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"The Tax-Man Cometh: The impact of revenue collection on subsistence strategies in Chitwan Tharu Society."

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The Tax Man Cometh: 
The Impact of Revenue Collection on Subsistence Strategies in Chitwan Tharu Society

Arjun Gunaratne

When I first began field work among the Tharus of Nepal’s Chitwan district, I was puzzled by what seemed to me a contradiction. The villagers would often tell me that in the “old days”—i.e., before about 1960—land was plentiful and to be had for the asking. But I was also told that many landless or near landless families in the village had been so far as anyone could remember, and used to earn their living working as servants for their landed neighbors. Why then, if land was readily available, should there have existed a section of the population with no apparent access to it?

The consensus among students of peasant societies is that the control of land is the most important and desirable guarantee of subsistence in the peasant economy. An early statement by Redfield attributed to the peasant an “intimate and reverent attitude” toward the land (1956:112). More materially, most writers have pointed out the importance of control of land as a guarantee of subsistence in the peasant economy (Scott 1976; Popkin 1979:23; Wolf 1966:92). James Scott for example, observes of peasant societies generally that “Ownership was prized over tenancy and tenancy over casual labor because, even though they might overlap in terms of income, each represented a quantum leap in the reliability of subsistence” (Scott 1976:38). A similar argument has been made by Ghimire in his recent work on the politics of land hunger in Nepal, in which he claims that for poor and landless rural people, “the search for land will be an overwhelming priority” (1992:8). Agarwal has cogently argued that for rural women to take control of their lives, they must first gain rights in land equal to those of their menfolk, for land is “the

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1 The term “peasant” is a contentious one (Hill, 1986: 8-15). The term has been used by Chayanov to describe rural households with rights in land cultivating primarily for their own subsistence and not for the market (Kerkblay, 1971). This is essentially the sense in which I use it here. The people whose society is described in this essay were all either peasants in this sense, or had the opportunity to be peasants and chose not to avail themselves of it.
primary source of economic security, social status, and political power" (1994:468).

The situation I discuss in this paper provides a striking exception to this general view that control of land is a sine qua non for economic security in rural societies. If peasants seek to maximize their security of subsistence through control of land as the most desirable form of social insurance, then a situation where a large proportion of rural people eschewed land in a context where it was available raises some interesting questions for the student of rural societies. In particular, what enabled a peasant to maximize his subsistence without control of land? What factors might serve to discourage cultivation of land in one's own right when, intuitively almost, such a course would seem to be the best guarantee of livelihood?

Chitwan, a district in the Central Inner Tarai of Nepal, did not suffer historically from a shortage of land before the 1960s. Yet there existed in Chitwan during the first half of this century and perhaps earlier, a stratum of the indigenous Tharu population which eschewed cultivating land in its own right in order to obtain a minimal level of subsistence working for others. Extrapolating from data collected in one village in Chitwan, between 30 and 40 percent of the population exchanged its labor for food, clothing, shelter, and an annual payment in kind with landholders, even though land was available to cultivate and tenants were in demand (Guneratne 1994:135-36). While Tharus, with 12.6 percent of the total population of Chitwan (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993) are a small minority in the district today, during the first half of the twentieth century, the period discussed in this paper, they were a majority of the inhabitants.

I argue in this paper that peasant subsistence strategies are not simply tied to land but to the entire universe of historical and material conditions in which a given peasant society develops. The relationship of the peasant to the land is in large part dependent on the nature of his relationship to the state. I argue here that the use and misuse of the powers vested in the state's village-level revenue collectors, together with certain other factors, substantially shaped the way Tharu villagers dealt with the problem of economic security. Subsistence security can be achieved in many ways; the direct control of land is just one of them. In Chitwan, the attitude of Tharu villagers to the problem of subsistence was shaped by a number of factors, including the shortage of labor, the revenue collecting policies of the state, and the power of the revenue collector (jimūdār) in village life.

**REVENUE COLLECTION AND VILLAGE SOCIETY**

**The System of Revenue Collection**

Agricultural land was the most important source of revenue for the Nepali state and continues to be a significant source of revenue today. While all land belonged to the state, the system of land tenure that developed in Nepal may be classified under three broad categories, birā, gūthī and raikar. Birā was land vested in an individual as payment or compensation for services rendered. The grant was tax exempt, and the birā owner was entitled to the revenue previously assessed upon it that would otherwise have accrued to the state. Tenure was often conditional on the provision to the state of various services. The birā system was abolished in 1959, and all birā holdings were converted to raikar and made taxable (Regmi 1960:7). Raikar was land from which the state derived revenue through the imposition of a land tax on the cultivator. The last category is gūthī, which is land transferred to charitable, religious or philanthropic institutions. The agrarian system described here relates to raikar land.

Historically, the system used to collect the land revenue was extremely complex and varied from region to region. At the time of the annexation of the Tarai to the Gorkha kingdom, which took place over a period of time during the latter half of the eighteenth century, the basic unit of land administration was known as a pargāñā, comprising a number of villages. The revenue agent was known as a caudhari, and he was usually a local landowner (Regmi 1976:105).

Following his accession to state power in 1846, Jang Bahadur, the first of Nepal's Rana prime ministers, began to reorganize the revenue

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2 The valleys between the main Mahabharat range and a lower range of hills to the south known as the Churia or Siwalik. The Outer Tarai is the extension of the Indo-Gangetic plain that reaches to the foot of these mountain ranges.

3 This claim is based on assertions made by Tharus in Chitwan and the data collected in the 1971 census. In that year, Tharu language speakers numbered 24,718 people (13.5% of the total population), while speakers of other indigenous (i.e., non-Nepali) languages totalled 5922 (Nepal Department of Information 1975). In other words, in 1971 Tharus were about 80.7 percent of the non-immigrant population.

4 The Land and Cultivators' Records Compilation Act of 1956 (Jaggā ra jaggā kamaune lagai khaugāthāśain provided for the compilation of records of land and cultivators throughout the country. The Lands Act of 1957 (Bhumi sambandhi amin, 2014) converted the raikar tenant into a landowner. See Regmi 1962.
collecting system throughout the country. In 1861 Jang turned his attention to improving the revenue administration in the Tarai (Regmi 1976:108). The prevailing system at the time was inefficient because the pargānā was too large a unit for the caudhart to be able to effectively collect all the revenue assessed upon it (Regmi 1978:78-79). The pargānā was therefore sub-divided into a number of maujā (a village or smaller groups of villages), and each maujā was placed in charge of a functionary known as jimidār. A jimidār might undertake responsibility for an existing village, or he might develop forested or waste land and settle it, creating new villages. The second was the more likely course for would-be jimidārs, but because the development of new maujās required a certain amount of capital, it is likely that they were developed by established jimidār families, which were more likely to have the resources or access to credit. This system of revenue collection was confined to the Tarai; others were instituted for the hills and the Kathmandu valley.

