Chapter 7

AGRARIAN THINKING IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY

In this chapter, agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia has been studied from two angles. In the first part, it will be seen how agrarian thinking became a part of organized politics. Political parties and organized politics were a mode of functioning of the intelligentsia under certain historical circumstances. The first quarter of the century was a period of intense political activities. It went through different phases, beginning with the anti-partition struggle and including the Swarajya politics, the spread of the praja and the communist movements and the prolonged controversy over the amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. During this time various agrarian issues were debated upon by the politicians. Many of these political leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, were erstwhile members of the intelligentsia. There were lawyers, journalists, teachers, scholars and other professionals. Their activities included among other things, holding debates in the Legislature on tenancy bills, organizing meetings and ryot sabhas, supporting or opposing peasant resistance depending on which agrarian class they sympathised with etc. There was a close connection between agrarian relations and organized politics.

In the second part of the chapter, other aspects of intelligentsia’s activity unconnected with politics — mainly at the level of ideas, have been studied. They took the help of journals, pamphlets etc. to express their ideas on different agrarian issues. Some of them, like Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, were also active workers in agrarian experiments. They were, on the whole, more interested in rural reconstruction and improvements in techniques of agriculture and tried to present their ideas coherently.

The Bengali intelligentsia’s involvement with the agrarian issues continued well into the twentieth century. On 3rd December 1903, Viceroy Curzon announced in the Calcutta Gazette, the government’s plan to partition Bengal. During the political movement that followed, it was Rabindranath Tagore who tried to draw the attention of the people, particularly the educated community towards the reform of rural society and its economic development. Inspired by him, a group of educated young contemporaries began to take...
keen interest in agrarian issues. But like Rabindranath, many of them too found it difficult to separate agrarian problems from the general rural problems. Rural society being synonymous with agrarian society, they found both closely inter-linked.

During the first two decades of the century, developments taking place both within the country as well as outside had an impact on the educated young community of Bengal. So when the government made known its decision to partition Bengal, the political movement gained momentum. Its aim was to attain swaraj. But there was a widespread belief among a section of the educated community that swaraj in its real form could be attained only if the needs of the village, where the majority of the population lived, were fulfilled. The life-blood of the villages had to be restored, new life injected into the half-dead villages. This was first highlighted in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore during the Swadeshi days. His message, however, went mostly unheeded. The countrymen were not interested in the actual work which he felt was necessary. The Morley-Minto reforms (1909) led to a temporary decline in the political agitation. The First World War and its aftermath soon brought in its wake disillusionment and dissatisfaction and political agitation once more gained ground.

Contact with the west also had a deep imprint on the minds of the Bengali intellectuals. Familiarity with western thinking gave new dimension to their thought process, which was reflected in their literary creations. Thus, in the period between the two World Wars, we notice the impact of socialist thinking in Bengali literature. In order to understand this socialistic leaning, one has to understand the gradually deteriorating economic conditions in Bengal. While agriculture languished, unrest became a normal feature in industries.

The repressive measures of the imperial rulers, together with economic degradation, alienated the middle class. With the increasing stress and strain on the middle class their resentment and restlessness deepened. It was but natural that, the intelligentsia would think of eradicating the maladies of society. This effort had two aspects. One was to fight the political and economic stranglehold through the national movement. The other was, the expression of the new thinking in literature and concentration on constructive work. It was in this state of things that, the Bengali literary mind was attracted to socialist thinking that was then sweeping over Europe. In the period after the First World War, of all the European events the Russian Revolution of 1917 impressed the Bengali youth most. Simultaneously, there was a new attraction for Marxist thinking and Russian literature from 1920s. The popularity of Russian literature through translations had increased socialist leanings in Bengal. No longer were the literary minds satisfied with the life, achievements, sorrows and anxieties of the kings, the aristocrats and the zamindars only. They were relegated to a secondary position. There was an earnest effort to discover the sorrow and anxiety of the common man.

2Tagore, Rabindranath, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (native society) and ‘Abasthya o babosthya’ (condition and arrangement), Rabindra rachanabali, Centenary edition, vol. 12.
3Discussed in chapter 2.
Socialist thinking in Bengal did not assume a positive role. No attempt was made to formulate a new ideology or preach a change of the base of our society. But there was a new awareness about some of the social and economic maladies. There is much truth in Chitta Ranjan Bandyopadhyay’s comment that what actually happened was that only the attention of the intellectuals was diverted to the down-trodden social groups after the pattern of the socialists⁴. Perhaps, it was nothing more than that. The glaring inequalities in the society became the main target of attack in many writings of the time. Manish Ghatak’s ‘Patal dangar panchali’(tale of Pataldanga) may be taken as an instance. The dreams and depressions of the agriculturists and labourers had become the theme of many a social novel. At the same time a feeling of antagonism against the aristocratic class was clearly visible. Reference may be made to Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay’s Jalsaghar(music room) or Dhatri devata(earth goddess).

However, it was the rural village and the agrarian society which was the main theme. Inspired by Rabindranath, a section of the Bengali intelligentsia began to take a keen interest in the agrarian sphere. Agrarian issues were hotly debated in some of the leading journals of the time. This stirring of mind released new energy in society which assumed a two-fold character: a political struggle as well as constructive attempt to reconstruct Bengal’s rural life. However, during the Swadeshi movement an agrarian programme was absent.

In the period between the Morley-Minto reforms(1909) and the beginning of the Non-cooperation movement(1921), a small section of the intelligentsia began to look inwards, inspired by Tagore’s concept of atmashakti. Rural re-construction and agrarian problems drew their attention. In the 1920’s, till the end of our period, this concern continued along with heightened political activities.

The intelligentsia discussed different agrarian issues such as the techniques of agriculture, co-operative farming, ways to improve the condition of the peasants, settlement of agrarian disputes, scientific means of agricultural marketing, cultivation of different types of crops, rural reforms, the role of the youth in rural development and importance of agricultural education. Among those who thought deeply on such questions were Pramatha Chaudhuri, Srinath Dutta, Amarnath Dutta, Kalikumar Mitra, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay and Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay⁵.

7.1 Lack of an agrarian programme during the anti-partition struggle(1903-08)

The Boycott and Swadeshi movement was the most significant political movement in the early years of the 20th century. But in spite of its varied dimensions, this movement lacked a peasant programme. It was indifferent to the question of landlord-tenant relationship

⁴Bandyopadhyay, Chitta Ranjan, Sahityer katha (notes on literature), p.62.
⁵More about these men will be discussed later.
at a time when the condition of the Bengal peasantry was slowly deteriorating. Even the Indian Association which had been the champion of the ryots before the enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, in a memorandum signed by Surendranath Bandyopadhyay criticised government interference in landlord-tenant relations.

The main support for the movement came from the zamindars. Spread of the movement to the mofussil areas hindered radical thought on agrarian questions, since the village bhadrakal had to depend more on land than the metropolitan intelligentsia. Besides, many of the leaders were often holders of intermediate tenures, and thus had a stake in the security of rentals. For these reasons, in spite of the multifarious aspects of the Swadeshi movement — boycott and industrial revival, national education, trade unions and samiti organization — the leaders failed to formulate any radical agrarian programme. They did not deal with any grievances of the peasants like high rent, collection of abwabs etc. In fact Aurobindo Ghosh, one of the brightest luminaries of this period, in his 1907 articles on passive resistance expressly ruled out a no-tax campaign as this would alienate the landlords who constituted the main plank of the movement. This accounted for the apathy of the peasants. Debiprasanna Roychaudhuri, the Brahmo editor of Nabyabharat, observed that more than nine-tenths of the lower orders were utterly indifferent to Swadeshi. But even he failed to suggest anything more than famine relief and setting up of rural banks to curb the exploitation of moneylenders. Consequently, peasants in the countryside often found it difficult to identify themselves with the movement, which expected them to use costlier indigenous products instead of the cheaper foreign goods, while paying no attention to their needs.

The leaders of the Swadeshi movement failed to boldly approach the question of landlord-peasant relationship. The Bengalee printed a letter (signed N.) detailing the grievances of ryots — arbitrary rent enhancements and the abuses of bhaoli or produce rent in Bihar. But in the Bengal Legislative Council, Asutosh Chaudhuri, a moderate national leader, a leading barrister, a Pabna zamindar, secretary of Bengal Landholders’ Association and president of Pabna District Conference (21 June 1907) concentrated his criticism on the provision for executive intervention in cases of illegal rent enhancement, arguing that the tenant can surely get relief from a munsif’s court. Bhupendranath Bose, another moderate nationalist leader, welcomed the summary procedure. Both of them of course, condemned the distinction sought to be drawn between good and bad zamindars. According to one recent view, two news items, published in Bengalee within a fortnight of each other in May 1906, might serve as indices of the limits of nationalist thought on agrarian issues during this period. On 13 May, it was reported that Rabindranath and Surendranath Tagore in course of a visit to their zamindari at Shilaidaha had remitted a large portion of rent due to scarcity and given loans to needy ryots. The Bengalee raised the question ‘will other zamindars follow suit?’. The second item was that on 27 and 30 May were published...
the replies of the Mukttagaccha zamindars to two petitions from Muslims of Kharaghari village, alleging the imposition of an abwab of 50 per cent, which the district magistrate had referred to them. This reply stated that ‘lately the ryots of this quarter have conceived an idea that their rents will be reduced and that their representations will be favourably considered by the government irrespective of their merits, and probably this idea has also induced them to file the said petition’. The petitioners, the zamindars alleged, had failed to pay their legitimate rents regularly, and hence deserved no consideration whatsoever. The *Bengalee*, the mouthpiece of the Indian Association which had taken a pro-ryot stand in the 1880s during the marathon controversy over the enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Bill, found this reply ‘sufficiently convincing’\(^{12}\). The issue of 30 May incidentally, carried another item describing high rice prices in Mymensingh (from Rs 6 to Rs 6-4 a maund), as a result of which many, particularly Muslim ryots, were in distress.

In this connection, mention must be made of an interesting pamphlet written by Charuchandra Basu Majumdar entitled *Bartaman samashya o swadeshi andolan* (present day problems and the swadeshi movement) published on 1 November 1905. Here, the author has dealt with the usual themes like the economic justification for the boycott, the moderate political goal of a reunited Bengal under a governor-general etc. But the literary form adopted is that of a dialogue between Ramesh Babu, a *swadeshi* enthusiast, and Gopi Ghosh, a peasant. The peasant at one stage rather timidly suggests that perhaps one way of reducing the poverty of the poor would be to redistribute among them the wealth of the rich. The *swadeshi* leader promptly informs him that no one is really rich in India; rather, what everyone should do, is to unite and cut down the annual expenditure of Rs 38 crores on foreign goods, which, it is argued, would automatically increase the average income of Indians by Rs 5. This is a clear vindication of the reluctance of the leaders of the movement to adopt any radical agrarian programme\(^{13}\). Barring a few exceptions, like Brojendrakishore Raychaudhuri in Mymensingh or Narendralal Khan and Digambar Nanda in Midnapur, the vital part in promoting *swadeshi* in the countryside was played not by big zamindars, many of whom were absentees who lived most of the year in Calcutta, but by the far more numerous small landholders — *talukdars* and possessors of intermediate tenurial rights. Such tenures were the real basis of the predominantly Hindu ‘middle class’ *bhadralok* community. The ranks of the *muftasil* pleaders, doctors, school teachers and zamindari *amlahs* were largely drawn from such holders of intermediate tenures. There were close links between the movement and these social strata. The landlords helped to extend and enforce the boycott in the countryside. They used their general influence over the ryot tenants or sharecroppers and closed the local markets to foreign goods.

It was this closeness with the landowning section that was primarily responsible, for the failure of the Swadeshi movement to evolve a peasant programme. This has been described as the real ‘real Achilles heel’ of the entire movement\(^{14}\). Surendranath’s Indian Association was relatively unimportant in *swadeshi* politics. It did not even try to organize a volunteer force of its own. On the other hand, the Bengal Landholders’ Association,

\(^{12}\) *Bengalee*, 30 May 1906.

\(^{13}\) Sarkar, Sumit, *op.cit.*, p.270.

\(^{14}\) *ibid.*, p.333.
which by 1914 became a dormant body, was very active and prominent. It was led by such eminent men like Asutosh Chaudhuri, who was its secretary. Apart from immediate material interests, it was their sense of alienation from men who lived off their labour i.e. the common peasantry, which was largely responsible for the intelligentsia's indifference to peasant problems. Education through a foreign medium did nothing to reduce this sense of alienation. The largely unconscious inherited assumptions and attitudes of the intelligentsia concerning the uneducated masses and in particular the Muslims among them, prevented the formulation of radical social programmes and the working out of a political ideology with mass appeal.

This short-sightedness would later strengthen communalist forces. A section of the Muslim aristocratic leadership adopted an anti-landlord stance. This was facilitated by the social fact of there being, in the words of the Moslem chronicle, 'many districts in Bengal where no large zamindar is a Muhammedan, and in which even petty landowners of the Muhammedan persuasion are but a small minority'\textsuperscript{15}. Another journal Mihir-o-sudhakar, owned by Nawab Ali Chaudhuri of Mymensingh, repeatedly denounced the oppression by Hindu zamindars\textsuperscript{16}. It suggested setting up of credit societies and revision of interest laws to free peasants from the clutches of moneylenders\textsuperscript{17}. It also attacked Hindu rice merchants for buying cheaply from the producers and selling at higher prices\textsuperscript{18}. The journal soon became very popular, compared to Soltan and Mussalman. On 25 November, 1906, a Muhammedan Vigilance Committee was set up in Calcutta with Amir Hussain and Sirajul Islam as the main leaders. Its purpose was to establish contacts with district Muslim associations and anjumans and thus prevent Muhammedan tenantry from being ill-treated by Hindu landlords\textsuperscript{19}. Though the Bengalee accused the Vigilance Committee of making 'groundless statements ... against Hindu landlords'\textsuperscript{20}, the sympathy of a powerful section of Muslim society for the hapless Muslim peasantry was undeniable.

However, a few little-known schemes for agricultural development were started. The Association for the Advancement of Scientific and Industrial Education of Indians was founded in March 1904 by Jogendrachandra Ghosh, the lawyer-son of Justice Chandramadhab. This Association had planned, in August 1905, an agricultural settlement to be set up on 45,000 bighas of land purchased near Deoghar. The aim was to provide a centre for training in scientific agriculture. Ultimately, it opened in 1908 with a training school for fifteen 'sons of gentlemen'\textsuperscript{21}. In June 1906, an Indian Cotton Cultivation Company was registered to start a cotton farm at Maluti, in the Santal Parganas, to provide raw cotton for the Banga Lakshmi Mill. It was as an abortive attempt. Of the cotton sown in a hundred bighas in the summer of 1907, seven-eights of the crop were ruined by drought\textsuperscript{22}. These highlight all the more clearly, the failure of the leaders to evolve an agrarian programme.

\textsuperscript{15}"The farce of Hindu-Muslim union', Moslem chronicle, 26 December, 1908.
\textsuperscript{16}Mihir-o-sudhakar, 15 September, 1905, 15 March, 1907, 7 February, 1908 — RNP for weeks ending 30 September, 1905; 30 March, 1907; 15 February, 1908.
\textsuperscript{17}ibid., 29 September, 1905 — RNP for week ending 7 October, 1905.
\textsuperscript{18}ibid., 24 August, 1906, — RNP for week ending 1 September, 1906.
\textsuperscript{19}Sarkar. S. op.cit., p.444.
\textsuperscript{20}28 November, 1906.
\textsuperscript{21}Bengalee, 30 August, 1905, 18 October, 1906, 7 March, 1908.
\textsuperscript{22}ibid., 23 January, 1907, 18 April, 1904, 8 May, 1908.
The only saving grace was Rabindranath Tagore, who represented the soul of the movement. He pleaded for *atmashakti*; the necessity of bridging the gap between the elite and the masses; rural reconstruction; rejuvenation of the villages and; agrarian development. But his message was mostly unheeded.\(^{23}\)

7.2 The Praja Party and the peasant’s cause (1914-26)

In the second decade of the 20th century, a considerable section of the Muslim youth in Bengal became increasingly interested in political activities. Led, among others, by A.K. Fazlul Huq they were particularly, interested in agrarian issues. Soon they were to emerge as the champions of the downtrodden Muslim peasantry. The *Praja* movement took the form of an anti-zamindari movement and highlighted the growing crisis in Bengal’s agrarian society. Led by Fazlul Huq, the Muslim leaders began to give great importance to the land question.\(^{24}\) The term *praja* or tenant came to be commonly applied to all those who had property rights below the zamindars.\(^{25}\) The Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885, also divided the *prajnas* into three major categories (a) intermediate tenure-holders, (b) the raiyats and (c) the under-raiyats.\(^{26}\) These divisions were based on the concept of property right, but there were *prajnas* without property rights also like, *bargadar, adhiar, bhag-chas, khetmajur* etc., who were directly related with production. Very soon the limitations of the Bengali Tenancy Act, 1885, came to be highlighted by these leaders.

