Chapter 8

THE RURAL WORLD OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI

Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal’s most famous literary figure, was not only an admirer of the beauty of rural Bengal, he was also aware of the multitudinal problems of villages. He devoted quite sometime in his life in analysing the problems and was also able to suggest some remedial measures from time to time. He was able to evolve a theory of rural development and was sincere in his aim to better the condition of the villagers. His basic theories of rural reconstruction were given their practical application at Shilaidaha, Patisar and then at Sriniketan. Tagore realised that, it was important to develop a proper plan before undertaking a large scale programme for the uplift of the village people.

Agriculture, Tagore recognised, was a vital component of Bengal’s rural society and economy. He believed that, no rural development could be possible without agrarian development. Rural problems could be primarily solved through reforms in agricultural practices. He was greatly interested in problems related specifically to agriculture, such as techniques of agriculture, co-operative farming, ways to improve the condition of the ryots, more scientific means of agricultural marketing, cultivation of different types of crops, importance of agricultural education, dairy farming etc. In a literary career spanning almost fifty-eight years he wrote innumerable essays, short stories, novels, poems, plays, travel diaries, letters and songs. They give us an insight into his thoughts on different issues.

Rabindranath’s ideas and constructive work had a deep impact on many of his contemporaries. Many of them had a first-hand experience in agriculture and were interested in agricultural development. They thought of agrarian issues in their entirety and could not separate agrarian issues from the problems besetting the village. Pramatha Chaudhuri(1868-1946), a contemporary of Tagore related to him, a prolific writer whose essays and short stories were highly acclaimed, was greatly inspired by Rabindranath. Though not much influenced by the latter’s literary style Tagore’s rural reconstruction work prompted him
to think extensively on some of the contemporary rural and agrarian problems. For a long time, Pramatha Chaudhuri was associated with zamindari work in Rabindranath’s estate. This gave him an insight into the agrarian scenario of Bengal.

The Bengali intelligentsia’s involvement with agrarian problems, which began in the mid-nineteenth century, continued well into the twentieth. In the post-Swadeshi period, the question of giving occupancy rights to under-ryots and bargadars and the right of free transferability of holdings were the issues which became crucial and were hotly debated on by the intelligentsia. Prolonged debates were held in the Bengal legislature on these issues when it became clear that, the government was serious in its resolve to amend the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Outside the legislature and outside the political arena the intelligentsia took the help of newspapers and journals to express their opinion on these burning issues. Like many of his contemporaries, Pramatha Chaudhuri too was drawn into this.

8.1 Rabindranath and rural Bengal

Rabindranath Tagore’s long association with the rural world began very early in his life, at the age of twenty-two, when his father entrusted him with the responsibility of looking after their zamindari. Their estates were spread over a large area - including Sahajadpur pargana in the Pabna district, Patisar sadar in the Kaligram pargana of the Rajshahi district, Shilaidaha sadar in the Birahimpur pargana of the Nadia district as well as some regions in the Cuttack district of Orissa. Besides these, the Tagores also owned some property in Kushthia and Kumarkhali. After taking charge of the zamindari, Rabindranath spent the rest of his life mainly in the rural areas - either looking after their estates or in Sriniketan, near Bolpur, in the Birbhum district. His long and close association with the rural world soon increased his knowledge about it. With it also increased his desire to improve its existing condition. As he himself wrote in his various letters, collected in Chhinnapatrabali (collection of letters), until and unless he himself did something for the poor helpless peasants, who were his subjects, their plight would not improve. This same feeling was echoed in his essays ‘Panchabhuṭ’ and ‘Palligram’ (rural village).

8.2 Agro-economic ideas of Rabindranath: a conception of the rural world

Rabindranath had a very clear perception about the position of the village in the socio-economic structure of the country. It constituted the heart of the entire structure. But
over the years the villages had lost their pre-eminent position to fast emerging towns. The British government, he observed, had ignored the interests of the village. British rule had nearly destroyed the village system\(^2\). What was even more dangerous was that, it had killed all initiative and enterprise in the villagers. They had become dependent on the administration for whatever little benefits they received and made no attempt to help themselves\(^3\).

In the period between 1892-93 to 1902-03, the years he spent mainly in the countryside, he was intimately connected with rural life. The majority of the stories included in *Galpaguchcha*(collection of stories) and a large number of his letters in *Chinnapatrabali* were written during this time. ‘Ramkanaier nirbuddhita’(foolishness of Ramkanai), ‘Khokabur pratyabartan’(return of the child), ‘Didi’(elder sister) are some of his short stories which give us glimpses of the day to day life in a village and the miserable plight of the common villagers. He has described the rigours of their daily lives, their hardships and the nature of their exploitation. They were exploited on the one hand by the government and on the other, by the zamindars, their officials and the moneylenders. They could find no redressal. In ‘Megh o roudra’(cloud and sunlight) he has depicted how the respectable villages were ill-treated by their English masters. Harakumar, a one time *pattanidar* who later became a *nasib* of an English zamindar was once insulted by a low caste sweeper at the orders of the latter for a minor offence\(^4\). The most lucid descriptions of the unimaginable poverty, helplessness and the utter hopelessness, internal rivalries and unending quarrels which were all a part of village life, is to be found in ‘Shasti’(punishment), a short story included in his *Galpaguchcha*(collection of stories). In this, he also described how the zamindars forcibly extracted money from the poor villagers. ‘Durbuddhi’(mischief) depicts the inhuman cruelty of a powerful village *daroga* towards a peasant whose daughter had died. ‘Dui bigha jamai’(two bighas of land\(^5\)) is yet another depiction of the exploitation of the farmers\(^6\).

It was Rabindranath who first tried to draw the attention of the people towards rural reconstruction and economic development during the anti-partition struggle in Bengal. He appealed to the people to become self-sufficient and proposed to channelise political awareness of the people towards constructive work. He said that the village constituted the heart of the country. New life had to be instilled in the village. In pre-British period, while the ruler looked after war and peace, administration and justice, the society looked after civil life, providing education, drinking water, welfare activities and improvement of rural life. Through the combined efforts of the local people, the problems faced by each district in the spheres of education, communication, availability of pastoral land, maintenance of communal harmony, irrigation etc. had to solved. In his ‘Swadeshi Samaj’(native society), he analysed the country’s history and the nature of society, politics and national welfare and outlined the nature of rural reconstruction, rural development and rural welfare and said that national life had to be reconstructed with the village at the centre. Around

\(^3\)Tagore, Rabindranath, *Palliprakriti*, p.6.
\(^5\)one bigha is equivalent to one-third of an acre
\(^6\)31 Jaisthya, 1302 B.S.
1890, December, when his father had sent him, then twenty-nine years of age, to live on and to manage the Tagore family properties in East Bengal, he had made two important discoveries: first, the villagers seemed to have lost all ability to help themselves; secondly, both research and technical assistance would be needed if they were ever to learn how to rescue themselves from their creeping decay.

Rabindranath’s concept of nationalism was very different from political nationalism of the period. This is clear from an analysis of ‘Swadeshi Samaj’. In it he said that in England if royalty was destroyed the country would be in peril. That is why politics was so important in Europe. This was not so in India. In our case the country would be imperilled if its social structure was crippled. In Europe, everything from giving aims to the poor to imparting religious education, was dependent on the state. In our country, the society did not depend on the government for its existence. While the contemporary politician visualised the ‘state’ in the ‘nation’, Rabindranath identified ‘state’ with ‘society’. In Europe, the fate of the entire race depended on the state, in our country it was dependent not on the ruler but on society. In our country, he wrote in ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, the function of the ruler was limited to conducting war and peace, protecting the kingdom and dispensing justice, while civil society was responsible for everything else from providing drinking water to imparting education. That was why, frequent changes in the political ruling authority could not disturb our social and religious set-up. Years of political turmoil had not been able to destroy the country because its social foundation was very strong. Whereas in other countries of Europe the nation had saved itself repeatedly from destruction through revolutions, here it was civil society which had taught the people the values of life and enabled them to develop their full potentiality, their atma-shakti.

During British rule, it was this society which had begun to crack. The rural villages, which had been the central point of Indian civilization, began to deteriorate. But the towns began to flourish. Lack of education, superstitions began to plague rural life. The Permanent Settlement, he observed, created a new class of zamindars, most of whom came from urban areas. The major portion of their landed incomes, which earlier used to be spent in their zamindaries in the villages on different welfare projects, were now spent in the towns. The conditions of villages began to deteriorate. Rabindranath wanted the restoration of this rural society to its former glory. To him, this was of great importance. Even during the Swadeshi Movement, with which he was closely connected right from its inception, he made it clear that the real interests of his countrymen lay in the restoration of traditional society.

He was misunderstood by most of his contemporaries, who were too busy in trying to acquire political concessions to pay much heed to his proposal for constructive work. But Tagore was undeterred. Love and respect lay at the root of his nationalism. He regarded his country as the soul of the race and repeatedly emphasised the need to be ready to serve it. He was pained by the spiritual and temporal degradation he witnessed in rural society and wanted immediate remedy.

He founded Sriniketan to give complete form to his Santiniketan idea. Without Sriniketan

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7Bandyopadhyay, Tarasankar, Rabindranath o banglar palli (Rabindranath and Bengal villages), p.38.
the latter cannot be complete. As he himself said, he had shifted his residence from
the banks of the river Padma to Santiniketan ashram with the determination to spread
education and undertake rural reforms. During his long stay in the countryside he had
seen the miserable plight of the villages, scarcity of drinking water in most villages, diseases
and poverty. Lack of education had made the villagers susceptible to exploitation from
all quarters. He bemoaned the fact that, the English educated community, residing in the
urban areas, had not realised that without a change for the better in the living conditions
of these villagers there could be no national progress. Rabindranath was against any sort
of outside help in the development of the villages. The villagers themselves should be
inspired to undertake their own development. First, they should be made to realise their
own strength and then the strength of their combined efforts.

There was thus a basic difference between his idea of nationalism and the politics-centric
'nationalism' of his contemporaries. That is why even though sympathetic towards the
latter he could never associate himself with the political movement of the time. To him
the real basis of swaraj lay in the development of the full potentiality of the 'self'. Its
absence in the villagers was responsible for the shortage of adequate food, absence of
proper education, knowledge, health and joy in the country. He had visualised a long
term process whereby, Indians of all creeds and castes would together win through to a
new sense of unity via education of the type he introduced in Santiniketan. He hoped that
India would achieve a balanced economy that recognised both rural and industrial and
cultural priorities.

The treatment of Tagore's agrarian thinking is different. Among all the intellectuals who
thought deeply on agrarian issues, he was the only one who tried to implement his ideas
into practice. Again, the work that he undertook reflect his ideas. So his ideas and practical
work cannot be separated.

8.3 Observations on the zamindari system

Like many of his middle class, educated contemporaries, Rabindranath too believed that
rural problems could be solved through reforms in agricultural practices and not through
a change in the land system. In this, the main role was to be played by the rich zamindars.
It was to the zamindars of Bengal that he appealed to, to revitalize the villages of Bengal.
As he wrote in his essay 'Mookhujjey banam (versus) Barrujjey', immediately after taking
charge of his zamindari, it was the zamindars who were in a position to provide leadership.
He called them the 'natural leaders' of society responsible for looking after the welfare of
the rural people. Previously, he wrote, the zamindars had earned glory by their generous
attitudes, welfare activities and patronage to art and literature. However, they lost interest
in earning such glory. They had become more interested in leading a life of luxury in

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8Tagore, Rabindranath, 'Sriniketan shilpa-bhandar udbodhan upalakhe abhibhasan' (welcome address
on the occasion of inauguration of industrial store at Sriniketan), Puliprakriti
9Tagore, Rabindranath, 'Swaraj sadhan' (achievement of swaraj), Kalantar (end of an epoch).
the towns.

British rule, he observed, had nearly destroyed the village system. It had killed all initiative and enterprise in the villagers. They had become dependent on the administration for whatever little benefits they received and made no attempt to help themselves. The faith of the villagers in themselves had to be restored and in this, the zamindars would have to play the most crucial role.

The zamindars' first task would be to educate the ryots and make them aware of their potential. This would also serve as a check on the exploitation of the ryots by zamindars. Unless the ryots were taught to look after themselves, they would be exploited from all quarters. But no improvement in the education of the ryots would be possible if the zamindars stayed away from the village. Mere investment of money for the improvement of the village would not suffice. Residence of the zamindars in the villages was imperative. It is a clear indication of Tagore's awareness of the evils of absentee landlordism.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the question of amending some sections of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 became most crucial. Among the most hotly debated issues were the questions of granting the right of free transferability to occupancy peasants and giving occupancy rights to under-ryots and the bargadars. Though silent on the last two issues, Rabindranath clearly expressed his stand on the first issue in the rejoinder that he wrote to Pramatha Chaudhuri's essay 'Rayater katha' (tale of the ryot).

