
Class Formation and 'Antediluvian' Capital in Bangladesh*

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Published data on rural class differentiation in Bangladesh is underdeveloped and inhibits elaborate description. This is partly because most of the research was conducted until recently by the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development at Comilla (Blair 1974: 122; Van Schondel 1976) and has been based on agro-economic surveys in the densely populated and fertile region of Comilla itself. The Comilla findings formed the basis of extrapolations for Bangladesh as a whole, providing an image of a homogenous agrarian structure described in terms of small-holding farmers. Thus an overall consideration of the land distribution and tenure data on Bangladesh in the 1960s threw up two misleading generalisations: the absence of a substantial class of landlords and landholders; and the low level of absolute average size holding. From this data it is usually concluded that "the rural economy of Bangladesh is best described as a peasant economy based on small family farms operated primarily with family labour" (e.g. Abdullah and Nations, 1974: 9; also Bose, 1973). The Comilla cooperative programme was predicated on the ideological assumption that class division within the 'peasant economy' was structurally insignificant.

More recently this view has been modified by recognising a critical distinction between 'surplus' peasants on the one hand and subsistence, below subsistence and landless on the other: i.e., that minor variations of landholding were nevertheless critical (Abdullah and Nations 1974; Bertocci 1972). In this view, and along with many subsequent evaluations of the Comilla cooperative strategy (Khan 1971), there are rural elites in Bangladesh—but their existence is explained largely in terms of traditionally strong lineages which have managed to dominate the cooperatives, new irrigation opportunities, fertiliser distribution through political connections with government officials. By such means rural elites have marginally extended their control over land. However, there is the related notion that these

elites do not constitute a class, since the division of the holding between sons ensures a process of cyclical mobility, or, indeed, 'cyclical Kulakism' (Bertocci 1972.) Differentiation in this perspective is analysed as stratification ('objective' categories of wealth, income and status through which actors move up and down) rather than with a focus on the social relations of production and exchange.

The leftist groups in Bangladesh (see Maniruz-zaman 1975) analyse its class structure differently, but they are divided by fundamentally opposed positions. Some groups like the East Pakistan Communist Party of East Bengal, describe social relations in the countryside as being feudal or semi-feudal. In particular they focus on the issues of sharecropping and bonded labour, pointing to the classes of landlords which remain significant in the North and West regions of the country. Elsewhere, even in the densely populated Dacca-Comilla region (including Noakhali) sharecropping is still an important component of many of the small farms. The Jatiyo Samajtrantik Dal (JSD, the Revolutionary Socialist Party) on the other hand argues that the rural economy is becoming pervasively capitalist. In particular it evaluated the impact of dominant capital from the Western wing of Pakistan (hence its tactical support for 'liberation'); emphasized the polarisation of landholding which was disguised by the aggregated national statistics; and demonstrated the way in which agricultural programmes in Bangladesh (and, before 1971, in Pakistan) were big-farmer oriented, especially when the Comilla strategy is extended into other, more differentiated, regions.

A refinement of the JSD position is in order. In the specific circumstances of the partition of Bengal in 1947 and the colonial domination of East Bengal by West Pakistan with the related restrictions on Bengali capital accumulation, the formal destruction of the landlord-tenant system did not bring about the development of capitalist relations of production in the countryside. Instead other forms of capital were released—moneylending, trading, petty leasing—which characterised the relations between different classes of Muslims, after Hindu landlords and moneylenders departed. It is through these relationships that the polarisation of classes is

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occurring, even under the 'minifundist' agrarian conditions of the Dacca-Comilla region. The development of these relations pre-dates the government strategies of intensifying the level of capital in agricultural production, thereby structuring the impact of these strategies away from the creation of capitalist production relations. Thus the process of class differentiation in Bangladesh is the development of usurious and exploitative relations in the sphere of exchange rather than in the sphere of production *per se*. It is another question whether these relations are a temporary phase of early accumulation destined to transform the social formation into native capitalism (Chattopadhyay 1972); or whether they are bound to persist and start the development of capitalist relations in Bangladesh (Patnaik 1972; Alavi 1975).

However, the development of these antediluvian relations is not a uniform phenomenon throughout all the regions of Bangladesh, and it is the existence of significant regional variations in the relations between classes which is perhaps responsible for the contradictory views of rural class differentiation, noted above. In particular the regions in the North and West of the country are characterised by a greater differentiation in landholding, larger landlords, no sharecroppers and higher landlessness. This pattern is associated with both specific historical conditions and lower density of rural population than in the eastern regions of the country. Thus while a general picture of antediluvian capital prevails, the precise forms of that capital and its effects vary—more petty leasing in the North and West, more usury and petty commodity exchange in the East.

