

The Analysis of Pre-Colonial Social Formations in Asia in the Writings of Karl Marx

I

The study of Asian society had made little progress in Europe at the beginning of the 1850s when Karl Marx, then a young revolutionary who had been expelled from his homeland after the abortive insurrection of 1848, began to work at the British Museum library on his economic studies. During the first decade of his life in exile, Marx was to witness a series of controversies in British political life on matters pertaining to the East. The renewal of the charter of the East India Company in 1853 and Dalhousie's policies in India spawned spirited debates while the Anglo-Chinese hostilities provoked a vote of censure in the House of Commons and led to the defeat of the Palmerston ministry. These developments and, in particular, the Indian uprising of 1857/8 kindled in Marx an abiding interest in Asian affairs. Thus, at the time when the main themes of his economic and historical thought that he later elaborated in *Capital* were being formulated and developed, Marx was collecting material on the organization of society in Asia and examining the changes taking place under the impact of the European presence.

It is in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, that Marx first speaks of Asian society as representing a specific "mode of production", (*Produktionsweise*) distinct from other types of social formation.¹ This was only a passing reference, but there are more detailed analyses of Asian Society in both *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen ökonomie*² and *Capital*. Marx's views on the subject are also to be found scattered in his lesser writings dating from 1853 onwards, like the series of articles on contemporary developments in Asia that he contributed to the *New York Daily Tribune* and his correspondence with Engels and other colleagues.³ These writings, together with his notebooks, some of which have been published as *Theories of Surplus-Value*⁴ and *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*⁵ are useful for understanding the development of his ideas. They also provide information on the source material he used.

1. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow, 1970, p. 21. Cf. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen ökonomie* in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Berlin, Band XIII, 1964, p. 9. For a useful discussion on the concept of the "modes of production" in Marx's writings, see "The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism" and "From Periodization to the Modes of Production" by Étienne Balibar in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London, 1972, pp. 201-225.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen ökonomie*, Berlin, 1953, hereafter referred to as *Grundrisse*.
3. A compilation of Marx's articles and letters which dealt with problems of Asian history and society are to be found in Sholmo Avineri, *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization*, New York, 1969. However, this collection is not complete and Avineri's notes are sometimes misleading.
4. The twenty-three notebooks amounting to 1472 pages that Marx wrote in the period 1861-3 were evidently meant to be a rough draft for *Capital*. A part of this material was re-written by Marx for the first volume of *Capital*, published during his lifetime. The notebooks VI-XV, XVII and section on Petty in XXII represent a historical account of Political Economy. These were first published by Kautsky as *Theorien über den Mehrwert* in 1910. There is a fresh edition in *Werke* (vol. 26, 1-3, Berlin, 1965-8), and an English translation, *Theories of Surplus Value*, (Moscow, 1969-72, 3 Vols.).
5. These notebooks, dating from the period 1880-2, have been edited by Lawrence Krader (Assen, 1972)

The works of English economists like Adam Smith and Richard Jones which Marx read in the early 1850s were clearly influential in shaping his views on Asian society. But he also collected material from many other sources. His writings contain references to the popular historical works of James Mill⁶ and Stamford Raffles⁷ as well as to the researches of such prominent Orientalists as William Jones.⁸ Marx often cited and quoted from Parliamentary Papers. The Fifth Report of the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, published in 1812, provided him with valuable material on many topics including land tenure in India. For information on China, he used the *Blue Books* containing reports on Chinese society prepared by Lord Elgin and the British commercial agent Mitchell.

The knowledge that Marx gathered from these sources was more detailed and deeper as regards India than other parts of Asia. Yet, very little was known at this time about the history of India of the period prior to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. Though the initial studies of Sanskritists like William Jones, H. T. Colebrooke and C. Wilkins and the decipherment of the Brāhmī script by James Prinsep had aroused wide interest and much speculation, the researches of the scholar-administrators in India proceeded at an extremely slow pace. Only a few sources like the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, certain extracts from the Vedas and the Purāṇas, and a score or so of inscriptions which had been translated were available to the European student of ancient Indian society. This trickle of information produced a flood of sweeping generalizations on "the nature of Indian society". It was an age when a Parliamentary Committee on Indian Affairs could invite officials who had served in India to comment on "the nature and character of the natives of Hindoostan". Some like John Malcolm were hesitant about giving a categorical answer to such a query, but others found it possible to make confident assertions without the slightest indication of doubt.⁹ Asia was easily substituted for India in such discussions. This intellectual climate bred vague generalizations which by far exceeded the limits of available evidence and, despite objections and criticisms from sober scholars like William Robertson, James Crawford and H. H. Wilson, shaped the attitudes towards Asia that became dominant in Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Characterizations of Asian society which were popular during this period claimed to distinguish what were supposed to be its cardinal features, viz. its antiquity and resistance to change, the despotic nature of its governments and the absence of private property in land. Though doubts were cast on the accuracy of chronological details in Indian literary works, the relative antiquity of the Vedas when compared with Greek classics was widely acknowledged. And the work of William Jones, which drew attention to the inter-relationship between the languages of Asia and Europe and to the similarities between the religious thought of the Vedas and those of Classical

6. James Mill, *The History of British India*, London, 1818.

7. Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, London, 1817.

8. Correspondence between Marx and Engels contain a reference to William Jones' collected works. See *Werke*, Band XXVIII, 1963 p. 261.

9. *Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Whole House and the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies: East India Vol. IV*, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1968, pp. 4, 54, 124.

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Greece,¹⁰ gave rise to the idea that India was the original home of the European peoples. Even Hegel, despite his acute Europocentrism, subscribed to this view though, at the same time, he carefully emphasized that the significant achievements of the European were totally unrelated to his Indian heritage.¹¹

James Mill's *History of British India*, published in 1818, gave wide currency to the view that Indian society had remained stagnant for nearly two thousand years. The fragments of Greek writings containing the observations of the companions of Alexander on conditions in India were cited as evidence for this conclusion, and it was pointed out that "the manners, society and knowledge of the Hindus" at that time were exactly the same as they were at the arrival of the modern Europeans in India.¹² The Minutes of the Select Committee appointed in 1810 to inquire into the affairs of the East India Company reveal that even by that time this idea had been gaining acceptance among those concerned with Indian affairs.¹³ Europeans of the era following the industrial revolution found such a view quite attractive and convincing particularly since their society was changing at a faster rate than elsewhere in the world. It was readily accepted by Hegel and the majority of his contemporaries.¹⁴ This view greatly simplified the task that Mill faced as a historian. For, if Indian society had been static, sources from any date prior to the establishment of British rule could be taken as representing conditions throughout the history of pre-British India. Thus Mill found it possible to write confidently about the form of government, laws, taxes and manners of the Hindus using little other original source material than what the *Mānavadharmasūtra* had to offer.

The use of the term despotic to characterize the nature of government in Asia can be traced back to the works of Plato and Aristotle and probably reflects the Greek reaction to political life in the Persian empire.¹⁵ It was revived in the French polemics against the absolutism of Louis XIV but was to become, at a later date, a convenient phrase for the supporters of monarchy as well. It was during these debates that views on Oriental despotism hardened into a concept which was carefully distinguished from the "legal" and "enlightened" despotism of the European monarch.¹⁶ Only a few, like the French Orientalist Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, had reservations about such a characterization of kingship in Asia, and their views were easily ignored.¹⁷ Hegel drew a sharp distinction between the European monarch and the Oriental despot. For him Oriental despotism symbolized the absence of personal freedom. In his periodization of

10. William Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India", *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. 1, 1788, pp. 221-275; "On the Hindus", *ibid.*, pp. 415-431.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trsl. J. Sibree, New York, 1956, p. 142.

12. Mill, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 118.

13. *Minutes*, pp. 4, 124, 143.

14. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

15. R. Kroebner has pointed out that Plato and Aristotle associated this term with master-slave relationships and Oriental forms of political organization. "Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. XIV, 1951, pp. 275-80.

