Chapter 3

MAJOR AGRARIAN CHANGES: AS A CONTEXT OF THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF THE BENGALI INTELLIGENTSIA

In our period, significant changes took place in Bengal's agrarian economy and the rural countryside. They were partly the outcome of the overall British economic policy. These changes started to occur in the last quarter of the preceding century. Consequently, the agrarian economy which emerged in Bengal in the 19th century, was different in many respects from the one which the British had inherited after Plassey.

All these changes had partly to do with the determined policy of the British to maximize their revenue. Their aim was to extract as large a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue as was possible from their territories in India. With this aim in mind they introduced, after a series of experiments, the Permanent Settlement in Bengal in 1793.

Recent researchers have added immensely to our knowledge of the changes affecting rural Bengal, throughout the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century and the reasons for these changes. I do not intend to add here any new knowledge or information in this regard. My aim is to analyse briefly the broad changes affecting Bengal's agrarian economy as the contemporary Bengali intelligentsia viewed them. It is quite possible, that in the process, some of the vital developments highlighted by recent researches may have been left out. In this study the intention has been to analyse the agrarian perceptions of the Bengali intelligentsia. It is true though, that the validity of some of their ideas have been questioned by recent studies.
3.1 Institutional changes in the 19th century: The land Acts

The Permanent Settlement fixed the land revenue in Bengal permanently. Land was assessed at a very high rate. This, however, did not mean a complete freezing of land revenue, and the Company could secure an increase from time to time\(^1\). The largest part of the increase came from the resumption of 'rent free' lands. The Settlement recognised the zamindars as having an unqualified, proprietary right in the land. It gave them 'all property rights which could not be proved to be an encroachment on the prescriptive or customary rights of the tenants'\(^2\). The 'prescriptive' and 'customary' rights of the tenants were not defined. It simply defined the relation between zamindar and government, and left the subject of the relation between zamindar and ryot open for later legislation.

This system, on the one hand, created a class of landowners dependent on the political authorities for its existence and on the other, made suitable arrangements for easy collection of revenue. The zamindar's position thus underwent a change. They were now elevated to the position of landowners. A class of landholding peasantry became their tenants, who could be easily evicted by the zamindars on their failure to pay their rent on time or at the enhanced rate. Such evictions, however, only occasionally occurred.

The introduction of the Permanent Settlement caused considerable dislocation in the rural society, at least in the initial years. The zamindars had to pay 9/10ths of the rent collected from the ryots to the government as revenue. This was a rather steep rate at that time. In the early stages, many zamindars lost their zamindaries because of their inability to pay the revenue punctually. There was considerable confusion in revenue management\(^3\). The zamindars refused to put on record, in the form of pattas, anything which might be constructed as a limitation on their proprietary right, while the tenants failed to press their customary rights in courts. The early years was a period of favourable land-man ratio\(^4\). So, when the ryots refused to pay their rent or abandoned their holdings and moved elsewhere, many of the estates were sold for arrears of revenue. Many of the old zamindari families were ruined. Quite a few of the moneyed men from urban areas entered the zamindari class. This distress sale of lands resulted in the formation of a land market. Many of the new zamindars, men who had mainly made their profits through trade with the Company, were inexperienced in zamindari work. They preferred to leave the work of collection of revenue to the gomasthas and amlahs and live in the town. The old and new zamindars also created different types of rights in land to facilitate collection of revenue. Consequently, in the period following the introduction of the Permanent Settlement, different intermediary tenures were created. None of these intermediary tenure-holders were interested in the improvement of land. All they were interested in was to vigorously collect the land revenue.

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\(^4\)Sangbad Prabhakar, 5 Bhadra, 1264 B.S.
In order to enable the zamindars to collect their dues, the ‘Haftam’ and the ‘Panjam’ regulations were passed in 1799 and 1812 respectively. These empowered the zamindars with coercive powers to extract rent from the tenantry. The legal sanction given by another regulation in 1819, to the creation of patni tenures gave the zamindars further powers. Gradually, landed proprietors became more and more a closed community, admitting new members much less frequently than before. This was due largely to the reduction in the auction sales of lands.

Throughout the course of the 19th century, the condition of the ryots continued to deteriorate. Due to the gradual destruction of the traditional cottage industry, the increasing population became more and more dependent on agriculture. Not much improvement in land was undertaken. The influence of moneylenders was on the rise. The ordinary ryots depended on them for meeting the rental demand and for buying plough animals and seeds. They often mortgaged their lands to borrow and could never pay off their mortgage. As a result, a part of their land used to be transferred into the hands of the moneylenders.

In course of the 19th century, the government made two significant attempts to legally amend some of the provisions of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. One was the Rent Act or Act X of 1859 and the other was the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Among other considerations which prompted the government to interfere in the landlord-tenant relation was, its ultimate acceptance of the fact that the zamindars had failed to fulfil the expectations of the framers of the Permanent Settlement to emerge as a class of entrepreneurs. The government also felt the need to promote, peasant enterprise in agriculture by restricting the powers of the zamindars to rent enhancement. There was increasing rural tension between the landlords and the tenants. Recurring famines also revealed the frailty of the base of the local peasant economy.

After a prolonged period of non-intervention spanning over six decades, in 1859 the government enacted Act X. It was a liberal measure intended to remove some of the obvious abuses of the existing laws, particularly of the laws relating to distraint of crops and properties of the peasants for the realization of arrears of rent. The most important provisions were those relating to the rent question. Ryots were classified into three groups: ryots holding at fixed rates, occupancy ryots and non-occupancy ryots. Ryots holding land at a rate unchanged for twenty years before the date of rent-suits brought against them by zamindars belonged to the first group. Zamindars could not enhance their rent. Any ryot who had cultivated or held lands for a period of 12 years was an occupancy ryot, as long as he paid rent. Zamindars could enhance their rent only where cultivation had increased, or where the rent rate paid by them was lower than what was called the pargana rate (the prevailing rate for lands of a particular quality) or where the value of the produce

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5Regulation 7 or Haftam of 1799, also known as the Law of Distraint, permitted landlords to distrain crops for arrears of rent and compel the attendance of tenants at their courts.

Regulation 5 or Panjam of 1812, also known as the Law of Eviction, further empowered the zamindars to make whatever terms they wished, regardless of custom and, if necessary, by evicting old tenants and settling new ones.

had increased. These legal restraints would not apply where occupancy ryots agreed, by a written contract, to pay an enhanced rent. Ryots without the right of occupancy were not protected by the law. Zamindars could not any longer compel the attendance of peasants at their courts for the adjustment of rent, or for any other purpose. Distraint was illegal for arrears of more than one year's standing or where the peasants provided security for their payment. An attempt was thus made to bring about, relative stability among the cultivating classes and to restrict grounds for rent enhancement.

The Act of 1859 gave a section of ryots right of occupancy and protection from arbitrary eviction provided that, they paid rents to zamindars. Under section VI of the Act, 'every ryot who has cultivated or held land for a period of 12 years, has a right of occupancy in the land so cultivated or held by him, whether it be held under a pattah or not, so long as the pays the rent payable on account of the same'. Under section XVII of Act X of 1859, enhancement of rent was permitted on three grounds: First, if the ryots' rents were below the prevailing rate; second if the productive capacity or value of land had increased without otherwise than by the agency of the ryot; third, if the quantity of land held by the ryots proved on measurement greater than that from which rent had been previously paid.