The maujā was raikar land owned by the state on which taxes were payable. It was the jimidār’s responsibility to recruit the settlers who would cultivate the land and pay tax, which was payable in cash. While, in theory, periodic settlements were provided for to assess the revenue payable to government, in actual fact, because of the general inefficiency of the Rana administration, revenue settlements were few and far between. The last revenue settlement in Chitwan was in 1922 (Regmi 1963:183), and the provisions of that settlement stayed in force for the next 40 years. In theory, the peasant could not be evicted so long as he paid his assessed revenue regularly (Regmi 1960). It was the jimidār task to collect this revenue and convey it to the caudhart, who in turn delivered it to the revenue office.

While the jimidār was made responsible for collecting revenues at the village level, he was also intended to be an agricultural entrepreneur, providing credit for farmers whom he would recruit to cultivate the land entrusted him for revenue collection. This was not an innovation; traditionally, the caudhartis in the eastern Tarai, including that portion of it lying in British territory, were sources of credit to new settlers, providing them with capital until they had raised a crop (Campbell 1851:16). This aspect of the jimidār’s duties does not seem to have been in effect in Chitwan during the closing decades of Rana rule; villages had long since been settled and the low rate of population growth limited further expansion. An important feature of the system implemented in Nepal was that the jimidār was made personally liable for the revenue, and if he could not raise the amount due on his revenue holding (for example, if he could not recruit cultivators to work it, or if they abandoned their holdings) he was required by law to pay it himself or surrender the maujā.

The cultivators recruited by the jimidār [the raît] were not his tenants but those of the state. However, Jang Bahadur’s regulations permitted the raît to relinquish his rights in the land to avoid tax obligations, but until he did so, or until another person was granted the land, he was obliged to pay the tax (Regmi Research Series 1969). What this meant was that until the changes affected by the registration of raikar tenants as landowners beginning in the late 1950’s, the raît had some freedom of movement. He had the option of moving to another village at the end of the year during which he had been registered as a raikar land-holder.

Theoretically, recruitment to the jimidār class appears to have been open to all. In practice, jimidārs were probably drawn from the village elite in the area at the time Jang instituted his reforms. Inasmuch as the jimidār was expected to be a source of credit under the system for encouraging agricultural development, it is logical to suppose that only those who already had substantial landholdings and capital would apply for or be selected to perform these functions.

The jimidār enjoyed certain official privileges by virtue of his position. Chief among these were his right to corvée labor from other village households. Such corvée was limited under the law to agricultural work only. In practice, however, there was no effective restraint on illegal exactions of labor. Forced labor (known as jhār-begā) has been integral to the process through which Nepal was unified and then governed, and was related to the heavy demand for human labor power that was required to overcome the barriers of geography and poor communication in a ruggedly mountainous country (Shrestha 1990:74). This was labor directly utilized by the state; an example would be corvée work as porters for the military. But government functionaries and landlords often used the system of corvée labor which had been established to meet the requirements of the state for their personal gain. Although the state prohibited such unauthorized exactions of labor, the victims of such exploitation were rarely in a position to seek redress.

A former jimidār in his mid-eighties recalled the powers of the jimidār thus:

It was like this, the jimidār’s authority, to give land and fields, to give everything. To order the raît [tenant farmers] about . . . we had other powers too . . . the jimidār had great power. . . . The raît couldn’t even attend to the work of their own households until they had done the
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household or some suitable representative thereof, accompanied by the other household heads in the village, had to call on the jimīdar, taking with him a bottle of rice liquor and a chicken (ideally a castrated goat, but seeing that everyone could not afford a goat, a chicken was considered to be a suitable substitute), and inform him of what had taken place. If the jimīdar was satisfied that no rules had been violated, he would accept the gifts and legitimate the union, after which a feast would be eaten, signifying the woman’s formal incorporation into the kul (lineage) of her husband; this feast is known as the bhatāhi bhojan.7 If the jimīdar however was not satisfied that no rule had been broken, he would refuse the gifts, and the matter would be referred to the caudhāri, who, as head of the pargāna had the ultimate authority, and the power to annul illegitimate unions. In short, the jimīdar, in addition to his formal role as a revenue collector, wielded considerable power in the ritual, moral and social life of the village.

Social Stratification in Tharu Society

Peasant society in Chitwan under the jimīdāri system can be divided into three strata based on access to and control of land. These were the jimīdars, the raiti or land-holding peasants, who were subject to taxation, and the servant class known as bahariyā. The dominant stratum of course were the jimīdāri families, who were the largest landholders in any village. Although in other areas of the Tarai the jimīdars were an intermediary class between the large birāta owners and the peasantry, birāta owners were largely absent in Chitwan.

The jimīdars dominated and continue to dominate Tharu society in Chitwan. Except for the villages of hill immigrants that developed following the eradication of malaria, virtually every old Tharu village has its jimīdar. Although the jimīdāri system was formally abolished by the Land Act of 1964, the title is retained as an honorific for ex-jimīdāri or their descendants, who retain an influential role in village affairs. While the jimīdar is usually the largest landowner in any village today, he is not a landlord, in the sense that other villagers are dependent on him for access to land for cultivation. Most cultivators in Chitwan today own the land they work. In that sense, the jimīdar under the Ranas was more akin to a landlord than he is now.

The “peasantry” (those who actually worked the land) in Chitwan during the first half of the twentieth century comprised two classes of villagers. The superior class were the raiti (i.e., farmers holding land in a maujā and paying taxes to the state). No village had very many of them. A village in Chitwan thirty years ago typically consisted of the household of the jimīdar and those of three or four raiti. Raiti households, like jimīdāri households, consisted of large, extended families, including the household head’s sons and their families and his unmarried daughters. Provided that the raitī paid his land revenue regularly, the jimīdar was not entitled to dispossess him of his holding.8 Although the testimony of villagers today suggests that in practice jimīdars may not have felt themselves constrained by this. The foremost among the raitī households was that of the cautariya. The term implies the second in rank or assistant; the cautariya’s position derived from his being the second household to establish itself in the village. Although he had no institutional authority, he could substitute for the jimīdar at the latter’s request in the organized rituals of village life, for example communal worship of the village deity.