He was against any attempt to give the right of free transferability of holdings to the ryots. Pramatha Chaudhuri said in his 'Rayater katha' that land should belong to him, who tilled it. Rabindranath in his introduction to 'Rayater katha' said that this could be possible only if land became saleable property and there was no restriction on transferability of land. But, he feared that if land was sold in the open market then ryot's chances of buying it would be rather slim. Most of the land would be bought up by those who had money but were not associated with cultivation. Due to the law of inheritance, land would become increasingly fragmented and would no longer be large enough to meet the growing needs of the peasant's family. Consequently, land would be increasingly bought and sold. The local moneylenders would get increasing possession of the small lands. Whatever rights the ryots had under the zamindar would not be left if the moneylenders got possession.

Rabindranath observed that, he himself had been successful in preventing the ryots in his zamindari from selling out to the moneylenders by imposing restrictions on land transfers. He reiterated his faith in the zamindar class when he pointed out that during the days of indigo cultivation, it had been the zamindars who had saved the lands of the small peasants from being forcibly possessed by the planters. It had been the restrictions on land transfer which had saved the ryots then. If these restrictions were removed then, Rabindranath feared, it would be the marwari traders and moneylenders who would have come to occupy their lands. If there was a decline in the profits from the businesses the marwars were engaged in, then they would try to invest their capital in land. The ryots,

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11 Tagore, Rabindranath, Palliprakriti, p.6.
12 Sabujpatra, Asar, 1333.
who had no powers, education or money would not be able to save themselves. If there was no restriction on land transferability the bigger ryots would also try to grab the lands of the smaller. So, he observed, even though it was not right to obstruct free use of the land by the ryots, it would be suicidal to give the ignorant ryots unrestricted freedom to transfer their land. In future, this right would have to be given to the ryots but not in the present. The ryots were much better off under the zamindars. They would be the losers if their lands were bought up by the moneylenders.

Rabindranath, however, suggested that the rent on the peasants' land should not increase. The revenue of the zamindars had been fixed by the government. So, it would only be right if no increase was allowed in the ryots' rent. Frequent increases constituted a deterrent to any improvement in the land which would in the long run be detrimental to the interests of the country. As regards the other rights of the peasants, he observed that, there should be no restrictions on the peasants' right to cut trees, build *pucca* houses or dig ponds on his land. What was imperative, he suggested, was the adoption of a benevolent attitude by the zamindars towards the ryots. They should undertake schemes for the welfare of the peasants. He did not prescribe any dramatic changes in the land system at this stage. It was only after his visit to Russia in 1930, that he realized that the prevailing zamindari system would have to be totally overhauled. Revising his earlier view he observed that, the actual owner of the land was the ryot and not the zamindar. In his view the zamindari should belong to the peasants and the zamindars should be their trustees. The latter could claim some allowance for livelihood from them, but only as their partners. He said that, what he had aspired to for long, Russia had realised in practice. His visit to Russia had deepened his 'long nourished' repugnance for the zamindari business. Besides, introduction of co-operative system of farming alone could bring about an improvement in agriculture. The agrarian system in Russia was an eye-opener for Rabindranath. The co-operative system of agriculture, the use of high quality seeds and fertilizers and tractors made a great impression on him. He saw in Russia an extensive practical application of all that he had been thinking of, in regard to overhauling of the existing agrarian structure. His visit to Russia strengthened his belief that the process of rural reconstruction could be successful in the long run through scientific system of agriculture.

### 8.4 Programme for rural reconstruction

In his 'Swadeshi Samaj' and one of his addresses to the students, he requested the leaders and intellectuals of the country to pay attention to the village and find solutions to its problems. Restoration of the life-blood of the villages of Bengal alone would lead to the emancipation of the country. Here, he stressed the importance of village fairs in the life of an average villager. He wrote in this connection that, if the educated community tried to revive the fairs in their own villages, established Hindu-Muslim amity and discussed

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14Bhadra, 1311 B.S., 1904.
15<Chhatrader prati sambhashan'(address to the students), Baisakh, 1312 B.S., 1905.
means to improve schools, roads, and irrigation facilities, general improvement of the country within a short period would be possible.\textsuperscript{16}

During the anti-partition movement, he reiterated his same concern for the welfare of the country. He wrote in 1905 that, without any further hesitation the people of the country themselves should take up the reins of the administration of the villages in their own hands. They should take steps to protect the peasants, educate their children, improve agriculture and rural health.\textsuperscript{17} In a letter written to Ajit Kumar Chakraborty in Santiniketan, he repeated the view.\textsuperscript{18} He said that, he wanted to attain \textit{Swaraj} in its real sense in every village — a miniature of what should be there in the whole country. A few days later in 1908, in a meeting of Bangiya Pradeshik Sammelani at Patna, he outlined a plan of work for his countrymen. It was a fifteen point programme to be undertaken in each district. It included:\textsuperscript{19}

1. establish equality and harmony among the various religious communities; find out the existing evils in the country and in society and remedy them,
2. settle all rural disputes through arbitration,
3. popularization of indigenous industrial products which should be easily available at a low cost; improvement of common and local industries,
4. setting up of schools as well as night schools wherever necessary for the education of village children and appointment of qualified teachers,
5. educating the common people in science, history and explaining to them the ideals of great men; explaining the basic tenets of all religions and inculcating a love for one's country,
6. setting up a dispensary and medical facilities in every village; making available medicines, medical care and also helping the poor to make funeral arrangements for their dead,
7. attempt to improve public health by providing facilities for drinking water, communication, physical exercise and cremation of dead bodies,
8. setting up of ideal farms, where the youth and other rural people would be educated in agricultural and pastoral activities — this would not only facilitate vocational education, but also lead to improvement of agriculture,
9. setting up granaries to ward off famines,
10. in order to enable the women to increase the family income and also to take sole charge of the family if necessary, they should be imparted adequate training and industrial skill as well as provided with the necessary material help,
11. taking adequate steps to stop the intake of alcohol,
12. establishment of clubs, where meetings would be held and issues related to the welfare of the country and the village discussed,
13. detailed information about the village should be collected — like the members of males, females, children and houses in the village, birth and death figures, condition of the crops, state of agriculture and various businesses, schools, number of students etc.,

\textsuperscript{16} 'Swadeshi samaj', \textit{RR}, Centenary ed., vol.12, p.68.
\textsuperscript{17} 'Asthā o babostha'(dependence and arrangement), \textit{Ashwin}, 1312 B.S., \textit{RR}, Centenary ed., vol.12, p.751.
\textsuperscript{18} 29 Pous, 1314 B.S., \textit{Prabasi}, Bhadra, 1335 B.S., p.685.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Palliprakriti}, pp.222-224.
14. establishment of harmony and a feeling of unity between different villages and districts,
15. provide help to the district samities, regional samities and national samities to attain
their aims and fulfil their tasks.

This fifteen-point programme bears testimony to Tagore's clear perception of the problems
faced by the Bengal countryside. They contain some of his central ideas. He was aware
of the communal disharmony prevailing in the countryside which vitiated the atmosphere.
There was need to inculcate a feeling of unity. It was necessary to impart proper education
to the villagers, which would not only bring about an improvement in their lives but
promote communal harmony as they would with proper understanding develop a feeling
of patriotism. Side by side, attempts should be made to remove the abject poverty of
the villages. Ideal farms should be set up and the village youth should be taught to
carry out agricultural and pastoral activities on scientific lines. Indigenous rural industries
should simultaneously be promoted. This would serve the twin purposes of providing
an alternative source of income as well as meet the local demand for necessities at low
costs. Attempts should also be made to help the people to cut down their expenses. One
way was to enable them to do away with needless litigation. Arbitration courts should
be set up to provide legal relief. There should be attempts to check the consumption
of alcohol. This would not only stop wastage of money but also promote morality. In
the improvement of the village, the women should play an active role. They should be
given vocational education so that, they would be able to augment the family income.
Tagore, however, did not concentrate only on the economic betterment of the village.
He perceived the village in its entirety. He was aware that it had certain other needs
too. He therefore suggested improvement of public health through provision of some basic
amenities. Adequate provisions, he felt, should also be made to facilitate leisure and
recreational activities.

One thing which stands out in his writings is that, even while Tagore appealed for help
for the peasants he emphasised atma-shakti. He believed that any man who did not know
how to protect himself, could not be saved by any law. Tagore did not believe that any
improvement of the country was possible through politics of prayer and petition. Neither
the Congress nor any political organization would be of much help. What was necessary
was the restoration of the life-blood of the villages. If this was done, then the villagers
themselves would find ways and means to protect themselves. In this, he felt, the educated
class had a significant role to play.

One factor which was a source of great concern to the poet was the blissful ignorance and in-
difference of the urban youth towards the rural folk. In an essay 'Byadhi o pratikar'(maladies
and their remedies) he invited the young people to devote their time to the upliftment
of the village. Tagore himself chalked out a programme in the Pabna Regional Conference.
In his presidential address there, he reiterated in greater detail what he had said a few

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211314 B.S.
2228 Magh, 1314 B.S.
years earlier in his essays ‘Swadeshi Samaj’23 and ‘Chhatrader prati sambhashan’24. Tagore made an earnest appeal to the urban youth to take an interest in the welfare of the villages, live with the villagers, educate them, develop agriculture and industry and encourage self-sufficiency among the villagers25.

Rabindranath was keen on establishing self-government in the villages. He realized very early that self-government could begin in the countryside. He often lamented that since he could not make anyone understand that the agrarian village, constituted the base of self-government he himself would try to implement it in practice26. He advocated the ‘mandali system’ as the main plank of rural reconstruction work. He described this in the Pabna provincial conference27. Its aim was to make the villages of the country self-sufficient28. Accordingly, in every province, a provincial representative committee should be set up. This committee, covering all the districts, would set up branches in the villages. Their first task would be to collect as much information as possible. Each village should be made self-sufficient. A number of villages would constitute a mandal. The heads of the mandalis should be responsible for the welfare of the villages and look after their needs. They should set up schools, vocational training centres, granaries, common stock of commodities and banks. Each mandali should have a meeting place which would be, the centre of not only activity but also of recreation. Here all disputes in the village would be settled through arbitration by the heads of the mandali.

In his Presidential address at Pabna Conference, Rabindranath praised the determined youth of the country who, had taken up service to the country as their motto. Each of them, he said, should take charge of a village. Their task would be to impart education, teach villagers the techniques of agriculture and health care. This would reduce the gap between the educated urban community and the uneducated rural masses. The former had introduced the concept of ‘Swadeshi’ in the urban area. This should be spread in the rural areas.

Tagore’s ‘mandali system’ was, in essence, the harbringer of the ‘panchayet’ system of today. Through this system he tried to combine various welfare activities and establish a harmonious relationship between the zamindars and their tenants. Tagore was aware of the fact that, the introduction of the mandali system, on the lines he envisaged, would entail considerable costs. He was, however, certain that the peasants who were keen on welfare activities would be ready to bear a part of this expense.

231311 B.S.
241312 B.S.
27Falgun, 1314 B.S.
28Palliprakriti, pp.1-3.
8.5 Ideas on improvement of agrarian techniques and production

In an agricultural country like India, no social revitalization was possible without the development of agriculture. This could not be achieved when traditional techniques of production continued. Scientific modes and mechanization had to be introduced. This was not possible for the poor and uneducated peasantry. The educated community alone could help them out in this. In 1906, Tagore sent his son Rathindranath and his friend’s son, Santoshchandra Majumdar, to Illinois University in America to learn the principles and methods of scientific agriculture and animal husbandry. A year later, they were joined by Tagore’s son-in-law, Nagendranath. In a letter to the latter Tagore wrote that the people had to go without food to finance their study abroad. The only way they could repay, would be by taking steps to increase the food supply.

Food shortage constituted a grave problem in the country. There were, according to Tagore, three main reasons for this. Earlier, agricultural land was cultivated every alternate year. Land was left fallow every alternate year to enable it to regain its fertility. But, with increasing demand for food, the fallowing practice was abandoned. But since, there was no improvement in agricultural techniques, land soon lost its fertility. Secondly, increasing demand for food led to a decrease in the land under fodder. As a result, animal husbandry suffered. Lastly, the Indian peasants lacked initiative. They still practised age-old techniques.

No real improvement was possible without agriculture and animal husbandry organized on scientific lines. Tagore voiced his thoughts aloud in the Pabna Regional Conference in 1907 when, he talked about mechanization in Europe and America. These meant use of labour-saving machines, introduction of which would entail huge costs. Poor peasants, owning little land, were in no position to introduce them. But if, co-operative farming was introduced in each mandali or in each village it would be possible to introduce them. It was Tagore who, for the first time, mooted the idea of the amalgamation of fragmented lands, common use of tractors and collective agriculture. He was in favour of mechanization. Plough, loom, bullock cart, horse-carriage, oil mill, facilitated work and reduced time and increased productivity. All kinds of work like agriculture, weaving, extraction of oil, sugar making would benefit. Clever technique rather than physical strength, had always been responsible for man’s success. But introduction of machines involved more land and money. This could, in the initial stages, be disheartening for the poor peasants and artisans. But to lose hope would be to give up any chance of survival. He added later that, time had come for collective farming. Agriculture should be based on scientific knowledge and hard work was essential. Along with agriculture, emphasis was laid on

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29 Rabindrabharati Patrika, Baisakh-Asar, 1379 B.S., p.125.
animal husbandry.

