinpoint the fallacies in the principles of Pringle's revenue policy, and in the application of this policy to the survey of Indapur.

The decrease in the burden of tax on the meerasdars, on which attention has already been focussed, was the most significant facet of the settlement to attract Robertson's attention. While Pringle was aware of this phenomenon in

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BA. R.K. Pringle to Bombay Government dated 28 January 1831: R.D., Vol. 426/427 of 1830.

qualitative terms, it took a detailed investigation by Robertson to reveal how drastic a change the survey had actually effected in the burden of tax on different classes of cultivators in the villages. In the village of Mouze Kowrey, for instance, the Pringle rental agreed closely with the kamal assessment of Rs.3304. But Robertson discovered that rents on fields held by the meerasdars, which were located in the most fertile parts of the village, had been lowered from Rs.2152 to Rs.1815, while the uprees' share of the village rental had shot up from Rs.1152 to Rs.1343. These alterations were effected through a simple expedient. The fertile rice-fields held by the meerasdars, which were formerly assessed at the maximum rates, had been transferred to an inferior category (jerayet) by Pringle's assessors, who had at the same time upgraded the fields held by the uprees. The collection of revenue from Mouze Kowrey before and after the new settlement constituted a telling indictment of the survey operations. In 1829 the village raised a sum of Rs.2690; in 1830 the total anticipated collection was estimated at Rs.1819<sup>22</sup>.



# TABLE A

TABLE SHOWING EFFECT OF PRINGLE  
SURVEY ON KURDELA JATHA

No.	Name of the head of the family	RIVAT SURVEY		PRINGLE SURVEY	
		Area	Assessment	Area	Assessment
1	PANDJEE KURDELA	20 beegahs	24 Rs.	21 beegahs	12 Rs
2	ARJONAH KURDELA	20 —do—	24 Rs.	20 —do—	14 Rs
3	KASSEEE KURDELA	20 —do—	24 Rs	24 —do—	16 Rs
4	GOONDJI KURDELA	20 —do—	24 Rs	29 —do—	17 Rs
5	BYHEROO KURDELA	40 —do—	48 Rs.	59 —do—	34 Rs
6	ANDJEE KURDELA	30 —do—	36 Rs.	28 —do—	24 Rs.

The survey, so Robertson discovered, had not only altered the relative burden on the meerasdars and the uprees to the advantage of the former, but it had also disturbed the proportion in which the meerasdars of a particular village distributed the rental amongst themselves<sup>23</sup>. This became clear when Robertson focussed his attention on the impact of the survey operations on a jatha of six families which held the estate called Kurdela in the village of Kurra (see Table A). The heads of these families were bound to each other by close ties of kinship: and in the not too remote past their forefathers had divided the estate into shares according to their several rights of inheritance. By the rivaj evaluation the first four meerasdars of the jatha held equal shares; the fifth a double share; and the last a share and a half. However, when Pringle's surveyors measured the estate, they discovered that the actual area of the different holdings did not correspond with the picture set out by the traditional accounts: Byheroo Kurdela's holdings, for instance, were practically three times those of Pandojee Kurdela, though the rivaj put them as only twice the size of the latter's possessions. The effect of the

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BA. H.D. Robertson to Bombay Government dated 1 November 1831: R.D., Vol. 434 of 1832.

survey, therefore, was to introduce radical alterations in the traditional distribution of tax among the Kurdelas.

While the jatha as a whole had its rental reduced, the families it embraced were affected to different extents. Arjunah and Pandojee Kurdela, for instance, had their rentals halved, while the tax on the rest of the Kurdelas had been reduced by only 33 per cent.

The members of the Kurdela jatha were completely baffled by this inexplicable change in their fortunes. As the Kurra Patels Luxman Gonday and Balloojee Dholay explained to Robertson, when the Kurdela estate was originally partitioned, the jatha had resolved the problem of differential fertility through apportioning shares in beegahs of varying superficial extent. The rivaj beegah, consequently, took into account both the area and the quality of the field. The measurement of the village lands in such a unit simplified the business of revenue management. Thus the former Government had levied a rental of Rs.1.25 on every rivaj beegah in the village. If in a particular year it raised the total rental on the village, all that was required to divide the enhanced demand evenly among the cultivators was a proportional increase in the rental per beegah sufficient to meet the new assessment. By disturbing the traditional distribution of the rental within the Kurdela jatha, Pringle had undermined the principles on which the shares of the Kurdelas, and the

breakdown of the village demand, were based. To offset the effects of the survey, the Patels Gonday and Dholey did not rule out the possibility of the Kurdela jatha 'effecting such a redistribution of the land as would bring their shares back to an equality'. Their verdict on the long range effects of the survey was, however, even more ominous: 'All the people do not yet know the effect of it (the new survey); but as soon as they comprehend it, we think that the meerasdars will generally quarrel among themselves'<sup>24</sup>.

The confusion into which the survey had thrown the affairs of the Kurdela jatha highlights the arbitrary treatment meted out to the meerasdars by Pringle. His attitude towards them was dictated by the suspicion that they had paid a very light rental under the former rulers, and that the distribution of tax on them was both inequitable and unequal. Such suspicions blinded Pringle to fallacies in the principles of his survey, or to errors in the application of these principles. They also led him to repose complete confidence in the findings of his subordinates, even when these findings contradicted the traditional rivaj accounts. Last of all, Pringle's belief in the State's discretionary right to raise

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BA. Report of an Interview between H.D. Robertson and the Patels of Kurra enclosed in Robertson's letter to Bombay Government dated 1 November 1831: R.D., Vol. 434 of 1832.



the rental on the meerasdars manoeuvred him into a catastrophic position:

That Meerasdars [Robertson pointed out] had their assessments raised or lowered by Government is true; but Government has no right to raise or lower the assessment of only one meerasdar of a village. It must raise or lower the assessment of all in equal proportions, for their assessments were originally equalised by their tenures and joint responsibility; and any alterations of the proportions, except in singular circumstances of fraudulent concealment, is precisely rendering their assessments unequal...<sup>25</sup>

Since they indicated how the prosperous cultivators of Indapur had emerged with substantial diminutions in rentals as a consequence of the survey, Robertson's inquiries provided a convincing explanation for the failure of the Pringle Settlement. But it required the detailed investigations of Robert Shortrede, a revenue officer who was requested to investigate the reasons for the failure of the Pringle Survey, to establish Robertson's suspicions beyond doubt<sup>26</sup>. The prosecution of the survey by the Brahmin officials under Pringle had involved two distinct stages: the measurement of the area of holdings; and their classification on a relative

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<sup>25</sup> BA. H.D. Robertson to Bombay Government dated 1 November 1831: R.D., Vol. 434 of 1832.

<sup>26</sup> NAI. Robert Shortrede's Report on the Revenue Survey and Assessment of the Deccan dated 24 October 1835: Revenue Department Proceedings No. 4 dated 23 January 1837.

scale according to their fertility. The first operation was carried out with reasonable accuracy. But the classification of the fields was completely undependable, and throughout the taluka, Shortrede pointed out, 'in two instances only did I find three successive fields correctly assessed'. He illustrated the extent to which the surveyors had bungled in the classification of fields through an ingenious device:

I have called the misclassification general and systematic [Shortrede observed] because had it been otherwise, had the class of each field been determined by lot, it might have been expected where there were nine classes, that one field in nine should have been correct, and of the remaining eight, four should have been above and four below the proper class. In order to try the classification in this way I made a spinning top on which I made nine marks corresponding to the nine classes, and in several villages I found that the class determined by the spinning top was nearer the truth than that determined by the Survey.<sup>27</sup>

Here, according to Shortrede, was evidence beyond refutation that the errors in classification were deliberate rather than accidental. Behind them lay the attempt of a social group in rural society to defraud the State of its revenues. The significance of the calculated errors in classification is brought out extremely well in the way in which the surveyors prosecuted their task in the village of Indapur itself. The estate called Brahman sthul in Indapur

possessed the best soil available in the Deccan. The portion of Brahman sthul which belonged to deputy Patel Masaye Galande was of the superior black category; but it had been classed as inferior red by the surveyors. Similarly, the 750 acres of black soil held by the Despandya Kulkarnis of Indapur were grossly under-assessed. In the latter instance, there were errors both in measurement and in classification: 23 acres of the land had been entered as 1 black; 299 as 2 black; 166 as 3 black; 140 as red; making in all only 631 acres. The Kulkarnis thus paid a lighter tax than they should have because their fields were under-assessed, and because there were errors in measurement.

All this pointed to collusion between the subordinate officials of the Survey Department and the dominant groups in the rural communities like the village officers and the principal ryots. Shortrede suspected this collusion to be the principal cause of the diminution in the burden of tax on the meerasdars. In village after village, the surveyors and assessors sent out by the Huzoor Cutcherry had been bribed by the more substantial peasants to under-assess their holdings. The decrease thus effected in the rent-roll had been made good by an increase in the tax on the uprees, who could least of all afford to pay anything extra, in order to work out respectable rentals for villages as a whole.



'I am credibly informed', Robertson pointed out in confirmation of Shortrede's suspicions, 'that in most instances where the aggregate assessment of a village is now less than it formerly was, a contribution was raised from the village officers and ryots'<sup>28</sup>. Shortrede's verdict on the unholy compact between the dominant groups in the village and the Brahmin revenue officers of Pringle was equally emphatic:

There can be no doubt [he pointed out] that the principle of assessing the land according to the net produce is the only one which is universally true..I must therefore give my full assent to the general theory of assessment. I must at the same time declare in terms as unqualified my dissent from the general application of that theory to the particular cases I have examined.<sup>29</sup>

Although Robertson and Shortrede had stumbled upon an important reason behind the failure of the Pringle survey, they failed to grasp the full implications of the ryotwari system. The most important feature of revenue administration under the Marathas was collective responsibility for the payment of the village rental by the meerasdars. It was the meerasdars as a body who distributed the total demand on the village on the basis of the rivaj once the village rental had

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BA. H.D. Robertson to Bombay Government dated 1 November 1831: R.D., Vol. 434 of 1832.

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Shortrede's Report cited in fn. 26.



been settled in the course of negotiations between the Patel, the mamlatdar, and the deshmukh. Pringle's views on the dominant position of the more substantial peasants in village society were based on sound logic, since it was natural for the Patel and the more prosperous meerasdars to exercise control over the levers of power in the village community. But the further inference, drawn from the comparison between the rivaj and kamal surveys, that the dominant cultivators were able to transfer a part of their burden of tax to the uprees, was incorrect. There was a strict limit to the share of the village rental which the meerasdars could pass on to the uprees, since the latter could always express their disapproval of excessive rentals by migrating to a new village. Besides, there was nothing to be gained by assessing the uprees at a rate higher than what they could actually pay, since it was the meerasdars who stood collectively committed to the mamlatdars for the payment of the village assessment.

All this was no longer true once the kunbis' traditional ties with the village community were disrupted through the institution of a ryotwari system involving a direct contractual relationship between the peasant and the State. A cultivator now stood to gain if he could secure a diminution in his share of the village rental, since it was the State's

responsibility to ensure payment of the rental from the villagers severally, instead of the community collectively. In instituting a survey on a ryotwari basis Pringle threw open to the meerasdars and to the village officers a means for bettering their position which had never existed before. This explains the alliance between the influential rural elements and the Brahmin officials of the Survey Department that was responsible for the more startling features of the Pringle Settlement. Pringle was right in postulating the existence of dominant groups of cultivators in village society. But ironically enough, the means he devised to destroy their power only strengthened their hold over rural society.

It would, however, be a grave mistake to attribute the failure of the survey solely to corruption in the Survey Department, and to the machinations of the meerasdars. The calculation of the 'net produce' was so intricate an operation that just as many cases of faulty assessment arose out of genuine error. But irrespective of their origin, mistakes in assessment produced identical results. The fate of the village of Oolhi provides a fascinating glimpse of what could happen to a prosperous rural community when the heavy hand of the Survey Department fell upon it:

One of the most heavily assessed villages is Oolhi, distance from Sholapur 8 miles [pointed out a revenue official in 1840 while revising the Pringle Survey]. The rate here is Rs.2 as 10 per acre. This place I well recalled a flourishing village 7 years ago, it had a couple of shops, and was to all appearance populous. It is now mostly deserted. The shops are ruined, all the trees disappeared, walls down, and the place in ruins; and of 4,000 acres 2475 are waste; revenue fallen from Rs.1066 to Rs.618. Patel and kulkarni both ruined, being involved in defalcations they could not prevent. An acting Patel and kulkarni doing duty, and an outstanding balance of Rs.3466. Several of the villagers now cultivate in neighbouring villages. The year prior to the Pringle survey the village produced net revenue Rs.2,000. The rest of the over-assessed and misclassified villages have all partaken more or less similar ruin and misery...<sup>30</sup>

Here was a flourishing rural community reduced to a state of desolation by the Pringle Survey. Because of its ineptitude, and its corruptability, the Survey Department dealt a death blow to prosperity in the taluka and discredited the principles informing the ryotwari system of Pringle.

#### The Bombay Scheme of Survey and Assessment

Although the disruptive impact of the ryotwari system on the rural communities was inadequately appreciated by Pringle's critics, the failure of his revenue policy finally scotched the attempt to base the administration of

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BA. J.D. Bellasis to G. Wingate dated 26 January 1839: R.D., Vol. 114/1198 of 1840.

land-revenue exclusively on rational principles. Robert Grant, who had succeeded Malcolm as Governor of Bombay in 1831, echoed a universally held sentiment when he minuted that the only general rule that could be laid down for the conduct of a future survey was that 'there ought to be a patient, searching, and accurate enquiry into the individual nature and capabilities of every beegah of soil...No abstract principles can be applied in such a case'<sup>31</sup>.

But apart from the growing scepticism in the effectiveness of rational action, the nature of the rural communities, and the arrangements within the village for the payment of the land-tax, were at long last becoming clear to the revenue officials. The confusion which prevailed in the 1820s around revenue policy partly stemmed from the fact that a majority of the Deccan administrators had gained their initial experience under Munro in Madras, and they were consequently inclined to apply his methods and his assumptions concerning social organisation in rural society to the newly conquered territories without taking local conditions sufficiently into consideration. Since the Pringle Settlement had resulted in so abysmal a failure, the conservative

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<sup>31</sup>

BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 12 October 1836: R.D., Vol. 11/698 of 1836.



administrators in the Deccan set about to re-examine the Maratha revenue system in the hope of isolating, and emulating, features of the former system which had been overlooked in the first instance. One such administrator was Thomas Williamson, the Revenue Commissioner of the Deccan, who subscribed fully to the Burkean values of an Elphinstone, and believed in the futility of drastic attempts at reform:

The results of all my researches and experience [Williamson stated in his critique of Pringle's Survey] have strongly impressed me with the idea that there is no system as good as the established custom of the country, and that when it has apparently failed, we have been misled by signs which did not properly belong to that system, but were the consequence of confusion, or decay, arising from it being neglected, or misunderstood... (Of) our own well-meant plans for the amelioration of this country, none have proved so successful as those directed at the support and restoration of local institutions, and none so unfortunate as those which have a contrary direction.<sup>32</sup>

In searching for the reasons behind Pringle's failure Williamson gained a new insight into the collective quality of the former revenue system in Maharashtra, though he was unable to transform this insight into a practical revenue policy. As opposed to Pringle, Williamson defined a ryotwari settlement as a system in which the rights and obligations of cultivators were first ascertained severally, and then made

the basis of the total village rental. The superiority of such a system lay in the precision with which it set out the cultivator's dues. It thereby prevented excessive taxation by the State and arbitrary exactions by the officials. Williamson saw a perfect expression of the ryotwari tenure in the bhayachara system of the North-Western Provinces, where a detailed inquiry was first instituted into the productive capacity of a village, and the total rental thus evaluated was apportioned into individual shares by the members of the village community. He recognised that the shares so determined would not necessarily have equal capacities, since some fields would be better looked after than others. But no additional rent could be levied on this account. Such a limitation embodied, according to Williamson, the most striking advantage of the system. For through the economic incentives the bhayachara tenure offered to the enterprising cultivator without 'alienating' him from the village community, it provided a stimulus for efficient agricultural operations. The ryot no longer wandered from one village to another in search for holdings bearing a low rental. Instead, he was firmly attached to his plot of land, and directed his energies solely to its improvement. It would be fatal, Williamson pointed out in conclusion, to weaken this attachment through a new assessment, which would

not only alter the rivaj rental, but would tax improvements which had been effected under the impression that they would not be subject to an additional levy.

It was left to Richard Mills, the Collector of Dharwar, to pursue the principle enunciated by Williamson to its logical conclusion. Mills hit upon the basic weakness of the ryotwari system (as interpreted by Pringle) when he pointed out how the Pringle Settlement, through alienating the kunbi from the village community, had weakened its cohesion and had encouraged the dominant cultivators to bribe the Survey Department with the object of defrauding the State of its revenues and of imposing an oppressive tax upon the uprees<sup>33</sup>. Yet the alternative adopted by him was open to equally serious objections. In eleven villages in his Collectorate, Mills had given leases on moderate terms as an experimental measure to the Patels for a period of ten years. He thereby hoped to preserve the cohesion of the village community, and to provide it with incentives for improvement. Before embarking upon the venture Mills had wondered whether the Patels would be willing to undertake responsibility for the village rental. But the reason which encouraged him to

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<sup>33</sup> NAI. R. Mills to Bombay Government dated 30 May 1839: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 10 dated 14 December 1840.



bring the experiment to the notice of the authorities was the enthusiastic response the idea evoked from the Patels and the village communities concerned<sup>34</sup>. However, Mills' proposal for the settlement of entire villages with the Patels was so strongly reminiscent of the notorious farming system which had prevailed under Baji Rao, and it could so easily be perverted by the Patels and the dominant kunbis to their selfish ends, that it was not even seriously considered by the revenue authorities<sup>35</sup>.

For it was impossible to revert to former methods of revenue administration. The rivaj rates had been laid aside for so long that their reintroduction was impossible, not least because they had been 'shockingly mutilated', and in places 'obliterated', through the arbitrary practices which flourished under Baji Rao<sup>36</sup>. Any practical system, therefore, would have to be a compromise between traditional methods of assessment, and the rational criteria on which Pringle had based his settlement. In his critique of the

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<sup>34</sup> NAI. R. Mills to Bombay Government dated 1 June 1839:  
ibid.

<sup>35</sup> NAI. Memorandums by L.P. Reid, Secretary to Bombay Government, and the Governor of Bombay dated 10 August 1839 and 11 January 1840 respectively: ibid.

<sup>36</sup> NAI. T. Williamson to Bombay Government dated 16 May 1836: Revenue Branch Procs. No. 3 dated 22 January 1837.



Pringle survey, Shortrede, for instance, advocated an assessment based on a proportion of the gross produce, diminishing from the rich to the poor soils, in the place of Pringle's attempt to calculate by detailed analysis the net produce of each variety of soil<sup>37</sup>. His application of this principle to Indapur shows to what extent he was willing to abandon rational criteria when confronted by practical questions. Setting aside the investigations carried out by Pringle, Shortrede proposed that the Government let out land at a very moderate rate of assessment on the 'chower' or rivaj unit of measure; in the first instance for a year, but with a view to an eventual decennial settlement. Williamson threw himself squarely behind Shortrede's proposal, since 'from the simplicity of the system, and the moderation of the rent, it would at once be intelligible and acceptable to the people'<sup>38</sup>. Nor did his intuition mislead him. For as soon as the Pringle rates were abolished, and the light assessments recommended by Shortrede substituted in their place, the situation in Indapur took a turn for the better. Journeying through the taluka shortly afterwards in 1836, Williamson

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<sup>37</sup> NAI. Shortrede's Report cited in fn. 26.

<sup>38</sup> BA. T. Williamson to Bombay Government dated 26 March 1835: R.D., Vol. 73/933 of 1838.

spoke with satisfaction of the returning confidence of the kunbis in the good intentions of the Government, and their consequent return to their villages. 'An interesting group of men, women and children who passed my camp the other day', he noted in his Journals, 'said they had left the Nizam's country and were going to their native village in Indapur in consequence of the security now enjoyed there'<sup>39</sup>.

Despite the favourable reaction of the ryots to the virtual revival of the rivaj rates, Shortrede's proposals were too arbitrary, and too unequal in the burden they imposed on individual cultivators, to form the basis of any lasting revenue arrangements. It was left to a group of revenue officials led by H.E. Goldsmid and G. Wingate to devise in the late 1830s a system of revenue administration which combined the practical features of the Pringle survey with the experience of the rivaj. In devising such a synthesis they laid down the foundations of land settlement policy in the Deccan. Goldsmid opposed the desperate expedient of rejecting the measurement of holdings carried out under Pringle's aegis, and of substituting in its place the 'chower', which was a fluctuating unit of measure, and did

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BA. T. Williamson to Bombay Government dated 30 January 1836: R.D., Vol. 73/933 of 1838.

not, as it was supposed to, vary inversely in area with the quality of the soil. Equally ill-conceived in his view was the idea of attracting the kunbis to the deserted Indapur villages through the low rates proposed by Shortrede. Such a measure would not only cause a serious loss in Government revenue, but it would create a grave imbalance in the economy of the surrounding districts by inducing kunbis from all around to throw up their fields and migrate to an area where they could rent land on very attractive terms.

But the most important feature of the policy advocated by Goldsmid and Wingate was the abandonment of Pringle's attempt to fix the rental on the land as a fraction of the net produce. Through the adoption of this criterion Pringle had aimed at rewarding cultivators according to the fertility of the soil they cultivated, rather than in proportion to the amount of capital they invested in the land, or the quality of the effort they put into their agricultural operations. Such a policy, he argued, was neither morally reprehensible nor politically inexpedient. The Ricardian law of rent proved that it was natural that the benefits reaped by cultivators should be determined by the quality of the land they cultivated, decreasing progressively from the best to the worst soils. From a political standpoint there was everything to be said for the introduction of such an

inequality, for it would enable the more substantial kunbis to save capital, which could then be reinvested in the land to secure higher returns. Such an accumulation of agricultural capital would promote the rise of a class of rich peasants whose prosperity would flow from an equitable taxation policy, rather than from the exploitation of its dominant position in the village community. Fashioned into the coping stone of rural society under the aegis of the new political order, this class of prosperous cultivators would not only constitute the principal impetus behind increasing rural prosperity and rising agricultural productivity, but it would also provide a stable social base for British rule in India.

According to Goldsmid and Wingate, Pringle's calculated attempt to foster the interests of the dominant cultivators was the most serious fallacy in his settlement policy, and the most important reason behind the failure of his survey. In an enquiry which they conducted in 1835 in 86 villages of Indapur, they observed, like Robertson and Shortrede before them, that while the measurement of holdings had been carried out with reasonable accuracy, the classification of fields was completely erroneous. Yet Goldsmid and Wingate were reluctant to attribute the failure of the survey solely to errors in classification. True, the ryots had opposed the



new scale of rates because it had raised the rents on inferior, and lowered them on superior, soils. But this feature of the Pringle survey 'cannot be accounted for... (exclusively) by the numerous cases of error and defect exposed by Lt. Shortrede; it is so general and unusual, that we must look for its cause in the system, and not in the execution of the survey'<sup>40</sup>. Goldsmid and Wingate were able to pinpoint in Pringle's application of the net surplus criterion the reason why his survey had dealt so harshly with the poor cultivators. Pringle had defined the net surplus as the rent which the cultivator was able to pay to his landlord after deducting costs of capital and wages of labour. But he had overlooked the fact that the most inferior soil taken into cultivation at any particular moment did not yield a rent to its owner. In taxing soils of the lowest fertility, Pringle had therefore trenched into the profits of the poorer cultivators, and had advanced a scale of assessment which favoured the meerasdars as against the uprees.

The erroneous application of the Ricardian law of rent undermined Pringle's claim that his assessment had not

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BA. A. Nash to G. Wingate dated 23 March 1838: R.D., Vol. 73/933 of 1838.

disturbed the benefits likely to accrue to the cultivator from the natural fertility of the soil. But having indicated where Pringle had erred in the application of the law of rent, Goldsmid and Wingate did not proceed to apply the net surplus criterion to the regulation of the assessment. In subsequent discussions on revenue policy they cited the 'net surplus' as the theoretical basis for their assessment, but in practice they employed pragmatic criteria for fixing rates of assessment on different soils. While Pringle's settlement was quite deliberately loaded in favour of the prosperous cultivator who normally owned the fertile lands, and geared to the creation of a class of rich peasants which would acquire a rational acquisitive instinct and habits of prudence under the settled conditions of British rule, Goldsmid and Wingate regarded this policy as ill-conceived and injudicious. For instead of rewarding kunbis with identical capital resources and agricultural skills to the same extent, it showered benefits on them in relation to the fertility of the soil they chanced to cultivate. Wingate, for instance, showed how a ryot having at his disposal a capital outlay of Rs.100 would, according to the Pringle scale of rates, make a profit ranging from Rs.32 as 8 on the best soil, to Rs.12 as 5 on the worst

# TABLE B

COMPARISON BETWEEN PRINGLE'S SCALE AND

WINGATE'S EGALITARIAN SCALE

Type of Soil	Area cultivated by R. 100.	Net Produce per Acre	PRINGLE'S RATES			WINGATE'S RATES		
			Rate per Acre	Total Tax	Ryot's Profit	Rate per Acre	Total Tax	Ryot's Profit.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1st BLACK	28-36-0	2-8-0	1-6-0	39-11-9	32-8-3	1-12-1	50-11-1	21-8-
2nd BLACK	29-15-0	1-15-3	1-1-3	31-10-9	25-11-2	1-3-6	35-13-0	
3rd BLACK	34-33-0	1-7-9	0-13-0	28-4-9	23-6-4	0-13-10	30-2-2	
1st RED	29-12-0	2-0-0	1-1-9	32-8-6	27-0-7	1-4-9	38-0-2	
2nd RED	35-1-0	1-5-3	0-11-9	25-11-6	20-16-9	6-11-5	24-15-4	
3rd RED	40-27-0	0-14-4	0-7-9	19-11-3	16-12-5	0-5-10	14-14-9	
1st BURUD	46-14-4	1-2-1	0-10-0	25-3-6	20-6-1	0-9-7	24-0-8	21-8-
2nd BURUD	40-34-0	0-13-2	0-7-3	18-8-2	15-1-7	0-4-9	12-0-10	
3rd BURUD	43-33-0	0-10-0	0-5-6	15-1-0	12-5-3	0-2-2	5-13-4	

soil<sup>41</sup>. Such an assessment appeared to Wingate to be monstrous in its partiality for the more fortunate peasant, and contrary to all notions of social equity. What he considered equitable was a scale of assessment which would leave the kunbi with the same margin of profit, irrespective of the fertility of the soil he cultivated. That a settlement based on Wingate's principles would have violated the 'net surplus' criterion is obvious; and a comparison of columns 3 and 6 in Table B illustrates how drastic a change in the Pringle evaluation it would have necessitated. Rentals on the best soils like 1st black, and 1st red, would have had to be raised by 25 per cent, while those on the worst soils like 3rd red, and 3rd burud, would have had to be reduced to 33 per cent of the Pringle evaluation.

The anti-rich peasant inspiration behind the changes advocated by Goldsmid and Wingate is also in evidence in their proposal to levy an additional tax on well-irrigated or Baghaet land, which was usually owned by the dominant cultivators in the village<sup>42</sup>. No corresponding levy had been imposed under the Marathas, though the former rulers had

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BA. G. Wingate to R. Mills dated 17 April 1838: R.D., Vol. 73/933 of 1838.

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BA. H.G. Goldsmid to R. Mills dated 8 Octobrr 1835: R.D., Vol. 12/699 of 1836.



collected a separate tax on wells called the Veer Hoonda, which was abolished under the Pringle survey. Since the annual settlements made on an ad hoc basis by Shortrede had lowered the assessment on all categories of soils, not excluding Baghaet, Goldsmid saw no reason why the State should sacrifice its share of the extra produce resulting from well irrigation, particularly when it was proposed to fix the assessment for a period of 10 years. The apprehension that an additional levy on well-irrigated land might discourage the ryots from digging wells to irrigate their fields was voiced by Richard Mills<sup>43</sup>. But the majority of officials in the Survey Department subscribed to the view that 'in the decennial settlement of the Indapur Taluka, which Mr. Goldsmid is on the point of fixing, we should not suddenly throw away a good share of the State's share of the produce'<sup>44</sup>, and on this plea baghaet land was reserved for special treatment at the hands of the assessor.

Despite the repudiation of Pringle's attempt to foster the interests and encourage the growth of a prosperous peasantry, it would be a grave mistake to think that Goldsmid

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BA. R. Mills to T. Williamson dated 26 January 1836: R.D., Vol. 12/699 of 1836.

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BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 22 February 1836: R.D., Vol. 12/699 of 1836.

and Wingate permitted any egalitarian principles to shape their revenue policy. The fate of the Pringle settlement had already shown the dangers of a doctrinaire approach to revenue problems. But Goldsmid and Wingate were as a matter of conviction willing to be guided by experience, and to be restrained by the rivaj, in fixing the assessment. While Pringle had relied solely on objective criteria in devising his scale of rates, and had entrusted the practical tasks of the survey to his subordinates, Goldsmid and Wingate showed a shrewd awareness of the pitfalls it was necessary to avoid in arriving at a practical scale of assessment:

It is absolutely necessary [they pointed out] that in assessing the land every field should be visited, and its soil and situation carefully assessed (by the European Superintendent). To conduct such an assessment wholly by myself... would be a work requiring years for its completion. Nor is it requisite that I should attempt to do so. For although I can place no confidence in native officials of the class we can afford to employ...still I should entertain 4 natives, unconnected with the districts, whose duty it would be to...prepare statements of the quality, quantity and situate of the land, and although not probably wholly present in the very fields in which the carcoons are engaged, I should take care to be so near at hand...as to prevent the possibility of fraud on the part of the native subordinates...<sup>45</sup>

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BA. H.G. Goldsmid to R. Mills dated 27 June 1835: R.D., Vol. 44/660 of 1835.

# TABLE C

COMPARISON BETWEEN PRINGLE, GOLD SMID

AND WINGATE SCALES.

Type of Soil	PRINGLE RATES	WINGATE RATES	Difference	GOLD SMID RATES	Difference
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	1	2	3	4	5
1st BLACK	1-6-0	1-12-1	+ 27 $\sigma_2$	0-12-0	-45 $\sigma_2$
2nd BLACK	1-1-9	1-4-9	+ 17 $\sigma_2$	0-8-0	-53 $\sigma_2$
3rd BLACK	1-1-3	1-3-6	+ 12 $\sigma_2$	0-4-7	-47 $\sigma_2$
1st RED	0-13-0	0-13-10	+ 9 $\sigma_2$	0-6-10	-44 $\sigma_2$
2nd RED	0-11-9	0-11-5	- 5 $\sigma_2$	0-5-2	-57 $\sigma_2$
3rd RED	0-10-0	0-9-7	- 7 $\sigma_2$	0-4-2	-60 $\sigma_2$
1st BURUD	0-7-9	0-5-10	- 25 $\sigma_2$	0-3-0	-63 $\sigma_2$
2nd BURUD	0-7-3	0-4-9	- 30 $\sigma_2$	0-2-5	- 71 $\sigma_2$
3rd BURUD	0-5-6	0-2-2	- 62 $\sigma_2$	0-1-0	- 67 $\sigma_2$



Goldsmid and Wingate accepted, with minor alterations, the measurement of holdings carried out by their predecessors. Pringle's classification, however, they found to be worthless, and decided to conduct anew, the holdings of the ryots being graded into one of nine categories of soils, with their fertilities determined according to a relative scale. But instead of actually calculating the net surplus of each grade of soil, and then fixing its assessment at 55 per cent of this figure (as Pringle had done), Goldsmid and Wingate derived their rates of assessment 'from local enquiry and the experience of qualified persons, without any very minute investigations into actual produce...'<sup>46</sup> The rates at which they assessed holdings of different fertility are indicated in column 4 of Table C.

Two features of the scale of rates proposed by Goldsmid and Wingate deserve special mention. Taken as a whole, their rates indicate a considerable diminution in the demand on the land; a diminution which they justified on the premise that Pringle had used inflated figures for the prices of food-grains in calculating the net-produce. More important still was the fact that while all grades of soils had their rates reduced, the reduction on the inferior soils like the

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Ibid.

buruds was significantly greater than that on superior soils like the blacks. The result was that while both the meerasdar and the uprees had their rentals lowered by the revised settlement, the tax paid by the latter was reduced to a far greater extent than that paid by the meerasdar. In this way the imbalance in the burden of tax on the poorer cultivators, which had been the most objectionable feature of the Pringle settlement, was abolished. Yet how far removed was the new scale of assessment from the egalitarian scale devised by Wingate, which would have put all ryots on the same footing, irrespective of the quality of the soil they cultivated, becomes clear through a comparison of columns 3 and 5 in Table C. To achieve the objective set by Wingate, Goldsmid had not only to reduce the Pringle rates on the poorer soils by 33 per cent, but he had also to raise the rates on the black soils by 25 per cent. However, Goldsmid was guided by practical considerations rather than by abstract notions of social equity. Instead of basing his scale of assessment on theoretical criteria, he deliberately took his cue from 'local inquiry and the experience of qualified persons' in calculating how much rental the different soils could with facility pay to the State.

Though Goldsmid's rates of assessment were thus less favourable to the more substantial peasant than those of

Pringle, they still had the very important effect of widening the economic gulf between the dominant and the poorer cultivators in the village. This was so because formerly the State demand had pressed heavily on the village community, and had trenched deeply into the profits of the dominant kunbis, who were responsible for the total village assessment to the mamlatdar, and were consequently obliged to make up by large personal contributions the sum which the village had contracted to pay. Under the Goldsmid settlement, however, the meerasdars' obligations were fixed for the period of the settlement, and they could not be called upon by the village community to make an additional contribution. The resulting improvement in their economic condition, and in their style of life, struck the attention of the Survey Officers when they revised the Goldsmid settlement after a period of three decades. Throughout the region the dominant peasants gave expression to the security and enhanced status they enjoyed under the new land policy by erecting chowris and dharamsalas, which added to the respectability of their villages, and by turning their attention to capital intensive activity like the digging of wells to irrigate their fields<sup>47</sup>.

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Vide Col. Francis' Report on the Taluka of Indapur quoted in fn. 8.

So marked, indeed, was the improvement in their style of life, and so ostentatious were its manifestations, that the revenue officials of the 1860s mistook their prosperity for a general rise in living standards in the rural areas; an assumption which was rudely shattered by the agrarian discontent which came to the surface during the disturbances of 1875.

Since Utilitarian ideas exercised so powerful a hold over the British administration in India, the absence of rationality in the principles informing the Goldsmid survey was a matter of serious concern to the higher authorities. For instance, Lord Auckland, the Governor-General, conceded the harm done by the Pringle Settlement and the need for a revised survey. But he also insisted that it was important to know 'upon what principles the new survey and assessment ...(were) to be made'<sup>48</sup>. However, revenue officials in Bombay like Thomas Williamson refused to pay any attention to such objections, since 'to introduce an entirely new assessment on a uniform system...(could) be liable to be vitiated by the very same errors as the (Pringle) survey itself'. In illustration of the spirit and the principles informing the

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NAI. Minute by the Governor-General of India dated 26 November 1836: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 4 dated 12 June 1837.



new revenue policy, Williamson recounted the instructions which had guided Goldsmid and Wingate in the revision of the Indapur Settlement. They had been directed to

restore and revive the mamool (traditional) assessment where that system was tolerably complete, carefully correcting the survey rates when it was found not difficult to discover and remedy their defects - and when the mamool system was obliterated, and the survey was found not to admit of corrections, introducing an entirely new assessment, combining as far as possible moderation and simplicity with correctness, and permanency, suiting, in short, the measure to be adopted to the peculiar circumstances of each village, reverting where practical to the ancient customs with regard to the assessment of the land, and where that could not be done, attempting to fix a sufficiently fair assessment, with as little violent change as possible.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding Williamson's conservative predilections, and his concern for 'the ancient customs with regard to the assessment of the land', the extent to which the ryotwari system, even as modified by Goldsmid and Wingate, undermined the traditional village institutions and affected rural social values was brought out by J. Thornton, Secretary to the Government of the North-Western Provinces, in a memorandum reviewing the 'Bombay Plan of Survey and Assessment',<sup>50</sup>.

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NAI. T. Williamson to Bombay Government dated 13 April 1837: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 4 dated 12 June 1837.

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Memorandum by J. Thornton on 'Bombay Plan of Survey and Assessment' dated 11 July 1850: Parliamentary Papers, Vol. LXXV for 1852-53, pp. 439-45.

The revenue policies pursued by the Bombay Government, Thornton pointed out, were based on an erroneous notion of 'common ownership' as it applied to tenures in India. It would, for instance, be a mistake to think that in the North-Western Provinces members of the village community could not, and did not, hold separate property in land; or that they did not reap the fruits of their labour. Common ownership by the community only implied that the properties of individual cultivators were subject to certain common obligations; and that part of the profits attached to them consisted of a share which the community had of its own volition agreed to set apart to meet the demands of the State:

The village communities of Upper India [Thornton observed] might easily be reduced to the same state as those in the Deccan. The process would be, first, to fix the payments to be levied from such shares, field by field, for the term of settlement, instead of allowing them to vary, as now, with the extent of cultivation in the villages, and other circumstances; secondly, to destroy the joint responsibility; thirdly, to collect the revenue from each man separately, instead of through the representatives of the body; fourthly, to assume possession on the part of the government 'ghutcool' of all land the owners of which might die without immediate heirs. We should then find, in one or two generations, the precise state of things which...exists in the Bombay Presidency.<sup>51</sup>

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Ibid.

The most disastrous consequence flowing out of a ryotwari system of the Bombay pattern was the alienation of the ryot from the village community. The kunbi was as a result deprived of the material and the moral support which he would have derived from participation in a community whose members were bound together by ties of mutual interest. In the individualistic environment created by the ryotwari system, every ryot either fended for himself, or depended upon State assistance, and there was an entire absence of that opportunity for the exercise of initiative which existed where the village community still reigned supreme. The existence of collective institutions exercised a beneficial effect on rural society. For such institutions encouraged co-operation and promoted a harmonious relationship among the cultivators themselves, and between the cultivators and other social groups in the village. They were also necessary for the well-being of a society in which the rural masses were denied access to the more conventional levers of political power.

The destructive impact of the ryotwari system on village society, Thornton believed, was not compensated by any ability to promote a capitalist transformation in the rural areas, or to induce the cultivators to extend the sphere of their activities. On the contrary, the Bombay system placed

restrictions on the investment of capital in land. The rise of mercantile castes possessing surplus capital to be invested in some profitable channel was an inevitable consequence of British rule in India. In the North-Western Provinces, when the member of such a caste had saved some capital, he could invest it in the purchase of entire villages, or of large and contiguous estates. The splitting up of the former estates in the Deccan enabled such transfers to be effected only through a succession of purchases, which frequently did not add up to compact properties. The intermixture of large landed estates with the small holdings of the ryot was eminently desirable. Even the staunchest proponent of 'peasant proprietorship' could not deny the beneficial effect which such estates exercised in promoting efficient agricultural activity. New and superior methods of cultivation had first to be tried out in the large estates before they became popular with the small cultivators who formed the backbone of rural society.

Apart from reinforcing the corporate ethos of rural society, and promoting efficient agricultural activity through the build-up of large estates, village settlement provided more economic incentives for the extension of agricultural operations than the ryotwari scheme adumbrated by the Bombay administrators. This was so because in the former system the



cultivable waste of the village was left at the disposal of the community on the payment of a nominal rent. It was thus up to the villagers to develop the waste land and reap the benefits of their labour while paying a negligible tax to the State, a condition conducive to waste land being taken under cultivation. The Bombay scheme, by contrast, had nothing comparable to offer to the ryot. Each field in a village, whether under cultivation or not, was surveyed and assessed by the revenue authorities; and the enterprising cultivator who wanted to till a plot of waste land had to pay the full rental from the outset. 'The stimulus to improvement is evidently much greater under...(the former system) than it is under that pursued in Bombay', Thornton pointed out in conclusion. 'In the one case every extension of cultivation relieves the pressure of the government demand; in the other, it has no such effect'<sup>52</sup>.

For Goldsmid and Wingate, however, Thornton's critique of their revenue policy was composed in equal parts of ignorance about conditions in the Deccan, and misapprehensions about the effect of a ryotwari system on rural society. While Thornton looked upon a direct relationship between the ryot and the State as the fatal weakness of the ryotwari system, it was

precisely on this feature of their settlement policy that the Bombay administrators based their hopes for a far reaching change in the quality of rural experience and in the values shaping the style of life of the cultivators:

The limitation of a landholder's liabilities to his own estate, [they pointed out] under the Bombay plan of survey, must tend to foster free and independent habits of thought and action, which are greatly wanting in the agricultural population of India, ground down into slavish subserviency and apathy by long ages of despotic rule...(Yet the) municipal institutions have in no wise been destroyed in the surveyed districts. It does not appear that the villages of the surveyed districts are less favourably placed for acting in concert than those of parts of India where joint responsibility for the discharge of land assessment obtains.<sup>53</sup>

A similar misconception, so they believed, informed Thornton's view that village settlements offered a greater incentive for the extension of agricultural operations. The spread of cultivation depended upon the availability of agricultural capital; and the system which permitted the most rapid accumulation of capital was the one which provided the maximum encouragement for the extension of agriculture. Viewed from this angle, the ryotwari system enjoyed a clear superiority over other systems of revenue administration. The limitation of the State demand to the land actually

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Reply to Thornton's Memorandum by H.E. Goldsmid and G. Wingate dated 21 December 1850: Parliamentary Papers, Vol. LXXV for 1852-53, pp. 445-52.

cultivated left a larger surplus of capital in the hands of the cultivators, than if they were obliged to pay an assessment, no matter how light, on the cultivable waste in the village. Once they had a surplus in hand, the ryots were not only encouraged to take vacant fields under cultivation, but they could afford to pay the State a full share of the profits they gained through the extension of their agricultural operations. The superiority of the ryotwari system, Goldsmid and Wingate said in conclusion, rested on solid ground, 'since in all the surveyed districts of Bombay, it is probable that cultivation has extended beyond what the amount of agricultural capital warrants, and the revenue returns subsequent to the survey settlements show that...(they) have greatly augmented cultivation...'<sup>54</sup>

In framing a revenue policy for the Deccan, Goldsmid and Wingate abandoned the Ricardian premises of Pringle's Settlement policy, and toned down its partiality for the prosperous cultivators in the village community. Nevertheless, since they subscribed to some basic utilitarian values, the objectives they had in view differed in emphasis rather than in quality from those set out by Pringle. While shedding the importance which Pringle had attached to rationality as the

inspiration behind social action, they stuck tenaciously to his atomistic approach to social phenomena, and to the belief that a social revolution could be effected only through offering economic incentives to the individual ryot, rather than to a collective institution interposed between him and the State. Their atomistic view of social action was in fact the great driving force behind their modified version of Pringle's ryotwari system. If their new land policy was calculated to infuse an acquisitive spirit and a rational attitude towards economic activity in the ryot, then it was also designed to undermine the collective ethos of the countryside which stemmed from the autonomy which the village community had hitherto enjoyed in its public concerns. The resulting change in the quality of social experience combined with the freedom from arbitrary exactions, which the dominant kunbis enjoyed under British rule, to promote the emergence of a class of rich peasants which was destined to become the lynch-pin of rural society and the hub of the new political order in Maharashtra.

#### Bureaucratisation and Social Fragmentation in Rural Society

We must now return to consider Pringle's attempt to rationalise the local village administration, and to place relations between different social groups in the village on a



firm legal basis, of which the ryotwari system of land revenue was merely one facet. There was no difference of opinion between Pringle and the conservative administrators on questions relating to the rationalisation of the administration. For, despite difference in their social visions, British administrators were agreed on the need to abolish the arbitrary principles which had formerly shaped relations between different social groups in the village, and which had in addition provided the inspiration for administrative action. Pringle's attempt to build a legal and rational bureaucracy received the enthusiastic support of administrators brought up in the traditions of Elphinstone. The creation of such a bureaucracy brought about the kunbi's alienation from the village community, and it resulted in the atomisation of the collective style of life in the villages of the Deccan.

A typical village in Maharashtra embraced three significant social groups: the cultivators; the village officials, like the Patel and kulkarni; and the bullotedars or the village artisans. Over and above these social groups stood Hukdars (lit. persons with prerogatives) like the deshmukhs, who did not form a part of the village community, though they had an important say in its revenue concerns, and received a share of its assessment as the perquisites of

their office. Peace and prosperity in the village depended upon the regulation of the obligations of these groups to each other, and to the State.

While the Ricardian law of rent had provided a rational basis for calculating the kunbis' obligations to the State, even a doctrinaire like Pringle confessed that the 'fees of the bullotedars could not easily, were it desirable, be regulated on more definite principles than they are at present',<sup>55</sup>. The principle on which the village community rewarded the bullotedars was the value of the services they performed, and their remuneration was in no way related to considerations of caste and social status. Thus the untouchable Mahars and the lowly Sootars were ranked as bullotedars of the first order, while the Brahmin priest barely qualified for a ranking of the third and lowest order. Such a ranking of the artisans found widespread acceptance. 'I have never known the (bullotedari fees) to be the subject of dispute', Pringle stated, 'and their nature and quantity appears to be well understood by the parties themselves',<sup>56</sup>. Because the rivaj had resolved the question of bullotedari fees to the

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BA. R.K. Pringle to Bombay Government dated 6 September 1828: R.D., Vol. 225 of 1828.

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Ibid.

satisfaction of everyone concerned, Pringle instructed the Survey Department to ascertain the amount which the cultivators of a particular village traditionally paid to their artisans, so that this amount could be taken into account in the calculation of the assessment to be paid by the village.

While the regulation of the cultivators' obligations to the bullotedars did not present any problem, the position of the Hukdars was quite different. Prior to the Survey, their dues were paid to them directly, though they also featured in the official kulkarni accounts. Pringle suspected in this procedure scope for extortion and oppression. He was also aware of the anxiety with which the Hukdars regarded the measures of the new Government, and their apprehension that the authorities would exploit the first opportunity to abolish their prerogatives altogether. In fairness both to the ryots and the Hukdars, he instructed the officials of the Survey Department to institute an inquiry into their claims, and to fix their remuneration as a percentage of the village assessment. However, the application of this seemingly simple principle presented Pringle with numerous problems, because the remuneration of the hereditary officers varied from village to village, and taluka to taluka. The Patels, for instance, had in most villages an Inam or gift in land,

like Patel Burmana Wullud Dongra of Rangaum, who cultivated 65 acres rent free in recognition of his services<sup>57</sup>. In addition, they received a small cash allowance from the authorities. Finally came a series of cesses, some legal and others illegal, which they levied on the ryots. The total emoluments of the Patels varied from the seven per cent of the revenue they were able to appropriate for themselves in the taluka of Indapur, to the two per cent they levied in the talukas of Pabul and Sewnair. On purely pragmatic grounds Pringle decided that a salary amounting to three per cent of the total assessment would suffice to 'support the respectability and efficiency' of the Patel's office. There was to be no diminution in a Patel's remuneration if it exceeded this figure; but in villages where the Patel received less than three per cent, the deficiency was to be made up by a gift of rent-free land.

Though it did not question the equity of the scale of payment recommended for the Patels by Pringle, the Bombay Government was obliged to reject his recommendations because of the widespread corruption that had characterised the survey conducted under his aegis. The Despandya Kulkarnis

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<sup>57</sup> BA. J.B. Bellasis to G. Wingate dated 26 June 1839: R.D., Vol. 114/1198 of 1840.



and Deputy Patel Masaye Galande of Indapur were typical of a whole class of district and village officials who had bribed the subordinate officials of the Survey Department to secure reductions in rentals, and increases in perquisites of office. Small wonder then that Pringle's critics found such groups vociferous in their support of the survey:

The oratory of the zemindars would be influenced by gratitude for the increase of their huks; and of the Patels and Kulkarnis for those of their salaries and graum khurch [Robertson pointed out]. I do not mean to imply injustice, or thriftlessness, in making these increases...All that I wish at present to draw the attention of Government to on this point is, that it was a most fortunate circumstance for the survey-assessment, that the leaders of the sentiments of the people, the zemindars and the village officers, should have reason to think so well of the measure as it affected their own personal interests.<sup>58</sup>

The scramble by the dominant social groups in the villages to further their interests at the expense of the community was by no means the only consequence of the introduction of the ryotwari system, and the bureaucratisation of the administration. An equally important effect was the diminution in the Patel's status. It has already been observed that the Patel's authority lay in a combination of traditional and legal domination which made him the

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<sup>58</sup>

BA. H.D. Robertson to T. Williamson dated 1 November 1831: R.D., Vol. 434 of 1832.

unquestioned leader of village society. How essential were both these sources of power to the maintenance of his position requires no further emphasis. But even Elphinstone, who appreciated the Patel's vital role in the village community, had failed to grasp the fact that in defining his powers in a Regulation, and in closely associating him with the revenue machinery, he was undermining the Patel's position in village society. In defining the rights and obligations of the Patels and other Hereditary Officers, Regulations XVI and XVII of the Elphinstone Code of 1827 virtually signed the death warrant of this class by making it subservient to the official hierarchy, and by integrating it into the bureaucracy. Thus the Patel's emoluments, instead of being a recognition of his authority over his fellow villagers, and his ability to guide them in matters of common interest, were henceforth 'to be considered strictly as the official remuneration of the person filling the office'. He was also placed under the administrative control of the Collector, and was obliged to render the usual services of his office 'under the penalty of suspension from office and emoluments'. An exposition of his status under the former rulers vividly illustrates the extent of his fall:

The Patel of a huge village was, indeed a substantial person, and, compared with the humble inhabitants of his village, occupied an influential and enviable position: his authority was unquestionable, and his will absolute; while his

privileges of precedence on all public and social occasions formed, according to native taste, an imposing picture of greatness. The profits of the office depended of course on the system of revenue pursued, and on his influence in the village. Under Native Governments his gains were seldom inquired after, as long as he produced the full amount of revenue, and the village generally prosperous. His direct imposts would therefore depend on his influence over the people, and the perquisites of his office upon the nature of the revenue system and the character of its executors.<sup>59</sup>

The effect of the Elphinstone Code on the Patel's position was recognised by officials like Barnard, the Judicial Commissioner of the Deccan, who as early as 1831 drew attention to the consequences of an hereditary official being treated as a member of the bureaucracy<sup>60</sup>. Barnard regarded the Patel as a leader of the village community who also acted as an intermediary between the administration and the cultivators. The question he posed was whether it was possible for such an individual to speak for the interests of the village if he was regarded as the juniormost official in the revenue hierarchy. To Barnard the answer was obvious. The Regulations had defined the duties and obligations of the

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Report on the Village Communities of the Deccan by R.N. Goodine dated 10 October 1845: Bombay Government Selections No. 4.

