Articles

Rural Bases of Political Power in South Asia

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Ten years ago an American liberal scholar, echoing a sentiment widely held in India as well as in the Western world, wrote: "The Indian democracy can claim with some pride to speak for its four hundred million citizens. The most remarkable feature of this democracy is that more than three hundred million of its citizens are rural, largely peasants with little if any education..." (Nicholas 1963: 17). That was said with reference to three general elections based on universal adult franchise that had been held. The results of these elections were no less remarkable, for in every case the Congress Party demonstrated its overwhelming domination of the Indian political scene. In later years, with the resurgence of radical politics and some revolutionary challenges to reactionary regimes in many countries of the Third World, and, against that background, the temporary and partial set-back experienced by the Congress Party in the Fourth General Election in 1967, the "New Mandarins" are obsessed as much with the problem of "Political Order in Changing Societies" (Huntington 1968) as an earlier generation was with the celebration of Indian democracy in the climate of the cold war. The new anxiety to legitimate authoritarian solutions to the 'problem of order' and the suppression of popular forces notwithstanding, the Congress Party and Indian "democracy" proved their resilience and secure bases of power by the renewed success of the Congress in the Fifth General Election of 1971.

The election was accompanied by 'malpractices' and 'violence, intimidation and fraud'; though hardly for the first time (Puri 1972). Repression was particularly severe in regions such as West Bengal where the Left presented a serious challenge. Repression alone, however, cannot explain the persistence of Congress Party dominance in the electoral process in India. For an adequate explanation it is necessary that we examine the social bases of its power at the grass roots level and the manner in which that power at the base is articulated through various channels with the central authority. An examination of the structural bases of its power raises questions about the meaning and significance of institutions of 'representative government' in a peasant society such as that of India. By the same token, questions arise also about the hopes of parties such as the Communist Party of India to bring about a social revolution through the ballot box and the pre-conditions that must be realised to enable the peasant to engage in effective political action in his own behalf.

In Pakistan rhetoric about 'representative democracy' was hardly to be expected from members of the first Constituent Assembly who were indirectly elected and were increasingly isolated from grass root political support and were dependent for their political existence on a ruling oligarchy. They constituted an impotent body whose significance was little more than a semblance of popular mandate and legitimacy that they seemed to confer on the ruling oligarchy. Rather, it was the leader-
ship of the political opposition that invoked liberal values of representative government and demanded a general election which was denied them. Their concern perhaps was less with the fate of the 'masses' in whose name they spoke and rather more with the prospects of sharing positions of political power through mobilisation of electoral support; some who were freshly elected in the Fifties were not slow to demonstrate that. When dismissing politicians from office, Ayub Khan could, for a time, carry conviction when he claimed that he had assumed power in order to emancipate the people from corrupt and self-seeking politicians who were greedy for the fruits of office and had misled the illiterate and ignorant peasant, the honest son of the soil, by their demagogy.

The system of 'Basic Democracy' which was introduced by Ayub Khan in 1959-62 substituted indirect election of the President and National and Provincial Assembly members by an electoral college of 80,000 'Basic Democrats' for direct universal adult franchise. The 'Basic Democrats' were themselves elected by village constituencies of about 1000 persons each. The system, it was argued, was designed to protect the peasant from political demagogues who exploited them. The peasant voter, it was argued, would no longer have to make a choice from amongst candidates whom he did not know personally who sought his vote in large parliamentary constituencies. Instead he would be asked to choose a person from his own village whom he would know personally and to whom he could entrust the task of acting on his behalf in higher level political arenas — the assumption being that the person so elected would be able to act more knowledgeably and with greater wisdom than his constituent in the village. The system of 'Basic Democracy' very soon became so notorious for its abuse and corruption that even its author could not refrain from pointing this out, and the system quickly fell into disrepute in the country and, with a time lag, (and after a decent interval after the fall of Ayub Khan) even among the 'New Mandarins' who had inspired and applauded it. But the system, as long as it lasted, had proved itself to be eminently suited to manipulation by those in command of power at the Centre. With the proclamation of Martial Law by Yahya Khan, the system of 'Basic Democracy', universally hated — but not least by the politicians — was abolished. That was followed by Pakistan's first General Election in 1970 and the dramatic and tragic events that followed it. In the provinces of what is now Pakistan, Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party won a majority of seats but mainly from the two provinces of Sind and Punjab. Bhutto now claims to rule the country on the strength of a popular mandate; the values of 'representative democracy' are once again invoked to legitimise the power of the ruling oligarchy.

