AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND
AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN BENGAL 1859-1885.

The two marginal years of the period were the years of two outstanding pieces of agrarian legislation—the Rent Act X of 1859 and the Tenancy Act VIII of 1885. The two acts were landmarks in the agrarian history of Bengal, but this chapter deals with many things else besides. In view of the impracticability of any scheme of periodisation in respect of most of these, I did not strictly keep within the limits of my period.

The title of this chapter indicates its scope. It has no pretension to the comprehensiveness of what may be called an agrarian history of Bengal. A serious limitation is the exclusion of the ideology of the agrarian society—its religious and ethical beliefs, the prevailing notions about rank, status and class, and the assumptions which accounted for the preference for certain institutions to the exclusion of others. For instance, to most non-Indian civilians in Bengal, the expenditure by zamindars of an enormous sum on religion, numerous social ceremonies and the maintenance of a large number of favourites seemed entirely irrational. The civilians' criterion of rationality was the desirability of managing landed estates as a business involving necessary conversion of the surplus income from the estates into capital as a means of gradually augmenting this income. But such a norm was unacceptable to most zamindars. They had acted according to their convictions about the most desirable form of the consumption of their income, and these convictions derived from their cultural milieu, their status consciousness and their concept of the ideal relations between them and their dependants.

The paper is mostly concerned with the main trends of changes in the agrarian economy and the agrarian relations in the period under review. Where it has not been possible for me to trace any remarkable change, I have only analysed the existing system.

EXTENT OF CHANGE IN THE TECHNIQUE OF CULTIVATION AND IN RELATED PROCESSES

Agriculture can be defined as 'man's transformation of the rural environment' and 'the stage of development of any rural economy can be estimated by noting the degree to which the natural environment has been changed, and the techniques employed to this end.' Judged by this criterion, agriculture in Bengal was largely stationary. The only notable change in the technique of production was the increasing use of a new iron mill for crushing sugarcane, known as the Beheen mills after a Sahabad estate whose proprietors Thomson and Myine invented it. The indigenous mill kolhu (stigmatised by the inventors of the new mill as 'the barbarous and wasteful method of cane culture') consisted 'essentially of a large wooden or
stone mortar in which a huge wooden pestle is made to revolve by
the traction of a pair of bullocks... The cane is cut up into short
strips, which are placed in the mortar, and are crushed by the pestle
as it rolls over them. The new mill was superior in many ways. It
completely eliminated the element of danger to the life of the
bullock driver and of the man filling in the canes which the sudden
breakage of the pestle of the old mill involved. It could crush nearly
three times as many sugarcanes as the old one, and that more
efficiently. The juice extracted by the new mill was far purer and
cleaner, and the yield of sugar was higher by nearly 25%. Thomson
and Mylne found that the new mill recommended itself to peasants
mainly as a labour saving device in the beginning. It could be
worked by a single bullock and saved the labour of at least one man,
since the canes need not have been cut up into pieces but were
pressed whole.

The invention took long to be popular among peasants. The inventors
themselves sent instructors to villages to show the peasants how to operate
the mill. Enterprising zamindars, managers of wards' estates, indigo planters
and even some village moneylenders had a role in popularising it. The old
mill was gradually being, in fact, priced out of the market. With time the
new mill became so popular that Thomson, Mylne & Co. had to ask for a
better legal protection for their invention from fraudulent imitations.

District officers reporting on the sugarcane cultivation invariably related
its rapid extension in recent years to the increasing use of the new mill.

The methods of water supply, which constituted the foundation of all
agricultural operations, also improved to some extent, but the improvement
did not go far enough. The new system of artificial irrigation could scarcely
cope with the increasing needs of peasants. The Bengal districts having a
heavier rainfall were in a position of greater advantage than the Bihar ones.
But even here with increasing pressure of population necessitating cultivation
of marginal lands, peasants had to rely on artificial irrigation. Haig,
Chief Engineer, Irrigation Branch of the Public Works Department, thus
writes of the metropolitan district of Hugli: There is not a single river,
drainage, water course or channel of any description, large or small, in the
whole district that is not bunded across at frequent intervals, from one end
to the other for the purpose of storing water; not a pool, puddle or water hole
the right to which is not jealously guarded. It is almost incredible the amount
of labour and effort thus expended... to secure as far as possible every drop
of the precious element!

The existing large irrigation works, mainly used for rice cultivation, in
the Bihar districts of Gaya, Sahahed, Parna etc. are evidence of the collective
enterprise in fighting aridity Grierson thus explains the origin of these
works in Gaya. Artificial irrigation had to provide the abundant water
supply indispensable for the cultivation of rice; particularly in two seasons—
in June-July during the period of transplantation and again in September-
October when grain was being formed. The soil, stiff and clayey, could not
retain moisture from rain water. The strong slope of the district from south to north, averaging about 4 feet to the mile, added to peasants' difficulty. Rivers were not of much use. With wide sandy beds they were nearly dry during a large part of the year. In flood time they were full, but because of the rapid slope water was quickly carried off. The most widely prevalent device of the rural community for storing water and using it whenever necessary was known as *ahar* and *pain*. An *ahar* was a reservoir for water formed on the highest land in a village so that whenever irrigation was needed water could be made to flow down the slopes. *Pains* were artificial channels of water to fill the *ahar*. Wells too provided a considerable part of the necessary water supply, particularly in South Bihar. The well irrigation, however, was mostly confined to cash crops like sugarcane, poppy, vegetables etc.

It was a common complaint, both by peasants and Government officers, that zamindars, customarily responsible for the maintenance of the large irrigation works, were unmindful of their duty and that the bursting of the ill-kept embankments often damaged the rice crop. Government officers explained this negligence on the part of zamindars by the constant feuds between co-sharers of joint estates which abounded in Bihar. Oldham, Collector of Gaya, went as far as to propose a special legislation to enforce these obligations of zamindars. The number of wells increased, particularly in the poppy growing regions. A more liberal policy on the part of Government would have resulted in considerably adding to the number. The assistance by Government was in the form of a loan, hedged in with a number of formalities. Even this small assistance was withdrawn whenever Government decided to reduce the extent of poppy cultivation. In view of the smallness of the margin of profit from opium, peasants were not enthusiastic about the construction of new wells, unless they were indispensable for the very existence of the poppy plant. The existing property relations too was largely incompatible with peasants' initiative in this respect. Peasants could not construct wells, tanks etc. without the prior consent of zamindars, who discouraged these as far as possible apprehending that they would result in the consolidation of peasants' occupancy rights.

A new feature of the irrigation system was the direct role of Government in its extension, particularly in Midnapur, Orissa and the Sone area. The Orissa and Midnapur works, started in 1864 by the East India Irrigation Company, were purchased by Government in 1869 for a sum of £ 1,148, 235. The Sone works too were projected by this Company, but Government took over before its construction had started. The Sone project of the Government owed its origin largely to its concern over the greater frequency of crop failures in Bihar in the recent years and to a conviction that it had a moral duty to counteract these. But such a feeling did not last long. In 1876 the Government of India refused to finance two irrigation schemes for North Bihar—Bagmati and Kamal project—despite the widespread crop failure caused by drought in 1875, and denied its obligation in fighting such droughts. Assuming that
irrigation in Bihar, unlike in parts of the Punjab and Sind, was needed mostly when the autumn rain failed, the Government concluded: 'Irrigation works in Bihar will be in the nature of an insurance upon the rice crop of the province, which insurance ought to be defrayed by those who obtain a profit from that crop, mainly by the landed proprietors'.

The Sone canal considerably contributed to agricultural productivity of the regions irrigated by it. The danger to crop from drought was largely eliminated. The safe reliance on the availability of the Sone canal water persuaded peasants to gradually substitute _Kharif_ crops for _rabi_, the latter being more liable to be damaged by blight. The cultivation most stimulated by the Sone irrigation was that of sugarcane. In the Patna Division it increased from 1804 acres before the Sone irrigation to 22,000 acres in 1880. As a means of irrigation, however, the Midnapur and Orissa canals were utter failures. Haig thus stated the official view: 'Six years after water was first offered to the people in Midnapur and Orissa, irrigation is now as far from general adoption as it was at first'. It was only exceptional droughts which persuaded peasants to apply for canal water. Heavier rainfall in Midnapur than in the Bihar districts did not entirely account for this reluctance to use the canal water. The high canal rate was not a sufficient explanation either. In fact the firm refusal of peasants to use the canal water at a price fixed by the East India Irrigation Company and Government resulted in the gradual reduction of the rate. The process has gone on very much after the manner of a Dutch auction, the Company and their successor putting up the water for sale at a certain rate from year to year, and the ryots beating them down to a lower, until at last, in Orissa a rate has been reached only one-fifth of that originally demanded. The local officers of the Canal Department, particularly J. N. Mukherji, Deputy Revenue Superintendent of Canals, Midnapur who claimed an intimate experience of rural life, attributed the reluctance to what they called the poverty of ryots, meaning thereby that the size of peasants' surplus was not large enough to meet three demands — rent to zamindars, interest to moneylenders and the water rate to Government. Mukherji narrated how the success of one of these three groups caused disappointment to the rest: He writes: 'While collecting the last year's rent, I had invariably to watch and await the debtor's return from making the sale (of rice), and where we failed to catch hold of him the very day or the day following, he had nothing to pay'. He writes elsewhere: 'Money kept for payment to the landlord is at once paid to the Government agent when he happens to come to the village before the zamindars' people made their appearance there, and the zamindar's agent, unless it was about any of the sunset days, always left the village in despair. The reaction of zamindars is not hard to imagine: The zamindars, whose resistance to the spread of irrigation was hitherto passive, has now broken out in action, and many of them have openly prohibited their tenantry from using the canal water on the penalty of incurring their severe displeasure.' The number of peasants
thus unable to use the canal water because of their poverty was estimated by Mukherji at nearly 75% of the total peasant population.

Movement Of Population And Its Role In The Change In The Agrarian Economy

In the context of a more or less unchanged technique of cultivation any change in the units of labour power employed in agriculture would normally affect agricultural production. With an unchanged technique of production and a low one at that, the stage of optimum cultivation would be soon reached, and, assuming that there was yet a scope for extension of cultivation it could not happen to a notable extent without an increase in the total labour supply. It is almost true to say that stationariness of agricultural production, or rather agricultural production increasing only at the same rate as population is the characteristic mark of a peasant community . . . . In a real subsistence economy, it can almost be taken as a law of nature that agricultural production will increase at about the same rate as population." A decline in population would adversely affect production. On the other hand, in the absence of any considerable scope for the extension of cultivation, the growth of labour power beyond a point where the input of additional units of labour would not result in increasing the total farm output would tend to reduce the per capita income in the peasant families.

It is necessary to qualify the model. Given a scope an extension of cultivation may sometimes occur without a corresponding increase in the supply of peasant labour. It may happen, as Myint explains, where the available resources of peasants, including land and labour, remained hitherto underemployed as a consequence of the absence of incentive for their full employment but which peasants would employ more fully with new incentives, for instance, the rising price of agricultural produces. This undoubtedly happened at times in some parts of Bengal, particularly in the eastern districts, where a continuous rise in prices for a reasonable length of time was followed by an extension of cultivation to new areas. In fact peasants agreed to take up new lands on the condition that they reserved the right to give up their cultivation whenever prices returned to normal. Such cases were, however, exceptional.

A fundamental assumption of the following study of demographic changes in Bengal is that the peasant producers constituted the overwhelming majority of the population and that the general trends in the increase or decrease of population represented the trends in the increase or decrease of the peasants population.

The convenient starting point of the study would be 1872, since reliable population statistics for Bengal as a whole are available from that year onwards. We can identify four important trends in the population movement in Bengal till the end of the 19th century: a) a large increase in the industrial and urban population; b) a declining or a stationary population
in many parts of central, northern and western Bengal; c) a rapidly growing population in most districts of eastern Bengal; d) a period of growth followed by one of diminishing rate of growth and then by another of spectacular decline. The growth of the urban and industrial population as a factor in the expansion of the market for food grains will be discussed later.

The census statistics show a decline in population in some well-known districts of Bengal proper. In Burdwan, Rangpur and Birbhum the decline in population was an established trend. In districts like Burdwan and Hugli the growth of industrial population largely made up for the losses in the agricultural sector. In Nadia and Jessore the increase in the first decade, as shown in our table, was only apparent and attributed by the Superintendent of the Census Operations to inaccurate enumeration. Dinajpur, Rajshahi and Murshidabad had a stationary population. Bankura was divided between progressive and decadent regions. In Pabna the first decade of growth contrasted with the decline in the subsequent decades, particularly in its western parts, and the decline was not arrested even in the long span of two decades after 1881. In some districts—the 24 Parganas, Maldah, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri—where census statistics show a striking growth in population, large scale immigration was mostly responsible for it.

It was the higher death rate caused by fever, variously known as the Burdwan fever or the Hugli fever, which accounted for the decadence in these regions. This fever was undoubtedly one of the outstanding events deeply affecting the agrarian society in Bengal throughout the second half of the 19th century. It was not a temporary phenomenon, like the plague in Bihar in the last decade of the 19th century or the influenza throughout the greater parts of India in 1919, disappearing for ever after a brief spell of terrible ravage. It broke out spasmodically, after short intervals, devastating rural Bengal, the periods of exceptional virulence being 1857 to 1864, 1866 to 1869, and 1871. Dr. Elliot, Civil Assistant Surgeon on Special duty to enquire into the fever, has left vivid accounts of the frightful ravages wrought by it. He thus stated what the tour of inspection in Hugli and Barasat revealed: "The deplorable state of some of those places can only be known by visiting them; but as a general rule, the greater portion of villages in both districts are overgrown with jungle and brushwood, more particularly those in which fever has been prevalent for 3 or 4 years". In the 21 villages in Hugli visited by him in 1862, he found that ‘four-fifths of the population either have been or are affected, and fully 20% have died’. As for the villages on the dried-up channels of Hugli, Pellew, Collector of the district, wrote: 'To talk of decimation is seriously below the truth as applied to mortality in many, very many, of these villages. Hardly the tenth part is left alive'. Bourdillon, Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations in Bengal in 1881, estimated the toll in the Burdwan Division alone at two millions. This is how Dr. Smith, Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal, wrote of the wrecks of human beings
who could survive the fever: 'On entering a large village one is immediately surrounded by poor, miserable, squalid creatures, with enormously enlarged spleens, hearts and arteries visibly pulsating and struggling under the influences of poisoned blood. It is almost impossible to imagine a more touching and saddening sight... I do not think I exaggerate when I say that fifth-sixths of the children under 8 years of age have spleens four times as large as natural.'

