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The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 43, No. 3 (May, 1984), pp. 481-497

Published by: [Association for Asian Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2055760>

Accessed: 17/06/2014 11:50

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How Moral Is South Asia's Economy?— A Review Article

ARJUN APPADURAI

This article is concerned with the interplay of moral and political processes and the ways in which they affect institutions that regulate access to food in South Asia. Several of the titles under review concern famine. Other titles concern issues related to the distribution of, control over, and access to resources in South Asian rural society. The books are dealt with together because—as several of them make clear—famine is a special sort of lens for examining society in normal times. It is important to determine what kind of a lens famine is, and here we must weigh two options. On the one hand, famine seems to exaggerate existing trends and thus to amplify preexisting conditions. On the other hand, famine brings various kinds of breakdowns, and with them, the distortion or destruction of routine structures and moralities.¹ How is this apparent contradiction to be dealt with?

The most fruitful method is to treat both the problems of cause and consequence as problems of what Amartya Sen calls “entitlement,” by which is meant the capability, under a given social, legal, and economic regime, of an individual or group to obtain legitimately the means of subsistence. To Sen’s conception of entitlement, we need to add another concept that I shall call “enfranchisement,” by which I mean the degree to which an individual or group can legitimately participate in the decisions of a given society *about* entitlement. Famines raise questions about the relationship between entitlement and enfranchisement in any society, at any moment in history.

Several of the books under review here raise, in one way or another, the question of the nature of the impact of the last century of colonial rule, with its commercialization of agriculture and integration into larger markets, on rural South Asian society. In assessing these arguments, I shall suggest that over the last one hundred years

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Rural Society in Southeast India. By Kathleen Gough. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, no. 38), 1981. xiv, 420 pp. Notes, Glossary, Bibliography, Index. \$44.50.

Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944. By Paul R. Greenough. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. xvii, 342 pp. Appendixes, Bibliography, Index. \$37.

Subject to Famine: Food Crises and Economic Change in Western India, 1860–1920. By Michelle B. McAlpin. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983. xvi, 288 pp. Tables, Maps, Figures, Glossary, Bibliography, Index. \$35.

Why They Did Not Starve: Biocultural Adaptation

in a South Indian Village. By Morgan D. MacLachlan. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983. ix, 288 pp. Tables, Maps, Figures, Glossary, Bibliography, Index. \$27.50.

Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation. By Amartya Sen. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. ix, 257 pp. Appendixes, Bibliography, Indexes. \$9.95 (paper).

¹ Although the title of this essay makes implicit reference to the idea of “moral economy” associated with Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976), I am less concerned with the specific question of peasant revolts and subsistence expectations, and more concerned with the moral basis of subsistence relations in general in rural South Asia, particularly in times of famine.

some important changes have occurred in the relationship between the structures of *enfranchisement* and the realities of *entitlement* in rural South Asia. Famines appear to be the price of such changes, especially in economies that are being absorbed into the world system.

Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* is a useful point of departure. This is a book of unusual cogency, whose understated passion and economy of style make its message all the more compelling. Though the theoretical core of the book relies on technical methods and arguments, these are confined to four appendixes at the end of the book. Ten substantive chapters make economics accessible to the nonspecialist as do few other recent books.

Sen accomplishes three interrelated tasks. First, he clears some confusion in the literature surrounding the ideas of inequality, poverty, starvation, and famine. This sets the stage for the second task, the central concern of the book, which is the author's theory of exchange entitlement in regard to famines. The third task is a careful examination of published evidence on the Bengal famine of 1943–1944, the famines in Ethiopia and the Sahel in the early 1970s, and the Bangladesh famine of 1974, by way of empirical tests of the entitlement theory.

Sen's argument is directed against what he describes as the food availability decline (FAD) view of famines. In his view, famines are caused principally by the incapacity of specific groups in a society, at a specific point in time, to obtain food by legitimate economic means. This incapacity may or may not be accompanied by a general decline in the availability of food. As Sen frequently points out, the FAD view remains the dogmatic basis of much orthodoxy among scholars and agencies concerned with the problem of famine.

Not the least contribution of Sen's essay is to sort out the relationships between poverty, inequality, starvation, and famine—concepts that are sometimes conflated. He places malnutrition squarely in the center of his conception of poverty, and he makes a strong plea for retaining some biologically based idea of minimum nutritional needs as the principal marker of the boundary between rich and poor. In the process, he carefully demonstrates that the measurement of income and, more generally, the analysis of inequality do not provide a direct lens into poverty, and hence into starvation. Inequality and poverty, in Sen's elegant argument, are related concepts, but one does not subsume the other. Concerning the measurement of poverty, what is suggested as a standard of nutritional adequacy is the standard that prevails in the society at the time in question. Nevertheless, we are warned not to lose sight of the core of absolute dispossession, which is all the more relevant in relation to starvation and famine.

Starvation and famine, like inequality and poverty, are related but not identical phenomena. Famine implies starvation, in Sen's view, but not vice versa. Starvation is a regular feature of life in many societies; insofar as it refers to a low typical level of food consumption, it must be distinguished from the sudden collapse of the level of food consumption that constitutes famine. Furthermore, starvation suggests a general drop in the level of food consumption, whereas Sen takes pain to show that famine is, above all, a matter in which some groups suffer while others are unaffected, or sometimes even prosper. This distinction between the predicament of different groups in the same society is at the heart of the political economy of famine, and Sen's conception of exchange entitlements is directed to this aspect of famine.