16. See Franco Venturi, "Oriental Despotism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXIV, 1963, pp. 133-42.

17. Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, *Legislation orientale*, Amsterdam, 1778. The relevant sections from Anquetil-Duperron's work are quoted in Venturi, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-141.

history, Oriental society marked the first stage of historical development. It was described in a peculiarly Hegelian turn of phrase as a society where only one person is free, and even that one, being given to this exercise of caprice and not freedom, was a despot and not a free man. The second stage in this scheme was represented by Greek and Roman Society, where "some were free" while German society was supposed to represent the third stage when absolute freedom of man was realized.¹⁸

Though there was general agreement on the absence of civil liberty in Asia, the claim that the Oriental ruler was the sole proprietor of all the land in his kingdom aroused a long controversy in which even official ranks in India were divided. They began with the disagreement between Warren Hastings and Philip Francis, the leading figure in the Governor-Generals' Council on the settlement of revenue in Bengal. There were also differences of opinion on this question between the Governor-in-Council and the Board of Revenue of the Presidency of Madras in 1796. The official policy of the East India Company was to maintain that occupants of land "can establish no more rights of inheritance to the soil, than tenantry upon an estate in England can establish a right to the land by hereditary residence".¹⁹ Yet certain Collectors in the Madras Presidency were convinced that private property rights in the districts in their charge were as well established as in any other country they could think of.²⁰ Among pioneer Orientalists, Anquetil-Duperron was perhaps the most vehement proponent of the view that the existence of private property rights should be recognized;²¹ William Jones tended to agree though his participation in this controversy was less prominent.²² Perhaps the most well-argued exposition of this view came from Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Wilks, in the *Historical Sketches of South India*, published in 1810.²³ Each party to this controversy delved into historical material and personal experience in India to support its case. But, apart from the fact that the wide variety of tenures in India did not lend to easy generalization, there was a formidable obstacle which made an unbiased study of the problem difficult. George Campbell was to observe at a later date that the whole question whether the State was the proprietor of land or not could be narrowed down to the question whether the State receipts were to be called rents or taxes; and the answer to the latter depended on the proportion of the produce of the land that was collected.²⁴ In the Kannada (Canara) region, for instance, the dues collected by the Company amounted to sixty per cent. of the landholder's share.²⁵ Obviously, the Company could not

18. Hegel, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 161.

19. See *Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, British Parliamentary Papers: East India*, Vol. III, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1969, p. 105.

20. See Reports of Place, The Board of Revenue at Ft. St. George, and the Collector of Canara as well as Thackeray's Report on Malabar, *Fifth Report*, Appendices xvi, xxiii, xxiv, pp. 714-5, 799, 812.

21. See Venturi, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

22. William Jones, *Al Sirajiyah; or the Mohammedan Law of Inheritance; with a Commentary*, Calcutta, 1789, pp. ix-xi.

23. Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Wilks, *Historical Sketches of the South of India in an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysore*, Chap. V "The Tenure of Land in Ancient India", London, 1810, Vol. II. pp. 107-184.

24. George Campbell, "The Tenure of Land in Ancient India" in *Systems of Land Tenure in Various Countries*, London, 1870 pp. 130-1.

25. *Fifth Report*... p. 132, 147.

claim that this was a tax. In other words, to a large extent, it was the current rates of assessment and methods of settling the revenue that were being argued about in these discussions on the nature of property rights in India. This involvement in a controversial contemporary political issue necessarily clouded the understanding of land tenure in the past.²⁶

The Select Committee of 1810 agreed after its investigations that the *mīrasdār* was entitled to a property right in the soil and had the following comment to make about land tenure in the Kannada and the Malabar provinces: "The land in general appears to have constituted a clear private property, more ancient, and probably more perfect, than that of England."²⁷ Following an opinion that Wilks had earlier expressed, the Committee remarked that, after the imposition of Muslim rule, property rights had declined in those areas which had been subjected to unduly harsh rates of taxation. It called for more moderate rates of assessment and urged that the permanent settlement of revenue be reconsidered as it was adversely affecting private property rights.²⁸

If the appearance of Wilks' book and the Fifth Report of the Select Committee caused any embarrassment to East India interests, these interests soon found a strong champion in James Mill. In the chapter on taxation in his *History*, Mill not only argued that the property of the soil resided in the sovereign in India, but held that this was equally true of Persia, China and Java; and he took the Select Committee to task for suggesting that the dues collected by the Government had been low in "Hindu times".²⁹ Mill was soon appointed to a senior position in the East India Company. His book proved to be popular, and, owing to his standing as a political economist and a philosopher, his views acquired a far-reaching influence. In his *History of India*, published in 1814, Mountstuart Elphinstone attempted to present what he termed a fresh point of view. He maintained that property rights of the village landholder were deeply rooted though they were collectively held and had never developed fully into separate individual rights.³⁰ But neither this book nor the condemnatory views of H. H. Wilson, that able critic of Mill,³¹ could undermine Mill's influence. By the beginning of the 1850s intellectual opinion had been tilted in favour of Mill's views on

26. Participants in this controversy on the nature of land tenure seem to have been acutely aware of the relationship between the two issues. See for instance the following statement from a letter of William Jones: "Our nation in the name of the king has twenty-three million black subjects in these two provinces, but nine-tenths of their property are taken from them and it has even been publicly insisted that they have no landed property at all: if my Digest of Indian Law should give stability to their property, real and personal, all security to their person, it will be the greatest benefit they ever received from us." Letter to Lady Georgiana, dated 24 October, 1791, quoted in S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, Cambridge, 1968.

27. *Fifth Report* . . . pp. 130, 132, 155, 166.

28. *Ibid.* pp. 138, 155, 166.

29. Mill, *op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 299-328.

30. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India*, London, 1841, Vol. I., pp. xvii, 126-139.

31. See Wilson's comments in his edition of Mill's *History*. James Mill, *The History of British India*, ed. H. H. Wilson, 1858 (5th edition), Vol. I, pp. 208 n. 3, 212 n. 2, 215 n. 1, 221 n. 1, 222 n. 3, 227 n. 3.

land tenure in Asia, and a host of influential writers including T. R. Malthus, Richard Jones and John Stuart Mill accepted his opinion as the most authoritative on the subject.³²

In his attempt at characterizing Asian society, Marx drew upon this fund of influential views and was influenced by some of these popular, but hasty, generalizations. Some of the key ideas outlined above, like social stagnation and despotism in the Orient, occupy an important place in his view of Asian society. And, despite the fact that he had subjected the German historical attitudes typified by Hegel to severe criticism,³³ Marx's reference to "general slavery" (*allegemeine Sklaverei*) in the East has a distinct Hegelian ring while his periodization of history bears a distant, yet recognizable, relationship to Hegel's own scheme.³⁴

However, the views that Marx held on the nature of Asian society were not a mere synthesis or a composite summary of the dominant opinions of his time. He clearly differs from all previous writers in attempting to analyse Asian society in accordance with principles of historical materialism. Neither Marx nor Engels was satisfied with merely describing Asian society. They were constantly attempting to find out why and how Asian society had come to assume its peculiar form. It was these investigations that led Marx to the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production. Further, Marx soon realized the inadequacy of the knowledge available to him. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he expressed the need for a more exhaustive study of Asian, especially Indian, forms of property as it would reveal the different forms in which primitive common property had been dissolved.³⁵ Though he borrowed certain concepts popular at the time, Marx constantly tested their validity against new material that became available to him. Thus some of his early views were modified while certain others were abandoned. Some recent discussions on the Asiatic Mode of Production have not only failed to bring out the changes in views, modifications and refinements that appeared as Marx accumulated new material, but also, by focussing on the complementary nature of the views of Marx and Engels, they have tended to obscure their diversity.³⁶ In fact, where Marx has not expressed any specific opinion, some writers cite Engels on the facile assumption that Marx would have agreed with his point of view. The views of Marx and Engels, based as they were on a common ideological framework, were obviously complementary. But, in their study of Asian society, they did not always arrive at the same conclusions.