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BA. Report by Mr. Barnard, Judicial Commissioner of the Deccan, dated 30 November 1832: R.D., Vol. 24/492 of 1833.



Patel in such a way that even if a Collector wanted him to defend the interests of his constituents, the 'necessary consequence of making him liable to departmental penalties is that he cannot do so'. Barnard's analysis of the Patel's position under the regulations was disputed by Robert Grant, the Governor of Bombay, who held that he had always served in the 'dual capacity' of a spokesman of the village community, and an official of the State; and that there was no contradiction in the simultaneous performance of these roles<sup>61</sup>.

Barnard's objections stemmed from the impression that there existed a conflict between the interests of the State and those of the ryots, with the Patel being obliged to make a choice between the two. Nothing, Grant stated, could be further from the truth; for the State did not expect the Patel to foster its interests to the detriment of those of the ryots. Instead of creating confusion in revenue management, it was only because the Patel in his 'dual capacity' enjoyed the confidence both of the ryots and the administration that he could act usefully as an intermediary between the village community and the authorities. The two roles he played were to the Patel a source of strength rather than of

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BA. Minute by the Governor of Bombay dated 27 February 1833: R.D., Vol. 24/492 of 1833.



weakness, Grant stated in conclusion, for 'Government listen to every representation which the Patel may make for the benefit of the community, and to each representation the official character of the Patel imparts a weight and consideration which would never be advanced to the mere agent of one party'<sup>62</sup>.

Barnard had made a correct appraisal of the effect of the Regulations on the Patel's authority; but he had failed to pinpoint the true significance of the changes stemming from the promulgation of the Elphinstone Code. Grant's argument that the Patel had traditionally acted in the dual capacity of a leader of village society and a revenue official was a valid one. But he had shut his eyes to the fact that the Elphinstone Code, with its excessive concern for the institution of legal controls within the revenue machinery, had disturbed the delicate balance between the two roles traditionally played by the Patel. Since under British aegis the Patel's actions were rigorously controlled by the mamlatdars and the Collectors, it was very difficult for him to give positive leadership to the village community. The Regulations, in effect, undermined one of the two pillars on

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BA. Ibid.

which his authority rested. The Patel was consequently alienated from the cultivators of his village, and he became increasingly incapable of communicating their views, on issues affecting them, to the authorities. The extent and significance of this alienation dawned upon the Government on the occasion of the Agrarian Riots of 1875.

The decline of the traditional leaders of village society was inevitable because of the values to which the new rulers of Maharashtra subscribed, and it was quite independent of the differences between a Utilitarian like Pringle and the administrators brought up in the Burkean traditions of Elphinstone. However significant may have been the differences between British civilians of conflicting persuasions, the gulf which separated them from a traditional Maratha administrator like Nana Furavees or Pandit Ramashastree was infinitely wider. The emphasis on a legal and rational basis for the bureaucracy, and the attempt to define the duties of (and the relationship between) different officers with precision, constituted a radical departure from Maratha practice, and was subversive of traditional forms of government. Whether it stemmed from conservative motives, or from a desire for reform, the very act of defining the duties and obligations of an office, or setting out the functions of

an institution, gradually changed its complexion and altered its characteristics.

The inevitability of change is best illustrated by the attempt Elphinstone had made to preserve the dignity of the Patel's office through banning its sale. This interdict was inspired by the best conservative motives, though it violated past practice, since the Patel had been formerly free to sell his office, and often did so. Elphinstone banned the sale of Patelships in order to prevent the political transformation of 1818 from resulting in the rise of a new class of Patels having no ties with the communities over which they presided. But the interdict created a fresh dilemma, since it interfered with the process through which control over the rural communities was formerly transferred to individuals who commanded the resources necessary for the extension of agricultural operations, and who possessed the capacity and the initiative for leadership. Immediately after the promulgation of the Code, the revenue authorities were flooded with applications, on the one hand, from Patels who wanted to sell their rights of office, and on the other, from individuals who wanted to purchase hereditary rights in their villages. Patel Ooka Wallud Jeysingh of Davgood, for instance, wanted to part with half the prerogatives of his office in favour of one Janu, a meerasdar of some property

and enterprise, who had undertaken to restore the decayed fortunes of his village. Similarly, Patel Kanjee of Dadree desired to sell his rights to a fellow villager called Abbajee, who proposed to invest in ten ploughs and re-establish the village<sup>63</sup>. Equally significant were requests like the one from Poolajee Kalley, a retired Subadar-Major of the Pioneer Corps, for permission to purchase the Patelship of Phoogaon; and another one from Gireppa, a native official of the revenue department, for the purchase of the kulkarni's rights in a village<sup>64</sup>.

Executive officials who had a first hand experience of rural society regarded the interdict on the sale of Patelships as an ill-conceived measure. As one of them pointed out, the prestige and status associated with hereditary offices was so highly prized that a wuttun was a possession which 'in ordinary circumstances no money will purchase, no influence will procure...'<sup>65</sup> Why then was it sold at all? 'Only when the holder has by a long series of misfortunes,

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<sup>63</sup>

NAI. G. Giberne to T. Williamson dated 4 February 1829: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 2 dated 4 May 1832.

<sup>64</sup>

NAI. R. Bagett to J.A. Dunlop dated 22 June 1838: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 11 dated 12 November 1838.

<sup>65</sup>

NAI. W.S. Boyd to T. Williamson dated 1 February 1834: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 3 dated 4 May 1835.



arrived at that helpless state of ruin which demands the greatest and last of sacrifices, the sale of his wuttun...<sup>66</sup>

The effect of an interdict on the sale of hereditary offices was consequently the reverse of what had been intended; for the non-alienability of the Patelship lowered its value in the eyes of the rural classes. The problem became so acute by the 1830s that even loyal Elphinstonians like Thomas Williamson confessed to a change in their opinion on the question:

I am still of opinion [he stated] that if the sale of Patelships becomes general and was indiscriminately sanctioned, then it would often produce bad effects by placing strangers at the head of village communities in place of the old respected hereditary families...(Again, in places) where the villages are large and the independent ryots require little assistance from the Patels, I feel satisfaction that the system would seldom succeed, but in the small impoverished villages...(it) might often be attended with beneficial effects.<sup>67</sup>

The Bombay authorities were sufficiently agitated over the issue to move an amendment to Regulation XVI of 1827 in order to permit the 'substitution as Patels for members of needy, decayed families, men who from their resources and energy are desirous, as well as capable, of inspiring changes

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<sup>66</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>

NAI. T. Williamson to Bombay Government dated 20 November 1836: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 2 dated 4 May 1835.

which<sup>68</sup> would work to the benefit of the village community as well as the Government. But the opposition of the Central Government at Calcutta prevented them from embarking upon so radical a departure from the Elphinstone Code.

As the aspiration of Poolajee Kalley and Gireppa to a hereditary status indicates, the whole question impinged upon issues which could never have assumed importance under the former administration. The subordinate native bureaucrats were bound to grow in numbers and in importance under British rule. There could be no better object of their legitimate ambition than a Patel's wuttun at the end of a term of loyal service to the State. Nor would the village communities stand to lose through the accession to their strength of a class whose accumulations of capital would be gainfully employed in the promotion of agricultural activity<sup>69</sup>. But there was one aspect of this question which no one in a position of responsibility could afford to overlook. As the Supreme Government at Calcutta pointed out:

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NAI. Draft of Regulation to Amend Regulation XVI (Section XX) of 1827: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 2 dated 4 May 1835.

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NAI. L.R. Reid to Government of India dated 12 October 1838: Home Department (Revenue Branch), Con. No. 10 dated 12 November 1838.

(Even) admitting the undoubted prerogative of Government to bestow these rights and offices on such individuals as it may think fit to select, without consulting the wishes of the people over whom they are to possess influence and authority,...(we) apprehend that the practice, if generally adopted, would be open to much abuse, and might frequently cause great dissatisfaction to the villagers affected by these arrangements.<sup>70</sup>

But was it at all expedient to make such an assumption?

Who had sanctioned such appointments under the Marathas? And to what extent were the sentiments of the community concerned worthy of attention in the selection of ~~an~~ hereditary officer? An inquiry into former practice at the Supreme Government's instance revealed an absence of uniformity only to be expected in an administration in which bureaucratic procedures had not been rationalised. In the outlying districts of Maharashtra, where the Peshwa's authority was weak, the deshmukhs had appointed their protégés in Patel wuttuns which had fallen vacant for want of heirs. But nearer to the seat of Government at Poona, the right had been exercised in the main by the State. This meant that the authority to dispose of lapsed Patelships, if exercised at all, had been a usurpation by the deshmukhs rather than a part of their prerogatives of office; an inference supported by the fact that when in 1822 the British Government had stripped them of this power, no

protests had followed, as would necessarily have been the case if a prescriptive right had been abolished. J. Vibart, Williamson's successor as Revenue Commissioner, was emphatically of the opinion that not only had the former rulers reserved this right to themselves, but they had also never hesitated to create new hereditary rights, and 'it would appear that no feeling against this system was entertained...'<sup>71</sup> The very notion of consulting the 'feelings and wishes of the village community' in the appointment of a Patel, for instance, was alien to the principles informing the Maratha administration. However, even if the stand taken by Vibart be conceded, there still remained for a Government having no 'natural' ties with the masses the need not to 'disturb the minds of the people and create general distrust' through creating new hereditary rights, or promoting the rise of a new class of Patels and deshmukhs<sup>72</sup>. This inconclusive debate over the alienability of the Patelship brings out the conservative dilemma in Maharashtra. For even an attempt to reinforce a traditional institution could alter the status quo

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BA. J. Vibart to Bombay Government dated 22 February 1840: R.D., Vol. 59/1143 of 1840.

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BA. Minute by Governor of Bombay dated 9 April 1840: R.D., Vol. 59/1143 of 1833.



in a significant way, and raise crucial problems for the new rulers of the land.

While reducing the status of traditional officers like the Patels and the deshmukhs, the bureaucratisation of the revenue administration enhanced the importance of the kulkarnis in rural society. A recognition of this change in the distribution of power within the village community led British revenue officials to suggest that the kulkarnis' scales of remuneration be increased, particularly because it was believed that they no longer commanded the means for unofficial exactions which had formerly been open to them:

The business of kulkarnees [a revenue official pointed out] is very much increased since the accession of our Government, and the various particular statements and accounts required by us seem to entitle them now to a higher scale of remuneration than they enjoyed before. It is not easy to ascertain what are the exact amount of money payments made to this class under the former Government; but it is indisputable that their incomes and profits are greatly decreased since we got this country (sic).<sup>73</sup>

The scale of remuneration recommended by Pringle was, of course, thrown overboard the moment it was realised how the kulkarnis had exploited the survey operations to secure exaggerated claims for themselves. But a scheme based on similar

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BA. Letter to G.W. Anderson, Collector of Dharwar, dated 12 October 18 : R.D., Vol. 24/492 of 1833.

principles was proposed by Richard Mills, the Principal Collector of Poona, in 1835. Mills' proposal embraced two basic features: first, that apart from the rent-free lands gifted to them, the cash Huks received by the kulkarnis from the Government should be their only source of income; and secondly, that the emoluments of a kulkarni should be fixed on a sliding scale according to the size and assessment of the village(s) under his charge<sup>74</sup>.

The assumptions and the preconceptions behind the attempt to determine a fixed scale of remuneration for the hereditary officials were made explicit in 1845 by R.N. Goodine in his 'Report On the Village Communities Of the Deccan'<sup>75</sup>. Combining with the atomistic view of social phenomena peculiar to the Utilitarians an evolutionary approach rare even among advanced thinkers at this stage, Goodine rejected from the outset the notion, so dear to Elphinstone and the conservative administrators, of the village community as a 'primitive commonwealth, held together by the individual interests of

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<sup>74</sup>  
NAI. Survey of Proceedings Regarding Emoluments of Patels and Kulkarnis: Home Department (Revenue Branch) Con. No. 11/16 of 9 August 1846.

<sup>75</sup>  
 Report by R.N. Goodine on the Village Communities of the Deccan dated 10 October 1845: Bombay Government Selections No. 4.

its inhabitants...' Closer investigation revealed the traditional village to be a 'minor branch of the feudal system of the earlier ages' and the 'natural effect of an unorganised Government...'

A village, then, [Goodine stated in an elaboration of his thesis] may be termed a self-constituted corporation, organised rather from the primitive necessity of its inhabitants than by design, and strengthened and perpetuated by the hereditary succession of its office-bearers. The numerous and rapid changes of Government in dissolving all stability, taught men to seek for protection of life and property within themselves, and conferred a degree of importance upon village communities, which, under more stable governments, they might never have attained to. A new and ephemeral ruler could have no inducement to displace village officials, when he had everything to gain from their co-operation; and the spokesman of a community had only to make himself master of their persons to extort the tribute of the village, their sufferings exciting the compassion, and exalting them in the eyes of the people...The village thus became the only centre of stability, and the only repository of civil rights; it was the only institution which the people possessed, and the only object of their national attachment...(Emphasis added)<sup>76</sup>

The stability of the village community had persuaded most administrators into looking upon it as the embodiment of the political sagacity and the organisational genius of a bygone age. These administrators had also come to regard the rights and privileges of the various social groups in rural society as sacrosanct and inviolable. But Goodine, after a minute inquiry, came to a diametrically opposite conclusion.

The village system, with its three-tiered organisation of the kunbis, the bullotedars, and the hereditary officials, was kept going mainly through the self-interest of the latter; and by its adaptation, not only to the genius of the rural masses, but also to the 'vices of their arbitrary rulers'! The vast majority of the cultivators did not enjoy any special rights or privileges under it. They possessed no independence or equality; they enjoyed no civil rights; and they were unable to attach themselves to any progressive principles of liberty. The true advantages of the prevailing form of rural social organisation rested with the hereditary village officials, who enjoyed under it wide powers of initiative and an extensive discretionary authority. The cultivators themselves derived little tangible benefit from it, save the 'natural pride' arising from the respectability attached to the tenures of uprees and meerasdars.

The stability of rural society, Goodine noted in conclusion, was thus based on the authority and prestige of the village officials, and on the exclusion of the majority of the ryots from the levers of power in the village communities. At the same time, the village community possessed two redeeming features: first, it afforded a convenient means for the collection of land revenue by the State; and secondly, it erected a strong buffer between the otherwise helpless ryots



and the unstable centres of political authority which characterised Maharashtra before the British conquest. But if the village system was inseparable from the 'spirit' of the Government formerly in force, then 'the change that has now taken place has entirely altered the position of the chief actors'. The interests of the deshmukhs and the kulkarnis and the Patels had been undermined, while those of the ryots had been reinforced, through the ryotwari settlement, which set out the obligations of the peasant to the State with equity and precision. In addition, the village officials had been stripped of their authority as the natural leaders of rural society, since their interests were closely identified with those of the bureaucracy, and because they acted as the State's representatives at the village level, merely performing the mechanical tasks of revenue collection. It was important for this change in the status of the hereditary officials to be reflected in the channel through which they received their emoluments. No doubt, Goodine pointed out, should be left in their mind that they drew their authority from the State, and not from the community. Consequently, whatever extra remuneration was to be given to the hereditary officials, 'should be given in the direct name of pagar (salary), and not on the principle of huk or bab

(prerogative), thereby precluding all possibility of such remuneration being claimed as a right...<sup>77</sup>

The new concepts of social order and political authority which inspired administrators as far apart in their ideological preconceptions as Elphinstone and Pringle thus became increasingly important in shaping relations within the village community and the bureaucracy. Under the former rulers there had been no systematic attempt to interfere in the affairs of rural society, apart from measures taken to ensure the flow of the land revenue to the State. The Maratha administration did not try to shape, or to alter, the patterns of authority and the centres of conflict within the village. Nor did it try to break through the facade which a village presented under the aegis of the Patel to an external authority. Maratha statesmen did not tamper with the social order as they found it for three reasons: first, because the idea of economic progress and social mobility as an activity promoted through State action had no place in their thinking; secondly, because they subscribed to an organic view of society characterised by a collectivist rather than an atomistic quality; and thirdly, because they believed that the springs of social action could only be

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<sup>77</sup>  
Ibid.

located in corporate institutions like castes (in the urban world) and the village communities (in the rural world).

British administrators differed radically from their Maratha predecessors in their concept of the rôle of the State in society, and in their belief that effective social action had to impinge on the individual rather than on collective institutions. The ryotwari system of land-revenue, which involved a contractual relationship between the kunbi and the State to the exclusion of all intermediaries, and was designed to stimulate agricultural activity through playing on the kunbi's acquisitive instinct, embodied the application of these values to the problems of rural social organisation. It was supplemented by attempts at regulating social relations within and without the village community along legal and rational lines. The various hereditary officials, for instance, were no longer to act as representatives of the community, or as the leaders of rural society. Instead, they were to be regarded as representatives of the State, with their freedom of action determined by a well defined body of laws and regulations.

The resulting change in the quality of social experience, and shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual, was therefore a consequence of calculated policy. From it stemmed a fragmentation of rural society which was defended

on the plea that it would foster 'free and independent habits of thought and action, which are greatly wanting in the agricultural population of India, ground down into slavish subserviency and apathy by long years of despotic rule....' Behind the various measures of reform initiated under Utilitarian aegis lay the belief that once the ryot was set free from the collective obligations which weighed down upon him, he would fashion his destiny unhampered by slothful kinsmen of the jatha, or by unenterprising cultivators in the village community. But barely two decades of British rule made it clear that the traditional institutions were breaking down under the impact of the legislation of reform without being replaced by anything competent to provide a basis for concerted action towards progress and prosperity. The fate of one community described at some length by Goodine highlighted this widespread social malaise:

Yewla [Goodine pointed out in 1845] is a thriving centre of some note, which was founded about the conclusion of the last century by an ancestor of the present Patel...Yewla prospered; but it suffered from a scarcity of water during the hot season ...The munificence of some individual in bygone days had founded a tank, but it has since been choked with mud, and is consequently useless. As usual in such cases, the Patel might have afforded some assistance from his profits, but he...lacked the means; or he might, in virtue of his office, (by forcing a subscription, or what not) have made the necessary arrangements; but this was contrary to the regulations of the present government. During the last few years several attempts have



been made to induce the present government to form an aqueduct; and it has consented to defray half the expense, if the inhabitants would defray the rest. A subscription list was set on foot, but the amount of promised subscription fell short of the sum required, and the measure failed, through the dissensions or disunion of its promoters...These facts are not peculiar to this...(community) alone, but, with slight modifications, are easily applicable to...(the whole of) the Deccan...<sup>78</sup>

The consequences of Utilitarian reform are vividly reflected in the virtual disintegration of community feeling in Yewla. The tragic fate of Yewla epitomises the inability of the Utilitarians to put their ideas to any creative use in Maharashtrian society. With the authoritarian sanctions behind British rule, it was all too easy to reject the values which had inspired State policy under the Peshwas, and to undermine the corporate institutions, and the collective quality of social experience, which formed the basis of the old order. But unless Utilitarian reform was to result in social anarchy, traditional institutions had not only to be destroyed, but new ones had to be created in their place. Utilitarian reformers failed to realise this because of their strong commitment to laissez-faire values. Their ill-conceived attempt to base their programme

of reform on the springs of individual action sharpened antagonisms within the village community, and led to a breakdown of integration in rural society which found expression in the agrarian disturbances of 1875.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DECCAN RIOTS OF 1875

The realignment of power in rural society which stemmed from Utilitarian measures of reform led to a build up of social tensions within the villages of the Deccan that erupted in the disturbances of 1875. While all the social groups in rural society were affected by the patterns of authority which took shape after 1818, the tensions which resulted from the administrative changes introduced by the British Government found their clearest expression in the relationship between the kunbi and the vani. Even before the British take-over, rural indebtedness was widespread in Maharashtra, and an inquiry into the state of a village like Lony in 1820 illustrates something of its extent<sup>1</sup>. But under native rule the kunbis dominated the village despite an overwhelming burden of debt, because they enjoyed a numerical preponderance, and because the vani was isolated

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T. Coats, 'Account of the Present State of the Township of Lony', Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, III, (London, 1823), pp. 183-250.

from his caste-fellows in other villages. The officers of the Poona Government remained unconcerned about the vani's fate so long as he kept the rural economy on the move. The only judicial institution to which the vani could appeal for the recovery of his debts was the panchayat. But since the panchayat was dominated by the Patel and other influential kunbis in the village, it was hardly an institution that gave fair consideration to the vani's claims. Because the kunbis controlled the judicial institutions that resolved conflicts within rural society, the vanis were prevented from exercising a social dominance over the village comparable with their role of keeping the rural economy on the move.

### The Growth of Kunbi Vani Antagonism

The changes brought about in the Deccan after the British conquest effected a redistribution of power within the village. The most crucial of these changes was the introduction of the ryotwari system of land revenue. The ryotwari system weakened the cohesion of the village through abolishing the collective responsibility which the kunbis had formerly borne for the village rental. It was also responsible for reorganising rural credit along novel lines. Under native rule, the role of the village vani had been sharply differentiated from that of the urban sowcar. The



vani was a member of the village community, and subject to its judicial and executive authority. He was a shopkeeper as well as a moneylender; and his meagre capital resources were tied up either in small monetary advances to the kunbis, or in grain loans to cultivators who were passing through a difficult phase. Due to his isolated position, and because he was dependent upon the kunbis for the security of his person and property, the vani never presented the village with any threat. The urban sowcar, on the other hand, was a somewhat different person, not only because of the scale on which he conducted his financial transactions, but also because of his position vis-a-vis the rural community. Instead of dealing with the cultivators directly, he advanced loans to each individual village as a community in order to enable it to fulfil its revenue obligations towards the political authorities. The sowcar therefore very often controlled all the surplus produce of the village that was available for disposal in the urban market. However, he did not desire to establish a more intimate control over the village economy, even though such a control lay well within his grasp, since to do so would have been to contravene the social style of his caste. Thus when in 1827 the Bombay Government tried to free the village communities of their burden of debt by compensating the sowcars with land-grants,

the sowcars revealed their unwillingness to participate directly in agricultural production by refusing these land-grants<sup>2</sup>.

The introduction of the ryotwari system, however, changed the role of the sowcar in the supply of credit to the village. Since the new system emphasised individual responsibility for the payment of the land-tax, credit was now required by the peasant, and not by the village community. The sowcar, therefore, no longer had any dealings with the Patel as the head of the village community. Instead, he dealt with each peasant individually. But since it was difficult for the sowcar to conduct business directly with the peasant, he preferred to work through his caste-fellow, the vani in the village. An immediate result of this re-organisation of rural credit was that the vani was now united with his caste-fellows outside the village to a far greater extent than ever before; and that the sowcar supported him in every possible way to fulfil the new role which had become open to him. All this not only strengthened the position of the vani vis-a-vis the kunbis, but it also increased the occasions for conflict, and the extent of

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BA (Bombay State Archives). R.K. Arbuthnot to Bombay Government dated 23 September 1826: R.D. (Revenue Department), Vol. 43/196 of 1827.

friction, between the two castes. Indeed, in the decades following the British take-over, the antagonism between the kunbi and the vani became the most significant cleavage in the villages of the Deccan.

Nothing did more to sharpen this antagonism than the operations of the new Courts of Law which were instituted by the British Government. These Courts not only wrested judicial authority from the kunbis, but their operations were guided by concepts of social equity and contractual responsibility which favoured the vani rather than the kunbi. The consequences of the new Courts of Law were brought to the notice of the British authorities in a petition addressed by the ryots of Thana to the Bombay Government in 1840. The petition opened with an enumeration of the 'blessings' which British rule had conferred on Maharashtra. Life and property, the ryots pointed out, were secure as they had never been before; arbitrary taxes had been abolished; and the territorial aristocrats who had formerly oppressed the peasantry were firmly under control. But, the ryots continued, 'though we live under such protection and prosecute our labour free of any apprehension of oppression, yet our families are reduced to a miserable condition, so much so that their ordinary wants even cannot be supplied'. The reason behind this state of affairs was simple. To carry out their agricultural

operations, the ryots were forced to borrow money from the vani. Under the former rulers, the moneylenders had levied interest on money loans at rates varying from 25 to 50 per cent; and on grain loans at rates varying from 30 to 60 per cent. In the case, however, of usmani sultani (natural or artificial calamities) the vanis had recovered their advances with moderation, since the Maratha Government

never allowed its ryots to be oppressed by usurious demands, and consequently the Sahookar did not carry any complaint to the Government. Considering the Sahookar as our parent and that he would save our lives at a critical moment, we settled our claims according to our circumstances. Thus both the ryot and the Sahookar were able to sustain their situations.<sup>3</sup>

But the harmonious relationship between the ryot and the vani had been transformed through the institution of the Courts of Law, and the promulgation of the Regulations, into one of acute antagonism. The vani now inveigled the ryot into ruinous agreements, and, if the ryot failed to fulfil the obligations set down in such a contract, he instituted a civil suit against him. As a result, the 'whole of his (i.e. the ryot's) property is disposed of; and he is reduced to such a condition as never to regain his footing in society'. This was made possible because the ryots were ignorant of the



Regulations, and could be enticed into agreements of whose significance they had no idea. In contrasting their wretched state under British aegis to their condition under the rule of the Peshwas, the ryots pointed to the obvious solution of the problem:

Under the late Government we suffered great oppression, but no one could sell our immovable property or lands etc., and therefore we were able to endure the oppression both of Government and of the Sahoo-kars...Under the present Government, by the sale of our immovable property we are reduced to a starving condition in the same manner, as a tree when its roots are pulled out, dies. We are neither Shroffs, nor traders, and we are not acquainted with the regulations of the Courts. The Vakeels whom we employ, extort money from us in the first instance, under various pretences, and when the cause is lost, advise us to make an appeal. Let Government therefore consider whether the cultivator is able to litigate with the Sahoo-kar...(We) beg...that our cases may be referred to the Panchayats, who should decide on the claims and liabilities of the parties with reference to the circumstances of each, agreeably to the ancient custom.<sup>4</sup>

The Thana appeal pointed to a social malaise of alarming intensity. It is true that in representations to the government the peasants as a rule painted their misery in lurid colours; but the accuracy of the kunbis' indictment was confirmed by an official inquiry into the condition of the Deccan districts. Because rural indebtedness had been

widespread even before 1818, the magnitude of the problem caused little surprise to the authorities, even though a District Officer pointed out that in the talukas of Khair and Mamul under his charge there was scarcely a village in which it was possible to find 'three persons, ryots or zamindars, not in debt for sums above rupees one hundred'.<sup>5</sup> But what perturbed the Bombay Government was the predominance which the moneylender was gradually acquiring over the ryot. By the 1840s the predominance of the vanis had become so characteristic a feature of the villages in the Deccan, that not a single British administrator questioned its existence, even though there were differences of opinion on its implications for the future of rural society, and the administrative policies of the government. The majority of executive officials linked the problem with the rapacity for which the vani was notorious, and the usurious character of his financial dealings<sup>6</sup>. But administrators, like Pringle held that while the vani was no less selfish than other men, it was wrong to assert that the rates of interest he charged were exorbitant and exceeded the normal profits of capital.

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BA. B. Frere, Assistant Collector of Poona, to P. Stewart, Collector of Poona, dated 2 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

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BA. M. Rose, Assistant Collector of Poona, to P. Stewart, dated 15 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

Looking to the condition of rural society in Maharashtra, Pringle characterised the vanis as a class which formed the only connecting link between 'civilisation and barbarism'. He also pointed out that although the ryots were 'loud in their complaints against their creditors, yet I imagine they would be the first to suffer by, and not less ready to complain against, any restrictions which would deprive them of the aid of so useful a class'<sup>7</sup>.

However, in focussing attention on the important part played by the vanis in the rural economy, Pringle was emphasising a point on which there was no difference of opinion. For the administrators who looked upon the vanis as a rapacious class recognised only too well the significance of their social role. The ryots rarely possessed any reserves of capital, and they seldom had access to ready money. It was the vanis who helped them pay their instalments of land revenue, and who provided them with the means of defraying the expenses they incurred on caste ceremonials and on religious festivities. The vani was consequently a valuable member of the village community, without whose assistance the cultivators could be reduced to the greatest

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BA. R.K. Pringle, Collector of Kandesh, to Bombay Government dated 17 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

distress for want of money. What the 'anti-vani' administrators deplored, however, was the lack of consideration with which the moneylenders conducted their business. In the districts around Poona, for instance, an experienced administrator like Bartle Frere regarded a return of 10 per cent as reasonable in a region where there was so little employment for capital. Yet interest on loans in the Poona countryside ranged from 25 to 60 per cent. Looking to the social costs at which the vani met the needs of the cultivators, Frere described him as 'one of the greatest obstacles upon the prosperity of society'<sup>8</sup>.

The relations between the kunbi and the vani barely two decades after the British conquest had assumed a pattern which boded ill for the future. With his greater all round sophistication, and his deeper grasp of the law, the vani was becoming more and more of a power in the rural world. His progress towards social dominance was facilitated by the Courts of Law. The increase in civil suits instituted against the ryots proves that the moneylender recognised in the new judicial institutions an instrument for self-aggrandisement. In Ahmednagar district, for instance, cases



involving ryots increased by 50 per cent (from 2,900 to 5,900) between the years 1835 and 1839. This increase is convincing evidence of the 'knowledge that the Marwarree has acquired of the Regulations, and of the powerful regime they afford him for exacting the fulfilment of the most usurious contracts which ever disgraced any country...'<sup>9</sup> A considerable proportion of these suits led to the transfer of holdings from the kunbis to the vanis. But since the cast style of the moneylenders prevented them from cultivating the land, they were mostly content to let the former proprietors labour in their fields, and appropriated all the profits of their labour apart from what was necessary for their subsistence. The social values of the vanis constituted the most frustrating feature of the agrarian scene. For they stood in the way of a social transformation through which the small peasant proprietor would have yielded to a class of capitalist farmers owning large landed estates, and possessing the resources necessary for efficient agriculture. The vani, Frere pointed out, did not

by a liberal expenditure of his part of his gains make up for the poverty of the ryots...Seldom do you see them (the vanis) improving any property that may have come in hand, or in embarking on any

speculation such as sugar plantations, cotton or the cultivation of silk. Their thoughts and speculations are confined to their ledger and money transactions, and in no instance have I ever found a banian step forward...to aid in any work of public activity.<sup>10</sup>

The transfer of economic dominance over the village from the kunbis to the vanis proceeded at a rapid pace after the completion of the Goldsmid Settlement in the 1840s, which put British land revenue policy in the Deccan on a firm basis. Barely three decades after the completion of this Settlement, the Commissioners investigating the disturbances of 1875 discovered that in one village after another the landowning families had been gradually dispossessed of their holdings by the marwari moneylenders who flourished under the new order. In each village a basic pattern of change was in evidence. The Patel and the principal cultivators, who had formerly guided the affairs of the village, were reduced to the status of tenants tilling the fields of the moneylenders. Their position as the most privileged and dominant group in rural society was a thing of the past. It was the vanis who now dominated the rural world. Yet caste prejudices and conservative habits of thought prevented the vanis from assuming that active leadership over the village which had

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BA. B. Frere, Assistant Collector of Poona, to P. Stewart, Collector of Poona, dated 2 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

formerly been exercised by those whom they had dispossessed of their land.

The process through which a nouveau riche caste of vanis rose to positions of dominance in rural Maharashtra can be reconstructed by looking closely in the affairs of a village like Parner in Ahmednagar Collectorate<sup>11</sup>. Parner was a largish village, the headquarters of a taluka, and a mamlatdar's station. In it resided 50 moneylenders, mostly marwaris by caste, whose financial dealings were not confined to the village, but extended over the neighbouring countryside. The Patelship of Parner was held by the Kowrey family. At the time of the British conquest, it was a coveted office, with the Patel owning 160 acres of fertile land. In 1840 the Kowrey estate was partitioned into two shares of 80 acres each. A further subdivision took place soon afterwards, with Rowji Kowrey and Babaji Kowrey, two grandsons of the Patel at the time of the British conquest, receiving shares of 40 acres each. In 1863 Rowji Kowrey borrowed a sum of Rs.200 from Rajmull Marwari to buy a standing crop. He paid a sum of Rs.150 on the original bond by the sale of his own standing crop, and signed a second bond of Rs.100 for the balance.

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Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, (Bombay, 1876), II, Appendix C, pp. 66-9.

He then paid Rs.24 yearly for three years, and in 1866 the bond was renewed for Rs.175. Rajmull subsequently sued him for a sum of Rs.388 in Court, and obtained a decree on the strength of which he was able to appropriate Rowji's share of the Kowrey estate. Being dispossessed of his holdings, Rowji Kowrey drifted to his wife's village, where he eked out a miserable existence as a labourer on daily wages. Babaji Kowrey's fate was no better than that of his brother, since his share of the family estate was in possession of Vittoo Marwari of Parner. Between them the marwaris Rajmull and Vittoo had thus humbled the once proud Kowreys to the dust. 'There is not now one yoke of bullock or acre of land in Parner village held by the Kowreys,' the Deccan Commissioners stated, 'though some of the family are still cultivating land in the hamlets.'<sup>12</sup>

The decline of the cultivators and the rise of the vanis can be illustrated from a comparison of the eclipse of the Kowreys with the emergence of a marwari family like the Karamchands of Parner:

The first immigrant of this family was Karamchand, who came to Babulwari in Parner, about 60 years ago. Karamchand had four sons. Tukaram, the eldest, came to Parner about 39 years ago as his father's agent; served him in that capacity for

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<sup>12</sup>

Ibid.



two years. Then his father lent him Rs.150 at annas 12 percent, per mensem, and he set up on his own account. Now his khata in Parner and Nagar talukas is Rs.664 for government assessed land...(which) represents an annual produce of Rs.3,600. How much land is mortgaged to him, and what may be the amount of his annual dealings, it is impossible to say with any accuracy...(The) kulkarni states that Tukaram was assessed in 1871-72 at Rs.2,000 per annum.<sup>13</sup>

The fate of the Kowreys and the Karamchands is not an isolated instance of the decay of landowning families, or the rise of the moneylenders. The deshmukhs of Parner, for instance, held 500 acres in 1818, but in the intervening period all their land had passed into the hands of local marwaris. At a more mundane level came ryots like Andu Dhondiba, once the proud owner of 30 acres of land, which were now mortgaged to the village vani; or Tantia bin Bapu Gaikwad, whose holding of 150 acres had passed over to Kapurchand Marwari for the paltry sum of Rs.75; or Navji bin Trimbakji, whose 48 acres were held by Oodaram Marwari against a loan of Rs.35 contracted in 1860. Typical members of the vani caste whose rise paralleled the eclipse of the landowning families were individuals like Chandrabhan Bhuban, who started from humble beginnings in 1840, and had acquired land assessed at Rs.2,000 by 1875; or Hariram Bhuban, who hailed

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<sup>13</sup>  
Ibid.

from a family which had settled in a village near Parner at the time of the British conquest, and who had since then amassed a small fortune for himself.

The extent of marwari dominance over rural society in 1875 is also reflected in the affairs of a village like Oorli located in the taluka of Haveli in Poona district<sup>14</sup>. Oorli had a population of 1,264 souls, an annual assessment of Rs.3,735, and 2,158 acres of cultivable land. It was also the happy hunting ground of five marwaris, whose claims amounted to Rs.16,000. Tukaram vani was the most substantial of these. His biggest debtor was Buggaji Panduji, who owed him a sum of Rs.1,300, and paid him in return Rs.75 worth of produce and cash yearly. In addition, Tukaram had acquired control of the fields of two of the ryots of Oorli, Marooti and Genoo Subaji, and he proposed to institute court proceedings against another ryot called Jotee. Of the other money-lenders only two, Muniram Marwari and Govinda Vani, were of any substance. Muniram had claims amounting to Rs.2,500 in all, while Govinda had loaned Rs. 1,000 to the various cultivators in the village. Between them the vanis of Oorli controlled all the ryots living within the village, and they

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<sup>14</sup>

Ibid.

appropriated the agricultural surplus of Oorli for disposal in the Poona market.

While the extent to which the cultivators were being dispossessed of their holdings is revealing in itself, the full repercussions of the growth of vani predominance can be appreciated only if account is taken of the social values which shaped the attitudes of the ryots, and the wider economic setting in which this transformation was being consummated. The agrarian changes described above were not accompanied by the growth of urban centres of industrial activity. In the absence of any outlet to the urban world, the dispossessed peasant was forced to eke out a wretched existence as a landless labourer, often on those very fields which he had formerly cultivated as an independent proprietor. However, even if an expanding urban economy had provided an alternative avenue of employment for the kunbis, it is doubtful whether caste prejudices would have permitted them to adapt themselves readily to a new style of life. All this meant increasing frustration for the kunbis, who were being dispossessed of their land by the vanis through legal processes which violated traditional notions of social equity.

### The Revision of the Deccan Settlement

The increasing bitterness between the cultivators and the moneylenders of the Deccan contained the seeds of a major

agrarian crisis. But while the dispossession of ordinary ryots like Andu Dhondiba or Navji bin Trimbakji was serious enough in itself, the simultaneous decline of important landed families like the Kowreys, or the deshmukhs of Parner, generated social frustration of an intensity that was bound to result in an upheaval. What was implicit in the social climate became explicit through two factors which heightened antagonism between the kunbis and the vanis, and added to the atmosphere of unrest in the country districts. The revision of the Goldsmid Settlement in the 1860s combined with the economic dislocation caused in the Deccan by the American Civil War to transform the dormant antagonism between the kunbi and the vani into open class and caste conflict in rural society.

The revision of the land Settlement was an important undertaking in an agrarian society like Maharashtra, where the entire population subsisted directly or indirectly on the land. The importance of the revision was enhanced by the Ricardian principles which underlay the revenue system. According to these principles the State was the supreme landlord in the country, and could alter at will, and according to the dictates of political expediency, the share of the profits of agriculture which it awarded to the cultivators. A resurvey involved too an evaluation of the changes in



economic conditions as they affected the profits of agriculture, and of the proportion of these profits which the State could claim as its own. A revision of the Settlement was therefore bound to stimulate excitement, and could easily arouse discontent, among the cultivators.

The changes which had come over Maharashtra during the period of the Goldsmid Settlement can be seen clearly through focussing attention on a region like the taluka of Haveli, which stretched around Poona, the former capital of the Peshwas. Poona itself had fallen into reduced circumstances in the 1860s, though it was still a considerable city, with a population of 75,000. The deserted palaces of the Peshwas, and the empty residences of the great territorial chiefs, bore silent testimony to its political decline. But the institution of a municipality in 1864, which was run by an urban elite that had been created under British rule, and which had in three years cleaned and widened the main streets of the city, spoke in clear accents of the shape of things to come. Similarly, the flourishing market held daily in front of the deserted Shanwar Palace, the former residence of the Peshwas, epitomised the change that had come over the region.

For the establishment of Pax Britannica had transformed the Deccan in a way it had never been transformed before. Peace,

political stability and the rule of law were only three of the influences at work in the new order. But there were others no less important moulding Maharashtrian society in a new shape. The state of communications, for instance, had altered beyond recognition. Since it embraced a city of the size and importance of Poona, Haveli was particularly fortunate in this respect; but what happened in the taluka was equally characteristic of the rest of the Deccan. In contrast to the primitive conditions of transport prevailing under the Marathas, a railway line now ran through the taluka, having four stations within its limits. There were in addition roads of good quality linking Poona with places like Bombay, Nasik, Satara and Sholapur. Since all the roads converged on the former capital, they afforded easy access to the vast quantities of supplies required for so large a city. The increasing facilities for the movement of agricultural surpluses, and the growth of markets for their disposal, stimulated the growth of population and the extension of cultivation in the Deccan. The population of 81 villages in Haveli (for which figures are available) rose from 37,695 in 1840, to 58,829 in 1870. While statistics are not available for the preceding decades, it is probable that the population was static before the British take-over. The increase in population led to an increase in the amount of land

cultivated, and equally inevitably, inferior soils were pressed into cultivation. In the Haveli villages already referred to the area under cultivation rose from 176,974 acres to 204,135 acres during the duration of the Goldsmid Settlement. Already the Deccan appeared to be poised on the edge of a Malthusian abyss!<sup>15</sup>

Such then were the altered conditions which confronted J. Francis and W. Waddington, the Superintendents of the 'Revenue Survey and Assessment of the Deccan', when they turned their attention to the revision of the Goldsmid Settlement in 1867. Like their predecessors, it was to the taluka of Indapur that Francis and Waddington first directed their attention in the hope of devising a scale of assessment which could be extended to other districts after appropriate changes in the light of local variations. The spirit in which they entered upon the revision of the survey was divorced from the doctrinaire predilections which had made the Pringle Survey of 1830 so disastrous an operation. But they did subscribe to the Ricardian view that the extension of cultivation which had taken place under the Goldsmid Settlement indicated a rise in profits of agriculture, and

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Report on the Taluka of Indapur by Col. J. Francis dated 12 February 1867: Selections From The Records of the Bombay Government, New Series, No. CLI. Henceforth referred to as Francis' Report on Indapur.

justified an increase in the rents levied by the State.

With this assumption George Wingate, who along with Goldsmid had laid the foundations of the 'Bombay System of Survey and Assessment', was in complete agreement:

The land assessment...is not a tax at all [stated G. Wingate in a memorandum approving of Francis' Report on Indapur], but a share of the rent which the land yields to its possessors. This share of the land rent has from the dawn of history formed the great fund from which expenses of government in India have been defrayed, and in an agricultural country like India the land must ever remain the great source of taxation from which the expenses of Government will have to be supplied. The government right to increase the land assessment is the property of the public, and forms a sacred trust, which, in my humble opinion, the government is bound to transmit...to its successors unimpaired...<sup>16</sup>

The Ricardian argument for the revision of the Goldsmid Settlement was reinforced by the errors discovered by Francis in the measurement of holdings by the former surveyors. All these errors were not fortuitous. The Goldsmid Survey had concerned itself exclusively with the measurement of the better quality of land, and it did not take into account inferior soils. However, apart from land left deliberately unmeasured, holdings had increased in area because field boundaries had not been erected by the Survey Department till

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Memorandum by Sir G. Wingate (on Francis' Report on Indapur) dated 12 February 1869: Selections From The Records of the Bombay Government, New Series, No. CLI.



a decade after the first Settlement; and during this interval the ryots had taken under cultivation the unclaimed land which surrounded their fields. Thus in the Haveli villages of Baura, Kalas, Shetphal and Nagunda, the ryots had appropriated between 1,500 and 2,000 acres of land of which no account existed in the official survey. The surreptitious extension of their holdings by the ryots obliged Francis to devise a new classification of fields. The need for reclassification became obvious when remeasurement revealed a particular field to be 40 acres in area instead of 30 acres, the figure under the old survey. If the 30 acres formerly taken into account were of medium fertility, and the 10 acres 'added' by the ryot of a poor quality, then the entire field had to be reclassified if its owner was to escape over-assessment.

However, since the revenue system was based on Ricardian principles, the need for a revised scale of assessment existed independently of inaccuracies in the measurement of holdings. There were no intermediate proprietors in the Deccan between the State and the ryots, whose increased rentals could provide Francis with an index of the rise in profits of agriculture over the period of the Goldsmid Settlement. He was therefore obliged to rely on a more fallible criterion in calculating the increase in the net surplus of different

# TABLE A

## FLUCTUATION IN PRICE OF JOWRI IN

INDAPUR DURING 1836 - 1866

YEAR	Price of Jowri (rs. per seer)	YEAR	Price of Jowri	YEAR	Price of Jowri
1836-37	43	1846-47	65	1856-57	32
1837-38	36	1847-48	48	1857-58	39
1838-39	67	1848-49	72	1858-59	32
1839-40	44	1849-50	72	1859-60	39
1840-41	64	1850-51	38	1860-61	33
1841-42	56	1851-52	40	1861-62	27
1842-43	68	1852-53	56	1862-63	16
1843-44	72	1853-54	56	1863-64	13
1844-45	60	1854-55	29	1864-65	16
1845-46	36	1855-56	32	1865-66	18
FIRST DECADE	$56 \frac{1}{2}$	SECOND DECADE	$45 \frac{3}{4}$	THIRD DECADE.	$26 \frac{1}{2}$

soils during the thirty years of the lease. The rise in the price of jowri, the staple crop of the region, during the currency of the Goldsmid Settlement constituted, in the circumstances, the best index on which a revised assessment could be based.

During the first decade of the Goldsmid Settlement (see Table A) the price of jowri fluctuated from 72 seers per rupee in 1843-44 to 36 seers in 1845-46; and the average over the ten years was  $56\frac{1}{2}$  seers. The following decade opened with an unfortunate season, when near famine conditions raised the price of the food-grain to 48 seers. However, in the very next year jowri had plummeted to 72 seers per rupee. A steady increase in price set in after that date, and in 1856-57 the grain was selling at 32 seers, the average for the entire decade being  $45\frac{3}{4}$  seers per rupee. Beginning with a price of 32 seers in the last decade of the lease, jowri did not experience any pronounced fluctuation in the first few years, and till 1861-62 its price remained stable at the figure of 30 seers. But thereafter, the outbreak of the American Civil War caused a sudden dislocation in the economy of the Deccan. The export of raw cotton from the United States to England having ceased abruptly, India was called upon to furnish the supply necessary for the English market. Indapur had not been a cotton growing district

earlier. But as soon as reports of the profits reaped from the cultivation of cotton reached the ryots, they immediately applied themselves to its growth, and by 1867-68 30,000 acres of land had been pressed into the cultivation of cotton. The diversion of such a large area to the cultivation of cotton gave a boost to the price of food crops, and jowri sky-rocketed to twice its normal price, raising the average to 26 seers per rupee in the last decade of the Settlement<sup>17</sup>.

The exceptional circumstances arising out of the American Civil War, Francis argued, could hardly form the basis of a new scale of rates because of the inflationary conditions caused by the sudden, and temporary, demand for cotton. During the thirty years of the Goldsmid Settlement, therefore, the price of jowri in Indapur in effect rose from 66 to 55 seers per rupee. But before this rise could be transformed into an increased rental, Francis had to answer two questions: at what stage during the currency of the Settlement had the ryots accumulated the capital necessary for the efficient cultivation of their fields? and what was the price of grain at this stage?

To answer these questions Francis turned to an appraisal of economic conditions in Indapur during the thirty years of

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<sup>17</sup>

Vide Francis' Report on Indapur.



the Goldsmid Settlement. The introduction of the Goldsmid rates had lowered the rental of the taluka from Rs.203,000 to Rs.89,000. This reduction gave considerable encouragement to cultivation. In the five years following 1836, the area under cultivation increased by 60,000 acres, and there was a proportionate rise in the yield of land revenue. But it soon became obvious that the low rentals had tempted the ryots to spread their resources far too thinly in order to cultivate as large an area as they could secure for themselves. When the inevitable reaction set in, the ryots were not only forced to yield a considerable portion of the land they had taken up, but they were also compelled to seek remissions in land revenue. It was only late in the 1840s that conditions became stable, and from then onwards there was neither any need for large scale remissions in revenue, nor any diminution in the area under cultivation. This favourable trend continued throughout the 1850s, indicating that the conditions of the cultivators had improved to an extent where they could pay their rents in bad as well as in good seasons. Their ability to do so also proved that they had built up a substantial reserve of capital, and could cultivate their land with reasonable efficiency. From this turning point in the state of the Deccan districts in the 1850s, Francis drew the following conclusion:

I think, therefore, we may fairly assume that towards the latter end of the second decennial period (1846-47 to 1855-56) the cultivators had acquired that amount of capital and that well to do position which we could assign to them in the name of profit to be left to them after payment of the government assessment. I am consequently of opinion that we may take the average price of grains during the latter half of the second decennial as the index by which we may estimate from prices what our present assessment ought to be. In other words, the percentage increase which has taken place during the last ten years will represent generally the percentage addition to the present assessment which may now be made.<sup>18</sup>  
(Italics in original)

With the increase in price of grain during the decennial preceding the Civil War as the index on which the rise in assessment was to be based, Francis' task was relatively simple. The average price of jowri during the last five years of the second decennial of the Goldsmid Settlement stood at 42 seers per rupee; the corresponding figure for the decennial ending 1865-66 was 26 seers; a difference of 16 seers in all. 'We may assume, therefore,' Francis stated, 'that between 50 and 60 percent is the addition (calculated solely with reference to the price of grain) which may be made to the present assessment.'<sup>19</sup> The rate at which Goldsmid assessed the best soil in Indapur was 12 annas per acre.

