



Agrarian Transformation and Bengali Identity: An analysis on Post Partition (1947) Bengal

Khan Md. Monoarul Islam*

School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Languages
Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur-1705, Bangladesh.

Abstract

The 1947 Partition altered not only the political landscape of Bengal but also its social and economic framework. People often talk about things like displacement, communal violence, and national identity when they talk about Partition, but the agricultural side of it is still not very well understood. This article examines how changes in farming made it more challenging to reconstruct the Bengali identity in Bengal after Partition. The partition of Bengal altered the way people owned land, relocated peasant communities, and prompted many, including farmers and landless workers, to migrate across the new borders. The economy of the village and the way people interacted with each other changed when zamindari ended, refugees were moved to rural areas, and agricultural relationships were changed. The article asserts that the agrarian economy played a crucial role in the reorganization of social order and the negotiation of cultural identity in both East Bengal (later East Pakistan) and West Bengal, as analyzed through these structural changes. The study utilizes archival documents, oral testimonies, and contemporary writings to elucidate the impact of land, livelihood, and community on the evolution of Bengali identity following Partition. Agrarian transformation is not just an economic change; it is also a key place in Bengal where memory, belonging, and identity were constantly being rebuilt after Partition.

Keywords: Bengali identity, agrarian transformation, peasant communities, the partition of Bengal (1947), the rural economy, social hierarchy

Introduction

The Partition of 1947 marked a significant turning point in the history of Bengal. It altered not only its political boundaries but also its agricultural foundation and cultural identity. The discussion about Partition has primarily focused on displacement, communal violence, and the transformation of national identity. However, the agrarian question remains an important yet understudied aspect (Chatterji, 1994; Bagchi, 1990). The hinterland of Bengal, marked by its dynamic land relations, agrarian activities, and the emergence of commercial complexes, has been a crucial region for understanding the reformation of Bengali identity in the post-Partition decades.

Agrarian transformation and pricing in pre-colonial times: the cash nexus. The history of agrarian change in Bengal, as highlighted by Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri (1975) in his work *The Growth of Commercial Agriculture*, reveals how a growing regime of export crop cultivation from the late

eighteenth century disrupted the equilibrium of traditional subsistence economies and reoriented peasant production towards new modes of reliance on world markets. Chittabrata Palit (1981) emphasized that colonial commercial imperatives not only intensified agrarian inequalities but also altered the rural economy, leading to a significant reorganization of social hierarchy. Highlighting the evolving patterns of landholding systems and tenancy contracts that necessitated significant adjustments during this period (Ray, 1979) and (Bose, S., 1993) elucidated the structural transformations that occurred within Bengal's peasant society from 1760 to 1850. These structural changes set the stage for long-lasting agrarian politics in Bengal in the 20th century, marked by considerable tension in rural life due to economic need, land loss, and social identity (Sarkar 2017:103; Bose 1986).

This only made the tension on the Partition worse because the farmers who had to leave their homes and the landless tenants who had to move by chance across the new borders of East Bengal (later East Pakistan) and West Bengal. The village economy was significantly impacted by the end of zamindari, the influx of refugees to rural areas for employment, and the introduction of new agricultural reform programs (Roy 2010; Chatterjee 1997). The demand for land among refugee communities transcended mere survival; it was intrinsically connected to a quest for self-worth and identity in their homelands, signifying that agrarian relations constituted a vital framework for the formation of concepts of belonging, community, and Bengali identity.

This analysis of post-Partition Bengal is situated within the larger framework of agrarian transition. This paper employs Chaudhuri's (1975) framework of commercial agriculture and the analyses of (Ray, 1979) and (Bose, S., 1993) regarding agrarian restructuring to argue that the disruptions experienced at Partition must be understood within a paradigm that includes both continuity and reconfiguration during the transitions in Bengal's agrarian landscape. Agrarian change is not only an economic transformation but also a crucial area for reconfiguring relationships and identity in post-Partition Bengal.

