SOME ASPECTS OF PEASANT SOCIETY

IN MIDDLE AMERICA AND INDIA

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Middle America is one of the areas of the world in which the greatest effort has been devoted by anthropologists to the study of peasant communities. A number of community and regional studies are already available providing the basis for comparative studies both within the area and with other major areas of peasant society. Among other areas, India has recently received a good deal of attention(1). The first anthropological community study, dealing with a Telugu village in Hyderabad, has recently been published by Dube (2) and a comparative study of peasant society in India and in Mexico has been made by O. Lewis in which a highly hispanized Nauatl village of Central Mexico (Tepoztlan) is compared with a Jat village of Northern India (Rani Khera) (3).

This paper simply presents some ideas suggested by the contributions of Dube and Lewis, considered from the point of view of the native peasant groups of Middle America. Tepoztlan, which was Lewis' Mexican unit of comparison, having been subject to strong acculturative influences, is no longer a good example of some aspects of economic and social organization typical of native Middle American village communities. I have especially in mind the politico-ceremonial organization that aligns positions of the political and ceremonial hierarchies into a single scale of offices through which all men are given a chance to pass. This type of organization offers a number of interesting points of comparison with India that I intend to discuss in this paper. My unit of comparison, then, as far as Middle America is concerned, will be a generalized picture of the conservative native communities of Southern Mexico and Guatemala (4). It does not apply to the same extent to the Gulf Coast areas of Veracruz and Yucatan nor to highly acculturated or urbanized communities. The points of Indian village organization to be discussed are apparently general in the traditional villages, although I will refer specifically to the village studied by Dube.

In making this comparison, emphasis will be placed on the economic aspect of social relations. Both in India and Middle America we deal with peasant societies and peasant economies, that is, economies that are to some extent part of a wider economic system but which are also to some extent closed subsistence economies in which primitive or non-market economic mechanisms play an important role. Economic relations are established which are not the result of the free play of the

market but take place along lines defined by the social structure of the community. In any such case we should ask 1) how is this peasant economy related to the wider economic system, and 2) what aspects of the peasant economy form a closed system and which are the lines defined by the social structure of the peasant community along which economic relations take place. I will consider the latter question first and then touch briefly on the other.

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For the purpose of our comparison, economic relations outside the market system can be classified into three levels: 1) relations within the family; 2) relations involving a number of families but without including the whole community; and 3) relations involving all the families in the community.

At the family level we find production for consumption within the household, especially in agriculture, and the exchange of services connected with the division of labor according to sex and age within the household. Although important differences can be drawn between Middle America and India because of the greater prevalence of the extended family in India, this type of economic relationship is one of nearly universal characteristics and will not be discussed.

In Middle America economic relations between different families outside the market system are found in the form of exchange of labor in agriculture or housebuilding, but these exchanges are limited in importance and distribution. Whether by farmers or craftsmen, we usually find in Middle America independent household production, either for home consumption or for the market, and outside help when employed is usually on a wage basis.

More important are exchanges of goods between families related by ties of blood or fictive kinship. These usually take place at the time of life cycle celebrations or upon the assumption of office. In the case of some gifts of food or in rendering services such as cooking or building a shed for a celebration, the givers participate as producers, but a great many of these exchanges consist of gifts of things such as cash, liquor or clothes, not produced by the givers but obtained in the market.

At the community level we find in Middle America productive activities, outside the market system, in the form of communal labor for the upkeep of roads and in the building or repair of community houses (town hall, school and church). Every man is obliged to share in this work and the obligation can be relieved only by sending a substitute or paying a fee.

But more important than the productive activities are non-market economic relations of distribution and consumption connected with the political and ceremonial organization. All the political and ceremonial offices in the community are combined into a single scale of offices, hierarchically graded, in which every man is expected to enter and will have a chance to reach the top positions. Although the scale varies in details from town to town, the pattern generally will start with the position of errand boy for either the church or the townhall, followed by that of policeman, sponsor of a religious festival, councilman, sponsor of some other religious function, and finally judge or other high position in the political hierarchy. At the end of the scale a man attains the rank of elder and is free from rendering further service to the community. Each office lasts only one year, and usually carries no remuneration, but on the contrary involves expenses. Between any two offices a man takes a rest during which he does not participate in the political and ceremonial organization of the community.

