

Reviewing the evidence for a number of cases in Asian sharetenancy (Cheung, 1969; Bell and Zusman, 1976; Bardhan and Rudra, 1980), one finds a disproportionate number of landless peasants among sharecroppers and also a substantial proportion of smallholders and even middle peasants who chose to supplement their income by leasing-in additional plots. What is common to all those categories is access to a minimal amount of capital stock (work animals, seeds, and ability to hire extra labour in peak periods) and - in most cases - a certain degree of patrimonial bonds to local landlords. And it is these bonds, rather than nominal title deeds, which restrict access to profitable utilization of land to only a portion of the peasantry in Asia and Latin America today, as demographic pressures and poverty pushes masses of their kin and neighbors to search for employment outside the village economy. (C. Keyder makes the important observation, in the context of modern Turkey, that only those sharecroppers who were embedded in semi-feudal relations become permanently proletarianized in agriculture; that is, within the village economy; Keyder, 1980:26).

We arrive to two tentative conclusions from the above. One, that sharecroppers as a group cannot be considered a stratum within the peasantry, but one that cuts across several peasant fractions, depending on the cropping arrangement that they enter with the landlord.¹ Second, that sharetenancy as an institution is more properly understood as a highly adaptive mechanism of allocating rural labour in a variety of transitional agrarian forms, rather than as an agency of siphoning the surplus of landless peasants by landlords in traditional agriculture. That aspect of sharetenancy may be true, but it is a truth that is rendered superfluous by its application to tenancy in general, and - in effect - characterizes relations of expropriation between landlords and peasants historically.