RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agriculture and the "Literati" in Colonial Bengal, 1870 to 1940

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Abstract: This paper attempts to understand the engagement of the "literati" in Bengal with issues relating to agriculture in colonial Bengal between 1870 and 1940. The outbreak of the Pabna Tax Revolt in 1873 led to a debate within intellectual circles on the crippling exactions levied on the peasantry by *zamindars*. They identified this as the primary reason for Bengal's agrarian backwardness. From the 1880s, however, the debate underwent a change, with a section of the intelligentsia shifting it away from the issue of landlordism as a bottleneck to rural development. This group argued for agricultural modernisation as the way ahead for the agrarian sector. In this new "productionist" discourse, the vanguard role of introducing new technologies into agriculture was to be played by forward-looking sections of the wealthy and educated urban middle class, who were called upon to take to cooperative farming for the purpose. The advocates of such productionism believed that such progress could be achieved within the framework of existing production relations, dominated by the *zamindars* of rural Bengal. From the middle of the 1930s, another distinct viewpoint on agrarian relations emerged as part of the Kisan Sabha-led peasant movement. Formed in 1936, the Kisan Sabha took up popular demands that included land reform and abolition of the *zamindari* system. It sought to improve the material conditions of the peasantry. However, its views on agriculture did not include a demand for the modernisation of agriculture through the application of new and scientific techniques and practices. The issue of agricultural modernisation was thus left to the intelligentsia.

Keywords: agriculture, modernisation, intelligentsia, production, colonial Bengal, cooperative farming, peasant movements, *zamindar*.

This paper discusses the engagement of the Bengali literati with the question of agricultural modernisation from 1870 to 1940. It also reviews the impact that the radical peasant movement, which emerged in Bengal in the middle of the 1930s, had on ongoing debates on rural transformation and growth.

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The initial engagement of the Bengali literati with issues pertaining to agriculture in Bengal surfaced in the early 1870s. This grew into an intense debate during the Pabna Tax Revolt of 1873, over questions related to agricultural rent and the oppression of the peasantry. From the 1880s onwards, in place of the rent question, the intelligentsia became interested in issues of the modernisation and improvement of agricultural production. In the post-1930 period, the emergence of the Kisan Sabha and the Krishak Praja Party shifted the debate in a radical direction. The paper argues that the divergent views posed by different sections of the intelligentsia in colonial Bengal, on issues ranging from the rent question to agricultural modernisation, reveal their varied socio-economic interests.

The term "literati" (or "intelligentsia"), as used in this paper, denotes the urban, educated, elite class that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century in Bengal as a result of the change in the land tenure policy under British colonial rule.[1] The proliferation of educational institutions in this period drew a relatively large body of people to the city for education. Why then were the literati drawn to the agrarian question at all? What did they understand by agricultural modernisation? Were all sections of this group united in their approach to resolving the problems of colonial agriculture, or were they divided in their opinions? Drawing on relatively unexplored sources in the Bengali language, this paper attempts to answer these questions in some detail.

Aspects of Agrarian Studies on Bengal

Economic historians who have studied agriculture in colonial Bengal have by and large focused on the impact of the colonial exploitation of agriculture. Their canvas of study includes land relations and land tenures, peasant uprisings and movements, and class relations in the countryside; in other words, themes relating to production relations in agriculture.[2] A large majority of Indians then, as now, were engaged in agriculture, a sector that served as the primary source of surplus extraction for the colonial administration. In its drive to secure land and maximise land revenue, the British created several intermediary classes in the rural sector, which served as the political basis of colonial power in rural Bengal.

More recently, some scholars have turned their attention to a study of agriculture in the colonial period from the perspective of science and technology. Their primary frame of reference has been to study institutions of agricultural knowledge, a history of individual organisations and universities that imparted knowledge of modern agriculture.[3] Another school of historians has investigated the issue of technology

[1] This characterisation is from Bhattacharya (2015).

[2] From the standpoint of economic history, agriculture in Bengal became the focus of scholarly writing early on. See, for instance, Ranajit Guha (1963), Tomlinson (1979), Sumit Guha (1992), Bose (1993), and Bose (1987).

[3] For an overview, see Deepak Kumar (1995) and Deepak Kumar (1997). See also Randhawa (1983), Pray (1984), and Prakash Kumar (2001).

transfer in colonial India.[4] In studying the Indian engagement with modern science in colonial times, however, these scholars have focused on the accounts of individual scientists. How different classes and groups incorporated and disseminated scientific knowledge has not received much attention.[5] The organic linkage between modern scientific knowledge and a productive activity like agriculture has not received the attention it deserves.[6] Thus, it is no surprise that the standard story of modernisation is confined to knowledge and education emerging as a result of the engagement of individual scientists with modern science. The issue of modernisation of agricultural production within the limits of existing land relations has not been a field of scholastic enquiry.

There are some economic historians who have studied the ideology and interests of the Bengali literati with special reference to the land question.[7] But the special engagement of the Bengali literati with agricultural modernisation is a relatively less explored area of study. In fact, as we will see later in this paper, the Bengali intelligentsia and radical left groups in the colonial period engaged in a discourse on different aspects of agriculture that typically included the rent question and agricultural modernisation. This paper is an effort to: (a) understand the engagement of the Bengali intelligentsia – including its radical constituents – with a range of agricultural issues; and (b) to examine the underlying ideology of an intelligentsia drawn from diverse social strata and its impact on the overall discourse on agriculture.

