Chapter 9

AGRARIAN THINKING OF THE MUSLIM INTELLIGENTSIA IN THE LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY

In the first half of the nineteenth century Muslims, well-versed in Islamic law and religion enjoyed pre-eminence in Muslim society. Among them, were the leaders of the socio-religious reform movements like Shariatullah (1781-1840), Titu Mir (1782-1831) and Dudu Mian (1819-62). But their influence gradually waned. By the end of the century the Muslim intelligentsia came to comprise of, among others, a group of traditionally educated men who favoured western education. They wanted a better deal for the Muslims within the existing politico-administrative framework. There also emerged a group of western-educated men, loyal to the British. Along with these two groups, the traditionally vernacular-educated men continued to be influential. Some of them were prolific writers, who using different literary forms, frequently expressed their views on diverse important issues of the day.

Throughout the period, the Muslim intelligentsia took an increasing interest in agrarian issues. They reacted to these issues partly at the level of ideas through essays, letters books etc. At the level of actions, some of their leaders tried to coherently present their views in the Council, associations, etc.

9.1 Beginning of an interest in agrarian issues

Between 1818 and 1870, a considerable part of Bengal countryside was affected by the Farazi and Wahabi movements. These movements had a great impact on Muslim society and gave a new direction to its thought process. The nature of these two movements was mainly religious. Their aim was to purify Islam in Bengal. But since they included
a political and economic programme, these movements had a mixed character — social, economic and political.

The Wahabi movement was a spontaneous demonstration of protest against the power of the zamindar. Later, anti-British feelings became pronounced. The rebels first retaliated on the one Hindu zamindar with whom they had an immediate quarrel. They next attacked two or three others in the neighbourhood. These zamindars, in their turn, found support from other influential zamindars of Nadia district. Once they were organized, the ryots became the sworn enemies of all the zamindars living in the locality. Even the Muslim zamindars were not spared. The village moneylenders were also plundered. The darogas were threatened and humiliated. The Wahabi movement thus presented all the typical features of a ‘peasant-plebeian’ rising. The rule of zamindars was of such an exploiting character that the peasants could seek redress only in a rising. The zamindars were vested with police powers. The rebels also committed acts of hostility against the indigo planters who had by then emerged in the countryside as the worst and the most formidable enemies of the people and were also in several cases hand in gloves with the zamindars. Thus, the revolt was directed as much against the evils of the zamindari system as against the oppressions of the indigo planters who became a terror to the people. The revolt gradually assumed an anti-British character.

The Farazi movement too started as a movement for religious reform. But it drew its main strength from the peasant masses who were drawn into the movement because it voiced some of their basic grievances and promised a radical solution to their problems. The esoteric doctrines of the Farazis inculcated a rigid adherence to the Islamic tenets, an abstinence from all ceremonies approaching to idolatry and a strict conformity with the Koran. The chief appeal that the Farazi movement had for the peasantry was that the agrarian programme formed a part of these doctrines. They said that ‘God made the earth common to all men, the payment of rent is contrary to his law.’ They used to draw a distinction between payment of rent to a zamindar and that of tribute to the government. Therefore they preferred landholding under the government in the khas mahals and sought the occupancy of the government chars in the large rivers. The Farazis asserted a kind of equality amongst themselves, which was very attractive to the lower classes. They not only resisted successfully the levy of all extra or illegal cesses by the zamindars and talukdars, they gave more trouble than others in collecting the land rent. They would withhold it altogether if they dared, for they believed that Earth was God’s, who gave it to his people. The land tax was accordingly held in abomination and they were taught to look forward

2In Narkelbaria.
3Kabiraj, Narahari, Wahabi and Farazi rebels of Bengal, New Delhi, 1982, p.52.
5Judicial Progs., 29 May 1843, nos.21-26, cited in Narahari Kaviraj, op.cit., p.90.
6ibid.
7Judicial Progs., 25 October 1848, no.121, cited ibid.
to the happy time when it would be abolished.

The Farazis preferred to hold land under the government. In fact, the Farazis used the religious motive to vent their agrarian grievances. They held that it was illegal to pay rent especially to an ‘infidel’. The term ‘infidel’ was conveniently used to apply to all Hindu zamindars and to Muslim zamindars also, who, as a rule, condemned Farazi practices as well as the European planters. There was however, a political undertone in the Farazi movement, though the leaders took care to give an impression that it was merely a movement for social reforms. Dudu Mian pleaded that his movement was not anti-government. But, the government which offered protection to the planters and the zamindars found itself in opposition to the movement.

The Wahabi and Farazi movements had a peasant content. The interests and demands of the peasantry were given considerable importance. The notion propounded particularly by the Wahabis, that land belonged to God and the peasants were not to pay any land tax provided the peasant rebels with an ideology sufficient to inspire them in the fight against the oppressors. However, the movement was such as to preclude the participation of Hindu peasants, although Hindu peasants were equally the victims of zamindari oppression.

The Wahabi and Farazi movements thus launched a crusade against the zamindari system. But they stopped short of being anything more than a revolt or reaction against the existing system. However, it cannot be denied that it was during this time that the concept of the right of the peasants to ownership of land was introduced for the first time. Gradually, the peasants came to believe that land belonged to those who tilled it.

By including some rudimentary sort of agrarian programmes these movements created, perhaps for the first time, an interest among the Muslim intelligentsia in agrarian problems, the condition of the peasantry and the question of peasant rights.

### 9.2 Continuation of this trend in the late 19th century

This trend continued well into the last quarter of the 19th century. Though, the education of the Muslims and their social uplift continued to be given priority by Muslim reformers, many of them also took up the cause of the illiterate, voiceless masses of the peasantry of Bengal. The deteriorating condition of the peasantry and the general decline in agriculture were the main themes of a considerable part of Muslim literature. Till the 1870s, there was an attempt by some educated Muslim leaders in Bengal like Syed Ameer Ali to make Urdu the accepted Islamic language. But the majority realised that Urdu had very little chance of success in Bengal, even if all the Muslims had wanted it. To most of them, Urdu was as much a foreign language as Sanskrit was to the generality of Bengali Hindus.

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9Kaviraj, Narahari, *op.cit.*, pp.92-93.
Many preferred a kind of Bengali for the benefit of the masses. Led by Meer Masarraf Hussain, the emergence of a group of powerful Muslim writers in Bengali gave a new sense of direction and respectability to the language in the eyes of the Muslim masses.

It was from the 1870s onwards that Muslim writers entered the domain of modern Bengali literature. This trend began with the publication of the book *Ratnabati* by Meer Masarraf Hussain in 1869. He was soon to emerge as one of the most popular writers of his time. Following him, other Muslim writers were soon to enrich Bengali literature. Most of them were vernacular-educated. They were associated with various journals like *Ajijan Nehar*, *Sudhakar*, *Hitakari*, *Hafez*, *Kohinoor* etc. Some of them had pronounced pro-ryot sympathies and highlighted zamindari oppression. Notable among them was Meer Masarraf Hussain.

He was born in 1846 or 1847, in the village of Lahinipara in Kushtia. His basic education was in the vernacular. He studied for sometime in Krishnanagar Collegiate School. He started his career as a journalist and essayist in *Prabhakar* and *Grambarta Prakashika*. Later, till his death in 1911, he was associated with a number of other newspapers and journals. Between 1869 and 1910, he published a total of 36 books. He edited the fortnightly journal *Ajijan Nehar*, from 1874 onwards, named after his first wife. This is probably the oldest Muslim journal.

Most of the articles published in the widely read contemporary journals and newspapers like *Hafez*, *Kohinoor* etc. had for their themes, the tales of the past glory of the Muslims, of Islamic religion and customs. Meer Masarraf’s work was an exception. He revealed an awareness of the contemporary social conditions. He preferred practical real life themes to the religious or historical. For instance, in his satire ‘Tala abhinay’ (Tala play) the theme was Hindu-Muslim conflict. His awareness of the miserable plight of the Bengali Muslims is evident here. He repeatedly highlighted the poverty of the Muslims. The main story of ‘Tala abhinay’ was as follows: There was a Hindu-Muslim quarrel over a decree passed by the court. The Hindu and Muslim ghosts held a meeting and decided to create trouble. On the scene of trouble, the priest ghost among the Hindus and the *maulavi* ghosts among the Muslims created tension. Sympathetic towards the miserable plight of the Bengali Muslims the author expresses his sentiments through the mouths of the imaginary characters. At the end of the conspiratory meeting, the Muslim ghost tells his Hindu counterpart that the Bengali Muslims had nothing. The lower class people, in particular, were ill-fed and ill-clothed. They were crying for a little rice.