Much of the rest of the village population was a floating one of bahariyā that moved from village to village, generally staying no more than a few years in any given place. A bahariyā is a servant who is clothed, housed and fed by his or her employer; in addition he or she is given 200 to 300 kilograms of paddy every year.9

The bahariya families in the employ of a raitī were considered part of his household. The heads of bahariya families were excluded from the kaohari, the village meeting where issues pertaining to the village as a whole were discussed by the heads of households (gharmakhyā). In effect, a bahariya household was not an independent household in its own right but treated simply as an appendage to that of its master. A bahariya family might be simply a nuclear family, as the dynamics of being a bahariya makes the maintenance of large joint families difficult. Bahariya thus had no voice in decisions pertaining to the village community as a whole.

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7 The word seems to be derived from the Nepali bhatāhi, which Turner glosses as “One with whom rice can be eaten without contamination. fellow-caste-man.” (1980 [1931]:467).
9 By way of comparison, the Nepal Rastra Bank estimates that the annual per capita consumption of rice in the bazaar is 135 kilograms (Nepal Rastra Bank, 1978:28). Depending on the quality of the paddy, a hundred kilograms can yield between 40 to 60 kilograms of husked rice.
A bahariya would commit himself to his employer for only a year at a time. The working year began in Cait (March-April), when, after negotiations regarding the terms of compensation, a bahariya would be hired. His term of employment would last until Phagun (February-March). He then had the option of renewing his contract or seeking work with another raiti, in the same village or elsewhere. Prior to the changes that took place beginning with the opening up of Chitwan in the late 1950s, a single raiti might support two or more families of bahariyas, and a jimiadar might support many more. Today, the descendants of such former raiti families still have bahariyas, but one or two individuals rather than a family. Some Brahmin and Chetri households also employ Tharu bahariyas. Very often, such present day bahariyas are children, not adults, and work as domestic help and as cattle herders. Two jimiadars of my acquaintance continued to employ whole families, but fewer than formerly.

LABOR, SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES, AND THE PROBLEM OF LANDLESSNESS

The Problem of Labor

Chitwan during the early part of this century and probably even earlier has been characterized by a relative shortage of labor. There was more land available to cultivate than there were people to work it, and most of the valley remained in jungle until the end of the 1950s. As a defensive policy resulting from Nepali fears regarding British expansionism following the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, the Nepali state de-populated Chitwan by moving a large part of the population out of the district and allowing much of the valley to revert to jungle (Oldfield 1974 [1880]:49). Chitwan became highly malarial during the nineteenth century,10 dreaded and avoided for that reason by hill people; the endemic malaria caused Chitwan to be known as the Valley of Death (Elder et al. 1976:11-12). Shortage of labor was a problem faced by all Tarai districts, but unlike the Outer Tarai, where the labor shortage was met by encouraging immigration from India (Ojha 1983; Regmi 1978:118), Chitwan never became a destination for Indian immigrants. With the exception of government officials and police, who, in fear of malaria, departed every year into the hills with the onset of the hot season, to return with the winter, the population of the Valley was mostly Tharu, along with small populations of other local groups such as the Kumal and the Darai.11 Part of the reason for the lack of immigration into Chitwan was geographical. Unlike the valleys of the Inner Tarai, the Outer Tarai of Nepal is simply an extension of the North Indian plain, and consequently lacks geographical barriers to movement across the border. Access to Chitwan on the other hand is difficult because of its location. That part of Champaran district in Bihar which adjoins it was malarial and relatively sparsely populated until the early part of the twentieth century (Blyth 1892; Sweeney 1922:56). There was no significant pressure (such as famine) on the population across the border that would have encouraged them to seek land in Nepal. Indeed, some nineteenth century writers suggest that Tharus (who comprised the population of the Tarai area of Champaran) may have been less affected by famine than other groups elsewhere in the district.12

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Chitwan appears to have been unimportant economically to the Rana state, particularly by comparison with the Eastern Tarai. The Nepal Trade Directory of 1959 lists its important products as oil seeds and big game (Nepal Trading Corporation 1959). Mustard seeds were traded by Tharus at Hetauda and Bikhna Thori (the main pass through the Churia hills into Champaran) to raise the cash they needed to buy cloth, kerosene and salt. Unlike the eastern Tarai, Chitwan during this period did not produce a surplus of rice. As far as the state was concerned, Chitwan was a Tarai backwater, which served primarily as a hunting preserve for the aristocracy (Smythies 1942).

10 I am assuming here that Chitwan was substantially less malarial prior to its evacuation in the early nineteenth century, but there is no evidence to make a definite judgment on this point.

11 Daniel Wright, the surgeon at the British Residency at Kathmandu, noted that Hetauda, a small town in the foothills at the head of the valley, was “a considerable village in the cold season, but the place is almost deserted in the hot season and during the rains [from April to November], on account of the cold or malarious fever, which is deadly to all but the aborigines of the terai.” (Wright 1872:11).

12 For example, W.W. Hunter contrasted the exceptional condition of Tharus in Champaran with what he described as the “general rule of poverty” in the district: “They cultivate with great care the tarai lands in the north of Ramnagar, which are naturally fertile; and their general prudence and foresight have raised them far above all other castes in Champaran. During the famine of 1874, not one of them came to the relief works; and they then asserted that they had sufficient rice in store for six months’ consumption” (Hunter 1877:257). Stevenson-Moore, who was the Revenue Settlement officer in the district, was of the opinion that the Tharus were “probably the most prosperous cultivators in Champaran” (1900:168).
Although the initial security requirements that kept Chitwan forested diminished in significance as relations improved between Nepal and British India, its qualities as a prime hunting preserve located relatively close to Kathmandu was highly valued by the Rana elite. Oldfield remarks that Chitwan was “the best shooting ground for the rhinoceros in the whole of the Nepalese [sic] dhans” (Oldfield 1974 [1880]:49). Hunting was the major pastime for the Ranas. A hunting expedition to Chitwan or the forests of the Western Tarai typically consumed the energies of hundreds of people, who accompanied the hunting party as military escort, game scouts, trackers, beaters, and general camp followers. Members of the Rana elite, including the prime minister, would spend as much as two to three months in a year away from Kathmandu on prolonged hunting trips. The Tharu villages provided the core labor for the Ranas’ hunting expeditions: to clear roads and campsites and collect firewood.

The Tharus are peasant cultivators. During the period discussed in this paper (the first half of the twentieth century), they produced primarily to meet the needs of their own households, while at the same time both their labor power and the fruit of their work was subject to the demands of the state. The primary crop was rice, grown in the wet season; for the rest of the year the land was left fallow, although a small portion of it might be planted in mustard. Mustard was sold in Hetauda and the bazaar at Bhikna Thori to raise cash, which was used to pay taxes, and buy essentials such as clothes and kerosene. Most tenant households maintained large herds of cattle and goats, which were grazed in the forests and on pasture land. Hunting and fishing were also ways to supplement the diet. The most important source of non-farm employment available in Chitwan during this period was work in the government elephant stable; such employment was limited. Only a few people appear to have availed themselves of the opportunity. According to nineteenth century British sources, Tharus were extensively employed by the Rana state in the capture of wild elephants (Vansittart 1894:215; Smith 1852:80-82).

