The beginning of systematic agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia can be traced back to Rammohun Roy. It was he who, for the first time, made an attempt to study the overall economic situation in Bengal and analyse the changes that had been taking place, particularly in the agrarian sphere. He was perhaps the best representative of the early generation of the modern Bengali intelligentsia which, stood at the crossroads of a process of economic change which had been initiated half a century ago. He represented a generation which owed its economic strength and its sense of identity to the colonial economy. Rammohun's concern for the Bengal peasantry influenced the intelligentsia throughout the century. His younger contemporaries tried to find solutions to various problems affecting Bengal's agrarian society.

4.1 Rammohun Roy and the beginning of agrarian thinking

Rammohun's father had acquired a zamindari when many zamindari estates were being sold at public auctions, after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement. Rammohun himself had added to his patrimony by service under the Company. These circumstances were to have a tremendous impact on the formulation of his views on economic questions. Besides, along with classical learning he had also received a proper grounding in western knowledge. His thesis on economic modernization reveals clearly, the extent to which he was influenced by Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Mathus' *Essay on Population* and Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy*.

1 Lekachman, Robert, *A history of economic ideas*, Chaps. IV-VII.
As he was advancing in age, his thought and consciousness, hitherto preoccupied with only the transcendental, gradually turned to worldly subjects outside the sashtra. He was being slowly drawn towards the contemporary problems of politics and economics. He wrote relatively less on economic subjects. But he studied rather closely the question of land revenue. This apart, he paid attention to the problems of European settlements, the monopoly business of the East India Company in general and salt monopoly in particular. He also analysed the Dayabhag and Mitakshara systems\textsuperscript{2}. In analysing the framework of his thoughts it must be noted that, by birth he belonged to the landed gentry and that he himself made money out of usury.

In 1831, the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee to go into the details of the question whether the Charter of the East India Company could be renewed. Rammohun was one of those to whom the Committee sent their questionnaire. He sent his written evidence by way of replying to the 54 questions formulated by the Committee. He also appended another long article to this evidence to clarify some of his points furnished in the text of his evidence. Both these pieces were concerned with the history and progress and consequences of the land revenue system of India. Rammohun’s attitude towards the Permanent Settlement is primarily contained in these two articles. He also answered the 13 cognate questions framed by the Committee. Out of these 13, about 6 questions were directly related to the Indian peasantry and their livelihood.

Rammohun’s ideas may be broadly classified under the following heads — analysis of the Permanent Settlement; condition of the ryots under the system; its impact on the zamindars; plan of land reforms; views on economic modernization; question of selective colonization of Europeans in India and; his views on indigo cultivation.

The Permanent Settlement in Bengal and the Ryotwari Settlement in the Madras Presidency were the two major land settlements introduced by the British. Rammohun concluded that, under both systems the condition of the cultivators became miserable. Under the former, ‘they were placed at the mercy of the zamindar’s avarice and ambition’\textsuperscript{3}. Under the latter, they were ‘subjected to the extortions and intrigues of the surveyors and other government revenue officers’. Writing forty years after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in India he remarked that, the Permanent Settlement recognized the zamindars as alone having an unqualified proprietary right in the soil, but no such right as belonging to the cultivators. However, the government had declared in Regulation VII of 1793, that the pattahs fixing the rates of payment for the lands of the resident cultivators or khud-kasht ryots could not be generally cancelled. They could be cancelled only on four grounds — if they had been obtained by collusion or; if the rents paid by the khud-kasht ryots within the last three years had been below the nirkhbundee (general rate) of the purgunnah i.e., particular part of the district where the land was situated or; if the khud-kasht ryots had obtained collusive deductions or; upon a general measurement of the purgunnah for the purpose of equalizing and correcting the assessment. In practice, however, under one or other of the preceding four conditions, Rammohun observed, the zamindars, through their

\textsuperscript{2}Dayabhag was the Bengal school of law on inheritance and Mitakshara, the north Indian.

\textsuperscript{3}Roy, Rammohun, \textit{Questions and answers on the revenue system of India}, London, 19 August, 1831.
local influence and intrigues easily succeeded in completely setting aside the rights, even of the *khud-kasht* peasants, and increase their rents.

In theory, Rammohun observed, rent was estimated at half the gross produce of the land. But it was, however, often increased much beyond that amount by various means. Rent was generally paid in money. But ‘modernization’ in the sense of the introduction of the system of cash rents, according to him, had not made much difference to the chronic poverty of the agricultural tenant. Money rent was usually paid in monthly instalments, the heaviest payments being made when the harvest was realised. In Bengal, he remarked,

> ...the landlords have met with indulgence from government in the assessment of their revenue while no part of this indulgence is extended towards the poor cultivators.

The question of occupancy right was of crucial importance in analysing the effects of Permanent Settlement. The regulations of 1793 deprived the ryots, including the *khud-kasht* ryots, of their occupancy rights for the first time. It was prescribed that the ryot would cultivate the land; expenses on account of livestock, cattle and seeds would be borne by him and; he would pay a part of the produce to the landlord as rent. The rest he would keep for himself. Yet, nowhere in the course of his fifty-four answers or of the appended article did Rammohun seriously raise the question of occupancy right. He made only one or two incidental references. He merely noted without comment, that in former times the *khud-kasht* ryots were considered as having an absolute right to continue the possession of their lands in perpetuity.

He also noted, without any comment, that in the regulations of the Permanent Settlement the landlord was accepted as the owner of the land and not the actual cultivator. So it would not be incorrect to presume that, he indirectly supported the fact that the ryots were deprived of their ownership of land, a right which the ryots had enjoyed since ancient times till the eve of the enactment of the Permanent Settlement. Right of ownership of land meant the right to inherit and transfer their holdings. This right was effectively shifted from the cultivator to the landlord by the Permanent Settlement. This was to have far-reaching consequences. Rammohun was silent on this.

This does not mean that he was indifferent to the conditions of the ryots under the new tenurial system. He suggested how their condition could be bettered within the existing framework i.e., that the ryot would cultivate the land in return for rent paid to the landlord, the landlord would in turn deposit the revenue to the exchequer. Rammohun criticised the different clauses of the regulations from this point of view. He said that, the rate of rent that was fixed under the Permanent Settlement was rather exorbitant. This rate was one-half of the total produce, the cost of cultivation and of seeds being borne by the cultivator himself. In addition, the landlords effectively exacted an even higher rate from the cultivators through all sorts of means available at their disposal — legal and extra-legal.

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4 *ibid.*
In Bengal, at the time of the Permanent Settlement, the amount of the revenue which had been paid by each zamindari in the preceding year was taken as a standard of assessment, subject to certain modifications. Taluks which had paid a revenue directly to the government for the previous 12 years without any fluctuation, were to be assessed at that rate, and the principle of that assessment was considered to be nearly one half of the gross produce. The different fields or plots of land on an estate were classed into 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th quality and certain rates per bigha were affixed to them respectively, agreeable to the established rates in the district. These rates were considered as a standard in settling the rent to be paid by the cultivators. But, in spite of all these provisions made in the settlement, Rammohun observed, the precise quality of land was always liable to dispute. Land might be classed in the first, second, third or fourth quality according to the discretion of the zamindari or government surveyors. Measurement was always liable to variation through the ‘ignorance, ill-will, or intentional errors of the measurers — there is ‘in practice’ no fixed rate or amount of rent demandable from them, although such a standard is laid down in theory’.

Rammohun was quite aware of the fact that, as a result of the Permanent Settlement the landlords gained as a class while the conditions of the peasantry deteriorated. In an abundant season, when the price of corn was low, the sale of the peasants’ whole crop was required to meet the demands of the landholder leaving little or nothing for seed or subsistence to the labourer or his family. On the other hand, Rammohun correctly observed, the landlords could improve their lot primarily for the fact that under the terms of the Settlement, the state was to collect from the landlords a fixed total amount and not a fixed proportion of rent. Again, if the landlord could bring fallows under cultivation then it would be practically free of any rent. In fact, it was believed that since the total amount payable by the landlord to the state was fixed permanently, the landlord therefore would pay more attention to the improvement of his land and cultivation. The fixed amount of rent payable would, thus act as an incentive to the landlord. The benefits which the landlords enjoyed was, thus due principally to two factors: the extended cultivation of waste lands which formerly yielded no rent and the subsequent increase of rents much beyond those rates paid by cultivators at the time of the Permanent Settlement. Rammohun did not disapprove of the increased income of the zamindars as a result of extension of cultivation. He was however, aware of the fact that the landlords had failed to live up to the expectations of the framers of the Permanent Settlement. They had failed to bring about much improvement in their lands and cultivation. This was primarily because, many of the new zamindars did not know anything about zamindari management. In most cases, they would delegate the responsibility of looking after their estates to their gomasthas and while away their time in wasteful luxury.