Masarraf Hussain was sincere in his belief in Hindu-Muslim unity and was broad-minded in his attitude. Yet, he also pointed out that Hindus had taken full advantage of the apathy,

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11 They include prose, poetry, songs, novels, plays, essays, stories, autobiographical works and others like school text books. A list has been compiled in *Masarraf Rachana Sambhara* (collected works of Masarraf), vol.I, (ed.) Kazi Abdul Mannan, Bangla Academy, Dacca, 1976 along with tentative dates of their publication. Most of these have been lost. Only about twelve full works have been found.

12 This has become rare.

13 Mannan, Kazi Abdul, *Unish sataker sahityapatra o Muslim manash* (literary journals of the 19th century and the Muslim mind), Dacca, 1959, p.52.

14 Published in 1897 in *Hafez*.
laziness and the life of luxury led by Muslims. He said that from the 18th century onwards, taking advantage of the degeneration in the character of Muslim zamindars, their Hindu naibs and gomasthas had managed to buy up the properties of their Muslim masters. It may be recalled that the new landlords of the 18th and 19th century mostly belonged to the Hindu middle class society, from which came the modern Bengali intelligentsia.

Masarraf Hussain’s long association with zamindari work, gave him an insight into zamindari society. One of his early works was Jamidar darpan (mirror image of a zamindar). The background of this play was the peasant revolt in Pabna in 1872-73. Here, he depicted the oppression of peasants by zamindars. He emerged as the champion of the oppressed peasantry for whom he had immense sympathy. The play begins with some general comments on the oppressive character of the zamindars and the general helplessness of the peasants. It then goes on to describe the oppressive character of Haiwan Ali, the zamindar of Koshalpur. His oppression knew no limits. The author describes lucidly how, the poor peasant Abumollah was forced to pay money to satisfy the zamindar’s whims. On his failure to pay the whole amount he was brought to the latter’s house and physically tortured. The zamindar also suffered from no qualms in satisfying his lust for Abumollah’s beautiful wife Nurunnaha, who was fatally injured in the process. Even her death did not cause any remorse in Haiwan Ali. He and his men’s instant reaction was how best to dispose of the corpse.

It is believed that this work was greatly influenced by ‘Neel darpan’ (mirror of indigo revolt) of Dinabandhu Mitra. However, there are some basic differences between the two. The language of the former is more refined. In ‘Neel darpan’, the author very clearly expressed his faith in the English law while in ‘Jamidar darpan’ we see how the culprits took advantage of its loopholes. Even Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, expressed his acclaim for the scene where the zamindar Haiwan Ali is allowed to escape scot free by the magistrate even after raping Abumollah’s pregnant wife Nurunnaha. Here, Meer Masarraf has shown how law had become an instrument for the zamindars to oppress their hapless tenants. He has shown how, powerful men committed atrocities in the name of religion. His sympathy

15 In a poem published in January, 1897, in Hafez, Masarraf Hussain gives a picture of the condition of Muslims.
1. *dital trital ghar* (two three storeyed house)/*khara acchhe bhitti*’pur (standing erect on its foundation),/*surki chun khasiya parichhey* (lime brick dust have withered away)/*
2. *Janala kapat bhanga* (windows doors broken)/*bhenga para int ranga* (broken red bricks),/*kato gach shikr charichhey* (so many trees have grown roots).

16 Between 1884 and 1896 he worked as manager in the sheristah of a zamindari in Tangail.
17 Published in 1873.

18 *Mari durbar projar-pare atyachar* (oppression on our weak ryots)/*kata jane kare, kare jamidar* (zamindars oppress so many)/* tara jane mane, jamindar bine* (they know in their hearts that without zamindars)/* nahi anya keho dukkha sunibar* (nobody to listen to their woes)/* proja kato sahe, kichu nahi kohe* (peasants suffer, without saying)/* mane bhabe er nahi upay aar* (think in their heart there is no way out)/* jamidar dhare jarimana kare* (zamindars often fine them)/* manosadh pure, nashikey projar* (oppressing the peasants to their heart’s content)/* suno sabhyajan, kariye manor* (listen gentlemen, pay attention)/* dekhaba aji abhiney tar* (show you its enactment today)
for the exploited masses, irrespective of their creed and religion, is quite clear. This work was criticised by Bankimchandra in *Bangadarshan* because the play was published at a time when the Pabna uprising had started\(^{20}\). Even while praising its style of writing he said that, in view of the peasant revolt taking place in eastern Bengal districts, the sale and distribution of the play should be stopped. It would only add fuel to the revolt of the peasants against the atrocities committed by the latter\(^{21}\). But even here, Bankimchandra did not refute the content of the play. He said that while ‘Neel darpan’ was aimed against indigo planters, ‘Jamidar darpan’ was primarily directed against zamindars.

The oppression of peasants by European indigo planters was denounced by Dinabandhu Mitra in ‘Neel darpan’. Muslim protests did not make such stir, but they were made, as in Meer Masarraf’s ‘Udasin pathiker maner katha’ (thoughts of a detached traveller) which was published in 1890. He describes the oppression of the European planters, the rudeness which Europeans generally displayed towards the ryot and the fear which the villagers of Kushtia felt before the local indigo planter T.I.Kinny\(^{22}\). In this novel, the author has described lucidly the internal workings of two zamindaries — the zamindari of Mishaheb of Saonta on the western side of the river Gouri and that of Pyarisundari of Sundarpur. This novel is highly informative. The author has shown how the zamindars were dependent on their officials, particularly their Hindu officials. They occupied the crucial high-ranking posts in their estates. Pyarisundari’s chief administrative officer was Ramlochan and Mishaheb’s was Debiprasad. It was with the help of Debiprasad’s connivance that Mishaheb was deprived of his estate by his nephew-in-law Shah Golam. A close bond existed between some of the zamindars and their tenants. Pyarisundari was deeply concerned for the peasantry\(^{23}\). She tried in vain to prevent Kinny from forcing the peasants of her locality to cultivate indigo. She lamented to Ramlochan about how an Englishman (Kinny) had destroyed the country, taken away the cultivated lands of the peasants and forced the cultivators to cultivate indigo in those lands. They had taken away the *talukds* and the *jots* of many *jotdars*, depriving many of even their homesteads\(^ {24}\). These also reveal the terror unleashed by the planters in the countryside and how universally they were hated. In a meeting, for instance, held at Shah Gholam’s house which was attended by the inhabitants of the adjacent localities, a Hindu zamindar played the lead role. The aim of the meeting was to protest against the atrocities of Kinny\(^ {25}\).

This novel, particularly in its portrayal of the character of Bengal zamindars, is very different from the author’s earlier work ‘Jamidar darpan’. Whereas in the latter the author has shown the moral degeneration of the zamindars, in the former he has shown their better side. He has shown that many of the zamindars did care for their peasants. Zamindars, irrespective of their religion, often also maintained friendly relations with one another. That is why, even though Mishaheb’s friendship with Kinny forced him to help the latter,

\(^{20}\) *Bangadarshan*, 2nd Year, no.5, Bhadra, 1280 B.S.


\(^{23}\) *ibid.*, pp.128-129.

\(^{24}\) *ibid*.

\(^{25}\) *ibid.*, p.264.
it was with regret that he received the news of Kinny's ravishment of the tenants of Pyarisundari. In his critique of the Bengal zamindars, in both these works Meer Masarraf gives proof of an attitude which was free from a communalist bias. He was impartial in his dealing with both Hindu and Muslim zamindars.

Meer Masarraf was also vehemently critical of the acts of oppression committed on women. He, as well as the author of 'Neel darpan', have described how both the indigo planters and the zamindars did not stop at oppressing the hapless ryots. Even their womenfolk were not spared. In some of his other works too, instances of oppression of zamindars abound.