The entitlement approach to starvation and famines "concentrates on the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the society,

including the use of production possibilities, trade opportunities, entitlements vis-à-vis the state, and other methods of acquiring food" (Sen, p. 45). Starvation is a result of entitlement failure, in this sense, for a set of persons or groups. Within a given production regime, which is in turn embedded within a certain legal, social, and economic framework, groups have different exchange entitlements, and famines occur either because there is a fall in the "endowment bundles" of a significant number of people or an unfavorable shift in what Sen calls the "exchange entitlement mapping," which is a formal economic description of the relationships of ownership and exchange that regulate access to food in any particular situation. Chapters 5 and 10 and appendixes A and B are devoted to a careful presentation of the economics of this argument. In chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, Sen thoroughly reanalyzes data from the famines in Ethiopia, the Sahel, Bangladesh, and the great Bengal famine of 1943.

The empirical chapters contain a wealth of insights into the political economy of starvation, and they make it difficult to retain any faith in the FAD view of famine. Some of the interesting results of Sen's research follow: the market mechanism, which respects purchasing power, and not need or desire, may in fact move food away from groups and regions that need it, to groups and regions that can afford it; famines may arise in boom conditions as well as in conditions of slump; and we are best off dispensing with the idea of "the poor" and thinking instead of more finely discriminated categories that differ in complex ways in their relationship to the forces of production and exchange. This is the differentiation that is magnified in the dramatic divergence of the fortunes of different groups during famines.

Sen's book is persuasive, and the approach he suggests is powerful. My only reservation about the exchange entitlement approach, as Sen formulates it, is its excessively legalistic view of social relations. That is, he regards the social framework within which the political economy is embedded exclusively from the point of view of formal, explicit, and enforceable norms concerning what is permissible. Order here is conflated with law. Missing is what might be termed a moral or cultural dimension, one that might provide, in many societies, an alternative to the existing legal framework. Somehow it seems distasteful to think of a woman forced into prostitution by failure in other exchange entitlements as simply making use of a hitherto latent trade opportunity—as Sen's approach might incline one to do. More generally, it is especially during famines that we might expect to see moral contradictions emerge, contradictions disguised by a view that focuses solely on the legal legitimacy of choices of action.

Paul Greenough's *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal* is a study of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944. This remarkable book is explicitly concerned with the moral dilemmas of famine. It combines the best of contemporary social science with a fine human and literary sense to produce a treatment of a major human tragedy that must set a new standard for the social history of famine in South Asia and elsewhere. The author acknowledges his debt to the Chicago school of "cultural" analysis in his preface; in reality, it is that school which is in his debt, for his book brings the approach alive in a way that no other study has so far done. Part of the reason for Greenough's success is that he never loses sight of the fact that culture mediates history but does not invent it. In recording the complicated changes that Bengali society has undergone during the last century, Greenough shows us a cultural system in combat with a historical predicament that is the product of forces outside its ambit and beyond its regulation. To document these changes and their implications for Bengali society the author uses the methods of demography and economic history as

well as the tools of cultural analysis. Each approach is strengthened by the others in the “long view” that the author takes of the causes and meanings of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944.

Greenough’s book has recently been reviewed in this journal, and portions of the argument of the book are surveyed in his recent article in this journal.² He has much of interest to say about the short- and long-term causes of the famine and about the impact of population growth, commodity production in agriculture, and the growth of an agrarian labor force on the moral economy of rural Bengal. I shall focus here on his discussion of patterns of famine victimization.

By 1943, one-third of all Bengali families totally lacked rights in land, while another two-fifths held less than 2 acres of land. Fewer than one out of four rural families could ensure their food supply through cultivation just before the famine, and in the early 1940s about 25 percent of Bengal’s population depended upon the market for rice. Perhaps most ominous, Greenough shows that even when imports from Burma are taken into account there was a 24 percent per capita decline in available food grain between 1901 and 1947 in Bengal. When we bear in mind that the growing population of sharecroppers and wage laborers (unlike tenants in the traditional Bengali system) had few moral ties with their landlords, we are face-to-face with a population at risk.

Clearly, analysis of the causes of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944 is a difficult business, given the multiple strands of crisis that formed its background. Greenough’s emphasis—though he carefully delineates the short-term role of climatic crisis, war hysteria, political battles, price fluctuations, clumsy government interventions, and so forth—is on what he calls “a gradual collapse of the grain-marketing system in early 1943 as the cause for the famine” (p. 85). Sen’s analysis of the short-run causes of the famine is somewhat more sophisticated, yet it makes more sense when seen against Greenough’s analysis of long-run factors in the Bengali economy. However, both authors are in basic agreement that the problem in 1943 was *not* a decline in the supply of rice; it was a failure of the market and, more generally, of what Sen would call the exchange entitlement map of rural Bengal.³

There is a good deal of overlap in the data and analysis provided by Greenough and Sen regarding patterns of famine victimization in Bengal in 1943–1944. Victimization, in Greenough’s careful analysis, had a clear social profile as well as a processual character. Using records generated by the Bengal Relief Committee, Greenough is able to show that the least affected persons were likely to be male, adult, and Hindu members of the trading, cultivating, and high-Sudra castes who were heads of households of more than 3.6 persons and who were willing to go some distance to seek relief in exchange for cash. By contrast, those who received free relief (and were forced to do so) were likely to be female adults and children, either Muslim or Hindu, of the lower, fishing, and untouchable castes. The latter were also likely to be widowed or married with an absent spouse, and heads of much smaller households who had lost their source of income and were tied to their place of residence (p. 196).

These two types of victims were not separate, as Greenough is careful to point out, but rather they were representative of two positions along a continuum of need

² See Greenough (1983) and Desai (1983).