Side by side, Rabindranath advocated the promotion of cottage industry. Agricultural activity was confined to a few months in the year. So, in the agriculturally unproductive months cottage industries would provide peasants with an alternative source of income. Cotton textile production was emphasised. He advised Rathindranath on the importance of imparting to villagers knowledge on making rice mills, umbrella making etc. These would supplement them usual income from agriculture³⁶. He also suggested the setting up of grain store-houses for stocking grains during times of plenty, to tide over the lean seasons when there were shortages and also natural calamities.

Rabindranath was equally aware of the role of exploitation of moneylenders in creating rural poverty. The peasants depended on them for loans. The only way to reduce this dependence was to make arrangements for financial assistance for peasants. So he advocated the setting up of ‘krishibanks’ (agricultural banks).

His speeches in the Pabna Regional Conference in 1908 and Bangiya Hitosadhan Mandali (Bengal Benevolent Society) in 1915 gave an insight into the evolution of Tagore’s agrarian thinking. The Bangiya Hitosadhan Mandali was established in 1915 by Dwijendralal Moitra. Rabindranath delivered three speeches to mark its inauguration³⁶. The last two speeches were included in Palliprakriti as ‘Karmayajna’ (worship of work) and ‘Pallir unnati’ (improvement of village). In all the three speeches he elaborately discussed, a programme of rural welfare activities:

1. provide elementary education and basic mathematical knowledge to the illiterate,
2. hold classes and distribute works on health care and nursing,
3. take preventive measures against tuberculosis and malaria,
4. find ways to check infant mortality,
5. provide for clean drinking water in the village,
6. set up loan advancing societies in the village and make the villagers aware of its benefits,
7. help the poor in times of famine, flood and epidemics³⁷.

Rabindranath’s proposed rural reconstruction work can be divided into five groups: providing medical facilities; imparting elementary education; undertaking welfare activities like digging wells, building roads; extending financial help to peasants with a view; to removing rural indebtedness; and settling disputes through arbitration.

In his programme on rural reconstruction, along with economic betterment based on agriculture, animal husbandry and education, health too formed an important part. The struggle against disease was characteristic of the Tagore family. Dwarkanath had taken the lead. He was one of the main supporters behind the establishment of the Calcutta Medical College. He even sponsored two students to go abroad and study medicine³⁸.

³⁶Letter to Rathindranath (1911-12), Palliprakriti, pp.246-7.
³⁸Mukhopadhyay, Prabhat Kumar, Rabindrajibani (biography of Rabindranath), vol.4.
³⁹They were Bholanath Bose and Gopalchandra Sil Chakravarty.
Tagore, Kshitindranath, Dwarkanath Thakurer jiboni (biography of Dwarkanath Tagore), pp.162-70.
Debendranath had established a few charitable dispensaries in his zamindari. From the beginning, Rabindranath’s rural work involved a struggle against disease and death.

Tagore had seen the indifference of the rural folk to the question. Many of his stories, written between 1298 to 1305 (B.S.) reveal this experience — the helplessness of villagers against natural calamities, their blind superstitions and dependence on the supernatural. ‘Ghater Katha’ (tale of the dock), ‘Taraprasannar kirti’ (deeds of Taraprasanna), ‘Nishithe’ (in the night) describe the dependence of the villagers on the imaginary powers of ascetics for medical help to cure the ill. In ‘Dena-paona’ (debit and credit) we see the reluctance of the uneducated rural women to find out the cause of illness. When the case becomes serious, the mother-in-law said that it was all put on. ‘Sampatti Samaran’ (transference of property) also describes the indifferent attitude of the people particularly, in the case of women. Here, he describes how, when Brindaban’s wife was seriously ill, the physician prescribed an expensive drug. His father, Yajnanath, saw this as an instance of inexperience on the part of the physician and dismissed him. When Brindaban abused his father as the murderer of his wife, his father asked him whether no one had died even after taking medicine. If everyone lived after taking expensive medicine then there was no reason why kings and emperors should die. Yajnanath further told his son that, the latter’s mother and grandmother had not been given any medication before they died.

Not only the uneducated, the educated too, often behaved senselessly. In ‘Drishtidan’ (gift of sight) the village girl Kumu’s husband was studying medicine. He had great pride in himself and his pride and jealousy was responsible for his wife losing her eyesight. When Kumu’s eyes began to give trouble her brother wanted to consult big doctors. But Kumu’s husband, a medical student, wanted to try out his own knowledge on her. Kumu refused her brother’s advice and followed what her husband prescribed. Wrong medicines damaged her eyes further. Tagore was aware that the people had to be protected from disease. In a poem, he promised to do his best in this regard. Its a prayer for food, life, light, free air, health and happy long lives. This prayer reveals not just his idealism. He also tried to make it a reality in his life.

In a meeting he once said that, one would have to think of how, in view of the present food shortage, the common people could be given a healthy diet. Easily available things which were rich in food value, like coconut, groundnut etc. had to find a place in the diet. Ever since he devoted himself to the work of rural uplift, Tagore found that good health was alien to the country-folk of Bengal. In an introduction to Dr. Pasupati Bhattacharya’s Bharatiya byadhi o adhunik chikitsa (Indian diseases and modern treatment), Tagore clearly wrote about this. He said that the work of nation-building was not possible with men who were ‘half-dead’. They often shirked their responsibility. The people of the villages had to be taught to fight illness. The political associations should have health departments.

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[40] Pous, 1305 B.S.
[41] ‘Ebar phirao more’ (now turn me back), 1300 B.S.
[42] Santiniketan Patrika, Magh, 1362 B.S.
to promote awareness. He had seen such a thing in Russia. But in India where the need was greater, there was no such thing.

Tagore’s knowledge of the countryside increased with his experience of a long stay there. He soon realized that it was the dreaded disease malaria which was the scourge of the countryside. In a meeting\(^44\) organized jointly by Visva-Bharati Sammelani and the Anti-malaria Society, Tagore in his Presidential address expressed three important opinions about malaria:\(^45\)

a. If the number of half-dead increased - its burden could not be borne by the nation. From physical weakness arose mental weakness. Malaria bred ill-health in blood. Simultaneously the mind would lose strength.

b. It had for long been believed that though malaria was rampant in the country, the government would not do anything. But such an attitude would not do. Malaria bred other illnesses. It had to be dealt with immediately. Only then could the Bengali race be saved.

c. However great the enemy, it had to be got rid of immediately. The greatest enemy was, not mosquito but poverty. It had to be conquered.

Tagore’s belief in the doctrine of \textit{atma-shakti} received practical application through health \textit{samavay samities}. Quite early, Tagore had developed his opinions about decrease in the rate of birth of children who had little opportunity of a healthy life. In a letter to Madame Sanger he wrote about birth control:

\begin{quote}
I am of opinion that Birth Control Movement is a great movement not only because it will save women from enforced and undesirable maternity but because it will help the cause of peace by lessening the numbers of surplus population of a country scrambling for food and space outside its rightful limit\(^46\).
\end{quote}

Rabindranath was the first who tried to make the people aware of the rural problems. Without rural development, no real development in the welfare of the people would be possible. He often expressed his desire to establish ‘swaraj’ in every village. This would be a miniature of what should be there in the whole country\(^47\). Before starting work in the villages, Rabindranath wrote ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ in 1904. Here he expressed his feeling that he would not be able to improve the condition of the entire country. But if he could improve that of one or two villages then, he would be able to hold it up as an ideal for the country. He expressed this feeling nearly 32 years later, in a meeting of the workers of Sriniketan. He said that, when he wrote ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ all that he had wanted to say was that there was no need to think at that moment about the whole country. He alone could not be responsible for the whole of India. He would only try to win one or two

\(^{44}\)29 August 1923.
\(^{46}\)Mukhopadhyay, Prabhat Kumar, \textit{op.cit.}, vol.14, p.46.
small villages. If he could free even two or three villages from the shackles of ignorance and inability then, it would serve as an ideal for the whole of India48.

8.6 Emphasis on the principle of co-operation

Tagore suggested various means for the removal of poverty. Provisions of loans on easy terms was one. He commented that poverty of the ryots, who constituted the bulk of the rural population, would persist so long as they continued to cultivate their lands separately and in isolation. Some method of co-operation, on the other hand, would strengthen their position. It would also make their holdings economically more viable. Introduction of western-type labour-saving devices would entail huge costs which was out of reach of the ordinary ryots working on their own. Not only was their financial ability limited but their small holdings were also unworkable. So Tagore suggested that, if all the people of a mandali or least of a village united and combined their land for agricultural purpose, then introduction of modern machines would save cost as well as labour. For instance, if the villagers decided to press the entire sugarcane produced in the village in the same press, then it would be profitable to combine and buy an expensive press of a superior quality for the entire village. Similarly, if the textile producers of a village co-operated and bought a manufacturing machine for the use of all, then production would increase. Introduction of machines in villages and their use by villagers themselves, instead of villagers seeking work in the mills in the cities, would prevent mass exodus from the villages. This would not only save villages but also make them self-sufficient49. Tagore knew that the ryots would be very reluctant to adopt new ways. He advocated giving them encouragement to convert one-crop fields into ones producing more than one. Arrangements should be made so that peasants could produce vegetables in their free time. He encouraged them to produce maize, sugarcane, cauliflower and peas of the Patna variety50.

Tagore was probably the first to introduce the principle of co-operative in Bengal. At that time, there were no government co-operatives in Bengal. He explained to the uneducated peasants that, what was not possible for one, would be possible if fifty united. The fifty, who had always cultivated their lands separately should combine their lands, plough, barns and other tools. Then, in spite of their poverty, they would have the necessary capital to buy machines51. He was greatly influenced by Sir Horace Curzon Plunkett(1854-1932), the pioneer of Irish agricultural co-operation who strongly influenced the rise of the agricultural co-operative movement in Great Britain and the Commonwealth. His works include Ireland in the new century(1904) and The rural life problem of the United States(1910).

Self-reliance lay at the root of Tagore's swadeshi thinking. The depth, extension and multiplicity of his rural thinking is expressed in his ‘Swadeshi Samaj’52. Rabindranath

48 Tagore, R., ‘Sriniketaner itihas o adarsha’(history and ideals of Sriniketan), Palliprakriti, p.104.
49 ibid., pp.1-2.
50 Adhikary, Sachindranath, Shilaidaha o Rabindranath, pp.103-05.
51 Tagore, Rabindranath, ‘Samavay 1’, 1325 B.S., Samavayaniti, p.15.
52 1904.
said about it that ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ was first read as a paper at a public meeting in Calcutta. The thesis presented by him was that the distinctive way of life in India had a social basis rather than a political. So the best way to combat an alien political power would be to ignore it and establish a self-governing community in the village. He drew up a set of down-to-earth rules for the kind of society he had in mind. But he was all the time busy thinking how the enthusiasm of the people for political freedom could be channelized along constructive work53.

Rabindranath, in a letter to Nagendranath, who was responsible for the supervision of agricultural activities in Shilaidaha, expressed his views on the co-operative principle54. He advised the latter to work on the basis of cooperation — to cultivate; set uplands; provide healthy living conditions; alleviate indebtedness; impart education; provide for their old age; build roads, embankments; remove water shortage. If in this way one ideal village could be set up in one place, then the country would be the greatest winner.

Tagore also felt the necessity of a co-operative bank. Its object would be to give loans at a very nominal rate of interest to peasants who were debt-ridden and as a result lost their land to pay their debt. The banks would finance improvement in agriculture and cottage industry and educate the people about how to curtail unnecessary expenditure and save.

However, Tagore bemoaned the fact that in Bengal, the co-operative principle was restricted to giving loans. It was a kind of reformed rural moneylending. It had not been applied to productive purposes. Sasadhar Sinha writes:

> Like the Irish poet George Russel (A.E.) Tagore firmly believed that the poverty, disease, depopulation, joylessness and backwardness of the rural areas could and should be removed by co-operative effort.55

Very often, Tagore expressed his views on the co-operative principle to the political leaders and the people. He wrote a number of essays related to the co-operative movement between 1918 and 1925. Later, these essays were collected in a book Samavayaniti. From 1918 onwards, a journal was published called Bhandar edited by Tarakchandra Roy. It was published by the Samavay Samgathan Samity. To this Rabindranath Tagore sent an essay called ‘Samavay’. Here he discussed the principles and essence of co-operatives. He said that the technique by which many householders or many people combined to earn their livelihood jointly was known as the co-operative system in Europe and the Samavay in Bengal. This co-operative system was the only way which could save the country from being impoverished. In fact, in all the countries of the world, this system had become indispensable. He said that, in contemporary world in the sphere of trade and commerce each person tried to win over others; cheat others; the rich tried to buy the labour of the poor cheaply; as a result of which wealth and power became concentrated in the hands of a few. The smaller powers lost out to the stronger. But in a co-operative system there was

54 Letter dated 20 Magh, 1316 B.S., published in Desh, 22 Kartick, 1362 B.S.
no scope for one becoming stronger at the expense of another through cunning or any such means. All would become strong together. Tagore believed that without co-operatives there could be no real freedom. The best period for an education in this principle was during student life.