The Act thus contained important provisions for the protection of occupancy ryots. Their rents could only be enhanced on certain specified grounds: they could only be ejected by a judicial decree or order and their crops could only be distrained for the arrears of one year. Further, in deciding the question of enhancement, the guiding line would be the principle of fair and equitable rent. "The court started with the presumption that the existing rate was fair and equitable till the landlord showed the contrary." Elasticity of the principle of fair and equitable rent was broad enough to cover almost all the problems arising out of rate of rent. But there was no definition in the Rent Act of what was fair and equitable. Consequently, the judges failed to apply the principle within the framework of the custom in determining the size of the zamindar's share in the increased value of produce. This led to all anomalies over rent rates.

The zamindar's right to enhance rent on the basis of increase in agricultural prices was a new one. The zamindar never had, before the passing of the Act of 1859, the right to enhance on the ground of a general increase of prices. Where the prices rose, the landlords suffered a loss since cash rents lagged behind the rise in prices. Act X therefore, permitted zamindars to enhance rent on the ground of increase in the value of produce. But it did not lay down a precise rule for the determination of the quantum of such increase.

Furthermore, the rent of a ryot was regulated by custom and not by competition. It was observed by the Rent commission that:

7For further details see Sanjibchandra Chatterjee, Bengal ryots: their rights and liabilities, Calcutta, 1864.
9Mukherjee, Radharaman, Occupancy rights, its history and incidents, Calcutta, 1919, p.79.
10Baden Powell, op.cit., p.644.
12Mukherjee, Radharaman, op.cit., p.87.
The principle of competition should not be accepted as applicable to the state of things in this country and should not be allowed to influence our legislation upon the subject in hand we entertain no doubt.\\n
In the period following the enactment of Act X, the landlords carried on a prolonged crusade against it. They resorted to illegal means in order to enhance rents and tried to deny occupancy status to those entitled to it and were very often successful in their efforts. Zamindars endeavoured to enhance rent because in most cases they needed an addition to their income. In view of the increase in the number of taxes and cesses imposed on them like the Public Works cess, road cess, chowkidari tax etc. increase in the rental income was necessary particularly, because landed income was often their sole means of survival. Two other reasons for the increase in rent rates were: peasant resistance to abwabs and apprehension that the new rent law would fix the rent rates once for ever. These led many zamindars to enhance rent rates as far as possible before such a thing happened. Act X neither gave the occupancy ryots any protection from incessant enhancement nor determined any rules for fixing an equitable rate of rent. The law also did not define the occupancy ryots' right to improvement. Nor did it specifically, determine his right in them in the event of his eviction.

The Rule of proportion enunciated in a Judgement of 1864, by which the size of the enhanced rent was determined, was often practically unworkable after the transference of rent suits from revenue officers to the civil courts in 1869 by Act VIII. The enhanced rent, the Rule laid down, bore to the previous rent the same proportion that the increased gross value of the produce bore to the previous gross value. The onus of establishing their case by full legal proof lay entirely on the zamindars. As long as the revenue officers tried such cases, zamindars won many of the suits despite their failure to provide all the necessary evidence because the revenue officers seemed to have entered upon the cases with the knowledge, that as a rule, prices of produce had risen very much. With the transference of the rent cases to the civil courts, the position of the zamindars became far more difficult. The courts, unlike revenue officers, did not assume the fact of the price rise but relied exclusively on the ordinary rules of evidence. Zamindars thus found it extremely difficult to prove, when the rent was previously fixed and what was at the time the gross value of the produce. Thus failing to enhance rent by legal means, the zamindars sought to make up for the loss by illegal exactions, enforced in several cases by illegal means. The truth of this was established by an official enquiry during Campbell's administration (1871-74).

It soon became evident to Sir George Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, that the government would be eventually compelled to deal with the whole question of relation of

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15 Mukherjee, Radharaman, op.cit.
16 Sengupta, K.K., Pabna disturbances and the politics of rent, 1879-1885, p.117.
17 Bengal land revenue (misc.) progs., September, 1881, Board of Revenue to the government of Bengal, Revenue Department, 3 June 1881, para II.
landlords and ryots in Bengal. But, during his tenure neither a revision and resettlement of the whole law of landlord and tenant nor a solution of the rent question was made. He was reluctant to reconstruct Act X on new lines. His successor, Richard Temple (1874-77) viewed with anxiety the increasing tension between the zamindars and the ryots which had culminated in the Pabna uprising and, felt it imperative to introduce a law facilitating speedy settlement of rent disputes. He conceded two old demands of the zamindars: the appointment of a commission to deal summarily with rent disputes and the transfer of rent suits to the revenue courts. On 10 July 1876, Agrarian Disputes Act V was passed. This transferred rent enhancement suits from the civil courts to the hands of the collectors. Temple felt that, the collectors were better equipped to deal with rent suits in view of their greater familiarity with the intricate questions relating to rent. Their knowledge of local conditions would enable them to find speedy solutions to rent disputes.

Tenancy Act VIII of 1885 was the next important milestone in the history of rent legislation. This Act made the acquisition of occupancy rights a much easier process. A peasant could qualify by cultivating for 12 years any plot of land in a given village. It was no longer necessary to continue cultivating the same plot of land. This would secure the peasants against the practice adopted by the zamindars of changing plots of lands every 5 or 6 years, to prevent their peasants from acquiring occupancy right. Unlike the Act of 1859, the new Act did not allow peasants to contract themselves out of such a right. It deprived zamindars of their power of ejecting peasants for arrears of rent alone. The sale of an occupancy ryots' holding in execution of a decree for the rent was, however, permissible. As for the question of rent, the Act did not reduce the present quantum anywhere. There was no change either, in the three main grounds of enhancement of the old Act. The government would henceforth be responsible, for the preparation of the price list necessary for deciding enhancement suits brought by zamindars on ground of an increase in the value of produce. Moreover, rent could be enhanced only once in a period of 15 years. The quantum of enhancement would not be more than 12.5 per cent of the existing rent. There was not much change in the incidence of occupancy rights. The Act did not provide for free alienation of holdings. But where such alienation had been an established custom, the civil courts would not interfere with them. The Act also gave the government, the authority to prepare a Record of Rights on the basis of survey even in the zamindari estates. All these provisions, however, applied only to the class of occupancy ryots. The non-occupancy ryots and the undertenants of occupancy ryots were entirely unprotected.

3.2 Agrarian structure in the 19th century, organization of production

Agrarian change over the long term can be best understood by considering the context of political economy within which commodity production took place. Access to ownership and use of the land was restricted, through the development of economic and social power
and an elaborate system of layered rights to the land including the property right in revenue collection granted by the colonial state.

Recent researches have identified some major types of social organizations of production in the nineteenth century — the peasant small-holding complex, the rich farmer-sharecropper arrangement, the plantation and the tribal communitarian form\textsuperscript{20}. Of these, the first three types continued from the pre-1860 period to be the three major types of social organization of production. The tribal communitarian form disintegrated in the late nineteenth century.

The first type, the settled ryot paying his rent in cash constituted the backbone of the agricultural population. In most east Bengal districts, peasant small-holding was the predominant form of social organisation of production\textsuperscript{21}. A \textit{malik} class of rentiers-cum-landholders was conspicuous by its absence. It was only demographic pressure between 1890 and 1920 that, saw the emergence of a land poor peasantry dependent on sharecropping and wage labour. In much of west and central Bengal rent collecting landlords, drawn mainly from upper Hindu castes supervised farming on substantial chunks of land which they held as their personal demesnes or \textit{khas khamar}. Small-holdings of peasants drawn largely from middle agricultural castes like \textit{mahishyas}, \textit{sadgops} and \textit{aguris} were also there. Low caste \textit{bagdis} and \textit{bauris} as well as Santal tribal labour worked the \textit{khamar} lands. The increasing grain prices from the mid 1850s onwards contributed greatly to increasing differentiation within the peasantry. The rentiers within the small-holding demesne complex were not only substantial landholders but creditors as well. So were the richer peasants, who too were involved in moneylending and grain dealing. Peasant small-holders borrowed money to purchase food and seeds to pay rent and labour charges. Regular grain advances attached the labour of sharecroppers and wage workers for the \textit{khamar} sector. The drain of necessary interest to the demesne sector was, ‘the price the small-holding sector paid to remain viable in the decades prior to 1930\textsuperscript{22}. In the period under review, the third type of system was common in north Bengal districts like Dinajpur as well as in the re-claimed areas of Sunderbans, 24 Parganas and also east Bengal districts like Bakhargunj and Khulna. Under the impact of colonial capitalism, significant changes also took place at the point of production along lines of gender and generation. The development of colonial capital resting heavily on peasant family labour meant, the forcing up of the intensity of unpaid and underpaid women’s and children’s labour particularly, in the plantations and rice husking\textsuperscript{23}.