Natural population increase remained low throughout this period; my research suggests a high infant and child mortality rate before the 1960’s. It has been said, and is widely believed, that Tharus are resistant to malaria. The truth of this has never been demonstrated. Certainly, in the period before the development of Chitwan, the local population suffered a very high rate of infant mortality across all social classes. For example, the largest landowner in Pipariya had twelve siblings, of whom ten died, mostly in infancy, from diseases such as polio and malaria. Late in life, this man’s father married again; of his nine children by this second marriage (all born after the malaria control program was established in 1958), only two died in infancy. A woman of about 40 told me she was one of seven or eight siblings, of whom only three survived; the others died mostly in infancy. Similarly, the wife of the principal of the village school, a young woman in her mid thirties, was one of eleven siblings, all but three of whom died. Other accounts by older villagers confirm a very high mortality rate among infants born before the eradication of malaria transformed health conditions in Chitwan. The contrast between past and present was poignantly summed up by an eighty year old man who said that the difference between the present and the past was that wherever you went today, you saw little children running around the villages. The consequence of all the factors discussed above was a low availability of labor in relation to the land available.

The relative economic marginality of Chitwan to the Rana state can be explained in terms of a combination of the factors mentioned above: the endemic and particularly virulent strain of malaria, which discouraged immigration into the valley, the sparse population relative to the land available, and the importance of Chitwan, so close to Kathmandu, as a prime hunting preserve for the elite. Given the importance the Ranas placed on hunting, and the convenience to them of a region teeming with big game so close to Kathmandu, and given that the virulent malaria endemic in Chitwan made the land economically unproductive from their point of view, it is likely that the Ranas were content to leave Chitwan the way it was. Agricultural expansion and development could not take place in Chitwan without an increase of the population. For the reasons discussed earlier, natural population increase was low, while the factors conducive to Indian immigration did not exist here; the adjacent Tarai of Champaran was equally malarial and just as sparsely populated.

13 Much of this information was gathered during a socio-economic survey of two Tharu villages during which I asked Tharu household heads how many siblings they had had, and how many of them died in infancy and early childhood.

14 The complexity of the various levels of rights and privileges in land is too great to be discussed here, but these landowners were presumably the local landlords (zamindar) prior to the incorporation of the Tarai districts into the Gorkha state. On this point, see the discussion in Regmi (1978:110-11; 115-17). Once the principal of the state’s ownership of land was asserted, they maintained their position in the local hierarchy by transforming themselves into the state’s agents.
Population Mobility

The population mobility that Tharu villagers today describe as a usual condition in Chitwan in the period being discussed suggests that there must have been some constraints to abuse of power by jimidar though it is impossible to say how far these were effective. If a jimidar became too oppressive, a village could move elsewhere. The jimidar is said to have had the power to throw people out of the village if he so wished, and he would often exercise this power. There were other reasons why a family might leave: it might decide that a particular village was unhealthful or unlucky in some way, and move on, but often the reason was disagreement with the jimidar. At the same time, however, because of the scarcity of labor in Chitwan, a jimidar could not afford to lose many villagers. Occasionally all the raiti and servants in a village would leave en masse, leaving the jimidar without labor. Land was plentiful, and labor scarce, so people who chose to leave could be certain that they would find land with another jimidar. Even so, bahariya labor by itself proved inadequate to the task of agricultural production and had to be supplemented by a form of cooperative labor among village households known as saghane (Guneratne 1994:175-177).

My data from interviews with every Tharu household in Pipriya and Merauli indicate that there was much turnover in the village population. Almost all landless or nearly landless families had been in the village for only one generation. Apart from the jimidar’s family, average landownership was highest among members of the Chautariya khândan where each family owned an average of 3.3 bighās (about 2.2 hectares; a bighā equals about 0.68 hectares). In general I found that most households which owned less than three bighās had moved to Pipriya only within the last two generations.

15 Mobility in the Tharu population is also noted by nineteenth century observers. About the Tharus of Champaran, close relatives of those settled across the border in Chitwan, the Settlement Officer noted, “Their tendencies are nomadic... At the slightest sign of oppression, they go elsewhere in a body” (Stevenson-Moore 1900:17). According to W.W. Hunter, “They [the Tharus of Champaran] are very timid, and will decamp into Nepal on the slightest provocation” (Hunter 1877:246). What these and other accounts of Tharus suggest is that as a society, they were mobile, and with no particular attachment to any particular piece of land. This is in keeping with their history as inhabitants primarily of forested areas who have retreated or been pushed back in the face of more powerful cultivating groups who expand into their territory.

16 A khândan is the local (village-level) segment of a patrilineage (a clan or kul) and is the significant unit of filiation in Chitwan Tharu society.

While it is difficult to gauge the proportion of the population that worked as bahariya before the land reform and the abolishing of the jimidar system during the fifties and sixties, by calculating the proportion of Tharus today who are descended from bahariya families, we may arrive at an approximation. One caveat is that determining bahariya ancestry is difficult; this system of social stratification was fluid, and raiti could and did become bahariya, and vice versa. There are however a number of khândi in Pipriya that have been raiti for several generations, and other lineages (such as the Patanahiya) which are identified in the village as being the descendants of bahariya. Table 1 gives the social origins of the population of the former mauja of Pipriya (today divided into two villages, Pipriya and Merauli).

Table 1. Social origins of the contemporary Tharu population of Pipriya and Merauli and proportion of total land held by each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social origin*</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>% of land held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jimidari khândan</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raiti:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chautariya khândan</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisahaniya khândan</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other raiti</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahariya Families</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin undetermined</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These categories refer to the antecedents of the present population. Thus, 30.3 per cent of the population are descended from people who were once bahariya. (The numbers above have been rounded to the nearest decimal point).

The data indicate that almost 60 per cent of village land owned by Tharus is held by just three lineages (the Jimidari, Chautariya and Sisahaniya khândan), those that have been resident in the village the longest. The combined share of the village population in these lineages is just over 30 per cent. The Jimidari and Chautariya lineages, the two that are longest resident in this former mauja, together comprise about 18 per cent of the Tharu population there and control 46.4 per cent of the land. Tharu families descended from raiti comprise 52.7 per cent of the Tharu
population in these two villages. All the ex-raitī households together control just under 58 per cent of the land owned by Tharus in Pipariya and Merauli.

