

Musing on Agri-history

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Why agri-history is important

Today, we who write are mostly distant from the agricultural life of the past, which peppers many historical perspectives with the pitfalls of value judgments, secularism, and a romantic view that David Ludden (1999; p. 3) in his 'New Cambridge History of India' refers to as 'stubborn, enticing otherness'.

Even though most of history grows out of agriculture it is seldom considered as its center. Nevertheless, it was agriculture that allowed the settled life that led to civilization, and its efficiencies in food security that allowed a leisured class to engage in writing and the codification of religions as part of creating agreed ethics and power bases. Histories that center on rulers or states do not seem conscious that they are using a proxy for agricultural history, and so miss much that history has to offer the present. This alone makes agri-history important, but so do many other factors.

As a great birthplace of agriculture, India has established the link between the state and food production, culminating at one point in Kautilya's Arthashastra with its overt recognition of the role of violence in a kingdom secure in its food base (Source:

<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/history/kautilya.asp>). Yet here too, it is easy to reduce history to empires and miss the bonds between nature, religion, and society that invariably emerge with agricultural occupations.

In my own country, Australia, awareness of the food production practices of the indigenous population prior to European settlement has begun to instill an understanding of the cultural meaning of landscape and food. While easy to overstate, this seems to offer a means of appreciating the eras over which such landscapes are formed and to recognize that humans have always altered the environment, as continues today in modern agriculture's shaping of the land, its waters and even its air. It also informs the sense of feeling 'at home' in our homelands and our cultural ideals of beauty and aesthetics. In this sense, agriculture is a civilizing influence on the land as it is for society – it brings concepts of ownership, territory, and power as well as of identity, nature, terroir, and equity. Indian and Pakistani ownership of and identification with the noble Basmati rice is an example (Manoj, 2006). And all of these concepts once came from the reverence of food security as a value underpinning society.

As we have all been shaped by our experiences, so has our social milieu been formed by agriculture. Our aphorisms often reveal agricultural roots, as shown for example, in the book on Thai folklore by Charan Chantalakhana and Pakapun Skunmun (2007). Our festivals vary across regions according to agricultural calendars – and we continue to hold onto these festivals, even when a foreign religion supplants traditional beliefs. So it is well said that agri-history is more than the history of agriculture; it is the source of history itself although this is often either assumed or neglected in various presentations of history, be they religiously or evidentially based.

The link of agriculture to religion repeats itself through civilizations, yet the common focus on rulers limits this understanding when contextualizing history. For example, the Hebrew story adopted by Christianity of Moses being found in the marshes of the Nile River (Source: Holy Bible Exodus 2:3–5), is commonly considered to have been at the site known archaeologically from its Greek name of Tanis. Yet much of its history is related under the name of its ruler and builder Ramses and the architecture of the Egyptian pharaohs, and even then the site is overshadowed by the better-preserved and more popular ruins in drier upstream climates. Thus neither the religious nor the architectural stories develop the otherwise obvious agricultural aspects of such a major ruling city being deep in the fertile Nile Delta, and neither dwells on its later demise probably being from siltation and climate change rather than non-historical conquests by the Israelites (Joseph Free and Howard Vos, 1992).

There are also differences with today's civilized viewpoints, such as time itself. In agricultural contexts time can be elastic – waiting on the rain and when it arrives acting quickly. The difference pervades the many urban-city divisions of every country today where long codified seasonal festivals may be viewed quite differently in 'the bush' and the city. Historical texts that relate Asian battles of a few centuries ago as taking place between growing seasons too easily portray this as a quaint custom. Thus they can miss the deeper knowledge that war and expansionism of a realm waited on the agricultural calendar, which was the essence of the religions, the oracles and auspicious days for battles to begin. It waited on agriculture because a secure food supply was the common need of both ordinary people and armies that needed feeding.

While such arguments are sometimes reduced to romantic ideas of synchronicity, they are facts that deserve proper consideration through the overwhelming majority of human history. It made sense for the rhythm of life to be determined by nature's cycles of food production. And this seems consistent with the views of those who note that the existential angst that characterizes modern society appears to be correlated with alienation from nature, seasonal foods, and ritualized traditions (Kierkegaard, 1946). Agri-history is part of unraveling this aspect of our nature also.

Agricultural urbanization

With agriculture providing the surplus that led to urbanization from at least 9500 years ago in South Asia and significant cities

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appearing about 5000 years ago (Sharma *et al.*, 1980), worldviews must have begun to diverge between sedentary and nomadic peoples. Confrontations between farmers and pastoralists passed down in religious stories and customs indicate differences, albeit written by the victors – agricultural cities. Power structures to defend cities will have required rituals and beliefs, which may well have been adapted from a past nomadic lifestyle, maybe even pre-Vedic hymns and rituals. Thus some interaction may have accompanied periodic conflict as farming sporadically took over pastoral lands. As pastoralists opened new well-watered grasslands farmers followed and thus also followed trade, wealth, sophistication in religions and the literature from which we glean glimpses of the past.