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<sup>18</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>  
Ibid.

Francis raised it to one rupee per acre. This constituted a rise of 33 per cent. The total assessment, however, was raised by 50 per cent, because of the concealed cultivation unearthed by Francis, and all told, the revision of the survey raised the rental of Indapur from Rs.89,000 to Rs.124,700

### The Kunbis' Reaction to the Francis Settlement

When confronted with the high rates imposed by the Pringle Survey in 1830, the ryots of Indapur had forced the Survey Department to reassess the taluka through the simple expedient of migrating in very large numbers to the surrounding districts. The events of the 1830s implied that even though British Survey Officers did not take the peasants into their confidence in making a revenue settlement, the peasants could nevertheless exercise a decisive influence on the pitch of the land-tax. The success of the new rates recommended by Francis, therefore, hinged on their acceptance by the kunbis. However, the timing of a new Settlement was just as crucial an issue as the pitch of the assessment, and the Bombay Government could not have chosen a worst moment for launching a revised Settlement. For by 1870 the stimulus given to the rural economy of the Deccan by the American Civil War had yielded to an acute depression which left the

peasants improverished, and in a discontented state of mind.

The imposition of an additional burden of tax on a peasantry whose economic life had been dislocated by a sudden but only ephemeral demand for a cash crop could hardly evoke a favourable reaction, particularly in view of the effect of the new rates on individual ryots and on specific villages. Francis was aware that while the total rental of Indapur had only been raised by 50 per cent, the increase in rent was as high as 200 per cent in the case of particular villages<sup>20</sup>. What he never bothered to investigate, however, was how individual ryots were affected by the changes he had recommended. The fate of the ryots of the village of Kullum was in this respect typical of the consequences of the new survey. It is clear from the alterations proposed in the rent roll of Kullum that a kunbi like Madoo Mitoo, whose assessment had been increased from Rs.6 to Rs.24 because of the 10 acres of land he had surreptitiously added to his original holding of 20 acres, was bound to become hopelessly indebted under the new Settlement. A similar fate awaited ryots like Madhoo Bawanee and Naroo Rowji, whose

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<sup>20</sup>

Ibid.



assessment had been raised from Rs.7 to Rs.19, and from Rs.12 to Rs.21, respectively<sup>21</sup>.

Yet the mass migration to which the peasants had resorted in 1830 in disapproval of the Pringle rates was no longer possible in 1870 because of the great increase in the population of the Deccan in the intervening period. Apart from demographic pressures, the creation of property rights, and the generation of an acquisitive spirit through the light rates of the Goldsmid Settlement, had tied the ryots to their villages in a way which made it impossible for them to throw up their fields and wander about the countryside in search of more attractive leases. However, the abandonment of their villages was not the only traditional form of peasant protest against arbitrary bureaucratic action. Under the former rulers, the deshmukhs and the territorial families had in comparable situations communicated the grievances of the ryots to the authorities at Poona. While the increase in the power of the bureaucracy under British aegis had virtually shorn the deshmukhs of their status as the patrons of rural society, the traditional leaders still exercised a certain hold over the imagination of the peasants. It was

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BA. Petition from the Ryots of Kullum dated 5 October 1874: R.D., Vol. 96 of 1874.

consequently not surprising that they should have turned to a traditional leader like Gopal Narsingh Deshmukh, who had assumed the new style sobriquet of 'Agent of the Ryots of Indapur', to communicate their grievances over the enhanced rates to the Bombay Government.

The petition presented by Gopal Narsingh Deshmukh on behalf of the ryots of Indapur to the Bombay Government was a remarkable document, both for the values it expressed, and the use it made of a traditional and supposedly defunct institution for communication between the peasants and the State. The petition originated at a meeting held in Indapur in July 1873. This meeting was attended by the more influential cultivators from the villages of the taluka, who had assembled to formulate their grievances for transmission to the British authorities. The appeal drafted at the Indapur meeting was circulated until 2,694 ryots had attached their signatures to it. The peasant origin of the appeal is evident from the old style sentiments and the traditional values which inspired it: a romantic yearning for the past; a refusal to look facts straight in the face; faith in a beneficent ruler, to whom the ryots could appeal against the acts of an unjust bureaucracy; and a belief that the mere

expression of discontent would oblige the government to yield to their demands<sup>22</sup>.

The principal theme hammered home by the Indapur Petition was the tragic contrast between the ryots' affluence under the liberal Goldsmid Settlement, and the abject destitution to which the rates introduced by Francis and Waddington were reducing them. Pringle's attempt in 1830 at settling Indapur had left the taluka desolate; and when the 'popularly beloved Mr. Goldsmid' was appointed to resurvey the taluka, he had realised that the peasants were so poor that only a very light assessment could induce them to recultivate their fields:

A model (sic) survey of the taluka was aimed at, [the ryots pointed out] and such were the settled rates, that after defraying all expenses of cultivation etc., including the assessment, they (i.e. the peasants) received no less than 1/8th of the produce as a reward to the cultivators.

Moreover, an ample provision had been made by these truly circumspect officers for our cattle etc., in excluding all and every sort of waste land, amounting to about 43,000 acres, which had been used by us as grazing lands, but are since the late survey about all assessed along with the cultivable lands proper.<sup>23</sup>

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BA. Petition from the Ryots of Indapur to Bombay Government dated 29 July 1873: R.D., Vol. 96 of 1874.

23

Ibid.

To the ryots of Indapur it appeared as though Francis and Waddington were inspired by motives completely opposed to the generous principles which had guided their predecessors. The new rates of taxation, they observed, were not only too high in themselves, but the inclusion of the former waste land under assessable categories made them positively ruinous. Yet the enhanced scale had been imposed by Francis 'without reflecting for a moment what calamities he was about to bring on the helpless poor...' The effect of an oppressive scale of rates was heightened by the harshness with which the revenue officials enforced the payment of the land-tax. Because of inadequate rain in 1871 and 1872, the yield of agricultural produce had been only 50 to 75 per cent of the normal figure, but when this had been brought to the notice of the Collectors, 'not the slightest notice had been taken of all our cries for exemption from this heavy tax'. Did the Collectors [the ryots posed the rhetorical question] pause to consider the damage they were inflicting by selling landed property worth thousands of rupees for the non-payment of a few beggarly revenue instalments? Did they realise the misery they were imposing on a peasantry impoverished through circumstances completely beyond its control? Faced with the cruel demands of the revenue officers, the ryots were obliged to turn to the moneylenders for assistance in meeting their



obligations. This ensured for them a fate worse than death, for they were reduced to being the bonded slaves of the vanis. 'The monstrosity of our subordinate rulers has been so great that words cannot express them,' the ryots stated in conclusion:

The usurpation of our rights by both the money-lenders and the government together, really brings to our recollection the jolly old times in which our fathers swayed the sceptre in prosperity. It really cuts one to the core to reflect on the past and present conditions; i.e. the freedom and affluence in which our fathers lived and died, and the serfdom in which we are doomed to live and die! From past history it is evident that during the 2,000 years back a great many rulers have been in possession of India; but notwithstanding their great abilities and power, no sooner they manifested a desire for worthless gain...the Almighty God supplanted them by others more human; for God will hear the cries of the afflicted and punish the wicked.<sup>24</sup>

The significance of the Indapur Petition lies in the light it throws on the hold of traditional institutions over rural society, and on the ryots' reaction to the new Settlement. Whether the petition was able to prove the existence of high rates of assessment, which it did not, is irrelevant to either of these considerations. For the ryots' problems stemmed basically from the economic dislocation caused by the American Civil War, and a succession of bad harvests, which

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<sup>24</sup>

Ibid.

had combined to trench into their slender accumulations of capital, and to render their economic condition precarious<sup>25</sup>.

But despite the depression which followed the Civil War, and the run of bad harvests, the grievances expressed in the Indapur Petition were not entirely unrelated to the enhanced rates imposed by Francis. It took, however, civilians like Sir Auckland Colvin, a revenue official who served on the Deccan Riots Commission, and W.H. Havelock, the Commissioner of the Northern Division, to reveal through an objective analysis what a deshmukh playing his traditional role could only express in emotive terms. Colvin questioned from the outset the assumption of increasing rural prosperity which lay behind the enhancement of the rates by Francis. In support of his view that a high assessment had contributed to 'disturb (for the worse) the relation of creditor and debtor in the Poona district', he invoked the Malthusian nightmare which had already cast its shadow over the Deccan. Looking to the rise of population in the four talukas of Haveli, Pabul, Supa and Bhimthari during the thirty years of the Goldsmid Settlement, Colvin observed that while this upsurge had been accompanied by an increase in economic resources, it was 'very

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BA. Petition from the Ryots of Indapur to the Bombay Government dated 15 February 1875: R.D., Vol. 106 of 1875.

TABLE B

TABLE SHOWING EXTENSION OF CULTIVATION IN THREE TALUKAS OF POONA  
COLLECTORATE DURING THE GOLDSMID SETTLEMENT. (Taken from Sir A.  
Colvin's Memorandum on the Deccan Riots dated 8 November, 1875).

		Indapur	Haveli	Pabul
1.	Waste Land at the end of first decennial(acres)	24,550	10,000	18,858
2.	" " " " " " second "	1,300	1,922	18,349
3.	" " " " " " third "	930	634	3,264

significant that the growth in population is out of all proportion to the growth of plough cattle or homes...(It seems) that individual property in stock has declined...'<sup>26</sup> The problem acquired an added intensity if account was taken of the manner in which demographic pressures had forced the ryots to cultivate soils of marginal fertility. The extent to which the waste land was being pressed into cultivation expressed the ryot's dilemma with great clarity and precision (see Table B). For here was evidence beyond refutation that the increase in the area of cultivation had kept pace with the rise of population 'until, generally speaking, the whole available area has been occupied. For further rise of population there is no further margin of waste.'<sup>27</sup>

But the most devastating indictment of the revised rates came from Havelock, who was requested by the Bombay Government to look into a complaint lodged by some villagers from Sholapur that the new rates weighed more heavily on inferior soils than on superior soils. To ascertain the accuracy of this charge, Havelock analysed the effect of the revised rates on a number of villages in Sholapur, of which Alipur in

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Memorandum by A. Colvin dated 8 November 1875: Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, Vol. I.

27

Ibid.



Barsi taluka can be taken as typical. On doing so he discovered that the assessment on soils of the most inferior category in Alipur had been raised by 67 per cent, while medium and superior soils were paying only 18 per cent more than they had paid formerly. The inquiry he had instituted convinced Havelock that

there has been a judicious increase (of rates) in the highest class of lands; but that, notwithstanding a most salutary and well designed reduction in the two lowest classes of the...(Goldsmid) scale, and a slight reduction in the 7th class, the new scale has not suited the special circumstances of the region; that the application of the revised classification at too high a rate on much of the former unculturable land, and on the lower and medium lands, has raised the assessment to be too high on such lands.<sup>28</sup>

To what could the imbalance in the scale of assessment be attributed? Unlike the Pringle survey, the establishment of an efficient survey machinery by 1870 ruled out the possibility of collusion between the rich peasants and the native officials of the revenue department. Havelock consequently traced the high pitch of the new rates to Francis' belief that Goldsmid and Wingate had left a standard proportion of the net surplus of the land to the rich as well as the poor peasant. This belief, he pointed out, was founded

on a misapprehension; because Goldsmid and Wingate had not made any rigorous use of the Ricardian law of rent in devising a scale of assessment for the Deccan. Their rates were based on the pragmatic principle that the poor cultivators deserved a larger share of the net surplus than the more prosperous cultivators. In revising Pringle's rates, which were based on Ricardian criteria, Goldsmid and Wingate had reduced the rent on superior soils by 40 per cent, but the rent on soils of medium and inferior quality had been reduced by 60 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, 'with the entire success which had been recognised at all hands'. Francis had repeated Pringle's error, and had tried to ensure a profit to the cultivator bearing the same proportion of the net produce irrespective of the quality of the soil he cultivated. But a successful scale of rates, Havelock concluded, had to be based on a progressive decrease in the pitch of assessment as it proceeded from the best to the worst soils.

#### The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha's 'no-tax' Campaign

The reasons why the ryots of Indapur opposed the introduction of the Francis rates were pinpointed by Colvin and Havelock with a cogency that completely eluded a traditional leader like Gopal Narsingh Deshmukh. In his failure to build a convincing case against the Francis Survey, the Deshmukh

revealed the inability of the traditional leaders of Maharashtra to channelise rural discontent in any meaningful way in the altered circumstances of British rule. The influence of the traditional landed families had not disappeared by the 1870s. But the gulf in values which lay between them and the new rulers restricted their effectiveness in positions of leadership. Contrast, in this context, the inanity of the Indapur Petition with the powerful case for a revision of the Francis Settlement made by Colvin and Havelock. How much more effective would have been the arguments of a Colvin or a Havelock if they had been put forth by the 'Agent of the Ryots of Indapur'? Could the British authorities have overlooked so forceful an indictment of official policy by a 'natural' leader of the people? And finally, would not a rational belief in the justice of their cause have imparted additional strength to the peasants themselves?

To raise these questions is to focus attention on the need for a new and more effective leadership in the community. In response to this challenge a number of Poona Brahmins founded in 1867 an organisation called the Poona Association. The Poona Association was created with the dual object of educating public opinion on the crucial issues of the day, and of communicating the views of the people to the British

Government. In 1870 the Association was reorganised along more ambitious lines as the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha. The Sabha not only claimed the sympathy of traditional aristocrats like the Pant Pratinidhi of Aundh and the Maharaja of Kohlapur, but it also counted among its members Brahmin intellectuals like Mahadev Govind Ranade, the most sophisticated political thinker of his time in western India, and Ganesh Vasudev Joshi, a liberal, and a leading figure in Poona politics. While the association of the traditional aristocrats gave legitimacy to the Sabha, it was the westernised elite represented by Ranada and Joshi which shaped the style of its political activity. The popular base of the Sabha was provided by 95 representatives from all over Maharashtra who attended the inaugural meeting on 2 April 1870. These representatives had been 'elected' by 'over 6,000 persons, representing all castes, creeds, and interests...' <sup>29</sup> Concurrently with the founding of the Poona branch of the Sabha, a number of affiliated bodies came into existence in the principal towns of Maharashtra such as Satara, Wai, Sholapur, Nasik etc. The object behind the creation of these Sabhas was

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Memorandum on the founding of the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha taken from the unpublished collections of Bombay State Committee for a History of the Freedom Movement in India. Henceforth cited as BSCHFMI.



set out with great clarity in the preamble to the constitution of the Poona branch:

Whereas it has been deemed expedient that there should exist between the government and people some institution in the shape of a mediating body which may afford to the latter facilities for knowing the real intentions and objectives of Government, as also adequate means of securing their rights by making timely representations to government of the real circumstances in which they are placed, an association has been formed and organised with the appellation of Poona Sarvajanik Sabha.<sup>30</sup>

The Sarvajanik Sabha has often been regarded as a body which concerned itself merely with presenting cautiously phrased petitions to the British Government. But its leading members like Ranade and Joshi did not conceive their role in a purely passive light. For they were anxious to establish themselves in the affections of the peasants, and to build a social base for the Sabha in the rural areas. The Sabha resembled a caste organisation to the extent that it provided an institutional framework for the political activities of the elite castes (Chitpavan Brahmins etc.) in the urban areas. But it simultaneously tried to assume the traditional role of the rural aristocracy as a bridge between the peasants and the State. The new elites of the Sabha were not only

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From an article by V.M. Potdar on the history of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in BSCHFMI.

advaitic intellectuals who fashioned their politics in the style of John Stuart Mill. They also stood as 'deshmukhs' defending the interests of their rural clients through invoking Ricardian and Utilitarian theories.

The resettlement of the Deccan by Francis, and the opposition of the kunbis to the enhanced rates of assessment, offered the Sabha a unique opportunity to champion the cause of the peasants and to broaden its social base. Immediately after the introduction of the Francis rates Ranade and Joshi tried to express the peasants' opposition to the new rates, and to secure a diminution in the land-tax, in conscious imitation of the traditional role of the deshmukhs. Their attempt to do so found expression in political activity at two levels: the drawing up of petitions which communicated the grievances of the peasants to the government; and the despatch of trained cadres to the villages in order to acquaint the peasants with the reasons behind their miserable plight. An elite which combined traditional techniques of agitation with a commitment to western political ideals presented a serious threat to British authority, and the significance of this development was not lost on the British Government.

The 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha' on the Francis Settlement, which was

presented to the British Government in 1873, concerned itself with themes identical to those elaborated in the Indapur Petition. But in contrast to the 'romantic' idiom of the Petition, the Report was couched in the rational language of political economy, and a wide gulf separated the arguments which it advanced in substantiation of its charges from the traditional principles on which Gopal Narsingh Deshmukh had based his indictment. Though written contemporaneously, the Petition and the Report stood worlds apart in the intellectual attitudes they represented. They displayed the cleavage in Maharashtra between those who subscribed solely to traditional styles of politics, and the emerging westernised elite which was engaged in the task of securing positions of leadership within the community. There can be no doubt of the greater impact of the agitation of the Sabha on the Government as well as on the rural community. For the leaders of the Sabha combined with a comprehension of the political beliefs of the new rulers the techniques of agitation with which the kunbis were already familiar\*.

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\* I have been unable to trace the Report presented by the Sub-Committee of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha to the Bombay Government. This inadequate precis of the Report is taken from extensive quotations of the same given in a despatch to the Secretary of State by the Bombay Government dated 27 December 1875: R.D., Vol. 44A of 1875.

The rational terms in which the Report spelt out the charge of the impoverishment of the kunbis put the Bombay Government on the defensive, and a searching inquiry was instituted in 1873 into the condition of the Deccan districts of which the Sabha had presented so gloomy a picture. District Officers who were intimately associated with the administration of the rural areas did not reject the Report as a polemical tract devoid of all objectivity. They emphasised, however, that the changed quality of social experience in the villages of the Deccan had to be given the same prominence as the statistical realities of rural life if any balanced assessment of the agrarian situation was to be achieved. Civilians like A. Wingate, the Collector of Satara, argued that adverse pronouncements on rural prosperity mostly stemmed from the changes in expectations, and in social values, which had come about as a consequence of British rule. Under the former rulers the material requirements of the ordinary peasant were extremely modest. '(The)...wants of a man scarcely exceeded those of an animal...(A) few bits of rags, a hut, and a cooking pot or two constituted the family accumulations...' All this was related to the fact that in a community where the means of transport were primitive, and markets undeveloped, the surplus agrarian produce could easily be appropriated by the State and the dominant sections



of rural society. Such conditions in turn produced a peasantry which was **passive** and apathetic, and reconciled to its wretched conditions of existence. The situation had changed dramatically under British rule. A generation of peace and stability, and the introduction of a rational revenue policy, had encouraged acquisition and accumulation and had opened the eyes of the kunbi to a new range of material wants. These influences had also revealed to him how he could satisfy these wants, and in doing so had made him thoroughly disgruntled with his lot. A competitive spirit and a desire for the good life were generating a revolution in the outlook of the peasant:

Western energy [Wingate pointed out] is introducing the element of labour to eastern apathy and with the desire to accumulate comes the necessity to work. People are no longer content with what satisfied them 50 years ago; their own and their neighbours' estimate of the fitness of things has changed...For example, one mamlatdar states that during the decade 1820-30 the ryots' condition was all that could be desired. The crops ripened well, grain was plentiful, and the instalments in kind were easily given. Great men in the State supported numerous retainers, and these in turn supported their families, so that labour was cheap, the necessity for buying little, and so long as the rains fell seasonally, everybody got enough to eat...It is true that there were no shops, no roads, no trade, and little encouragement for labour; no one could afford either to leave his village or to purchase his clothes or ornaments or fair stock. But then... (these things) were not wanted...<sup>31</sup>

The Pax had thus created an undercurrent of discontent among the peasants by generating a desire for a higher standard of life. It had also stimulated the rise of a class of kunbis whose standards of consumption, and whose accumulations of capital, were 'in every way so superior to what the same people were 40 years ago as it is possible to conceive'<sup>32</sup>. In contrast, however, to the prosperity of these rich kunbis stood the poverty of the great majority of the cultivators. This was reflected in the widening gap between the wages of agricultural labourers and the prices of the major food-crops, on the one hand, and the decreasing margins of profit on the inferior soils which were being taken under cultivation through a rise in population, on the other. In Ahmednagar district, for instance, the wage of an agricultural worker had risen from Rs.28 per annum to Rs.60 per annum during the course of the Goldsmid Settlement. Yet this rise did not represent any real gain, since the price of basic food grains like jowri and bajra had risen by 250 and 185 per cent respectively over a corresponding period<sup>33</sup>.

The inquiries instituted in response to the Sabha's Report demolished the picture of increasing rural prosperity

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Ibid.

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BA. H.B. Boswell, Collector of Ahmednagar, to Bombay Government dated 28 August 1874: R.D., Vol. 44B of 1875.

which formed the background to Francis' revision of the Goldsmid Settlement. But while the Sabha had attributed the deterioration in economic conditions to the revenue policy in general, and the Francis' survey in particular, the Bombay Government ascribed it to the population upsurge which followed the British take-over, and to the absence of prudence and thrift among the peasants. In the Government's view, an uncontrolled rise in population in a country which did not have a diversified and an expanding economy could lead to only one result. The rising pressure on the land would oblige the cultivators to take soils of inferior quality under cultivation, and would in the course of time lower the profits of agriculture. 'Some experienced officers under us are already of opinion that the land is less productive now than formerly', the Bombay Government pointed out in a despatch to the Secretary of State of India which rebutted the Sabha's accusations. But there were obvious limitations to what the Government could do in the circumstances. All 'civilised' communities exercised a voluntary restraint on the increase of population. In India the limit was set by famines and epidemics. Marriage was enforced by religious sanctions, and the possession of heirs was the precondition of salvation. Small wonder then that the great bulk of the people lived and multiplied 'with the only check to the rise of population



being starvation and disease'. The persistence of such social beliefs was leading to disastrous consequences, for while

a government can do much to foster the development of the country, it can do little or nothing to enrich such of its subjects as are wanting in thrift or enterprise...(Progress) depends more on the desire of the people to learn than on the capacity of the government to teach, and after all the principal object of government is to afford protection to life and property, and the accumulation of wealth must be left to individual action. It cannot be denied that as regards security of life and property, opportunity of education, etc., there is no comparison between present and former ideas...But still the people are worse off than they were ten or fifteen years ago...<sup>34</sup>

The Sarvajanik Sabha's ability to put the Bombay Government on the defensive indicates how effective the new elite was becoming. The Sabha's success also highlights the impotence of a traditional leader like Gopal Narsingh Deshmukh. But to play the role of a deshmukh to the full, it was essential for the Sabha to secure participation by the peasants in its campaign against the Francis Settlement, not least because the elites who comprised its backbone were urban based and urban oriented, and lacked that intimate connection with the kunbis which lay behind the power and influence of the 'natural' leaders of rural society. In pursuit of this tactic,

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34

BA. Despatch to Secretary of State for India dated 27 December 1875: R.D., Vol. 44A of 1875, Part I.



the Poona Sabha and its branches sent agitators to the villages, to whip up the kunbis' opposition to the rates imposed under the new survey, and to apprise them of the reasons behind their impoverished condition. The Sabha's success in arousing the peasants against the new Settlement was dramatic, and became immediately apparent to the authorities. One Superintendent of the Revenue Survey, for instance, ran into organised opposition the moment he tried to introduce the Francis rates to the ryots of Barsi taluka:

I had scarcely concluded my explanatory remarks [Waddington wrote to Francis] when most of the assembled ryots stood up, refusing to have their 'khata's' examined, and declaring their intention to pay no more assessment than they had hitherto been in the habit of paying. I endeavoured to reason with them and to point out the grounds on which it was but equitable that their payments should be raised; but without success, and so excited and disrespectful was their demeanour that I felt myself bound to report the matter to you for further instructions...I have little doubt that the opposition has been fostered by the Sarvajanic Sabha of Sholapur.<sup>35</sup>

Waddington's experience was not an isolated instance of the Sabha's ability to arouse opposition to the new scale of rates. The revised assessment had been introduced without any trouble in the talukas of Madhe and Sholapur in 1872. But while the ryots had quietly accepted the new rates in the

first instance, they refused to pay the land-tax the moment agitators connected with the Sabha appeared in their midst, and told them that in raising the rental the Survey Department had encroached upon their rights and was depriving them of the fruits of their labour. The Collector of Satara believed that these agitators had urged the cultivators 'to refuse to pay the new assessment, trusting to them, the Surwajanik Sabha (sic), to make it all right for them to do so' 36.

#### The Outbreak of the Deccan Riots

The disaffection aroused by the Sabha's agitation thoroughly alarmed the Bombay authorities, particularly because the depth of this disaffection was obvious from the alarming reports which poured in from one taluka after another of the increasing resistance which the ryots were offering to the payment of the new taxes. It was true that most revenue officers were of the opinion that the ryots' intransigence stemmed from the impoverishment which had overtaken them as a result of a succession of bad harvests. But an inability to pay the rental due to the State was not

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36

BA. Letter from Collector of Sholapur dated 3 December 1873: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874.

the only reason behind the truculence exhibited by the kunbis, as Waddington had discovered to his great surprise while introducing the new rates in Barsi taluka. The high pitch of the Francis rates had led to an alliance between the traditional leaders of rural society and the new elites of the Sabha, and this alliance was an important factor in shaping the peasants' attitude to the new Settlement. Pointing to the active role which a few leading families of the taluka of Bhimthari had played in the Sabha's 'no-tax' campaign, the Collector of Poona observed: 'It may seem strange to connect a general failure in the collection of a whole taluka long under our rule, with the discontent of a few families,...But it must be remembered that these families had considerable influence under the former Government, which still exists to some degree...'<sup>37</sup>

The situation took so serious a turn that in April 1874 Havelock, the Revenue Commissioner, called a meeting of the revenue officials of the affected districts in order to chalk out a course of action that would relieve the tension prevailing in the rural areas. In a letter written to the Collector of Poona on the eve of the conference, Havelock

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BA. Letter from Collector of Poona to Bombay Government dated 14 December 1873: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874.

outlined his views on the problem, and the means he considered expedient for its solution. He was prepared to view with sympathy appeals for reductions in tax from ryots who were unable to pay their rents, but he would not yield an inch to the spirit of opposition fostered by the Sabha and a few disgruntled territorial families<sup>38</sup>. However, the discussions which took place at the conference revealed how difficult it was to arrive at any definite conclusions regarding the peasants' ability (or inability) to pay the enhanced rental. Rao Saheb Balwant Sitaram, the mamlatdar of Bhimthari, felt that the peasants were genuinely unable to pay the new rates, because the opposition 'was as great in the revised villages that had good crops, as in those that had bad crops'. But the mamlatdar was opposed by the Collector of Poona, who held that the opposition sedulously propagated by the Sabha in alliance with the disaffected territorial families had alienated the ryots to such an extent that they were thirsting for a collision with the authorities. The solution suggested by the Collector was of a piece with his prognosis. Once the spirit of the leading families had been broken by the confiscation of

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BA. Letter from H.D. Havelock to the Collector of Poona dated 26 December 1873: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874.



their estates, he pointed out, the peasantry would no longer dare to oppose the revised rates<sup>39</sup>.

But the Bombay Government refused to embark upon a repressive course of action because a deterioration in economic conditions had been brought to light by the inquiries provoked by the Sabha's charges; and because the revised rates had hit the poor cultivators harder than the more prosperous ryots<sup>40</sup>. Instead of accepting the suggestions of the Collector of Poona, the Government extended a series of concessions to the ryots in order to obviate their hostility to the revised rates. It resolved that in no case should the assessment of a taluka or a group of villages be raised by more than 50 per cent; or that of a single village by more than 75 per cent. It also decided that if a cultivator was unable to pay his tax, then the Revenue Department would in the first instance attach his movable property, the ryot's holdings being auctioned only when his movable property proved insufficient to cover the full amount of the tax<sup>41</sup>.

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BA. Letter from Collector of Poona dated 13 May 1874: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874. Also see Minutes of a Departmental Conference held in Poona on 14 April 1874: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874.

<sup>40</sup>

Resolution by Bombay Government dated 29 October 1874: R.D., Vol. 97 of 1874.

<sup>41</sup>

Ibid.

The imposition of a ceiling on the extent to which the assessment could be raised mitigated the ryots' hostility to the authorities and to the Francis Settlement. But the decision to attach the ryots' movable property, if they failed to pay the land-tax, held implications which suddenly intensified the tensions in rural society. It is important to bear in mind that despite the opposition provoked by the Francis Settlement, the disquiet prevailing in the Deccan stemmed basically from the loss of their lands by the kunbis, and the dominance which the vanis had consequently come to acquire over rural society. Undoubtedly the American Civil War and a series of bad harvests had combined to provoke a degree of rural ferment which was unusual. But the most important cleavage in the rural world still flowed from the antagonism between the peasants and the moneylenders. Because of the dependence of the ryots on the vanis for the payment of the land-revenue, the decision to impose a preferential alienability on movable property was a concession which was immediately exploited by the vanis. The vani had hitherto advanced the assessment to the ryot in the knowledge that if the latter defaulted, then the only security which he had to offer, namely, his land, had to be attached by the Revenue Department. Since the government had now declared its intention to alienate the ryot's movable property in the

first instance, the vani did not see any threat to the ryot's land, and refused to advance him the land revenue.

The dormant antagonism between the moneylenders and the cultivators was consequently transformed into open class and caste warfare, and the pressures which had been building up within rural society erupted in the form of a violent conflict between the kunbis and the vanis. It would be misleading to look upon this upheaval as a phenomenon stemming from a single cause. The dislocation of the rural economy by the American Civil War; an ill-conceived Settlement by Francis; the agitation launched by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and backed by the dominant rural families; and finally, the simmering hostility between the kunbis and the vanis, conjoined to contribute to the tension and the social frustration which expressed itself in the riots of 1875. The social complexion of the disturbances was determined by the Government's decision to make the ryots' movable property alienable, which put an abrupt end to financial transactions in rural society; it was also influenced by the fact that the tie between the kunbis and the vanis was the weakest link in the chain which bound different classes and castes in rural society.

In contrast to the opposition to the Francis rates, the Riots of 1875 were spontaneous and did not bear any evidence

of the organisation that had gone into the Sabha's 'no-tax' campaign. Moreover, while the anti-Settlement agitation had revealed the extent to which the old landed families still exercised influence over rural society, the upsurge against the moneylenders brought into sharp focus the fragmentation between the different castes and groups of the village community whose close interdependence was formerly a distinguishing feature of rural life. Thus the Patel had become so closely associated with the administration that he was now incapable of leading the cultivators, and was looked upon by them with suspicion as the member of a hostile institution. Similarly, the partial introduction of the cash nexus, and the spread of an acquisitive spirit, had driven a wedge between the cultivators and the bullotedars which had been absent earlier.

In the initial stages of the upsurge of 1875 the cultivators restricted their action to the imposition of social sanctions against the vanis in an attempt to browbeat them into acquiescence without resorting to violent measures. Their moderation is brought out in a sama patra (bond of agreement) executed by the ryots of Kallas in Indapur, which illustrates at the same time the fragmentation that had come about along caste and functional lines in the village at this juncture. The main fire of the sama patra was directed



against the moneylenders, since it pointed out that any kunbi cultivating the field of a vani

will neither be allowed to come to caste dinners nor intermarry amongst his own society. Such person will be considered outcaste. He will not be allowed to join the community without their unanimous consent, and will have to pay the fine which the community may inflict on him, and further to give one meal to the community.<sup>42</sup>

But there were many indications of the lack of co-operation, if not actual friction, between the kunbis who were the driving force behind the anti-vani upsurge, and the village officers and the bullotedars. The latter were threatened with the termination of their customary dues if they did not join the rest of the village in the boycott of the vanis; and the Patel, instead of leading the kunbis to whom he was related by bonds of class and caste, had to be warned that 'if he joins the moneylending people, his hereditary rights will be discontinued...'

Coercion of the vanis along the lines adumbrated by the ryots of Kallas soon spread extensively to the villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Sholapur and Satara. In the absence of any centralised control, it is difficult to trace the lines along which the movement gained momentum. But a letter

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42

Substance of a Sama Patra by the Villagers of Kallas in the taluka of Indapur dated 7 May 1875: Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, Vol. II.

written by the ryots of Kallas to the neighbouring 'Village Community of Akola' gives an indication of the mechanism responsible for the spread of the anti-vani agitation.

Rebuking the ryots of Akola for their apparent refusal to co-operate with their caste-fellows in other villages, the cultivators of Kallas asserted in their letter:

It is very wrong of your people to keep communication with the marwaris whom we excluded from the community of this village. Unanimity is very important at this time. You will perhaps know this if you give the subject mature consideration, and we therefore refrain from making further remarks about the matter.<sup>43</sup>

They proceeded to appeal to Akola in the name of the traditional ties binding the two villages ('We have always regarded Kallas and Akola one'); they asked them to send two responsible elders to thrash out the issue at a meeting; and they concluded with a renewed plea for unity at so critical a period: 'We shall be helpless', they said, 'should you take no measure to (prevent co-operation with the moneylenders)... For the good of all of us it is necessary that we should co-operate with each other.'

The widespread adoption of social sanctions against the moneylenders created so tense a situation in the Deccan that

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Letter from the Villagers of Kallas to the Villagers of Akola dated 15 May 1875: Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, Vol. II.

a violent clash between the kunbis and the vanis became inevitable. The first outbreak occurred at Supa, a largish village in Bhimthari taluka, on 12 May 1875. The victims of the ryots were the vanis, of whom there were a goodly number in Supa. Their houses and shops were stripped of everything which the rioters could find, and then burnt, but no violence to any person was committed. Within 24 hours of the outbreak at Supa, the leading marwari of Khairgaon, a village 14 miles away, had his residence burnt. In the following days riots occurred in four other villages of Bhimthari, and threatened in 17 more. The contagion then spread to the talukas of Indapur and Purandhar. Outside Poona district, the disturbances were concentrated in the talukas of Parner, Shrigonda, Nagar and Kargat in the Collectorate of Ahmadnagar. The riot at Supa was singular in the wholesale destruction of property; and that at Damareh in the murderous assault on a vani. In a few other cases the ryots threatened the vanis with violence. But on the whole the disturbances were associated with little violent crime. The object of the rioting cultivators was to obtain and destroy the bonds and decrees in possession of the money-lenders. Where these were given up without any resistance, no bodily harm was done; but if the marwaris refused to yield the legal documents in their possession, violence was used

to intimidate them. Fortunately, only in a few cases were the kunbis forced to resort to extreme measures, and the 'non-violent' character of their proceedings impressed itself forcibly on the Commission investigating the disturbances:

In reviewing the character of the disturbances generally [ran the report of the Commission] the most remarkable feature presented is the small amount of serious crime. A movement which was a direct appeal to physical force was over a large area usually restrained within the limits of a mere demonstration; the moderation is in some measure to be attributed to the nature of the movement itself. It was not so much a rebellion against the oppressor, as an attempt to accomplish a very definite and practical object, namely, the disarming of the enemy by taking his weapons (bonds and accounts), and for that purpose mere demonstration of force was usually enough.<sup>44</sup>

The unique features of the Deccan Riots of 1875 were a reflection of the tensions generated within rural society through the legal and administrative reforms carried out by the British Government. Before 1818, rural society in the Deccan was characterised by an intimate interdependence between the different caste and functional groups which went into the making of a village. The dominance of the ryots, a feature which found expression in the power and influence of the Patel, created the consensus which held these groups together. It was also responsible for generating a social



climate in which collective action rather than individual endeavour formed the basis of the social order. All this was transformed under the impact of Utilitarian policies which tried to mould rural life along individualistic and acquisitive lines. The key-note to the resulting changes in Maharashtrian society was provided by the increasing dominance of the vanis, and the growing antagonism between the latter and the ryots.

The tension between the vani and the kunbi was not the only line of cleavage within the village, but it was the relationship which displayed the maximum antagonism in rural society. The climate of individualism and acquisitiveness encouraged by Utilitarian measures of reform undermined the collective structure of the village and split it into discrete functional groups: alienating the Patel from the kunbis through stripping him of his traditional authority; setting the bullotedars against the ryots through introducing them to the notion of a cash nexus; and transforming the harmonious relationship between the vani and the kunbi into one of conflict by the introduction of new legal principles and the creation of new judicial institutions. To an extent these changes were calculatedly fostered by the advocates of reform in the fond hope that the breakdown of the village community would set in motion a revolution in rural society. But the

caste styles which fashioned the pattern of rural life stood in the way of the transformations which the Utilitarians regarded as politically expedient and socially desirable. The caste values of the marwaris, for instance, prevented them from becoming capitalist farmers even after they had acquired large holdings of agricultural land. Instead, they preferred to lease their estates at rack rents to the former proprietors. The marwaris thereby generated a climate of conflict and strife which had been absent earlier, and which could have been avoided if they had taken to farming on capitalist lines.

The basic cause of the Deccan Riots of 1875 thus lay in the social frustration generated through the growing antagonism between the cultivators and the moneylenders. Other factors which contributed to the upheaval were the demographic pressures created through the peace and stability flowing out of British rule; the depression following the all too brief stimulus provided by the American Civil War; the impolitic revisions of the Goldsmid Settlement by Francis; the alliance of the new elites with the traditional leaders of rural society against the new rates of assessment; and, last but not the least, the increasing fragmentation of what was before 1818 a cohesive village community. Once tensions within the village had touched the level of explosive

intensity, the breakdown of rural consensus came along the axis of maximum antagonism, namely, that between the kunbi and the yani. Behind the changes responsible for this outbreak lay the ideals of the Utilitarian reformers. Their vision of Maharashtra was shattered beyond hope of repair by the Agrarian Riots of 1875.

## CHAPTER V

### RECONSIDERATIONS AND REAPPRAISALS

The Agrarian Riots of 1875 revealed the bankruptcy of the Utilitarian programme of reform for Maharashtra. The lynch-pin of Utilitarian policy was the ryotwari system of land revenue, which was introduced to undermine the collective quality of life in rural society, and to substitute in its place a competitive social environment. The Utilitarian reformers wanted to liberate the kunbis from their obligations to the jatha and the village community, and to create the conditions for the rise of an affluent peasantry whose acquisitive instinct would form the basis for economic progress in rural society and establish a stable social order. But their disregard of prevailing social values, and their lack of concern for Maratha institutions and the structure of power in the village, led to consequences which defeated the very objectives they had in view. The breakdown of traditional rural institutions, and the introduction of a rational revenue system, did to a limited extent promote the rise of an affluent class of ryots. But these ryots were completely



eclipsed by the growing dominance of the vani castes, and the simultaneous decline of the landed families whose power and prestige had formerly been the mainstay of the rural social order.

The implications of the rise of the vani castes had been recognised long before growing tensions within the village erupted in the disturbances of 1875. But so stultifying was the influence of Utilitarian values and laissez-faire preconceptions on British administrators in India, that no steps were taken to ward off the possible dangers which loomed ahead. The inertia which characterised responsible administrators in the face of a problem that was bound to grow in complexity with the passage of time is reflected in the debate provoked by the representation of the ryots of Thana in 1840 which set out the dangerous proportions assumed by the power and influence of the vanis over rural society. When the disturbing picture set out in the ryots' representation was confirmed by its District Officers, the Bombay Government raised the question whether the concepts of legal responsibility which guided the British judicial system did not require modification in view of their adverse effect on the distribution of power within the village. But so strong was the belief in the virtues of free enterprise, and so deep the attachment to the notion of a free economy, that even

while acknowledging the magnitude of the evil, a civilian like J. Vibart, the Revenue Commissioner of the Southern Division, felt that 'however injurious, in some respects, the perfectly free traffic in money may be to the advancing prosperity of the country, any interference on the part of the government, in the way of limiting the legal rate of interest ...would be of doubtful tendency; and possibly lead to greater extortion on the part of the moneylenders...'<sup>1</sup> While Vibart acknowledged the parasitic role of the vani, some administrators viewed any attempt to curb the vani as impolitic and looked upon his role as worthy of support and encouragement:

The moneylenders [the Collector of Surat pointed out] have already sustained a severe injury to their trade by the introduction of one universal currency and, in our zeal to protect the poorer classes, we should not forget the policy of conciliating an industrious and very influential tribe, one of the few who are still attached by interest and inclination to our supremacy in India. These people might be seriously injured, and entirely alienated from us, by precipitate legislation on the subject under review, while our revenue might be imperilled by a stoppage of customary advances, and the ryots themselves disturbed by the very means taken to benefit them.<sup>2</sup>

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BA (Bombay State Archives). J. Vibart, Revenue Commissioner of the Southern Division to the Bombay Government dated 28 February 1840: R.D. (Revenue Department), Vol. 1664 of 1844.

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BA. Letter from the Collector of Surat to J. Vibart dated 29 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

However, executive officers who had first hand experience of the social consequences of the dominance of the vani castes were convinced of the irrelevance of laissez-faire concepts to the problems of rural social organisation in Maharashtra. The growing dissatisfaction of such administrators with the doctrinaire approach of their superiors was expressed by Bartle Frere, when as a junior official in the Poona Collectorate in the 1840s he pressed for bold governmental action to remedy the serious turn the situation had taken in the Deccan districts. Frere traced the ryots' difficulties to the principles enshrined in Regulation V of the Elphinstone Code of 1827, according to which loan transactions between the vanis and the kunbis were governed by rates of interest regulated by a free market economy. He conceded that in a commercially developed country like England there was a lot to be said for the removal of restraints on the free movement of money. But in the Deccan 'where the population are mostly needy, thoughtless and ignorant, and the Banians enjoy a monopoly of the money market, unrestricted license...(is highly undesirable)...'<sup>3</sup> Even a casual acquaintance with conditions in the villages, Frere pointed out

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BA. Letter from Bartle Frere to P. Stewart, Collector of Poona, dated 2 July 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

revealed the irrelevance of arguments in favour of a free market economy. The ryots were supposedly free to deal with a vani of their choosing; but in practice they were completely dependent upon the vani of the village, and looked upon him as a 'wuttundar, and it would require an entire change in the constitution of the ryots to get them to seek pecuniary aid elsewhere'<sup>4</sup>.

The conditions prevailing in the rural areas led Frere to suggest the determination of an official rate of interest to check the widespread practice of usury by the vanis. But while there existed considerable agreement with his prognosis of the rural situation, opinion was divided on the possible effects of an artificial restraint on the rate of interest. The Collector of Poona, for instance, was in sympathy with the reasons that had encouraged Frere to suggest the adoption of so drastic a step. But he apprehended that any attempt to lower the rate of interest would have the reverse effect. It would encourage the vani to enforce even higher rates of interest than before in order to compensate himself in advance against the risks involved in the evasion of the law, and it

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Ibid. For a similar viewpoint see letter from the Collector of Sholapur to the Revenue Commissioner dated 9 October 1840: R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.



would lead him to charge high premiums for the loans he advanced to the cultivators<sup>5</sup>. The difficulties involved in enforcing an official rate of interest thus made some administrators chary of legislative interference in the operations of the money market, and turned their attention to more subtle means for supporting the ryots. Vibart, for instance, thought that the ryots would benefit enormously if all debt bonds had to be registered before they could be regarded as legally valid<sup>6</sup>. The registration of bonds, he pointed out, would impress upon the cultivators the precise conditions under which they were contracting a loan. It would also prevent the evasion by the vanis of the principle of dam dupat, which was rigorously enforced by the new Courts of Law, and according to which interest on a loan could not exceed the principal. The vanis circumvented dam dupat by forcing the ryots to sign fresh bonds every two or three years for sums made up of the principal and the interest. A system of compulsory registration would make such evasion impossible by exposing the succession of bonds through which the vani dragged his helpless client.

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BA. Letter from the Collector of Poona to J. Vibart dated 20 July 1840; R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

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BA. J. Vibart to the Bombay Government dated 28 February 1840; R.D., Vol. 1664 of 1844.

The legislative remedies suggested by Frere and Vibart were not without their merits. But they did not penetrate very far beyond the surface of the rural problem. For while the principles guiding the British Courts of Law were in no small measure responsible for the growing dominance of the vanis, the crux of the problem revolved around the ryot's need for credit to carry out his agricultural operations, and the antagonism between the kunbi and the vani created through the institution of the ryotwari system. Formerly, when the payment of the rental was the joint responsibility of the entire village, the village community had ~~borrowed~~ money from the urban sowcar to fulfil its revenue obligations to the State. But through establishing individual responsibility for the land-tax, the ryotwari system directed the flow of capital to the cultivator through the village vani, instead of the village community. It thus created a relationship of tension between the ryot and the moneylender in a situation in which all the trumps lay in the moneylender's hands. To reinforce the position of the ryot it was necessary to provide him with an alternative source of credit that would reduce his dependence upon the vani. It was with this object in view that P. Stewart, the Collector of Poona, suggested the establishment of banking institutions similar to the Montes de Piete of western Europe. Such institutions,

Stewart held, would 'protect the helpless and needy (peasants) from being plundered by irresponsible persons...like the village banians...' They could, under official patronage, go a long way towards undermining the vani's grip over the rural classes. But Stewart's proposal was rejected out of hand by Vibart, who felt that the State was under no obligation to assume the responsibilities of a sowcar in relation to the cultivating classes.

A proposal which resembled the one made by Stewart, but stemmed from a more sensitive appreciation of the distribution of power in the rural communities came from H.E. Jacomb, a junior civilian in the Ahmednagar Collectorate. Proceeding at the very outset to the crux of the problem, Jacomb pointed out that in order to restore the cultivating classes to their former position in rural society it was essential to 'counterpoise the baneful influence of the village sowkars, and...(to inculcate) habits of thrift and carefulness among the rural population...'<sup>7</sup> But before any steps could be taken in such a direction it was necessary to grasp the basis of the vani's dominance over rural society.

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Letter from H.E. Jacomb, Assistant Collector of Ahmednagar to C.E. Fraser-Tytler, Collector of Ahmednagar dated 6 December 1858: Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, Vol. II, Appendix A, (Bombay 1876). This Report is henceforth referred to as DRC.

British rule had conferred a great boon on the ryot through awarding him property rights in the soil. Yet the expectations with which this step had been taken were not realised. Instead of making rapid progress, the ryot had sunk more and more into a state of impoverishment. This had come about because of his abject poverty, which prevented him from developing his land, and induced in him an apathy that was fatal to all notions of progress and social mobility. The ryots' poverty could in turn be attributed to debts contracted for the payment of the land revenue, and debts arising out of caste and other social obligations. Between his meagre capital resources and an accumulated burden of debt, the ryot was trapped in a vicious circle from which escape was difficult, if not impossible. But one method, Jacomb pointed out

by which the incubus of debt may be gradually but surely overcome (is) by endeavouring to raise small capitalists to act as a check on the listless sole possessor of money (the vani) in a village, and by which the great moral lessons of thrift and carefulness may be instilled, fostered, and nurtured, by the force of example in the minds of the native agricultural population. Could these debts be swept away or even modified, the ryots saved from their deteriorating influence, would be free and most probably willing to expend his energies, both in capital and labour, on the land so firmly guaranteed to him.<sup>8</sup>



The absence of an affluent class of ryots could be a formidable obstacle in the realisation of Jacomb's scheme. But surely, he argued, there existed in most villages in the Deccan a group of cultivators who could be persuaded to save small sums of money for the establishment of credit institutions like the English Savings Bank. The capital so accumulated, and controlled, by the ryots could be used to meet the credit requirements of the poor peasants. The establishment of Savings Banks would undermine the insidious influence of the vanis and would create an atmosphere free from social bitterness in the village:

In endeavours to improve the social system of the millions of our subjects [Jacomb stated] it is only by small commencements and by striking directly at the root of an evil that we can hope to succeed. It is in the aggregate of useful institutions that a good social system exists. But the aggregate can only be attained by careful and well considered atoms. The mechanist must bestow equal care and attention on the details as on the undertaking itself. The strategist must attend to individual training ere he can consider his organisation complete. So with Indian society the details of the system must be remodelled, if we look for collective improvement.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Rational Conservatism of Sir Henry Maine

Jacomb's proposal for the creation of credit institutions controlled by the cultivators reveals his awareness of

the imbalance that had crept into the distribution of power in rural society as a result of the introduction of Utilitarian measures of reform. But even in attacking specific aspects of Utilitarian policy, he fully shared the atomistic approach to social phenomena which characterised reformers like Pringle. Because they shared the basic values of the advocates of reform, critics of Utilitarian policies in the 1840s and 1850s failed to carry any conviction with the higher authorities, despite the fact that their analyses, and the remedies which they proposed, were most relevant to the problem confronting the British administration in Maharashtra.