On the surface Pakistan's political experience appears to have been one of persistent instability — one of a struggle for power resulting not only in a succession of governments but also in new constitutional arrangements none of which survived for long, interrupted by interludes of Martial Law. That picture contrasts sharply with that of the uninterrupted power of the Congress Party (at the Centre) and the continuity of its Constitutional basis. However, on closer examination there is a striking continuity in the alignment of social forces that make up Pakistan's ruling oligarchy and in that constellation of forces the landlords of (West) Pakistan have occupied a central position. Their class power is manifested above all in their ability to resist pressures for land reform (which has been only symbolic in its actual impact) and
many other measures which would affect their interests. On the other hand, they have successfully pressed for policies which have extended their privileges, at the expense of the rest of the community. Their presence at the centre of power is symbolised by (e.g.) Malik Khuda Baksh Bucha who has served under successive regimes, as West Pakistan's Minister for Agriculture under Ayub Khan's regime and now as Adviser to Bhutto on agricultural policy. Though by no means the only representative of the landowning classes who is ensconced in the ruling oligarchy (Bhutto himself is a big landowner) Bucha has proved himself to be, above all, their uncompromising and effective champion. Neither direct universal adult franchise nor the indirect electoral system of 'Basic Democracy' nor indeed the intervals of Martial Law, have significantly affected the ability of the landowners to secure their class representation in Government and the effective implementation of policies suited to their class interests notwithstanding the effects of such policies on other classes including the mass of the peasantry.

These facts invite a closer examination of the rural bases of political power on which the system of representative democracy is based. A pervasive assumption that underlies the explanation and legitimation of institutions and processes of representative government in such peasant societies is that of a direct plebiscitary relationship between political leaders and peasants viewed as individual citizens, acting freely in the political arena on the basis of their individual and private evaluations of the political leaders and parties and the options that are open to them. That is an assumption that is not borne out by closer examination of the complex links between political leaders operating at the national level and members of local communities. Our object in the present paper is to examine certain aspects of modes of articulation of power between the level of the local community and the national level and the implications of the alignment of power and its modes of articulation both for evaluation of representative democracy as well as for a strategy of acquiring state power through the ballot box as a mandate and means for initiating a social revolution, as for example, is proposed by the Communist Party of India.

Power in the Local Community

It is our argument that the threshold of the village marks a critical boundary in the articulation of power relationships but also that the structure of power within the village community derives not only from the economic and political structure of the community itself but also from relationships that are established through structures of power and economic structures that encapsulate the village community. On the other hand, the larger polity in turn rests on its base in the rural power structure. By that we do not suggest that power in the national polity derives exclusively, or even predominantly from its rural base. The national polity represents a constellation of power not only of the landowning class but also the indigenous and 'metropolitan' bourgeoisies together with bureaucratic-military oligarchies which mediate their interests but also enjoy a relative autonomy with respect to each of them. (Alavi 1972). What we do wish to emphasise, in the context of the issues that are raised in this paper, is the importance for the national polity of its rural power base for maintaining and reinforcing the existing social order and securing it from potential challenges.
The power of landlords in peasant societies is often subsumed under a generalised rubric of 'feudal' (or sometimes semi-feudal or feudalistic) power. It is not our purpose here to consider the semantic problem whether the term 'feudal' is an appropriate one for societies such as the contemporary peasant societies of South Asia. Rather, we wish to emphasise the need to examine the structure of relationships that are subsumed under that generalised term, to break it down analytically into distinct sets of relationships that constitute the structure, in a manner that might shed light on the precise operation of political processes and the conditions on which they might be contingent and the problems of political movements that can be identified in the light of such analysis.

