

## A Debate on Colonial State and Social Formation in India

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**Abstract**—This paper analyzes the debate relating to mode of production and social formation keeping in view the specific characteristics of the colonial state in India. This debate helps in locating the multiple dimensions of domination, exploitation and marginalization of a particular class engaged in organization of productive activities. The major characterizations of the mode of production on the Indian agrarian economy revolved around the concepts of semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, feudal and capitalist. But, as a whole, the characterization were endorsed to the specific social formation, which came to be significantly stressed as the colonial economy and ignored the significance of other kinds of social formation that are related to tribal societies. Hence, this debate encourages incorporating tribal social formation as a means to cognate the issues of marginality and social oppression on par with the cast and class hierarchies.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The formation of social classes among the present day people is not an accidental affair. It has evolved through several phases in the past. Therefore, an understanding of their present conditions will certainly lead to the study of their social formation. For the understanding of any social formation, we need to study the theoretical concepts which help us in the reconstruction of their society. The debate on mode of production and social formation in Indian agriculture in the middle of the 1970's, while raising basic issues, failed to focus on the social structures of various communities and patterns of class formations and, class and caste alignments in the process of transformation of the country. There was also a failure to evaluate the role of kinship and the ethnic factors in the transformations of Indian society. Yet another failure is to ignore the presence of different modes of production existed based on the regional disparities.

### II. CONCEPT OF SOCIAL FORMATION:

Social formation<sup>1</sup> is a Marxist concept which may loosely be said to correspond to the ideological notion of 'society'. The term was devised by the Structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser as a substitute for society, because he thought that the latter was too strongly marked by what he regarded as pre-Marxist humanist conceptions of social life as being (ultimately) the product of individual human beings. For this reason, its presence in a text normally indicates that the author works with a Structuralist conception of social life, according to which social relations as such – rather than their bearers – determine what happens within the societies. (It is

worth noting that Marx himself rarely used the term.) According to Althusser, a social formation is a complex of concrete economic, political, and ideological relations, bound together and given their particular character as capitalist, feudal, or whatever by the fact that the economic relations are, in his words, 'determinant in the last instance'.<sup>2</sup>

According to Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst<sup>3</sup>, it designates a complex structure of social relations, a unity of economic, ideological and, in certain cases, political structural levels in which the role of the economy is determinant. If the dominant relations of production are antagonistic, involving a social division of labour between a class of laborers and a class of non-laborers, then the social formation contains a state and a political level as the necessary space of representations of the antagonistic classes.

The relation between the concept of mode of production and social formation may be understood in terms of the conditions of existence of particular mode of production.<sup>4</sup> The concept of each particular mode of production defines certain economic, ideological or political conditions that are necessary to the existence of that structure of social relations.

The following discussion and debate in Marxist terminology attempts to lay out the framework for an analysis of the nature of colonial state and social formation.

### III. COLONIAL SOCIAL FORMATION: AN OVERVIEW

The debate started with a report published by Ashok Rudra<sup>5</sup> in the Punjab region. His main objective was to identify the trends emerging in Indian agriculture. Ashok Rudra says that the Indian rural society is characterized by the capitalist mode of production. He suggests following five criteria for identifying capitalist mode of production: The capitalist 1) tend to cultivate his land himself rather than to give it out on lease; 2) tend to use hired labour in a much greater proportion than family labour; 3) tend to use farm machinery; 4) delivers to market an important share of his produce; and 5) so organize the production as to yield a high rate of return on his investments.

According to Utsa Patnaik<sup>6</sup>, since India is an ex-colonial country, it is characterized by a limited and distorted development of capitalism which has not revolutionized the mode of production. She counters the proposition of Ashok Rudra by stating that the capitalist development in agriculture in India rests neither on the employment of hired labour nor on production for the market. She maintains that the imperialistic design of the British regime was the root cause of pauperization and proletarianisation of the peasantry. The use of cheap labour to be hired was based on the

circumstantial factors such as their availability in a particular locality at a particular time. According to her the capitalist development in agriculture can be recognized when there is accumulation and reinvestment of surplus value so as to generate more surplus on an ever expanding scale.