In his second essay on co-operatives (1922) he explained how through co-operatives man gained strength, especially economic. This essay expresses Tagore’s economic beliefs. He said that the wealth of the rich could not remove the poverty of the masses. Only the masses had the power to do so. They had to realise this. No artificial distribution of wealth could be the solution. Wealth had to be produced in the real way. When the people would learn to convert their own strength into wealth, through the medium of co-operatives, only then would real freedom be achieved.

Tagore’s co-operative principle highlighted two main problems. He said, removal of poverty was as important as solving the differences, mainly political inequality, between the rich and the poor. He wanted the unemployed in the villages to become self-reliant in an united way. This could be possible through collective agriculture and use of machines. There was to be total rural development on the basis of the co-operative principle. Different types of artisan work and cottage industries should be developed. He suggested that co-operative grain stores dharma-golas should be set up to tide over lean periods. Even dairy and poultry work should be done on the co-operative principle. Schools had to be conducted.

Tagore always felt that if livelihood in India could be based on the co-operative principle, then the villages would be revitalized, thereby injecting fresh blood into the country.

Rabindranath’s belief in the co-operative principle was strengthened after his visit to Russia in 1930. What surprised him was the multifarious activities organized there on the basis of the co-operative principle — not just limited to agricultural or industrial work but it would also apply in the spheres of knowledge and pleasure. He saw in Russia the fulfilment of his vision which he set up in Sriniketan. He regarded his visit to the country as a ‘pilgrimage’. At the same time he realized two things. For the first time he felt that the country could be protected against the onslaught of capitalism only if ownership of land was vested in the ryot. Secondly, no improvement of agriculture was possible without co-operative farming. He thus moved away from his earlier stand and now advocated the abolition of the zamindari system.

56 Tagore, R., ‘Samavay 1’, Sravan, 1325, Samavayaniti, p.16.
58 Ibid., p.51.
8.7 Application of Tagore's ideas into practice: His multifarious activities in rural Bengal

Tagore was not content with restricting himself to the theoretical plane. In his lifetime, he tried his best to translate his ideas into practice. His constructive rural work can be broadly divided into three phases: Shilaidaha, Kaligram and Sriniketan. Shilaidaha sadar was in the Birahimpur pargana of the Nadia district, Kaligram pargana was in the Rajshahi district, Sriniketan, near Bolpur, was in the Birbhum district of Bengal.

8.7.1 Rabindranath and Shilaidaha

From the beginning of his stay in the countryside, Tagore was involved in different kinds of activities. He attempted to eradicate disease, look after public welfare, spread education, remove blind superstition and make the people self-sufficient.

Three trends can be discerned in Tagore's activities in Shilaidaha

1. impart practical training in agriculture,
2. create ideal villages,
3. organise groups of volunteers from among the youth.60

Soon after taking charge of his zamindari, Tagore realized that agriculture constituted the heart of the economic life of the rural world. While residing at Shilaidaha, as early as 1899, he saw that agriculture was still carried on in a very primitive manner. He began to take a keen interest in agriculture. In keeping with the first trend, he experimented with various types of crops, vegetables and silk-worms. He had maize seed brought from America61. During this time, he tried to grow potatoes with the help of his friend, the poet and dramatist, Dwijendralal Roy. The latter was well educated in the science of agriculture. He also received help from his friend and scientist, Jagadishchandra Bose62. Discussions of farming techniques were frequently held at Shilaidaha. He entrusted a group of young men to grow different types of flowers, ground-nut, potatoes, peas, onions, cauliflowers etc. on his estates in Shilaidaha. They experimented with different types of fertilizers.

He realized that no agricultural development would be possible through the persistence of the traditional techniques of production. Scientific techniques had to be adopted. He began scientific testing of different kinds of seeds, crops and silk-worms. He had fine paddy seeds brought from Madras for experimentation. He even invited his friend Priyanath Sen to cultivate roses. With the help of Dwijendralal Roy, Tagore took the initiative in potato cultivation in Shilaidaha and had potato seeds brought from Nainital. Though initially

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60 Adhikari, S., op.cit., p.71.
61 Letter written to Jagadishchandra Bose from Kumarkhali village in Shilaidaha, 10 Asar, 1306 B.S., Palliprakriti, p.211.
62 Tagore, R., Kumarkhali, 10 Asar, 1306 B.S., ibid., p.211.
his experiment was not a success, he was undaunted. Experimentation continued and he induced several neighbouring ryots to take to potato cultivation.

In Shilaidaha, silk cultivation was also started with great enthusiasm. In this venture, the main inspirer was Akshay Kumar Moitra. He frequently visited Tagore at Shilaidaha. He also set up a silk factory at Rajshahi. He gifted some 20 silk-worms to Tagore. The latter entrusted Rabindranath's house-tutor, Lawrence, with the duty of looking after these. Later Rabindranath informed Jagadishchandra Bose that, they gave birth to 2 lakh silk-worms. 10-12 persons had to look after them day and night. However, this experiment with silk-weaving failed as the silk produced could not be sold. It had to be finally abandoned.

Rathindranath returned from Illinois in 1909 with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture and animal husbandry. Tagore was then in Santiniketan. Rathindranath set up a farm for agricultural research on a 80 bigha land in Shilaidaha. A research laboratory was set up to test soil. Fertilizers were produced, as also crops. Irrigation with the help of pumps was begun. An agricultural circular was published and distributed. Here, details of crops and their seasons were published. Rathindranath also had some machines brought from America and carried out experiments.

Tagore's early experiments made it clear to him that the ryots were very reluctant to adopt new ways. This reluctance was due to their limited experience and lack of adequate courage to take risks and their inhibitions. It killed all initiative and enterprise in those associated with agriculture. It made them closed to new ideas and rather inactive for any kind of work other than the usual system of agriculture. They had become slaves to their traditional mode of agriculture. He had seen that, in the mono-crop districts, the ryots worked extremely hard to grow paddy. Then they could have grown vegetables in their spare time, in their back-yards. He himself had tried to encourage them but to no avail. It amazed him to see that those, who could work so hard to grow paddy, would not lift a finger to grow vegetables, which was so much easier. This he concluded, was because they could not concentrate on more than one thing. In another district he had seen that, the ryots were involved in the cultivation of paddy, jute, sugarcane and mustard. But those lands in their areas which were unsuited to the cultivation of these crops, were left uncultivated even though they paid rent year after year. On the other hand, ryots came from other areas and cultivated watermelon and other fruits on these lands. Rabindranath observed:

We cannot deny the hard truth that by looking upon agriculture as a daily repetition of drudgery our peasants humiliate themselves... When a man exhausts all his wits plying the loom or driving a plough, he has no surplus left from cultivating his higher or nobler traits of humanity. He puts his hand to the job — but only as a machine or automation — and that is not conducive

63 Ashwin, 1340 B.S., RR, vol.11, p.735.
64 Adhikari, S., op. cit., p.424.
65 Letter written from Kumarkhali, Shilaidaha, 10 Asar, 1306 B.S., Chithipatra, vol.6, pp.3-4.
66 Tagore, R., 'Ashramer rup o bikash' (nature and development of the ashram), RR, vol.11, p.736.
to his development as a complete human being... Manual work mechanically performed stultifies the mind and blunts the intellect.

He tried to convert mono-crop fields into ones producing more than one crop. He adopted plans by which in their free time, the peasants could produce vegetables. He encouraged them to produce maize, sugarcane, cauliflower and peas of the Patna variety. He also advised the peasants not to ignore lands with sandy soils but to produce watermelon, kankur and kala. He had sugarcane of the ‘gandari’ variety brought from Dacca and had it cultivated in Shilaidaha where a sugarcane mill was set up.

To build up an ideal village Tagore organized a group of volunteers with students in the Komarkandi village of Shilaidaha. The main work of these volunteers was to eradicate illiteracy and impart knowledge in health care. He often acted in an advisory capacity on the basis of information supplied by the volunteers. While at Shilaidaha, he became aware of the importance of education in his scheme of rural reconstruction. To educate his own children he first started a school in his house at Shilaidaha. This was to receive its complete form at Santiniketan. Since he felt that village fairs played a very important role in the life of an average villager, he himself took an initiative in this. He organized the ‘Katayayani mela’ (1905) and ‘Rajrajeshwar mela’ (1907) in Shilaidaha. They were an excellent medium for educating the villager and restoring Hindu-Muslim amity. So their organization constituted a positive step in the direction of rural reconstruction.

As for Tagore’s rural reconstruction work, Sachindranath Adhikari writes that, Tagore started experimenting with rural organizational work with the youth at Shilaidaha in 1907-1908. In April, 1908, in a letter to Abala Bose, Tagore wrote about his experiment. He wrote that he was helped by some young enthusiastic men from eastern Bengal in his rural reconstruction work. These volunteers were going to the villages and trying to make the villagers themselves take an interest in the welfare of their own village. They were being encouraged to participate actively in constructing roads, drains, clear jungles etc. So far the villagers had been pretty lackadaisical in this.

The group of young volunteers was known as the bratidal. Tagore arranged for them to have practical primary training in agriculture. They practised cultivation in the land adjoining the kuthibari(main house). Sachindranath Adhikari, who was then a student, writes how different kinds of fruits and flowers were cultivated scientifically. Each student was in charge of five rose trees. Their duty was to take charge of them, water them and apply fertilisers. In another plot adjoining the kuthibari, groundnut, potato, onion, peas, cauliflower were grown. The students had to take care of these too. In 1906-07, in Shilaidaha and Kusthia agricultural experiments based on the co-operative principle were

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70 Adhikari, S. *op.cit.*, p.68.
71 Palliprakriti, p.229.
To the group of volunteers, organized in 1907-08, he explained the work of rural reconstruction. Emphasis was on ideal village planning. Among the boys was Sachindranath Adhikari, the author of *Shilaidaha o Rabindranath*\(^{73}\). He told the boys that persons suffering from ordinary ailments in the village were to be brought to the *kuthibari* for treatment. The seriously ill persons, however, should be sent to the government dispensary. But, on no account were they to encourage belief in supernatural miracles. The volunteers had to visit villages, collect information about the number of villagers, birth and death rates. In Birahimpur, Tagore built the Maharshi Charitable Hospital and appointed qualified doctors. In Shilaidaha too, he opened another Maharshi Charitable dispensary. The hospital at Birahimpur was one of his main successes. He was rather upset when, due to a shortage of funds, there was a proposal for closing it down. He wrote to his nephew-in-law, Pramatha Chaudhuri, that the enterprise expensive as it was, promoted the welfare of his subjects. It was the only welfare activity which had succeeded. He would not be sorry if all the debts incurred by the zamindari were due to such work\(^{74}\). Tagore himself soon acquired fame for his knowledge of homeopathy\(^{75}\). The sight of Rabindranath with a box of homeopathic medicines beside him, surrounded by patients, soon became a familiar one. There is no continuous record of the patients he cured in the long period spanning fifty years since the time he began to reside in Shilaidaha. There is, however, mention of it in the innumerable letters written by him. Those who have seen him in his work have also mentioned it. He had great faith in homeopathy and biochemic treatment, particularly in the latter\(^{76}\). From Shilaidaha itself he began to practise homeopathy\(^{77}\). Here, measures were taken to fight malaria. A registered society was set up for this purpose\(^{78}\).

In 1907-08 the *mandali* system was introduced. It constituted an important plank in Tagore's rural reconstruction work. Rabindranath divided the Birahimpur (Shilaidaha) *pargana* into 5 *mandals* each under an *adhyaksha* or head. The first five appointed by him were Kalimohan Ghosh, Bhupeshchandra Roy, Anangamohan Chakraborty, Pyarimohan Sengupta and Akshaychandra Sen. They acquired considerable experience working along the lines advised by him\(^{79}\). These *adhyakshas* were to establish village societies there, so that the villagers would themselves look after their own welfare, maintain roads, remove water scarcity, settle disputes through arbitration, set up schools, clear jungles, set up grain stores to ward off famines. Rabindranath instructed the village or *mandal adhyakshas* to build the houses of the tenants and plant banana, pineapple, date palm and other saleable fruit trees. Strong threads could be made from pineapple leaves. Cultivation of potato and American maize seeds should also be encouraged as they would bring in large profits. Since the introduction of the *mandali* system on the lines he envisaged would cost a lot, he

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\(^{73}\) 1974 ed., p.72.
\(^{74}\) 19 Kartick, 1324 B.S., chithipatra(letters), vol.15, pp.232-33.
\(^{75}\) Gangopadhaya, Gourander, *Atpaure Rabindranath*(domesticated Rabindranath), p.76.
\(^{77}\) In a letter to Mininalini Devi he wrote that, the inspector's voice had cracked and he had given him some medicine.
\(^{78}\) Adhikari, S., *Shilaidaha o Rabindranath*, p.31.
was certain that the peasants were ready to pay for the welfare activities. He introduced a tax called 'kalyanbritti' at Shilaidaha. It was first at the rate of 3 paise per rupee of the revenue. Tagore himself contributed from the income of his zamindari an amount equal to that collected from the peasants to meet the expenses of welfare activities. This amount was spent according to the proposal agreed upon by the heads of the mandali. Since he knew that the agrarian village constituted the basis of self-government he did his best to implement it in practice.