³ Both the Greenough and Sen accounts of the causes of the Bengal famine emphasize the roles of panic hoarding and withholding of rice from the market at the village level. This suggests the applicability here, on a large scale, of models that

have been developed in the last decade to account for situations where the pursuit of self-serving behavior by individuals has negative aggregate consequences. For a lucid account of such models and their uses, see Schelling (1978).

created by the processes of victimization, which proceeded in stages. These stages consisted of: *impoverishment*, accompanied by property sales and economic decline; *unemployment*, accompanied by exclusion from patronage and income; *abandonment*, accompanied by exclusion from domestic subsistence; *beggary*, accompanied by forfeiture of social status; and *starvation*, resulting in physiological decline and illness.

Given the very large number of persons who went through some or all of these stages in 1943–1944, we should not be surprised that many Bengalis felt that the moral fabric of their society was being damaged beyond repair. Greenough is especially effective when he lets Bengalis tell horrifying stories of the famine in their own words, through their own recollections and reports. Starvation and death were ugly, but worse still was the loss of dignity, the confusion of caste rank in relief kitchens, the abandonment and sale of children, women turning to prostitution, the suspension of crucial group and cosmos-maintaining ceremonies—in short, the degradation of social and collective identities.

Yet Greenough does not leave the reader simply with a harrowing human account of a large-scale tragedy; he makes his boldest interpretive stroke in accounting for the patterns of victimization during the famine. What he suggests, to summarize his rich argument briefly, is that those in charge of making key subsistence decisions—rulers, landlords, husbands, and family heads—when faced with real or threatened shortages of the “food of well-being”—rice—consciously and knowingly chose to abandon those who depended on them—subjects, clients, wives, and children. This abandonment, the moral opposite of Bengali ideals of reciprocity and nurture, was both the symptom and the result of the breakdown of morality precipitated by the famine.

Abandonment of dependent children and spouses by adult male household heads is the pattern that Greenough places at the center of the moral drama of the famine. And he reads in this pattern a deliberate set of choices by the decision makers: choices that paralleled similar decisions by the government (which favored urban-based priority classes over the rural needy) and by land-controllers who deliberately abandoned their commitments to rural clients (although “fixed” and “casual” rural clients were abandoned later than those whose relations to the landlord were solely regulated by the market). In the fragmentation of families, especially among those who were most destitute, and in the deliberate decision to favor the chances of survival of adult males, Greenough reads a morality of distress (*āpad-dharma*), which places the continuity of the patriline above the interests of females and children, and which differs dramatically from the Euro-American belief in “Birkenhead’s rule” (women and children first), and in which there is no contradiction between male self-interest and the preservation of moral order.

Two major questions arise about Greenough’s radical moral interpretation of Bengali patterns of family breakdown during the great famine. First, I wonder whether those cases where women and children were physically abandoned by male adults might not equally be regarded as part of an effort to maximize the life-chance of each and every member of the family in circumstances where co-residence was clearly not feasible. Thus the sale of children (however distasteful to a parent) might be seen (and has been seen in other times and places) as an effort to construct a better set of life-chances than those of the existing family structure. This interpretation would modify (though not substantially challenge) Greenough’s emphasis on the survival priority of the male household head. Second, and more serious, Greenough does notice a parallel between the abandonment of rural dependent classes by landlord classes and the abandonment of familial dependents by household heads. He does not

adequately stress the causal link that seems highly probable *between* these levels. That is, it seems evident that the abandonment of rural clients at one level of the system created conditions sufficiently painful to bring about the abandonment of dependents by male household heads belonging to these client classes. This ripple effect is as critical to the political economy of famine victimization as was the pattern of moral disengagement by adult males and other providers of subsistence in Bengal in 1943–1944.

Two patterns that may have application beyond the Bengal case are clearly emphasized by Greenough. The first is that, from the point of view of access to the means of subsistence and the measurable aspects of nutrition, famines exaggerate existing trends: “Famine is, at least in societies where malnutrition is chronic, an extreme version of a prevailing condition; it is not qualitatively but only quantitatively distinct” (p. 241). From a moral point of view, existing arrangements and patterns are frequently distorted or abandoned, but this moral distortion is not simply anomalous. If Greenough is right, what we may expect to see in situations of famine is a shrinkage of the circle of moral expectations and attributions, and a falling back on some especially favored moral principles—such as the survival of the patriline—over others—such as the importance of female sexual exclusivity or the primacy of children’s lives.

In other words, the Greenough and Sen studies, taken together, suggest that, at least during famines in market-dependent agrarian societies, the tension between entitlement and enfranchisement becomes very great. In normal times, entitlement, the capability of a person to make legitimate claims on the social stock of food, disguises the harsh realities of enfranchisement, the capability of that person to make decisions *about* entitlement. In the patterns of victimization during the Bengal famine of 1943–1944, we see those who are enfranchised—the government classes, the rural land-controlling classes, and male household heads, in general—deciding to withhold the entitlement rights of dependents, women, and children. Entitlement without enfranchisement, the fate of rural clients, women, children, slaves, and household pets in many societies, is not a safe condition when famine sets in. The problems of inequality, poverty, and starvation come together in the relationship between entitlement and enfranchisement.

In many ways, Michelle McAlpin’s book, *Subject to Famine*, takes an approach to famine in modern India which is diametrically opposed to the views of Greenough and Sen. McAlpin views the period of colonial rule as largely favorable to agricultural life in western India, the penetration of markets and the commercialization of agriculture as prophylactic of widespread hunger, and the famine policies of colonial administrators as reasonably effective.