It may be observed here that the *praja* leaders did not present their views on the agrarian issues in an organized manner. Their plan of action, the lists of demands they presented from time to time, the programmes they outlined in the various conferences and meetings they held and the stand they took in the Legislature when agrarian issues were discussed, give us an insight into their agrarian ideas. Through their political activities they tried to realise these ideas. Agrarian thinking of their leadership constituted a part of their political programme.

The *praja* movement was mostly concentrated in the eastern Bengal districts, where a considerable section of the Muslim peasantry were either under-ryots or agricultural labourers. This movement was increasingly supported by a large number of affluent Muslim tenants of the region. They wanted to secure land and other means of production, to establish their own authority in the rural economy as well as in the political sphere. This could only be possible through a struggle against the existing authorities in the rural societies viz., zamindars, moneylenders, traders and upper caste Hindus. The communal factor was used very skillfully by them. They used, to their advantage, the fact that not only were the major portion of zamindars Hindus, but the officials responsible for estate management

\(^{23}\) Tagore’s agrarian thinking will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.


\(^{26}\) Sen, Sachin, *Banglar raiyat o zamindar(Bengal’s ryot and zamindar)*, Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1944, p.15.
were also mainly Hindus. This category of affluent Muslim tenants allied with the newly emerging Muslim professionals, who had close ties with the rural society and mobilised the under-ryots, the bargadars and the poor Muslim peasants who constituted a major part of the rural masses in Bengal.

They were soon to channelise the discontent of the Muslims against the zamindari system into a communal conflict. The praja leaders which included some newly emerging professionals, utilized some concrete socio-economic grievances. The controversy over the issues of the right to transfer, which was an important incident of a ryot's holding, and the ryot's right to trees was a major cause for tenants' resentment. Other grievances included rent enhancements, collection of excessive abwabs, ill-treatment by zamindars and their officials, the exploitation of moneylenders and the high rates of interest charged by them etc. The praja movement was essentially a form of anti-zamindari movement.

The praja movement started in real earnest with the Kamarerchar praja conference in Jamalpur sub-division of Mymensingh district in 1914. It was attended by prominent Muslim leaders like, Fazrul Huq of Bakhargunj, a lawyer, Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan from Calcutta, Muniruzzaman Islamabadi of Chittagong, a writer. It forged a close link between the local leaders of the praja movement and the Muslim urban professionals. The latter were not blind to the advantages of securing some form of mass support. The conference formulated the first demand charter of the tenants. It included the abolition of zamindar's right to nazar and salami; reduction of rent; effective measure against illegal exaction by zamindars; occupancy right to the tenants when the land is cultivated by them for 12 years and the landlords should not be entitled to take it away from them because they would not pay higher rent; tenant's right to plant trees on his land etc. This charter mainly upheld the interests of better-off ryots. There was no mention of the rights of the bhagchashis. The praja leaders began to experiment with organizations that might win them a following among the Muslim peasantry. As early as December, 1917, Fazlul Huq and a group of fellow lawyers and journalists formed the Calcutta Agricultural Association. In early 1920, the Bengal Jotdars and Ryots' Association was founded, with office-bearers drawn from Calcutta and the towns of eastern Bengal. At this stage they demanded abolition of the landlords' fee on transfers of land, abolition of illegal exaction, reduction of rent, the tenant's right to trees, relief from indebtedness and 'honourable treatment of Muslim tenants in the zamindar's kutcherry'. Such organized efforts continued through the 1920s. They tried to combine sporadic local actions by peasants against landlords or their agents, or against moneylenders, with the more ordered forms of meetings, processions, boycotts, 

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27It was found in 1921 census report that the total number of agents, managers of landed estates, clerks, rent collectors etc. was 1,33,775, out of which 1,10,579 or 82.66% were Hindus and 22,356 or 16.71% were Muslims.


31Moslem Hitoishi, 21 December, 1917.

32De, Jatindranath, op.cit., pp.31-32.
strikes and refusal to pay illegal cesses. These associations did not achieve anything of immediate importance, but they were the precursors of the peasant organizations formed by Muslim politicians in the mid-1920s, which later provided a backing for Fazlul Huq’s Krishak Praja Party in the Legislative Council. Gradually district level associations were set up by the praja leaders.

Very soon, Fazlul Huq was to emerge as the undisputed leader of the praja movement. In 1921, he was responsible for the organization of a big praja meeting in a village in Barisal. His popularity increased with his success in the anti-Saha movement in Ghiur in Dacca district in 1926. It was a movement of the poor Muslim cultivators against the local Sahas who were moneylenders-cum-landlords in the sub-division of Manikganj in Dacca district. They demanded a low rate of rent and interest. The Muslim cultivators began the movement by refusing to cultivate the lands of Sahas and went on to suspend all work for the other local Hindu zamindars too.

A significant event in the history of the praja movement was the organization of a big peasant conference at Salimpur on 3rd January 1926, under the leadership of Maulavi Ismail Hussain Siraji, a Muslim jotedar. A 14-point demand charter was drawn up to further the cause of the peasants. It stated:

1. That the raiyats must have kaimi (permanent) right in his arable and homestead land at fixed jama (rent).
2. That they must have unlimited and unqualified right for transfer of their land and that the landlord will have no right to dispossess the purchaser thereof.
3. That the zamindars should not be permitted to have khas possession of land sold after payment of compensation to the purchaser.
4. That the landlords’ fee to be realised through registry office with compulsion of zamindars to grant dakhila in receipt of same without right to claim nazir; that inherited property should be exempted from any kind of salami.
5. That the right of zamindars for khas possession or transfer of whole jama must be stopped.
6. That the provision of increment of rent after lapse of every 15 years must be declared null and void.
7. That the raiyat must have right to valuable trees grown in his land.
8. That the raiyat must have complete right to excavate tank, sink pucca well or erect building in their own land without giving any nazir.
9. That available lands must always be under exclusive possession of the cultivating class alone.
10. That the raiyat will acquire kaimi mourasi right of his holding if he occupies it continuously for 12 years.
11. That the zamindar must be bound to accept rent by postal money order.
12. That the raiyat’s arable and homestead land, seed store, bullock or the plough must not be sold for debt.

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34 Ibid., vol. XX, no.3, 7 January, 1926, p.5.
35 raiyats were peasants; tenants under meaning of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, raiyats fell broadly into 3 categories viz., (a) raiyats at fixed rent, (b) occupancy raiyats and (c) non-occupancy raiyats.
13. That the practice of realizing abwab by zamindars must be stopped.
14. That free and compulsory primary education must be introduced.

This charter expresses the views of the praja leaders on some agrarian issues. It must be observed here that most of the demands in the charter were put forward to protect the interests of the jotedars and affluent peasants. Not much thought was given to the needs of the Muslim bargadars. Yet the charter received an overwhelming support from the Muslim peasantry. The praja movement had by now become the undisputed champion of the cause of the suffering Muslim peasantry. It paid no heed to the sufferings of the Hindu peasants. The movement repeatedly focused on the oppressive character of Hindu moneylenders and zamindars. By now there were praja samities in virtually every district in east and north Bengal. The course of movement was mostly limited to meetings, processions, refusal to cultivate land of Hindu zamindar, refusal of illegal as well as legal payment to the zamindar, socio-economic non-cooperation with the Hindus and sometimes peaceful demonstrations in front of zamindari kutcherris.

A remarkable feature of the praja leadership was its affiliation in terms of the major political groupings in provincial politics. In contrast with the westernised Calcutta-based Muslim leadership, these leaders were quite unequivocally members and supporters of Chittaranjan Das's Congress. Under his leadership the Swarajya party had accepted the Bengal Pact in its Calcutta conference, 16-17 December, 1923. The main terms of the Pact were:
1. Representation in the Legislative Council was to be in proportion to the population and through separate electorates.
2. In local bodies, the majority community in each district would have 60% seats, and minority community 40% seats.
3. 55% of government posts to be reserved for the Muslims.
4. There was to be no music in procession before mosque and cow killing for religious sacrifices was not to be interfered with.36

Within three years of C.R.Das's death in 1925 this affiliation ceased. The terms of the Pact were neither whole-heartedly supported by the Hindu Swarajists, nor did the Muslims feel that their interests had been secured firmly. Ultimately in the Bengal Provincial Congress Conference which met at Krishnanagore(22-23 May, 1926), the Pact was annulled. Communal riots soon broke out in Pabna in August 1926, followed by riots elsewhere.

The disillusionment at the Krishnanagore Conference gave a great opportunity to the Muslim leadership particularly to those who were involved with the Praja movement. So long there had been no attempt at redressal of the grievances of the Muslim bargadars. Yet, considering Muslim bargadars as a vital force in the conflict with Hindu zamindars and moneylenders, the praja leaders had followed a 'skilful strategy of verbal support' in handling the problem of the bargadars. So it was mainly to the interest of the praja leaders that the genuine economic grievances of the Muslim bargadars was turned into a violent communal conflict. The leaders maintained this strategy during the controversy over the amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1928, on the rights and status of bargadars in the Legislative Council.

It would not be out of place to briefly discuss the barga system which developed in Bengal from the late 19th century and brought about a structural change in the agrarian system. Barga or the system of sharecropping developed as different forms of an iniquitous system of produce rent in which the bargadar paid 50% of the produce rent to the landowners. He himself supplied cattle, plough, seeds and the manure, but had no right of occupancy. The condition of the bargadars was deteriorating fast. The announcement of the draft of the Tenancy Act (Amendment) Bill in 1926 was going to give rise to a controversy among the Bengali intelligentsia on the question of the rights to be given to the bargadars. In this controversy, the leaders of the praja movement were going to play an active part. The Praja Bahini, the first popular weekly of the praja movement, started by Rajibuddin Tarafdar from Bogra in 1925, was going to become the mouth-piece of the leaders. It published the views of the praja leaders on the rights of peasants, particularly the Muslim bargadars.

After the amendment was passed to the Bengal Tenancy Act in 1928, it was no longer possible for most Muslim leaders, in their own interest as well as in that of the praja, to rely on the Congress. From this time onwards, organized politics among the Muslim masses of Bengal moved decisively away from the Congress and the leadership of the Praya movement decided to form a provincial organization of its own. The 'All Bengal Praja Samity' was formed in 1929. In 1931, it resolved to participate in all government institutions, legislatures, municipalities and union boards. This apparently necessitated an appropriate provincial leadership. Jatindranath De shows that in the years 1930-34 the Praja party was controlled at the top by a Calcutta leadership consisting of Sir Abdur Rahim, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen, Sir Musharraf Hussain and Akram Khan. In 1935 this leadership was challenged when, at the Mymensingh conference, Fazlul Huq defeated Abdul Momen and became president of the party. From then on the Krishak Praja party, as it came to be called from 1936, became 'almost entirely an east Bengal party'.

In the 1920s the organized demands made repeatedly on behalf of the Praya movement in eastern Bengal included abolition of illegal exaction, reduction of rent, reduction of interest rates and relief from indebtedness, honourable treatment of Muslim tenants in the zamindar's office and abolition of the landlord's fee on transfers of raiyati land. The first four demands affected the peasantry in general. The fifth affected the richer peasantry, trying to increase its control over the land and thus demanding a free land market in peasant holdings. Yet, this demand was supported by the majority of the peasants, since free transferability and a general rise in land values would have meant easier terms for loans and smaller distress sales of land. In the 1930s, as an impact of the depression of 1931-32, these issues were raised more aggressively leading ultimately to a general demand for the abolition of the Permanent Settlement. Politically, peasant resistance in eastern Bengal did not only take the form of an organized Praya movement. Between 1926-31, there were a series of violent 'communal' clashes against Hindu landlords and moneylenders.

38Ahmad, Abul Mansur, Amar dekha rajnitir panchas bachchar (fifty years of politics that I have seen), Dacca: Nowroze Kitabistan, 1970, p.61.
39De, Jatindranath, op.cit., p.92.
7.3 The Swarajya Party and agrarian politics (1923-26)

In the 1920s the Swarajya Party came to dominate Bengal politics. Right from its inception in 1923, the Party adopted a pro-zamindar stance. In the election manifesto of 1923, the Party declared that the agriculturist of India needed no assurance of the consistent support of the Party to his cause. He was the backbone of the country and the mainstay of the Congress. The Swarajya Party would miserably fail in its primary duty if it did not make the betterment of his deplorable condition its first and foremost concern. While assuring the support of the Party to the cause of the agriculturist, the manifesto added that the zamindars had in the past furnished many a brilliant chapter to the history of the country and those who desired to help in the building of swarajya could not possibly dream of undermining the very foundation of the society as it had existed for years by trying to eliminate an important and influential class. However, the Swarajya Party did not totally ignore the agrarian issue. When, in the Legislative Council it prepared its work agenda, under the leadership of C.R. Das, the eminent Calcutta barrister, it decided that instead of waiting for the government to take the initiative in introducing the tenancy bill, the Swarajya Party itself in consultation with other parties would work out a proposal acceptable to both the zamindars and the peasants and prepare a bill to be introduced in the Council. The leaders of the Swarajya Party wanted to keep both the zamindars and peasants satisfied within the framework of the zamindari system. However, after C.R. Das's untimely death on 16th June, 1925 the leaders of the Party set up a committee to make the plan a reality. The Swarajya Party included some local leaders like Birendranath Sasmal, Anilbaran Roy as well as Muslim leaders like Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chaudhury.

It was decided that the Committee would suggest such a solution to the land problem which would be acceptable to both landlords and tenants. The Swarajya Party announced its decision to introduce a Bill in the next session of the Council, based on the proposals of the Committee. The members of the Committee were Rai Harendranath Chaudhury, Rai Satyendranath Choudhury Bahadur, D.N. Roy, Rajibuddin Tarafdar, Kadir Bux and Hemanta Kumar Sarkar. The Committee was asked to submit its report by November 1925. But the Swarajya Party failed to come to a decision on the land question. Nor could it prepare a report. When in November 1925, it was announced in the Calcutta Gazette that a tenancy bill would be introduced in the Council, the English journal Forward, the mouth-piece of the Party, published an editorial headed 'Tenancy Bill'. In this essay, it observed that the main intention behind the amendment of the Tenancy Act was to reduce the number of legal suits. It was also suggested that, if the right of zamindars to collect revenue easily was recognised then there would be no objection to recognition of the rights of peasants. But there was no provision in the Bill which would ensure easy collection of revenue without having recourse to law. The Forward also observed that, the Committee of 1921 had stated that relations between zamindar and peasants were cordial. But if the Tenancy Bill was passed then relations would become strained. That was why the

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40 Bengal Legislative Council Progs, no.1, 7 August, 1928, p.416.
41 Forward, Wednesday, 26 August, 1925, p.3.
Forward did not think it necessary to bring about changes in the land system\textsuperscript{42}. What the Forward did not realise was that, the land system of Bengal was greatly responsible for the increasing communal tension in Bengal.

It would not be out of place here to analyse the social composition of the Swarajya Party and its supporters in the Legislature. It consisted of (a) highly successful Calcutta based professionals and businessmen, such as Dr. Pramathanath Banerjee, Saratchandra Bose, Dr. J.M. Das Gupta, P.D. Himatsingka, Jogeshchandra Gupta, Dr. Kumud Sankar Ray, Dr. Bidhanchandra Roy, Kiran Sankar Roy, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, J.M. Sen Gupta, Ananda Mohan Poddar and Satishchandra Sen, (b) big landlords, such as Harendranath Chaudhuri, Debendra Lal Khan, Taraknath Mukherjee, Srischandra Nandy, Hemchandra Naskar, Ranjit Pal Choudhuri, Surendra Nath Ray and Sarada Kripa Lala, and (c) district organization leaders, usually landlords or professionals and often with terrorist connections, like Jogendrachandra Chakravarti, Akhilchandra Datta, Amarendra Nath Ghosh, Jogendranath Moitra, Satyen Roy Choudhuri, and Nagendranath Sen\textsuperscript{43}.

Besides, the Swarajya block often received the support of landlords and businessmen like Sashikanta Acharya Chaudhuri of Mymensingh, Bijoy Prasad Singh Roy of Chakdighi, Bhopendra Narayan Sinha of Nashipur, Satyendrachandra Ghosh Maulik of the British Indian Association and Badridas Goenka of the Bengal Marwari Association. It was because of the social class to which they belonged that, the majority of the members in the Swarajya bloc were defenders of what they termed 'the middle classes of Bengal', i.e., the rentier classes. They favoured the rights of landlords, whatever their position in the hierarchy of proprietorship, against those of under-tenants and sharecroppers.

The Swarajya Party was not only sympathetic to zamindars but praised their progressive role in the national movement. Right from its inception, this was the attitude of the Swarajya Party towards zamindars. A large number of zamindars were members of the Party and some of them were also members of the Bengal Council with their support. According to the Swarajya Party, the main task before the nation was national freedom. Yet, to resolve the differences between zamindars and peasants the Party wanted some legal changes within the framework of the Permanent Settlement. The leaders of the Party did not realise that their failure to find a proper solution to the agricultural problem might lead to more complexities. Probably they left the solution to the agricultural problem after Independence.