Reference Years

In this paper, we focus on the period from 1870 to 1940. Although the emergence of the intelligentsia in Bengal dates to the first half of the nineteenth century, their engagement with agricultural issues started later, in the early 1870s. The Pabna Tax Revolt of 1873 sparked interest and concern among the intelligentsia on issues such as high rent and peasant unrest. Periodic occurrence of famine in India was a striking feature during colonial rule. Six devastating famines between 1876 and 1878 claimed the lives of more than 60 million people. The horrific effects of the famines led to the formation of the Famine Commission in 1880. The report of this Commission as well as a later report by Dr J. A. Voelcker pointed to the need to improve the conditions of poverty in which a majority of the rural population lived, and recommended drawing on the knowledge of modern science and technology and incorporating this within already established agricultural practices. These

[4] See Henry (1995) and Sangwan (2007).

[5] This is not to argue that historians have merely narrated the biographies of contemporary scientists, including studies of P. C. Ray, J. C. Bose, and others. In fact, the stories of individuals are always set within the larger context of colonialism and contemporary Indian society. However, such studies do not provide a sufficiently insightful view of the involvement of different classes and groups in the development and support of scientific knowledge. For individual accounts, see Dasgupta (1999), Palit and Das (2007), and Palit and Pahari (2001).

[6] Few works have focused on the extended link between science and technology on the one hand, and productive activity on the other. But the relative lack of emphasis on agriculture is striking and peculiar. See, for instance, Raina and Habib (2004).

[7] See, for instance, Sen Gupta (1974a), Sen Gupta (1974b), and Raha (2012).

recommendations might have served as the basis for the Bengali intelligentsia's approach towards the issue of agricultural modernisation, which continued into the early decades of the twentieth century. With the emergence of left politics, and peasant organisations like the Kisan Sabha and the Krishak Praja Party in the mid-1930s, a radical view of the agrarian question gained currency. The left intelligentsia consistently voiced the demand to abolish landlordism in order to improve the material conditions of the peasantry. As a consequence of their pressure, the Government established the Floud Commission in 1938. The Commission, which submitted its recommendations on March 2, 1940, called for abolishing the Permanent Settlement. (The Permanent Settlement of Bengal was an agreement between the East India Company and the large landlords of Bengal in 1793 that had long-term consequences for agricultural productivity in the region. It fixed the revenues to be collected from the *zamindars* in perpetuity). However, the Government could do little towards implementing the recommendations of the Commission.

The Intelligentsia on Agriculture: The Rent Question and Peasant Unrest

Under the Permanent Settlement of 1793, annual land revenue was fixed at a permanent rate. The old traditional *zamindaris* crumbled under the weight and inflexibility of this new arrangement. Finding that they could not pay the revenues assigned to them, several of these *zamindars* divided up and sold their estates. This resulted in a proliferation in the number of *zamindaris*, and the flow of capital from urban to rural areas. In many cases, the merchant classes in Calcutta and Dacca invested their capital to become auction purchasers of the *zamindaris*.[8] It was not only the merchant classes, however, that purchased the *zamindaris*. A section of the managerial class or bureaucracy that looked after former *zamindaris* as well as some of the small *zamindars* also purchased either whole or part of the *zamindaris* on the market.[9] It is a fact well established in academic literature that the *Diwan* or the managerial class took advantage of the ignorance and incompetence of this class

[8] Many examples can be cited to show that the urban trading class invested capital in purchasing *zamindaris*. These are the Tagore family, the Nawabs of Dacca, the Roy family of Bhagyakul, the Kandi family of Murshidabad, the Kashimbazar Nandy family of Murshidabad, and others. See Mamun (1975). In this connection, it may be noted that Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India, in a letter dated March 6, 1793 (quoted in Ghosh 1975), commented: "The large capital possessed by many of the natives, which they will have no means of employing . . . will be applied to the purchase of the landed property as soon as the tenure is declared to be secured." It was the urban trading class of colonial Bengal that became the purchaser of land.

[9] There are many instances from contemporary Bengali literature that describe how members of the old *zamindari* bureaucracy took advantage of their position and made their fortunes from it. A small passage from *Hutom Penchar Noksha* (1862) says: "The great grandfather of our Babu used to be the *Diwan* of Nimak after the invasion of the Company and before the hanging of Nandakumar. There was an advantage of earning in those days in the position of the *Diwani* of Nimak. Consequently, the great grandfather of the Babu could earn around 20 lakh Rupees after working for five years. From there on these Babus became rich, aristocratic people." See Singha (1977), p. 1. Another satirical masterpiece of the same time, *Palligramostho Babuder Durgotsav* (1868), also contained similar observations. See Bidyabhusan (1977).

and bought *zamindaris*.[10] In short, the old *zamindaris* could not survive. The new *zamindar* class invested unproductive capital here and turned into prosperous, rent-extracting, absentee landlords, residing mostly in the urban metropolises of Dacca and Calcutta.[11] The first generation of the urban Bengali intelligentsia/literati emerged from this class of absentee landlords in the first half of the nineteenth century (Sen Gupta 1974a, p. 28). Associations were formed by them for the purpose of extending their support to the landholding class in Bengal. Take the British Indian Association as an example. Its members were landlords, merchants, and a segment of the intellectuals, and they supported the *zamindars* as well as the landholding class. For instance, there was Kristo Das Pal, who was appointed assistant secretary of the British Indian Association in 1858. As an editor of the periodical *Hindoo Patriot*, Pal championed the rights of the *zamindars*. Landlord and educationist Radhakanta Deb, landlord and lawyer Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Sambhunath Pandit, and Joykrishna Mukherjee were all representatives of the first generation of the Bengali intelligentsia that emerged from the absentee *zamindari* class (Raha 2012, pp. 79–80).