Rather than springing into being as fully formed political entities, cities will have followed various models of governance, with trade as the connecting element. Technology no doubt followed trade with agriculture as its major focus since it was the major business of the populace until cities became more sophisticated. Thus innovations in the use of labor, metal tools, irrigation, nurseries, and animal and plant breeding affected farming technologies and

encouraged new groups of suppliers for ores and skills as agriculture expanded. In this milieu, new cities based on trade that could purchase food must have assumed an importance perhaps in some cases greater than agricultural cities. Such cities on trade routes were even more vulnerable to food insecurity as a siege could threaten all wealth, and so food reserves became an integral part of urban management. Without the ability to feed a city, governance was not possible.

Such Indianized civilization expanded along trade routes in what is now Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia and also extended to Cambodia through theocratic political systems that were to establish the basis for much of Southeast Asia cultures (Tarling, 1992). And with that assumption of Indian manners by local chieftains, attractive technologies were adopted, some of which remain obvious today such as the distinctly different rice harvesting techniques of southern Thailand compared to those practiced in the other more Chinese-influenced regions of that country (Lindsay Falvey, 2000). As the Asian Agri-History Foundation's publications indicate, much of the information about these developments, particularly in India, is to be found in ancient texts – sometimes referred to as religious texts. So it is not only the Vedic scriptures that point to the indissoluble link of agriculture to religion, but the less ancient Buddhist and Jain texts that indicate the associations of trade routes, cities, and technologies.

We now understand the expansion of agriculture and hence agricultural cities as

being isolated harbors in a sea of pastoralists more that a wave progressively washing over a 'primitive' pastoralism two to three millennia ago (harbors – in both the sense of protection from mobile pastoral aggressors, and as trade entrepots often on coasts and rivers). Eventually, possibly in the Gupta era, as agriculture began to encroach on pastoral lands more consistently, it must have been under a replicable agrarian governance system that allowed some autonomy for local chieftains – a model of early colonial expansion. Alliances would have been cemented through common rituals and religions, giving rise to some shared literature among the increasingly diverse elite. Linking religion and power allowed economic progress as rulers assumed divine status and spiritual rewards became a means of payment, even into later periods such as for the construction of the Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia (Taylor, 1992). Meanwhile continuing pastoralists, sometimes marginalized from their preferred lands, possibly remained somewhat unified by their early Vedic rituals, which allowed some degree of interaction with settled farmers who observed similar rituals and this may have reduced potential conflict to ritualistic games (Heesterman, 1995).

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Whatever the basis of farmer-pastoralist interaction, pastoralism continued as the dominant lifestyle into the present millennium. This was common to areas contiguous and distant from India, from Central Asia to Mongolia and the Middle East. Agriculture relied on rivers or at least water sources and storages that were easily developed for farming, and such land was far more scarce than dense jungles and uncontrollable floodplains, and even the arid-lands where pastoralism evolved an ecologically-balanced system that lasted into the 20th century. But nestled against this vast pastoral sea was the excessively well-watered tropical landscape of Southeast Asia, which was largely useless to pastoralists in its native state of floodplains, swamps, dense forests, and carnivorous predators. These areas awaited further innovations before they could be tamed, eventually leading to the major kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia.

From even such a simplistic overview of agri-history it becomes clear that the agricultural cities that gave rise to cultures adjacent to dry regions where water was reliable or with seasonal rains represents the regions where millets and wheat were domesticated – adjacent to pastoralists' domains. Rice, on the other hand, was related to flooded environments, and as a peculiarly Asian

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crop, it is of interest to speculate on cultural differences between rice cultures and those that developed from wheat for example. Such is another lesson from agri-history; yet another relates to war.

War and agriculture

Forestalling conflict allowed agriculture to expand across the millennia, and so sophisticated governance and diplomacy arrangements evolved, again using common rituals for negotiations. In the agricultural cities housing mixed populations of merchants, farmers, visiting pastoralists, pilgrims and religious leaders, a certain stability arose along with agreement to a 'rule of law'. In this context, farming alone did not underwrite food security for the agriculturally-divorced vocations, as it was subject to droughts, pestilence, floods, and attacks from other expansionist states or pastoralists. Thus food security became a primary occupation of governance, built on the best possible agricultural base linked to both war and religion. War damaged food production while religion promised

some protection through specific gods and rituals. With food being the first priority of governance, aggression or defense tended to be a seasonal activity with farmers enlisted for the dry season when little agricultural work was needed, and when they could well be motivated by earlier crop losses from conflict or weather. Nevertheless, the modern image of sedentary agriculture vulnerable to repeated attack was probably less common to this mobile agricultural population until investment in infrastructure made one piece of fertile land near water more valuable than another.

