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Chapter Nine

Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India: The Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour

CRISPIN N. BATES

The problem of regional underdevelopment, particularly in tribal India, has long been recognized and more than one political party has campaigned on this issue. The Indian constitution and state and central government development plans have included special clauses aimed at assisting those groups, the tribals or adivasis, who are most affected by the problem. Reports have been commissioned and investigations conducted, but rarely have these ended in constructive or relevant action.

The work of anthropologists over a number of generations since the


2 This paper is derived from the author’s Ph.D. thesis ‘Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India, 1820–1930’, (Cambridge, 1984).

3 A.B. Bardhan, The Tribal Problem in India (Communist Party of India, 1976).

4 The ‘jharkhand’ movement in Bihar takes up the same issues, though the current Assam agitation seems increasingly to be developing along communal lines.

1920s has perhaps done most to tell us of the real depth of the problem as it has affected central India. Foremost amongst them was W.V. Grigson, the aboriginal tribes enquiry officer of the government of the Central Provinces and Berar, whose 1944 report stands as the most comprehensive study available of the condition of the tribal peoples of this region at the end of the colonial period.3

There was a total of thirty-eight million scheduled tribals in India according to the 1971 census and another five million people who, by their social organisation, might also be regarded as adivasis.4 Next to Orissa, the largest concentration of tribals is to be found in Madhya Pradesh (twenty per cent of the national total), and most of these in the districts of southern M.P. which were formerly under the rule of the Central Provinces government (see map). Even today the economy of this area is only partly monetized, settlements are scattered, communications poor, and production mainly for home consumption. Historically, one of the more visible features of underdevelopment has been the progressive expropriation of tribal lands. W.V. Grigson found a fall in the average size of tribal tenant’s holdings from 13.54 to 11.60 acres over the C.P. as a whole between the 1890s and 1939-40, while tribal landlords (who enjoyed much greater freedom of transfer) were almost entirely displaced in some tahsils. Thus the number of Gond villages fell from 205 to 141 in Narsinghpur district between 1866 and 1907 and from 294 to 129 in Raipur district between 1869 and 1912, and no less than 270 villages were transferred in the Mandla district between 1868 and 1888, predominantly from tribal Gonds to mahajan-moneylenders such as Raja Gokuldas, or to members of the Kallar caste of distillers. A comparison between tribal population and tribal landholding as a percentage of district totals also

3 W.V. Grigson, The Aboriginal Problem in the C.P. and Berar (Nagpur, 1944). Ameliorative legislation of the colonial period is summarized in appendix R.

assimilation rather than on looking for the historical roots or the economic forces behind the changes in tribal society that have been observed. A step forward in the study of the dynamics of regional underdevelopment in India was made by Sachchidanand Sinha. However, Sinha has been criticized for coining the emotive term ‘internal colonialism’ and for conceiving this as purely a matter of inter-areal exploitation, arguing that Bihar would be better served if its ties with the central government were severed. This argument clearly missed the point that within Bihar the tribals are the most exploited group and that successive Bihar state governments have been amongst the most corrupt and inequalitarian of Indian legislatures. An alternative approach might be to invoke the interpretative value of a notion of a distinct form of economy peculiar to the tribal and more backward parts of India. The responsibility of the State in allowing and even encouraging underdevelopment in these backwaters of the Indian economy has been underlined by Jones and Corbridge, as well as in my own research. Besides the issue of the gradual expropriation of ancestral tribal lands, much more could be said about neglect and the abuse of authority by the colonial administration than there is room to describe. Instead, I wish to stress here the idea that as a modified survival of pre-colonial times, there also persisted a tribal form of economy which in itself acted as an obstacle to the penetration of capital and hence, indirectly, to the measures of reform proposed by capitalist-oriented colonial and post-colonial governments. This backwardness was not merely a product of limited resources, the usual neo-classical argument in favour of the theory of comparative advantage. Rather it was a matter of State, economy and society combining to produce a set of social relations of production that locked the tribal and more backward rice-growing areas of Chhattisgarh into a static non-correspondence to capitalist inputs or (possibly worse) into a negative cycle of cumulative causation, bordering on involution, as appeared to be the case in Chhattisgarh.