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Bose, Sugato, The new Cambridge history of India, peasant labour and colonial capital: rural Bengal since 1770}, chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Jack, J.C., Faridpur settlement report (1904-14), p.29}.
\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Bose, Sugato, op.cit., p.91}.
\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Mukherjee, Mukul, ‘Impact of modernization on women’s occupation: a case study of the rice-husking industry of Bengal’, IESHR, vol.20, no.1, 1983, pp.27-45.}
3.3 Demographic changes

From 1770 to about the middle of the nineteenth century, all parts of Bengal shared a secular all India trend of population increase which was more marked in some regions than others. It was in this phase that the agrarian economy of colonial Bengal showed the high concordance between population and production. The demographic behaviour of west and east Bengal diverged sharply from the middle of the nineteenth century to about 1920. The decay of the rivers and a high mortality rate owing to malaria and epidemics, resulted in a demographic arrest and a reduction in the area under cultivation and output in west Bengal. During the first half of this period, c 1860-90, east Bengal witnessed a secular rise in population and rapid expansion of cultivation and total output through the extensive proliferation of peasant small-holdings. Between 1890 and 1920, although the extensive margins were reached in many parts, population growth induced new intensive techniques, which more than offset the diminishing returns from new lands in terms of productivity. The overall picture, however, during the three decades shows stagnation in agricultural production. From the 1920s, on the whole, better control of disease brought about a sharp fall in the death rate in west Bengal, so that the population graph once again swung upwards but failed to have any commensurate impact on production. In east Bengal too demographic growth appeared to acquire an autonomous, self-sustaining character while output stagnated.

In the period under consideration in this section, agriculture was adversely affected in west Bengal both by the exhaustion of land and by the mortality as well as morbidity of labour as a consequence of malaria infection. With population reducing acreage and debility affecting yields, it is likely that gross output in west Bengal declined between 1860 and 1920 in a context of stagnant population, though there were some pockets of growth. Pictures of growth were to be found in the 24 Parganas, Khulna and parts of Midnapur where the money and supervision of enterprising farmers and the labour of small peasants were responsible for the retreat of the Sunderbans as well as, in the Contai and Tamluk sub-divisions of Midnapur where with the withdrawal of the government’s salt monopoly in 1860s, the mahishya peasants fleeing from the ravages of malaria settled down.

In east Bengal, by contrast, the general picture was one of growth. Population and cultivation continued to expand between 1860 and 1920. Despite a limited amount of inter-regional and inter-district migration, the increase in population was almost entirely a natural increase caused by a high birth rate out-stripping the death-rate. The Muslim and namasudra peasants were mainly responsible for the extension of cultivation. Extensive cultivation almost reached its full limits. By the second decade of the twentieth century, nearly all land cultivable at the current level of technology was being cultivated in most

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east Bengal districts. The crunch would have been felt sooner had it not been for two developments: first, the ‘exploitation of the intensive margins partly through a switch to a high value and labour intensive cash-crop’ and second ‘the utilization of the escape-hatch of migration particularly to the flood plains of the Brahmaputra in neighbouring Assam’. There was double cropping in many districts of Bengal. Jute, an important cash crop from the early 1870s onward experienced a major spurt in its acreage in 1906-7. From then on, between 10% and 22% of the acreage under cultivation was devoted to jute in the seven major jute-producing districts of east Bengal. Unlike forced commodity production in west Bengal, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the pace and character of the commercialization process in east Bengal at the turn of the century was set and shaped to a significant extent by the demographic context. North Bengal however, presents a different picture. Demographic trend in eastern parts of north Bengal was very similar to that in eastern Bengal. But it was the immigration of mostly Santal, Oraon and Munda tribal labour from Bihar which boosted population level in the western parts of north Bengal between 1860 and 1920. Starting soon after the repression of the tribal insurrection of 1855 in Bihar, the process gathered strong momentum very late in the nineteenth century. Immigrant labour played a crucial role in the clearing of jungles in this part. The tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling also recruited immigrant labour on a large scale, enough to offset the depletions caused by malaria.

Generally speaking, an increased mortality rate can be seen in west Bengal to have brought about a demographic retreat. The large quantities of fallow land in west Bengal around 1920 owed their existence, however, to a combination of infertile land and scarce labour. In east Bengal, the birth rate continued to be marginally higher than in west Bengal and the death rate considerably lower. Settlement of unoccupied wastes did not present much difficulty. The phase of relative deficit labour was associated with the resort to more intensive methods of cropping. By now, the labour process resting on increasing exploitation of peasant family labour tended towards the perpetuation of a high rate of fertility. Proliferating population in east Bengal was mostly a natural increase based on large surplus of births over deaths. This was not so in north Bengal where immigrant labour from Bihar came to work as sharecroppers and plantation labourers.

3.4 Commercialization

A significant development of this period is increasing commercialization which was both an economic and a political process. The dynamics of expanding market forces engulfed rural Bengal and influenced productive activities. Besides, the colonial state supported re-
striction and regulation of peasants’ options, which was influenced by world market forces, moulded the nature of their involvement in the market and determined their incomes.

Increasing commercialization and monetization in the mid-nineteenth century has been variously explained. An early view, had credited increasing commercialization to the colonial state’s inflexible demand for land revenue payable in cash and agricultural production for the market. A more recent view, while not denying the revenue-money-commerce nexus cautions against acceptance of any notion of an inexorable sequence set in train by the cash-hunger of the colonial revenue establishment, by pointing to the levels of monetization and commercialization reached in the immediate pre-colonial era. Yet, the colonial state was a key factor in bringing about major shifts in the scale and character of commodity production while, some of the impetus in this process came from the centre of an emerging capitalist world economy based in Europe. Indigenous arrangements and organizations of society and political economy not only moulded the impact of colonial capitalism, but compelled a significant degree of adaptation to ‘pre-existing networks and patterns’. Colonial capitalists engaged in both contest and compromise with intermediate social groups of merchants and service gentry; even as subaltern classes of artisans, peasants and labourers were constrained to reorganize their priorities in production and consumption, aspects of their social organization remained fundamentally unaltered.

One illuminating research has highlighted some general circumstances affecting the growth of commercial agriculture in Bengal in the later half of the nineteenth century. Apart from the particular circumstances contributing to the growth of cultivation of different cash crops, several developments in the world stimulated India’s foreign and internal trade. In general, trade largely consisted of raw materials and agricultural produce. The pace of industrial growth in some nations in the continent of Europe was far quicker in this period than earlier, resulting in the increased demand for raw materials. By 1870, railways and steamships were developed in England, France, Germany, and the U.S.A. which tended to make quicker, easier and broader the commercial contacts of the industrial west with the sources of raw materials, including India. The opening of the Suez canal in 1859, synchronising with the fast growth of steam navigation, revolutionised the east-west trade.