The generalised concept of 'feudal power' is sometimes misleading where it identifies such power with very large landholdings and landlords who hold sway over many villages and large numbers of people. Even in Pakistan, where 'land reforms' have barely touched the great concentration of landownership (70% of the land is owned by about 5% of the rural population) cases of single landowners (or single families of landowners) owning even one whole village, not to speak of a number of villages, is relatively rare. But the 'feudal' class does not consist only of landowners who possess several thousand acres each, although there are some who possess such holdings. Typically the landlord class consists of owners of a few hundred rather than a few thousand acres, generally anyone who owns more than about 20 acres or so has his land cultivated by sharecroppers. In a typical village of Pakistan there are about 1200 acres; there are usually a few big landowners who live amongst a large number of small independent peasant proprietors and members of other classes. Given such a composition of the rural population, it would be simplistic to explain political power in the rural society by a reference to very big landowners who are the exception rather than the rule. That would leave unexplained political power in the majority of villages. What has to be examined, therefore, is the manner in which power of such landlords in a multitude of villages is aggregated as the power of the class as a whole. That problem arises, a fortiori with respect to regions of India where very large concentrations of landholdings do not exist.

Dependence and Autonomy

The idea of the economic power of the landlord class calls for some clarification and elaboration. We cannot, in the present context, take up the large question of the mode of production in the contemporary agrarian economies of countries of South Asia, which determines the formation of classes in those rural societies; nor the extent to which rural capitalism has made inroads into or has displaced the pre-existing 'feudal' mode of production. With regard to definition of classes in the rural society we have discussed the broad criteria elsewhere (Alavi 1965). We would add, however, that in the case of West Pakistan, and possibly elsewhere, it might be misleading to make a sharp distinction between 'feudal' landlords and 'capitalist' farmers as distinct and separate classes, insofar as the two modes of production are combined on the land of the same owner into a single 'multiplex mode of production', as we might designate it. That is not only because in Pakistan we find that it is the biggest landlords who have the largest share in farm mechanisation and the introduction of capitalist relations of production i.e. work by hired labourers, in place of the traditional
methods of cultivation by sharecroppers, but also because the two modes of production are intertwined so that the viability of each is dependent upon its relationship with the other. That is because the landlords find it necessary to retain all their sharecroppers, but on greatly reduced holdings to release land for mechanised cultivation, because the sharecroppers are needed by them as a tied source of seasonal labour. Successful operation of the mechanised farming on their land depends on that relationship with the traditional mode of production; likewise, the traditional mode of production no longer provides an adequate livelihood for the sharecroppers who are forced, because of their reduced holdings to work on the mechanised farm area seasonally to make up their livelihood. We have described that development elsewhere (Alavi 1973). In the present context, we would only emphasise that for an examination of the structure of power in the rural society the distinction between the poor peasants employed in either sector namely the sharecroppers or wage labourers nor that between their respective masters, is at all crucial.

The idea of a 'rural proletariat' can all too easily suggest an analogy with the industrial proletariat on the one hand and a sharp distinction between it and other poor peasants such as sharecroppers in a feudal mode of production. In fact the situation of the rural wage labourer is little different from that of the sharecropper, a tenant-at-will, in this respect and the situation of both of them stands in marked contrast to that of the urban proletariat. The feature that is common to both categories of poor peasants is their direct and personal dependence on their landlord which is in marked contrast with the anonymity and mobility in employment that is enjoyed by an industrial worker. In contrast to the poor peasants the industrial worker can engage in militant class action with relative impunity, insofar as he is able to find alternative employment and does not place at risk the entire livelihood of himself and his family, his home and his entire social existence in doing so. When the poor peasant, of either category, embarks on militant action in defiance of his master, the stakes are of a different order.

For that reason, in our analyses of peasant political action, the concept of dependence has been central to our argument, as presented in our study of 'Peasants and Revolution' (Alavi 1965) and propounded recently in an examination of 'Peasant Classes and Primordial Loyalties' (Alavi 1973). The relationship is not greatly different from that of medieval feudalism described by Marx: "Let us now transport ourselves from Robinson's island bathed in light to European middle ages shrouded in darkness. Here, instead of independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterises the social relations of production just as much as it does in the other spheres of life organised on the basis of that production." (Marx 1954: 77).

