Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

An attempt has been made in this work to survey the evolution and development of the agrarian question in the perception of the Bengali intelligentsia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Periodization is understandably difficult. Yet, 1859 provides a meaningful starting point for this study. The Rent Act passed in that year was the first decisive intervention by the government in rural agrarian relations. The year 1928 may be taken as the suitable point of termination for this work, as the amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed in that year. This was a significant landmark in the history of land legislation.

However, it has not been possible to restrict the scope of this work strictly to this period. This study effectively begins from 1831, since it was the year in which Rammohun Roy gave evidence before the Select Committee of the British House of Commons examining the question of the renewal of the Company’s Charter due in 1833. This evidence outlines his economic ideas. He analysed in this connection the working of the agrarian economy of Bengal. This was the first comprehensive presentation of the agrarian question.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the modern intelligentsia in Bengal. The word ‘intelligentsia’ is of Russian origin and gained popular usage from 1860 onwards. The colonial intelligentsia, by whatever name they are called (‘elite’/ ‘western-educated’/ ‘modern intellectuals’) are recognised as playing a crucial role in their society and polity. Though ‘intelligentsia’ and ‘intellectuals’ are often used to denote the same group, they are distinct from one another. All intellectuals are members of the intelligentsia but not vice-versa. ‘Intellectuals’ may be defined as a group composed of writers, public men, journalists and thinkers. This definition is more precise than Edward Shils’ which included ‘civil service, journalism, law, teaching and medicine’.

These professions require either intellectual certification or intellectual skills but, not all these professions allow its members to function in society as intellectuals. Groups described by Shils as ‘intellectuals’

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2Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi, ‘Notes on the role of the intelligentsia in colonial society: India from mid-
should properly be termed ‘intelligentsia’. The former constitute a subset of the latter, distinguished by their special role as transmitters of ideology.

The intelligentsia in Russia had a radical character, often questioning the established order, which was lacking in their counterparts in Bengal. The latter were a product of the land settlement and western education introduced by the British. One, however, cannot exclude the traditional learned professions from the intelligentsia; in the ideological-cultural realm they sometimes played a crucial role as also in nationalist politics. The intelligentsia were chiefly in the ‘service sector’, not physically involved in material production. While considering the intelligentsia as a collectivity, we should remember that it was far from being homogeneous.

The Western-educated in the late 19th century included few Muslims among their peers, due to factors partly connected with the socio-economic pattern of post-Permanent Settlement Bengal. But during the 1880s and 1890s, the government tried to remove the educational disparity between Hindus and Muslims at the initiative of some Muslim leaders. Gradually, a western-educated class emerged, even though the vernacular educated section continued to exercise considerable influence. Some of them were prolific writers.

In our period, momentous changes took place in Bengal’s agrarian economy and the countryside. They were partly the outcome of the overall British economic policy. To maximize land revenue they introduced the Permanent Settlement. It simply defined the zamindar-government relation. Deteriorating land relations and recurrent famines, revealing the maladies in the agrarian economy, despite apparent signs of prosperity — like, increase of cultivation, expansion of market for agricultural produces and rising agricultural prices prompted enactment of Rent Act of 1859 to bring about relative stability among the cultivating classes and restrict grounds for rent enhancement. The Act inaugurated prolonged landlord-peasant conflict over issues of occupancy rights and rent enhancement. The rent struggles in Bengal in the 1870s and the Bihar famine of 1873-74 convinced the government of the imperfections in the Act. After much deliberation, the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed in 1885 which only partly resolved the landlord-peasant conflict over the issues of occupancy rights and rent enhancement.

In the meantime, rural Bengal came under the influences of a wider capitalist economy. The number and range of the exchanges in which rural people participated, increased. The colonial state, directly through its effects on the pace of monetization in the indigenous economy and on population growth, initiated many economic changes. Destruction of traditional cottage industry made the increasing population more dependent on agriculture. Lack of non-agricultural avenues of investment and railways brought about significant changes. The inheritance law split up zamindari properties. Rack-renting and usury became the main means of accumulation of wealth. There was increasing commercialization. Credit needs of the peasants increased as also their dependence on moneylenders. The majority of the ryots were owners of small jots, many of whom cultivated the lands of others as sharecroppers or as day labourers. Prices of foodgrains went on increasing without

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bringing about simultaneous increase in the income of the ryots. The consequence was increasing impoverishment. Agriculture remained stagnant.