These views are embedded in a polemic directed against R. C. Dutt (and several other scholars who have followed him). They argued that the severe and frequent Indian famines at the end of the nineteenth century were due to increasing revenue demands made by the colonial government on agriculturalists, and to the drain of resources from India to England to cover part of the cost of governing India. McAlpin’s data and analysis in large part are directed against the first of these arguments—involving increases in land revenue—although she is also committed to the correction of the second view.

Through a careful analysis of demographic data on births and mortality, McAlpin is able to show that the impact of famines on population growth after the beginning of the twentieth century was much less adverse than during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Her question is: What accounts for this favorable change?

Her answer is that "in the agricultural sector of Bombay Presidency between 1860 and 1920, prosperity was generally increasing with some setbacks caused by bad monsoons and attendant bad harvests" (p. 157). The reasons for this increase in prosperity were "better markets for surplus produce brought about by falling transport costs as railroads were built; rising prices for exported products; reductions in the amount of land used to grow grain for insurance against crop failures; and shifts among crops to those with higher values and higher profits" (ibid.).

To document these claims, and the revisionist approach to the economic history of western India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that she takes them to entail, McAlpin makes impressive use of a wide variety of archival sources, principally those reporting agricultural statistics pertaining to revenue assessments, crops sown, and acreages under cultivation over the period in question. The author is very much aware of the empirical and methodological problems of using these sources and of the many trenchant criticisms that have been made of them. She is delightfully candid about holes and gaps in the statistics, and refreshingly open about the operations she sometimes had to perform on these data to make them usable. The sophisticated technical and interpretive use of agricultural statistics for the colonial period constitutes a significant advance over previous studies and defines the single greatest strength of this study. But this strength is also a weakness in a way, for aggregate statistical data, apart from the standard problems that their use entails, frequently mask village-level realities.

McAlpin derives more general conclusions from her study of western India from 1860 to 1920. First, there is no evidence that either the initial land revenue assessments or the revisions of these assessments led to the impoverishment of farmers. Second, she claims that, far from precipitating famines at the end of the nineteenth century, railroads created good transport for bulk commodities and thus permitted the movement of grain into regions of shortage, which, in turn, mitigated the effects of the famine. Third, she assigns the severe famines at the end of the nineteenth century to a period of extraordinary dryness in the Presidency. Finally, she attributes the cessation of periods of major famine to the development of a transport network, the growing economic opportunities in the region, and the efforts of the British administration to provide an effective relief system. Some of these propositions are more persuasive than others, and one of the singular virtues of this book is that the author tells us exactly what her evidence is for the claims she makes, permitting critical assessment in ways that would otherwise not be possible.

McAlpin makes it clear, in spite of a few minor qualifications, that she is an adherent of exactly the FAD view of famine that Sen and Greenough attack. Her careful analysis of rainfall statistics for the Presidency is designed to shore up her claim that the late nineteenth century was a period of extraordinary drought, and here she is quite persuasive. The problem, of course, is the question of who bore the brunt of this climatic severity, and this is where a strong dose of entitlement mapping analysis, on Sen's model, would have been very helpful. Of course, as Sen too concedes, climatic improvidence might provide the starting point of famine, but it rarely accounts for the profile of entitlement breakdown. This is one of the hazards of aggregate analysis. On the question of revenue assessments under British rule, McAlpin is at her very best, and she convinces me that existing charges of gross increases in extraction are probably ill-considered and exaggerated, again from the *aggregate* point of view.

But the really serious problem still remains. That is the question of the distribution of benefits from the penetration of external market forces, the improvements in

transport, and the commercialization of agriculture, and McAlpin is not unaware of the problem. But this is the weakest link in her chain of argument, in terms of both internal and external evidence. The only hard evidence she adduces for her claim that these gains were quite widely distributed is consumption data from a single *taluka* (the revenue unit into which districts are divided) in the Khandesh district about the increase in the number of superior houses from 1859 to 1889 (p. 130). However, she is herself quick to point out the weakness of such data for assessing the problems of differentiation. More serious than the weakness of her own data for making her case is the wide variety of studies, in western India and elsewhere, that have shown decisively the positive correlation between the commercialization of agriculture and the penetration of world markets and the growth in rural stratification and differentiation.⁴ She is on stronger ground when she suggests that the mounting demand for labor-intensive crops probably increased the demand for agricultural laborers, “insuring that they also shared in the gains of the sector” (p. 158), but the question here is what happens to such persons when food shortage (whatever its cause) sets in. It is difficult not to assume, following Sen and Greenough, that market-generated ties in particular and obligations to dependents in general are severed rather quickly when hard times set in.

The question concerning grain exports and the drain of resources from India to England raises similar problems. In some ways that portion of the book which discusses the relationship between railroads, markets, and prices between 1860 and 1920 is the most problematic. In general, the statistics McAlpin presents on movements of rail-borne grain are very difficult to correlate with specific famine years and with price data for individual districts or even divisions, much less for *talukas* or villages. Thus, though she may be right about the aggregate flow of grains out of the Presidency, it seems less likely that she is correct in her conclusion that “probably by the end of the nineteenth century and certainly by the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement of grain into regions with harvest shortfalls was a routine process” (p. 175). She recognizes the ambiguity when she asserts that “the shipments of wheat and rice in excess of those bound for the ports moved within India in response to food shortages and price differentials among regions” (p. 175). The question, of course, is how to weigh the two stimuli, and Sen’s evidence makes a forceful case that the logic of the market may well be to move food to regions and groups that can afford it, rather than to those who most need it. Indeed, if Sen’s general approach is correct, we might predict a built-in contradiction between the expansion of markets and railroads, which move grain to areas of high effective demand, and famine-relief policies, which seek to move grain to areas of greatest need.

