

INTRODUCTION

The systems of peasant agriculture vary with climate, geography, political outlook and economic development of any country. So diverse are the influences created by these factors, and so varied are the combinations present in different localities, that definitions of this system of agriculture are inadequate, if not inaccurate.

W. Arthur Lewis (6) in his thesis "The Evolution of the Peasantry in the British West Indies" propounds that the peasant is ideally a man who owns enough land to occupy his full attention, but not too much for him to cultivate alone or with the help of his family. This author, however, admits that many variations are possible and it is evident that his definition is adequate only because he is dealing with a specific area.

Other economists, notably Sir Alan Pim and I. C. Greaves identify peasant agriculture by contrasting it with the less variable plantation type, choosing the systems of cultivation, land utilization and tenure, processing, marketing, credit and the social and political stages, as the basis for this comparison.

It is however evident that co-operative farming produces conditions similar to those of the plantation system, which leads to some degree of overlapping and hence confusion. Greaves (4) discusses the definition of peasant based on cultivation characterised by personal labour of the proprietor and points out the occurrence of borderline cases, particularly those of prosperous peasants who hire and supervise labour. She concludes "it is extremely difficult, therefore, to reach a definite classification for the purpose of comparing the geographical distribution of the two systems" (plantation and peasant).

Furthermore, Pim (2a) has pointed out the inadequacy of the statement "a uniform system under central management" as the distinguishing feature of plantation agriculture, for in Fiji where peasant production of sugar cane is under direction from central factories or the Sudan Gezira Cotton Scheme which is directed by central management of a company, but organised on a peasant basis, would nevertheless be classified as plantations. Whereas the production of bananas and cocoa in Central America by some European holdings would be peasant production.

A common misconception of the term peasant may be attributed to the dictionary definition which states the original meaning namely, a countryman, synonymous with serf, villein and bond, a person either working for others or renting or owning and working a plot of land. With this definition has remained the idea that peasants are the lowest class of agricultural producer. Thus the tendency has arisen of substituting terms such as family farmer when referring to the more efficient systems of peasant production. This leaves the false impression that inefficiency is a characteristic of all types of peasant farming.

This essay is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the characteristics of peasant farming, particularly those of the economic factors of production, and the second with the consequences of these characters and ending with a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this system.