What was required then was a new vision of society, and a new conception of the institutions and legislative measures necessary for the realisation of this vision. The accepted philosophy of social action was a creed proceeding from Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Conceived at a time when mercantilist ideas stood in the way of free commercial intercourse between the nations of Europe, and out-dated feudal laws inhibited the growth of industrial societies, Utilitarianism 'had been a corrosive solvent of everything that clogged the free play of individual activity'<sup>10</sup>. It condemned State

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Sir Ernest Baker, Political Thought in England 1845 to 1914, (Oxford, 1947), p. 3.

interference in the name of social and economic liberty; but unfortunately, it continued to condemn such interference even when condemnation could only serve the cause of social oppression. When applied to Maharashtra, liberty for the vani and the sowcar did not necessarily mean liberty for the ryot. Actually, it meant the reverse. There was consequently a pressing need for a change in the premises of social action; a change which was essential if social improvement was not to be frustrated by an intellectual system whose founders had been unequivocally committed to the cause of progress and prosperity.

Utilitarian reformers of the second generation were not blind to the adverse consequences flowing from the application of Utilitarian notions of law and government to the problems of social organisation. It was precisely such a realisation which prompted John Stuart Mill, described as 'one of the finest minds and most generous natures of the nineteenth century',<sup>11</sup> to modify the ideas which the advocates of reform had inherited from Smith and Bentham and the elder Mill. In his essay On Liberty, J.S. Mill expressed a more sophisticated interpretation of the concept of liberty. From the notion of liberty as freedom from external restraint, Mill came to

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<sup>11</sup>

Ibid., p. 3.

the definition of liberty as free play for that intellectual originality which could alone form the basis of a progressive society. Similarly, in his essay On Representative Government, he conferred a new dimension on the Benthamite concept of democracy. Instead of regarding popular self-government as freedom for the people to pursue their self-interest at the expense of organised social groups, he conceived representative institutions as the necessary condition of that individual energy of mind and character which had to be stimulated in all directions, and which could be stimulated only if the area of individual thought and will was extended to include the affairs of the whole community<sup>12</sup>.

While the modified Utilitarianism of J.S. Mill provided some answers, inadequate though they may have been, to the problems of an industrial society, the position was quite different so far as the British possessions in India were concerned. In India Utilitarianism exposed only its most vulnerable flanks. Utilitarian reformers lacked a sense of historical perspective, and they were ignorant of social evolution as a phenomenon with a rationale peculiarly its own. These two factors combined to invest the school of reform

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R.P. Anschutz, The Philosophy of J.S. Mill, (xford, 1953), Chapters II and III, passim.



with an insensitivity towards prevailing social values, and a facile optimism concerning the pace at which legislative measures could change deeply ingrained habits of thought and action. The shortcomings of the Utilitarian approach are clearly reflected in the failure to transform the kunbi into an acquisitive peasant who would exploit the opportunities offered by the ryotwari system to build for himself a position of increasing economic prosperity.

In view of the consequences of the application of Utilitarian ideas to India, it was appropriate for one of the most significant anti-Utilitarian currents to be associated with a political thinker whose Indian career exercised a decisive influence on his intellectual development. Conceived as a conservative reaction to the Benthamite calculus of utility, and the doctrine of natural rights propounded by the radical thinkers associated with the French Revolution, Sir Henry Maine's School of Historical Jurisprudence drew heavily on British experience in India in defining the place of tradition and prescription in progress and social evolution. Intellectually, Maine was eclectic. But he wove different intellectual strands into a fabric that bore the unmistakable stamp of his genius. Darwin's Origin of Species preceded Ancient Law by two years, and it introduced Maine to social evolution, and to the scientific method which distinguished

his rational conservatism from Burke's notion of the social order. Maine's approach to social phenomena was inductive and rested on generalisations based on the observation of facts. In an address before the students of Calcutta University he outlined his approach in terms which marked him out as a thinker typical of his scientific age:

There can [Maine pointed out] be no essential difference between the truths of of the Astronomer, of the Physiologist, and of the Historian. The great principle which underlies all knowledge of the Physical World, that Nature is ever consistent with herself, must also be true of Human Nature and Human Society which is made up of Human Nature...If indeed History be true, it must teach what every other science teaches, continuous sequence, inflexible order, and eternal law.<sup>13</sup>

But the most important influence on Maine was the Historical School of Eichhorn and Savigny in Germany, which set out to demolish social theories drawing their inspiration from 'natural laws' like Rosseau's general will, or Bentham's principle of utility. Abandoning a priori assumptions of the first causes of human society, the historical school entered upon a scientific criticism of social phenomena in the light of the historical data of law. It analysed society in terms of its changing legal structure, using a method that was

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H. Maine, Village Communities in the East and the West, (New York, 1876), p. 230. For an excellent exposition of Maine's ideas see P. Vinogradoff, The Teachings of Sir Henry Maine, (London, 1904).

historical, in that it was based on data arranged in chronological sequence, and comparative, in that it relied on induction from the condition of different societies in comparable stages of growth.

The chief value of Maine's approach to social phenomena lay in his firm grasp of the idea of evolution, and of the relativity of values and social institutions. The insight which his method provided into the social process is illustrated by the analysis of rural society in India by Maine's most distinguished Anglo-Indian disciple, Sir Raymond West, a judge of the Bombay High Court. In a polemical tract entitled Land and the Law in India which appeared in 1873, West hit upon the key Utilitarian weakness when he accused the reforming administrators of disregarding the quality of social experience which prevailed in India, and of assuming that the mere application of advanced notions of law and government would suddenly transform the habits of thought and action which influenced rural society. Progress was an orderly process which could not be quickened by the adoption of ideas in advance of the stage of development in which a society existed. Progress possessed a logic peculiarly its own:

History teaches us [West pontificated] that in all nations growing up in a process of spontaneous development, a change of institutions follows



regularly on a change in the dominant ideas of the people. In this way the new blends itself imperceptibly with the old, and the law is the mirror of the various aims and needs that it has to satisfy. Thus healthily evaluated, it rests healthily on the tendencies from which it has sprung, and affords at each stage a fresh starting point for some new advance of the ethical or political standard. Without saying that such a course as this is possible in India under British rule, one may yet say that the circumstances which make it difficult or impossible ought to be profoundly studied; that the results should greatly control our application to this country of abstract theories or empirical laws gathered in a wholly different field; and that as our institutions are the out-growth of special character, we should, before introducing any one of them...draw the popular mind in some measure within our own sphere of thought in that particular subject. No polity can be enduring which does not find room under it for the national virtues and defects; and while we are striving to improve the moral and intellectual tone of the Hindus by the influence of new and wholesome ideas, we ought in some things to wait patiently for their fruition. If our superciliousness prevents our doing this, we may often place ourselves on some mechanical success while we may in truth have been sowing the seeds of political disaster and of a dissolution of society.<sup>14</sup>

Here then was the crux of the imperial dilemma as seen through the eyes of a conservative deeply influenced by the scientific spirit of the age. To every stage of social development, ran West's argument, there corresponded a set of social values and political institutions, and between the two

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Sir Raymond West on Land And The Law in India, (Bombay, 1872): Selections from Papers on Indebtedness and Land Transfers, Vol. I.



there existed a definite and indissoluble relationship. Imperialism embodied the political control of an under-developed society by an evolved society. In governing the subject people the imperial administrator was often guided by his own advanced notions of law and government, and in attempting to apply these advanced notions to the subject society, he created difficult problems for himself. However, the very concepts of progress and order which made West critical of the Utilitarian approach to reform, also pointed out to him the changes which British rule could bring about in India without risking social disintegration or political chaos. The reason behind the tension generated in rural society was the application of sophisticated concepts of contract and legal responsibility to the problems of rural social organisation. The solution lay in a redefinition of these notions in conformity with the values with which the peasants of India were familiar.

In defining the extent to which the State could regulate private property, or enforce legal obligations, West was drawn into an historical enquiry concerning the development of property rights in India. Premising himself on Maine's investigations into the interaction between religious ideas and social structure in classical Europe, he pointed out that the growth of the State's interest in the life and property

of its citizens was closely connected with the development of religious values. In primitive societies the family first expanded into the clan; then the clan became a tribe; and finally the tribe was transformed into a nation. The primitive State flourished under the protection of a deity propitious to its founder; and this deity had to be subdued before a new conqueror could establish himself over the political community. By the same logic, the reigning deity was worshipped by the national community which collectively owned the agricultural land lying within the State's frontiers. The citizens comprising this community had to support the State by contributions from their agricultural produce, and this was an obligation from which no one could escape. 'A Roman proprietor could be fined for negligence in the cultivation of his own fields, as under the Hindu system he might have to make good ten-fold the loss occasioned by similar carelessness. The numerous agrarian laws were repeated assertions of the State's permanent title to the soil...'<sup>15</sup>

Till a certain stage, according to West, the notion of the State's permanent title to the soil developed along parallel lines in the entire 'Aryan' world, whether it be Hindu India, or the Europe of classical antiquity. But with

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Ibid.

the emergence of caste as a social institution, and the spread of Brahmanical values, India entered upon a course of evolution peculiarly her own. The growth of an hereditary priesthood stripped the ruling chiefs of their jurisdiction over the sacred world, and the Brahmin priests, on their part, never attempted to usurp the secular functions of the chiefs. Memories of the chief's priestly character were erased by the Brahmanical intelligentsia, though his political power was exalted in the most extravagant terms. As a result the notion of challenging the secular authority, and rejecting its pretensions to the ownership of land, never occurred to the Indian peasant, as it did to his Greek or Roman counterpart. Hence the idea came down to modern times that the land was held by a powerful ruler or conqueror, and not by the tiller of the soil. Of course, Hindu lawgivers saw no inconsistency between such a view and the assertion that the cultivator held an inalienable though subordinate usufructory right in the land. According to one classical authority (Yajnavalkya) 'the cultivator is not destitute of ownership, (but) his ownership is a qualified one, and, being subordinate to that of the king, cannot be transferred without his consent...'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>
Ibid.

With the State's right over the soil resting on such firm prescriptive grounds, West elaborated his thesis, the extent to which it was desirable to prevent free transfers of land had to be determined exclusively on grounds of political expediency. Further, the ordinary kunbis, who were weighed down by a heavy burden of debt, had to be considered separately from the landed families which were losing their dominance to a nouveau riche marwari caste. Just as the State possessed a prescriptive and inalienable property right in the land, similarly, rural sentiment had been traditionally opposed to 'the severance of the family from the family estate...'. British rule had introduced the idea of free contract, which was a progressive notion. But it was completely out of tune with the state of Hindu society, and had resulted in the transfer of agricultural land to the vanis on an unprecedented scale. The notion of free contract had thus enhanced the vani's ability to dominate rural society, and it was necessary to exercise a check on his power through legislative action.

Quite different, and more frankly conservative, were the considerations which West brought to bear on the problem of the decaying territorial families whose domination had formerly been the mainstay of the rural social order. He conceded that an effete aristocracy incapable of looking after its interests deserved to be replaced by men of initiative



and resources. It was a law of nature that the weak and the incompetent should go to the wall. However, the social cleavages which characterised Hindu society, and determined the values of different social groups, could be overlooked only at the cost of social chaos. It would be equally disastrous to lose sight of the ultimate objectives of British rule in India:

This continued disappearance [West observed] of families, either of old repute, or just as their hours are mellowing by time, must be of the most serious import. India, which we are striving to make a political community, has no political nationality, no historical consciousness greatly diffused, out of which a true nationality can be developed to give force and impulse to its future. Families of distinguished social position, impelled to a certain loftiness of feeling by the pride of ancestry, and acting on hereditary principles of political conduct, are virtually indispensable in such a community. In this, and in this alone, the sense of public honour maintains its existence. They use without effort an habitual power of command; and form a nucleus of organisations in the midst of what is else a mere chaotic mass of human atoms tending to no common centre as they are drawn by no common force.<sup>17</sup>

The rational conservatism which West applied to problems that had defied the ingenuity of an entire generation of Utilitarian administrators created a climate that was favourable to legislative reform seeking to protect the cultivator's interests. It simultaneously enabled British civilians to

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Ibid.

escape the grip of concepts which restricted their freedom of action, and prevented them from examining administrative and political problems on their merits. Perhaps the best example of the stultifying influence of Utilitarian ideas was the Ricardian doctrine of land rent, which tied up property rights with the 'net surplus' yielded by the land. This doctrine enabled revenue officers like Pringle and Francis to present high assessments as generous on the specious plea that the State had created property rights for the ryot which he had never enjoyed before through leaving him a portion of the rent over and above the normal returns of capital.

When confronted with the disastrous consequences flowing from the application of Ricardian principles to land revenue administration, a Utilitarian like J.S. Mill raised doubts regarding the relevance of the law of rent to India. The Indian ryot, he argued in his Principles of Political Economy, was neither a wage labourer nor a capitalist farmer. Instead, he was a peasant earning his subsistence from the soil by his own labour and capital. For this reason his rent did not follow the ordinary workings of economic law, but was determined by the relation between population and land, rather than the proportion between population and capital. A farmer working on capitalist lines paid in rent only what he was able to produce over and above the prevailing rate of profit.

But the Indian ryot was forced to cultivate the land as the only means of livelihood open to him, and could be bullied into paying a rent which absorbed all the profit except the minimum necessary for his subsistence<sup>18</sup>. Yet if J.S. Mill appreciated the dangers of a doctrinaire approach, he still viewed the problem from an exclusively economic standpoint, and extended strong support to a land revenue policy based on Ricardian principles<sup>19</sup>. For this reason, West's analysis of the concepts of Land And The Law In India, which related property rights and the State's competence to enforce legal obligations to a broad range of social and political issues, introduced a breath of fresh air in an environment which had for long been subject to the stultifying influence of laissez-faire preconceptions. Maine's ideas did not make any converts in the dramatic fashion of philosophical radicalism a generation earlier. But it succeeded in focussing attention on the relativity of social values and institutions, and encouraged a catholic approach to the problems of social organisation and political authority on the part of British administrators. Without ceasing to be Utilitarians, and without

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<sup>18</sup>

J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, (London, 1909), pp. 318-28.

<sup>19</sup>

E. Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India, (Oxford, 1959), pp. 156-237.



substituting belief in laissez-faire values for active State interventionism, British administrators were henceforth to exhibit a new awareness of the complexity of problems which they had hitherto attempted to resolve on rigid doctrinal grounds.

### The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act

Maine's rational conservatism not only inspired the debate initiated by West, but it also defined the scope of the remedial legislation enacted to restore that balance in rural society which had been undermined by the advocates of reform. Casting his eye in the 1870s over the changes which had come over Maharashtra under British rule, W.G. Pedder, the Secretary to the Bombay Government, pointed to the decline of the landed aristocracy as the most significant transformation of all. Given the social mobility which characterised society in the West, such a change would have proved advantageous. For it would have been accompanied by the flow of new capital to the rural areas, and the exploitation of rational techniques of agriculture by a new and enterprising class of capitalist farmers. But in India it was not so:

The landowner [Pedder pointed out] who had lost his estate sinks into abject poverty, embittered by the memory of the position he has lost, and, if a man of energy or influence, becomes politically dangerous...The moneylender, on the other hand, who acquires the estate, though he likes the possession



of land well enough, has no idea beyond that of getting all he can out of it, and would shrink with horror from the notion of leaving the town life, the security of his caste-fellows, the business, habits, and the petty gains to which he is accustomed in order to reside in solitary dignity in a remote village.<sup>20</sup>

It was, however, the indebtedness of the ordinary ryot rather than the decline of the landowning aristocracy which aroused acute concern in official circles. This was because few administrators in the Deccan subscribed to a vision of society in which the landed aristocracy played any important role. On the other hand, as pointed out by civilians like the Collector of Ahmednagar, no government could afford to overlook the political consequences of the dispossession of the ryots on the scale on which it was being carried on in the Deccan. The point to be remembered was that this change, instead of being a 'natural' one, had been brought about by giving to the country 'laws, and I may say, advantages, for which it is not prepared'. The government was faced with a series of important questions: How would agricultural production be affected when the land was owned by a social group ignorant of agriculture, and cultivated by a class of discontented kunbis? What would be the effect of the large

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DRC, Vol. II. W.G. Pedder's Report quoted in Precis of Correspondence Regarding Indebtedness of Agricultural Classes in Bombay and Upper India, Part II.

scale dispossession of the kunbis on the stability of British rule? Would it not be more difficult to control a community of disgruntled labourers, than one of happy peasant proprietors? Yet for the authorities to confine their attention to such questions was to give a very limited construction to the objectives of British rule in India. For surely, the Collector of Ahmednagar argued, the British Government had other ends in view apart from the maintenance of its political authority:

The glory of the government has been that it has hitherto secured to a great extent the prosperity of the masses, and the highest credit of our Revenue Survey has been that it appeared to have settled these on a firmer basis than ever. How then can it but be a matter of great anxiety and uneasiness to Government to discover that the prosperity of the masses is declining and their happiness passing away before the encroachments of an alien community.<sup>21</sup>

The vanis' refusal to advance credit after the disturbances of 1875 placed the ryot in so desperate a position that J.B. Richey, a member of the Bombay Executive Council, turned his attention to the possibility of State assistance to help the ryot cultivate his land. Richey observed that although the reluctance of the vanis to advance money had made agricultural operations virtually impossible, the situation was

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DRC, Vol. II. Letter to the Deccan Riots Commission by H.B. Boswell, Collector of Ahmednagar dated 5 October 1875.

not without its redeeming features. The riots had left the two classes 'on more equal terms than they have ever been'. The vanis had been chastened by the outbreak, and had come to realise the extent to which they were exposed to peasant retribution. The kunbis, on their part, had seen that violence did not pay any lasting dividends. The logic of the situation had drawn the ryots and the moneylenders together. In several villages of Poona and Ahmednagar panchayats had been called on popular initiative to settle differences between the kunbis and the vanis. In Supa such a panchayet had persuaded the vanis to accept payment on a graduated scale according to the antiquity of their claims. The crux of the problem, of course, was the availability of credit. The ryots had no ready money of their own. But, Richey suggested, it would 'be advisable to turn the present attitude of the sowcars and the ryots towards each other to account by assisting them to a compensation of claims'<sup>22</sup>. If the Government assisted the ryots in clearing their former debts with the vanis, then the kunbis could start with a clean slate, and they would be in a position to draw the maximum benefit from the protective legislation which the authorities would enact in due course.

Richey's proposal received strong support from Pedder as Secretary to the Bombay Government. In a memorandum outlining the implications of the scheme, he pointed out that assistance would have to be extended to all ryots who were not hopelessly involved in debt. The ryots, on their part, would be required to mortgage their crops to the Government till their debts were repaid. In implementing the scheme, revenue officials would let the cultivators have enough grain to last through the year, and they would credit the remainder to instalments of the debt. The undertaking implied an entirely new conception of the State's obligations and responsibilities, and it involved a considerable financial risk for the Government and an additional burden on the revenue officials. But the benefits flowing from it would be equally substantial. 'We shall', Pedder pointed out, 'have to spend a great deal more than this if we have a famine in the Deccan and shall then only save life, instead of providing the rise of the people as well.'<sup>23</sup> However, even though the spread of Maine's ideas had undermined a doctrinaire belief in laissez-faire principles, the degree of Governmental involvement associated with Richey's scheme appeared

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BA. Memorandum by W.G. Pedder dated 31 August 1875: R.D., Vol. 118 of 1875.



far too hazardous to Sir Philip Wodehouse, the Governor of Bombay. The proposal, he pointed out, would virtually oblige the State to assume the responsibilities of the sowcar, who provided the ryot with advances for the purchase of seed and cattle, and for the payment of the land-tax. It would be exceedingly foolish for the Government to take upon itself so heavy a responsibility:

The ~~more~~ I enter the subject [Wodehouse stated] the more convinced I am that any measure tending to curtail the relations of the sowcar with the ryot must work prejudicially. We cannot possibly free the latter from their dependence upon the sowcars ... Our aim must be to maintain friendly relations with the sowcar, to satisfy him that while we will do our best to prevent extortion, we will throw no obstacle in the way of the reasonable involvement of his money. I am far from assuming that attempts in this direction will be successful; but if one attempts more, one will do great mischief.<sup>24</sup>

The rejection of Richey's proposal set the broad frames of reference for the Deccan Riots Commission, which was appointed immediately after the disturbances of 1875, when it met to consider measures that would restore the balance of power in rural society in favour of the ryots, and protect their interests from encroachment by the vanis. The cultivators could be reinforced by either of two methods: the State could take upon itself the responsibility for supplying the

ryot with cheap credit, or it could modify the legal system in his favour. With the former means ruled out by Wodehouse's commitment to laissez-faire principles, the remedy had to be found in preventive legislation and judicial reform. The most consistent step would have been a complete interdict on the sale of land in satisfaction of debts. Taking their stand on historical grounds, West and Pedder had emphasised the legitimacy of such a step on the basis of the level of social development which prevailed in India, and the political and judicial values apposite to that level of development. But Wodehouse was against so drastic a change in the legal concepts underlying the British administration. He believed that if the right to private property in land was upheld, then it was also incumbent on the State to enforce responsibility for debts justly contracted, even if such enforcement led to the large scale transfer of landed property. Any attempt to interfere in such a process, he pointed out, would create serious complications through flying in the face of a natural process<sup>25</sup>.

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Vide letter from the Bombay Government dated 6 April 1877: Papers Relating to Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act, Vol. I; Selections From The Records of the Government of India, No. 342. (Henceforth referred to as DARA.)

The Deccan Commission was therefore obliged to seek a solution of the problem through alterations in the legal machinery. The ignorance of the ryot, the Commissioners pointed out, placed him under a grave handicap in the struggle in which he was pitted against an astute moneylending class. The removal of the ryots' ignorance was a slow and laborious process, and concerned issues which the Commission was not competent to discuss. But till the time this ignorance was removed, the Government bore a moral responsibility to see that the ryot's lack of sophistication did not work to his disadvantage in judicial proceedings. The compulsory registration of debt bonds by public notaries, followed by the detailed record of subsequent proceedings, would be a great help to the cultivating classes. Courts in the Bombay district, the Commissioners further observed, were situated at great distances from most villages, so that the ryots found it virtually impossible to appear as defendants in suits filed against them. The obvious remedy for this state of affairs was an increase in the strength of the judicial personnel, and the institution of Courts of Circuit which toured through the country districts<sup>26</sup>.

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DRC, I, Paras. 13-14.



The cautious recommendations of the Deccan Commission were framed to secure the approval of Sir Philip Wodehouse, who had made no secret of his commitment to laissez-faire principles. J.B. Richey, a leading member of the Commission, had special reason to be aware of the restricted construction which Wodehouse placed on the role of the State in the community, since his proposal for the extension of credit to the cultivators had already been turned down by the Governor of Bombay. But despite the Commission's moderation, it was only after Wodehouse's departure that active steps were taken to reinforce the ryot's position in rural society through judicial reform. Sir Richard Temple, who succeeded Wodehouse as Governor of Bombay, was an administrator cast in an entirely different mould. Temple was a product of the Panjab school of Sir John Lawrence, which combined a conservative and evangelical strain with a Benthamite concern for rationality and simplicity in law and administration. He looked to a vision of rural India as a community of strong and independent 'yeomen farmers', who had to be protected at all costs from the corrosive influences of a commercial civilisation<sup>27</sup>.

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Stokes, op. cit., p. 244.



Temple's concern for the well-being of the ryot, and his belief in the effectiveness of State action as a social determinant, were reinforced by the preconceptions which West and Pedder had already applied to the analysis of the rural problem. Immediately after assuming office in 1877, he sponsored a draft Bill that went considerably beyond the legislation recommended by the Riots Commission in altering the legal system in favour of the cultivator. In a minute defining the objectives of the Bill, Temple pointed to the natural poverty of the land, and the demographic pressures flowing out of the stability established under British rule, as factors over which the legislator exercised no control whatsoever. He also referred to the creation of private property in land, and the institution of a rational administrative system, as changes which were irreversible, and which contributed to the social antagonism between the different rural classes. In a community subject to such strains, if the kunbis and the vanis took upon themselves to enter into conflicts like the one characterising the Riots of 1875, then there was little the State could do about it. 'But we ought, I think,' Temple stated, 'to see that our laws do not tend to bring about this state of things. At present they actually

do so. Indeed, it is probably the case that unless this were so people would not be treading such dangerous paths.<sup>28</sup>

The remedy, Temple suggested in a radical reinterpretation of the principle of contract, lay in imposing an obligation on the Civil Courts to examine the detailed history of all debt cases brought before them for adjudication. Hitherto, Courts of Law had looked only to the formal aspects of a case. On being presented with a bond that was properly executed, a Court was obliged to pass a decree against the ryot. The cultivators consequently preferred to keep away from the Courts altogether. Yet the bond which handed over the ryot to a life of slavery could be 'utterly unjust - indeed...(was) generally more or less unjust'. The original sum borrowed by him was in most cases a small fraction of the sum for which he was sued. The rest of the debt was made up of interest which was added to the principal at successive renewals of the bond. The debt could also be an inherited one, with the ryot having only the vaguest of ideas of the obligations which he had taken on himself:

With an innocent peasantry dealing with an astute and practised class of moneylenders [Temple stated] these circumstances constitute real

grievances. Therefore the Courts should not only be empowered, but obliged to go into all the points to separate the real debt from the fictitiously accumulated debt. There should be a limit imposed on the accumulation of debt...There should (also) be a distinction between a ryot's liability for his own debts and his liability for the debts of his ancestors...<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis added)

Temple's draft Bill set about to redress the imbalance in rural society arising from the application of laissez-faire principles. Without questioning the concepts of economic rationality underlying British rule, Temple was advocating changes in the judicial machinery to support the interests of the ryot, and to undo the dominance of the vani over rural society. But the measures outlined in his draft Bill were opposed by the Supreme Government at Calcutta, which saw no reason to alter the existing law in favour of the cultivators<sup>30</sup>. Law Courts in India, the Calcutta authorities pointed out, already required proof that consideration had been received by the indebted ryot according to the terms of the bond produced by the creditor. For the Bombay territories, the principle was even more explicitly enshrined in Regulation V of 1827, according to which 'written acknowledgement of debt in any shape shall not be held conclusive in any

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Ibid.

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Letter to Bombay Government dated 1 July 1878: Bombay Government Selections No. 157, New Series.

Court of Law...if the defendant shows that a full consideration had not been received.' The existing law thus offered reasonable protection to the ryot. To go any further in his favour would be impolitic. Temple desired the Courts to investigate debts even if the ryot did not put up any defence for himself. But the Supreme Government

doubted the expediency of legislation in this direction at present. It would cast upon the Courts an amount of work which it seems very questionable whether they could, as at present constituted, get through; it would afford many opportunities for fraud and evasion to dishonest debtors, and ought thus to be an incentive to reckless borrowing.<sup>31</sup>

The objections advanced by the Supreme Government at Calcutta failed to shake Temple's belief in the need for an enlarged construction of the responsibility of Courts in adjudicating debt cases. He did not deny that there were provisions in the existing law which a vigilant peasant could turn to his advantage in his struggle against the vanis. But it was obvious, Temple pointed out, that the peasant was unable to do so because of his ignorance, and because of the superior business acumen of the moneylender. It was consequently necessary to amend the law in such a way that the

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<sup>31</sup>  
Ibid.



duty of Courts to investigate debt cases became obligatory, instead of being volitional<sup>32</sup>.

The intervention in the debate at this juncture by Lord Cranbrook, the Secretary of State for India, turned the scales in favour of Temple, and resulted in legislation far more comprehensive in the protection it afforded to the ryots than the draft Bill sponsored by the Bombay Government. A glance at social and economic conditions in the Deccan convinced Cranbrook of the validity of Temple's view that the poverty of the ryots stemmed largely from factors over which the legislator could not exercise any control. British administrators, he pointed out, had tried to grapple with the problem by investing the ryots with property rights, and by developing a rational land revenue policy and a modern judicial system. Their efforts had been rewarded with partial success through the emergence of a small class of affluent peasants. But they had simultaneously created acute tension between different social groups in rural society. The creation of private property had enhanced the ryot's credit, and had encouraged him to incur indebtedness on a scale which was impossible earlier, while the vani had exploited the

opportunities offered by the new Courts of Law to build for himself a position of social dominance in rural society:

This last observation [Cranbrook told the Bombay Government] brings me to the consideration of the Bill now before me. Your government has distinctly perceived that the Courts of Justice we have constituted, and the law they administer, operate most harshly, and frequently with injustice, on debtors, who form the bulk of the population. Here, therefore, is an opportunity for the beneficial interference of Government...(The legislation proposed should therefore be) framed with the view of mitigating the law, and of extending the power of judges to modify the contracts entered into between man and man.<sup>33</sup>

There were, according to Cranbrook, two areas in which the Government could concentrate its efforts to assist the ryot. The remoteness of the Courts from most villages discouraged the ryots from appearing as defendants in suits filed against them, while the situation was further aggravated by a system of law based on freedom of contract. Both these difficulties could be resolved through the creation of new Courts which were suitably dispersed in the rural areas, and which dispensed justice based on notions of social equity which the ryots understood and appreciated.

The Benthamite emphasis on cheap and efficient justice, and the Maine inspired recognition of the forms of law and

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Despatch to Bombay Government dated 26 December 1878:  
Bombay Government Selections No. 157, New Series.

administration apposite to Indian society, which combined to inspire the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 found eloquent expression in the speech made by T.C. Hope in the course of piloting the Bill through the Supreme Legislative Council. Touching briefly on the reasons behind increasing rural indebtedness in the Deccan, and the consequent growth of an antagonism between the moneylenders and the cultivators, Hope pointed to the increasing dispossession of the kunbis by the vanis as the crux of the rural problem. It was, he confessed, legitimate to look upon this change as a symptom of social progress. The creation of private property in land was necessary for the well-being and progress of a society. It was equally essential that the land should be held by those who were qualified to turn it to the best account. If ownership of land was vested in a class which was unequal to its social responsibilities, and had burdened its inheritance with a load of debt that could never be repaid, then it was in the interests of the community for this class to be dispossessed. But while such principles were effective guides to administrative policy in western societies, considerable caution was necessary in applying them to India. So many of the dilemmas confronting the British Government could be traced to measures of reform which paid no attention to the traditional values and social



institutions of India. 'When one overturns by an act of legislation institutions which popular consent has maintained for centuries,' Hope stated, 'we sometimes forget that we are not the bearers of a political revelation from Heaven':

In the present instance there seems genuine reason for doubting whether the premises on which a policy of laissez-faire is based are sound. If the present condition of the Deccan ryots is caused by inherent moral and physical defects,... if they encumber the land to the exclusion of a class of intelligent, enterprising and energetic capitalists,...then indeed we must sit down and sit out the process of gradual transfer of the rights of property from one class to another... But consideration will show that no such circumstances exist in the Deccan. The Maratha kunbi is not the useless and defective creature postulated...His embarrassed condition seems to be rather his misfortune than his fault, induced by the calamities of the last century, the obligation of ancestral debt, the burden of the land revenue - firstly in amount and latterly in imposition - and the facilities for extortion conferred by our laws upon his creditor.

On the other hand, those into whose hands the land is now observed to be passing are not yearning for it to improve it by their capital or intelligence. With solitary exceptions, the transferees are the professional moneylenders, who have no wish even to hold the status of landed proprietors...Such conditions deprive the transfer of land from distressed to moneyed classes of all the glosses with which political economy would surround it. They show that the noble gift of property in land, made by the British Government to the peasants for their sole benefit, is passing, contrary to their intentions, and in frustration of their objects to a class unfitted to receive it.<sup>34</sup>



To Hope, then, it appeared that the Deccan offered a clear case for legislative action to prevent the emergence of the vanis as the heir to the decaying power of the cultivating classes. It was, he pointed out, necessary to restrain the moneylender from dominating the kunbi, though it was equally essential to ensure that he would continue to keep the kunbis supplied with credit. Any measure proposing to deal with the rural problem had therefore to assure fair play to the two social groups whose co-operation was vital for agricultural production.

The first concern of the Relief Act of 1879 was to establish safeguards against frauds by debtors or by creditors in the original transaction of the loan. For this purpose a bond to which a cultivator was a party had to be drawn under the supervision of a village registrar. Next came the provision of Conciliators for informal arbitration in disputes between ryots and moneylenders. If arbitration proved abortive, and the disputing parties decided to resort to litigation, they could proceed to newly instituted Courts of Law, which were situated within easy reach of villages, and were less dilatory and less expensive than the already existing Courts. These Courts were presided by Munsiffs, who were selected from respectable rural families. The Courts of the already existing Subordinate Judges, which came next in the

judicial hierarchy, were strengthened in two directions. Their number was increased from 24 to 31, and they were empowered to try a wider range of cases. However, in keeping with the best Benthamite principles, the extensive powers of the Subordinate Judges were counterbalanced by a machinery for supervision and control. Immediately above the Subordinate Judges, therefore, came a Special Judge who was authorised to inspect, supervise and revise the proceedings of the judicial officers under him. Apart from the reorganisation of the judicial machinery, the Relief Act introduced changes in the substantive law administered by the Courts of Law. These changes concerned the definition of a debtor's liability, and were inspired by the belief that 'the passing of a bond by a native of India is often of no more value as proof of a debt ...than the confession of a man under torture of the crime he is charged with'. In conformity with the new concept of social equity advanced by Temple, the Courts of Law were obliged to go into the history and merits of all debt cases that came up before them to establish the extent of the debtor's obligation<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

### The Kunbi, the Vani and the Relief Act

The impact of the Relief Act on the disturbing accumulation of power in the hands of the vanis under British rule was immediate and decisive. Through obliging the Courts to go beyond the bonds which made the ryots the helpless prisoners of the vanis, the Act at one stroke eliminated the inadvertent bias in favour of the vani which had previously characterised the legal system. However, the changes which had come over rural society since the British conquest did not fail to influence the implementation of the Act. Not all peasants could benefit from its enactment. And the vanis, who had grown into a powerful class by the 1870s, were able to exploit some of its provisions to defeat the very objectives with which the Act had been framed. While Temple and Hope had made no secret of their desire to restore the cultivators to their former position of dominance, the extent to which the ryots were able to regain their power was determined by their prosperity, and their ability to exploit the Act to their advantage. Of course, the popularity of the Relief Act with the ryots was unquestioned. 'In the various places through which I have passed during my late tour,' a Revenue Officer noted in 1883, 'I have found that by all true agriculturists the Act is regarded as their charter of safety,

and that no measure of government for many years past can be compared with it in point of popularity.<sup>36</sup> Yet the kunbis' enthusiasm for the measure did not bear any direct relation to their ability to comprehend its provisions, or their capacity to exploit the opportunities it offered them. For only the more affluent peasants were able to draw any substantial benefits from the Relief Act.

For the purposes of the Relief Act the peasants of Maharashtra can be divided into three groups according to their state of indebtedness, and the material resources at their command. First came a group of cultivators representing 10 per cent of the rural population. This group cultivated large holdings of superior quality with adequate stock and capital. Its prosperity was largely a consequence of the peaceful conditions prevailing under British rule, and the rational economic policies pursued by British administrators. These rich peasants of Maharashtra possessed small but not insubstantial reserves of capital, and when they incurred debts, they were fully competent to meet their obligations, and could therefore be regarded as solvent and independent. A series of bad harvests, or a serious famine, could trench

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Report on the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act by H. Woodward dated 25 June 1883: DARA, Vol. I, pp. 335-59.



heavily into their resources, but could not ruin them.

The rich peasants were followed by a group of cultivators who formed 40 per cent of the rural population. This group was the one most intimately affected by the Relief Act since its position, although serious, was not beyond all hope of recovery. Members of this group owned between 20 to 70 acres of land of medium quality, and their best fields were usually mortgaged to the vanis. Despite the industry with which they cultivated their fields, they barely managed to keep body and soul together, and a succession of bad seasons could reduce them to a state of abject poverty. For the remaining 50 per cent of the rural population, which was poor even by the miserable standards of the Deccan, life was a perpetual struggle against the threat of starvation. Ryots belonging to this group owned between 10 to 20 acres of land of such poor quality that the vanis were reluctant to advance them loans on the security of their holdings. They did not own sufficient cattle to plough their fields, and they were obliged to depend upon their fellow villagers for this purpose, whom they repaid either by working on their fields, or by giving them a share of the produce. Even in normal seasons the poor ryots barely raised enough to feed their families all round the year; but if the rains failed, they

were forced to sell their cattle, and work as labourers on daily wages<sup>37</sup>.

Despite its bias in favour of the cultivating classes, the Relief Act was double edged in its consequences. By obliging the Courts of Law to go into the history of loan transactions it protected the interests of the ryots; but at the same time it made the vanis reluctant to advance loans to the cultivators because of the arbitrary and inquisitorial powers, so the vanis believed, with which it armed the judges. The reluctance of the vanis to advance credit to the cultivators could, as critics of the Act were quick to point out, have grave repercussions because of the dependence of the ryots on the vanis for carrying out their agricultural operations. But the Act did not precipitate any serious crisis, because different groups of cultivators were dependent upon the vanis to varying degrees, and the extent to which their credit was affected varied with their prosperity. Rich peasants were least dependent of all on the vanis. Their indebtedness could generally be traced to a desire for social ostentation; and the contraction of credit which followed the Relief Act did not affect them in any significant way. The reverse was true of peasants belonging to the second and third

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<sup>37</sup>

Ibid.

groups since they were forced to borrow money to carry out their agricultural operations, and to pay their taxes to the State. But considering the social consequences of an unrestricted flow of credit from the vanis to the kunbis, the restrictions placed by the Relief Act proved to be more of a blessing than a calamity.

The fate of the ryots of the taluka of Kopergaon substantiates this assertion. Kopergaon experienced a series of bad seasons after 1879, but on the failure of their crops the ryots were unable to persuade their vanis to advance them credit because of the fear in which the vanis held the new legislation. In the absence of assistance from a source on which they had relied in former years, the ryots were forced to migrate to the neighbouring talukas to work as labourers on daily wages. But for the obstacles raised by the Relief Act, the ryots of Kopergaon would have received advances from the vanis, and would not have been obliged to migrate from their villages. However, their fields and cattle would have been pledged to the moneylenders, and they would have been reduced to the status of tenants. The ryots were actually better off as agricultural labourers than they would have been as the tenants of the vanis under the old order of things. Their wages sufficed to keep body and soul together, and they still retained their land and hope for the future. A return

to normal conditions of rainfall would see them back in their villages. One good season would improve their situation considerably, while a succession of good harvests would restore them to their former state of prosperity. If this was true of districts where conditions were unfavourable after 1879, the improvement in the condition of the ryots was even more marked in areas where the crops were good. The contraction of credit which followed upon the passing of the Relief Act obliged cultivators to reduce their customary expenditure, and since they could no longer borrow money as easily as they had done before, they were thrown back on their own resources, and no longer looked to the vani for assistance. As a result, the share of agricultural produce which had formerly been appropriated by the vanis as interest was now retained by and distributed among those who actually tilled the soil<sup>38</sup>.

While the ryots therefore welcomed the Relief Act as a measure that would rehabilitate them as the dominant class in rural society, the vanis construed it as an attempt to undermine their position, and immediately raised a loud outcry against its 'iniquitous' provisions. They were, at the same time, confident that the bid to relieve the ryots of indebtedness would prove abortive, since they believed that the credit

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Ibid.



which they supplied to the cultivators was essential for agricultural operations:

The intention of the Government [the vanis pointed out in a representation to the Bombay authorities] is to relieve the agriculturists from indebtedness, but it is impossible to carry out the profession of agriculture without involving oneself in debt, because agriculture is a speculation. One is supposed to lay out money on land, and labour on for twelve months, maintaining himself by borrowing. If, unfortunately, the crops are damaged, the cultivator is required to ask from his creditor twelve months time to pay off the debt...And the creditor, on his part, is obliged to lend money for the next year, in order to recover his past dues. Thus a creditor and a debtor stand in need of each other; but it appears that the legislators have not sufficiently considered this point.<sup>39</sup>

The crux of the problem, the vanis emphasised, did not lie in indebtedness as such. The real difficulties stemmed from the climate of distrust and suspicion which had been generated through the institution of a rational legal system.

Before the British conquest the relation between the kunbi and the vani had been one of co-operation and mutual trust. The vani was regarded as a useful member of the village community, and his participation in the rural economy had been to the advantage of everyone concerned. 'The agricultural work ...(was) not hindered owing to the agriculturalists' dealings with a sowcar, just as the management of a family is not

hindered owing to the wife having a husband', the vanis stated. But the moment legal procedures were rationalised, the partnership between the kunbis and the vanis had dissolved, and the moneylenders were forced to secure their advances by bonds and legal documents, instead of trusting the pledged word of the ryots, which they had done formerly. As the laws became increasingly formal, the moneylenders were forced to turn the screw on the cultivators. The resulting antagonism between these two classes led to occurrences like the agrarian disturbances of 1875. British legal institutions and British judicial values had driven a deep wedge between the two most important rural classes; while partisan measures like the Relief Act had undermined the vanis' faith in the integrity of the Government:

The Regulations of 1827 [the vanis held] protected all people, and gave no trouble and expense to Government in any way. New laws were not framed every year. The traders never hesitated to carry out their dealings. Now new laws are frequently framed, and so the traders have lost their trust in laws. The traders and agriculturists do not know what laws may be framed by Government...Therefore they are very cautious, and cannot attend to agricultural work. But the Government should point out a way by which the agriculturists would be enabled to get timely pecuniary aid. This would do good to all.<sup>40</sup>

Though the vanis regarded the entire Relief Act with disapproval as a measure that would disrupt the rural economy of

the Deccan, what they found most offensive was the provision which obliged the Courts to investigate the history of debt cases which came up to them for consideration. Such a provision, the vanis believed, openly encouraged the ryots to disown debts which they knew to be legitimate. Since the authorities were acting in a manner so blatantly partial to the cultivators, the vanis decided to discontinue their credit operations in order to impress upon the State, and the cultivators, the importance of their role in agricultural operations. Their decision to restrict the flow of credit to the cultivators is reflected in a reduction of 75 per cent in loan transactions in the years following the passing of the Act. But what was a calculated attempt on the part of the affluent vanis to force the Government to its knees, was in the case of the poorer vanis a genuine inability to carry out their business under the provisions of the new legislation. We have already dwelt upon the changes effected in the vani's role through the institution of the ryotwari system, which channelised the flow of credit from the urban sowcar to the ryot through the village moneylender, instead of the village community. While some vanis like the Karamchands of Parner had blossomed into independent capitalists in the course of a generation, a considerable number of village moneylenders possessed little resources of their own, and they borrowed



money from the urban sowcars in order to advance loans to the ryots in the village. For such vanis the passing of the Relief Act was a major calamity<sup>41</sup>. The new legislation did not shield them from their creditors, the urban sowcars; yet the ryots to whom they advanced money were fully protected by the Act. The dilemma confronting these vanis found cogent expression in an appeal from the 'Small Sowcars' of a village in the Junnar taluka to the Bombay Government:

Before Act XVII of 1879 came into force [they pointed out] we used to borrow money from larger sowcars at a low rate of interest and advance the same with or without security to the agriculturists. As we received our dues from these agriculturists without any very serious difficulties, we were better able to support ourselves and pay off our sowcars. Since the Act came into force we are called upon to produce our accounts from the beginning in support of our claims against agriculturists. We generally do not keep accounts. Our difficulties do not end with obtaining decrees against agriculturists. The Civil Courts (now) have no powers to attach agriculturists' movable property ...(and) after obtaining decrees against agriculturists we are left to all intents and purposes in the same position in which one would find himself when his claim is time barred...The large sowcars have now ceased lending us money, and consequently we have ceased lending money to the agriculturists. All money dealings have come to a standstill, and we are left without any means to

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W.H. Crowe, District Judge, Poona to Bombay Government dated 3 September 1883: DARA, Vol. I, pp. 399-400. Also see Memorandum by E. Hoskins, Assistant of Sholapur dated 21 August 1883: DARA, Vol. I, pp. 401-2.



support ourselves. Our prayer, therefore, is that the Act be cancelled and the old order of things restored.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the 'anti-vani' bias of the Relief Act, and despite the fate of the small sowcars, it would be a mistake to think that the measure led to a complete suspension of credit operations, or that it placed the moneylenders entirely at the mercy of the cultivators. Among other things it is important to bear in mind the ignorance of the kunbis who lived in the more inaccessible villages. A revenue official touring the 'relieved' districts in 1883 found such cultivators totally unaware of the enactment of legislation to protect their interests. They were aware that they could no longer secure loans as easily as they had done formerly. But they lacked the curiosity to find out the reason behind this state of affairs. There were, in addition, cultivators whom the vanis had always treated with consideration, and for whom the Act was therefore unnecessary. Such cultivators clung to their traditional values, and they still cherished the notion of an harmonious relationship between themselves and the vanis, so much so that their 'feelings...(were) strongly opposed to litigation, and they preferred almost any sacrifice rather than resort to the Courts'<sup>43</sup>.

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Petition by the 'Small Sowcars' of Otur, Taluka Junnar, dated 28 July 1883: DARA, Vol. I, p. 401.

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Report on the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act by H. Woodward dated 25 June 1883: DARA, Vol. I, pp. 335-59.

But the most important reason for the survival of the vanis was their ability to exploit their dominant position in turning certain provisions of the Relief Act to their advantage. Besides changing the substantive law, the Relief Act had provided for Conciliators who were meant to resolve conflicts between the kunbis and the vanis through informal arbitration and traditional notions of social equity. The Conciliators were appointed from the dominant rural families; and the office was created to partially restore to the traditional leaders of rural society the control over judicial institutions which they had formerly exercised under the panchayats. Behind the appointment of the Conciliators lay the assumption that the former rural elite was still capable of providing the ryots with leadership, and of playing an active role in the affairs of rural society. This assumption was erroneous. For like the Kowreys of Parner, the old landed families had mostly been eclipsed by the rise of the vani castes. The social climate in the village had changed to such an extent that influential and respectable cultivators actually shrank from accepting the responsibilities of office because of the odium they feared to incur in carrying out their duties. 'Individuals are more apt to stand apart and interest themselves less in communal matters', a civilian pointed out. 'The Deshmukh, or mouthpiece of the community,

TABLE A

TABLE SHOWING DECREASE OF CIVIL SUITS FILED  
AGAINST RYOTS AFTER 1879.

DISTRICT	No. of Cases in 1881	No. of Cases in 1880	Average over past 10 years
POONA	4723	3161	8072
SATARA	4501	2712	10155
AHMEDNAGAR	4337	3469	11142
SHOLAPUR	2981	2453	5735

TABLE B

CASES BEFORE CONCILIATORS

DISTRICT	Number of Applications for Conciliation	Cases withdrawn by Applicants	Number of Cases Decided	Decided by Arbitration under Conciliation	Number of Failures
POONA	20514	2639	2351	8	9387
SATARA	27766	1585	2185	148	14456
AHMEDNAGAR	18656	1231	2219	13	8521
SHOLAPUR	10068	714	1547	6	4505

whom every member of it looked to and heeded, is, in all but name, a thing of the past.<sup>44</sup> The individuals whom the authorities persuaded to act as Conciliators bore little resemblance to the independent and influential cultivators who had formerly controlled the affairs of the rural communities. A majority of them were heavily indebted, and were consequently looked upon by the ryots with suspicion as the supine instruments of the moneylenders.

The vanis leapt upon conciliation as their opportunity to circumvent the offensive provisions of the Relief Act. This is obvious from a comparison (see Tables A and B) of the decrease in suits filed against cultivators in the higher Courts of Law with the flood of applications which immediately confronted the Conciliators appointed under the provisions of the Act. As Table A indicates, suits filed against the cultivators in 1880 and 1881 dropped to 50 per cent of the figure before 1879, but this decrease was amply compensated for by the volume of judicial business handled by the Conciliators. The 'popularity' of conciliation led some British officials to view it with great suspicion. Ideally, the system required Conciliators of integrity, and disputing parties that were evenly matched in their legal acumen and

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Ibid.



intellectual sophistication. Neither of these conditions was forthcoming, since most Conciliators were heavily indebted to the moneylenders, who were at the same time far more intelligent than the cultivators against whom they were pitted. Conciliation, therefore, often led to collusive agreements; and the institution was regarded by the vanis as a channel of escape from that 'inquisitorial' investigation into the past history of debts which was for them the most repugnant feature of the Relief Act<sup>45</sup>.

Yet conciliation was not without its advantages. It saved the villagers a lot of time and energy by bringing the Courts to their very doorsteps. It eliminated the friction between the vanis and the kunbis which was an inevitable result of the reference of disputes to formal law courts. And finally, it intercepted a body of legislation which would have swamped the higher courts, and prevented them from carrying out the investigations into debt transactions which they were expected to conduct under the new legislation. Judicial Officers like M.G. Ranade, who carried no brief for the moneylenders, felt that the awards given by the Conciliators showed little evidence of collusion with the vanis. In the

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Report on the Working of the Relief Act by A.D. Pollen dated 4 February 1882: DARA, Vol. I, pp. 290-314.

districts of Poona and Satara, for instance, Conciliators had reduced the claims of the vanis by 50 per cent before awarding decrees against the cultivators. This, Ranade argued, 'satisfactorily disproves of the allegation that the conciliation system gives a legal sanction to the claims of the creditors...'<sup>46</sup> A glance at Table B would lead one to the conclusion that while the vanis may have preferred the courts of conciliation to the regular courts, the Conciliators were certainly not their creatures. For if conciliation amounted to the acceptance of the vani's diktat by the ryots, then it is difficult to explain the high rate of failure (50 per cent of the suits filed) in the Conciliator's attempts at arbitration between the ryots and the moneylenders. Despite the loopholes it afforded to the vani, the Relief Act completely transformed the quality of social feeling in rural society, and for the first time after the British conquest the kunbi was made to feel that in any dispute with the vani the weight of the administration would be thrown in his favour rather than against him. The effect of such an assurance being held out was dramatic, and it restored the kunbi's confidence in his ability to hold his own against the moneylenders:

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<sup>46</sup>

Ibid.