While the development of the Narmada valley wheat zone in the colonial period was largely State sponsored and fundamentally unbalanced, the development of the Nagpur-Berar cotton zone benefited from a more propitious class structure and land policy, and managed to attract the sort of productive investment sorely lacking from the Narmada valley. This launched it onto a virtuous cycle of cumulative causation and economic growth, but even this growth was subsidized by those resident in the tribal and rice-growing tracts who benefited, surely, in that they were able to export surplus grain and surplus labour, but who did not at the same time enjoy the economic clout to demand something nearer the full value of their product in return and to convert this into productive investment on their own land. This phenomenon perhaps goes some way toward explaining the dynamics of the continuing underdevelopment experienced in these parts. The longer these zones remained in second place and the more the developed lowlands advanced ahead of them, the more locked they became into a subordinate position, dependent on the crumbs falling from the tables of their richer neighbours. Migrant labour was a key element in this relationship as it became integral to the competitive growth of the wheat and cotton zones. In this sense it was qualitatively more significant than the parallel development of a trade in cheap grain, which was important to the cotton-growing area, but represented a small advance as far as the rice zone was concerned, which was only partly monetized and could equally well have continued to export at the low levels of the early nineteenth century when the only necessity was the need to raise cash to pay the government revenue demand. Few Chhattisgarhii farmers were broken by the decline in this outlet for surplus grain during the depression of the 1930s. This was in marked contrast with the nature of migrant labour. As can be demonstrated from survey and cost of production statistics, migrant labour amongst other sources of off-farm income was a necessity...
as far as the average smallholding Chhattisgarhi and tribal cultivator was concerned, and the loss of this income could have literally fatal consequences. Furthermore, the phenomenon of cheap, migrant labour not only helps explain the articulation of developed and underdeveloped economies (as has been described in a number of studies of the southern African economy), but it also explains the curiosity of the development that did take place in the wheat and cotton zones of central India, namely the speed with which it progressed (and failed), despite the low average density of population for much of our period, the distance of central India from the main export markets, and the absence of the sort of major state investment that was to be seen in the Punjab.

The nature of the problem can best be understood if we look at the modest output of raw cotton in the year 1890-91 in Berar and the Central Provinces. This came to a total of 3,308,000 maunds, or 2,264,640,000 lbs. Most of the crop was reaped by women and children. This being a labour-intensive business, an active woman was able to gather only about thirty lbs of cotton in a day, meaning that a minimum of 8,821,333 labour-days were required to collect the entire crop. This compares with a total population in the cotton zone of Nagpur, Wardha, Amraoti, Akola, Yeotmal, Buldana and Nimar districts of 4,249,242. Approximately one-third of this population were agricultural labourers, a total of approximately 1,373,000 individuals, whilst a sizeable proportion of the remainder (approximately 671,000) dwelt in towns and cities and were thus unlikely to assist much in agriculture. The labour requirements of cotton then had to compete with the combined output of 22,523,000 maunds of other produce being cultivated, and this at a time when cotton covered only about thirty per cent of the Gross Cultivated Area in the cotton zone as a whole. The demand for labour is thus likely to have increased in proportion as the cotton area rose to forty-four per cent of G.C.A. by the 1920s.

A similar situation presented itself in the Narmada valley wheat zone, where the population density was lower than in the cotton zone (about 140 per square mile on average in 1921 compared with 170 per square mile in the cotton zone) and less than thirteen per cent of the total population in the centre of the zone were classed as agricultural labourers for most of our period. The consequence was that as late as 1927, long past the hey-day of the wheat trade, the total number of migrants flocking into the valley to assist in the harvest operations was estimated at 120,000. The scale of this migration must have been proportionately much greater in the 1880s, when wheat exports and acreages were 340 and twenty-five per cent higher, respectively. The 1901 census described the wheat migration as follows:

... in the Jubbulpore haveli there is an immigration of Chaitharas, or those who come in Chait (March-April) to cut the wheat crop. Year by year... the Gond comes down from the Rewa hills to the Lodhi...
in the haveli, the same Gond to the same Lodhi and from father to son. Till the crop is ready to be cut, he occupies himself in roofing the house, building up walls, and doing any other odd job that may be required. Then he assists in the reaping of the crop, and when it is threshed and harvested, he returns home, having received his food while he is there, and taking across his shoulders as much grain as he can get into a kawa1 load.11

Of the wheat labourers, or Chaitharas, who came to assist in the harvest of 1921, 38,857 were enumerated as having been born outside of the province. The census was taken in mid-March, and caught a number of districts at the beginning of the wheat harvest. In Hoshangabad 18,812 were recorded as having arrived for the wheat harvest, in Jabalpur 14,862. In Hoshangabad this amounted to twenty-two per cent of the labouring population of the district, 12.5 per cent in Jabalpur. Though these figures will have been affected by the bad harvests of that year, it was also the case that many more tribals from the Satpuras had yet to arrive.

