

PEASANTISATION OF ADIVASIS IN  
THANA DISTRICT, 1818-1947

BY

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**PEASANTISATION OF ADIVASIS IN  
THANA DISTRICT, 1818-1947**

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*with Summary.*

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Certified that the work incorporated in the thesis "PEASANTISATION OF ADIVASIS IN THANA DISTRICT, 1816-1947", submitted by Shri Ashok K. Upadhyaya was carried out by the candidate under my supervision. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged in the thesis.

*S. Brahma*  
Sulabha Brahma  
(Supervisor)

'Wandering between two worlds, one dead  
the other powerless to be born'.

---- Matthew Arnold

'I die of thirst beside the fountain  
Hot as fire I'm shaking tooth on tooth,  
In my own Country I'm in a distant land,  
Beside the blaze I'm shivering in flames'.

---- Francois Villon

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(111)

The lines of Matthew Arnold are from the 'Stanzas from Grande Chartreuse', included in The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold, London, 1892, p 321; those of François Villon are from The Poems of François Villon, French-English Edition, New American Library, New York, 1965, p. 185.

Note: The full titles of the abbreviations of the references used in the text are given in the Bibliography.

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## INTRODUCTION

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### Part 1. The Perspective

In 1945-6 the Varli tribals of Thana district mobilised by Godavery and Shyamrao Parulekar under the Kisan Sabha began a movement against the dominance of the local landlords and moneylenders. The latter's forms of exploitation determined the nodal points of the movement itself--the principal one of which was the extraction of exorbitant rents--from the Varlis who, along with other tribals, laboured under, what G. Parulekar described as, serfdom. This concept suggests the characteristics of the system of land relations itself--centering around a rent paying formation and perpetuated by the constant use of what Marx described as 'extra-economic coercion' along with a system of 'forced' labour.

The movement's fundamental thrust and the leader's epistemological premise focused principally on the extant exploitation/oppression by the local landed gentry, all

of whom were non-tribals. Perforce, this meant the singular attention on the pattern of relations constructed around the ownership and use of land. This was the subject matter of the concept of 'serfdom'. While it defined the constitutive elements incorporated within, it nevertheless limited the epistemology from an examination of other factors that might have perpetuated or reproduced or even initiated the emergence of 'serfdom' itself. The problematic was then as follows: The movement of the struggle was predicated on the 'lived' reality of the tribal, that was most apparent (or in other words, most striking in impact) at the particular conjuncture of tribal existence --the exploitation by landlords through rent. But this very perception precluded the examination of the more subtle processes at work that, historically, had lent weight to the movement of serfdom. The conjunctural moment was a part of the whole tradition of history, whose summation added upto a 'holistic' reality. Parulekar's perspective missed the tension that is implicit in the grand design (conspiracy) of history and its moment, frozen at a certain conjuncture of its march. In other words the leadership by its singular focus on the landed gentry (the landlords/moneylenders, traders, grass merchants) as the exploitative element in the lives of the tribals allowed the 'directors', the 'script writers' of the tribal's historical odyssey, the British themselves, to

remain unnoticed (but not ineffective) in the wings. The creator (sic!) of the historical weight, colonialism, itself was never posited in its true colours. In effect then, the leadership could not and did not, make the necessary connection, between the complexity of the historical process of tribal exploitation and the apparent easy-to-visualize, reality of its moment in 1945-6.

The imperative for this thesis flows from the above. The epistemological scale has to shift its weight not to the moment, (which was in any case amply exhibited by the tribal movement) but to the examination of the historical saga that led to the moment. In the process the latter's limits will necessarily expand to encompass the hitherto neglected 'dramatis personae' and incorporate their action in the content of tribal existence as it was manifest in 1945-6.

The first premise for the study of the historical 'weight' is that the primacy of the ownership and use of land does not, and indeed cannot, be at the cost of the exclusion of other factors, both economic and non-economic, that may have led to the creation of exploitation/oppression. The perspective followed here, attempts to incorporate various elements constitutive of the whole reality of British colonialism and tribal existence to account for as totalising a canvas as possible. So elements that on first sight, appear innocuous in their disclaim to any

connection to the tribal, may have considerable bearing on their lives, as history unfolds itself.