The second quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence as landed magnates of former rural middlemen like *jotedars*, *talukdars*, and *pattanidars*. The formation of a managerial class to effectively administer the *zamindaris* in the rural areas was essential for the absentee *zamindars*. The Patni Regulation of 1819 strengthened the practice of granting sub-tenures and under-tenures. Writing in 1939, M. Azizul Huque, Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, commented on the situation in the following words:

> Once this was done, more subordinate taluks were created till a system of profit-upon-profits with one shifting the burden of rent-collection on to the next, created a complex hierarchy of sub-infeudatories in the Bengal land system. (Huque 1939, p. 250)

Owing to the practice of sub-tenures, the old *zamindaris* were divided into many parts. Thus the actual number of *zamindars* increased manifold. At the same time, the Patni Regulations helped to increase the numbers of the middlemen.[12] A bulk of the old, dispossessed *zamindars*, after losing their land following the Permanent Settlement, moved to the cities. The collapse of the *zamindari* system, its subsequent division and sub-division, and the economic downturn in the fortunes of former middlemen triggered a fairly large flow of people from the rural areas in search of new avenues

[10] For instance, the magistrate of Dinajpur characterised the auction purchasers, who were former dependants of the Raja, as "low people." The *Diwan* of the Chandradwip *zamindari* of Bakarganj, which had been the biggest estate in the district before the Permanent Settlement, took advantage of the *zamindar's* incompetence and himself became a landed magnate. Nearly half the *zamindari* was sold off in 1799 and came into the possession of Ramakanta, who had been a servant of the Raja. See Choudhury (1983).

[11] R. P. Dutt captured this with unmistakable clarity: "With the fall in the value of money, and the increase in the amount rack rented from the peasantry, the Government's share in the spoils, which was permanently fixed at 3 million pound, became relatively smaller and smaller; while the *zamindars'* share became larger and larger." See Dutt (1947).

[12] For a detailed study of the emergence of middlemen and sub-tenures, see Ghosh (1975).

of employment in the cities.[13] This section came under the ambit of school education and soon constituted a segment of the English-educated "service holder, idle Bengali *babu*" (Mukhopadhyaya 1929, p. 196). They formed a new class of the intelligentsia. Unlike the earlier generation of the literati, the new intelligentsia did not depend exclusively on income from land. Instead, they depended upon the relatively promising employment avenues arising out of the colonial system (Sen Gupta 1974a, p. 28).

Thus, in terms of their origin, there were two groups of the intelligentsia in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. The first group came from the stratum of absentee landlords who depended on income from the land. The second group came from the families of dispossessed landlords and former middlemen who took up clerical jobs in the colonial administration. The latter did not depend only on agricultural incomes.

Some of the early engagement of the Bengali intelligentsia with agriculture surfaced in the 1870s. The Permanent Settlement defined the rights of the *zamindars* but remained silent on the rights of the cultivators. The passage of the Bengal Tenancy Act X in 1885 intended to define the rights and liabilities of cultivators, and removed some sections of the existing law, particularly those related to distraint of crops and properties of the peasants for the realisation of rent. Thus the Act gave the cultivators rights of occupancy and protection from arbitrary eviction. The Act created mayhem among the Bengali intelligentsia. But the debate among the intelligentsia sharpened only during the agrarian unrest that had started in Pabna in 1873.[14]

The Bengali intelligentsia was divided over the issues of illegal *zamindari* exactions and peasant eviction that the Pabna revolt raised. Those who were allied to the absentee landlords took a pro-landlord stand under the leadership of individuals like Joykrishna Mukherjee, Krishnadas Pal, and Jatindra Mohan Tagore. This group held the Government responsible for the agrarian unrest and demanded revision of Act X. The educated elite that were part of the rent-receiving landed class viewed the "problem of agrarian relations from the narrow angle of the landlord class" (Sen Gupta 1974a, p. 29).

On the other hand, the salaried intelligentsia took a pro-peasant stand that was supportive of tenants' rights. Litterateurs like Akshaychandra Sarkar, Krishnamohan Banerjee, Krishnakumar Mitra, Dwarkanath Vidyabhusan, and Ananda Mohan Bose[15] refuted the charge that Act X entailed a threat to the rights of landlords. Periodicals like the *Bengalee* commented that the Act had been "forced

[13] Radhanath Choudhury of Sylhet is a case in point. His great grandfather was a landlord. But by the time Radhanath was born, the *zamindari* had collapsed. The financial woes of the family forced them to take up clerical jobs in the colonial administration. See Mamun (1975), p. 114.

[14] Not many landlords were ready to accept this Act and instead increased the rent. An agrarian league was formed in Pabna in May 1873 against the arbitrary increase of rent as many tenants refused to pay the enhanced rent. The movement lasted for a year. See Raha (2012), pp. 80–1.

[15] For an overview of the division among the intelligentsia, see Sen Gupta (1974a), pp. 27–34.

by the Government of Lord Canning by a mass of evidence showing that the old regulations had worked oppressively."[16] The periodical *Sulabh Samachar* noted: "The object of the Regulations framed by the British Government for the good of the *ryots* is being frustrated by the machinations of selfish *zamindars*."[17] Harinath Majumdar, editor of *Grambarta Prakasika*, blamed the *zamindars* for the misery of the peasantry. However, despite their pro-tenant sympathies, they also made known their aversion to the violent nature of the Pabna peasant revolt. Thus, on one occasion, *Grambarta Prakasika* demanded the segregation of "good and bad *zamindars* and *prajas* (tenants)" to arrest peasant "disorder."[18]

From the Rent Question to Modernisation

A new and distinct form of intellectual engagement with agriculture surfaced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth century. In place of the rent question and the material conditions of the peasantry, the intelligentsia now laid emphasis on improvement in agricultural production by drawing on modern scientific knowledge. By the late nineteenth century, science education, though limited in reach, had been established in India through the educational institutions promoted by the British Raj as well as by scientific institutions founded by Indians themselves. Thus a discourse on agricultural modernisation, as evident from the writings of the Bengali intelligentsia, became possible only after modern science education had been introduced in India. In fact, the reports of the Famine Commission and the Voelcker Report of 1893, which also emphasised agricultural modernisation, must have generated great interest within the intelligentsia.

