

Chapter - 2

Agricultural Situation in Pre-independence Period

The land system, in pre-independent undivided Bengal, was a mixture of occupancy rights and revenue obligations (Ray,1996) . In Mughal period, the peasants continued to cultivate land occupied by them and paid the government land revenue which varied between a half to a third of the gross produce and the settlement of revenue was generally made directly with the cultivator. The task of revenue collection was assigned to zamindars who often performed this function hereditarily (Sinha,1968). In the land tenure system of the Moghal period, land was held directly by a tenant who could not ordinarily be evicted from land unless he failed to pay the stipulated sum to the Zaminder (Sen 1962:55-56).

However, with the declining power of the Mughal rulers, there emerged a class of intermediaries who entrenched between the king and the cultivators. This class of rural people began to collect revenue from farmers giving one-tenth of the revenue collected to the king. These intermediaries began to claim hereditary right in land with further decline in the power of the Mughal rulers. But they could not assert an absolute right to land (Ray,1996).

The cultivators, in the Mughal period, continued to enjoy the customary right over the land occupied by them. There were two types of cultivators in the Mughal period. One is the '*Khudkasht*' ryots who enjoyed undisturbed possession of their holdings subjected to the payment of stipulated rents to the

Zamindars and the other type is the '*Paikasht*' ryots who came into the village to cultivate land temporarily and enjoyed no security of tenure (Bhaumik,1993).

A radical change in the agrarian structure began to take place with the onset of the British rule. After obtaining the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, the East India Company experimented with several changes in the method of revenue collection. The company insisted that there must be a system of fee for land ownership. It introduced the quin-quennial settlement (1772), the decennial settlement (1789) and the Revenue Farm Contracts on a five yearly basis where the rights of revenue collection were distributed through auction to the highest bidder. Thus, the British tried to seek a system which could ensure them a steady source of income. But all these settlements ended in extreme rack-renting , often in the forcible collection of revenue, and consequently placed an unbearable burden on the cultivating peasantry (Choudhury,1975a:2). The situation was aggravated with the great Bengal famine of 1770 which was followed by the famines in 1784, 1787 and 1790. The oppression and misery of the cultivating peasants led to peasant resistance which was expressed in the forms of the Fakir and the Sanyasi rebellions of 1772-89 (Sen, 1962:58). The agrarian situation urgently called for a settlement which would rehabilitate agriculture and stabilise revenue collection.

In 1794, the device of Permanent Settlement of revenue with Zamindars was introduced in Bengal. In the Permanent Settlement the Zamindars were given proprietary rights in land. The provisions under the Act were :

- 1) to fix permanently land -tax rates from the zamindars at 90 percent of the sum collected as rent by them from the peasants in 1794 ;
- 2) to grant to the Zamindars, the right of driving the peasants from the land and raising rents at will; and
- 3) the right to take decision regarding peasant matters by the zamindars.

The Act , at the same time stipulated that the Zamindars were to pay dues on time, failing which, their estates were liable to be sold for arrears of revenue.

As a result of this Act, the peasants became tenant farmers without rights, while the Zamindars, the erstwhile revenue collectors, become the owners of land. Being proprietors of the land and being obligated to pay stipulated land - tax to the government, the Zamindars began to farm out the collection of rents instead of taking initiative to promote capital investment in agriculture and thereby laid the foundation for the formation of a hierarchy of parasitic rent-receivers. As a result, a long hierarchy of sub-zaminadars, as the hereditary owners of all the given lands, appeared in the agrarian scene of Bengal. The Zamindary system, thus, led to a system of sub-infeudation.

The tenure-holding rights were, often, sold by the Zamindars when they became unable to manage, successfully, the collection of rent from a large and scattered estates. Besides, sometimes the estates of many Zamindars were sold

for arrears of revenue and the purchasers of such estates were generally marchants, money lenders, traders and the middle class of urban areas (Sen,1979:7).The Zamindary estates , thus, underwent fragmentation overtime and the new zaminders were interested in squeezing in high rent and often they deligated the collection of rent to the middlemen (Thorner, 1962 : 54). The peasants were often rack-rented by the local officials of the zaminders and the 'naibs' who acted as defacto zaminders. These persons imposed innumerable illegal exactions known as 'awabs' on the cultivating peasantry (Govt. of West Bengal, 1941: 34). Under the increasing burden of rent, awabs and other extractions, the pasants were left with very little means to go in for agricultural improvement. Economic motivation of the people who controled land, thus, tended towards exploitation of land resources and land operators rather than towards investment on land for improvenment of agriculture.