In any case, there is some question about the benefits of rising agricultural prices in the period from 1881–1885 to 1920. McAlpin claims that rising prices for agricultural goods benefited all those with surplus produce to sell. Of course, this says nothing about the impact of rising prices on landless or land-poor agriculturalists. Even with reference to those who owned some land, at least one important village-level study done by H. H. Mann, the distinguished agricultural researcher, suggests that rising agricultural prices were a mixed blessing in the Deccan during the early decades of the twentieth century.⁵

⁴ For western India in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Banaji (1977), Charlesworth (1978), and Kumar (1968). For other parts of India and for more general approaches, see Bagchi (1982),

Harriss (1982), and Patnaik (1976).

⁵ See the essay on “Effects of Rise in Prices on Rural Prosperity” (Mann 1967:104–17).

Discussion of commercialization and intensification of agriculture, of rural differentiation and inequality, and of their possible bearing on famine is best addressed at the microlevel; two recent anthropological monographs permit us to shift the focus away from famine conditions to problems of adaptation and entitlement in normal times, away from aggregate, archival data to descriptive, village-level analysis.

With a few notable exceptions,⁶ the anthropological study of agriculture in South Asia is in its infancy, although significant gains have been made in other areas of the world.⁷ There are, however, signs of a new interest in agriculture among anthropologists of South Asia.⁸ Morgan Maclachlan's *Why They Did Not Starve* and Kathleen Gough's *Rural Society in Southeast India* bring South Asia into the mainstream of anthropological analysis of the political economy of agriculture.

Maclachlan did his fieldwork in 1965–1966 in Yaavahalli, a village some 40 miles north of the city of Bangalore in the Kolar district of Karnataka State. At that time the population of the village was 360, of whom 70 percent belonged to the Vokkaligga caste, 13 percent to the Nayak caste, and 11 percent to the untouchable Holeya caste. Though situated in a drought-prone region with low rainfall, Yaavahalli itself was a highly irrigated village. The farmers had strong extravillage ties and had taken to using high-yielding varieties of maize and hybrid millets, and they showed other signs of being “progressive.” The relatively high degree of agricultural intensification made the village an employer of labor from elsewhere in the region.

When Maclachlan arrived in Yaavahalli in the autumn of 1965, it was recovering from the effects of a severe drought, which had also affected many other rain-dependent zones of rural India. This famine had caused no deaths in Yaavahalli. By contrast, a similar drought in 1876–1877 had taken a heavy toll in human lives. Maclachlan's question is similar to McAlpin's, but applied to a larger time frame: What had happened during ninety years to make Yaavahalli more capable of withstanding the pressures of drought?

His answer, which provides the underlying framework of *Why They Did Not Starve*, is that the intensification of agriculture, principally in the form of wells dug since the 1920s, had increased productivity, reduced dependence on the fickle monsoon, and thereby made the population of the village more drought proof. Of course, Maclachlan recognizes that there have been other changes since the late nineteenth century, such as improved transport, government relief policies, the abolition of certain privileged forms of landholding that created more incentives for peasant enterprise, and so forth. Yet he sees agricultural intensification as the most significant factor.

This is not, however, a simple confirmation of Ester Boserup's hypothesis that farm people respond to increased population pressure with labor intensification of their agriculture (Boserup 1965). Maclachlan is really concerned about the factors that account for the choice of the policy of intensification in this particular village. This is where the biocultural and evolutionary components of his argument come in, and this is what the bulk of the book is about. Maclachlan proposes that a series of cultural policies—involving the division of labor between the sexes, the ages of men and women at marriage, postmarital residence, male inheritance, and the value of hypergamous and consanguineous marriages—“constitute a biocultural system in the

⁶ Bêteille (1974), Djurfeldt and Lindberg (1975), Epstein (1962, 1973), and Mencher (1978) are exceptions, the pioneers in this area.

⁷ Two outstanding recent examples of the anthropological contribution to the study of agri-

culture, from Latin America and Africa, are Gudeman (1978) and Hart (1982).

⁸ Brow (1980), Harriss (1982), Hill (1982), and Schlesinger (1981) best represent this salutary shift in South Asian anthropology.

sense that biological sex differences are culturally amplified in patterns of symbolically monitored and managed behavior specifically adapted to conditions of labor-intensive cultivation" (p. 3). Further, these policies survive because they "stimulate an effective agricultural adaptation" (p. 49). The argument is explicitly in line with the cultural materialism advocated by Marvin Harris (1979), although its description of actors, choices, and the human predicament of agriculture is rich enough to mitigate the mechanical and "best of all possible worlds" functionalism often associated with such approaches. Nevertheless, the principal concern of Maclachlan's book is to examine the view attributed to villagers that their central domestic policies yield crucial agricultural benefits, and that flouting them is the cause of material misery and agricultural failure. The goal of these policies is the creation of large joint families, made up of patrilineally related males, their wives, and their children under the control of an authoritative senior male—families created by marriages of higher-status males with lower-status females.

Much of Maclachlan's book is taken up with a careful exposition of the sexual ideologies of Yaavahalli's villagers, especially as these bear on the division of agricultural labor. The richest ethnographic portions are chapters 4, 5, and 6, which contain the finest descriptions of the organization of work in a South Asian agricultural setting that I have seen.⁹ The chapters that deal with domestic life, socialization, and the ideology of the joint family tread more familiar ground, but do so with great skill, freshness, and wit. Together, these chapters demonstrate that production and reproduction are closely interwoven in South Asian rural life, that the intrafamilial and intersexual allocation of labor reflect subjectively and objectively real differences between the sexes, and that the villagers of Yaavahalli are quite right in believing that the maintenance of joint families is the *sine qua non* of agricultural success. Embedded in these chapters are many insights into children's patterns of play, the complexity of agricultural decisions, the politics of family life, and the interdependence of the sexes.