The origin of the fever was attributed to the excessive humidity of the sub-soil caused by obstructed drainage, which was mainly a consequence of changes in the course of rivers in the Gangetic plain. Recent studies on the decline of population in Europe in some particular periods emphasise the correlation between the intensity of the diseases responsible for this decline and the deficency of the existing food supply. It is interesting to find that some Government officers, reporting on the fever in 1873-74, were inclined to the 'hunger' theory of fever 'common in Germany and Great Britain, and which was so largely accepted in Ireland in post-famine literature of 1848.' The Magistrate of Burdwan was informed by one of the subordinate officers that "the class visited most severely by the fever has been the lowest class, that of the daily labourers, which class is also notoriously the poorest, the worst fed, clothed and housed." J. Mukherji, Deputy Magistrate on Special Duty in connection with the Fever Enquiry, concluded: 'It may be said with tolerable accuracy that the well-to-do cultivators who could save capital escaped with comparative immunity, while those who lived from hand to mouth, the masses of cultivators, agricultural labourers, weavers, braziers, sankaries, potters... died without number.' Most local officers explained the falling living standard of the people by what they called the growth of population at a rate faster than that of the increase in agricultural production—an assumption which they did not care to substantiate. Some careful observers related the diminishing food intake to a diminishing food supply as a consequence of a decline in productivity in recent years and of an increasing export of food grains, 'the extraordinary rise in the prices of food crops and other necessaries', increasing rent and a general increase in the cost of agricultural production.

The fever, considerably decimating the working population and draining off the vitality of the survivors, immediately reacted on agriculture. Scarcity of labour was a common phenomenon in the fever-stricken districts. Families which were full of robust, working heads and could very well spare many of them from their own fields to work for others, can now scarcely supply labour adequate to cultivate their own lands.' In a paper read at a meeting of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1872 Peary Mohan Mukherjee, a zamindar of Uttapara in Hugli, referred to the 'rare, perhaps hitherto unknown, spectacle of crops rotting in the fields or being destroyed by animal for the very want of the labour and means necessary to reap and store them.' The low vitality of the survivors made them incapable of hard and strenuous labour that rice cultivation de-
manded. B. N. Mukherji, who was investigating the origin and effects of the fever in some selected villages in the district of Burdwan, notes a 'very curious fact that in four villages lying contiguous to one another, only one child has been born during the last two years'.

The immediate reaction of peasants to such a situation arising out of scarcity of labour was to relinquish their holdings. Pelllow, Collector of Hugli, reported 'wholesale abandonment by ryots of portions of their holdings or of all their lands'. More than 2,000 peasants applied to the Collector of Hugli in a single month in 1872 for such relinquishments. In many villages of Burdwan, Kala or Dow lands 'were generally shunned owing to the labour which they require in their cultivation, unless they are in the neighbourhood of dwelling houses, or enjoy any facilities for irrigating them'.

A considerable decline in cultivation naturally resulted, but official reports do not provide us with detailed statistics for precisely ascertaining its extent. B. N. Mukherji's Report on the Burdwan Fever occasionally referred to the question. Out of 2,000 bigahs in the village Royan, 500 were left fallow. In the village Jowgram, 'a very large and populous village', the fever brought to an end the rapid reclamation of waste lands for four decades before 1874, and 'nearly a fourth of the good arable land in the village has for several years remained uncultivated. Hugli presented a similar scene. In the villages of the Pandua, Bansberia and Dhanikhal police stations, which were once so densely populated that 'the residents had not even land enough to dry their parboiled paddy', one fourth of the land lay uncultivated. J. Mukherji estimated the extent of fallow land at one-eighth of the total cultivation.

Contemporaries were agreed that a rise in the cost of cultivation, taking place simultaneously with the fever, made a recovery from this setback a protracted process. Apart from the rising rent and the increasing wages of labour they stressed the rise in the price of cattle, the rise ranging from 25% to 50%. The official report on cattle plague (1871) discussed the question in some details. The slaughter of an increasing number of cattle for providing meat to Calcutta and other growing urban centres, extensive cattlepoisoning by agents of persons or organisations connected with the increasing export trade in hide in the second half of the 19th century, the employment of a large number of cattle in the expanding internal trade by land and the gradual deterioration in the breed of cattle tended to push up their prices. The most important role in this, however, was that of the widespread cattle murrain in the sixties and the seventies. The ordinary death rate among cattle did not exceed 4% to 6% a year, but in times of these murrains the mortality was nearly 40% to 60%.

To these decadent districts in the western, central and northern Bengal the eastern Bengal districts, with a fast growing population, present a pleasing contrast. The natural calamities sometimes checked this growth, but the resultant losses were soon made up for. The general absence of fatal diseases like the Burdwan fever, the greater resourcefulness of the eastern
Bengal peasantry, the greater scope for extension of cultivation, the higher birth rate among the Muslims who were more numerous than the Hindus in these districts, and a large immigration—all these explain the rapid growth of population there.

In the Bihar districts, as we have earlier pointed out, the general trend in the population movement was a rapid growth in the decade 1872-1881, a diminishing rate of growth in the decade 1881-1891 and a spectacular decline in the following decade. The growth in the first decade was not, however, a substantial as it looks. The imperfect enumeration of 1872 resulted in the unusually inflated figure in the census of 1881. The ravages of fever accounted for the falling rate of growth in the next decade.

In the absence of any improvement in the technique of cultivation, the impact of population pressure had a more or less uniform pattern throughout Bengal—a search for new land causing movement of population from the densely populated regions to sparsely populated ones. This feature was also present in the decadent districts. Apart from the fact that there were still a number of overpopulated regions, the frequency of the recurrence of the fever, which dislocated the entire cultivation process when it broke out, persuaded peasants to flee this menace to secure cultivation and find out new lands. With the help of census statistics we can trace this process in almost every district of Bengal. But in view of limited space, we confine the study to only a few selected districts.

In Midnapur peasants moved away form the densely populated and low lying tracts in the north-east and centre of the district to the reclaimed Jalpaig lands along the coast and tidal river in the west. In Birbhum peasants migrated from the less productive laterite areas, which were worse affected by the fever, to the more fertile western tracts. In the 24-Parganas the immense scope for new cultivation in the Sunderbans area attracted peasants in larger numbers.

Thus while the percentage of variation for the whole district in 1891-1901 was 9.9, for some Sunderban regions it was as high as 41.9. In Rajshahi the scene of the peasant enterprise in extending cultivation was the Nawgong subdivision. The decline of silk manufacture drove peasants from the west and south of the district, which formerly specialised in the cultivation of mulberry, to the large swamp chalan bil, the reclamation of which was becoming increasingly attractive with the rising prices of food grains. The Barind tract, elevated and undulating, and fit to produce only the winter rice was another centre of growth and was being reclaimed mainly by immigrant labour. The migration of peasants to the areas producing ganja (a plant with narcotic properties) resulted in the phenomenal rise in population by 59.3% in the period 1872-1901. In Rangpur "there has been a general movement of the population from the north and east to the south in search of healthier habitations and more suitable land, except where it has been arrested by the counter-attraction of the railway in the north-west of the district." It was the eastern Bengal districts which
witnessed the most successful reclamation efforts of peasants. Apart from a fast growing population, the rising prices of food-grains and the expanding market for jute largely explain these efforts and the existence of a large scope for new cultivation of their success. As in other districts peasants were migrating to sparsely populated areas. In Faridpur the vast marsh in the south, mostly inhabited by the peasant community known as Chandals, was gradually being reclaimed by immigrant labour from the north. In Bakarganj 'the one governing cause of movement of population... is the flow of surplus population of the northern thanas to the waste lands in the south and the east.' A distinct feature of the search for new lands in these districts was the greater concentration on the new alluvial formations. Despite the very small scope for extension of cultivation in many districts of Bihar we find the movement of peasants in search of new lands. In Muzaffarpur 'from 1881 to 1921 the centre of population shifted persistently towards the north.' The southern part was the oldest agricultural settlement. In Champaran the movement was towards the north.

The new lands were not necessarily more fertile or as fertile as the ones left by peasants. Particularly in Bihar, the new lands were invariably inferior and agriculture was much less secure there. These mostly produced only one crop—rice, the cultivation of which was most sensitive to changes in water supply. The loss of crop from the failure of seasonal rain or its maldistribution would leave the peasants utterly destitute. Yet if peasants had to stick to land as the sole means of subsistence, there was no other choice. Where even this precarious choice did not exist, they had to abandon cultivation altogether and migrate to other districts in search of new occupations—which formed a unique feature of the agrarian life in the districts of Saran, Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur. The other alternative was to accept the fate of an agricultural labourer, whose fortunes entirely depended on the state of harvests.

Changing pattern of land use: Growth of cash crop cultivation

In the last section we have noted two important features of the impact of the variations in population on agriculture. First, a sudden reduction in the size of the labour force employed in agriculture, as in the fever-stricken districts, invariably resulted in the decline of cultivation. Secondly almost throughout Bengal, peasants were on the move in search of new land, which suggests that nearly everywhere, except in the decadent districts the existing extent of cultivation could not support a growing population. Whatever the variations in the extent of cultivation resulting from the variations in population, statistics show that, given the existing technique of cultivation, a very high percentage of the cultivable land in Bengal was fully employed. 44

The pattern of land use was changing in our period. Apart from the changes brought about by the pressure of population, such as the extension
of cultivation to the village commons resulting in the gradual disappearance of pasturage, increasing cultivation of marginal lands, shortening of the period of fallowing, intensive cropping, there was another significant change—growth of commercial agriculture, i.e., growth of the cultivation of cash crops. Though the cash crops occupied only a small fraction of the total cultivation, yet their cultivation process left a deep impact on the peasant economy and the general society.

The phrase 'commercial agriculture' is used here simply to mean that a certain portion of agricultural produces was marketed. We do not mean that this was invariably the result of an allocative efficiency of peasants, that peasants themselves were responsible for the production decision in this respect, and that the profits from the marketed produce entirely belonged to them. As we shall see later in this section, the commercial agriculture was a mere form of the subsistence agriculture itself functioning under particular historical conditions rather than a consequence of conscious response of peasants to the market stimulus. As for instance, the increase in the volume of marketed rice in our period did not result from any scheme of organising production for a larger profit from marketing the surplus. In fact the concept of 'surplus' was partly irrelevant in the context of the social organisation and of the particular agrarian economy in Bengal. Peasants had to surrender a portion of their produce for meeting customary communal obligations, particularly where the system of produce rent prevailed, even if this considerably reduce their usual subsistence fund. The particular form of the production organisation often resulted in the hypothecation of the entire rice crop to the moneylender-cum-graindealer, thus depriving the peasants of any control over the disposal of their crop. The size of the marketed rice was also determined by the quantum of rent. In normal circumstances the largest quantity of the marketed rice was composed of the post-harvest sale by peasants so that they could have ready cash to pay their rent. It was the basic requirement of the subsistence farming which primarily influenced the peasants' choice to continue growing poppy. Peasants were attracted to poppy mainly because of the advances given by the Opium Department. These advances were seldom used for financing the poppy cultivation itself, but were used up for paying rent. That is why in the poppy growing regions the periods of the several instalments of rent payment and the periods of the poppy advances invariably coincided. Even in the case of jute, where calculations of profit greatly influenced peasants' decision to substitute the crop for rice the role of the needs of a purely subsistence farming was present. Jute was an early crop, and the offer of jute advances at a time when the resources of peasants had nearly run out persuaded them to grow it. As regards indigo, the question of peasants' free choice was irrelevant, since its cultivation was forced. But while in most cases the entrepreneurial role was not that of peasants and their choice to grow cash crops was often determined by the requirements of their subsistence farming, other entrepreneurial groups were in a position to organise
production for the market for profit. This happened, however, without creating a distinct commercialised sector where, taking the peasant family as the unit of production, the resources of certain families had been entirely devoted to the production of cash crops. Nowhere did peasants completely dissociate themselves from the cultivation of subsistence crops. Even in periods of an unusual expansion of the market for jute, the most profitable commercial crop of peasants, they did not devote more than one-third of their entire holdings to jute.

Apart from the particular circumstances contributing to the growth of the cultivation of different cash crops, which we shall discuss when we deal with individual crops, numerous developments in the second half of the 19th century greatly stimulated India's foreign and internal trade in general—a trade largely consisting of raw materials and agricultural produces. The pace of industrial growth in some nations in the continent of Europe was far quicker in this period than at any time before, resulting in the increased demand for raw materials. In the world economy itself, as Knowles has pointed out, new trends were visible about the year 1870. The period of world economy which means world production, world interdependence and world rivalry may be held to date from 1870, by which time railways and steamships were developed in England, France, Germany, and the U.S.A. to a point where their means of communication were revolutionised. New developments tended to make quicker, easier and broader the commercial contact of the industrial west with the sources of raw materials, including India. The opening of the Suez Canal (1869), synchronising with the fast growth of steam navigation, revolutionised the east-west trade. Telegraphic communications between England and India since 1855 further broadened this contact by making possible a more accurate and quicker study of the demand and supply position and of other related phenomena. The liberalisation of the tariff policy, particularly after 1867, by the Government of India by abolishing or reducing export duties on very many commodities, and the gradual reduction of ocean freight also contributed to the expansion of India's foreign trade. These developments affected not only the volume, but also the commodity composition of this trade. It was no longer practically confined to 'drugs, dyes and luxuries', and now included in increasing quantities food grains, fibres and other great staples of universal consumption. The development which contributed most to the growth of internal trade was the gradual extension of railways and other improvements in communications.

The trade in rice itself, the main subsistence crop, remarkably expanded. The absence of adequate statistics regarding the intradistrict and the interdistrict movement of rice makes inconclusive any study of the actual dimension of the expanding trade. So we take the export from the Calcutta port, of which we have accurate statistics, as an index of the general trends in the grain trade, though the export trade from Calcutta was by no means co-extensive with the entire rice trade of Bengal. The
trade had been steadily increasing. Its value rose from £ 200,000 in the mid-thirties of the 19th century to more than £ 4 million in 1864-65.\footnote{43} It had some periods of growth since then, though the rate of expansion varied in different periods.\footnote{44} One of the biggest booms in the rice trade in our period was caused by the widespread famine in Madras and Bombay in 1876-77, which coincided with the larger than usual rice harvest in Bengal for two successive seasons. The volume of the export was so large\footnote{45} that despite abundant harvest the local reserve of food grain dwindled to insignificance, causing a popular outcry against the continuing export and an apprehension in the official circle that an acute scarcity would soon result. The sudden upward swing of the prices of rice confirmed this apprehension. With the disappearance of the famine conditions, the boom burst, with export and the price level soon returning to normal.

