

CHAPTER-SIX

EMERGING OF LAND QUESTION AS COMMUNAL ISSUE

The English East India Company experimented on land in the pre-colonial and colonial period and that process continued in the later years also. In 1793 Lord Cornwallis introduced *zamindari* system named Permanent Settlement and consequently the Mughal land system was also reformed.¹ One thing must have to be mentioned that Murshid Quli Khan gave a new shape to the land and land revenue system. He did not like Muslim religious brothers because they were not regular in the payment of revenue. Moreover, they were not faithful. But Murshid Quli believed that the Hindu *zamindars* were faithful and they were regular in terms of payment of revenues.

Zamindari system was introduced in Bengal by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 which was distinct from the *Rayatwari* or *Mahalwari* system in other parts of the country.² Yet the *zamindari* system in its deceptive legal mould has continued to provide a basic frame work for the study of Bengal's rural economy and society.³ If we begin with the study of land relations, we look at landed property, relations of production in agriculture, forms of labour, the spread of a market economy into the rural areas. The study of connections between this changing structure of agrarian relations and political development in Bengal in the decaydes of the 1920's and 1930's gathered a momentum about the emergence of land question.⁴ On the other hand, the making of the Tenancy Act Amendment by the Bengal Legislative Council in 1928 touched upon some of the most controvercial issues relating to the agrarian economy and served to bring together the various proprietary and agrarian interests in one organized forum.⁵

There were three significant issues involved in the Tenancy Act Amendment Bill introduced in the Bengal Lagislative Council in 1928. Firstly, it brought up the question

of the rights of share-croppers. Whether they should be recognized as tenants. Secondly, there was the matter of the status of under-*rai-yats*. Thirdly, the law had to come to grip with the problem of transferability of holdings.⁶ Indeed the Bill drafted sought to strike a very delicate balance between the interests of the landlords, the tenants and the under-tenants while the general political climate in the province and the apprehended dangers of incipient agrarian movements made it necessary that certain rights be given to the tenants as well as to the under-tenants. It was also well known that there would be severe opposition in the council against all attempts of curtailing the rights of the landlords. Later landlords' Conference was held by the patrons of Viceroy, Governor of Bengal, Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald and Lloyd George expressing its concern at the proposal to give the tenants the right of transferring their holdings.⁷

North Bengal especially Malda and West Dinajpur were agro based districts. In the second quarter of the 19th century Malda was well known for indigo production.⁸ Though silk was the first cash crop of Malda and the second was indigo. *Santhals*, Muslims and others joined hand against land oppression. In Dinajpur, new *zamindar*, intermediary and *jotdar* class emerged. Land got a new height by the initiatives of the Communist Party.

From Plassey to Permanent Settlement a lot of development took place on land. Tebhaga and Naxalbari gave us new light about land movement. After partition land took a new shape. In many cases political parties used land for their political purposes. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the epicenter of the rural politics was land. Moreover after partition, land some times took communal shape. In the frontier regions of Malda and West Dinajpur Muslim population gradually increased. Non-Muslims migrated from East Pakistan after the partition especially in 1971 i.e. after the birth of Bangladesh.

A recent essay on pre-1947 Bengal opens with the statement: The primary and abiding interest of the colonial government in the agriculture of Bengal, or for that matter any

where else in India, was the extraction of a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue.⁹ The arrangement by which a class of persons designated ‘proprietors’ were assigned the property in revenue collection in 1793 together with late 19th century amendments ‘to protect as far as possible the predominant organizational form of agricultural production, viz. small-peasant farming was still the main context within which the evolution of Bengal’s agrarian structure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was analysed.’¹⁰

The resulting emphasis was a revenue history and rent relations, formal landlordism and tenancy.¹¹ A typology of agrarian social structure in early 20th century depicted the picture of land in the rural life of North Bengal. Land structure of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar were different from the rest of North Bengal. On the contrary, Malda and West Dinajpur (present Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur) represented same land structure. At present two new districts Alipurduar and Kalimpong were added to North Bengal. The District of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri’s Duars were, therefore, non-regulated regions. In these regions laws and regulations in force in the Regulation areas would be operative and applicable only on executive instructions. In 1875, these two districts became scheduled districts under the Act of that name of 1874.¹² The Government of India Act of 1919 transformed them further into backward tracks and they were outside the sphere of representations in the legislative council created.¹³

F.O. Bell who was a settlement officer of Bengal District presented totally contrasting representations of the socio-economic hierarchy among the cultivating classes of Bengal. Bell wrote of the North Bengal district of Dinajpur: The most significant feature of Dinajpur rural life was the inequality in social status and standards of living of different rustic families. Almost every village will reveal some large family of substantial cultivators.....As elsewhere in North Bengal; this *jotdar* class was socially supreme in the countryside. The *jotdar* families might hold several hundreds or even thousands of acres of land in their own

possession.....All these men were of a class which may be described as practicing large-scale farming, through it was farming not with any large capital sunk in machinery, but through the traditional methods employing either labourers or *adhiars* (share-croppers).¹⁴ J.C. Jack wrote about the East Bengal District of Faridpur. He mentioned that the cultivators were a homogeneous class. This was no country of capitalist farmers with bloated farms and an army of parasitic and penurious labourers.¹⁵

The *jotdari-adhiari* system of North Bengal grew out of conditions wholly atypical of the older settled regions of West Bengal and East Bengal. Most of the regions were uncultivated jungle and setteled for reclamation with enterprising tenant-farmers called *jotdars*. This process started by the big *zamindars* prior to the Permanent Settlement and continued in the post 1793 period.¹⁶ Later *Koches*, *Polias*, *Rajbanshis* and the immigrants *Santhal* tribes were utilized to conquer the inhospitable wasteland.

