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B O O K R E V I E W S

The Literati and Colonial Rural Bengal

Malini Bhattacharya*

Raha, Bipasha, *The Plough and the Pen: Peasantry, Agriculture and Literati in Colonial Bengal*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 318, Rs 975.

This book gives a detailed analysis up to the 1920s of the condition of the peasantry and of the agrarian situation in colonial Bengal in consequence of various legal and administrative measures implemented by the colonial masters, and seeks to work out how these issues were raised and debated at the time by the Bengali literati. While significant work has already been done on the first aspect of the book, it is its second aspect that is really interesting, particularly because it deals with primary material accessible to only those with knowledge of Bengali; without such material and knowledge, an understanding of the growth of anti-colonial consciousness among different classes of people would be incomplete.

The “literati” refers to that small but crucial section of the people who often had familial links with land, but who had shifted to the city, had the benefit of English education, and enlisted themselves mostly among the newly-risen professional classes. At a time when even primary education was not available to most of the peasantry and their voice remained unheard in the public sphere, members of this elite group, versed in both Bengali and English (and even Persian, as with Ram Mohan Roy), sometimes used the public space to highlight the peasant and the agrarian situation through their writings, their debating societies, periodicals published by them, and also through their interactions with the colonial rulers.

One reason why the literati were interested in these issues was that they themselves had, as owners, links with land, whether they had come in to it as family legacy or whether they had invested in land what they had earned in their professions. But in spite of their being beneficiaries of the system, they were not only critical of the failure of the zamindars under the Permanent Settlement to take advantage of it to improve the agrarian economy and the sad lot of the peasant, but also sometimes moved on

* Former Professor of English and Director, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, mihirmalini@gmail.com.

from there to a perception of the untenability of the system itself as far as the people of this country were concerned. Their perception of the peasant's condition in their writings became a focal point even in the changes they demanded in the system in the interest of their own class. Thus, as intermediaries for the peasantry, they came to have a hegemonic role to play in society. The author's extensive studies of such material in this book are very useful.

The author takes her material chronologically, starting in her first chapter with the economic-political context in which these literati first appeared and made their intellectual interventions, the Permanent Settlement, the subsequent amendments to it and other legal measures, its influence both on the zamindar and the peasant, and the phenomenon of peasant resistance that provoked some of the discussions. In the two subsequent chapters, she delineates the major trends in such debates and discussions in the nineteenth century and then comes to a crucial chapter on Rabindranath Tagore. In the next chapter and in the concluding chapter, she moves on to the first three decades of the twentieth century and developments in the debate in the evolving political scenario.

Her study is commendable in that she does not dismiss the interventions of the literati as part of a "derivative discourse" but tries to discover the contradictions within this group of people that sometimes led them to question the colonial system in their portrayal of the peasant's predicament. Why did they not avoid this and focus on the smaller problems of the zamindars, which could be solved by small legal amendments? The fact that they felt constrained to comment on the larger agrarian situation and the status of the peasant is an indication of the complexity of their position and the need for such intellectuals not to remain mere spokespersons of the colonial system or their own class. This relative intellectual dissociation happened in spite of the fact that many of the so-called literati personally thought of the colonial system as beneficial to the country and as providing an opportunity (almost the only opportunity) for the zamindar to act in the cause of the betterment of the economy. The zamindar's failure to do this led the literati towards a critique of the system itself and to find alternatives such as those that emerged in the writings of Rabindranath and in his own experimentations in the agrarian sector, which are elaborately discussed in the book. The many folds in the approach of the literati to these issues were crucially connected with the changing historical context in which they wrote.

Although the author's style is mostly descriptive and the connections mentioned in the previous paragraph not always worked out, the gist she gives of the positions taken on these issues by eminent intellectuals, scholars, and social reformers of the period covered by her — people such as Ram Mohan Roy, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Harish Chandra Mookherjee, Krishto Das Pal, Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Harinath Majumdar (Kangal Harinath), Pramatho Chowdhuri, Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Syed Amir Ali, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, and others — is most

informative, and her coverage of a large number of periodicals (mostly Bengali), such as *Bangadarshan*, *Sambad Prabhakar*, *Sadharani*, *Som Prakash*, *Hindu Patriot*, *Sabujpatra*, *Modern Review*, *Mussalman*, *Ganabani*, *Langal*, and many lesser-known ones that interested themselves in these issues, provides us an insight into the multiple aspects of the debate.

Not all of these people were armchair intellectuals, and in their capacity as magistrates, government personnel, professionals, and independent journalists, many of them had the opportunity to find out for themselves what was happening on the ground, and, in spite of the fact that few of them supported peasant militancy, some of the associations that they had formed eventually also tried to organise sections of the *ryots* (or peasants) under their wing in order to give them leadership. Thus the literati even had an indirect or direct role to play in nascent forms of mass mobilisation. The book contains such suggestions, but the story of how the above-mentioned intellectual and social efforts, for all the anomalies evident in them, contributed to the emerging politics of anti-colonialism, has not been analytically developed here. The political interests of the class to which they belonged had to evolve towards issues of a broader nature as their contradictions with the colonial masters became more evident; they had to extend their hegemonic role over other classes in order to challenge colonialism. Their engagement with the problems of peasants and with the agrarian situation was crucial for this.