The Congress also did not want any change in the land system, which would lead to abolition of zamindari system. During the Non-cooperation movement, many peasants had joined the struggle. But class interests prevented the Bengal Congress leaders from providing leadership to the peasants. The peasants were disillusioned. In 1925, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee planned to develop the village by setting up Deshbandhu Village Reorganization Fund Committee. But there was no plan to find a solution to the land problem. The programme adopted by the committee was to open day and

\textsuperscript{42} "Tenancy Bill", editorial article in Forward, Tuesday, 24 November, 1925, p.4.

\textsuperscript{43} Chatterjee, Partha, op.cit., pp.94-95
night schools, medical relief centres, charkha spinning centres, arbitration board for settlement cases, agricultural cooperative and credit societies and cooperative purchase and sale societies.\textsuperscript{44}

In the 1924 Congress session at Gauhati, the proposals of the communists included demand for abolition of zamindari system along with independence for India. But the proposal was defeated by a large majority of votes. The main reason for this was that zamindars made substantial financial contributions for the nationalist movement. But one of the proposals accepted was that, the Congress would try to gain permanent occupancy right and other advantages for the peasants. When the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act was passed in 1928, the Congress members of the Bengal Legislative Council were more concerned about the interests of the zamindars.

In practice, ignoring their election pledge, the Swarajists defended the interests of landlords by sacrificing the just rights of the agriculturists. This is evident from the statement of its leader Babu Naliniranjan Sarkar, who in support of landlord's right to salami and pre-emption said, 'I am at a loss to understand, how this can be opposed by those persons who have maintained on the floor of this House that no customary or legal right should be taken away from any body or any person without giving them an adequate compensation.\textsuperscript{45}

The Swarajist Party was more anxious to safeguard the interests of the middle class people to which many of them belonged. They objected to the proposal of giving tenancy right to the bargadar on the ground that the middle class would be ruined. The Swarajists also refused to amend the provision relating to the abolition of commutation of produce rent into cash rent, as they considered that it was not just and fair to petty landlords especially when, they were minors, orphans or widows who could not cultivate their lands personally. It would lead to rising agricultural prices. Nor was it fair in the case of middle class bhadraloks, Hindus or Muhammedans, who could cultivate their lands themselves but let out their lands for getting paddy for the consumption of their family just for subsistence, and it was in this light that the matter was considered.\textsuperscript{46}

\section*{7.4 Muzaffar Ahmad, the Workers and Peasants' Party and agrarian issues in the 1920s}

A shift to organized politics was a marked feature of Muzaffar Ahmad and his Party. The 1920s also saw the beginning of communist movement in Bengal. Taking up the cause of the socially downtrodden, it was naturally keen on defending the peasant cause. Muzaffar Ahmad(1889-1973) was closely associated with the communist movement in Bengal since the inception of the Party till his death. A self-educated youth, he was

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{Forward}, 22 November, 1925; Gupta, Atulchandra, \textit{Jamir makh(land owner)}, Calcutta, 1351 B.S., pp.11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Bengal Legislative Council Progs}, 22 August, 1928, p.428.
\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{ibid.}, 20 August, 1928, p.220.
\end{enumerate}
associated for long with the Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samity. It was while editing the Bangiya Sahitya Patrika that, he became acquainted with Kazi Nazrul Islam, the poet. The two began to publish an evening daily Navajug. There, he used to contribute articles on the lives of the workers and their problems. Gradually he became interested in the labour movement. This interest continued even after he left Navajug in 1921, after his dispute with its founder A.K. Fazlul Huq, a lawyer by profession.

In early 1920, he became enthusiastic about communism. He came under the influence of M.N. Roy, who first preached communism in India, through his emissary Nalini Gupta. From the beginning, the government of India adopted a very stern attitude towards Communism. Muzaffar Ahmad and other Communists were accused in the Kanpur Bolshevik conspiracy case in 1924 and sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment. But he was released from jail in early September 1925, on medical ground. On 25 December, 1925, he joined the Communist conference held in Kanpur where the Communist Party of India was founded. Ahmad was given the responsibility of organizing the Communist movement in Bengal. After his return to Calcutta on 2nd January, 1926, he became deeply involved in this work.

In his absence his old associates, Abdul Halim, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar and others had formed the Labour Swaraj Party in Bengal on 1 November, 1925, within the Indian National Congress. The object of the Party was the attainment of swaraj based on economic and social emancipation and political freedom of all. Particular emphasis was laid on organizing workers and peasants and on preparing a complete charter of demands. This included, minimum wages, 8-hour day, introduction of cooperative organization, free and compulsory education, and ownership of land to be vested in the autonomous village communities. The mouth-piece of the Party was a Bengali weekly Langal. Nazrul was closely associated with it.

After his return to Calcutta, from the Kanpur Communist conference, Muzaffar Ahmad joined the Labour Swaraj Party in early 1926. He began to write frequently in the Langal, articles on the plight of the workers and the peasants with the intention of spreading communism. Earlier, in a letter published in Dhumketu, edited by Kazi Nazrul, under the pseudonym of Dwipayan, he had given proof of his sympathy for the toiling masses. He wrote that the strength of the country lay in them. They kept the wheel of life moving. The peasants produced food, while the workers satisfied other needs. Even during war, soldiers were recruited from these two classes who constituted 80% of the population. He wrote an article in Langal, entitled 'Why India is not independent?' Here he called upon

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47 Ahmad, Muzaffar, Amar jiban o bharater communist Party: 1920-29 (my life and communist Party of India), Dacca, 1972, p.23.
48 Ahmad, Muzaffar, Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha (reminiscences), Calcutta, 1989, p.3.
49 Ahmad, Muzaffar, Amar jiban (my life), p.57.
50 Ibid., p.341.
53 Dhumketu, 13 October, 1922.
the educated youth to organize the peasants and the workers and spread the message of life among them. They should be taught to enjoy the fruits of their labour. They should be set free from the influence of the deceitful sadhus and sanyasis, mullahs and maulavis who had hitherto taught them that life is an illusion and material acquisitions hindered their passage to heaven. Unless freed from their corrupting influence, there was no hope of emancipation for the toiling masses.

In the same issue of the Langal, a report on the first national conference of the Communists was published. It was reported that, the Indian workers and peasants could not lead their lives as 'human beings' because of the exploitation of the Indian and foreign capitalists and the Indian landlords. The bourgeoisie dominated in most of the contemporary political parties. So it was proposed in the conference, to organize a Party to fight for the emancipation of the workers and the peasants. This Party would be called the Communist Party of India. The aim of this Party would be to establish social control over land, mines, telegraph, railways and all other sources of public wealth to enable workers and peasants to live their lives as 'human beings'.

In February 1926, the Labour Swaraj Party convened the Second Conference of All Bengal Peasants in Krishnanagar, Nadia. It was presided over by Dr. Nareshchandra Sengupta, the eminent lawyer of the Calcutta High Court. It was resolved to organize the Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal. The name of the Labour-Swaraj Party was changed to Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal. Dr. Naresh Chandra Sengupta was elected president and Hemanta Kumar Sarkar and Qutubuddin Ahmad, Joint-Secretaries. Kazi Nazrul Islam, Muzaffar Ahmad and Soumendranath Thakur became members. The aim of the Party was to organize the workers, peasants and the middle-class youth for a country-wide general strike and a no-tax and no-rent campaign. It called for public utilities being made national property, vesting of property in land in the village communities etc.

In an article on class-struggle, Muzaffar Ahmad blamed the unequal social structure for class-struggle. The actual toilers were always being deprived. In another article, he wrote that the middle class had always neglected the peasants and workers who constituted the major forces. It was now time for the latter to put up an united front to fight for their rights. Thus Muzaffar Ahmad was trying to familiarize the people with Marxist ideas.

The Langal had to be closed down in the middle of April, 1926, due to a fund crunch. After a tireless effort, Muzaffar Ahmad succeeded in starting a new weekly Ganabani from 12 August 1926. This now became the mouth-piece of the Peasants and Workers' Party of Bengal. Kazi Nazrul and Hemanta Sarkar, among others, were regular contributors. From 10 October, 1926 the publication of this paper too had to be stopped due to financial difficulties. It was revived on 14 April 1927.
In the meantime, Muzaffar Ahmad had begun to concentrate on organizing the Peasants and Workers Party in Bengal. In the Communist Conference held in Bombay from 16 to 18 January, 1927, it had been resolved to organise an All Indian Workers and Peasants Party on the lines of the Bengal model. The second conference of the Bengal Peasants and Workers Party was held on 19 and 20 February, 1927, under the presidency of Atulchandra Gupta. A new programme of demands was adopted in the meeting.61

Muzaffar Ahmad now wrote an article called 'The new Party'62. He wrote that, it had become necessary to organize the Peasants and Workers Party because the social, political and economic emancipation of the masses had to be secured. The Indian National Congress has failed to do so because of its attempt to be the organization collectively of zamindars, capitalists, peasants, workers and the lower classes. But the interests of peasants and zamindars, of capitalists and workers could never be identical. Peasants and workers belonged to the class of the exploited, and zamindars and capitalists to that of the exploiters. These two classes could never work together and a conflict was inevitable. The Congress had frequently proved that, when the interests of the two clashed, it would always side with the capitalists, merchants and zamindars. Likewise, he felt, the All India Trade Union Congress too had failed to safeguard the interests of the workers. For all these reasons, the organization of the Peasants and Workers Party had become necessary to provide leadership to the toiling masses. It would include the proletariat who had lost their means of production and been forced to sell their labour; the peasants and; the lower middle class who had joined the national movement. The peasants and the workers constituted the main strength of the national movement. The lower middle class would educate them since they were illiterate.

Later, a broad based programme was adopted in the central executive committee meeting of the Communist Party of India, on May 31, 1927, in Bombay. It included complete independence, abolition of landlordism, nationalization of public utilities, 8 hour day, minimum wages etc.63 Though Muzaffar Ahmad had been elected one of the presidents of the meeting, he did not participate in it. After 1927, the Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal spread very rapidly. Propaganda and organizational work was started among the jute workers. Unions were formed.

The next important milestone in the history of the Party was the significant role it played in the Madras session of Indian National Congress in December 1927. From 1921 onwards the Communist Party of India had preached its own manifesto and programme in every session of the Congress. But in the Madras session, the manifesto of the Peasants and Workers Party was circulated instead of that of the Communist Party of India. Muzaffar Ahmad was responsible for this. It laid before the Congress session a detailed programme of abolition of landlordism; of controlling the practice of usury; of ensuring living wage and democratic rights of combination and strike to the worker.64

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62*Ganabani*, 14 April, 1927.
64*Manifesto of the Workers and Peasants Party to the Indian National Congress*, *ibid.*, pp.301-306.
From the Madras session, an alliance was established between the Left faction of the Indian National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru and the Peasants and Workers Party and the Communist Party. The Peasants and Workers Party now started to participate actively in national politics.

The third annual conference of the Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal, was held at Bhatpara, 24 Parganas, on 31 March and 1 April 1928. It was presided over by Atul Chandra Gupta. In this conference a new branch of the Party was opened at Tangail. The workers there took up the demands of the peasants and spoke of the hardships they had to suffer because of the vast neighbouring area being declared reserved by the Government. In this conference the Party’s name was changed to the Workers and Peasants Party of Bengal. In the executive committee Muzaffar Ahmad was elected the General Secretary.

In 1928, under the aegies of the Party a number of strikes by the workers and the scavengers were organized in various parts of Bengal. It also succeeded in organizing the peasants. The government placed some parts of Atia and Mirjapur region in Mymensingh district, under the forest department without consulting the cultivators. The Mymensingh branch of the Party protested against this step under the leadership of Faijuddin Hussain. Protesting against the act of the government, Muzaffar Ahmad sent a leaflet from Calcutta, entitled ‘An appeal to the cultivators and labourer brethren residing in the Atia Parganas and Tangail’ for circulation. The leaflet asserted that the lands belonged to the cultivators. He also wrote three articles on the Atia incident in Ganabani. These had a great impact. He even visited Dacca and Mymensingh to prove his sympathy for the movement.

In the meantime, All India Workers and Peasants Party conference was held in Calcutta between 21-23 December, 1928. In this conference, it was resolved that the Party could no longer remain content with being left-wing of the National Congress. It would now build up its own organization. Muzaffar Ahmad moved a resolution proposing the formation of the All-India Workers and Peasants Party.

The next important event was the organization of the All Bengal Peasants’ Conference at Kusthia on 23 and 24 February, 1929 by Hemanta Kumar Sarkar. It was attended by Muzaffar Ahmad, Kazi Nazrul Islam and others. After this, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar decided to call a meeting of the working committee of the Bengal Peasants League in Calcutta on 24 March 1929, to consider the formation of a branch of the Bengal Peasants League in the districts of Nadia, Khulna, Pabna and Mymensing. But before the meeting could be held, Muzaffar Ahmad was arrested on 20 March 1929, and sent to Meerut for trial. Thus was started the Meerut conspiracy case against the Indian Communists.

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65 ibid., vol.IIIC, p.73.
7.5 The intelligentsia and the evolution of the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1928

The practical working of the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885, had revealed various defects which called for an early remedy. There had been a vast amount of litigation and some conflicting judicial decisions in regard to many of the fundamental provisions of the Act. Important problems affecting the relations of landlords and tenants had assumed such a prominence as to warrant alterations in legislation. The demand for such amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act was made as early as 1900 by the British Indian Association which observed, 'the land question, in so far as government responsibility to the landlord's interest is concerned, stands thrown back into a comparatively worse situation than what was caused by the legislative changes of 1859.' In a memorandum to the government of Bengal, the Association cited various reasons why the operation of the Bengal Tenancy Act had been unfair to landholders. It had practically stopped all enhancement of rent. It had enabled ryots to change the character of holdings on the plea of making improvements. The Association viewed with the most serious concern the difficulties landholders were facing even in the matter of realization and recovery by suit in court of admitted rents and cesses. It therefore, wanted to make a few suggestions for amending a few of the provisions of the law. This would afford landholders adequate facilities for the recovery of rents and cesses. But, the government of Bengal had then no intention to make any change in the Act and the Lieutenant Governor replied that landlords should depend on the judicial decisions for the solution of their difficulties. Here, the British Indian Association proved its partisan character.

Others too voiced their dissatisfaction with the Act. Section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act, in particular, under which an occupancy ryot could apply for commutation of his rent in kind into money rent became a constant source of irritation to the settlement officers. The middle class people wanted the bargadars to be treated as labourers but the settlement officer could not accept this view and many bargadars were recorded as occupancy ryots.

The margin between the fixed land revenue and the rent actually payable, was the direct cause of not only an increase in tenancy but a number of intermediary interests between the landlords and the actual cultivator. In Bengal, in some cases, there were as many as fifty or more intermediary interests between the landlord and the cultivator. Under the Bengal Tenancy Act, the occupancy right could only be enjoyed by one person in the chain. The regulations passed in connection with the subsequent amendments to the permanent settlement recognised the right in the resident ryots of the village who were generally known as khudkasht. The principle of the settled ryot adopted by the framers of the Bengal Tenancy Act had been gradually accepted as a satisfactory recognition of the customary rights of the resident ryot of village. It afforded a satisfactory solution to the status problem in areas where, conditions were simple and there were only two persons.

71Bengal Revenue Department Proceedings, February 9, P/1-1 of 1900, no.31-32, 29 December, 1900.
73Mitra, Kalipada, Supplement to the final report on the survey and settlement in the district of Dacca, p.3.
interested in the land namely the proprietor landlord and the cultivating tenant. But in most of Bengal, conditions were rarely so simple. There was often a whole chain of persons interested in the land, both as rent receivers and as rent payers, between the proprietor at the top and the cultivating tenant. Besides, as the law was not properly adapted to the complicated state of sub-infeudation which actually existed, it frequently happened that the occupancy tenant right got into the hands of the wrong person and the cultivating tenant who should have had the right found himself in the position of a tenant-at-will.

The ryots of Bengal too, had for long been clamouring for a revision of the act as they had been suffering great hardships. Khan Bahadur M.A.Momen, magistrate-collector, in his evidence before the Royal commission on agriculture said that 'the ryots' land not being transferable by law his credit is very small'\textsuperscript{74}. But if the land was freely transferable, the cultivator could get more money by mortgaging only one bigha instead of three bighas. He was also against restricting or limiting powers of ryots to transfer their lands by sale or mortgage\textsuperscript{75}.