During the 19th century, *jotdar-adhiar* pattern became the dominant characteristic of the agrarian structure of North Bengal. The existence of considerable waste in North Bengal usually placed the *jotdars* in a powerful bargaining position vis-à-vis the absentee. *Zamindars* and from the later 19th century they were also armed with formidable legal rights. Their *jotes* either as permanent tenures or as *raiyati* holdings became protected interests while they remained totally free to rack-rent their under-tenants and exact a lion's share of the produce from dependent *adhiars*. In North Bengal big *jotdars* and *zamindars* were the dominant elements in the agrarian structure.¹⁷ F.O. Bell in his Dinajpur Settlement Report presented the best profile of the various grades of *jotdars* and their multifarious moneylending and grain-dealing activities.

In the early 19th century debt relation between the rich farmer and share-cropper arrangement in North Bengal turned a new outline of the rural credit relations. Buchanan Hamilton surveys in Dinajpur in early 19th century and the excellent settlement reports in the

1930's have made the broad outlines of the rural credit relations in North Bengal. From the source of F.O. Bell it was known-The conception of a village *bania*, foreign to the cultivator in caste and tradition, and sucking the blood of a depressed peasantry did not fit the conditions of Dinajpur. If there was any blood-sucking, it was done by the richer cultivators themselves. People of non-agricultural tradition were few in the Dinajpur country side. The Muslim *jotdars* were all peasants and agriculturist lends money, it was usually within 2 or 3 miles of his residence.¹⁸

In the 20th century the agrarian scene of North Bengal changed in many ways. The primaries and abiding interest of the colonial government in the agriculture of Bengal, or for that matter anywhere else in India, was the extraction of a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue. Well in to the 19th century, Bengal's agriculture was a subsistence economy where, as Benoy Krishna Chowdhury describes it 'peasant owned the means of production'. Most peasants had land, whatever the legal or customary nature of its title, though it did not always suffice for their substance. The family labour supplemented at times by the co-operative communal labour and by a small quantity of paid labour was the usual size of the individual peasant's holdings. His small surplus ploughs and cattle and loans from the village moneylenders and grain dealers constituted the necessary capital of a peasant.¹⁹

Now the question peasants turned into proletarians? The market in land and question of change in the social organization of production created a new issue of land transfer in North Bengal. The dynamism of the land market was not a sufficient criticism of social differentiation. Nor can be heterogeneity of farm size areas of the sort referred to be Rajat and Ratnalekha Roy be accepted as class differentiation and change or continuity in the structure of farm sizes be treated as change or continuity in agrarian class structure.²⁰ At least relations developed in the variety of social formation peasant small holding structure and rich farmer-share-cropper type.

In the historiography of agrarian Bengal especially North Bengal the effect of indebtedness on land transfer has been the focus of investigation, even for those who have tried to prove a negligible or negative correlation between the two.²¹ But changes in rural credit relations alone can explain shifts in the agrarian social structure and its link with the economic system. Several Acts (s) and Bill (s) implemented in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district in the case of judicial procedure.²²

The Rent Act of 1859 and Tenancy Act of 1885, by defining the rights of occupancy of a certain class of tenants, by limiting the conditions where enhancements of rent would be permissible, and by allowing transfer of occupancy holdings albeit 'governed by local custom,' attempted to clarify in the context of a changing agrarian structure the limitations inherent in the concept of the proprietary right of the landlord.²³ But the story of landed proprietorship in North Bengal was a story of continuous fragmentation.

Actually North Bengal consists of different land types, ethnic group and geographical situation. Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar were covered with hills and forests. On the other hand Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur were totally different. Northern part of North Bengal were dominated by tea-orange and pineapple but in the southern part of North Bengal related with mango-lichi garden and silk.²⁴ Northern part of North Bengal known as tea-timber-tobacco and jute land.²⁵ Hence, difference of land structure represented a unique feature of land question. There were differences about the small holding.

The dynamism of the land market in the 1920's was no proof of the emergence of a stable peasant elite or the rapid growth of the moneylender-landlord's demense. In the 1920's many moneylenders seem to have invested more in the purchase of *talukdari* rights than in occupancy *raiyyati* rights.²⁶ As agricultural prices plummeted at the onset of the depression, defaults in the payment of interest on the part of peasant debtors became

common. The rapture of the delicately balanced system of rural credit in North Bengal brought about a crisis in agrarian relations.