Numerous developments were stimulating the internal and the external trade in rice. The increasing size of the urban and industrial population was one. In Calcuta the population growth was very rapid after 1881. (The percentage of variation in the decades 1881-91 and 1891-1901 was 11.4 and 24.2 respectively.) In the Serampore sub-division, the most important industrial centre of Hugli, population rose by 40% in 1881-91 and by 24% in the following decade. In the industrial belt of Howrah there was a spectacular growth of nearly 88% in the period 1872-1901. Similarly, large was the increase in the Ranigunj subdivision of Burdwan. (In the Asansol thana, population rose by 13% in 1872-1901.) The expanding tea industry in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Chittagong and Assam employed an increasing number of immigrant labourers. A larger grain supply was thus necessary to feed this growing industrial and urban population. The role of the growth of the metropolitan demand in the expansion of rice trade is illustrated by the fact that of the total imports of rice into Calcutta, estimated at 20 million maunds in a normal year, 7 million were consumed by the metropolitan population.\footnote{46}

The expansion of industries outside India but employing emigrant labourers from India had a similar role in the growth of Bengal's rice trade. The preference of these labourers for Indian rice accounted for a considerable export of Bengal rice to these regions. We can take, for instance, the growth of tea industry in Ceylon. Its usual dependence on the imports of Indian rice naturally increased to a considerable extent with the flow of Indian labourers, who were essential for the expanding tea industry. The export of tea from Ceylon rose from 162,575 lbs in 1880 to 7,849,888 in 1886.\footnote{47} The emigration of Indian labourers in larger numbers to the different sugar plantations in Africa and West Indies similarly necessitated the export of an increasing quantity of rice from Bengal. The extension of railways and the resultant improvement in communications had a big role in the development of the Bengal rice trade, particularly in view of the fact that most rivers were not navigable for more than 4 to 6 months a year. While investigating the prospects of an increasing trade with the construction of the proposed Northern Bengal Railway, the Commissioner of Rajshahi found that 'as a
rule... for some 8 months of the year there is no natural outlet for the main productions of the country'.

Of the non-food crops, the only important one whose cultivation had been continuously declining was mulberry. The Bengal silk trade, on the state of which its fortunes entirely depended, was passing through acute depression. The statistics of the market prices of Bengal silk\(^49\) show that the crisis set in 1873-74. Excepting a short-lived spurt of prosperity in 1876-77, the descending spiral was not reversed since then. Bengal was increasingly losing its market to Italy, France, China and Japan. The Bengal trade recovered from the depression only when crop failed in these countries. Its prosperity over a fairly long period, 1864-65 to 1871-72, was entirely due to this. Bengal was beaten undoubtedly by the superior technology of its rivals, by the application of a superior skill to the process of rearing cocoons and reeling. Local officers emphasised the role of a higher differential rent on the mulberry land in depressing the cultivation. The rent on mulberry land in Maldah, Rajshahi and Murshidabad was as high as Rs. 12 to 16 per bigha, while the rent on the ordinary rice land was only Re.1-8 annas to Rs. 2. In 1886 Thomas Wardle, an authority on sericulture, proposed to the Government of India to investigate 'whether mulberry land rentals are not acting as a barrier against the extension and development of sericulture in Bengal'.\(^50\) At a conference held in Calcutta in 1886 'there was evidently a decided feeling that the zamindars were killing the industry by exorbitant rents'.\(^51\) There was also a feeling that a nearly monopoly control over the silk trade by three firms—Robert Watson & Co., Lyall & Co. and Louis, Payen & Co. enabled them to control the prices of cocoons and that the offer of low prices while the depression was continuing only tended to harden the resolve of the frustrated cocoon rearers to quit the occupation altogether.

Peasants continued growing mulberry despite risks of utter loss largely because the change over to other crops was at times a difficult process. Continuous tank silt dressings raised the level of the land so high that it was not ordinarily suitable for rice or jute. The crops that could be grown were potatoes, vegetables and sugarcanes, but their cultivation was too expensive for peasants of ordinary means. Where this technical difficulty was not insuperable, mulberry cultivation was being thrown up.

A similar fate befell safflower, which had once an important place in the local peasant economy of Dacca. The discovery of aniline dye, a cheaper and a more efficient dying agent, made its existence superfluous. Other important cash crops prospered, with the exception of indigo the cultivation of which had been declining the last decade of the 19th century. We confine our study to some major crops.

The cultivation of sugarcane remarkably increased, particularly in the last three decades of the 19th century. In the period 1884 to 1899 it had trebled.\(^52\) It was mostly concentrated in the Bihar districts, of which Sahabas had the largest area under sugarcane.
The history of the growth of sugarcane cultivation had a striking feature. The growth in the first phase was entirely due to foreign demand, but in the last three or four decades of the 19th century it was entirely due to internal demand. By then Bengal was an importer of foreign sugar rather than an exporter. Bengal started exporting sugar to Europe on a large scale when the revolt in the sugar producing colonies of France during the French Revolution practically destroyed the sugar industry there, thus necessitating the import of the necessary quantity of sugar from a different source. Bengal partially provided it. In the eighties of the 19th century the foreign demand very nearly disappeared, the Bengal sugar having been priced out of the market by the cheap beet sugar from Germany. Even before the beginning of the beet sugar cultivation Bengal sugar could meet only a small part of the total European needs. It was no match for the West Indian variety. Its cultivation was much stimulated by the equalisation of duties (1836) of the Bengal sugar and the West Indian sugar. But even this badly needed fiscal measure did not provide a sound base for a viable system of sugarcane cultivation. An ambitious scheme for its extension in 1846 entirely fell through. Minden Wilson, who left Mauritius as a sugar planter with the idea of growing it in Bihar, called this sugar craze 'that golden dream that swamped so many good men in 1847-48'. The craze thrived on a naive belief that because of cheap land and labour large fortunes could be made out of sugar. The entrepreneurs introduced expensive machinery without waiting to know more of the properties of the soil in Bihar, only to find, much to their disappointment, that the price of the manufactured sugar was scarecely enough to cover the cost of production. The brighter prospects of indigo at the time hastened the complete abandonment of this costly experiment. A new phase of expansion of the sugarcane cultivation began since then, but the predominance of European enterprise ceased. The two most important factors in this were the invention of the iron mill for crushing sugarcane and the new facilities for irrigation.

The history of indigo cultivation in the second half of the 19th century had three main features: its gradual decline in Bengal proper; a continuous expansion in Bihar till the mid-nineties and a rapid decline in Bihar too since then. Despite occasional reverses, particularly those caused by the failure of the Agency Houses (1830-34) and of the Union Bank (1847), which provided capital to the indigo planters, indigo cultivation continued to expand in Bengal till 1860—the year of indigo peasants' revolt. Its immediate impact was seen in the sudden fall in the indigo exports in the following year. But the cultivation did not entirely disappear. Bengal continued to produce a little over one-third of what Bihar produced. A new feature of the cultivation in Bengal was the increasing indigenous enterprise. The Commissioner of Rajshahi found that 'except in the districts of Murshidabad and Rajshahi, the business is now wholly in the hands of the natives, and carried on apparently with but little appliance of capital'. The European enterprise tended to be concentrated in a few firms the most
prominent of which were Messrs. R. Watson & Co. and Jardine, Skinner & Co. Capital was undoubtedly being withdrawn from indigo. 'Capitalists prefer investing their money in speculation like tea, which involves less risk and gives larger profits over a term of years than indigo'. The cultivation under European enterprise was more and more confined to new alluvial lands and that on the high lands was gradually abandoned.

In Bihar, on the other hand, the cultivation was fast increasing. Indigo had already a sound base there, particularly in the district of Tirhoo. Other circumstances were stimulating its growth since the forties. As we have seen, the prospects for the cultivation of sugar, which increased at a remarkable rate in the period 1836-46, were found more and more disappointing. As a consequence, when the prices of indigo looked up in 1849-50, a large part of the capital invested in sugar was transferred to indigo. It was about 1850 that 'sugar was finally superseded by indigo as the European industry of the district of Tirhoo'. Of the 86 indigo factories found by the revenue Surveyor in 1850, several were originally meant for sugar and afterwards converted into indigo factories. A consequence of the determined resistance of peasants to the cultivation of indigo in Bengal since 1859-60 was the withdrawal of the capital from there and its transference to Bihar—a development which immensely helped the growth of indigo cultivation there.

The Bihar indigo planters could confidently continue extending cultivation, since the market for the Bengal Indigo was fairly steady. It held a practically monopoly position. Attempts at growing indigo in other parts of the world (for instance, in Central America and Java) were not as great a success as to perceptibly affect this position. The invention of the chemical dye began to tell on the Bengal indigo trade only since the mid-nineties. Once the dye established its reputation in the market, the Bengal indigo was no match for it, and the continuous decline in its cultivation in Bengal and Bihar could not be arrested.

Despite periodical variations in the extent of poppy cultivation, the long term trend was a considerable growth. In the 40-year period 1845-46 to 1885-86 the cultivation increased by 221%. Since Government had the sole control over the cultivation of poppy, it was its decisions to extend or reduce cultivation which were responsible for the changes in its extent. The Government policy was to derive the maximum amount of revenue from exercising a monopoly control over the production and sale of opium. The method adopted to that end was to maintain the cultivation of poppy at such a level where a relatively high price resulting from insufficient production would not encourage the import of opium into China from other countries or the cultivation of poppy in China herself; or a large production resulting in the fall in the market prices of opium and at the same time increasing the total cost of opium manufacture would not reduce the revenue of Government. Given such a policy, wide fluctuations in the extent of poppy cultivation were inevitable. Government could control the number
of peasants who would be permitted to grow the crop for it, but it could not control the productivity of the poppy land, which entirely depended in any particular season on climatic variations. Poppy was particularly sensitive to these. Other conditions remaining the same, an abundant poppy harvest for two or three successive seasons would persuade Government to reduce the cultivation. Interpretation by Government of the precise role of the other variables—competition with other countries and the rate of growth of the indigenous cultivation in China—in the fluctuations of the market prices of opium often varied—thus affecting the decision of Government on the desirable extent of poppy cultivation in Bengal. Government at times related the upward trend of opium prices to an insufficiency of the production in Bengal, and tended to believe that unless production was raised the Bengal opium would face a keen contest with the rival varieties in the Chinese market—a development fraught with dangerous consequences for the security of the opium revenue of Government. To counteract this probable menace Government launched on a scheme of extending cultivation as rapidly as possible, only to find that its apprehension of such a menace was unfounded.

The variations in the extent of cultivation had some distinct phases. There was an enormous expansion of the cultivation in the period 1860-64. The alarm of Government over the gradual abandonment of poppy cultivation by peasants, disaffected over the low price paid them for crude opium, was heightened by the informations it received about the growth of indigenous cultivation in China. The Government of Bengal thus expressed its concern: 'The whole opium revenue is in a precarious state, when for many years, the auction price in Calcutta is artificially maintained at such an extreme point that out of India, ungenial lands are being converted into poppy gardens'. In this context the Government policy should be 'to extend the cultivation, the manufacture remaining still profitable, until the increasing cultivation of opium in China is decisively checked'. The increase of the cultivators' price, to provide incentive to them to extend their poppy cultivation, Rs.3½ to Rs. 5 within two years was unprecedented. Government was so keen on expansion that it did not object to the employment of inferior soils, generally unsuitable for poppy. The Bihar Opium Agent, who held a different view, was reprimanded. 'Certainly the ryot must know what his own land would grow better than the opium agent and as Government pays only for the quantity produced, it is the affair of the ryot, not of the Government, what sort of land opium is grown upon.'

A reaction followed soon. In 1864 Government suddenly realised that the extension of the cultivation at the current rate would soon result in overstocking the market, which would eventually affect the opium revenues by lowering prices. The cultivators' price was reduced and the Opium Agents were instructed 'to take up no new lands, to make no engagements with any new ryots, to confine those with whom engagements were made last year strictly within the limits of their former cultivation; to give them
facilities for diverting land to other purpose... and on no account to allow the ryots to cultivate in excess of the areas for which they may engage.' This restrictive policy did not change till 1868-69, when a shortfall in production and the disquieting news of the fast growth of poppy cultivation in China persuaded Government to revise its policy. It wanted the cultivation extended again as far as possible. In 1875 this policy of unlimited expansion was changed for the one of concentration on the best lands without reducing the aggregate production. Even the abundant harvests of 1875-76 and 1876-77 did not lead Government to take 'active' measures to contain further extension of cultivation. Government found it 'quite enough for the present to leave the reduction of the price... to produce its natural and legitimate effect in the reduction of the area cultivated'. Unfavourable seasons causing an appreciable decline in production reinforced this cautious policy of not hastily reducing the cultivation. The problem now was to arrest the decline by active measures for promoting cultivation, and the policy was continued till 1885-86, when Government reverted to the policy of 1875—'neither advancing, not going back'. A radical change followed in 1887-88. 'Stringent' orders were issued to the opium agents 'to give up the least remunerative tracts, to refuse advances to unsatisfactory cultivators and bad villages, and to close inferior cultivation in the neighbourhood of large towns'. This is what distinguished 'active' measures from the passive ones for eliminating unwanted cultivation.

Jute, unlike the crops we have studied so far, was a new crop. (We do not include tea, another new crop). Its emergence as an important cash crop dated only from the mid-fifties. The growth rate of jute cultivation was strikingly rapid. Poppy and sugarcane had a comparable record. But jute occupied a much larger area of the cultivated land that any of these crops. The estimated area of sugarcane cultivation at the end of the 19th century was 860,200 acres. The poppy cultivation seldom exceeded 9½ lacs of bighas (approximate 3.20 lacs of acres). Even in Sahabad having the largest extent of sugarcane cultivation, sugarcane occupied not more than 3% of the total cultivation in the first decade of the 20th century. The poppy cultivation did not occupy more than 1% to 3% of the cultivated area. This percentage in the case of indigo in the most prominent indigo districts—Saran, Muzaffarpur, Champaran and Darbhanga—was 3.54, 5.62, 6.63 and 3.08 respectively. The average of the jute cultivation in the 10 year period 1891-92 to 1900-1901 was 2,030,548 acres. In the districts of Rangpur, Tippera, Mymensingh and Dacca jute occupied nearly 30%, 27%, 18% and 13.5% respectively of the net cropped area in the year 1901-02.

This enormous expansion of jute cultivation in the course of less than five decades resulted from an increasing demand for raw jute. Before the establishment of the jute factories in Bengal, the supply of Bengal jute was mostly confined to the Dundee mills. But a strong feeling at the time against the 'adulteration' of hemp and flax by combining them with jute—
a feeling best conveyed by the current commercial phrase 'warranted free from Indian jute'—retarded its wider use. An appreciable progress resulted from the decision of the Netherlands Government, about 1838, to replace flax by jute in the manufacture of coffee bags for the East Indies. But the decisive turn in the tide occurred with the Crimean War (1854-55). The war cut off the supply of flax, the main source of which was Russia. The old prejudice against jute completely disappeared, and the Bengal jute began to flow in. The establishment of jute mills in Bengal from 1855, which was made possible by the coming of the coal and railway age, further widened the market for jute. The local jute industry grew apace, particularly in the first two decades. The five mills established between 1855 and 1866 'simply coined money', as Wallace, the author of Romance of Jute puts it. In 1872-75 thirteen new mills were set up and the number of looms increased from 1250 in 1873 to 3500 in 1875. A depression followed and only one new mill was added in 1875-82. The raison d'être of this confident jute enterprise was the increasing use of gunny bags which the expanding trade of rice, cotton, wheat, etc. both in and outside India necessitated.