The premises for such a perspective are twofold. Firstly, there is the epistemological one. History cannot but be a manifest complexity of events and personalities, infinitely rich in its unfolding, affording the chronicler an intricate tapestry of purposes and intents, determinate contradictions and voluntary thoughts, and it behoves the chronicler to weave as many of these fine threads and rechart the routes and bye-lanes that it has traversed. Thus reason has to capture the complexity of reality. Secondly (there is no priority or ranking implied here. Both feed each other) the ontological premise. And this is that the whole history of the tribals in Thana district is a story of their, almost 'trans-historical leap' from a condition of living in what could be called a 'natural economy' to their subsumption into the dominant land relations based on rent extraction. The process, for the purpose of the study has been abstracted into the concept of 'peasantisation', which in its usage here, pithily sums up this telescopic leap. Its significance, peculiar to the study again, lies in the fact that, within the sphere of production, common to both the ends of the continuum pole, the tribals had moved from a position of non-surplus producers in the natural economy to the production of surplus for someone else in the emerging relation.



There was no period, spatially or temporally when the tribals<sup>1</sup> enjoyed a position (unlike the Kunbis, Agri-Patils of Deccan districts and Thana) of producing surplus appropriated by themselves. This demands an introduction of another concept, as a suffix to peasantisation, to further sum up the process. Thus in the relevant places 'dispossession' is equated with peasantisation. The equation is symbolic of another process that would clarify its usage even further. And this is the introduction of private, enforceable and codified rights in land as the premise of the Raiyatwari settlement introduced by the British, in Thana in 1865. With respect to the tribals, on whom these rights were, ipso facto, conferred, there is a double irony. Not only was their transhistorical leap effected but the grant of legal titles to land which then implied possession, was rendered, almost simultaneously, null and void. The tribal lost his possession in the legal sense also, and the process of peasantisation/dispossession carried with it the authority of British jurisprudence.

The ontological premise of this study, then, is suggested in the concept of peasantisation/dispossession with its predication of a transhistorical leap. Existence within natural economy--one end of this spectrum--meant

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1 This deserves some qualification only for clarificatory purposes. In the course of colonialism some tribes viz. Kolis and Thekurs emerged (some of them, not all) as independent viable peasant producers. The large majority of the other tribes and even sections of these did not.

two things for the tribal. One, as the term itself suggests, was his close proximity to nature-as-natural resources. To be more precise, he was reconciled to the bounties of nature. Secondly, there was a close identification of production of material life and reproduction of the family (or tribe). The two aspects fed off each other. The typical pattern of production of staple food for instance, was the slash and burn cultivation or what was locally called 'Dhongar dalhi'. This shifting cultivation necessitated and was predicated on the availability of vast stretches of forests, which could be cleared at different times for cultivation. Besides, the other necessities of material life even in terms of food, for instance, meat (of birds or beasts) and fruits or roots could be collected only because the forest was available to the tribal. In sum the forest provided the tribal with almost every necessity of his life and thereby defined his proximity to the natural resources contained therein.

The twin conditions of natural economy-production for family reproduction and proximity to natural resources, which were at his beck and call defined other aspects of tribal material life. It afforded him the leisure for play, and thereby created a paradigm of the work ethic that was to sharply differ from the one introduced by colonialism. The reconciliation with nature and simple production moulded tribal existence by affording it that vital element

of community life-culture-as and in play. The tribal was not simply man the producer or food gatherer, but Homo ludens, defining himself in and through his cultural norms and practices-as-play. While the subject of his cultural norms and practices have yet to be chronicled in a systematic fashion and without the prejudice of colonial anthropology, it is sufficient to suggest some fundamental issues arising out of it. The span and duration of time allowed leisure and the incorporation of festivities and group carnivals within it, to gain as much importance as the production of goods for material life. An important, indeed integral part or ingredient of this play, was the consumption of home brewed liquor, which all members of the tribe partook of. Here again conditions of natural economy played to the tribal's advantage. The date palm tree, producing toddy, a mildly intoxicant drink grew wild in almost all the parts of Thana, with its predominance of forests, just as did the mhowra flowers, another source of liquor. In effect the needs of the tribal for drink on constitutive part of his culture-as-play was freely available, literally in his backyard.