Telegraphic communications between England and India since 1855, further broadened the contact. The liberalisation of tariff policy by the government of India, particularly after 1867, by abolishing or reducing export duties on many commodities, and the gradual fall in ocean freight also contributed to the expansion of India’s foreign trade. These developments affected both the volume and the commodity composition of the trade. No longer practically confined to drugs, dyes and luxuries it now included, in increasing quantities, foodgrains, fibres and other great staples of universal consumption. The internal trade and commerce was much stimulated by a gradual development of communications particularly,
the railways which helped carry agricultural produce from village to distant markets

As regards the nature of commercialization in Bengal in the nineteenth century, it was European capital which was mainly invested in the plantations concentrated in north Bengal, in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. Very few Indian entrepreneurial farmers were associated with draining waste lands for plantation agriculture. In the early phase of British domination, from the 1780s to 1860, we find in Bengal a sort of ‘dependent commercialization’ characterized by ‘intrusive foreign merchant capital which brings the agricultural production process firmly under its sway but stops short of capitalist accumulation and consolidation of land’. Production of indigo in Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century, comes closest to this type of agricultural commercialization. Probably, some of the stimuli for increased production of indigo came from its increased demand in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and was also an important means of remittance. The state’s role in consolidating indigo production for export was significant but, not as direct as in the case of two other important commodities in the same period — opium cultivation which was a state monopoly and mulberry production which was almost entirely state financed. Of the two main forms of indigo cultivation, on raiyati or peasant lands and ‘nij’ or demesne land, where the planter had bought into a superior tenurial right, the former was much more prevalent. For instance, as much as 61,000 bighas out of 75,000 cultivated under the Bengal Indigo Company in 1860 was found to be of the raiyati variety. It is quite possible that, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, indigo was not quite the kind of forced cultivation that it became after 1825. Faced with population pressure on land as well as revenue and rent offensive, peasants in west Bengal districts may well have opted for what looked like a higher-value and more labour-intensive cash-crop which, not only promised a larger income but came with cash advances which could be used to pay the rent. This probably accounts for Rammohun Roy’s observation in 1829, that indigo-growing peasants looked ‘better clothed and better conditioned’ than their neighbours. It might well have referred to a carry over from the era of a relative well being. In 1830, the magistrate of Dhaka referred to the misfortune of receiving indigo advances which reduced the ryot to ‘little better than a bond-slave, to the factory’. Apart from outright coercion, the only reason for wanting to cultivate indigo was the money advance that came with it which they could hardly ever pay off. No indigo peasant could hope to redeem the unpaid balances which mounted over the generations, thereby attaching unpaid labour to indigo cultivation. However, in the late 1820s, early 1830s and late 1840s, export of indigo suffered a set back because of a crisis in the world economy and trade depressions leading to a collapse of the indigo system. The severe depression in the British economy in 1847-8, proved to be the last straw for the acutely strained indigo based commercial economy of Bengal. From September 1847, one indigo concern after another went bankrupt and with the closure of the Union Bank in December 1847, the crisis reached its peak. There was a

38 ibid.
39Bose, Sugato, op.cit., p.42.
43Chowdhury, B.B., Growth of commercial agriculture, p.133.
general crisis of confidence in credit transaction which paralysed internal trade of eastern India.

The drying up of capital and credit, following the collapse of the Union Bank made the planters, who retained their factories or bought new ones at distress sales increasingly reliant on coercive powers partly sanctioned by the state, and a rent offensive in their capacity as holders of tenurial rights to maintain indigo production\(^{44}\). Once the planters had become wary of making new advances to the peasants, the only rationale for wanting to cultivate indigo disappeared. Some further economic changes between 1854-60 set the stage for the indigo revolt of 1860. The outbreak of the Crimean War (1854-56) cut off the supplies of flax and hemp from Russia and created a new demand for Bengal jute. The volume and value of Bengal jute exports jumped from 111,218 maunds and Rs 1,52,924/- in 1839-40 to 1,94,470/- maunds and Rs 32,74,768/- in 1855-56\(^{45}\). Demand for rice in the European and Chinese markets, as well as a diversion of some rice lands to jute and oil-seeds, set an inflationary trend in the rice price beginning in 1855. The price of the rice increased steadily in Bengal between 1855 and 1860. While the inflow of foreign capital and the beginning of demand in foreign markets had pushed prices up between 1854 and 1857, the dislocations and scarcities after the 1857 revolt took over as the leading factors in the inflationary process\(^{46}\). In a context of general increase in the prices of commodities and foodgrains, the forced cultivation of a wholly unremunerative crop like indigo came to be increasingly resented by the peasants. They were encouraged by the indigenous moneylending landlords who now saw better prospects in the rice sector. The planters were defeated in Bengal. The dismantling of an exploitative system of production for the market did not by itself, resolve the problems of subsistence of peasant labour. The crucial link between subsistence and the market ensured that moneylending landlords and traders were to emerge as major claimants of the peasant’s surplus in a phase of subsistence commercialization from the later nineteenth century\(^{47}\).

The history of indigo cultivation in the Bengal presidency in the later nineteenth century had three main features: its gradual decline in Bengal proper; a continuous expansion in Bihar till the mid-1890s and; a rapid decline thereafter\(^{48}\). In Bengal proper, the immediate impact of the revolt of 1860 was seen in the sudden fall in the indigo exports in the following year. However, indigo cultivation did not entirely disappear in Bengal proper. Bengal continued to produce nearly one-third of what Bihar produced. A new feature of the cultivation in Bengal was the increasing indigenous enterprise\(^{49}\).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, we witness in Bengal what may be called, ‘subsistence commercialization’, where poor peasants driven by their concerns of securing basic subsistence in a context of demographic and social pressures turned to the cultivation of high value and labour intensive cash-crops. The prime example of this was small-holding

\(^{44}\) Bose, Sugato, *op.cit.*, p.51.
\(^{45}\) *The Hindoo Patriot*, 25 December, 1857.
\(^{46}\) Bose, Sugato, *op.cit.*
\(^{47}\) *ibid.*
\(^{49}\) *ibid.*
production of jute in east Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jute was a new crop. Its emergence as an important cash crop dated only from the mid-1850s. The demand for jute in the world market increased particularly since the Crimean War.

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of international grain trade provided the stimulus for the growth of the acreage under raw jute as well as the establishment of a jute manufacturing industry in east India. The demand closer at home for container bags to export grain from Bengal to the famine afflicted regions of Bombay and Madras presidencies in the mid-1870s, helped pull the jute sector out of the slump of 1873-74. For the next three decades, the jute economy of Bengal followed a pattern of short periods of buoyant prices and expanding acreage culminating in sharp set-backs. Bengal jute entered its most vigorous and sustained period of boom in 1906, one which lasted till the outbreak of the First World War. In 1907, jute cultivation reached its high point of 3.88 million acres. After that date, although peasants engaged in short-term switching between jute and autumn rice in response to relative prices, no long term upward trend in its acreage was discernible. The total value of Bengal's jute, however, rode a long term upward trend until the world depression of 1930. The market of raw jute tended to widen as a result of its increasing consumption in the new jute mills in Calcutta, its neighbourhood and Sirajgunj for the manufacture of gunny bags, and of its increasing exports. Unlike indigo cultivators, advances were not sought by jute cultivators in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They themselves met the expenses incurred in production and the traders in jute had no control over supply. This changed in the twentieth century. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century we also find, the increasing popularity of yet another commercial crop — tea in north Bengal. Tea plantations, owned by Europeans, were worked mainly with the help of tribal labour.

