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The Dynamics of Village Communities, Land Ownership, Socio-economic Structure and Politics in East Bengal on the Eve of 1947

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Abstract

This study delves into the socio-economic and political transformations in East Bengal during the final years of British colonial rule, particularly focusing on the structure of village communities, land ownership, and political dynamics. Drawing upon the Census of 1941 and data on agricultural land distribution, the research highlights the stark contrast in land ownership across various districts, with regions like Chittagong and Tippera exhibiting higher percentages of land held by proprietors (zamindars) compared to others. The paper examines the uneven distribution of land across families, where a significant proportion of families owned less than 2 acres of land, especially in rural areas like Bakarganj and Bogra. This paper then examines how these patterns of landholding affected socio-economic formations, such as the increasing trend towards tenant farming and greater political mobilization among rural peasants. Interweaving these quantitative estimates with the historical narratives, the paper tries to develop a comprehensive picture of the politico-social scene in East Bengal before Partition in light of land policies, village structures and nationalist movement.

Keywords: *Village Communities, Land Ownership, Colonial Land Policies, Socio-economic Structure, East Bengal*

Introduction

The society and economy of East Bengal before 1947 was characterised by a combination of land tenures, underpinning local rural governance, and political beliefs. The communal allocation of Hindu and Muslim populations by district and the holdings of agricultural land offer us in-depth insight into the socio-economic structure make-up in a region. Using 1941 census data and post-colonial studies as its sources, this study explores village-community dynamics, disparate landholding patterns and new political structures. These complexities weave together to contribute to a historical framework necessary for understanding the transformation of rural landscapes in East Bengal where the classic theories by important historians like March Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Lucien Febvre and E H Carr are instrumental.

March Bloch's work on historical theory, especially his notion of the *longue durée*, is crucial in analysing the structures and patterns of social and economic life of East Bengal. Bloch's method depicts that history should not be seen as chronologically developing events but rather a complex overlay of large scale social processes (Bloch, 1992). This provides a context to an appreciation of how classical agrarian societies in eastern Bengal have evolved during centuries of feudalism, colonialism and agrarian politics. The legacy of local customs, such as the superiority of zamindars

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(landlords), and hierarchical land distribution in the region became a major factor in rural life. Hence, for example, the excessive concentration of land-holders and high percentage of families in ownership of under 2 acres of land in such districts as Chittagong and Tippera on the one hand, on the other a large percentage of families holding less than 2 acres or thereabout as Bakarganj and Bogra show how deep rooted these inequalities have been in the very fabric of rural East Bengal.

Another lens to consider these schemes is offered by Fernand Braudel's concept of *la longue durée*, which emphasizes the role of geography and climate. Braudel claims that geography is the superstructure for the foundation of social and economic formations (Braudel, 1972). The variation in land type found in East Bengal from fertile Ganges Delta to upland. From less-soil-base area produced correspondingly heterogeneous patterns of agriculture and society. The evidence of the differences in proportions of land between zamindars, tenure-holders (*irfens* and *mushtandads*) and ryots (hereditary tenants or *acropperates*) in districts like Faridpur and Mymensingh also supports Braudel's theory. In these areas, the natural environment combined with historical processes had produced different patterns of land use as well as socio-economic developments.

Lucien Febvre, along with Braudel, was instrumental in establishing the Annales School of historical thought, which advocated for a history that considered not just political events but the broader social and economic contexts (Febvre, 1982). Febvre's focus on collective mentalities, or the shared beliefs and practices of a society, helps in understanding how political consciousness among rural populations in East Bengal evolved. As nationalist movements gained momentum across India, rural communities in East Bengal—shaped by a history of exploitation by landlords and the colonial state—began to adopt political ideologies that resonated with their socio-economic realities. The statistics presented in the census data, showing the role of Muslim and Hindu populations in landholding and their interaction with national politics, highlight the social divisions that ultimately influenced the rise of political movements in the region.

This focus on the importance of historians in creating history is very relevant in light of how we see versions of events change over time. Carr, called into question the belief that historical facts are merely found and instead claimed that they were constructed (Carr, 1961). This study, the body of ideas proposed by Carr is adapted to analyse historical sources; like patterns of land ownership and population statistics. Different views on the outcome of colonial policies on land reforms. Where revenue collection in the region shows how interpretations of history can be shaped by contemporary politics.

The theories of Bloch, Braudel, Febvre and Carr have given us direction to understand the historical complexities of East Bengal. This study, through these theoretical frameworks, seeks to explore the complex interconnections between landowning patterns, structures of social and economic relations. Here the political developments in the region leading to an overall understanding of the pre-partition dynamics that have molded rural East Bengal society.