It has, of course, often been pointed out from contemporary reports that, at the time of the Permanent Settlement the burden of rent on the *raiyat* was just about the utmost that he could bear.²⁷ At the same time, the pressure on the land, increased sub-stancially by deindustrialization, reached a point where the erstwhile constraint on the enhanceability of rents was no longer fruitful.²⁸ So the only real constraint was the apprehension of agrarian unrest and revolt. The majority of the *zamindars* and *talukdars* who acquired the title of landlord under the Permanent Settlement were not of agricultural stock as were the Hindu *zamindars*. Their object was not to take physical possession of land, but to appropriate as much as possible of the surplus produced by the village through enhancement and equalization of assessment rates.²⁹

From the last decades of the 19th century, the most common ground for claiming an enhancement was a rise in the prices of staple food crops. There can be no doubt that rents did in fact rise in every district of Bengal. There were, in addition, the extraordinarily large amounts of illegal exactions or *abwab* which proprietors and tenure holders customarily received in the east Bengal districts.³⁰ Different types of *abwabs* were prevailing in rural Malda. It was estimated that the total amount realized as *abwabs* would not be less than the land revenue of the entire district.³¹ Actually, large portions of *abwabs* went in the pockets of the *gomastas*, but in some cases, the landlords also took their shares. Later some relief measures were taken in the eastern Bengal districts. For the abatement and revised rule regarding revenue was accelerated.³²

The demense labour-peasant small holding complex in west and central Bengal during the 20th century raised lot of questions. But clearly, the vast bulk of agricultural land in Bengal was in the direct possession of *raiyats*. As with tenures, rent-free and fixed-rent

tenancies too were frequent in the older *zamindari* and *patni* areas of western Bengal i.e. Burdwan etc. Besides fixed-rent tenures which were mostly held by substantial owners were found especially in Dinajpur.³³

In the western upland area of Malda, about 35 square miles out of a total of 802 square miles in a Settlement Block had during the 1920's passed from *Santhal* and *Orawn* cultivators to non-agriculturist moneylenders.³⁴ In North Bengal there was a rigid and permanent class division between a handful and substantial *jotdars* on the one hand and a mass of *adhiars* on the other. A sprinkling of small *jotdars* and *chukanidars* existed, but the *jotdar-adhiar* system remained the dominant form.³⁵ The description so far had been in terms of the proportions of agricultural population having various kinds of rights of proprietorship or occupation. The 1931 census used different categories for classifying the agricultural population. Following table shows the results of the classification by economic categories:

Table No: 1.12 (Different Categories for Classification of Agricultural Population in the Census Report of 1931)

Name of the Districts	Rent received	Owner cultivation	Tenants	Labourers	Others
Dinajpur	3.67	46.88	14.62	34.22	0.61
Jalpaiguri	6.60	36.25	85.83	31.09	0.23
Malda	6.22	42.71	8.29	41.54	1.24
Darjeeling	15.20	36.55	24.79	23.03	0.43
Source: Computed from Census of India, 1931, Vol-v (Bengal), Part-ii					

The Land Revenue Commission of 1938-39 conducted a survey in selected villages to find out the manner in which the land was cultivated in different districts in

Bengal.³⁶ The survey also included an enumeration of the number of families who lived mainly or entirely as *bargadars* and those who lived principally on wage earnings. In North Bengal, particularly in Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur, the crop-sharing arrangement of cultivation was both common and old, and was used by landlords irrespective of whether they were categorized as tenure holders or as *raiya*s under the Tenancy Act. In the northern part of North Bengal i.e. out side Permanent Settlement areas there were no *zamindars* but these regions were dominated by the *jotdars*. On the other hand Permanent Settlement areas were dominated by the *zamindars*. It was seen in most cases that the land lords were Hindu and peasants were Muslims but in Malda and Dinajpur only some landlords were Muslims. On the other hand, Muslims of Jalpaiguri were educated and they can be well compared with the Hindus. Many Muslim *zamindars* belonged to Duars region. These *zamindars* had a close contact with the *adhiars*.³⁷

By customs, *adhiars* in Jalpaiguri were regarded as labourers cultivating the land of proprietors, *jotdars* or *chukanidars* on a half-share basis. In Dinajpur, although there was a tenancy to conceal the existence of *adhiars*, fearing that anything of *adhiars* names in the working *khatians* would give them some rights. Bell, the Settlement Officer, nonetheless confidently asserted that fully a quarter of the cultivated area of the south and west of the district was cultivated through *adhiars*.³⁸