A most remarkable feature of the emerging system of surplus extraction was that, anybody with money to buy intermediate land rights could buy them and establish a direct claim on agricultural surplus. Land rights were sufficiently differentiated from superior to inferior rights. Statistical evidence from a somewhat later period suggests that, agricultural output of Bengal province did not rise rapidly enough to absorb these increasing claims by the expanding class of rent-receiving intermediaries. Consequently, the peasants' consumption level had to be continuously forced down to generate enough surplus. An inevitable part of this process was the growing extent of rural indebtedness. The peasants had to take increasing recourse to borrowing, in an attempt to maintain the bare minimum level of consumption. The resulting indebtedness in which the vast majority of small peasants were caught, set in motion a different process of commercialization of agriculture. This was what some have called the 'second phase' in the commercialization of Bengal's agriculture.
3.5 Credit relations

Commercialization forcibly involved the peasants into market relations through the mechanism of debt. With the rapid expansion of commodity production in the rural countryside, there was increasing demand for credit and debt followed. Debt was more insidious than rent as a surplus — extracting mechanism because it was, not just, a mode of exploitation. The operation of credit as the principal mode of exploitation and the size of its appropriation varied according to the nature of the agrarian social structure. Within the peasant small-holding system predominating in jute-growing east Bengal, the credit and product markets were closely interlinked. Credit in the peasant small-holding demense labour complex, typical of west Bengal, increased the dependence of labour on the demesnes and facilitated continuous rent extraction from small-holders. The rich farmer-sharecropper system prevailed in north Bengal. There, the jotedars' product share also included the interest due on the debt incurred.

In addition to trader-mahajans, some rentier landlords who had proven to be too weak to enhance rents or expand demenses in the face of falling rental rates, became usurers. In many cases the richer peasants constituted the group of creditors. Lending within the demense sector was mainly in grain. Peasant small-holding could not reproduce itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without money borrowed from the demense lords, but paid a heavy price in interest payments and was caught in a cycle of impoverishment in the process. The moneylending landlords became involved in the rice market.\(^54\) Recognising that credit, not rent, was now the more acceptable and important mechanism of surplus-appropriation, landlords included rental arrears in accounts of debt. In the jute growing parts of the rich farmer-sharecropper system prevalent in north Bengal, some trader-mahajans engaged in the dadan business. But grain loans constituted the bulk of credit, which gradually came to exercise effective control over land and the product market.

Evidence from the early twentieth century strongly suggests that, appropriation through debt interest was larger than rent and that the differential widened during the fifty-year span from 1880 to 1930. Indebtedness was on the rise.\(^55\) Sharecroppers and labourers in the demense sector paid for credit with their labour and a good part of the product of their labour.

Settlement of past debt plus current cash expenditure in any period, forced a peasant to 'sell under distress' a considerable portion of his output. Indeed, the portion marketed was often so high, that he was soon forced to borrow again until the next harvest for 'distress buying' of paddy to supplement his own consumption. The indebtedness was carried over to the next harvest forcing him again to sell too much under the compulsion of debt, leading in turn to the next round of distress buying. The overall process was characterized by a spiraling sequence of distress buying and selling over time. For most peasants, the spiral meant mounting debt until they were hopelessly ruined 'in a state of

manifest insolvency. For the fortunate few, the spiral might have ended to release them ultimately from debt. Only in exceptional cases, a peasant might have even risen from the rank to become a moneylender himself. Such a process of forced commercialization carried within it, the possibility of further differentiation among an initially indebted peasantry.

3.6 Condition of the peasantry in the late 19th century

An important development of our period was the increasing differentiation among the peasantry. A class of rich peasants emerged at the top of the ladder. Apart from their income from the land, they accumulated a considerable sum from graindealing and moneylending. The relative richness was not a product of any superior technique of cultivation. Their origin can be attributed to some greater differential natural advantages like better soil, better facilities for irrigation, nearness to the markets, superior agricultural skills, enterprise, readiness to take up reclamation of waste land and to cultivate richer crops. A considerable class of sub-ryots also emerged. They leased the land from the richer peasantry who often dissociated themselves from agriculture in return for rent. There emerged also a class of poor peasantry. They had lost their rights of occupation over the lands which, they had cultivated for the richer peasantry. But this very seldom led to absolute eviction. The dispossessed peasants in most cases continued to cultivate the same plot of land, with inferior rights and higher effective rents. At the bottom of the ladder were the agricultural labourers, who had no land and no implements of agriculture. They were employed by zamindars as well as the substantial peasantry.

The main reason for land transfer was indebtedness. There was considerable rural impoverishment. Peasants borrowed in order to pay the rents as well as to buy grain during the lean seasons. The debts kept on accumulating. The fact that they had to sell their grain during the harvest season to pay their dues meant lower cash returns. They did not have sufficient resources to take advantage of the lean season. The pressure of population on land, because of the increase of population as well as the lack of other avenues of sustenance, weakened the bargaining capacity of the tenants. The low level of technique stood in the way of an increase in output. There was increase in output but that was mainly due to the extension of cultivation after the Permanent Settlement. But the increase in population soon outstripped the extension of cultivation. Pressure of population soon resulted in the village common being put to the plough. Thrus pasturage gradually disappeared. Land was put to more extensive cultivation. Agriculture remained stagnant. Lack of adequate capital in the hands of the peasants naturally meant, the absence of productive investments on land. This was particularly noticeable in the case of irrigation. The peasants lacked the adequate means to undertake measures for better irrigation. This severely handicapped agriculture in the region of an uncertain rainfall. The zamindars

56 Bhaduri, Amit, op.cit.
who were customarily responsible for irrigation and embankments neglected their duty. Besides, they also refused to allow the peasants to undertake any such measures as they could, for fear of the consolidation of occupancy rights by the peasants.

Increasing cultivation of cash crops contributed to the growth of rural indebtedness in some cases. In the cases of indigo and opium, according to one recent research, this resulted from the particular organization of their cultivation.\textsuperscript{58} Cultivation of the unremunerative indigo was largely forced on the cultivators, by European planters. Opium cultivation was not forced and was far more remunerative to the cultivators, particularly where they could sell part of their produce to private traders at prices higher than those fixed by the government, which controlled its cultivation and sale. But the vulnerability of the poppy to fluctuations in the weather and the rigidity with which opium advances, which were interest-free and hence attractive to cultivators, were recovered by the government often resulted in indebtedness. As for jute, the jute industries which controlled its demand and price appropriated a major part of the gains. The cultivators, where they borrowed, also surrendered part or whole of their crops to creditors, including jute traders, at prices lower than the market price. Rural indebtedness was greater in regions dominated by commercial farming than where there were subsistence based economies.\textsuperscript{59} Increased production for the market increased the value of the land. The moneylenders became increasingly keen on acquiring the land. Rise and fall in agricultural prices also contributed towards indebtedness. Bengal came into contact with the wider market system during British rule. This had an impact on the movement of agricultural prices. Rising prices, though normally beneficial to peasants, were distressing to farmers whose surplus stock of grain ran out within a few months after the harvest. They then had to borrow to buy grain at a time when its price was high. A significant development during this time was that, there was enormous increase in the powers of the moneylenders in regard to realization of debts.