Meer Masarraf's works suffer from one limitation even though, the phrase 'art with a purpose' can be aptly ascribed to his works. He has repeatedly told the tales of oppression and cruelty committed by the powerful classes in society. But almost nowhere, has he cited instances of powerful resistance put up by the oppressed and the exploited. Here lies his difference with the author of 'Neel darpan'. The latter, along with depiction of the gross exploitation has a 'positive' side to it. The powerful resistance put up by Torap has made it more gripping. It is strange that, the revolt of the peasantry in 1873 did not make much impact on the later works of Meer Masarraf even though he continued to be sympathetic towards them. Nowhere, has he tried to find out the reasons for the general misery of the peasantry. He failed to realise the adverse effects of the Permanent Settlement or its significance as a system of rural power relation.

In some other contemporary Muslim works too, the miserable plights of the peasants have been depicted and explained. Bangiya Mussalman (Bengali Muslim) by Noushar Ali Khan Yusufzahi described at length the miserable plight of the peasantry, the majority of whom, he pointed out, were Muslims. He felt that they were the most numerous and important members of society, yet as he saw it, the rest of the community hardly cared for them at all. In particular, he felt that far too little was being done for their education, although one of the main reasons for their miserable condition was that they lacked education. He wrote:

In certain parts of Bengal the peasants are growing profitable crops. In the soil where they previously used to grow paddy worth Rs 5, in the same soil they grow jute to the value of at least Rs 15. But in spite of the increase in their income their standard of living has not improved. When enquiries are made into the cause it is found that ... the oppression of the zamindars has not lessened ... and the mahajans are simply sucking the blood out of the peasants ... But the peasants are not so fully conscious as to realise what treatment they are receiving. Unless the peasants take to education they will never be able to improve their own condition.

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26 Ibid., p.133.
28 Published in 1891.
29 Ahmed, Sufia, Muslim community in Bengal, 1884-1912, Bangladesh, 1974, p.348.
30 Yusufzahi, N.A.K., Bangiya Mussalman, p.16 cited in ibid.
He therefore, made an earnest appeal to his educated co-religionists to quench the peasants' thirst for education.

It is however, doubtful whether there was a thirst for knowledge among the Muslim peasants in general. Recent researches have shown that the poorer classes in general were apathetic to any education, whether it was the vernacular variety or the English system. There is no real evidence to suggest that these classes had ever been keen on any formal education. The Hindu cultivating classes — the namasudra, pods and rajbanshis — could not afford any education, neither could the Muslim peasants. The Director of Public Instruction in Bengal expressed his doubts in 1871 if there was 'much difference regarding education between the two great sections into which the body of cultivators have for many generations been divided'.

Nowsher Ali Khan described in details the oppressive character of zamindars and moneylenders. The high rate of rent demanded from the peasants forced them to regularly borrow from moneylenders, thereby, drawing them increasingly into the debt trap from which they could never get away. Besides, it was very easy for moneylenders to charge a very high rate of interest from the peasants. They very often also cheated the unsuspecting illiterate peasants who, without realising continued to pay even after their loans were repaid. Moneylenders also frequently took more than what was their due. After paying the dues of moneylenders and zamindars, the peasants were left with almost nothing. The only way by which an improvement in the condition of the peasants could be made possible was, by imparting some elementary education to them.

Almost similar suggestions were made by Muhammad Mashenullah who, in his essay *Budir suta* (Old woman's thread), noted the rumour that the government was contemplating the introduction of free primary education in the country. He appealed to the government to adopt the measure soon, as it would immensely help peasants. He said that, there should be representatives of the peasants in the legislative councils. He appealed to the government on behalf of the peasants that, the rents should not be raised without the latter's permission and that the survey of the record of rights should not be interfered with by the zamindars. He suggested that, the government should take up management of the estates of those cruel zamindars who exacted illegal abwabs from the tenants and should collect the revenue directly from the tenants. Since the local mahajans were taking very high interest on the loans taken by the poor peasants, the government should fix a maximum rate for interest. He created a ryot Guru Pramanik who, conveying the sentiments of the author, blamed the government equally for the misery of the peasants. The government erred by not preventing oppression of the zamindars. The peasants could not hope to get redress even in the law courts.

Mention must be made of the work entitled *Hindu mussalman* (1888) written by Sheikh Abdus Sobhan. In this, the author has described the lack of morality in the Muslim

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31 Ahmed, Rafiuddin, *op.cit.*, p.139.
32 *General report on public instruction in the lower provinces of Bengal: report of the Director of Public Instruction 1871-72*, p.25.
zamindars and tried to show how, through various nefarious practices their Hindu amlahs have brought about their ruin. He says that in almost all Muslim zamindaries, it was the Hindus who worked as naibs, mohurees, dewans, khazanchies, sheristadar, peshkar and managers. It was they who controlled the zamindaries. Their Muslim masters were, in most cases, like pension-holding puppets who often did not even know the actual income of his zamindari or the total number of men working in his estate. The problems he would face if he tried to dismiss any of his Hindu servants were many. These men would either openly revolt or have the zamindari sold for arrear of revenue. He observed that, even 25 years earlier there was a considerable number of Muslim zamindars in Bengal. But most of them had disappeared. For this, Sobhan blamed the treachery and the cunning of their Hindu servants and the love for luxury and lack of foresight of the Muslim zamindars. The author has described the fate of 13 Muslim zamindaries. He has probably drawn from his personal experience. In the end, the author has offered some advice to the Muslim zamindars. He has asked them to regularly visit their zamindaries; keep account of their quarterly, half-yearly and annual incomes and expenditures; reduce expenditure; increase their income; dismiss all dishonest amlahs and; refrain from unnecessary legal suits. He also advised the zamindars to become their own salaried managers and meet their own household expenses from their salaries. If the zamindars could not manage their own zamindaries, they should employ suitable, honest, educated Muslims as managers and pay them well.

In this work, the sympathy of the author for his own co-religionists is quite apparent. He had witnessed the deterioration in the condition of Muslim society and the simultaneous improvement in the economic condition of the Hindus.

All these Muslim writers, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were quite sincere in their concern for peasants. Some were also concerned about the fates of the Muslim zamindars. But they never wanted a change in the existing land system. Most of them believed that, it was the lack of enterprise on the part of Muslim zamindars and the intrigues of their Hindu amlahs which was responsible for the decline of most of the Muslim zamindaries. Even while describing the misery of the peasants, they failed to suggest an alternative by which this misery could be alleviated. They were not concerned about any of the problems besetting the agrarian sector. They did not suggest any means by which there could be an improvement in agrarian techniques and production. Nor, did they mention how there could be a change in agrarian relations.

Leaders like Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) and Abdul Lateef (1828-93) took up the cause of the peasantry and the issue of peasant rights in the realm of actual politics. During the debate on the Tenancy Bill in the 1880s, Ameer Ali, then a member of the Governor-General’s Council, spoke in favour of the ryots. While critical of the Hindu zamindars he was silent on the oppressive nature of their Muslim counterparts. In the Legislative

34Mannan, Kazi Abdul. Adhunik bangla sahitye muslim sadhana(Muslim efforts in modern Bengali literature), vol.1., pp.123-141.
36Mannan, Kazi Abdul, op.cit., p.131.
37Ameer Ali’s role in the debate on the Tenancy legislation has been discussed earlier.
Council, he pleaded for tenants who had no representatives of their own. He insisted not only on the passing of the pro-ryot clauses of the Bill, but he also demanded an extension of occupancy right to the non-occupancy ryots and the under-ryots\(^{38}\). He wanted a free transfer of occupancy holdings and moved an amendment that the occupancy ryot should be permitted, in Bengal proper, to transfer his holding in the same manner as other immovable property, provided that the landlord was entitled to a fee of ten percent of the purchase money\(^{39}\). He objected to the amendment proposed by the zamindars to allow enhancement of rent on the ground of increase in the prices of staple food crops\(^{40}\).