Between 1900 and 1930 rural credit was the nub of an interlocking set of relations of production and surplus appropriation underpinning the agrarian social structure in East Bengal. As early as the first and second decades of this century, much concern was expressed in official circles to give the share-cropper some rights-rights of occupation to which cash paying *raiya*s or under *raiya*s were entitled, and the right to have his produced rent commuted to a money rent. So much important steps were needed for official protection of the rights of share-cropper. Indeed, it was no longer merely a question of granting tenancy

rights to those who had customarily cultivated the landlord's land on a crop-sharing basis i.e. under the old *barga* or *adhi* system.³⁹ Instances were commonly found in Malda where the lands cultivated by *adhiars* were previously their occupancy holdings but had been sold up in rent or mortgage sales; this was particularly so in the *Barind* area where the *Santhals* have lost their occupancy rights over a large area.⁴⁰

The legal form of land relations in Bengal created two sets of rights over land—first one was a right of proprietorship and the other was a right of occupation. Actually the entire structure of *zamindari* and tenure holding property based on the right of proprietorship. Apart from these, there was a strong tendency towards increased differentiation within the peasantry, with the emergence of a significant strata of substantial peasantry at the top and the immiserisation of a poor peasantry who lost their rights of occupation over the lands which they cultivated.⁴¹ Transfer of land from the small to the larger peasantry was common.

In the 20th century the tendencies towards a differentiation within the peasantry were far more advanced in the south-western and some of the northern districts of Bengal. But in the late 1930's *raiyat* peasantry had a stronger basis to unite the common fight against exactions by *zamindars* and tenure holders.⁴² This was to attain a relatively organized political platform in the 1930's. These tendencies developed were set by the conditions of colonialism. In the sphere of law-making as in executive action, there was the permanent assumption that the *zamindar* was owner of his estate, while at the same time there persisted the concern that the *raiyat* must be protected in his right to cultivate. The contradictions as well as the possibilities of political manoeuvring inherent in this policy were well revealed in the 1928 Bill to amend the Bengal Tenancy Act.⁴³

Actually Bengal Tenancy Act was passed to save the peasant. *Zamindar's* income was limited but their expenditure gradually increased. Hence they could not balance it. *Zamindars* increased revenues and oppressed the poor peasants. Later middle class and

jotdar section were born. By the help of share-croppers *jotdar* classes were flourished.⁴⁴ By the Act of 1928, *bargadars* were not recognized as *raiyyat*.⁴⁵ In this context it may be said that in the year 1928 the Government of India submitted the Public Safety Bill and sixty-one votes was recorded in favour and against the Bill. By exercising casting vote Bithal Bhai Patel invalidated the proposal. In his view, in all important matters if there were no clear majority and in case of equal voting the speaker should cast his vote against the government proposal.⁴⁶

A new agrarian structure of Bengal emerged. Landed proprietor classes were declining and a new contradiction with a rich peasant-moneylender-trader class emerged. Especially in North Bengal intermediaries played a crucial role in this event. A growing poor peasant-share-croppers-tenants class formed out of the dissolution of small-peasant production. The economic depression of the thirties might have aggravated distress sales of *raiyyati* tenures but such land transfers had deep-seated causes.⁴⁷ Colonial and post-colonial appropriation from the agricultural sector faced a vivid political challenge and therefore to intervene both in the process of agricultural production and in the evolving class struggle within the social formation. Over and again, a new middle class intelligentsia emerged and they played an independent role of leadership in the political sphere of North Bengal. The capitalized value of government, orders regarding the payment to the occupant of the rent-free holding where the paying Estate to which it appertains is not known.⁴⁸

A major organized political force in Bengal accelerated the process of the main development of the decade of 1920's. In this time the introduction into the provincial leadership of several leaders who had recently conducted local peasant movements aimed against Union Boards or the Chowkidari tax or against settlement operations.⁴⁹ In fact in the early 1920's i.e. after the end of the war Hindu-Muslim classes of Bengal facing increasing

economic difficulties. Especially in the field of rising prices, shrinking real incomes from rent and the lack of employment opportunities gradually increased.

On the other hand, Britisher's affection towards Muslims created lot of problem. From Bakhtyer Khalji to Murshid Quli khan, Hindu-Muslim relations never reached lime light position for nation's national unity and even today that condition remained the same. Apart from these, British government set oil to the fire about the Hindu-Muslim relations. By the hands of Pabna, Dhaka riots and other many instances created lot of problem about Hindu-Muslim relations. The Hindu-Muslim question had now come to dominate the political scene in Bengal, and 1927 was a particularly tense year. District Magistrate of Mymensingh reporting on communal tension there, made the observation: There was the economic rivalry of Hindu landlords and Muhammadan *talukdars* or *jotdars* in this district which was reflected in the keen interest taken by the Muhammadan electors in the fate of the Bengal Tenancy Act Amendment Bill.....⁵⁰

The riots of 1926-27 had made it clear that the peasantry of east and northern Bengal was now prepared to strike against *zamindari* suzerainty. Given the social composition of this peasantry, the ideological form in which the collective interests of the community came to be defined in peasant consciousness was that of a community united by religion and separated from its enemies by religions. But the material issues were land, tenancy, rent, *abwab*, interest rates, rights of transfer and right of preemption.⁵¹