Under the circumstances, the regulations like the 'Haptam' regulation in 1799 and the 'Panyam' regulation in 1812 were passed which aimed at vesting unrestricted power on the Zamindars for seizing the crops and other property of the cultivators, and even to arrest them in order to realise rent arrears. The unrestricted power of the Zamindars coupled with deprival of the peasants' right to perpetual hereditary landownership, and the transformation of peasants into tenants without right, created conditions of growing unrest among the peasantry. The result was the great 'Santal' insurrection in Bengal (1855-56) (Government of West Bengal.1980).

The prevailing agrarian situation compelled the Government to formulate the first tenancy legislation, viz. The Bengal Rent Act of 1859, with the aim of improving the relation between the landlord and their tenants (Choudhury,1967:308, inserted in Bhaumik1993). The Act cancelled out all laws issued from to 1812, and prohibited the Zamindars from driving the peasants from the land or raising rent (Ulyanyvsky,1981:30-31). The main aim this act was to create stability in actual tenancy relations and for this, an attempt was made for the first time to define occupancy tenancy. The Act of 1859 classified ryots into three groups:

- (a) ryots holding at fixed rates: they were those who cultivated land continuously for 20 years prior to the demand for a higher rent by the Zamindar. Their rents were fully protected against future enhancement;
- (b) occupancy ryots: this group included those who cultivated the same plot of land for 12 years continuously. Their rents could be enhanced only on specific grounds;
- (c) non-occupancy ryots: they were those who could not prove 12 years' uninterrupted possession over land.

However, in the majority of cases rent could not be increased on those tenants who continuously held land for 12 years. The Zamindars, then, began to prevent tenants from completing cultivation for 12 uninterrupted years. Litigation and discontent began to appear and as a consequence, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 was passed.

Under the Act of 1885, a ryot could acquire occupancy right by cultivating any plot of land in given village; it was not necessary for him to remain in continuous possession of the same plot of land for 12 years. Some protection was also given to non-occupancy tenant to mortgage or sublet his holdings for a period of not more than nine years. Later, the Act of 1928 provided the occupancy rights transferable by sale, subject to payment of a transfer fee to the land lord. The occupancy tenant was also given the right to mortgage his holding for a period of not more than 15 years. The right of resumption which was accorded to the occupancy tenant in 1928 was abolished in 1938 (Govt. of India, 1953a: vi, inserted in Ray, 1996).

It may be noted here that the 1885 Tenancy Act classified the peasants in undivided Bengal into the following groups:

- (i) Perpetual tenant: peasants with the right of tenure, holding of land either at a rent fixed in perpetuity or at a rate of rent in perpetuity;
- (ii) Occupancy tenant: peasants with the right of occupancy, inheritance and alienation of their rights, but without a fixed rent rate or fixed rental;
- (iii) Temporary tenant: peasants with no right of occupancy;
- (iv) Peasant sub-tenants or under-ryots;
- (v) Peasant tenants without rights.

However, all these categories of tenants established by law could not create even a relative stability in the actual tenancy relations. The real situation of some

section of the toiling peasantry did not conform with their rights and legally established place in the Bengali system of tenancy. The actual position of the bulk of the peasants was, usually much lower than that what was provided for them by the formal rights of tenure (Ibid.: 119-120).

The colonial land policy, thus, led to the emergence of a class of people as the proprietors of land (zamindars and tenure-holders) in the one hand, and a vast majority of tenants with varied legal rights on the other. Some legal rights also created a legal basis for the subletting, mortgage, sale and transfer of the raiyoti interest within the overall framework of private proprietorship of the landlord. It should be noted that subletting and alienation of raiyoti holdings were very common in Bengal.(Chatterjee,1984:24). The zamindars and tenure-holders did not practice farming on a significant scale, and as a rule, leased out land for exorbitant and oppressive rents. A class of tenants called 'jotdars' (rich peasants) were also engaged in purchasing the alienated holdings and sublet them to others and they appeared as a kind of landlord (ryoti landlord).

Land Use and Land Distribution in Pre-Independent Bengal

Pre-independent Bengal was the most densely populated province in British India. According to 1931 census, Bengal had a population of 50.1 million. The population density was 646 per sq. mile and was the highest in India. About 37 million of the population in Bengal lived in agriculture; of those, 30.5 million were cultivators, 4.3 million were debt slaves or farm labourers and the rest were landlords and non-cultivating tenants. Cultivated

land totaled some 24 million acres, out of which 1.2 million acres (5 per cent) were irrigated in 1931. The irrigated area was divided as follows: Government Canals 20,700 acres; Private Canals 1,91,600 acres; Ponds 6,83,100 acres; Wells 31,800 acres, and other sources 35,800 acres.