Various welfare activities were undertaken by the mandals. In Shilaidaha, an agricultural bank (krishibank) was set up. Initially, he borrowed a few thousands of rupees from friends and rich moneylenders to build up the bank capital. But this was insufficient for the growing financial needs of the peasants. After he won the Nobel Prize Tagore kept most of it in the krishibank. This bank worked for 20 years after which it had to be closed down primarily due to the Rural Indebtedness Act. As a result he could not recover the loans forwarded.

In 1915, Tagore set up an ideal village in Lahini near Shilaidaha. It was to be the culmination of all his dreams. But due to the machinations of the jealous Raja of Naldanga, the plan had to be abandoned. However, the greater the obstacles faced, the greater was his determination to make the co-operative principle a success.

However, Rabindranath’s rural reconstruction work at Shilaidaha attained only a limited success. The main reason for this was that, the introduction of the mandali system adversely affected the amlaha of the zamindars. The latter tried to resist the mandali system which gave the mandali pradhans considerable power. Though, in the end, Rabindranath was able to check the opposition of his amlaha with the help of Pramatha Chaudhuri, his rural organizational work was far more successful in Patisar.

The first phase of Tagore’s rural work ended in 1915. In 1915-16, he lost his zamindari in Shilaidaha to a member of his family, as the zamindari estates of the Tagores were partitioned among the co-sharers. As a result the agricultural experiments there had to be abandoned. Besides, in the villages surrounding Shilaidaha, Hindu-Muslim relations were strained and peasants were reluctant to accept any new ideas. To this was added the problem of non-availability of skilled workers.

### 8.7.2 Rabindranath and Kaligram

The first phase of constructive rural work ended in 1915 when, Tagore left Shilaidaha for Kaligram. Here, the main centre of his activity was Patisar sadar in the Kaligram pargana of the Rajshahi district. This constitutes the second stage of his work. Kaligram

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811905.
82Tagore, Rathindranath, Pitrismriti (paternal recollections), p.249.
83Adhikari, S., op.cit., pp.76-78.
constituted the largest area in the Tagore zamindari. To facilitate his work he established three centres at Patisar, Kamta and Ratoal.

Agricultural experiments in Patisar were much less successful. Land was not favourable for agriculture. It was too hard to till. In the rainy season it became waterlogged. Seeing this difficulty Tagore advised the cultivation of fruits in Patisar. He encouraged the cultivation of pineapple, dates, banana and other fruits. Sturdy thread could be made from pineapple leaves. He also encouraged potato cultivation. Tractors were introduced. What Tagore succeeded in doing was that he brought about a change in the mentality of the people. They too wanted to use tractors in their own land. Like in Shilaidaha, in Patisar in Kaligram, a krishibank was set up. Though it entailed a huge financial loss for him, it was a novel experiment. It was quite popular and was said to have an adverse effect on the business of the local moneylenders. It provided peasants with the necessary capital to undertake agricultural cottage industry. They had to pay 9% interest. After they were given loans, care was taken to ensure that agricultural loans were spent for agricultural purposes. Loans had to be repaid after the harvest. Almost always the ryots were given a remission of 3% on the interest rate. Once the peasant repaid his debts he was free to borrow again. The bank was in operation for 30 years. Tagore even deposited Rs 1 lakh 80 thousands of the Nobel Prize money in the bank.

In Kaligram, he tried to implement the programme which he outlined in his speeches in the ‘Bangiya Hitosadhana Mandal’ in 1915. Tagore introduced the mandali system which did not quite succeed in Shilaidaha. Rathindranath gave a vivid description of the mandali system. The residents of each village chose a head. The village heads then selected the panchpradhan of the pargana. Minor disputes were settled by the village heads themselves. Major disputes, particularly those concerning land were referred to the panchpradhan. The final court of appeal was the zamindar himself. His officials had no right of dispensing justice. This system lasted long. The subjects were happy since they did not believe that they would receive fair judgement in the government courts. Those who appealed to the government courts was socially boycotted. The new system of justice saved the subjects, the expenses involved in taking recourse to government courts. They were satisfied with the democratic working of the mandali system.

In the second phase, Tagore tried to implement the programme he had outlined in the speeches he delivered in 1915 to mark the inauguration of the Bangiya Hitosadhana Mandal. He was helped by a number of enthusiastic supporters like Kalimohan Ghosh, Rathindranath, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, Nagendranath Chaudhuri and Pramatha Chaudhuri. The programme was extended to a hundred villages of the large Kaligram pargana of northern Bengal. So Rabindranath set up three centres here: Patisar, Kamta and Ratoal. The people of the pargana elected a samity, the ‘Kaligram Hitoishi Sabha’. For every department it was decided to establish a departmental Hitoishi Sabha. He initially started work in 600 localities of Patisar. Collections were made from the zamindari and the villagers. The total amount of collection was Rs.11,000. It was to be spent according

\[84\] Palliprakriti, pp.244-5.
\[85\] 1905.
\[86\] Tagore, Rathindranath, op.cit., p.42.
to the decisions of the committee. In Kaligram, at Patisar, Kamta and Ratoal, three health centres and dispensaries were set up. Arrangements were made for doctors. Seriously ill patients could be admitted. The expenses were shared by the zamindars and the people. For every rupee collected as revenue, the zamindar and villager each paid one anna. At Kaligram, Tagore was actively helped by Atul Sen. During this time, there was an outbreak of epidemic in this region, followed by a famine. Cancelling all his social obligations in town, Tagore rushed to Patisar feeling that his presence there was imperative. To meet all expenses he arranged for the enactment of the play ‘Phalguni’, in his house at Jorasanko in Calcutta. The money collected from the tickets sold was sent to the famine affected area.

A little over 200 free elementary schools were set up. Primary schools were set up in each division. At Patisar, there was a English high school with two hundred and fifty students. The three centres were given the responsibility of eradicating illiteracy from the villages. After the work of literacy had progressed to a certain extent, the level of education was raised. Knowledge of agricultural techniques and nation building was also imparted.

Rabindranath’s rural reconstruction work here can be divided into five groups: providing medical facilities, imparting elementary education; undertaking welfare activities; extending financial help to the peasants and; settling disputes through arbitration. Welfare activities like digging of wells, clearance of forests and repairing of roads were undertaken. Since all these involved considerable expenses, Tagore introduced a tax called ‘hitoishibritti’ at Patisar similar to ‘kalyanbritti’ of Shilaidaha, fixed at the rate of 3 paise per rupee of the revenue. Sometimes the villagers also contributed labour in lieu of cash payment. Within a few years, work had progressed considerably.

In Kalipur pargana, a karmi sangha was established. Its success in increasing the production of crops pleased Rabindranath who, wrote to its leader Atul Sen that such work should be started everywhere. The aim of karmi sangha was to improve the economy of the village and increase the self-confidence and productivity of the peasantry. It also aimed to protect the peasants from the moneylenders. If the karmi sangha led by Atul Sen recommended loans, the samity sanctioned it. After harvest, the crop did not go to the cultivator’s house. It was brought straight from the fields to the office of the estate. The cultivator could take away his share only after paying off the debt together, with the interest. Generally, the rate of interest was 9%. A relief of 3% was almost invariably granted. So the peasants had to pay 6% interest. Even a portion of this was waived if necessary. Thus, freed from the current debt, the peasant would again be in a position to borrow from the estate wherever a necessity arose. Tagore was criticised for his insistence on the peasants bringing the harvested crop straightaway from the field to his kutchery.

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87Das, Sajanikanta, Rabindranath, jiban o sahitya (life and literature of Rabindranath), pp.92-3.
89Extract from Bengal District Gazetteer, Rajshahi; Mr.L.S.S.O' Malley (1916) quoted in Shilaidaha o Rabindranath, p.221.
90Das, Sajanikanta, op.cit., p.90 (date of the letter unknown).
91Sen, Sudhir, Rabindranath Tagore on rural reconstruction, pp.97-98.
However, this was baseless as the arrangement was designed to reduce the indebtedness of the peasants. It dealt a blow to the hitherto flourishing business of the moneylenders.

In Kaligram too, the volunteer group achieved considerable success in settling disputes through arbitration. Atul Sen earned a good reputation as an arbitrator. He was respected by both the Hindus and the Muslims. In 1915-16 no dispute reached the sadar adalat. This was evidence of the success of the method\(^2\).

No other zamindar had done so much to reduce the misery of the villagers. However, activities in Kaligram soon received a setback. Within a year, Atul Sen and his group of volunteers aroused the suspicion of the British Government and were interned. Thus Rabindranath’s work in Patisar, like in Shilaidaha, was only half-done, before it had to be abandoned. Yet he did not lose heart. He was to take it up again at another place, Sriniketan.

Rathindranath has given a vivid description of the multifarious activities of the Hitoishi Sabha of Kaligram. He writes that it was engaged in spreading education, improving agriculture, pisciculture, imparting knowledge of handicrafts industry like weaving cloth, settling disputes through arbitration, setting up grain storage etc\(^3\). He further writes that even after partition, the government of eastern Pakistan allowed the Hitoishi Sabha to carry on with its welfare activities:

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\text{It is good to note that the Hitoishi Sabha still exists and is permitted by the east Pakistan Government to maintain the schools, hospitals, dispensaries and other institutions started in fathers’ time}^{94}.
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### 8.7.3 Rabindranath and Sriniketan

The early history of Sriniketan was associated with rural awareness and national welfare. Much before he set up Sriniketan, Rabindranath had set up the Brahmovidyalaya in Santiniketan in 1901. Twenty years later, in 1921, he set up Visva-Bharati which was united with the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya to give practical application to the dream of nation-building. However, he was not content with building this educational and cultural centre. The dream of an ideal village was ever-present. As he himself said once, his greatest work was Sriniketan\(^5\).

Santiniketan he felt, could never be an urban institution. The life-style here was modelled after the ancient rural system. But if lack of education and health and poverty continued, then the ideal of Santiniketan would never be realized. This made Sriniketan necessary. If Santiniketan was the ideal of education and culture, Sriniketan was that of rural organiza-

\(^{92}\)Mukhopadhyay, Prabhat, \textit{op.cit}, vol.4, p.331.
\(^{93}\)Tagore, Rathindranath, \textit{Pitrismriti}(paternal recollections), p.248.
\(^{95}\)Tagore, R., \textit{Chithipatra}(letters), vol.2, Letter no.43, pp.104-05.
tion. Both combined to form Visva-Bharati. Santiniketan was the expression of his faith in ancient Indian culture. About Sriniketan he wrote:

The sympathy that I feel for millions of my countrymen who cannot get a square meal throughout the year even for a day will find expression in Sriniketan.

Sriniketan originally formed a part of Surul which was a commercial centre under the East India Company. The kuthibari in Surul was built by Mr. Wilson. Later this kuthibari and the adjoining lands were bought by the Sinhas of Raipur. In October 1912, Rabindranath bought this from Colonel Narendra Prasad Sinha in London. He first sent Rathindranath and Nagendranath to repair the kuthibari and set up a laboratory. Work in Sriniketan thus began. The two cleared the jungles and set up an ideal agricultural farm to give practical education to the farmers. In 1917, they were joined by Santosh Majumdar. The dairy of Santiniketan was later transferred to Sriniketan. In the first phase of Sriniketan, agriculture and dairy work continued simultaneously. Paddy, groundnut and chillies were cultivated. It was also planned to cultivate napier grass and jowar to solve the problem of fodder in the rainy season. Rabindranath also thought of growing fruits and vegetables. Cultivation of paddy was accompanied by that of lime, jackfruit, tomatoes, brinjals. Later, this was supervised by a Japanese teacher Mr. Kashahara who taught vegetable cultivation and woodwork.