Changes in farming and Bengal before the Partition

In the decades preceding Partition, Bengal's agrarian history underwent significant structural changes, altering the relationships among land, labor, and power. Saugata Mukherji's definitive work, *Agrarian Class Formation in Modern Bengal, 1931–51* (2017), offers a lucid analysis of the impact of colonial land policies and peasant uprisings on social differentiation in rural regions, as well as the changing relationships among landlords, tenants, and wage laborers. His analysis contextualizes agrarian transformation within the overarching political economy of colonial Bengal, underscoring that rural regions were not merely passive backdrops for nationalist politics but essential battlegrounds for disputes concerning production, entitlements, and identity. To comprehend the agrarian transformations in Bengal prior to Partition, it is essential to examine the formation and expansion of colonial agrarian systems and rural classes, the mobilization of peasants, and the crisis that enabled candid discourse in Bengal's countryside just before 1947.

The Permanent Settlements in 1793 marked the beginning of the agrarian transformation of Bengal. They made the zamindari system and the power of landlords official. This has led to the formation of a highly divided agrarian society, characterized by significant disparities in land ownership (Ray, 1979). Mukherji (2017) noted that the agrarian structure of the 1930s was characterized by a large number of people who didn't own any land and a small number of large landowners.

Even though farming was slowly becoming more commercialized, the fact that there were so many bargadars (sharecroppers) who worked on land under very unfair conditions indicated that feudal practices were still prevalent. The structural imbalance was exacerbated by colonial revenue demands and the increasing integration of Bengal's agricultural economy into global markets (Bagchi, 1990). Peasant families went into debt because they were growing cash crops, such as jute. To pay off their debts, they had to borrow money from moneylenders at high interest rates. These factors exacerbated poverty in rural areas and created new class divisions within the peasantry. For example, relatively wealthy tenants or middle-class peasants often profited at the expense of poorer farmers (Bose, 1986).

Mukherji's (2017) primary contribution is his examination of agrarian class formation in Bengal from 1931 to 1951. He demonstrates that class identity in rural Bengal was not static but rather a dynamic outcome of the interactions among economic positioning, political mobilization, and institutional transformation. The 1931 census and other land-based surveys indicate that most people living in rural areas were small, marginal farmers who had lost their rights to land and were essentially tenants with little security of tenure. In the 1930s and 1940s, new kinds of farming classes also grew slowly. The middle class of peasants worked small but safe plots of land and had started to make their voices heard in politics and business. At the same time, the role of jotedars—landowners who also owned tillers and collected rent—grew, making it harder to tell the difference between landlords and peasants. Mukherji stated that jotedars had evolved into a powerful group in rural areas. They were both patrons and creditors, and they were essentially local power brokers who arranged loans and deals for their own benefit. This illustrates the interplay between agrarian classes through a combination of economic and social power structures.

The major changes in Bengal's agrarian relations before Partition can only be understood through peasant mobilization. Large peasant movements began in the 1930s. The All-India Kisan Sabha and the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha were key groups (Sarkar 2017). These protests demanded lower rents, debt forgiveness, and housing policy changes to reduce landlords' power.

The Tebhaga movement, from 1946 to 1947, was the most significant of these protests. The idea behind this movement was that sharecroppers should be able to keep two-thirds (tebhaga) of the crops they grow. It exposed the unfairness of sharecropping and prompted tens of thousands of peasants to take to the streets. Mukherji (2017) asserts that the Tebhaga struggle primarily represented class antagonism, leading to a heightened demand for agrarian justice. It was violently put down, but it set a standard that continued to shape the conversation about land reform after the Partition. The politicization of rural areas became increasingly linked to conflicts between communities. During the turbulent 1940s, landlords, tenants, and workers often belonged to different religious groups. When one group was unhappy, the others would sometimes feel the same way (Chatterji, 1994). In that sense, the agrarian issue was linked to the political process that led to the Partition of Bengal.

It is significant to acknowledge that the transformation of the rural economy in Bengal prior to Partition was characterized by severe crises, notably exemplified by the Bengal Famine of 1943. Mukherji (2017) contextualizes the famine within the inherent weaknesses of Bengal's agrarian economy, marked by reliance on jute cultivation, enduring debt bondage, and unequal land ownership. The famine highlighted the unreliability of rural jobs, with sharecroppers and landless workers being hit the hardest. At the same time, it made traders and hoarders who took advantage

of the lack of goods even richer. Roy (2010) asserts that the famine intensified class disparities and increased the demand for agrarian reform, resulting in a lasting effect that would further polarize the rural political landscape.