The condition of agriculture as well as of tenants on estates divided into co-parcenary shares was even worse. There were constant feuds among the co-sharers of joint estates. The tenants on these lands suffered more as they were subject to extortion by all the co-sharers. The break-up of zamindari property was detrimental to the interests of agriculture. The co-sharers, intent on scoring over their rivals neglected productive investments on land. The laws of succession among the Hindus and Muslims made it impossible for estates to remain undivided. There were few instances found in Bengal, of a single estate owned by one zamindari. Estates were usually joint property and each landholder zealously guarded his own interests. The contentions and differences among the ryots were submitted to the arbitration of the joint holders, who derived some benefits from them and were, therefore, ready to forment these differences. After bringing the more influential of their tenantry under their influence by remission of their rents, or making them participators in the process of extortion, they extorted \textit{abwabs} from petty ryots. On the occurrence of disputes among them, the co-sharers espoused the cause of different parties and put others to extreme trouble and inconvenience. The ryots in their turn, stuck to the cause of different

\textsuperscript{58} Chaudhuri, B.B., 'Agrarian relations, eastern India', in Dharma Kumar and Tapan Ray Chaudhuri (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p.146.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{ibid.}
co-sharers and thus exposed themselves to the ire of the opposing parties when these latter, as was frequently the case, happened to quarrel with each other. The tenants were made to pay their rents more than once to the co-sharers. Those who were less powerful than others, especially females and minors, suffered most. The stronger party encouraged the ryots even to set aside their claims and were in a manner dispossessed of their estates. Litigation was frequent in co-parcenary estates, but often failed to secure justice to the weak. Both landlords and ryots suffered. Most often than not, rent fell into arrears. Agriculture was at a low ebb.

3.7 Major trends in the first quarter of the 20th century

The permanent zamindari system, which survived throughout the 19th century, began to crumble in the 20th. The trends that were dominant in the late 19th century agrarian economy continued well into the 1920s. Population continued to rise. In early 20th century, in east Bengal the birth rate continued to be marginally higher than in west Bengal and the death rate considerably lower. Proliferating population in east Bengal was mostly a natural increase based on a large surplus of births over deaths. It was a dramatic decline in mortality rates in west Bengal after 1920 which, brought that region more in line with the increase in numbers in the rest of the province. This increasing trend, visible all across Bengal, which began in the 1920s acquired momentum in the 1930s. Increasing population resulted in continuous reclamation of unoccupied waste lands as well as declining per capita output. Demographic pressure failed to act as a force adequate to induce technological innovations, which would have enhanced productivity. Between 1920 and 1946, for instance, total agricultural output grew at a mere 0.3% per annum and food crops output stagnated, while population increased at an annual rate of 0.8%. Even in the areas of aggregate agricultural growth, per capita output declined.

The condition of the ordinary peasants went on deteriorating. Due to the destruction of the handicrafts industry, a large section of the gradually increasing population became dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. But there was no improvement in the techniques of agriculture. The influence of moneylenders increased in the rural countryside, as the poor peasants depended on them to meet the expenses of buying plough animals and seeds and also to pay revenue on time. They mortgaged their lands to them which they would never recover. As a result, a portion or the entire land of the peasant became the property of the moneylender.

As far as agricultural production is concerned, in 1905, jute cultivation reached its high point of 3.88 million acres. The total value of Bengal’s jute, showed an upward trend

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60 Hindu Ranjika, 9 February, 1875 (RNP).
61 GOI, Census of India, 1921, vol.V., Bengal, pt.I.
62 Bose, Sugato, op. cit., p.32.
until the worldwide depression of 1930. However, it was not the jute producers who benefited from the increase in jute acreage. It was the manufacturers and exporters who benefited the most. They now increasingly tried to maintain an assured supply of the raw product at a price much lower than the competitive price, by getting more deeply involved in the financing of agrarian production and trade. The annual inflow of foreign finance and merchant capital became a crucial element in Bengal’s commercial agriculture. Gradually, a qualitative transformation in jute’s marketing pattern and hierarchy became visible. Usury capital was still important in the countryside. The usurer was often a rentier landlord. Distinct from the trader who provided dadans or advances, he was not directly interested in the product market. Yet the product and credit markets were, between 1906 and 1929, effectively integrated\(^6\). The small traders, known as farias or baparis, who collected jute from the homes or villages of the cultivators, were in the early 20th century mainly commission agents of others higher up in the chain of middlemen, who in turn were recipients of funds from the ultimate purchasing companies. The dalal or broker of the baler and the warehouseman were important intermediaries at trading centres in the districts.

The interest rate on dadans ranged between 24\% and 75\% and the debtor, undertook to deliver the crop at 10\% to 25\% below the market price. In the mid-1920s, the middlemen’s commission was estimated to reduce by at least 20\% what the primary producer might otherwise have received. Yet as one historian has pointed out, ‘the cultivators were denied fair prices, not primarily because of the intervention of too many middlemen, as alleged by British civilians’, but ‘mainly due to combination of European buyers of jute’\(^6^5\). The financial and organizational strength, despite some conflicts of interest, of the purchasers and the lack of holding power of the producers, ensured a significant differential between average Calcutta prices and harvest prices in Bengal districts. For the 1910s and 1920s, these were 32\% and 31\% respectively\(^6^6\). The jute purchasers used different techniques to deprive the peasants of a fair and equitable price; one of the more effective means was the manipulation of grades by which different qualities of the fibre were ranked.

Rice occupied for the Bengal peasants the unique position of chief subsistence crop while, at the same time being of considerable commercial importance. The bulk of the rice trade was inter-district in character. The marketing pattern bore some superficial resemblance to that of jute, although Europeans did not dominate at the top. The middleman’s chain was shorter in 1920s and the practice of dadan was not as pervasive. As one historian has observed, the ‘prices of these two commodities, the premier ‘cash-crop’ and ‘food-crop’, were organically linked and the relative trends in these two connected markets had the most critical bearing on the subsistence security of Bengal’s peasantry\(^6^7\).

In the early 20th century, the peasant small-holding system continued to be the predominant form of social organization of production in most east Bengal districts. Rent-collecting

\(^6^4\)Bose, Sugato, \textit{op.cit.}, p.57.
\(^6^7\)Bose, Sugato, \textit{op.cit.}, p.59.
landlords drawn from the higher Hindu castes and ashraf Muslims, stood over a mass of mostly ajlaf Muslim and namasudra peasants holding firm rights to occupy and cultivate their small-holdings. However, the increasing pressure of population between 1890 and 1920 saw increasing dependence on sharecropping and wage labour. Barga cultivation on a small portion of landlord’s khamar as an adjunct to predominantly peasant small-holding cultivation, was still the usual practice. The landless labourer was reportedly rare anywhere in eastern Bengal. Dependence on wage labour in early 20th century east Bengal was, in fact, not as rare as landlessness. A considerable section engaged in short-distance migration from poorer to better-off districts, to harvest jute and paddy where the timing of crop cycles permitted.

The sharecropping and labouring strata ‘were not structurally distinct from peasant small-holding resting on recognised raiyati rights’. During this time, indebtedness within the peasant small-holding system widened because of the increased market penetration of east Bengal agricultures and the enhanced credit needs of the peasantry. There were two major categories of moneylending interests functioning in the rural countryside. The peasants needed cash not only to tide over the lean periods, but also to carry on production. While some moneylenders dispossessed their peasant debtors for default, the usual practice was to preserve the peasant small-holding system. It was more profitable for the moneylenders to extract reasonably regular interest payments over an extended period of time than, to seize the fragmented holdings of a heavily indebted small-holding peasantry.

In much of west and central Bengal, rent-collecting landlords, including the large number drawn from the upper Hindu caste, supervised farming on substantial chunks of land which they held as their personal demenses. Small-holdings of peasants drawn largely from middle agricultural castes like the mahishyas, sadgops and aguries were still preponderant in quantitative terms, but ‘the small-holding sector was structurally dependent on parcels of surplus land and doses of credit from the demesne sector to reproduce itself’. A large reserve of low-caste bagdi and bauri as well as Santal tribal labour worked the khamar lands. The somewhat larger and less fertile average holdings in west Bengal ensured the use of hired labour. The rentier class and the rich peasants were involved in moneylending and grain-dealing business. Peasant small-holders borrowed money to purchase food and seeds and to pay rent and labour charges. Regular grain advances attached the labour of sharecroppers and wage-workers for the khamar sector.