As early as 1867 the settlement officer of Hoshangabad district had described the migration as rather like that of the Irish crossing ‘the channel’ for the English harvest, and many migrants from the Central Indian States penetrated as far as eastern Berar where they occupied themselves weeding and picking during the autumn and winter and either stayed for the spring harvest in Berar (where as many as 9,000 were enumerated in 1911), or returned via the Narmada valley, where the wheat harvest gave them employment until they returned home to prepare their own fields for the ensuing agricultural season.12 The Jabalpur settlement officer in the late 1880s wrote that ‘The Gonds flock with their families at the spring harvest time to the wheat fields of the “Haveli” to eke out their subsistence by working as labourers’, and claimed that their earnings gave them food sufficient to life from until the commencement of the rainy season.13 Jabalpur farmers in fact often grew a crop of the inferior kodon grain specifically in order to pay the wages of these labourers—the wheat crop itself being far too valuable to give away in grain wages—and here as well as in Narsinghpur the farmers were said to rely entirely on migrant labour for the embanking of their fields, work which was done at rates much below those demanded by local labourers.14 From Balaghat district there were a number of reports which spoke of labour shortage due to ‘the annual exodus in March and April from the north of the district to the wheat tracts of Seoni and Mandla’, and to the fact that the tracts of Katangi and Langi sent large numbers of persons to Berar every year for the cotton picking after Dasahra. Wages were far higher than in Balaghat and it was noted that many of the ‘jharis (or jungle folk)’ stayed up until the rains in pursuit of casual labour.15 In Saugor, Damoh, Seoni, Mandla and Chhindwara, the annual migration for harvest operations was common enough to be regarded as rozgar, or part of the daily avocation, and in Damoh, at the time of the 1891 census, it was reported that ‘the forest tribes . . . have actually decreased, due, it would appear, to the drain made on the southern or hilly part of the district for labourers to reap the harvest in Jubulpore.16

Except when a specific question was asked about labour migration in the census, as occasionally it was, it is not always possible to distinguish between permanent and periodic migration, especially since labourers might not stay merely for a season, but for a whole year or even longer, in which case they were more likely to be enumerated among the permanent workforce of a district. The C.P. and Berar, being traditionally an under-populated area, had a large number of immigrants. Estimates in 1931 based on a plateau district where there were no massive movements of population suggested that four per cent was a

15 Balaghat D.G., p. 73.
fairly normal proportion of casual migrants compared to the total population. Estimates for many Deccan districts gave combined totals of permanent and casual migration at around the same level, while at the all-India level roughly ninety-one per cent on average were shown by censuses between 1881 and 1931 as having been born in the district in which they were enumerated, six per cent being born in adjacent districts and only three per cent having migrated further. The central Indian censuses, however, give totals of casual and permanent migration significantly in excess of this (see Table 1).

Amongst other explanations of short-distance migration across borders, marriage is usually considered of importance, the bride commonly travelling to the bridegroom’s home over a distance of several miles. There were, indeed, a greater number of females recorded as having migrated from Hyderabad and Bombay Presidency into the Berars in 1921 and 1931, but something like one in six of married males in Berar must have married a girl from Hyderabad or Bombay presidency if the marriage explanation were to carry any great weight. More likely this imbalance was tied in with the labour requirements of agriculture in each region. Occupational statistics demonstrated a preponderance of females, at a level around seventy-four per cent, being employed in cotton spinning and other aspects of cotton processing. They also usually constituted around sixty-six per cent of the total number of field labourers and were strongly favoured when it came to employment at cotton harvest time. Only in longer-distance migration and migration to the big industrial centres were males substantially in the majority.17

The 1931 census described two main streams of migration by that date as follows:

The one comes in a southwesterly direction from the U.P. and the Central India Agency States, which is caused by the general poverty and periodic scarcity in Central India and the lure of good wages and opportunities for obtaining work in the industrial centres of the C.P. The other comes in a westerly direction from the Chhattisgarh Plain

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**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Those born elsewhere in C.P. as percentage of district population</th>
<th>Those born beyond C.P.</th>
<th>Total immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1881</td>
</tr>
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<td>Wheat zone:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saugor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damoh</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jabalpur</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoshangabad</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narsinghpur</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton zone:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagpur</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wardha</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amraoti</td>
<td>9'</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akola</td>
<td>7'</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buldana</td>
<td>5'</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeotmal</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>21'</td>
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<td>Rice zone:</td>
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<td>Raipur</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal zone:</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhindwara</td>
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<td>Drtul</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaghat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanda</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ those born elsewhere in, or beyond, Berar not C.P.
* the figures for 1931 are for the amalgamated province of C.P. and Berar.