Not surprisingly, the Chautariya khrāndan, which, together with that of the jimīdār, has been settled in the village for the longest period, owns the largest proportion of the land held by raitī. All other raitī have been settled in the village for less than three generations, most of them within the last thirty years. Of 27 households in the village descended from baharīyā, only three of the family heads had been born in Pipariya. With the exception of the Chautariya and Jimidari khrāndan, almost all other families traced their recent origins to some other part of Chitwan or, in the case of three landless families, to Champaran in India. This is reflected in the names by which each khrāndan is identified in the village: they are named for the place from where they came. The Patanahiya khrāndan, for example, comes from Patana in the Padampur panchyātī across the Rapti River. Many of its older members however were born in Patanai in western Chitwan, and moved east seeking work as baharīyā. The Khargoliya khrāndan traces its origin to the village of Khargauli in western Chitwan, and arrived in Pipariya to take up land as raitī. Significantly, it is mainly raitī who can muster enough families in the village to be grouped in khrāndan. Most baharīyā have no other representatives of their patrilineage in the village.

In Tharu society, an individual as well as a khrāndan is often identified or referred to by the name of that person’s village of origin. This is true both for married women and for men born elsewhere who have now come to reside in the village. It may be that one reason not much importance is attached to given names is that people never stayed in one village for very long, and it was easier to identify them with reference to their original village. Thus a man from Baghmara would be known as Baghmariya, and from Bankata as Bankattawa. A woman from Gothauli who married into the village would be referred to as Gothauri, even by her husband. Visiting anthropologists, whose presence in the village is no less permanent, would be similarly labelled with their origin, as, for example, Sri Lanka.

For a khrāndan to count a number of households in any given village implies that it has been around long enough for families to split off from the original household and establish themselves as separate units. The antiquity of the Chautariya khrāndan is attested to by the fact that all the households grouped under it can no longer trace with any certainty the exact nature of their common descent, which goes back more than four generations. In contrast, I was able to trace every other khrāndan to its origin in the village.

In short, agrarian relations in Chitwan used to be characterized by a high mobility of labor. Changing conditions in Chitwan during the sixties and seventies, particularly the eradication of malaria, the expansion of the population through immigration and the land reform, have altered this situation. The registering of raitī as landowners and the issuing of title deeds to land, as well as the development of a permanently settled immigrant population on all available land not already occupied by Tharus, removed the context which made such population mobility possible.

The relative labor shortage that characterized agrarian relations in Chitwan prior to the eradication of malaria was thus compounded by the mobility of labor, both raitī and baharīyā. Because land was available and labor scarce, a raitī or baharīyā could be certain of finding land or an employer if he chose to move. Before a raitī moved to a new village he would sound out the jimīdār there about the prospects of finding a house and land. A house might be vacant which he could occupy, or he could dismantle and move his current house. An old raitī remembers, “There was no problem of land, the land was empty. Wherever you went, land was available, houses were available.” It was not unknown for a jimīdār to be abandoned by all his villagers, raitī included, and thus forced to give up his office because he could no longer raise the revenue he was obliged to deliver to the government.18

Landlessness and Subsistence

Given that land was available if the peasant chose to have himself registered as a raitī, why did so many peasants choose not to do so? Observers who have pointed to the peasant’s desire to acquire land have generally been speaking of land-poor societies with a surplus of labor, which is not the case here. In Chitwan, the constraining factor was not land; instead, many peasants chose not to avail themselves of land because of the shortage of labor to cultivate it, the taxes imposed upon it, and the exploitation to which land-holding peasants were subjected.

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17 This is the lowest unit of administration in Nepal; each panchyāt consists of nine wards, roughly corresponding to villages. Since 1990, the panchyāt has been renamed the Village Development Committee.

18 One such instance concerns a jimīdār who wanted to give up the post because everyone in his village had moved out. A meeting was summoned, presumably by the caudhart, but no one could be found willing to take over. My informant recalled that finally, the jimīdār in question had to bribe someone with curd to take over the maṣā from him. No particular significance should be attached to curd as a bribe; this man simply had a lot of female buffaloes, and, therefore, a lot of curd.
The attitudes that the descendants of raiši have toward bahariyās is illustrated by two anecdotes. They exemplify the two ends of a spectrum of opinion. I once asked Krishna, a young and well educated man of the Sisahaniya khānīn, why the family of a servant in the jimidar’s household had no land, given that land was supposed to have been plentiful in “the old days” and to be had for the asking. They were clever people, he replied; they had worked as bahariyā since the old days because they preferred this to holding land as raiši. Thus they were not liable for taxes (mālīpot) and for some forms of corvé labor. For example, when royal hunting parties came to Chitwan, the household heads in each village had to go personally a month or two before to perform the labor needed to make preparation for it—clearing a campsite, beautifying the spot and so on. They could not send servants in their stead as the jimidar would not allow that.19 So, he said, clever people became bahariyā. To be a bahariyā, in other words, was a way to avoid the onerous demands made upon a raiši.

A contrasting interpretation was given by Thagawa, one of Krishna’s near kinsmen and, like Krishna, educated and in his early twenties. Only people who were clever, active and courageous used to take land to cultivate, he said. Other people were afraid to do it because of taxes and fear of punishment. It was easier to work as someone else’s servant and be fed and not have any responsibilities. He illustrated his point by recounting for me the story of his grandfather’s (a raiši) and his grandfather’s sister’s husband (a bahariyā), which he had heard from his grandfather relate: When the first cadastral survey was carried out in Pipariya in the late 1950’s, as part of a program of land reform which intended to vest full proprietary rights in the cultivator,20 the grandfather urged his relative to have five to six bighās registered in his name. The man refused and reproached the other for trying to get him to take land. But the grandfather kept pressing him and eventually the man gave in and took the land very reluctantly “crying while he did it from the fear of taxes.” Afterwards he would tell the grandfather “Why did you give me that land? You must help me work it.” Ironically, this man’s descendant’s are now among the largest Tharu landowners in the village, owning more land than any individual household of the Sisahaniya lineage. While that khanīn’s landholdings have been split five ways after the original household in Pipariya divided (twice), this former bahariyā household has remained intact. What is significant about the story told by Thagawa is the claim by the reluctant landowner on the labor of his would be benefactor, for it points to the most important problem affecting land development, not only in Chitwan but throughout the Tarai.