This decisive shift in the intellectuals' thinking on agriculture is seen in the numerous Bengali periodicals that appeared in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, like *Babosayee* (1876), *Krishi Gazette* (1880), *Krishitatva* (1877), and others.[19]

The periodicals of the late nineteenth century did not last very long. But the intelligentsia's pursuit of the theme of modernisation of agriculture reached its high point in the first decade of the twentieth century, with the emergence of a number of new periodicals that focused on issues such as agriculture, trade and commerce, and agricultural modernisation and improvement. The emergence of agricultural periodicals in early twentieth-century Bengal could be linked to the growth of agricultural education in the province. The Shibpur Engineering College started a

[16] "*Bengalee*, October 25, 1873," quoted in Raha (2012), p. 83.
[17] "*Englishman*, July 8, 1873," quoted in Raha (2012), p. 117.
[18] See "*Grambarta Prakasika*, Jaistha 1874," in Basu (ed.) (2000), p. 338.
[19] *Krisi Sampada* (1930), vol. 21, nos. 2 and 3. Not much information is available on these periodicals, with the possible exception of *Krishitatva*. This author was able to access three volumes of *Krishitatva* (from 1881–2, vol. 4 onwards). The periodical was first published by Bipradas Mukhopadhyaya, from Paikpara Nursery. Nrityagopal Chattopadhyaya was a later editor of the periodical. In 1899, he began editing its successor, *Krishitatva Nabaparjai*.

course of study in agriculture in 1899. A degree in agriculture, our evidence suggests, was seen as the promise of a government job. The course at Shibpur did not continue very long. In 1908, the Bhagalpore Agriculture College was established.

The first decade of the twentieth century also saw a group of enterprising Bengali youth returning from the west after receiving an education in modern agricultural science. The colonial Government had instituted scholarships in Europe in the late nineteenth century for a handful of Indian students.

> With the view of securing competent persons to carry on in Bengal the study of scientific agriculture, two special scholarships of £200 a year each have been created, to be held for two and a half years by science graduates of the Calcutta University at the Royal Agriculture College, Cirencester. A Bengali gentleman of high scientific attainments and a Mohammedan graduate of Bihar have been selected as the first scholars.[20]

Upon their return to India, they started contributing articles to different periodicals that focused on agriculture. *Krisi Sampada* published a list of contributors to the journal, which included the names of scientists who had been trained abroad and returned to India. Thus appear the names of Jatindranath Chakraborty, Dwijadas Dutta, Amitabha Sarkar, Jadunath Sarkar, Manmath Nath Dey, Yogesh Chandra Choudhury, Swarnakumar Mitra, Iswar Chandra Guha, and Probodh Chandra Dey, who, after returning to Bengal, started popularising the idea of agricultural modernisation.[21] They were relatively unknown as compared to scientists who specialised in fields other than agriculture. For instance, Ambikacharan Sen was the first to study agricultural science in England. After his death *Krisi Sampada* noted with regret that his name was not one that was recognised by ordinary people in society.[22]

The other periodicals that these scientists contributed to were *Kajer Lok*, *Grihastha*, *Grihastha Mangal*, *Krishak*, *Pallibashi*, *Mahajan Bandhu*, *Khadya Utpadan*, and *Gramer Dak*. These publications carried articles on issues like the critical assimilation of scientific knowledge in the countryside, projects for the dissemination of knowledge, the uses of chemical fertilizers, new varieties of seeds, modern agricultural implements, and the linkage between agriculture and industry. In short, it was a productionist discourse, intended to increase productivity and

[20] *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1879–80* (1880), BSA no. 159, Deepak Kumar Collections (DKC), Calcutta, pp. 27–8. In 1882, *Krishitatva* published similar news. "Our present Secretary of State has announced that in order to learn science, every year, two students will be sent from Bengal to England, and the Bengal Government will choose the two students. This year, Babu Girish Chandra Basu, professor of botany at Cuttack College, and Babu Bomkesh Chakrabarti, professor at Habra Engineering College, will be sent to England. They will learn agricultural science along with many other subjects." See Rajendra Nath Dutt, "The Government of Bengal, Indian Science Congress, and Agricultural Education," *Krishitatva*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1882), pp. 42–3.

[21] See advertisement behind the title page, *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1919).

[22] Author unknown, "Late Ambikacharan Sen," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 10, nos. 6 and 7 (1919), p. 160.

production by expending more capital in the form of modern scientific methods and techniques.

It is interesting to note that the intellectuals who participated in such a productionist discourse seem not to have engaged with the questions raised by the Pabna Tax Revolt, questions that had previously constituted the primary frame of reference for the debate between two groups within the intelligentsia. At that time, the pro-tenant group had highlighted in their discussions the tyrannical nature of the *zamindars* and their rapacious ways of squeezing the cultivators for rent.[23] The new productionist discourse, although silent on the rent question, criticised the *zamindars* for not taking any initiative to develop productive forces by investing capital in agriculture. The critique of the *zamindars* became more production-oriented. An anonymous correspondent of *Krisi Sampada*, writing in 1912, said:

> The English Government has spent large sums of money for the welfare of agriculture and agricultural society. But of late, the *zamindars* of this country have been inactive, irresponsible, and cruel as far as the cultivator is concerned . . . They suspect that the tenants will benefit if agricultural land is developed and for fear of suffering loss, the *zamindars* remain busy in filling their treasuries with revenue from the land.[24]