SOURCE: Berar, C.P., and C.P. and Berar decennial Census Reports.
division and Bhandara district, which is caused by the poverty of the not very fertile, land-locked plain and periodic failure of crops in the same region, as also the prevalence of a higher standard of wages in the developed portion of the province.18

A survey of the cotton industry labour force at Jubbulpore, Nagpur, Hinganghat, Amraoti and Akola revealed that in fact the largest portion of migrants (thirty-three per cent) came from Chhattisgarh. Similarly, the Berar censuses of the nineteenth century revealed that roughly forty-three per cent of immigrants came from the east, thirty per cent from Hyderabad and eighteen per cent from Bombay presidency, while the 1921 census showed the largest imbalance in migration in the Chhattisgarh districts of Raipur and Bilaspur, which had a total emigration of 322,805 and an immigration of 188,073. Among this total were many out of the 5,000 per annum in the 1900s who went to Assam to work on the tea plantations. But most returned after working out their contracts, and even at its peak, 1918-19, migration to the tea plantations took no more than 31,000 from the Central Provinces as a whole. By comparison, the Berar districts, which were less than two hundred miles away, had a total number of immigrants of 473,559 and 181,155 emigrants recorded in 1921.19

Between 1911 and 1921 there is evidence of a definite increase in the number of emigrants from Chhattisgarh to the Maratha plain, partly as a result of bad harvests and the influenza epidemic of 1918 but doubtless also affected by the increased demand from the cotton zone for labour in this period; 27,000 residents of Berar were recorded as having been born in Chhattisgarh in 1911, and 37,000 in 1921, this being over half of the total number of immigrants from the east. In the nineteenth century this total had been running at the level of around 200,000 plus.20 In 1931 emigration statistics were not included in the census, but the total number of immigrants in Berar had increased to 449,576. If we assume a mortality rate of forty per thousand on the immigrant population of 1921, this means there may have been as many as 215,000 new arrivals over the period 1921-31: possibly an exaggeration, but the figures give an idea of the continuing scale of the migration phenomenon, and this despite improving employment opportunities in tribal areas and in Chhattisgarh with the construction of irrigation works and the Raipur to Vizianagram railway, Chhattisgarhi irrigation works in 1927-28, to take just one example, employing 8,600 labourers, most of them recruited locally.21

The migrant was not always landless, but typically a small-holding tribal or Chhattisgarhi rice cultivator holding only an acre or two of land.22 For the Chhattisgarhi the prospects were admirably summarized in the late 1920s by Chhotelal Verma, the Bilaspur settlement officer:

In a district like Bilaspur, where the opportunities for agricultural operations are limited only to a part of the year, on account of a large area being devoted to only one crop, paddy, and the pressure of population falling heavy on land, small tenants, whose number is fairly large, take to various other occupations in the non-working season; those residing in the proximity of Government and Zamindari forests engage themselves in extracting and carting forest produce; others find employment on the irrigation works and Public Works Department roads; some do carting of grain, while the more adventurous Satnami emigrates temporarily after each harvest to Calcutta, Kalimati and other centres of trade, to obtain the best market for his labour and returns with the beginning of the year to resume agricultural operations. It is not an uncommon sight to see villages denuded of a large part of their population during January, February, March, April and May each year, on account of the temporary exodus.23

Unlike in Maharashtra, where the kharif rice harvest tended to be a little later, in Chhattisgarh harvesting began around the 15th of September and was in all cases finished before the 15th of December. There was no other major crop or winter rice to

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18 Census of India, 1931, vol. XII, pt I, p. 100.
20 This was described as a veritable tide in 1870s—see Berar Gazetteer, p. 219.
22 Memo. by C.E. Low, director of agriculture and industries, C.P. Wage Census, 1912.
be sown, so until the season for sowing came round again, in the second week of June, there was little work to be done. Hence the attractiveness of the so-called 'jhari' migration to the Berars, helping with the cotton picking, which started in November, or helping with the later wheat harvest in the Narmada valley, which was over rather more quickly, between the second week of February and the month of April. The slum suburbs of Hamalpura, Masanganj and Ratanganj around the town of Amrataoti were inhabited very largely by such migrants, and big and small settlements such as these were scattered all about the towns and villages of Nagpur and Berar, Nagpur city itself growing at a rate of 1.4 per cent per annum in the late nineteenth century.