As to the benefits which accrued to the state from the settlement, Rammohun observed that the state did not lose financially. His argument was that, the rate fixed at the time of the Permanent Settlement was higher than any hitherto fixed rates and the government sacrificed nothing in concluding the settlement. This analysis was not strictly correct because, even if it is granted that the rates fixed by the Permanent Settlement were no
less than any fixed earlier, still it remained true that by this the state gave up for all times any opportunity of having the rates enhanced. If the landlords ever added to their acreage under cultivation, it would not mean any additional revenue for the state. Besides, the state had nothing to expect in the future from possible rise in prices either of land or its produce. Since land revenue was the principal source of the government revenue and since its total amount became permanently fixed, it necessarily followed that to meet additional expenses and other contingencies the state would have to levy new taxes. This meant that for the benefit of the landlords as a class, the other sections of society would have to bear the burden of additional taxes.

Rammohun’s reply to the question whether the cultivators had any means of accumulating capital under the existing system of land tenure was an emphatic ‘certainly not’. He thus explained the failure of the peasants to accumulate capital:

Very often when grain is abundant, and therefore cheap, they are obliged, ... to sell their whole produce to satisfy the demands of their landlords, and to subsist themselves by their own labour. In scarce and dear years they may be able to retain some portion of the crop to form a part of their subsistence, but by no means enough for the whole. In short, such is the melancholy condition of the agricultural labourers, that it always gives me the greatest pain to allude to it.

He drew attention to the fact that, when the tenant defaulted in rent payment the proprietors distrained their moveable property, with some exceptions, by the assistance of the police officers and got it sold by means of judicial authorities. All these precluded accumulation of capital by the ryots. Consequently, no true economic development was possible as it depended on capital accumulation. The Permanent Settlement had left the ryots totally at the mercy of the zamindars who, using their powers increased rent at will. Besides, the zamindars were in the habit of farming out their estates to middlemen and authorizing them to collect the rent from under-tenants. These middlemen were much less merciful in their collection of rent than the zamindars. The law courts were often situated far away. Besides, the landholders and middlemen had in general great local influence and pecuniary means, while the cultivators were too poor to undertake the hazardous and expensive process of seeking redress. Rammohun thus, regretfully said that the legal protection of the cultivators was not as it should have been. He thus observed:

The power of imposing new leases and rents, given to the proprietors by Reg. I and VIII of 1793, and subsequent Regulations, has considerably enriched, comparatively, a few individuals, the proprietors of land, to the extreme disadvantage or rather ruin of millions of their tenants, and it is productive of no advantage to government.

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6 ibid.
7 Sarkar, Susobhan Chandra (ed.), Rammohun Roy on Indian economy, p.23.
In fact, he observed, the zamindars themselves often suffered in the event of a sale of estates for revenue default. Little publicity was given to the notices of sales, so native revenue officers often had the opportunity of effecting purchases of the land at a reduced price. Since the notices of sale were published in the government gazette, the proprietor often was unaware of it. In cases where the business was conducted by the agents of the zamindar, the former often with the help of the revenue officers sold the land at a very low price. For removing these abuses Rammohun suggested a plan of reform. He suggested that the advertisements or notices of sale should first be regularly sent to the parties interested, to their own residences, not merely delivered to their agents. They should be fixed up not only in the government offices, but at the chief market places and ferry ghats of the district and in those of the principal towns. The police officers should be required to take care that the notices remained fixed up in all these places, from the first announcement till the period of sale. The date and time of sale being precisely fixed, the bidding for an estate should be allowed to go on for a specific period to enable all intending purchasers to make an offer. This indicates that Rammohun had no desire to see the zamindars exploited. What he objected to was the unlimited power given to the zamindars to increase the rents of the khud-khasht ryots.

To Rammohun Roy, the primary basis of economic modernization and development was a policy of harmonising and rationalising the agrarian relations so as to relieve the chronic poverty of the common peasant, who in his view must first, feel that he had a stake in the land as an owner cultivator, or at least, as an occupancy tenant with full security of tenure, who paid a reasonable rent. If this happened, there was a chance, for him to accumulate capital. If, at the same time, he had access to improved techniques and other facilities for increased production, which economic modernization could ensure, there was a clear possibility of a massive economic transformation because Rammohun believed that, Indian workers had the same capacity of improvement as any other civilized people.

Rammohun outlined a comprehensive plan of land reforms. He regarded the government's measurement operations regarding land, in so far as they related to land rights and obligations, as an instrument of oppression. He came to the conclusion that, during the forty years of the operation of the new land system, the landlords had been able to ascertain the full measurement of the lands to their own satisfaction and by successive exactions to raise the rents of the cultivators to the utmost possible extent. So, if the government intended to improve the condition of the peasantry it should absolutely interdict any further increase of rent on any pretence whatsoever. The condition of the Indian peasants was that of 'agricultural labourers' rather than that of 'peasant proprietor'. On no consideration, should the government allow the prevailing 'settled and recognised extent of the land to be disturbed by pretended remeasurements'. The logic of freezing of rents was explained as follows. During Muslim rule, he argued, landed proprietors had to pay to the ruler a 'considerable proportion' of the rent collected. The ruler could also increase the revenue rates and even take away the proprietary rights of the landlords when they failed to pay

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the revenue unjustly alleged to be due from them. Indian landlords had thus been quite unlike English landlords. 'Under these circumstances, the situation of the proprietors was not in any respect on a more favourable footing than that of the *khud-kasht* tenant, and consequently their right was not in any way analogous to that of a landlord in England'.

Yet, the British treated them as English landlords. Rammohun did not object to the government treating them liberally and sparing them any distress and difficulties originating from the uncertainty of assessment. What he found unsatisfactory was, the government's failure to protect all types of tenants against the uncertainty of assessment. He said:

> I am at a loss to conceive why this indulgence (shown to the landlords) was not extended to their tenants, by requiring proprietors to follow the example of government in fixing a definite rent to be received from each cultivator, according to the average sum actually collected from him during a given term of years.

He saw no reason why the government, out of compassion for the miserable condition of the cultivators, should not be induced to fix a 'maximum' standard, corresponding with the sum of rent now paid by each cultivator in the year, and positively interdict any further increase.

Rammohun remarked that, if his proposal was adopted by the government, there would be no real violation of the Regulations of the Permanent Settlement. Regulation I of 1793, the basis of the settlement, expressly declared that it was 'the duty of the ruling power to protect all classes of people, and more particularly those who from their situation are most helpless, the Governor-General-in-Council will, whenever he may deem it proper, enact such regulations as he may think necessary, for the protection and welfare of the dependent *talukdars*, ryots and other cultivators of the soil'. Similarly Regulation VIII of 1793, provided for the permanent right of a *khud-kasht* tenant to retain possession of land at a 'fixed rent' and also protected him against cancellation of his title deeds, except under certain conditions. These exceptions were abused. Rammohun proposed that the guarantee given to the *khud-kasht* tenant was not to be limited by vague exceptions, liable to be abused as means of oppression.

What Rammohun was proposing was in essence a permanent settlement for the ryots. It would be a logical corollary to the permanent settlement of the landlord's revenue. But freezing of rents was not enough, because the rent was already raised so high, that even a statutory ban on further increase could not afford ryots any relief or comfort. The high rent rate also hindered provident husbandry and accumulation of capital for farm improvements. So the ryots' rents should be reduced and stabilized and along with this, the revenues payable by the landlords should be lowered. The loss of income that the government would suffer on account of the lowering of the revenues payable by the zamindars, should be made good by 'taxes on luxuries and such articles of use and consumption as are not necessaries of life'. This, in itself, was a remarkably advanced position for Rammohun Roy to have...
taken in the early nineteenth century. He felt that, it was feasible to tap new sources of indirect taxation i.e., luxury goods. Increased demand for agricultural commodities since 1814, had enriched the landlords and the dealers in agricultural commodities. Their luxury consumption as well as that of Europeans could be easily taxed\(^{13}\). If this failed, an alternative method for filling the budgetary gap could be adopted. He suggested that, the large government expenditure could be drastically reduced\(^{14}\). One just and effective method for securing a reduction would be, to appoint Indians in place of Europeans in most of the administrative and judicial posts. It is interesting to note that, even as early as 1831, he was already speaking of ‘drain’ from India i.e., of an unilateral outward movement of funds. His own estimate of the ‘drain’ was about 2 million pound per year. He was not in favour of the employment of Englishmen in the administration because they had to be paid much more than their Indian counterparts. The large sum that might thus be saved, would enable the government to give some relief to the unfortunate ryots by reducing their rents.

For a general improvement in the condition of the country, Rammohun pleaded for economic modernization. This meant free enterprise. He was well aware that the comparative freedom of trade after 1813 had created an illusion of prosperity. But he maintained that, there had been no ‘Common increase of Wealth’. He said that there was an extreme difference which existed

...between the rate of value of the estates sold prior to the year 1793, or even several years subsequent to that period, and the common price which the disposal of those estates now obtained to government or individuals at public or private sales ...\(^{15}\).