These trends continued well into the 1920s. Population continued to increase. In the face of rising prices and exploitation, land under sharecropping and the number of sharecroppers and day labourers increased. Small farm-owning landholders also suffered. The question of giving occupancy right to the sharecroppers became crucial. In 1928, an act amending the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed. Three issues had become crucial: the question of giving occupancy right to sharecroppers and the under-ryots and giving occupancy ryots the right of land transfer.

New researches in the last decades, have added immensely to our knowledge of the changes affecting rural Bengal throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and the reasons for such changes. It is not intended here to add any new knowledge or information in this regard. Among the significant developments in the agrarian economy and the rural countryside of Bengal were deteriorating land relations; peasant resistance; increasing commercialization which forcibly involved the peasants into market relations through the mechanism of debt; increasing impoverishment and ruination of the peasantry; landlessness; increase in the number of sharecroppers; static agriculture etc. Notable among the works which contributed to broader debates about agrarian changes in Bengal in the period under study and have been of great help are those of Sirajul Islam⁴, B.B. Chaudhuri⁵, Ratnalekha Ray⁶, Partha Chatterjee⁷, Sugato Bose⁸, Asok Sen⁹ and M. Mufakharul Islam¹⁰. The works of Sugato Bose and Partha Chatterjee, in particular, have been immensely helpful in reconstructing a narrative on the major agrarian developments taking place in the Bengal countryside in the course of our period.

What has been attempted here is an analysis of the broad changes affecting Bengal's agrarian economy, to put into a proper perspective the intelligentsia's perception of them. It is quite possible that in the process some of the vital developments, highlighted by recent researches, may have been left out. By way of an explanation, it may be observed that, this study intends to analyse the agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia and not agrarian developments that took place as such.

Agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia has not yet been chosen as a separate subject of study. No other comprehensive account of this has appeared so far. This work is a ten-

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⁷Chatterjee, Partha, *op. cit.*
tative step in that direction. The economic ideas of some of the eminent intellectuals of the period like Rammohun Roy and Romeshchandra Dutt in particular, have been analysed by some scholars. Some have also analysed the attitudes of the intelligentsia, to some of the significant events taking place in the rural countryside like the indigo rebellion\textsuperscript{11} and the rent struggle in 1873-74\textsuperscript{12}. But the focus has not been on their agrarian ideas. One probable exception is Amalendu De's \textit{Chirasthayi bandobasto o bangali buddhijibi}\textsuperscript{13} (Permanent Settlement and the Bengali intelligentsia) where, the scholar has studied the reaction of some 19th century intellectuals towards the Permanent Settlement. However, the intelligentsia's reaction to issues related specifically to agriculture has not been studied. Here, this reaction to agrarian issues has been studied from two angles. We have first analysed their reactions to land settlements, agrarian relations, the rights of the peasantry, their condition, credit relations, tenancy legislation, the question of rent etc. On the other hand, the attitudes of the intelligentsia towards questions pertaining specifically to agriculture like techniques of agriculture, land productivity, organization of production, marketing etc. have also been studied. ‘Agrarian’ includes both agricultural production and the relations of production here. The ideas of the intelligentsia on both aspects have been studied.