In the year 1928 it was totally clear to all who wished to act as representatives of the 'Muhammadan community' in the elected organs of government that there was only one possible stand on the tenancy question-unequivocal opposition to the *zamindar* and support for the *praja*. Actually Muslim politics in Bengal from 1927-37 shows that this was a case where a populist stance was not so much an instrument of mobilization from the top, but a response to the pressures of an antonomous would of unorganized politics below.⁵²

It was of course, the districts of eastern Bengal which was predominantly Muslim area of the province. It was a well known characteristic of the social character of the peasantry of these districts that where Muslims formed the overwhelming bulk of the peasantry, the landlords were mainly Hindu. It was important to look at land transfers. The process which brought into existence a new class of richer *raiyyat* peasantry in Bengal, accompanied by the corresponding spread of share-cropping, also resulted in substantial transfers of land from the hands of the poorer peasantry.

“*Sudhu bighe–dui chilo mor bhui*”⁵³ (I have only few lands in my hand) Rabindranath’s Upen at last could not maintain his *dui bigha* (2 acre) lands. This was the part of social picture at that time.⁵⁴ Quoting land revenue administration sources, Azizul Hoque has given the figures on the number of transfers of occupancy holding (1881-1936) in Bengal over the years.⁵⁵ Actually mortgages, leases and transfer of lands increased significantly in 1920s. The depression, however meant a much greater indebtedness and pauperisation of the poor peasantry in Bengal, and the rate of transfers of *raiyyati* holdings again picked up from mid-1930s. Eminent historian Benoy Bhusan Chowdhury gives us the following figures of the number of sales and mortgages of occupancy holdings in Bengal (Registration Department Sources).⁵⁶

Table No: 1.13 (Number of Sales and Mortgages of Occupancy Holdings in Bengal)

Year	Number of sales	Number of mortgages
1930	1,29,184	5,10,974
1931	1,05,701	3,76,422
1932	1,14,619	3,38,945
1933	1,20,492	3,13,431
1934	1,47,619	3,49,400
1935	1,60,341	3,57,297
1936	1,72,956	3,52,469
1937	1,64,819	3,02,529
1938	2,42,853	1,64,895
1939	5,00,224	1,54,780
1940	5,02,357	1,60,152
1941	6,34,113	1,51,553
1942	7,49,495	1,06,088

Source: Benoy Bhusan Chowdhury, The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947, *Indian Historical Review*, 2,1(July 1975)

In Dinajpur, the moneylenders were pre-eminently the richer cultivators or *jotdars*. In a survey conducted in the late 1930's 30% of the surveyed families were found to have borrowed on *derhi*. (50% interest rate) ⁵⁷ Tenancy Act of 1928 legalised for the first time the sale and transfer of *raiya* occupancy holdings. However, while registered sales were resorted to much less frequently, there were many other subterfuges available for intending purchasers and distressed sellers. Apart from sales by oral agreement or by unregistered documents, causes were found in Malda of transfer by granting a sub-lease and making a negligible increase in rent.⁵⁸ Cases were also found in which the parties to the transaction applied jointly to the landlord for mutation of the purchaser's name. The landlord accepted a transfer fee less than 20% of the sale price, and granted a rent receipt to the purchaser. In some parts of undivided Dinajpur (present Bangladesh) it was seen that the land is settled to an under-*raiya*. The 1938 amendment to the Tenancy Act removed all restrictions on the transfer of occupancy holdings.

It can be said that Bengal's agrarian history bearing a land question on the development of the agrarian class struggle in Bengal in the final decades of colonial rule. Following issues were developed for class struggle-⁵⁹ i) declining class of landed proprietors, ii) emerging class of rich peasants-moneylender-traders, iii) a growing poor peasant-share-cropper labourer class, iv) the colonial state and v) a middle class intelligentsia.

A central question in land lord-tenant relations was rent. It is also worth pointing out here the way the landlord-tenant conflict was resolved in eastern Bengal. End of the *zamindari* system did not bring to reality any of the *zamindari* system did not bring to reality any of the millenarian dreams of a self sufficient peasantry free from oppression and injustice.⁶⁰ Organised Praja movement got its strength in eastern Bengal in the decade of 1930's resisting excessive rent payments and demanding the abolition of the Permanent Settlement. After partition and later the birth of Bangladesh changes the agrarian structure. A

differentiation between a rich peasant-moneylender class and poor peasant-labour class relation is clearly discernible.

The share-croppers movement in North Bengal specially Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Malda were well organized by the Communist Party from the early 1940's. In Dinajpur, the *Krishak Sabha* movement began with a campaign against the burden of levis imposed by *jotdars* and *zamindars* on peasants selling their produce in village *hats* (mart).⁶¹ *Adhiars* from Duars of Jalpaiguri, Malda, Dinajpur (present Dakshin Dinajpur and Uttar Dinajpur) demanding a reduction of the landlord's share of the produce from half to a third.⁶² Sunil Sen draw a picture for their agricultural demand in Tebhaga movement.

