

## Chapter 10

# Conclusion

The farmers of western Rajasthan are faced with one certainty: the certainty that their livelihood each year is uncertain. My concern in this study has been to look at the way people in one part of the region survive in circumstances of great uncertainty about subsistence in the face of unreliable seasonal rainfall. The study has been conceived primarily as a study of an agrarian system - a system of agricultural production including the ecological, socio-economic and political context.

I have discussed the organisation of production and the annual cycle of production. The object of this analysis was to examine technological and social responses to drought and to the risk of famine. One possible response is intensification of agricultural inputs, either in the form of improved or increased technology (for example, the use of high yield seed varieties, machinery or irrigation) or in the form of increased labour. However, my analysis shows that few technological innovations are economically viable in my study area at present. Certainly few have occurred. Further, there was no evidence that intensified labour inputs are a major factor in the organisation of agro-pastoral production. Household structure does not reflect a high level of labour demand.

The main planned responses by farmers are in terms of risk management. This is a matter of spreading risks by scattering plots, mixing crops and, overwhelmingly, by engaging in a mixed agro-pastoral economy.

However, all this talk of strategies for this and options for that has a great danger. And the danger is this: it may obscure the simple fact that wealth (or *comparative* wealth) is the best defense against the uncertainties of the environment. Richer people have strategies which can allow them to recover economically after a drought. Poorer people are often not in a position to apply these strategies and tend to drop out of the system, by migrating to urban areas.

I have explored the agrarian hierarchy from two points of view. The first relates to the distribution of land. This is decidedly skewed and analysis shows that land reform has left a class of landless (or nearly landless) poor, despite the real benefits which have accrued to the former

tenant classes. The landholding aspect of the agrarian hierarchy is essentially predicated on a land equals wealth nexus. However, there is another aspect of agrarian hierarchy which relates to the capacity of the Rajputs to escape this nexus. They do so through continuing in their traditional occupation in military service and by utilising certain structural features of their caste to facilitate the formation of alliances which provide opportunities outside the village. Village Rajputs are sometimes able to tap into the patron-client ties which have survived the dismantling of the Rajput States. This happened in the case of the Rajputs (Case 2, Chapter 9) who used marital alliances to obtain appointments in the hotel in the former Maharajah's palace.

Land reform in the 1950s and 1960s has affected more than the distribution of land between castes and classes. It opened the way to a cycle of land partition which presents a problem to all households. It also has importance in terms of social organisation, particularly in terms of household size. Variations in household size, far from being determined by labour demands, are affected by other factors. Smaller landholders tend to have smaller households mostly because they cannot support large ones; larger landholders may have, but don't necessarily have, large households. Where they do, they often do so because large households enable them to beat the land ceiling laws (in the case of very large households), or because large households defer the partition of land.

A great paradox in the recent history of western Rajasthan is that the increasing population of the present century has occurred at the same time as a decline in human mortality associated with serious drought. General economic development, which provides alternative employment and an increased ability, on the part of the state, to provide for human needs during drought, seem to be the main contributors to the decline in mortality.

For whatever reasons, human population continues to increase. At present land holdings are sufficient to support many of the existing households. But, further population growth will lead to more partition of land and, without massive changes in technical and financial inputs, no significant increase in productivity is likely.<sup>1</sup> Increased migration to urban centres seems to be inevitable. Strategies for delaying the partition of land can only work for a short time.

The agrarian system that I have described is involved in a continual process of change, especially in terms of changes to landholding sizes and the wider political and economic context. The strategies and solutions described are responses to a changing situation at a certain point in time.

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<sup>1</sup> Any major intensification of agriculture (at least using existing technologies) is likely to have detrimental environmental consequences, and to further raise questions of sustainability.

## Conclusion

I have concentrated very heavily on several small villages and on a single small village in particular. The agro-pastoral economy of Hinganiya is not typical of Rajasthan as a whole. It is, however, representative of agro-pastoralism in semi-arid rainfed conditions, which is one of the types of agrarian systems present in western Rajasthan. It is tempting to try to see Hinganiya and the surrounding villages as part of a more general type. The situation described is similar, in many respects, to the 'dry grain agrarian mode' described by Hill (1982).

Hill argues that there is 'a crying need for the systematic categorisation of broad types of rural under-development in the contemporary, tropical, third world - for a respectable typology of agrarian systems' (1982:49). She examines similarities between situations in Hausaland (Nigeria) and Karnataka. She sets out nine 'necessary conditions for the existence of this dry grain mode':

- (1) The population is so dense that nearly all of the available farmland is necessarily manured and cultivated every year - and densities are increasing fast.
  - (2) The bulk of the farmland is used for cultivating basic food grains. . . without irrigation.
  - (3) The farmland is effectively owned by individuals or households - being inherited by sons on, or before, their father's death.
  - (4) Cultivation is undertaken by household members with or without the help of agricultural labourers.
  - (5) Cultivators have for long been accustomed to buy and sell farmland for cash.
  - (6) However, land scarcity and rising prices have recently led to a much reduced incidence of land-selling.
  - (7) Grain yields per acre are very low on any standard. . . .
  - (8) Most farm tools and equipment, which are of 'traditional design', are made by local blacksmiths and carpenters.
- (1982:50. Emphasis removed from original)

Hill adds one further factor

. . . which relates to Hausaland and Karnataka, but might have to be expressed somewhat differently in other regions where this dry grain mode applied.

- (9) In a sense. . . there has been a long-term withdrawal (which is not a large-scale migration) from the countryside.
- (1982: 50)

The broad picture here is very similar to the one I have described. All conditions, except (5) and (6) apply in Hinganiya. Clearly there is a sense in which broadly similar environmental and political contexts can

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lead to broadly similar agrarian systems. But the particularities are important. It is the relatively recent shift from a 'feudal' form of landownership and subsequent land reform, that give the agrarian system of western Rajasthan its specific character.

As I understand it one factor underlying Hill's desire to construct a typology of agrarian systems is the wish to demonstrate the diversity of conditions underlying the use of the term 'peasant'. Her intention is to develop a 'large-scale classification', not to assert 'anything so preposterous' as the existence of a single 'dry grain farming mode'. Hill would agree that it is important to balance the need to generalise with the need to particularise.

The comparison of the agrarian system operating in Hinganiya with that operating in Yaavahalli highlights some of the risks which might be involved in taking typology building too far. Hinganiya and Yaavahalli have broadly similar characteristics. But, the existence of relatively accessible underground water in Yaavahalli leads to fundamental differences in the technical and organisational possibilities for agricultural intensification. The combination of such strategic comparison and the type of typology building advocated by Hill (both based on detailed field work) may be one way to achieve a balance between particularising and generalising.

It is an obvious (but not, I think, trivial) point that ecological anthropology (and the social sciences in general) aim to build generalisations which will help people to make sense of the world. However, there is a risk that our typologies and generalisations may obscure important differences. Perhaps the most important generalisation that can be made from this study is that the study of human ecology must, to a great extent, focus on historically and locally specific processes.