A decade later, a letter published in *Krisak* expressed a similar view:

> The educated and the rich, who are apathetic to agriculture, industry, and commerce, might not even consider that how, in the absence of these, the condition of the country is worsening every day. They are content with their position; their only concern is how to earn greater interest by investing their money in different ventures . . . in their opinion, investing this money to assist agriculture, industry, and commerce would be an act of foolishness . . . the farmer, the blacksmith, the potter, and the trader cannot undertake the improvement of agriculture, industry, or trade in any extended way owing to their poverty. Their small, individual endeavours cannot compete with scientific agriculture and modern industry, and consequently, they fall behind. The selfishness of the rich and the aristocrats is leading the country down the path of ruin.[25]

Zamindars, as understood in this discourse, were "satisfied to receive rent" and were not bothered about the "development of land."[26] Asutosh Lahiri, a regular contributor to *Krisi Sampada* and the president of the Agricultural Literary Conference, commented on the "impossibility of development of agriculture or of cultivators by the *zamindars*."[27]

[23] On a number of occasions, periodicals like *Somprakash*, *Sulabh Samachar*, *Sambad Prabhakar*, and *Grambarta Prakasika* published articles depicting the nature of the *zamindars* in realising rent, tax, etc., from the actual tillers. See, for instance, "*Sambad Prabhakar*, 28/11/1892," in Basu (ed.) (2000), pp. 92–3, and "*Sulabh Samachar*, 2nd Agrahayan (1875)," *ibid*., pp. 88–9.

[24] Names of author and article unknown, *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1912).

[25] "Monetary problems," *Krisak*, vol. 24, no. 10 (1923), p. 298.

[26] "Agricultural Education in Primary Schools," *Krisak*, vol. 26, no. 12 (1925), pp. 376–7.

[27] "Agricultural Words," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 19, no. 5 (1928).

Within the productionist discourse on agriculture, modern scientific knowledge was to become the key issue. Asutosh Lahiri, a frequent contributor to *Krisi Sampada*, defined "agricultural development" at the North Bengal Literary Conference (1917) as an "increase in production" and the "proliferation of cultivation of new commercial crops."[28] On the one hand, there was a decline in the productivity of land, and on the other, the population was increasing. The solution, therefore, was to "improve farming."[29] The call to disseminate knowledge of agricultural science in order to enhance production continued to be made throughout this period.[30]

Another theme in the debate concerned the use of chemical fertilizers for improving the productivity of the soil.[31] It was understood that "year by year, the process of reduction of potash and phosphoric acid in the soil made the land steadily infertile."[32] *Krishak* translated an interesting article from the *Journal of the Jamaican Agricultural Society* which emphasised the need to use caustic lime as manure. The advantages of using lime were that it "assisted the release of soda and potash," "produced nitrate of potash," and finally, "increased the productivity of land."[33] Some of the articles advocated the importance of calcium phosphate as a fertilizer.[34] One article argued at length the need to increase productivity by the addition of nitrogen, phosphoric acid, potassium chloride, potassium sulphate, and calcium carbonate in the soil through the application of fertilizers.[35]

The writers demonstrated their familiarity with new and modern machines. An unidentified correspondent of *Krishi Samachar* listed some of the implements and their relevance in different stages of the production process.[36] These writers championed the use of modern implements to improve productivity, and often compared the productivity of labour in India with that of advanced capitalist countries.[37] The idea that the productivity of labour could be enhanced by the use of modern machines was widely shared.[38] However, even those who ardently

[28] "Agricultural Literature Conference," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 8, nos. 5 and 6 (1917).
[29] Surendra Chandra Roy, "Agriculture and the Agricultural Experimental Farm of Rangpur," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1912).
[30] Iswarchandra Guha, "Application of Agricultural Chemistry in Contemporary Bengal," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1915).
[31] Apart from some traditional manure, the unidentified author refers to a journal called *Tropical Agriculturist* which claimed that using bone dust would be suitable for the production of good coconut. See the Kartik 1900 issue of *Krisak* (vol. 1, no. 3), p. 45, for the essay titled "Coconut."
[32] Rajendra Lal Singh, "What is the Cause of Degradation of Productivity of Land," *Krishitatva*, vol. 4, no. 12 (1882), p. 228.
[33] The original article in the *Journal of Jamaican Agricultural Society* (1902) was written by Oscar A. M. Feurtado. See "Caustic Lime," *Krisak*, vol. 3, no. 8 (Agrahayan), pp. 175–7.
[34] Sasibhusan Mukhopadhyaya, "Calcium Carbonate," *Krisak*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Jaistha 1911), pp. 41–4.
[35] Prafullakumar Bandopadhyaya, "Fertility of Land and its Increase," *Krisak*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Asar 1916), pp. 65–71.
[36] "Agricultural Implements," *Krisi Samachar*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jaistha 1910), pp. 57–9.
[37] "Tractor," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 2, nos. 11 and 12 (1911).
[38] "Development of Agriculture," *Gramer Dak*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Poush/Magh 1929–30).

supported the use of modern implements warned that this must be done keeping in view the diverse ecological and economic setting of agriculture in India. They advocated both ecologically and economically adaptive innovations.[39]

Thus the liberal Bengali intelligentsia maintained that the entry of modern science into already established agricultural practices would lead to improved agricultural productivity.