Outside the Legislature too, some of these leaders took up the peasants' cause. In the late 19th century, the branches of the Muhammedan Literary Society of Calcutta, established by Abdul Lateef in 1863 and the Central National Muhammedan Association of Calcutta, established by Syed Ameer Ali in 1877 were set up in the Bengal countryside. Other such associations were established towards the end of the century like the Dacca Muhammedan Friends Association (1883), Muhammedan Union in Calcutta (1890), Malda Muhammedan Association (1891) etc. None of these associations demanded a change in the existing land system. They highlighted the oppression of zamindars and the miserable plight of peasantry, particularly the condition of the Muslim peasantry. They appealed for legal safeguards for the protection of peasantry and permanent restrictions on the powers of zamindars to eject their tenants and rent enhancement. Both Abdul Lateef and Syed Ameer Ali were loyal to British rule and sought government help to bring about a change for the better in the condition of the peasantry.

Later leaders like Delawarr Hussain Ahmed Mirza (1840-1913) had the same attitude. He was the first Bengali Muslim to graduate from the Calcutta University. He joined Syed Ameer Ali's Central National Muhammedan Association of Calcutta. He wrote a number of essays in which, he suggested ways in which the Muslim society could be reformed. In his famous work *Essays on muhammedan social reform* published in 1889, he discussed in detail the economic condition of the Muslims. He described their gradual impoverishment and the ruination of the erstwhile wealthy section during the course of British rule. However, he did not give much importance to the land problems. He emphasized the fact that in the last one hundred years, innumerable Muslim zamindars had lost their lands. These lands had been bought up by Hindus. He also lamented the fact that the Muslims had fallen behind the Hindus in trade and commerce\(^{41}\).

The Muslim intelligentsia in the late 19th century thus did not want any change in the land system based on the Permanent Settlement, a source of many an agrarian problem. Some of them like Syed Ameer Ali, however, tried to provide some sort of an agrarian programme. They suggested rent reduction; government management of estates of inefficient zamindars; prevention of *abwab* collection; fixation of a maximum rate of interest; easy credit facilities for peasants to reduce moneylender oppression and; basic education for the peasants. These would facilitate not only an improvement in the peasants' condition but also a general rural

\(^{38}\) The *Supplementary Gazette of India*, 14 February, 1885, p.17.


\(^{40}\) The *Supplementary Gazette of India*, 14 February, 1885, p.17.

9.3 Agrarian thinking in the 20th century

The trend of thinking begun by Meer Masarraf Hussain was continued in the early 20th century in the works of many Bengali Muslim writers. We do not intend here to write the history of Bengali Muslim literature. That is why the writings of all the authors of this period have not been included. Only those, in whose writings agrarian issues are discussed have been included. A coherent analysis of their conception of the agrarian question has been attempted. Many of these writers dealt with other socio-economic issues too. Though it has not been the intention to discuss them here, in many cases, it has not been possible to totally separate their ideas on agrarian problems from their general socio-economic thoughts.

Besides, many of them continued to write long after the end of our period. Though, on the whole, their ideas and works on agrarian issues during our period have been considered, occasional references to some of their later writings and activities have also been referred to, to highlight particular aspects of their thought process.

In the works of many of the creative writers we notice an awareness of contemporary society and socio-economic issues. Different political and social movements, particularly after the First World War, had an impact on them. Among those whose works have been considered are Muhammad Maniruzzaman Islamabadi (1874-1950), who was not only an eminent writer but also actively participated in political movements in the 1920s; Kazi Imdadul Hoque (1882-1926); Abul Hussain; Syed Ismail Hussain Siraji (1880-1931); Sheikh Habibur Rehman; Nazirul Islam Muhammad Sufian; Muhammad Abdur Rashid; Muhammad Lutfar Rehman (1889-1936); Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976) and some others. Many of them were associated with some of the leading contemporary journals like *Hafez, Moslem Hitoishi* (1911-21) etc.

They discussed oppression by zamindars, exploitation by moneylenders, and the miserable condition of Muslim peasantry. They described how, by dint of sheer hard-work the peasants produced crops while it was zamindars, who led a lazy luxurious life-style, who lived off them. While the producers were ill-fed and ill-clothed, zamindars and moneylenders built up their fortunes. Most of them dwelt on the fact that zamindars and moneylenders in Bengal were mostly Hindus, while the majority of the poor peasants were Muslims. The latter often took loans from Hindu moneylenders at very high rates of interest and could never get out of the debt trap. In the process, they lost everything. Their lands and houses were often mortgaged to moneylenders and failure to repay their debt cost them their lands. The Muslim intelligentsia also emphasised the responsibility of the peasants for their own ruin. Their lack of thrift and foresight was responsible for their economic crisis and made them vulnerable to the rapacity of moneylenders.

They suggested some ways by which the poverty of Muslim peasantry could be reduced.
Seeing that the Muslims were backward in trade and commerce, in which the Hindu-Marwaris enjoyed a near monopoly, they encouraged them to engage in commercial activities. Some of them felt that with the capture of the Indian market by the industrially produced goods from Europe, the Indian industries were being ruined. So they emphasised the need to boycott foreign goods and use swadeshi goods. Some like Abul Hussain mentioned that a socialistic economy alone could provide a solution to the crisis posed by imperialism and capitalism. By this they meant a classless society where factors of production were commonly owned. There would be re-distribution of wealth with the intention of attaining some parity in income. They inspired the people to fight for their rights against those who oppressed and exploited them.

The attitude of the Muslim intelligentsia has been studied here from two angles — their reaction towards the zamindari system and moneylending operations and their attitude towards the overall economic system in general. They were convinced that the zamindari system and the system of rural credit had a great impact on contemporary society and economy. The common people, faced with economic crisis, lived in abject poverty.

Muhammad Maniruzzaman Islamabadi (1874-1950) was not only a popular writer, but was also a journalist and an orator. He was associated with political and social service activities. In 1920, he joined the Khilafat movement. As a member of the Indian National Congress he joined the Civil Disobedience movement. He was also associated with the Krishak Praja movement in the 1930s. He discussed the economic misery of the people and the exploitation of Hindu moneylenders in many of his works. He wrote that everyday, on an average, the property of more than three hundred indebted Muslims were sold off at auctions to pay off their debts and it was the Hindus who were buying up these properties. Consequently, in the villages inhabited by Muslims, Hindu settlements were coming up. He blamed this economic plight of Muslims on their lack of thrift and foresight. In his ‘Anjumane-ulma o samaj sanskar’42 he said there were two reasons for this. One was their propensity to get embroiled in unnecessary legal battles, so that all their property was sold off to pay their debt. The other was the heavy expenses they incurred in conspicuous expenditure like the weddings of their children. Consequently, their bankruptcy was inevitable43. Islamabadi felt that if they could avoid these then there would be a change in their condition. For this, he felt, rigid social control over their social life was necessary.

Looking for reasons for the economic backwardness of contemporary Muslim society, Islamabadi found it in the apathy of the Muslims towards trade and commerce. He said that Islam allowed such activities if conducted honestly. In his essay ‘Samaj samskar’(reform of society), he advised the Muslim community to take part in trade. He said that it was a matter of concern for the Muslim community that non-Muslims had established a near monopoly over such activities. Almost no Muslims were to be found in the professions of blacksmiths, goldsmiths, potters, cattle rearers, fishermen and such others. He advised the educated and respectable Muslims to develop a respect for all types of work, take up such professions and accumulate money.

42Published in 1326 B.S.
43Islamabadi, Muhammad Maniruzzaman, 'Anjumane-ulma o samaj sanskar'(ulemas and social reform), Al-Islam, Asar, 1326 B.S., pp.160-162.
Islamabadi noted much later that defects in the land revenue system were also partly responsible for economic deterioration. In Ulema and Peasant Conference held probably in 1939 in the Chittagong south sadar district, he outlined some proposals in his presidential address for the removal of these defects.

He suggested that the zamindari system should be abolished; but since this was both difficult and time-consuming process, other measures needed to be taken such as; launching of a movement for reduction of rent; cancellation of abwabs; waiving of rent during natural calamities; fixing the minimum price of jute etc. The government should also set up agricultural banks and provide agricultural loans; provide medical facilities; construct shallow canals and; exempt the ryot-tenants from chowkidari tax. Islamabadi also appealed to the people to avoid wasting money on weddings and legal battles. Instead of going to courts to settle each dispute, he advocated recourse to arbitration. He advised them to engage not only in agriculture but also in small business and use only those goods which were produced in the country.