The Village Communities Dynamics on the Eve of 1947

In South Asia 1947 became a defining year in the history as the subcontinent saw momentous changes in its political, social and economic system. This changes following partition and after being freed from colonial rule. In East Bengal, the ways of village life were intricately associated with systems of land ownership and socio-economic divisions. Such conditions overlaid with centuries-old political changes. The Table (1) providing the population of Hindus and Muslims in different districts of Bengal. Such information about possession of agricultural land throws a revealing light on rural Bengal on the eve of independence. Referring to charts from the 1941

Census and studies after this time we get some insight about this point. One can unravel latent forces that operated during those volatile years in rural societies by taking into account population distribution, landholding activities and the political environment of that time.

Table 1. Breakdown of Hindu and Muslim Populations in 1941 in Different Districts

District	Muslim	Scheduled Caste	Caste Not Returned	Other Hindus
Bakarganj	2,567,027	427,667	246,288	284,674
Bogra	1,057,902	61,303	46,148	80,081
Chittagong	1,605,183	57,024	150,832	250,218
Chittagong Hill Tract	7,270	283	971	3,629
Dacca	2,841,261	409,905	454,280	495,947
Dinajpur	735,382	344,638	35,730	233,490
Faridpur	1,871,336	527,496	270,668	208,074
Jessore	1,100,713	314,876	130,922	275,301
Khulna	959,172	470,550	186,286	320,857
Kustia*	381,261	32,022	23,343	82,057
Mymensingh	4,664,548	340,676	373,333	582,629
Noakhali	1,803,937	81,817	57,314	273,130
Pabna	1,313,968	114,738	87,540	181,477
Rajshahi	1,173,285	75,650	93,028	160,552
Rangpur	2,055,186	495,432	111,903	242,574
Tippera	2,975,901	227,663	171,778	480,539

Note. Until August 14, 1947, Kustia was a subdivision of Nadia district. Later it was incorporated in East Pakistan as a district.

Source: Census of India, Vol. 5, 1941

The demographic composition of the Hindu and Muslim population in the districts of East Bengal in 1941 (see Table 1) displays a high degree of contrast between urban and rural areas. Districts like Dacca had a Muslim majority with more than 2.8 million Muslims; only 495,947 Hindus living there. Regions like Jessore, Faridpur and Khulna were less imbalanced, though the Muslim-majority districts were also very much a sign of the regional differences that would be significant at partition. These numbers are revealing of the socio-religious landscape characteristic of a considerable proportion of rural Bengal where "social identity" was often co-terminous with that of landholding and social-political allegiance (Census of India, 1941).

There were two sources of land ownership — one from colonial policies and another by local tradition in East Bengal. The second table — the percent of agricultural land in direct possession — tells which share of the land was owned by each type of landlord. The dichotomy between landlords (zamindars), tenure-holders and ryots (tenants) existed in the rural economy. For example, in Dacca district only 8.79% of the agricultural land was directly owned by zamindars, and 84.23% was held by ryots. This issue of skewed distribution of land was a reflection of the strength of zamindari relations, which had been developed during but also persisted in post-colonial times (Chatterjee, 1982). As landlords, the zamindars were supported by the colonial government and they enjoyed a privileged position as overseas agents-amongst them being zamindars (bargadars) in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The information very well reveals that an overwhelmingly majority of

the agricultural land was owned by a microscopic few, while the peasantry largely had no or minuscule holding of land (Census of India, 1941).

This disparity was reflected by the socio-economic structure in the village communities. The third table demonstrating the average family land holding per district, more clearly brings out the discrepancies. Districts like Bakarganj and Bogra, possessing only 2.17 acres and 4.28 acres per family on average. This information indicates that great majority of landowning families possessed very little land. Each household could claim or use every day as Rangpur and Tippera, with 6.67 acres and 2.22 acres respectively, which happened to be above were so much land out of reach in this case. The high degree of land monopolization by a few landlords combined with the fact. Most of the rural population had little or no land. That was another cause for economic unrest, leading to social turmoil and discontent (Chatterjee, 1982).

The socio-economic milieu of rural Bengal influenced by the political awakening in the pre-independent era also had an impact on it. The pattern of landholdings and the increasing discontent of tenant farmers along with the landless laborers had an impact that stimulated nationalist movements. While villagers were struggling against poverty and oppression under the zamindari, political ideas also started to flourish in their lives (Bose, 2011). The land reforms and revenue collection practices of the British colonial regime had widened gulf between zamindars and tenants, paving the way for the popularization of nationalist ideas. The census data was a reflection of a rural population that had begun to take more political interest and active participation in the independence movement (Chatterjee, 1982).