In north Bengal, it was the jotedar class which was predominant. These jotedars were not rentiers under the Permanent Settlement, but rich farmers who after 1885 often held the raiyati right to their very substantial holdings. Many of them, both Muslim and rajbansi, were deeply involved in the credit and product market.

It must, however, be remembered that in 20th century Bengal, not only did the condition of the peasants deteriorate due to price rise and exploitation, a large section of the landholding class also suffered as they were owners of small farms. The Dutt Committee’s detailed

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69 Bose, Sugato, op.cit., p.86.
70 ibid., p.90.
investigation of prices between 1890 and 1912, had found that the growth of agricultural income had been sluggish compared to the rise in the cost of living. While ‘agricultural income per head of population’ was up 16% in 1909-13 over 1890-4, ‘average retail prices’ of an agriculturists' usual purchases had risen by 26%. But, peasants who had resorted to jute in east and north Bengal had made profits and were substantially better-off than before\textsuperscript{71}. However, the number of powerful zamindars or intermediary landholders was very small. Division of property due to inheritance law and creation of intermediary tenures led to fragmentation of landed estates, which in turn was responsible for decline in landed incomes. It was the zamindar whose minimum income was Rs 10,000 who got the right to elect representatives to the Bengal Legislature. At the turn of the 20th century, their number was only one thousand. The condition of the majority of the small zamindars was deteriorating due to continuous price rise on the one hand, and contraction of opportunities of increasing revenue on the other. Failure to pay their debts was often responsible for transfer of portions of their lands to the rich peasants. It was only natural that, given these circumstances, the zamindar class would try to cling on to their old prerogatives. This became evident during the prolonged debate in the Legislature on the question of giving some rights to the ryots.

In the 1920s, it was proposed in the Bengal Legislature to reform the Bengal Tenancy Act. Three issues had become crucial — the questions of giving occupancy right to sharecroppers and; under-ryots and; giving occupancy ryots the right of land transfer. The zamindars opposed any attempt to limit their prerogatives. A large section of the Bengal zamindars became members of the Council with the support of the Swarajya Party. At the close of our period, the Amendment of the Tenancy Act was passed in 1928.

3.8 Amendment of the Tenancy Act, 1928

The main provisions of the Act were: \textsuperscript{72}

1. The occupancy holdings were declared to be transferable in whole or part, subject to a transfer fee amounting to 20% of the sale price or 5 times the rent. The landlord was given a right of pre-emption on payment of the sale price plus 10% as compensation to the purchaser. He also retained the right to levy a fee for the sub-division of holdings in the case of part transfer, because the Act did make it incumbent on the landlords to divide the holdings in such cases;

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

3. Occupancy ryots were given all rights in trees;

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

5. Under-ryots were divided into three classes. Under-ryots who had already obtained rights of occupancy by custom were given the full rights of occupancy ryots, except transferability and the right to be deemed protected interests against superior landlords of the

\textsuperscript{71}Bose, Sugato, \textit{op.cit.}, p.59.

ryots. The second class consisted of under-ryots who had a homestead on their land or had occupied for 12 years continuously, or had been admitted in a document by their landlords to have a permanent and heritable right. This class could be ejected if they failed to pay their rent or if they misused the land. The third class of under-ryots could also be ejected on the additional ground that the ryots wanted the land for his own cultivation.

When the Bill was introduced it contained an explanation that for the purposes of this section, cultivation by the ryot himself did not mean cultivation by bargadar. But this explanation was omitted from the Bill by the legislature. The initial rent of under-ryots was left to contract, subject to the provision that it could not exceed one-third of the estimated value of the gross produce. But once their rent had been fixed, it could only be enhanced under a registered contract by 4 annas in the rupee.

6. Persons who under the system generally known as adhi, barga or bhag cultivated the land of another person was not a tenant unless he had been admitted in a document by the landlord or held by a civil court to be a tenant. Persons who cultivated the land of another person on condition of delivering a fixed quantity of produce was, however, recognised as tenant, whether he was a ryot or under-ryot as the case might be under the Act73.

By the Act, the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers were completely precluded from acquiring the status of ryots. Section 4(a) of the Act recorded the ineligibility of the sharecroppers to be recognised as tenants. The Act not only forbade the bargadar from acquiring any tenancy right, but those bargadars who had acquired certain rights under the record of right prior to the passing of the amendment Act were also prevented from acquiring their rights. The tenants on the barga land were, at the same time, subjected to an exorbitant rate of rent74.

This amendment of the Tenancy Act did not solve all the existing problems. The need for further legislation was soon felt. In October 1937, the Bengal Tenancy Act Amendment Bill was passed. It provided for the abolition of landlords' fees and the right of pre-emption upon the transfer of raiyati holdings as well as, the suspension of enhancements of raiyati rents for the next ten years. Though the interests of the actual cultivators who often held cultivating rights below raiyats were not protected, it was a pro-peasant legislation.

3.9 Peasant resistance movements

A significant phenomenon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was the increasing resistance by peasants against exploitation by the colonial state and dominant landholder and capital controlling classes. There was every day resistance to inequities and periodic surges of effective resistance which, dismantled the established structures of domination. The subordinate sectors of agrarian society began to show distinct signs of a growing consciousness.

74The debate over the proposed changes in the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.
Between the 1810s and 1850s, peasant grievances concerning rent and indigo came to the fore in movements of agrarian resistance. So long as the demographic situation remained relatively favourable, desertion and migration were the most common strategies resorted to by peasants anxious to avoid paying enhanced rents. Refusal to fulfil indigo contracts after taking advances was the usual early form of resistance against an unremunerative forced cultivation. But from the 1820s, the landlords became increasingly successful in enhancing rents. Again, between 1823 and 1835 a series of legal measures helped the planters to force the peasants. The picture changed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Changes in the broader political structure and economic context during the 1850s, brought some new pressures but also opened unprecedented opportunities for effective peasant resistance. The rising cost of indigo production and increased prices of alternative cash crops and rice after the mid-1850s, supplied the motive and opportunity for a revolt to destroy the entire system. The violation of indigo contracts in the early period through frauds were just the expression of antagonism at a 'particular level of its development'. The final and most mature form of this expression was the peasants' fight to overthrow the entire system. Both the state and the moneylending landlords of west and central Bengal, had an interest in promoting new agricultural exports and the rice sector respectively. The indigo-growing peasants could take advantage of the planters' erosion of support among government officials and key dominant classes in the rural areas as well as the urban intelligentsia.

In the first half of the 19th century, two significant rebellions took place. The first was in the 1830s and 1840s in the region around Barasat. It was led by Titu Mir. It started against zamindari coercion. Later, it also targeted indigo planters and the coercive symbols of the colonial state. His main supporters were the peasants but they also included many weavers. During this time, there was also a sustained resistance movement by the farazis in east Bengal. Led by Dudu Mian it targeted zamindars, planters and the government. Both these movements were permeated by a religious ideology. Even though faced with government repression, these movements spread to different parts of Bengal and continued over a prolonged period.

The second important resistance movement was the great Santal hool of 1855-56 in the Bengal-Bihar border. It was preceded by a phase of dacoities targeted against the Bengali moneylenders. The hool was led by Sido and Kanhu. It resisted the inroad made by the dikus or foreigners among whom they included both the British, who were trying to control their forests, and the Indian moneylenders who were capturing their best lands. Though the Santals fought bravely, the hool was effectively repressed by February 1856.