This organization has a number of economic aspects. Because of the yearly rotation of offices among all the men in the community, there is in the division of labor within the political and ceremonial organization, no hereditary or even life-long position. We find in Middle America no hereditary village headmen, priests, village watchman, etc. Positions are open for everyone to achieve. Only to the point that certain positions are occupied by all men at a certain point of their lifetime can we say that there are ascribed statuses, but then they are ascribed on the basis of age among a uniform population (5). Only exceptionally are there positions occupied for a long period of time, for instance those of sexton or scribe.

Another feature of the scale of offices is that the expenses of the political and ceremonial organization are met by assigning various responsibilities by turns to the members of the community. Since no position ordinarily carries a salary, a man while serving must be supported by his family (a youth serving as policeman for example), or must have himself accumulated enough property to be able for a year to neglect his usual activities and devote much of his energies to the responsibilities of office.

Most offices, furthermore, imply expenditures, such as financing religious festivals, as well as banqueting one's fellow officials and sometimes even the townspeople at large. These are occasions in which an official must have accumulated property to pay for the ceremony or the feasting. Much of the economic surplus in the community is spent in this way and transformed into prestige for the feast giver.

All this constitutes, then, a complex system of economic obligations connected with the various statuses in the political-ceremonial organization, and involving exchanges of goods and services rendered along different lines and in which several types of reciprocity are present.

There are balanced exchanges of the same type of goods, as when fellow officials feast each other.

There are one-sided renderings of services or goods, as when an errand boy serves the councillors or when officials feast the elders. The givers in these cases will receive similar treatment when they reach the higher grades.

There are exchanges of goods and services between officials and their relatives and friends who help them and are feasted by them. The goods and services will be reciprocated when it is the helpers' turn to assume office.

Finally, there is the reciprocity involved in the case of the officials who contribute their services and wealth to the community in supporting the political and ceremonial organization. When they are inactive they will benefit as community members from similar services performed then by others whose turn has come to serve. This last aspect is usually the one emphasized by the people themselves when they describe the taking of office as doing their share for the community, as a duty required in return for the privilege of membership in the community.

In India, economic relations other than those in a free market revolve around the division of labor according to caste and the customary exchanges of the jajmani system, that is, exchanges of goods and services between members of different castes who stand in the relation of hereditary patron and servant, or servants of the same patron. The central figure in the relationship is usually the patron belonging to an agricultural caste, who pays his servants in grain at harvest time or with small grants of land. In the village studied by Dube, the jajmani system relates in this way farmers, carpenters, barbers, washermen, potters, weavers, priests, shepherds, blacksmiths, and leatherworker-laborers (6).

The exchanges of the jajmani system which take place between individual families might be compared with the kind of exchanges between related families that take place in Middle America, mostly at the occasion of life cycle celebrations. This latter kind of exchange, however, also exists in India between families of a same caste; the jajmani exchanges take place between nonrelated, even if hereditarily connected families of different caste, and are additional to the type of exchanges existing in Middle America. It will be instructive to see how the exchanges that in India are usually part of the jajmani system are carried out in Middle America.

Some of the services rendered by specialists, in the jajmani system of India, do not call for specialists in Middle America and are performed as part of the division of labor within the household. For instance, laundering, tailoring, or sweeping. Services performed in

India by servants such as barbers or leatherworkers at a marriage celebration in their patron's family will be performed in Middle America by relatives of the bride and groom.

Other goods and services obtained in India from a hereditary servant will always be obtained in Middle America in the market. Such is the case with the services or wares of the barber, carpenter, blacksmith, potter, or midwife.

In comparison with India, the Middle American ceremonial organization is marked by the lesser importance of family celebrations and the greater importance of communal celebrations in which a body of officials perform for the community as a whole. In Middle America there are no hereditary family priests, and the services of a priest, native or Catholic, will usually be paid for in an isolated market-type transaction.