The phenomenon is also suggested by the once sustainable *muang fai* irrigation system of traditional Tai ethnic group, which was based on annual repair or rebuilding of simple wooden weirs across small swift flowing streams (Lindsay Falvey, 2001). Over time, weirs became more sophisticated and hence more worth defending, which in turn led to the organization of governance being based on watersheds since all on one river shared a common need for defense as well as equitable water allocation. The

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governance system developed with minor rulers of a river valley being consolidated into larger catchments as larger rulers who could command countless paddy fields (Cohen, 1980) – such as in King Megrai's northern Thai kingdom of *Lanna* (million rice fields). An echo of the same folk expectation may be found in the Indianized names of the Thai Kings who in adopting the title *Rama*, that reincarnation of Vishnu, acquire among other names 'Lord of the Waters'.

So power developed around land and water with religious and other symbols protecting the centrality of farming and immovable irrigation infrastructure until the modern era, when as one anthropologist described the arrival of the Western era and the demise of the integrated religious era in the words 'The spirits aren't so powerful anymore' (Lando, 1983). However, through the long era before today, defense of both agricultural cities and villages was necessary from marauding pastoralists, nomads, forest dwellers, and wildlife from whom new agricultural land was constantly being annexed – and the farmers knew that such lands were also

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occupied by spirits that had to be appeased. So it seems that farming communities while adopting the rites of the great religions also maintained the life of the gods and spirits of the forest, trees, rivers, and places giving rise to the continuing folk-interpretations of, for example, rural Buddhism in Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, and Thailand. The idyllic notion of agricultural expansion as if it was a god-given destiny may owe more to foreign romantic ascription than to expansionist agricultural kingdoms with their armies, in Asia. As civilization arose with farming and required a strong power base, we can see the role of dharma in its early Hindu iterations of duty to the god-king as distinct from Buddhist interpretations of the word 'dharma' as fitting in with natural law – although some may see the two reconciled in Arjuna's story.

Once agriculture has become established with its stratified society and power base, it is open to an acceleration of technological innovation and labor efficiencies. Thus 'walled towns were more common, and long-distance trade was more visible in dynastic core settlements where military activity was a permanent adjunct to farming' (David Ludden, 1999; p. 71). But this situation arose after a long ebb and flow of power between pastoralists and farmers, which together with civilization, religion, and writing, is a defining role of agriculture that continues towards its apparent inevitable conclusion in some parts of the world today. Thus agri-history teaches that if one accepts the notion that agriculture underpinned the creation of civilization, the major religions and writing, one must also accept that it was a cause of expansionist militarism.

With 'troops' protecting farmers, agriculture expanded into more remote areas and incorporated new tribes and peoples into the supporting roles of the new society, such as toolmakers, domesticated-animal herders, traders, forest-product gatherers integrated into civilized society, builders, priests, and militia. Independent communities settled nearby to benefit from the protection and trade opportunities of agricultural cities and so by early in the current millennium across the subcontinent the landscape must have contained thousands of agriculture-based settlements linked by traveling traders and separated by forests, deserts, or other unsettled lands.

Such a scenario seems to differ from more centralized power bases in European and Chinese agri-history. As such it provides a clearer view of the central role of agriculture such as in the ancient Tamil poem – *'Food is first for all living things, made of food, and because food is but soil and water mingled together, those who bring water into fields create living beings and life in this world. Even kings with vast domains strive in vain, when their land is dry and fields sown with*

seeds look only to the sky for rain. So Pandya king who makes dreadful war, do not mistake my words: quickly expand watery places that are built to bring streams to your land! For those who control water reap rewards and those who fail cannot endure' [Source: *Purananuru* (Thoughtful Living). No. 18. <http://www.aleroy.com/blog/archives/tag/purananuru>]. One might speculate that the difference may well be that military expansion under a centralized power was planned from a base of agricultural surplus and well-stored grains and that takeover targets were other agricultural settlements, whereas expansion under the Subcontinent model of chiefs was to develop new agricultural lands as the first priority.

Expansionist farmers of Asia were not necessarily the naive folk imagined in Western projections of their *paysan*, but in some cases were farmer-warriors. Using their assets accumulated in one settlement, they attacked others in loose companies of other potential beneficiaries including merchants. Records in religious writings indicate that *'conquest and trade went hand-in-hand with religious endowments*

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and investments in farming' (David Ludden, 1999; p.89). Thus we have the aggressive agriculturist; fighting as part of farming. Warring was part of the agricultural calendar, and those that became superior were fighters and farmers. Conquests continued and centers expanded their influence such that by the dawn of the European colonial period, cities such as Vijayanagar ('Victory City') were suggested as surpassing Paris in their edifices, festivals, and rights to tribute (Surajit Sinha, 1962).

Today, agriculture is the dominant practice. So integrated is with power and so successful has it been in underwriting that power-base that it is often forgotten. Thus we have some food-insecure nations paying inadequate attention to the need to secure food to maintain their license to govern. At the same time across Asia, some tribal groups in lightly populated forests and jungles are still sustained by albeit reduced wildlife and vegetable products that they trade to supplement their shifting cultivation (*jhum*, swidden agriculture, slash-and-burn, etc.), and in other areas some pastoralists control water sources for their animals. It is these areas, notwithstanding various well-meaning preservation projects, that are today's frontier for agricultural expansion. This is another lesson of agri-history.

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