In his presidential address he said further, while explaining the aim of the conference, that the peasants, workers, blacksmiths and potters were very poor. Their only aim in life was to ensure the comfort of others through hard work. In the changing world there was no change in their lives. In this connection, he said that the aim of the peasant conference and the peasant movements was to open the eyes of the peasants and workers and remove their misconceptions and show them the means and the methods by which they could break out of the vicious circle of poverty and lead a life of relative prosperity.

In his opinion there could be an end to their misery only when they realised that zamindars, taluqdars, moneylenders and the foreign traders were exploiting them and united to fight against this exploitation. Through meetings, conferences and sabhas, he felt, the ryots could be made aware of their condition. He further observed that, agents of zamindars and moneylenders would pretend as if they were sincere in their efforts to unite the Muslims; Muslims spies and insincere maulavis would use religion to lead them in the wrong direction; zamindars, traders and moneylenders would tempt the educated Muslim youth with prospects of jobs and rank them against the ryots and workers. He warned the common people to beware of all these. Islamabadi also noted with regret how the intrusion of western influence had ruined the handicrafts industry, increased unemployment and enhanced the misery of ryots.

About the Bengal ryots he said that, out of a total population of 5 crores, 4.5 crores were workers and landless peasants and a peasant cultivated upto 1 acre of land. By selling his crop he had to pay the rent to zamindars and taluqdars, repay his debt to the moneylender at a high rate of interest, buy clothes, plough animals, seeds and meet other expenses.

It was the duty, in his opinion, of all educated men to think about how the poor peasants could survive on so little. Besides, they also had to bear the expenses of the legal suits.

44Islamabadi, M.M., 'Abhibhasan'(welcome address), op.cit.
45ibid., pp.3-5.
46ibid., p.7.
brought against them by the zamindars and moneylenders. He appealed to them to help in preventing the ruin of the peasantry. In his opinion, zamindars collected from peasants, as rent Rs 37 crores annually. Out of this, they paid only Rs 3 crores 10 lakhs to the government. The rest they kept for themselves. Thus, their demands far exceeded those of the government and added greatly to the burden of the peasantry. In his novel ‘Abdullah’ published in 1920, Kazi Imdadul Hoque portrayed the economic exploitation of poor Muslims by the moneylender class. He cited the case of Madan Gaji who took loan from the moneylender Digambar Ghosh at the time of the marriage of his son Sadeq. Over the years the interest accumulated. There were three successive years of crop failures and he could not repay the debt. Digambar’s son Janardan wanted to build a garden-house on the land where Madan’s homestead stood. Janardan came in a bamboo-cart to get control over the land. Madan repeatedly appealed to be spared. The village headman took Madan aside and appealed on his behalf but failed to convince Janardan Ghosh. As a result, Sadeq jumped into the river and Madan Gaji fainted in grief.

In Rasulpur, an expanding village inhabited by well-off Hindu householders, there were some Muslim families who were once well-off but whose property had subsequently been mortgaged to the Hindu moneylenders against debt. In Palashdanga and other neighbouring villages lived many Muslim peasants. The major part of their income was being pocketed by the moneylenders. Whatever was left the peasants used, to meet the expenses of part of the year. For the remaining part of the year, they again borrowed from moneylenders.

From this, the misery of contemporary Muslim society becomes evident, which Imdadul Hoque not only observed but tried to portray in his works. He blamed the moneylending system for this and was extremely vocal against this.

The poverty of the common people was the theme of the works of yet another contemporary writer, Abul Hussain. He repeatedly commented on the poverty of the people in a country, rich in natural resources, where there was no scarcity of food or of any other necessities. In his essay ‘Amader rajniti’, he observed that this poverty was primarily due to the

47 ibid., pp.8-9.
48 He said - Amar galaye pade damada bar kare fele dan katta. Amar jeno ar eh sayena go, amar jeno aar sayena. Hayre (Allah), ami kachcha-bachcha, bou-jhi niye konne ge'danrabo, ogo apnara daya kare amar hoye babuke duto kata kande'take out the shackles from my feet and neck master. I cannot tolerate anymore, I cannot tolerate anymore. Oh allah! where will I go and stand with my children, wife and womenfolk, you all please say a few words in my favour to the master), Kaji Imdadul Hoque rachanabali (collected works), vol.I, Kaji Imdadul Hoque, p.36.
Kazi Imdadul Hoque (1882-1926) was born in Gadaipur village in Khulna. He studied in Khulna district school, Calcutta madrasa and Presidency college. He did his M.A. in English. After completing B.T. from Dacca Teachers Training college, he became inspector of Mymensingh school and Headmaster of Calcutta Training school. He taught in Calcutta and Dacca madrasa. He was the first secretary of board of intermediate and secondary education of Dacca. He was rewarded with the title ‘Khan Bahadur’. His works include ‘Abdullah’, ‘Nabi kahini’, ‘Moslem jagate bijnan charcha’ (science study in Muslim world) etc.
49 ibid., p.38.
50 Published in 1337 B.S.
fact that the lives of the people were governed, not by their own needs but by the greed of a parasitical class of exploiters who lived off the labour of others. The state, from the ‘Brahmanical’ till the British period, had helped certain classes to acquire importance and power. It had never been geared towards the greater interests of the common people at large. It had not helped them to develop their personalities\textsuperscript{51}.

Abul Hussain specifically said that the Muslims were greatly dependent on the Hindus for everything. The Hindu zamindars, businessmen, traders and moneylenders had kept them subservient. Even the British rulers were unable to protect the Muslims from the Hindus. So he felt that the Muslims were not benefiting from their policy of separatism.

The Muslim maulavis had issued fatwas stating that Islam forbade interest. But they suggested no ways by which the poor Muslims could be freed from this curse. In his essay ‘Nishedher birambana’\textsuperscript{52}, he criticised this situation and advised how to get rid of this situation. He said that the Muslims would have to be saved from moneylenders and the vicious cycle of debt and interest payment. Otherwise, Muslims would either be destroyed or they would retaliate by revolting. In this respect the observed, Hindus too had some responsibilities. They should take the initiative and involve the Muslims in joint production societies, joint buying and selling societies and joint industrial societies\textsuperscript{53}.

Abul Hussain also discussed some of the laws enacted by the British which had an adverse impact on the Muslims like the \textit{waqf}\textsuperscript{4} law and the law of inheritance. According to the \textit{waqf} law, the Muslims could make their property \textit{waqf} for their successors. But the British cancelled these sorts of \textit{waqfs}. Consequently, innumerable such \textit{waqf} properties changed hands. Successors often quarrelled among themselves over property. They frequently fought legal battles with their co-sharers over the division of their properties. The result was economic ruination.

In another essay ‘Banglar balsi’ (tackles of Bengal)\textsuperscript{55} he warned the simple peasants about the hollow promises of democracy uttered by zamindars and taluqdars. He wrote that, zamindars should not talk about introducing the western type democracy in the country because they could neither live with the ryots nor understand their struggle. The latter struggled hard to feed all and wanted equal rights. Yet, they were ill-fed and always in debt. Such humiliating and unequal situation could not continue for long\textsuperscript{56}.