It was this unsatisfactory condition that led the government, to initiate steps to speedily bring forward appropriate legislation\textsuperscript{76}. It was felt by all sections of the people that, an amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act was long overdue. However, the matter was shelved with the beginning of the First World War. But the matter was re-opened with the inauguration of the Bengal Legislative Council under the Government of India Act of 1919. Babu Bishmadev Das moved a resolution in 1921, for the appointment of a special committee. The resolution was carried on and in consequence, a strong representative committee was formed with Sir John Kerr as President to report what amendments were needed in the Bengal Tenancy Act. Among the other members on the committee were Raja Bahadur Ban Behari Kapur, Rai Bahadur Surendra Chandra Sen and Sir Ashutosh Choudhuri, the well known High Court Judge.

In January 1923, the Report and the Bill of the Committee were published for public criticism\textsuperscript{77}. The Committee mainly referred to two problems, the problem of transferability of occupancy right and of the right of the actual cultivator of the soil. Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 had laid down that, an usage under which a ryot was entitled to sell his holding without the consent of his landlord would not be affected by the Act. Sir John Kerr's committee remarked that, this provision was of no use as it was seldom possible for a ryot or his transferee to prove the existence of the usage, and no guidance was afforded to the courts in regard to the law to be applied to the numerous transfers which were effected without the landlord's consent and without any proof of usage being put forward\textsuperscript{78}.

The committee noted that, the number of transfers of occupancy holdings effected by the registered deed had risen and with the growing pressure of the population on soil, leading to ever increasing demand for land thereby increasing its value, transfers were increasing

\textsuperscript{74}Report on the Royal commission on agriculture in India, 1928, vol.IV, p.340, Q.22278.
\textsuperscript{75}ibid., vol.IV, p.323.
\textsuperscript{76}Implication of Bengal Tenancy Act 1885, for rural relationships have been discussed earlier.
\textsuperscript{77}Sir John Kerr's committee's report published in the Calcutta Gazette, 10 January, 1923.
\textsuperscript{78}ibid., p.4, para-7.
in number whatever the law. It was an established fact that, occupancy rights were then freely transferred without reference to and without the knowledge of the landlord. The committee therefore, recommended that ‘the only remedy was to recognise the existing widespread practice of transfer and to admit the transferability of occupancy holdings subject to the safeguards necessary to protect the interest of the landlords and to secure the general welfare of the agricultural community’. The committee proposed to fix the transfer fee at 25 per cent of the consideration money and to enable the landlord to get a right of pre-emption. The landlord could transfer the holding to himself on payment to the transferer of the consideration money with 10 per cent as compensation, together with any sum which the transferee might have paid in respect of rent or landlord’s fee. It proposed to give a limited occupancy right to all under-ryots of whatever grade to avoid the latter evil. For the first time it suggested that, a bonafide cultivator paying a share of the produce to the original owner of the land would be deemed to be a tenant, notwithstanding any future contracts to the contrary. For this purpose, a bonafide cultivator was to be defined as a person who himself supplied the plough, cattle and implements of agriculture. It made modifications in the Bengal Tenancy Act by declaring, that when the landlord was dependent upon the produce rent for the subsistence of himself and his household, such a rent should not be converted into a money rent. Besides, in view of the disparity which existed in many parts of Bengal between the average value of the rent in kind obtained by the landlord and the money rent into which it could be equitably converted, some compensation should be payable to the landlord. It also recommended that, the ryot should have complete right in the trees on his holding and also proposed that these provisions should be extended to under-ryots with right of occupancy.

The report and the bill of the Kerr’s committee gave rise to a storm of controversy. The intelligentsia became involved in this. The general feeling among zamindars and their supporters among the intelligentsia was that, their class interests were threatened. At the Annual General Meeting of the British Indian Association, held on 28th March, 1923, the President observed:

No one would object to the interests of the agriculturists and the cultivators being duly protected and safeguarded by necessary legislation. But let it not be done by depriving the landlords of the rights and privileges which they, had enjoyed since the days of lord Cornwallis. The zamindars of Bengal and of the neighbouring provinces have always considered the Permanent Settlement of 1793 as their Magna Carta and having stood by the government through good report and evil for nearly a century and a half they expect the government also to stand by them, and to treat their rights as sacrosanct. It would be a very unwise and inexpedient policy to trample upon these rights at this stage and set tenants against their landlords and create a new atmosphere of political unrest in their province. But if the government will persist in its contemplated legislation, your Association will have to be prepared to put a fight against any interference with the rights of the Bengal landholders.

79 Ibid., p.7.
80 The Statesman, 29 March, 1923.
At a conference of the landholders of Bengal held on 3rd April, 1923, at his residence, the maharaja of Kasimbazar commented that the proposed amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act was injurious to the interests of the landholders as it aimed to curtail some of their long standing and just rights in order to benefit the tenants. He felt that, it would lead to a deterioration in the relationship between the landlord and tenants. Another speaker Mr. B. Chakravorty said that, if the power of transfer was given to the peasant and if he was a free person to deal with his holding, he would not be benefited. His land would pass within a very short time into the hands of the moneylender, and he would be reduced to the position of a day labourer instead of being a sort of peasant proprietor as he was at present. At this conference, the general feeling was that the Amendment Bill proposed to do away with the long standing vested rights and privileges of the zamindars. If the Bill was passed in its present form, it would destroy the permanent settlement and would reduce the cultivators to the position of day labourer. It would also bring in the middlemen and create ill feeling between the landlord and tenant. So the conference urged the government to either drop the Bill or modify it.

The pro-landlord journals too took up the issue. Condemning the Bill, they said it would be injurious to the interest of all sections — zamindars, ryots and also the middle class. Commenting on the proposed amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act, the Barisal Hitoishi wrote:

As a result of the proposed amendment there will be a very strong agitation in the country. Many landowners will not let out their lands and in consequence many poor cultivators will be reduced to day labourers. Many zamindars will get their lands cultivated by labourers recruited outside the province. If the present tenancy Act is amended on the lines recommended, it will bring about a serious revolution in the country.

This weekly was published since 1896. Its first editor was Rajmohan Chattopadhyay, the former headmaster of Barisal Bangavidyalaya. The Panchavat published from Dacca wrote:

The recommendation of the committee to grant occupancy rights in the barga lands to bargadars and the rights of commutation of the share of the produce into money rent, if carried out, will harm not only the poor middle class bhadraloks, but the zamindars and many of the cultivators as well.

The weekly Pratikar from Berhampur said that, the poor only would suffer if tenancy rights were conferred on holders of barga land. Sub-tenants should not be given occupancy rights, for that would lower the value of the land and therefore tenants would be the losers. The

81 ibid., 3 April, 1923.
82 RNP, no.11 of 1923, p.223: Barisal Hitoishi, 7 March, 1923.
83 ibid., p.248, Panchavat, 9 March, 1923.
84 ibid., p.248, Pratikar, 9 March, 1923.
Mohammadi published from Calcutta since 1908, whose proprietor and editor was Maulana Akram Khan, wrote that the middle class and the well-to-do peasant ryots would be ruined by virtue of the Act. The value of land would greatly diminish and litigation would reign rampant in the country. The Navayuga, also published from Calcutta, wrote that:

If the cultivator of barga land becomes tenant thereof as it is suggested, many of the landholders will not lease out lands on the barga system but import hired labours from the Santal parganas and elsewhere. This will deprive many tenants of their livelihood. Secondly if the right of transfer is given to the tenants, the zamindar himself can become a purchaser of holdings under him. The result of the bestowal of this right will be that tenants will sell off the lands, which will pass into the hands of capitalists and thus gradually reduce them to the position of labourers.

The Desher Vani wrote that such an amendment would put both talukdars and cultivators to great difficulties. It would considerably increase litigation and give a death blow to the spirit of union. The Bankura darpan remarked that, the proposed amendment had scared the middle class and so such a measure was undesirable. The Jasohar observed that, the amendment would create ill feeling between the cultivators and the middle class. The effect would be that landless labourers would be turned into beggars and the middle classes would be wiped out of existence. The Birbhum Varta observed:

The proposed amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act, if passed into law, will completely ruin the middle classes. The religions of both Hindus and Muhammedans will be interfered with as this amendment will prejudicially affect the Devottar, Brahmottar and Pirottar lands. This amendment if passed into law, will create unprecedented chaos in the villages. Such instances of robbing Peter and paying Paul have never been found in the history of civilised nations.

The Swaraj, published from Calcutta, was even more critical in its attitude. It observed:

The proposed Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill has got a defect — it leaves some resemblance to the system of the Bolsheviks, civilised society as it stands at present had given the right of ownership to a buyer, and the law of ownership is still being regulated by this principle. Many jotedars have bought lands with their money, so if they lost their ownership for letting on bargas possibly that will not also be reasonable according to the present definition of ownership.

85 ibid., p.249, Mohammadi, 10 March, 1923.
86 ibid., p.223, Navayuga, 11 March, 1923.
87 Published from Noakhali, p.289, Desher Vani, 27 March, 1923.
88 ibid., p.306, Bankura darpan, 1 April, 1923.
89 ibid., p.322, Jasohar, 17 April, 1923.
90 ibid., p.355, Birbhum Varta, 23 April, 1923.
Indeed, the Bill has got no usefulness so far as the tenants or jotedars or even society are concerned. If this Bill is passed, it is our conviction that an organized system will be broken, as a result of which many fresh troubles will be created.91

Thus, while the landlords and their supporters were severely critical of the proposed Amendment Bill, ryots' meetings were held at different places in its support. The Bengal Provincial Ryots' Conference was held at Kamarer Char in Mymensingh on the 29th and 30th March, 1923 under the presidency of Maulavi Syed Nasim Ali. A large number of ryots and jotedars including representatives from many districts of Bengal were present. Referring to the proposed legislation, Maulavi Khanadaka Naziruddin Ahmed, Chairman of the reception committee, maintained that ryots should be considered as proprietors of the soil and that legislation was imperative to save them from moneylenders. He, however, apprehended that the investing of bargadars with occupancy rights and with power to commute produce rent into money rent would lead to unnecessary disputes92.

On 23 April, 1923, the concluding meeting of the All Bengal Krisak and Raiyats' Conference was held in Calcutta under the presidency of Sir P.C. Roy93. After referring to the condition of ryots and tenants under the zamindars, the President said, the Bill had been introduced at an opportune movement. Among the resolutions passed at the meeting were the following: occupancy ryots should have free rights of transfer without paying any salami to the superior landlords; the lands of an actual cultivator having a holding consisting of no more than fifteen bighas of land should be made unsalable in money decree; that occupancy ryots should have full rights to fell and use trees without paying any nazar or salami to the landholders; in case where the tenant himself often effected a required improvement, enhancement of rent should not be allowed on any ground. It also suggested that where a landlord or his agent did not record the actual payment made by a ryot for a particular land, or withheld receipt for which rent was paid, or did not record the full amount tendered by any ryot, or realised abwab, fine etc. his action should be counted as a cognizable criminal offence. In case it was feared that the landlords in certain parts of Bengal intended to bring suits hurriedly for ejecting jotedars from the jotes, the conference urged the government to issue a circular of some sort of instructions suspending such action.

In regard to the proposal to confer occupancy right on bargadars, it appeared that neither the zamindars nor the pro-zamindar journals nor the ryots' friends were in its favour. As regards the right of transferability, the zamindars opined that it was not only a violation of the Permanent Settlement but would also lead to land passing into the hands of moneylenders. Landholders associations like the British Indian Association, the East Bengal Landholders Association and the North Bengal Zamindars Association wanted the government to modify the Bill94. The ryots' friends on the other hand, looked upon the right of transferability as an important concession to the ryots.

91 ibid, p.355, Swaraj, 20 April, 1923.
92 The Statesman, 4 April, 1923.
93 ibid., 24 April, 1923.
94 ibid., 3rd April, 1923.
The government considered the diverse opinions and made some changes in the committee's Bill. But the main principles were left untouched and were adopted in the Bill which was drawn up by the government in the Revenue Department in 1925. The Bill was introduced in the council by the government on 3rd December 1925. Under the new Bill, an occupancy holding was made transferable subject to payment of certain salami or transfer fees to the landlords. Under-ryots should, except in certain cases, be given occupancy rights against their immediate landlord. The other provisions of the Bill proposed to give some advantages to tenants such as, their rights to trees, the greater facility of payment of rent by money order, the abolition of realization of rent by distraint and the commutation of produce rent into money rent. It proposed to provide facility for and simplification of the procedure for the realization of rents. It also recognized the difficulties of the landlords on account of the existence of the co-sharer landlords or co-share tenants.

The pro-ryot clauses of the 1925 Bill were, not to the liking of the zamindars as they feared, these would mean negation of the rights accrued from the permanent settlement. They refused to accept them and protested vociferously during the debate in the Legislative Council. Their main argument was that, if transferability was legalized then more and more ryots' holdings would fall into the hands of non-agriculturalists. On the contrary, those representing the views of the ryots were equally dissatisfied with the bill. They felt that the bill would actually benefit the landlords. Maulavi Tarafdar, praja leader, found that 'the proposed Amending Bill will, in reality, make the condition of the tenants worse as the changes are inequitable and in spite of the many advantages enjoyed by the landlords under the old Act, the amendment will make the landlords enjoy more.' In fact, the Muslim members in the council such as Maulavi Ekramul Hoque and Shah Syed Emdadul Hoque adopted a pro-ryot stance. They opposed the attempt to give the landlords transfer fee amounting to 25 per cent as well as the landlord's right to pre-emption with 10 per cent compensation.

However, so far as the question of granting occupancy right to the bargadar was concerned even those supporting the cause of the ryots in the Council too were against it. Maulvi Ekramul Hoque argued that at places lands were held in khas, not by zamindars but by persons who were actually tenants but, who were not able to cultivate the land themselves. It could be that they were at one time the holders of large estates but had gradually become poor and could not hold the plough themselves. It was only right that since they had given the land to a bargadar the right should be given to the bargadar. But he agreed that, in cases where there were undertenants who were giving fixed rents to their immediate superior tenants or to jotedar or zamindars occupancy right should be given to the undertenants. In Rangpur, Patiladaha pargana etc. big landlords were talukdars or jotedars. Special conditions prevailed in those areas. For those areas, observed Shah Eyed Emdadul Hoque, special provisions should be made in the law in regard to the purposes of barga system. But where ordinarily poor but respectable people made a living by letting out their holdings on the barga system, such a provision for accruing rights to the bargadar could not at all be beneficial. Its effect would be extremely mischievous and it would foster

95Bengal Legislative Council Progs., vol.XIV, 3 December, 1925, p.57.
96 ibid., p.63.
The Bill of 1925, thus failed to satisfy the zamindars and the supporters of the ryots' cause. The former would not accept curtailment of their proprietary right. The latter objected to the salami and right of preemption given to the former. So, the government referred the Bill to a select committee for consideration. It submitted an amended bill on 22nd July 1926. The Committee added a provision to the definition of tenant (clause 13 of section 3 of the Act) in order to make it clear that adhiars, bargadars and bhagchasis were not tenants within the meaning of the Act. It amended the definition of holding, so as to extend it to undivided shares of parcel or parcels of land. It refused to recommend that under-ryots should be given occupancy rights. At the same time, it suggested, an under-ryot who had held his holding for 20 years and had his homestead was entitled to protection against eviction except on ground that, he had failed to pay the arrears of rent or on the usual grounds on which an occupancy ryot could be ejected. Regarding the right of the ryot to tree, the committee said that, the landlord should have full right in a limited number of existing trees valuable for their timber which should be specifically mentioned in the Act. All other trees, including all trees which grew or were planted in the future, would be at the absolute disposal of the ryot. The committee also made certain modifications in the clause 44, according to which a tenant would be allowed to construct wells, tanks, water channels etc. for the purpose of providing drinking water for himself and he would be allowed to erect dwelling houses, whether of masonry bricks, stones, or any other materials whatsoever.

In the Select Committee, a note of dissent was sounded by thirteen of the eighteen members. Among the dissenters were men like Maharaja Kshaunishchandra Roy Bahadur, Khan Bahadur and M.A.Momin. They argued that the Select Committee had refused to confer occupancy rights on under-ryots, or to grant in lieu thereof any substantial rights to them. At the same time, if ryots holding were made legally transferable then they would be more frequently transferred to non-agriculturists. They said that the committee had removed from the original Bengal Tenancy Act (as well as from the Bill) the provisions which prevented a co-sharer landlord from becoming a ryot on his own property. They had inserted a provision in the bill which barred all produce payers, who were called adhiars, etc. from obtaining any right as tenants. These recommendations, if carried into effect would enable the non-agriculturist to purchase ryoti holdings freely under the assurance that they would never need to cultivate the land themselves. Again, if the actual cultivator delivered part of the produce to them, he would be a labourer without any right. If he paid a money rent he would be an under-ryot with practically no rights under the Act. To avoid such a calamity, the dissenters suggested that only if the actual cultivators were given substantial rights in the soil then ryoti holdings could be made legally transferable.