A former jimidar similarly observed of this sort of reluctance (and the reluctance of bahariyās to take on land because of their fear of taxation was alluded to by many other villagers):

But what were the Chaudhurīs [used here as a synonym for Tharu] like then? After you give them land they run away [bhagne] out of fear. Because they can’t pay the taxes, [they run away] saying they won’t take it [the land]. That’s what they used to say before, and all the bahariyas ran away. They said why did you give us this land? Why did you have it registered in our names? How are we to pay the tax? And they ran away. Now after they left, the lands were registered in their names, but we paid the taxes and we farmed that land. Then the nāpī [the second cadastral survey in 1970] came, and they [the bahariyās who had fled] began to return and they reclaimed the land [that they had abandoned]. This entire village is now comprised of our former servants. The land they farm is the land we gave them.

The reluctance on the part of many Tharu peasants to take up the cultivation of land as raiši is attributed by Tharus today to the fear of taxation. In both interpretations by Tharu informants above, taxation is cited as the premier cause discouraging raikar tenancy. Taxation, however, was not that onerous, in part because land taxes in the Tarai were deliberately kept low by the Rana state in order to encourage settlement and development of waste land in the region (Regmi 1978:63-64).21 In

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19 Krishna’s statement that household heads, during royal hunts, were compelled to perform corvé labour personally by the jimidar was denied by the son of a jimidar with whom I raised the issue. He said that it didn’t matter who went to do the work so long as the quota of workmen required by the village was fulfilled.

20 Regmi suggests that raikar tenancy was a system of de facto property rights since the early period of Rana rule, and that, by the third decade of this century, “Raikar landholding rights had evolved to a stage little short of full-fledged property rights. Sale, mortgage, and tenancy were permitted without any restriction, subject only to the condition that payment of taxes due to the state not be disrupted.” (Regmi 1976: 177: see 170-182).

21 Apart from the formal taxes, which had to be paid in cash, other demands were made on the production of raiśi (and jimidāri) households by the state. Tax-paying villagers, including the jimidar, were obliged to provide grain at no cost to institutions such as the police and the government elephant stables, and, unless we are to assume that local officialdom was more honest and upright than in the rest of Nepal, they were probably subject to extortion at the hands of local officials (Regmi 1978:59-60).
addition, the inefficiency of the Rana administration meant that the land tax was not revised regularly enough to keep pace with inflation, as the quote below suggests. The last revenue settlement was in 1922 (Regmi 1963:183). During the fifties, the period just prior to the abolition of the jimidār system, the land tax in Chitwan was Rs. 1.50 per bighā. The value of land during the same period was about Rs. 700 per bighā.

The exploitation that cultivators were subject to at the hands of the jimidārs was probably more important than the burden of the land tax in discouraging raikar tenancy. One commentator on the land revenue tax notes,

the Zamindars have used the authority of their office to exact as many additional rackams²² from the owner cultivators as possible. Thus while the burden of land tax has decreased over the years it is those in authority in the local community, the landlords and the tax collectors who have gained. The tenants, the owner cultivators and the State have been left far behind in the distribution of benefits which a fixed assessment and a rising level of prices have conferred.²³

Although the revenue office was technically responsible for maintaining registers of raiti, actual control over this was in the hands of the jimidār, who furnished the revenue office with the records. As one man put it,

There were no talpurjās [title deeds] in the old days, the jimidār was responsible for registering land in people’s names. Let’s suppose you were a raiti and I was the jimidār. You could give your land to someone else and ask me to remove your name from the register and insert his name instead. I would send this information to the tax office and the land would then be registered in the new person’s name.

The commentator on the land tax referred to above notes the situation obtaining in revenue collection in Nepal,

Many Mal Addas [Revenue Offices—AG] find it possible to get along without records. The Patwaris, the Zamindars and Talukdars [revenue functionaries in different parts of Nepal—AG] maintain detailed

records of the land which falls within their respective jurisdictions and in effect these are the records on which tax collections are made. One member of the Land Reform Commission however rightly complains that the records of the Mal and the Talukdar do not correspond but “are all jumbled up”, another that “the land records are one big joke.” The owner or tenant of land therefore pays such taxes and fees as the zamindar [i.e., the jimidār] says he will pay and these are believed to be more than the state demanded when the original assessments were made.²⁴

A peasant, by having his name entered in the land record as a tenant cultivator of the state, thus became subject to exactions legal and illegal. Many peasant cultivators paid more in taxes to the jimidār than they were legally obliged to. The nature of such exploitation in Chitwan is illustrated in the following account by a former raiti. About 1959 the government took over some of his land and included it within a forest preserve. He had 15 bighās at the time (about 10.2 hectares); by this act it was reduced to eight (about 5.4 hectares). However, he was compelled by the jimidār to pay taxes for 15 bighās until the second cadastral survey of 1970, on pain of losing what was left to him.

More generally, Tharu villagers would complain that the jimidār would take land away from a raiti in whose name it had been registered, give it to someone else, then collect taxes from both parties. Although such abuses were illegal, peasants had very little room to protest. Most of them were ignorant of what their rights were or how far the jimidār’s legal authority extended. For a poor peasant to have recourse to the state to seek relief from the abuses of one of the state’s functionaries would clearly require considerable and intolerable provocation, and would be unlikely to bear much fruit.

The Demise of the Jimidār System

This agrarian order began to disintegrate with the opening up of Chitwan for development in the 1960’s. A highly successful malaria eradication program was begun in 1958, and in a few years, the threat of malaria was rendered insignificant. This important development, coupled with the construction of an all weather road that connected Chitwan and the Tarai to the main road between Kathmandu and Pokhara in the hills, enabled hill people to move to Chitwan in large numbers. The state alone settled 5233 hill families in Chitwan on land alienated for the purpose.

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As Regmi observes, “practically all over the country, the burden of feeding local functionaries and visiting dignitaries fell on the peasant” (ibid.:60).

²² A form of taxation levied as corvée labor.


²⁴ Ibid.
but there was considerable unsponsored immigration in addition to this (Shrestha 1990:187 ff.). By the 1971 census, Tharus, once the overwhelmingly preponderant group in the valley, had been reduced to less than 14 percent of its population. The period between the ending of Rana rule in 1951 and the early 1960’s saw a number of other developments which contributed to the transformation of the agrarian system described above. Chief among these were legislation affecting the control of land and the abolishing of corvée labor. Raikar tenants were registered as landowners under the provisions of the Lands Act of 1957 (Regmi 1962) while the jimidar system was formally abolished by the Lands Act of 1964 (Regmi 1976:121-122). With the establishment of the Royal Chitwan National Park in 1973, and the settlement of all available arable land outside it and the attached forest preserve, land became increasingly scarce and valuable at the same time that wage labor resulting from the expansion in the population, augmented by migrant workers from the Outer Tarai taking advantage of the new conditions and the newly established road system, became readily available.