The Act X of 1859 brought about a change in the nature of peasant resistance. It took away the legal sanction behind some forms of extra-economic coercions in extracting the agrarian surplus. It introduced, the legal concept of occupancy rights for individual tenants which would form the basis for moderation of rent. The main issues of conflict between landlords and tenants became occupancy rights and rent and lent, a legalistic character to the anti-rent agrarian movements in east Bengal in the 1870s and 1880s.

The first was the indigo revolt in different districts of Bengal. It spread across the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad, Faridpur, Maida, Pabna and Rajshahi. Rumbling of discontent against unremunerative indigo cultivation had been heard throughout the later 1850s, but it was the Act X of 1859 which made it clear to the peasants that the government was no longer standing solidly behind the planters which signalled the outbreak of the indigo revolt in 1860. In fact, it was some acts of Magistrate Eden of Barasat which was the immediate cause. In March 1859, he upheld the peasants' right to grow whatever crops they preferred. In August 1859, he stated further that the police had a duty to protect peasants in the possession of their land even if they had broken contracts. Once this was made known to the peasants, the rebellion broke out. Supported by the small talukdars and the urban intelligentsia, the rebellion soon spread.

The rebellion received a temporary setback when the government revived the Regulation of 1830. But it was withdrawn in September 1860. Having failed to force the contracted peasants to grow indigo and seeing no prospect of expropriating raiyati land and expanding nij cultivation, the planters made an attempt to enhance rents in their capacity as landlords under the provisions of Act X of 1859, especially on the grounds that the value of agricultural produce had increased. The peasants responded with a successful no-rent campaign on the planters' estates. This had an adverse impact on the zamindar-mahajans who had initially backed the rebels. They now decided to withdraw their support. Though the indigo system in Bengal was fatally affected by the revolt, it also left the moneylending and grain-dealing landlords as the dominant class in rural west Bengal.

Another development in the post-1859 period was, the high rental demand made by the landlords who not only controlled substantial demense but also engaged in profitable moneylending and grain-dealing. The source of the conflict in east Bengal was, the attempt by some rentier landlords to circumvent the pro-tenant provisions of the Rent Act to increase rents in an era of rising prices. In particular, these landlords sought to prevent the accrual of occupancy rights, which would have assured moderation of rents, by shifting their tenants around different holdings in the village and getting them to accept new kabuliyats foregoing their legal rights to occupancy status. Unable directly to serve notices of rent enhancement, they also tried to consolidate various legal abwabs with the juridical rent in the new kabuliyats. The landlords' lack of possessory dominion placed them at a disadvantage in carrying through their programme of subverting the progressive aspects of the Rent Act. The peasants easily saw through the manipulations of the landlords and combined to resist them. In May 1873, an agrarian league was formed in the Yusufzahi pargana of the Pabna district, to fight back against the impositions of the Banerjee, Tagore and Sanyal zamindari families of the area, one of the earliest to have turned to jute cultivation. Although, the leading historian of the Pabna disturbances denies the official view that

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77 By the Regulation 5 of 1830, a peasant found guilty of breach of contract with the indigo planter (like failure to cultivate indigo) would be sentenced to imprisonment for a period not exceeding one month. Moreover, the Magistrate could 'require' the convicted peasant to sow or cultivate the land; a disobeying peasant would come in for a more rigorous punishment of a longer period of imprisonment not exceeding two months. ibid., p.158.
78 Sengupta, K.K., Pabna disturbances and the politics of rent, 1873-1885, Calcutta, 1974;
the prosperity of the ryots was a causal factor in the tensions, according to one recent analysis the battle was at least in part about the share-out of the higher gross income brought in by jute. The league began by filing petitions seeking protection against the illegal acts by zamindars and raising subscriptions to meet litigation expenses. The central theme of this protest movement was the refusal to pay rent. The militant phase of the Pabna protests lasted from May to December 1873 and had a powerful demonstration effect on the peasants in other districts of east Bengal. Agrarian leagues on the Pabna model organized rent strikes in the mid-1870s in Bogra, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Tipperah and Bakhargunj against what has been termed as 'high landlordism' by one historian. He has defined it as a stage of change in the pattern of ownership and its impact on the tenantry which developed under nineteenth century colonialisation, and of the growth of a desire on the part of some landlords to hold their estates untrammelled by even conventional rules and regulations for protection of their tenantry. These agrarian protests demonstrated the power of agricultural unionism which develop amongst certain sections of the cultivators, underlined the basically unstable nature of landlord-tenant relationship during the seventh and eighth decades of the nineteenth century, sharply pointed to the inadequacy of the existing law which governed these relationships. In the anti-rent agitation we find that, most landlords in Pabna were Hindus who formed just below 10% of the district's population. The great majority of the people were peasants, 70% of them being Muslims. The agrarian league's activities were anti-landlord rather than anti-Hindu in character.

In general, it can be concluded that, the peasant movements in this period were 'rarely organized on caste lines' and that the new caste solidarity movements only marginally affected the peasant movements, except in some cases, such as the Chandal movement in Faridpur in the 1870s. Although class predominated over religion in the anti-rent movements, there is evidence from Pabna that the spirit of combination was facilitated because 'social alliance was easier among the Muslims than among the Hindus who were divided into innumerable variation of castes, jealous and distrustful of each other'. There was no other major insurrection in the nineteenth century.

Late 19th century saw a redefinition of caste and religious identities. Between 1872 and 1911 several castes changed their nomenclature and claimed higher ritual status: the kaibartas of west Bengal became mahishyas, the chandals of east Bengal narmasudras, and the koches of north Bengal rajbansi kshatriyas. There was also an assertion of a Muslim self-consciousness among peasants of east Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their indebtedness bound them to the moneylending landlords and traders. Early nationalist leaders were oblivious of their grievances. Consequently, during the Swadeshi movement...
movement, there were instances of rioting against Hindu landlords and moneylenders in Mymensingh and Tipperah in 1906-07. Between 1907 and 1913, there was relative economic boom and so peasant grievances did not come to the surface. But during and after the First World War, predominantly Muslim peasant political associations emerged. There were demands for remission of rent and debt. The non-cooperation movement started by the Indian National Congress successfully channelised the peasant discontent of the post-war slump of 1920-22. Peasants enthusiastically responded to the calls not to pay local taxes and occasionally went beyond the nationalist programme to resist the imposition of the landlords and moneylenders. Though concerned about the fate of Turkey, the majority of the Muslim peasantry were more interested in economic issues. However, as the economy stabilized social relations too remained stable. Troubles started again in 1926-27, when as a result of dislocation in the product market there was social conflict. Ultimately, the world crisis of 1929-30 caused a rupture in the exploitative social structure in the countryside which was never to be repaired.

In the 1930s and 1940s, there were a number of peasant resistance movements. In 1930, there was an anti-moneylender uprising in Kishoreganj in Mymensingh. Between 1932 and 1935, the talukdar- and trader-moneylenders were the main targets. Local krishak samitis became very active. There were demands for the abolition of zamindari and amendments to the Bengal Tenancy Act. Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Huq played a prominent role. The 1940s saw agitation by sharecroppers. The Tebhaga movement contributed to new social tensions.

3.10 Concluding remarks

A broad view of the major agrarian changes and significant developments taking place in the course of our period is essential, for an understanding of the changing perception of the Bengali intelligentsia. Recent researches have highlighted most of these changes. They have been useful in constructing a coherent account of the major developments. The intelligentsia identified some of these changes affecting Bengal’s agrarian economy. But not many of them provided coherent accounts of all of them. Their perceptions have been questioned by recent researches. But they did try to analyse many of the agrarian problems. Their sympathy for the hapless peasantry first attracted them to agrarian issues. Though not always successful, they tried in many cases to provide solutions to some of these problems.

85Refer to the works cited above.