Incomplete statistics of the consumption of raw jute in the local mills baffle any attempt at a precise quantification of its total production. So we take exports as an indication of the rate of its growth. The following are the quinquennial statistics of exports in the period 1828-29 to 1872-73.\(^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quinquennial period</th>
<th>Total exports in Cwts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1828-29 to 1832-33</td>
<td>59,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833-34 to 1836-38</td>
<td>337,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838-39 to 1842-43</td>
<td>585,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843-44 to 1847-48</td>
<td>1,170,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848-49 to 1852-53</td>
<td>2,196,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853-54 to 1857-58</td>
<td>3,554,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858-59 to 1862-63</td>
<td>4,848,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863-64 to 1867-68</td>
<td>13,140,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868-69 to 1872-73</td>
<td>24,290,814</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excepting the years 1866-68 the period was one of unbroken prosperity. A major setback occurred after the year 1872-73. Prices fell and peasants could not sell a large part of their produce. The depression was, however, shortlived. The confidence in the stability of the jute trade was shown by the eagerness of investors to purchase the shares of the new companies floated during the slump. The shares of the jute companies... are selling at premia considerably in advance of former quotations. Indeed, the trade has laid so deep a hold on a public confidence that, in the case of the Seebapore Jute Company, just formed (1873), double the number of shares to be allotted were subscribed for in less than a week after the scheme was set afloat.\(^5\) A distinct trend after 1873 was a decline in the export of raw jute. The export decline from 7,061,951 Cwts in 1872-73 to 4,532,148 Cwts in 1876-77.\(^6\) The Collector of Sea Customs, Calcutta related it to the
increased consumption in the local mills. The explanation is hardly convincing, since the stationary state of jute cultivation is to be accounted for. It was an indication that the price received by the cultivators continued to be low, since the depression of 1872-73. The decision of peasants to gradually substitute rice for jute was reinforced by the rising prices of rice from the beginning of the Bengal famine in 1873-74 to the end of the famines in Madras and Bombay in 1877-78. Falling prices, with the disappearance of the famine conditions, persuaded peasants to take to jute again. A larger demand in U. K. and other importing countries and a more favourable rate of exchange contributed to the revival of the jute trade.

The growth of commercial agriculture had a deep impact on the peasant economy and the peasant community. To understand the nature of the impact it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that though the long term trend in our period was an expansion of the size of the cash crop cultivation, yet it formed, as we have seen, a small part of the total cultivation. Even jute, the most extensively cultivated cash crop, did not occupy more than 10% of the total crop area of the districts in which it was grown, though in some particular districts the area was much larger. To analyse this impact we shall mainly concentrate on two questions: (1) to what extent could commercial agriculture affect the existing production organisation? (2) how did it affect the production efforts of peasants? Did it stimulate or depress them? We shall particularly emphasise the new circumstances which bore on the questions in our period.

The traditional form of the production organisation can be described as small peasant farming, where peasants themselves owned the means of production. Most peasants had land, whatever the legal or customary nature of its title, though it did not always suffice for their subsistence. The family labour supplemented at times by the co-operative communal labour and by a small quantity of paid labour was the usual size of the labour force employed in the cultivation of individual peasant's holdings. His small surplus, ploughs and cattle, and loans from the village moneylenders and graindealers constituted the necessary capital of a peasant. These loans did not necessarily involve any interference on the part of moneylenders in this choice of crops.

The only two crops whose cultivation required a revision of this framework were tea and indigo. We exclude tea from our discussion, since it did not directly affect the peasant community. Its production organisation was capitalistic, but this did not necessitate expropriation of peasant producers in the regions covered by the tea cultivation. Tea was cultivated in waste lands purchased or leased from Government in large blocks, containing only tiny patches of settled agriculture. Indirectly, however, tea had a wholesome effect on the agriculture of the districts in which it was grown and also of the neighbouring districts. The presence of a large number of tea labourers created a steady effective demand for a considerable quantity of rice and thereby stimulated the production of rice, gradual
substitution by planters of zeral cultivation for ryoti, and this process resulted in considerably modifying the existing small peasant farming. Each of these forms of cultivation involved a distinctive labour process. Under the latter the holding of a small peasant was the unit of cultivation; except a little circulating capital in the form of advances from planters the peasant had to provide all the necessary means of production. The cultivation was under a written contract; the entire risk of cultivation was the peasant’s, and he had to surrender the entire produce at a fixed price. The zeral cultivation was done on the planter’s own land and wholly financed by him and the risk of cultivation was his. Whenever the small peasant was brought to the scene it was in the form of wage labourer.

The impact of the latter system on the peasant economy derived from the way it originated and was organised. The real meaning of zeral was the private land of the landlord. To this original land the landlord could lawfully add in different ways; for instance, by taking over lands of absconding peasants or of peasants dying without heirs. But the zeral system associated with indigo planting was not at all such an innocent process. The Commissioner of Patna thus describes its origin: 'under the zeral system the planter takes a terminable lease of proprietary rights, whether with or without specific private lands, and employs the powers hired from the zamindars for the purpose of confiscating ryots' tenures and converting them into zeral lands'.

The zeral cultivation had been steadily replacing the ryoti cultivation in our period. In Muzaffarpur the zeral system occupied 43,202 beegahs of the total indigo cultivation amounting to 74,719 beegahs. In 1876-77, nearly 75% of the total cultivation in Darbhanga was zeral. A survey in three thanas of the Samastipur subdivision of Darbhanga in the last decade of the 19th century showed that as high as 94% of the indigo cultivation was zeral. In Saran the Collector found that the enormous increase in indigo cultivation from 22,000 beeghas in 1860 to 65,000 in 1877-78 was mostly under this system.

The conversion of the ryoti cultivation into zeral, an established process prior to our period, was practised on an increasingly wider scale after the revolt of the indigo peasants in Champaran and Darbhanga in 1867-68. The planters found it the most effective means at the time to keep the indigo system functioning more efficiently than before. Their calculations were shrewd enough: if peasants in possession of their lands were found troublesome, the proper remedy would be to dispossess them of their land, and to make them work for planters as mere labourers. Planters could thereby avoid having to depend on the peasants for the use of their land and labour. They were confident of success in this daring course entirely because of their safe reliance on the exercise of the coercive authority of zamindars in their capacity as either proprietors or farmers.

Though the zeral system involving the expropriation of peasant producers looked like capitalistic farming, in content it was not, since the distinctive wage-labour system was absent. Planters did not recruit their
labour from the open market. It was the destitute peasants themselves, forcibly dispossessed of their land by planters, who provided the necessary labour force. But even this labour was not paid at the current market rate. Macdannell, Collector of Darbhanga, characterised the zerrat system as one of 'compulsory labour'. He found the peasant 'compelled by the planter, who to possess this leverage of compulsion is his ticcadar (farmer), to give his labour at wages which do not vary with the times and are always low. In fact the zerrat cultivations was a perpetuation of the ryoti cultivation—a forced cultivation upheld by planter's authority as a ticcadar—, with its contradictions deriving from the existing production organisation resolved in a particular way. Though indigo cultivation did not develop, unlike tea cultivation, the characteristics of a capitalistic farming, yet the zerrat system involving dispossession of peasants from their lands and the use of peasant labour by extra-economic coercion amounted to a negation of the traditional peasant farming.

Despite the retention of small peasant farming as the foundation of the cultivation of commercial crops, the production organisation had developed new features, the most important ones being the emergence of a new group of credit financiers and the exercise by them of a new kind of control over the cultivation process and the disposal of the produce. The cultivation of most of these crops was not initially financed by peasants' resources, and a system of advances constituted its foundation. But in very many cases it was not the traditional moneylenders who made these advances. A new credit agency emerged. Even in the case of rice cultivation itself, the usual preserve of local moneylenders the new credit agency became active, particularly at a time when the rice market tended to expand. In respect of the Bihar districts at least, Macdannell, Collector of Darbhanga, could confidently write: 'In point of fact, a large portion of the crop—the rice crop particularly—is hypothecated from year to year; advances are made on it, and it is exported as soon as reaped'. Such a hypothecation against advances was not a characteristic form of the traditional rural credit system, as we shall see presently. Government itself made the advances for poppy, and the indigo planters for indigo. As for sugarcane, official reports, the most valuable sources of information on the question, are not precise as to how its cultivation was financed. The Government of Bengal believed: 'The cultivation of sugarcane, though expensive, is lucrative. It is confined to the well-to-do ryots, and the aid of moneylenders is seldom sought'. This applied to those cases only where the crop was consumed locally or by peasants' families. But when the crop was intended for the market and the scale of cultivation widened peasants could not do without borrowing. Reports of the local officers contradict statement of the Government of Bengal. The Commissioner of Burdwan writes: 'When crushing out the juice and converting the same into gur (raw sugar), most of them generally take advances from the moneylenders to enable them to manufacture or dispose of their gur on the spot, or in the nearest market.' In Rajshahi 'some
cultivators take advances from mshowuns at the commencement of the season, in which case they repay the debt in gur, giving the latter at from 6 to 8 annas per maund under the market rate." In Pabna 'manufacturers generally work on borrowed capital or are co-sharers with the mahajuns, who advance money on condition of getting interest as well as of getting coarse sugar at a price below the market rate.'

In fact a rise in the demand and the market price of sugar attracted even peasants of common means who did not mind borrowing if the cultivation brought them a larger income. As to the source of credit the official reports did not carefully distinguish between the local moneylenders and the traders in gur. The reports we have quoted unmistakably show that a group of traders clearly distinguishable from local moneylenders was active, and, as a consequence, the system of hypothecation against advances was coming into greater use. In some districts (like Bareilly) of N.W.P., specialising in the production of sugar, such a system was almost universal. In the Bechea estate of Sahabad, one of the biggest centres of sugarcane production in Bihar, the European owners of the estate themselves actively engaged in sugar trade, had the leading role in making such advances.

It is difficult to quantify the extent of the dependence of jute peasants on the alien credit groups for financing their cultivation. An official enquiry in 1873 arrived at the conclusion: 'There is no demand for advances, and a good number of ryots in easy circumstances carry on the cultivation without taking any advances from mahajuns or dealers. But in some places the system of advances is in vogue.' Another official enquiry revealed that this system did not become universal even as late as 1934. The system was not universal, but the official report of 1873 was not right in underestimating its role. Surprisingly, the report itself contains much evidence which sufficiently refutes its conclusion, and the report itself qualifies it. Of the important jute districts it was only Dacca where peasants were found to be growing jute without advances. The system widely prevailed in Rangpur, Mymensingh and some other districts. Normally a continuous expansion of jute manufacture resulted in a wider prevalence of this system, since in a market thronged by a host of purchasers, this would guarantee more than a system of ready money purchase a secure supply of an increasing quantity of raw jute. The conditions of making the advances varied from place to place. Agreements were in very many cases not verbal. A written contract stated all the conditions. Sometimes the whole crop, sometimes a part, was hypothecated to the creditors. The price at which peasants sold their crop was invariably below the market rate. In Mymensingh they had to give their creditors 5 seers on every maund of jute sold to cover the charge for interest on the advances.

The agencies making the necessary advances were mostly people connected with the jute trade or jute manufacturing organisations. With the coming of a jute 'slump', these agencies disappeared.
The advances given by the new credit agency basically differed from the loans provided by local moneylenders. The latter advanced loans to peasants in grain or money with the ulterior motive of getting them back on a high rate of interest, without intending to control the production process. These advances ultimately partook of the nature of usury. The new credit agency, connected with trade or manufacturing organisation was primarily interested in the secure supply of a certain portion of peasants' produce, the failure in which would inflict on it a greater loss than the wastage of advances immediately involved.

The emergence of this new credit group, connected with new trade or manufacture, but without any previous connection with the existing rural credit system, was not, however, incompatible with the persistence or even consolidation of the old credit agency. The two crops whose cultivation entirely depended on the new credit groups were indigo and poppy. The indigo planters systematically sought to supplant this agency and partly succeeded in this. The cultivation of poppy, on the other hand, resulted in the strengthening it. The khatadars on whose assistance Government primarily relied to plan poppy production were none but the village moneylenders. Kemble, Behar Opium Agent, called khatadar a village banker. They were the peasants' representatives, taking and distributing the poppy advances and being responsible for payment to individual peasants for their crude opium. The association with the poppy system provided the khatadars with means for strengthening their hold over the peasants. Government had no direct contact with individual peasants. It did not interfere with the way the Khatadars persuaded or forced peasants to grow poppy. The poppy advances enabled them to more effectively discharge one of their normal functions as moneylenders. The entire amount of the poppy advances was straight away paid to zamindars as rent due from the community of the poppy growers. The system of payment was another instrument of control. As the Opium Commission of 1883 wrote, "The members of a Khata are in fact, though not altogether willingly, members of a joint stock company, of unlimited liability." Peasants having a full crop had to share in the losses of their brethren from failure of crops, and the system of apportionment of losses resulted at times in a perpetual indebtedness of some peasants to the khatadars. The increasing rigour in the Government policy regarding remission of balances arising out of the failure of poppy crop drove peasants deeper into the moneylenders' net. In 1879-89 the liberal policy of partially remitting such losses was abandoned. The Government of Eden thus formulated the new policy: Government 'cannot unreservedly accept the position that when the season is a good one, the cultivators are to gain, and when it is a bad one the Government is to lose.' The Opium Commission of 1883 condemned such a role of Government 'as a hard task master.' But the Board of Revenue justified it: 'The system, under which the cultivator looked to Government to cherish and protect him, must give place to a more business-like and practical system, under which the ryot would feel that he
has entered into an agreement which entails some responsibility on him for fulfilment." Under an altered economic set-up, it would be wrong, according to the Board, to follow a different principle. The Board thus argued its case: In earlier years poppy was a highly attractive crop and a peasant took pride in his 'status as a Government cultivator'. Government also assumed that without an unusually inclement season, peasants would not willfully violate their agreements with Government, and this belief in the integrity of peasants made it lenient to them. But poppy had lost this enviable position to other more remunerative crops. The Board emphasised two implications of this economic change. First, peasants had now better means, in case they cultivated both poppy and other crops to pay off their balances. Secondly, prospects of a bigger profit from other crops would tempt them to violate the agreement on the basis of which they accepted advances from Government. A lenient law would tempt a peasant 'to neglect the interest of the Government in favour of those of the harder task master to whom he is under bond as to his potatoes or wheat crops.'

The cultivation of jute shows the complex nature of the interaction of the new credit agency and the old. In the period of a rapid expansion of jute cultivation, the former had undoubtedly encroached on the latter's preserve. But apart from the fact that the advances given by the new credit group could cover only a segment of the fast growing cultivation of jute, the setting in of a slump in the jute trade reduced the scale of activities of this group to an extent far disproportionate to the fall in the market demand, this being due to the highly speculative nature of jute trade. The old credit agency could then soon recover its lost ground. The expansion of jute cultivation tended at times to strengthen it, particularly when this expansion taking place at the cost of rice cultivation and thereby reducing the local grain supply made unavoidable the dependence of peasants on moneylenders for this supply.

When peasants decided to extend cultivation without advances from the new credit group on condition of hypothecating their crop, a dependence on the local moneylenders was in most cases unavoidable. I have so far come across no evidence to support Myint's statement: 'The essential lubricant which pushed the peasants so smoothly and rapidly into export production and the money economy was the existence of a considerable margin of surplus productive capacity in the form of both surplus labour and surplus land over and above the minimum subsistence requirements'.