II

A detailed examination of the views that Marx held on the nature of property in Asian society is useful for understanding his position on this controversial issue; it also reveals gradual changes in his views and highlights

32. T. R. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, London, 1836, pp. 153, 155. Richard Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, p. 109; *Text-book of Lectures on the Political Economy of Nations, Delivered at the East India College, Haileybury, Hertford*, 1852, pp. 62-3. John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, London, 1854, Vol. I, pp. 391-5.

33. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Moscow, 1968, pp. 27-49, 52.

34. See *Infra* p. 14

35. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 33.

36. See for instance George Lichtheim, "Marx and the Asiatic Mode of Production", in *Far Eastern Affairs* No. 3, *St. Antony's Papers*, No. 14, Illinois, n.d., pp. 86-112.

certain misconceptions which have crept into recent discussions on the subject. A letter written to Engels on June 2, 1853 reveals for the first time that Marx was making a serious attempt to analyse and understand social formations in Asia. He had by this time read the account of travels in India that Francois Bernier, a Frenchman, had written. It is clear that Marx thought highly of Bernier. In his letter, Marx cited Bernier's comment that "the king is the one and only proprietor of land in the kingdom."³⁷ Marx remarked that Bernier had discovered the basis of Asian society—the absence of private property in land. This was "the real key to the Oriental heaven", and explained the durability of its institutions.³⁸

In his reply dated June 6, Engels readily accepted Marx's hypothesis: "The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Herein lies its political and religious history." He agreed with Marx that Bernier who provided this valuable insight was a sober and clear-headed writer, but added rather obliquely that the Frenchman "keeps hitting the nail on the head without appearing to notice it." Engels went on to make a further comment: "But how does it come about that the Orientals did not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form? I think it is mainly due to the climate, taken in connection with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of the desert which extend from the Sahara across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary up to the highest Asiatic plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture and this is a matter either for the communes, the provinces or the central government."³⁹ These two letters have been often quoted to show that Marx and Engels agreed on the absence of private ownership of land in the East, as also to suggest that they explicitly excluded feudal property from Oriental society.⁴⁰

Marx depended heavily on his exchange of views with Engels for his article, "The British Rule in India", written on June 10, 1853, for publication in the *New York Daily Tribune*.⁴¹ It shows extensive borrowings from Engels. But, by this time, Marx had read the Fifth Report of the Select Committee of 1810 from which he quotes.⁴² Consequently, his views had changed. It is significant that in this article Marx makes no mention of the absence of private property in land though in the letter cited earlier he had described this as the "real key" to Oriental society. A letter he wrote to Engels on June 14 makes it clear that this was not an accidental omission. "As to the *question of property*", he wrote in this letter,

37. Marx to Engels—June 2, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, 1963, pp. 252-4; Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 450-1.

38. Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, tr. Archibald Constable, rev. V. A. Smith, Oxford, 1914, pp. 224-32.

39. Engels to Marx, June 6, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, 1963, 259; Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 451.

40. See Lichtheim, *op. cit.* p. 91 and Y. Varga, "The Asiatic Mode of Production" in *Politico-Economic Problems of Capitalism*, Moscow, 1968, pp. 330-351.

41. Marx, "The British Rule in India", *New York Daily Tribune*, (NYDT) June 25, 1843, Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 88-95.

42. Avineri (p. 93, n. 2) suggests that Marx obtained this quotation from George Campbell's work, *Modern India: A Sketch of the System of Government*, London, 1852. But Marx's quotation has some sections which had been deleted by Campbell. This, together with the fact that Marx's writings reflect the influence of the views expressed in the *Fifth Report*, makes it fairly clear that Marx did consult the latter source.

“this is a very *controversial* one among English writers on India. In the hill of country south of Crishna, property in land does seem to have existed.... In any case it seems to have been the Mohammedans who first established the principal of “no property in land” throughout the whole of Asia.”⁴³

The views expressed here come very close to the observations in Mark Wilks' *Historical Sketches of South India* and the Fifth Report of the Select Committee. It seems most likely that by this time Marx had read both these works.⁴⁴ Elsewhere he quotes from Mill's *History* on another matter pertaining to the history of India.⁴⁵ But he was now aware of the limitations of both Bernier and Mill who supported the theory of king's ownership of land in India. It is noteworthy that, in *Capital*, too, Marx makes no mention at all of Bernier or Mill but cites the opinions of Wilks with approval.⁴⁶ Evidently, he had, by this time, drifted away from the more popular view on property in land in India.

Marx's article on “Indian Affairs”, which appeared in the *Tribune* on August 5, 1853, has been cited by George Lichtheim as reflecting his acceptance of the view that there was no private ownership of land in India.⁴⁷ But what Marx attempted in this article was to examine the effects of the revenue reforms introduced by the Company administration on property relations in India. Here Marx was in his best polemizing form. He remarked that the *zamindari* system of Bengal which had dispossessed the cultivators of their hereditary rights was a caricature of English landlordism. Similarly, the *ryotwari* system of Bombay and Madras, which reduced the “native nobility” to cultivating small fields, was a caricature of French peasant proprietorship. As a result of these ill-advised reforms, land had lost all value. “But a curious sort of English landlord was the zemindar,” Marx commented,

“receiving only one-tenth of the rent, while he had to make over nine-tenths to the Government. A curious sort of French peasant was the ryot, without any permanent title in the soil, and with taxation changing every year in proportion to the harvest.... Thus, in Bengal, we have a combination of English landlordism, of the Irish middlemen system, of the Austrian system, transforming the landlord into the tax-gatherer, and of the Asiatic system, making the

43. Marx to Engels June 14, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, pp. 268-9. Marx's emphasis. Avineri, *op. cit.*

44. It is noteworthy that the passage on the village community that Marx quotes in this letter is somewhat different from the quotation which appeared in his article and shows that he had read Wilks. For instance, in place of the phrase “the *tallier* and the *totie*” which occurs in both the *Fifth Report* and Marx's article, here he uses the phrase “3. The *Taliary* or *Stulwar* and 4. the *Totie*” reproducing exactly what Wilks had given. As Dumont has pointed out, the original source of this description was Thomas Munro's Report From Anantapur. Louis Dumont, “The ‘Village Community’ from Munro to Maine,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. IX, 1966, pp. 80-1, n. 24.

45. Marx, “The East India Company—Its History and Results”, *NYDT*, July 11, 1853, see Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 101.

46. Marx, *Capital; A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Moscow, Vol. I, 1961, p. 358.

47. Lichtheim, *op. cit.* pp. 94-5.

State the real landlord. In Madras and Bombay we have a French peasant proprietor who is at the same time a serf, and a *metayer* of the State."⁴⁸

The dispatches sent to the *Tribune* in 1857 and 1858 also show that Marx had not changed his view that private property rights had existed in India. In an article on "The Indian Question", published on August 14, 1857, he quoted lengthy passages from Disraeli's speech where the Indian *ināmdār* was compared with the English freeholder.⁴⁹ His own views are stated more clearly in an article entitled "English Colonization in India", published on April 3 in the following year. "The land, however, in India" he asserted, "did not belong to the Government, the greater proportion of it being as much private property as the land in England, many of the natives holding their estates by titles six or seven hundred years old." He further observed that proprietary rights already existed "over almost every acre" of land in the hill country which had been considered suitable for European colonization.⁵⁰

It is most surprising that neither the article on colonization cited above nor the one that Marx wrote specifically on land tenure in India for the *Tribune* of June 7, 1858, has been considered in recent discussions of his views. The latter is his most detailed statement on the subject. Here he discusses the controversy between those who subscribed to the view that State was the proprietor of the soil and others who held that private property in India was as well-established as in any other country, the sovereign's "ultimate right" being, as in European countries, merely a theoretical claim. The manner in which he posed what he considered to be the main question clearly reveals Marx's own conviction; "Admitting, however, that the lands of India are private property, held by as good and strong a private title as land elsewhere", he inquired, "who shall be regarded as the real owners?" There were two principal claimants: the *zamindar* and the *ryot*. "A more thorough study of the institutions of Hindostan," Marx noted,

"together with the inconvenience, both social and political, resulting from the Bengal settlement, has given currency to the opinion that by the original Hindoo institutions, the property of the land was in the village corporation, in which resided the power of allotting it out to individuals for cultivation. . ."