In 1927-28, 41,59,000 acres yielded more than one harvest and nearly 5,000,000 acres were usually laid fallow. Despite the high population density, the colossal agrarian overpopulation and the extra-ordinarily crowded parcels due to the prevalence of large scale landlord estates, the exploitative role of the latter was so high that the impoverished peasant masses were unable to develop some 6.5 million acres of available uncultivated land. Useless land totaled 19.2 million acres, and the area under forests was 4.6 million acres (Ulyanovsky, 1981, Ch.4).

As regards, the distribution of land, it was found that a large part of the land in pre-Independent Bengal was in the hands of the big landowners. In the Zamindari System, the strength of landlordism was revealed quite thoroughly by a comparison of average size of peasant holdings with that of landed estates. While the average size of the peasant holdings was 2.59 acres, the average holding size of the permanent and the temporary estates were 425 acres and 813 acres respectively. And the numbers of the permanent and the temporary zamindari estates were 92,508 and 3,886 respectively (*Ibid.*:54).

According to data for the end of the nineteenth century, compiled by one of the most outstanding British economists and the historians, Baden-Powell, it was

seen that almost all the land in Bengal was monopolised by big landowners (Ibid.:54). The monopoly of landed estates is reproduced in Table 2.1 below.

Such colossal excess of land (table 2.1) in the hand of the landlords tightly restricted the availability of land to masses. Most of the peasants were land less, bonded and semi-bonded tenants of the feudal landlords and British imperialists. A lot of tenants although registered as belonging to perpetual tenants, had been reduced to the state of sharecroppers without rights. It may, hence, be clear that the distribution land was highly skewed in undivided Bengal in the pre- Independence period.

Table-2.1 Landed Estates in Bengal.

Area (in acres)	Number of Estates	Average area (in acres)	Total area (in million acres)
Less than 500	85,500	216	18.5
500 to 20,000	10,000	1000	10.0
Above 20,000	500	25,000	12.5
Total	96,000	Nil	41.0

Source : B. H. Baden-powell, *The Landed System of British India, Vol. 1, Oxford, 1892, inserted in Ulyanovsky, 1981, P.55*

The Extent of Sharecropping:

The available data relating to the size of share cropping (popularly known as barga cultivation) is extremely fragmentory. In fact, precise measurement of the extent of barga cultivation is not an easy task. According to the estimate of the Floud Commission (1940), the extent of barga cultivation was about 23 percent of the cultivation of the villages taken as sample. In 1914, McAlpin, Director of Land Records, estimated the 'normal proportion' of the barga lands in some 'test areas' in Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Midnapore, Faridpur, Dacca and Pabna at 5 to 10 percent of the ryoti lands. The proportion of under-ryoti tenancies held on 'produce rent' was far larger ; it was about 52 percent in Midnapore, about 24 percent in Faridur, about 54 percent in Pabna and about 49 percent in Jalpaiguri. According to the findings of the District settlement officers, the proportion was about 25 percent of the total cultivation in Dinajpur and 25 percent of the 'paddy lands' in Burdwan. In fifteen villages of Birbhum district survyed in 1939, this proportion was found to be 37.1 percent . The Indian Statistical Institute also estimated the proportion at 25 percent in 1946, though 35.15 percent of the 'cultivating families' were involved in sharecropping. The 1951 census data, however, showed a smaller decline of 2.3 percent since 1940, except in Midnapore, Burdwan, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Malda where the sharecropping cultivation increased in the 1940s by 1.9, 4, 6.1, 6.9 and 8.6 percent respectively. Such heavy concentration of the system of barga cultivation was observed in the regions where the cultivators mostly belonged to sheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The 1951 census data show that 40.8

percent of the bargadars (sharecroppers) in West Bengal belonged to these two communities. It may, hence, be said that the size of barga cultivation in pre-Independent undivided Bengal was evidently quite considerable.

Forms and Terms of Sharecropping Contracts

In British Bengal, the average Bengal peasant had his own implements, seed, livestock but had no land. The merger of labour power and implements with land was effected through various forms of sharecropping system introduced by the feudal lords. These forms were: the Utbandi system, the Barga system, the Sanja system, the Duna system and so forth. In most of the systems, rent was paid in kind and amounted to form one-third to two-thirds of the produce (Ibid.:122-126). For example, in the Sanja system, a tenant was required to pay a fixed quantity of the harvest as rent. This system was found in rice-producing areas in West Bengal. Here, the sharecroppers were mainly sub-tenants. But the Sanja sharecropper was often a perpetual tenant whose land had been taken over by a usurer landlord in case of default.