Views on Organising Agricultural Production

The liberal intelligentsia saw it as the role of the educated and the wealthy to participate in agricultural improvement. Writing in 1882, an unnamed author said:

> Cultivation is not the work of the *chasha* (farmer); cultivation is the work of the educated, cultivation is the work of the wealthy. Till such time as the educated and the wealthy do not pay attention to cultivation, neither the improvement of agricultural methods, nor the economic development of the country will occur.[40]

The possibility of modernising agriculture with the help of the working peasantry was dismissed. The traditional *chasha* was "foolish, illiterate, unable to count, and dependent on others in every way."[41] This was a view that was widely held in the discourse on modernisation. An understanding that appeared again and again in the pages of *Krisi Sampada* was one that highlighted the role of the educated in developing agriculture and improving the condition of the "illiterate and poor" peasantry.[42] The low levels of education of the tillers appear to have been the basis for the argument that they were structurally incapable of improving agriculture. The writers identified the educated sections as agents of change and modernisation in agriculture.[43] In fact, the agricultural periodicals of the period saw it as their purpose to inculcate "the habit of agriculture in the minds of the educated *bhadrasantans* (gentlemen's children)."[44]

In calling upon the educated to take up agricultural activity, the writers even redefined the established category of *bhadralok* (gentleman). Gurusaday Dutt,[45] in his speech at the seventh annual conference of the Andul Hitkari Sabha, said:

[39] There were many articles that promoted the adaptation of modern technology in different ecological and economic settings of India. See, for instance, Jawaharlal Biswas (Jaistha 1930), "Agriculture with Machines," *Krisak*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 41–3.

[40] An issue of *Krishitatva* in 1882 said, "Cultivation is the work of the *chasha*;" *Krishitatva*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1882), p. 23. The term *chasha* here is used in a derogatory sense.

[41] "Development of Indian Agriculture," *Krishitatva*, vol. 6, no. 11 (1884), p. 206.

[42] "Offerings," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1912).

[43] Many articles can be cited to show that the educated section was called upon to improve agricultural production. See, for instance, Baidyanath Sanyal (Falgun 1916), "Miserable Conditions of the Peasantry," *Grihastha*, vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 421–37.

[44] "A Few Words – *Krisi Sampada*," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1930).

[45] The view of Gurusaday Dutt is interesting. Although he was a civil servant, it is said that he was benevolent towards the colonised.

> Both the educated (*bhadra*) and the illiterate (*abhadra*) must pay attention to agriculture. From now onwards change the definition of *bhadrolok*. They are to be called *bhadra* who are able to carry out agricultural activity by giving their physical labour, and they are to be called *abhadra* who do not want to follow that.[46]

Another article, published the same year, declared that "cultivation is not the work of the *abhadra*."[47] The literati often used the phrase "dignity of labour" to motivate the educated middle classes to engage in agricultural production.[48] The reality of the traditional rural peasantry almost ceased to exist in the imagination of the liberal intelligentsia. In its place, a new category of *bhadralok chashi* (gentleman farmer) was to emerge.

The tendency of the educated youth to join the Government was ridiculed by the section of the intelligentsia that supported agricultural modernisation.[49] They tried to present agriculture as a more profitable occupation than government service.[50] Some of these articles also carried mathematical calculations to prove their point. Dr Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay wrote of the need "to make the subscribers and the readers of *Krishak* realise that service does not bring about permanent betterment."[51] The theme that agriculture was a more respectable profession than a government job was to return in many issues of these journals. One writer made the following point:

> What should be the course of action of the educated Bengalis? Is not agriculture as reputable as a government job? Is not focusing on agriculture more relevant than seeking employment? It is already said that agriculture is the foundation of all fortunes. But then it has to be carried out in a modern scientific way. These days there is talk about rural reform. In order to do that, educated people must attempt to make the village flourish by going into hamlets. The impoverished peasantry would learn new techniques for producing crops following the aid and inspiration from them [the middle class].[52]

The intelligentsia argued that the way to enhance rural incomes for educated youth who took to farming was through the diversification of agricultural production. A number of articles described the production processes of these new crops in detail.

[46] "What is Swadesh?" *Gramer Dak*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1927–8).

[47] Kishorimohan Pal (1927–8), "Our Responsibility and Prosperity of the Family," *Gramer Dak*, vol. 1, no. 4.

[48] P. C. Ray, a noted public intellectual, also glorified the concept of dignity of labour in a speech critiquing the middle class. He said: "There is something called dignity of labour in that country. And in our country, after buying hilsa fish for eight annas, we would immediately give two annas to a porter (to carry the fish). I wish that the son of a *dhopa* (washerman), a *naapit* (barber), or a *chashi* (farmer) could travel by third class in a train. Father is tired after returning from the market, and *sriman* (a term of respect) wearing a new shirt, is smoking a cigarette sitting in the yard." The term *sriman* is here used sarcastically to connote a spoiled child. See "Our Misery," *Grihastha Mangal*, vol. 4, no. 9 (Poush 1930), p. 226.

[49] Umeshchandra Bandopadhyaya (Poush 1923), "The Problem of Unemployment and Its Solution," *Krisak*, vol. 24, no. 9, pp. 273–6.

[50] Rasiklal Roy (Asar 1901), "Some Words About Agriculture," *Krisak*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 56.

[51] Asutosh Mukhopadhyaya (Jaistha 1913), "Service and Agriculture," *Krisak*, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 42. This article begins with an interesting poem, which explains that trade and agriculture are more profitable and lucrative than a government job. The name of the poet has not been mentioned.

[52] "Agriculture is the Primary Means of Livelihood," *Krisak*, vol. 26, no. 12 (Chaitra 1925), p. 373.