Some economists are of the view that the development process of the eastern regions could not be characterized as capitalist mode of production and, rather, they identified it as semi-feudal.

According to Amit Bhaduri<sup>7</sup> there are four prominent features of the semi-feudal type of agriculture and characterized them as: 1) share cropping, 2) perpetual indebtedness of the small peasants, 3) concentration of two modes of exploitation, namely, usury and land ownership in the hands of some economic class, and 4) the lack of accessibility for small tenants to the market.

However, a few scholars have criticized the conception of the semi-feudal mode of production as the dominant mode. On the grounds of its internal logic and on the ground that the political power of the landlords does not rest on the debt bondage alone, they contest the semi-feudal mode of production in the agriculture. Apart from the economists' characterization of a particular type of mode of production, the historians have also expressed their views about the mode of production in a wider context.

Hamza Alavi, in his influential article on the colonial mode of production, begins by postulating that neither 'feudalism in colonial India nor contemporary 'rural capitalism' can be theoretically grasped except in the world wide structure of imperialism into which India was, and is, articulated.<sup>8</sup> Further He observes<sup>9</sup> that the term 'mode of production' designates the coherent structures within the social formations, i.e., societies conceived of as systematically structured entities. It designates social relations of production and identifies fundamental classes that are embedded in them, i.e., for each mode of production a class of exploited producers and a corresponding class of exploiting non-producers. Other auxiliary classes in social formations derive their significance from their relationship with either the pre-existing fundamental classes or new ascendant classes in a social formation in which a mode of production develops. He also emphasizes the nature of class alignment in social formation in a particular mode of production. It is this concern which necessitates a discussion of structural features which are specific to the colonial mode of production. He strikes a word of caution when he stated that: "it is wrong to describe colonial economies as those in which pre-capitalist relationships co-exist with capitalist relations."<sup>10</sup>

According to Eric Hobsbawn<sup>11</sup> the mode of production constitutes the structures which determine what form the growth of productive forces and distribution of surplus will take and how, at suitable moments, the transition to another mode of production can take place. It also establishes the range of the superstructural possibilities. Therefore, it is the base of our understanding of the variety of human societies and their interactions as well as of their historical dynamics.

On the basis of a distinctive relations of exploitation and relations of production and rejection of co-existing modes of

production, Jairus Banaji<sup>12</sup> argues for the recognition of a specific entity, the colonial mode of production. The distinguishing characteristics of colonial modes of production were their subordination to metropolitan accumulation and pre-dominance of semi-feudal relations of exploitation in agriculture. Banaji stresses the recognition of colonial mode of production but sees it as induced through metropolitan accumulation. For Banaji, this metropolitan accumulative capitalism led to the predominance of semi-feudal relations in the agriculture.

A.K Bagchi<sup>13</sup> says that the colonial period was marked by the de-industrialization and de-commercialization of agriculture. In fact he is of the view that complete disappearance of pre-capitalist relations has not taken place even in contemporary times. Therefore, he talks about a symbiotic relationship between pre capitalist and capitalist mode of exploitation. Over population and low rate of capital accumulation, according to him, have accounted for this continuity. Therefore, according to him, any label such as semi feudalism, semi- capitalism, neither feudalism nor capitalism, with the exception of colonial mode of production could be possible so long as the basic laws of motion of society are correctly understood.

The economists and the historians, whose studies have been referred here, have not only raised theoretical issues but also marshaled data from field research. Sociologists and Social Anthropologists too have not remained indifferent to the issues raised on mode of production. However, the concern assumed importance after 1975 and during 1980s it became predominant among those who analyzed the Indian situation.<sup>14</sup>

Kathleen Gough<sup>15</sup> conducted a study on social structures and political economy of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu and identified several modes of production over time. She observed: "I choose to refer to three modes of production - Asiatic, Feudal, and Capitalist - because it did seem to me that they hit upon essential difference between the states of Kerala and Thanjavur in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and between them and the modern period." She stated that the social organization of Thanjavur district reflected the characteristic features of Asiatic mode of production where the exploitative mechanism and its operational dimension rested on the mode of surplus appropriation which existed both in kind and in the form of labour. Similarly, according her, Kerala state was feudal in character because land was privately owned and serfdom and service tenures of households were the basis of production relations in village.