The specialists forming part of the jajmani system are often craftsmen whose wares are produced for a specific consumer, their patron. Their occupations, determined by caste, are life-long and hereditary. In Middle America, craftsmen produce only for the free market and the most important customary exchanges take place among the temporary part-time officials of the politico-ceremonial organization.

The social stratification of the Indian caste system is also related to land tenure. There is always a sharp difference between landowning castes and landless castes of artisans and laborers. By comparison, although inequalities do often exist, individually owned land is much more evenly distributed in Middle American villages, and the commons are always available equally to all villagers irrespective of the amount of land they own as individuals.

The hereditary division of labor according to caste also enters into the political and ceremonial organization of the Indian village, and it therefore presents a striking contrast to the Middle American system. In the village described by Dube, there is a village headman and a number of caste headmen, as well as fourteen village menials selected mainly according to caste and performing for the village some of the traditional services of their castes. The offices tend to be hereditary. The headman, some other officials and the village menials are paid in grants of land, shares of land revenue or, in the case of some menials, in dues collected from the farmers at harvest time. They thus constitute a set of relationships closely similar to the jajmani system (7). In the ceremonial organization we find hereditary priests, and members of different castes are assigned specific duties during the celebration of village festivals (8).

The division of labor and the financing of the political and ceremonial organization follow entirely different principles in

Middle America and in India. In India we find life-long hereditary positions ascribed to specialists on the basis of caste. The services of the village officials and menials are rewarded. The "feast of merit" aspect of the Middle American officials' duties seems to be lacking in peasant India. In Middle America we have instead unpaid officials who are not specialists, occupying temporary positions along successive steps in a scale of offices. Some of the services performed in an Indian village by a caste menial will be performed in Middle America by the messengers and policemen who are in the first steps in the scale of offices and who will all have a chance to reach the positions of councilman, village headman and elder.

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The Indian and the Middle American villages have been compared as if they were closed economic systems; their relation to the national economy should now be compared.

One point to consider is the participation of the village in the national market. The importance of trade and regional markets in the economy of the native communities of Middle America has been very much emphasized in the literature. Especially important is the prevalence of village specialization in crafts and the system of regional periodical markets where people from different villages meet and exchange their goods. In spite of the large number of different kinds of specialists found in a single village, the outstanding fact when seen on a regional basis is the village specialization in trades. Since villages are practically endogamous, intervillage relations are usually impersonal market relations and only an occasional marriage or ritual kin relationship (compadrazgo) will add a personal element to the interaction of members of different communities. It is this prevalence of market relationships among individual producers that has led Tax to define native Guatemala as a special type of economy that he labeled penny capitalism (9).

The literature about peasant India has not emphasized the importance of village specialization in different trades or the existence of regional market systems. Both undoubtedly exist but detailed studies are needed. It would be interesting, for instance, to compare the relative importance in India and Middle America of rural vs. urban artisans. Since the jajmani system has been described in communities where farmers are the dominant caste it would also be important to know what form the jajmani system takes in communities of craftsmen.

In any case the importance of jajmani relations in India and the lack of anything similar in Middle America points to the possibly greater relative importance of impersonal trade relations in peasant Middle America than in peasant India. This supports from the economic point of view Oscar Lewis' impression that India looks "primitive" while Mexico is "western," even though we have considered here a part of Middle America more primitive than Tepoztlan.

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Another way to assess the place of the peasant within the national economy is to consider the total land system and see what, in the form of rent or taxes, does the peasant contribute to the support of a non-peasant landowner class or to the support of the State.

Although both India and Middle America show significant variations in their many subareas and historical periods, some striking differences generally characterize the two areas.

Perhaps the most important difference lies in the different relation of the peasant towards the State as regards the taxation of land (10).