This increase was tenfold and in some instances twenty. This enormous augmentation of the price of land was partly due to the extensive cultivation of waste lands which had taken place in every part of the country and to a larger extent, due to the rise of rents payable by the cultivators. The greatly increased demand for the produce of lands had been attributed to the increased wealth of Bengal which had been due to the opening of trade in 1814. But Rammohun observed that, ‘in so far as these causes had operated to bring about an increase of wealth, it was confined to landlords and dealers in commodities’. The government also ‘appropriates to itself an enormous duty on the transit and exportation of the produce of the soil’. The considerable increase in the produce of the soil, had been occasioned by the extension and the improvement in agriculture by the proprietors after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement as the proprietors had been assured that, no demand of an increase of revenue would be made upon them on account of the progressive productiveness of their estates. This prosperity, however, was not shared by all. ‘It soon became evident to anyone who had toured the provinces’, observed Rammohun, ‘that within a circle of a hundred miles in any part of the country, there was very few, if any

\(^{13}\)Ganguli, B.N., *op.cit.*, p.50.
\(^{14}\)Datta, Bhabatosh, *The evolution of economic thinking in India*, p.5.
\(^{15}\)Roy, Rammohun, *Questions and answers on the revenue system of India*. 68
besides the proprietors of land who had the least pretension to wealth or independence, or even the common comforts of life.\(^{16}\)

Rammohun came to the conclusion that, the country as a whole could not gain much from the kind of economic administration which rested merely on 'freedom of trade'. What was imperative was agricultural and industrial development with the aid of western techniques, western capital and western enterprise. Economic modernization should involve not just the new Indian middle class but also the impoverished peasants, the masses of the population. For any economic modernization, the chronic poverty of the agricultural tenant had to be alleviated as, the agricultural tenants constituted the majority of the population.

Economic modernization based on western technique, capital, and enterprise was linked up with his belief in selective colonization of Europeans in the country. Though Rammohun was not in favour of employment of large number of Englishmen in the administration, he was not averse to the policy of inducing them to settle in India. Probably, he was assuming that such settlement would mean import of capital and skill and would thus make the economy prosperous. If 'Europeans of character and capital' were allowed to settle in the country, it would greatly improve the resources of the country, and also the condition of the people, by showing them superior methods of cultivation. As to how the settlement on a large scale, of Europeans of capital in the country would improve its resources,\(^{17}\) Rammohun argued that, since a large sum of money was being annually drawn from India by Europeans retiring from it with the fortunes realized there, a system which would encourage Europeans of capital to become permanent settlers with their families, would necessarily greatly improve the resources of the country. He advocated the ownership of real property in India by Europeans.

It was not easy for Europeans to hold land in the country. In the early period, the government did not encourage settlement of Europeans fearing that it might cause discontent among the people. Regulation 38 of 1793 provided that, 'no European of whatever nation or description shall purchase, rent or occupy, directly or indirectly any land out of the limits of the town of Calcutta without the sanction of the Governor-General-in-Council'. Consequently, the European planters were forced to hold land in the names of their subordinates. Until 1824, the government of Bengal refused to give permission to Europeans to hold land in the interior parts of the country. There was increasing agitation against this policy. In 1827, the British residents of Calcutta started an agitation for submitting a petition to parliament for, the opening up of the country to free trade. It had the support of Rammohun and his supporters who, used the Bengali newspaper *Sambad Kaumudi* as their mouth-piece in order to air their views. But a section of the British, supported by Hindu orthodoxy opposed this policy. Their mouth-piece was the other influential Bengali daily, the *Samachar Chandrika*. It listed as evils of European colonization: scarcity of rice due to plantation agriculture; the economic misery of the poor classes and; danger of conversion of Hindus to Christianity.\(^{18}\) On the other hand, a public meeting was held in the Town Hall in Calcutta on 17th December 1829, by the modernist group led

\(^{16}\)ibid.

\(^{17}\)Sarkar, Susobhanchandra (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.74-79.

\(^{18}\)*Sambad Kaumudi*, 26 February, 1828.
by Rammohun and Dwarkanath Tagore. The object was to draft a petition to be sent to the British Parliament for the abolition of restriction on colonization. The petition demanded among other things, the abolition of legal obstructions to the application of British skill, capital and industry to the commercial and agricultural resources of India. This initiated a long debate in the Bengali press. The orthodox Hindus opposed the ideas of colonization as they feared that the country would be invaded by unworthy Europeans. The natives would lose their means of subsistence and continual disputes would arise with the British settlers regarding agricultural land. They submitted a counter-petition to Parliament against European colonization in March 1829. It was alleged in the petition that indigo planters occupied lands by force, that they sowed indigo by destroying the rice plant which explained the scarcity of rice and other articles of consumption, that they detained the cattle of the poor cultivators and extorted money from them.

In spite of staunch opposition, Rammohun remained firm in his view that selective colonization could initiate a process of economic modernization in India\textsuperscript{19}. He said that, European settlers in India would introduce the knowledge they possessed of superior methods of cultivating the soil and improving its products (such as sugar, for instance), as had already happened with respect to indigo, and improvements in the mechanical arts, and in the agricultural and commercial systems generally. Contact with the European settlers would enable the people to get rid of 'superstitions and prejudices standing in the way of useful exertions'. The presence of Europeans would hasten the improvement in the laws and the judicial system. By their very presence in the countryside, they would afford protection to the poor man against 'the impositions and oppression of the landlords and others superiors' and against the official abuse of power. In short, the advantages of colonization, according to Rammohun, far outweighed its disadvantages.

On this issue Rammohun found an ally in Governor-General Bentinck\textsuperscript{(1828-35)}. His government supported the indigo planters for it found that, the legal prohibition on the holding of land failed as a practical measure. The law was often cleverly evaded. Besides, it felt that the holding of land by the Europeans would have an economic impact. It would facilitate the production and reduce the cost of articles of export from India. The two most disliked restrictions imposed in 1824 on holding land, were withdrawn in 1829, i.e., the withdrawal of licence of a planter found guilty usurping others' possession and the security the planters were asked to furnish in addition to their plantation. This did not fully satisfy the planters. They wanted removal of all obstacles to enterprise. Bentinck's government supported them. During this time, the Charter Act of 1813 was nearing the end of its period. A powerful group in England was in favour of opening up India to free English enterprise and they influenced the government. The latter felt that, in view of the changed political and economic circumstances in India, the old restrictions were no longer necessary. The fear of early British administrators of discontent and disruptions in case of any change in the socio-economic structure were no longer valid. The new economic scenario had brought different sections of Indian society into close contact with the British. The new land system had led to the emergence of a new gentry. Many were associated with commercial activities with the British. All these, along with spread of western education

\textsuperscript{19} Roy, Rammohun, \textit{Remarks on settlement in India by Europeans.}
had tightened the bond between Indians and Europeans. The government also argued that, it would ensure that Europeans did not forcibly seize lands from natives. Settlement of Europeans in India would bring European enterprise and skill. It would improve moral values. The Charter Act of 1833 accepted these arguments and accepted the demand of the planters. Rammohun believed that, the bulk of the people should benefit from economic advancement. So, while he favoured freedom of economic enterprise and freedom of trade, his deep concern for the rural poor prevented him from being a 'doctrinaire' free trader in respect of the export of food grains from India. He once argued that the export of rice had a tendency to aggravate the effects of the failure of crops and, therefore, on one occasion appealed to the government to suspend free exports of rice from the Bengal ports. Generally, he had noticed that the rural trade in rice in the Bengal region, as well as the export trade in rice, was particularly lucrative and he came to the conclusion that, an export duty on rice was not unwarranted, if the proceeds of the duty could be used for reducing the burden of land revenue, particularly on the tenant farmers.

Rammohun Roy was thus, the first thinker to provide a comprehensive critique of the agrarian situation in Bengal. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was justifiably his starting point as it had initiated a process of change. He said that, if the Permanent Settlement had not been introduced the zamindars would always have taken care to prevent the revenue from increasing, by not bringing the waste lands under cultivation and by 'collusive arrangements' to elude further demands; while the state of the cultivators would not have been any better. So, the abolition of the Permanent Settlement was not the answer. The improvement of the lot of the ryots would be possible only if the rents were reduced and the Permanent Settlement was extended to them. He explained that, the introduction of cash rents did not encourage cultivation in a period of rising prices after 1814, because the normal burden of rent on the ryot was excessively heavy. And since, the British had no interest in maintaining or raising the productivity of agriculture, by means of investment in economic overheads like roads, canals or extension of markets, land tax became an instrument of exploitation.

Rammohun, however, in spite of his brilliant critique of Permanent Settlement, failed to realise the true impact of the system of indigo cultivation on the rural countryside. Another eminent Bengali, Dwarkanath Tagore too had this shortcoming. This shortcoming becomes all the more glaring in view of the fact that, the indigo peasants had for long been agitating against the system. Both Rammohun and Dwarkanath Tagore had not only supported the indigo plantation system but, were themselves planters in their own right. Under the pseudonym 'landholder', Dwarkanath wrote in the *Sambad Kaumudi* that the poor classes were better off through the diffusion of purchasing power, which was the result of the introduction of a remunerative cash-crop. Forced labour exacted by indigenous zamindars was being replaced to some extent by free labour. He observed that, the wages of Rs 4 per month paid by the planters was not a miserable income and also that the middle classes, employed as *sarkars* and in other capacities in the plantations, were

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21Kling, Blair B., *The blue mutiny, the indigo disturbances in Bengal 1859-1862*, p.104.
22*Sambad Kaumudi*, 26 February, 1828.
getting higher salaries and were no longer at the mercy of the zamindars and the great banyas. The agents of the absentee landlords were, far more oppressive than the planters. These agents, he observed, held the indigo planters responsible for the tenants leaving their estates and kept their principals ignorant of the true facts about the reduction of revenues of the zamindari estates. In a meeting held in the Town Hall in Calcutta on 17th December 1829, Dwarkanath Tagore reiterated in his speech the same views. Rammohun too held the same views. He said that the natives residing in the neighbourhood of indigo plantations were evidently better clothed and better conditioned, than those who lived at a distance from such stations. The advocacy of the indigo system, by Rammohun and Dwarkanath, in spite of the glaring anomalies of the system was due to their imperfect understanding of the system and not, contrary to the popular view, because they wanted to safeguard their class interests.