It is noteworthy that the ties of dependence that Marx describes are mutual inasmuch as the lord is as dependent upon the serf to extract wealth from the land by his labour as the latter is dependent upon the lord for being allowed access to the land that is the source of his livelihood. Needless to say, that does not imply that the relationship is reciprocal, based on 'mutual benefit', nor is it equal; the dependence of the serf on the master is not of the same order as that of the latter upon the serf. Furthermore, an aspect that we would emphasise, the relationship of dependence is not absolute and inviolable; rather it is contingent and vulnerable. It is contingent in several respects.
The relationship of dependence is contingent, firstly, on the ability of the landowner, and the polity that upholds his class status, to enforce property relationships that invest in him the right and the ability to exploit the sharecropper and deprive him of a part of what he produces by his labour. In that perspective we can look upon property as a manifestation of a given configuration of political power; power that, in turn, is derived from the economic power of the landowning class but which is, nevertheless, vulnerable to political intervention. Such intervention may come from outside the peasant community, such as the Red Army in China and be in turn reinforced by the altered balance of power in the rural society that its intervention brings about. Given such intervention, the tie of dependence that binds the sharecropper to the landlord is severed and the former, freed from bondage, enters the political arena in his own behalf.

The relationship of dependence is contingent, secondly, on alternative possibilities open to the poor peasant, sharecropper or labourer, to secure an alternative means of livelihood for himself and his family. Insofar as he has no other choice, he has to submit to the demands of the landowner. That is so when land available for sharecropping is scarce and employment opportunities in towns as well as villages are few — the prospect of emigration to towns presents a major problem when it is not merely the question of a single member of a family who might go to town to supplement the inadequate income of the family from land, but instead when it is a question of an entire family uprooting itself from the village. In general, therefore, the condition of dependence imposes upon the poor peasant the necessity to submit rather than a capacity to rebel. But such economic dependence might be eroded where alternative opportunities of earning a livelihood appear within reach of the poor peasant. Expansion of industrial employment has that effect as also large construction projects that might have a massive effect in the vicinity. Perhaps it is no coincidence, for example, that the greatest amount of peasant militancy in Pakistan, which broke out into an armed peasant revolt, occurred in the densely populated and impoverished northernmost districts of Pakistan which is the principal recruiting ground for industrial employment in the country. The substantial resources made available by members of poor peasant families employed in the towns and the possibility open to all of them to join their relatives there, has given the peasants in those regions a capacity to defy their masters that has not yet appeared in other regions of the country.

A question arises in this connection that it might be appropriate to emphasise. That is the difference in patterns of interaction in peri-urban villages and villages which are situated beyond commuting distance from towns, as most villages are. Poor peasants in peri-urban villages, especially those that are situated near large industrial centres, do have an alternative means of livelihood that is accessible to them. They enjoy, therefore, a relatively greater autonomy in political action. But, by the same token, such autonomy is not enjoyed by those who live in more distant villages: the majority of villages. There is therefore an obvious risk in generalisation of observations from peri-urban villages for the whole of a rural society. The risk is all the greater in the light of the fact that it is convenient for those who go for fieldwork to find a place to live in a town and to commute to nearby villages for their fieldwork. Results of investigations (far too many?) that are based on peri-urban villages must therefore be evaluated with great care. This is not always evident in the manner
in which such results are presented to us.

The two aspects of the contingent nature of the relationship of dependence outlined above throw light on some external factors that erode or break down the relationship of dependence. There is a third aspect of dependence that is contingent on internal factors that might challenge it. That is the dependence of the landlord on the poor peasant for the cultivation of the land. Where there is a relative scarcity of poor peasants, whatever be the factors that might have brought that about, the hands of the latter are strengthened. We have related a case of a successful strike by women cotton pickers in a Pakistani village (Alavi 1971: 124) which was possible mainly because of a reduction in the number of women available for cotton picking (because women from 'middle peasant' households which had improved their position because of greater productivity no longer felt it necessary to go out to work in the fields) and also because the total acreage and output of cotton had greatly increased thus increasing the demand for labour. That was an economic factor at work. But the degree of dependence of the poor peasant and his bargaining power can alter also where the power of the landlord is challenged — for example in the face of middle peasant militancy. In such situations the poor peasant, in alliance with the middle peasant, is in a position to challenge his master. Dependence, it might be added, arises not only directly from relations of production, as we have treated it so far, but also from such relationships as debtor and creditor. Where 'middle peasants' are in debt to a landlord, they have common ground with his sharecroppers and labourers.