We now turn to the second new feature on which the existing organisation of small peasant farming developed under the impact of the growth of cash crops-control over the production process and the disposal of crops. This varied from crop to crop. The credit agency exercised control over the production process only in the case of poppy and indigo. The poppy peasants could not produce as much as they liked, and the usual device of Government to reduce cultivation to a safe point was to reduce
the cultivators' price, so that many a marginal farmer was weeded out. As regards contraction or abandonment of poppy cultivation by peasants themselves there was no legal bar, but a large number of extra-legal circumstances made it difficult, at times impossible for them. The control was at its worst in the case of indigo cultivation. It often degenerated into a harassing interference in all phases of agricultural operations, an invariably affected the cultivation of rice too. Such an interference was the necessary consequence of indigo planters' methods for enforcing an unremunerative cultivation.

The system of advances necessitated a control over the disposal of peasants' crop too. Both the poppy and indigo peasants had to surrender their produce at a fixed price, whatever the existing market rate, and the principles behind the price fixation were often arbitrary in that they virtually ignored the cost of production and the probable market price of these commodities. The rice, jute and sugarcane growers too had to enter into agreements, supported by legally enforceable contracts to hand over to their creditors a certain portion of the produce at fixed price. But their case differed from that of the poppy and indigo peasants. The latter had to surrender their entire produce, while the former parted with only a part. Moreover, the price fixation in the former case was much less arbitrary and more likely to be influenced by market forces. Government could afford to ignore market considerations to a certain extent because the legal prohibition of poppy cultivation for any group or groups other than Government eliminated all competition in the market. The indigo planters could enforce their arbitrary prices by using the coercive authority of zamindars or farmers.

How did production for the market affect the production efforts of peasants? In some countries the peasant community had been hard hit by frequent, at times violent fluctuations in the market, the injury having been greater in the economies specialising in the production of one or two crops. The fact that the supply of agricultural commodities as a whole has in the short run a one-way flexibility in the sense that higher prices induce an expansion and that lower prices do not bring about a comparable contraction partly accounts for this injury. To what extent did the peasant economy of Bengal suffer this injury? The poppy and jute growers were the worst sufferers. The poppy peasants were particularly hit by the sudden decision of Government to reduce cultivation. Paradoxically, such a decision usually followed, particularly in our period, as we have seen before, a bountiful harvest which faced Government with the menace of overproduction. The widest range of fluctuations occurred in the jute market, and the jute peasants suffered worse than the poppy growers. Government was bound to purchase whatever quantity of opium was produced in any particular season. But where jute peasants did not grow under a system of advances, a slump in the jute rice inflicted on them a serious economic loss, particularly because the slump invariably followed a rapid extension of jute cultivation
under the stimulus of rising prices. We can take, for instance, the consequences of the depression of 1873. An official enquiry in the year revealed that in both Dacca and Mymensingh, two major jute districts, ‘everywhere. . . quantities of the jute grown last season had been left abandoned on the fields. The falling market in Calcutta seems to have created a panic amongst the cultivators, so much so that in some instances, even jute which had been cut and put in the water to steep, was abandoned entirely. The Collector of Dacca forecast a decline by nearly 67% in the cultivation of jute in the following year. In many parts of the 24-Parganas like Barasat and Baridpur, and in Hugli, the unsold quantity of jute was estimated at one-fourth to three-fourths of the total production. Such fluctuations were a normal feature of jute cultivation, though the range varied from time to time.

But despite these occasional jerks an expansion of the market and the presence of facilities for the movement of commodities to the market introduced a healthy strain into the economy of some regions. Jute illustrates this. It minimised the hazards of dependence on rice as the sole money crop, and whenever the price of rice tended to fall (as for instance, after the end of the famine in Bombay and Madras in 1877-78 and again in 1883-84 after an unusually abundant harvest), jute provided a way out. The extension of jute cultivation, largely at the cost of rice, is evidence that the rice market was not extensive enough to absorb a continuously expanding supply of rice.

The relations of production had a more important role than changes in the market in affecting the production efforts of peasant, particularly in the case of indigo and poppy. The unwholesome effects of indigo on the peasant economy followed from the enforcement of an unremunerative cultivation, necessitating forcible employment of the means of production of peasants and their eventual ejection from land. The peasants’ reaction to it was a sullen resentment, which occasionally exploded into a violent resistance. Poppy played a positive role in the peasant economy by providing advances to peasants without interest at time when they needed them most, that is, when their rent instalments became due. But some other conditions under which poppy growers had to work tended to far outweigh this advantage. There was no certainty as to how much land the Opium Department would like them to cultivate. The law prohibited them from reaching the open market, and the price paid them by Government was admittedly low. The particular nature of relations between khatadars and zamindars on the one hand and the peasants on the other, to control which Government failed to take any effective measure, resulted in further reducing the small profits from poppy. Illegal exactions by khatadars on various accounts were a common grievance of poppy growers. The system of payment by which the losses from the failure of crops of some peasants were distributed amongst all resulted in discouraging efficient farming. Government rejected suggestions for introducing the system of individual payment to peasants on the ground that it thereby risked ‘the opposition of the whole
body of khattadars and a possible collapse of the cultivation in Bihar. In 1884-85 Government discussed the feasibility of a measure to prevent landlords from exacting a higher differential rent on poppy lands and concluded that such an interference would be improper. The Board of Revenue thus argued the case of non-interference: Support by Government officers of the resistance of peasants to the enhancement of rent on poppy lands in one estate would encourage a similar resistance everywhere. Commitment made once to support the peasants would thus tend to be perpetual. So it would be wise to avoid being involved at all. Moreover, from the point of view of the security of poppy cultivation in Bihar, it would be a folly to antagonise the landlords. 'Engaged as the Government is in Bihar in a large commercial enterprise, success in which is to a great extent dependent on the attitude adopted towards it by the local landlords, it would be exceedingly unwise to take an active part as supporters of peasants'. Some opium agents, however, disagreed with such a judgement.

All these made peasants increasingly apathetic to poppy, and with new opportunities for the production of more remunerative crops they were gradually changing over to them. Of these opportunities opium agents particularly emphasised the improvement in communications. These, as the Bihar Opium Agent found, 'have opened out for the cultivators markets for their country produce which they did not produce before, whilst European and native competition following on lines of communication may be said to have in some instances brought the market on to the very fields in which the crops are grown'. An official enquiry in 1869 showed how best lands were being diverted from poppy to other crops. The retention of some of these lands still for poppy was not due to any particular fondness for poppy but because "no one knows better than the ryots themselves that it does not pay them to cultivate the poppy except in a good soil". Government had to admit that at the existing price, the poppy cultivation could not be further extended. A special enquiry in 1880 by Buckland, a member of the Board of Revenue, convinced him that 'not only that there is no hope of increase, but that the tide has turned considerably against us. The evidence against any chance of an increase under the existing circumstances, and at the present price of opium seems to be indisputable'.

The cultivation of other crops was free from the kind of control exercised over indigo and poppy growers. Peasants' gains from them, however, depended on the extent of hypothecation of their crops to their creditors, presumably at a price lower than the market rate. The system of hypothecation was undoubtedly gaining a firmer hold. But as we have seen earlier, this was affected by the trend of rising prices in the market. Contemporaries particularly stressed the fondness of peasants for jute—a view confirmed by the enormous expansion and the large size of jute cultivation in our period. Many circumstances account for this. The offer of jute advances at a time when long after the last rice harvest peasants were
almost at the end of their resources was attractive. The substitutability of
jute for the low-priced early rice was at times a more important reason. In
highly fertile lands peasants could raise another crop in addition to jute in
the same season which constituted a big gain for them. Moreover, in eastern
and northern districts the paddy crop was often damaged or destroyed by
floods, which generally occurred after the harvesting of jute. So in the event
of the loss of the rice crop, peasants could depend on jute for their
subsistence.

**Changing Agrarian Relations: The Relations Of Peasants With Money
Lenders And Zamindars**

The growth of commercial agriculture vitally affected the peasant
economy and the peasant community, but its role should not be exaggerated.
Cash crops occupied a small portion of the total cultivation. Cash crop
cultivation was in very many cases a mere variant of an essentially
subsistence farming. No new pattern of agrarian relationship emerged.
Indigo planters had to convert themselves into zamindars for success in
their enterprise. The Government Opium Department had to accept the
institutional framework of the zamindar-ryot relationship.

The peasant community as a whole was much more affected by its
relations with moneylenders and zamindars. These relations, upheld by
customs and laws constituted the context in which the farm unit operated,
and the appropriation and disposal of the various factors of production were
regulated by these customs and laws. The relations between peasants and
moneylenders and those between peasants and zamindars had different
origins. The sole proprietary right of zamindars in land—an institution
created or sanctioned and eventually consolidated by a well-defined body
of laws—governed their relations with peasants. In pursuing their profession
moneylenders could not count on any such pre-established legal right.
The law did not compel peasants to borrow from moneylenders, let alone
from any fixed group of moneylenders. But the law did compel peasants
to part with a portion of their surplus in the form of rent. If peasants
borrowed from moneylenders, the law did not prevent them from subse-
sequently becoming independent of them if their resources permitted it. Thus
the right of zamindars to appropriate a part of the peasants' surplus derived
from a pre-established monopoly over land, and that of moneylenders form
a certain role in the organisation of production.

Moneylenders in Bengal were not a sharply differentiated group. In
very many cases rich peasants themselves lent money. But the role of
moneylenders as a distinct group became increasingly important with time.
The basic functions of the rich peasants themselves tended to assimilate to
those of moneylenders with the enlargement of the scale of their loan
operations. The emergence of a new credit group in connection with the
cultivation of cash crops, including in some cases rice too, has been mentioned before.

Contemporary reports\textsuperscript{101} testify to the wide prevalence of indebtedness among the peasantry, but it is difficult to quantify the phenomenon and any change in it in our period. It appears that peasants, excepting a small section, were becoming more and more indebted. This is a attributable to the renewed drive of zamindars to enhance ryots' rent (a phenomenon discussed later in this section), a general rise in commodity prices, in the cost of living and the cost of cultivation, the increasing extent of cash crop cultivation (the relevance of which to the question of peasants' indebtedness has been discussed earlier), and the greater frequency in the occurrence of famines.

We can identify two main changes in the general relations of moneylenders with peasants. First, a clearer definition of peasants' rights in land by the new legal concept of occupancy right (enunciated first by the Act X of 1859 and clarified later by other enactments, including the Tenancy Act VIII of 1885) and the Civil Procedure Code of 1859 gave moneylenders a better security for the realisation of their loans and, consequently, enabled peasants to borrow with greater ease. The concept of occupancy right (according to which a continuous possession of land by peasants for twelve years would give them special protection against enhancement of their rent and eviction from their holdings) was not intended by the legislators of 1859 as a conscious innovation, but simply as a means of simplifying an existing system. The arbitrary choice of the twelve year period was believed by them to have been quite in conformity with accepted usages. But as a legal concept it was new. Though, it did not succeed in replacing the local customs in many parts of Bengal and could not thus constitute the basis of a new agrarian relation, yet it considerably affected the relations of moneylenders with peasants. Customs were well understood, but moneylenders could more safely rely in their loan transactions on a precise legal definition of peasants' rights in land. Secondly, a further legal measure (revised Civil Procedure Code, Act X of 1877, Section 266) prohibiting in execution of decrees the attachment of the 'implements of husbandry' and the 'materials of an agriculturist's house or farm-building' made peasants' land a far greater security for the realisation of loans by moneylenders, thus facilitating the alienation of peasants' holdings to them. In both these cases the pre-established English law of contract helped moneylenders consolidate their position. The law of contract, however, as the Collector of Hugli points out, was seldom fully applied. 'Our law enables him (the moneylender) to recover strictly what is written (in the bond), but even to this day, to my own knowledge, in many parts of the country mahajans do not dream of insisting on the letter of the bond'.\textsuperscript{102} A local panchayat often intervened and gave an award after carefully considering the material circumstances of the indebted peasants. 'Such an award' the Collector of Hugli observes, 'in my experience, gives the mahajan only a very moderate
interest'. The Collector explained this forbearance on the part of mahajans by their reluctance to incur the opprobrium of society to which their defiance of the panchayat decisions would expose them.

It is useful in this connection to examine the validity of the persistent assertion by zamindars that moneylenders had been buying up the holdings of peasants, thus inflicting on the peasant producers a far greater injury than any other class. Such a view widely prevailed also in the official circle. The official enquiry of 1893-94\(^{103}\) established two points. First, the number of peasant holdings alienated was fast increasing. Secondly, professional moneylenders formed only a small minority of the purchasers of the holdings. Analysing the statistics of 1883-84 the Bengal Board of Revenue concluded that about 17\% of the purchasers were moneylenders. Again, 'Of these so-called mahajans but a small proportion were probably other than substantial ryots themselves, for these are the chief moneylenders in rural Bengal'.\(^{104}\) This observation particularly applied to the districts of Bengal proper. Of the purchasers of peasant holdings in Noakhali in the years 1890-93 only 5.3\% were moneylenders. The situation in the Division of Rajshahi was thus summed up by its Commissioner: 'The holdings were seldom bought and more infrequently retained by professional moneylenders'. In Bakarganj 'there is very little tendency to accumulation of property in the hands of this class (the moneylenders). The bulk of the bonafide purchase figure under the heads of intermediate tenureholders and ryots'. In Khulna 'the number of holdings that have passed into the hands of moneylenders is smaller than that which has passed into those of zamindars who frequently secure a ryoti holding in order to annoy another zamindar'. Most of the district officers were unanimous on the relative unimportance of a distinct group of professional moneylenders in rural Bengal. Westmacott, Collector of Noakhali, found that 'the capital used for agriculture in Bengal is in the hands of thrifty saving ryots and that they lend it to their unthrifty neighbours and to those who are still struggling into the position of a cultivator'.\(^{105}\) The Commissioner of Burdwan thus states his experience: 'In many parts of Bengal, especially of this division, it is difficult to draw a distinction between a moneylender and an ordinary ryot. Any ryot who saves a little money—and there are many who do so—lends it in small sums to his neighbours so that almost every well-to-do ryot is a moneylender'. The Collector of the district of Burdwan drew on his experiences in districts other than Burdwan: 'In the districts with which I am familiar, a rustic moneylender is generally a successful cultivator, and a cultivator if he is successful and saves a little money, becomes almost as a matter of course a moneylender'. Cotton, Commissioner of Chittagong, thus writes of his Division: 'What is meant by a mahajan? Is it not the case that in many, if not the most cases the mahajan is also a person directly interested in agriculture?..... As soon as a ryot gets free from debt, his head is above water, does he not immediately set up as a moneylender on his own account?'\(^{106}\)
 Whoever the alinee, a professional moneylender or a substantial ryot, the fate of the peasant who lost his land did not much differ. In most cases he continued to cultivate his land, on condition of giving the alinee half of the produce (adhiyari). This arrangement was seldom violated by the latter, but the peasant had no protection under the law if any such violation occurred. Nowhere did the alieenees attempt a reorganisation of cultivation, which the enlargement of the farm unit as a consequence of several purchases made possible. The only difference that the alienation brought was a new right of the alinee to a larger share in the produce of his undertenants.