Any discussion of the land system of India invariably turns on questions of land revenue. Different methods of assessment and collection; the existence or absence of intermediaries between the cultivator and the State; the security of tenure against seizure by the State or its representative; the farming out of taxes; the granting of land by the State, including the power of taxation over the peasants; the relation and transitional forms between landowner, tax-farmer, land-grantee and petty chief; are all basic questions in any discussion of the Indian land system, and the basis for the usual distinctions made between different regions and historical periods.

According to the Hindu political treatises the peasant had to turn over one-sixth of his crop to the State. This proportion, especially during the Muslim period, was usually much higher (11). The British made significant changes by giving security of tenure as against the former arbitrary power of native rulers, and by reducing tax rates, but the importance of the peasant for the State as a payer of revenue has been maintained to this day. Detailed records of landholdings are kept in every village and the village revenue officer is always one of the main officials in the village (12).

In Middle America taxation of peasant land is of little significance. The rates are low and in native communities land records are usually inaccurate. Native peasants thus fit into the national economy mainly through their participation in the national market and as a labor supply. Only during the Colonial period when natives were subject to the payment of tribute was theirs an important contribution to the exchequer, although the tribute was not a land tax but a head tax assessed on the community as a whole. The development of large estates, mining and trade, however, gradually relegated the native communities to a less significant position in the national economy; their numerical strength relative to the total population diminished constantly, and the tribute was abolished upon attaining Independence. All discussions of the land systems of Middle America deal with the growth of large estates at the expense of the native village communities. Land revenue questions are of little importance

and a survey book such as Whetten's Rural Mexico does not even discuss the taxation of land (13).

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The different types of economic organization prevailing in each of the two areas under comparison is of course closely related to the nature of the existing social segmentation.

Everything in Middle America seems to deepen the main lines of social cleavage between different villages and to make for internal solidarity within the village. The cleavages between village and village also separate the peasant communities from all other segments of society.

The existence of communal lands equally accessible to all villagers, the relatively even distribution of landholdings, the specialization of villages in different crafts, all add to the uniformity and community of interests within each village and to its differentiation from other villages. The absence of hereditary division of labor within the village and the assignment of various communal duties in turn to all the villagers maintain social equality within the village and also serve as an economic equalizer by consuming the wealth of the rich. As an organizational principle this rotation of duties and the concomitant division of labor according to age, have the obvious limitations of the skills that an individual can master and the size of a group within which responsibilities can be effectively distributed among all. Only a simple society, or one segment with limited functions within a larger society, can be organized along those principles. And that is the way it occurs in the politico-ceremonial organization of individual Middle American villages, without connecting different villages among themselves or the villages with the non-peasant segments of society.

Unlike the Middle American rotation of functions and division of labor by age, the division of labor based on inheritance, as in the Indian caste system, has unlimited possibilities for development into complex societies. The same principles of caste organization prevalent in the village apply to the wider Indian society. A counterpart to the sharp social stratification within the village is the existence of regional caste groups cutting across different villages. The Indian village would then be much less of an isolate than the Middle American village and the same factors of caste that make for differentiation within the village tie different village groups with other groups outside.

The traits of village organization in Middle America that have been discussed are better understood as the result of what happened to the complex native societies as a consequence of Spanish conquest. The native societies were reduced to the peasant level of organization,

the upper class being eliminated, and became subject to the strong influence of a mercantile economy, even though the technology remained at a simple level.

The pre-Spanish or even the early Colonial periods in Middle America would not offer the same contrast with India that has been drawn in this paper. During those early periods the importance of the natives' tribute offers a parallel to the Indian land revenue, and the landholdings of native chiefs or the Spaniards' encomiendas are comparable to the Indian jagirs. During the native period most communities included subdivisions related by ethnic or kinship ties to similar subdivisions in other communities. Many high positions were hereditary, and even during Colonial times hereditary chiefs survived. The modern village community is largely the result of the Spaniards' organization of the natives into reservation-like communities which held land in common and were collectively responsible for the payment of tribute. The suppression of hereditary positions and, in recent times, the loss of communal property for the support of the community organization, led to greater reliance upon the scale of offices and the rotation of economic responsibilities among office holders. The strong mercantile influence upon the village economy has resulted in the predominance of individual household production for the market, when not for home consumption, and primitive economic mechanisms are mostly limited to the field of distribution and to conspicuous consumption.