British colonialism transformed tribal existence by destroying the twin conditions of natural economy, and thereby clearing the passage for his subsumption as a rent paying tenant or a 'feudally-subjugated forced labour'. And therein hangs the tale of multi-dimensionality to which

this study lays claim. To move him into the strait jacket of the land relations it was necessary to break his tie with the forest (as natural resources) and move him within the confines of a surplus-production economy. The process of his peasantisation is the story of the enclosure of the forest, the growth of commercialised monopoly manufacture and sale of liquor as much as his settlement on the land with rights of transfer and alienation.

The multiple thrust of tribal peasantisation through the ensemble of the three aspects outlined above, were not the deliberate, predetermined, conscious action of men motivated by the sole desire for driving the tribals into the constricting space of the land relations, but was part of the structure and functioning of colonialism, a point which puts the argument in the perspective with which it began.

British colonial practise hinged on two fundamental principles, whose operationalisation created the premises for tribal peasantisation in its multidimensionality. For one it evolved around the conversion of custom into contract and common right (sanctioned by usage) into private/individual rights (sanctioned by law). That is, individual rights as defined in law counterposed to the rights of the sovereign state. If there was any contradiction here it was resolved by making both rights and their respective

areas of operation accountable to the Law and its Courts, which in the process then acquired the nature of a neutral body of arbitration in the minds of the people, making them paradoxically, more worthy subjects of the colonial state.

So the first task of British colonialism was to implement the latter half of the above antinomies, and looking back over their shoulders at the culture they had politically overthrown they defined custom and common right not by the recognition of their existence, but the absence of contract and private rights, and explained thereby the inefficiency of previous 'Native' systems. Thus the 'efficacy' of their system hinged on resolving the antinomies; the custom of 'handicraft' liquor-making by almost all the tribals was stopped and contracted to monopoly liquor farmers, all non-tribals and often the local landed gentry; the forest as common right (except for some trees) in earlier times was converted over a period of seventy to eighty years into the exclusive property of the state, and the tribal himself was settled on the land with private alienable rights--something he had never heard before, considering (as one British official was to point out) the Varkas that he cultivated had a common right sanctioned by usage.

The second important premise of British colonialism was its importation of structures and ideas of classical

political economy--the Bentham ideal of utilitarianism which had reached its apogee in England into this country. Nursing the fond and vain hope that they could carve out the image of the English economy in the space of this country, they introduced the notions and allowed for the spread of those mechanism that would engender the free flow of man's artefacts as exchangeable utilities. Thus the free and unhampered sale and purchase of commodities whose quantum could be determined by the force of demand and supply took wide acceptance. Thus grew the produce and land markets, the credit laws and the free play of interest rates which unlike before would no longer be subject to the constricting influence of tradition but could now climb sky high in response to the inelastic needs of the market (i.e. the peasant/tribal).

But the introduction of the market mechanism with its underpinnings in the Benthamite paradigm had different purposes here. After all, the British were the colonising masters, so the market mechanism had to play the role of centralising the sources of colonial extraction itself. The collection of revenue (under the various heads of land, excise and forest) could be facilitated and its quantum manipulated by the state only if the agents involved in production or distribution, functioned within structures that were familiar to itself. The market mechanism to which the society responded, drew its imperatives and

sustenance from the structures and laws of colonialism; accordingly, the state was on familiar grounds when claiming its share of the cake.