The intelligentsia reacted to the agrarian issues at two levels. One was at the level of ideas through essays, letters, books etc. The other was at the level of actions which included, among other things, a coherent presentation of their views in the council and associations, organization of ryot \textit{sabhas} etc. An attempt has been made to analyse the various ways in which they analysed these issues, the shifts and changes in their attitudes and the actions that followed from their understanding of them. It is notable that some of the ideas of the intelligentsia are not actually supported by recent researches. Agrarian thinking of the intelligentsia may be divided into three broad phases — early nineteenth century, late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

The beginning of systematic agrarian thinking can be traced back to Rammohun Roy. The early 19th century intelligentsia with pro-ryot sympathies, including the Derozians, Akshay Kumar Dutta and the Tattvabodhini group, Iswarchandra Gupta, Harishchandra Mukhopadhyay and others blamed the Permanent Settlement for all agrarian problems. Even the conservative leader Radhakanta Deb with definite pro-landlord bias, observed that the government’s agrarian policy was ruinous for both classes. Their views on the major agrarian issues have been examined. It was only Rammohun who drew up a comprehensive plan of reform. While the intelligentsia down to the 1850s highlighted the maladies in the existing system, most of them failed to realise that without a change in the zamindari and \textit{patni} system, agrarian problems could not be solved.

Immediately after the enactment of Act X in 1859, it became evident that the Act was inadequate to cope with the new agrarian problems arising out of the changing agrarian relations in eastern and central Bengal. It satisfied neither the landlords nor the ryots. The

\textsuperscript{11}Kling, Blair B., \textit{The blue mutiny, the indigo disturbances in Bengal 1859-1862}, Calcutta, 1977;
\textsuperscript{12}Sen Gupta, K.K., \textit{Pabna disturbances and the politics of rent 1873-1885}, New Delhi, 1974.
\textsuperscript{13}Calcutta, 1981.
question of peasant right divided the intelligentsia into two factions in the late 19th century — pro-landlord and pro-ryot. Both forwarded their respective claims for an amendment of the Act. Widespread peasant unrest in the 1870s attracted intelligentsia's attention to the question of landlord-tenant relationship. Their reaction was not a homogeneous one. The liberal intelligentsia with pro-ryot sympathies, mostly engaged in the learned professions and government services, the Indian Association and a section of the press realising, that the deteriorating landlord-tenant relationship adversely affected agriculture and destroyed rural peace, tried to convince the government about the need for remedial action. In 1885, the Bengal Tenancy Act was enacted ending the marathon rent controversy. The views of some eminent men like Dinabandhu Mitra, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Lal Behari De, Sanjibchandra Chattopadhyay, R.C. Dutt and others on agrarian issues have been analysed. In the leading journals of the time like Hindoo Patriot, Som Prakash, Bengalee, Truth, Amrita Bazar Patrika and many others, articles were published on these issues reflecting the opinion of the intelligentsia. These have formed an important source of our information.

In the early 20th century, developments within and without affected the intelligentsia's thinking. The partition of Bengal led to a widespread political movement; its aim was to attain swaraj. It was Rabindranath Tagore, who for the first time tried to show that real swaraj could be attained only if the needs of the villages were fulfilled. But his message was mostly unheeded. An agrarian programme was generally absent in the Swadeshi movement. Influx of western ideas during and immediately after the First World War gave new dimension to intelligentsia thought processes, which was reflected in their literary creations. There was disillusionment and dissatisfaction. The repressive measures of the government, together with economic degradation, alienated the middle class. Their struggle assumed two forms — one was to fight the political and economic strangle-hold through the national movement and the other was the expression of the new thinking in literature which, would act as a vehicle of progress and constructive work of rebuilding native society and economy. The Russian Revolution and the popularity of Russian literature helped create an earnest effort to study the lives of the common people. There was a new awareness about some of the social and economic maladies. Social inequalities became the main target. Village and the agrarian society were the main themes. Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, the intelligentsia in early 20th century began to take keen interest in the agrarian sphere. Agrarian issues were discussed in leading journals.

In the 1920s, Bengal politicians became embroiled in the controversy in the legislature over the proposed amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act. Outside the confines of the legislature and political activities, some members of the intelligentsia like Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Pramatha Chaudhuri, Rathindranath Tagore and many others concentrated on problems related specifically to agriculture and its development. Many of them had first-hand agricultural experience and regularly expressed their ideas in some of the leading contemporary journals like Prabasi, Modern Review, Sabujpatra etc. An attempt has been made to study their views on agrarian issues.