In North Bengal there were both Muslim and *Rajbanshi jotdars*, just as there were Muslim and *Rajbanshi adhiars*. The principal organising cadres were middle class political activists, and acted as independent vanguardist agents in the agrarian class struggle. *Kishan Sabha* strongly supported the movement.⁶³ Tebhaga movement paved the way for future agrarian struggle of the peasants. Important changes have occurred in the agrarian social structure in the frontier regions in the decades following 1950, notably the decline in *barga* tenancies and the dramatic growth of agricultural wage labour.⁶⁴ Yet it is perhaps a measure of the enduring qualities of certain elements of *longue-duree* social structures that the anti-*jotdar* agrarian explosions of the late 1960s invariably occurred in the frontier regions of North Bengal.⁶⁵

In North Bengal peasants were Muslims and *Namasudras* class where owner of the land was Hindu.⁶⁶ In the northern district of Malda and West Dinajpur, the Muslim *jotdar* class was said to be 'socially supreme' in the country side. In the Rajshahi division the *Rajbanshis* were the largest single caste.⁶⁷ Now the question came in front of us that who are *Rajbanshi*? The *Rajbanshis* are a caste of mixed origin, some being descended from Mongoloid *Koches*, while others are of Dravidian stock. The fact appears to be that there are

four sub-castes viz. *Rajbanshi*, *Polia*, *Deshi* and *Koch*.⁶⁸ The *Rajbanshis* are said to claim descent from the *Koch Rajas* and the *Deshi* from the higher *Koch* families, though they also often claim to be *Rajbanshis*.⁶⁹

The meaning of the word *Rajbanshi* means *Kshatriya's* dynasty.⁷⁰ The population is divided between Hindu and Muhammadans. The Hindu mostly belongs to the caste called *Rajbanshis*. The controversy whether the Muhammadans are *Rajbanshi* converts has not been settled. There are some men from north India and a fair sprinkling of *Santhals* and *Orawns*. These are landlords and *jotdars*, who have immigrated from Rajputana through Bihar and are still restricting their marriage relations to the emigrant communities here and elsewhere in Bengal and parts of Bihar. An interesting movement has taken place among the *Rajbanshi* led by Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma. They are now calling themselves *Kshatriya*, adopting the sacred thread and the style of *Barman* or *Singha*.⁷¹ *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya* established their foot prints especially in Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Duars, parts of Dinajpur and some parts of Assam. Panchanan Barma founded the *Rajbanshi* community during his time socio-ethnically in a sharp contract.⁷² *Rajbanshi* class later played a significant role in the geo-political atlas of North Bengal.

There were lots of differences between the pre-independence and post-independence land. In the undivided Dinajpur the upper caste Hindu *zamindar*, tenure holder or *jotdar* were clearly in a different social category. Land lordism in this region was generally perceived as something practiced principally by upper caste Hindu landlords. To this was added in the predominantly jute-growing districts of northern Bengal the presence of the *Paschima* (generally *Marwari*) moneylender.⁷³ In the Duars region of North Bengal, *Orawns* and *Mundas* of *adivashi* sect came from Chotonagpur.⁷⁴ Besides, many east Bengal's *Bengalees* came to the tea Estate and they work as manager and other posts. Most of these owners of the tea Estates were *Bengalee* tea industrialists.⁷⁵

From Coochbehar many *Rajbanshi* and Muslim came to Duars. Actually *Rajbanshis* were totally depended upon agriculture. *Rajbanshi's* economic life based on agri-economy.⁷⁶ Hence, in these regions most of the land owners were *Rajbanshi* and some were Muslims. Land is the main source of their substance.⁷⁷ Natuarally in these agricultural zones when the British government introduced *jotdari* system; most of the *jotdars* were *Rajbanshi* clans.⁷⁸

Scholars think that post 1947 *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya Samiti* lost its previous life line and political character and turned into a social organization as it was in 1920. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the vitality and life-force that the *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya Samiti* gads shown in the pre-independence era became sedate to a large extent post the grand event.⁷⁹ After partition many caste Hindu *Bengalees* and later *Namasudra* classes were settled in North Bengal. Many of them came from East Pakistan also. Due to the comings of these people, a great change took place in the socio-economic and infrastructure of North Bengal. These new structure of North Bengal encouraged the *Rajbanshis*. A new shape was given to the racial unity of the *Rajbanshi* clan. The nature of the movement was different from earlier movement. New movement came to be known as Identity movement.⁸⁰