**Middle Peasants**

Small peasant proprietors, the so-called 'middle peasants', who cultivate their own land, are free from direct dependence on a landlord for access to their means of livelihood. They are independent. That fact makes it possible for them to engage in militant political action without thereby placing their entire livelihood into jeopardy. They are therefore more militant than poor peasants. This so-called 'middle peasant thesis' has come to be associated with my article on 'Peasants and Revolution' (Alavi 1965) and Eric Wolf's article 'On Peasant Rebellion' and his book on 'Peasant Wars Of The Twentieth Century' (Wolf 1969 a and 1969 b).

This is a crucial issue for our analysis on which our (Alavi's) position is widely misunderstood and misinterpreted. A clarification is essential. In summing up the result of our analysis we expressed the view that: "The middle peasants... are initially the most militant element of the peasantry... But their social perspective is limited by their class position." (Alavi 1965: 275) In other words the 'middle peasants' are (initially) more militant but not revolutionary. The distinction clearly is crucial and is made quite explicitly in our article. Furthermore, having pointed out the fact that the poor peasants are (again) initially the least militant, in view of their economic dependence on their landlord, the relationship of dependence is not indissoluble and when that tie is dissolved or broken, the revolutionary potentiality of the poor peasant is released. Both the initial subservience and the eventual unleashing of the poor peasant's revolutionary potentiality are contingent on a variety of economic and political factors. We do not regard the poor peasant to be incapable of revolutionary participation in political movements and we distinguish between militancy of which the middle peasant is capable and the possibility of revolutionary action. In
all this our own position is significantly different from that of Wolf and our respective 'middle peasant theses' are by no means identical and should not be considered to be 'basically the same'.

In a study of kinship in West Punjab villages in Pakistan (Alavi 1972b) we found that 'middle peasants' tend to constitute tightly knit and cohesive kin groups, which are often subject to the authority of lineage councils that manage their internal affairs and external relations. That is in marked contrast to the organisation of other strata of the peasantry and the landlords. Poor peasants, being subject to their respective landlords, are not similarly organised into tightly knit kin groups whose solidarity might be consolidated by a lineage council. The significance of the more cohesive kinship organisation of middle peasants may lie in the fact that they are then better able to defend their local interests vis-a-vis big landlords who aim to dominate the local communities. Studies by Nicholas of politics in West Bengal villages (Nicholas 1963 and 1965) also suggest an important role for kinship in affecting the solidarity of middle peasants in the political arena. That is an aspect of local political alignments that might be profitably followed up in future research.

Factions

Given the dependence of poor peasants on their landlords, they have little option but to follow them in the political arena – not to do so would mean revolutionary defiance. Typically, therefore, and in conditions of electoral competition, alignments in the political arena run across class lines rather than along it in manifestations of class solidarity. Cleavages are not horizontal, between strata, but vertical, constituting factions led often by rival landowners contending for power, status and political office. The factional mode of politics manifests not class war but, rather, the unchallenged domination of the political arena by members of a single class, the landlords. In some cases rival factions may be constituted on the basis of support from middle peasants, as seems to be the case in the example cited by Nicholas showing the main basis of support for communist candidates being derived from kinship ties whereas Congress candidates got their support mainly on the basis of economic dependence. (see discussion in Alavi 1973).

Poor peasants who are dependent on a landlord constitute the core of his faction. An aspiring faction leader sets about to recruit a following from those who do not already belong to his core of dependents. He enters into alliances with other landlords who bring in train with them their own respective cores of dependents. Lineage or caste ties may be invoked to rally and reinforce such support. Furthermore, the faction leader sets about to establish a following among 'middle peasants'. Some of the methods of terror and intimidation that are sometimes employed for that purpose are described by us elsewhere (Alavi 1971). One of the most important levers used by faction leaders for that purpose, however, is their relationship with the apparatus of the state, both the bureaucracy and the political party leadership, and mediation with them on behalf of peasants who choose to align with them in their faction. A 'ruling' party that is prepared to come to terms with the landowning class has an obvious advantage for this reason in consolidating its local power base by reinforcing the power of those who rally electoral support for the party. The Congress Party in India has shown great skill and willingness (notwithstanding its occasional radical rhetoric) in
consolidating its alliance with the local level powerholders. That, above all, is the secret of the persistence of Congress Party domination of the electoral game.