\textsuperscript{52}Published in 1333 B.S.
\textsuperscript{53}Hussain, Abul, ‘Nishedher birambana’(problems of prohibitions), \textit{op.cit.}, p.37.
\textsuperscript{54}see glossary.
\textsuperscript{55}Published in 1328 B.S.
\textsuperscript{56}He said — ‘He jamidar. Tumi ki bujhbe se kartabya? Tumi paschimer democracy ke hubuhu ene bashie dio na. Tumi manush hishebe chashar sange bashe jete parbe ki? .... Tumi chashar klesh bodh karte paro ki? Jadi eshaber konotir shakti tomar na thake, tabe aar democracy-r katha tumi bolo na — bhooter janya take byay kare tomar praja banglar chashake aar bibrata karo na. Tumi tahale bujhbe banglar chashake balsi kare tolbar jogar karecho ... Tara manush hoye sammant adhikar pete chaye. Tara buker rakta diye utpadan kare sakalke kharoachhe kintu nije anshane, ardhashane rin jarjarito hoye udibigno rajani pohachche. Eh asaman abasthya aar katodin?”(Oh zamindar. Will you understand that duty? Don’t drown us by blindly imposing western democracy. Can you sit with the ryot like a human being? ... can you feel the ryots’ suffering? If you don’t have the strength for any of these, then don’t
Abul Hussain had great sympathy for the ryots and the workers. He was pained by the fact that poor peasants who struggled to produce crops, had no right to enjoy them. The crops went to the zamindar's granary. He feared that such a situation could not continue for long. The ryots and the workers, pushed beyond a point, would one day rise. They would revolt against the exploiting zamindar class. In his essay 'Krishi biplaber suchana' he said, there could be no peace till the workers received their due wages; the zamindars did their best to restore the fertility of the soil and; the ryots became free in every sense of the term. Till this happened the threat of revolution would always be there. He said further that, if ever the Indian peasants were inspired by the idea of 'Bolshevism' then the zamindars would be totally responsible for this. He held that it was the zamindari class which was gradually driving the peasants towards an inevitable resistance. In fact, he welcomed such a situation. He thought it to be the duty of the peasants to resist the oppression of zamindars.

Abul Hussain also criticised foreign exploitation of the country. He said that though the country was rich in natural resources and its people hard-working, all the benefits were being appropriated by aliens. He observed that, since India's agricultural production did not suffice to meet her needs, she had to depend on the exploiters for most of her wants. In his essay 'Frederick List o tatkalin Germany' he said that, to repay her economic debt and regain economic independence, all types of indigenous artisan industries necessary to produce commodities indispensable for survival should be encouraged. A dependent economy drained the life-blood of the people. Elaborating himself further, he said that industrialization had advanced in Western countries. As a result of this, England was selling her manufactured goods in India to the detriment of the latter's indigenous industries. Indians began to exchange agricultural products with foreign industrial goods. As a result, the pressure on agriculture increased. So he considered western industrialism harmful for Indians.

In fact, he considered industrialization of the western type harmful for innumerable people of the world. It had led to the degeneration of the human race. Man had become lifeless...
and a slave to machines, the mill owners had in fact turned the workers into machines. It had killed the souls of the latter. He said industrialism had caused deterioration at all levels of society. In the modern world, the mill-owners were trying to kill the ‘inner man’ in the workers. It was the struggle of the ‘inner self’ of the latter to exert itself that found reflection in ‘Socialism’, ‘Collectivism’ and ‘Bolshevism’. According to him, ‘Bolshevism’ was a reaction to industrialism.

Abul Hussain then observed that, one main reason for poverty of Bengal Muslims was laziness and lack of enterprise among the young generation. They neither tried hard nor were enthusiastic about utilizing the natural resources of the country. He told the Muslim youth in an essay ‘Tarun Muslim’ (young Muslims) that Bengal rice and jute occupied an important place in the world market. The young generation instead of trying to utilize this favourable situation were, more concerned about procuring jobs. Instead of using their power, ability and knowledge in some enterprise, the educated youth were keen on getting clerical jobs.

He said that, there was no scarcity of raw materials in Bengal. But they were taken out of the country and finished products from abroad were sold here for which, the people paid huge sums of money. He further pointed out that, at one time the cotton and the muslin produced from that cotton was very famous. But all that was gone. If the Bengali youth, who were keen on services, concentrated on agriculture then economic poverty of the Bengalis could be reduced. The cultivation of fishes or pisciculture, like that of cotton, could also contribute towards economic recovery. There was a great demand for fishes in Bengal and they could become an important item of trade. He said that, if the Bengalis took no steps to enhance the resources or utilize them and continued to rely on nature then, no improvement would be possible. Besides, if the Bengali youth concentrated on cattle rearing and poultry farming then also, there could be good results. So he advised them to engage themselves in such activities. Abul Hussain also held unequal distribution of wealth responsible for the economic miseries of contemporary society. He said that there were a lot of similarities between socialism in Europe and Russia and the basic tenets of Islam. Muslim law of inheritance supported socialism. Islam never wanted concentration of resources in the hands of a few. In this connection, what he said in ‘Muslim culture o uhar darshanik bhitti’ (Muslim culture and its philosophical basis) is to be noted. He said that, the main reasons for disquiet among the common people were concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the widespread poverty. Islam had raised its voice against both. He advised that the wealthy should distribute wealth equally and the poor should become thrifty. In the modern world, the aim of European culture was to make all happy. The aim of Muslim culture was also that. It is clear from all these that, Abul Hussain believed in socialism. He was aware of the adverse effects of capitalist economy and tried to prove that capitalism was responsible for all social ills. He highlighted the evils of industrializations.
and showed how the working class was exploited. He showed how it had led to colonization and imperialism. The colonies were ruined economically to enrich the mother countries. Competition resulted in constant warfare causing great suffering to the common people.

Abul Hussain had, thus for the first time, raised some issues of great economic importance. Besides dealing with the issues of peasant poverty and the exploitation of moneylenders and zamindars he questioned some of the decisions of Muslim theologians on the ground that they, like the ban on Muslims taking interest on loans, constituted an obstacle to economic development. He blamed industrialization in western countries for the ruin of Indian indigenous industries. He suggested some proposals for the economic recovery of the Bengali Muslims. He sought the help of the educated and prosperous Hindus for this. He suggested joint production societies, joint buying and selling societies and joint industrial societies. Like Rabindranath Tagore he had firm faith in the co-operative principle. The impact of the idea of Bolshevism on his writing is evident from his observation on an impending revolution by the peasantry.

Citing reasons for the poverty of Bengal Muslim peasantry, another writer, Syed Ismail Hussain Siraji (1880-1931) observed that, though they cultivated and produced jute, a highly remunerative crop, they had no part in the jute trade. The English and the Hindu-marwari traders controlled this and made immense profits. He advised the Muslim peasants who were involved in jute production to unite and establish monopolistic control over this jute trade. The English in particular, should not be allowed to trade in jute. The Muslims should sell the jute in the foreign market. Thus the profits hitherto pocketed by aliens could be shared by Muslim peasants. This would, to some extent, alleviate their poverty.66

Siraji noted with regret that, apart from those in Chittagong and Dacca districts, the Muslims in other regions of Bengal were apathetic to trade and commerce. This, as well as the anomalies in the moneylending system, were greatly responsible for peasant poverty. Yet, he observed, the marwaris had managed within a span of 30 to 40 years to acquire immense success in commercial activities. In an essay entitled ‘Mochalmandiger daridra samashyar samadhan’ (solutions to problem of Muslims poverty)67 he warned the Muslim peasants that the marwaris were now trying to invest their commercial profits in jots and zamindaries. Since they had already invested greatly in usury business, they had been able to bring a large number of poor Muslim peasants under their control through the mechanism of debt. If such a situation continued for another 25 years then, the Hindus and the marwaris would come to exercise complete domination over the Muslims. The entire Muslim community would come to comprise of only workers, bearers, orderlies, chowkidars, menials, lathials and servants.68 Siraji felt that, to protect themselves from the oppression of the marwaris and the Hindus, the Muslims would have to concentrate on trade and commerce. In each commercial centre and district headquarter, companies should be opened with investments between 5 to 10 lakhs of Rupees. In order to enable even the poor people to buy some shares, the value of shares should be between 5 to 10

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67Published in 1330 B.S.
68Siraji, Syed Ismail Hussain, 'Mochalmandiger daridra samashyar samadhan', Soltan, Jaisthya 1330 B.S.
Rupees. This makes it clear that he was very sympathetic towards the welfare of the poor Muslims.

It may be mentioned here that, Siraji took an active part in the political movements. He was loyal to Surendranath Banerjee. He was active in the anti-partition struggle in 1905-06. He supported the Boycott and Swadeshi movements. He was pan-Islamist and anti-British in his attitude. He was imprisoned in 1909 for his anti-British propaganda and his book *Anal-Prabaha* (fire flow) was banned. He became a member of the Indian National Congress and took an active part in the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930.