It should be discussed that in the northern part of North Bengal i.e. out side Permanent Settlement area, there were no *zamindars*, only *jotdars* dominated. On the contrary, in the Permanent Settlement areas, there were only *zamindars*.⁸¹ For example, in Malda, Dinajpur, Bogra and Pabna; there were some Muslim *zamindars* and land owners. Many rich Muslims lived in Bogra. In North Bengal especially in Jalpaiguri, Muslim families were educated. *Nawab* Mosaraf Hossain was belongs to Jalpaiguri. Many rich Muslim *jotdars* also lived in Duars-Rajmohal area. Some prominent names of Muslim *jotdars* were Cornel Hedayat Ali, Mechua Muhammad, Muhammad Sonallah, Abubakar Siddique, Nepua Muhammad, Mophis-ud-din Ahmed, Abdul Karim Pradhan, Abdul Gani, Khoda Box and

others.⁸² Actually a landed aristocrat class was formed among the Muslims. In Coochbehar, rural society was dominated by the upper caste Hindus.⁸³ Brahmanas played a vital role. Among the Muslims there were no caste divisions but there were some social divisions. Pathan-Mughal and Saiyads have their own social status. In Coochbehar, Muslim *jotdars* role was also important. Some Muslims lived in Mekhliganj, Haldibari, Dinahata, Sitai, Tufanganj, Mathabhanga and other places.⁸⁴ In Darjeeling district, Muslims were found in Terai regions and few Muslims were found in rural areas of Phansidewa, Kharibari, Siliguri etc.⁸⁵ Land was the main source of livelihood. *Rajbanshi* and Nepali Muslims depended on land.⁸⁶

Actually post-independence land converted into communal and also divided into ethnic groups. Land question was totally changed. *Zamindari* system was abolished not only in West Bengal but also in East Pakistan in 1951.⁸⁷ Most of the common people supported the abolition of *zamindari* system but in spite of that northern part of North Bengal suffered the crisis of agitation and dis-satisfaction. Why the abolition of *zamindari* system and land reforms created discontent in North Bengal? Land specialist and social scientists were well aware that the *Rajbanshi* and *Kshatriya* society of North Bengal were mainly land related society. Upto 60's *Rajbanshi* and *Kshatriya*'s main occupation was related with land. So bank, transport, life insurance, rice-mill etc. these lucrative professions never entered to the life of *Rajbanshi* and *Kshatriya* society. Due to racial reason *Rajbanshis* were never connected with the tea gardens.

Naturally due to the implementation of Land Reforms Act, *Rajbanshis* were confused. It was well known to the administrators of that time what type of crisis will broke out in North Bengal? To solve the problem two decisions were taken in the annual meeting of *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya* conference -⁸⁸ i) At the time of distribution of *khas* land and excess land, a member of *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya Samiti* should appoint as a member of that committee. ii) At the time of distribution of excess and *khas* land, *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya*

society should get preference because *Rajbanshis* were totally depended on land. This conference was held at Jateswar in Jalpaiguri. In this conference Upendra Nath Barman, Minister Shama Prasad Barman, Satish Singha Roy Sarkar, Umesh Chandra Mondal and others participated. They expressed their valuable opinions.⁸⁹

In the British period Congress raised the question “land to the tillers”. After independence that claims was implemented. In West Bengal Act I was passed in the year 1954 which came to be known as Acquire of *Zamindari* Act.⁹⁰ By this Act middleman’s dominations came to an end. The ceiling of upper limit of land was decided to 25 acre. After that in 1971 the upper limit of private property was decided to 2.50 hector in the case of *khas* and agricultural land. Although, West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act of 1953, West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955, West Bengal Land Amendment Act of 1971 decrees personal land and excess lands were distributed among the landless people.⁹¹

Later *Rajbanshis* raised the questions of the upper ceiling of land. They expressed their view that the upper ceiling of land in the case of Vardaman and Mekhliganj in Coochbehar district should not be same. Because Vardhaman had enough irrigational facilities. On the other hand, Mekhliganj had no such facilities. Vardhaman had fertile land where produced mulberry, paddy, cotton etc. in a huge quantity.⁹² In comparison fertility and valuation of both these lands were not same. But due to ununiformity of land reform system, land related or land depended people perished. In consequences a part of rich *jotdars* became converted into landless peasant or small peasant. According to Swaraj Basu, the large influx of people only led to a growing demand for land and a rise in land price.⁹³ This was the sad plight of cultivators. If the intellengtsia group shows their generocity at that time, the history of North Bengal flows in other ways.

In the case of land reform, West Bengal was always ahead and again proved the saying “what Bengal thinks today India thinks tomorrow”. But at the same time this system

(land reforms) created a socio-defrayal discontent in a part (especially northern part of North Bengal) of our State. Most of the reforms showed that type of tragedy. It was also true. Due to agricultural revolution in England, enclosure systems were implemented and for this reason yeomanry classess were erased.⁹⁴ But this was not a comparison, reality was very hard. In spite of limitations it was true enough that from Tebhaga to Operation Barga, North Bengal's many landless peasants were became small peasant and small peasant became rich farmer. Hence, the question rose was which section of people benefitted most from the Operation Barga system? ⁹⁵ This was an extreme complex and sensitive matter.