Difficulties arise when Maclachlan uses these interesting (and hard-won) insights as a springboard for his larger reflections on agricultural adaptation, sociobiology, and the evolution of human subsistence systems. Maclachlan argues for the broad validity of Boserup's view of agricultural intensification, although he makes two interesting modifications of it in light of his data from Yaavahalli. First, he suggests that instead of defining intensification as increased labor input per unit of *land*, it should be defined as an increase in "energetic output per unit of *time*" (p. 201; emphasis mine). Modified in this way, Boserup's hypothesis becomes, as Maclachlan suggests, a version of the rule formulated by the Russian economist, A. V. Chayanov, "which holds that the amount of work farm people do depends on the number of mouths they must feed."¹⁰ Second, Maclachlan argues that, instead of population growth necessarily

⁹ Hill (1982) is a comparative study of a region in West Africa, on which the author has published extensively in the past, and a *taluka* in Bangalore district, Karnataka, where the author conducted fieldwork during 1977–1978. This book contains fascinating ethnographic data on a region that is both near and similar to the locus of Maclachlan's fieldwork. Comparison of their findings will be of interest to all those scholars who are interested in village-level agricultural realities. Hill's comparative insights and her proposal concerning the existence of a "dry grain agrarian mode" constitute real

progress in the anthropological study of agriculture. Her views on a series of related problems are likely to prove controversial.

¹⁰ It is a pity that Maclachlan does not appear to be aware of the very lively debate on farm size and productivity that has been going on over the last decade in South Asia. For a recent overview of this debate, see Rudra and Sen (1980), on which his data would surely have cast some interesting light. Note that Hill (1982), Harriss (1982), and Herring (1983) all add interesting dimensions to the debate. This gap in Maclachlan's presentation is sympto-

occurring prior to intensification, in cases such as that of Yaavahalli, the digging of wells in the 1920s was probably undertaken in *anticipation* of the growth of families. This suggestion raises some problems although it makes logical sense. In the first place, Maclachlan has no hard evidence that farmers in Yaavahalli in the 1920s, in fact, had increased family growth in mind when they intensified agriculture. This is an inference based on analogy with current justifications for intensification.

But the more serious difficulty with this reconstruction of the conditions of intensification in Yaavahalli is its more general effect on Maclachlan's evolutionary approach. If the desire to have larger families is a constant (and we have no reason to doubt this), how did it happen to lead to a policy of intensification at this particular time? Here we are faced with the potential conflict between evolutionary approaches, which stress adaptation and function, and historical approaches, which stress causality and contingencies. Indeed, the largest flaw in the evolutionary approach to biocultural adaptation involves the move from the general to the specific, both spatially and temporally. The cultural policies that Maclachlan describes are obviously of some antiquity, yet he uses them to account for specific and recent developments. In addition, these policies are geographically quite widespread, yet he uses them to account for the history of one particular village. And the analysis of a nearby village, which Maclachlan treats as a contrastive case of what he calls a reproductive failure, does not clarify these issues greatly. Chapter 9, on the evolution of intensification fitness, and the appendix on sociobiology, though interesting, raise issues and questions that go beyond the purview of this article.

Whatever the larger methodological and theoretical problems of Maclachlan's biocultural approach, he does make a plausible case that a major form of insurance against drought (and famine) in the low-rainfall areas of South Asia is the intensification of agriculture through the digging of open-surface wells. But what is the price of such intensification? And who pays it? In asking these questions, we return to the questions of entitlement and enfranchisement, inequality and dependence. Clearly Maclachlan's argument applies mainly to the 60 percent of Yaavahalli's households that are self-sufficient Chayanovian households; it applies less obviously to the 20 percent of households that buy 70 percent of the labor they use, and the bottom 20 percent of households that devote 85 percent of their labor to the land of others.

Although Maclachlan devotes a section of his book to the matter of rich and poor in Yaavahalli, and although his data are intriguing, the treatment of inequality in relation to intensification is a weakness in the otherwise happy story of Yaavahalli's adaptation to conditions of drought. Maclachlan shows clearly that there is a sharp and systematic decline in the participation of women in agriculture as wealth increases: "The richest women work only one-third as many hours as the poorest women, who work as much as most men" (p. 130). Wealthy families compensate for the lower participation of their women in the labor force by hiring poor women as casual laborers. Maclachlan further notes that intensification has probably amplified income inequalities, in part "because big peasants follow Ricardian principles even when economists do not" (p. 225). There is also little doubt that, although intensification has increased the demand for casual labor, wage increases have not kept pace with inflation in food prices.

Thus one answer to the question of who pays the price of intensification is

matic of his general tendency to completely bypass the many sophisticated contributions to the economic history and the agricultural economics of

South Asia that have appeared since he did his fieldwork in 1966.

women—the women of the land-poor or landless households, whose cheap labor underwrites intensification and pays the premium for the insurance of the wealthier households against drought and famine.¹¹ Maclachlan also points out that one ancillary effect of the increases in the variance of household incomes is that the size of loans from rich to poor households in hard years probably increased, thus creating relations of indenture built on unrepayable debts. This re-traditionalization of relationships as a result of new forms of irrigation, as Maclachlan notes, is similar to what Scarlett Epstein (1962) observed in another part of Karnataka. Finally, there appears to be a significant relationship between the hunger for labor of Yaavahalli's wealthier households and the increasing incidence of landlessness in surrounding villages.