(The ryots)...are no longer debarred from the hope of one day being free and independent [a British civilian pointed out in 1883]. They are far from being oppressed and harrassed by the creditors. They have ceased to regard him with stark dread and to accord to his dictates a submission which no one else could command. The local power and influence of the sowcar, more often abused than not, was paramount. All, or nearly all, with whom he came in contact were his debtors, and so his servants and fawning sycophants. The effect of the Act has been to change all this.<sup>47</sup>

The Relief Act of 1879 redressed the imbalance in rural society which had been created by Utilitarian measures of reform. This imbalance had resulted in the dominance of the vani castes without effecting that revolution in agriculture which alone would have justified the dispossession of the peasant proprietor by the moneylender. The Act was a recognition of the inadequacy of the Utilitarian solution for the problems of Maharashtra. It was also a consequence of the rational conservatism through which Maine and West gained a new insight into the structure of rural society. Social evolution and the relativity of values and institutions were two concepts which were central to Maine's thinking, and they demolished the assumption made by the advocates of reform that a 'primitive' society could be transformed overnight

into an acquisitive community through appropriate changes in law and administration. By focussing attention on the rationale of evolution, and the relationship between values and social structure, Maine presented a convincing explanation for the Utilitarian failure to transform the kunbi into an acquisitive peasant, and to persuade the vani to assume the role of a capitalist farmer. He simultaneously pointed to a way out of the impasse. Progress, he said in effect, could best be achieved through changes which took account of the level of social development prevailing in a community. In his concern for tradition and continuity in the processes of change, Maine stood very close to conservatives of the Burkean school. But he reinforced their arguments with tools of rational analysis, and with a social vision, which completely undermined the supremacy of the Utilitarian world view. Maine substituted the facile optimism of the Utilitarians with a sophisticated appreciation of the extent to which the British administrator could pursue economic progress and social justice in India.

The Act of 1879 was the first legislative measure which tried to refashion the law in harmony with traditional notions of social equity, and in conformity with the requirements of a kunbi dominated rural society. Since it undermined the dominance which the vanis had come to acquire over rural



society, and laid the basis for a more healthy relationship between the ryots and the moneylenders, it was eminently successful in achieving its short term objectives. But the Act did not live up to all the expectations with which it had been launched. In introducing the Bill to the Imperial Legislative Council, Hope had not only emphasised its ability to undermine the power of the vanis, but he had also prognosticated that it would promote the rise of a prosperous peasantry.

This did not turn out to be true. The Relief Act successfully protected the ryot from exploitation by the vani. But it also deprived him of the sources of credit upon which he depended, and to which he had no alternative till such time as he had accumulated the capital necessary for efficient farming. Yet the trouble here rested with the exaggerated expectations raised by Hope, rather than with any inadequacy in the provisions of the Act. A legislative measure seeking to change the judicial machinery could at best create a suitable climate for economic progress by the kunbi; it could do little to actually bring about such progress. Ranade had a clearer vision than Hope of the potentialities of the Relief Act when he pointed out that

the proper standpoint from which the working of the Act must be judged appears to me to be that it is admittedly an experiment dictated by an emergency and that it is further a compromise between the let-alone policy and extreme communistic suggestions ...Whenever its effects on the credit of the ryots

and the economical prosperity of the country are considered, then three characteristics of the Act, namely, that it is an experiment, a compromise and one of several administrative reliefs which were to have simultaneous operation, should not be lost sight of. A too sanguine or exaggerated view of its beneficial effects is necessarily doomed to disappointment.<sup>48</sup>

Once the legal disabilities which retarded economic development in rural society had been removed, the one pressing problem confronting the ryots was an acute shortage of capital to develop the land and exploit improved techniques of agriculture. The inadequacy of credit was made all the more acute by the Relief Act, since it dried up the sources upon which the ryot had traditionally depended for carrying out his agricultural operations. It was consequently to the problems of rural finance that the State in Maharashtra next turned its attention.

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<sup>48</sup>  
Report on the Working of the Relief Act by M.G. Ranade dated 12 February 1882: DARA, Vol. II, pp. 323-4.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE NON-ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

The consequences flowing out of the Relief Act of 1879 revealed the judicial system to be merely one of the factors responsible for the crisis which overtook rural society in 1875. It also proved that alterations in the judicial machinery alone could not put the peasant on the path to progress and prosperity. What enabled the vani to establish his dominance over rural society was the ryot's need for credit to finance his agricultural operations, and to meet the social obligations imposed on him by his caste status and his standing in the village. The Relief Act protected the ryot from legal exploitation at the hands of the moneylender. But it did little to assure him of a cheap supply of credit, partly out of an erroneous reading of the rural problem by the legislators, and partly because of their restricted view of the responsibilities of the State towards the community. The rational conservatives who sponsored the Relief Act not only refused to pay adequate attention to the problem of rural credit, but by amending the law in favour of the ryots, they

made the vanis reluctant to advance loans to the cultivators, and created a situation which threatened to undermine the foundations of the rural economy of the Deccan.

Because of the ignorance and the apathy of the peasants, and the commitment of the British Government to principles of social action, which frowned upon minute interference in the affairs of the community by the State, it was up to the sowcars to devise a solution that would break through the impasse and restore the flow of urban capital to the ryot in the village. That the moneylenders had a shrewd idea of the importance of their social role is obvious from the tenor of their protests against the Relief Act, and their attempt to browbeat the Government into acquiescence through withholding credit from the cultivators after 1879. But the sowcars' bid to force the government to its knees through starving the peasants of credit turned out to be a double-edged weapon. For if the peasants banked upon them for carrying out their agricultural operations, then the vanis, in turn, could not afford to let their capital lie idle indefinitely, since they depended upon the business of moneylending for their livelihood. Indeed, the decrease in loan transactions after 1879 was not entirely a result of a boycott by the sowcars, but also reflected the inability of the small sowcars to conduct their business under the provisions of the new legislation.



The accumulation of idle capital in the hands of the sowcars called for a solution that would remove the obstacles in the flow of urban capital to the ryot in the village. The need for such a solution was all the more pressing because of the rise of new social groups, like retired Government officials and the professional classes, which had substantial capital to invest, and whose faith in the ordinary channels of investment had received a rude jolt through the crises which had overtaken so many business houses in Bombay during the depression that followed the Civil War in America<sup>1</sup>.

#### The Proposal for Agricultural Banks

With the passing of the Relief Act the Government had for the time being exhausted its resources, and the initiative for further action rested entirely on the moneylending community. Encouraged by leading members of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha like M.G. Ranade and S.H. Chiplonker, and supported by sympathetic officials like Sir William Wedderburn, a group of Poona sowcars headed by Rao Bahadur

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NAI (National Archives of India). Memorandum by Jhaveri Lal Yajnik, a Gujerati banker, dated 9 May 1882: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 13/20, June 1884.

Viziarangam Mudliar<sup>2</sup> proposed the formation of Agricultural Banks with the idea of finding profitable employment for the capital lying idle in the hands of the urban classes, and supplying the ryot with the credit he needed for the cultivation of his fields<sup>3</sup>. Behind this proposal lay the belief that the flow of credit from the sowcar to the ryot through an institution which enjoyed official patronage would ensure fair play both to the cultivators and the vanis, and create the conditions for prosperity in the countryside. The system of rural credit which prevailed before 1879 had resulted in the social and economic dominance of the vanis over the cultivators: equally, the Relief Act, by amending the law in favour of the ryots, had undermined the vanis' faith in the impartiality of the State, and had persuaded them not to advance loans to the cultivators. Agricultural Banks were designed to avoid both these evils. For if the vanis were organised in banks which enjoyed the blessings of the State, they would have no reason to seek dominance over the cultivators, since the banks would protect their interests without involving them in legal processes of dubious morality.

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Parliamentary Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Communication from the Bankers of Poona to Bombay Government dated 18 August 1882.

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Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: 'A Proposal from the Poona Bankers Regarding Agricultural Banks' dated 20 November 1882.

Though Agricultural Banks appeared sound in conception, the Poona sowcars did not underestimate the difficulties involved in launching a new experiment in rural finance. Before taking up the proposal with the Bombay Government, they propagated the idea of a rural bank among the leading sowcars of the mofussil towns in order to win them over to the scheme. Mudliar believed the co-operation of the mofussil sowcars to be vital for the success of his proposal, since the Agricultural Banks would have to depend upon them for a part of their capital, and because the influence which they exercised over the cultivators in their areas could, if directed against the Bank, seriously jeopardise the success of the scheme.

The Poona sowcars bestowed equal care on the choice of a suitable base of operations for an experimental Agricultural Bank. One of the most prosperous talukas in Poona district was Purandhar, which had a population of 75,678 distributed in 92 villages over an area of 457 square miles. Of the 15,000 peasant households in the taluka, 13,400 possessed land of their own. The distribution of holdings in Purandhar indicates the existence of a sizable group of affluent peasants, who owned fields between 10 to 30 acres in extent. The annual income of the taluka was Rs.7,50,000, of which costs of cultivation accounted for Rs.3,00,000. The



Government assessment for Purandhar amounted to Rs.1,00,000. The cultivators of the taluka were therefore left with a surplus of Rs.2,00,000, over and above the wages of labour and the profits of capital<sup>4</sup>.

For a taluka whose total indebtedness amounting to Rs.10,00,000, Purandhar, with an annual surplus of Rs.2,00,000, was in a sound financial condition. The prosperity of Purandhar persuaded the sowcars of Poona to choose it as the site for an experimental Agricultural Bank, since there was every prospect of its ryots being relieved of their burden of debt with a little encouragement and support. The scheme which the Poona sowcars outlined before the Bombay Government involved, in the first stage, the liquidation of the debts of the ryots of the taluka<sup>5</sup>. For this purpose they proposed the appointment of a Commission comprising an official of the Revenue Department, and two non-official members representing the vanis and the kunbis. This Commission was to settle the amount of debt to be paid by the cultivators. Once this amount had been settled, the Bombay Government was to undertake the immediate payment of the sums

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Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Poona Sowcars to Sir William Wedderburn dated 21 October 1885.

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Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Poona Committee to Sir William Wedderburn dated 9 January 1883.



due to the sowcars. The Commission would then arrange for the repayment of these sums to the Government in the shape of annual instalments by the ryots. The payments made to the sowcars by the State, the Poona capitalists assured the Bombay Government, would be largely a fictitious transaction. For as soon as the Commission had concluded its inquiries, the proposed Agricultural Bank would assume responsibility for all advances; and since the sowcars would become shareholders in the Bank for the sums of money due to them, the State would not have to advance any money to the ryots at all.

The crux of the sowcars' proposal concerned the assistance which the Bombay Government was to give to the Agricultural Bank for the recovery of advances from the ryots. The Relief Act, the sowcars held, had made the recovery of loans impossible, and no bank could be run successfully so long as its provisions were not amended. The loans made by the Agricultural Bank ought to 'be a first charge on the land after the assessment, and should be recoverable through the revenue agency free of costs like the arrears of land revenue'<sup>6</sup>. The sowcars also assured the authorities that if in a year of scarcity the Government decided to suspend the land-revenue, the Bank would follow suit. But to provide for the

contingency of the ryots defaulting in the payment of the revenue, the Bank would have to be empowered with the authority of buying the ryot's land, or the new proprietor of the land would have to be compelled to assume the full obligations of the former owner. If assured of the support outlined in their proposal, the Poona sowcars noted in conclusion, an Agricultural Bank would provide the ryots with the capital they required to build a prosperous future for themselves and for rural society as a whole.

The fate of the proposed Agricultural Bank depended upon the attitude adopted by the Bombay Government towards the conditions set out by the sowcars of Poona. For his own part Sir James Fergusson, the Governor of Bombay, assured the delegation of Poona capitalists who met him on the 23rd of November 1882, that 'he was favourably disposed towards the scheme...(and that) he and his honourable colleagues would give their best consideration to the proposal'<sup>7</sup>. But a memorandum by W. Lee-Warner, a senior Bombay civilian, expressed the reservations with which even sympathetic officials were inclined to look upon a scheme based on a new conception of

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Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Reply by Sir James Fergusson, Governor of Bombay, to an address by a delegation of the Poona sowcars dated 23 November 1882.

the responsibilities of the State vis-a-vis the community. Lee-Warner opened his critique with an emphatic repudiation of the 'exaggerated views of the duties of Government which had lately been put forward by some distinguished advocates of State assistance in this Presidency...' He conceded that in an agricultural society where the State stood as the supreme landlord, the cultivators had a special claim on its resources, and a strong case could be made for the extension of State assistance to facilitate the flow of capital to the villages in order to resolve the dangerous situation created by an increasing pressure of population, and a decreasing fertility of the soil. To mitigate these evils, Lee-Warner observed, it was proposed that the State should extend support to the sowcars, and at the same time protect the cultivators by controlling the activities of the moneylenders:

All these statements [Lee-Warner continued] are more or less truisms, and on them I found my first proposition, that it is desirable for Government to render some assistance to capitalists for bankers who undertake to advance money to the landholders, and to exercise some control over their business. But in deciding to what lengths the Government should go, I hold that the former must be left to private enterprise, and that if this private enterprise is to be floated with cork-jackets by a Government guarantee, it will not be private enterprise, but a spurious form of State interventionism ...involving a check to real private enterprise. The assistance which Government must give should, therefore,...fall short of being any part of the weight of the liabilities of the capitalists...But the State might place the business of land banks



under special advantages, supplying none of its capital, taking none of its shares, and accepting none of its liabilities, but offering it special facilities for investigating titles, collecting interest, recovering arrears, and generally for carrying on its business by allowing the bank to employ the State machinery.<sup>8</sup>

While Lee-Warner was reluctant to commit the financial resources of the State to an Agricultural Bank on grounds of economic doctrine, Revenue Officers in Bombay were apprehensive of the political repercussions of the assurances which the sowcars considered essential for the success of Agricultural Banks. The ryotwari system of land revenue, they pointed out, involved a direct settlement of the land-tax between the State and the ryot; and the exigencies of the system often required the application of coercion by the revenue official to compel the cultivators to pay their taxes to the State. This inevitably led to some bitterness between the cultivators and the authorities. But if the revenue department undertook the collection of the instalments due to the Agricultural Bank over and above its normal duties, then it would be increasing the possibility of friction between the ryot and the State, since the distinction

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NAI. Memorandum on the question of State assistance to Agricultural Banks in India by W. Lee-Warner of the Bombay Civil Service dated 20 April 1882: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 13/20, June 1884.



between the land-revenue, and the sums collected on behalf of the Bank, would be lost on the ryots:

I cannot bring myself to believe [stated one Settlement Officer] that the economic advantages which will be derived from agricultural banks in the Dekkhan talukas will outweigh the political objections to Government undertaking the duties of a bill collector towards a poor community of cultivators. Since the days of the early settlements it has been the great boast of Bombay revenue officers that each cultivator has his one fixed Government demand explained to him once for all...If this principle of fixity of payment is liable to be altered by the inclusion in the Government demand of fluctuating sums on account of agricultural banks, one great guarantee for the success and popularity of the Settlements will be removed. Let Government give every assistance in its power to the establishment of an Agricultural Bank,...but this one portion of the programme should...be completely abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the reservations voiced by Lee-Warner, and despite the possibility of increased friction between the State and the ryot to which attention was drawn by the Revenue Officers, the proposal for an Agricultural Bank received support both from the Bombay Government and the Supreme Government at Calcutta. This support was largely due to the interest taken in the scheme by Sir Evelyn Baring, the Finance Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, who applied his experience of Agricultural Banks in Egypt to the

problem of rural finance in India<sup>10</sup>. Baring did not disagree with the objections advanced by Lee-Warner to the indiscriminate extension of State assistance to private enterprise, particularly if this assistance took the form of financial support. But he saw little harm in the recovery of the Bank's advances to the ryots through the machinery of the State. Admittedly, in assisting the Agricultural Bank to recover its loans, the administration would be acting as an instrument of the sowcar, and would share with him the odium attached to his role. But the consequences of inaction, Baring pointed out, were even more dangerous. A peasantry which was being progressively impoverished presented a serious political danger; and unless this deterioration was checked in time, the rising tide of peasant discontent could undermine the stability of British rule in India. The forceful logic of Baring's argument clinched the issue for the authorities in India, and the Supreme Government recommended the Poona scheme to the Secretary of State for India as an experiment which deserved official assistance, and which would not only reveal the degree of indebtedness and the general condition of the Deccan ryot, but would also

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NAI. Memorandum by Sir Evelyn Baring dated 17 August 1882: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Revenue Branch), A Procs. No. 13/20, June 1884.

indicate the extent to which State action could contribute to the progress of rural society<sup>11</sup>.

At the India Office, however, caution prevailed over the arguments in favour of a bold policy for the resolution of the problems which obstructed the progress of rural society. The Secretary of State for India questioned the bona fides of the Poona scheme as a genuine example of 'private enterprise' on which alone rested the responsibility for financing agricultural operations. The Poona sowcars, he pointed out, not only wanted contributions in capital from the Government, but they insisted that the machinery of the State be placed at their disposal for the recovery of their advances. It would be politic to extend such support 'only on the assumption that it (i.e. the bank) is to work on behalf of Government for political or social objects rather than be conducted on ordinary business principles'<sup>12</sup>. But it was obvious that such an assumption would be unwarranted. Even if political considerations were for a moment set aside, there was little evidence to support the view that the Bank would succeed in its objectives. The vani in the village not only advanced

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Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Revenue Despatch No. 7 dated 31 May 1884 to the Secretary of State for India.

<sup>12</sup>

Parl. Papers, Vol. LXII of 1887: Despatch to the Government of India dated 23 October 1884.



credit to the cultivator, but he also provided him with a market for his surplus. Would the Bank too try to become a dealer in agricultural produce? If it attempted to do so, it would be embarking upon a business for which it was ill equipped. If not, then the ryots would remain exposed to the designs of the moneylenders. The Bank's problems were hardly made any easier by the fact that the ryot, instead of negotiating a single loan in the course of a year, kept a running account with the vani on which he drew from time to time to meet his needs as and when they arose. An Agricultural Bank was incapable of conducting business on such lines; and it could not therefore restrain the cultivator from conducting business simultaneously with the vani in the village:

It appears to me doubtful [the Secretary of State said in conclusion] whether any ingenuity can provide an effectual substitute for the operation of the ordinary laws between the ryots and those, whether sowcars or banks, from which they obtain advances; and...whether any bank could carry on its business with success. There is a strong presumption that Government cannot directly do much for the relief of the agricultural debtor than take care that in disputes between him and his creditors the law shall provide, and the courts shall administer, speedy, cheap and equal justice, and that the ryot shall be as little liable as possible, from his ignorance, his poverty, or his position, to be defrauded or oppressed.<sup>13</sup>



The Secretary of State's rejoinder put an abrupt end to the initiative of the Poona sowcars to launch a credit institution that would restore the flow of urban credit to the cultivators. The Poona scheme aimed at creating a machinery for financing agricultural operations that would avoid the progressive impoverishment of the ryots, and at the same time prevent them from dominating rural society. The sowcars were justified in assuming that an Agricultural Bank would not try to dominate the ryots in the fashion of individual vanis before 1879. But to accept their standpoint in no way lessens the force of the arguments advanced by the antagonists of State assistance to an Agricultural Bank: namely, that the State would become unpopular if it acted on behalf of the sowcar in collecting his dues; and that it was impossible for a Bank to replace the village vani as a source of credit for the ryot. The consequences of a policy of laissez-faire, however, could prove equally disastrous. For the odium which the State would earn through associating itself with the recovery of the Bank's dues paled into insignificance when compared with the political tension that would flow from a progressive deterioration in the economic condition of the peasants.

But the supreme irony of the situation lay in that the official advocates of the Poona sowcars supported their

proteges because of a mistaken understanding of the working of rural banking institutions. Underlying their support of the Mudliar scheme lay the assumption that the Agricultural Banks would provide the ordinary ryot with an abundant supply of cheap credit. This assumption was completely erroneous, since Agricultural Banks were equipped to deal with large landholders, rather than with a peasantry owning small plots of land. In Egypt, for instance, the Credit Foncier found it practical to deal with large capitalist farmers, who could profitably exploit annual loans ranging from L(E) 5,000 to L(E) 10,000, rather than with the fellahin for whom the institution had been created in the first instance. If Egyptian experience had any relevance for the Deccan, and the fellah bore a remarkable resemblance to the kunbi, then it is obvious that the ryots' problems could not be solved by an Agricultural Bank<sup>14</sup>.

How then could the ryots of the Deccan be supplied with the credit which they required for cultivating their fields, and improving their condition of existence?

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Parl. Paper, Vol. LXII of 1887: Despatch to Government of India dated 9 February 1885 and enclosures.

### The Raiffeissen Land Banks

For an answer to this question British administrators in India turned to Germany, where a remarkable experiment in agricultural co-operation had shown the improvement that could be effected in rural society by the peasants on their own initiative through the proper organisation of their resources. The movement for village credit societies owed its genesis to Raiffeissen, the mayor of an obscure town in Germany, who was distressed by the way in which the scarcity of capital stifled the enterprise of the peasants<sup>15</sup>. Being a person of deep religious faith and conservative political principles, Raiffeissen was equally perturbed by the atomisation of rural society through the influx of individualistic and acquisitive values. He consequently looked for means to improve the moral and material life of the peasant. Raiffeissen discovered a remedy for the ills affecting rural society in credit associations run by the cultivators on their own initiative for helping each other in times of distress, and for financing schemes of improvement in normal seasons. The most striking feature of the credit societies or village banks launched by Raiffeissen was the

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C.R. Fay, Co-operation At Home And Abroad, (London, 1948), Vol. I, pp. 19, and 42-50.



non-acquisitive principle which inspired their conception, and the co-operative spirit which guided their day-to-day operations. The village banks started from very humble beginnings. The peasants of a village, endowed neither with worldly sophistication nor with an abundance of capital, would pool their resources to form a credit society with unlimited liability. This society would then borrow capital from all available sources, and would advance loans to industrious and enterprising cultivators to enable them to carry out schemes of improvement in their holdings. The success of Raiffeissen societies did not stem from the business acumen of the peasants who managed them, but was a result of the intimate knowledge they possessed of their fellow villagers, and the restraint which the principle of unlimited liability imposed on their financial transactions. Raiffeissen societies flourished in Germany despite initial hostility by the State, and they were responsible for bringing about a striking change in the conditions of life in rural society:

You should go into the valley of the Rhine [observed a British disciple of Raiffeissen] where the Raiffeissen Banks have been longest at work and observe to what extent homes have been made habitable and comfortable; how culture has been improved...; how the small peasant can now buy his implements and seeds of the best quality at the cheaper wholesale prices, and yet...at six



months credit; you should see how small industry and trade have developed, how the usurer, once all powerful, has been driven out of the fold, and these once poor men have become small capitalists. One is afraid of falling into strain of rhapsody in describing all these results.<sup>16</sup>

Into the valley of the Rhine went Sir Frederick Nicholson, a Madras civilian, to observe Raiffeissen societies in action, and to draw appropriate lessons for the rural problem in India. The result of Nicholson's inquiries was an encyclopaedic Report Regarding The Possibility Of Introducing Land And Agricultural Banks Into The Presidency Of Madras which constitutes the inspiration behind the co-operative movement in India. In his Report Nicholson laid emphasis on two points: the close resemblance between the peasant societies of Germany and India; and the inability of Agricultural Banks (of the type proposed by the Poona sowcars in 1882) to provide credit for small cultivators as opposed to large landholders and farmers working on capitalist lines. When Raiffeissen started his movement in the middle of the nineteenth century, the condition of the rural classes in Germany was in no way different from that of the Indian cultivators. Like the ryot, the German peasant was

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H.W. Wolff as quoted in F.A. Nicholson, Report Regarding The Possibility Of Introducing Land And Agricultural Banks Into The Madras Presidency, (Madras 1898), I, p. 146. This Report is henceforth referred to as Nicholson's Report on Co-operation.

ignorant, poor and opposed to change; he held land in small and scattered patches; he was exploited by the usurers, incapable of any sustained effort to improve his lot, and both unable and unwilling to apply techniques which had revolutionised agriculture elsewhere. As many as 87 per cent of the peasants in Germany owned fields less than 25 acres in extent. The Agricultural Banks instituted by the German State left this vast mass of peasants completely untouched, partly because of the suspicion with which the peasants looked at these institutions, but primarily because of the reluctance of the Banks to undertake the risk involved in extending credit to hundreds upon thousands of small peasants.

At the time Nicholson instituted his inquiries two rival and conflicting systems of co-operation had developed in Germany, both of which sought to inculcate self-confidence and thrift among the peasants and the urban working classes, and to help them improve their conditions of existence<sup>17</sup>. The Village Banks started by Raiffeissen ran along non-acquisitive lines, and they were as much concerned with the spiritual as they were with the material well-being of the peasants. The inspiration behind them was conservative and clerical, and they sought to protect rural society from

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<sup>17</sup>  
See Editorial in The Pioneer dated 12 November 1903.

the influx of acquisitive values, and from the impact of an encroaching commercial civilisation. Raiffeissen secured his objectives by confining the operations of a Bank to a single village, where all the cultivators knew each other intimately; by enforcing the principle of unlimited liability, which inhibited the development of a business ethic; by keeping the share capital to a low figure, and enforcing a low rate of dividends, which kept in check any latent acquisitive tendencies; and finally, by granting long term loans which were necessary to enable the peasants to invest what they had borrowed in the development of their holdings.

Totally different in spirit were the credit societies started by Schulze-Delitsch, who subscribed to radical and anti-clerical views, and who tried to promote rather than to inhibit the growth of an acquisitive instinct in those who participated in co-operation. Like Raiffeissen, Schulze-Delitsch had an enduring faith in co-operation, and he believed that progress could be achieved only when the weakness of the isolated individual had been replaced by the strength and cohesion of disciplined groups. But the belief in co-operation formed a point of departure for these two movements. A Schulze-Delitsch society had little in common with a Raiffeissen Bank. It did not confine its activities to a closed area; it did not impose any limit on the share



capital or the dividend paid to the shareholders; and being on the lookout for quick returns, it advanced loans for small periods of time only. Because of these differences, Schulze-Delitsch societies were popular with the artisans and the working classes who lived in towns and cities, while Raiffeissen societies endeared themselves to the peasants who lived in a world of traditional values.

Since he was concerned with a peasant society, and because he was engaged in the task of restoring a social fabric which had been undermined by individualism and acquisitiveness, Nicholson had little hesitation in selecting Raiffeissen Banks as the expression of the co-operative movement most apposite to India<sup>18</sup>. The problem of rural finance, he pointed out, could not be solved by Agricultural Banks managed by the sowcars under State patronage; its solution lay in Village Banks run by the cultivators on co-operative and non-acquisitive lines. A Raiffeissen society confined its operations to a single village with whose affairs its members were thoroughly conversant. It also accepted unlimited liability for its financial dealings. For these reasons, a village bank was able to inspire confidence among the urban sowcars, and to persuade them to subscribe to its

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Vide Nicholson's Report on Co-operation, I, pp. 370-80.



working capital in the form of interest bearing deposits. A Raiffeissen society possessed a number of other advantages over Agricultural Banks and Schulze-Delitsch societies. Its intimate knowledge of its clients ruled out the possibility of spurious loans; its simple methods of procedure suited the unsophisticated peasants; and it could act as a useful brake on social ostentation, and on expenditure which was wasteful and not productive of any benefits.

Yet his enthusiasm for co-operation did not blind Nicholson to the difficulties which Village Banks would face in India. The atomisation of rural society by the advocates of reform had made the peasants incapable of concerted action, and suspicious of attempts to organise them or to channelise their activities along collective lines. The situation was further aggravated by the poverty of the cultivators, and the hostility with which the sowcar was bound to view the movement. It would therefore be necessary, Nicholson pointed out, to extend State assistance in the form of capital and leadership to the co-operative movement in the initial stages. But although the difficulties confronting co-operation in India were considerable, there was no reason for pessimism. The pioneers of the movement had faced, and had successfully carried out, a far more difficult task in Germany. For in the ultimate analysis the problem could be

reduced to human dimensions, and it was a challenge to Indian society, and to those who considered themselves to be its natural leaders:

What is really wanted [Nicholson noted in conclusion] is the advent of men of zeal, enthusiasm, devotion and perseverance who will take up the western ideas and methods, and, by personal labour, solve the difficulties of the problems, not on paper, but in actual practice; the philanthropic reformer of the East must sit down in the villages as did their prototypes of the West, and must then establish the petty societies which, as in Europe, shall contain the germs and promise of infinite potentialities. There can be no higher honour for any man than to achieve the role of... the Raiffeissen of India...<sup>19</sup>

Implicit in Nicholson's advocacy of co-operation, and his support of village banks on the Raiffeissen model, lay a conservative bias and a social vision which repudiated the values of the proponents of reform in India. Inspired to pursue measures of reform by Utilitarian ideals and the Utilitarian approach to social change, radical administrators had based their policy on the proclivities of the individual rather than organised social groups, and had attempted to create a rational and an acquisitive environment in order to persuade the peasant to exploit the opportunities open to him under British rule to build for himself a position of increasing material prosperity. Co-operation, on the other

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<sup>19</sup>

Ibid., I, p. 25.

hand, was based on a collective rather than an individualistic view of social action; and on notions of Christian brotherhood and mutual assistance rather than on acquisition and rational economic behaviour. It consequently sought to cushion peasant societies from the impact of a commercial ethic and a rational social order:

The ideal which the founders of the co-operative movement had before them [pointed out Marshall] was that of regenerating the world by restraining the force of competition and substituting for it brotherly trust and association. They saw that under the sway of competition much of men's energy is wasted on the endeavour to overreach one another. They saw...the seller striving to give as little and that of as poor a quality as he could. And they saw the buyer always trying to take advantage of the seller's necessity...The "Co-operative Faith" ...(is) that these evils can be in a great measure removed by that spirit of brotherly love and openness, which though undeveloped, is yet latent in man's nature. It looks forward to a time when man ...shall think of promoting the general welfare as much as promoting his own interests...<sup>20</sup>

The conservative implications of Raiffeissen Banks for rural society were seen with great clarity by H. Duperne, a revenue official of the North-Western Provinces, who shares with Nicholson the distinction of being one of the founding fathers of co-operation in India. While Nicholson had focussed his attention on the problem of rural credit, and



stressed the ability of Raiffeissen societies to supply the ryot with capital without reducing him to a state of serfdom, Dupernex concerned himself with the effect of co-operation on the structure of rural society, and the values which shaped the peasant's style of life<sup>21</sup>.

What struck Dupernex as highly significant was the close resemblance between the co-operative societies of Raiffeissen, and the village communities which had flourished in Maharashtra before the British take-over. The key to social organisation in the traditional village community was the intimate association of the co-proprietary group of the village; in co-operation, the members of a village society were held together by ties that were equally close. What gave the village community its unique character was joint responsibility for the land-tax, since the more prosperous cultivators were thereby impelled to stimulate their less fortunate fellows to greater efforts: similarly, the principle of unlimited liability encouraged the more affluent members of a Village Bank to keep a close watch on the affairs of their poorer associates. But the most important similarity between co-operative societies and the village community was a common approach towards acquisition and the

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Ibid., pp. 69-70.



profit motive. Through combination the members of a village community gained a security which they could not obtain otherwise. But this security was obtained through subordinating their personal interests to the interests of the village as a whole. Thus a co-sharer would never dream of abandoning his hereditary association for the sake of rack-renting an unfortunate neighbour, since the village community was based on the subordination of individual gain to the principle of association. Co-operative societies demanded similar sacrifices of their members, and co-operation was equally emphatic on the contradiction between individual gain and collective welfare:

The two things [Dupernex pointed out] are incompatible. Once the idea of gain is allowed to obtain a footing, its ultimate predominance is inevitable, and its predominance entails the triumph of individualism over mutuality...Experience teaches that the only way to safeguard the interests of the community...is by limiting the amount of dividend, or better still by abolishing it altogether. Profit and individualism are interchangeable terms. The desirability of eliminating profits as far as possible is apparent when it is borne in mind that where the individual is strong enough to stand alone, he should have no difficulty in obtaining a suitable reward for his efforts; but as the combination of persons into an association is for the express object of obtaining benefits which they could not obtain singly, it ought to be regarded as an inconsistency for members to seek to appropriate to themselves profits which rightly belong to the

community as they are gained by the community and not be individual members.<sup>22</sup>

As conceived by Nicholson and Dupernex, therefore, co-operation aimed at the total regeneration of rural society rather than the simple restoration of the flow of urban credit to the ryots in the village. They believed that the growth of Raiffeissen societies would check the atomisation of rural society, inhibit the spread of the acquisitive spirit, and retard the development of individualism. All these qualities had been generated in rural society by the application of Utilitarian notions of law and administration to the problems of rural social organisation, and they had created conflict and tension within the villages of Maharashtra. It was to mitigate this tension that the advocates of co-operation proposed to substitute a corporate and non-acquisitive community for a rational and acquisitive society.

#### The Co-operative Credit Societies Act of 1904

Since co-operation along the lines advocated by Raiffeissen sought to organise village society on principles so different from those which had hitherto formed the basis

of the rural social order under British rule, official reaction to Nicholson's recommendations was one of scepticism concerning the possibility of establishing Village Banks; and reservations were expressed regarding the possible consequences of the non-acquisitive climate which they would generate, and under which alone they could flourish<sup>23</sup>. What made Nicholson's proposals particularly vulnerable was his admission that Village Banks in India would in the first instance have to be supported by the State with financial assistance. The Madras Government, which had deputed Nicholson to study the Raiffeissen movement in Europe, not only denied the existence of acute indebtedness in its territories, but it also pointed out that to float Village Banks with official support was to destroy the fundamental objectives of co-operation. Raiffeissen had launched the movement to create self-reliance, thrift and industry among peasants who had despaired of improving their lot. A spontaneous growth of Village Banks would revive the peasant's faith in himself, and it would demonstrate to the rest of the world his ability to strive for his moral and material improvement. However, if the banks were floated with official assistance,

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NAI. Resolution of the Madras Board of Revenue on Nicholson's Report dated 6 November 1896: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 7/10, November 1900.



the cultivators would gain little apart from access to a new source of credit. Although such a facility was not to be lightly discounted, Raiffeissen had aimed at far more than the mere organisation of rural credit. What he had emphasised was 'educative credit...based not on subventions from the State, but on the thrift and prudence of the cultivators...' Village societies which were launched on local initiative would, according to Raiffeissen, bring about a revolution in the outlook of the peasants; and they would set in motion a complete transformation in the social climate of rural society. Since financial assistance from the State would undermine the objectives of Raiffeissen societies, the Madras Government had 'no hesitation' in turning down Nicholson's proposal for officially sponsored Village Banks<sup>24</sup>.

However, the seriousness of the rural problem and the political implications of a disaffected peasantry prevented the Supreme Government at Calcutta from sharing the complacency of the Madras Government, particularly in view of the pressure that was being brought to bear on the Secretary of State for India by the 'Indian lobby' for the adoption of

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NAI. Order in Council by the Madras Government dated 13 October 1899: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A. Procs. No. 7/10, November 1900.



measures to remedy the deteriorating economic conditions in the country<sup>25</sup>. In reviewing the Madras Government's resolution on the Nicholson Report, therefore, T.W. Holderness, the Secretary of the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, expressed regret at the 'cynical and unsocial' manner in which the Madras Government had reacted to a proposal which embraced far reaching possibilities. The Madras Government, Holderness pointed out, appeared to see no difference between the assistance demanded by the Poona sowcars in the 1880s, and the help which the Village Banks would require for an initial period. In France and Germany, where urban credit was efficiently organised, the principle of unlimited liability had from the very outset established the credit of the Raiffeissen societies, and had encouraged urban credit institutions to advance money to the village societies without any hesitation. But in India the situation was different, since urban credit was not well organised. Dupernex, Holderness stated, had proposed the floating of Banks in district towns and provincial capitals to facilitate the flow of urban credit to the ryots. His suggestions deserved serious

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NAI. Minute by E. Maconochie, Under-Secretary in the Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture dated 22 January 1900: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A. Procs. No. 7/10, November 1900.

consideration, and pointed to a conceivable way out of the dilemma. Alternatively, it was possible for the State to step in with its financial resources, and to extend assistance to the village credit associations<sup>26</sup>.

The desultory exchanges between the Governments of Calcutta and Madras were transformed into a creative dialogue through the intervention of Sir Edward Law, the Finance Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, who believed that co-operation along the lines advocated by Raiffeissen could do a lot to improve the conditions of village society in India<sup>27</sup>. In December 1900, a Committee comprising Nicholson, Dupernex, Holderness and Law met in Calcutta to examine the possibilities of establishing co-operative societies in India. After considering the avenues open for financing the ryots, the Law Committee came to the conclusion that

village associations constituted as mutual-Credit Associations, somewhat on the lines and with the objects of Raiffeissen Mutual Credit Associations, would generally be the most useful instruments of rural credit, since these or similar societies

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NAI. Note by T.W. Holderness, Secretary to the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, dated 28 August 1900: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs., No. 7/10, November 1900.

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NAI. Note by E.F.G. Law, Finance Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, dated 26 September 1900: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 7/10, November 1900.

satisfy the several postulates of small, continuous, village credit, while developing conditions, habits and qualities essential to rural stability and progress.<sup>28</sup>

The financing of the proposed village societies was a question which the Committee thought ought to be tackled on two fronts. On the one hand, every encouragement ought to be given to the 'well-to-do, influential and educated' urban classes to form banks which would keep the village societies supplied with money; on the other, the State should extend pecuniary assistance and advice on problems of organisation to the credit societies in the initial stages. Because of the differences in social and economic conditions between the ryotwari tracts of Maharashtra, the 'joint' villages of the North-Western Provinces, and the permanently settled estates of Bengal, it was impossible for the Central Government to set down the form which State encouragement could assume with advantage in different parts of the country. The Law Committee, therefore, focussed its attention on broad questions of principle, and left it to the Local Governments to decide how these principles were to be applied in their territories<sup>29</sup>.

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NAI. Resolution of the Law Committee dated 19 December 1900: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 11/24, November 1901.

<sup>29</sup>

NAI. Circular letter to the various Provincial Governments



Despite the enthusiasm which the prospect of a rural society revitalised through co-operation had aroused at Calcutta, the Bombay Government was doubtful whether it was at all possible to launch Village Banks in Maharashtra<sup>30</sup>. Its scepticism stemmed from an appraisal of social and economic conditions in the Bombay territories. The atomisation of rural society resulting from the ryotwari system had weakened the ties of association among the ryots, and had made it difficult for them to co-operate with each other for a common objective. It had also reduced the power and the prestige of the natural leaders of village society. The problems arising out of individualism and the decay of social cohesion were reinforced by the poverty of the peasantry, and the economic cleavages which the pursuit of rational economic policies had introduced in the village community. The question which the advocates of co-operation would have to ask themselves, the Survey Commissioner of Bombay pointed

by J. Fuller, Secretary to the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, dated 5 November 1901: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 1/10, November 1901.  
30

NAI. J.W.P. Muir-Mackenzie, Secretary to the Bombay Government, to Government of India dated 24 May 1901: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 1/10, November 1901. Also see Letter from the Collector of Ahmednagar to the Commissioner of the Central Division dated 25 March 1901 in ibid.



out, was how the ryot could be freed of his burden of debt, and how he could rise from a state of virtual serfdom to the independent ownership of his ancestral lands<sup>31</sup>. The proponents of Raiffeissen societies had assumed that the ryot possessed a small reserve of surplus capital, and that his financial dealings with the vani were those of an unencumbered individual. Neither of these assumptions was true for Maharashtra. The majority of the ryots had no reserves of capital, and their poverty made them reckless in their dealings with the moneylender, so that they were invariably encumbered with a very heavy burden of debt. It was difficult to see how Village Banks could be started in such a peasant community. And if they were launched with official backing, they could hardly be expected to break through the dominance which the vanis exercised over the cultivators.

The only group of cultivators which would benefit from Raiffeissen societies, the Survey Commissioner pointed out, was a small class of 'rich' peasants, whose prosperity was a consequence of the economic policies pursued by the British Government, and whose affluence was ensured by the peaceful conditions of British rule. This small class of peasants,

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NAI. Survey Commissioner, Bombay to Bombay Government dated 2 April 1901: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 1/10, November 1901.

the 'creme de la creme' of the cultivating community, alone had the capital to float credit associations; and it alone possessed the intelligence and the initiative required to administer them once they had been organised. Since the idea of 'joint' responsibility in the villages of Maharashtra had been expressly repudiated by the ryotwari system, it was difficult to see how the rich peasants could be persuaded to run credit associations in the true spirit of co-operation, and to accept responsibility for loans contracted to assist their less fortunate fellow villagers. It was far more likely that the credit associations would refuse to accept any obligations towards the poor peasants, and that their financial dealings would be confined to the more prosperous ryots. All the support, financial and organisational, which the State would extend to the Village Banks would consequently increase the prosperity of those ryots who were least in need of any assistance:

If distressed agriculturists [the Survey Commissioner concluded] could be given a method of escaping from the usurer's hands, and village associations were started to prevent them from falling back, then Government would not only be justified but morally bound, to go to any length consistent with prudence in forming the associations, but it does not appear to be quite a proper use of public money to lend it to...(rich peasants) merely to enable them to obtain loans at a lower rate of interest than at present in the off chance that thrift and self-help may thereby be stimulated. It is even conceivable that the use

of Government money may have the effect of discouraging these virtues.<sup>32</sup>

However, the scepticism of the Survey Commissioner was not shared by officers who administered the more prosperous districts of Maharashtra, where the ryots' burden of debt was not beyond redemption, and where a wider section of the peasants could form the base of the Village Banks. The villages around Poona, for instance, enjoyed the advantages of a flourishing urban market, and a good system of communications for the transport of agricultural surpluses; they could also depend upon schemes of irrigation which protected their crops from the vagaries of the weather. J. McNeill, the Collector of Poona, was impressed by the possibilities held out by Raiffeissen societies, and he believed that 'the Poona district could be a hopeful field for an experiment in the formation of agricultural banks on co-operative lines'<sup>33</sup>. The ryots of Poona district, McNeill observed, were burdened with debt like ryots all over the Deccan; but there were some villages with a significant number of prosperous cultivators who could be persuaded to start Village Banks. Of course,

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<sup>32</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>

NAI. J. McNeill, Collector of Poona, to Commissioner, Central Division, dated 26 March 1901: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 1/10, November 1901.



the management and financing of such societies would present difficulties. But if the Raiffeissen model was stretched to admit in the village societies 'landowners of some standing, (and) rich ryots, vakils and the higher government servants', then the Village Banks would be greatly strengthened.

All these points were impressed upon McNeill in the course of discussions with the principal cultivators of Chakan, 'a large and prosperous village in the Khed taluka'. Once the objectives of co-operation were outlined before the ryots of Chakan, and they were apprised of the extent to which the State would assist them, they exhibited considerable enthusiasm for the scheme. They also assured McNeill that they could be trusted to be honest and punctual in their financial dealings with a credit association that belonged to the village collectively. However, the initiative for any scheme of improvement had rested for so long on individuals, and on institutions, outside the village that the selection of a panch (managing committee) would present difficulties; and the ryots 'doubted if a capable panch to manage the working of the Associations would be found in the village alone'<sup>34</sup>. But this was precisely where official guidance could be most effective, and provide the leadership which was



lacking in the village, and could be developed only after the movement had worked successfully for some time:

Official guidance [McNeill pointed out] is necessary if village banks are to be widely instituted. Perhaps official guidance might be adequately supplied by requiring that the Assistant Collector or the Mamlatadar should be members of the managing body of any village banking association assisted by Government capital... Their position as members of the managing body would enable them to examine the workings of the bank and to put a timely check on any irregularities... A further advantage... would be that they could initiate unpleasant measures against defaulters and relieve honest but weak members of the panch of the odium of such measures. In the early stages of village banks neither the associates nor the managers might have the courage of their convictions, but it would not be unreasonable to hope that a sense of responsibility and of mutual support will grow...<sup>35</sup>

Despite the optimism of McNeill, who believed in the regeneration of rural society through co-operation, and who looked upon the movement as a challenge to the British Government, and a test of its faith in a prosperous peasant society, the poverty of the Deccan ryot, and the disastrous impact of the legislation of reform on the traditional values and leaders of the village, combined to make most District Officers sceptical of the success of Raiffeissen banks. A.R. Bonus, the Collector of Nasik, spoke for such officials when he observed that the prospect of the Deccan

ryots attaining prosperity through association and self-help reminded him 'of those islanders who are said to have made a living by taking in one another's washings...'<sup>36</sup> The Bombay Government's reply to the Calcutta Government on the question of co-operation was, therefore, couched in the language of despair rather than in the language of hope. The crux of the issue hinged on the individualism and the acquisitiveness which had been deliberately fostered in rural society by the Utilitarian policy of reform. While these reforms had been carried out on the basis of European experience, it was seldom borne in mind that the Deccan ryot lacked the sophistication which enabled the European peasant to strive for individual gain without depriving himself of benefits which he could not obtain through individual effort. For instance, individualism had taken so deep a root in the villages of the Deccan that it was impossible to rely on repairs being done to embankments and irrigation channels for which the villagers were traditionally responsible. The social climate of Maharashtra had deteriorated to an extent where the cultivators of a village regarded themselves as rivals and antagonists rather than as partners in a joint

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BA (Bombay State Archives). Letter from Collector of Nasik to the Commissioner of the Central Division dated 24 December 1901: R.D., Vol. 22 of 1902.

enterprise. 'The burden of the reports from all parts of the Presidency is that there is seldom or never found such a spirit among the rural communities as will make co-operative credit societies possible', stated the Bombay Government<sup>37</sup>. It would take a long time before the benefits of co-operation could be explained to such peasants, and unless this was done, it was futile to expect the prosperous cultivators to interest themselves in the fate of the poor peasants.

Although British administrative officers were far more optimistic about the prospects of Raiffeissen societies in regions like the North-Western Provinces, where the land revenue system had preserved the collective quality of rural social organisation, the challenge posed by co-operation appeared to most of them to be far too formidable to be easily overcome. Even Sir Daniel Ibbetson, who piloted the bill which launched co-operation in India, confessed that he was 'not too sanguine' about the success of Village Banks. 'The idea of co-operation for the purpose of mutual help...(was) familiar to the people of India...' Ibbetson pointed out. '(But) the whole tendency of our rule has been to discourage such action...However, we are bound to give the experiment

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NAI. Letter to the Government of India dated 12 August 1902: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs., No. 1/14, September 1903.



every encouragement and a fair trial.'<sup>38</sup> For belief in co-operation was an expression of confidence in the ryot's capacity to rise above selfish considerations, and to improve through his personal efforts the moral and material state of rural society.

The Bill which sought to launch co-operation in India was therefore an act of faith in the peasant and his style of life. As the Government of India pointed out in a despatch to the Secretary of State for India, the principal object of the legislation was to encourage thrift and co-operation among ryots of 'limited means' through the establishment of Raiffeissen societies<sup>39</sup>. Government was aware of the fact that urban societies organised along similar lines could help the poor artisans, or facilitate the flow of capital to the countryside. But its principal concern lay in the village; and its sympathies were for the poor peasant. Government was anxious to ensure that the facilities which it extended to the poor peasants were not exploited by the prosperous cultivators. For this reason rural societies had to

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NAI. Minute by Sir Daniel Ibbetson dated 29 January 1902: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs. No. 1/14, September 1903.

<sup>39</sup>

NAI. Despatch to Secretary of State for India dated 3 September 1903: Dept. of Revenue and Agriculture (Rev. Branch), A Procs., No. 1/14, September 1903.



be organised on the principle of unlimited liability, since the obligations imposed by that principle would frighten away the rich peasants from the Village Banks.