Under the Kishani system, the landlords provided everything except labour, and the tenant's share was generally one-third of the produce. Here, the tenant was often bonded by debt obligation to the landowner.

The Barga system of sharecropping was widespread in undivided Bengal. It was known as 'bhagchas' in west bengal. The landowner normally

claimed one-third of the harvest, and as much as half the harvest when the tenant was loaned seed and fertiliser.

The Duna system of sharecropping was found in the state-managed estate, the Khasmahal. In this system, the term of repayment was such that "if I take ten maunds of paddy in July, in December, I repay 20 maunds. If it is not paid then I am liable to pay 30 maunds in March, and if not paid then 35.5 maunds in July. If I still fail to pay, a mortgage is executed, the consideration money being 37.5 maunds converted into cash at the market rate and interest will be charged at 37.5 percent on that". The result of this inequitous system, was the loss of all lands and even the homestead lands of the sharecroppers (*Ibid.*,:124-125).

These were the main types of sharecropping imposed on rural peasantry in Bengal. No matter how they differed in forms and terms, they were economically oppressive (*Ibid.*).

The sharecropping contracts often led to a kind of dependency relationship between the sharecropper and the landlord (Cooper,1983). The control over land usually empowered landlords to obtain 'free labour' from sharecroppers' family. Another aspect of dependency relationship was the indebtedness of the sharecroppers. When the landlord was also creditor, the debt bondage of the sharecropper reinforced the dependency relationship. In case where the landowner acted as trader, loan transaction enabled him to seize even the produce of the sharecroppers.

To sum up, in the land tenure system, introduced in British Bengal, the peasant lost their customary rights over land, and the Zaminders, the owner of land, were involved in collecting rents from the peasants through rack-renting, usury and various other forms. The landlords did not cultivate land in any significant scale and they did not undertake investment on land for improvement of agriculture. Land occupancy rights were not secured. Subletting of land was a common practice. The rich peasants were involved in extracting surplus from poor tenants and augmented the level of their income by investing the extracted surplus on money lending and/or in purchasing the alienated peasant holdings and turning them into barga cultivation. The terms and conditions of tenancy were very stringent. The poor peasantry were left with very little means to go in for agricultural improvements. Motivation to improve economic condition of the cultivator could not exist at all under the circumstances. An insignificant proportion of land cultivated was irrigated. It was already pointed out that only 5 percent of the total area under cultivation had irrigation facility. Such limited irrigation base could not help farmers to undergo adoption of improved methods of cultivation.

All these, perhaps, indicate existence of a situation for pre-Independent Bengal in which the land resources as well as its operators were gradually impoverished. The agrarian structure and the production relations were neither conducive to improved methods of cultivation nor favourable for establishment of social of justice in rural areas. The whole agrarian situation was one of lack of enterprise on the part of all concerned, continuing

exploitation of actual cultivators and prolonged backwardness of agriculture (Sen, 1982 : 45).

The agricultural backwardness in pre-Independent Bengal is also observed from Blyn's study, conducted for the period 1891 to 1947. This study shows the stagnation in agricultural technology and production in Bengal during the closing 50 years or so of British rule. According to this study, the annual average growth of yield and output for foodgrains were -0.55 percent and - 0.73 percent respectively while the growth rate of population was 0.65 percent; the percentage of irrigated land to net cultivated land was 13.3 percent during the period from 1908-'09 to 1921-'22 which was increased only to 15.0 percent during 1922-'23 to 1945-'46; the proportion of double cropping area to net sown area was 20.0 percent during 1891-'92 to 1981-'20 to 1945-'46; the percentage of total cropped area under improved seed was only 6.2 percent in 1938-'39.

In the circumstances, a change in such an inequitable and exploitative agrarian structure is supposed necessary to create a situation favourable for adoption of improved methods of cultivation, to liberate the peasantry from feudal exploitation, and also to ensure justice to different sections of rural population involved in agrarian relations. Since, it has long been considered that a change in agrarian structure can be brought about by land reforms, which would change and restructure the legal and contractual arrangements of land and

which would enable farming communities to gain access to productive opportunities on the farm, it may be necessary to discuss land reform measures which have been undertaken after independence. Chapter III deals with an analysis of land reform measures and their consequences on the rural West Bengal.