Alongside the growing income disparities accompanying intensification is a new interdependence of rich and poor via the currency of labor. Does this interdependence enhance the position of land-poor laborers in times of agricultural crisis? Are those who do not own wells—who provide their labor to those who own wells—assured of some employment in times of food crisis? Or are they, as in the Sen-Greenough model, the first to be cut adrift in times of crisis? Put another way, how closely are the productive interests of the rich tied to the employment interests of the poor in times of food scarcity? Unfortunately, in his discussion of the famine of 1965, Maclachlan does not devote the same attention to this critical question as he does to several others. The answer, in any case, is likely to vary from situation to situation, but the general question that emerges is: From the point of view of the land-poor members of rural society, is the weakening of the bonds of reciprocity that appears to accompany commercialization offset by the growth in demand for labor that also accompanies these processes? Whatever the terms of this trade-off, has it significantly improved the security of the rural poor in times of scarcity?¹²

These questions can be looked at partly in the context of Kathleen Gough's long-awaited study of a village in Tamilnadu. *Rural Society in Southeast India* is the result of fieldwork done by Gough in two villages of Thanjavur (Tanjore) district from 1951 to 1953, and the book gives readers of her articles during the last two decades a sense of the overall historical and ethnographic context within which her views are located. This volume covers the period of colonial rule and brings the story up to 1953; a second volume, covering changes in the political economy of Thanjavur between 1953 and 1976 is promised in the preface.

Gough has long been known for her strong and unequivocal Marxist analyses of rural social structure, economy, and politics in South Asia. In this book, she makes her approach and her framework explicit. The bulk of the monograph concerns a village called Kumbapettai, a few miles from the town of Thanjavur in the northwestern part of the district. The main theoretical goal of the book is to locate the political economy of the village in the contemporary world economy and to contextualize its development in a particular approach to the history of the colonial and capitalist economy of Thanjavur. In the last sections of the book, a similar (though much briefer) analysis is made of the village of Kirippur in eastern Thanjavur, largely for comparative purposes. Along with recent monographs by Djurfeldt and Lindberg

¹¹ See Meillasoux (1981) for a very different, Marxist account of the relationship between the domestic mode of agricultural communities and its articulation with the political economy of capitalism, based largely on African data and relationships.

¹² More intensive studies of the relationship

between seasonality and the commercialization of agriculture in South Asia are needed. Chambers, Longhurst, and Pacey (1981) is an important start, especially the essays in the sections on "Economic Relationships and the Seasonal Use of Labour" and "The Social Distribution of Seasonal Burdens."

(1975), Mencher (1978), and Harriss (1982), this book makes the Tamil-speaking part of South Asia the locale of four major ethnographic exercises in Marxist anthropology.

Gough's picture of the political economy of Kumbapettai rests on: a model in which the precolonialist South Indian state constitutes an example of Marx's Asiatic mode of production; a model of the colonial economy of Thanjavur in which the agrarian mode of production is viewed as having become decisively capitalist (although the relations of production in Thanjavur are still seen as involving the "formal" rather than the "real" subsumption of labor under capital); and a model of the contemporary links between caste and class which seeks to account for the differential success of the Communist movement in various parts of Thanjavur district. The core of the book is part 2, which is a rich historical and ethnographic account of the political economy of caste in Kumbapettai.

Perhaps the least satisfactory sections of the book are those having to do with Gough's account of the precolonial South Indian state. The author insists on hanging on to the widely criticized Marxian idea of an "Asiatic mode of production," even though her own analysis of the many ways in which this model does not apply to precolonial South India should have led her to abandon it. Her commitment to this sterile conception of certain kinds of premodern states is not helped by regarding temples, monasteries, kingship itself, as well as the great merchant associations, as arms of the state (p. 111), or by such outright errors as glossing the Tamil term *kattalai* (a relatively autonomous endowment organization) as a "department" of the temple. One does not have to be a proponent of the "segmentary" conception of the premodern South Indian state to find Gough's analysis unacceptable.¹³ An example of the difficulty is that although Gough takes great pains to show the penetration of state forces and agents into villages in the pre-British period, she describes precolonial Kumbapettai as having belonged to the type of social formation that Eric Wolf (in a Latin American context) christened the "closed corporate community."

Fortunately, this problematic analysis of the pre-British period does not compromise Gough's analysis of the evolution of Thanjavur (and Kumbapettai) during the colonial period. This account makes good use of both published and archival sources as well as oral histories to show how Thanjavur, like India as a whole, became a peripheral segment of the world capitalist mode of production and social formation. During the colonial period, Gough argues that there was a deterioration in the living standard of the majority, for while the population was growing rapidly "part of the district's surplus value and labor power were siphoned off in the form of migrant labor for British plantations, revenue for British government, and profits for British companies" (p. 132). As Greenough does for Bengal, Gough notes the growth in the number of agricultural laborers in relation to the agricultural work force and the total population, and, unsurprisingly, she has a view of the role of railroads that is diametrically opposed to McAlpin's. Indeed, there is no greater contrast than that between the analyses of Gough and McAlpin concerning the benefits of colonial rule. It seems clear that Thanjavur is a textbook case of the kind of region that demands Gough's type of analysis in the linkage of centers to peripheries in the colonialist capitalist mode. Thanjavur, incidentally, also supports Sen's views of the importance of looking at problems of distribution and entitlement in matters of food shortage.