While Ram Mohan Roy recognised that the peasant's plight was worsened by some of the provisions of the Permanent Settlement that benefitted the zamindar, and while he called for an extension of the Settlement to the peasant, he still thought that the way forward lay not in the rejection of the Settlement, but in modernisation of the economy, capital accumulation through free enterprise in land, and selective colonisation by Europeans. In subsequent years, few of the literati would accept the western model for agrarian development he was proposing as the solution for India's problems. There must be a historical explanation for this, which the author might have explored in greater detail.

Further, Ram Mohan's optimistic view of indigo cultivation was not shared by his younger contemporaries. Sympathy for peasant militancy was more open. This may be explained by the fact that a section of landowners were also being ruined by enforced indigo cultivation and joined forces with the rebellious peasants. Further, the fact that the indigo rebellion, unlike the Wahabi and the Farazi movements, had no religious component in it, may have resulted in larger sections of the literati becoming more vocal in the support of the former than they had been in earlier movements. But more than individual differences, what counts in understanding these developments is the shift in the objective situation. It is not enough to say that some of the literati were "traditionalists" and others "radicals," or that they were "pro-landlord" or "pro-ryot" — it is the context of these positions that has to be analysed. One of the lacunae in this book is that it tends to look at the differences in the

responses of the literati or the shift in the position of one of them (viz., Ramesh Chandra Dutta) more as an individual matter than as a historical problem. This is really the limitation of a merely descriptive style.

I do not entirely agree with the view that Muslim peasants, who were in a majority in some parts of Bengal, went entirely unrepresented in literature before the emergence of literati who were of Muslim origin. Bankimchandra starts his “Bangadesher Krishak” with the predicaments of two peasant stereotypes, “Hasim Sheikh” and “Rama Kaiborto.” In his career as magistrate, he is said to have brought legal succour on at least one occasion to rebellious peasants (mostly Muslims) in the Sunderban area. Rabindranath, too, does not shy away from explicit references in his writings to the treatment meted out to Muslim peasants by Hindu zamindars of East Bengal. It is true that, with the rise of the Muslim literati, there was more specific focus on the Muslim peasant; but where the problems of the Hindu peasant have been excluded in the writings of the literati, we should not look at such exclusion merely as the prejudice of individuals, but should perhaps try to contextualise it in relation to the development of communal politics as a whole at that particular juncture.

Even though the author has been very thorough in her treatment of non-fictional texts, she seems to be much more casual in her treatment of fictional texts and poems, which are no less important as historical sources. Apart from seeming to be unaware of the fact that the methods of reading the latter as historical sources are different from methods of reading non-fictional discursive texts, she makes some unpardonable mistakes, particularly in her references to some of Tagore’s writings, such as describing *Panchabhut* and *Palligram* as short stories (p. 142), or taking “Ramkanaier Nirbuddhita,” “Khokababur Pratyabartan,” and “Didi” as illustrations of exploitation of the peasants (p. 128). These mar what is otherwise an informative chapter on Tagore’s thought and work on rural rejuvenation.

In spite of these limitations, the author’s engagement with a large variety of primary sources makes this a very useful book.

INDIAN JOURNAL OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

(Organ of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics)

Vol. 70 | JANUARY–MARCH 2015 | No.1

CONTENTS

SUPPLEMENT TO THE CONFERENCE NUMBER: JULY-SEPTEMBER 2014

Presidential Address:

Has Indian Agriculture Become Crowded and Risky? *P.K. Joshi*
Status, Implications and the Way Forward

Conference Keynote Papers

Livestock Marketing and Supply Chain Management *Steven J. Staal*
of Livestock Products

Agricultural Mechanisation Development in India *Gajendra Singh*

Agricultural Subsidies: Resurging Interest *Madhur Gautam*
in a Perennial Debate

Summaries of Group Discussion

Livestock Marketing and Supply Chain Management *P.S. Birthal*
of Livestock Products

Labour Scarcity in Agriculture and Farm Mechanisation *C. Hazarika*

Subsidies in Agriculture and Their Implications *A. Ganesh Kumar*
for Trade and Environment

ARTICLES

Agricultural Growth in West Bengal (1949-50 to 2009-10): *Soumitra Kundu*
Evidence from Multiple Trend Break Unit Root Test

Understanding Trait Preferences of Farmers for Post-Rainy *G. Basavaraj,*
Sorghum and Pearl Millet in India - A Cojoint Analysis *P. Parthasarathy Rao,*
Lalith Achoth, Lagesh,
V.G. Pokharkar, S.K. Gupta
and A. Ashok Kumar

BOOK REVIEWS

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Indicative Outlines of Subjects Selected for Discussion at the 75th Annual Conference / Platinum Jubilee Conference of the Isae
Obituary

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Please address correspondence to:

Hon. Secretary and Treasurer,

The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics,
C-104, First Floor, Sadguru Complex I, Near Vagheshwari, Gen. A.K. Vaidya Marg,
Goregaon (East), Mumbai - 400 063 (India).

Telephone : 022-28493723 | Fax : 091-022-28493724

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Social Scientist

502–503

The Nehru–Mahalanobis Strategy Prabhat Patnaik	3
The New Metropolis: Nehru and the Aftermath Romi Khosla	11
From Regional Histories to Histories of the Regions and Beyond Bhairabi Prasad Sahu	33
‘Divide and Rule’? Race, Military Recruitment, Society in Colonial India Amar Farooqui	49
The Many ‘Truths’ of Reservation Quotas in India Sasheej Hegde	61
Obituary: Jasodhara Bagchi Mihir Bhattacharya	105
Obituary: Rajni Kothari Paval Tomar	119
Book Review	122