Among the dissenters in the Select Committee were also members like Raja Manmotha

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98 ibid., pp.62-69.
Nath Roy of Santosh who represented the landholding interests. In his note of dissent he pointed out that:

The rights of transfer and the right to trees are substantial rights of the soil and it has always been maintained that the zamindars had, by tenure, a property in the soil ... The present Bill ... will virtually lay the foundation of what I may call, ‘agrarian socialism’ and help the so called friends of the ryots to put into their mouth the slogan ‘land for the tillers alone’. Such steps will lead to revolution and not reform. I think it is a short sighted policy to undermine the Permanent Settlement.\(^9\)

A section of the press soon voiced its opinion in support of the landlords. The *Pallibasi*, an important organ of the Burdwan landholders, observed that the proposal to give occupancy right to the *korfa* ryots was an ‘application of the Bolshevik principle’ to the land relations in Bengal. Regarding the proposal it said:

This will not only bring about an upheaval in the society and materially ruin the interests of the middle classes but will also decrease the value of the lands by considerably affecting the proprietary rights which have been enjoyed from time immemorial.\(^10\)

The Muslim intelligentsia, on the contrary, took up the peasants’ cause. The *Moslem Jagat*, one of their influential newspapers, observed that the Muslims did not think that there was any provision in the Bill which was detrimental to the interests of the zamindars. In fact, it observed, the people of the country wanted the tillers of the soil to become the real owners of the land. So it requested the members of the Select Committee to amend the Bill in favour of the ryots. It observed that:

The raiyats want to be free from the clutches of these (the zamindars and the *mahajans*) demons in human shape. They (the raiyats) have taken a solemn pledge that they will not henceforth allow their hard earned money to be spent in the house of prostitutes while their children starve at home. They want permanent rights within lands. Even if the government side with the zamindar the raiyats will not be deterred from their determination for they have now understood that the remedy lies in their hands.\(^11\)

The *Hanafi* observed:

It is a matter of wonder that the zamindars of Bengal are in one voice protesting against the Bengal Tenancy Act (amendment) Bill, which has given very little


\(^10\) *Pallibasi*, Burdwan, 3 February, 1926, cited in *RNP*, no.9, 1926, p.108.

privilege to the raiyats while it has considerably enhanced the powers of the zamindars.102

Protesting against zamindari exploitation the *Praja Bahini* demanded abolition of the system itself103.

In the meanwhile, the government rejected the recommendations of the Select Committee on the ground that it had made radical changes, in some of the most important provisions of the Bill. The main reasons for government's rejection of the Bill were that: it made no provision for any substantial rights for under-ryots; it declared that no cultivator who did not pay cash rent could be tenant and that; it repealed the provision by which a co-sharer landlord could not hold lands in his own estate on tenure as ryot104. The government, therefore, referred the matter to a sub-committee consisting of an ex-chief justice of Bengal, Sir Nalini Ranjan Chatterjee and three officials. The draft Bill of the sub-committee was submitted in July 1927.

This Bill observed that the full rights of an occupancy ryot should not be given to all under-ryots. Under-ryots who had already got the right of occupancy by custom would, however, acquire occupancy right now by statute. The incidents of such right were defined. These under-ryots would have, as against their immediate landlords, all the rights of occupancy ryots except the new right of transferability105. The remaining under-ryots were divided into two classes:

1. those who had held their lands, including a homestead for 20 years continuously and, also those who had been admitted in a document by their landlord to have permanent and heritable right;
2. and all others.

Both classes would be liable to ejectment on the grounds on which an occupancy ryot was liable to ejectment. These grounds were: if they used the land in any way which made it unfit for the purpose of the tenancy; or had broken a contract which was consistent with the act and also; on one additional ground for arrears of rent. The second class could also be ejected on the ground that their lease had expired on six months' notice. This, however, could only be done if the landlord required the land for his own cultivation. For the purposes of ejectment of an under-ryot, cultivation by *bargadar* should not be counted as cultivation by the landlord himself or by hired servants.

The initial rent of the under-ryot was left to contract between the parties. Limits were put on subsequent enhancements, viz.

(a) if made by contract, not exceeding four *annas* in the rupee and
(b) if by court not so as to increase the rent to more than 1/3rd of the average gross produce during the previous 10 years. Rent once enhanced could not be enhanced again within 15 years.

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104 *The Calcutta Gazette*, no.28 of 1928, part-IV, p.94.
105 Clause (d) of Section 160.
The Select Committee's view that no class of produce paying cultivators should be treated as tenants were followed. Exception was made in favour of dhankaridar, that is, persons paying a fixed quantity of produces, and also persons already recognised as tenants by their landlords or by the civil courts. But other bargadars or adhiars had been excluded from the definition of tenant. This provision would apply with retrospective effect even to those cultivators of this class who had been recorded in a record of rights as ryots on under-ryots unless they came under the category described above. The provisions in the present act regarding commutation of produce rent were deleted in accordance with the view of the Select Committee to abolish commutation.

Most of the provisions of the Bill were severely criticised when the Bill was debated in Legislative Council (August-September, 1928). Some members declined to confer such right on the occupancy ryots while, others agreed to more restrictive measures. Raja Bahadur Narayan Sinha of Nashipur, stated that the Bill instead of maintaining their rights and privileges or giving any concession or relief and practically curtailed the rights acquired by the zamindars from the Permanent Settlement. Many of the pro-zamindar members opined that the right of transferability of occupancy holdings would actually reduce the ryots to the position of landless labourers. Some of them felt that, as the proprietary right of the landlords was going to be taken away, they should be given something in lieu of that. Suresh Nath Biswas (Faridpur) of the Swarajya Party pointed out that, since the proprietary right was vested in the landlord above, they could take possession of the land on its transfer by the tenant. He added that the landlord gave out the land to the tenant for enjoyment only and not for transfer. But in the amending Bill it was proposed that the right of transfer should be given to the tenant. This was limiting the rights of the zamindars and not taking away the rights of the tenants. Therefore the zamindars should have a share of the value of the land on transfer. Saratchandra Basu (Burdwan), of the Swarajya Party said that, if any unfettered power was given to the tenants to sell then, in the long run these lands would be transferred from the hands of the grihastha community to the banias, marwaris and others. So ultimately, the ryots would suffer. Freedom of transferability, said Ranjit Pal Chaudhury, would convert the tenant into bhag jotedar (or sharecropper) on sale of his holding and make his creditor the actual ryot. The pro-landlord representatives opposed the provision to give certain rights to under-ryots. The pro-ryot members reiterated the same objections to the proposal to give 25 per cent of the purchase money by way of salami and also of the provision relating to the zamindars right of pre-emption. Babu Jitendralal Banerjee (Birbhum) said that every year there was transfer to the extent of 2 crores of rupees. It meant that a free gift of 50 lakhs of rupees would be made over to the landlords annually. So the transferor would never get the full value of his property. Nor would be able to sell his property to whomsoever he liked. Both Sir Abdur Rahim and Maulavi Ekramul Hoque felt that the right of pre-emption

106 Bengal Legislative Council Progs, no.1, 7 August, 1928, p.405.
108 ibid., 22 August, 1928, p.437.
109 ibid., 23 August, 1928, p.505.
110 ibid., no.1, 8 August, 1928, p.466.
111 ibid., no.2, 2 August, 1928, p.425.
would be really transferring all the lands gradually to the hands of the landlords who did
not cultivate and did not even live in their zamindaries. They like Maulavi Asimuddin
Ahmed pointed out that this would lead to further oppression of the ryots. The Muslim
members in the Council, led by Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan (north Faridpur), proposed the
bestowal of some rights on the bargadars.

In spite of their differences on most of the provision of the bill, the supporters of the
interests of the landed class as well as that of the ryots were both opposed to giving
any rights to the bargadar and wanted them to remain as wage labourers. Bijay Kumar
Chatterjee observed that, generally the owner of the land gave the land to the bargadar
on condition that he would simply cultivate the land but should not have any right in it.
All liabilities regarding the land remained with the tenure holder and the bargadar only
cultivated the land and got half of the produce. The person who owned the land had to
pay for the land and the cultivator came in merely as a labourer, for which he paid in
kind, Babu Jogindrachandra Chakravarti (Ahajpur) of Swarajya Party stressed on the
disastrous results of giving the bargadars occupancy rights. Surendranath Biswas said that
if the bargadar was given the right of a tenant it would discourage investment of money
in land. The ryot had been given the right to transfer its occupancy holding. But one
would invest money by purchasing the land if he knew that, by cultivating the land on
barga system he would lose his absolute right of enjoying it. Attempts were also made by
members to deprive the labourers of their right of occupancy acquired by them through
the settlement records. Surendranath Biswas said that in the last settlement operations in
Faridpur and in other districts, all labourers had been recorded as tenants. But since the
Council recognised that the bargadar was not a tenant he should not be allowed to avail of
the presumption of settlement records.

When Maulavi Nurul Hoque Choudhuri (Noakhali) moved a motion to reduce the rate of
rent of the under-ryot and the bargadar, the motion was lost. He pointed out that in place
of one-third, they should pay one-fourth the under-ryots for the labour they had employed
and for the capital they had employed. Supporting the motion Azizul Hoque (Nadia)
said that in 1885 the government laid down that the enhancement of rent should not be
more than double the previous rent or more than one-fourth of the average annual value of
the gross produce. So far as produce rent was concerned, on the same principle it should
be one-third instead of the one-half. Including Subhashchandra Bose (Calcutta), all the
Hindu members, except Rai Sahib Rebatimohan Sarkar (nominated non-official member)
voted for the zamindars against the interests of the bargadars.

On 14 December, 1928 the Bengal Tenancy (amendment) Act was passed. Its chief provi-
sions were:

1. The occupancy holdings were declared to be transferable in whole or part, subject to

\[112^{\text{ibid.}}, \text{no.1}, 7 \text{August, 1928, pp.401-09.}\]
\[114^{\text{ibid.}}, \text{no.2}, 13 \text{August, 1928, p.44.}\]
\[115^{\text{ibid.}}, \text{p.58.}\]
\[116^{\text{ibid.}}, 21 \text{August, 1928, p.389.}\]
\[117^{\text{ibid.}}, \text{p.391.}\]
a transfer fee amounting to 20 per cent of the sale price. The landlord was given a right of pre-emption on payment of the sale price plus 10 per cent as compensation to the purchaser. He also retained the right to levy a fee for the sub-division of holdings in the case of part transfer, because the Act did not make it incumbent on the landlords to divide the holdings in such cases;

2. In order to prevent land from passing to mortgage for indefinite periods, occupancy ryots were allowed to give usufructuary mortgages only for a period of 15 years;

3. Occupancy ryots were given all rights in trees;

4. The right to commute rent in kind into a cash rent was also abolished;

5. Under-ryots were divided into three classes. Under-ryots who had already obtained rights of occupancy by custom were given the full rights of occupancy ryots, except transferability and the right to be deemed protected interests against superior landlord of the ryot. The second class consisted of under-ryots who had a homestead on their lands and had occupied it for twelve years continuously, or had been admitted in a document by their landlords to have a permanent and heritable right. This class could be ejected if they failed to pay the rent or if they misused the land. The third class of under-ryots could also be ejected on the additional ground that the ryot wanted the land for his own cultivation. The initial rent of under-ryots was left to contract, subject to the provision that it could not exceed one third of the estimated value of the gross produce. But once their rent had been fixed, it could only be enhanced under a registered contract by four annas in the rupee.

6. Person who under the system generally known as adhi, barga or behag cultivated the land of another person on condition of delivering a fixed quantity of produce was, however, recognised as tenant, whether he was a ryot or under-ryot as the case might be under the Act. It seems that the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1928 was essentially a compromise. It belied the expectation of the masses. Popular discontent was reflected in the contemporary vernacular newspapers. The Ananda Bazar Patrika opined that, the contemplated law although it conceded some privileges to the ryots, had so many provisions in it to put them under the control of the zamindar, that they would have no escape from their present miserable condition. The Saogat said that the new Tenancy Act had only made provision for the harassment of tenants by zamindars.

The opposition of the Swarajya Party, which was numerically strong in the Legislative Council, was responsible for the omission of important provisions favouring the cultivator with certain rights for the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1928. On virtually every motion involving landlord-tenant relationship, the pattern of voting was consistent. The Hindu members, Swarajists and non-Swarajists, combined to safeguard the reasonable interests of the landlords while the Muslim members with solitary exceptions, tried to uphold the interests of the ryots. The result was that the original bill was gradually pushed through almost unchanged. All anti-landlord amendments were defeated by wide margins. For instance Tamizuddin Khan's motion that there should be no right of pre-

119Ibid., p.391.
emption was lost by 25-76. Almost every amendment moved by Muslim members was defeated. The unequivocal support of the Congress-Swarajya Party to the rights and privileges of landlords against every attempt to voice the demand of tenants revealed the identification of landlord interest with organized Hindu politics. This was only natural, considering the class composition of the leaders of the Swarajya Party and their supporters. The overwhelming majority of members in the Swarajya block were, therefore, defenders of what they termed the 'middle classes' of Bengal, i.e. the rentier classes. Consequently, as far as undertenants and sharecroppers were concerned they always supported the rights of landlords, whatever their position in the hierarchy of proprietorship.

7.6 Consequences of the Act of 1928

An important consequence of the Act was the rapid decline in the popularity of the Swarajya Party among the Muslim masses. Abul Mansur Ahmad observed that, henceforth, neither in terms of the Muslim interest, nor of the praja interest, was it possible to rely on the Congress. The debate in the Council on the clauses of the Bill revealed to all that protection of the class interests of zamindars mattered more to the Congress than the protection of the interests of the peasantry.

In a meeting in Calcutta, on 13-14 October, 1928, the All Bengal Muslim Youngmans' Conference condemned the Swarajists for having sided with the zamindars against the most elementary rights of 95% of the population of Bengal. On 24 December, 1928; a conference of Agricultural and Ryots' Associations was held in Calcutta under the presidency of Abdur Rahim. The conference appealed to the members of the Council favouring the interests of the ryots to form a ryots' party in the Council. The leaders of the praja movement took the initiative. In July, 1929 the All Bengal Praja Samiti was formed. From this time onwards, organized politics among the Muslim masses of Bengal moved decisively away from the Congress.

In the post-1928 period the Langal-Ganavani group i.e. the communists in Bengal also intensified its efforts to win over the poorer sections of the peasantry with some pragmatic and economic oriented demands. Some of the important demands were: the right of pre-emption should be immediately withdrawn from zamindars; the transference fee should be reduced from 20% to 1 rupee only; every person should have occupancy rights to his own land; rent should not be enhanced; the present rent should be reduced by half; rent should be realised not by zamindars but the collectors appointed by the government; the bargya-holders and other agricultural labourers should be paid at such a rate that their

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121 Ahmad, Abul Mansur, Amar dekha rajnitir panchas bachchar (fifty years of politics that I have seen), Dacca, 1970, p.61.
122 Gupta, Atul Chandra, Jamir malik (owner of land), Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1351 B.S., p.11.
124 ibid., no.48, December 28, 1928, p.11.
125 De, Jatindranath, op.cit., p.75.
monthly earning may amount to Rs.40/-; all rates of interest should be limited to 1% and; agricultural banks should be established by the government126.

The Ganavani wrote that the Swarajists in their party manifesto had declared that they would make every effort to see that the interests of both zamindars and tenants remained unimpaired127. They wanted to satisfy both. They did not realise that such a reconciliation of interests was an impossibility. The Soltan remarked that nothing could be more regrettable than that the Swarajists who entered the council with the view of opposing the government should now for their selfish interests, join with government against the ryots. It said that the serious injury done to the ryots this time by the treachery of the Swarajists, the selfishness of the zamindars and the rashness of the government were indeed more fatal than even what had been brought by the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis128.

An important consequence of the passing of the Act was that relation between the tenant and the landlord became increasingly strained. There was a growing tendency among zamindars to convert, as much as possible, such land into khas and sublet to adhiars129. Cases of forcible reaping of the tenant’s paddy, of zamindars draining off water from the tenant’s fields were reported from different parts of Bengal. While there was an agitation against the bargadars that they should not be treated as tenants, the bargadars were also demanding better conditions in many places. They formed strong combination among themselves in several sub-divisions of the Dacca and Mymensing districts130. They also started a movement for the division of the produce between the bargadar and the landlord, in the proportion of two-thirds and one-third, and this became a source of much trouble in Jessore. Tenants resented extraction of extra money by zamindars over and above the landlord's fee of 20 percent. Tenants resented the right of pre-emption.

By 1932-33, growing ill feeling between the landlords and the tenants was visible in wider areas. This was most noticeable in the Rajshahi Division, in Nadia, Barisal, Bankura, Hooghly, Midnapur and Tipperah131. Tenants’ associations were formed and meetings were held in various places to ventilate their grievances and protect this interests, to advocate reforms and to obtain concession from the landlords. It was apprehended that the peasant movement might develop into a campaign for withholding payment of lawful dues. On some occasions non-payment of rent was openly advocated particularly in some regions of Midnapore and Hooghly.