In its emphasis on the prosperity of the village community rather than the individual cultivator, and in its concern for the poor as against the rich peasant, the Act sponsored by the Government of India sought to develop co-operation along the lines mapped out by Raiffeissen. Thus in addition to the principle of unlimited liability, it was proposed that no dividends were to be paid out of the profits of a rural society, and the number of shares in a bank held by a single individual was to be limited, in order to prevent control over its activities from flowing into the hands of a rich vani, or a prosperous peasant. Besides, since the traditional leaders of rural society had been deprived of their positions of dominance under British rule, the Government refused to entrust the promotion of Raiffeissen societies to the initiative of the peasants. Instead, provision was made for the appointment of a Special Officer (the Registrar of Co-operative Societies) in each province who was expected to guide and control co-operative societies, particularly in the early stages of development. Again, in view of the difficulty in creating confidence in the credit of the village banks from the very

outset, pecuniary assistance to these banks was recognised as an essential part of the Government's responsibility in launching the movement. In recommending financial assistance the Government was aware of the danger of undermining the principles of thrift and self-help, but it preferred a calculated risk to the consequences of inaction, since it believed that its 'advances will have a value beyond their mere use as capital, since they will be an earnest of the intensity of the government's interest in the movement, and will stimulate the interest and self-help which should be a condition precedent to this grant...'<sup>40</sup>

Implicit in the concern for rural prosperity and for rural social values were questions relating to the stability of British rule, and the maintenance of British authority over India. These questions formed the background to the debate on co-operation, and they influenced the attitude of the British administrators towards the movement. The Utilitarian attempt to base British rule on the prosperity of affluent peasants had proved abortive because of the imbalance which the ryotwari system of land-revenue had created in the distribution of power in the village, and the encouragement it had given to the pretensions of the vanis at the cost of

the cultivators. The upsurge of 1875 revealed how dangerous a situation the individualism and the acquisitiveness encouraged by the advocates of reform had created in the villages of the Deccan. The most ominous feature of the disturbances of 1875 (from the British standpoint) was the 'no tax' campaign of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in association with the traditional landed families. For the alliance between the westernised and the traditional elite exploited peasant discontent to threaten the very foundations of British authority in India. The prevention of a combination between the peasantry and the westernised elite was an important reason behind legislation like the Relief Act of 1879, and the Co-operative Credit Societies Act of 1904, which sought to protect the interests of the ryots, and to create the conditions for prosperity in rural society. Co-operation was not only the thin edge of a wedge between the peasants and the urban elites who were aspiring for positions of leadership; it was also regarded as a measure that would oblige these elites either to prove their capacity for leadership through participation in a creative process, or to renounce their political ambitions. In the Bombay Council, for instance, F.S.P. Lely, the Commissioner of the Northern Division, turned upon the representatives of new Maharashtra to ask why a Raiffeissen had not risen



from their ranks. To Lely it appeared that the westernised elite 'have failed in their duty to their country in this its particular need. (For) to stir up the dreary deadness of a single village where most of the population hung upon the Government in bad times and in good times upon the sowcar...would be to do more service to their country, which I know they love, than to make twenty speeches however eloquent and however convincing...'<sup>41</sup> Curzon expressed a similar sentiment in the Imperial Legislative Council, when referring to the embarrassed praise which Gokhale had showered on the Government for taking the initiative in founding Village Banks, he voiced his 'pleasure to find today that we (i.e. the Government and its nationalist critics) are all so unanimous, and that in the contemplation of this measure the lion had lain down with the lamb'<sup>42</sup>.

#### Co-operation and Social Structure in Maharashtra

But for J. McNeill, the first Registrar of Co-operative Societies in Bombay, the task of educating the ryots was

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Proceedings of the Bombay Council, (Bombay 1904), Vol. XL: Speech by F.S.P. Lely, Commissioner of the Northern Division, dated 21 April, 1902.

<sup>42</sup>

NAI. Papers Relating to Act X of 1904, Vol. I: Procs. of the Governor-General's Council dated 23 October 1903.



far more important than that of hurling reproaches on the urban elites for their failure to anticipate Raiffeissen in India. McNeill could hardly have embarked upon his task in an optimistic frame of mind, because the poverty of the Deccan ryots, and the atomisation of rural society through the ryotwari system, led most administrative officers to look upon the prospects of co-operation in Maharashtra with deep pessimism. Yet several factors combined to make a qualified success of co-operation in Maharashtra. One reason behind this was the availability of urban capital which could be invested in agriculture once a suitable channel for its flow into the villages had been devised. Besides, urban castes amongst whom traditional ties and habits of association remained strong formed a receptive social base for co-operative societies in the cities. Atomisation and poverty in the villages were facts which successive Registrars had to learn to live with; and to gradually vanquish. But with patience and skill it was possible to organise the ryots into village societies which, with State patronage and support from urban capital, were able to do something to ameliorate conditions in rural society. Of course, as co-operation gained momentum the values and structure of society in Maharashtra imposed its logic on the movement; and principles more in keeping with the

requirements of the ryot in the village, or the artisan in the city, were substituted for the ideals of 'non-acquisition' and 'Christian brotherhood' through which Nicholson and Dupernex had hoped to refashion rural society.

The first year which McNeill spent in propagating co-operation in the villages of the Deccan did not produce any spectacular results. But it prepared useful ground for the future, and convinced him that although rural society lacked men of initiative who could be trusted to run Village Banks on their own, habits of association and collective endeavour had not toally died out among the cultivators<sup>43</sup>. McNeill was agreeably surprised to find that the ryots were quick to grasp the advantages of co-operation, even though it rested on principles outside their social experience. In the absence of any indigenous leadership the ryots were willing to be guided and controlled by the Registrar, so long as they were able to decide the membership of the credit societies, and to grant or refuse loans to the cultivators. What struck McNeill as a particularly hopeful feature was the cheerful acceptance of the principle of unlimited liability

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43

Annual Report Relating To The Establishment Of Co-operative Credit Societies In The Bombay Presidency For 1905 by J. McNeill, Registrar of Co-operative Societies, dated 29 September 1905. Henceforth referred to as Annual Report of Co-operative Societies.

by the ryots. He had been apprehensive that insistence on unlimited liability would prevent prosperous peasants from participating in village associations, and would deny the associations of the capital and leadership that was available in the villages. But in

the villages which I have visited [McNeill pointed out] the ordinary agriculturist accepts unlimited liability as natural. I propose to register no rural society in which the liability is to be limited unless careful inquiry shows that it is impossible to organise a society on the basis of unlimited liability. Apart from the fact that societies with unlimited liability are more genuinely co-operative, the committee are more likely to exercise care in granting loans and the whole body of members are more interested in preventing default...<sup>44</sup>

From the outset the credit associations which McNeill set up in the villages of the Deccan faced the problem of finding sufficient capital to satisfy the needs of the ryots. Since the village societies were meant to advance the interests of the poor peasants, their membership fee was deliberately kept very low, and the bulk of the capital was raised by taking fixed deposits from the prosperous cultivators of the village at an interest of  $6\frac{1}{4}$  per cent. Deposits by individual cultivators ranged from Rs.5 to Rs.300;

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44

Annual Report Relating To The Establishment Of Co-operative Credit Societies In The Bombay Presidency For 1905 by J. McNeill, Registrar of Co-operative Societies, dated 29 September 1905.



and most societies were able to raise between Rs.500 to Rs.2,000 in this fashion. The capital thus raised was disbursed in loans to needy and enterprising cultivators at an interest of  $9\frac{3}{4}$  per cent, and the profits which the societies made through such transactoons were transferred to a reserve fund<sup>45</sup>.

Though the growth of rural credit associations was painstakingly slow until the organisation of 'feeder' societies in the towns opened a new source of capital to the Village Banks, the educative value of the movement was significant even when it was confined to a few prosperous villages. As G.V. Joglekar, the officiating Registrar in 1908, pointed out in an annual Report, to receive a transcript of 'Proceedings in Committee' from some remote society of ryots couched in terms like 'first resolution', or 'voted to the chair', or 'carried unanimously', gave some indication of the changes that would transform rural society once the movement gained momentum:

Let us visit Hulkoti [ran Joglekar's Report], just by Gadag, and see what its society can tell us. We are met by the Patel, Mr Shiddangowda, and told he is the chairman. With him are several others, more or less leaders too; and with them is the schoolmaster, who, we are told, is the Society's Secretary. We find that their capital stands at Rs.10,500, of which Rs.4,000...is entirely devoted



to redemption of old debts...We find they are charging  $9\frac{3}{8}$  per cent on loans to members, and giving  $6\frac{1}{4}$  per cent on fixed deposits. We think at once of investing in the paying "deposits", but are told that such a privilege is reserved as a rule for "members only!" What will they give then for a loan? They look at their books and find only five demands outstanding; just at present, for loans from members, they have Rs.175 odd at hand in the Post Office, instalments to the amount of Rs.872 are due next month, so that altogether they have no immediate need of our money... Again we are disappointed. But then, remember that we are dealing with one of the best...Rural Societies in the Presidency...We ask about their membership, and find there are 123 members. The liability is unlimited...and they are together more like a little family, a village within a village, ruled by a panch, then a Company established by Law...<sup>46</sup>

However, the 'best' rural society in Maharashtra can hardly convey any adequate impression of the difficulties which confronted rural banks in the poorer villages. By 1907, the Registrar had launched 48 rural credit associations. But the precarious margin which separated a majority of these societies from liquidation, and the ingenious methods which the ryots devised to obtain loans for their capital-starved holdings, reflected the extent to which the vanis still featured in the rural economy, and the grip of traditional values on the peasants. Because of the paucity of capital, and high rates of interest, it was far more difficult to launch credit societies in the central districts of

Maharashtra than it was in the Northern, or in the Southern, districts. But even in the more prosperous tracts, the obstacles in the spread of the co-operative movement were formidable. Ryots frequently borrowed money from the vanis and deposited it in the Village Banks merely to establish their credit, and to create the good will necessary for raising a large loan. Besides, since it was impossible for the credit societies to accommodate the ryot whenever he required an advance, his dependence upon the vani was diminished, but was not wholly eliminated by the new credit institutions. Finally, the number of occasions on which a ryot returned a loan, only to be advanced a similar sum shortly afterwards, indicated that the cultivators who ran the Village Banks took a cavalier view of the ethics of co-operation, and of the virtues of thrift and prudence which the movement was meant to inculcate in the ryots<sup>47</sup>.

The breakthrough for co-operation in Maharashtra came with the organisation of credit societies in the urban areas. Two factors made this breakthrough possible. First, the existence of sophisticated and cohesive castes, which were organised for collective action, and which took to acquisitive co-operation on the lines advocated by Schulze-Delitsch

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Annual Report of Co-operative Societies for 1907.

with a minimum of persuasion. And secondly, the presence in Bombay of sowcars, who for reasons of self-interest and philanthropy, were anxious to invest their capital in agriculture.

The facility with which the institution of caste could be exploited for the promotion of co-operation was forced on the attention of the Bombay Government even before 1904. In Sholapur, for instance, lived a community of weavers, 15,000 in all, who were reduced to destitution by a series of bad harvests in the 1890s, which made deep inroads into the purchasing power of the ryots of the surrounding villages on whom the weavers of Sholapur depended for custom. To alleviate their misery the Sholapur Municipality and a local philanthropist, Mr Veerchand Deepchand, combined to make a grant of Rs.25,000. This grant was used by Mr T.J. Pitre, an enterprising municipal officer, to advance sums of money to the weavers at low rates of interest for the purchase of yarn and other raw material which they required for the production of cloth. Once their financial dependence upon the local moneylenders was eliminated, the Sholapur weavers, who had formerly paid high rates of interest and were obliged to sell their products at low prices, began to thrive and prosper in a remarkable fashion. The success of his scheme encouraged Pitre to propose the



institution of a 'Weaver's Co-operative Society managed by the panch of the Sholapur Weavers for the benefit of their community under the benevolent supervision of the State'<sup>48</sup>.

Since the urban castes were aware of the advantages of association, and because most of them possessed a high level of sophistication, it was natural for the first urban co-operatives to be organised along caste lines. A pioneering caste co-operative in Bombay was the Shamrao Vithal Society of the Saraswat Brahmins, which was founded in 1907, and which built up a membership of 371, and accumulated capital assets worth at Rs.14,000, in the brief space of two years. In a closely knitted caste like the Saraswat Brahmins the Shamrao Vithal Society was able to do a lot of constructive work, and with a scattered yet cohesive social group for a constituency, it was able to open branches in places like Kawwar, Hubli and Kumta immediately after its inception. 'There is no knowing into what corner of the Presidency or activities of life the Society may not penetrate, on discovering a constituent through whom to preach a practical lesson of co-operation', pointed out the Registrar

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BA. A. Maconochie, Collector of Sholapur to Bombay Government dated 11 August 1904: R.D., Vol. 22 of 1904.



in 1909<sup>49</sup>. Nor did he see any harm in the growth of sectarian societies, which exploited the bonds of caste for the promotion of co-operation. A particularly fruitful field of endeavour for the Registrars were urban castes like the weavers or the chamars, who formed a distinct professional group. While such castes were as easy to organise as the Saraswat Brahmins, the benefits derived from organising them were far more substantial, since the advantages of co-operation could be made to impinge directly on their professional activity. Successive Registrars were not slow in grasping the opportunity which the institution of caste offered to them. In 1907, for instance, out of 30 urban societies in Bombay as many as 22 were caste societies embracing groups like the chamars, the weavers, the Sutar, the Khatiks and the Mahars.

Despite the insight they afford into the strength of caste ties and the structure of urban society, caste societies did not occupy the centre of the stage in the movement, and their strength in numbers can convey a distorted impression of their relevance for co-operation as a whole. As emphasised earlier, while there was a considerable amount of urban capital seeking exploitation in agriculture,

rural societies were starved of capital, and could not make any substantial progress so long as they depended solely upon the more prosperous ryots in the villages for their financial resources. Far more important than caste co-operatives, therefore, were associations called Central Unions, which set about to organise urban capital in order to finance rural societies. Immediately after his appointment as Registrar of Co-operative Societies in Bombay, McNeill met a group of Bombay sowcars headed by a philanthropic financier, Sir Vithaldas D. Thackersey, who were won over to the idea of co-operation, and launched a Central Union for helping Village Banks<sup>50</sup>. Thackersey's Central Union proposed to raise capital through fixed deposits bearing interest at the rate of 6 per cent. This capital was to be channelised to Village Banks through the Registrar, whose advice was to be sought on the solvency and the credit worthiness of the village associations. By 1909, five Central Unions had been launched in the Presidency, each one of them enjoying the patronage of a leading personality. Thus in addition to Sir Vithaldas' Central Union there were: the Broach District Society of Rao Bahadur Motilal Chunilal; the Dhulia Society of Mr K.N. Bhangaonkar; Mr Harlekar's

Southern Maratha Society of Dharwar; and finally, the Sural Credit Union. The Bombay Central Union of Sir Vithaldas was the most substantial of these societies. By 1909 it had loaned Rs.14,000 to eight village associations. More significantly, it was negotiating the institution of a Central Bank with the Government<sup>51</sup>.

For although the Central Unions were able to give considerable assistance to village societies, they did not obviate the need for a more centralised credit institution that would attract all the urban capital awaiting exploitation, and encourage the floating of credit societies in villages which did not possess capital of their own. In focussing attention on the need for such an institution, Vithaldas Samaldas, a leading banker of Bombay, pointed out as early as 1902 to the 'growing...class of capitalists' who desired a higher return on their capital than what Government securities had to offer, but who lacked the acumen to enter into business on their own<sup>52</sup>. Samaldas' scheme for an Agricultural Bank, which would draw its capital from the rich cultivator and the sowcar, failed to arouse any

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Annual Report of Co-operative Societies for 1909.

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BA. L. Samaldas to J. Monteath, Revenue Member of the Bombay Council, dated 2 May 1902: R.D., Vol. 22 of 1902.



enthusiasm in official circles when it was first proposed. But in 1908 he joined hands with Sir Vithaldas to sponsor a scheme for a Central Bank in Bombay<sup>53</sup>. This bank was to commence business with a share capital of Rs.5,00,000; and with reserve powers to extend it to Rs.25,00,000. It would also issue debentures at 4 per cent which would be guaranteed by the State. Finally, the capital at the Bank's disposal was to be used exclusively for making advances to village societies.

While expounding his scheme before a Conference on Co-operation held in Bombay in December 1908, Sir Vithaldas observed that a guarantee on the debentures, and the adoption of commercial principles of management were vital to the success of the proposed Central Bank. The guarantee would inspire public confidence in the Bank until it had justified itself as a viable institution, and the adoption of commercial principles of management would ensure the success of the project. Although the Vithaldas scheme leaned heavily on State assistance, and exploited the profit motive, it received strong support from the Bombay Government as a

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BA. Vide 'Scheme for a Central Financing Society' presented by Sir Vithaldas Thackersey and L. Samaldas at a Co-operative Conference held in Bombay on 15-18 December 1905: R.D., Vol. 69 of 1909.



measure that would facilitate the spread of the co-operative movement<sup>54</sup>. But precisely the reverse view of the scheme was taken by the Supreme Government at Calcutta. Non-acquisition and thrift and prudence were values on which the Supreme Government set great store, and it found the proposal for a Central Bank offensive to all these principles. A guarantee, it pointed out, would foster dependence upon the State instead of encouraging habits of independence; and a guarantee was all the more objectionable when it was meant to support a credit institution based on the profit motive. Besides, financial assistance to any urban bank was hardly necessary. For the Supreme Government was convinced that co-operation had come to stay in India, and that it had aroused that 'interest in commercial and banking circles that it is quite possible that in the early future capital may be forthcoming for its needs without the necessity of any Government guarantee...'<sup>55</sup>

The objections raised by the Supreme Government to a guarantee for the proposed Central Bank were refuted by J. McNeill and C.S. Campbell, the two pioneering Registrars of

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BA. Minute by Sir George Clerk, Governor of Bombay, dated 13 December 1908 and 10 March 1909: R.D., Vol. 60 of 1911.

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BA. Government of India to Bombay Government dated 20 September 1909: R.D., Vol. 60 of 1911.

co-operative societies in Bombay, through arguments which illustrate how the objectives with which co-operation had been launched in India gradually gave way to the practical needs of the situation<sup>56</sup>. As Campbell pointed out, it was absurd to talk of the dangers of State interference when the entire movement owed its genesis to an act of legislature, and when it had been nourished by officers specially appointed to persuade the ryots to organise themselves in credit associations. Equally pointless was the refusal to extend support to a Central Bank because it was based on the profit motive. While it was sure to prove fatal for urban societies, over-emphasis on non-acquisition and mutual assistance could prove disastrous even in the villages, for the ryots who managed Village Banks could thereby be persuaded into adopting too lenient an attitude towards defaulting members. But to hold the profit motive against an urban bank bordered on the ridiculous. It mattered little to what extent the Bank offended abstract principles; the point at issue was how much it would benefit co-operation, and what were the advantages which the peasants would draw from it:

Turning from the abstract to the concrete [McNeill observed], I could cite the case of Hulkoti Village

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BA. Memorandum by J. McNeill dated 24 October 1909 and C.S. Campbell dated 6 November 1909: R.D., Vol. 60 of 1911.

Society...The Society collected about Rs.2,600 from members, borrowed Rs.2,000 from the Bombay Society organised by Sir Vithaldas and others. After a little (more) experience was gained it borrowed Rs.4,000 (more) from the same source to liquidate various debts. It is now flourishing, possessed a considerable reserve, and has done much to familiarise the people of several talukas with the benefits, both moral and material of co-operation. Its borrowings...may be termed... unhealthy. But I do not think that the only result was to teach the people of the village to rely on official aid or Bombay philanthropy. On the contrary, the main lesson learnt was the ease with which ordinary villagers could combine to help themselves and manage their own businesses without reference to officials. They have profited both morally and materially, and they are only at the beginning of the lesson.<sup>57</sup>

With the support they received from the Bombay Government, Sir Vithaldas Thackersey and Lalubhai Samaldas launched the Bombay Central Co-operative Bank in 1911, with a share capital of Rs.7,00,000 subscribed by 911 sowcars. The organisation of the Central Bank was an important landmark in the development of co-operation in Bombay. Because of its abundant capital resources, and the ease with which it could channelise credit to remote villages through a network of district and taluka organisations, village associations were no longer starved of capital, and they had only to come forward with the necessary leadership and enterprise for things



to set moving. So drastically did the Bank alter the financial situation, that the Registrars had henceforth to be on guard against the dangers of facile credit, and to prevent the growth of societies which lacked any momentum of their own, and were not backed by thrifty and industrious cultivators. So extensive, indeed, were the financial resources of the Central Bank that in addition to supporting village societies, it was able to sponsor schemes of debt redemption, and back the cultivation of cash crops in the Poona district. In short, with the institution of the Central Bank, co-operation in Maharashtra came into its own, and spread into the villages as fast as the enterprise of the ryot, and the purse of the sowcar, permitted it to do so<sup>58</sup>.

But the principles which formed the basis of co-operation were a far cry from the non-acquisitive ethic, and the collective quality of social existence, through which Nicholson and Dupernex had hoped to regenerate rural society in India. The emphasis initially placed on Raiffeissen societies, and the importance attached to the absence of the profit motive, reveals that the movement started as a reaction against the individualism, the rationality, and the spirit of competition which had been inculcated in rural society by the



legislation of reform. It is equally obvious that the proponents of co-operation aimed at restoring that balance of power in the village, and that dignity of the peasant's style of life, which had been undermined by the reforms sponsored by administrators subscribing to Utilitarian views. But acquisition had become so important a constituent of the social climate, and to such an extent had the ryot taken over to rational economic behaviour, that it was impossible to run credit associations solely on non-acquisitive lines.

The abandonment of non-acquisition as a guiding principle of rural co-operation led to consequences which had a powerful impact on economic cleavages within the village. In floating mutual aid societies in Germany, Raiffeissen had placed great stress on the organisation of the poor peasants, who comprised the most depressed social group in rural society. Raiffeissen societies were meant primarily for the poor peasants. The more prosperous peasants were discouraged from joining them, because if they did so, they could acquire control over the movement, and exploit it for their ends. In the Deccan, however, it was impossible to exclude the rich peasants from the movement, because the poor peasants were so utterly demoralised by poverty and debt that Village Banks could not be floated on

their resources and initiative alone. However, to include rich peasants in the credit societies was to yield to them a controlling interest in its activities. The control exercised by the Patel and the principal cultivators over the Hulkoti Society, of which we have had a glimpse earlier, was characteristic of credit societies throughout Maharashtra<sup>59</sup>. As a result, the Village Banks supported the rich peasants rather than the poor peasants, and a tendency was built into the structure of rural co-operation which defeated the objectives of the movement in so far as they revolved around the moral and material salvation of the poor peasants.

But whatever be its effect on the distribution of economic power among rich and poor peasants in the village, co-operation reinforced the position of the cultivating community as a whole vis-a-vis the moneylenders. Before the British conquest, the ryot had procured capital from the urban sowcar through the village community, and since he confronted the sowcar with the authority of the village community behind him, the sowcar was unable to establish his dominance over him. By directing the flow of capital through

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Vide discussions in Poona with Dr Kakade of the Servants of India Society, and a rich peasant who was the Vice-President of the Hadapsar Credit Society, the first Village Bank to be founded in Poona district.

the vani, instead of the village community, the ryotwari system robbed the peasant of the strength he derived from association with his fellow villagers. The creation of Village Banks partially restored the old order of things, since the ryot could once again borrow money from urban sources through an institution which protected him from the designs of the sowcar. The spread of co-operation, therefore, reinforced the position of the cultivator vis-a-vis the moneylender; though within the cultivating community co-operative societies served the interests of the more prosperous peasants and sharpened economic cleavages within rural society.

What direction did the ambitions of these prosperous peasants assume? And what was their relationship with the 'new Brahmins' who coveted positions of leadership in Maharashtra?

To answer these questions we turn to the concluding chapters of this study.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE WHIG BRAHMINS

The consequences of the economic policy pursued by the Utilitarians in Maharashtra were in the main destructive rather than creative. The advocates of reform had attempted to create a climate of competition and individualism within the villages on the assumption that such a climate would encourage the ryots to improve their lot through hard work and rational endeavour. But the reformers merely succeeded in undermining the collective quality of rural society, and in heightening tension in the villages of the Deccan. This tension led to the agrarian disturbances of 1875, which obliged the British administrators to abandon the twin principles of social atomism and rational action through which they had hoped to transform rural society. However, while the attempt to refashion rural life along individualistic and acquisitive lines proved abortive, the British Government was far more successful in the intellectual development which it tried to foster in Maharashtra, and the values which it sought to inculcate in the sophisticated



sections of the community. It is, indeed, in the growth of a rational and liberal sentiment in a section of the Brahmin community that we must look for the enduring impact of British rule on western India.

### The New Brahmins of Maharashtra

To appreciate the changes effected in the intellectual climate of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century it is necessary to bear in mind the intellectual consensus which existed at the time of the British conquest. This consensus was a result of the influence exercised by advaita over elite castes like the Chitpavan Brahmins, and by its hold on the middle and lower castes through the bhakti orders which expressed the religious philosophy of Sankara in a simple poetry comprehensible to the peasants. The significance of the social consensus which linked the Brahmin and the kunbi to a common religious outlook was heightened by the policy adopted by Elphinstone of supporting institutions like the Hindu College and the dakshina, in the first instance for the transmission of traditional values, but with the ultimate purpose of introducing the Brahmin elite to the rational ethic and the liberal values of the West. The course mapped out by Elphinstone for the intellectual development of Maharashtra did not share the fate of his economic policy, and his

programme of education for the Brahmin castes was faithfully carried out by the Utilitarians who assumed control of the Bombay Government after his departure in 1827. The result was the creation of a group of Whig Brahmins who combined a liberal and rational outlook with a concern for the traditional values which held together the classes and castes of Maharashtra through allegiance to a common corpus of religious ideas.

A commitment to Elphinstone's views on education was in no way inconsistent with the periodic review, and the reform, of the institutions created by him as the instruments of his policy. His successors, therefore, kept a close watch on the progress of the Hindu College, and the distribution of the dakshina. When in 1834 J.H. Baber, the Principal Collector of Poona, turned his attention to the Hindu College, he discovered that the institution had drifted far from the ideals for whose promotion it had been founded by Elphinstone. Instead of providing a classical education in Sanskrit for young Brahmins of outstanding ability, the College had become a refuge for idlers and drones 'having the appearance of men 25 to 30 years old, to whom...it was never intended the allowance should be continued'<sup>1</sup>. The apparent failure of the

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<sup>1</sup> BA (Bombay State Archives). J.H. Baber, Collector of Poona, to Bombay Government dated 31 October 1834: G.D. (General Department), Vol. 8/303 of 1836.

institution raised several questions of fundamental importance. The College had been founded by Elphinstone in order to impress upon the Hindu community the new Government's concern for the religious traditions and the values to which the community was deeply attached. Elphinstone had also hoped that the College would train and encourage young men from established Brahmin families to enter into the service of the British Government. But neither of these expectations was realised. The College had provided only one candidate for the public service; and the courses of instruction it offered were so unattractive that not a single Brahmin family of repute had deigned to send any of its members to it. In view of these circumstances, Baber raised the question whether the College was serving any useful purpose at all, and whether it deserved any support from the Government.

Baber had presented so dismal a picture of the Hindu College that a Committee appointed in 1835 to investigate the institution, and having as its President a well known conservative like Thomas Williamson, the Commissioner of the Deccan, recommended the outright abolition of the College<sup>2</sup>. However, Robert Grant, the Governor of Bombay, refused to be pushed

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BA. Report submitted by the Committee for the Reorganisation of the Hindu College to the Bombay Government dated 29 October 1835: G.D., Vol. 17/349 of 1836.



into taking so precipitate a step, even when it concerned an institution which, as he put it, 'preserves and cherishes the old Brahmanical interest, which is anti-British in all its tendencies'<sup>3</sup>. To abolish the Hindu College, Grant argued, just when the Bombay Government had established a school in Poona for imparting education through the medium of English would be highly offensive to the Brahmin community, even though the students of this school did not receive any financial assistance from the State, unlike the drones leading a parasitic existence at the Hindu College. Since political considerations ruled out its abolition, the only solution open to Government was to modify the courses of instruction offered in the Hindu College, keeping in view its long term objectives.

However, political expediency was not the only reason which pointed to the need for continued State assistance for the Hindu College. It was left to the Reverend J. Stevenson, a Poona Missionary who was well versed in Sanskrit, to impress upon the Government the proper role of a Sanskrit College and the importance of some, if not all, of the

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BA. Minute by Robert Grant, Governor of Bombay, dated 22 March 1835: G.D., Vol. 17/349 of 1836.



disciplines which formed part of a classical education<sup>4</sup>. The existence of a parasitic student community, Stevenson argued, could be ascribed to the ineptitude of Narayan Shastri, who had succeeded Raghu Acharya Chintamun as the Mukhya Shastri (Principal) of the Hindu College in the late 1820s, rather than to any inherent defect in the institution. Sanskrit, he continued, was the classical source of all the languages of India, and its study was therefore essential for the development of the regional languages, and their transformation into media adequate for the transmission of rational and scientific ideas to the common people. As Stevenson put it, while 'English is necessary to furnish ideas to the native mind, the SANSKRIT is equally necessary to enable the learned in European science to diffuse their knowledge among the masses of the community'. But in putting forth a powerful plea for the retention of Sanskrit, Stevenson proposed drastic alterations in the disciplines taught at the Hindu College. Instead of any encouragement being given to metaphysical speculation on the nature of the universe and the spiritual quality of man, he argued, emphasis ought to be placed entirely on the more practical fields of study. Among

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<sup>4</sup> BA. Report by Reverend J. Stevenson dated 28 November 1836: G.D., Vol. 39/409 of 1837. Also see Memorandum by W.H. Wathen, Chief Secretary to the Bombay Government, dated December 1836: G.D., Vol. 39/409 of 1837.

the 'pernicious' disciplines taught at the Hindu College, Stevenson listed Advaita, Jyotish, Alankar, Nyaya and the Vedas, and he recommended the abolition of the Chairs in these fields. Courses of instruction in disciplines like Mayukh (jurisprudence), Vyakaran (grammar), and the Dharamashastras could continue as before, since proficiency in these spheres could equip a young Brahmin for a useful career in life.

The reconstitution of the Hindu College along the lines advocated by Stevenson in 1836 reflected the Bombay Government's determination to slowly undermine the hold of traditional values on the Brahmin intelligentsia, and to expose it to the influence of rational and liberal ideas. A similar objective inspired the changes effected in the 1830s in the distribution of the dakshina, an institution to which Elphinstone had extended his support for precisely the same reasons which prompted him to establish the Hindu College. Of course, for the Hindu community in general, and the Brahmins in particular, the dakshina was far more important than the Hindu College, since it not only supported a large number of impecunious Brahmins, but it also identified the State with the values and traditions to which the community was deeply attached.

Whatever be its significance, when Baber turned his attention to the distribution of the dakshina in 1834, he

discovered that the institution was being thoroughly exploited by the Brahmin community<sup>5</sup>. In recommending candidates for the award of the dakshina, the Committee of Shastris appointed for this purpose by the Bombay Government was guided by 'caprice' rather than by the merit of the applicants. But apart from the corruption which apparently determined its distribution, the dakshina, Baber argued, hardly promoted any of the objectives which had encouraged Elphinstone to support it. Instead of training the minds of the rising generation of Brahmins 'in habits of respect and attachment to the British Government', it confirmed them in their allegiance to traditional values, and was instrumental in widening the gulf between the rulers and the ruled. Baber's appraisal led the Bombay Government to appoint a Special Commission to investigate the distribution of the dakshina, and to suggest ways and means for its reform. Through the implementation of the Commission's recommendations the old Committee of Shastris, which had thoroughly discredited itself in official eyes through its corrupt practices was dismissed, and the rules for admission to the dakshina were made much more rigorous than before. The most important decision taken by the Bombay

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<sup>5</sup> BA. J.H. Baber, Collector of Poona, to Bombay Government dated 8 November 1834: G.D., Vol. 6/301 of 1835.



Government on the Commission's suggestion concerned the imposition of an interdict on the admission of new candidates to the dakshina after 1836<sup>6</sup>.

The reaction of the Brahmin community to a decision which affected its interests so adversely was sharp and instantaneous. For besides providing financial assistance to impecunious but scholarly Brahmins, the dakshina symbolised the predominance of Brahmanical values over the community, and the acquiescence by the State in this predominance. The Brahmins therefore interpreted the decision to discontinue the dakshina as a challenge to their intellectual hegemony over Hindu society, and a bid to undermine the values and traditions of which they regarded themselves as the custodians. After debating the issue in their caste assemblies, in November 1836 the Brahmins of Poona presented a petition to the Bombay Government. This petition was signed by 800 'Shastris, Pandits and Puraniks etc.' and it stated in forthright language the serious consequences likely to flow from the discontinuation of the dakshina grants<sup>7</sup>. The study of the Vedas and the Shastras, the petition pointed

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<sup>6</sup> BA. Report submitted by the Committee for the Reorganisation of the Dakshina dated 20 September 1836: G.D., Vol. 17/349 of 1836.

<sup>7</sup> BA. Petition by the Brahmins of Poona to the Bombay Government dated 4 November 1836: G.D., Vol. 15/385 of 1837.



out, was necessary to sustain a creative relationship between the Hindu community and the values and traditions which gave it moral cohesion, and fashioned its objectives in the secular and spiritual worlds. In keeping with their traditional role, the Brahmins of Maharashtra had taken upon themselves this responsibility, and in return the State had promised to maintain them, and to encourage them in their labour, through the distribution of the dakshina. Such an alliance between the political and the intellectual leaders of the community had worked with the happiest of results in the past, and had protected the interests of the Brahmins as well as the secular authority. Elphinstone, the petition argued, had recognised the benefits which accrued to the State, and to the community, from the dakshina, and he had therefore refrained from abolishing it. To do so now, the Poona Brahmins stated in conclusion, would be to undermine the moral foundations of Hindu society, and to sow the seed for its political disintegration:

We therefore entreat [ran the petition] that the Sircar will take the whole of these circumstances into consideration, and make such arrangements as to cause all such balances as will have remained in hand, after the distribution of the ensuing Dakshina, on account of the absent Brahmins, to be distributed to all new candidates, who may be admitted after passing the usual examination. This will be the means of disseminating the learning and the people will moreove be happy and it will greatly tend to the honour of the Government,

but should it be otherwise, both science and religion will be lost and ruined, and people will not act uprightly in their dealings, and every one will suffer extremely.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Bombay Government refused to be browbeaten into surrender by the spectre of moral anarchy and social disintegration raised by the Brahmin community. Its confidence in its policies stemmed from the belief that the education being given in institutions like the Poona English School (which was founded in 1832) would, in the course of time, give rise to a generation of Brahmins who would sympathise with its political ideals and its social objectives. The orthodox Brahmins who had petitioned against the decree prohibiting new individuals from presenting themselves as candidates for the dakshina were therefore told that the Government was unable to reconsider its decision<sup>9</sup>. It was, however, pointed out to them that the funds released through the interdict would 'continue to be made available to the general purposes of promoting education and rewarding acquisitions of science'. The Government also committed itself to a de novo consideration of the problem after the number of dakshina receiving Brahmins had fallen sufficiently low.

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Ibid.

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BA. Bombay Government to the Collector of Poona dated 19 January 1837: G.D., Vol. 15/385 of 1837.

Since the Bombay Government had refused to acquiesce in the demands of the Poona Brahmins, the agitation against the discontinuation of the dakshina continued with unabated vigour, and even spread in widening circles to embrace the Brahmins of Satara, Wai, Pandharpur, Kurud, etc. Throughout the 1840s the authorities were made to feel the brunt of Brahmin disapproval through representations drawn along the lines of the Poona petition of 1836<sup>10</sup>. But the Government did not retreat before this onslaught, since it was confident that the establishment of institutions like the English School was bound to exercise a liberalising influence over the Brahmin community. Nor was it disappointed in its expectations. A series of representations received in 1850 from a group of Poona Brahmins, and from some students of the English School, spoke in clear terms of a cleavage in the Brahmin caste, and the emergence of a group of liberal Brahmins who had disowned the values and traditions of their forefathers, and who were anxious to exploit the opportunities open to them to secure positions of leadership within the community.

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BA. See Petition by the Brahmins of Poona, Wai, Satara, etc. dated 19 January 1838: G.D., Vol. 9/526 of 1840. Also see Petition by 300 Brahmins of Poona to Bombay Government dated 2 November 1849: G.D., Vol. 26 of 1850.



The liberal Brahmins threw an open challenge to the old style shastris the moment sufficient arrears had accumulated from the annual dakshina subvention of Rs.30,000 to oblige the government to consider ways and means to usefully exploit the funds at its disposal. Their bid for power took the form of a representation to Viscount Falkland, the Governor of Bombay, which contained suggestions seeking to extend the scope of the dakshina beyond the promotion of studies in Sanskrit, and the assistance of old style shastris and pandits. The liberal Brahmins proposed the institution of 16 prizes, of the total value of Rs.1,000, in Sanskrit; and a similar number of awards, amounting to Rs.2,000, in Marathi and English. These prizes were to be awarded to individuals of any caste on the submission each year before a competent body 'of an original useful composition in the Prakrit, or translation from some original works in the Sanskrit, English or any other language'<sup>11</sup>.

In stating the reasons which had encouraged them to propose alterations in the distribution of the dakshina, the liberal Brahmins defined their social vision and their political objectives with unmistakable clarity. Under the

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BA. Petition by the liberal Brahmins of Poona to the Bombay Government dated September 1849: G.D., Vol. 16 of 1849.



Peshwas, they pointed out, support of Sanskrit and the pretensions of the Brahmin caste could be justified on the basis of the prevailing intellectual climate, and the concept of political order from which the State drew its sanctions. But for the British Government to desist from introducing changes in the distribution of the dakshina would be a pointless surrender to the forces of reaction. The ideals to which it subscribed were in no way related to the values of which the old style shastris regarded themselves as the custodians; nor did it draw its sanctions from the traditions which the orthodox Brahmins cherished. On the other hand, with a little boldness and a little imagination the State could be instrumental in promoting the dissemination of knowledge which would widen the intellectual horizon of the community, and spread habits of thought and action that would promote progress and prosperity. It was incumbent on the British Government to adopt such policies both for altruistic reasons, and on grounds of equity. Its revenues were largely drawn from a tax on the peasant, and a policy which subordinated the kunbi's interests to the interest of the superior castes was morally reprehensible and politically inexpedient:

The present system of the distribution of the Dukshunna Fund [the liberal Brahmins of Poona stated in conclusion] has no tendency to promote learning

among and extend its benefits to the great mass of the population. It is found (sic) on the old illiberal and barbarous prejudice of confining learning to the Brahmin Caste and locking it up in stores which the great mass of the people can never be able or hope to open...(The) present plan is calculated to civilise the nation in general and lay open for its benefit these stores of learning and wisdom...which have hitherto been inaccessible to the nation at large.

Another striking characteristic of the old system of the institution of the Dukshunna is the confinement of its benefits to the caste of Brahmins... The cultivator, the gardner (sic), the carpenter, the blacksmith, who are the most useful members of society, and from whom the Dukshunna Fund is wrung, would not under the old system, share in its benefits nor can be civilised by it...What the nation most wants is useful arts, science, and morals, and they shall find them not certainly in the dead Sanskrit, but in the animated English literature. This essential reform must therefore be introduced and it cannot be commenced too soon.<sup>12</sup>

When the petition from the liberal Brahmins calling for an imaginative view of the dakshina was followed by a representation, couched in identical language, from the 'students of Government English School and other English Schools in Poona',<sup>13</sup>, J.G. Lumsden, the Secretary to the Bombay Government, observed that the time had at long last come when the Government could safely embark upon a policy of reform<sup>14</sup>. The

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Ibid.

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BA. Petition by the Students of the Government English School dated 23 October 1849: G.D., Vol. 26 of 1850.

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BA. Memorandum by J.G. Lumsden, Secretary to the Bombay Government, dated January 1850: G.D., Vol. 26 of 1850.

support given by Elphinstone to the dakshina and the study of Sanskrit, Lumsden argued, in no way committed the government to prop the traditional order in Maharashtra. Elphinstone had yielded to no one in his anxiety to introduce liberal ideas among the Brahmins. But with his Burkean concern for continuity in the processes of change, he had visualised the westernisation of the Brahmin intelligentsia as a gradual process. Since there existed a considerable group within the Brahmin caste that was clamouring for a liberal education, and a bold attitude towards the dakshina, it was clear that a policy of reform could be adopted without any fear of social disintegration. That reform would have to be undertaken sooner or later, Lumsden argued, was inevitable. For to retain the dakshina as it stood under the Peshwas was to deny the ideals and objectives for whose fulfilment British rule had been established over Maharashtra. Brahmanical values, with their emphasis on stability and prescription and status, were diametrically opposed to concepts like equality in the eyes of the law, and economic progress and social mobility. To submit to Brahmin ideals would prevent the British Government from embarking upon any scheme of improvement or reform:

Are the recipients of the Duxxina [Lumsden asked] unable to comprehend that the system at work around them is directly at variance with the social system and the entire body of ethics which have formed the subjects of their studies and which they regard with a bigoted reverence? Or is it to be supposed that



a single act of concession like the distribution of this Duxxina will conciliate the views of (those?) who receive it or render them less alive to the fact that the Government is pursuing a course which threatens eventually to deprive them of their cherished social supremacy?

If there be justice in the above remarks the course which it is proper to pursue will not require much consideration. Unless Government are deterred by the apprehension of adding to the dissatisfaction of this class who in the present day are rather subjects for compassion than for admiration it should avoid all occasions of extending to them a direct and prominent support which places them in a false position equally in relation to ourselves and to the people.

What encouragement Government can afford should rather be given to those among them who have come out from their camp and who have been educated under the auspices of Government in ideas more consonant with "the progress of national education". The time has arrived when without concern for the result, Government can afford to give a direct and unequivocal support to those men whose ideas it has helped to liberalise and whose minds it has endeavoured to advance beyond the prejudices of their nation and in so doing has placed them in the position of opponents to their own caste and to caste interests while they may unquestionably be regarded as more friendly and partial to ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

Since it recognised the contradiction between Brahmanical values and the political objectives of the British Government, and because it focussed attention on the liberal forces at work within the Brahmin community, the Lumsden memorandum was the signal for sweeping changes in the dakshina and in the Hindu College. No new candidates had been admitted to the



dakshina after 1836, and the amount of money distributed to the shastris and pandits by the Government was reduced from Rs.28,000 in 1839, to Rs.12,000 in 1857<sup>16</sup>. In 1859 the dakshina fund was taken over by the Education Department, and a number of Fellowships were instituted, which were awarded to candidates, irrespective of caste, to enable them to receive a secular education in the schools and colleges of Bombay<sup>17</sup>. The Hindu College had in the meanwhile been transformed into an institution for imparting a modern and a scientific, as opposed to a classical, education. Through reforms initiated in 1850, the College was thrown open to all castes, and its Sanskrit Professorships were substituted by four Chairs: the first in Vernacular, the second in English, the third in Marathi, and the fourth and last in the Sciences<sup>18</sup>. Students seeking admission to the College were expected to possess a sound knowledge of the Vernacular. It was also obligatory for them to study Marathi, though Sanskrit was optional for candidates whose main interest centred on the English language, and vice versa. A second set of reforms

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<sup>16</sup>

R.V. Parulekar, Selections From The Records Of The Bombay Government, Education, Part I, 1819-1852, (Bombay, 1953), pp. xx to xxv.

<sup>17</sup>

Report of the Director of Public Instruction in Bombay for 1857-1858.

<sup>18</sup>

Report of the Board of Education of Bombay for 1850-1851.

introduced in 1856 heightened the importance of the Chairs of English and Science in the College, and stipulated that 'Sanskrit students should be made to learn also the other branches of a useful general education taught in the College...'<sup>19</sup> Finally, in 1864 the Hindu College was renamed the Deccan College, and thereafter played a key role in the intellectual life of Maharashtra through giving a liberal education to generations of young Brahmin students.

Despite the changes brought about in the intellectual climate of Maharashtra by a deliberate policy of westernisation, the radical Brahmins whom a liberal education, and the tacit support of the State, had encouraged to challenge the position of their orthodox caste-fellows were still in a minority. The weakness in numbers of the radical Brahmins is underscored by the fact that while the liberal petition seeking changes in the dakshina was supported by only 22 Brahmins, the orthodox faction could persuade 500 shastris and pandits to endorse a counter-petition to the Bombay Government<sup>20</sup>. However, while the orthodox Brahmins had the strength of numbers on their side, the winds of change that were blowing

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<sup>19</sup>

Parulekar, op. cit., p. xlviii.

<sup>20</sup>

BA. Petition by 500 Brahmins of Poona, Satara, Wai etc. dated 13 December 1849: J.D. (Judicial Department), Vol. 16 of 1849.

across Maharashtra had created a climate that was favourable to the aspirations of the 'new Brahmins' for the leadership of the community. The power of the orthodox shastris, it should be borne in mind, did not rest exclusively on their religious role. For besides regulating the spiritual life of the individual, the shastris led the caste assemblies which acted as channels of communication between the caste members and the State, and protected the secular interests of the community. Now the shastris could initiate social action only when the State too subscribed to the values on which they based their positions of leadership, and shared their social ideals and political objectives. Since the British Government stood for social ideals and political objectives which were different, and in some vital respects antagonistic, to those of the traditional leaders of the community, the latter were unable to perform their political role adequately after the British conquest. The stage was thus set for the emergence of a new elite, and the development of a new style in politics.

The inability of the traditional elite to act to any purpose in the altered political climate engendered by British rule, and the consequent need for a new leadership, is brought into sharp focus by the riots which broke out in Surat in 1844. The Surat riots of 1844 were obviously connected with the depressed economic conditions which prevailed in the city ever since its displacement by Bombay as the



entrepot for the trade of western India in the opening decades of the nineteenth century<sup>21</sup>. But the immediate cause of the anti-British uprising in Surat was a decree which raised the duty on salt to off-set the losses sustained by the public treasury through the abolition of transit duties on commercial goods. In raising the salt-tax the Government unwittingly imposed a new and heavy burden on broad sections of the community: on the cultivators, who were already staggering under the weight of an oppressive land-tax; on the Brahmins, who were living on the wreck of fortunes of better times, and whose main diet consisted of vegetables cured in salt; and on the poor fishing communities of the coast, which employed large quantities of salt in preserving the fish they caught. The increase in the duty on salt was particularly ill-conceived since the social groups it affected did not gain anything from the abolition of transit duties. Dr Gibson, a missionary who was in close touch with native opinion in Surat, pointed out how the measure had confirmed the natives in their suspicion that the British Government would ultimately burden them with taxation just as arbitrary, and oppressive, as that levied by the Peshwas:

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<sup>21</sup>

BA. Petition by 1180 Merchants of Surat to the Bombay Government dated 24 April 1827: J.D., Vol. 20/146 of 1827.



I have often conversed [Gibson observed] with Natives who were ready to twit me with the philanthropy of the British Government in giving up transit duties, and in substituting this tax which brought in a huge sum...It seems to me that one could not have hit on a measure better calculated to excite extreme discontent among the various classes who have suffered by our rule, and whose affection we have no opportunity of conciliating otherwise than by letting them alone. The different classes are numerous - they are influential.<sup>22</sup>

As pointed out by Gibson, and subsequently underscored by the riots, the intensity of feeling against the increase in the duty on salt afforded an excellent opportunity to the traditional leaders in Surat to acquaint the authorities with public reaction to the measure. But to such an extent was the traditional elite alienated from the centres of power, that it was unable to act to any purpose in the crisis precipitated by the British Government. In the absence of any initiative from their traditional leaders, the citizens of Surat expressed their opposition to the increase in tax on salt through uncoordinated mass action. On the 30th of August, 1844, an angry and excited 'mob' of 30,000 marched to the adawlut in Surat, and demanded a cancellation of the duty on salt from the British magistrate, Sir Robert

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BA. Memorandum by Dr Gibson enclosed in letter from Sir R.K. Arbuthnot, Collector of Surat, to Bombay Government dated 31 August 1844: P. & S.D. (Political and Secret Department), Vol. 92/1625 of 1844.

Arbuthnot<sup>23</sup>. The march on the adawlut brings into sharp focus the ineffectiveness of the traditional leaders in a situation which they could have turned to their advantage; on the one hand, by asserting their leadership over the community, and on the other, by demonstrating to the British Government their proper role as channels of communication between the State and its subjects. The spontaneity of the Surat demonstration, and the extent to which the bewildered traditional leaders were compelled to adopt belligerent attitudes under pressure from their followers, is all too clear from an account of the riots by Sheikh Sharif, the foremost Muslim divine in the city:

In the hope of seeing you hereafter [Sheikh Sharif wrote to Arbuthnot] I beg now to repeat that since this morning, the whole men of this city have united and assembled at my house and urged me to proceed to the Sirdar (i.e., the British representative). But I have since morning till this time told them to have great patience and make no disturbance or tumult... and that those who have anything to say, should petition on the subject, and to agree to whatever a beneficent Government may desire, but in no way will they be satisfied. At length they have agreed to be satisfied in this manner: the Government to order...that an answer will be given to the petition in a few days and for the present, until a final order be given, that all the ryots shall remain in their own homes...<sup>24</sup>

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23

BA. Letters from A. Remington, Judge of Surat, to Bombay Government dated 30 August, 31 August and 2 September 1844: P. & S.D., Vol. 92/1625 of 1844.

24

BA. Letter from Sheikh Sharif to R.K. Arbuthnot dated 30 August 1844: P. & S.D., Vol. 92/1625 of 1844.

That the dilemma which confronted the traditional elite was genuine rather than simulated is obvious from Arbuthnot's description of Sheikh Sharif as 'a very respectable and good man...whose followers are a discontented set...'<sup>25</sup> But in the absence of any other channel of communication with the 'mob' on the streets, Arbuthnot was obliged to turn to traditional leaders like Sheikh Sharif, and the Mullah of the Borahs, and the Goswamijee Maharaj of the Hindus, for assistance in bringing the situation under control<sup>26</sup>. However, because the traditional leaders were unable to adjust themselves to the changing style of politics in Maharashtra, the future lay with the liberal Brahmins, who were in a position to convey the sentiments of the people to the government, and at the same time shared the values of, and were inspired by the same ideals as, the British Government. Of course, the traditional leaders were fully aware of their growing impotence, and of the changes which were undermining their predominance over the community. All this is clearly reflected in the retort of an embittered shastri of the old school to a liberal Brahmin who tried to win him over to the cause of reform: 'We Shastris know that the tide is against us and it

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<sup>25</sup>

BA. Letter from R.K. Arbuthnot to Bombay Government dated 3 September 1844: P. & S.D., Vol. 92/1625 of 1844.