Amongst the Gonds and Bhumias of Eastern Mandla, Stephen Fuchs has described three categories of tribal labourers. These began with the barsi or barkhi, who was a permanent field servant who worked for a whole year, often in order to pay off a debt. Then there was the harwaha or ploughman, usually employed for just one season at a time and paid in kind, though not enough to feed his family as well. A survey of nineteen villages this category outnumbered the former by three to one. Finally there was the bani (banihar) or occasional labourer, who was paid in kind on a daily basis. Fuchs commented that their numbers were not great, but that yearly epidemics among cattle reduced many to this status, from which it was extremely difficult to regain the position of tenant or landowner. Similar categories amongst tribal labourers were also described for other of the Satpura plateau districts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Balaghat the permanent farm servants were known as barsias, and servants hired on a monthly basis were called mahinhias, a similar nomenclature also being found in the Betul district where the terms harwaha and barsalia were used to describe the permanent servant, mahantia those employed by the month. Banihar or rozina being the names for daily labourers. In Seoni, farm servants were sometimes engaged on a balia or share basis at a rate of one-fifth of the crop, this form of payment being even more prevalent in Chhattisgarh, the large number of smallholdings here making the roles of tenant and labourer several times interchangeable—crop-sharing labourers here going by the name of saonjia. Step by step, more and more Gond cultivators in the Satpura tribal belt were being pushed into these categories of temporary labouring as was explained by R.A.B. Chapman, the Seoni district commissioner in 1906:

The Gond appears unable to retain the good land in his possession and as soon as his holding begins to produce anything like valuable crops, he falls back into the position of a farm-labourer and his fields too often pass to others to whom he has become indebted. The bulk of the Gond population are labourers ... Till lately they were always paid in kind, but with the great rise which has lately taken place in the value of wheat, there is a tendency now for payments in kind to be commuted into cash. At the time of cutting of the wheat harvest, there is always a great movement among the labouring classes. Like the hop-pickers at home, whole families will travel long distances to places where plenty of harvesting is going on ... A considerable number ... have emigrated.

24 This skewed structure of demand for labour in the rice zone was one of the factors which also made groundnut an unwelcome addition, despite the efforts of the C.P. agriculture department, and linseed so popular, easily fitting, as it did, into the slack season of the year. Census of India 1921, vol. XI, pt I, p. 26. Wardha D.G., p. 137.
25 Amrataoti D.G., p. 359. L.R.S. Nagpur 1890–95, p. 21. Mr Balkrishna L. Bapat, Deputy Educational Inspector, commented: 'As proof of the gradually increasing demand for labour for agricultural purposes, one may easily observe clusters of little houses which during the last fifteen years or so, have grown up on the outskirts of every village in the mofussil. These are the habitations of immigrant labourers who once came seeking labour for a season, but who, finding enough of what they sought for, and probably, on their terms, have permanently settled in the provinces. In some cases a hundred families of such immigrants have thus been added to the labouring population of a village.' (Dufferin) Enquiry into the Condition of the Agricultural Classes of India (Calcutta, 1888), pp. 40–1.

27 Balaghat D.G., pp. 192–4; Betul D.G., p. 152; Chhindwara D.G., p. 124.
29 Seoni D.G., pp. 113–14.
Estimating the remuneration received by these labourers is a difficult matter as the sources are numerous, ill-defined and sometimes contradictory, but there is no doubt that higher wages were obtainable in the lowlands, especially in the cotton zone after 1891, than was available either in Chhattisgarh or the tribal belt. The C.P. administration reports, the series of *Prices and Wages in India* (from 1873), volume B of the district gazetteers and the wages census conducted after 1910 suggest that wages in the Chhattisgarh district of Bilaspur in cash or kind were equivalent to about one anna six pice a day, or much less in rural areas where food and clothing only might be provided—this was about half the rate being paid for unskilled labour in the Nagpur—Berar plain or the Narmada valley in the 1870s and 1880s. By 1910 the wages cited in the C.P. wage census for the principal tahsil of each district were in Bilaspur slightly increased to two annas a day, when paid in cash, but were most often paid in kind, the three seers of grain received being worth no more than one anna six pice. Wages in the central Narmada valley, in Hoshangabad, were unchanged at four annas a day, whereas in the Berar district of Akola, wages as high as five annas might be paid, or six seers of grain worth six annas. By 1923 wages everywhere had doubled, but this was a generally lagged response to grain price inflation. Three seers of grain were still the standard wage in Bilaspur, but now worth three to four annas. In the central Narmada valley, cash wages were higher (from four to ten annas), but grain payments were roughly the same, indeed cash wages would have been lower but for the exceptional demand for labourers to assist the neighbouring cotton cultivators in Nimar. In tribal areas only half these rates might be paid. In Berar, though, the standard wage for a number of years ranged from five annas to as high as twelve annas a day.