Most contemporary opinions on moneylenders tended to identify the institution of moneylending with that of usury, and moneylenders with a set of unscrupulous and greedy men, largely responsible for the destitution of most peasants. Such a description is a half-truth. Given to perpetual hazards of cultivation based on low techniques, the various economic needs of the peasantry and the paucity of credit facilities from any other source, the positive role of moneylenders in the continuous functioning of the peasant economy is undeniable. District officers, who intimately knew rural Bengal, were convinced that the elimination of this group would under the circumstances have been utterly disastrous for peasants.

The impact of the institution of zamindary and the relations of zamindars with peasants on the agrarian society did not derive from any such indispensable role. This impact derives from the landed property right of zamindars and the right to appropriate a variable share in peasants' produce on the one hand, and the superior social position of zamindars by virtue of their possession of landed property. This relationship involved fundamental questions affecting the peasant economy—the degree of security of peasants in the holding of land, the extent of the liability to pay enhanced rent, the size of the enhanced rent, the nature of the penal measures adopted by zamindars in regard to defaulting peasants and various other related things.

It is in the period under review that zamindars consistently formulated what may be called the doctrine of high landlordism, though some of the beliefs and assumptions that went into its making existed earlier. The statement of the doctrine was a kind of response to the challenge to their position which the zamindars believed the proposed rent law (1880-85) amounted to. The doctrine can be thus summed up: it entirely disagreed with the prevalent assumption among the pro-ryot enthusiasts in the official circle that zamindars and ryots were co-proprietors in land—an assumption which constituted the main defence of the legal change contemplated by Government for safeguarding peasants' rights. Whatever rights the ryots had been enjoying, zamindars argued, did not derive from any a priori principle, but were entirely conditional upon certain specific historical circumstances. Such circumstances, however, zamindars believed, had considerably been changed by the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Purchasers of estates at the public auction since
the settlement had looked upon such purchases as the most profitable mode of investment of their liquid cash, and assumed that such purchases gave them a complete freedom in the management of their estates, a necessary corollary of which was the right to substitute contracts for customs and to enhance rent of ryots on the basis of these contracts. Any legislation which ignored this historical change and put constraints on the growth of the contractual relations, zamindars concluded, would be an improper step. Zamindars sometimes vaguely talked of the undesirability of legislative interference with the natural course of economic development, but nowhere do we find any clear statement of the concept. They seemed to have believed that an artificial and indiscriminate protection of all peasants would often result in encouraging inefficient farming and a free choice of zamindars to select their tenants would largely eliminate these farmings, much to the benefit of the general peasant community.

But the practice of zamindars did not correspond to the doctrine. Given historical circumstances in fact determined the mode in which it could be put into practice. Zamindars did not participate in the production process, and this in itself constituted a limit. Contrary to current beliefs zamindars were not eager to add to the fund of demesne lands, the only exceptions being the indigo planters, and, only rarely, some indigenous zamindars of Bihar. In most cases the demesne lands were those which, for various reasons, had not yet been settled with peasant, and zamindars, particularly in Bengal, were anxious to get rid of them. They themselves explained this anxiety by the prevalent scarcity and high wages of labour, particularly in the fever-affected districts. In some places, however, the conditions on which peasants cultivated the demesne lands were different from those of the ordinary tenures of peasants. In the former case peasants' title was insecure, zamindars having reserved the right to change one peasant for another, while in the latter the title was normally secure as long as rent was regularly paid. But since peasants had to pay rent for the demesne lands in produce, and the quantity to be given to the zamindars was more or less fixed by custom, it did not serve the purpose of zamindars to frequently change cultivators.

In our period the doctrine of high landlordism mainly affected two questions: alienation of peasant holdings and enhancement of rent. Zamindars opposed with greater determination than ever before the alienation by peasants of their holdings without their prior consent. The law did not prohibit such alienations if they were necessary for the payment of rent due to zamindars. They sometimes approved of the practice even if it had nothing to do with the payment of rent, and in these cases the aliens had to pay the zamindars a certain sum as salami (perquisite). The growing opposition to alienations was attributable to various circumstances. The Bihar zamindars opposed the practice mainly to frustrate attempts of the indigo planters to deal directly with peasants. The loss to zamindars from such direct contacts was twofold: the resultant control of the planters over peasants would tend to diminish the
authority of zamindars in the village. Moreover, these involved a financial loss. Planters would not pay zamindars any more for permitting them to use peasants' land for indigo. Apart from other things, the most important consideration of Bengal zamindars in opposing the practice was an apprehension of the growing power of moneylenders. The contemplated move of Government for legalising these alienations strengthened this opposition. Government argued that this legalisation would considerably enhance the market value of peasant holdings, while the existing restraints deprived peasants of a fair price for them. Where peasants had to borrow, the legalisation would secure them loan on better conditions; and where they preferred to sell their land, the higher sale price would be a distinct advantage. The resolute opposition of zamindars prevented the legislation, but it could not stop the practice of alienations.

Rent was the more fundamental question. Important changes occurred in this. Rent was in fact composed of two elements—the original rate (paid either in money or produce) and abwabs (illegal cesses). We discuss first the changes in regard to the latter.

In the period under review the system of abwabs became more consolidated. We see some exceptions in some parts of Bengal, particularly in the eastern districts, where increasing peasant resistance made zamindars more cautious in the demand and collection of the abwabs. In some places some of the abwabs were discontinued altogether. Such a consolidation partly resulted from the increasing reliance of zamindars on the abwabs wherever they failed to enhance peasants' rent by a normal legal process. Zamindars called this method a 'moral adjustment'. The official attitude to abwabs indirectly encouraged them in this. The official policy was contradictory. Government (particularly the Government of Campbell which investigated the whole question in 1872) had no doubts about the obvious illegality of the abwabs. By way of explaining the origin of the abwabs the Government of Bengal wrote to the Government of India in 1873: It is abundantly clear that during the last 30 years, the zamindars have by fraud and force confiscated and ignored very many of the rights which the ryots held from Government and under the guarantee of Government. 167 But Government was reluctant to intervene mainly on three grounds. First, such an intervention would be undesirable in view of the fact that 'this system is now in universal vogue, is so deeply rooted, and so many social relations depend thereon'. 168 Secondly, Government was afraid that any resolute measure on the part of Government to suppress the abwabs would be immediately followed by a drive on the part of zamindars to enhance the rent of ryots—a development of more ominous consequences for the peasants than the perpetuation of the existing wrongs. Thirdly, Government was unwilling to face the 'social strife' that would inevitably arise from this development. Though Government believed that 'the result of that war may ultimately be to place the relations of landlords and tenants in Bengal on a sounder and more satisfactory footing...'; yet it concluded; 'it is impossible to predicate with any certainty so favourable
an issue to a social strife which, if it became general, would be the most serious, and probably for the time, most calamitous which these provinces had known under the British rule.¹⁰⁹ In view of the well-known pro-ryot bias of Campbell, such a retreat on the part of Government was immensely encouraging to zamindars. They fully exploited the opportunity.

There was an important change in the method of collecting the cesses. It had two forms. First, in view of the increasing bitterness of feeling between zamindars and peasants the former did not rely simply on verbal agreements with the latter for this collection. Written pattahs clearly stating the obligations of peasants in this respect were increasingly becoming the rule. Such an increase in the number of registered pattahs was a significant development in the history of agrarian relations in Bengal. Secondly, there was a move for the consolidation of the cesses with the original rate. Addition of new cesses was another change in the institution of abwabs. The origin of most of these—for instance, dak khurcha (payment made by zamindars on account of district post), income tax khurcha etc.—was the shifting of the whole incidence of new taxes on zamindars to peasants. Thus the confirmation and consolidation of the existing cesses and the imposition of new ones, coupled with the refinement of the machinery of collecting them, must have considerably added, at least in some parts of Bengal, though not everywhere, to the quantum of appropriation of peasants' produce by zamindars.

Important changes also occurred in the institution of the legal rate of rent. We discuss first the system of produce rent, which had some distinctive features and affected peasants in a different way from money rent. Produce rent was more or less confined to the south Gangetic districts of Bihar, and here again it was most extensively prevalent in Gaya, the proportion there of lands paying produce rent to those paying money rent being 7:1. Produce rent prevailed mostly where cultivation was uncertain, and it was almost exclusively confined to rice. It was quite natural. Production was entirely financed by the small resources of cultivators, and it was they who lost most from any failure of crops. So where cultivation was uncertain, peasants would not agree to cultivate at all on condition of paying a fixed money rent. The persistence of produce rent in districts like Gaya despite the fact that large irrigation works made cultivation reasonably secure is explainable by the paramount needs of maintaining these irrigation works. Produce rent was believed to be one of the means of making zamindars fulfill their customary obligations of keeping these works in order. The failure of zamindars in this would result in the gradual decline of cultivation and eventually in the proportionate fall in their income from rent.

Adverse criticism of the system of produce rent was growing in our period. It was denounced as 'an infamous and one-sided system', and a Government officer went to the extent of calling it 'a relic of barbarism'.¹¹⁰ Very many Bihar officers attributed the destitution of the Bihar peasantry,
which was a recurring theme in the official discussions from the late seventies onwards, partly to this system. Zamindars (and a small minority of Government officers), however, continued to defend it. The substitution of a rigid system of money rent, they argued, would be ultimately ruinous to peasants unless means were taken for making cultivation more secure than before. Moreover, while the enhancement of the rate of money rent had produced much class bitterness, civil litigation and consequent waste of money of both zamindars and peasants, produce rent, it was said, 'is a self-regulating system which adjusts itself to the variations in the price of produce, and which is best fitted to give to each of the interested parties his just rights without the intervention of laws and courts'.

It is undoubtedly true that the system of produce rent admirably suited certain types of cultivation. But the way it worked was utterly iniquitous for peasants. Peasants provided all the means of production, but the share of the produce that was left with them was often too small for their subsistence. It seldom exceeded 35% to 37.5% of the gross produce. In the danabandi system (division of the crop on the basis of the estimate made by zamindar's servants), the peasant's share was sometimes still smaller because of the exaggerated estimate of the crop. The local custom according to which peasants could harvest the crop before both zamindars and ryots agreed over the mode of division of the crop was made the most of by zamindars to coerce peasants into accepting their terms. Peasants preferred foregoing a part of their share to the loss of the entire harvest which the exercise of this coercion by zamindars inflicted on them. Peasants suffered in still other ways. In many places produce rent was the normal system, since peasants paid in cash the value of the zamindar's share. The rate at which peasanats were asked to pay was often arbitrary and seldom the one prevailing immediately after the harvest. Such an arbitrary selection of the rate inflated the real share of the zaminder.

It is quite natural that the prevalence of produce rent was everywhere associated with a slovenly cultivation. Such a phenomenon struck Buchanan Hamilton as early as the first decade of the 19th century. Macpherson, (who was investigating the question of the commutation of produce rent into money rent in South Sahabad), had formed a similar impression in 1884: 'Bhaoli villages (villages paying produce rent) are almost always undercultivated when compared with others. . . .it appears to me to be very injurious to the agriculture of the country.' Rural proverbs like char battaya gawan oogor (four divisions i.e., working of the system of produce rent for four years, depopulate a village) best conveyed the popular feeling on the question. A Government officer who intimately knew Bihar was 'assured by more than one Behar zamindar that when a landlord, in whose villages rents have been hitherto paid in cash, desires to harass or to oust his ryots, he has only to introduce the battaya system, and his object is soon effected'.
Two major changes occurred in the system of produce rent. In the estates directly managed by Government produce rent was gradually being commuted into money rent. Peasants sometimes complained of the high rate at which this commutation was made, and wanted the previous system restored. Macpherson, however, could not reconcile these complaints with the fairly wide view that commutation had nearly everywhere brought a marked improvement in agriculture. The Tenancy Act of 1885 permitted commutation if zamindars and peasants agreed to it. But the pace of commutation in the zamindari estates was slow. Another change took place in the form of payment, particularly where the danabundi system prevailed. Formerly peasants had the option of either paying rent in produce or of paying the money value of the produce at a certain rate. This option tended to become increasingly rare. With the rising price of rice the payment of money value at the market rate was preferred by zamindars. Exceptions were found in those estates where the thikadars (farmers), with whom peasants had to directly deal, were also grain-dealers. Such a combination of the two functions was not uncommon.

Money rent had a deeper impact on the peasantry and on the general relations of zamindars with peasants. Two major changes occurred in this: (1) a new principle had emerged in regard to enhancement of rent; (2) the quantum of rent tended to be larger in most districts of Bengal, circumstances leading to it varying in different cases.

Apart from the question of the enhancement of rent and of the desirable limits to it, Government had long been investigating the foundation of the existing rent-rates with a belief that a set of economic criteria could be found which would provide the basis of a reconstruction of the rent rates. The whole approach of the Rent Commission (1880) was affected by this belief, the emphasis of the Commission being on the adjustment of the rent rates to the classes of soil. In proposing an enquiry into the rent rates in 1882, the Government of India assumed the possibility of such an adjustment. The results of the enquiry, however, contradicted such an assumption. The following are the observations of the Bengal Board of Revenue on the findings of Finucane's enquiry in Bihar: "The rates of rent actually paid on different lands are altogether independent of the productive powers, situation, or other advantages and disadvantages of the lands respectively as compared with one another. They are equally independent of the value of the produce. Rent paid for each field often depends on historical considerations, as connected with the holder of it. . . . Differences between the rates of rent now being paid for lands of similarity and advantages depend on the differences between the old rents which were influenced by many different causes, such as—(1) favour allowed to the higher castes; (2) the different arrangements made by the planter-farmers, during the period of their leases, with individual ryots in connection with the cultivation of indigo by them, or with the exchange of lands for the purpose of indigo cultivation; (3) the higgling of the market in a country where the pressure of population and the
demand for land is great; (4) the personal characteristics of the ryot, his strength or weakness in resisting a demand for higher rents; (5) success and liberality in bringing the amlah of the zemindars when they made the original assessment.\textsuperscript{114} Though purely economic circumstances like the quality of lands, their nearness to the lines of communication and trade centres and routes, nature and value of the produces, the degree of the intensity of pressure of population on land and the resultant changes in the demand for land had much to do with the origin of particular rent rates and subsequent variations in them, their role was considerably affected by a number of non-economic circumstances. Such a role was in many cases obscured beyond recognition.

The new principle in regard to enhancement of rent consisted in the recognition (by the Rent Act X of 1859) of an increase in the value of produce as a valid ground for enhancement of rent. The existing law that directly related to the question of enhancement of the rate of rent was based on the concept of what was known as the *parganah nirkh* (prevailing rate of rent). Such a rate was believed to have been existing, though in fact it did not. Zamindars were permitted by law to enhance rent in their estates if it was below the *parganah nirkh*. The new principle, however, was intended by Government merely as a guide to Government officers handling rent suits and not as an absolute determinant of rent. The original draft Rent Bill did not in fact contemplate any such change. Such an omission was not inconsistent with the main plan of the Bill, which attempted merely a codification of the existing rent laws, with a view to giving them a clearer shape, and not any change in the substantive law. This accounts for the retention of the old and archaic concept of the *parganah nirkh*.