Krishitatva, one of the early Bengali newspapers, meticulously recounted the production methods of many new crops, fruits, and plants, including turmeric, ginger, bamboo, *shan* (brown hemp/Indian hemp), mango, and jackfruit.[53] On one occasion, a regular contributor to *Krishak*, Suresh Chandra Ganguly, warned enterprising and educated agriculturalists against the cultivation of non-commercial crops like paddy.[54] In another short-lived periodical called *Krishi Lakshmi*, an unknown correspondent advised interested educated youth to cultivate potato, vegetables, betel leaf, and tobacco to earn higher incomes.[55] This idea of profitability from diversified commodity production emerged from an economic understanding that mixed farming required a smaller amount of capital.[56]

The ignorance of the *chasha* as perceived by the urban educated elite led them to believe that the ordinary cultivator was incapable of developing agricultural production along the lines of modern science and technology. The productionist agricultural discourse had no view on how to deliver such knowledge to the peasantry, and therefore believed that it was only the educated and the wealthy that should engage in agriculture. The liberal intelligentsia thus thought of agricultural production without taking into account the role of the working peasantry, even while advocating capitalist farming.

The Challenge to Zamindars

The advocates of scientific agriculture proposed carrying out farming on a cooperative basis, a common and widespread view at that time. But the cooperative method of cultivation they had in mind depended on the participation of the *bhadralok chashis*, while excluding the real cultivators. The frequent advice to buy fertile land to carry out cooperative farming on a small scale continued.[57] This theme of agricultural land at an "affordable" price was to remain.[58] The Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society, through its organ *Bhandar*, assumed the responsibility for urban educated Bengalis to take the lead in setting up cooperative societies in rural areas.[59] The advocates of cooperative farming believed that the educated middle class should take the initiative, possibly due to the ambivalent attitude of the *zamindars* towards the cooperative movement.[60] However, the call to the educated

[53] In every issue, *Krishitatva* published such articles. Going through any issue of *Krishitatva* indicates that the chief exponents of the productionist agricultural discourse at the end of the nineteenth century focused on commercial agriculture and diversification of traditional agricultural commodities.

[54] Suresh Chandra Ganguly (Baisakh 1927), "My Cultivation," *Krisak*, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 11.

[55] "A Few Important Words," *Krisi Lakshmi*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Srabon 1932), pp. 181–3.

[56] *Ibid*., p. 182.

[57] See, for instance, Rasiklal Roy (Jaistha 1913), "Agriculture as the Way Out for the Middle Class *Bhadrolok*," *Krisak*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 59–61.

[58] Ashis Kumar Bandopadhaya (1919), "Agriculture and Cooperatives," *Krisak*, vol. 20, no. 10, pp. 382–3.

[59] "Many Words," *Bhandar*, vol. 1, no. 1, (Poush 1918).

[60] *Bhandar* published an article where the correspondent criticised the Bharat Sabha, the British Indian Association, and the Zamindar Sabha for not taking any initiative to organise cooperatives. See "Many Words," *Bhandar*, vol. 1, no. 8 (Phalgun 1918).

and wealthy sections to engage in cooperative agriculture had little impact but for a few individual cases that were reported in periodicals of the time.[61]

The arguments put forward to attract the youth to take to cooperative farming in the writings of the time suggest that by pooling land, a vast tract of cultivable land would be created, on which heavy implements and modern machines could be easily used. This would increase productivity and enhance profits.[62]

Even the view of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's leading poet and public figure, was not very different from that of other members of the liberal intelligentsia. His project of agricultural education at Sriniketan and the agricultural farm in Bolpur, from where knowledge of scientific agriculture was disseminated among the local cultivators, gained considerable attention. Though Tagore acknowledged the poverty of the peasantry, he saw technological development and promotion of cooperative farming as the surest means to develop their material conditions. Tagore also believed that productivity would be unleashed by promoting cooperative agricultural farming:

> But more land and money are required to use machines . . . you 50 people who have been cultivating close to each other and separately forever, you, being poor, could easily get the opportunity of having big capital if you could unite all your land, plough, granary, labour . . . it seems to me that this cooperative method is the only way to rescue our country from poverty.[63]

The intelligentsia's promotion of cooperative farming drawing upon modern scientific techniques was directed towards the enterprising capitalist farmer. The capitalist farmer was either to guide the poor villagers or directly involve them in agriculture based on cooperation. The promotion of capitalist land relations by the intelligentsia, it could be argued, was a lukewarm protest against dominant *zamindari* production relations in agriculture. However, an explicit challenge to the dominance of the *zamindars* through the modification of production relations in rural Bengal was never posed in the cooperative and productionist discourse. The liberal intelligentsia asserted that the productive interests of the middle class, unleashed by a change in land relations in favour of capitalist farming, were the surest means to improve agricultural production in the landlord-dominated agriculture of colonial Bengal.

[61] See, for instance, an article about the Khulna Cooperative Society in *Bhandar*: Taraknath Maitra (Kartik and Agrahayan 1920), "Campaign of the Cooperative," *Bhandar*, vol. 3, nos. 4 and 5. See also Indranath Nandi (Falgun 1926), "24 Pargana Bhadro Cooperative Society," *Krisak*, vol. 27, no. 11, pp. 366–8. In a report published in *Krisi Sampada*, it was reported that an organisation by the name of Agriculture Industry Development Company Limited at Shrihatta had taken up 953 acres of land to cultivate commercial products, including sugarcane, orange, pineapple, banana, jackfruit, grapes, etc. It also received assistance from the Agriculture Department of Assam. See "Agriculture Industry Development Company Limited," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 3, no. 6 (1912). K. C. Dey, the president of one such society, reported that the Rangpur Agricultural Society had taken up the cause of commercial agriculture; see K. C. Dey (1915), "Rangpur Agricultural Society," *Krisi Sampada*, vol. 6, no. 8.

[62] "Many Words," *Bhandar*, vol. 1, no. 6 (Poush 1918).