Agrarian thinking had thus become a part of organized politics. A general change in the ideas of the tenants regarding their own rights in land was brought about through the constant preaching of new theories in this respect by Krishak Praja agitators, Congress workers endeavouring to further mass contact movement and Communist labour leaders anxious to court the sympathy and support of agricultural labour132. It was reported that

127 RNP, no.29 of 1928, 16 August, 1928, p.471.
128 ibid., 26 August, 1928, p.481.
129 Report on Land Revenue Administration of the Presidency of Bengal, 1929-30, p.22.
130 ibid., 1927-28, p.21.
131 ibid., 1932-33, pp.16-17.
absentee landlordism, the practice of realisation of abwabs and the refusal of rent receipts by the agents of the landlords had greatly contributed to the complexity of the situation and had helped the creation of a favourable atmosphere for the preaching of disaffection amongst the tenants. Relations between landlords and tenants become strained in most regions of Bengal, throughout the decade following the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act of 1928. Taking advantage of loopholes in the Act, the landlords continued to harass the tenants. But the tenants refused to the oppressed and found in the Krishak Praja Samity a champion of their cause. The Nikhil Banga Krishak Praja Samity was formed in 1927 and its leader was Abdul Kassim Fazlul Hoque.

The Party adopted a radical political and economic programme. It harped on secularism and its members were recruited from both Hindu and Muslim communities. Its stronghold was mainly in the eastern Bengal districts of Noakhali, Comilla, Rangpur, Bakhargunj, Mymensingh, Dacca, Pabna and Barisal. During the period from 1927 to 1928 the Party played a significant role in the peasant movement in Bengal. It held meetings in different places of eastern Bengal to discuss the grievances of the peasants. In the period after 1928 it became very active in its efforts to expose the evils of zamindari system. Its concern for the peasants became apparent in its Election Manifesto in 1936. Among its most important provisions were thorough overhauling of the Bengal Tenancy Act in the interests of the agriculturists. It demanded the vesting of proprietary rights in the tillers of the soil. It also wanted
(i) the abolition of the zamindar's right of nazar and salami right of pre-emption;
(ii) tenant right of mutation of name without additional payment;
(iii) reduction of rent to take adequate and effective measures against illegal exaction by zamindars, moneylenders and their representatives; to adopt measures for the improvement of agriculture and cattle.

In its struggle for achieving a better deal for the peasants the Party did not accept a communal tone. Its economic programme for the peasants attracted to it both Muslims and Hindus. As Fajlul Hoque said, his fight was against landlords, capitalists and holders of vested interests. The landlords were about 95 per cent Hindus. He apprehended that in the near future they would join hands with their Muslim compatriots, viz., Muslim landlords, capitalists and others to thwart him.

7.7 Other major agrarian issues and the intelligentsia — reflection in contemporary journals

In this section, the ideas of some of the eminent men of Bengal, most of whom were highly educated and held high positions in society, on the major agrarian issues have been discussed. Among them were Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay, Srinath Dutta, Kalikumar Mitra, Amarnath Dutta, Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay and Dwi-
jadas Dutta.

The younger brother of Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay, Radhakamal, was a famous economist. After completing his M.A., he taught for sometime in Krishnanath College in Beherampore, Murshidabad and then in Calcutta University. He was also the Principal of Lucknow University. He was a prolific writer whose works include *Bartaman bangla sahitya* (contemporary Bengali literature), *Monomoy bharat* (ideal India), *Taruner bharat* (India of the youth), *Daridrer krondon* (cry of the poor), *Visva bharat* (2 volumes) and many others. He also edited the journal *Upasana*. Srinath Dutta, a graduate from London, edited the popular journal *Byabshayi*. Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay was the assistant director of the Agricultural Department of Bengal. On his return from America, Nagendranath joined Rabindranath in his experiments with rural reconstruction work. He was actively involved in the latter's Sriniketan programme. The knowledge he had acquired while studying agriculture in Illinois University stood him in good stead. Dwijadas Dutta, after completing his M.A., became a teacher in Government Engineering College at Sibpur. Along with agriculture, he was greatly interested in dairy farming.

These men were more interested in problems related specially to agriculture. They continued to think deeply about how improvement could be brought about in agricultural techniques and production. Some of the widely read journals of the time like *Prabasi*, *Modern Review*, *Sabujpatra* etc. dealt extensively with issues ranging from techniques of agriculture to co-operative farming, ways to improve the conditions of the ryots, settling agrarian disputes, more scientific means of agricultural marketing, cultivation of different types of crops, rural reforms, the role of the youth, importance of agricultural education and cattle breeding. Long and critical essays were written on these topics by men. Many of them had first-hand experience in agriculture. Away from the debates in the Legislature, they were more interested in agricultural development.

### 7.7.1 Nagendranath and the problem of rural reconstruction

Most of them could not separate agrarian problems from the problems of the village. At a time when *swaraj* had become the goal of the national movement Nagendranath observed that, *swaraj* in its real form could be attained only if the needs of the village were fulfilled\(^{135}\). The life-blood of the villages had to be restored, new life injected into the half-dead villages. This was first highlighted by Rabindranath Tagore during the Swadeshi movement\(^{136}\). Nagendranath too believed that, times of heightened political activities were best periods for concentration on reconstruction of rural society. This could be an important technique for mobilization of the rural people for the political movement. On the other hand, the general awakening and enthusiasm of the educated urban people could be channelised for constructive work in the villages without which the alienation


\(^{136}\) Tagore, Rabindranath, ‘Swadeshi samaj’ (native society) and ‘Asth a o babosta’ (dependence and arrangement), *Rabindra rachanabali*, vol.12.
between them and the rural people could never be reduced. However the disjointed efforts of the swadeshi leaders at rural reconstruction made him conclude that, stray attempts at rural reforms like building a school here, a co-operative society there, or providing facilities for loans at low rates of interest were not enough. They would not be of any use until the rural society was revitalized. For instance, as he pointed out, a number of co-operative loan-giving societies were set up at government initiative. Its members were the comparatively well-off villagers. But there was no evidence of any co-operative effort on the part of villagers. So until and unless the heart of the village was revitalized, its life-blood restored, Nagendranath observed, all help from outside would be futile.

Nagendranath Gangopadhyay suggested some ways as to how rural development from within could be possible. Firstly, since the work was a long-drawn process and not at all easy, involving a lot of hard work, those actively involved in this work should have great strength of character; belief in the eventual success of their work and in the power of the self and the nation and should not be easily disheartened by failures. In such work, the youth should play the leading role, rather than the village elders. Nagendranath's contact with the latter had convinced him that they had no faith in the ultimate success of rural reconstruction project.

Secondly, for village re-construction programme to attain any degree of success it must involve all sections of society including the untouchables. Caste distinctions should be removed; particularly the stigma of untouchability. The Hindu society, he observed, ignored the interests of a large section of population, i.e, the agricultural class or the Paria. But it would not be possible to build up society, without this class. He appealed to the higher castes to gradually rid themselves of their caste prejudices in the greater interests of the nation. At a time when the nation was aspiring for political swaraj, these social ills were gradually destroying the life-blood of the society. Here the influence of contemporary Irish poet, George Russell, is clearly evident. Echoing him, he firmly stressed on the removal of caste distinctions as a pre-requisite for real freedom. Political freedom was meaningless without equality and social justice. Man should be free to enjoy his freedom. Social bondage was more oppressive than political.

Thirdly, Nagendranath also emphasised the fact that rural reconstruction work should be taken out of the purview of the political movement as the influence of the latter might lead to Party frictions. Those dedicated to rural work must do it quietly and without public attention. Only then would the villagers be inspired. Such constructive work should involve those at the bottom of the society — peasants and other low caste groups such as hadi, bagdi, dom, chamar without whom it would not be possible to build up national life.

Nagendranath appealed to all political parties, the moderates, extremists and others, to

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137Gangopadhyay, N., op.cit., pp.732-34.
138"Our conception of a civilization must include, we must begin with the life of the humblest, the life of the average man or manual worker, for if we neglect them we will build in sand. The neglected classes will wreck our civilization', George William Russell (1867-1935) was an Irish author and painter whose pen-name was 'AE'. In 1897, he became an organizer of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society of Sir Horace Plunkett, New Standard Encyclopedia, p.12, Standard Educational Corporation, Chicago, 1984, p-r-411.
139Gangopadhyay, N., op.cit.
adopt a sympathetic attitude towards such work. Differences of opinion and political debates would only hinder such work. Besides, attempts should be made to create an awareness among the villagers and community feeling fostered. This would instill in them the strength to struggle for the fulfilment of their needs.

Lastly, as he pointed out, a beginning had been made in the sphere of rural work since the days of the Swadeshi movement. Even some zamindars had been won over to the cause and they in turn had appointed volunteers to carry on the work in their estates. But, all these efforts had ended in vain, primarily because the workers had never tried to analyse the actual problems of the villages. Just the willingness to work was not enough. This had to be backed by sufficient knowledge of the countryside. The workers had also to have firm determination to work. It was important to remove all internal obstacles. It was difficult to find really devoted workers. The youth was keener to join the political movement. But, unless such constructive work was taken up in real earnest, no real benefit could accrue to the nation.

He believed that the government, if it so willed, could undertake rural reforms. It could create the infra-structure needed for such work by easily removing all obstacles in the path of development. With the help of law, it would be possible to establish order. But, he emphatically observed, this would not suffice. Unless the people, for whom such work was intended, were inspired enough to help themselves, all development would be superficial. It was however, true he said, that political freedom would facilitate the work of rural reconstruction. But since Indians have not been able to overcome political obstacles and put in combined efforts, most of their endeavours were likely to fail. This, Nagendranath further observed, could very easily dishearten the youth. However, no external obstacle was as powerful as internal ones. The actual obstacle existed in the minds of the people — their lack of belief and confidence in themselves and their inertia which prevented them from making any move to help themselves. If their will could be strengthened, all external obstacles could be overcome.

When Nagendranath was talking of rural development undertaken by the people themselves he was echoing the concept of atmashakti, so consistently stressed by Rabindranath much earlier. He was also placing the same faith in the role of the youth in rural work. Their enthusiasm and love for the country should be channelised in the right direction. But he had found that, this appeal to the educated youth to take charge of the effort made by some villages to improve their own educational, health and financial condition have gone unheeded. The main reason, according to Nagendranath, was the disdain of the educated towards the uneducated. They could not mix with the uneducated lower classes. Similarly the village peasants could not trust the bhadraloks. But it was becoming increasingly important to inculcate atmashakti among the villagers and inspire them to undertake their own development. Their apathy could not be allowed to continue for long primarily because of two reasons. Firstly, unlike earlier, those men in the villages who were in a position

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to undertake benevolent activities for the village were now moving to the towns. Besides, with the spread of education among the financially well-off, it was no longer believed by them, unlike their ancestors, that such works were necessary for going to ‘heaven’.

In most cases, the efforts of the educated youth were limited to drawing up proposals and plans of work. Their attitude towards the needs of the village was rather narrow in scope. In Nagendranath’s opinion, they firmly believed that, if agriculture continued unhindered; if their homesteads were habitable throughout the year; if the exploitation of moneylenders could be reduced; and some roads built, then there was not much left in the way of improving the condition of the village142. But this was not enough. Such limited vision could not lead to any real development. The problems, that the country was facing, could not be solved through Morley-Minto (1909) or Montagu-Chelmsford (1919) or any other such political reforms. The time had come to establish before the country the real ideal of freedom.

Nagendranath, however, did not suggest the steps to be taken to improve the lot of the villages. He bemoaned the fact that the ideal of rural reform, outlined by the authorities and the leaders of the country, was rather narrow. The needs of the village were ignored. There were more than 6 lakhs villages in the country where men belonging to different communities lived. If a section of the educated community tried, they could easily inspire the villagers to unite by getting rid of social divisions. In Nagendranath’s view, lack of proper education was the main reason for the prevailing disunity in the country which, was being exploited by the British. The village society had to be revitalized. But this would not be possible through the efforts of external agencies like the District Boards, magistrates or the police.

What was lacking in the villagers was ‘spirit of the community’. This had to be developed. Nagendranath’s close association with village life had made him aware that the villagers were bogged down by the rigours of daily life, which constituted a drain of their energies. They had no self-confidence or sense of personal worth. There was no scope for leisure in their lives.

Till date, most of the efforts at rural reconstruction have been limited to establishing sabhasamities. This could never lead to any real development. Only when a minimum of two to five villages put in combined effort could the basis for real work be laid. He proposed the establishment of village mandalis. The mandali thus set up by the villages would prepare its own products, sell their agricultural products at a fair price and make arrangements to hoard their grains if the prices fell. The mandali would protect the wealth of the village and even increase it. Such activities were possible only by joint efforts. Nagendranath was thus reiterating great faith in the co-operative principle.

As to how to reform the village, Nagendranath observed that, no development was possible in isolation. He observed that, one had to broaden our horizon and take into consideration the success attained in other countries and learn from them143. This did not mean rejection

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143Gangopadhyay, Nagendranath, ‘Palli samskar samashya’(problems of rural reform), Prabasi, Kartick,
of the culture and heritage of Indian civilization. The pattern of our development would
certainly be different.

In a series of articles entitled 'Krishi unnatir drishtanta' (instances of agricultural improve­
ment) in Tattvabodhini Patrika the leading journal of the Brahmos, Nagendranath analysed
in detail the case of Ireland. Here he pointed out the similarity between the condition of the
peasants in Ireland and in India. In Ireland too, the selfish landlords, greedy moneylenders
and the pitiless wholesalers had set up a thriving businesses in grain produced by the hard
work of the peasants. The peasants worked hard throughout the year. Yet their miseries
knew no bound. They could not lead a life of leisure. The parasitic classes on the contrary
lived a life of plenty. The Irish example led Nagendranath to believe that such a situation
could be remedied only through co-operatives144. In Ireland, under Sir Horace Plunkett
a group of young men had built up a co-operative system and done immense benefit to
the peasants. As a result, the peasants there had become fearless, self dependent and
comparatively prosperous. He established the Irish Agricultural Organization Society145.

However, there were many contemporaries who had reservations about the application of
Plunkett's methods in India. They felt that his system would not work in this country.
To prove their point they cited the instance of government-directed co-operatives and
said that the peasants had still not been won over to the idea and inspired to join them
spontaneously146.

Nagendranath, however, did not conclude that the system was not suitable for our country.
What was a necessary was to find out the reasons as to why the peasants were not attracted
to the idea of co-operatives and why it had failed. The rural people of Bengal were not
alien to the idea of working in co-operation with one another. Many events in Bengal's
rural life like community workshops and rituals, buying and selling of cattle were completed
successfully on the basis of joint efforts. In such efforts, the villagers helped one another.
So this community feeling could be channelised towards other constructive ends also.

For any real development to be possible the first necessity was to reduce the burden of
debt of the peasants. It was necessary to ensure that they got full return from selling the
crops produced by them. Attempts had to be made to ensure that agriculture could be
conducted on scientific lines. All these could be organized on the basis of the co-operative
principle.

However, success of the work depended on creating an awareness among the peasants of
their problems. They would then try to become self-sufficient. Knowledge of science should
be imparted. Rural problems, he continued, could not be solved in isolation. For instance,
he cited that, the news of the failure of cotton crop in America in the 1860s reached India
within 24 hours and the price of cotton in Bombay City went up. Again, when Russia did

144 ibid.
145 Plunkett was the pioneer of Irish agricultural co-operation. He strongly influenced the rise of the
agricultural co-operative movement in Great Britain and the Commonweal th. His Irish Agricultural Or­
ganization Society was the forerunner of similar societies in England, Wales and Scotland.
146 Gangopadhyay, Nagendranath, op.cit.
not buy tea, there was less work for the Assam tea garden coolies. The tea garden owners decided to reduce tea cultivation.

To solve the constant problem of food shortage, Nagendranath suggested that, the peasants should be taught the use of fertilizers and good quality seeds. They had to be saved from the moneylenders and wholesalers. India’s agricultural problem was a part of a world problem which made it a rather complex one. Knowledge of the developments taking place in various parts of the world was necessary, particularly those taking place in the sphere of science. He felt that, what was required at the present were scholars, economists, thinkers, educationalists and litterateurs who would populate the ‘desert depths of national consciousness with real thought and turn the void into a fullness. We have, few reserves of intellectual life to draw upon when we come to the mighty labour of nation building.\(^{147}\)

Nagendranath bemoaned the fact that no one had proposed a well-thoughtout method of work. The country needed a group of young and dedicated workers with the real vision of freedom who were willing to work silently to revitalize rural society and were more concerned about doing their work, rather than about attaining success. To get such workers, proper education was required. To facilitate this, it was necessary to set up training centres for rural workers\(^{148}\).

7.7.2 Radhakamal’s programme of rural work

Expressing his opinion on this question of how rural work could be undertaken, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay pointed out, there was no need to put much emphasis on the methods of work or in fruitless debates on which method of work to follow. What was crucial was to ensure that through different ways and institutions the desire to work was awakened in all the villages\(^{149}\). In his article in the *Prabasi*, he said that all forces should be harmonized and directed towards one end. An ideal should be kept in front, so that all forces could be inspired by a common ideal. Village reconstruction work alone could benefit the ryots.