<sup>26</sup>

BA. Letter from R.K. Arbuthnot to Sheikh Sharif dated 30 August 1844: P. & S.D., Vol. 92/1625 of 1844.



is no use opposing. You people should not consult us, but go your own way, and do the thing you think right; and we shall not come in your way. But if you ask us and want us to twist the shastras to your purpose and go with you, we must speak plainly and we must oppose...'<sup>27</sup>

Who were these 'new Brahmins' who were seeking to rob the traditional elite of their role as leaders of the community? What was their social vision and what were their political objectives? How wide was the gulf which separated them from the orthodox leaders, and how fundamental were the changes which they sought to bring about in Maharashtra? Were they an alienated group, or did their enthusiasm for reform stop short of a rupture of their ties with the more conservative sections of the community?

These questions are best answered by sketching brief portraits of some representative new Brahmins of Maharashtra.

Gopal Hari Deshmukh, also known as the Lokhitwadi (Advocate of the People's Welfare), was born in 1823 in a Chitpavan family which had served the Peshwas, and whose estates were confiscated by the British Government for their loyalty to the ancien regime. After completing his education

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Quoted in 'The Mandlik School' by N.G. Chandavarkar: The Speeches & Writings of Sir Narayen G. Chandavarkar, (Bombay, 1911), pp. 32-8.



in the Poona English School, the Lokhitwadi entered the judicial service of the Bombay Government, and rose from a humble position to be a judge in the Nasik District Court. He was a pioneer of Marathi journalism, in which capacity he applied himself to the task of spreading political education and propagating social reform in Maharashtra. The 'Satapatren', or the weekly letters which the Lokhitwadi contributed to a contemporary journal, are not the effusions of a sophisticated mind; nor do they reveal any deep insight into current problems and predicaments. But despite his limited vision, and his superficial acquaintance with western thought, the Lokhatwadi reached at a shrewd assessment of the impact of British rule on Maharashtra. The British occupation, he pointed out, differed fundamentally from the Muslim conquest. While the intellectual impact of Islam had been marginal, British rule had opened the eyes of the intelligentsia to a new and exciting range of social values and political objectives, and had convinced it of the advantages of representative government and popular democracy. Through promoting a change in the intellectual climate, the British Government had cleared the way for the political emancipation of the country. Once Maharashtrians had exorcized evils like the institution of caste and the low status of women, and reorganised their society on a liberal and democratic basis, they would have no trouble in achieving political emancipation. Social change rather than political power formed the principal concern of the Lokhitwadi, but like many a first generation new Brahmin, he

did not look upon the political and the social as mutually exclusive, and he believed that liberalisation in the latter automatically assured progress in the former sphere<sup>28</sup>.

Vishwanath Narayan Mandlik was born in 1823 in a distinguished Chitpavan family which was connected with the Peshwas by ties of kinship, and which had provided the former rulers with many a high officer of State<sup>29</sup>. Mandlik was endowed with an intellectual stature and qualities of leadership which would have assured him an outstanding political career anywhere. He received his education in Elphinstone College, Bombay, where he created a most favourable impression on his teachers, and after a brief spell of Government service embarked upon a legal career. But it was through his participation in public affairs, first in the Bombay Municipality, then in the Provincial Legislative Council, and finally in the Imperial Legislative Council, that he made his mark upon the contemporary stage. A 'Whig' who saw no

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I am indebted to Mrs Indira Rothermund for a biographical note on Gopal Hari Deshmukh, and for translations from the Satapatren, on which this paragraph is based. Also see article entitled 'Pioneers of the Reform Movement in Maharashtra' from unpublished source material available with Bombay State Committee for the History of the Freedom Movement in India. (Henceforth referred to as BSCHFM)

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Based on a biographical note on V.N. Mandlik by D.G. Padhye in Writings And Speeches of Vishwanath Narayan Mandlik, (Bombay, 1911), pp. 32-8.

contradiction between the British 'connection' and the increasing participation of Indians in affairs of State, as a figure in public life Mandlik provided a striking contrast with the traditional leaders of the jo hokum (sycophantic) school, from whose ranks the British Government all too frequently packed the legislatures. Yet his essentially conservative cast of mind, and his regard for traditional values, alienated him from the more impetuous Brahmins who had become impatient of the slow pace at which power was being transferred into their hands. The image Mandlik has left for posterity is that of an enlightened conservative who was outpaced by the rapid growth of radical sentiment among the second generation of new Brahmins; and although he started public life as a cautious liberal, towards the end of his career he was battling furiously and valiantly on behalf of orthodoxy to protect Hindu society from schemes of reform which, so he believed, would have undermined its cohesion by creating a wide gulf between its leading and its traditional elements<sup>30</sup>.

A new Brahmin with a difference, because of his political interests, was Ganesh Vasudev Joshi, who was born in Satara in 1828, and who came to Poona in 1848 in search for

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Vide fn. 27 above.



employment after having completed his preliminary schooling in the city of his birth. After a brief and unhappy spell of service in a Government department, Joshi applied himself to a legal career, and at the same time commenced taking an active interest in the politics of Poona. He was a founding member of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, and as its first secretary responsible (along with M.G. Ranade) for guiding its agitational activity, and shaping its political style. Like other Brahmins who subscribed to liberal values, Joshi was aware of the wide gulf that had come to separate the traditional leaders from the centres of political power, and in the Sarvajanik Sabha he saw 'a mediatory body which may afford to the people facilities for knowing the real intentions and objectives of the government...(and provide them with means) for securing their rights by presenting timely representations to Government of the circumstances in which they are placed'<sup>31</sup>. His search for a creative political role for the new Brahmin elite prompted Joshi to involve the Sabha in a series of agitations, from support to the ryots of the Deccan in their grievances against the Revenue and Survey Department which found expression in the disturbances of

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<sup>31</sup>

Vide article entitled 'Note on the Life and Work of G.V. Joshi' in unpublished source material available with BSCHFM.



1875, to organised protests against the repressive press legislation enacted by the government of Lord Lytton. None of these agitations was marked by any conspicuous success. But Joshi did not have any illusions about the strength of the forces that were ranged against him, within the community, and in the ranks of the administration. Besides, he regarded participation in agitational activity by the new elite not as a short cut to victory, but an experience which would strengthen the moral fibre and sharpen the intellectual faculties of the new Brahmins for the political struggles that lay ahead. Joshi's finest hour came in 1877, when he attended the Imperial Durbar as the representative of the Sarvajanik Sabha, and invoked an 'Indian Parliament' of the princes and feudal chiefs who had assembled there to expound for their benefit the ideals and objectives of liberalism<sup>32</sup>.

The most influential new Brahmin of his day was Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, who transformed Marathi into a language capable of expressing modern ideas, and who assumed the role of an iconoclast with an eye for humbug that was pitiless in its appraisals, and a vision that was bold in the ideals which it set before the community. Before he died a

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See Source Material For A History Of The Freedom Movement In India, (1885-1920), II, (Bombay, 1958), pp. 1-10.

premature death in 1881, Vishnu Shastri had made a profound impression on the young Brahmin intellectuals of his time, and in assessing the loss which Maharashtra had suffered through his demise a contemporary compared him to 'Voltaire (who) made everyone from Stockholm to Rome, and St. Petersburg to Lisbon, tremble in his shoes when he took up his pen...(So) did Shastribua make the Rao Sahebs, the Rao **Behadurs**, the Reverends and the Saraswatis squirm and squeak under his literary lash'<sup>33</sup>. While he accepted western values with far more discrimination than an intellectual with the limited vision of a Lokhitwadi, Vishnu Shastri's sympathies lay with the advocates of change rather than with the old style shastris, and he looked with hope and optimism to a future in which Maharashtra would play a creative role after having purged itself of its social evils and regenerated itself politically. Such ideals found expression in the New English School, which Vishnu Shastri founded in 1880 together with a group of young Brahmins like Tilak, Agarkar and Apte who were destined to give intellectual and political leadership to Maharashtra till well into the opening decades of the twentieth century.

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Quoted in D.M. Limaye, The History of the Deccan Education Society, (Poona, 1935), p. 19.

### Ranade's liberalism and his rational ethic

Despite the influence exercised by Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar on the intellectuals of his generation, new Brahmanism found its loftiest expression in Mahadev Govind Ranade, who was the most sophisticated thinker of his day. Born in a poor Chitpavan family in 1842, Ranade received his early schooling in Poona, and in 1859 proceeded to Elphinstone College in Bombay, which was then virtually moulding the mind of young Maharashtrians through enlightened and liberal educationalists like Green and Wordsworth. Although the lack of independent means obliged Ranade to enter into the service of the Bombay Government, he did not permit his official duties to restrict either his interests or his activities. Ranade's interests encompassed the entire range of human activity, and once he had entered public life through the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha in the 1870s, he continued to play an active role in the affairs of the community till his death in 1901. But despite the leadership he gave to the new Brahmins in politics and religion and social reform, Ranade compels our attention primarily for the insight which he possessed into the shortcomings of Hindu society, and the vision and catholicity with which he proposed solutions for their eradication. The intellectual qualities which raised Ranade a head and shoulders



above his contemporaries restricted him as a man of action, and placed him at a distinct disadvantage in the rough and tumble of politics. A pessimistic cast of mind; an inability to compromise on questions of principle; and a lack of the qualities that make the successful demagogue combined with intellectual sophistication to circumscribe the influence of Ranade's ideas, and to restrict the popularity of his leadership<sup>34</sup>.

Apart from his mental make-up and education, Ranade's social vision was shaped by his membership of an elite caste which shared its values with the lower and middle castes of Maharashtra, and which retained even after the lapse of half a century vivid memories of the dominant position it had enjoyed under the Peshwas. The transfer of power in 1818 had shattered the hegemony of the Chitpavan Brahmins. But by virtue of their intellectual traditions, and the hold they had exercised over the bureaucracy before the British take-over, they remained even after 1818 the most influential indigenous group in Maharashtra, flocking in great numbers to the educational institutions opened by the British Government, and monopolising the junior ranks of the civil service. An

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J. Kellock, Mahadev Govind Ranade, (Calcutta, 1926), Chapters I and II, passim.



# TABLE A

CASTE BREAKDOWN OF STUDENTS IN  
THE COLLEGES OF BOMBAY IN 1884

INSTITUTION	Brahmins.	Kshatriyas	Trading Castes	Kayasth Prabhus
Elphinstone College, Bombay.	59	10	38	18
Deccan College, Poona.	107	1	1	3
Free General Assembly's Institution, Bombay.	34	1	6	-
St. Xavier's College, Bombay	15	1	5	7
Gujarat College, Bombay.	3	-	1	1
Rajawade College, Bombay	23	-	-	-
TOTAL	241	13	51	29

examination of Table A demonstrates their predominance over the schools and colleges in the Bombay province, which provided the only means of access to the civil service, and to independent careers in professions like law<sup>35</sup>. In the Deccan College in Poona, for instance, more than 97 per cent of the students were Brahmins, although the caste formed only four per cent of the total population of the Deccan. Small wonder then that British civilians viewed the preponderance of the Chitpavans with alarm, and apprehended the implications of their memories of past glory for the future of British rule in India:

Now the Chitpawun tribe [wrote Sir Richard Temple, the Governor of Bombay, to the Viceroy, Lord Lytton, in 1879] still stands in vigour and prosperity. They are inspired with national sentiment and with an ambition bounded only with the limits of India itself...If you were to count heads among our best native employees all over the Deccan and the Concan, and even among our humble village accountants, you would be surprised to find what a hold this tribe of Chitpawuns has over the whole administrative machinery of the country. And this position is won over not by favour but by force of merit. For among prizemen and honours holders in the schools and graduates of the University the Chitpawuns are predominant...But nothing that we do now, by way of education, emolument, or advancement in the public service, at all satisfies the Chitpawuns. They will never be satisfied till they regain their ascendancy in the country, as they had it in the last century.<sup>36</sup>

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Vide Education Commission, Bombay, Vol. I: Report of the Bombay Provincial Committee, (Calcutta, 1884), p. 136.

36

Vide The Hindustan Times, (New Delhi), 8 July 1962.

The social background of a new Brahmin like Ranade deserves special emphasis because of the light it throws on his views, and the significance it bestows upon the ideals he set before the community. It would be futile to deny that Ranade's views were to a considerable extent shaped by a conservative temper which prompted him to look upon politics as the art of the possible, and to reject the utopian and the visionary for the concrete and the practical. But it is equally certain that the political ambitions which he entertained as a member of the 'Chitpawun tribe', and the spiritual outlook which he shared with the unsophisticated kunbi through allegiance to a common body of religious values, inculcated in him a concern for social consensus, and encouraged him to reject progress achieved at the cost of social alienation.

Ranade's concern for social consensus as a member of an elite caste which was closely integrated with the rest of the community was reinforced by the intellectual influences which shaped his views on politics and society. Like other new Brahmins of his generation, he read extensively of the works of Adam Smith, Burke, Bentham and the Mills; and like the rest of them, he was impressed by the place given by Burke to tradition in the life of the community, and the interpretation given by Mill to liberty, despite the sweeping reservations

voiced by the prophet of liberalism about societies which lacked political sophistication and a sound formal education. But it was the social theories of Herbert Spencer, to whom Ranade once referred as 'the greatest living philosopher of the age'<sup>37</sup>, that made the most significant impact on his mind, and inculcated in him a belief in evolution, and a vision of progress, which saw social or economic or political activity as intimately related rather than isolated fields of human endeavour. Ranade and the new Brahmins who chose to follow his lead are frequently referred to as liberals. This label is accurate only to the extent it distinguishes them from the old style shastris who were committed to traditional values, and from individuals who subscribed to activist theories of political action. But the new Brahmins of Ranade's camp did not believe in the individualism which characterised English liberalism in the nineteenth century, and they did not pin their faith on social action based on the motivations of the individual rather than the group. Indeed, so far was Ranade from subscribing to laissez-faire ideas, that he held the economics of liberalism responsible for much of the poverty of India under British rule.

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Quoted from a speech given by M.G. Ranade in the Prarthana Samaj: The Mahratta, 11 December 1887.



Despite his comprehensive view of society, and despite his belief in progress as an all embracing rather than a fragmented quality, since the circumstances of India under British rule hinged on a relationship of political superordination and subordination between two societies, Ranade was obliged to place an emphasis on political progress which did some violence to the ideas of Herbert Spencer. The need for such an emphasis became all the more pressing when a powerful group of conservative officials in the Government of India initiated a debate concerning political objectives, which (to Ranade) appeared to contradict the manifest principles of political progress, and to violate the basic assumptions that provided the moral sanctions for British rule over India. Admittedly, these officials had been provoked into action by the liberal policies of Lord Ripon, and by the Ilbert Bill in particular. But since Ranade looked upon the devolution of power initiated by Ripon as a process to which the British Government in India was irretrievably committed because of its basic political values, he regarded the conservative reaction to Ripon's policies as an attempt to give a novel and sinister interpretation to the relationship binding India to England.

The conservative case against the liberal policies of Ripon was best expressed by Sir Fitzjames Stephen, a

Utilitarian who was influenced by the authoritarian doctrine of Hobbes, and whose experience as the Law Member of the Government of India from 1869 to 1872 reinforced his contempt for popular democracy and representative government, and for the shibboleths of 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity'<sup>38</sup>.

Stephen regarded Ripon's attempt to promote progressive Indian participation in affairs of State as a step that would fatally undermine British authority in India; and he subjected the liberal vision of British rule over India to a scathing attack in an article which appeared in the Nineteenth Century in 1883, and which spelt out his view of 'The Foundations of the Government of India'<sup>39</sup>. At the root of liberal pusillanimity and liberal blunders in India, Stephen argued, lay the confusion and feelings of guilt which overwhelmed the heirs of John Stuart Mill when they found themselves upholding two different, and contradictory political ideals in India and England. The correct policy to be pursued in a dependency which was at the same time an oriental polity became clear once the liberal principles of Mill were

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See E. Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India (Oxford, 1959), pp. 273-98. Also see J.F. Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, (London, 1874), for Stephen's attack on John Stuart Mill.

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J.F. Stephen, 'The True Foundations of the Government of India', in Nineteenth Century, Vol. XIV, 1883.

disavowed, and it was recognised that England was a 'belligerent' civilisation in India, and that she could attain her political objectives there only by refusing to share power with any indigenous group. The Government of India, Stephen followed his argument, was

essentially absolute Government, founded not on consent, but on conquest. It does not represent the native principles of Government, nor can it do so unless it represents heathenism and barbarism. It represents a 'belligerent civilisation', and no anomaly can be so startling or so dangerous as its administration by men who, being at the head of a government founded on conquest, implying at every point the superiority of the conquering race, of their ideas, institutions, their opinions, and their principles, and having no justification for its existence except that superiority, shrink from the open, uncompromising, straightforward assertion of it, seek to apologise for their own position, and refuse, for whatever cause, to uphold and support it.<sup>40</sup>

Stephen was convinced that British rule over India was based on principles which were different from, and opposed to, the sanctions of government in England. These principles hinged on the assertion by the British Government in India of absolute power. Stephen further argued that absolutism was a legitimate form of government in itself, and not merely a stage of transition to popular democracy, as was widely assumed by the liberals in India. In justifying British rule over India, the liberals employed arguments which implied that the

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Ibid.

exercise of absolute power could be justified only as a temporary expedient to educate the peoples of India in the virtues of popular democracy, and the use of representative institutions. 'I do not think', Stephen pontificated, 'that the permanent existence of such a government as ours in India need in itself be a bad thing; that we ought not to desire its permanence even if we can save it; and that the establishment of some kind of parliamentary system instead of it is an object which ought to be distinctly contemplated, and, as soon as it is practicable, carried out'<sup>41</sup>.

For Ranade the authoritarian principles of Stephen were anathema, since they condemned India to permanent servitude, and deprived the British Government of any convincing moral argument justifying its presence in the country. Since Stephen's principles were shared by influential civilians in India, and viewed with sympathy by powerful politicians in England, their enunciation held implications that Ranade was quick to recognise. To offset the influence exercised by Stephen's incisive attack on the liberal positions, he outlined his view of 'The True Foundations of British Rule in

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<sup>41</sup>

Ibid.



India',<sup>42</sup> in an article which appeared in the April 1884 issue of The Journal of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. This article embodied a cogent and sophisticated expression of the liberal conception of the objectives of British rule, and it set out with remarkable foresight the process by which political power was transferred into Indian hands.

At the very outset Ranade attacked Stephen's doctrine of absolute power, and the 'practical inferences' Stephen drew from the application of this doctrine to the issues confronting the British Government in India. It had been argued, Ranade observed, that since the British Government in India was founded on conquest, it should not hesitate to proclaim the superiority of the conquering race, and it ought not to limit its freedom of action by the opinions and ideals of its Indian subjects. Both the inferences drawn by Stephen were fallacious. If the culture of the ruling elite was superior to that of the subject race, then the dominant group could quite legitimately assert its superiority over the latter, whether it had acquired power through conquest, or through the consent of the governed. However, the superiority of the

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M.G. Ranade, 'The True Foundations of the Government of India', Quarterly Journal of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (henceforth referred to as JPSS), April 1894. This article does not appear under Ranade's name, but can be attributed to him on stylistic grounds.

ruling elite did not invest it with the right to disregard the sentiments, or even the prejudices, of the subject people. Instead, it imposed on it the responsibility of raising their cultural level. On his own part Ranade was willing to admit the superiority of European civilisation in certain branches of human activity, and he proclaimed his willingness 'to receive, from our English rulers, the benefits of the new civilisation'. But the reasons which encouraged him to welcome the liberalising influence of British rule also convinced him that British authority over India could never be absolute or unquestioned:

(We)...have no objection [Ranade pointed out] to open and straight forward assertion of the superiority of Englishmen over us, in so far as such assertion is necessary for the spread amongst us of the higher civilisation of which Englishmen are the representatives. But on the other side, we say such assertion should not be as uncompromising as Sir F. Stephen makes it - because it is essential to the spread of that civilisation that at many points it should proceed by way of compromise...<sup>43</sup>

Ranade's opposition to the conservative standpoint stemmed from his disapproval of the authoritarian principles which Stephen applied to the British Government in India, and his dismay at Stephen's denial of any creative role to the new Brahmins whom he represented. In focussing attention on the

dangers of absolute government, Ranade leaned heavily on the familiar liberal indictment of authoritarianism. Stephen, he argued, had made a plea for absolute government on grounds of its ability to initiate reform with far greater efficiency than was possible for a government that was subject to the popular will. But was this supposition at all justified? Government, whether absolute or otherwise, was run by individuals who were fallible, and who had therefore to constantly appraise and modify their policies in the light of the responses of informed opinion, and the reactions of the enlightened sections of the community. For the British Government in India, the new Brahmins constituted the one and only link with the native community. While the great bulk of the population was ignorant and apathetic, a small but significant minority had learnt to appreciate western values through the education it had received in the new schools and colleges, and as a result of the intellectual climate of the country under British rule. This minority was anxious to see representative institutions work in India, and it sought to apply rational and liberal techniques to the social and economic development of the country. These new Brahmins could be taken into political partnership by the British Government in India with advantage both to the State and the community, and they would in course of time provide the social base for the



transfer of authority into Indian hands. Only by embarking upon such a policy could British rule in India justify itself, and successfully accomplish its civilising mission:

We dissent almost entirely [Ranade stated in conclusion] from the political principles which Mr Justice Stephen wishes to be prevailing in the government of this country. We consider these principles to be erroneous and of evil tendency. Our general conclusion is, that while the shell and husk...which belong to the English constitution as it at present rests, may be and ought to be cast aside, the real kernel of it is as suitable in this country, as in the soil where it has had such beneficial growth. We agree, that even this essential portion of that constitution should not be introduced all of a sudden. Let each successive step that is taken be justified by the event before further progress is attempted. But however slowly we may move, however cautiously and circumspectly we may look about us at every step that we take, let our progress be towards the goal which is indicated by the constitution of the great kingdom with which we are now so closely associated as parts of the great empire in which the sun never sets...<sup>44</sup>

The debate in which Ranade participated as an antagonist of Sir Fitzjames Stephen, and the definition he gave to his political views, formed only one facet of his activities as a public figure. With his belief in the intimate interdependence between the political, the intellectual, the religious and the economic facets of a society, Ranade was convinced that it would be futile and dangerous to place an exaggerated



emphasis on the achievement of political objectives, to the exclusion of progress in other directions. To be meaningful and enduring, so he believed, progress had to embrace all the fields of social activity, and it had to proceed at a uniform pace in all the branches of human endeavour.

The insight which Ranade gained through his vision of progress as a comprehensive rather than a fragmented phenomenon, and the importance he attached to the intellectual climate which prevailed in the community and shaped its values, are seen clearly in an article in which he spelt out 'The Exigencies of Progress in India'<sup>45</sup>. The first prerequisite for progress, he pointed out, was a belief in progress on the part of the individuals who made up a community. For progress to be achieved, it had first to be desired. The revolution of rising expectations, and the growth of a widespread belief in the desirability of social mobility and economic growth, were the two most fundamental and significant changes in the climate of opinion in India under British rule. Prior to the British conquest, social values had imposed acquiescence in the status quo rather than an urge for improvement on the

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M.G. Ranade, 'The Exigencies of Progress in India', JPSS, April 1893. This article again does not appear under Ranade's name, but can be attributed to him on stylistic grounds.

individual:

Satisfied with an ancient civilisation [Ranade pointed out], we have never, in recent history, endeavoured to fall in line with modern progress; nor, but for our education, it is likely that even now we should cherish any new ideal. Our ruin is attributable to our national apathy, lethargy and torpor, the direct result of past isolation and foreign conquests. The active impediments to progress are the inquisitorial power of religion, and the overpowering influence of custom and tradition, which have associated the highest ideal of happiness in our minds with inactivity and ease. While the western nations have striven to develop human energies and powers, and to secure a mastery over physical nature, we have stood before the world with folded hands, a picture of helplessness and despair, but in dutiful veneration of everything pertaining to the past, and yielding ourselves in placid contentment to the guidance of antiquated usages, and to rules of conduct which regulated social life before the dawn of modern civilisation.<sup>46</sup>

If a commitment to values which placed a premium on order and stability at the cost of progress had retarded the development of India, Ranade raised the question, how could the progress of the country be ensured? The most important attribute of a forward looking society was a rational approach to economic activity. Reduced to its bare essentials, a progressive and modern community was one in which every person was constantly striving to improve his status through planned effort. In this quest for self-improvement there was no place for the irrational and the romantic; and even where these qualities were not wholly eliminated, they

were subordinated to the achievement of practical ends. Science and rationality were the two basic props of modern society; and as seminal intellectual influence they played the same role in the contemporary world as faith and religion had played in the earlier stages of human history.

Since the key to social progress lay in rational action, and in the substitution of reason for superstition, and scientific values for religious prejudices, Ranade's attempt to effect a religious revival was geared to the promotion of such changes in the social climate of Maharashtra. Alone among the new Brahmins of his generation, he discerned the implications of the rise of protestantism in Europe, and recognised the upsurge of creative energy that had reinvigorated the West through the spread of the idea of individual responsibility to God, and of an ethic which promised spiritual fulfilment through dedication to a calling in the secular world. The spread of protestantism in Europe had prepared the ground for progress through creating a social and intellectual climate which undermined the mediaeval world. The bhakti saints of Maharashtra (Ranade believed) had attempted to stimulate similar changes, and they stood for ideals and objectives identical to those that had inspired the religious reformers of mediaeval Europe:

There is a curious parallel [Ranade pointed out]  
between the history of the Reformation movement in



Western Europe, and the struggle represented by the lives and teachings and writings of these saints and prophets...The European reformers of the sixteenth century protested strongly against the authority claimed by the priests and clergy with the Roman bishop at their head...The reformation in western India had its counterpart in this respect. Ancient authority and tradition had been petrified there, not in an ambitious Bishop and his clergy, but in the monopoly of the Brahmin caste, and it was against the exclusive spirit of this caste domination that the saints and prophets struggled most manfully to protest. They asserted the dignity of the human soul as residing in it quite independently of the accidents of its birth and social rank.<sup>47</sup>

Ranade's critique of the bhakti movement is far more convincing as an exposition of the religious values which he sought to propagate in Maharashtra, than it is as an appraisal of the social objectives which inspired the leaders of the bhakti movement. In their attitude towards established religion, and towards spiritual privileges which were as arbitrary as they were devoid of any utility, the protestant reformers of Europe resembled the bhakti saints of Maharashtra. But the protestant emphasis on the worthiness of the secular life, and on the possibility of salvation through dedication to a calling in the secular world, were conspicuously absent in the teachings of the bhakti saints.

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M.G. Ranade, 'The Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra', in Rise of the Maratha Power, (Bombay, 1901 reprinted in 1961), pp. 66-7.



The leaders of the bhakti movement were primarily interested in spreading the values of Hinduism, which had till then remained confined to the Brahmin castes, among the lower and middle castes through expressing them in a language and an idiom comprehensible to the common people. They sought to create a social consensus by directing the allegiance of the various castes to a common corpus of religious values. Whether Ranade (like many a reformer before him) deliberately misinterpreted the social objectives of the bhakti saints is difficult to say. What is unmistakable is his desire to create in Maharashtra the same intellectual climate which he believed had set European society on the path to economic prosperity and social progress.

Such were the values of the 'Hindu Protestantism'<sup>48</sup> which Ranade preached from the platform of the Prarthana Samaj, a religious society which he launched in association with new Brahmins like Dadoba Pandurang and R.G. Bhandarkar, to reconcile Hinduism to the spirit of progress, and to cleanse it of the irrationality that had presumably come to disfigure it over the period of time. While rejecting the religious philosophy of Sankara as a principle whose arid

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The term 'Hindu Protestantism' is used by N.G. Chandavarkar to describe the teachings of the Prarthana Samaj.

intellectual quality left the emotional roots of the individual untouched, Ranade acknowledged his debt to advaita through attributing the creation of the universe and the existence of man to a single and omnipotent God. 'There are not many Gods, nor a hierarchy of Gods, nor deified good and bad powers, nor principles of light and darkness, of matter and spirit, of Prakriti or Maya and Purusha. God is One and without a second and not many persons - not a triad, nor a duality of persons'<sup>49</sup>, he asserted in A Theist's Confession of Faith. Ranade saw this Being in the compassionate God of the bhakti saints, in whose praise Ekanatha and Namdeva and Tukarama had composed their abhangas, and who could be reached more readily through devotion than through intellectual inquiry.

Because of the evolutionary ideas which shaped his approach to social problems, and convinced him of the inevitability of progress, in reinterpreting Hinduism Ranade saw himself rationalising forces that were spontaneously at work within Hindu society, rather than imposing alien values on it. Nor was such a view unjustified; for all around him he saw changes stemming from the interaction between the traditional society of Maharashtra and the values which the new

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<sup>49</sup>

Quoted in Kellock, op. cit., pp. 168-9.

rulers interjected into the social climate. As early as 1821 the Poona Brahmins had split into conflicting camps over the readmission into the community of a caste-fellow called Ganghadhar Dixit Phadke who had defied custom by residing in Bombay for a short interval. The conservative and liberal factions within the Brahmin community had clashed even more violently when Shivprasad Seshadri, a convert to Christianity, had indicated a desire to be readmitted into the Brahmanical fold. In 1840, barely two decades after the British conquest, a society was launched by a group of Brahmins along masonic principles to propagate the abolition of caste. A more important landmark in the spread of western and liberal values was the founding in 1848 by young Brahmin students of a Literary and Scientific Society which served as a forum for the discussion and dissemination of radical ideas. Members of this society were prominently associated with social reform, and tried to promote the emancipation of women. Encouraged by their initial success in liberalising the institution of caste, and in providing for the education of women, the liberal camp launched in the 1870s an attack on that great bastion of Hindu orthodoxy, the interdict on the remarriage of widows. While the habits of thought the liberals encountered in their attempt to promote the remarriage of widows were far too deeply entrenched to be



shaken by a single assault, Vishnu Shastri Pandit, the leader of the radical Brahmins, had the satisfaction of debating the issue publicly with Shri Sankaracharya, the spiritual head of the Advaitists; and even though the Hindu pontiff decreed the marriage of widows to be against the letter and the spirit of the shastras, his participation in the debate indicated how strongly the winds of change were blowing across the land, and it reflected the concern of the orthodox community over the rapidly changing intellectual climate of Maharashtra<sup>50</sup>.

Yet Ranade did not permit his belief in social evolution to blind him to the need for organised action, or to convert him to the view that the forces at work within Hindu society would spontaneously ensure its development along the right lines. He dismissed the conviction of some new Brahmins in the spontaneity of social change as being compounded in equal parts of 'apathy and intellectual sophistry'; and he argued that the inevitability of change stemmed from the active assertion of their will, and the propagation of their

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N.G. Chandavarkar, 'The Forces at Work (Within Hindu Society)', in Times of India, (Bombay), 8 December 1887. Also see M.G. Ranade's speech before the Prarthana Samaj reprinted in The Mahratta, 11 September 1887. For a brief review of social reform movement in Maharashtra see speech by N.G. Chandavarkar before the Bombay Provincial Social Conference in 1901 reproduced in his Speeches and Writings etc., pp. 92-6.



views, by the liberal sections of the community. It was important for the liberals to actively promote change along desirable channels, and there was no assurance that this would come about spontaneously. The doctrine of a liberal elite in the role of a social catalyst was enunciated with great clarity by one of Ranade's closest followers in the field of social reform:

Though a state of transition [stated N.G. Chandavarkar] such as that through which our Hindu society is passing is inevitable under the present conditions...we should not delude ourselves with the belief that a period of mere scepticism... without any inward impetus or conviction must necessarily and unconditionally give way to a better period in the long run. When a society is being disintegrated...no hope of a better integration of it can be held unless there are found even in the midst of the forces that disintegrate it "organic filaments" or forces which promise to bring the disturbed elements together, and reunite the different and dispersing elements of society on a better and higher principle of life. It is in the formation of those "organic filaments" that the work and value of the social reformer lies; while the forces around us are slowly loosening our faith in the old..., the social reformer has to bring those very forces to his aid and show the way to the formation of a new faith, a new ideal, and a new bond, which shall enable society to enter into a higher and richer form of life, instead of being disorganised.<sup>51</sup>

Equally vital to enduring social progress (as the notion of a leading elite) was Ranade's view of reform as a process

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From N.G. Chandavarkar's speech on Social Reform delivered on 28 November 1896: Writings and Speeches etc., pp. 62-3.

which altered traditional values and institutions slowly and gradually<sup>52</sup>. Both his conservative cast of mind, and his belief in social theories which set a premium on evolution, as opposed to revolution, led him to the view that the advocates of reform in a hurry only succeeded in harming the course of progress, and the community which they set out to serve. Ranade fully realised the obstacles in the path of slow and cautious reform. But to assume a contrary course of action, he argued, could well prove disastrous. The reformer had to 'accept the teachings of the evolutionary doctrine..., because they teach that growth is structural and organic, and must take slow effect in all parts of the organism...<sup>53</sup> The supreme illusion, Ranade pointed out, was the belief that the reformer had to write on a clean slate. Nothing could be further from the truth; for his work was to 'complete the half-written sentence..., (and) to produce the ideal out of the actual, and by the help of the actual'. As it happened, for the reformer in Hindu society the task of maintaining links with tradition presented no serious difficulty. Hinduism had shown remarkable flexibility in the past,

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From M.G. Ranade's speech on Social Evolution before the Indian Social Conference of 1892: Miscellaneous Writings of the Justice M.G. Ranade, (Bombay, 1895), pp. 114-21.

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Ibid., p. 118.

and there was no reason to believe that Hindu society had lost the ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances<sup>54</sup>. It was possible for the liberal Hindu to draw his sanctions from the best traditions of the past, and to adjust the relationship of the present with the past in a spirit of true catholicity. It was also possible for him to hold in high regard the essence of the shastras, though he might on occasion violate the letter of the sacred texts. Such was the spirit which inspired Ranade to range himself with B.M. Malabari in the great debate between orthodoxy and liberalism which the Parsi reformer initiated in 1886 through his Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood. A similar logic impelled him to seek in the shastras and the sacred texts support for the measures of reform proposed by Malabari<sup>55</sup>.

Ranade's desire to modernise Maharashtra without disrupting the consensus which held the various castes together in allegiance to a common corpus of values provides the key to his social ideals and his political objectives. He was

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From M.G. Ranade's Speech on 'The Past History of Social Reform' before the Indian Social Conference of 1894: Writings of Ranade etc., pp. 133-42.

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M.G. Ranade, 'The Sutras and Smriti dicta on the Age of Hindu Marriage', in JPSS, April 1891.



aware of the fact that the bhakti movement had mitigated social tensions in Maharashtra to such an extent that 'caste exclusiveness finds no place in the religious sphere of life, and is relegated solely to the social concerns of men, and even there its restrictiveness is much relaxed, as any one can judge who compares (the caste feelings of) the Brahmans of South India...with the comparative indifference shown in such matters in the Deccan portion of Maharashtra'<sup>56</sup>. This realisation prompted him to reject the politics of extremism, and to oppose religious movements like the Brahma Samaj, whose members alienated themselves from the community because of their radical views on religious and social reform<sup>57</sup>. The social consensus which linked the Brahmin to the kunbi, and which Ranade was above all things anxious to preserve, impressed itself forcibly even on a visitor like the Russian Indologist I.P. Minayeff, who travelled extensively in India in the 1880s, and who was struck by the unique quality of the intellectual climate in Poona and Bombay. Minayeff noticed how the radical Brahmin

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<sup>56</sup>

M.G. Ranade, 'The Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra', in Rise of the Maratha Power, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup>

Address by M.G. Ranade to the Indian Social Conference of 1895: Writings of Ranade etc., p. 151.



student of the Deccan College 'admire(d) Spencer and at the same time is devoted to spiritualism'; and how in any discussion on the state of society and the nature of politics with the Brahmin intellectual, the problems of the kunbi occupied a prominence which they rarely did elsewhere<sup>58</sup>.

Both in politics and in social reform Ranade sought to modernise Maharashtra without disrupting the social cohesion, and undermining the intellectual consensus, which linked classes and castes together in a close relationship. Ranade's policies did not reflect any explicit concern for the maintenance of Brahmin predominance; nor did they reserve for the Brahmin castes a dominant role in society. Notions of caste exclusiveness, and caste superiority, and caste monopolisation of social roles had no place in Ranade's vision of the future. But because he wanted to lead Maharashtra into the age of rationality and progress without destroying the existing cohesion, and since the Brahmins occupied a position of superiority, the changes which Ranade advocated would have left (for some time at any rate) the predominance of the Brahmin castes unaffected. Any attempt to artificially undermine this predominance would have struck

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I.P. Minayeff, Travels in and Diaries of India and Burma, (trans. by S. Bhattacharya), (Calcutta ?), pp. 49, 52-3.

Ranade as morally reprehensible and incompatible with orderly progress. Thus when in 1884 the Bombay Government attempted to raise the intellectual and educational level of the lower and middle castes by reserving scholarships for them in the various schools and colleges, the Sarvajanik Sabha launched a bitter campaign under Ranade's aegis against what was characterised as an act of discrimination against the Brahmin community<sup>59</sup>.

However, since the notions of progress and rationality propagated by Ranade challenged the traditional values of Hinduism, and the beliefs which sustained the institution of caste, they were bound to undermine the social and intellectual preponderance of the Brahmin castes. The implications of Ranade's ideas were clear to the old style shastris and pandits, whose grip over positions of power was even otherwise being undermined by the changing quality of the political scene. The orthodox Brahmins therefore opposed Ranade's social ideals and political objectives as subversive of the traditional order, and of Brahmin supremacy over the community. Their reaction to the liberal doctrine was

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The Mahratta dated 20 September 1885; The Kesari dated 29 September 1885; The Bombay Chronicle dated 27 September 1885; The Din Bandhu dated 10 December 1885.

expressed in political action like the deputation of Poona shastris headed by Rama Shastri Apte, which apprised Sir James Fergusson, the Governor of Bombay, of the strong disapproval with which they would view state interference in the social and religious life of the Hindu community along the lines suggested by the advocates of reform. 'According to the Hindu shastras marriage was a religious institution regulated by strict rules and injunctions...', Rama Shastri told Fergusson, '(and no) good government has yet interfered with our religious laws and customs...'<sup>60</sup>

Because of the opposition of the traditional leaders of the brahmin community, and because of the long range implications of the changes he advocated in Hindu society, Ranade's programme of reform did not commend him to the majority of the Brahmins of Maharashtra. Despite the catholicity of their vision, the insight they possessed into contemporary society, and the rationality of their programme of social and political reform, new Brahmins like Ranade formed only a small section of that Brahmin community whose dominance over Hindu society remained unshaken till the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Yet the tragedy of the new Brahmins did not lie in their failure to influence

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<sup>60</sup>

The Mahratta dated 10 October 1886.

the Brahmin rank and file. Their tragedy lay in their inability to win over to their side the middle and lower castes of Hindu society. The Sarvajanik Sabha's attempt in the 1870s to lead rural discontent against the Bombay Government remains an isolated bid on the part of the new Brahmins to win peasant support for their policies. But apart from the 'no-tax' campaign which preceded the riots of 1875, the new Brahmins were unable to make any impression on the kunbis whose cause they espoused with such integrity and skill.

The new Brahmins' failure to establish political rapport with the peasants was a result of the changes which took place in the distribution of power in the villages of the Deccan in the nineteenth century. We turn next to a consideration of these changes and to an assessment of their political implications.



## CHAPTER VIII

### CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS IN MAHARASHTRA - 1918

Since the political and economic life of Maharashtra in 1818 was shaped by the character of rural society, and because the Deccan retained its predominantly rural complexion in the nineteenth century, the social climate of the villages continued to exercise a decisive influence over the region in 1918. In view of the predominantly rural influences which shaped the political life of Maharashtra, the Chitpavan elite which had dominated the region at the time of the British conquest, and which continued to dominate it during the course of the nineteenth century, found its position being undermined by the emergence of the rich peasants in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The rise of these rich peasants was a result of policies that sought to transform Maharashtra from a traditional to a modern society, and put her on the path to progress and prosperity.

## Social Change in the Villages of the Deccan<sup>1</sup>

To appreciate the changes which took place in rural society during the nineteenth century, it is necessary to recapitulate the social organisation which prevailed in the villages of the Deccan in 1818, and the institutions which linked the rural communities to the seat of government in Poona.

The village of 1818 was a self-sufficient and virtually isolated social unit. The cultivators within the village were divided into two social groups on the basis of the tenure on which they held their land. First the meerasdars, who were the descendants of the first settlers of the village, and whose superior status was reflected in their social prerogatives rather than in their wealth. The meerasdars of a village made up the executive council which managed the affairs of the village community under the leadership of the patel or the headman. In contrast to the meerasdars, the uprees were temporary settlers who rented and tilled the cultivable waste, or the deserted holdings, of the village. The uprees did not possess a voice in the village council. The distinction between the uprees and the

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The entire sub-section is based on the preceding chapters, and has not therefore been documented.

meerasdars hinged on social status rather than on differences in incomes; and it found expression in contrasting styles of life. Because of the collective responsibility of the cultivators for the land-tax of the village, and the manner in which this tax was distributed among individual cultivators, both the meerasdars and uprees lived at the level of subsistence, and there were no glaring inequalities of wealth in the village.

The patel was the most important individual in the village. His power stemmed from his traditional authority as the head of the most senior founding family of the village, and from his appointment by the State as the headman of the village. The combination of the roles of the traditional leader of the village, and its official headman, formed the basis of the patel's unique authority and prestige. Because his freedom of action was not hampered by any legal and rational restraints, the patel could represent the interests of the State and the village community without involving himself in a conflict of loyalties. Between the village community and the Poona Government stood the mamlatdars, who assessed and collected the land-tax for the State, and the deshmukhs, or the traditional landlords, who acted as alternative channels of communication between the kunbis and the State. A balance of power between the mamlatdars and the deshmukhs was

necessary for the smooth working of the administration, and this balance was dependent upon the effective exercise of his authority by the Peshwa who controlled supreme power in Poona.

The cohesion and identity of the village community was reflected in the assessment of its fiscal obligations to the State through consultations between the patel, who represented the interests of the village, the mamlatdar, who spoke on behalf of the State, and the deshmukh, who mediated between the patel and the mamlatdar, and played a vital role in the determination of a reasonable land-tax. The cohesion of the village was also reflected in its relations with the sowcar or urban financier. The patel was often unable to collect the land-tax he had contracted to pay to the mamlatdar. When confronted with such a situation he turned to the sowcar for assistance, and pledged the credit of the village community in return for a loan which enabled him to honour his obligations. The financial dealings of the patel, representing the village community, and the sowcar are to be distinguished from relations between the kunbis and the village vani. The vani, who lived in the village and was subject to its judicial and executive authority, doled out small sums of money to the cultivators in their individual capacity in times of distress. The sowcar, on the other hand, lived outside the



village, and dealt only with the patel. He was far too powerful an individual to be controlled by the village community. Indeed, through the loans he advanced to the patels, the sowcar very often gained access to the entire agricultural surplus of the village, and only his caste values prevented him from acquiring a more intimate control over the economy of the village community.

Before 1818 the villages of the Deccan were therefore organised along collective lines, with the community rather than the individual cultivator conducting their relations, both with the mamlatdar who represented the authority of the State, and the sowcar through whom urban credit flowed to the village. Besides, relations between the village community and the State, on the one hand, and between different social groups within the village, on the other, were conducted on traditional rather than on legal and rational lines. The powers and responsibilities of a patel or a mamlatdar, for instance, were not precisely defined: and the pitch of the land-tax was determined on the basis of past realisations, rather than on abstract economic principles. As a result, the village was characterised by a collective and co-operative rather than an individualistic and competitive social environment. Further, distinctions within the village found expression in different social styles rather than in glaring

inequalities in incomes. Practically all the peasants lived at the level of subsistence, and the only outstanding figure in the village was the patel, who provided leadership to the village community, and resolved its day-to-day administrative problems.

For the Utilitarian administrators who were entrusted with the government of the Deccan after 1818, both the collective form of social organisation which prevailed in the village, and the absence of a legal and rational basis for relations between the kunbis and the State, were anathema. As against the inertia and lack of mobility which characterised Maharashtra under the Peshwas, the Utilitarians were interested in promoting social progress and economic growth. To achieve these objectives they embarked upon a programme of reform which looked upon the ryot instead of the organised community for creative social action, and which attempted to determine relations between the peasant and the State on the basis of the scientific laws of political economy.

The ryotwari system of land-revenue was the hub of the Utilitarian programme of reform in the Deccan. Through defining the kunbi's fiscal obligations in a legal contract between him and the State, the ryotwari system set aside the authority of the village community in revenue affairs. It simultaneously determined the land-tax on the basis of

scientific principles in preference to the rivaj or customary realisations under the Marathas. Behind the institution of the ryotwari system lay the belief that once the peasant was rid of his obligations to the village community, and his fiscal burden regulated on a rational basis, he would be well set on the path to progress and prosperity. Through stimulating economic growth, and promoting the rise of an affluent peasantry, the ryotwari system sought to create a social class whose loyalty would be firmly anchored to the new order in Maharashtra.

The ryotwari system held revolutionary implications for rural society. First and foremost, it removed the distinction between the meerasdars and the uprees, and reduced all cultivators to an identical status. But its significant consequences lay elsewhere. The most important bond between the peasants of a village was the collective responsibility they bore for the payment of the land-tax. Once this responsibility was no longer enforced, the cohesion of the village community was undermined in a most significant fashion. Simultaneously, the Patel's leadership over the village community became a thing of the past, since he no longer determined the burden of tax on the village in consultations with the mamlatdar, and because his powers and obligations were defined by a code of regulations which emphasised his legal authority



at the cost of his traditional ties, and alienated him from the village. Besides diminishing the status of the patel, the creation of a rational administration reduced the importance of the deshmukhs and other leaders of rural society, whose authority had stemmed from the non-existence of an organised bureaucracy under the Peshwas.

Apart from undermining the village community and the traditional leadership in rural society, the ryotwari system altered the economic links between the city and the village, and effected a redistribution of social power in rural society. So long as the cultivators had shared joint responsibility for the land-tax on the village, any deficit in the collection of this tax was met by a loan contracted by the village community from the sowcars. But once collective responsibility for the land-tax was no longer enforced, the village community ceased to have any dealings with the sowcar. Under the new system the sowcar used the vani in the village as an agent for advancing loans to the cultivators, who were now expected to look after their affairs. As a result of this change, the vani's role gained considerably in significance; and because of the links which he developed with his caste-fellows outside the village, the vani became a powerful figure in the rural community. The creation of a judiciary on laissez-faire principles, which favoured the



vanis against the kunbis, served to heighten the dominance acquired by the vanis through the institution of the ryotwari system.

The social consequences flowing out of the ryotwari system belied the expectations of the advocates of reform. The Utilitarian administrators had introduced reforms on the assumption that a competitive social environment and a rational policy of taxation would stimulate agricultural productivity and encourage the rise of an affluent peasantry. This actually happened to a limited extent. But the emergence of a small class of rich peasants was completely overshadowed by the growing dominance of the vanis over village society. So acute was the tension generated by this social change, that in 1875 the Deccan was convulsed by class and caste warfare between the cultivators and the moneylenders.

The Deccan riots of 1875 highlighted the failure of Utilitarian reform. Based on a consuming belief in the virtues of individualism, the ryotwari system was all too successful in undermining the collective institutions which had flourished in the villages of the Deccan before 1818. But the decay of these institutions benefited the vani instead of the cultivator. When the authority of the patel over the village declined, dominance passed over into the hands of the vani rather than the peasant. The resulting crisis obliged

the British administrators to abandon their doctrinaire belief in individualism and rationality. The Relief Act of 1879, for instance, was an attempt to modify the legal system in order to buttress the declining position of the kunbis, and it violated a fundamental principle of laissez-faire in throwing the weight of the State in favour of the cultivators. When the reform of the legal system proved inadequate, the British Government took the initiative in organising co-operative societies in the villages; in the first instance to provide the kunbis with cheap credit; next to undermine the power of the vanis; and finally to stimulate growth and prosperity in rural society on a co-operative instead of a competitive basis.

The Relief Act and the Village Banks instituted with official support were meant to assist the peasants as a whole in raising agricultural productivity and in improving their standard of living. But both these measures proved to be discriminatory in the benefits they showered on the cultivators. The Relief Act, for instance, destroyed the credit of the poor peasants and made the vanis reluctant to help them in times of distress, since its provisions made the recovery of loans very difficult. But while the poor peasants fared badly under the Relief Act, the more substantial cultivators still commanded enough goodwill to raise loans whenever they needed

them, and they were also able to exploit the Act to restrain the vanis. Similarly, co-operation furthered the interests of the more affluent sections of the rural community. The poor peasants possessed neither the capital nor the intelligence to run co-operative societies, with the result that these societies were financed and run by the more substantial peasants, for the benefit of their class, rather than for the benefit of the cultivating community as a whole.

The measures enacted to curb the power of the vanis consequently vested social and economic dominance over the villages of the Deccan in a class of rich peasants who owed their prosperity to the economic policy pursued by the British Government.