It would appear that, comparatively speaking, large sectors of the Indian peasantry have been much less changed by the impact of the West. Caste is taking on new functions; the jajmani system is breaking down; the division of labor is more free; land reforms are being carried out; and plantations and modern industry have developed. Nevertheless, the conservative Indian village which has here been considered is still largely organized along the old principles of division of labor by caste and customary economic exchanges of the jajmani system. The Indian village is still integrated into wider social units along many of the traditional lines. This of course reflects the fact that, unlike the natives of Middle America, India was not reduced by conquest to a mere mass of peasant communities but survived as a whole to assimilate Western influence and reassert its independence.

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Oscar Lewis ends his comparative analysis of peasant culture in India and Mexico by remarking how Tepoztlan and Rani Khera are similar in terms of economics but very different in terms of social organization. This paper has pointed out some differences in the economy of peasant India and Middle America which refer both to the local village economy and to the integration of the village into a larger economic system. Although, in spite of important differences, the Middle American and the Indian peasantry can be said to be at a

roughly similar technological level, important differences exist in the economic organization, which are an important part of the differences between the social systems of the two areas under comparison.

NOTES

(1) McKim Marriott, ed. Village India. Chicago University Press, 1955.

(2) S. C. Dube. Indian Village. Cornell University Press, 1955.

(3) Oscar Lewis. Peasant Culture in India and Mexico: A Comparative Analysis. In Marriott, op. cit., pp. 145-170.

(4) See the bibliography in Sol Tax, ed. Heritage of Conquest: The Ethnology of Middle America. Glencoe, 1952. I also draw from my own field experience in Michoacan, Oaxaca and Chiapas.

(5) In some communities the working of the scale of offices results in groups similar to age-sets although promotions from one grade to the other are individual and not based mechanically on age but on achievement in the scale of offices. See Roberto J. Weitlaner and Carlo Antonio Castro. Papeles de la Chinantla. Mexico 1954, pp. 160-176.

(6) Dube, op. cit. pp. 57-69. The classical description of the jajmani system is W. H. Wiser. The Jajmani System. Lucknow, 1936.

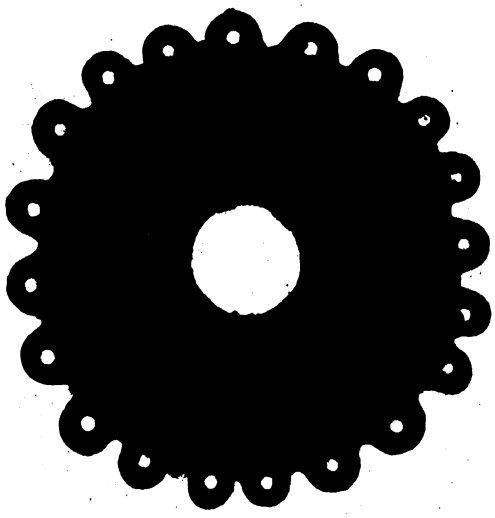
(7) Dube, op. cit., pp. 45-53.

(8) Ibid. pp. 111-116.

(9) Tax, op. cit. pp. 43-65; Sol Tax, Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy. Smithsonian Institution. Institute of Social Anthropology, Publ. 16. Washington, 1953.

(10) Absentee ownership of land is of much greater importance in India than in the native villages of Middle America where it is of very slight importance.

(11) W. H. Moreland. The Agrarian System of Moslem India. Cambridge, 1929.

(12) Dube, op. cit., p. 51.

(13) Nathan L. Whetten. Rural Mexico. University of Chicago Press, 1948. Tax, 1953 gives the most detailed economic study of any Middle American village. All it says about land taxation is, "The real estate tax is popularly called the three-per-thousand. I am not sure, but I believe the rate is actually higher. Most landholders do not pay this tax because their land titles are not legally registered with the higher authorities." (p. 182).