Religious and political dynamics also played a vital role in the socio-economic sunder of rural Bengal besides political movements. The partition of Bengal in 1947 was not just a division of land and wealth. It inspires mass people to create their identity. As we analyse the demographic data we can easily find out that religious cleavages were deeply rooted in rural hinterland area. In these areas Hindu and Muslim populations closely coexisted but led different class lives. This division was further accentuated by the colonial policy of divide and rule. That also created aggravated feelings of separateness among different communities and eventually led to the partition (Bose 2011).

The life of Bengali village inhabitants of East Bengal in the pre-1947 context was an interwoven mess. Their threads were landholding, social structure and political transformation. Rural Bengal as in other Indian provinces, uneven land distribution, the persistence of the zamindari system and socio-religious schisms were significant factors. These things contributed to rural landscape prevalent in Bengal. Data from the 1941 Census and subsequent works make it very clear. From these data we can widespread the structural inequities that characterised rural life were, and they fuelled the political unrest that led to Bengal's partition. But taking these dynamics into account is vital to understand the larger history of processes that fashioned East Bengal over this period.

Land Ownership in East Bengal on the Eve of 1947

On the eve of 1947, East Bengal landownership mirrored long-standing social hierarchies, colonial policy, and economic division which had profound effects on village life. The pattern of landholding, as revealed by the figures of the 1941 Census, exposes the appalling disparities in the agrarian economy. Such unequal distribution of land determined the socio-economic structure of rural societies. It provoked political disturbances and social movements which eventually led to the partition of India (Census of India, 1941).

The table demonstrates the sharp contrast in landholdings within East Bengal, where a small number of elite zamindars (landlords) held extensive tracts of land. Most of the rural population like tenant farmers and sharecroppers; held little or no land at all. In areas like Dacca, zamindars owned much of the country but not more than 10% of agricultural land was under direct cultivation by these landlords. This centralization of land in the hands of a small number of landowners gave rise to an atmosphere of economic dependence, within which most members of the rural populace (the ryots) were coerced into working on land they did not own under exploitative terms (Chatterjee, 1982; Guha, 1915). Due to high rents charged by the landowners, associate farmers were no better off and faced a lifetime in poverty unable to save or improve their prospects (Beames, 1961).

The uneven land holdings were further accentuated by the colonial land policies, most notably the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which legalised and institutionalised the zamindari system. Under this system, zamindars were given landholdings and were required to pay tax on the land to the (British) colonial authorities. This led to the concentration of fertile land in the hands of a small elite and many peasants were only tenants at large, frequently with no security (Broomfield, 1968). The tables show that in such districts as Bakarganj and Bogra the majority of families held very small extents of land, frequently less than 2 acres, which were insufficient to support a family. Rural impoverishment and alienation of landless agricultural labor from property-owners were the result of such a concentration of landholding (Chatterjee, 1982).

The unequal distribution of land had major political implications in East Bengal. This discontinuity of population and destruction of the fabric of society further aggravated the antagonisms between various sections of Indian society which had already been stimulated by the English rule. The seeds for such discontent among rural inhabitants had already been sown in times of the Mughal Empire when foreign invaders like Ahmed Shah Abdali plundered the countryside, collected taxes forcibly and deported young men to fight his wars. Awareness of politics increased, especially among the landless peasants and tenant farmers, often saw the struggle for land reform and redistribution as an integral part of the wider clamour for independence (Bose, 2011). Parties out in the lodge, whose heartbeats are land disparities, were therefore an essential aspect in informing the political ideologies that would characterize the rest of the region (Sinha, 1956).

Property ownership in East Bengal at the verge of 1947 had not only ipso-facto been determining its socio-economic and political structure. The concentration of land in the hands of a small number of zamindars, and the colonial land policies led to a sharp dichotomy between landowners and tenants. These disparities were not just economic, but were profoundly political as well. This condition accelerated the growing unrest and later partitioning of Bengal. A grasp of the land system sheds much light on the forces that were shaping Bengal's destiny in the decades leading to independence (Shanin, 1971).

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Agricultural Land by Type of Landholder in Different Districts of East Bengal

District	Proprietors (Zamindars & independent talukdars)	Tenure-holders (families with >100 bighas of land)	Ryots	Under-ryots
Dacca	8.79	5.84	84.23	1.14
Mymensingh	13.42	7.96	73.35	3.27
Faridpur	2.89	8.50	79.50	9.11
Bakarganj	9.23	26.42	60.68	3.67

Chittagong	22.55	50.73	23.43	3.29
Tippera	3.76	9.57	83.87	2.80
Noakhali	7.24	26.23	60.73	5.80
Rajshahi	7.40	5.14	78.44	9.02
Dinajpur	7.81	4.10	83.58	4.51
Rangpur	6.81	4.78	81.48	6.93
Bogra	4.60	3.36	85.12	6.92
Pabna	7.42	6.97	81.63	3.98
Jessore	2.41	9.69	60.37	27.43
Khulna	2.39	14.22	70.40	12.99
Nadia	4.37	13.09	73.36	9.18

Source: Adapted from P. Chatterjee, *Agrarian Structure in Pre-Partition Bengal*, p. 148.