It was with the weakening of the power of the central government in places like Oudh that "feudal landholders" like *zamindars*, who were originally mere tax-collectors, had succeeded in curtailing the rights of both the government and the cultivators.⁵¹

48. Marx, "Indian Affairs", *NYDT*, August 5, 1853; see Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 129-130.

49. Marx, "The Indian Question", *NYDT*; August 14, 1857, see Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 202.

50. Marx, Leading article in *NYDT*, April 3, 1858, Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 277-9.

51. Marx, Leading article in *NYDT*, June 7, 1858, Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 313-6.

The article on land tenure in India highlights an important development in Marx's thinking on Asian society. In this letter to Engels written on June 14, 1853, Marx, relying most probably on information from Wilks,⁵² had spoken of "some villages" in India where land was cultivated in common while recognising that "in most cases," each cultivator tilled "his own fields".⁵³ Here, on the other hand, he refers to the view that common ownership by the village corporation was the original form of land tenure in Hindu times. Though Marx does not identify the "more thorough study" which gave rise to this view, it seems very likely that it was Elphinstone he had in mind. In *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, published in 1814, Elphinstone stated that the communal clan ownership of land, together with the practice of periodical redistribution, existed among Afghan tribes like the Eusofzyes. He also noted the similarities between these institutions and the practices of German tribes recorded by Roman writers.⁵⁴ By the time he wrote his *History*, published in 1841, Elphinstone had come to believe that communal ownership was the typical form of land tenure in "Hindu times". He spoke of rights of land-holders which were collectively held. These rights could be alienated only with the consent of the community, and, if a family became extinct, these rights reverted to the community.⁵⁵ It is quite likely that Marx who, in an earlier article, had spoken of Elphinstone and Thomas Munro as men of genius who had real sympathy for the Indian people,⁵⁶ knew of and used Elphinstone's works.

At the time his article on land tenure was published, Marx was finishing his massive manuscript *Grundrisse*. In fact, the section in this work on pre-capitalist economic formations had been written earlier than the two articles on colonisation and land tenure in India.⁵⁷ As Hobsbawm remarked,⁵⁸ *Grundrisse* is written "in a sort of private intellectual shorthand" and contains many passages which defy comprehension. The section in which Asiatic, Slavonic, Celtic and other forms of communal property are cited as representing the initial form of property in land is by no means one of the easiest. Here we find Marx stating that, in the Asiatic form, property existed "only as communal property".⁵⁹ The despot who embodies the "comprehensive unity" (*zusammenfassende Einheit*) or the "total unity" (*Gesamteinheit*) of the various communities in the kingdom may appear to be the proprietor of the soil, and land occupied by members of the community

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52. Compare, for instance, Marx's statement with the following observations of Wilks. "In some instances the lands of a village are cultivated in common, and the crop divided in proportion of the labour contributed, but generally each occupant tills his own field." Wilks, *op. cit.* pp. 118-9.
 53. Marx to Engels, June 14, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, p. 268; Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 436.
 54. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies, in Persia, Tartary and India*, London, Vol. II, 1839, pp. 14-7. and note on p. 17. Elphinstone was to some extent indebted to Richard Strachey for material on land tenure. See his preface, Vol. I, p. vii.
 55. Elphinstone, *The History of India*, Vol. I, pp. 126-7.
 56. Marx, "The Native States", *NYDT*, July 25, 1853, Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 125.
 57. The fourth and fifth notebooks which contain the relevant sections of *Grundrisse* were written between mid-December 1857 and the beginning of February 1858. See *Grundrisse*, The Pelican Marx Library, 1973, pp. 371, 481.
 58. Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, (PCEF) ed. Eric Hobsbawm, New York, 1965, p. 10.
 59. Marx's emphasis.

may appear to be something the despot has ceded. But, in fact, the community is the real proprietor. Beneath the distorting image of Asian society, "clan and communal property exists in fact".⁶⁰ In this discussion, Marx reduces the difference between king's ownership and communal ownership to the subtle distinction between appearance and reality. And the fact that, in a later passage, he refers to Roman communal property, the *ager publicus*, as State property (*Staatseigentum*) adds to the confusion.⁶¹ In fact, the distinction between appearance and reality totally disappears when he speaks of the Asian State as representing both the landlord and the sovereign in the preliminary draft he prepared for the third of *Capital*.⁶² But, in the section of *Capital* which he revised and personally made ready for publication, Marx refers to communal property as "always distinct from State property" and cites the "ancient Indian community" as an example of a society based on communal property.⁶³ Indian forms of communal property attracted Marx's attention for a long time. Influenced perhaps by popular views about the antiquity of Indian institutions, he had stated in his *Contribution* that the origins of European forms of communal property could be traced back to Indian communal property.⁶⁴ He re-iterated this view nine years later, in a letter he wrote to Engels.⁶⁵

The fact that, in *Grundrisse*, Marx completely excluded individual ownership of land from his characterization of Asiatic society poses another problem since he had taken a different position in his earlier statements. It seems most likely that in this analysis Marx is attempting to present a construct of a form of Asian society representative of the distant past rather than of contemporary conditions. Such an interpretation would make it easier to explain the statement in the Preface to his *Contribution* which designates the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and the modern bourgeois modes of production as "progressive epochs" (*progressive Epochen*) in the economic formation of society.⁶⁶ In fact certain other statements, too, support this interpretation. In his critique of political economy cited above, Marx remarks that "numerous examples" of the primitive form of communal property which was common to Slavs, Celts and the ancient Roman society "are still to be found in India, though in a partially ruined state", thereby implying that this form of property was no longer the universal form even in India.⁶⁷ And, in *Capital*, as noticed earlier, it is to "the ancient Indian community" (*altindischen Gemeinde*) that he refers while citing examples of societies based on communal property in which exchange could not develop properly.⁶⁸ Later on, in the same work, it is the "most ancient small Indian communities" (*uraltertümlichen, kleinen indischen Gemeinwesen*) which he takes as his model.⁶⁹ Perhaps the most convincing evidence to support

60. Emphasis added. *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen ökonomie*, Berlin, 1953, pp. 376-7; *Grundrisse*, 1973, p. 473.

61. *Grundrisse*, 1953, p. 378; 1973, p. 474.

62. *Capital*, Moscow, Vol. III, 1962, pp. 771-2.

63. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 724.

64. *A Contribution* . . . p. 33.

65. Marx to Engels, March 14, 1868, *Werke*, XXXII, 1965, p. 42, Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 466.

66. *Werke*, XIII, p. 9; *A Contribution* . . . p. 21.

67. *A Contribution* . . . p. 33.