In North Bengal people's formability of infrastructure created several questions. It is said that North Bengal is '*pandora's box*'. But it is true that most of the people of North Bengal depend on land. Especially Malda and West Dinajpur are agro-based districts. Main professions of the people of these regions are agriculture. If we notice from 1947, immigration crisis created lot of problem throughout North Bengal. North Bengal's adjacent foreign states were Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. If any crisis broke out in these foreign countries, peoples took shelter in North Bengal. Besides that, if any problem broke out in the north eastern provinces like Assam, Meghalay population of North Bengal gradually increased. In any cases North Bengal always suffered.⁹⁶ Population of North Bengal increased due to several reasons but the lands remained the same in terms of size. For this reason, social tension and crisis gradually increased day by day. Small and rich peasants of North Bengal were fighting for their land. Apart from these, immigration crisis created new problems. Lord Curzon's surgery over Bengal in 1905 created a tremendous crisis. Secondly, surgery over Bengal was done in 1947. First one was stopped in 1911 but the second one opened a new busket of problem especially over North Bengal. From Government Report of 1973, fifty-eight lakhs immigrants came from Bangladesh to Bengal.⁹⁷

Due to Operation Barga, a section of people who were benefitted they also were swallowed by the immigrants' problem and this process continues still today. In this situation thinking of tea-garden suddenly gulfs them. At the same time small peasants were suffered most. In many cases they were directed to the wrong way. Small peasants gradually erased i.e. traditional peasant society degraded. No body knows when this will stop? A new movement started which was known as Land Hungry movement. This movement took different shapes in different times. The main focus of this movement was land. If you have land, you have identity and that identity comes from language. But except land every thing is lost. According to social scientists this discontent came to be known as Land Hungry movement.⁹⁸

The nature, structure and the pattern of land gradually changed with the passing of time. From 1793 to 1978 lands changed its shape and character according to the need of peasants, moneylenders, *jotdars*, *zamindars*, tenants and farmers. In North Bengal lands actually divided into two segments-hilly lands and plain lands. In the British period North Bengal again divided into two different sections-regulated area and non-regulated area. Malda, Dinajpur were regulated area and there British government introduced Permanent Settlement. On the contrary, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Duars were non-regulated area.⁹⁹ British government directly controlled these lands. There was no Permanent Settlement. Coochbehar was under the suzerainty of *Raj*.

Land was also rolled in two sections as pre-independence land and post-independence land. Pre-independence land was communal and post-independence communal land was converted into ethnic groups. *Rajbanshis* played the major role in it. Throughout North Bengal a *Rajbanshi-Kshatriya* movement emerged in first half of the 20th centuries. In this movement upper caste *Rajbanshis* were always neglected. Subhrayati Roy wrote that- The class bias can be shown from the attitude of the leaders of the movement towards

agrarian issues. Not only were most of the leaders from landed background as has been shown earlier, but when they took up agrarian issues they clearly favoured their own class. Thus 1920 some *jotdars* of Kurigram Sub-division of Rangpur, who were not covered by the rules protecting the other *jotdars* of North Bengal, appealed to Panchanan Barma for confirmation of their tenurial rights.¹⁰⁰ *Limbo, Metch, Rava, Kotch, Toto, Bhutia, Gorkha, Deshi, Polia, Adivashis (Santhal, Munda, Mahali, Orawns etc.)* were treated differently by the hands of *zamindar, jotdar*, moneylender some times by the hands of political parties and their leaders. From Tebhaga to Naxalbari and Naxalbari to Operation Barga there was a long story.

Before independence Hindu *zamindars* were united and on the other hand, Muslim *zamindars* were also united. It should be noted that in 1906 Muslim League was formed in Dhaka. In North Bengal they established their foot prints in Jalpaiguri. The first branch of Muslim League was established in Jalpaiguri in 1928.¹⁰¹ In Coochbehar, there was no influence of Muslim League in pre and post-independence period. Today's West Dinajpur's (Later Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur) Islampur Sub-division was connected with Purnia. This part was connected with West Bengal by the recommendation of State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in 1956.¹⁰² Though Malda was Muslim populated district but Jalpaiguri was far ahead in the case of Muslim League politics.¹⁰³ Fazlul Haque ministry gives some new ideas. Moreover, Pakistan Proposal of 1940 melted the heart of Muslims of Bengal. It was seen in North Bengal that Peasants were Muslim but *zamindars* were Hindu. After independence all Muslim *jotdars* and *zamindars* were united. Due to partition *Namasudras* never supported Congress and they were not interested in cultivation. Hindu people never believed that one of the reasons of partition was land.

Tebhaga was done in the case of Hindu *zamindar* but political parties were not raised their voices against Muslim *zamindar*. Paben Barman, a Tebhaga worker of Dinajpur

(Patiram-Khapur region) told that due to minority sentiment political parties avoid Muslim zamindar.¹⁰⁴ In the Tebhaga movement those who were soldier and in Operation Barga those who always supported the movement they could not get land for the support of the Land Hungry movement. Actually a part of Leftist leader thinks that if the government changed and they (Leftist) got power then everything will be solved. But in reality Leftist leaders changed in such a way that ideology and social changes were in many cases obstructed. All though Leftist were not totally responsible for that. Time is the key factor behind this. Due to the question of immigration, North Bengal is the worst affected region. All the people of this region are still fighting sometimes for their land and sometimes for their existence. When the good days will come no body knows?

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