However, although wages in the lowlands were higher, it is difficult to find evidence that they increased at a rate anything like comparable to the growth of agricultural surpluses and the extension of cultivation, particularly when rises in the cost of living are taken into account. In Nagpur the cash value of the wages of agricultural labour was thought to be Rs 5 a month in 1873—evidently a hangover from the American Civil War Cotton boom. In 1881 this fell to Rs 4, remaining at this level until 1891. Thereafter it rose to Rs 5 again, reaching Rs 5–12 by 1903. At this date the Nagpur commissioner was able to comment on a real improvement in the labourer’s position, but the increase was partly due to the fatal impact of famine at the turn of the century and after 1905 the upward trend ceased, the commissioner of Amraoti expressing his belief that wages in Berar by 1910 were little changed by comparison with 1870, though increasingly paid in cash, rather than in kind.

Women were preferred for cotton picking simply because they could be paid less, it usually taking three to five pickings completely to clear a crop. At the first picking the wage was two annas per diem and at the second and third it was the money equivalent of a wage in kind, roughly four to four and one half annas per every maund of fifteen seers (three hundred lbs) picked. After this wages fell and at the fourth and fifth picking only two annas a day were earned. *Juar* and other crops were sown by men at a rate of pay of from four to six annas a day, cutting, stacking and threshing being done on contract by men on a basis of two to two and one half kuros (one kuro=sixteen seers) for every *tiffin* (four acres) reaped, or sometimes twenty-four seers for every khandi of 320 seers harvested. The ears were separated from the stalks by women being paid a basketful of ears (value about four and a half annas) per day. J.B. Fuller in his review of progress in the Central Provinces in 1892 also noted a rise in wages in the cotton zone, but he was less sanguine about the rates paid in the Narmada valley for the harvesting of grain, which could go as low as twenty lbs per acre harvested, compared with thirty to forty lbs (the minimum contract) in the Nagpur country. The permanent farm servant he then believed to be paid 1,440 lbs per annum compared with 1,200 lbs sixty

32 The preference for female labour was also unchanged since the American Civil War—see *Berar Gazetteer*, p. 68.
years before at the time of Richard Jenkins’ report on the Nagpur kingdom. By the 1890s, he estimated, something like fifty-seven per cent of the wage-earning classes were dependent on daily hire. This class had generally lost ground ‘in localities where agriculture has become ancillary to trade, and custom and sentiment are sacrificed to profit. Chief among these localities is the Hoshangabad district, where a casual labourer now receives from four and a quarter to five and a quarter lbs. a day, against six and a quarter lbs. at last settlement.’ By way of confirmation, the rate for unskilled labour hired on the railway between Burhanpur and Jabalpur was quoted as being typically as low as two to four annas a day in 1888, and this was a peak year for the wheat export trade.

Despite the doubling of nominal wages by 1923, compared with their level in 1910, this does not compare well with a seventy-eight per cent increase in the wholesale price of wheat and other goods in the Nagpur market, prices which peaked at more than two and a half times the 1910 level between 1917 and 1921 and again at twice their 1910 level in 1924–25. And these were the years when cotton cultivators in the Nagpur—Berar plain were on average making ‘profits’ of about Rs 1000 per annum. It was also the case that whenever the demand for agricultural exports slackened, the agricultural labourers were the first to feel the pinch, wages falling first in areas (such as the cotton zone) where they had formerly risen most. Typically, employers would only take on groups of labourers on contract whenever there was a slump, the point being that these contracts specified a piece rate rather than payment by head or by the number of hours worked, thus ensuring the farmer an increased return for his money. When famine struck the conditions of employment changed more rapidly:

The ordinary field labourer depends a great deal on harvest earnings, and if one locality does not offer harvest wages he will move to another which does. The two great movements of the labourers of the province . . . are those of the people from the south of the province to Berar in November—December to reap the cotton and jujar crops, and the descent of the inhabitants of the upland tracts in March—April to reap the wheat crop of the Nerbudda valley. These movements are in ordinary times most salutary; but when famine comes and there are short crops to be reaped, the migration of labourers is a source of much embarrassment. In 1896 this exodus of people from the Wain-ganga Districts to Berar in search of harvesting employment resulted in the districts of Wardha and Nagpur being overrun with crowds of wanderers, some pressing on to their imaginary land of promise, others struggling back empty handed and starving unable to support themselves or to return to their homes.