68. Emphasis added. *Werke*, XXIII, p. 102.

69. Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

this interpretation comes from the two articles on land tenure and colonization cited earlier. In his article on land tenure, Marx spoke of communal ownership by the village corporation as the form of land tenure which was in agreement with "the *original* Hindoo institutions"; but he also noted that, subsequently, certain changes had taken place, one of these being the metamorphosis of the tax-collector into a feudal landholder. Similarly, in his article on colonization, which was also written after the relevant section in *Grundrisse*, Marx spoke of "natives" who held their estates by titles "six or seven hundred years old". Thus Marx seems to have believed that, parallel to institutions of communal property which had survived right up to his own times, individual property rights were not only known in India, but had been so for centuries. In fact he even appears to have agreed with the somewhat exaggerated view presented in the Fifth Report of the Select Committee of 1810 which asserted that Indian private property in land was comparable with contemporary English private property. In *Capital*, however, Marx is more careful in pointing out the special nature of private property in land under the capitalist mode of production. He cited England as a model country where the new economic relations in land, supplanting the old feudal relations, had developed early. These new ideas of property, he observed, had been imported by Europeans to only a limited area in Asia.⁷⁰

By the end of the 1850s Marx began to take a greater interest in China and the Far East. Though he had spoken about China in certain of his earlier articles, it was after the outbreak of Anglo-Chinese hostilities in 1857 that Marx undertook a more careful study of the Far Eastern countries and their trade with the Western world. He wrote a number of articles on Chinese affairs, drawing material from sources varying from reports in contemporary newspapers and journals to the *Blue Books* which contained diplomatic correspondence and the reports of Parliamentary committees on relations with China. These studies made Marx further aware of the diversity of the contemporary forms of landownership in Asia. He came to realize that communal ownership of land was not found in all Asian countries: the survival of this institution was largely an Indian phenomenon, though it had been the "original form" (*ursprüngliche Form*) of property in China as well.⁷¹ In Japan, he found that feudal property had developed to such an extent that it bore a clear resemblance to forms in medieval Europe. "Japan, with its *purely feudal*⁷² (*rein feudalen*) organization of landed property and its developed small-scale peasant agriculture (*Kleinbauernwirtschaft*)," Marx remarked, "gives a much truer picture of the European middle ages than all our history books."⁷³

It will have been evident from the foregoing discussion that Marx recognised several forms of land tenure in Asia: (i) communal property, the "original form" of tenure which had survived in certain Indian villages. (ii) "Private property" in the region south of Krishna which had not come under Muslim rule. (iii) Feudal property in areas like Oudh where tax-collectors had made use of the weakness in the central government to develop into feudal landholders. (iv) Developed feudal property in Japan which was comparable with medieval European forms of property. Marx's interest was

70. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 742-4; Vol. III, pp. 600-4.

71. *Werke*, XXV, 1973, p. 346; *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 328.

72. Emphasis added.

73. *Werke*, 23, p. 745; *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 718.

focussed mainly on the first of these forms and he did not give adequate attention to the others. But it is quite clear that he had come a long way since the time he had considered the absence of property in land to be "the key to the whole of the East."

III

While Marx grew increasingly aware of the diversity of the forms of land tenure in Asia, he turned his attention more and more to a related institution—the village community. Several descriptions of Indian village communities by British administrators like Munro, Wilks, Metcalfe, Elphinstone and Campbell were available at the time.⁷⁴ Selections from government records concerning the North-western provinces, which included Strachey's description of villages in Punjab, appeared in 1856.⁷⁵

In his very first discussion on the village community, published in 1853, Marx is found clearly avoiding the tendency prevalent among certain British administrators and sections of the radicals at the time to idealize this institution. The village community was, for him, the basis on which despotism flourished, and its destruction, despite its tragic and sombre aspects, was bringing about a fundamental revolution in Indian society.⁷⁶ Romanticized accounts of the village community of the Munro-Metcalfe tradition emphasised the durability of this institution and its millennial resistance to change. Marx probed deeper and, characteristically, tried to explain this durability in terms of the economic basis of that institution. He suggested that "the domestic union of agriculture and manufacturing pursuits" provided the answer. "Those family-communities were based", he remarked, "on domestic industry, in that peculiar combination of hand-weaving, hand-spinning, and hand-tilling agriculture which gave them self supporting power."⁷⁷ This view about "the domestic union of agriculture and industry" did not take into consideration the caste system which Marx himself had earlier described in the *German Ideology* as a gross form of the division of labour.⁷⁸ The discrepancy was settled shortly afterwards. In the letter he wrote to Engels four days later, Marx reverted to the problem, and recapitulated what he had written in the article. But here he carefully modifies his earlier formulation, and, while speaking of the autonomous and self-supporting character of the village community, also refers to the caste system.⁷⁹ His insistence that, despite the presence of domestic industry, the family unit was dependent on the village community through the communality of property and the division of labour characterizes his later writing on the subject.

74. Wilks, Elphinstone and Campbell, *op. cit.* See also *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, III—Revenue, British Parliamentary Papers 1831-2*, pp. 331-2. Republished as *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies: East India*. Vol. IX, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1970, pp. 331-2.

75. *Frequency of the Transfer of Proprietary Titles, Selections from Records of the Government of North Western Provinces*, Pt. XXIX, Agra, 1856.

76. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India", *NYDT*, June 25, 1853. Avineri, *op. cit.* pp.93-4.

77. Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 93.

78. *The German Ideology*, p. 52.

79. Marx to Engels, June 14, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, p. 268; Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 456.

Not long after the appearance of Marx's article where he discussed the Indian village community, Georg von Maurer published his study of the *Mark* and the *Dorf*.⁸⁰ This work, which was to some extent a continuation of the researches undertaken earlier by Jakob Grimm,⁸¹ created a renewed interest among European scholars about the German village community. Maurer's study stressed the inter-dependence of the polity and the economy in the village community and characterized it as a body of co-proprietors who were both self-governing and free. Though Maurer is first mentioned in *Capital*,⁸² it is likely that Marx knew of his study by the time he started work on *Grundrisse* where Asian and European village communities are treated as variants of a common basic form of early social organization.⁸³ The Indian village community, with its communality of property in land and internal union of agriculture and industry, was described in this work as a self-sustaining unit which "contains within itself all conditions of reproduction and surplus production". The condition of the individual within the community was one of the problems which attracted Marx's attention in this work. According to him, the Asiatic mode of production represented a type of society in which the relations of the individual with the conditions of production were mediated through the community. In effect, the individual was himself the property of the community, and, consequently, of the "total unity" represented by the despot. This line of thinking led Marx to the concept of "the general slavery of the Orient". On the other hand, in his remarks about the internal organization of village communities, he observed that a community could be either despotic or democratic, depending on whether the unity of the community was represented by a single head or by the relations between the heads of families within it. Later, in a letter he wrote to Engels,⁸⁴ he cited the Russian and the South Indian village communities as examples of the patriarchal non-democratic type, but, at the same time, specifically excluded the village communities of Punjab from this classification. Thus he not only emphasized the differences among Indian village communities in their internal organization, but he also implied that "Oriental despotism" was not incompatible with village communities having a "democratic" internal administration.

The discussion on the Indian village community, presented in *Capital*, is Marx's most mature analysis of the economic basis of this institution.⁸⁵ He recognized the prevalence of different types of village communities in India, but selected what appeared to be the most simple and archaic form for special consideration. According to this analysis, while the family unit practised agriculture as well as spinning and weaving and produced some of its main needs, there was a systematic and unalterable division of labour as regards certain crafts, services and managerial functions. This division of labour made provision even for the maintenance of records and accounts of the community and thus, Marx observed, a feature characteristic of capitalist

80. Georg Ludwig Ritter von Maurer, *Einleitung zur Geschichte der Mark, Hof, Dorf und Stadtverfassung und der öffentlichen Gewalt*, München, 1854.

81. Jakob Ludwig Grimm, *Deutsche rechtsalterthümer*, Göttingen, 1828; *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1848.

82. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 71.

83. *Grundrisse*, 1973, pp. 88, 495.

84. Marx to Engels, November 7, 1868, *Werke*, XXXII, 1965, p. 197; Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, nd., p. 261.

85. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 357-8.

society could be traced back to a stage "as early as the primitive Indian community".⁸⁶ The constitution of the village community, however, effectively hampered any further development in the division of labour. Each craftsman produced for an unchanging, limited market. The major part of the produce was consumed within the community and, since each community was self-sufficient, production could not lead to exchange of commodities. Only the surplus drained off by the State could be converted into commodities, and that, too, for an external market. Under such conditions, the division of labour could not progress either at the macro-level of regional specialization or at the micro-level of specialization in various phases of the process of manufacture. These conditions perpetuated a system of production where each artificer "conducts in his workshop all the operations of his handicraft in the traditional way, and without recognizing any authority over him."⁸⁷ Marx thought that this simplicity in the organization of production within the village community was a feature common to Asian society. The discussion in *Capital* marks a stage in the development of Marx's thought when he had come to believe that organizational simplicity explained the ability of Asian institutions to resist social change.