The new principle was not arbitrarily selected. It embodied a real economic change—tendency of some commodity prices to rise. The first spectacular rise in prices was caused by the Mutiny, and the rent legislators could not ignore this exceptional phenomenon. The following is a study of the movement of prices of rice in Bengal in the period 1861-1885.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lcccccc}
1861-64 & 1865-68 & 1869-72 & 1873-76 & 1877-80 & 1881-84 & 1885 \\
(1) & (2) & (3) & (4) & (5) & (6) & (7) \\
26.29 & 18.66 & 22.87 & 18.9 & 16.05 & 21.61 & 15.18 \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The rise in prices of rice was particularly rapid in the period 1874-1887 because of the occurrence of famines (1874, 1877-1879) and of three years of very bad crops from drought and flood (1883-85).

Indigo planters were the first to systematically use this principle. When the rebellion of the indigo peasants faced the planters with the danger of an imminent destruction of the whole indigo industry, they
decided to use a quick enhancement of rent by the application of this principle as a coercive instrument. Peasants were asked to choose between the continuation of indigo cultivation and the liability to pay a considerably enhanced rent. The legality of enhancement on the ground of a rise in the value of produce was not questioned, but the undecided point was the extent of legitimate enhancement. The High Court judgment in the case *Hills Vs Issur Ghose* (Hills was a planter of Nadia) of 1862 accepted the Malthusian definition of rent as the basis of decision, according to which rent was 'that portion of the value of the whole produce which remains to the owner of the land after all the outgoings belonging to its cultivation of whatever kind have been paid, including the profits of the capital employed, estimated according to the usual and ordinary rate of agricultural capital at the time being'. Such a definition wrote off the customary rights of peasants in regard to their rent. With this potent weapon indigo planters struck the rebel peasants. Such an interpretation of the law of 1859 was soon challenged, critics having particularly emphasised the incompatibility of the doctrine of 1862 with the organisation of the peasant economy in Bengal. Another High Court decision (*Thakurani Dasi Vs Bishesur Mukherji, 1864*) substituted the Rule of proportion for this doctrine. The enhanced rent should bear, the Rule laid down, to the previous rent the same proportion that the increased gross value of the produce bears to the previous gross value.

The *direct* role of the Rule in the enhancement of rent by zamindars was not much significant, mainly because of their small success in this in the civil courts, particularly after the Bengal Act VIII of 1869. To win suits in the courts zamindars had to comply with a number of formalities. The onus of establishing their case by full legal proof lay entirely on them. Suits were sometimes rejected because evidence on the past history of prices and rent was found inadequate and the notices of enhancement were not served strictly according to law. As long as revenue officers tried the enhancement cases zamindars won very many suits despite their failure to furnish the necessary evidence. "The Revenue Officers seem to have entered upon the cases . . . with the knowledge that, as a rule, prices of produce had risen very much since 1857 (say), and that, where rents had not been recently revised, they were in general far below the normal competitive rates; hence they were satisfied with such evidence as was adducible". With the transference of rent cases to the civil courts by the Act VIII of 1869, the position of zamindars became far more difficult. The courts, unlike the revenue officers, did not start with the assumption that prices had risen, but relied exclusively on the ordinary rules of evidence. Rules regarding the process of serving enhancement notices were made much more rigid. 'The zamindars soon found that a large proportion of their suits were defeated by preliminary objections, and even when they did reach a trial on the merits, so difficult was it to supply such evidence as would satisfy the courts, the almost without exception the cases broke down."
It was in the Government estates—Tushkali (Bakarganj), Jelamuta and Majnamuta (Midnapur) etc.—that the Rule was mostly applied, which, however, necessitated special legislation. The enforcement of the enhanced rates of rent was a difficult job for revenue officers and, as we shall see later, caused widespread peasant resistance.

The initial failure of zamindars in getting rent rates enhanced through civil courts led them to rely on either a systematic falsification of the village patwari papers and perjury or the exercise of some coercive methods for the enforcement of an enhanced rent rate without any use of the legal machinery. An attempt to enhance rent rate on the ground of the so-called paraganah rate, which was mostly fictitious, led invariably to similar consequences. In most cases the institution of rent suits in the civil courts was a mere pretence, and was really intended as a continous harassment of peasants, so that they would ultimately give in. All these affected agrarian relations and the nature of rent as well. The result of the organised falsehood, perjury and coercion was to heighten the bitterness of feeling between zamindars and peasants and to deepen mutual distrust and suspicion—a phenomenon which struck all the Government officers investigating the origins of agrarian unrest. As for rent rates, they were increasingly becoming divorced from economic circumstances, and their size tended to be determined by the relative success of zamindars in the use of non-legal and illegal means.

What led the zamindars to enhance rent? In explaining this, most contemporaries, including some Government officers with an anti-zamindari bias, emphasised what they called personal despotism of zamindars and entirely ignored objective circumstances. The whole enhancement process, involving much coercion for peasant and causing them immense distress, may be described as despotic. But it would be wrong to say that the drive for enhancement itself derived from 'despotic' human nature.

Zamindars proceeded to enhance rent because in most cases such an enhancement was an unavoidable economic necessity, because they badly needed an addition to their income. We do not mean that rent tended to be stationary where this necessity did not exist. It is undeniable that zamindars sometimes enhanced rent because they knew it was perfectly legal for them to do so and not because of any urgent economic needs. Two particular circumstances prompted a ready exercise of this pure legal right by zamindars. First, the symptoms of increasing resistance of peasants to the payment of illegal cesses, most of which had been paid for generations before, persuaded zamindars to enhance the rate of rent in order to maintain the existing level of their income. Secondly, an apprehension that the new rent law would be a dreadful measure, reducing or completely eliminating their authority in the villages and fixing the rent rates once for ever, led many panicky zamindars to enhance rent as far as possible before the day of doom came.

Pressing economic needs were powerful motives behind the drive for enhancing rent. A persistent theme of a number of tracts written by
zamindars themselves and of some periodicals of Bengal was the financial difficulty of zamindars. The Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote on 11 August 1871: 'A civilian judge is better off.' The Bengal Board of Revenue remarked in 1878: 'A very large proportion of the zamindars of the Lower Provinces are deeply involved; they have drawn upon their capital by pledging the whole or part of their estates to make up the successive deficits.'

The difficulty resulted from income lagging behind expenditure. To the contemporaries the explanation of this was very simple: a more or less fixed income could not support the increasing number of zamindars' dependants. The difficulty was aggravated by the rising cost of living, resulting partly from the increasing commodity prices and partly from the wider use of expensive luxury goods. With increasing peasant unrest necessitating institution of very many rent-suits in courts, the cost of management of estates tended to go up. The appointment of highly paid managers, including Europeans,—a practice increasingly being adopted by zamindars in order to more efficiently tackle the growing problems of estate management—added to the cost. The breaking up of large joint estates into numerous petty estates—a phenomenon particularly important in Bihar—enormously increased the aggregate cost of management. The imposition on zamindars of new taxes and cesses—as, for instances, income tax, road cess, Public works cess, chowkidari tax, municipal tax etc.—further added to the cost where they did not succeed in shifting their incidence on to peasants. Whatever the reasons, zamindars with a very few exceptions, were not enterprising enough to invest their resources in the new trade and industry, nor in the improvement of agriculture in their estates. Zamindars under these circumstances had to rely more and more on deriving a larger income from land. Where an extension of cultivation did not provide it, the only means open to them was to enhance rent of their ryots.

All evidence confirms the general feeling of the contemporaries that rents had risen in the period under review. There were some exceptions. For instance, a statistical enquiry in 1872-73 in Rangpur brought out the fact that the enhancement of rent in recent years had been very small. Glazier, Officiating Magistrate and Collector of Rangpur, thus observed: 'Act X (of 1859) has not been worked so as to result in any general increase of rent, and there can be no doubt that in this district the ryots have in a much larger degree than the zamindars participated in the profits arising from the increased value of produce.' In the absence of detailed statistics we can not conclude whether zamindars preferred a larger number of abwabs to the more conspicuous process of legal enhancement.

It is, however, difficult to quantify the phenomenon of the enhancement of rent for the whole of Bengal. Discussions over the various Rent Bills (1880-85) encouraged attempts at such quantification. Finucane, Deputy Collector of Gaya, who had already established his reputation for his skill in handling agricultural statistics, thus estimated the extent of the enhance-
ment of rent in some select districts of Bengal and Bihar in the period 1793-1880 by comparing the rental of zamindars at the time of the Permanent Settlement with the existing one as shown by the road cess valuation.\textsuperscript{121}

*How many times the present rental exceeds rental at the time of the Permanent Settlement.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Multiplier</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patna</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaya</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahabad</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muzaffarpur</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darbhanga</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saran</td>
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<tr>
<td>Champaran</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td>Midnapur</td>
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<td>Hugli</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
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<td>Murshidabad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
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Finucane, however, did not specify how much of the enhancement resulted from increased cultivation, nor did he quantify the extent of enhancement in our particular period. There are precise statistics for some districts. While investigating the rent rates in the Narhan estate in the district of Darbhanga in 1883, Finucane found that rent had risen by 136\% in the past forty years. Since there had been 'no increase in the productiveness of soil', the only legal ground for enhancement was a rise in prices, which was only 73\% in the same period.\textsuperscript{122} A statistical enquiry by Collin in some select villages in Muzaffarpur in 1886-87 shows an increase of rent 137\% since 1840, and Collin believed that 'the greater part of the increase has taken place in the last fifteen or twenty years'.\textsuperscript{123} Enquiries by Stevenson Moore\textsuperscript{124} in the years 1892-99 in some villages of the same district revealed a similar phenomenon. Since 1843 rent rose by from 115\% to 192\%, except in one village where the percentage of increase was 62. In the same period cultivation had increased by only 14\%.

**Peasant Resistance**

How did peasants react to the changes, particularly to the ones which had adversely affected them, which the two preceding sections have dealt with? Apart from the fact that these reactions had a role in partly counteracting these changes, they constitute a significant phenomenon in the agrarian history of Bengal. We shall mainly deal with combined resistance of peasants.
The cultivation of two commercial crops, poppy and indigo, had adverse consequences for peasants. Resistance of poppy peasants was, however, a rare phenomenon. Official reports occasionally referred to the assembly of discontented peasants bound by a pledge not to grow poppy any more unless the price for crude opium had been increased. Government could not afford to ignore it, particularly when the resultant fall in the extent of cultivation was likely to adversely affect its opium revenue. An increase in the cultivators' price removed the source of their discontent. Two important circumstances, apart from other, largely accounted for the absence of any sustained resistance of poppy peasants—(a) the predominant role of *khatadhrs*, who were mostly the village moneylenders, in planning and organising poppy cultivation; (b) the legal right of peasants to abandon poppy cultivation if they did not like it (though many extra-legal circumstances prevented them from taking advantage of the right). Any resistance to poppy would involve peasants, some way or other, in a resistance to the moneylenders; and for obvious reasons, they were careful not to antagonise the moneylenders. Where peasants could freely exercise the right of abandoning cultivation resistance was unnecessary.

The cultivation of indigo universally provoked resistance. It assumed the most extensive form in 1860, and the indigo industry in Bengal proper very nearly collapsed under it. There were isolated instances of such resistance even before 1860. In view of the extremely unremunerative nature of indigo cultivation and of the coercive methods adopted by indigo planters, these were natural. The *ferazi* movement of both Barasat (1831-32) and Faridpur (1846) showed a strong anti-indigo feeling. In 1854 peasants of a Jessore Factory resolutely fought back the planter's attempt to get indigo sown by force, and the *Nizamat Adalat* set the peasants free 'giving them credit for having only asserted the natural right of defence of their own property, which the agressive acts of their assailants had encroached upon'. In 1854 the Judge of Nadia observed: 'the violent outrages that from time to time spring from the sowing of indigo indicate an unwillingness on the part of the ryots to place their lands at the service of the planters'. The resistance in these cases had the usual form of a spontaneous outburst confined to some limited regions. Cooperation of other classes like zamindars gave it at times a wider basis and greater vigour. The programme of peasants was most often one of defeating for the time being the planters' move for a forcible cultivation of indigo. Various developments tended in course of time to make peasants more determined against indigo, and the programme they set themselves was the complete overthrow of the indigo system.

An important consequence of the failure of the Union Bank (1847) was to make the indigo cultivation far more repugnant to peasants than before. With this failure the most important source of planters' capital was gone. They now became more careful in collecting arrears of rent from peasants and more cautious in making fresh advances. Peasants not producing enough were asked to work off old balances. The normal source
of capital having failed, planters intensified their drive to get indigo cultivated with paying as little as possible for peasants' land and labour. The cost of living and the general cost of cultivation tended to rise, particularly since the Mutiny, as a result of a rise in the price of commodities including bullocks, bullock carts and ploughs, and the consequence of a continued association with indigo was a further worsening of the living conditions of the indigo peasants. The continuous rise in the price of most agricultural produce made them more bitter about indigo. Some peasants of Barasat, involved in a major clash with the Habrah factory in 1856 over their refusal to sow indigo, thus defended their stand before the Joint Magistrate of the district: 'they will not sow indigo for this very sound reason that they find tobacco and other crops far more profitable'. Even an alarming rise in the number of such overt acts of hostility towards planters could not persuade them to pay peasants a higher price for indigo. When the situation was thus ripe for a revolt, peasants were much encouraged in this by other circumstances, one of which was the deepening indignation of the entire society at the indigo system. It was mercilessly criticised in the journals of the time. Such an indignation reached its height during the historic agitation over the 'Black Bills' of 1849. The Bills designed to bring the British-born subjects under the jurisdiction of local criminal courts were vehemently opposed by the British indigo planters. The Bengal intelligentsia condemned their attempts to defend racial discrimination, and a bitter resentment was sweeping over the country. The formation of a new political association, the British Indian Association (1851), following the agitation, with the avowed purpose of protecting people's rights, was a measure of the depth of popular indignation. Peasants thus found the entire society bitter against the planters—a development immensely encouraging to them. What finally touched off the explosion was a widespread feeling among peasants that Government itself had been of late becoming more and more critical of planters. A deeprooted belief that Government was partial towards planters had so long deterred them from any active resistance to planters, and even the slightest indication that Government had disapproved of planters' actions prompted them to resist. The parwana (order) of Abdool Luteef, Deputy Magistrate of Jessore, to Mackenzie, an indigo planter, forbidding him to forcibly cultivate peasants' land with indigo (1854) and the public expression of hostile opinion against compulsory cultivation of indigo by Mangles, Magistrate of Nadia, in 1855 were immediately followed by the abandonment by peasants of their indigo cultivation on a large scale. Peasants owed their courage to finally strike to two decisions of Eden, Magistrate of Barasat. The first decision (March 1859), on a petition by peasants, vindicated their right to grow whatever crops that suited them. Police force was sent 'to prevent any disturbances that are likely to ensue from any compulsory cultivation of their lands'. In August 1859 Eden went much farther, Eden thus explained to the Deputy Magistrate of Kalarua (Jessore) the appropriate line of action for the local administration in
indigo disputes. The first duty of a policeman would be to protect the peasants in the possession of their lands. It was exclusively their concern to decide how to use their lands, and they did not forfeit this right to protection because of any 'promises' to sow indigo. An examination of such documents was a function of civil courts and any use of force on these pretexts would be opposed by the police. The Deputy Magistrate's parwana of 20 August 1859, based on Eden's instructions, set off the spark which started the fire. Ryots from remote districts flocked to Barasat to get authenticated copies of Eden's order. 'It (the parwana) was made known by beat of drums at all the principal bazars on the market day'. Blumhardt, a missionary, remarked: 'The sum and substance of the parwana spread far and wide ......it was common bazar talk; everybody talked it' Peasants construed the parwana to have given them the right to throw up the cultivation wherever possible. Herschel, coming to the district of Nadia in February 1860, found that 'there appeared among the ryots a general sense of approaching freedom. They behaved as if about to be released from something very oppressive and as if impatient of the slowness of the process'.