Rammohun's conscious presentation of the agrarian question brings to light certain major issues, which were to become the focus of a prolonged discussion by the later Bengali intelligentsia. His was the first critique of the Permanent Settlement. This settlement, which fixed the revenue at a very high rate, was responsible for a corresponding hike in the rent rate. It destroyed gradually the bond of amity between the landlords and the tenants. Rammohun was aware of this. If this bond was not restored, he observed, no real economic modernization would be possible. The proprietary right granted to the zamindars, their unlimited power to increase the rent due from even the khud-kasht peasants, the increasing hostility between the zamindar and the ryots, all contributed to the impoverishment of the latter and their failure to accumulate capital. Rammohun highlighted all these issues. It was he who was the first to lay down, the principles on which some effective steps could be taken to ameliorate the condition of the peasants, such steps being fixed rents on the basis of a permanent settlement between the zamindar and the ryt.

4.2 The Young Bengal and agrarian issues

The Young Bengal continued the critique. The young students of Hindu College in the 1820s and 1830s, because of the unique influence of Derozio, came to be clubbed together as a distinct and homogenous group. Very soon however, they came under many other influences, which were not always homogeneous. For instance, while Maheshchandra Ghosh and Krishnamohan Banerjee became Christians, Tarachand Chakrabarti became the Secretary of Brahma Sabha. Pearychand Mitra became interested in spiritualism from the 1860s and became prominent in the Bengal branch of the Theosophical Society. In later life, their paths diverged. While Krishnamohan joined the missionaries, some entered government.

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24Roy, Suprakash, Bharater krishak bidroho o ganatantrik sangram, p.237.
service. Harachandra Ghosh was made Sadar Amin in Bankura in 1832, Rasikkrishna Mullick and Gobindachandra Basak became deputy-collectors around 1837-38, Chandrasekhar Deb, Sibchandra Deb and Kishorichand Mitra were appointed deputy-magistrates between 1843-46. Pearychand Mitra and Ramgopal Ghosh became fairly successful businessmen. Pearychand Mitra's father, Ramnarayan Mitra, was a friend of Rammohun. After completing his education in Hindu College, Pearychand was associated with the Bengal British India Society, British India Association, the Bengal Social Science Sabha and other welfare organizations. He was elected a member of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India. He achieved considerable success in internal and foreign trade as well as in the literary sphere. He wrote a series of essays in Jnanannesana, Bengal Spectator, Calcutta Review, Bengal Hurkura, Indian Mirror etc. His best work was Alaler gharer dhal (Indulged son of the house). Again Dakshinaranjan (18114-78), a favourite of Derozio, was born in an orthodox Brahmin family of Bhatpara and was related to the branch of the Tagores at Pathuriaghata. In 1838, he became acquainted with the young widow of Maharaja Tejchandra of Burdwan, Basantkumari, whom he later married. He then settled in Lucknow where, he acquired eminence. During the Mutiny he helped the British, for which he was rewarded with a big taluk in Rai-Bareilly. He helped in the foundation of Lucknow Canning College. He became a member of the Oudh Talukdar Samity. In 1871, the British honoured him with the title of 'Raja'.

In their early years, the Derozians were more concerned with religious and social issues rather than with agrarian problems. A review of the activities of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, an association of the students of Hindu College, till 1838 bear testimony to this. Early in their career, most of them were atheists. But this was a passing phase. They soon retreated from their early radicalism. Dakshinaranj Mukherjee for instance, one of the most radical of the Derozians, was reported by Rajnarain Basu to have settled down in Oudh like a good Hindu by the 1860s and to have got his son married to an Ayodhya Brahmin’s daughter. With Pearychand Mitra, ‘the retreat turns into a rout’, for in his biography of Ramkamal Sen, written in 1880, who along with Radhakanta Deb was responsible for securing the dismissal of Derozio, he even stated that Ramkamal’s kind of religion was preferable to the irreligion of Young Bengal, the theories imbibed from Huxley, Spencer, Mill or Bradlaugh. Thus the Derozians left no permanent effects in the sphere of religion.

In the sphere of social reform, their main emphasis was on the emancipation of women: the need for education, the evils of child-marriage and Kulin polygamy, parental arrangement...
of marriages, the seclusion of women, and the ban on widow-remarriage. Derozians, like Radhanath Sikdar, actively supported Vidyasagar’s campaign for widow re-marriage. But they themselves however, failed to organise any real campaign on any social reform issue.

It was only later that, some members of this group became conscious about agrarian issues and began to take an active interest. But by then, almost a decade had elapsed since Rammohun had presented a comprehensive account of the economic problems besetting the country, before the Select Committee of the British House of Commons. It is difficult to explain this apathy of the Young Bengal towards the problems of the greater multitude of Bengal’s population. One possible reason is that they came predominantly from the urban classes and even those who had rural roots, belonged mainly to the landed classes. They were relatively unfamiliar with the agrarian scenario. It was difficult for them to transcend their class interests and develop on awareness for issues not affecting them directly. That came only with time.

Gradually, some of the erstwhile members of the Young Bengal began to take an interest in agrarian issues. In 1838, the Landholder’s Society was established. One of its primary objectives was to prevent the government from acquiring those lands from which no revenue was collected. Gradually, it took up the task of safeguarding the interests of the zamindars. In 1842, Dwarkanath Tagore invited George Thompson to come to India. He had been associated with the movement against the system of slavery in England. During his visit Thompson met many of the leading men of Bengal. In 1843, through his efforts the Bengal British India Society was established in Calcutta. Its objective was to acquire information about the people, law and order situation and economic condition of the country and; to try and improve the condition of the people. These developments created an interest among the intelligentsia in the condition of the rural people, particularly the peasants. Like their contemporaries — Akshay Kumar Dutta, members of Tattvabodhini Sabha, Iswarchandra Gupta — the Young Bengal too became interested in agrarian problems. In April 1842, the Bengal Spectator was first published. Young Bengal leaders like Ramgopal Ghosh took the initiative in its publication. Till November 1843, when its publication was stopped, the need for the amelioration of the condition of the ryots was emphasised in its columns. The journal became the mouth-piece of the Young Bengal. In its first issue, it stated that its aim was to educate the people and strive for their happiness. The time was suitable for such an effort because, the British rulers were becoming increasingly concerned about the welfare of the subjects; the educated people of the country were becoming increasingly interested in the welfare of the country and; they had also become more responsive to criticisms of their views. In view of these changing social circumstances, the Bengal Spectator felt that any appeal to the government for the improvement of the country would be fruitful.

The journal adopted a liberal economic viewpoint. It put stress on the fact that, the Bengal ryot had to undergo two-fold oppression — oppression by the zamindar and also by the government which legalised the system of zamindari oppression. Speaking about

32 Bengal Spectator, April, 1842. Cf. From April-August 1842, this journal was published monthly. In September 1842, it became fortnightly and from March 1843, till November 1843, it was published weekly.
the Permanent Settlement, the journal stated:

A system such as this country never beheld, was established, by which in the same ratio that government secured the realisation of its own revenue, it enabled its farmers and revenue payers to squeeze the last pice from their undertenants.\(^{33}\)

The liberal attitude of the journal was revealed in a series of articles entitled 'Ryot' which were published over a period of time. By narrating the story of the poor Muslim peasant Miajan\(^{34}\) of Hooghly, it illustrated how the zamindars and talukdars took advantage of the legal loopholes in the land settlement to exploit the ryots. The talukdar bought a new taluk at the expense of few thousand rupees. He decided to collect this money by increasing the rent due from the ryots. The rents of both the occupancy and non-occupancy ryots were increased. Different types of pressures were applied on the poor ryots like Miajan. As Miajan soon found out, not only the talukdar but also the local police and the collector were involved in oppressing the poor ryots.

At a weekly meeting of Native Community at Balkhana, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, spoke at length on the condition of the ryots under the Hindu, the Muhammedan and the British administrators. He explained that under the native government the right in the soil was not vested in private individuals, and that it was a great mistake to have converted zamindars, who were the 'collectors of revenue' into proprietors of landed estates, by which act the rights of a vast number had been sacrificed.\(^{35}\)

The *Bengal Spectator* narrated in detail the evils of the zamindari system. Among these evils were rack-renting, illegal imposts and the oppression of moneylenders. At a meeting addressed by George Thompson, Ganendranath Tagore exposed the abuses of the zamindari system.\(^{36}\) At another meeting, Dakshinaranjan depreciated the system of middlemen as being highly detrimental to the interest of the ryots.\(^{37}\) Pearychand Mitra depicted the zamindars as cruel oppressors of their ryots. He asserted that they imposed illegal taxes of all kinds and resorted to the worst forms of physical torture to gain their ends. Moreover, there were also moneylenders, who through various indigenous forms of extortion left the cultivators with nothing.