The two premises of colonialism informed the practise of its structures and institutions in every aspect of the economy. In the process it also integrated the former disparate elements within a single whole, motivated and perpetuated by the neutral laws of the market. Earlier, custom and common right had reflected disarticulation of the various elements of the economy from one another--land, forest (and trade connected therein), liquor manufacture, such that each element exuded a dynamism that was unique to it. Thus ownership of land was prevalent; much of the garden and coastal rice lands in Bassein had been surveyed and rights on them, acknowledged. But the forest remained, by and large, open to all, for felling of trees or cultivation; and by this virtue, if the regular settled cultivators were subject to monopolistic control by the landed gentry--the 'Panderpeshas'--the tribal constituting a sizeable proportion of the 'hill' talukas remained free of any control. Similarly, even as the Bhandaris, traditionally supplied the local populace with its liquor, by making it at home, the tribal was free, by custom (usage), and the availability of date and palm trees, to brew his own toddy.

The introduction, by British colonialism, of the

operative categories of contract and individual/public (state) rights and the market mechanism, centralized the diverse aspects of the economy by converting all the agents within them, into exchange commodities--peasants (including tribals) on land; as labourers in State-owned, contractor operated forests (after 1880), and consumers of liquor manufactured and sold by monopoly liquor farmers. The state collected its revenue from all these sources; the specific quantum of which was either fixed for a period (thirty years for land revenue, or as in forest coupes) or determined by the variations in demand and supply (land revenue after the thirty year period, and liquor excise).

But the underlying premise of converting all into equal commodities subject only to the warp and woof of the market, created its opposite--inequality and concentrated ownership of land and labour and control over their value. The emergence of classes, in a modern sense, fabricated within and functionalising the structures of production and distribution of value via the nexus of exploitation, was the result of British colonialism. A striking manifestation of this was the making (unmaking?) of the vast strata of tribals as tenants and forced labour of the combined classes of moneylenders--landlords, forest contractors and liquor farmers.

Legitimising these divisions within society were the premises of the colonial state. After all, it could be said



(as it was by various officials) that the societal hiatus was not their creation but a product of 'objective' forces of the market to which the agents were responding and reaping their just fruits therefrom. But in the case of the tribals, this legitimisation became inoperative after a few years of the Original Survey, with near absolute pauperisation visiting them. Reports suggested the tribal's total inability to respond on any but unequal terms, to the market. Their participation was a non-starter. And in the fashion of its functioning, the state explained away their pauperisation with an argument that pointed the finger away from itself and squarely at the tribals themselves. Legitimation of tribal pauperisation (and indirectly the obfuscation of colonialism), met colonial anthropology in the centre of the street and evolved a rubric that was to justify the iniquitous status quo. The tribals were explained as 'lazy' (thereby converting the virtue of 'leisure' into the vice of unproductivity), 'bad husbands-men', 'given to drink', 'uneducated' and completely 'passive' to the appeal of Capital and Profit. Early 'sociological' reports on the 'conditions' of the tribals, which had only suggested, somewhat confusedly, such prejudices, were, to be later converted, rather incorporated, into the official explanations by the state--the prejudices of a Christian 'man of God' (Dr. Wilson in 1838), were transformed into the emolient arguments of the state--in

the process, for all concerned, the origins of the tribal's pauperisation had been located. In this sense, colonial observations, as subjective evaluations, that normally would have received scant notice, but by the Royal Asiatic Society, became (however scattered they were) material weapons in perpetuating tribal pauperisation. For what it suggested was that the victims of exploitation were its authors. It was only in 1945-6 that the tribals were able to deny this imposed self-flagellative ethos and the life sustaining it.

## Part II. Methodology

Since the study is historical in nature, the material used, dates from the British times. But the problem lies here. For the major part of the data is official in character or at least reflecting, as in the case of private accounts, official perspectives and preoccupations. This means that the data on hand is ordered in the light of the imperatives and needs of colonial rule and in the scale of preoccupations, the tribals, although constituting a large chunk of the population, figured rather at the bottom. If they did receive any prominent attention periodically, such notice was prompted more by the official concern with matters of revenue/excise collection, disputes over claims to property as public or private, viz. forests.