At the level of the village of Kumbapettai, these transformations had paradoxical

¹³ For Burton Stein's most recent presentation of this influential model, see Stein (1980).

results. On the one hand, the external colonial economy had penetrated the village sufficiently for Gough's division of the village into petty bourgeoisie, independent commodity producers and traders, and semiproletariat to seem at least as reasonable as other more conventional caste-based classifications. Gough's Marxian terminology occasionally seems arbitrary. For example, the 5-acre cutoff between petty bourgeoisie and independent commodity producers and traders seems to conceal essentially a division between Brahman and non-Brahman land-controllers. Yet, its great virtue is that it forces the reader to contemplate the transformation of agricultural relations by market forces and the many ties between the village and external metropolitan interests. Although Gough documents the steady impoverishment of the Brahman landlord class in the last century, as well as the transformation of many patron-client relations into casual wage and tenancy relations, it is remarkable that the control of the Brahmans over all the other castes in 1952 was still largely unchallenged and the politics of the village largely involved conflict between competing Brahman lineages.

Gough also notices that the effects of colonial rule and absorption into the world economy are not wholly negative for villages such as Kumbapettai. This is especially clear in the growth of certain forms of tenancy during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which accompanied the impoverishment of Brahmans and the rise of certain non-Brahman agricultural and trading castes. This growth in tenancy also benefited previously Untouchable members of the bonded classes, many of whom had become tenants. Thus, in 1952, twenty-four out of fifty-nine, or 41 percent of the non-Brahman agriculturalists, including three middle peasants, held tenancy tenures, while 39 percent of the Adi Dravidas had some land, though usually smaller amounts, in a form of tenancy tenure. Though agricultural wages had not kept pace with inflation, and though members of the previously bonded classes, the Adi Dravidas, generally had to supplement their tenancy earnings with agricultural wage-labor, this does seem to be a significant step forward in entitlement for this group, one to which Gough gives short shrift. Nevertheless, based on Gough's village-level data, it seems probable that "Kumbapettai's people were, on average, roughly as poor if not poorer in 1952 as in 1827, while their class structure had become more polarized" (p. 288).¹⁴

Add to these findings Gough's description of the penetration of Communist ideas and organizations into the coastal village of Kirippur and their incipient arrival in Kumbapettai in 1953, and we see a pattern that has been noted before by Gough and others, namely, that "both in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala, the areas of high rainfall, density, irrigation, wet paddy, and high proportions of noncultivating landlords, Harijans and agricultural laborers, are also ones in which class struggle is most pronounced between landowners and semi-proletarians, and the communist movement or some form of class struggle is most prominent in rural areas" (p. 414).

These findings suggest a conclusion of greater generality, one that is relevant to the problems of entitlement and enfranchisement with which this article began. The villages of the wet areas of Thanjavur appear to represent, in extreme form, processes that have characterized other wet-rice areas, such as Bengal, and even dry areas, such as Maharashtra and Karnataka, in the last century. The main shift appears to have taken place in the relationship between entitlement and enfranchisement for the poorer members of rural society. In precolonial times, there seems to be evidence for the supposition that, at least in normal times, dependent classes and persons partici-

¹⁴ For a lively and recent discussion of the many problems, both empirical and methodological, involved in analyzing rural mobility and long-term differentiation, see Harriss (1982:200–4).

pated in the reciprocity economies of South Asia sufficiently to be entitled to a minimum level of food. The price paid for this form of entitlement was their disenfranchisement and, clearly, the *adimai* (slave) relationships emphasized by Gough were only the most extreme examples of such bondage.

During the last one hundred years, the widespread loosening of patron-client ties by market forces and the spread of ideas of universal franchise and of equality before the law, as well as the mobilization of the poor by political parties (however cynical their motives), have greatly increased the capability of the poor to protest their predicament publicly. In other words, the rural poor have grown more enfranchised. Yet, paradoxically, the growth of population without corresponding increases in productivity, the increase in the numbers of agricultural laborers and sharecroppers, the lack of fit between increases in agricultural wages and the cost of food, and, most of all, the erosion of the moral ties between landlords and clients have meant a loss of routine entitlements. The rural poor of South Asia, over the last century, appear to have traded a situation in which they were entitled without being enfranchised for one in which they are partially enfranchised without being securely entitled, in Sen's sense of the term.¹⁵

The ideas of enfranchisement and entitlement as they have been used here suggest a fresh approach to the problems of moral economy, peasant rationality, rural revolts, and so forth. A set of essays recently published in this journal makes it amply clear that there is no reason to choose between "moral economy" and "political economy" approaches to peasant action.¹⁶ Indeed, exclusive emphasis on one or the other is likely to lead to distortion. Looking at the relationship between discourse surrounding enfranchisement and outcomes involving entitlement in specific historical and social contexts makes it possible to keep morality and economy distinct and yet dialectically related.

What does all this have to do with the special conditions of famine? These studies of South Asia suggest that famines exaggerate, but do not completely destroy or suspend, routine relationships between enfranchisement and entitlement. In those agrarian societies that have become linked to wider market forces the terms of the relationship between enfranchisement and entitlement have altered; sudden and intense "supply" famines have given way to low-level but probably endemic "demand" famines for many of the poorer members of society. Fuller understanding of the ways in which famines twist routine moral and social arrangements will have to await more case studies, from societies of different scale, technological complexity, subsistence mode, and moral complexion. These studies from South Asia have made a significant contribution toward such a full-fledged "anthropology of entitlement."

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¹⁵ An example of this paradox is to be seen in the short-term effects of land-tenure reforms, which have been adverse for many tenants. For documentation of this paradox, as well as of the many moral, technical and scholarly problems involved in land-tenure reform in South Asia, see Herring (1983).

He also advises caution in correlating specific sets of agricultural conditions *directly* with the likelihood of the political mobilization of the rural poor.

¹⁶ See "Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies: Moral and Economic Approaches—A Symposium," *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 4:753–868.

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