The *Bengal Spectator* vehemently criticized the laws of distraint. It stated\(^{38}\) that the oppression of the zamindars, which was proverbially the cause of the ryots' misery, was inseparable from the operation of those summary powers which had been given to them by the makers of the Permanent Settlement. Section 2 of the Regulation XVII, 1793 which gave the zamindars immense power was far worse. The journal held that, the distraint laws legalised all kinds of oppression and tyranny by zamindars. Government allowed

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\(^{33}\) *Bengal Spectator*, 15 October, 1842.

\(^{34}\) *ibid.*, 1 November, 15 November, 15 December, 1842.

\(^{35}\) *ibid.*, 17 April 1843.

\(^{36}\) *ibid.*, 8th March 1843.


\(^{38}\) *Bengal Spectator*, 1 November, 1842.
them to squeeze their ryots, in order that the government could squeeze the zamindars in turn. The summary trials were nothing but occasions for exactions. They were the bane of the Bengal peasants. The journal lamented the fact that, the makers of the Permanent Settlement ignored the plight of the peasantry. Consequently, there was no end to the misery of the ryots, so much so that the word 'ryot' was synonymous to 'poor'39.

With regard to the relation between landlord and tenant, the attitude of the Bengal Spectator was definitely pro-ryot. A correspondent of the journal wrote that, the ryots constituted not only the majority of the population but were also the most oppressed40. There were occasions when the oppressed peasantry, as a last resort, took to Dharmaghat. Citing an instance, the journal stated, the oppression of the peasantry in one case broke all limits. Following the burning of their cottages by the agents of the zamindars, the ryots ultimately proposed to unite against oppression. The heads of the peasantry accordingly met, deliberated, and having set up the Dharmaghat the emblem of the Divine Presence, resolved with all the ryots, that they would abide by each other, and resist demand for increased rents41.

The Bengal Spectator listed as reasons for the miserable plight of the people of the country — immorality, administrative inefficiency and poverty. Blind religious superstitions accounted for the immorality of the people. Administrative inefficiency was the result of centuries of foreign rule. These two were responsible for the narrow-mindedness and hence poverty of the Hindus. Lack of courage and open-mindedness had made them apathetic to economic activities. It had destroyed all spirit of enterprise. The Young Bengal proposed to set up some sort of an organisation to carry on constitutional agitation in defence of the peasantry. A committee was set up to find a solution to the major agrarian problems42. The committee circulated through the columns of the Bengal Spectator a questionnaire, to be filled in by the readers43. The questionnaire not only throws light on the oppression of the peasantry in all its aspects viz., enhancement of rent, illegal imposts, the oppression of the moneylenders but also highlighted the real condition of the ryots, particularly the loss of their rights. It also sought information on the growing differentiation in the ranks of the peasantry44.

The Young Bengal, more radical than the moderate Rammohun, was unequivocal in its denunciation of the evils of the zamindari settlement. They highlighted all its evils and held them responsible for the increasing poverty of the masses. Another crucial fact which they emphasised was the increasing animosity between the landlords and the tenants. They held the Permanent Settlement responsible for the destruction of the 'paternal' relationship between these two classes. Like Rammohun, they had a good idea about the changes taking place in the rural countryside of Bengal over the preceding half century. But unlike the former, they failed to suggest any comprehensive plan of reform. They only pointed out

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39 ibid.
40 ibid., 25 April, 1843.
41 ibid., 16 August, 1843.
42 Bengal Spectator, 17 April, 1843.
43 ibid., 24 July, 1843.
44 Dutta, R.C., The peasantry of Bengal, (ed.) Narahari Kaviraj, Introduction, pp.XXX-VI.
the defects in the prevailing system, but failed to suggest a viable alternative. They failed to raise the agrarian question from the conceptual plane to the level of practical politics. Their activities in this sphere was limited, to the publication of a few articles in their journal and that too over a very limited period. Besides, only a handful of their leaders were associated with this. In actual fact, the Young Bengal leaders had no connection with the countryside. They had no real conception about the problems facing the multitude of Bengal’s peasantry. So they could only skirt the surface and offer a half-hearted response.

After criticising the Permanent Settlement, Rasik krishna Mullick asserted

...that the only way now to improve the condition of ryots, is to effect a refor-
mation in the organization of Mofussil Courts.

The Derozians also criticised the Company’s monopoly rights and administrative practices. Pearychand suggested a permanent settlement in rent-rates. He had great faith in the zamindars made benevolent by English education. He appealed to the zamindars:

When the ryots are well-protected, they find it easier to pay your claims... your happiness and the happiness of your ryots, are identified with each other.

The arguments of the Young Bengal on agrarian issues were based on certain general premises. They accepted the Permanent Settlement as an accomplished fact even while criticizing some of its defects. They did not advocate its abolition for they could not offer a viable alternative. But their concern for the ryots made them point out the unprotected status of the peasantry under the system. Pearychand Mitra in 1846, pleaded for protection of the ryot and echoing Locke’s thought introduced by Derozio theorized that ‘it is private property which gives rise to government, and not government to private property’ and that ‘the opulent and powerful do not require so much of its care and anxiety as the poor and helpless’. But they did not suggest how their rights could be safeguarded. Nor did they specify the types of rights to be given to the ryots. Their faith in the zamindars led them to appeal to them to adopt a benevolent attitude towards the ryots.

For all their early apparent radicalism, at least in their economic thinking, the Derozians gave little proof of anything unique or novel. A basic loyalty towards the British underlies all their ideas. Derozian journals like the Jnanannesana repeatedly urged their readers to take up independent trade, as distinct from acting as mutsuddies to British businessmen, investing in company papers or taking up service or clerical jobs. Pearychand Mitra

46 Mitra, Pearychand, op.cit.
47 ibid., p.350.
48 ibid., p.351-52.
and Ramgopal Ghosh did become fairly successful businessmen, but it is important to consider how 'independent' this avenue of advancement could be in the mid-19th century Bengal. Kalachand Seth & Company of 1839, with which Pearychand had been associated, and Pearychand Mitra & Sons of 1855 were both engaged essentially in the export-import business, and R.C. Ghosh & Company traded in Arakan rice. Their activities fell far short of the Dwarkanath Tagore level, and Bengali entrepreneurship of even this compradore type was being rapidly eliminated after the 1847 crash.

Their understanding of the basic economic relationship between Britain and India was handicapped by their own dependence for economic advancement on the British. Thus, even the decline of Indian handicrafts passed unnoticed by them. The letters describing the miserable plight of Miajan in the *Bengal Spectator* were soon to be surpassed by Akshay Kumar Dutta's series in the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Again, when Pearychand Mitra suggested a permanent settlement in rent-rates he was echoing what Rammohun had suggested earlier.

### 4.3 Akshay Kumar Dutta and the *Tattvabodhini Sabha*

After Rammohun and the Derozians, the notable name is that of Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-86) and the *Tattvabodhini group*.

He was a man of wonderful and versatile intellectual interests. Born in a humble family, it was through sheer effort that he educated himself. He soon came into contact with the poet Iswarchandra Gupta, at whose request he began to write regularly for *Sambad Prabha kar*. It was again at the latter's request that, he became a member of the Tattvabodhini Sabha founded by Debendranath Tagore and later adopted Brahmoism. He was a prolific writer who wrote on widely different subjects.

A contemporary of the Young Bengal group, the Tattvabodhini Sabha was founded in 1839 by the friends and supporters of Rammohun Roy. They continued the trend of agrarian thinking initiated by Rammohun. In August 1843, they started the publication of the *Tattvabodhini Patrika* which became their mouth-piece. Till the time when it went out of circulation in 1859, the *Patrika* regularly expressed the views of the Brahmo leaders on major agrarian issues. It had a modern economic outlook. While it favoured economic development, it was also quick to condemn all forms of socio-economic exploitation.

The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* published a series of articles which, give an indication of the perception of the agrarian question of the members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha. These

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55 Ghosh, Benoy, *op.cit.*, vol.4, p.43.
56 *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, Baisakh 1850.
articles clearly depict the miserable condition of the Bengal peasantry. They were oppressed by the colonial government as well as the local lords. The Patrika categorically stated that land was their capital. But it was lamentable that their misery knew no bounds. The reason was the unrestrained oppression of the zamindars. The latter fleeced the ryots, subjecting them to extra-legal and illegal imposts. In some cases, the zamindars increased the dues of the ryots by one-fourth of the total unpaid dues of the ryots. The Patrika gave an instance of how the zamindars increased their dues. It seemed that, a Calcutta-based Brahmin zamindar once asked his peasants for a handful of grains as alms. Then he calculated that this collection amounted to Rs.1,500/-. He then declared that henceforth the ryots would have to pay in addition to their other dues a yearly sum of Rs.1,500/-. This was just one mode of oppression. Each zamindar devised different methods for oppressing the ryots. The Patrika observed that Cornwallis’s dream that the Permanent Settlement would improve the condition of the rural economy had not been realised. The revenue had been fixed at a very high rate and was rigorously collected. The zamindars had to pay the revenue by the sunset of a specified date, irrespective of the fact whether the ryots could pay or not. So the oppression of the ryot, who was left totally at the mercy of the zamindar, was the logical corollary. The Tattvabodhini Patrika described how the zamindars exercised their rights over not only the moveable and immovable properties of the ryots, but also over the latter’s person and his physical labour. His plight was worse than that of a slave. The slave had the right to be looked after by his master, but the ryot had no such right. The Patrika listed eighteen different types of physical torture practised upon the hapless ryots by their zamindars.