In its early phase, Sriniketan served as Santiniketan’s agricultural department. On 28 November, 1921, Elmhirst joined. His contribution is an integral part of the history of Sriniketan. One can hardly think of Sriniketan without recalling the debt it owes to Elmhirst’s dynamic zeal, devotion and initiative. He did the spade work (literally, too) and helped Rabindranath lay the foundation of a complex of activities, seemingly rustic and lowly but in the long run vital for national regeneration. For Rabindranath, the two experiments, pedagogic and agricultural, cultural and rural, were vitally linked. The very difference in their setting made the link more vital. What he tried to work out, at Santiniketan and at Surul, was an integral programme in which culture of the mind and culture of the soil went hand in hand. That Santiniketan should grow as a cultural oasis in the midst of an arid waste of decaying humanity had never seemed right to him. How to build a living and fruitful network of communication between the two had long troubled him. When Elmhirst arrived at Santiniketan, Rabindranath asked him to go and see for himself the state of things in the villages. He placed at his disposal a few young men whom, the poet said, he might train up as workers in village reconstruction. This, in brief, is the genesis of the Rural Reconstruction Department at Sriniketan. Elmhirst’s initial difficulties were, indeed, very great. He had to fight against numerous obstacles in the shape of ignorance, lethargy, suspicion and social inhibition of various kinds all of which, he overcame with love and sympathy, patience and hard work. He went to the very root of the problem in so far as he attempted to break down the age-old social conservation and infuse in the villagers a feeling of mutual respect and self-help. The school of agriculture

\[86\text{Mukhopadhyay, Sisir, 'Rabindranather Sriniketan: pragatishil krishibhabnar adipith' (Rabindranath’s sриникетан: source of developmental agrarian thinking), Udichi, Pous, 1388 B.S., pp. 59-60.}\]
was set up. On 6 February, 1922, a new chapter began on the day the department of Rural Reconstruction and Rural Development was opened in Sriniketan. It aimed to bring under the scope of its activity the neighbouring villages. In a meeting, in December, 1922, the working committee expressed its aim:

That in the opinion of the staff; and subject to the approval of the Sriniketan samity (Executive Committee); the function of the Institute shall be regarded as two-fold: (1) Education and (2) Extension ... That so far as its function of extension is concerned, and this shall be understood to include all activities relating to the reorganization or reconstruction of village life as well as to the building up of rural industries and the earning of its own income through agricultural or business enterprises. The department shall make it its duty to welcome and to stimulate to the full the co-operation of any other bodies, public or private, which can be of help in the forwarding of such extension work.

Under Elmhirst's leadership, the work schedule adopted in Surul can be regarded as that of the second phase. Elmhirst's devotion to work was an inspiration to the villagers as well as to his young band of workers. He is the chief architect of Sriniketan which, he built up with his own labour and later gave financial stability to the project with funds from his own resources. The work he started was not simply an isolated undertaking; it was a sort of movement full of possibilities and had then taken the shape of community development undertaken by the government. Much greater effort was concentrated, upon ways of working out with each village its own programme for economic, social and health rehabilitation. The approach was experimental. It was promoted and led by Kalimohan Ghosh and Dhirananda Roy. From the beginning, attention was paid to the problems of fodder and fodder storage, deep ploughing, manuring and trenching. It was decided to offer major and minor projects for each student to work on and, to try and establish co-operation among the local farmers in buying, selling and for credit. He found that one reason why ryots did not succeed in extracting sufficient wealth from the soil for their subsistence was their faulty treatment of the soil. Improvement of agricultural method might mean no more than improved exploitation of soil for selfish benefit. Elementary education of a kind which the people would welcome and which they could afford, had to go hand in hand with community organization for buying and selling, for manufacturing and irrigation, for cultivation and sanitation. Nor, he emphasised, was it merely a matter of forming co-operative societies, though it was quite true that there was a close relation between the spirit in which a successful co-operative society was started and that which was indispensable for any genuine community life. The two things stressed in this period were — improvement in the economic standard of the village and health and organization work. Rabindranath often translated into Bengali Elmhirst's views on agricultural problems, soil erosion etc. for the benefit of the people. It was Elmhirst who showed the peasants...
in Sriniketan practical application of the knowledge gained. He showed, for instance, how use of organic fertilizers could increase soil fertility. Besides, with the help of students and employees he set up an ideal scientific farm on 60 bighas of land in Sural. Here, his main associate was Kalmohan Ghosh. His other helpers were Santoshchandra Majumdar, Nepal Roy, Gourgopal Ghosh, Santoshbehari Bose, Sachindranath Roy and others.

During his stay here for three years, Elmhirst laid the foundation of rural developmental work. It touched different aspects of life. From a written description of 1923, a programme of the proposed work can be drawn up:

1. organizational work of the bratibalaks (voluntary group) was going on in 3 villages. In 1923, Rabindranath organized a group of volunteers in Sriniketan called 'Sahayak Sangha' (society for help). Under Elmhirst it adopted rural work as its motto or brata. So Rabindranath changed its name to bratisangha or more commonly called bratidal.
2. cotton weaving work was going on at a slow pace,
3. bamboo and cane work could be carried on well in the village,
4. Sachi Bhowmik would go for training in leather work. A cobbler from Sodepur would be sent to Bankura for education in shoe-making,
5. wood work was improving. Very soon one would be able to earn a living from it,
6. domestication of birds was going on well,
7. no suitable ponds could be found for pisciculture. The villagers were not yet ready for it,
8. work in the hospital was progressing fast,
9. work of rural organization was progressing and the students were happy. It was reaching the villagers,
10. it was hoped that the village women could be given help in domestic science including needlework and preparation of healthy food,
11. scientific work in seeds and fertilizers would begin under Santoshbehari Basu.

In these activities, Rabindranath played an active part. He wanted education to be related to life and economy. He called this 'Siksha Satra' (institute of education). In 1922, a co-operative society was set up to fight malaria. It was to Elmhirst, that most of the credit goes. He however, stayed for only 3 years. In 1924, he went back to America. His work was taken up by Kalmohan Ghosh and others.

*Visva-Bharati Bulletin* no.6 published in 1925, outlined in considerable details the programme of work to be undertaken:

1. encourage welfare activities among the peasants and the villagers and help solve the problem of their livelihood;
2. discuss rural and agrarian problems in the classroom and find solutions through experiments in the agricultural field;
3. after experiments in the classrooms and agricultural lands, the acquired knowledge and experience was to be distributed among the people and improve health and habits. The economic condition of the people was to be improved. Knowledge of agriculture, animal husbandry and cottage industry was to be imparted. This would enable the villagers to live a life of co-operation and harmony;

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101 Deb, Chittaranjan, *Sriniketan parichay (acquaintance with Sriniketan)*, p.11.
4. arrange for education in the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. For this boys scouts or similar training was necessary. This would make such education attractive for the people;

5. inspire the workers and the students in such activities which would inspire them to voluntarily do their best for the illiterate and poor people;

6. encourage normal physical and mental development of the students. Impart to them such an education which would enable them to do their own work skilfully like the villagers and the peasants;

7. arrange for practical experience of agriculture, dairy, animal husbandry, poultry, wood-weaving and leather work to the students as well as health education. Care should be taken to ensure that all these works were done on the basis of co-operative principle

8. in order to enable the students to acquire practical experience on a scientific basis, attention had to be paid to ensure that they could think and observe correctly. At the same time, care had to be taken to see that the knowledge acquired by the students could be applied for the good of the community.

An extensive work plan was adopted in the rural reconstruction centre of Sriniketan. The ideal of Sriniketan, as Rabindranath observed was:

... to bring back life in its completeness into the villages, making the rural folk self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural traditions of their own country and competent to make an efficient use of modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic conditions102.

In the work plan, aimed to build up Sriniketan as an ideal village, emphasis was laid on agriculture, animal husbandry, education, health and treatment, cottage industry, organization etc. These express the depth of Rabindranath’s rural thinking:

1. Agriculture: Earlier the institute in Sriniketan was called the 'Santiniketan Agricultural Department'. Birbhum was a backward region with infertile land and very scanty rainfall. The agricultural farm had two aims — experimentation and demonstrating its results to the villagers. Apprentices were accepted in the farm. Special attention was paid to the selection of seeds, rotation of crops, green manuring, preservation of manure, conservation of moisture and the use of improved implements which were quite within the reach of the peasants103.

Different kinds of paddy were grown — 'basmanik', 'paramannashal', 'raghushal', 'nonarmashal', 'sindurmukhi', 'chapshal', 'badkalamkati-65', 'jingeshal', 'basmati'104. Though Birbhum was a single-crop land, different types of seeds and saplings were supplied from Sriniketan to the peasants of the neighbourhood. To encourage sugarcane cultivation and to show how it could substantially increase agricultural income, the 'Hadi system' of making jaggery (gur) was introduced. Cultivation of tomatoes, cauliflower, beetroot, beans

102 Visva-Bharati Bulletin, no.11, December, 1946 (reprint).
103 Lal, P.C., op.cit., p.65.
104 Visva-Bharati Bulletin, no.11, p.2.
and potatoes were encouraged as also the use of good seeds and fertilizers.

2. Animal husbandry: Scientific work plan was adopted for dairy, poultry, goat breeding and breeding of bees. The dairy set up in Santiniketan was shifted to Sriniketan, probably in 1916. Tagore always felt that improvement in agriculture was dependent on good cattle. In a letter to Nagendranath, he advised him to visit Ireland to find out how dairy farming had been so successfully conducted there on co-operative principle so that it could be introduced in Sriniketan. ‘Napier’ grass and jowar was cultivated during the rainy season to solve the problem of fodder. Their seeds were also distributed among the peasants. The object of the work of Sriniketan dairy was two-fold: to supply Santiniketan and Sriniketan with fresh, pure milk and; to breed cattle. It also aimed to induce the cultivators to adopt scientific and systematic system of breeding so that, they would have good milk cows and sturdy, draught animals. Goats and hens were also bred. Apprentices were taken, who later would set up their own poultry farms. Breeding of bees was, however, not successful. During the long, dry season it was difficult to prevent the bees from going away. The project therefore, was not pursued.

3. Education: From the beginning Rabindranath hoped that education in Sriniketan, unlike that in Santiniketan, would be work-centric. He felt that rural problems and their solutions were far more important than classroom education. In Sriniketan, students were taught to think correctly and to apply them in practice. He hoped that education there would enable the students here to become broad-minded. There were four centres of education in Sriniketan.

a. Shiksha Satra - Begun in Santiniketan in 1924, it was shifted to Sriniketan in 1926. Based on the ideas of Elmhirst, various schemes of rural reconstruction were adopted. General education was combined with social welfare activities. Keeping in tune with the needs of rural life, agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage industry were encouraged. After Santoshchandra Majumdar, Premchand Lal was in charge.

b. Siksha Charcha - This was the training centre for rural teachers. This was shifted from Bolpur to Sriniketan in 1937. Its expenses were partly borne by the Bengal government. Here teachers of village schools received training for two years. Later it was reduced to one year.

c. Lok Shiksha Samsad (People Education Council) - Its role in rural reconstruction was most significant. This institute was set up in 1937. Its aim was to make possible for the people of the villages and the towns to stay in their homes and receive education from school to university in the Bengali language. With Sriniketan as the centre, the branches of Lok Shiksha Samsad were spread out in the villages and towns.

d. Shilpa Bhavana- Its aim was to revive village industries. In Rabindranath’s view the

place of industry in rural reconstruction was:

The idea moving Gurudeva in this direction presented itself in the form of a two-fold objective:

1. to revive the many moribund crafts and industries which were once the pride of the villages; and by so doing
2. to ensure the well being and happiness of the masses.

Begun in 1922 in Santiniketan, Shilpa-Bhavana was later transferred to Sriniketan. Both training and production were emphasised. Complete education was given keeping in mind the future of students of the neighbouring villages. In the woodwork department, training was given in making furniture, doors, windows etc. Weaving, book-binding, leather work, pottery, cane-work were encouraged. After completing their education, they either joined Shilpa-Bhavana or started their own business. The jobless artists and artisans were employed in such a way that they could easily earn a livelihood by selling their own products. Through co-operations, raw materials were supplied. In order to attain a degree of excellence:

We brought the skills of craftsmanship of Italian leather workers, Manipuri weavers and the artists of Java to bear upon his planning for rural industrial development. The plan was thus well conceived and almost perfect to the minutest details.

At the wishes of Rabindranath, Rathindranath and his wife Pratima Devi learnt leather work in Italy. Manindranath Sen came back as an expert in cotton weaving. It was said that:

The goods produced at Shilpa Bhavana by the villagers of the surrounding areas, flooded the markets of all major towns and villages of India;... Shilpa Bhavana made a bountiful trade and accumulated considerable profit for its business section, specially during the period of World War II.

A sale centre for the goods produced in Sriniketan was set up in Calcutta in 1938.

Women's education and adult education were also given priority. Library facilities were also provided. Rabindranath felt the need for domestic science in Sriniketan. In this leisure time, women were given training in weaving, stitching, toy making, batik printing and leather work. As a result, many helpless women and widows were able to become self-dependent. In many villages, night schools were set up. Here, apart from education, training was given in agriculture and cottage industry. For promoting mass education

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110 Das Gupta, Sugata, A Poet and a plan, p.6.
111 ibid., p.61.
Rabindranath adopted measures, such as lantern lectures, festivals, fairs and exhibitions etc.\(^{112}\).

4. Health and Treatment: From the beginning, at Santiniketan, Rabindranath was keen on ensuring good health among the students. Arrangements were made for a routine health check-up every Wednesday in the hospital. For long he had cherished the hope of setting up a hospital at Santiniketan. This would involve huge expenses. So he entered into a contract with the Pondilicium Company and went to visit America in 1916. It was decided that for every speech he would get $500 or Rs 1500. Tagore intended to keep part of the money for the hospital. He wrote to his son, Rathindranath, from Los Angeles that once he had accumulated about thirty thousand rupees, he could open a good hospital and a technical department.\(^{113}\) The hospital established by Tagore, adjoining the ashrarn school\(^ {114}\) catered to the needs of not just the students of ashrarn but also to that of the neighbouring villages. The students themselves were so inspired that they often took turns to act as nurses\(^ {115}\).