Under the circumstances, the evidence at hand needed

scrutiny of a fashion whereby absence of any information on tribals in one area of official preoccupation had to be accounted for by its presence in another. For example, even as the tribals were being settled on land by the Original Surveys of the 1860's and survey officials were waxing on the advantages for the tribal, other aspects of their reality tended to show a gradual shift towards pauperisation. Thus the Abkari (Excise) data showed an increasing movement of the tribal into the market to purchase his liquor. Similarly, the aggressive postures of the Forest Department Officials indicated in the same period, a restriction of the tribals' use of forests which would become final by the 1880's. In other words, the availability of data in any field of colonial influence was often predicated, quite naturally, upon the extent of the concerned official's jurisdiction, and is therefore limited by the operation of his authority.

Significantly enough, the Collector, of all the officials, had the more universal view of matters relating to his district. Very often, since he discoursed on various areas of official policy, he was at odds with particular officials e.g. the forest officials, the latter of whom would see matters differently. Indeed the acerbic disagreements on matters of forest conservation and the needs of the peasantry, which, in the bargain, only served to highlight the conditions of the affected peasantry, reflected the contradictions of the state towards public property and

private needs, as also that of revenue collection from two seemingly contradictory, inversely related sources.

This brings us to the data itself. The initial spadework was done on the published records of the Bombay Government relating to land revenue, forests, excise et al. But the published records are abstracted data of on-going processes at work. To piece together the experiential reality as lived by tribals, peasants, landlords-moneylenders and witnessed by officials, it was necessary to delve into the unpublished manuscripts. In this respect the reports detailing the periodical correspondence on land, revenue, excise, forests became a gold mine waiting to be disinterred. The written, bound volumes of the Revenue, Judicial and General Departments, but principally the Revenue, found in State Archives at Bombay contain details of the minutest kind, a written compendium of everyday life and events whose important (for the state) moments were frozen in the published records.

Of the hand written volumes, the Annual Administration Reports of the Collector were the most comprehensive, covering almost every aspect of life in the district and chronicling the over-load of the Collector in the exercise of his authority. Early reports e.g. Marriott's in 1818-1824 were long and rambling often reflecting his own views on 'reforms' for the district, but over the years the reports became more cogent, formalised, and wider in coverage. But

the subjective element, the predilections of the author himself were never exercised. For they tended to reflect differences in evaluation and emphasis of events and personalities. In the flush of the Survey Settlements, Collectors or other officials viewing bonded labour amongst tribals saw it as an aberration; by the beginning of the twentieth-century, succeeding Collectors were brooding on its permanence and spread amongst tribals. Necessarily these are not merely subjective or speculative concerns alone, but reflect the movement within the economy and the turns and twists of its course. But subjective elements sometimes observed the reality or even confused it. For example, in one report, the Collector mused that, due to landlord exploitation, the tribals were being treated like the Red Indians of America! In yet another, a 'Native' assistant Collector, allowed the rhetoric of his concern for tribals to overwhelm his assessment of the reality, painting a picture of impending rebellion by tribals. Necessarily such reports have been the chafe. Besides, even objective reporting by Collectors has often contradicted other data on the same issue or the reports antedating it. Again, this has demanded a critical scrutiny of all the data on hand, for every issue, in each period, which suggests that the scrutiny of the trends in the information for the entire period of British rule has had to be balanced by the minutest detail noted in the reports.

There are differences, most manifest only in the hand written volumes, also between officials, voicing their respective departmental concerns. The most striking example was the rivalry between the Revenue and Forest Departments. If, the officials in the latter saw the 'Jungle Fee' scheme introduced in 1851 as the medicine to prevent deprivations by tribals, the Revenue officials saw the scheme as the disease causing havoc to forests and hardships to peasants. Both had a point and both in light of their preoccupations afforded a glimpse of the reality for the tribal, in this phase. At yet another level, the Abkari reports on the extent of liquor consumption and excise per head in Thana, especially after the Act of 1878 and the reconstitution of liquor manufacture and sale, are of little interest apart from attesting to the highness of the figures for Thana. But combine it with contemporary reports of Collectors to the effect that Abkari revenue is almost equal to the land revenue and that consumption is very high amongst tribals, and the verification yields a sound logic.

