

based politics. The deeper reason is, however, the failure to institutionalise a civil society. Subedi's study of Indo-Nepal relations holds that most conflicts arise out of treaties dealing with security, economic issues, access to the sea, and the like, and argues for greater openness, trust and mutual respect, as well as the replacement of outdated treaties.

The main lesson which emerges from the volume is that transitions to democracy in multi-ethnic Asian societies involved in the arduous task of nation-building remain incomplete, and need to be examined in the context in which they are occurring. Further, it is greater democratisation of society and a more accommodating attitude on the part of governments, which, despite causing instability in the short run, will ensure stability and orderly governance.

**Sudha Pai**

Centre for Political Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi

NARIAKI NAKAZATO, *Agrarian System in Eastern Bengal c. 1870–1910*, K.P. Bagchi and Company, Calcutta/New Delhi, 1994, pp. 337.

CHITTA PANDA, *The Decline of the Bengal Zamindars. Midnapore 1870–1920*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 231.

Although initially wary of the entrenched might of the old landed aristocracy, the British realised very early on that it was well nigh impossible to administer their vast colonial dominion with only a handful of Englishmen, and without forging an alliance with the 'natural' rulers of India. This was one of the philosophies underlying the Permanent Settlement with the landlords of Bengal. This 'new rule of property' for Bengal, however, was also forward looking in that it sought to encourage entrepreneurial activity by bestowing an absolute and alienable right over the land, and by fixing the land revenue demand in perpetuity. This changed the traditional rules of the game, since the right over land and the rental demand had always been circumscribed by custom. Some of the subsequent land revenue settlements in northern India were even more innovative, as revenue was settled directly with peasants and cultivating communities over the heads of the landed aristocracy. The Revolt of 1857, however, put paid to all social experimentation, and a new conservatism now informed British policy in India. The alliance with the old landed aristocracy was reaffirmed—as embodied most strikingly in the alliance with the taluqdars of Awadh—as the British tried to freeze the existing social order.

No society, however, not even an 'Oriental' one, is static and unchanging. One of the central ironies of British Rule in India was that, far from transforming landlords into modern entrepreneurs, it undermined the very forces that were expected to buttress its position. New social forces arose in the countryside and in urban areas to challenge, and ultimately supplant, British rule in India. The period from

1870 to 1920 constitutes something of a watershed in this regard. There is general consensus among historians up to this point. The consensus breaks down, however, when it comes to determining the extent to and the manner in which the authority of the old landed aristocracy was undermined. This is a theme still debated among historians, the debate being confounded by the great regional diversity that India presents to the serious scholar.

Two major orthodoxies have emerged over the years. The first is that the old landed aristocracy was either transformed into, or replaced by, a new class of oppressive landlords, such as the *jotedars* of Rajat and Ratna Ray. This new semi-feudal class held productive forces in check, or worked as 'built-in depressors within the village economy', through inter-locking rent and capital markets. The second orthodoxy is the emergence of a class of rich peasants, on the back of a rapidly integrating market (through all-weather roads and railways), secular inflation in agricultural prices, secure water supply (through irrigation networks) and the peace of Pax Britannica. The peasant revolts that punctuated British rule have been interpreted variously as the proverbial last straw that broke the back of an impoverished peasantry, or as heralding the social arrival of the rich peasant, the only rural entrepreneur to have emerged at the end of two centuries of British dominance.

One is tempted to believe that the two orthodoxies derive from studies based in different regions: the former in regions which were agriculturally stagnant, and the latter in regions that were agriculturally dynamic. Thus, the pattern in western India differed from that in eastern India; indeed, there were significant differences between eastern and western UP, and also between eastern and western Bengal. This two model approach is, of course, a very stylised portrayal of a complex social reality, where there was not only a continuum between the two patterns, but where combinations and permutations of both may have prevailed within the same region as well. While the predominant pattern in each region may have influenced the conclusions of the authors, sufficient evidence could always be found to validate each pattern for those historians who had a model to begin with.