The development of a market economy and the corresponding pressure on the peasant economy, the necessity for credit and a cash income, and the development of multiple cropping and developed varieties of rice, wheat and maize, made it necessary to maximize the portion of the crop that could be brought to sell in the bazaar. The bahariya system became a liability to the cultivator because he was obliged to maintain his workers and their families even during the off-season, when demand for labor was low. Landowning peasants, those who had been raii in former times, could no longer afford to maintain whole families of bahariya in exchange for labor. Today, they hire an individual or two for housework or to herd cattle. At times of peak labor demand, they hire wage labor. They have thus freed themselves of the burden of supporting entire families all year round. The availability of wage labor gradually led to the replacement of bahariya labor. In effect, the development of a capitalist economy shifted more of the burden of reproducing labor from the raii onto the shoulders of the bahariya himself.

Many bahariya found themselves both landless and without employment as bahariya. Others however, at the instance of the jimidar himself, had acquired some land during the cadastral survey, although minuscule for the most part. In Pipariya and Merauli, 27 peasant families who were formerly bahariya or descended from bahariya owned an average of 0.44 hectares. Fourteen of those families were effectively landless. In contrast, average landownership among 41 former raii households was 1.4 hectares. Most bahariya were thus forced to seek a living in other ways and many of them have become wage laborers. Many such households still send one or two of their children to wealthier households to work as bahariya. Not only are they thus spared the burden of an extra mouth to feed, but they also benefit from the two or three quintals of paddy (unmilled rice) the child brings home at the end of the year. Others have found work in the tourist sector, working in the elephant stables or in the hotels. A few bahariya households have entered into the service of a jimidar in the traditional way, but many others get by on casual labor and wood cutting. More than 36 per cent of the indebtedness incurred by landless households (which correspond approximately to the bahariya families of former times) has been for consumption—the costs incurred for food and clothing (Guneratne 1994:192).

While many jimidars as well as raii lost land to immigrants, it was the rationalization of the revenue collection system, the growth of the bureaucracy, and the demands for land reform that led to the formal demise of the jimidar system as an institution. The state passed legislation affecting the control of land and abolishing corvée labor. The jimidar system was abolished by the Land Act of 1964 (K.C. 1986:4), which also imposed a ceiling on land ownership. As I have noted, two cadastral survey were made over a period of time to enforce this ceiling, which, in the Tarai, was placed at 18.4 hectares (ibid.:23). The survey “measured the size and specified ownership of each plot of land” and issued ownership certificates to the cultivators, identifying the location of the lands on survey maps and giving its size and revenue gradation (Scholz 1977:25). The land reform was largely unsuccessful, however, because the state not only lacked a clear policy on the matter but also lacked an effective machinery to implement it and overcome the resistance of rural elites (K.C. 1986; Scholz 1977). In the Tarai, including Chitwan, many jimidars took advantage of their position as the chief representatives of the government at village level to lay claim to land for which they bore the responsibility of revenue collection; Tharus did not always understand the purpose of the survey and were often loathe to take title to land in their own names. Pandey observes that in Nawal Parasi, across the river from Chitwan, Tharu farmers “thought that land registration would increase their land tax; therefore, some households did not register any land and others registered only a few bighas” (Pandey 1987:11).

We have already seen that the burden of the government tax was not really onerous enough to discourage a peasant from taking up a holding, and that the explanation for bahariya motivation lay elsewhere, in the
pressure of illegal exactions and vulnerability to exploitation that *raitā* were exposed to. But what of the motivation to be a *jīmdār*? In purely pecuniary terms, the *jīmdār* received inadequate compensation for the task he was called upon to perform. Regmi states that in Chitwan the *jīmdār* received Rs. 5.00 for every Rs. 105 he collected, but elsewhere in the Tarai, the *jīmdār* received 2.5% of the collection (Regmi 1963:132). The son of a former *jīmdār* remembers that “They say we got Rs. 4 in every Rs 104 [of taxes collected].” Four or five percent of the total revenue collected when the tax was as low as Rs. 1.50 per bighā adds up to very little. The son of a former caudhāri told me that prior to 2015 v.s. (1961), the annual revenue from Chitwan was said to be 6000 rupees. According to Bhandari, in 1955, just prior to the implementation of the malaria eradication program, only 2500 bighās were under cultivation in Chitwan (Bhandari 1985:13). Certainly, for most *jīmdārs* in Chitwan, unlike their counterparts in the hills, revenue collection posed no logistical problem, as the tax payers were for the most part their neighbors in the village. But they were obliged to transport the revenue collected to the village of the local caudhāri, and in the case of the caudhāri, to the tax office, a journey of two or three days into the hills.

Official regulations to the contrary, *jīmdārs* throughout the Tarai usually extorted more from peasant landholders than they were legally entitled to. In the Naya Muluk (the four Tarai districts taken from Nepal in 1816 by the British, and restored in 1857), for a few years after Nepal resumed control, the *jīmdārs* were keeping as much as one third of the revenue collected (Clark and Boys 1873:176).

More generally, the office of *jīmdār* represented access to power and status in village society. Pecuniary benefits, as I have pointed out elsewhere in this paper, came not from the official compensation allowed the *jīmdār* but from the opportunity for illegal exactions, both through exploitation of the peasant’s general illiteracy and ignorance of the regulations as well as through control of the land records. He stood to benefit from the obligation on the part of the *raitā* to provide him with free labor for agricultural work. Although the regulations stipulated limits to the use of such labor, in practice there was no effective oversight of the *jīmdār*’s exploitation of the system. His power rested on, and was exercised through, a triad of supports: he was tax collector and law enforcement official, he presided over and conducted the worship of the village gods and he adjudicated infringements of the customary law and traditions of the *jāt*.

The Tharu elite in Chitwan have not added to their landholdings at the expense of the poorer sections of the peasantry, in which respect they would seem different from rural elites elsewhere in Nepal and the world. The *jīmdār* class as a whole in Chitwan has not been able to translate its dominant status within Tharu society into an increase in the size of its landholdings. As Scott (1985) has shown for Malaysia, the manipulation of credit is a crucial factor in the acquisition of land by large landlords, and the development of large estates that result from that process. In Chitwan also, moneylenders have acquired land by manipulating credit, but those moneylenders are hill people not Tharus.