Added to the oppression of the zamindars was, the exploitation by their agents and servants. The latter collected their dues from the ryots on their own. The misery of the ryots increased if the zamindar leased out portions of his land to the ijardinars or revenue farmers. Unlike the zamindars, the revenue farmers had no stake in the land. While the former did not desire the absolute ruin of the peasants, for fear of ruining agriculture which would prove detrimental to his interests in the long run, the latter had no such compunction. His dues to the zamindar or the superior lease holder was fixed. Anything he collected over and above this due went into his own pockets. Since the term of his lease was fixed, he had no interest in the improvement of the land. His sole interest was, to get rich as quickly as possible at the expense of the ryots. The ryots thus had to serve four masters: the zamindar, the pattanidar, the ijadar, and the dar-ijadar.

The ryots had no means of redressal. There were law courts but they were often situated far away. Recourse to law courts was a lengthy and expensive process. It was also difficult to find witnesses to testify in their favour. The zamindars with far greater resources could easily control legal proceedings. The police and the officials of the court were in their pay. In fact, the local police officials also took their pound of flesh from the hapless ryots.

The exploitation of the ryots would increase if a zamindari was divided into co-parcenary shares. All the claimants would then claim their dues from the ryots. In order to meet the

57 ibid., Sravana, 1850.
58 ibid.
59 ibid.
manifold dues, the ryots had more often than not to borrow from the moneylenders who claimed more than half the principal sum as interest. So, whatever was left after paying the different dues went into paying the interest. This often left the ryots with not even the bare subsistence. Coupled with this, there was also the ever present threat that the zamindar might evict a ryot and give his land to another who promised to pay a higher rent.

Having outlined the condition of the ordinary ryot the Tattvabodhini Patrika, edited by Akshay Kumar Dutt, went on to highlight the anomalies in the indigo cultivation system. Unlike his predecessor Rammohun, Akshay Kumar Dutt had a clear perception of what the indigo system entailed for the cultivating ryot and the way the system operated. This was probably the first concerted attempt to highlight the indigo problem. He pointed out that, the oppression of the zamindars was far surpassed by that of the indigo planters. The planters gave dan to the ryots and forced them to cultivate indigo either on their own land or on the land of the planters. The amount they gave as dan was negligible and even out of this negligible amount, the agent and the gomasthas took a share. The ryots were forced by the planters to cultivate indigo on their most fertile lands, lands which had till then been under rice cultivation. Even after cultivating indigo, the ryots were not given a fair price for the crop. Cultivation of indigo ruined the productivity of soil, making it unsuitable for the cultivation of other crops.

Unlike the ordinary ryots, the indigo cultivators were denied even the token means of redressal. Since the planters were mainly Europeans, the ryots could hardly hope to get any justice by complaining to the English magistrate. Unhindered by any legal constraints, the planters continued the forced cultivation of indigo in Bengal. The Tattvabodhini Patrika lamented that, there seemed to be no means in sight by which such a coercive system could be abolished. This description of the working and actual significance of the indigo system, indicates that for the first time the Bengali intelligentsia had a clear conception of the indigo problem.

Another crucial fact which the Tattvabodhini group brought to light was that, the oppression of the rural middle class i.e. the class which stood between the zamindars and the masses of peasantry, could be compared with that of the indigo planters. This 'middle class' comprised of the agents and gomasthas of the zamindar and the planters. So the major agrarian issues on which the members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha, through their mouth-piece, focussed were the exploitation of the ryots by the zamindars, the planters and their agents, their increasing poverty, the growing tension between the zamindars and the peasants and the real significance of the indigo system.

Akshay Kumar Dutta thus conducted the Tattvabodhini Patrika, which he edited from 1843 to 1855, to highlight the deplorable plight, wretchedness and despondency of the peasantry of Bengal. He could, as it were, hear their cries. His attacks were, in particular, directed against the native landlords and the foreign indigo planters. He wrote three essays entitled 'Palligramastha prajader durabasthya' (the miserable condition of the village peasants) in Tattvabodhini Patrika in 1850 on the miserable conditions of the Bengal peasants. Here, he

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60ibid., Agrahayan, 1850.
highlighted the oppression of the Bengal landlords and blamed the *patni* system for this\(^{61}\). In the second part of the essay, he lamented the fact that the government did not take steps to protect the peasants. Here again he highlighted the oppression of the landlords\(^{62}\). In the third part he discussed in detail, the oppression of the indigo planters whose atrocities surpassed those of even the most powerful landlords. The indigo planters had one freak of law in their favour, that they could not be tried and brought to book by any subordinate law court existing in the *mofussil* area, because they were Europeans. Thus emboldened, they terrorized, looted, beat, burnt and killed at will, if the peasants did not accept their terms.

The miserable condition of the peasants made him lament:

> It is beyond anybody's conception when or how this immeasurable suffering is going to end. There is oppression of the landlords, tortures of the indigo planters, exactions of the officials, and over and above, misgovernment and injustice of the government itself. Can they have any of their strength left, who are constant preys to such co-ordinated violence? They are poor in wealth, poor in knowledge, poor in religion, and even poor in strength and vigour. Is there any way to remedy this desperate and terrible situation? These exists no unity among the people; nor is there any feeling of oneness among the upper and lower classes of our society. Those who are desirous of ending the misery lack strength and power; those who have power have no will ... No one doubts that the government could greatly ameliorate their present condition if they so desired ... But, alas, they do not move even at the sight of peasants writhing under brutal tortures and oppression. Hence, they are hopelessly failing in their obligations, for which they would surely be guilty in the eyes of God\(^{63}\).

Though Akshay Kumar repeatedly raised the question of how the sufferings of the peasants could be ended, he could not provide an answer. It probably did not occur to him that, the problem could not be solved without a change in the zamindari and *patni* system. He lived long enough to see further deterioration in the condition of the peasantry. He appealed to the government to redress their misery.

If Rammohun, the other Brahma leaders and the Tattvabodhini group constituted the western educated moderates and the Young Bengal, the western educated radicals, Radhakanta Deb of Shovabazar was certainly the best representative of the traditionalist group. He was associated with the Agricultural and Horticultural Society which, had been founded with the aim of improving Indian agriculture\(^{64}\). His association with the zamindar sabha and the British Indian Association reveals his pro-landlord bias. Though he did not deal with the agrarian issues at length, he observed that the government’s agrarian policy was

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\(^{61}\) Dutta, Akshay Kumar, 'Palligramastha prajader durabastha', *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, Baisakh, 1772 Saka.

\(^{62}\) *ibid.*, Sravan, 1772 Saka.

\(^{63}\) *ibid.*, Agrahayon, 1772 Saka.

\(^{64}\) Bagal, Jogeshchandra, *Radhakanta Deb*, pp.38-40.
ruinous for both the landlords and the tenants. He opposed the government’s proposal to tax the *lakheraj* (rent-free) lands.

4.4 **Continuation of this trend in the mid-19th century**

The classical humanist poet and erudite editor of *Sangbad Prabhakar*, Ishwarchandra Gupta, added a new dimension to the agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia. Though not a product of English medium education, he imbibed much of his western liberalism from his long association with the Tattvabodhini Sabha and the eminent Brahma leaders. Under his guidance, the *Sangbad Prabhakar* became an influential paper. Ishwarchandra was helped by Jogendramohan Tagore of the Pathuriaghata branch of the Tagore family. Among those who regularly wrote in the journal were Akshay Kumar Dutta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, the poet, Sambunath Pandit, a High Court judge, Sambhu Chandrachandra Mukhopadhyay, the writer and journalist, and many others. It adopted a very modern and progressive economic outlook. It had a close look at the agricultural scene and came to the conclusion that, the government’s revenue policy was responsible for the economic ruin of the zamindars and ryots of Bengal.

The journal referred to the oppression of the peasantry by the zamindars and *ijaradars* and to their subsequent ruin. It stated that, the greater the increase in the number of intermediaries between the zamindars and the ryots, the greater the latter’s misery. The journal observed that, though many held the zamindar solely responsible for the ryot’s condition this was not always the case. The zamindars themselves suffered greatly from the provisions of the Permanent Settlement and the sale laws. They had to pay their revenue by the sunset of a particular date. No remission was granted or any delay tolerated. Failure to comply meant the sale of the landlords’ estates. So they could not afford to be forbearing to the ryots in distress. This logic in the *Prabhakar’s* argument has some validity. This attitude does not, however, indicate a pro-landlord bias because time and again it highlighted in its columns the miserable condition of the ryots.