Basically, then, the methodology in relation to the use of the data has been to look at every piece of information in one field in relation to information in another, necessitating a very exhaustive reading of every volume of manuscript material relating to land, revenue, excise, forest et al.

The basic and detailed material, as said earlier, is contained in the departmental volumes at the Archives. With

respect to the Revenue Department manuscripts, in chronological order, the earliest records that were looked into were from 1808 onwards. Till 1820, the correspondences are in the form of 'Revenue Diaries', but unfortunately, there are no indexes as to their contents; they are merely numbered. The procedure then involved scanning the diaries for every year at random, hoping to 'strike gold'. From 1820, the material is gathered in volumes, which are indexed, in a list of volumes, making the task of selecting from amongst the numerous volumes easier. But barely so. For each volume, although following a certain uniform collection of material under various heads, still had to be read through. Overlapping, misplacements, omissions in the compilations of the volumes rendered this necessary. The volumes are arranged for every issue that fell under the authority of the Revenue Department overlapping with the Judicial Department on certain matters e.g. Civil Court decrees, till 1915; after 1915 they are arranged in Files, as loose sheets, typed or written. Again, there is no indexing, and files have to be looked at random without any certainty of finding any relevant information. Many of the files relating to the annual administration reports after 1916 are inexplicably missing from the Archives. As said before, the Annual Administration Reports by the Collector formed the basic source of local information, along with Jummabundy (Land Revenue) reports. In 1903-04, the Land Revenue Administration Reports of the

Presidency were begun to be published; reports that incorporated the earlier Jummasbundy reports in a new format along with selective, relevant (for the Government) sections from the administration reports of each district. Necessarily, this has rendered statistical comparison of data over this period difficult, involving as it did, cross-checking for the variations in the definitions of categories used in the quantitative data. After 1915, since the relevant files are missing, the published Land Revenue Administration reports have constituted the main source material.

To sum up, the initial scrutiny was of the published records of the Government, especially the survey settlement reports, both original and Revision published as selections from Bombay Government records, which provided the 'benchmark' periods of the colonial rule, corroborated by the Annual administration reports of the Forest and Abkari Departments. The next stage was the detailed examination of the manuscript volumes and files of each department, especially the Revenue. As far as possible, and where corroborated, the original manuscript records have provided the final source of information. The comprehensive list of source material is included in the Appendices.

Finally, the original spellings of places, communities, individuals et al., used by the British, have been modified to conform with the modern contemporary spellings. In quotations however, the originals have been retained. A



comprehensive list of words whose spellings have been changed is added in the Appendices.

### Chapter Plan

Chapter I deals with the details of the district and its people both prior to the British and on the eve of their rule. Historical, geographical and census details together with the major crops grown are highlighted. Chapter II chronicles the period of the interregnum i.e. between 1818 and 1865, when the British were coming to grips with the economy of Thana that was still, and the tribals all the more so, disarticulated. Chapter III outlines the Original Survey of the district and the early attempts at forest control, abkari experiments and the position of the tribals. Chapter IV suggests the beginning of tribal peasantisation by outlining its premises viz. enclosure of forests with demarcation, farming out of liquor manufacture and sale and the consequent forced movement into 'sedentary' agriculture on the basis of allotted alienable lands. Chapter V outlines changes in the economy consequent to the survey, the principle one being the commoditification of verkas lands and the importance of grass as a profitable cash crop and the other side of the coin viz. concentration of ownership of land. Both these provided the grounds for an enhancement of revenue, at a time when scarcity and plague were prevalent throughout the district, and the forests enclosed. The reactions of the tribals to their pauperisation is also noted. Chapter VI

outlines early attempts and the failures of Government to stem the tide of tenancy amongst the tribals, and the further reproduction of such forms of exploitation as also bonded labour, both by this time, having become intrinsic qualities of the modes of surplus appropriation in the tribal areas of the district. The concluding chapter outlines the place of the state in the formation of the social classes composed of non-tribal moneylender/landlords and the tribal tenants and bonded labour and suggests the system by which the attendant domination/subsumption was reproduced.