I have also attempted to indicate some trends in the agrarian thinking of the intelligentsia
from the Muslim community (henceforth referred to as the Muslim intelligentsia). The period between 1818 and 1870 saw the spread of the Wahabi and Farazi movements in Bengal. By including some rudimentary sort of agrarian programme they 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. In the late 19th century, both the vernacular-educated and western-educated Muslims became interested in agrarian issues. Leaders like Abdul Lateef and Syed Ameer Ali took up the cause of the peasantry and the issue of peasant rights. The 1870s saw the beginning of modern Bengali Muslim literature. Most of these writers like Meer Masarraf Hussain, Nowsher Ali Khan Yusuf Zai, Muhammad Mahsenullah, Sheikh Abdus Sobhan and others were vernacular-educated. They were associated with various journals like Ajijan Nehar, Sudhakar, Hitakari, Hafez, Kohinoor etc. Though they did not want any change in the land system based on the Permanent Settlement, they tried to provide a coherent agrarian programme. This trend of thinking was continued in the early 20th century by writers like Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Kaji Imdadul Hoque, Abul Hussain, Kaji Nazrul and others. They wrote in journals like Hafez, Moslem Hitoishi etc. They tended to analyse the overall economic situation. In this study, only those writers whose works reflect their views on agrarian issues have been considered.

As to the arrangement of my material, Chapter I contains a discussion on the Bengali intelligentsia, their emergence, traits, composition and tendencies. Some of the recent definitions have also been considered. Chapter 2 deals with the major agrarian changes taking place in Bengal in the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, I have passed on to the core of my subject. The evolution of agrarian thinking in Bengal, beginning with Rammohun Roy, till the 1850s have been discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 deals with the intelligentsia's reaction to major agrarian issues in late 19th century; their reaction to Act X of 1859; circumstances leading to Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885; the varied reactions of the intelligentsia to the Act; their views on agrarian relations, commercialization and rural indebtedness. In Chapter 5, the agrarian perceptions of some eminent intellectuals in late 19th century, Vidyasagar, Sanjibchandra Chattopadhyay, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Romeshchandra Dutt have been discussed. Chapter 6 analyses the intelligentsia's perception of agrarian issues in the first quarter of the 20th century; their role in the enactment of the Amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1928; their attitude towards agrarian practices, techniques and other issues. The agrarian ideas of Rabindranath Tagore and Ramakrishna Chaudhuri, two of the most eminent litterateurs of the period, have been discussed in Chapter 7. It may be observed here that, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay have been left out of the purview of this work. The bulk of their writings, particularly those with rural settings or dealing with rural issues, were written after our period. Saratchandra's 'Palli samaj'(Village society) reveals his ideas on contemporary rural society and not on agrarian issues. Some trends in the agrarian thinking of the Muslim intelligentsia in our period have been discussed in Chapter 8.

I have examined the relevant official and unofficial records and used part of the abundant materials which I have found in the contemporary newspapers, journals, periodicals and other relevant literary works. Contemporary literary works of Bankimchandra Chattopad-
hyay, Romeshchandra Dutt, Meer Masarraf Hussain, Rabindranath Tagore, Pramatha Chaudhuri and others have proved useful. Articles, editorials, snippets and letters published in the newspapers also give us an insight into the attitudes of the intellectuals to the agrarian issues. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to get many of the contemporary newspapers. Some of them are available in the National Library, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and the Rabindra Bhavan Library, Santiniketan. It has thus been possible to get the relevant issues of *Tattvabodhini Patrika, Sangbad Prabhakar, Hindoo Patriot, Bengalee, Bangadarshan, Prabasi, Sabujpatra, Modern Review* etc. ‘The Report on Native Papers’ (Bengal) preserved in the record room of the West Bengal government secretariat have proved to be an useful substitute for newspapers otherwise not available. I have also referred to some recently published selections from newspapers and journals\(^\text{14}\).