The resistance movement, at first a constitutional agitation in the form of sending numerous petitions to the local administration praying for protection against the forcible cultivation of indigo, assumed at times and in some regions violent forms. Factories were burnt, indigo plants were destroyed, factory servants beaten or killed and the scheme of boycotting the numerous groups connected with indigo factories rigorously followed. The planters' devices to break the resistance by enforcing the temporary contract law of 1860 and by utilising the institution of rent as a method of coercion could not go far enough towards solving the crisis. The nearly complete destruction of the indigo industry in Bengal proper can thus be attributed to this resistance movement. Some patches of cultivation still remained, without any basic reform in the system. In 1883 and again in 1889-90 the planters of Jessore had to face a general revolt. By that time the market for Bengal indigo had been shrinking, and the low market price for it made any reform by increasing the cultivators' price out of the question.

The class bitterness produced by the indigo system was not any less intense in Bihar. The widespread revolt of Indigo peasants in Darbhanga and Champaran in 1866-68 and the continuing tension ever since contradicted the assumption of the Indigo Commission (1860) that Bihar had a sound system of Indigo cultivation. During the revolt in Darbhanga towards the close of 1866, which was confined to the villages in the Pandul Concern of Gale a planter holding farming leases from the zamindar of Darbhanga, indigo was almost everywhere replaced by cold weather crops. An increase in cultivators' price and the cancellation of subleases (kutkena) to factory servants—a device of planters to strengthen control over peasants—pacified peasants for the time being. They became restive again in 1868, particularly in the regions contiguous to the Bhettiah estate in
Champaran which was at the time the main centre of indigo peasants' resistance. The movement in the Bettiah estate had a much wider basis and derived its strength from the participation of many social groups other than peasants. These other groups were affected by the way the indigo planter Gibbon managed the encumbered estate of Bettiah after he took over as manager in 1866. One of the immediate means for achieving his main object, that is, to augment the income of the estate in order to extricate it from its financial difficulties, was the abolition of age-old privileges of these groups in respect of the amount of revenue payable to the zaminder of Bettiah and, in several cases, the entire elimination of some middlemen groups. The indigo peasants' revolt coincided with the drive for reorganising the estate's finances. It is immaterial to ask whether peasants first started the anti-indigo agitation in which other malcontents participated later or the malcontents themselves incited the peasants to rebel. Whatever the way the revolt had started, it soon developed into a united resistance movement of various groups and peasants had a definite programme of their own to uphold. Beames, appointed Magistrate of Champaran in 1866, found a 'spirit of quiet, determined opposition which was growing among the ryots', and was proud to think that peasants, finding in him 'a magistrate who would do justice impartially between them and planters, judged the time opportune for rising and resisting the oppressors'. His intervention persuaded planters to a compromise, which, however, did not work for long. The flare-up in 1868, affecting a much wider region, assumed such a serious form that the Magistrate had to call out the military to protect the station of Motihari. Planters promptly responded by increasing the cultivators' price and promising a fair wage for their labour. Resistance on such a wide scale did not occur again, but peasants continued to be bitter about indigo. In 1873 a movement for abandoning indigo started in the Concerns of Pandul, Narah and Harsinghpur in Darbhanga, the immediate cause being a widespread rumour that all the leases to planters would be soon resumed by the Darbhanga raj. 'This rumour . . . in some instances took the form of authoritative abolition from indigo agreements and from paying balances of rent to the outgoing farmers.' While visiting Bihar in 1873, Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was 'surrounded by clamorous complainants, and it needed but a spark or a word to create a conflagration and bring the whole (indigo) system to the ground'. Macdonnell, Collector of Darbhanga, observed in 1876 that but for the change from the ryoti to the zerat cultivation and the intervention of the famine of 1874, 'there would be scarcely a beegah of indigo cultivation in this district'. In the following year he thus summed up the situation: 'The indigo system in this district and generally throughout the Division has reached a crisis'.

The absence of any combined resistance to moneylenders, except in Rajshahi (1836) and Sonthal Parganas (1854-55), despite their obvious role in the destitution of peasants may seem surprising, but it is explainable.
The absence of any sharply differentiated moneylending group, the fact that
the occasions on which peasants borrowed, the amount they borrowed, the
rate of interest at which they borrowed and the general conditions of
payment varied from person to person made any such resistance virtually
impossible. In fact peasants did not want the moneylenders completely
eliminated for the very simple reason that they could not do without them.
On the other hand, they had no means of making the system of moneylending
fair to them. They could go to civil courts to contest the rate of rent that
zamindars demanded of them, but no Government law sought to regulate
the rate of interest. They could bring any particular cases of exactions by
moneylenders to the local panchayats, but it was an attempt at a compro-
mise and not a move for resistance. The revolt of the Sonthals against
moneylenders is also explainable. The agricultural settlements of Sonthals,
who had in fact migrated from other regions, necessitated a much greater
dependence on moneylenders than in other parts of Bengal, and this
coupled with the absence in the newly settled areas of the usual restraints
of a Hindu society and that the Sonthals were not familiar with these
exactions till they came into contact with the moneylenders enabled mon-
eylenders to enforce harder terms on the Sonthals. The fact that moneylend-
ers constituted a group entirely alien to the close-knit tribal society of the
Sonthals made them all the more bitter about the intruders. They looked
back fondly to their ideal society of the past, which was free from these
exactions, and firmly believed in the possibility of restoring the good old
days. This dream animated them and they could strike at the enemy with
a clear sense of purpose. The resistance of the Sonthals in this case was the
resistance of the entire tribal community, because moneylenders did not
deal with individual Sonthals, but with the whole community through its
manjhi (headman).

Combined resistance of peasants against enhancement of rent, in both
Government and zamindari estates, was a significant feature of the
agrarian history of Bengal in the second half of the 19th century. We
discuss separately the revolt of the Sonthals, which had a complex-origin
and a distinct character of its own. It started with attacks on money-
lenders, but it had a far wider basis. It was also against zamindars, the
local administration and the entire European community, particularly the
one connected with the construction of new railways. Zamindars were
disliked, and also Government, because Sonthals had to pay them rent.
In fact such was their abhorrence of rent that they did not mind throwing
up settled cultivation, which their strenuous labour for years made
possible, and migrating in search of new lands where they had not to
pay any rent. The anti-Government feeling had a deeper source. The
Sonthals had been long complaining of the exactions by moneylenders
and zamindars without any success in persuading Government to take any
measure to stop them. On the contrary, when sheer desperation led the
Sonthals to use violent means for finding a remedy, Government promptly
punished them. The origin of the hostile feeling against the European community and the local assistants engaged in the construction of railways is well worth investigation. The official report on the origins of the Sonthal insurrection practically ignored the question. We have no evidence to prove that the introduction of railways resulted in any considerable export of the local food-grain, which might have raised its price and thus caused distress to the Sonthals or that any significant changes in the economy occurred which had adversely affected them. We have, however, evidence regarding certain kinds of injuries that the Sonthals suffered. For instance, railway contractors, in view of the known aversion of Sonthals to wage labour over a long period, had to practise much deceit and, occasionally, force for the recruitment of the necessary labour. The Sonthals were sometimes cheated over the rate of payment. The settlement of a large group of people engaged in railway construction necessitated a steady food-supply. In not a few cases, which were in fact investigated by the Magistrate of Bhagalpur, goats, kids, fowls etc. of Sonthals were carried off by force or on a nominal payment.

The insurrection of 1855 was all in vain. Important administrative changes followed it, but they could scarcely remove the causes of discontent of the Sonthals. With new developments the discontent tended to deepen, exploding into revolt in 1871-72 and 1880-81, while in the intervening period it manifested itself in various other forms. The significant developments were: 1. gradual weakening of the institution of manjhi (headman), the elimination of the manjhis in very many cases and the substitution of strangers for them; 2. enhancing of rent; 3. the increasing control of moneylenders and a rapid rise in the number of alienated holdings of peasants. The Sonthal manjhis, who had so long held a high position in the Sonthal village community, leading new agricultural settlements, presiding over all sacred religious rites and representing the community to the outside world, had been fast losing their position. Zamindars treated them as ordinary farmers, holding them liable to pay increased rent demanded of them or simply changing them for strangers who agreed to pay. This happened particularly where zamindars appointed Europeans as managers of their estates. Apart from the ghatwali zamindars deeply indebted to alien traders and moneylenders, numerous large estates coming under the control of the Court of Wards after the Mutiny and some enterprising zamindars like Raja Lilananda Singh (about whom the Report on the Administration of the Sonthal Parganas of 1862 says: 'The Rajah appears to act on the conviction that an English farmer is a better hand at raising rents and fighting the battle of enhancement through the courts than a native') preferred to farm their estates to Europeans. The European farmers also took the lead in using the Rent Act X of 1859 (introduced in the Sonthal Parganas in 1863) for enhancing peasants' rent, entirely ignoring the inappropriateness of such a law to the tribal setting of the agrarian economy in the Sonthal Parganas. In fact the Government experiment of administering
the district (formed in 1855 by Regulation 37 of 1855) with a special kind of laws suitting its particular needs and circumstances had to be abandoned in 1863 when the Advocate-General declared ultra vires this Regulation which outlined these special measures. The fact that Money, Commissioner of Bhagalpur and Sonthal Parganas at the time, subscribed to the views of the European farmers strengthened the latter's position. He thus stated his views on the manjhi question: "To recognise as inherent to their position a right of occupancy would be not only acting contrary to the provisions of Act X, but would thus perpetuate a mode of tenure which may in time prove unsuited to the improvement and progress of the country". 111 He did not believe that the Sonthal peasants required any special protection against enhancement of their rent: "The main point to be kept in view is that the rights of zamindars and ryots are the same in the Sonthal Parganas as they are outside". 112 In 1872 the Government of Campbell revived the experiment of 1855, but the injury that the reversal of the experiment resulted in inflicting on the Sonthals could scarcely be undone. Government could not find any solution for the manhji question. The new land revenue assessment beginning in 1872 resulted in fact in enhancing the rent of peasants, particularly where strangers completely replaced the Sonthal manhjis and were responsible for the distribution of the lump communal assessment among the individual Sonthals. An immediate consequence of the enhancement of rent on the one hand and the definition of peasants' status in land by the new land settlement of 1872 was a quick rise in the number of mortgages of peasant holdings to moneylenders and their eventual sale to them.

These developments tended to disrupt the basis of the Sonthal community, and the revolt of the Sonthals was not one of any differentiated class of peasants (which in fact did not exist) but of the entire community. Sonthals bitterly resented the elimination of their manhjis not only because their rent was thereby considerably enhanced, but also because the existence of the community without its headman, who was a part and parcel of the social and religious life of the Sonthals, was utterly inconceivable to them. They did not know how to adjust their community to the intrusion of a host of strangers, whose primary function was to collect a larger rent from them. The increasing alienation of lands to moneylenders further strengthened these incompatible elements in the community. Despite their best intentions Government laws did not make this adjustment any easier, since the notions that these laws embodied were far from appropriate to the Sonthal society. Some Government officers with an intimate knowledge of the Sonthals realised it. For instance, Allen of Birbhum writes: 'It is this disruption of the people as a people that I believe mainly provokes the indignation of the Sonthals. They feel themselves in a net and know not which way to escape and our system of laws unfortunately allows them none. Those laws are constructed on the principle of the rights of the individual. They know nothing of the Sonthal village but as a collection of individuals. For the
protection of an individual the right of occupancy under Act X of 1859 affords ample provision; for the protection of the Sonthal village none. . . . The point I am most anxious to enforce is the necessity of abandoning our English notions of the rights of the individual and so moulding the law that it shall be capable of recognising the Sonthal view of the rights of the village.133 The realisation of the Sonthals that such an adjustment was not possible within the existing framework explains the nature of the programme that the rebel Sonthals set themselves: an entire rejection of all the changes that the new economic relations and legal set-up had brought to the Sonthal society and the restoration of this society in its pristine purity.

The combined resistance of peasants in Government and zamindari estates fundamentally differed from the Sonthal revolt, the main difference consisting in the absence in these estates of any such radical programme of entirely rejecting the existing property relations.

The first Government estate to be affected by such resistance was Tushkhali in the district of Bakarganj. Till 1874 it was leased to farmers. During the first phase of the resistance, 1855 to 1858, the farmer was the zamindar of the Taki estate. It was organised by a group of middlemen, variously known as abadkar, osut talukdar and mazul who reclaimed waste lands with the help of peasants. The revolt started when the farmer decided to eliminate this middlemen group in order to appropriate the entire amount paid to it as rent by ordinary peasants. To isolate the mazuls from the peasants, the farmer offered the latter quite liberal terms, but the hold of mazuls over them was too strong to be thus shaken. In fact some measures of the farmer antagonised peasants and thus defeated his own strategy of keeping mazuls peasants disunited. Some of these measures were strikingly new and seldom adopted in the zamindari estates, the novelty deriving from the particular enterprises of the farmer. He was engaged in reclaiming waste lands, and peasants had to contribute, under compulsion, to the cost of this reclamation by paying a rupee per bigha (kathi khurch). The labour requisitioned for it was poorly paid for. The farmer traded in grain; so peasants were forbidden to sell their grain to any other agency and had to surrender it at a price much below the market rate. To these were added most of the usual exactions practised in the zamindari estates. The particular measure of the farmer which caused the final explosion was to force peasants surrender to him their pattahs and receipts of payment. This was a shrewd device to persuade Government to renew his lease, due to expire in 1859, by inflating the actual figure of arrears of rent due from peasants and by showing that the rent rate paid by peasants had been moderate—a pretension or the peasants would be unable to refute without their pattahs and receipts of payment. The initial form of resistance was to send 'petitions by the hundreds' to the local administration, but some violent means were adopted later. The frightened farmer absconded at night, with an order to his agents 'to burn down the ryots' houses and to