*Jīmdārs* in Chitwan never transformed themselves into a money lending class, where usury was the source of profit. This may be due in part to the fact that the cultural norms of hospitality require constant expenditure, and the most onerous burden falls on the village elite; certainly, the *jīmdār* of Pipariya often had a cash flow problem and would often turn to me for loans, particularly during harvest time, when the agricultural workers had to be paid. Furthermore, unlike those hill ethnic groups which have been heavily recruited into foreign armies, Tharus in general do not have guaranteed sources of outside income that could be used for capital. Caplan describes an analogous situation among the Limbu following upon Limbuwan’s incorporation into the Gorkha state:

Limbu leaders, like the majority of their lineage kinsmen, found it impossible to maintain their level of consumption and meet minimal social obligations. They were forced to turn for financial assistance to the very thari [Brahmin sub-headmen] to whose forefathers a portion of their lands had originally been granted (Caplan 1967:110).

Caplan points out however that certain Limbus became moneylenders (and thus came to occupy important and powerful positions within the Limbu community, displacing the traditional headmen) only as a result of long service in the Gorkha regiments abroad; their pensions assured them a relatively large and assured cash flow that they could transform into capital (Caplan 1991:312). For their own part Tharus believe they lack a “business sense” and compare themselves unfavorably with Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars, who are believed to have good (and unscrupulous) business acumen (cf. Guneratne 1996). On the whole, the lands the *jīmdārs* inherited have shrunk rather than grown, both in relative and in absolute terms. Very often, even members of the Tharu *jīmdār* class have lost land through debt; many have lost their holdings altogether and
been reduced to landlessness. The size of landholdings have declined through sub-division and inheritance (but so have those of former raiti) and land has been sold to meet debt. Few Tharus in Chitwan command ready capital to buy land (in 1990, a bighã started at Rs. 100,000—approximately $2300).

The abolition of the jimïdar system contributed to the decline of the influence of the jimïdar but failed to negate the dominant role the class plays in Tharu social life. The jimïdar's control over the registration of raiti tenancy and his punitive power depended on the backing afforded him by the state. Previously, the jimïdar could decide whether he would give land to a particular raiti or not, and he could even order a raiti to leave the village if he wished. Post-jimïdar Chitwan however is not characterized by widespread tenancy. Thus the jimïdar lacks even a landlord's control over tenants. His holdings however, although generally large by village standards, are small enough for him to cultivate using hired labor, a course more profitable to him than renting out. While the power and status afforded him as the jimïdar also translated, as we have seen, into authority as the principal arbiter of social custom and traditional practices, the juridical power of his position in matters relating to what might be termed caste affairs has been considerably weakened and will doubtless eventually disappear.

Even so, the jimïdar retains influence over the affairs of the village, although he lacks the institutional basis to impose his will. The demise of the jimïdar system is so recent that tradition still accords him a certain deference. In large part, that deference is due to the fact that although the jimïdar no longer has institutional power, he is still the largest landowner, and the source of favors and patronage, as well as an avenue, through his political connections and contacts in the wider world, to the influence that gets things done in Nepal.

Conclusion

The material universe of the peasant is dominated by insecurity: the vagaries of the weather on one hand and the demand outsiders make on the product of his labor on the other. The peasant's overwhelming concern has been to guarantee himself and his household a reliable subsistence. The argument of this paper has been that rural people, dependent for their livelihood on agriculture, can assure themselves of a subsistence—the minimum requirements of food, clothing, and shelter—through means other than acquiring rights in land. The behavior of the peasant must be understood in terms of the way his relationship to the state is structured, and not in terms of a narrow focus on land per se. In a context of labor scarcity and ready land in Chitwan, and because of the pressure exerted on them by the state's revenue-collecting arrangements, some Tharus, by electing to exchange their labor for food and shelter, managed to guarantee their subsistence, while the risks of land-holding fell on the shoulders of another. The bahariyã's employer was responsible not only for maintaining his worker and his family (the labor of all of whose able-bodied members were also available to the raiti), but also for meeting the demands of the outside world. If he were unable to do both, his labor could attach itself to one more able to do so. There was little need for money for consumption, except to pay taxes and buy essentials such as kerosene, salt and cloth. Again, that was the responsibility of the raiti not the bahariyã. The bahariyã was largely free of the need to incur debt, and from litigation and disputes over land. This system appears to have worked reasonably well in the pre-capitalist agrarian society of Chitwan, and guaranteed at least a minimal subsistence to every bahariyã, to the extent that he and his family were assured of food, clothing and shelter.

In a recent book, Krishna Ghimire (1992) has argued that landlessness is produced when land is turned into a commodity. I have described in contrast a situation that we might call "voluntary landlessness", resulting from the particular nature of the state's relationship to village society. The landless hill peasants who are the subject of Ghimire's book are driven to search for land because of a scarcity of arable land in the hills, a ready availability of agricultural labor, and a lack of economic opportunities outside the agrarian sector. Only the last factor was shared by the Tharu peasant in Rana times; his universe was defined then by an unexhausted land frontier and a shortage of labor. Today of course, the situation faced by the landless Tharu bahariyã is identical to that faced by the hill peasant; with the traditional

25 My data from a socio-economic survey carried out in two villages in Chitwan show that in the category of the landless, those families working as bahariyã according to the traditional system had the lowest incidence of debt, and had not incurred debt for food and clothing. These were the commonest reasons given for indebtedness by the poorest sections of the village in general (Cf. Gueratanie 1994:192).

26 Ghimire's book explores the dynamics of a situation that appears to be the opposite of the one described here. Using Chayanov's definition of the concept of peasant, he describes a situation of attempted re-peasanitization: the migration of landless hill people into the Tarai in search of land, through the acquisition of which they could reconstitute themselves as peasants producing primarily for their household subsistence. The Tharu bahariyãs, on the other hand, in the period prior to this mass immigration, chose to avoid this peasant status.
system described in this paper vanished beyond recall, he too would like to guarantee his subsistence through control of land, but the land is now beyond his reach.

The defining feature of a peasant society is that it exists in relationship to a state, which has a claim on what it produces (Wolf 1966; cf. discussion in Silverman 1979). In the case of Chitwan, the agent of the state (the jimidar) was not external to peasant society, making demands from the outside, as it were. Rather, he was structurally a pivotal figure, standing at the nexus of the moral, social and economic dimensions of Tharu society and linking it to a larger polity. Unlike say, the landlord class in Scott’s description of a Malaysian village (Scott 1985), the jimidar did not depend on the patronage of external sources of power and authority to reinforce his position in the village; he wielded it directly as the agent of the state. At the same time, however, he was an integral member of the village community, the one most responsible for its moral integrity and physical well-being, who had everything to lose by failing in that responsibility.

What characterizes the relationship of the state in Nepal to peasant society in the case described in this essay is that it was not restricted simply to appropriating the surplus as it was produced. Instead, the state, perhaps unintentionally, directly influenced the form and organization of Tharu society, even to its nature as a moral community, through the role played by the jimidar in both social and economic reproduction.

References