Mukherji (2017) investigates the agrarian transformation of pre-Partition Bengal, elucidating the impact of enduring structural imbalances, colonial directives, and peasant resistance on class formation within villages. From 1931 to 1951, the traditional feudal system began to disintegrate, and new methods of class division, political engagement, and rural problem-solving emerged. Many changes occurred in rural Bengal on the eve of Partition. There were strong divisions between classes and communities, but there were also popular struggles for land and justice. As a result, the agrarian transformation was not just an economic process; it was also a revolutionary change in the way rural Bengal's society functioned. This change set the stage for, and influenced, the course of both East and West Bengali history after 1947.

The agrarian transformation of pre-Partition Bengal was profoundly shaped by the policies of the colonial state, the dynamics of peasant resistance, and the intricate interrelations among class, caste, and communal politics. Chatterjee (1986) notes that the structures of feudal oppression and exploitative usury in eastern Bengal frequently exhibited a "communal" discourse, intertwining economic grievances with religious identity, and correlating rural conflict with struggle patterns that surpassed class distinctions. This sedimented accumulation of economic and cultural animosity constituted the agrarian question in Bengal, integral to the political and social upheaval that ultimately resulted in Partition. Colonial state interventions, especially those evident in tenancy laws such as the 1859 Rent Act and the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, modified but did not completely eradicate exploitative agrarian relations. On the other hand, these changes made landlords even more powerful, and only partially protected tenants from eviction or rent increases (Smalley, A., 1983). These half-hearted reforms reveal the colonial state's precarious position: it sought to maintain stable agricultural production while also attending to the interests of the elites who paid taxes.

In this case, the peasants gradually became players in a rural order that was undergoing change. Guha (1995) asserts that through persistent tenancy disputes and the strategic implementation of colonial legislation, many tenants gradually transformed into minor proprietors. This slow change indicates that the transition to farming wasn't a quick and easy process that everyone had to undergo. Instead, it was a battlefield where the state, landlords, and farmers all fought for new power balances. Most small farmers and sharecroppers remained poor and in debt, especially in areas where jute and other commercial crops were cultivated. This meant that peasants' lives depended on markets that were not stable around the world (Mukherji, 1986).

The mobilization of peasants in the 1920s and 1930s altered rural politics, giving shape to long-standing complaints. The Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha and radical factions within the Congress Party sought to exploit farmers' discontent to achieve reduced rent and interest rates, debt alleviation, and enhanced security for tenants (B. Chakrabarty, 1985). After the war, rural Bengal became increasingly politicized, and this trend continued during later struggles, such as the Tebhaga movement (1946–47), which advocated for sharecroppers to receive two-thirds of the crop. These mobilizations highlighted the exploitative characteristics of agrarian relations and indicated that rural Bengal had become a pivotal hub of mass political activity on the eve of Partition

(Mukherji

1986).

At the same time, subordinate groups, such as Dalit agricultural laborers, worked to (re)build their political identities in the middle of changes in farming. (Bandyopadhyay S., 2009) demonstrates that Dalit mobilization in the 1930s and 1940s linked anti-casteism with anti-ground exploitation. In the countryside of Bengal, people from diverse classes, castes, and communities coexisted. This was because agrarian change in Bengal before Partition was not just about changing how people owned land, but also about making new social and political identities. The reform of the colonial state, the mobilization of peasants, and the voices of those who were on the fringes of society were all working together to change the way classes were formed in the countryside. This was setting the stage for social conflicts and divisions that only stopped for a short time before Partition.

Bengali Nationalism's Beginnings, 1947–1954

After the 1947 Partition, East Bengal (which later became known as "East Pakistan") was a very unstable place. The primary reason for this was that the economy wasn't growing fast enough, which led to the social and economic problems that Bengali Nationalism was based on. Most people in East Bengal worked on farms, which kept the area crowded (Van Schendel, W., 2020). The agrarian economy that developed was unable to keep pace with the growing population, resulting in long-term food shortages and increasing anger among people who felt they weren't receiving their fair share of the economy compared to West Pakistan. This gray story about farming was an important part of the early growth of Bengali nationalism because it highlighted how the central government in Karachi showed little concern for East Bengal and how resources weren't being shared fairly.