Gail Omvedt<sup>16</sup> said that such contacts with capitalist economy have reinforced the feudal arrangements with some modifications. While studying agrarian structure in the context of social movements of the Dalit panthers in Maharashtra and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in south Bihar, she found closer links between class and caste identities. Class identities have not crystallized independent of caste identities. Therefore, the class based exploitation has found its expression through the feudal structures. In the Indian situation class based exploitation is complicated by caste oppression.

Joan Mencher's article on "Problems in Analyzing Rural Class Structure"<sup>17</sup> found contradictory features of South Indian society. After having compared the development of peasant organization and movements in the Tahanjavaur district of Tamil Nadu and Kuttandad in Kerala with the Chingelput district in Tamil Nadu, she found out the middle peasants as the critical group who took key roles in activating peasant uprisings. Like Eric Wolf's<sup>18</sup> hypotheses (that middle peasant has a crucial role in activating peasant uprising), she tried to work out a classification of groups in order to identify the class structure. Her six fold classification included: the landless; poor peasant; middle peasant; rich farmers; capitalist farmers and traditional landlord and an intermediate class of large landlords. Joan Mencher's classification comes closer to the three-fold classification of occupational groups by Ramkrishan Mukherjee<sup>19</sup>, viz., the land holders and supervisory farmers; the self-sufficient peasantry (viz., the cultivators including the artisans and traders) and the share-croppers, agricultural labourers, service holders etc. He found a close relation between the economic structure (i.e., class-based hierarchy) and the caste based hierarchy and therefore, concluded that caste hierarchy had dovetailed itself into the economic structure. Joan Mencher's study concluded that caste loyalties penetrate and subjugate class loyalties and that the caste and class hierarchies overlap.

The application of mode of production approach to identify the structures of exploitation actually leads one to examine the social formation in the tribal society. Those involved in the debate have tried to produce empirical proofs in support of the domination of capitalist, semi-feudal or colonial mode of production. There are others who have found co-existence of capitalist and feudal modes of production as well. Since the position taken by various scholars on this issue pertains to the contingent (or, context-specific) social formation, it is not possible to generalize their contentions either in favour of dominant mode of production identified by them or rejected by them.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the mode of production debate help in locating the multiple dimensions of domination, exploitation and marginalization of a particular class engaged in organization of productive activities. In this debate, we found that a straightaway application of Marxist's Mode of Production in tribal social formation is not possible since their social formation is based on kinship relationship, ancestral relations and traditional customs (laws) etc. The communal mode of production plays a significant role in the shaping of tribal society which is marked by the absence of private property and division of classes. In this light, it is important to appreciate the fact that, though Marxist mode of production can't be the sole theoretical frame to capture the tribal society, yet we can not overlook the location/situatedness of the tribal social formation within the overall colonial economy. This raises the need to combine Marxist mode of production with the communal mode of production formation to understand the holistic and historical

interaction between tribal social formation and colonial social formation.

On the other hand, the tribal social formation would offer insights into the self-sufficient and kinship-oriented tribal social economy and their various ways of encounter with the colonial accumulative economy. Therefore, though not 'class' and 'capital', but 'labour' and 'accumulation' as the conceptual frames in Marxist mode of production can be useful in our understanding of the ways in which colonial economy aggressively attempted to appropriate the tribal mode of production. At the same time, 'community' and 'kinship' as the major concepts of tribal social formation offered the tribal society a space to negotiate with the colonial economy.

#### END NOTES

- [1] The modern usage of 'Social Formation' by Marxists refer to particular, create historical societies, usually states, whose relations may be structured through one or more than one mode of production. Marx and Engels, however, did not always distinguish between 'Social Formation' and 'Mode of Production', and some times referred to their main Modes of Production as 'Basic Social Formations'.
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- [13] Bagchi, A.K, "Relations of Agriculture to Industry in the context of South Asia", *Frontline*, Calcutta, 7, 1975.
- [14] Y. Singh (1986) has made a pointed reference of 'Sociologist and Social Anthropologists' studies on mode of production by providing a synoptic view of their positions on it.
- [15] Kathleen Gough, "Modes of Production in South India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February, 1980. Pp. 337-338.
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