This characterization of Asian society, with its emphasis on the village community, had a corollary: the city had virtually no place in such an economy. "Asian society", Marx remarked in *Grundrisse*, "is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and country (the large city, properly speaking, must be regarded merely as a princely camp, a superimposition (*Superfötation*) erected over the real economic structure).⁸⁸ Lesser cities arose either where it was favourable to foreign trade or at the places where provincial rulers dispensed the "labour funds". Marx considered the Asian urban settlement to be clearly distinct from the Greek and Roman city, which was the seat of landholders; and also from the medieval European town whose privileges were constantly defended against encroachment by the king and the rural nobility. It is rather unfortunate that Marx's analysis of the Asian city is limited to a few statements in *Grundrisse*. Consequently, there is no means of finding out how cities like Dacca, which, as Marx himself noted later, had been a large centre of textile production before its decline began under the pressure of competition from English textiles,⁸⁹ fits into his scheme.

It is noteworthy that, in his discussion on the Asian city in *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the term "labour-funds" since, in *Capital*, he expatiates on the inappropriateness of this term.⁹⁰ It is one of the English phrases that are found scattered in the German text of the *Grundrisse* which in his later works he translates into German as *arbeitsfonds*.⁹¹ The concept of the labour fund

86. *Capital*, Moscow, Vol. II, 1957, p. 134 n. 12.

87. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 357-8.

88. *Grundrisse*, 1953, p. 382; 1973, p. 479; *PCEF*, pp. 77-8.

89. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 340.

Grundrisse, 1953, p. 377 and *Werke*, XXIII, pp. 636-9

90. See chapter entitled "The So-called Labour Fund" in *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 609-611.

91. Cf. *Grundrisse*, 1953, p. 377 with *Werke*, XXIII, pp. 636-9 and *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, Stuttgart, 1921, dritter Band, p. 470.

occurs frequently in the writings of both Malthus and Richard Jones.⁹² Jones used it in the sense of "the aggregate amount consumed by the workers". In his lectures on political economy, Jones pointed out that in Asia the labour fund was formed out of income derived from the land. This was similar to conditions throughout Europe in earlier times.⁹³ The agricultural labourer "raised his own wages" from the soil while the non-agricultural labourer, employed in a craft or in a service occupation, was maintained either from "the joint-revenues of the villagers" or from the revenues of the land-holders and the State. The payment for non-agricultural labourers, both urban and rural, thus came from the same source —the surplus from the land. But the manner in which this surplus reached the urban workman had a profound effect on his life and habits. The control of the labour fund was, in Asia, in the hands of the despot and his officials. Major public works like the Great Wall of China and the irrigation systems of Sri Lanka were the results of sporadic, but large-scale, disbursements of this fund. But, primarily, the Asian city was the place where this fund was being constantly disbursed in exchange for services and luxury goods. Jones believed that the dependence of the urban workman on the labour funds dispensed by the State explained the phenomenon that Bernier had described: the inhabitants of Asian cities had no choice but to follow the men who dispensed the labour funds, wherever they went. Consequently, when an Asian city ceased to be a political centre, it also ceased to be a city.⁹⁴

There is a certain resemblance between Marx's characterization of the Asian city and the views that Jones had earlier expressed on the same subject. This similarity of views and the use of the term "labour funds" by Marx suggest that Marx was influenced by Jones. Jones is not mentioned in *Grundrisse*, but an analysis of his economic thought is found in *Theories of Surplus Value*. Here Marx criticised Jones' indiscriminate use of the terms "wages" and "wage-labour" in describing pre-capitalist economic relations; and he also pointed out that Jones had overlooked the unity of agriculture and industry in the Asian village community.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, in the same work, Marx included many quotations from Jones on Asian society, and he seems to have agreed with most of it. In fact, Marx developed an admiration for his work and considered him to be a profound thinker. "The members of the Church of England", he remarked with typical sarcasm, on recalling that Jones was a clergyman, "seem to think more than their continental brethren."⁹⁶

It is in Marx's analysis of labour in Asian society that Jones' influence is most evident. In *Grundrisse*, Marx had noted that in "a few clans in India" communality extended beyond ownership of property to production within the community. However, it was for specific communal projects like the

92. T. R. Malthus, *Definitions in Political Economy*, London, 1853 (1st ed. 1827), p. 19; see also his *Principles of Political Economy*, London, 1820, pp. 234, 238, 239, 313. Richard Jones, *Introductory Lecture on Political Economy and Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on the Wages of Labour*, London, 1833, pp. 48-9; *Text-book of Lectures on the Political Economy of Nations, Delivered at the East India College, Haileybury*. Hertford, 1852, pp. 70-2.

93. Jones, *Introductory Lecture* . . . p. 18.

94. Jones, *Text-book of Lectures* . . . pp. 74-7.

95. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Moscow, Vol. I, 1969, p. 157, Vol. III, 1972, p. 417. Jones is first mentioned in a letter Marx wrote in 1852. Marx to Joseph Waydemeyer, March 5, 1852, *Werke* XXVIII, p. 507.

96. *Theories of Surplus Value*, Vol. III, p. 428.

construction of irrigation systems that communal labour was generally organized. Marx traced the beginnings of "lordly dominion" (*herrschaftliche dominium*) and serfdom (*Frondienst*) in society to this need for organizing labour for communal projects, be it war or the construction of public works.⁹⁷ In his later works where he elaborated these ideas, Marx makes specific reference to Jones. In *Capital*, Marx followed Jones in pointing out that among "ancient Asiatics", Egyptians and others, co-operation on such a massive scale had been made possible by the concentration of a large part of the surplus produce in the hands of the ruler, which he could use to feed the labour force.⁹⁸ Marx compared the power wielded by the Asian ruler in directing large labour forces with the power of the modern capitalist; but, at the same time, he observed that, unlike in capitalist society, simple co-operation in pre-capitalist societies depended on relations of dominion and servitude (*Herrschafts-und Knechtschaftsverhältnissen*).⁹⁹

Despite his general agreement with Jones on the organization of labour in Asian society, Marx differed from him regarding the manner in which the surplus collected from the agricultural workers was being distributed among non-agricultural workers. According to Marx, princes as well as landlords were among the ranks of the "magnates" (*Größen*) who exchanged revenue for labour and luxury goods.¹⁰⁰ Arguing from what appears to be a viewpoint which underestimated the strength of dominion-servitude relations in production and distribution, Marx maintained that, since the artisans were few in number, they were able to enrich themselves by selling their products at "monopoly prices", over and above the quantity of labour contained in them.¹⁰¹ He believed that accumulation of wealth could take place in pre-capitalist modes of production, though increase in consumption and reproduction tended generally to keep pace with increase in production. Such accumulation would be in the form of treasures or of extension in the scale of production. Since the labourer was not alienated from his means of production, it could not lead to the growth of capital.¹⁰²

It has already been pointed out that the special role of caste in the organization of labour in Indian society had attracted Marx's interest. He did not have the occasion to make a detailed analysis of caste and he limited his observations to the economic aspects of this institution. Citing the remarks of Hugh Murray and James Wilson on the excellent quality of textiles

97. *Grundrisse*, 1953, p. 377; 173, pp. 473-4; *PCEF*, pp. 70-1.

98. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 333-4.

99. *Werke*, XXIII, p. 354; *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 334.

100. "On the other hand, the non-agricultural labourers in those provinces of India where the English rule has least disturbed the old system, are directly employed by magnates, to whom a portion of the agricultural surplus-product is rendered in the shape of tribute or rent." *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 598. See also *Werke*, XXIII, p. 625.
"Similarly in all countries, as for example the Asiatic, where the principal revenue of the country is in the hands of landlords, princes etc. . . ." *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Vol. I, p. 277. The word "landlords" is retained in the German text. *Werke*, XXVI (1), p. 248.

101. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Vol. I, p. 277.

102. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 598; *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Vol. III, p. 420.

produced in Dacca and the Coromandel coast,¹⁰³ Marx pointed out that the Indian weaver achieved such a high degree of proficiency in his trade only because the hereditary traditions enabled special skills to be accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation. He noticed a certain similarity between caste and the European guild system in that both these institutions were the results of the general tendency in early societies to make trades hereditary. Like guilds, caste appears when the society reaches a particular degree of development.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Marx also emphasized the special characteristics of the organization of non-agricultural labour in Asia. He quoted Jones to point out that in Asia labour met "casual wants".¹⁰⁵ The craftsman worked only when a customer placed an order. Even large scale public enterprises were sporadic. In a statement which reveals the depth of his understanding, Marx observed that discontinuity was a characteristic feature of the employment of labour in Asia.¹⁰⁶ He pointed out that, in contrast to these conditions, the guild system of medieval Europe began to serve as "a preparatory school for the capitalist mode of production" by providing for continuity in the employment of urban labour.¹⁰⁶

I V

The position and functions of the State and its relations with the village communities represent some of the most problematic aspects in the concept of the Asiatic mode of production. Engels was interested in the nature of the Asian State perhaps to a greater extent than Marx. Previously, Adam Smith had drawn attention to the role of the State in Egypt and India. He had remarked that the State in these countries took special care to provide irrigation facilities since it derived its revenues mainly from agricultural produce.¹⁰⁷ Richard Jones, too, had written about the arid lands which stretched from Africa into the extremities of China where agriculture was possible only with the help of irrigation.¹⁰⁸ Engels wrote in similar vein in a letter to Marx, dated June 2, 1853. He stated that irrigation works were essential for agriculture in the East, and this was a matter for the commune, the provincial administration, or the central government. The construction of such public works was one of the three functions in which Oriental governments were involved, the other two being war and taxation, both of which he characterized as plunder.¹⁰⁹ In the *Anti-Dühring*, which he wrote nearly twenty-five years later, Engels is found presenting a different formulation. Here he characterized the Asian despot as the "total entrepreneur" (*Gesamtunternehmerin*) in irrigation enterprise. The need for irrigation explained the origin of despotism in Asia. Engels recognized that force, too, played a part in the growth of despotic power, but he emphasized on the "social function" (*geseleschaftliche Funktion*) of the ruler as the major factor behind this development. Social function could, he theorized, elevate

103. Hugh Murray and James Wilson, *Historical and Descriptive Account of British India*, Edinburgh, Vol. II 1832, p. 449.

104. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 340.

105. Jones, *Text-book of Lectures*... pp. 37-8.

106. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Vol. III, pp. 433-4.

107. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, ed. E. Cannan, London, 1930, pp. 179, 181.

108. Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, pp. 119-20.

109. Engels to Marx, June 6, 1853, *Werke*, XXVIII, p. 259; Avineri, *op. cit.* pp. 451-2.

itself to domination over society. The importance of his functions turned the servant of the society into its master. And this metamorphosis set in motion a process leading to the emergence of a ruling class. Engels sought to establish that social function was *everywhere* the basis of political supremacy and, according to his interpretation, in countries like Persia and India, it was the king's function of constructing and maintaining irrigation works which provided the basis for Oriental despotism.¹¹⁰

The analysis in the *Anti-Dühring* is important for two main reasons. For one, it provided the inspiration for an influential interpretation of Asian society which finds its most elaborate expression in the work of Karl Wittfogel.¹¹¹ Secondly this is a crucial point on which Marx and Engels were not in complete agreement. In his article on British rule in India, Marx accepted Engels' definition of the functions of the Oriental State, but he abandoned the rigid distinction that Engels maintained between Asia and Europe on the basis of climatic factors. Marx was aware that that the need for irrigation had evoked widely different responses in Flanders, Italy, and in the Eastern civilizations. In this particular article, he speculated that such variation in response had to be explained in terms of the difference in levels of civilization in these regions. Intervention of the central government in irrigational enterprise had become necessary in Asia because "the civilization was too low and the territory too vast" for voluntary enterprise.¹¹² This rather simplistic explanation totally disappears from Marx's later works.

In *Capital*, Marx pointed out that irrigation not only provided the indispensable water, but also enriched the soil with mineral fertilisers. Irrigation and other such enterprises which brought natural forces under control through extensive use of manual labour had played a decisive role in the early history of industry. But Marx did not consider the dependence on irrigation to be a feature peculiar only to Asian society; and, in his discussion in *Capital*, he cites examples from not only Egypt and India, but Holland, Lombardy, Spain and Sicily as well, among countries with a history of involvement in irrigational enterprise.¹¹³ Thus, though Marx considered irrigation to be very important for agriculture in Asian countries, he ranked it only as "one of the material bases" of despotic power.¹¹⁴

Marx's emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the village community and the simplicity of its internal organization implied that the State was virtually superfluous. The relationship between the Asian despot and the village community, as depicted in *Grundrisse*, is a subtle one. The despot symbolized the "total unity" of the village communities. He received from them a part of their surplus labour as "tribute". Another part of the surplus labour of the village communities took the form of communal labour which was used to

110. Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, New York, 1969, pp. 198-9; *Werke*, XX, 1973, pp. 166-7

111. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, Yale, 1957.

112. Marx, "The British Rule in India", *NYDT*, June 25, 1853, Avineri, *op. cit.* p. 90.

113. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 514.

114. Emphasis added. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 514, n. 2.

construct works of public utility as well as to erect religious monuments. Though they were products of communal labour, these works appeared to be the work of the despot. At the same time, despotism does not seem to have been considered by Marx to be a pervasive element within this society; it was possible for a village community under the despotic regime to have a "democratic" internal administration. The phrase in *Grundrisse* which describes the despotic regime as "hovering" (*schwebenden*) above the village communities gives an indication of Marx's conception of the relationship between the two institutions.¹¹⁵

In his remarks on Asian society, Marx often refers to phenomena which seem to point to social stratification. He speaks of the caste system as a gross form of the division of labour. He detects the beginnings of a lord-serf relationship in the organization of communal labour. But it is significant that ideas of class rule and even of class as a social category are absent from his characterization of the Asiatic mode of production. Marx's views on the village community imply that the economic and physical isolation of this institution effectively hampered the development of social stratification latent in Asian society. Contradiction and inequality were all contained within the framework of the community. In his article entitled "Future Results of British Rule in India", published in the *Tribune* of August 8, 1835, he pointed out that each village existed almost without any intercourse with other communities. "The village isolation," he observed, "produced the absence of roads in India, and the absence of roads perpetuated the village isolation."¹¹⁶ Marx believed that despotism thrived under such conditions where society dissolved into disparate units. "The isolation of the village communities," he remarked in a letter he wrote to Vera Zasulich in 1881,

"the lack of links between their lives, this locally bounded microcosm, is not everywhere an immanent characteristic of the last of the primitive types: However, wherever it does occur, it permits the emergence of a central despotism above the communities."¹¹⁷

The growth of extra-village relations which would lead to the development of social stratification and permit mobilization against the despot was hampered by the isolation of the community. Despotism, according to this line of thought was not the product of the social function of the state in Asia. Marx did not see a necessary link between the need for irrigation and the rise of despotism; the despot was not inevitable and essential in hydraulic society. Unlike later analysts of hydraulic society who speak of an Oriental despotism based on the bureaucratic ramifications necessitated by the irrigational functions of the Asian state, Marx believed that the development and the perpetuation of despotism depended on the absence of such links, on the isolation of the village communities.