[63] Rabindranath Tagore, "Cooperative," *Bhandar*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Srabon 1918).

From the middle of the 1930s, another distinct perception of agricultural issues emerged almost in parallel with the productionist discourse. This came from the left and peasant movements in Bengal. The formation of peasant organisations had started in the 1920s,[64] but it was with the establishment of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936 that the demands of the cultivating peasants were raised in a systematic manner (Rasul 1989, pp. 3–4). The supporters of the productionist discourse did not, of course, share these views, although it would appear that they took them seriously. In an article in *Krishak*,[65] its correspondent wrote of a *kisan* conference as follows:

> In this conference, the peasants are demanding rights from the *zamindars* on the issue of land. Till date, the English educated people were involved in conferences like the National Congress, the social conference, the moderate convention, etc. We are pleased to see that the peasants who do not know English are conducting the conference for their small demands.[66]

At an early phase of peasant mobilisation, the demands of peasant organisations were directed against arbitrary exactions levied by the *zamindars*. However, with the formal establishment of the left-led Kisan Sabha in 1936, agrarian demands were raised more forcefully and with far greater eloquence. At its first conference in 1936, the Kisan Sabha adopted a resolution "to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation of the peasantry," and declared that "landlordism shall be abolished and all rights over lands be vested in the cultivators" (Rasul 1989, pp. 5–6). At the Comilla session (1938), the Kisan Sabha reiterated the demand for the abolition of landlordism, which required a fundamental change in agrarian property relations (*ibid*., pp. 33–4). Unlike the productionist discourse of the liberal intelligentsia, the Kisan Sabha did not raise the question of scientific development in agricultural production.

Owing to the emergence of left organisations and the Kisan Sabha, a group of periodicals in Bengal started taking up issues of the tillers. Periodicals like *Langol*, *Ganabani*, and *Sanhati* became vehicles for the voice of the oppressed agricultural communities. But most of these early periodicals were short-lived.[67] *Janayuddha*, an official publication of the Communist Party of India (CPI), first appeared at the time of the Bengal famine in 1942 and continued publication for a short period of time. All these periodicals took considerable interest in the material conditions of the peasant's life. The focus was on the need to improve the conditions of the peasantry, with an emphasis on economic factors. In one article, a writer in *Janayuddha* commented:

> The condition of the peasants, associated with the production of jute, is miserable in this season. On one hand, there has been a price hike for the essential commodities . . . and on the other hand, the price of jute has drastically fallen . . . The reports from different

[64] *Ibid*., p. 2.
[65] "Peasant Conference in Bhar: Demands of the *Prajas*," *Krisak*, vol. 20, no. 12 (Chaitra 1919), p. 434.
[66] *Ibid*., p. 441.
[67] For an overview of these periodicals, see Chattopadhyaya (ed.) (1992), pp. i–xxx.

> districts confirm the fact that there has been a sharp decline in the price of jute . . . which this year has fallen from Rs 8 to Rs 4.[68]

But questions relating to agricultural modernisation did not figure in any significant way in the demands of the Kisan Sabha, thus leaving the issue in the hands of the elite intelligentsia. The fierce opposition to the *zamindari* system by the left and liberal intelligentsia pressured the Government of Bengal to appoint the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, popularly known as the Floud Commission, in 1939.[69]

Conclusion

Agriculture was the primary source of livelihood for the majority of the people in colonial Bengal. The different sources cited in this paper show that, in the early years of the period covered by this paper, the Bengali literati was divided on a range of issues relating to agrarian relations. Till the 1930s, the urban liberal intelligentsia of Bengal upheld the view that the modernisation of agricultural production was the solution to the agrarian crisis, a point of view identified here as "productionist." With the emergence of peasant organisations, notably the Kisan Sabha, in the mid-1930s, the rent question returned to the debate on agriculture. The demand to abolish *zamindari* was articulated in a consistent and forceful manner. However, this demand did not include the idea that the use of science and technology could hasten agricultural improvement. It remained for the liberal intelligentsia to articulate this view.

A striking feature of the debate on agricultural modernisation in Bengal was its early domination by a perspective that was clearly that of the literati, comprising the urban, salaried, liberal intelligentsia. This manifested itself in two distinct but interrelated ways. In the first instance, the intelligentsia was of the view that the nature of agrarian relations, in particular the nature of property relations in land, was the reason for low agricultural productivity in Bengal. Thus, an increase in the productivity of agriculture could be achieved through the assimilation and dissemination of modern scientific knowledge.

Secondly, the intelligentsia strongly believed that it was the educated and the wealthy who would play a key role in determining the modernisation of agricultural production. In other words, the key to improving agricultural production lay in the application of modern agricultural scientific techniques by those who were best placed to understand and pay for them. The literati upheld capitalist farming and the importance of organising the educated urban middle class into cooperative farms for increasing production. The idea of promoting capitalist farming was to oppose the dominant *zamindari* production relations in agriculture. An explicit challenge to the *zamindars* did not, however, figure in the productionist discourse.

[68] "A Remedy Required for the Miserable Condition of the Jute Farmers," *Janayuddha*, vol. 1, no. 29 (November 25, 1942), p. 8.
[69] See, for instance, "Abolishment of the *Zamindari* System," *Ganabani*, vol. 1, no. 5 (September 9, 1926).

From the middle of the 1930s, different peasant organisations and the Communist Party of India played a major part in bringing a new perspective to the debate. They took up popular demands that included the demand to change property relations and abolish the *zamindari* system. With their focus on the material conditions of the peasantry, they provided a new dimension to the view on modernisation of agriculture – one that was considerably different from the standard, production-oriented discourse of the liberal intelligentsia.

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