Radhakamal first tried to analyse the problems faced by the villages. He criticised the increasing migration to the towns from the villages. Those who had the intellectual ability or the means to bring about development in the villages were leaving for the towns in the hope of a better life. As a result, there was all-round deterioration in the living conditions of the villages. The villagers were becoming increasingly embroiled in internal rivalries. The village *mandal* could not find solutions to the pending cases. There was growing disharmony among the villagers. Agriculture was being neglected, village handicrafts industry could not cope with the European factory produced goods. Whatever capital was left in the villages was being utilized to export grains abroad. But this grain trade was gradually being controlled by the foreign traders. So, in spite of growing scarcity of grains

\(^{147}\) *ibibid.*

\(^{148}\) *ibid.*

in the villages, grain was being exported and the villages were starving.

The foremost need of the hour was revitalization of the village society. Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay tried to find out the methods which could be adopted to enthuse those who were able to work. The artisans and cultivators should become self-sufficient. They should be able to take up different activities to remove their wants. He believed that the middle class should look after agriculture, business and trade. They should arrange education for the villagers which alone would lead to material and spiritual upliftment. This would make possible cultural development and independence of thought in the villages. Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay stressed that, for their development the villagers themselves should be responsible and the middle class should be assigned the leading role. He advised that, to achieve success the workers should start work slowly. They should not try to do too many things in the beginning. As to how such work could be started in the different villages, the daily wants of the villagers had to be met first. To do this a store or bhandar should be set up in each village. All the people or at least some responsible persons should collect some money and give it to the village panchayat. With this money, the panchayat would buy clothing, sugar, salt and other necessary goods from places where they were sold at the lowest possible prices. These goods were to be sold to the villagers at wholesale price. Radhakamal added that, if the sales of the bhandar increased greatly then the panchayat, instead of buying those goods from outside towns and bazars, could employ artisans to produce them. This would give great filip to rural industries. The village weavers and smiths would send their goods to the bhandar and from there they would also get their own necessities like food, clothing etc. The village peasant could take loans from the bhandar with which they would be able to start agricultural work. This loan would not be given to the peasants individually. Each peasant would be responsible for the other peasant's loan from the bhandar. As a result all the peasants would be interested in one another's agricultural activities. It would ensure proper use of the capital borrowed from the bhandar. If all the peasants were responsible for the debt incurred by each, then the chances of misuse of money would be reduced. Consequently, the interest on the debt would be less.

In India, under government initiative, a number of agencies giving loans to peasants had been set up in different villages. However, as many feared, if the peasants got just easy access to loans it would not lead to any development in their condition unless there was improvement in agricultural activities and they could sell their agricultural produces at fair price.

The necessity of introducing the co-operative system at all levels of rural work was a hotly debated issue of the time. It had already been introduced in a limited way at government initiative. The system was borrowed from Germany. The intelligentsia felt that the aim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Co-operative Societies</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a 1906</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>91,343</td>
<td>Rs.21,31,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b 1911</td>
<td>8177</td>
<td>40,3000</td>
<td>Rs.2,02,68,133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[150\] In 1904 a loan giving society was set up in India. The following figures give an idea of the development of the co-operative movement:

\[\text{ibid.}\]
of those co-operative societies should not be to limit themselves to providing credit at low interest rates to the poor peasants on a co-operative basis. It should be involved in other welfare activities: such as providing high quality seeds, fertilizers and necessary agricultural implements to the peasants and also opportunity for selling their crops. In many European countries they had attained great success. Such societies were a great help in improving agriculture by providing cheap credit, seeds, fertilizers and market facilities. If a single peasant could not buy some necessary agricultural implements, there would be provision for the peasants residing in the village to combine and buy. As Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay observed, so far the co-operative societies in the country had only been providing credit. Though, this had to an extent relieved the peasants of the oppression of moneylenders, they had not been able to meet all the financial needs. The peasants were still forced to take loans from others. There had been no improvement in agriculture. The peasants were unaware of the use of good seeds and fertilizers. Even if they bought these, they were unaware of the right price and often paid more. When they sold their products they more often than not did get a fair price. Until these opportunities were provided by the co-operatives, just the advantage of getting loans at low rates would not be enough. There could be no real improvement. Ways must be found to apply this principle in all types of activities. Unless the poor and weak peasants, artisans and labourers co-operated with one another, their plight would not improve.

Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay advocated a plan as to how this co-operative principle could be applied in all spheres of rural life:

Agriculture: Ways must be found to provide seeds, fertilizers and agricultural implements to peasants and to protect and improve the condition of the farm animals. A general dairy should be set up in each village where opportunities should be provided for production of pure milk and other milk products on a co-operative basis. Instead of the peasants taking loans independently from the moneylenders at high rates of interest, the peasants should unite and take responsibility for one another's debt and set up a co-operative credit giving mandali.

Industry: The artisans, instead of taking loans and advances or dadan individually from the wholesale traders would combine to form a society and take responsibility for one another's loans. They would co-operate and buy expensive scientific machinery jointly.

Commercial: The peasants used to sell their products to the brokers and wholesalers individually and were deprived of the right price. But, if the peasants combined and arranged on the co-operative basis for the sale of their produce at wholesale price then they could control unrestricted export of crops. They could control cultivation of food crops and set up general food granaries to store grains and set up general bhandars to facilitate acquisition of necessary goods from abroad at advantageous prices and sell at wholesale price in the villages without profit. They could also arrange for the sale abroad of artisan products produced in the villages. Until the

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151 Mukhopadhyay, Radhakamal, 'Palli charja bidhan'(solution to rural issues), Prabasi, Magh, 1320 B.S., part 13, vol.2, no.4, pp.370-1.
goods were sold, the artisans should be given loans to meet the expenses of their daily necessities. Exhibitions and competitions should be arranged in the village *hats* and fairs for agricultural and artisan products.

Educational: Schools, both day and night, should be provided to all. All should be made literate. Books should be provided free of cost. Provision should be made for recreational and cultural activities like holding *Samkirtans*, *Kathakathas* etc. Scientific laboratories should be set up. The people should be acquainted with modern scientific knowledge particularly that sort of knowledge related to agriculture, industry and trade which would give more opportunities for financial profit to the villagers. The co-operative society should experiment with different types of crops and fertilizers in the agricultural farms. Exhibitions should be started to enthuse the peasants about use of new fertilizers, crops and equipments. This would lead to the use of the new ones among peasants. The expenses of all these would be met from the profit made by the co-operative *bhandar*, from buying and selling of goods, giving credit and grain trade.

Health: The villagers should be encouraged to work together to clear jungles, clean water bodies, dig wells and maintain them. Steps should be taken to treat the ill and prevent the spread of disease. Medical facilities should be provided to all.

These facilities, said Radhakamal, should be extended throughout the country. It would check deterioration of our national life. For this, in every village, sub-division and district, dedicated workers were required. They should be helped by the educated, the rich and the zamindar classes. If the villagers themselves took responsibility for the education, material and moral improvement of their village then, gradually the villages would be able to develop their full potential without any external help. There would be gradual improvement of agriculture and industry. Those who were hoping to find work in the towns would no longer need to leave the village. They would find work in the village itself. It would provide opportunities of livelihood in the villages for the middle class. Under the village committee, small factories on co-operative basis could be set up. Its’ surplus products could be exported. With increase in productivity of the village the financial condition of the peasants would improve. It would no longer be necessary to import necessities from abroad\(^{152}\).

In all these, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay proposed, the village committee should take the lead. The basis should be the co-operative principle. The work of the *mandal* or the *panchayat* should not be limited to the dispensation of justice and maintenance of law and order. It should be involved with all aspects of village life. As representative of the villagers it should regulate agriculture, industry, business, education, health etc. In short, its multifarious activities should include:

i) Production of food and other necessities and provide employment opportunities.

ii) Maintenance of health.

iii) Education (agriculture, industry and business).

\(^{152}\)Mukhopadhyay, Radhakamal, ‘Palli samskar’(rural reform), *Prabasi, op.cit.*
iv) Religion; *Jatra, Kathakatha, Samkirtan*, Festivals.
v) Justice; arbitration of all disputes.
vii) Clearing jungles and providing water.
viii) Irrigating, maintaining embankments, cleaning water bodies, building roads.
ix) Buying - selling; trade; protecting grain stores, collecting capital.
x) Recreation, sports, exercise.

If such co-operative societies were set up everywhere in the country, the villages would become self-sufficient. The educated youth community should take charge of the entire operations. They alone had the necessary qualities, observed Radhakamal. They had the abilities of self-sacrifice and hard work.

### 7.7.3 Some ideas on methods of rural reconstruction work

In contemporary journals, there were lengthy discussions on the techniques to be adopted by volunteers in their rural reconstruction work. In an essay entitled ‘Palli gathaner upay’ (method of rural reconstruction), Kalikumar Mitra observed that, the rural reformers had to be firm in their resolve to carry on their work undaunted by initial failures. Their foremost task would be to unite the rural people and convince them about their mission. This would not be an easy task, as the rural people did not trust easily and were rather sceptical about the sincerity of the urban and educated people to benefit the former. So the rural reformers had first to get acquainted with the villagers, mix with them, understand them and find out about their needs. Depending on that they would have to prepare a list of the type of work to be done and decide on who would be suitable for what type of work. Then they would have to acquire workers for all types of work. Each group of workers should be entrusted with each type of work geared towards rural development.

It was difficult for the villagers to unite for any kind of work, divided as they were along caste lines. For any developmental work to succeed, the villagers had to co-operate with one another. This could only be possible if caste divisions were ignored. Even the lowest castes were necessary for the success of rural developmental work as the *bhadraloks* were incapable of great physical rigour. It was also necessary to spread education among the common people. For this, primary schools, observed Kalikumar, should be established. Education had to be given to all classes without any differentiation. Once the villagers were made to appreciate the advantages of education, the number of students would automatically increase. Once anyone from the lower classes acquired some education, Kalikumar Mitra advocated that, he should be inducted into the working committee of the school. This would encourage others from his community to acquire education. He also advocated that, in every school a girl’s section should be opened where girls from all social classes should be taken in.

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153 ibid.

His personal details are not known. But his writings reveal his deep knowledge about rural society and his interest in agriculture.
The rural workers should realise that the villagers would not be able to undertake any kind of work that would involve huge expenses. Yet any attempt to improve the agricultural system would initially involve some expenses. Again, it was equally true that unless there was improvement in agriculture, the financial problems of the people could not be solved. The moneylenders in the villages gave loans at very high rates of interest. If, due to any reason the agricultural activities of the peasants who took loans suffered, then in most cases, let alone paying back the principal amount, they could not even pay the interest. In such cases the moneylenders deprived them of all their possessions. To solve their financial problems, Kalikumar Mitra advocated the setting up of co-operative credit societies in every village. A minimum of 15 persons irrespective of their castes could combine to form a society. This society should be registered under the registrar of the Bengal Co-operative Society. After registration the society could appeal for inclusion within the district central co-operative bank. If this appeal was accepted then, it would have the bank’s shares. Then the village society could get loans at very low rates of interest from the bank. Then the actual expenses of the society and the interest due from it to the central society would be calculated, the rate of interest fixed and the peasant would be given loan for agricultural improvement. Attention should be paid to ensure that majority of the peasants of the village became members of the village society. Since, its interest rate would be low, the peasants would not have much difficulty in repaying it.

In Bengal there were 27 districts, 84 sub-divisions and 380 police stations (thanas). In the last census Bengal’s population was 4 crore 54 lakhs. In his essay entitled ‘Palligramer katha’ (rural tales), Srinath Dutt expressed his fear that in the next census, population, was likely to go up to nearly 5 crores. Srinath Dutta, a graduate from London, was associated with a number of journals. He was the editor of a monthly journal called Byabshayi. So, he said that, it was necessary to establish self-sufficiency in the villages. In future, the villagers themselves should take care to build schools, roads, canals, embankments and other welfare activities. Chowkidari panchayat and village union would be included in the new village committee. Srinath Dutta advocated that those villagers who paid road cess, chowkidari cess and other cesses should elect the members of the village committee. There members should be given the power to elect the members of an organizing sabha. Every sub-division, he suggested, should appoint 1000 mandals for 2 to 3 years. They would do all the work of the village committee and also appoint the members of the organizing committee. It was better for the villages to have village committees and their organizing committees to look after their welfare. They would look after providing drinking water, schools, health centres, clearing of forests and building roads and embankments. The money collected in the form of road cess and other cesses, he said, rightfully belonged to the villagers. This money should come back to the village from the Collector. Till now this money was being taken out of the village. It was the district board which was receiving this money. In future, Srinath Dutta observed, the village committee, the circle board or the local board and the district board would divide it up among themselves. At least, two-thirds of the road cess should be due to the village committee. This provision, he said, should be made legal. Until the base of the village committee was strengthened, the

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155 ibid.
156 Prabasi, Kartick, 1325 B.S., part 18, vol.2, no.1 p.75.
work of the provincial organizing *samity* would not be beneficial for the country. Great attention should be paid to the constitution of the village committee. Its size should not be too large. A few adjacent villages, sharing some common interests should combine. The village committees must pay attention to improvement in agriculture. They should ensure easy availability of rice, pulses, fish and other necessities. They must meet the basic needs of all classes of the population. Another important thing, emphasised by Srinath Dutt was the need to establish *amity* between the Hindus and Muslims residing in the same village. The Muslims should be represented in all organizations, in the village committee, district board, circle board, organizing committee and others. Out of every 5 members, at least 2 should belonging to the Muslim community.

Villages in Bengal could be broadly divided into two categories — villages adjacent to towns and railway tracks and those situated far away from the towns and railway tracks. The condition of the second was worse. In the villages, apart from agricultural, minor businesses and jobs in the zamindar’s *kutcherry* or village school, there was not much chance of employment. The majority of the villagers had to go to the nearby towns for jobs. The result was that they gradually began to lose touch with the villages and the number of people of the villages began to decline. The towns were becoming over populated and were just becoming centres of jobs and not of independent businesses and means of survival. The number of jobs were not increasing but prices of essential commodities were rising everywhere. This was causing great hardships. The income of the middle class was not increasing. So, Amarnath Dutta, another rural enthusiast, advised those keen on rural reconstruction work to pay attention to providing jobs for villagers in the villages. It would prevent migration from the villages. He wrote that the government and the educated community should also help in this effort. He advised that some branches of justice, revenue and administration departments could be shifted at low costs to the villages where the comparatively educated villagers could find jobs. To enable the rich people to open factories and set up commercial linkages in the villages, the government should take the initiative to provide good roads and extend railways. All these, he said, would encourage and provide opportunities for the educated and wealthy people to live in the villages and earn their livelihood. Opportunities of higher education should be provided for the village children. Schools should be opened. Arrangement for health, educational and recreational facilities should also be made in the villages. All these would develop a spirit of co-operation among the villagers. It would also remove them from the clutches of the unscrupulous zamindars and moneylenders.

**7.7.4 Zamindar-tenant relationship**

The deteriorating relation between the zamindar and the peasants was a source of concern to those intellectuals interested in rural welfare. This not only hampered rural life but also constituted the main obstacle to agricultural development. Nagendranath Gangopadhyay,

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157 ibid.
who like his inspirer Rabindranath was greatly concerned about this, narrated an incident which had given him an insight into this. He had spent a few days in a couple of villages in the Bakhargunj district during severe famines. During that time of want and misery, he had observed the behaviour of the employees of the local zamindari kutcherry. They rigorously collected the rent from the frightened peasants with the help of lathials.

According to Nagendranath, improvement in the relationship between the zamindars and the peasants would be possible if the zamindars sacrificed some of their own interests and undertook welfare activities for the peasants. This would not be an easy task as the peasants were scared of zamindars and would not believe easily that the latter wanted their welfare. So this mistrust had to be removed first. Absenteeism was another factor which contributed to the growing disharmony in the relationship between the two. Most of the zamindars did not stay in their zamindaries as they did not find life in the village congenial. They preferred to live in Calcutta. The educated bhadralks no longer kept close touch with the villages. It was not possible for the zamindars to stay in Calcutta and do good for the villages by leaving to their naibs the fate of the peasants. The misery of the peasants left at the mercy of the growing power of the naibs went on increasing.

Absenteeism was also responsible for the increasing deterioration in village life. The villages were in increasing need of roads, sources of drinking water and pasture land. Without roads movement was difficult, particularly during the rainy season. Without proper sources of drinking water, the plight of the villagers, particularly in summer was miserable. Drinking contaminated water they often succumbed to diseases. There was not much pasture land. So, during the rains the domesticated animals faced great hardships. Had the zamindars kept in touch with the villages, observed Nagendranath, they would have directly witnessed the misery of the villages and would have undertaken reform work. In this observation of Nagendranath, we find an echo of the sentiments of Rabindranath who held that not all zamindars were bad. There was an underlying belief in the innate goodness of the zamindars. Nagendranath suggested that, at least for a few months every year the zamindars should stay in their zamindaries. This would lead to closer bonds with the villagers and make for better relations between the zamindars and the peasants.