Articulation of Power: Village and the Nation

Rival factions that have their bases in local communities are integrated with similar factions based in other communities; such alliances of rival factions constitute larger factions at successively higher levels, namely the sub-district, district, etc. Participants in the higher level factions are the leaders of local factions; but the latter can offer to the larger faction support of their own core and followers in electoral contest. Local faction leaders are coopted, therefore, by political parties. Here, again, the Congress Party has shown some skill in the management and consolidation of its political resources, based on the local powerholders by, firstly, refraining from participation in village council (Gram Panchayat) elections but coopting into the party those who are successful in such elections i.e. who prove themselves to be de facto local powerholders. Because of the value of the Party links (and links with the administration through the party links) for the local powerholders in recruiting and consolidating their power base, they are only too willing to be so coopted. Secondly, in many cases the Congress Party has shrewdly accommodated both rival factions into its fold; the factional conflict and intense competition between the rival faction leaders serves to multiply the electoral support for the party rather than diminish it. Both rival faction leaders are anxious not to be forced to sever their links with the ruling party for that would further weaken their local position.

Insofar as, structurally, rival factions replicate each other in their class composition, the cleavages in the local society being vertical rather than horizontal, factional conflict is not class conflict. Where rival political parties are ranged against each other in local political arenas, that by itself is not sufficient ground to presume some conflict of rival class interests underlying their contest. Where factions are based on the power of the landowning class, the local powerholders, at all levels of their organisation (that is institutionalised into political parties at higher levels) the rival factions stand for common goals of social policy and economic programmes that embody their common interests. At the level of national policy making, their interests are safeguarded by their leaders who are elected to National and State or Provincial Assemblies and members of their class who proliferate in the bureaucratic establishment.

The system of 'Basic Democracy' introduced by Ayub Khan made no change in the equation of power at the level of the local community. It altered, however, the manner in which they were integrated into the national political system. In effect, the indirect system of election and the direct relationship that was established between the bureaucracy and the local level powerholders through Tehsil (Sub-District) Councils and District Councils, meant that the Provincial and National level political leaders were, in effect, deprived of their mediating role. The system was preeminently designed to consolidate bureaucratic power and to push the political leadership into the background. No wonder, therefore, that the most reactionary politicians that Pakistan has known, as well as the liberals, were all crying out for the restoration of direct universal adult franchise which was equated with democracy.

Conclusion

This discussion has been necessarily brief; hopefully some of the key issues that
invite consideration for evaluation of processes of representative democracy have been highlighted. It is clear that given the condition of dependence and the structure of power at the local level, 'democracy' is a highly doubtful term that we might apply to the electoral process as it operates. The fact that the Congress Party succeeds in securing a large proportion of the votes and an overwhelming number of seats in the State and National Assemblies is no measure of its 'popular mandate'. The same can be said of parties in Pakistan.

Given the crucial constraint imposed by the relationship of dependence, the Communist Parties in India have been able to do little better than to mobilise support from middle peasants and some landowners! It is perhaps no accident that the regions in which the Communist Parties have been able to rally most support, namely Kerala and West Bengal, are both areas with relatively large proportions of 'middle peasants'. The electoral strategy is unable to break the critical constraint of dependence of the poor peasantry which might allow them to make a break-through in the electoral process. Recent years have witnessed a great radicalisation of the Indian peasantry in many areas, largely in the wake of far-reaching economic changes. But that radicalisation has not altered the electoral equation to any significant extent. We have examined above the conditions in which the relationship of dependence might be broken. However, the Indian Communists have so far shown no signs that they are in a position to organise a Red Army nor have they been able to mount local resistance on a scale that might dethrone the local powerholders reinforced by the power of the Congress-dominated state machine. In the absence of a new political strategy, all that the Indian peasantry can hope for is the slow maturing, perhaps, of the economic forces that might in the long run upset the balance of power at the local level. There is little reason to assume, however, that other strategies will not be forthcoming.

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1969b Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century