115. "...der über den kleinen Gemeinden schwebenden despotischen Regierung...." *Grundrisse*, 1953, p. 377; 1973, p. 474; *PCEF*, p. 71

116. Marx, "The Future Results of British Rule in India", *NYDT*, August 8, 1835, Avineri, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

117. Emphasis added. Marx to Vera Zasulich (Sassulitch), March 8, 1881, Second draft, *Werke*, XIX 1973, p. 399; *PCEF*, p. 143.

V

In his study of Asian society, Marx was addressing himself to two main tasks. On the one hand, he was trying to construct, on the basis of "archaic" types of communities preserved in north-western and southern parts of India, a model of the "primitive form" of society based on communality of property. This he considered to have been antecedent to known European forms of communal property. The distinction between this early Asian form and other constructs like "tribal property" and "primitive communism" is not very clear. In fact, there are a few instances where the Asiatic form appears to have been their equivalent.¹¹⁸ Investigation into more recent developments in Asian society was the second major task that concerned Marx. In this connection he speaks of different types of property which had evolved from primitive communal property in Asia. Marx realized the need for a detailed study of Asian property to clarify the manner in which primitive communal property had been dissolved.¹¹⁹ But the process of this dissolution, which had resulted in the appearance of private estates in South India and feudal property in Japan, had not been examined at that time. Marx sometimes used terms like "primitive Indian community" and "ancient Indian community" to distinguish the primitive form of society from other later forms.¹²⁰ This distinction is at times blurred. Nevertheless, it is significant. It emerges from a study of Marx's writings that he did not consider this earlier formation, which is described as a specific mode of production, to be representative of the whole of Asia, and that he was aware of diverse types of social formation found there in his time.

Even at the very end of his life, Marx was collecting material on various aspects of Asian Society from such sources as M. M. Kovalevsky's *System of Communal Landed Property* (1879), John Budd Phear's *Aryan Village in India and Ceylon* (1880) and Henry Sumner Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* (1875). He made copious notes on these works, occasionally adding his own comments. While reading Kovalevsky's work, Marx noted that the Turkish domination in Algeria did not lead to a feudalization of the type witnessed in India in the period of the decline of the Mughal empire.¹²¹ Marx was at the same time keenly aware of the difference between the "feudalism" in India and the "pure" feudalism of the Romano-German type. He sharply criticised Kovalevsky for speaking of feudalism in India as being of the same category as western feudalism. Marx remarked that such aspects of Romano-German feudalism as "poetry of the soil" ("*Boden-Poesie*), the "noble nature" of land which limited its alienability and "patrimonial justice" were absent in India and that serfdom did not play a significant role in that society.¹²² Thus it seems that, while Marx had readily used the term feudal to describe conditions in Japan, he was much more guarded about its use in the Indian context.

118. Marx to Engels, April 2, 1858, *Werke*, XXIX, 1963, p. 315

119. *A Contribution* . . . p. 33.

120. See *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 87; Vol. II, p. 134, n. 12.

121. "Les systeme foncier en Algerie au moment de la conquete francaise", *Sur les societe precapitalistes*, Paris, 1970, p. 390.

122. L. S. Gamayunov and R. A. Ulyanovski, "Trud russkovo sotsiologa M. M. Kovalevskovo 'Obshinnoe emlevladienie, prichini xod i posledstvia evo rezloshenia' i kritika evo K. Marksom", *Proceedings of the Twenty-fifth International Congress of Orientalists, Section 14*, Moscow, 1960, pp. 38-45.

Marx used Phear's work to obtain information on agrarian conditions in Bengal and Sri Lanka. Ten pages in his notebook were devoted to the latter¹²³. Marx made detailed notes on the system of land tenure, particularly such practices as *ande*, *betma*, *taṭṭumāru* and service tenure. Methods of cultivation, the ways in which the produce was divided and the importance of joint labour in this economy impressed him. He is also found reproducing a quotation from the *Aggañña Sutta* on the concept of taxation, together with Buddhaghosa's commentary on it.¹²⁴ Marx's interest on the material is clear from the fact that he carefully underlined long passages on the above-mentioned topics, sometimes adding further emphasis with lines on the sides as well. However, it is not possible to ascertain what specific conclusions he drew from this evidence except on one point, that the head of the village in Sri Lanka was entitled only to services. This he considered to be an earlier organizational type than what was found in India.¹²⁵

Marx's notes on Maine which follow those on Phear show his total disagreement with Maine on many points. Critical comments as well as invectives directed at Maine (e.g. Asinus, Block-head, Philister) are found frequently in this section. Among critical comments, those on the nature of the State are particularly relevant. Marx thought that Maine had ignored the significant aspect of the State. He theorized that the autonomous existence of the State was only an appearance, since in all its forms it was an outgrowth, an "excrecence" of the society. It was a mistake to think that the State was something standing above society and based upon itself (*sich selbst beruhendes*). It arose from the clash of interests—of individual, class and common interests—all of which, in the final analysis, had economic conditions as their basis.¹²⁶ Perhaps this criticism of Maine also reflects Marx's dissatisfaction with his own formulation in *Grundrisse* on the nature of the Oriental State. It is relevant to note that during these years Marx tended to emphasize the role that mobile property could play in generating conflict of interests within village communities by facilitating differentiations of wealth among their members.¹²⁷ It is tempting to hypothesize that Marx was moving to a position of linking the rise of the State in ancient Asia with this phenomenon. Unfortunately, the evidence is inadequate to permit such a conclusion.

V I

The proper understanding of Marx's views on Asia has been beset with many difficulties. The difficulties posed by the incomplete and evolutionary nature of these views have been further complicated by the bias of those seeking to interpret them. The school of Marxist historical research which became dominant in the 1930s was too rigid in its approach to show adequate sensitivity to the diversity of social formations, and tended to ignore Marx's views on Asia as largely irrelevant. The wide interest in the Asiatic mode of production, witnessed in recent times, has been, in contrast, accompanied by

123. Lawrence Krader, *The Ethnological Notebook of Karl Marx*, Assen, 1972, pp. 271-284 (pp. 146-155 in Marx's notebook).

124. *ibid.* p. 281

125. *ibid.* p. 274.

126. *ibid.* pp. 329-30.

127. Marx to Vera Zasulich, March 8, 1881, Second draft, *Werke*, XIX, 1973, p. 399; *PCEF*, p. 143.

interpretations of Marx's views which emphasize the polarity of "Western" and "Eastern" historical processes. Lichtheim, for instance, attributes to Marx the belief that "the inner principle of western historical development has from the start been quite different from that of the East."¹²⁸ Wittfogel, another scholar who interpreted Marx along similar lines, claimed that his theory of hydraulic society was derived from Marx's views on the Asiatic mode of production. But he found that there were certain views of Marx which could not be accommodated within such an interpretation and he had to dismiss them as "retrogressions" and "sins against science".¹²⁹

It is true that Marx saw something special about feudalism in Western Europe in that it gave birth to capitalism. But he was averse to drawing rigid distinctions on a geographical basis. For Marx, Asia was not an area totally apart or one in which the dialectic of the European historical process was wholly inoperative, but merely an important area which was yet to be studied in detail. In a letter he wrote in 1877, he carefully emphasized that his analysis of pre-capitalist economic relations "does not pretend to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist order of economy emerged from the feudal order of economy." He warned against the danger of using "a general historico-philosophical theory" as a master key to the understanding of varied types of historical development and stressed the importance of studying each society separately with a view to comparison.¹³⁰ The survival of certain "archaic" social formations in regions like the north-western parts of the Indian sub-continent attracted his interest. But he was quick to recognize that European categories of social formations like feudalism were applicable to certain regions in Asia though in certain other regions they could be applied only with modification. To reduce his views to a rigid formulation more like an echo of the popular refrain from Kipling's "Ballad of East and West" would be to do Marx injustice and to ignore the significant contribution he made to deepen the understanding of Asian society.*

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128. Lichtheim, *op. cit.* p. 112.

129. Wittfogel, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-7.

130. Letter to "Otetschestvennie Sapiski", November 1877, *Werke*, XIX, 1973, pp. 111-2.

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