In the sheristha papers, there was not much information about the peasants and the tenants. So, Nagendranath advocated that there should be written information about their financial, social and physical condition. The educated zamindars should themselves take the initiative. This could not be done by the naibs or amlahs. He said that, the rich zamindars should become aware of the attempts being made in Europe and America to improve the lot of peasants. It was noteworthy how, having adopted improved techniques of agriculture, the villages in Ireland, Belgium and Holland had become prosperous. In England too, where the landlords dominated agrarian society, agriculture was undergoing great improvement. The workers were leaving the factories and returning to agriculture. So there was no reason why there could be no improvement in Bengal’s agrarian society which was very similar to the English one.

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160ibid., p.690.
Nagendranath, however, suggested that any attempt to bring about such improvement would involve a change in the laws relating to zamindars. Peasants had to be given some rights like fixity of tenure, fixity of rent and free right of sale, that is peasants would be free to sell or transfer their holdings at will. Nagendranath felt that unless peasants were given the right to transfer their land at will, there could be no improvement in their condition. In Bengal, some zamindars were enthusiastic about giving this right to the peasants as they felt that it would benefit both and the zamindar could enhance their landed incomes only if there was improvement in agricultural production and in the condition of the peasants. Rabindranath discussed this issue in great detail in the *Prabasi*. He observed that, technically land should belong to him who tilled it. This was possible only through transfer of land. If land was a saleable commodity then there was no problem in its transfer. But if land was sold in the open market then the possibility of the tillers buying it was slim. Affluent non-agriculturists would acquire most of the land. Moneylenders to whom cultivators were indebted would acquire most of the lands. The ryots would suffer. He was against granting peasants unrestricted right of transfer of land. The ryots, who had no money or education or power were in no position to protect themselves. So, observed Rabindranath, to give unrestricted freedom of transfer of land to the peasants would be suicidal. He said that it would in the end benefit the moneylenders. Ryots under the jurisdiction of the zamindars would be better-off than under the moneylenders.

The zamindars should also save the ryots from the clutches of moneylenders. Most peasants were in debt to the moneylenders and could save hardly anything of their income. To pay rent, to undertake agriculture, to buy cattle for the plough and to buy seeds, peasants had to depend on the moneylender who generally charged interest at the rate of 1 anna per rupee per month. It was very easy for them to hoodwink the uneducated peasants who could never escape from the cycle of debt. Nagendranath advocated that, zamindars should take the initiative to remedy the situation. He observed that, the government through cooperative loan giving societies, with branches in different villagers was trying to give loans at low rates of interest to the villagers. But, if these societies were to succeed they had to be supported by zamindars, even if it meant that they had to incur some losses in their dadni business. He further suggested that zamindars should concentrate on improvement of agriculture, providing good seeds, fertilizers, agricultural implements and if necessary, employ agricultural experts. In short, the role played by the American government to help peasants should be played by the landlords in Bengal. In America, the government had made great efforts to reclaim fallow lands. The agricultural department there had set up a society called ‘Land reclamation services of the states’ whose work was to reclaim infertile land, guide the peasants on the crops which would be suitable for their particular type of soil and how best to produce them. Nagendranath hoped that prosperous Bengal zamindars would set up such agricultural departments in their zamindaries to help peasants in every way so that agricultural improvement was possible. The traders bought the produce from

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162 His ideas have been dealt with at greater length later.
the peasants at very low price. Where moneylenders took part in trading activities the oppression of the peasants was limitless. If an agricultural department was set up then, it could arrange for the sale of the peasant’s produce. It was, he felt, the efforts of the peasants which had made possible a life of plenty for the landlords. So it was the latter’s duty to help improve the lot of the peasants.

7.7.5 Problems likely to be faced by educated people in the works of agricultural development

At a time when there was some enthusiasm among the educated community to improve agriculture in the country there were some intellectuals who were rather sceptical about the extent to which they would be able to maintain their enthusiasm and attain success. Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay, Assistant Director of Agricultural Department of Bengal is an instance. He observed that, as the educated community was taking an interest, all over the country there was desire for greater improvement in agriculture. However, he observed that, if people became enthusiastic over agricultural projects and engaged in agricultural experiments without any experience then, there was bound to be financial loss. In most cases they would carry on their experiment for sometime, incur losses and then abandon it. Most of these educated men engaged in agricultural experiments, were in the hope of making quick and easy profit. They had no experience in agricultural work and suffered losses. Nityagopal observed that, those who had little capital, but wanted to make easy profit by engaging in agricultural work came from reasonably well-off homes. They believed that it was easy to make profits from agriculture. However, such beliefs were erroneous. Unlike in England, Canada, Australia or South Africa, it would not be easy for the bhadrlok class to make much profit from agriculture. In Bengal, agriculture was not easy. They had to cope with adverse climate, difficulties of village life and diseases, which soon led to disappointment and they abandoned agriculture.

Nityagopal observed further that, the educated people were not interested in the widely grown Indian crops like grain, paddy, jute, gram and mustard. His advice to them was that if new crops were grown then, attention would have to be paid to factors like finding a market for these crops; teaching the peasants proper techniques of cultivation of these crops etc. But on the other hand, if through new methods improved paddy, jute, gram and mustard could be produced then the problem of finding a market for them would not arise. Besides, if in spite of adverse climatic conditions like droughts there could be increase in productivity of these crops then the peasants would really be benefited. He further advised that, if any bhadrlok wanted to take up agriculture then he should first cultivate these crops which are cultivated by the common peasants, make a profit from that and then take to other crops. But in cultivating the common crops, he should use better techniques. Since good crops depended on good seeds, it would be easy for them to acquire good seeds. They had easy access to the annual reports published by the

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164 Mukhopadhyay, Nityagopal, ‘Shikshita bhadralker krishibritti abalamban’ (adoption of agriculture as vocation by the educated men), Prabasi, 1309 B.S., part 2, no.6, pp.207-08.
government agricultural experimental centre from which they could acquire the necessary knowledge.

However, as Nityagopal observed, it would not be possible for the bhadraloks to do any kind of physical work. They would require the help of the labourers. The best way out for the bhadraloks was to carry on agriculture on the basis of mutual sharing with the peasants. The bhadraloks, he advised, should provide the land, good quality seeds and specific implements, while the peasants would provide the animals and labour. In the end, the produce should be shared equally. In Nityagopal’s opinion, if such a system of agriculture could be carried on then the peasants would easily adopt it and both sections would profit. However, he warned those educated persons who were unable to live with the peasants or cope with the rigours of outdoor life in the village should not take to agriculture. So before making their wards study agriculture and practise it, parents should ascertain their aptitudes.

He argued that there were three ways in which, those interested in agriculture could acquire the necessary knowledge: getting such education in the schools; by working alongside peasants and; learn through experience by investing their own money. As regards the first, extensive knowledge was given in the schools. Different types of subjects were taught. Based on the recommendations of an agricultural meeting held in Simla in 1893, the Bengal Government in its Regulation I of 1st January, 1901, had introduced certain provisions for facilitating agricultural education in the lower primary, upper primary and middle Bengali and middle English schools. Agrarian education was to be imparted with other education, that is, this type of education should not be limited to the few specific agricultural schools. Agricultural science was to be included in the university syllabus. Agricultural education should be given in both vernacular and English languages. Particularly in the village schools, agrarian education should be imparted, as it was easier to give the students there, first hand experience than in the town schools. Agricultural and other vocational science subjects should be given the same status as other sciences like Physics, Chemistry and Botany. The method of teaching such subjects should be simple and text books should be written. Knowledge of cultivation of commercial crops like indigo, tea, silk etc. would provide opportunities for jobs in the factories too.

However, Nityagopal observed that when the students began to actually practise agriculture, it was often found that classroom knowledge was not sufficient. One could acquire more knowledge about the crops from peasants, which was not possible in school education. But the educated people found it difficult to accept such knowledge from peasants. As regards the third method, if was possible for all educated persons to acquire some knowledge from text books. They could also invest their money and carry out experiments and learn through their own experience. This involved taking great risk. All the three methods of learning, according to Nityagopal, were workable depending on circumstances. Those interested in agriculture could adopt any of the three according to convenience. For those who owned land in the village, it was easier to acquire knowledge from books and learn

165 Mukhopadhyay, Nityagopal, ‘Krishi o annanya britti siksha’ (agriculture and other vocational education), Prabasi, 1309 B.S., part 2, no.1, pp.6-10.
through experience rather than acquire this knowledge in the schools\textsuperscript{166}.

Members of the intelligentsia discussed in depth and suggested means by which improvement in agricultural techniques leading to increased production could be possible. Dwijadas Dutta was one of them\textsuperscript{167}. He classified again the land in Bengal into different categories depending on their qualities and observed that some were suitable for cultivation of grains; some for cultivation of fodder crops; some for pastoral farming; some for cultivation of fishes and some for cultivation of bees, lac and silk\textsuperscript{168}. The peasant should decide how best to use his land on the basis of the quality of his land. Only good quality land where there was no scarcity of water during summer and yet no fear of grains being spoilt during rainy season was good for cultivation of grains. Mixed cultivation was good for agricultural activities on a small scale. Among the different types of cultivation, crop cultivation and dairy farming were the main. However, Dwijadas made a comparative analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of both in order to find out which was best suited for the \textit{bhadraloks} interested in agriculture and rural development work. In Bengal he observed, paddy and jute were the main crops cultivated. Both required hard work and the ability to withstand the heavy rains and heat required for it. As this was impossible for the educated \textit{bhadraloks}, they were dependent on labourers. But this labour was necessary only at certain times of the year. It was economically unviable to pay wages to the large number of labourers throughout the year. The agricultural labourers on the other hand could not depend on uncertain wages which were insufficient. Many of them had some \textit{jot} land. It often happened that when \textit{bhadraloks} needed labour for their land, small peasants preferred to work on their fields. Consequently, the former’s agricultural production often suffered because of scarcity of labour. This, he felt, was one of the main reason for the losses incurred by the \textit{bhadraloks} in paddy and jute cultivation. As far as profit from the cultivation of both was concerned, it was found that though jute cultivation was more profitable, not much profit accrued to the \textit{bhadraloks} if they had to employ large number of labourers. In jute cultivation the profit was not more than 10 rupees per \textit{bigha}.

On the other hand, profit from cultivation of potato, cauliflower, sugarcane, banana and tobacco was comparatively more, an average of Rs.20 to Rs.40 per \textit{bigha}. The average profit per year could be Rs.30. But a \textit{bhadralok} could not do with less than Rs.30 per month. To make this type of profit and maintain themselves throughout the year on their landed income they would require large amount of land with irrigation facilities. Closeness to the market was also necessary to facilitate easy sale of the produce. Besides to protect the crop from animals, Dwijadas suggested, there must be consolidation of holding. He pointed out that more than two decades earlier, Japanese peasants had been able to consolidate their scattered holdings by mutually exchanging their land. This could be possible even in

\textsuperscript{166}Mukhopadhyay, Nityagopal, ‘Shikshita bhadraloker krishi britti abalamban’(adoption of agriculture as vocation by educated men), \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{167}After completing his M.A. he joined the Govt. Engineering College at Sibpur. No other personal details is available about him. But he wrote regularly in the \textit{Prabasi}. His essays reveal his knowledge about agricultural practices and pastoral farming.

Bengal. But, he warned that it would be difficult to acquire a large amount of land with all these advantages to ensure to the bhadraloks, the income they needed to maintain their standard of living. Even if they were able to acquire it, they would need large amount of money to invest in order to start agriculture. So he observed that, it would be difficult for the bhadraloks to earn their livelihood solely from cultivation of crops. Cattle farming and cattle trade was more profitable because such business was possible on small acres of land. There was great demand for dairy products. It did not require much labour. So it would be more congenial for the bhadraloks. But if they could combine little crop farming with dairy farming, it would be even better. Agricultural waste could be used as fodder for the farm animals while animal wastes could be used as fertilizers. So mixed agriculture, Dwijadas suggested, would contribute towards decrease in agricultural cost and increase in income. But to be successful, the bhadraloks would require the necessary knowledge.

Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay echoed the same view. He pointed out that the best time for agriculture were the months between June to November. But this was the rainy season. It was difficult for the bhadraloks who had the capital to invest to take active part in agriculture. So he suggested that general agriculture should remain in the hands of the peasants. But since they were so poor, it was impossible for them to use expensive scientific equipments. Besides the peasants had to be taught scientific methods of farming like crop rotation and use of fertilizers. If grain was cultivated in two consecutive years, in the third year crops with root nodules like groundnut should be grown\textsuperscript{169}. This would increase soil fertility. It would be good for those who could not buy fertilizers. As fertilizers, two types of cheap things could be used — animal wastes and bones and dead remains of animals. The educated bhadraloks interested in agriculture, he observed, should show the peasants how scientific knowledge could be applied to increase agricultural production.

With the help of zamindars, they should set up \textit{dharmagolas'} or food granaries. They should give seeds and advances to the peasants and teach them the importance of working on co-operative basis. In course of time the \textit{dharmagola} would be converted into the rural grain store. The villagers would store their grain in it and when necessary could get \textit{dadan} at a fair rate of interest. In the absence of such an arrangement, peasants had to sell their products in the market or to the trader at very low price. But the village society would give 6 per cent as interest for the grain stored and charge 10 per cent as interest for the \textit{dadan}. A reserve fund would be created. The money from this would help the peasants to pay off old debts and help them in time of need. It was suggested that, the moneylenders should be prevented by law from attaching the grain capital. To establish such \textit{dharmagolas} financial help from the zamindars and powerful men to the village was required. A co-operative society should be set up in the village. From the village society, initially, only grain would be given as \textit{dadan}. This grain would be given as loan to the village society from the district bank at interest of 6 to 7 per cent of that which was given as loan from the district bank, that is, Rs.6 to Rs.7 per hundred, the government should be responsible for Rs.3 and the zamindar Rs.3 to Rs.4. The government should initiate the project with an investment of Rs.1 to Rs.2 lakhs\textsuperscript{170}.

\textsuperscript{169}Prabasi, 1313 B.S., part 6, no.1, pp.646-47.
\textsuperscript{170}ibid.
In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the intelligentsia repeatedly emphasised the need to organize agricultural work on the co-operative principle. Nityagopal Mukhopadhyay even observed that, if silk cultivation and business was organized on the co-operative principle then he would contribute financially. Silk cultivation required co-operative effort of a lot of men, good arrangement and guidance by experts. Only through swadeshi effort could silk industry be improved. He even promised to go to Japan and get the best cocoons. Silk cultivation required large investment. Though there was a thriving silk industry in Bengal, the best mulberry trees, cocoons and silk threads had to be brought from Punjab and elsewhere, Charuchandra Das, another rural enthusiast, suggested setting up of co-operatives among jute farmers. There were a chain of intermediaries between the jute farmers and the market. They determined the price of jute. The peasants had no option but to accept the price. They were thus deprived of a share of the huge profits made from export of jute abroad. The exploitation of the peasants could be prevented by establishing a co-operative society which would control the price. It would undertake marketing of the produce of all the partners. The partners had to sell their produces to the society. The society would then sell it to the traders in Calcutta.

7.8 Concluding remarks

It is thus quite evident that rural problems and the work of rural reconstruction had attracted the intelligentsia. However, most of them believed that, rural problems could be solved not through a change in the land system but through a reform of the agricultural system. In this work, they assigned the main role to the rich zamindars and the educated men. The economic interests of the intelligentsia was connected with land. They were against any move to give the poor or landless peasants any rights in land. Yet in the 1920s, a section of the intelligentsia began protesting against the permanent zamindari system. Even Rabindranath after his return from Russia in the 1930s advocated its abolition.

Dr. Nareshchandra Sengupta, an advocate of Calcutta High Court, later gave his evidence before the Floud Commission and advocated the abolition of the permanent settlement. In his opinion, the Permanent Settlement constituted an obstacle in the path of agricultural improvement. However, he suggested the zamindari system should be phased out gradually and zamindars should be compensated. Acharya Prafullachandra Roy, the eminent scientist, wrote an essay much later where he described the total incapability of zamindars. He said that the Permanent Settlement was not congenial to the improvement of the country.

In actuality, the Bengali intelligentsia in the first quarter of the 20th century, though interested in overall rural and agrarian development, failed to suggest a concerted plan of action. Their plans for constructive work took for granted the tacit support of the...
government. It is not certain what they proposed to do if the latter responded negatively. They could not really suggest any concrete social or economic programme attractive enough to draw in the masses. Their programmes were based on humanitarianism. Their appeals to the goodness of the zamindars were rather utopian. They could not provide a solution to the basic problem of the land question. While remarking on the mistrust of the masses towards the educated classes, who were expected to conduct the constructive work, they could not suggest how this mistrust could be removed.