Tagore even had a physical instructor, brought from Japan. He laid special emphasis on a healthy diet for the students. In 1914, students opened a relief fund for the poor. So they omitted sugar and clarified butter from their diet to save money for the fund, which was to help the poor jute peasants of eastern Bengal. Tagore, then in Agra and ignorant of all this, read the news published in December 1919 in the *Modern Review*. He then wrote to Andrews:

I was surprised to read in the *Modern Review* that our Bolpur boys are going without sugar and ghee in order to open a relief fund. Do you think this is right? In the first place it is an imitation of your English school boys and not their own original idea. In the second place so long as the boys live in our institution they are not free to give up any portion of their diet which is absolutely necessary for their health.\(^ {116}\)

In 1912, under Visva-Bharati, a work plan was adopted to prevent diseases in the neighbouring villages of Sriniketan. He bought Surul kuthibari from the Sinhas at the cost of Rs 10,000. Malaria was then rampant. He wanted to complete here the work that he had begun at Shilaidaha. From 1916-17, with the help of Rathindranath and Nagendranath, agricultural work was begun. But Tagore's dream remained unfulfilled because eighty per cent of the people of Sriniketan were suffering from different ailments. Andrews advised him to sell off the place. But he refused.

In 1922, on 6 February, rural reconstruction work was begun in Sriniketan. In the villages where malaria raged, Tagore tried to make arrangements to control it. In an early bulletin

\(^{112}\) Lal, P.C., *op.cit.*, pp.82-83.
\(^{115}\) ibid.
of Visva-Bharati, he said:

When in 1922 Visva-Bharati workers started welfare work in some of the villages around Sriniketan, they soon discovered that no improvement in the condition of the villagers could be so vital as that of improving the health of the people. Since then they have been carefully studying the problem of trying out different methods of placing the benefits of medical science within reach of the poverty-stricken masses. It did not take long to realise that any scheme involving charity will defeat its own object. The problem was to devise a scheme of health work which could be maintained by the people themselves.

Tagore himself soon became reputed as a homeopathic and biochemic doctor.

According to Elmhirst, at Sriniketan, a health centre was set up. Steps were taken to acquaint the people about causes of illness and the means of fighting it. More than a hundred families benefited:

The provision of medical aid at an insignificant cost was found from the outset to be a powerful weapon in establishing contact with the villagers close to Sriniketan. Beginning with a clinic at Sriniketan, under the supervision of an American lady, a trained nurse, the rural health service has now been organized into co-operative health societies benefiting hundreds of families.

In his fight against malaria, Tagore was helped by Gopal Chattopadhyay who in 1921, set up Anti-Malaria Society to fight malaria in Bengal. The government was only content to supply quinine cheaply. Gopalchandra received great help from Elmhirst and Kalimohan Ghosh. The superintendent of the village welfare department, Kalimohan Ghosh was deputed in 1930 to study the Rural Health Organization in Yugoslavia. He, Elmhirst and Dhiren Roy did their utmost to prevent malaria in the neighbouring villages of Sriniketan. They tried to create an awareness among the people. A brand of volunteers was organized. Rabindranath first named it the 'sahayak dal'. But since village welfare was their avowed aim, he later called it the 'bratisangha'. Like the Brati boys in Sriniketan, the girls also had a 'sahayika dal'.

Through the samavaya health society, the villagers got the opportunity to cure themselves. With subscriptions from the villagers, such samities were set up with elected representatives. There was a hospital, a qualified doctor and a compounder within the jurisdiction of each samity. Between 1932-37, 10 such health samavay samities were set up in Sriniketan and surrounding villages. It extended medical facilities to 99 villages. These samities were

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117 Visva-Bharati Bulletin, no. 25, p.3.
119 Sinha, Sasadhar, Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore, p.104.
121 Visva-Bharati Bulletin, no.25, p.3.
in Bandgora-Bolpur, Benuri, Bahiri, Adityapur, Illambazar, Adirepara, Langulia, Jashpur, Rupaspur and Goalpara. Irrespective of the contribution of a member, all were entitled to full help from the *samity*. Medicines were provided at a cheap rate. However, Tagore's dream of a separate hospital for infectious diseases were not fulfilled during his lifetime, mainly because of the shortage of adequate funds. It was only after the death of the poet that a centre for the treatment of leprosy was established in Sriniketan in July 1952.

In the sphere of health and treatment, there was thus considerable success. Under Elmhirst and Kalimohan, disease prevention work made great progress. Health *samavay* societies took the initiative in cleaning up the village surroundings. Efforts were made to tackle diseases in an organized manner through the health societies set up in the neighbouring villages. All the families in the villages paid annual subscription through which the salaries of the doctors and the expenses of the dispensaries were met. The doctors of the health societies lived in the villages. The volunteers offered free service. The people, however, had to pay the price of the medicines. With Sriniketan as the centre, the neighbouring villages benefited as a result of the activities of the health *samavay* *samities*. The success of the latter can be easily inferred from the reports published in the *Visva-Bharati News*:

> The moving of the Dispensary centre... enhancing its efficiency to a great extent and the number of male and female patients has increased considerably. Mrs. Rebecca Timbers also attends to the patients from 7 to 11 on all week days. The malaria survey is going on intensively. ... The village work department has extended its activities towards Ruppur village, so that practically the whole of Ruppur union has come to touch with Sriniketan.

5. **Organization:** In 1932, Rabindranath organized a group of volunteers called the 'sahayak sangha'. Later, he changed its name to 'bratisangha'. Dhirananda Roy was its leader till 1935. Bratidal was divided into two groups. Boys between 6 to 16 years were called 'bratibalaks'. After 16, they became members of 'yuva samgathan'. They were made responsible for rural organization. They were given training in agriculture and cottage industry like wood carving, pottery, weaving, book-binding etc. They helped in adult education, held magic lantern shows, organized *samavay* *samities*, arbitration shows. Sykes commented:

> They are an excellent example of the way in which Rabindranath used good ideas from all over the world in the building up of his Indian centre of education and service. ... The bratibalak troops owed great debt to the genius of Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the English Boy scouts and his insight into the needs of boys; Rabindranath studied his methods, saw where their value lay, and adapted them to the needs of the Indian village boy.

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123 *ibid.*, p.13.
125 *Sykes, Rabindranath Tagore, Sriniketan*, p.88.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of society</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of starting</th>
<th>No. of villages under the society</th>
<th>No. of members</th>
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<td>1. Bandgora-Bolpur</td>
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<td>Ruppur</td>
<td>January 1934</td>
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<td>4. Adityapur</td>
<td>Taltore</td>
<td>August 1936</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>5. Illambazar</td>
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<td>October 1937</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>9. Rupaspur</td>
<td>Khayrasole</td>
<td>October 1937</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>10. Goalpara</td>
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Table 8.1: Visva-Bharati Bulletin, no. 25, page-10

The co-operative societies provided the main strength of his rural organization. Like in Patisar, a co-operative bank was set up in Sriniketan. It provided loan facilities for the peasants. A grain store was also set up in 1923 to meet the grain crisis in times of famines and floods. Different festivals were also organized. The foundation day of Sriniketan, 6 February 1922, was celebrated as the Sriniketan annual celebration. Generally, on 6 and 7 February, the festivals are held. Fairs, exhibitions were arranged. Certain festivals laying emphasis on agriculture were also introduced in 1928 — 'briksharopan' (planting of trees) (14 July) and 'halakarshan' (tilling with the plough) (15 July). On Vishwakarmapuja 'shilpotsav' (industrial festival) was celebrated. 'Halakarshan' was the main festival of Sriniketan. Rabindranath himself opened the festival by holding the plough. The main aim was to eliminate the distinction between the ryots and the bhadraloks (elite)\(^{126}\). 'Pous utsav' (winter festival) was complementary of 'Halakarshan'. In the latter the seeds were sown. In the former the crop was harvested.

In Sriniketan, Tagore tried as far as possible to follow the co-operative principle. That is why, in 1918, the ‘Santiniketan Samavay Bhandar’ was established. Every student and teacher became its member. All necessary commodities for the ashram, whether for the kitchen or for the library, were provided through this bhandar. It was an essential part of ashram life. First Rathindranath and then Surendranath Kar were responsible for the working of this bhandar. It was closed down after thirty-eight years. The same fate befell the ‘Sriniketan Samavay Bhandar’ at the same time.

The co-operative principle underlay his entire Sriniketan plan. Here, the emphasis was on collective agriculture and use of machines. There was to be total rural development on the co-operative principle. Different types of artisan work and cottage industries were developed. On 30 November, 1921, in Sriniketan, the beginning of rural work on the

\(^{126}\) Tagore, R., ‘Halakarshan’ (tilling with the plough), Palliprakriti, p.107.
We decided to offer major and minor projects for each student to work on and to try and establish co-operation among the local farmers in buying, selling and for credit. In every village of Sriniketan, a village society was set up. The villagers also co-operated to make Tagore's dream a reality. They were inspired by the doctrine of atma-shakti and encouraged by the enthusiasm of volunteers. They cleared forests, helped lay roads and set up dispensaries. An anti-malaria co-operative society was set up by Kalimohan Ghosh in the neighbouring villages of Sriniketan. It was an effort by the locals to fight the dreaded disease combinedly. There were eight health centres in Sriniketan. Sugata Das Gupta states that:

Eight Health Societies, covering an area of eighty four villages and touching a population of 66,000 were affiliated to a health union which was located at Sriniketan with a central hospital and clinic attached to it.

Even co-operative grain stores dharmagolas were set up here to tide over lean periods. At the initiative of the workers a co-operative central bank was set up. Agriculture, dairy and poultry work was done on co-operative principle. 13 primary schools were conducted. A general library was organized.

However, Tagore often had to face a lot of hindrances in his rural development work. Shortage of funds and paucity of skilled workers were some of them. But he still continued undeterred. But it is unfortunate that he did not receive any support of note from the political leaders of the time. This did not daunt him. He wrote at a later date that as long as he stayed in the countryside he tried to gain as much knowledge about it as was possible.

From an analysis of the work that Rabindranath did in his zamindari, one can conclude that he was an agro-economist. He had a very clear perception about the inputs and infra-structural changes, application of science and technology, economic organization of production etc. that were needed for agricultural improvement in a backward country. When he was referring to co-operative farming he did not mean Russian 'Kolkhoz' or collective farms in place of personal proprietary right over land. He was probably talking about consolidation of the small holdings and setting up co-operative 'joint' farms. In that case even while retaining personal proprietorship of land, it would be possible to acquire the advantages of economics of scale. Consolidation of holdings would lead to bigger farms which would mean large scale production. It is amazing that he had developed these ideas...
so early. What is even more significant was his observation that, for rural work to attain any degree of success, those involved in this should be properly educated.

What emerges from an analysis of the various projects undertaken by Rabindranath is his passionate concern with the imperative need of resuscitating the dying agricultural and village economy of his land. It is a pity that this very real concern of his somehow failed to receive due appreciation from his people. Is it because it was overshadowed, partly by his own glamour and partly by Mahatma Gandhi’s mystic cult of the *charkha*?¹³⁰

Rabindranath’s active concern with this problem was prior to the Mahatma’s dating, from the nineties of the last century when he had first come face to face with the grim tragedy of the village economy while looking after his family estates in north-east Bengal. Though he lacked the Mahatma’s singular power of dramatising every issue into a national crusade, his practical approach to the actual problem was both more realistic and more comprehensive. He believed in the need for intelligent application of scientific technique for the development of Indian agriculture and of small-scale rural industries. This belief, rather than the magic of *charkha*, has been amply vindicated by what has happened in many parts of India today. On the other hand, he shared the Mahatma’s gospel of self-help and his faith in the dignity of manual labour, however seemingly low. Though the Poet did not himself handle the plough, except symbolically as in the beautiful wall-fresco by Nandalal Bose, and left it to Elmhirst and his team at Sriniketan to break the clod and upturn the soil, he was in spirit a true Plowman¹³¹.

8.8 Pramatha Chaudhuri and the rights of the peasants

Born in an aristocratic family, Pramatha Chaudhuri imbibed the culture of English educated metropolitan elite and went abroad for higher education. On his return he devoted himself mainly to literary activities. The bulk of his works was written after 1913. He edited the popular journal *Sabujpatra*. He introduced a new style of Bengali prose. His writings show the stamp of a progressive mind. He was a critic of the decadent society and social beliefs. He thought deeply on various subjects — literary, linguistic, social, political and economic. Though he wrote poems, stories and novels, his fame rests mainly on his short stories and critical essays. He was essentially a critic as is apparent from his essays ‘Rayater katha’ and ‘Du Yarki’¹³².