While the major landowning caste of the Brahmins experienced a 0.3 per cent increase in their population over this period between 1891 and 1910, the Gonds suffered a 77.3 per cent decline, and the Mahars (or Mehras), a traditional labouring caste in Nagpur and the Narmada valley, suffered a six per cent decline in their numbers. This was partly due to local differences in the severity of famine: Betul was especially badly hit with the Korku tribal population being cut by forty-three per cent (either by death or migration), and the rice-growing Bilaspur district was also badly affected, the almost complete absence of decent government famine relief in some of these backward areas greatly exacerbating the problem. Berar, by contrast, did not experience anything like the extent of crop failure seen elsewhere.

However independent of the vagaries of charity and the local harvest, cultivators in the tribal and rice-growing areas suffered in addition from the failure of harvests in other tracts since migrant labour was an integral part of their subsistence base.39

Hence R.H. Craddock reported:

The aborigines of Betul...lost not only the millet crops, but also their harvest earnings, for there was no cotton or juar worth mentioning in the neighbouring tracts of Berar. The enormous labouring population of Chhattisgarh, most of whom are usually paid for their work in a share of the produce, received nothing; the labourers of the Wainganga rice districts had little or no transplanting or weeding to carry them through the rains and no rice crop to harvest at the end. The cultivators of these same rice tracts in only comparatively few cases had their seed returned to them... At a recent census taken of two crowded works in Raipur, twenty per cent were cultivators.40

Distress amongst the Chaitharas was similarly observed in the Lakhnadon tahsil in Seoni district, and again when the harvest failed in Jabalpur, Saugor and Damoh districts in 1928 and 1929.41 Although wage rates sometimes rose as a result of famine, the effect was comparatively short-lived and would hardly compensate a labouring family for the loss of one or more of its earning members. Likewise, the onset of depression in the world economy after 1929 hit the demand for cotton, and the migrant labourer in Berar was among the first to be affected. The Buldana district commissioner noted a 'substantial reduction' in the movements of labourers and observed that many families who had migrated from the Bombay Presidency and Hyderabad, and whose arrival was recorded in the 1921 census, were now moving back again, while the Wardha district commissioner noted the return of migrants to the forests of Chanda.42 By 1939 the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research report on costs of production revealed the wages of hired male and female labour in Berar (excluding children) to be as low as Rs 2.8, rising to a maximum of Rs 7.5 per month—rates not very different from those paid in 1860-70. However, during the years of depression, 1930-41, the cost of living had also tumbled dramatically, one index of the cost of living of industrial workers in Nagpur and Jabalpur indicating that price levels had fallen back to the level at which they had been in 1914, the cost of living staying at this level for most of the decade. To those in employment this was a great boon after the years of astronomical inflation they had experienced in between, but work was short and wages were cut and if one looked at the total income of the smallholding family, used to every member, men, women and children, contributing something, it is likely that we would find an overall deterioration in their condition.43

**Conclusion**

Economic growth in the wheat and cotton zones thus clearly extended the employment opportunities of those resident in the more backward tribal and rice-growing areas, but the rates of remuneration do not seem to have been high enough in them-