Both Nakazato and Panda, who have studied the watershed period, are strongly grounded in regional history (Nakazato has studied the Dacca division in eastern Bengal, while Panda has researched Midnapore District in western Bengal) and address the issue of social change in the countryside. It is, therefore, not surprising that they arrive at different conclusions. Both locate their studies within this ongoing debate, and their studies throw up new evidence to further refine the arguments of prevailing orthodoxies. While the old landed aristocracy emerged weaker at the end of the period in both the regions, Nakazato, studying eastern Bengal, rather predictably sees the emergence of the semi-feudal *jotedar* or *bargadar*; Panda, focusing on western Midnapore, one of the most monetised regions of the Bengal Presidency, sees the emergence of a class of rich peasants.

Panda's work underscores the eternal dilemma which pushed the British to trade off fiscal objectives—revenue collection, after all, was the mainstay of their Rule—against the need to maintain social harmony. The field officer, responsible for the

maintenance of order and for effecting sales, made a constant plea for leniency towards defaulting zamindars; the higher echelons of government, responsible for balancing budgets, were less relenting. Did the Permanent Settlement make excessive demands on the old landed aristocracy? The archival sources are replete with remarks by contemporary civil servants that it did. However, the inability or reluctance to pay the revenue persisted right up to the twentieth century, by which time the secular increase in agricultural prices had vastly reduced the revenue burden in real terms. Was the early distress, then, a genuine one, or a continuation of an older, medieval recalcitrance which, according to at least one school of thought, had pulled down the Mughal Empire?

The British were wiser, or so it seemed. They deprived the landlords of their executive and law-enforcing powers, of sovereignty so to speak, reducing them to the status of rent-gatherers, subject moreover to a new and codified written rule of law. Rent collection had, at the best of times, been a very delicate and complex affair: circumscribed by custom, involving a multiplicity of thinly differentiated rights and with the landlord dependant upon several intermediaries. The landlord's economic clout was buttressed by his supra-landlord status of 'lord' of the land. Once this status was taken away, the demands of revenue, an opulent lifestyle, natural proliferation and the litigation that the new system lent itself to, increased their dependence on intermediaries, and reduced their hold on the cultivator. New social groups now muscled their way into the rural power elite. British rule redefined social relationships, and hard as it tried to prop up the old order through mechanisms such as the Court of Wards, it had set in motion a new momentum over which it had no control, and which would one day pull it down. Rather ironically, in the end, the landlords of Midnapore—so-called 'collaborators' of the Raj—came to be sympathisers of or participants in the National Movement. This rather startling conclusion adds a new twist to battle between the prevailing orthodoxies.

Panda's study of the land market shows that an emerging class of rich peasants pushed an increasingly impoverished landed aristocracy into pervasive decline. Nakazato, using records of the registration department and the Courts of Ward to study the land markets for both landlords and peasants, comes to a contrary conclusion. While the position of the old landed aristocracy was considerably weakened through indebtedness, increase in mortgages, sub-division of estates and sub-encroachment, by and large it maintained its pre-eminence in rural society. The peasants' land market was even more dynamic, as increased differentiation enabled the emergence of a new class of grasping landlords, *a la* the *jotedar* model, who flourished through competitive rack rents.

The landlords of Midnapore, like those of Dacca, may have lost formal trappings of power and sovereignty. This did not prevent the latter, however, from spawning a 'troop of lightly armed muscle-men as a permanent staff of his establishment in order to intimidate the raiyats into submission'. Nakazato may well be describing contemporary Bihar, where local *satraps* continue to maintain their pre-eminence with the help of extra-constitutional private armies.

Which brings us to the present. All history, in the immortal words of Croce, is contemporary history. These two well-researched works throw as much light on the British impact in rural India, as on the makings of contemporary India. Studying the past is of course valid in its own right; but it is even more meaningful, and interesting, when it sheds some light on the present. If the genesis of the social forces underlying the Green Revolution can be traced to the rich peasants of Midnapore, the antecedents of the Ranbir Sena lie in the neo-landlords of Dacca.

**Alok Sheel**  
New Delhi