Another contemporary writer, Sheikh Habibur Rehman, also condemned the acts of oppression and self-indulgence of the zamindars. He observed that, the zamindars had become so powerful that the tenants feared to take the help of law against them. They had no other alternative but to tolerate their oppression without resistance. In his essay ‘Jamindar o government’[^69] he observed that, it had become the fashion to criticize the government. Yet, the government itself committed no direct acts of oppression. On the contrary it always tried to curb such acts. So, while even a beggar could file a legal suit against it, all feared the zamindars who in most cases were very oppressive[^70].

In his opinion, the main reason for the misery of the common people was the oppression of zamindars. So, unless this could be remedied, not even the attainment of swaraj would help the common people. Here, Habibur Rehman was indirectly advising the Hindu leaders and those Hindus who were aspiring for swaraj to correct themselves. On the other hand, he was also staunchly supporting the British government.

In Nazrul Islam Muhammad Sufian’s novel 'Durbipak’[^71], there are also instances of the types of atrocities committed by the zamindars and moneylenders on the helpless common people. Even if there were crop failures, there was no remission of rent for the tenants. A poor peasant, Yaqub, once could not pay rent because of crop failure. But the zamindar would not remit his rent on the ground that if he failed to pay the revenue to the government, his zamindari would be auctioned off[^72]. In the end, he agreed to remit the rent after Yaqub’s mother gave her seven-year-old daughter to him. The girl later found her way to Calcutta. In this way, the peasant family was ruined. Added to this was the fact that Yaqub borrowed some money from Girish, the village moneylender, on the occasion of his marriage. But soon both quarrelled and Girish filed a suit against him. Yaqub failed to repay the money and was sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment. There was also the case of Ibrahim Mondal who, borrowed some money against interest payment during the famine, from Girish. Later, Girish went to court when Ibrahim failed to repay and bought up the latter's land *benami*. Similar other cases of atrocities committed by zamindars and moneylenders have also been described. This makes clear, the author’s indirect sympathy

[^69]: Published in 1332 B.S.
[^71]: Published in 1926.
[^72]: Sufian (1906-82) — born in Bogura, was a writer and an educationist. He taught in Rajsahi Teacher’s Training college. His novels include 'Durbipak', 'Jibaner jaijatra', etc.

Another contemporary writer Muhammad Abdur Rashid also thought deeply about the miserable condition of the Muslim society and its possible remedies. He too was pained, by the ruin of the common Muslim people due to the vicious cycle of debt. He held the moneylenders responsible for this since they charged interest at a very high rate. In order to save them from this, he suggested the setting up of co-operative banks in every village. In his essay 'Banga-Moslemer durabastha o tahar pratikar'\textsuperscript{73}, he wrote that, if banks were set up in every locality and in every village then, it would facilitate borrowing at very low rates of interest. Besides, arrangements could also be made to set up a fund in every village, from which the villagers could be given loans at low rates of interest. All these would reduce the dependence on moneylenders\textsuperscript{74}. These proposals of Abdur Rashid, for the improvement of the conditions of the Muslims were both constructive as well as intended towards securing the welfare of the people. Participation in trade and commerce could have helped in the alleviation of the misery of the Muslims. But, lack of adequate financial resources hindered this. It was unfortunate that in spite of the fact that, it was the Muslims who produced such commercial crops like jute and others which enriched the economy of Bengal, there was no improvement in their financial conditions. Seeking the reasons for the poverty of the Muslims Abdur Rashid said that, it was the moneylenders, who charged very high rates of interests, who constituted the greatest obstacle to economic development. Most of the moneylenders were Hindus while, Muslim moneylenders were very rare. The Muslims paid yearly Rs 60 to Rs 70 crores as interest to the moneylenders\textsuperscript{75}. Rashid believed that the money which the Muslims paid as interest charges should be retained within their community. But this would not be possible unless there was an increase in the number of Muslim moneylenders. When the poor Muslims needed money urgently they got no help, with or without interest, from the rich Muslims. In response to the \textit{fatwa} issued by the \textit{maulavis} that Islam forbade taking interest he said that, it was also the duty of the Muslims to ensure that their enemies did not become rich at their expense. Steps should be taken so that the Muslims did not have to borrow from the Hindus at high rates of interest\textsuperscript{76}. He advised the rich Muslims that, if they believed in the \textit{fatwas} they should lend money to their poor brothers without interest and retain the prestige of the brotherhood. Criticising the dictum of the \textit{maulavis} he said that, the Koran prohibited \textit{reba} or interest on interest. But generally, interest was not forbidden. Besides, Islamic law stated that interest was not illegal in \textit{dar-ul-harb}.

Rashid also blamed the poverty of the Muslims on some of their character traits. They wasted their money on such conspicuous consumption like elaborate weddings, legal suits, competitive buying of land, building luxurious houses and others. He firmly believed that unlike the Muslims, the Hindus were very thrifty. He advised the former to give up

\textsuperscript{73}Published in 1335 B.S.
\textsuperscript{74}Rashid, Muhammad Abdur, 'Banga-Moslemer durabasthya o tahar pratikar'\textsuperscript{\(1\)}(misery of Bengal Muslims and its remedy), \textit{Muazjin}, Baisakh, 1335 B.S., p.16, cited in Dr. Shahjahan Munir, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{75}Rashid, Muhammad Abdur, \textit{Mussalmander artha sankat o tahar pratikar}(financial problems of Muslims and its remedy), Calcutta 1936, p.6.
\textsuperscript{76}\textit{ibid.}, pp.12-13.
their wasteful habits. He also emphasised economic freedom which he felt was far more important than political independence. About swaraj he said that, many movements have been organized for swaraj or 'self-government'. But no such movement had been organized for freeing the peasantry from poverty. There was no need for swaraj. What was necessary was economic well-being. Rashid’s thoughts give the impression of a liberal mind. He was not much influenced by religious taboos.

Muhammad Lutfar Rehman (1889-1936) emphasised the importance of self-dependence for economic development. He believed that the import of foreign goods was harmful for the economy and stressed on self-production of all necessities. His novel ‘Raihan’ clearly expresses his economic ideas. Here he said that, if all the people of the country resolved to use only indigenous goods then it would benefit all. If the money spent on imports could be kept within the country then, the country would become powerful.

Mention must be made of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976), one of the greatest literary figures of this century. Though most of his works were written after our period, in some of his early writings there is ample evidence of his ideas on agrarian issues.

In his essay ‘Dharmaghat’ (strike) he depicted the miserable plight of peasants. Regarding the exploitation of poor peasants by moneylenders, he said that former worked hard throughout the year. Yet, he was ill-fed and ill-clothed. It was the moneylenders who lived a life of luxury on the fruits of the labour of the peasants. He reiterated the same thing in his poem ‘Gariber byatha’ (sorrows of the poor). In his opinion, the ill-fed, ill-clothed, peasant families, denied any sort of medical help, would be satisfied with even the leftovers of the rich. In another poem called ‘Chashi’ (ryot), his sympathy for the peasants, whose hard labour provided the rich with all the amenities of a luxurious life, is quite evident. In the poem ‘Chor-dakat’ (thieves and robbers), he wrote that there was no point in hating the thieves and robbers. Actually the king, the rich, the mill-owners and the zamindars, were all robbers who robbed the common people of all that was rightfully theirs. Nazrul was contemptuous of the moneylenders and zamindars.