### Anti-Brahmanism and the Rise of the Rich Peasants

The growth of a class of rich peasants by the opening decades of the twentieth century held serious implications for politics in Maharashtra. If Elphinstone's programme of educational reform had been carried out in its entirety, and a network of schools disseminating liberal and rational values among the cultivators had been created along with the Hindu College, then the ideals of new Brahmins like Ranade would possibly have acquired considerable popularity in rural society. But since popular education came to be dominated by



advocates of the diffusion theory, who entrusted the education of the masses to a westernised Brahmin elite, the values of the kunbis did not change under British rule. Peasants brought up in a traditional climate acquiesced readily in the institution of caste, and in the absence of opportunities for raising their standard of living. The extent of their subservience to caste values is indicated in their refusal to attack Brahmin moneylenders (of whom there were a goodly number) in 1875, despite the fact that Brahmin moneylenders were just as grasping in their dealings with the peasants as were moneylenders from other castes<sup>2</sup>.

But even before 1875 a small but articulate non-Brahmin elite was trying to instill among the kunbis an awareness of their fallen state, and encouraging them to reject the institution of caste. Conspicuous among this elite was Jyotiba Phule, who was born in 1827 in a mali (a kunbi sub-caste) family, and whom the non-Brahmins of Maharashtra even today revere as their Mahatma<sup>3</sup>. Phule was endowed with a forceful personality rather than with a sophisticated cast of mind.

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Report of the Deccan Riots Commission, (Bombay, 1876), para. 76.

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Based on a biographical note on Jyotiba Phule available with the Bombay State Committee for the History of the Freedom Movement in India (henceforth referred to as BSCHFM).



He received a narrow education in a missionary school, and this contact with the missionaries was instrumental in shaping his attitude to the Brahmins, and in impressing upon him the need for improvement in the moral and material condition of the non-Brahmin castes. Phule first tried to achieve this objective through opening schools for children from the lower castes. But when his efforts to educate his caste-fellows failed to make any significant impact, he embarked upon a programme of political activity, creating in the Satya Shodak Samaj (Association for the Propagation of Truth) a counterpoise to the new Brahmin dominated Sarvajanik Sabha, and spelling out in polemical tracts like Gulamgiri (slavery) the extent and the iniquity of Brahmin dominance over Hindu society.

Phule's Gulamgiri, which appeared in 1873, not only focussed attention on Brahmin exploitation in contemporary Maharashtra, but it also created a mythology from which anti-Brahmanism all over India subsequently drew its inspiration. The Brahmins, Phule argued, were not the original inhabitants of India. They were an Aryan people who had in a period of remote antiquity been attracted to the country by its wealth and fertility, and had subjugated the original inhabitants, referring to them subsequently in terms of opprobrium as the shudras (the insignificant). The sanguine

conflicts associated with the Aryan invasion of India held a sacred place in the folk memory of the Aryan people; and this memory found expression in legends like the one concerning the annihilation of the Kshtriya race by the Aryan-Brahmin leader, Parashuram. To perpetuate their dominance over the country, the conquering Aryans had

devised that weird system of mythology, the institution of caste, and the code of cruel and inhuman laws, to which we can find no parallel amongst other nations. They founded a system of priestcraft so galling in its tendency and operation, the like of which we can hardly find anywhere since the times of the Druids. The institution of caste, which has been the main object of their laws, had existence among them originally,...The highest rights, the highest privileges and gifts, and everything that could make the life of the Brahmin easy ...were inculcated and enjoined, whereas the shudras and the atishudras were regarded with supreme contempt, and the meanest rights of humanity were denied to them.<sup>4</sup>

In the emotive rhetoric of Gulamgiri, the history of India after the Aryan conquest revolved around a continuous struggle for power between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Though the dominance of Kshtriya dynasties like the house of Shivaji indicated that the non-Brahmins had frequently held their own in the contest, the intellectual hold which the Brahmins possessed over the community through the monopolisation of the priestly function assured them of a privileged

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From translation of Gulamgiri available with BSCHFM.

position which they did not hesitate to exploit for their selfish ends. But whenever their intellectual predominance was reinforced by the acquisition of political power, and this was precisely what had happened under the Peshwas, then the non-Brahmin position became completely intolerable, and a gross tyranny was imposed on the non-Brahmin community.

Since Phule identified the rule of the Peshwas with Brahmanical tyranny, he looked upon the events of 1818 with approval, and regarded the British conquest of Maharashtra as an act of deliverance for the lower and middle castes from the Brahmin yoke. He was also deeply impressed by the Christian values and the humanitarian ideals which inspired the new rulers of Maharashtra; and he singled out for special praise the egalitarian spirit which moved them to equate the bigoted Brahmin with the lowly shudra, and to accord them an equality of status in the eyes of the law. But, Phule argued, although the British Government was inspired by the noblest of ideals, it had inadvertently supported policies which had strengthened the Brahmin hold over the community. Public service and the liberal professions, particularly the former, were the two avenues to advancement open to the people under British rule. Access to these avenues was to be had through the schools and colleges set up under British aegis. Because of their belief in the diffusion theory of education, British



administrators had concentrated all their efforts on these institutions in the hope that the favoured individuals who graduated through them would take upon themselves the task of educating the masses. Such an assumption, however, took no account of the caste values of the Brahmins. Instead of directing their energy to raising the intellectual level of the lower castes, the Brahmins had exploited the situation to monopolise the public service and the liberal professions. The position of the shudras under British rule was therefore worse than ever before:

The Brahmin deceives the shudra [Phule pointed out] not only in his capacity of the priest, but does so in a variety of other ways...In the most insignificant village, as in the largest town, the Brahman is all in all; he is all and end all of the ryot. He is the master, the ruler, The Patil of a village, the real head, is in fact a nonentity. The kulkarni, the hereditary Brahman village accountant...moulds the Patil according to his wishes. He is the temporal and spiritual advisor of the ryots, the sawkar in his necessities, and the general referee in all matters...If we go up higher, to the court of a mamlatdar, we find the same thing. The first anxiety of a mamlatdar is to get around him, if not his own relations, his castemen to fill the various vacancies under him...If a shudra repairs to his court, the treatment which he receives is akin to what the meanest reptile receives...If we go up higher still..., the same system is followed in a greater or smaller scale. The higher European officers generally view men and things through Brahman spectacles, and hence the deplorable ignorance they exhibit in forming a correct estimate of them.<sup>5</sup>



Because an ill-conceived though well intentioned educational policy had reinforced Brahmin preponderance over the community, Phule believed that the liberation of the non-Brahmins from the Brahmin yoke was possible only through drastic changes in the attitude of the British Government towards popular education. The State in India, he pointed out before the Education Commission of 1884, drew the bulk of its revenues from a tax paid by the ryots. It was, therefore, legitimate to demand that it should focus its attention on the education of the rural masses rather than the Brahmin castes, who constituted a small intellectual elite. This could be done most effectively by making primary education compulsory in the villages, and by giving a practical orientation to the instruction given in the primary schools. At the same time, since secondary schools and colleges were equally important for the balanced intellectual development of the community, it would be wrong for the State to withdraw the support it had hitherto extended to such institutions. But to prevent them from being monopolised by the Brahmins, it was necessary to encourage the lower castes to join them in increasing numbers through special incentives. 'The shudras are the life and the sinews of the country', Phule told the Education Commission, 'and it is to them alone, and not to the Brahmins, that the Government must look to tide

over the difficulties, financial as well as political. If the hearts and the minds of the shudras are happy and contented, the British Government need have no fear for their loyalty in the future.<sup>6</sup>

### The Orthodox New Brahmins

Though Phule's anti-Brahmin crusade failed to make any immediate impact on the kunbis of Maharashtra, the significance of his ideas was not lost on the Brahmin community. The old style shastris and the majority of the Brahmins of Maharashtra were opposed even to the whiggish ideas of a new Brahmin like Ranade, since they saw in any attempt to promote rationality and progress the decay of their hegemony over Hindu society. But while Ranade's proposals were characterised by restraint, and he looked to a gradual change in the values and structure of Hindu society, Phule aimed at unleashing a social revolution through a frontal attack on Brahmanical dominance and the institution of caste. Phule, therefore, presented a far more serious threat to the established order than Ranade.

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Vide Evidence by Jyotiba Phule before the Education Commission: Report of the Education Commission, Bombay, Vol. II, (Calcutta, 1884).

On being confronted with the non-Brahmins who advocated revolution, and the new Brahmins who preached reform, the Brahmin community of Maharashtra at first turned to its traditional leaders. So far as the traditional leaders were concerned, they concentrated their fire on reformers within the Brahmin community, rather than on revolutionaries outside the Brahmin pale. The impassioned debate on the secular implications of advaita between Narayan Vishnu Bapat, the President of the liberal Hindu Union Club, and Bhima Acharya Zhalkikar, a shastri who held the chair of Sanskrit at the Elphinstone College, during the Hemantotsava (spring festival) lectures of 1886, illustrates the orthodox bid to stifle heresy before it had a chance to influence the Brahmin rank and file, and convert it to a new religious and secular outlook<sup>7</sup>. In tracing the evolution of the advaitic weltgeist, Bapat made a strong plea for active participation by the individual in the secular life; and he debunked other worldly interpretations of Sankara's philosophy as reflecting the political subservience of Hindu society. Bapat's interpretation was disputed by Bhima Acharya Zhalkikar, who held that 'the advait philosophy was sought only by those who were convinced of the transient nature of the universe, and the

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The Mahratta dated 17 January 1886.

common herd of people generally were allured by objects which influence the passions....'<sup>8</sup> Yet the traditionalists were not always on the defensive, nor did they hesitate to adopt the new style in politics in order to secure their objectives. This is indicated by the Madhav Bagh meeting held in Bombay in September 1886, when a crowd of 10,000 from the leading Hindu castes congregated to draw up a petition against the reforms proposed in Hindu marriage by Malabari with the support of individuals like Ranade<sup>9</sup>. It is also reflected in the creation of bodies like the Sanatana Dharma Parishad (the Association for Preserving the Orthodox Religion), which enjoyed the patronage and support of Shri Sankaracharya, the pontiff of the Saivites, and Pandit Gattulalji Sharma, a leading Vaishnavite intellectual; and which sought to revitalise orthodox Hinduism through the active co-operation of the heads of the various castes and communities<sup>10</sup>.

But Zhalkikar Shastri's defence of advaita against the liberal onslaught was as futile as the traditionalist bid to reinvigorate Hinduism through the creation of bodies like the

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<sup>8</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>

The Mahratta dated 5 September and 12 September 1886.

<sup>10</sup>

From unpublished source material available with BSCHFM.



Sanatama Dharma Parishad. For the basic weakness of the traditional elite lay in the intellectual gulf which separated it from the new rulers of the land. This gulf made it impossible for the orthodox Brahmin leaders to give effective leadership to the community in its secular concerns. However, if the old style shastris were unable to perform their secular role with any measure of adequacy under the altered conditions of British rule, precisely the reverse was true of those new Brahmins who saw no contradiction between the achievement of progress and the traditional structure of Hindu society; and who looked forward to an era of progress and prosperity in which the traditional values, and the traditional patterns of social dominance, would remain unaltered. The exponent of such a standpoint among the first generation of new Brahmins was Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar. For despite his vitriolic attacks on the pillars of Hindu orthodoxy, and despite his belief in the desirability, as distinct from the inevitability, of social change, Vishnu Shastri did not subscribe to the views of a Ranade or a Lokhitwadi, and he was opposed to radical changes in the intellectual quality and the social structure of Hindu society.

The most forceful advocate of orthodoxy among the new Brahmins was Bal Ganghadhar Tilak, who combined a belief in advaita with a commitment to the spirit of progress, and who

tried to reconcile the institution of caste with the modernisation of Hindu society. In his vision of society as a dynamic as opposed to a static organism, and in his belief in economic progress along the lines of western society, Tilak stood for values and objectives which were opposed to the traditional outlook. But unlike the liberal new Brahmins, he would not allow that there was any incompatibility between the traditional structure of Hindu society and its economic development, on the one hand, and political emancipation, on the other. In putting forth his views on 'The Hindu Caste from an Industrial Point of View' before the Bombay State Industrial Conference of 1892, Tilak launched a scathing attack on those who 'held that any amelioration of the industrial classes of this land is impossible without a religious revival, or at any rate without a complete annihilation of the caste system, which they have been brought up to regard as the prime source of all evil in Hindu society...'<sup>11</sup> Explaining the evolution of caste as a consequence of the increasing complexity of the productive process, and the consequent division of functions in society, Tilak heaped ridicule on the idea that distinctions of caste implied

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B.G. Tilak, 'The Hindu Caste from an Industrial Point of View', in The Industrial Quarterly Review of Western India, October 1892.

differences in status and social rank. Caste, he pointed out, was 'a secular institution among the members of the Aryan race, for the propagation of hereditary institutions, and for purpose of mutual help and co-operation'. Like the guilds of mediaeval Europe, caste had formerly played a vital role in the secular life of the community. Caste panchayats had regulated the affairs of Hindu society through enforcing norms of social behaviour and through upholding values which were essential for the social order. Could caste serve a similar function in the industrialised community of the future? Tilak asked the question:

I think [he stated in answer to his question] there can be no two opinions on this point...The free competition of foreign countries has well nigh threatened the very existence of many industrial classes in the land, and the ignorance of the latter leaves them completely helpless in such a crisis...Under these circumstances...our industrial classes badly want an organisation which will protect them from total ruin. The organisation of caste already prevails among them, and its history shows that it has saved them from similar crises in ancient times...If we prudently attempt to build on the existing foundations there is every hope that the organisation of caste might again become a living force, and under the altered circumstances of the country protect the working classes in the same way as it did in ancient times...<sup>12</sup>

Despite his allegiance to traditional institutions Tilak recognised the need, and inevitability, of social change. Where

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<sup>12</sup>

Ibid.

he differed from liberal new Brahmins was in his belief that the political community existed distinct from the social community; and that it could progress independently of the latter. Since he distinguished the social from the political, Tilak believed that the advocates of social reform would only succeed in delaying the achievement of those political objectives on whose attainment all new Brahmins were agreed. The occasion for spelling out these differences came in 1895, when Tilak's followers prevented the Indian Social Conference, a body organised by Ranade to promote social reform in the country, from holding its session jointly with the Indian National Congress<sup>13</sup>. In defending the stand taken by his followers, Tilak disputed Ranade's picture of social progress as a process catalysed by a westernised elite; and he stressed the desirability of spontaneous change, which would carry along with it all the sections of the community, and prevent the alienation of its liberal and progressive from its conservative elements. Hindu society, Tilak argued, was divided into castes and communities which existed at different levels of social development and intellectual sophistication. To raise the banner of social reform was to transform these castes and communities into antagonistic social groups, and

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<sup>13</sup>

The Mahratta dated 24 November 1895.



to sharpen the cleavages which divided them from one another. But in the political sphere the spirit of nationalism was all pervasive, and the demand for devolution of power would unite instead of dividing the people.

Although he opposed the social programme of the liberal Brahmins on grounds of expediency, Tilak cheerfully accepted the inevitability of change. His differences with the liberal camp were not really fundamental. Indeed, in searching the classical texts of Hinduism for a definition of the individual's role in the secular affairs of the community, he came to a position very similar to the one advocated by Narayan Vishnu Bapat, the President of the Hindu Union Club, during the Hemantotsava controversy of 1886<sup>14</sup>. As Tilak pointed out in the Gita Rahasya (Secret of the Gita), the distinction between the sacred and the profane worlds made by a traditionalist like Bhima Acharyz Zhalkikar was based on an erroneous reading of the religious texts:

The conclusion I have come to [Tilak pointed out] is that the Gita advocates the performance of action in this world even after the actor has achieved the highest union with the Supreme Deity by Gnyana (knowledge) or Bhakti (devotion). This action must be done to keep the world going by the right path of evolution which the Creator has destined the

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<sup>14</sup>

See Srimad Bhagavadagita Rahasya or Karma-Yoga-Shastra, by B.G. Tilak, trans. by R.S. Suthankar, 2 Vols., (Poona, 1936).

world to follow...This I hold is the lesson of the Gita...Gnyanayoga (the path of knowledge) there is, yes. Bhaktiyoga (the path of devotion) there is, yes. Who says not? But they are both subservient to the Karmayoga (the path of action) prescribed in the Gita.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of his differences with the traditionalists on the meaning of the classical texts, and on questions of social change, Tilak's views gained considerable popularity in the Brahmin community. If the choice for the Brahmins had rested between the old style shastris and Tilak, their response to his ideas might well have been hostile. But the political climate of British rule had undermined the power of the traditional elite to such an extent that the only practical alternative to Tilak's lead was acquiescence in the views of liberal new Brahmins like Ranade. Between Ranade and Tilak the Brahmin community had little hesitation in making its choice. Ranade openly acknowledged the superiority of western political ideals and social values; Tilak stood for the revitalisation of Hinduism. Ranade wanted to introduce a new ethic in Hindu religion; Tilak regarded any such attempt as completely superfluous. Finally, and we touch here on the most significant difference between the two, Ranade regarded

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See Bal Ganghadhar Tilak: His Speeches and Writings, (Madras, 1909), p. 233. Also see D.M. Brown, 'The Philosophy of Bal Ganghadhar Tilak: Karma vs. Jrara in the Gita Rahasya', Journal of Asian Studies, February 1958, pp. 197-208.

caste as incompatible with progress and rationality; Tilak, on the other hand, looked upon it as an institution that would protect the individual from the moral anarchy, and the social atomisation, that were the inevitable concomitants of modernisation.

Tilak's attitude to caste and the traditional structure of Hindu society persuaded the Brahmin community to extend its support to him. The Brahmins of Maharashtra believed that so long as the institution of caste remained intact, and to the extent the values of Hindu orthodoxy claimed the allegiance of the people, their predominance would stand unshaken. They were equally convinced that the breakdown of caste values would spell the end of their dominance. Brahmanical opposition to Ranade was, therefore, only to be expected. In recommending the substitution of belief in traditional values by rationality, and in advocating a gradual change in the social structure of Hindu society, Ranade outlined a programme of action which was bound to undermine the positions of power which the Brahmins had won for themselves under British rule. However, the Brahmins refused to embark upon a suicidal course, and they preferred to follow the lead of Tilak, who proposed to leave their supremacy unchallenged.

### The Brahmin non-Brahmin Conflict

But the very reasons which endeared Tilak to the Brahmin community alienated him from the non-Brahmin castes, since orthodox Hinduism had condemned these castes to permanent servitude. So strong were the ties of caste in Maharashtra, and so powerful the intellectual consensus which linked the kunbis to the Brahmins, that there was no immediate opposition to the ideals or the pretensions of the orthodox new Brahmins. But the growth of a non-Brahmin elite nursed in the values of a Phule, and the rise of a rich peasantry anxious to find for itself a place in the sun, introduced a new note of disquiet in the politics of Maharashtra. The non-Brahmin elite saw in the devolution of power which lay ahead both an opportunity, and a challenge, for the rich peasants whom it claimed to represent. If Brahmin supremacy remained unchallenged, it argued, and the Brahmin castes acquired control over the machinery of government and politics, then the transfer of power into Indian hands would result in caste tyranny and caste oppression of an unparalleled intensity. However, through an active assertion of the rights and prerogatives assured to them under British rule, and through an exploitation of the democratic process, the kunbis could secure for themselves a fair share



of political power. In what measure they would be able to do so would depend upon their intellectual sophistication, and the extent to which they were able to exploit the opportunities thrown open to them under British rule.

Such were the arguments which Phule presented before the kunbis of Maharashtra through a dedicated cadre of political workers whom he had enrolled in the Satya Shodak Samaj. The activities of little known Samaj agitators like Narayan Pensai, whom we find addressing a meeting of kunbis in the village of Kowli in Amraoti district in 1901; or Dharmaji Ramaji, who travelled through the villages of the Deccan, distributing pamphlets which told the ryots 'how we have all fallen victims to the religious tyranny of the Brahman', and exhorted them to rise against this tyranny, gradually created among the peasants a desire for equality of status with the elite castes<sup>16</sup>.

Yet it would be a mistake to attribute the ferment among the peasants of Maharashtra solely to the agitational activity of the Satya Shodak Samaj. The kunbi awakening was part of a wider process which affected all the castes and classes of Maharashtra. Behind this awakening lay the growing belief that progress and prosperity and social mobility were

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Note on the anti-Brahmin movement available with BSCHFM.

desirable and attainable; that the lower and middle castes could improve their status through hard work and rational endeavour; and that the key to self-advancement lay in education, and in the pursuit of careers in the public service or the liberal professions, which had for so long been monopolised by the Brahmin castes. Consider, for instance, the advice given to his caste-fellows by the President of 'The Third Educational and Social Conference of the Reddies of Bombay Province' in 1910. Welcoming the growth of a new caste consciousness among the Reddies, 'with a view to uplift ourselves socially and to devise means for the spread of education amongst us', the President exhorted his castemen to pursue the path of loyalty to the British Government, demanding in return for this loyalty special facilities for education and recruitment in the public service. 'It is very easy to scoff at office seeking,' the President stated, 'but in the particular circumstances in which we are situated, the bestowal of office would, apart from the good it directly does to the recipient, give hope and infuse energy into other members of the community and make them strive their utmost, not only to get themselves educated, but to spread education among their clansmen.'<sup>17</sup>

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BA (Bombay Archives). Address before the Third Social Conference of the Reddies of Bombay dated 22 May 1910: R.D. (Revenue Department), Vol. 59 of 1910.

The intellectual climate of Maharashtra under British aegis undermined the values which had formerly reconciled the lower and middle castes to an inferior social status; and the imminent devolution of power combined with this change to unleash a profound conflict between the different castes and classes, since to be outmanoeuvred in the jockeying for positions of influence and authority which lay ahead meant total insignificance for a social group. So far as the rural classes were concerned, however, their desire for power was reinforced by the emergence of a rich peasantry through the economic policies pursued by the British Government. Having accumulated wealth through the opportunities thrown open to them under British rule, the rich peasants sought for themselves a position in keeping with their newly acquired economic status. Their ambition was the driving force behind the anti-Brahmin movement which sought to wrest social and political control from the Brahmins. Witness the representation made by the Deccan Ryots' Association in 1918 for separate electorates for the agricultural classes in the new legislatures that were to come into existence under dyarchy. While the Ryots' Association claimed to represent all the peasants, its social base is obvious from the demand that the

rural vote be limited to rich peasants 'who paid Rs.48 or more as land revenue'<sup>18</sup>.

The ryots' demand for separate electorates in 1918 represents a high water mark in the tension between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin castes of Maharashtra. Behind this demand lay two factors: the growth of a rich peasantry anxious to transform its economic gains into political power; and the conflict unleashed between the different castes and classes through the interjection of popular democracy into their midst. However, the social consensus which characterised Maharashtra prevented the tension arising through the introduction of representative institutions from creating any deep cleavages in the community. That this consensus had not been undermined under British rule was largely due to the conservative social vision of Elphinstone, and the cautious liberalism of Ranade, the two most creative influences to impinge upon Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. The persistence of a consensus despite the stresses and strains of modernisation set the pattern for the development of Maharashtra in the twentieth century. It also determined the moderation of the anti-Brahmin movement in the region before

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<sup>18</sup>

Representation from the Deccan Ryots' Association to the Bombay Government dated 12 September 1918.



and after 1947; and the ultimate success with which the dominant rural caste of kunbis was able to forge a creative political alliance with social groups like the Brahmins, on the one hand, and the Mahars, on the other. Maharashtra stands unique in India in her political stability; and in the absence of the frustrating tensions which characterise relations between classes and castes in other parts of the country. Her stability is an eloquent tribute to the religious reformers who shaped her destiny during the time of troubles under the shadow of Islam; and to the patriots and administrators who handled with such consummate skill and far-sighted vision the heritage bequeathed to them by the Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra.

## CHAPTER IX

### RETROSPECT

Between the downfall of Baji Rao Peshwa in 1818, and the rich peasants' demand for an appropriate political status in the reformed constitution of 1918, there intervened a century of social and political change in Maharashtra. I have attempted to focus attention on the implications and the quality of this transformation, and to trace its connection with the social ideals and the political objectives which inspired the new rulers of Maharashtra, and shaped their administrative policy. My attempt to look up social and political change in Maharashtra during the nineteenth century as a consequence of the interaction between the social organisation which prevailed in 1818, and the policies of the new rulers, involved a search for the answers to a series of questions: What were the factors of conflict and consensus in Maharashtra before the British conquest? What were the values which sustained the community and shaped its spiritual and secular outlook? How did the new rulers look upon this society? To what extent did they agree with its moral

suppositions? and in what respect did they desire to modify these suppositions? Were there any conflicts of opinion within the British administration? If so, how were these conflicts resolved? How did the policies of the British Government affect the structure of Maharashtrian society? What were the new conflicts and cleavages it created in the community? How did it proceed to heal these cleavages? Did British rule bring about any change in social values, and in the complexion of the dominant social groups? And finally, what were the characteristics of the new society which emerged out of a century of innovation and reform?

The two striking features of Maharashtra in 1818 were the social consensus which tied class and caste in a close intellectual relationship; and the extent to which the Brahmins in general, and the Chitpavans in particular, dominated the rest of the community. The consensus between the high and low castes stemmed from the bhakti movement which expressed the Brahmanical values of advaita in a folk literature of great simplicity and emotive power, and thereby gained the allegiance of social groups which were not directly influenced by the great tradition of Hinduism. The bhakti upsurge bound the lowly kunbi and the bigoted Brahmin in a close bond of religious values, mitigating the tensions which characterised the relationship between these social groups in

regions such as Tamil Nad where Brahmanical values and popular religion were based on different, and even conflicting systems of religious philosophy. However, while the consensus between the high and low castes was deliberately fostered by the Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra in order to meet the challenge of Islam, the extent of Brahmanical dominance over the community flowed from the purely fortuitous seizure of power by the Chitpavans in the person of their caste-fellow, Balaji Vishwanath. As an elite which monopolised the function of priesthood, and looked upon itself as the guardian of the traditions of Hindu society, the Brahmin caste enjoyed a unique position throughout the country. But by seizing political power in Maharashtra, the Chitpavan Brahmins reinforced their dominance over the rest of the community. Since the Peshwas, in addition, created a land-owning aristocracy from members of their caste in order to buttress their position, the Chitpavans enjoyed a position of unparalleled ascendancy over Maharashtra before the events of 1818 transferred authority into the hands of the British Government.

The institution of caste and the consensus linking the kunbi with the Brahmin were both intimately connected with the lack of progress and mobility in Maharashtra before the British conquest. But while there was little change in the



over all values and structure of society before 1818, it would be wrong to assume that the relative position of the castes and classes within the community was not capable of any alteration. Conflict between one social group and another was a normal feature of the social system, and the displacement of one caste by another in a position of dominance was a frequent occurrence. The eclipse of the 'kshtriya' house of Shivaji by the Brahmin Peshwas, and the long standing feud between the Brahmin castes and the Kayasth Prabhus, bear witness to this. But since these conflicts rested on moral presuppositions revolving around the institutions of a traditional polity, the antagonism between the different social groups reinforced, instead of weakening, the values of Hinduism, and it contributed to the stability and cohesion of Maharashtrian society.

Underlying the lack of progress and mobility in Maharashtra before 1818 lay a collective pattern of social organisation which encouraged co-operation and mutual assistance between individuals, and which stifled that spirit of competition which forms the basis of progress and mobility. In the urban world, caste organisations imposed a rigorous code of social behaviour on the individual, and shaped his relations, on the one hand with the political authorities, and on the other with his caste fellows. Rural society was

similarly controlled by institutions like the village community and the jatha, which were interposed between the kunbi and the State. The role of the village community in shielding the peasant from the arbitrary exercise of political authority, and in regulating the ryot's fiscal obligations to the State, is well known to students of Indian history. But it has been overlooked that caste organisations played a similar role in urban society. The distribution of the dakshina by the leaders of the Brahmin community; and the undertaking by the artisan and commercial castes to pay a collective mohturfa to the State, which was then distributed amongst individual caste members, focusses attention on the secular functions of caste organisations. The point to be emphasised about these urban and rural institutions is the premium they put on stability as against progress; and the extent to which they discouraged attempts at self-improvement. Both the village community and the urban castes distributed the tax they had contracted to pay to the State amongst their members with reference to an individual's ability to contribute to the collective obligations, rather than as a fixed proportion of his gross income. As a result, the peasant and the urban craftsman were unable to accumulate the capital necessary for sustained economic growth.

The notions of social equity which prevailed in Maharashtra before 1818 approved of a system of taxation which was based on a collective pattern of social organisation, and which reduced inequalities in incomes to a minimum. This was particularly true of rural society, where accumulations of capital were rare, and where differences in status found expression in social styles rather than in standards of living. Both the weight of the tax on land, and the manner in which the village communities distributed it amongst their members, reduced the majority of the peasants to a level of bare subsistence, and precluded the possibility of striking inequalities in incomes. The absence of sharp economic cleavages reinforced the consensus stemming from the bhakti orders that linked the entire community in a texture of common religious values. These two factors interacted with and reinforced one another, and they were responsible for the cohesion and stability which characterised society in Maharashtra before the British conquest.

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The conservative administrators who were entrusted with the pacification of Maharashtra after 1818 faced a task beset with serious difficulties. This was so because of their social vision, and the values which inspired their

administrative policy. The conservatism of Elphinstone, who represented an influential school of British administrators in the Deccan, did not lead him to an indiscriminate defence of the status quo, since he regarded innovation and reform as an inevitable and even necessary part of the social process. But he also subscribed to the view that to be meaningful and effective, reform had to premise itself on the enduring moral suppositions of a community, and to establish a creative relationship between the past which it was seeking to undo, and the future which it was attempting to create. Natural as opposed to artificial innovation, Elphinstone believed, was based on the principle of continuity in the processes of change; and he regarded progress as an affirmation and fulfilment of the ideals and objectives which formed the moral basis of a community.

The Deccan presented a dilemma to Elphinstone because of his views on social change; and on the intimate relationship between the moral suppositions of a polity, and its social and political institutions. The caste organisation of society, which institutionalised inequalities in spiritual and secular status; a bureaucracy which was not subject to legal and rational restraints; and an economic order which achieved stability and cohesion at the cost of progress, were all morally repugnant to Elphinstone, and opposed to the



values which he cherished. Yet he could hardly initiate the changes which he considered desirable and essential without doing violence to the principle of 'natural' innovation, and without forcing the pace of orderly progress.

To avoid creating any tension between the Brahmins and the British Government, Elphinstone extended his support to the dakshina and the Hindu College, in the first instance for the support of traditional values, but with the ultimate objective of winning over the Brahmin elite to the liberal and rational ideals of the West. The intellectual development which Elphinstone envisaged for Maharashtra stemmed from his conservative vision of social progress, and his comprehension of the role of Brahmins in Hindu society. He was convinced that any attempt to disregard their position as the intellectual leaders of the community would alienate them from the British Government, and reinforce their attachment to traditional values in a gesture of defiance to the alien rulers of the land. On the other hand, once their position was recognised, it was possible for the Brahmin castes to be won over to western values, and to support the social ideals and the political objectives of the British Government. Such a transformation would put an end to the dominance of Brahmins which weighed so heavily on the lower and middle castes, and stood as an insurmountable obstacle in the way of progress.

But since the initiative for the change would come from westernised Brahmins who had rejected traditional Hinduism, it would not breed any antagonism, either between the State and the intellectual leaders of the community, or between these leaders and their followers.

Though the response of the Brahmin castes to a policy of gradualism differed in some respects from the reaction anticipated by Elphinstone, his success in winning over a section of the caste to western values without raising any serious problems of alienation, and without undermining the consensus which had characterised Maharashtra under the old order, was quite remarkable. But if Elphinstone achieved considerable success in the intellectual sphere, the reverse was true of his attempt to remould the Maratha bureaucracy, and reform the Maratha land revenue system, in tune with the requirements and the objectives of a modern State. The use of traditional institutions for modernising Maharashtra was in fact impossible. For it involved their exploitation for objectives that were not only different but were contradictory to the purposes for whose realisation they had been created. The Maratha State stood for prescriptive status and social stability; in its place Elphinstone wanted to create a polity resting on economic progress and social mobility. Between the two, and between the institutions necessary to secure their objectives, there was little in common.

The futility of Elphinstone's attempt to use traditional institutions for the creation of a modern State is highlighted in his failure to preserve the status of the deshmukh and the patel, who had maintained the Peshwa's peace, and who played an important part in the collection of land revenue. The unique position enjoyed by these officers stemmed from the traditional dominance which they exercised over rural society, and the de jure recognition of this dominance by the Maratha State. In an administration devoid of legal restraints, the patel and the deshmukh were successful in acting simultaneously as spokesmen for the peasants and the State, and in reconciling the interests of the political authority with those of the village communities. But the moment Elphinstone drew up a code of Regulations which transformed the patels and deshmukhs into the instruments of a rational bureaucracy, he undermined their traditional ties with the peasants, and alienated them from the communities which had formerly accepted their leadership. The creation of a rational administration weakened the authority of the traditional leaders of village society, and in combination with other changes (of which more later), it created the conditions for the rise of a new dominant group in rural Maharashtra.

Elphinstone attempted to achieve the impossible, and failed. But the radical administrators who succeeded him

deliberately set about to substitute the collective quality of rural society by an individualistic and competitive environment in the hope of setting Maharashtra on the path to progress and prosperity. Besides his concern for continuity in the processes of change, a conservative like Elphinstone looked upon society as an organism embracing conflicting social groups in a state of equilibrium whose wanton destruction would result in moral anarchy and social disintegration. For the Utilitarians who succeeded him, however, prescription and status held no significance whatsoever; and they regarded collective institutions like the village community and the jatha as obstacles in the way of progress. Under their aegis, therefore, a system of land revenue in which the jatha and the village community played an important part had to give way to the ryotwari system, which revolved around a direct contractual relationship between the individual ryot and the State without the interposition of any intermediaries. The Utilitarians simultaneously replaced the egalitarian basis on which the land-tax had formerly been computed by a rational criterion which favoured the accumulation of capital by the more affluent peasants, and sought to promote economic growth in rural society.

The ryotwari system of land revenue was the lynch-pin of the Age of Reform in Maharashtra. Its advocates sought to



liberate the peasants from their obligations to the jatha and the village community, since they believed that these obligations prevented the peasants from seeking individual gain, and discouraged them from making the effort necessary to improve their economic conditions. The proponents of reform looked forward to the growth of a class of rich peasants whose emergence would put an end to the climate of stagnation in rural society. In contrast to the Maratha system of land revenue, which fell heavily on the more prosperous peasants, the ryotwari system taxed rich and poor peasants on a uniform basis, thereby seeking to create a dominant rural class whose accumulations of capital, and desire for acquisition, would form the basis for a steady improvement in agricultural productivity. The Utilitarians justified their revenue policy on both theoretical and practical grounds. The laws of political economy (as embodied in the Ricardian notion of rent) demonstrated that it was equitable that rich peasants, who owned fertile land, should enjoy **higher** returns than poor peasants, whose fields were of a poor quality. Expediency supported a similar course of action, since by protecting the interests of the rich peasants the Government would secure the loyalty of a class whose dominance over rural society would ensure the stability of British rule over Maharashtra.

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The presuppositions underlying the policy of Utilitarian reform were only partly justified by the consequences of the ryotwari system of land revenue, and the legal and rational administration, which formed the basis of the new order in Maharashtra. Barely half a century after the British conquest, the village communities which had till 1818 defied the ravages of time, and the free-wheeling Maratha bureaucracy (a no less formidable opponent), stood fragmented into antagonistic functional groups, and were divested of much of their former cohesion and vitality. True, the growth of a small class of rich peasants, whose desire for acquisition and ostentatious style of life created the illusion of all round improvement in rural society, appeared to vindicate the policy of the Utilitarian reformers. But the benefits flowing to the community from the emergence of this class were completely over-shadowed by the disadvantages arising out of the diminution in the authority of the Patels and the deshmukhs, who had sustained the village community, and had infused it with the vitality, self-sufficiency and ability to look after its affairs that were its most important attributes.

The disastrous consequences of a land revenue policy based on the twin principles of rationality and individualism are seen at their clearest in the decline of the traditional leaders of village society. The situation was further

aggravated through the seizure of social power in the villages by sowcars and vanis whose caste values prevented them from participating in agricultural production, and who preferred a parasitical role in the rural economy. Even before the British take-over, the vanis had occupied an important position in rural society, and had advanced capital to the ryots to enable them to carry out their agricultural operations, and to pay their taxes to the State. But despite the important role they played in the rural economy, the moneylenders were not a dominant social group, because of the strength and cohesion of the ryots organised into communities, and due to the nature of the Maratha judicial system, which favoured the kunbis as against the vanis. With the atomisation of the village community through the ryotwari system, and the establishment of a judiciary based on laissez-faire principles, the position was reversed. The ryot now confronted the vani as an individual rather than as a member of an organised community; while a judiciary which inadvertently favoured the pretensions of the vani served to heighten his social impotence. All this led to a drastic redistribution of power in rural society, with the vani replacing the patel and the deshmukh as the dominant element in the village.

The transfer of dominance from the kunbis to the vanis created a serious tension in the villages of the Deccan, and

it undermined the cohesion which had formerly held the village community together. The peasants conveyed their social frustration, and their resentment of the dominance of the vanis, to the British Government through representations which protested against the iniquity of the new Courts of Law, and denounced the oppression of the vanis. But British administrators were far too committed to Utilitarian principles and laissez-faire values, to adopt any new course of policy. Commitment to abstract ideas did not obscure the vision of District Officers whose intimate knowledge of rural society, and the tensions breeding within it, made them sceptical of a rational economic policy and a bureaucratic system of administration. But the attempt of such officers to support the ryots through administrative and judicial reforms proved abortive because of the doctrinaire views which prevailed in the seats of authority remote from the villages.

As a result of the build-up of tension within the villages, the Deccan went ablaze in 1875, when a frustrated and enraged peasantry suddenly rose against the moneylenders to divest them of the title deeds and mortgage bonds in which it saw the principal instruments of oppression. The antagonism between the kunbis and the vanis was not the only factor behind the Deccan Riots of 1875. An economic depression which followed the all too brief stimulus given to the



agrarian economy by the American Civil War: a series of ill-timed, and inefficiently executed, revenue surveys which raised the burden of tax on the poor cultivators: the propaganda conducted by the traditional leaders of village society, and reinforced by the agitation launched by a new elite (of which more later) seeking to establish itself in the affections of the peasantry, all contributed to heighten the tension which erupted in 1875. But the involvement of the kunbis and vanis in the Deccan Riots, to the exclusion of other social groups in the village, makes it clear that these factors merely served to highlight what was the most irreconcilable antagonism in rural society.

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The Deccan Riots of 1875 revealed the bankruptcy of the Utilitarian programme of reform. They simultaneously undermined the faith of the advocates of reform in the efficacy of their social vision. Admittedly, policies based on rationality and individualism had undermined the stagnation which had characterised rural society before 1818, and had stimulated the rise of a small class of rich peasants. But the Utilitarians had hardly bargained for the growth of a powerful vani class which exploited the peasantry without contributing anything to agricultural production. Instead of

creating the conditions for stability and progress, the proponents of reform had on their hands a rural society fragmented into antagonistic social groups, and incapable of making any sustained effort to raise agricultural production. The social and economic consequences of Utilitarian reform were disturbing in themselves; but its political implications were even more disquieting. The class of rich peasants which had grown up since 1818 was far too insignificant a social group to provide a firm base for British rule over Maharashtra. Rural society was dominated instead by the vanis and sowcars. But their dominance bred antagonism instead of order; and it created conditions which could (vice 1875) precipitate a violent conflict, not only between the peasants and the vanis, but also between the peasants and the political authority which the kunbis blamed for the growth of an oppressive vani class.

After the upsurge of 1875 the British Government, therefore, sought to foster the interests of those ryots for whom the decay of the village community, a rational economic policy, and the growth of a bureaucratic administration had only brought forth exploitation at the hands of the vanis and the sowcars. The propagation of new notions of progress and change about this time by Maine and West provided British administrators with a new insight into Hindu society, and

helped them understand the reasons why the Utilitarian programme of reform had failed so disastrously. According to Maine, social evolution was a phenomenon embracing the orderly progress of a community from one epoch to another, each epoch being characterised by a unique set of social and political institutions. Because of his evolutionary view of progress, Maine looked upon the Utilitarian bid to transform Hindu society from a community based on prescription and collectivism to one resting on individualism and rationality as an attempt doomed to failure. Utilitarian notions of law and government were relevant only to the advanced communities of the West. Their application to a retarded community was bound to create new antagonisms and new tensions in Hindu society.

Maine's belief in the intimate connection between the maturity of a society, and the nature of its social and political institutions, reinforced the political argument for the extension of support to the ryots of the Deccan, and encouraged the Bombay Government to reform the legal system in order to curb the growing power of the vanis. The notion of freedom of Contract, for instance, was central to the Utilitarian view of a progressive community, and it formed the basis of the Courts of Law instituted after 1818. However, administrators who took their cue from Maine looked

upon this principle as apposite only to the advanced communities of the West. The application of freedom of Contract to Hindu society, which was based on prescription, could only result in chaos and confusion. Since this prognosis was vindicated by the events of 1875, the Bombay Government accepted the remedy advocated by the Maine school for the rural problem, and placed a partial interdict on the freedom of land transfers through the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879, which attempted to throw the weight of the law in favour of the cultivators as opposed to the moneylenders.

But the Relief Act of 1879 was based on a limited view of the rural situation, and it overlooked the problems of rural finance which lay at the root of the kunbi's troubles. While it is true that a legal system based on laissez-faire principles supported the ambitions of the vanis, the fact remained that the vanis played an important role in rural society by providing the ryots with credit for financing their agricultural operations. Through imposing a partial interdict on the transfer of land, the Relief Act deprived the cultivators of the only possession which made it worth while for the vanis to advance them money. It therefore interfered with that flow of credit from the moneylender to the cultivator which was essential for the prosperity of rural society. Ironically enough, the Relief Act curtailed



the credit of the poor peasants to a far greater extent than the credit of the rich peasants, since the goodwill of the latter was dependent upon their general prosperity, and they could even after 1879 persuade the vanis to advance them money. Despite the legal protection which it afforded to the peasants, the Relief Act therefore failed to improve the condition of the poor peasants for whose benefit it had been primarily enacted.

The failure of the Relief Act to improve rural conditions turned the attention of the British Government to the problems of rural finance, and to the quality of social environment in village society likely to maximise production. Practically all British administrators conceded that the kunbi had to be protected from legal exploitation by the vanis; but it was equally obvious that a measure which ensured this would not suffice by itself. In fact, legislative enactments (like the Relief Act) which struck indiscriminately at the moneylenders created more problems than they solved, since in supporting the kunbi they tended to drain the sources of capital on which he was dependent for the cultivation of his fields. For conservative officials like Nicholson and Dupernex the rural problem was far more complex than the Maine school had led itself to believe, since it impinged, on the one hand, on the decay of the village community, and on

the other, on the spread of the acquisitive spirit which had been deliberately encouraged by the Utilitarian reformers. Under Maratha rule the sowcar had lent money to the village community instead of individual ryots, and the strength of this institution had prevented the moneylender from embarking upon a career of exploitation. Since the ryotwari system obliged the cultivator to borrow money directly from the vani, the latter was now in a position to establish his dominance over the former. The acquisitiveness fostered by the Utilitarians added to the gravity of the situation, since it discouraged the cultivators from helping each other in times of distress, and weakened the spirit of mutual assistance which had formerly flourished in rural society.

To break through this vicious circle Nicholson and Dupernex recommended the adoption of co-operation along the lines of the Raiffeissen movement in Germany. The organisation of the peasants in co-operative societies, they argued, would not only restore the flow of credit to the kunbis, but it would revive the corporate spirit and encourage that subordination of individual gain to collective prosperity which had characterised the village community before the Utilitarian deluge. As a member of a credit association the ryot would strengthen his position vis-a-vis the vanis; and he would at the same time proclaim his preference for the

principle of association to that of acquisition. A successful co-operative movement would revive the values of non-acquisition which had flourished in the villages of the Deccan before 1818, and it would create a prosperous society of peasants basing their progress on mutual assistance rather than on competition. However, the advocates of co-operation based their expectations on a mistaken notion of the extent to which individualism had taken hold of rural society, and the degree to which rational considerations of gain determined the behaviour of the peasants. The credit societies established with official assistance came to be dominated in a very short space of time by the more affluent peasants in the villages, who utilised their funds for their personal gain, rather than for the benefit of the rural community as a whole. Like the Relief Act, therefore, co-operation reduced the power of the vanis by opening a new source of credit for the ryots, and by giving them the strength which comes from organisation. But also like the Relief Act, the opportunities which it offered reinforced the position of the affluent peasants, rather than of the peasant community as a whole. By the opening decades of the twentieth century, therefore, rural society in the Deccan was dominated by a class of rich peasants who owed their prosperity to the economic policies pursued by the British Government. These rich peasants

played a vital role in the political life of the community.

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No less significant than the growth of the rich peasants was the emergence of the new Brahmins who gradually displaced the old style shastris and pandits as the intellectual leaders of the community, and who usurped the secular role that had given the traditional elite a position of unique importance in the affairs of Hindu society. Partly because of the consensus which characterised Maharashtra before 1818, and partly due to Elphinstone's policy of educational reform, which stemmed from a deep insight into the intellectual quality of Hindu society, the rise of the new Brahmins was not accompanied by any crisis comparable to the agrarian disturbances of 1875. Elphinstone had acted on the assumption that the recognition of the intellectual predominance of the Brahmins over the rest of the community, and the gradual introduction of rational disciplines in the schools and colleges where they were educated, would create a class of liberal Brahmins who would share the social ideals and the political objectives of the British Government, and who would play a creative role in bridging the gulf between the State and the Hindu community. His vision was vindicated when barely three decades after the British conquest, the Brahmin



community had split into liberal and orthodox factions, of which the former looked up to the British Government for support, and sought to transform Maharashtra into a progressive society resting on the twin principles of social equality and popular democracy.

While new Brahmins like Ranade were cast in an intellectual mould fashioned by Elphinstone, it does not follow that their rise to positions of leadership did not present the British Government with problems of authority and order, or that their dominance was not challenged by any social group from within Hindu society. Since they looked upon themselves as the heirs of the Chitpavan elite which had ruled over Maharashtra before 1818, and because they subscribed to the same values which inspired the new rulers of Maharashtra, the new Brahmins expected the British Government to sympathise with their aspirations, and to transfer political authority into their hands as they increased in numbers and strengthened their hold over the rest of the community. Elphinstone, to do him credit, had anticipated such a development; and had held that the emergence of a liberal elite dedicated to progress, and believing in the virtues of representative government, would spell the fulfilment and the end of British rule over India. But his views were the reverse of popular with a majority of British civilians in India, and conservative

politicians in England, who subscribed to the authoritarian ideas expressed by Fitzjames Stephen. Though they were products of the English enlightenment, and firmly committed to liberal values, the new Brahmins therefore clashed with the British Government on the question of devolution of power, until the latter substituted the authoritarianism of a Fitzjames Stephen for the liberalism of an Elphinstone.

But opposition to the new Brahmins did not only come from authoritarian civilians and politicians. Since the concepts of social equality and popular democracy which they promoted tended to undermine the institution of caste, and destroy Brahmanical supremacy, the Brahmin community looked upon their programme of social action with considerable hostility. Given the choice, the Brahmins of Maharashtra would have preferred to follow their traditional leaders, who rejected progress and change, and clung to values which assured the supremacy of the Brahmin caste. But the inability of the traditional leaders to perform their secular role with any measure of adequacy in the political climate generated under British aegis compelled the Brahmin community to turn to a group of new Brahmins who reconciled progress with Brahmanical supremacy, and who saw no contradiction between popular democracy and the institution of caste. The 'orthodox' new Brahmins shared the political objectives of the liberal new

Brahmins. But unlike the latter, they refused to countenance social action designed to destroy the traditional structure of Hindu society. Since they did not attack Brahmanical supremacy, and because they believed that political emancipation could be achieved without social reform, the orthodox new Brahmins enjoyed a popularity in the Brahmin community which was denied to their liberal antagonists.

The objectives of the orthodox new Brahmins set them in opposition to the non-Brahmin elites, who looked upon Brahmin supremacy as the greatest obstacle in the progress of Hindu society, and who apprehended the transfer of political authority into the hands of the Brahmin community. But while a liberal education had destroyed the faith of the non-Brahmin elites in the institution of caste, the majority of the non-Brahmins, of whom the kunbis comprised the single biggest group, were far too attached to caste values to take any serious notice of what they preached. Phule's fulminations against the joshis and kulkarnis, for instance, made little immediate impact, because during the agrarian disturbances of 1875 the kunbis refrained from attacking the Brahmin moneylenders, of whom there were a considerable number. The consideration shown by the peasants in 1875 to the Brahmin moneylenders is clear proof of their attachment to caste values, and their cheerful acceptance of their

prescriptive status. However, those peasants who had grown into a rich and dominant class by the opening decades of the twentieth century refused to acquiesce in their traditional status, and sought to transform their wealth into political power. Their search for a place in the sun found expression in the non-Brahmin movement of Maharashtra. But the intellectual and religious ties between the Brahmins and kunbis prevented this movement from acquiring the virulence it assumed in other regions (e.g., Tamil Nad). Consensus, rather than conflict, dominated political life in Maharashtra, and contributed to a political stability and co-operation between castes and classes which stands unique in India.



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- B. PRIVATE PAPERS
- C. PUBLICATIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
- D. PUBLICATIONS OF THE BOMBAY GOVERNMENT
- E. PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS
- F. CONTEMPORARY WORKS
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