One of the main reasons agriculture hasn't grown is that few new technologies for growing food crops have been adopted through this process. Most countries in the world purchased high-yielding wheat and rice in the 1960s, but previously, low-yielding methods were more common (Dalrymple, 1974). East Bengal relied heavily on rice and was highly sensitive to changes in weather and crop conditions.

The government didn't take any measures to improve irrigation, seed technology, or fertilizer supply, resulting in the region's agricultural output falling behind population growth. This made it possible for subsistence crises to recur repeatedly (Islam, 1977).

The new Pakistani government was more interested in development than in fixing these problems in farming. Falcon (1971) states that Pakistan's early economic planning primarily focused on industrialization, with a particular emphasis on developing industries in West Pakistan. Although agriculture was crucial to the economy of East Bengal, relatively little money was allocated to its infrastructure. This uneven distribution of resources gave the impression that people were purposely ignoring East Bengalis, which made them feel even more like they were being taken advantage of (Sobhan, 2015). East Bengal produced a significant amount of jute, which Pakistan sold to other countries, generating substantial revenue. However, it didn't receive nearly enough funding for farming or improving life in the countryside. People felt even more like they were being treated like a colonial backwater (Jahan, 1972).

The stagnation of agricultural output directly contributed to food insecurity, especially since the population was growing faster than food production could keep pace. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics states that East Bengal had less food per person immediately after Partition, which led to recurring food shortages (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Public food interventions were

poorly planned and executed, making the rural poor particularly susceptible (Haggblade, 2000). People still remembered the terrible Bengal famine of 1943, and worries about shortages in the late 1940s and early 1950s made people even less likely to trust government institutions (Van Schendel, W., 2020). The central government's inability to guarantee adequate food supplies became a political issue, resulting in allegations that Karachi prioritized the needs of West Pakistan over the subsistence crisis in the East.

The leaders of East Bengal's nationalist movement quickly turned these economic and food-related complaints into political issues. The Awami League and other regional parties emphasized the disparities between the two regions of Pakistan, citing the neglect of agriculture as an illustration of a broader economic control system (Sobhan, 2015). Students and intellectuals played a major role in linking subsistence crises to questions of identity and freedom. Christiansen (2012) notes that university students in Dhaka organized not only around cultural and linguistic issues, but also against economic policies that kept most of East Bengal's people in poverty and hunger. The failure of agricultural development became linked to the larger goal of asserting Bengali identity, where economic neglect made the call for political recognition even stronger.

Additionally, the fact that farming didn't grow during this crucial period exacerbated the class differences in East Bengal. Food shortages hurt small farmers and sharecroppers the most. People often thought that landlords and traders were working together to take advantage of the situation by hoarding food and raising prices (Islam, 1977). This division within the country made people feel even more wronged, and nationalist leaders were able to get a lot of support by saying that the lack of progress in farming was due to both local unfairness and West Pakistan's unfair treatment of East Pakistan.

The political economy of agricultural stagnation in East Bengal, however, fostered the development of Bengali nationalism from 1947 to 1954. It stopped being a good farmer because it was unproductive, but it also became a symbol of the structural inequalities in the Pakistani state. A lack of investment due to food shortages highlighted the extent to which East Bengal relied on the central government. This made people feel more connected to each other because they were all poor and felt like the government had let them down. By the mid-1950s, these complaints had evolved into a more organized nationalist rhetoric that linked poverty to cultural independence and autonomy. This set the stage for later national movements that helped Bangladesh become free.

Concluding Remarks:

The agrarian crisis in post-Partition Bengal should not be regarded merely as a tale of stagnation; it is, in fact, a deeply political narrative with considerable implications for the development of Bengali identity and nationalism in the formative years of Pakistan. Most people in East Bengal were farmers, and they were clearly worried because they couldn't get a good price for their goods. Farmers have always faced marketing challenges, which are now referred to as "perennial." Even though the needs of a growing population became increasingly urgent, this lack of organization prevented agricultural products from receiving what they deserved. The story wasn't just about a subsistence crisis; it was also about how Bengalis came to realize that their economic well-being and rural development were not as important in the new state. These became progressively more intricate due to the exodus of significant segments of society during partition. When zamindars, wealthy farmers, and parts of the professional petty bourgeoisie moved to India,

there was no longer a specific institutional middleman in the rural economy. However, this didn't prompt Bengalis to devise their own solutions. Instead, the state made it easier for West Pakistani traders, bureaucrats, and middlemen to do business. People thought that East Bengal was being reoccupied because of this business, even though it was new for people from other places and times to come to the agrarian delta. For the average peasant, the expropriation of a local elite by outsiders was a practice that combined cultural and economic exploitation, making already strong feelings of resentment about being excluded from politics even stronger. The story of deprivation struck a chord with the East Bengalis. Two countries collided: economic stagnation met problems of justice and identity; the complaints of the poor were heard by a broader segment of the middle-class intelligentsia. Farmers believed that the inability to obtain favorable prices was not indicative of market failure, but rather a manifestation of systemic discrimination by a government administered from West Pakistan. Hunger returned, and there were no changes to the institutions or improvements to the country's agricultural base. These are all signs of exclusion. They helped create a shared sense of Bengali victimhood, where economic problems mixed with language and cultural goals. Yes, it was a way for the producers to talk about their daily problems, but it was also a way for them to speak Bengali. By the early 1950s, this growing awareness of oneself had changed from an economic cry to a nationalistic cry of recognition, independence, and pride. This period of agricultural stagnation following the Partition was not only detrimental to the economy but also a pivotal moment in the rise of Bengali nationalism and the ensuing struggles for self-determination.

Reference

- Bagchi, A. K. (2015). On colonialism and the Indian economy. *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 5(2), 95–109.
- Bandyopadhyay, S. (2009). Partition and the ruptures in Dalit identity politics in Bengal. *Asian Studies Review*, 33(4), 455–467. doi: 10.1080/10357820903363736
- Bose, S. (1986). *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and politics, 1919–1947*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bose, S. (1993). *Peasant labour and colonial capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chakrabarty, B. (1985). Peasants and the Bengal Congress, 1928–38. *South Asia Research*, 5(1), 29–47. doi: 10.1177/026272808500500103
- Chatterjee, P. (1986). The colonial state and peasant resistance in Bengal, 1920–1947. *Past & Present*, 110, 169–204. doi: 10.1093/past/110.1.169
- Chatterjee, P. (1997). *A possible India: Essays in political criticism*. Oxford University Press.
- Chatterji, J. (1994). *Bengal divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chaudhuri, B. B. (1964). *Growth of commercial agriculture in Bengal, 1757–1900*. Indian Studies: Past & Present.
- Christiansen, S. M. R. (2012). *Students, space, and the state in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, 1952–1975* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. Northeastern University Library.
- Dalrymple, D. G. (1974). *Development and spread of high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice in the less developed nations* (Foreign Agricultural Economic Report No. 95). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
- Federal Bureau of Statistics. (1998). *50 years of Pakistan in statistics, 1947–1997* (Vol. 3). Manager of Publications, Government of Pakistan.

- Guha, S. (1995). Agrarian Bengal, 1850–1947: Issues and problems. *Studies in History*, 11(1), 119–142. doi: 10.1177/025764309501100105
- Hossain, N. (2018). The 1970 Bhola cyclone, nationalist politics, and the subsistence crisis contract in Bangladesh. *Disasters*, 42(1), 187–203. doi: 10.1111/disa.12235
- Islam, N. (1977). *Development planning in Bangladesh: A study in political economy*. C. Hurst & Company.
- Jahan, R. (1972). *Pakistan: Failure in national integration*. Columbia University Press.
- Mukherji, S. (1986). Agrarian class formation in modern Bengal, 1931–51. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21(4), PE11–PE21, PE24–PE27.
- Ray, R. (1979). *Change in Bengal agrarian society, c. 1760–1850*. Manohar.
- Roy, T. (2011). *The economic history of India, 1857–1947* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Smalley, A. (1983). The colonial state and agrarian structure in Bengal. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 13(2), 176–197.
- Sobhan, R. (2015). *From two economies to two nations: My journey to Bangladesh*. The Daily Star Books.
- Van Schendel, W. (2020). *A history of Bangladesh* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.