He raised his voice against the exploitation of the weak by the strong in his poem

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77 ibid., p.18.
78 Published in 1919.
79 Rehman, Muhammad Lutfar, Raihan, 3rd ed., Dacca 1978, p.82.
80 In his Yugabani, published in 1922.
82 Rekhecho je chal morai bendoche, charti tarai pel, (the rice you have stored in the barn, if he gets a handful of it) / ah-ona mar bhat kheyte je bancha esab ehhale! (he can survive eating it even without salt) / peshak tomar tarbetar neiko eder tana, (they have no yearning for good clothes) / je-kapare mocho / eder tao mele nai! (they don’t even get those clothes with which you polish your shoes), ibid., p.298.
83 Chashike keu chasha bale (by calling a peasant a peasant) / koriyo na ghrina, (don’t hate him) / banchtam na amra keho (son of us would have lived) / oe se krishan bina’ (without the peasant), ibid., p.299.
84 In his ‘Samyabadi’ (equality) published in 1925.
85 ‘Bipannader anno thakhiya phole mahajan-bhunsi (depriving the poor of his food the bellies of moneylenders swell) / nirannader bhite nash kore jamidar chare juri’ (by grasping the lands of the hungry, zamindars drive carriages), Najrul rachanabali, vol.2, p.12.
'Fariad' (appeal for justice)\(^{86}\) (revolt). He preached revolt and the ultimate victory of the weak and the exploited\(^{87}\). He advocated equality and the end of exploitation. In his poem 'Daridra more paramatiya' ('the poor are my best relatives') he expressed his intention to arrange for education, medical facilities, food and clothing for the poor.

Mention must be made here of two remarkable essays written by Nazrul early in his career — 'Mandir-o-masjid'\(^{88}\) and 'Hindu mussalman'\(^{89}\). These were written in the journal Ganabani, the mouth-piece of the communists in Bengal. Written at the time (1926) when there were communal riots in Kanpur, Calcutta and other parts of the country, these essays are remarkable in that they speak of the author's faith in communal harmony. He blamed both the Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist leaders for such mindless violence. It was the common people — both Hindus and Muslims — who were the ultimate sufferers. Nazrul was a close friend of Muzaffar Ahmad and associated with the Workers and Peasants Party\(^{90}\).

Nazrul's love for the exploited and the deprived knew no bounds. He inspired them with the message of truth and justice and repeatedly asked them to unite for their rights. In his poem 'Sramik-majur' ('workers and labourers'), Nazrul protested against the life of ease and luxury led by the rich at the expense of the labour of the workers and labourers\(^{91}\). Through the power of revolution he tried to destroy all ills and wrongs in society. Through the establishment of a socialistic economy he tried to succeed in his aim of exploitation-free society.

Making some general observations another writer Abul Mansur Ahmed emphasised the importance of boycotting foreign clothes and use of indigenous khaddar. This was the only way in which economic freedom of the native people could be ensured. In his essay 'Khaddar paribo keno' ('why wear indigenous clothes')\(^{92}\) he stated clearly that it was the use of khaddar alone which could remove the problems of food scarcity in the country and the misery of the poor. It was only natural that the common people should concentrate on spinning and weaving of this cloth. But it was to be regretted that the people had forgotten all these and were filling up the pockets of the Manchester and marwari mill-kinders.

\(^{86}\) Janagane jara jongsame shoshe tara mahajan raye (those who suck the blood of people like leeches they are moneylenders) / santan sama pale jara jani tara jamidar naye (those who rear peasants like children they are not zamindars) / matite jader thake na charan (those whose feet are not on the ground) / matir malik tanharai hai (they become the owners of land), in 'Sarbabar' (musical flow); published in 1333 B.S., ibid., vol. 5, 1st half, Dacca, 1984, pp. 7-9.

\(^{87}\) Jai nipriita pran (long live the oppressed) / jai naba abhijan (long live new adventure) / jai naba utthan (long live awakening), ibid., p. 41.

\(^{88}\) Islam Kazi Najrul, 'Mandir-o-masjid', Ganabani, 1st year, no. 3, 26 August, 1926.

\(^{89}\) 'Hindu mussalman', ibid., 1st year, no. 4, 2 September, 1926.

\(^{90}\) Nazrul's role in the Workers and Peasants Party has been discussed earlier.

\(^{91}\) Je barite thako, tar prati inte rakta makhano kar (why is each brick of your house covered with blood)? / hriday thakite, dekkhi bodonaye kanpiya uttha kathi (if you have a heart it would have been heavy with the suffering around you) / majur tomar majuri kariya nazrama kato paye (how much wage does a labour get working for you)? / chokche tomar lajja thakile mare jeto lajja ye (if you had shame you would have died of shame) / ... moder prapya aday karibo, labji shakto karo (we will get our dues, strengthen your wrist) / garar hathuri dharechi, ebar bhangar hathuri dharo (so long we held the hammer to create, now we will hold it to destroy), ibid., p. 19-21.

\(^{92}\) Published in 1330 B.S.
owners. Consequently, the clothes produced by the Bengal weavers remained unsold. The writer had great faith in the basic ideas of the Swadeshi movement. Sadat Ali Akhand was aware of the lack of awareness among the Muslims about trade and commerce. He observed that, the Hindu youth had earned economic well-being by opening insurance companies. The Muslims however, showed no enthusiasm in this respect. This was to be regretted. He said that, the Hindus were gradually capturing the Indian market. Let alone opening such companies, the Muslim youth did not even figure among the agents. He said that there was a considerable number of educated but unemployed Muslim youth. Many of them, because of a lack of capital, had become burdens on their poor guardians. If these persons engaged themselves in such businesses, they could earn some money and improve their economic condition.

This trend in economic thinking continued even after the end of our period, well into the 1930s and 1940s. Many of the Muslim writers continued to express their economic ideas in their essays, poems, and novels. Some of their works show that they were greatly influenced by the Russian Revolution and the ideas of socialism. In the 1920s many of them became embroiled in the controversy over the amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. In the debate in the Council, they generally took a pro-ryot stand.

9.4 Some general trends in agrarian thinking of the Muslim intelligentsia

The agrarian perceptions of the Muslim intelligentsia did not over the years remain separated from their political beliefs and became gradually obscured as some sort of duality in their attitudes becomes visible. They were concerned mainly with the fates of Muslim zamindars and peasants. Where their concern was the former they on the whole, blamed the Hindu officials in the zamindari estates for ruining their masters. Again, excepting in the early works of Masarraf Hussain, the oppressors of Muslim peasants were almost always Hindu zamindars and moneylenders. They were silent on the fact that the condition of the Hindu peasantry was no better. Nor were the Muslim zamindars and officials less oppressive. They were not concerned with the multitudes of Hindu peasants and did not suggest any means by which their condition could be improved.

Yet, simultaneously many of them realised that without the help of the economically better-off Hindus, the Muslims could not prosper. So, they often appealed to the Hindus, particularly the prosperous Hindu merchants and traders, to involve the Muslims in co-operative economic ventures. They, particularly the early 20th century intelligentsia, offered some suggestions for the overall economic recovery of the Muslims. Seeing that the

95 Their participation in the debate in the Council has been discussed earlier.
Muslims were backward in trade and commerce, in which marwaris enjoyed a monopoly, they encouraged them to engage in commercial activities. They advised the Muslim jute cultivators for instance, to boycott foreign goods and use indigenous products in the manufacture of which, they expected their co-religionist to take an increasing part. There was a general dissatisfaction with colonialism and capitalism. There was also a growing belief among some that, a socialistic type of economy alone could solve the crisis posed by imperialism and capitalism.

The Muslim intelligentsia, like the Hindu counterparts, failed on the whole to provide a plan for agrarian recovery. Without this there could be no real improvement in the condition of the peasants. Their agrarian perceptions were primarily limited to highlighting the miserable conditions of the Muslim peasantry and seeking reasons for it. They dealt with issues like agrarian relations, the role of moneylenders in the rural economy, the existing class antagonism and the exploitation of the upper classes. But they ignored one vital aspect of the agrarian economy. They did not deal with issues relating specifically to agriculture on which the whole rural structure was based. Vital issues like agrarian yield, tools and techniques of production, adoption of scientific methods of farming and such others were overlooked. Most of them failed to suggest any positive steps as to how agricultural production could be improved. They did not comment on the age-old techniques of agrarian production adopted by Bengal peasants. There seemed to be a general lack of awareness among the intelligentsia about how agriculture had been revolutionised elsewhere in the world, particularly in Europe. So, they could not suggest ways by which western scientific methods could be applied in this country to remove agrarian backwardness.

This shortcoming may have stemmed from the fact that most of them lacked any sort of practical experiences of agriculture. They had little first-hand knowledge of agriculture. That is probably why they failed to realise that without changes in agrarian techniques, increase in productivity, provision for easy credit, better system of agricultural marketing, condition of peasantry could not improve.