The *Sangbad Prabhakar* alluded to the change in the composition of the zamindari class and its effect on the zamindar-peasant relationship in the post-Permanent Settlement period. Distress sale of lands had resulted in the entry of moneyed men from urban areas to the zamindari class. Unlike the old zamindars, they had no ties with the land and their sole aim was to make more money. This had destroyed the old relationship between zamindars and peasants. The journal also alluded to the oppression of moneylenders. They advanced money and seed, to the ryots at the time of cultivation and collected their dues during harvest with heavy interest. In order to pay all their dues, the ryots had to

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65 *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 11 Ashar 1258 B.S.
66 *ibid.*, 28 Bhadra, 1259 B.S.
68 *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 5 Bhadra, 1264 B.S.
continue to borrow and there was no way out of this vicious circle of debt payment for them. The only remedy was the change in the land-revenue policy of the British.

Taking its cue from the Tattwabodhini Patrika, the Sangbad Prabhakar also systematically attacked the indigo system and the oppression of the indigo planters. It observed that, the planters coerced the ryots to cultivate indigo without sufficient remuneration\(^\text{69}\). Their exploitation was particularly noticeable in the districts of Murshidabad, Jessore, Pabna, Dacca, Mymensingh, Bakhargunj, Faridpur and Rajshahi. The oppressed indigo cultivators were denied proper justice because of the close alliance between the magistrates and the indigo planters\(^\text{70}\).

In an editorial Iswarchandra wrote that, anyone who took dadan from an indigo planter bound himself to a life of endless misery and ‘lost his all’. There was no end to the forms of oppression practised by the planters. The ryots could hope for no redress from the magistrates, whom they feared and who maintained very friendly relations with the planters. They frequently visited the plantations. Act XXXI of 1841 gave the magistrates the power to imprison for fifteen days and impose a fine upto Rs 50 on disobedient ryots. But to ensure proper justice, Iswarchandra suggested that the ryots should be allowed to appeal to higher authorities if they were not satisfied with the judgement\(^\text{71}\). In another editorial, Iswarchandra described how the planters forced the ryots to sow indigo and irrigate the land without any reward for their labour. They forcibly cultivated the lands of the zamindars. Lt. Governor Halliday was aware of these abuses. Yet, in the report which he sent to the government after his visit to some districts he did not mention any of them. Iswarchandra lamented that those who were connected with the judiciary were friends or relatives of the planters. The judges, magistrates and collectors were frequently invited by the planters to dine and hunt with them. The ryots could never hope to get fair justice from them against the planters\(^\text{72}\).

Iswarchandra observed that European magistrates would never punish the oppressive planters. Only Indian administrators would try to do that. He said that, when Chandramohan Chattopadhyay was the deputy magistrate of Murshidabad and Kishorichand Mitra that of Rajshahi, the planters of those two districts had ceased to be oppressive and the ryots had lived in peace. The same was true in Natore when Gopalchandra Mitra was in charge there\(^\text{73}\). So unless more and more educated Indians were given magisterial powers there could be no redress for the suffering indigo peasants.

\(^{69}\text{ibid., Ashar, 1255 B.S.}\)
\(^{70}\text{ibid.}\)
\(^{71}\text{ibid., 2 Ashar, 1255 B.S.}\)
\(^{72}\text{ibid., 4 Kartick, 1261 B.S.}\)
\(^{73}\text{ibid., 1 Magh, 1265 B.S.}\)
4.5 Harishchandra Mookherjee and the *Hindoo Patriot*

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Bengali intelligentsia in keeping with the trend of thought initiated by Rammohun Roy had thus begun to think seriously about some of the major agrarian issues. The oppression of the zamindars, the miserable condition of the ryots, the relationship between these two groups, the exploitation of the ryots by moneylenders, indigo cultivation were some of the major issues discussed. During this period, under the editorship of Girishchandra Ghosh and Harishchandra Mookherjee, the *Hindoo Patriot* also emerged as an influential journal. Its comments on the landlord-tenant relationship are revealing:

That relation is one from which scarcely a hundredth part of the population, of the country is free. Its extent, its influence over individual happiness and the national character, and the degree in which it modified the action of all our social and political institutions are admitted by all to be surprisingly great, yet on none of the subjects of high national interest which are presented to the Indian spectator does exist such an amount of error and prejudice74.

The owners and occupiers of the soil had conflicting interests and a feeling incompatible with social well being was kept alive. The general consequence, the journal pointed out, was

that of a fabric torn and defaced by the feuds of its inmates, where each solicitors, only for the preservation of the part inhabited by himself and intent upon the destruction of the rest75.

Each class tried to further its own interest at the expense of the other. The result was constant conflict in which the occupiers of land, comprising by far the large portion of the population, were the greatest sufferers. But, 'it is a law of providence', the *Hindoo Patriot* observed,

that the oppressor cannot oppress long without losing much that is truly valuable in him and to him, and the body of the Bengal zamindars have not escaped the visitations of this law76.

So, it was felt that a satisfactory adjustment of the relation between the zamindar and the ryot was absolutely imperative for the good of both. These ideas expressed by the *Hindoo Patriot* found an echo in other contemporary journals. The *Hindoo Intelligencer* stated, 'Our zamindar conceals the heart of a viper under the garb of an Angel' and the

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74 *Hindoo Patriot*, 6 September, 1855.
75 *ibid.*
76 *ibid.*
“poorest ryot is the first object of his rapacity.” A satisfactory solution to the problem of landlord-tenant relationship was the prime necessity of the day.

Discussing the cause of the miserable plight of the ryots the Hindoo Patriot observed:

The principal causes to which the oppression practised by zamindars upon their tenants may be traced are the ignorance, amounting in the case of the latter to unconsciousness of the precise nature of the change brought in their respective position by the Permanent Settlement and by the laws subsidiary to that measure and the abuse of the social influence of the zamindar class.

The zamindar interpreted the terms of the settlement in his own favour. As absolute proprietor of the land, ‘which he is in so many words declared by the law of the settlement to be’, he concluded that he had the right to claim from his tenants the highest rent for the use of land. The zamindar was aware that the settlement imposed some limits upon his rights, but as these were not respected or observed, it was left to the zamindar to decide on the rent. On the other hand, the Hindoo Patriot observed, the Bengal tenant firmly believed that land was the property of the person who cultivated it. He had heard that it was not the intention of the makers of the Permanent Settlement to alter either the terms of his occupancy or the terms on which he was to maintain it. So, he did not understand, it stated, why he should ever be compelled to pay rent in times of natural calamities. While the tenant admitted that the zamindars had a claim on the produce of the land, he could not be reconciled to the belief that his rent was liable to revision or the land he occupied to survey and measurement. Though there were other sources of misunderstanding between the Bengal zamindar and his ryot, by far the largest part of dispute between them originated in a misunderstanding of the exact position of the two classes. This, was a very interesting point of view which was forwarded by the Hindoo Patriot. It admitted that the relation between the two classes was not as it should have been. The lack of clarity in the Permanent Settlement, as well as both the zamindars and the ryots were to blame for this.

The Hindoo Patriot, however, observed that neither misunderstandings on the subject of legal rights nor the acrimony of social disputes would have eventuated in the adoption by zamindars of such conduct as they sometimes manifested towards their tenants, if ‘public opinion — if the class opinion in which the body of zamindars are educated had been sound, on these matters.” So, for the first time the Hindoo Patriot advocated the need for a strong public opinion against the oppressions of the zamindars. Not ‘legal sanction’ but ‘social sanction’ i.e. the dread of ‘public’ and ‘class opinion’ would alone act as a restraint on the zamindars. The oppressive landholder in Bengal lost no caste or consideration in the eyes of the public and so, there was no restraint on his conduct.
On the question of the laws of summary arrest and distraint, two great evils which had been condemned by the Bengali intelligentsia, the *Hindoo Patriot* observed\(^{81}\), that on the operation of these laws depended the fate of the ryots. According to the journal, the landlords had to have their means for earning the punctual realization of their dues. But since these two laws had been abused by the zamindars, the journal advocated some changes in these laws. It stated that the ryots had already learnt the virtue of punctuality and the fear of a prolonged and expensive legal battle would ensure timely payment of their dues. The zamindars could always have recourse to law to ensure the payment of their dues. So, the change in the laws of distraint and summary trial was necessary. The *Hindoo Patriot* suggested that, distraint should henceforth be confined only to crops on the grounds. The tenants' home would thus be placed in comparative safety. The distraint procedure should be conducted by officers having some interest in an honest discharge of their duties. This was an absolute necessity as the commissioners of distraint were thoroughly corrupt. As far as was possible, the police should not be allowed to interfere. Lastly, the judicial cognizance of cases arising out of distraints should be transferred back to the civil courts with regard to changes in the law of summary arrest. The *Hindoo Patriot* suggested that, the law of arrest of recusant tenants should be placed upon the same footing as the general law of arrest. Harishchandra even talked of peasant resistance against increase of rent\(^{82}\). Yet, he did not propose the abolition of the Permanent Settlement\(^{83}\).