Socio-economic Structure and Politics

The social relations of production in East Bengal before 1947 were embedded in established systems of land tenure, class relationships and political developments. This condition had evolved over many centuries under the impact of feudalism, colonial rule and modes of agrarian production. The pattern of landholding, indicated in the tables included above, indicates a sharp economic divide between the small number of landlords and the large number of tenants. This types of situation made a serious impact on the political system in that region (Census of India, 1941).

The "subfeudation" model as indicated in the first table, reflects a rigid hierarchy of land ownership in East Bengal. This is connected with power and resources largely remaining concentrated with a numerically tiny group of elite zamindars. These zamindars had large estates, like that of the 2000-acre estate yielding an income of Rs 200. They exercised their control over land through various levels of intermediaries. The table describes how this land filtered through a series of tenants. This process including talukdars, osat talukdars, haoladars and nim haoladars are paying rent up the layer directly above its own. A dominant agrarian structure emerged that was quite fragmented and exploitative with the tenant farmers having little or no say about the land they tilled. This system resulted into a hierarchal society in which zamindars were at higher level. After this numerous intermediate landholders were in between, and the tenant or landless peasants at the lowest (Broomfield, 1968; Shanin, 1971).

The hierarchical nature of landownership had deep socio-economic implications. The second table (Table 2) shows the distribution of land holdings by district. This indicates characteristic of a situation where most families owned less than two acres of land. In districts such as Bakarganj and Tippera, over 60 percent of families possessed less than two acres of land. This circumstances reflected the deep level of poverty and economic insecurity pervading the countryside. All of the countryside was in fact "trapped" by the hands of a few landowners, and although much unowned (and therefore unspecified) frontier still existed. Forager populations could escape agrarian exploitation and seek refuge from state regimes. Large swaths of the world were geographically or politically monopolized by ruling dominants so as to render agrarian civilization inevitable. The absence of the security of land tenure for tenant farmers — and high rents charged by landowners — increased rural resentments and class cleavages (Guha, 1915).

Politically, the fact that East Bengal's sociopolitical composition before 1947 is said to have influenced its regional political scene. Tenants were exploited by the zamindars and other intermediaries, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and in turn led to political movements calling for land reform as well as for independence from the colonial power. The political awakening of

the rural masses was determined by poverty and moved towards national self-determination trying to get rid of British rule in addition to a revolution against their feudal landlords. Partitioning of Bengal in 1947 would compound these divisions, with land and resources assuming a dominance in the politics that emerged (Bose, 2011; Chaudhuri, 1975).

The socio-economic environment of East Bengal in 1947 had a sharp dichotomy between landholding elite and largely landless peasants. The social injustice from the feudal land system resulted in economic instability and public resentment. Rural political movements rooted in issues of economic justice and political rights found their genesis in these struggles. These were ultimately part of the wider historical dynamic behind the separation of Bengal. We can find out its transformation from a social and political point of view (Chatterjee, 1982; Schendel, 1981).

Concluding Remarks

Landholding patterns in the village society and socio-economic structure along with the politics of East Bengal on the eve of 1947, present a complex mixture. It includes historical past, economic and political characteristic that could not be considered in isolation. The system of land ownership had very deep social divides. The lands were concentrated in the hands of landlords or zamindars, where was widespread poverty among tenant cultivators. This situation played a vital role in causing rural dissatisfaction and unrest. This socio-economic disparity was further accentuated due to colonial exploitation. This situation was exemplified by the zamindari system, which strengthened the hegemony of landlords and relegated most of the peasantry into economic serfdom.

The Census data of 1941 and the model of subfeudalization both make evident the severity of social stratification in the agrarian economy. Most of the population, including ryots and tenants, had little or no stake in land they toiled. These economic inequalities were not just about who owned the land, but also reflected the harsh political order of the times. Not only were rural communities being systematically exploited, but also their political awareness had grown to the point of demanding land reforms and political autonomy, leading inevitably to a call for independence from colonialism. The division of Bengal only exacerbated this divide, with politics of land and resources emerging as flashpoints in the post-colonial milieu.

The socio-economic formation of East Bengal on the eve of 1947 was characterized by inequality and exploitation clashing with political consciousness. This situation marked the efflorescence political movements and ultimately led to the partition of that region. An awareness of these dynamic features is key to understanding the historical precursors of mid-20th-century social and political convulsions. It underscores how the land question, socio-economic justice and political transformation are central to the future of East Bengal and the wider South Asian subcontinent.

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