Pramatha Chaudhuri was writing at a time when agrarian issues were being hotly debated by the intelligentsia both inside as well as outside the legislature. During this time, the question of making certain amendments to the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 began to preoccupy the majority of those interested in the rural and agrarian question. In the

¹³¹ibid.
period subsequent to the passage of the Act, great economic and agrarian changes had taken place in Bengal and various defects in the Act had become apparent. Relations between tenants and landlords had become bitter. Both were demanding a change in some of the provisions of the Act. Zamindars held that the Act had facilitated the creation of more occupancy holdings, stopped all enhancement of rent and enabled ryots to change the character of holdings on the plea of making improvement and in various other ways. Litigation had increased. Besides, they were also against grant of the right of transferability to occupancy peasants and the right of occupancy to bargadars. Ryots on the other hand, were against restrictions or limitations of their power of transferring their lands by sale or mortgage and any enhancement of rent. But they too were against giving occupancy rights to bargadars. They wanted the right to fell trees and build houses within their holdings.

These agrarian issues were taken up by the Bengali intelligentsia from the early years of this century. On these issues, the zamindars and ryots both found their supporters among the intelligentsia. The question of giving occupancy rights to under-ryots and bargadars and the right of transferability of holdings, were the issues which had become crucial in the post-*swadeshi* period and were hotly debated on by the intelligentsia.

Like many of his contemporaries, Pramatha Chaudhuri too was drawn into this. The bulk of his thoughts on agrarian issues is contained in his ‘Rayater katha’, to which Rabindranath wrote a long critical note and Pramatha wrote a rejoinder\footnote{Both Rabindranath’s note and Pramatha’s rejoinder were published in *Sabujpatra*, Asar, 1333 B.S.}. His other essays particularly ‘Du Yarki’, short stories and the articles in *Sabujpatra*, are partly a statement of his socio-economic beliefs.

Pramatha proposed that the Bengal ryots should be made owners of their holdings. He described the Permanent Settlement\footnote{Chaudhuri, Pramatha, *Rayater katha* (tale of the ryot), op. cit., p.373.} and showed how it had brought about a change in the relationship between the zamindars and the ryots and also in the relationship of these two classes with land. Land belonged to the person who tilled it. Pramatha wanted the restoration to the peasant of the proprietary right which he had enjoyed prior to the introduction of the Permanent Settlement\footnote{ibid., p.369.}. However, like most of his contemporaries in the first quarter of the century, he did not want its abolition. It was probably his familial connection with the landed society of Bengal that was responsible for this conservative attitude. He was in favour of introduction of legal changes to safeguard the position of the ryots within the framework of the zamindari system. Such changes, he felt, were necessary to prevent any social revolution of the Russian type in future\footnote{Chaudhuri, P., ‘Tika’, *Sabujpatra*, Asar, 1333 B.S.}. If the interests of zamindars were to be saved, then certain changes in tune with the changed times of the post war period had to be made in the existing situation. If these changes were not made, then, in course of time, the peasants themselves would rise in rebellion and seize by force what they considered was rightfully theirs. To prevent such an eventuality some of the rights of the peasants had to be recognised.

To enable the ryots to become peasant proprietors, the occupancy ryots’ right to free
transferability of their holdings had to be legally recognised. It was recognised by custom in many areas. In areas where it was not, the zamindars either ignored it, or extracted a salami from each such transfer\textsuperscript{137}. Jot land was frequently changing hands and the zamindars were accepting it. The amount they extracted as salami depended on their power. Pramatha Chaudhuri observed that anyone with the interests of the peasants at heart, would probably suggest, as Rabindranath did in his rejoinder to ‘Rayater katha’, that it would be better if the right to transfer jot was taken away from the peasants. Otherwise, agricultural land would become mortgaged to the moneylenders and Bengal’s peasants would become landless. But he believed that, even if such a thing happened, the peasants’ right to transfer their holdings should be maintained because this was a proprietary right and should be vested in him who tilled it. Only the zamindar’s right to extract money on each such transfer should be taken away. There would be no problem if, in case of such transfer, the ryot acquired the land of another ryot. In such cases, agriculture would continue as earlier. The problem would arise if it went to a non-agriculturist or jotdar. In that case, the latter would get the land cultivated by an adhiar or korfa tenant who would not have any of the rights which a ryot under a zamindar had. Besides, he also observed, jots were not transferred only to pay the debt of moneylender but also in case of failure to pay the revenue due from the zamindar. Since buying and selling of land could not be prevented, it should be ensured through legal provisions that, if land was transferred from a zamindar to a jotdar, the occupancy right of the ryot was not disturbed. But Pramatha did not suggest how this could be done. He left it to the lawyers.

Another demand of the peasants, emphasised by him was that, this jot should be made mourasi and mokarari, that is, the zamindar should no longer have the right to increase the rent of the ryot. In his view, the rent was fixed by the record of rights, according to the land of the peasant and it should be legally permanent. As long as the Permanent Settlement between the zamindars and the state was in force, the permanent settlement between the zamindar and the ryots should also be in force\textsuperscript{138}. Here, he claimed that, he was demanding for the peasants something that was not new. In 1831, Raja Rammohun Roy in his evidence before the British Parliamentary Commission had made the same demand. He had stated that, if the rent of the ryots was increased, then they would not be able to survive. So zamindars should not be allowed to increase the rent of the peasants at will\textsuperscript{139}.

Regarding the other rights of peasants, Chaudhuri observed that, they had the right to fell trees in their own jots\textsuperscript{140}. They needed wood to meet their daily needs. So they should not be fined by zamindars for cutting the trees which they had probably planted.

Regarding the question of the right to dig wells and build houses on their land, Chaudhuri felt that the law was very confusing. The law recognised the peasants’ right to improve their jot. However, there was a dispute over what was meant by improvement of the jot. If the peasant built a pucca house on his jot by spending his own money, then the zamindar

\textsuperscript{137}Chaudhuri, P., ‘Rayater katha’(tale of the ryot), op.cit., p.370.
\textsuperscript{138}ibid., p.371.
\textsuperscript{139}ibid.
\textsuperscript{140}ibid., p.370.
either fined him or brought an eviction suit against him.

If all these demands were met the poverty of peasants would be reduced to some extent and they would be released from their state of slavery. What was sadly lacking was the absence of awareness in ryots particularly of their rights. Primary education, combined with a general improvement in their condition would free the peasants from the state of mental slavery. If the peasants of Bengal, got the right to transfer land, cut trees, build _pucca_ houses and if their _jots_ became _mouroati mokarari_ they would become peasant-proprietors in the real sense. If this happened, the peasants became owners of their land, then the wealth of the country would increase and the race would become powerful, as was the case in France.

These demands of the peasants, Chaudhuri observed, could be met easily by changing some of the clauses of the Tenancy Act. This would involve no extra cost. Nor would it mean interfering with the Permanent Settlement. On the contrary, it would mean making good the promises made to the peasants by the makers of the Permanent Settlement. Till its introduction, the peasants had certain rights over the land. The ryot was entitled only to a portion of the income from the land. Zamindar was just a tax-collector. It was the ryot, who tilled the land, who was the actual owner of the land.

The framers of the Permanent Settlement, he said, had failed to understand the relation between the zamindar and the peasant and given the zamindars rights which they never had. But even then, they realised that adequate provisions had to be made to safeguard the interests of the peasants. The ryots had enjoyed for long the rights they then demanded. Even the framers of the Permanent Settlement had promised to restore these rights. But they had not made good their promise for long. In 1859, Act X had been passed and in 1885, the Bengal Tenancy Act. But all these had just been half-measures. Without further delay, he suggested, the rights of the ryots should be restored. He even suggested that the _bargadars_ should be given occupancy right.

Like his predecessors, Rammohun and Bankimchandra, Chaudhuri too did not advocate abolition of the Permanent Settlement on which depended the existence of the zamindars. Yet, he did not have in the zamindars, the same faith that Tagore had. Unlike Tagore, he did not regard the zamindars as the natural protectors of the ryots. He felt that Tagore as a zamindar was ‘unique’. More than ninety-nine percent of the zamindars were unlike Tagore. They were not interested in improving the condition of their zamindaries. They did not undertake any welfare activities which Tagore did in his zamidari. No part of the money earned by the zamindars from their estates was invested in their zamindaries. Tagore, on the contrary, had even spent his Nobel Prize money in his attempt to partly solve the financial difficulties of his people.

Chaudhuri laid stress on the fact that any improvement in the condition of Bengal was synonymous with agricultural improvement. For this, the prime necessity was the develop-

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141 ibid., p.372.
142 ibid., pp. 382-383.
143 ‘Tika’, ‘Rayater katha’, _op. cit._
ment of human resources. He suggested that Bengal peasants should have healthy minds in healthy bodies. The main cause of all national ills, he felt, was that the people's life-blood had been drained away by poverty and disease. Like Rabindranath, he too felt that the peasants were 'half-dead'. They needed better sanitation to enable them to combat the scourges of malaria and cholera. Better educational facilities, provisions of schools and dispensaries within a reasonable radius would make all the difference to their life. Education would lead to better mental health. On these issues Pramatha Chaudhuri's views were supported by members of the government and the zamindar class and the politicians. They also agreed on the fact that the ryots should develop in themselves the power to thwart all potential threats to their existence. No law could save one who did not know how to protect himself 144.

Chaudhuri also invited the politicians, who had a role in shaping the fate of the country, to formulate a programme for bringing about a change in the condition of the peasants. He advised the politicians that, at least for their own interests they should adopt such a programme in their election manifesto. Without such a programme they could never hope to win the confidence of the villages or do much for the country. However he had his reservations about their ability to formulate such a programme. Most were unaware of peasants' plight. Most came from the legal profession and were close allies of the zamindars. Thus while they were willing to improve the condition of peasants, they were unwilling to give them any rights. So he felt that it was left to the litterateurs to evolve an agrarian programme as the failure of the moderates and the extremists to formulate it was ample testimony of the fact that they were unable to do so.

8.9 Concluding remarks

In the first quarter of this century, disillusionment with British rule increased with the failure of their political concessions to satisfy Indian politicians. In the meantime, significant developments were taking place in the West like the First World War and its aftermath, and the Bolshevik Revolution. Many of the writers, the bulk of whose works were written during the period between the second decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the Second World War, were inspired by the European ideal, particularly contemporary French and Russian literature. Like the great figures of the latter, they too concentrated on describing every day real life, minute analysis of human psychology and the ups and downs in the political and economic spheres. They expressed the thoughts and ideas on, among others, various rural problems — social and economic, particularly the agrarian problems.

The first spark of socialist thinking is found in some of the writings of Sabujpatra. Though in many of its issues, essays of Rabindranath found a prominent place, it is debatable whether socialist thinking had a deep imprint on his writings. There is no denying the fact that social evils and inequality concerned Rabindranath. He stood against oppression and-

144 Tagore, Rabindranath., 'Introduction to Rayater katha', op. cit.
exploitation no doubt but; that was the result of his inherent humanism.

The impact of socialist thinking was more pronounced in the writings of the ‘Kallol group’ of writers led by Dinesh Ranjan Das. Two distinct shades may be found in the thinking of these writers — one relating to the problems of urban life and the other relating to the problems of the socially down-trodden classes like the workers. What is striking is the appearance of a number of journals at this time in which socialist thinking was clearly reflected. *Upasana* by Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay and other journals like *Langal*, *Ganavani*, *Sanghati* etc. set a new pattern. Socialist thinking was no longer a matter of speculation. It was slowly becoming an ingredient of Bengali literary output. By the 1930s its impact was an acknowledged fact as evident in some of the works of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay and particularly Manik Bandyopadhyay and Gopal Haldar. The impact of socialist thinking reached a high-water mark by the time of the Second World War.

However, the impact of socialist thinking on Pramatha Chaudhuri and some of his immediate contemporaries was not a significant one. In fact some of Pramatha Chaudhuri’s essays in *Sabujpatra* reveal that he was hostile to Marxism. Their appreciation of the problems of the downtrodden classes of society like the peasants was the manifestation of a kind of emotional humanism resulting from their striving for a deep and sincere understanding of the ills of society. But his and Rabindranath’s agrarian perceptions were not free of limitations. Both left the basic problems of land relations untouched. Though aware of the evils of the zamindari system and the exploitative character of the Bengal zamindars, Pramatha Chaudhuri, while not averse to giving the ryots some rights, wanted no change in the land system. He wanted to prevent any social revolution of the Russian type. Rabindranath’s vision on the other hand, was the rather utopian one of benevolent zamindars encouraging village self-help efforts. His constructive work was based on his humanitarianism. His appeal to zamindars was surely utopian. Even Pramatha Chaudhuri, who was closely associated with Rabindranath’s rural reconstructive work for years, was rather sceptical about the extent to which the latter’s faith in the benevolence of the zamindars would be justified.

Yet, Rabindranath was probably the only intellectual of his time who tried to translate his ideas on agrarian issues into practice. He tried to bring about a change in the techniques of production through scientific means. He realised what many of his contemporaries did not, that no real improvement in the condition of the peasants would be possible without overhauling the system of agriculture. Well aware of the agrarian revolution that had taken place in the West, he tried to adopt new ideas and implement them here. In his own way he was a pioneer in the work that he did. He was a visionary with great foresight. Even his close associate, Pramatha Chaudhuri, had nothing to suggest by way of improving the agrarian system. In his essays he only expressed his views on the question of peasant rights.

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147 Chaudhuri, P., ‘Tika’, *Sabujpatra*, Asar, 1333 B.S.