The emergence of the *Hindoo Patriot* as one of the leading journals in the 1850s was, due to the untiring efforts of its editor Harishchandra Mukhopadhyay who, wrote a series of essays on the agrarian problems particularly the condition of the indigo ryots. In 1852, he became a member of the British Indian Association which aimed to uphold the interests of the landowning class. Among its members were the Derozian Ramgopal Ghosh; Prasanna Kumar Tagore of the Pathuriaghata branch of the Tagore family; Raja Radhakanta Deb of Shovabazar and Joykrishna Mukherjee of Uttapara. As a member of this Association, it was within the framework of the existing tenurial system, with the interests of the zamindars at heart, that Harishchandra formulated his ideas on agrarian issues. Ever since the first publication of the *Hindoo Patriot* in 1853, he was associated with it. From 1854 till his death in 1861, he was its editor. During his tenure the journal 'backed the cause of ryots. During the indigo revolt, lucid details were published about the oppressions of the indigo planters.

Although it was from the first hostile towards indigo planters, it did not engage in a systematic campaign against indigo till 1858. Its correspondents travelled throughout the indigo districts reporting the miserable condition of the ryots. Its correspondents included Sisirkumar Ghosh, who later founded and edited *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and Manmohan Ghose, who later edited the *Indian Mirror*. Harishchandra provided considerable aid, published stirring editorials and freely gave advice and encouragement to the peasants who visited him in his Calcutta office. He helped support *mukhtars* in the *mufassil* courts by paying them for their services as newspaper correspondents\(^{84}\). His admiration for the

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\(^{81}\) *ibid.*, 28 May, 1857.

\(^{82}\)"Laltyalism in Bengal", *The Hindoo Patriot*, 9 April, 1857.

\(^{83}\) *ibid.*, 21 April, 1860.

\(^{84}\) *ibid.*, 21 April, 1860
struggling peasantry was revealed in his editorials:

Bengal might well be proud of its peasantry... Wanting power, wealth, political knowledge and even leadership, the peasantry of Bengal brought about a revolution inferior in magnitude and importance to none that has happened in the social history of any other country... With the government against them, the law against them, the tribunals against them, the Press against them, they have achieved a success of which the benefits will reach all orders and the most distant generations of our countrymen. And all this they have done by sheer force of virtue, by patience, perseverance and fortitude, without committing a single crime — almost a single act of violence.

In an editorial, he even lauded the zamindars for taking the side of the ryots against the planters and quoted one zamindar as saying:

Sir, we would undoubtedly benefitted by renting lands to planters but what will become of our ryots.

He stood by the peasantry throughout their struggle.

In his evidence to the indigo commission he said that, as a result of the Act passed in 1860, which made reluctance of the ryots to cultivate indigo even after entering a contract to do so a punishable offence the exploitation of the ryots had increased. He had examined the issue of the indigo revolt and come to the conclusion that indigo cultivation was detrimental to the interests of the ryots in all respects.

In 1861, Kristodas Pal became the editor of Hindoo Patriot and held the post till 1884. During this time, it gave up its pro-ryot stand and actively took up the cause of zamindars, particularly during the marathon controversy over the Tenancy Bill in the 1870s and 1880s.

Another luminary of the period, Nabinkrishna Bose, the secretary of the Bethune Society became interested in the land question. He pointed out some flaws in the Permanent Settlement. It had resulted in the creation of a large number of intermediaries between the zamindars and the ryots. He pointed out the oppressive character of the zamindars and the necessity of survey of land. To ensure fair justice for all he proposed reorganization of the judiciary. He also agreed that, it would be best for the ryots if the right to ownership of land was vested in them. Yet, he acknowledged that this would not be possible under the present circumstances. So he advised that just as there was a settlement between the government and the zamindars, there should be a similar one between the latter and the ryots. This would, he hoped, to some extent strengthen the ryots’ control over land.

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85 ibid., 19 May, 1860.
86 ibid., 26 August, 1858.
87 Files of The Hindoo Patriot, 1861-1884.
88 Bose, Nobinkristo, ‘The landed tenure in Bengal’, in The proceedings of the Bethune society, for the
4.6 General trends in the handling of agrarian issues by early 19th century intelligentsia

In 1859, after a long period of non-intervention the government enacted Act X. By this time, the agrarian thinking of the Bengali intelligentsia had reached a level of maturity. Ram-mohun, Young Bengal leaders, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Iswarchandra Gupta, Harishchandra Mookherjee, Nabinkrishna Bose and others had been able to identify the major agrarian changes that had been taking place in Bengal. British policy of maximization of revenue was responsible for the conclusion of a settlement with the zamindars. The latter were endowed with proprietary rights and the power of rent enhancement. The ryots were placed at the mercy of their avarice and ambition and were subject to frequent increases of rent. Besides, the zamindars often leased out their lands to revenue farmers. The Hindoo Patriot observed that, while the most rapacious zamindar waited for an occasion, a pretext to increase the rent of his lands or levy new cess upon his tenantry, the "middle man's opportunity is perennial and his pretexts ever forthcoming"\(^89\). The intelligentsia emphasised the changing nature of agrarian relations. There was growing class tension between landlords and tenants. The intelligentsia also analysed the relationship between the peasants and moneylenders. Commercialization had increased the cash needs of the ryots. This led to greater dependence on moneylenders. Commercialization, however, failed to improve the lot of the peasants. The description of the working of the indigo system by the intelligentsia highlights this fact. There was increasing impoverishment of the rural masses. There was no room for capital accumulation. Consequently, there was no qualitative change in agriculture. There was no change in the technique of production. Thus, the increasing impoverishment of the masses hindered any real economic modernization.

Serious thinking about the growing anomalies in the agrarian system thus started in the nineteenth century, when Rammohun Roy drew attention to the miserable condition of the lower order in the agrarian society. He had not only tried to analyse the cause of this misery but had put forward a comprehensive plan of reform. Thought he had not suggested a social revolution, he had pointed out that a permanent settlement for the ryots also would be a logical corollary to the permanent settlement of the landlord's revenue\(^90\).

When Rammohun was writing his evidence to the Select Committee, he had already before him the experience of forty years that had elapsed since the Permanent Settlement. That the settlement was in effect a failure with regard to all its avowed objectives, could be seen clearly in these forty years. It was supposed that, the landlords would be induced to improve their farms and take greater care of cultivation, since it would mean an absolute surplus for them. But the landlords could not unfortunately assume a character of progressive agricultural entrepreneurs. They would primarily rest content by leasing their lands out to intermediaries of various descriptions. The interests of the ryots were also

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89 Hindoo Patriot, 5 March, 1857.
90 Roy, Rammohun, *Exposition of the political operation and the judicial and revenue system of India*, p.70.
not safeguarded under the Permanent Settlement. It was stipulated that, the landlords would issue *patta* and *kabuliata nama* specifying the rates to be paid by the ryots in order to rid them of uncertainties. In most cases, the landlords did not issue these. As a result, the uncertainties of the ryots continued. They were frequently subjected to new *abwabs*. The class whose interests were really protected to some extent by this settlement were the landlords as, it ensured no further increase in their dues. But this relief could not be turned to the advantage of Indian agriculture. This basic failure of the Permanent Settlement conspicuously escaped the notice of Rammohun and his immediate successors who were concerned with agrarian problems. Most of them were aware of the defects of the Settlement. Yet they supported it. They probably overlooked how wretched could be its implementation mainly at the hands of the profiteering middlemen. It left the ryots exposed to economic bankruptcy. Besides, they also failed to suggest concrete ways to reform agricultural practices. They did not suggest how it could be modernized. Agricultural improvement was surely one way of bettering the lot of the ryots.

The intelligentsia of this period also overlooked the changes that had been taking place in the indigenous industrial sector. The native handicrafts industries were virtually destroyed by the combined impact of the increasing export of raw material like cotton to England and the capture of the Indian market by cheap machine-made cotton textiles from Manchester. This meant the loss of an alternative means of livelihood for the Bengal village folk. Those dependent on weaving were ruined while those, who combined agriculture with weaving were faced with reduced incomes. There was now greater pressure on land at a time when there was no increase in its productivity partly because, of the continuation of age-old agrarian techniques and decadent river system. The impact of decline of indigenous industries on rural society would be extensively discussed by the later intelligentsia but their counterparts earlier failed to grasp its full significance.

Another limitation of the early intelligentsia was their failure to understand how the increasing cultivation of cash crops — indigo and opium — contributed in some cases to the growth of rural indebtedness. Cultivation of the unremunerative indigo was mainly forced on the peasants by European planters through various devices. The vulnerability of poppy to fluctuations in the weather and the rigidity with which the opium advances were recovered by the government forced the opium cultivators into indebtedness.

Yet, in spite of these shortcomings these men made the first attempt to analyse some of the basic agrarian issues of the time. They were sincere in their concern for the miserable condition of the Bengal peasantry. Even though they failed to provide coherent solutions to all the problems, they did highlight some of the maladies affecting the agrarian society of Bengal. The tradition of agrarian thinking started by them was continued by their successors later.

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