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40 R.A.C. Procs., 3 February 1900, no. 5, pp. 40-1, R.H. Craddock to Sec. to G. of I. During these years of distress migration to Assam also greatly increased, 28.2 per cent of recruits for Assam coming from the C.P. in 1896, 37.7 per cent in 1900 and 39.2 per cent in 1901—this compares with only 5.6 per cent in 1894, (children are excluded from these totals). See Annual Reports on Inland Emigration and Annual Reports on Labour Immigration into Assam (Calcutta), and Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (London, 1931) (P.P. 1930 21. XI. p. 571, Cmnd. 3883).
selves to dent in any way the underdevelopment from which they suffered. It is, of course, unproven what the course of development might have been in tribal central India in the complete absence of this relationship; however, there are other aspects beyond straight remuneration, such as the expropriation of tribal lands by non-tribals, the destruction of forests and the disintegration of social cohesion and formerly effective methods of land control, suggesting that the interaction of developed and underdeveloped went beyond passive symbiosis and had a number of positively damaging effects. In explaining these effects the notion of a distinct tribal form of economy, rooted in an ideology of egalitarianism and which was peculiar to the more backward tribal and rice-growing areas, has a useful role to play. The idea of a conflict of rationalities between this tribal economic system and that of the lowlands, with which the capitalist-oriented colonial government was most at ease, helps explain the failure of colonial administration in these areas, a failure which might otherwise be put down to wilful racial chauvinism. This failure manifested itself in the progressive marginalization of cultivators and the creation of a dependence on migrant labour, despite the presence of other positive developments in the tribal and rice zones, such as the growth of population, the improvement of communications and an increase of trade. The procedure of breaking down the whole of central India into discrete agro-economic zones, analysing the relationship between developed and backward zones as well as the different patterns of growth in each, and the construction of a notion of a tribal form of economy, is also useful because it avoids cliched essentialist debate—such as whether Indian agriculture is locked in a state of Semi-Feudalism (a la Bhaduri), or languishes as a peripheral social formation within capitalism viewed as a world system (a la Frank). Such categories of analysis are implicit in many a political programme or research proposal, but there are clearly other exploitations beyond the inter-class and the international and these must be looked at afresh if history is to throw off the role of ‘sweeper’ to the social sciences. In the case of central India the scale of migrant labour we have described here is clearly an important phenomenon of inter-regional exploitation which must be taken into account in the historiography of the region.

As far as the more developed wheat and cotton zones of the lowlands were concerned the presence of backward reserves of cheap grain and labour proved an advantage, assisting rapid growth that otherwise might not have taken place. Colonial land policy itself had very different effects here, dependent partly on the pre-existing class structure of each zone. This point illustrates the second main theme in my research which has concerned the relative merits of what may be loosely termed demand-side and supply-side economics in explaining the historical experience of development. It can clearly be shown that the development of the Narmada valley wheat zone was fundamentally stymied by the colonial government’s encouragement of high landlordism in the shape of the malguzar. The soil, lesser tenancy and migrant labourers were over-exploited and the absence of any reinvestment caused the late nineteenth-century wheat boom to grind to a halt after only a few decades. The lower level of differentiation among the peasantry of the cotton-growing Nagpur—Berar region, however, made it far less amenable to a malguzari settlement policy and the results were more propitious. There were also far greater reserves of capital within the credit system due to the presence of princely kingdoms which held together key mercantile groups during the ‘time of troubles’ in the early nineteenth century. In the area of Berar there was a fairly successful ryotwari settlement which put ownership within the reach of most cultivators, thus also assisting the flow of capital, and in Nimar district a passable ryotwari system was established out of the remains of the discredited malguzari policy. Markets here were not ‘free’ but regulated by the State, thus encouraging a more competitive credit system and allowing greater opportunity to cultivators, who learnt to profit by leasing-in and by investment in improved cultivating techniques, and had less need to rely on depressed wages and supra-economic coercion—as was the case in the Narmada valley. The result was a steady growth which was brought to an end not by natural calamity or internal contradictions but primarily by the onset of depression in the international economy...
after 1930. Thus although tribals, migrants and other labourers were generally in a structurally disadvantaged position, they could be more or less efficiently exploited depending on the local character of the economy with which they were involved. Clearly some did have the chance to improve themselves (as well as others) by migrating to the cotton zone, but by contrast the super-exploitation of the wheat zone proved in the long run to be of little advantage to anyone.

In sum, therefore, any combination of evidence regarding solely resource availability and the growth of opportunities for risk-taking via the development of markets and communications remains unsatisfactory if we are to account for the differential nature of economic growth in different agro-economic zones, as well as the relationship between developed and underdeveloped regional economies. Empirical evidence of changing patterns of distribution (described in other discourses as 'the social relations of production' or simply 'class structure'), and particularly evidence regarding the supply and mobilization of labour—itself a consequence of changing patterns of land control and surplus appropriation—must be an essential ingredient in any economic history that wishes to advance beyond the mere rhetoric of received theory. Above all, the regional character of economic development must be taken into account. It is always possible to find local models of economic success under colonial rule, but no theory of class and development can be adequately constructed without due attention to such wider phenomena as the growth of inter-regional migration and trade.

Annotated Bibliography

This bibliography is anything but comprehensive. It supplements references in the Introduction and Chapters, and it is designed for students and scholars who want to follow up on themes presented in this book. It groups entries according to themes and categories that are useful in research.

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