Under British rule the province of Bengal was a 'Permanently Settled' area, where most of the land was divided among *zamindars*—a hereditary class of tax farmers and 'super landlords' taken over by the British from the declining Mughal empire during the eighteenth century. The cultivator with permanent occupancy rights was a *raiyyat*, and he in turn might rent out all or part of his land to under-*raiyyats* or sharecroppers. Between the *zamindar* and the *raiyyat*, a class of intermediaries or tenure-holders proliferated as *zamindars* sub-divided the rent-collecting functions. Apart from the State, then, the classes variously connected with the land were: *zamindars*, *raiyyats*, under-*raiyyats*, sharecroppers and landless labourers. Sharecroppers and landless labourers were the main classes of labour on the land with *raiyyats* occupying the structural position of aggregating the surplus from sub-tenants and labour and transmitting it upwards

in the form of rent. This *zamindar* system was formally abolished in 1950 by the East Bengal State Acquisition Act, although the partition of India in 1947 had already undermined some of its features. The pervasiveness of the system, and therefore its structural importance for the social formation after 1950, is demonstrated by noting that in pre-partition East Bengal, out of a total of 28.8 mn acres, approximately 18 mn acres were held by *raiyyats* and a further 2 mn held directly by under-*raiyyats*, i.e., approximately 70 per cent.

Land Revenue Commission reports in the 1940s reveal regional variations in the structure of rural social relations which undermine the assumptions of homogeneity based on national level averages which comprise the more recently published data on landholdings. They show that the districts in the North and West of East Bengal were distinguished from elsewhere in the province by greater proportions of sharecroppers and landless, and that the classes of *raiyyats* and tenants were more differentiated by size of landholding. In those reports there are descriptions of Muslim *jotedars* (petty landlords/rich *raiyyats*). This lends weight to the proposition that there were Muslim 'surplus' farmers before and during the emergence of Pakistan in certain areas of East Bengal, as against the more familiar notion that these classes developed all over East Bengal solely as a result of West Pakistan colonial policy or in response to the opportunities created by Comilla-type agricultural development strategies.

An explanation for this regional variation in the extent of differentiation among the *raiyyat* classes must in part refer to the historical specificity of the 'border' districts during the 1940s. These districts were more exposed to communal tension which developed as a prelude to the Muslim League's campaign for a separate Islamic State. This communal factor restrained the excesses of (Hindu) *zamindar* oppression over Muslim tenants (e.g., illegal charges in addition to statutory rent), thus retaining more surplus at the level of *raiyyat* for accumulation and consolidation of holdings. Also, as the rural population in border districts was more evenly distributed between Hindus and Muslims than elsewhere in the province, the impact of inter-caste relations on the pattern of landholding and tenancy was greater. And after 1947, the departure of Hindu *raiyyats* as well as *zamindars* and tenure holders created more 'illegal' opportunities than further east for the remaining rich Muslim peasants to expropriate the land vacated by the Hindu *raiyyats* as well as landlords. As a result, in this region,

which in any case received the greater proportion of new immigrants, the newcomers became sharecroppers and landless labourers rather than *raiyyats* more frequently than elsewhere.

The proposition is important for several reasons. First, it indicates a structure of rural class relations very different from the 'Comilla' model which is generally applied—namely a homogenous structure of undifferentiated, small-holding peasants. Second, it undermines the related assumptions about the nature of power in East Bengal which has traditionally been analysed solely in terms of the aspirations of an urban petty-bourgeoisie leading an undifferentiated mass of the peasantry against the common oppressor from the West—e.g. the language movements and the rise of Bengali nationalism (Alavi 1972; Ahmed 1973: 419-48; Ali 1975; Maniruzzaman 1975). More specifically it focuses our attention on the role of these classes in transforming the entire social formation both through their support for the Muslim League and the quest for an independent Pakistan, and through their subsequent influence over agrarian legislation and state policy in agriculture. The Muslim League's policy of partition had the related advantage of removing the stratum of Hindu landlords from their stultifying influence over the aspirations of the Muslim *jotedars*; while the attack on feudal rural relations had to be contained at the point when the conditions for their own appropriation of land and surplus had been fulfilled.

However the political significance of this class of Muslim *jotedars* in the North and West of Bangladesh can only be considered in conjunction with that of the Bengali petty bourgeoisie consisting of small traders, shopkeepers, professionals, teachers, junior officials and clerks in the provincial services. In a country where the entire urban population was never more than 10 per cent, this class had close kinship and other connections with the economically stronger classes of *raiyyats* and *jotedars* in the countryside. It is not difficult therefore to see the relationships between the frustrated aspirations of a Bengali petty bourgeoisie whose language (and career prospects) was threatened and those of the larger Muslim farmers and peasants whose own development was restricted by West Pakistani colonial policy. In this way the language movements could expand into broader Bengali Nationalism and lay the foundation for the creation of a reformist nationalist party (the Awami League) which successfully combined the respective concerns of the larger rural petty commodity producers and the urban petty

bourgeoisie to reproduce West Pakistani capitalism in the East through a constitutional bourgeois-democratic transformation, with associated career prospects for the Bengali intelligentsia in the private and public sectors. A combination of populist rhetoric and rural vote banks (Ayooob 1971) steadily increased support among the poorer classes of Bengali peasantry, culminating in the League's overwhelming electoral victories of 1970 and 1973.

Despite the contemporary significance of these two classes—*jotedars* and urban petty bourgeoisie—and the alliance between them, they remained economically weak from 1947 to 1971 as a result of East Bengal's status as a colony of West Pakistan. This has been well documented elsewhere by Nations (1971) and Sengupta (1971). The Muslim League and the Movement for Pakistan had been led essentially by classes outside East Bengal—landlords from Punjab, Sind and Central India; trading communities from Gujarat and Bombay which formed the basis of the Pakistani industrial capitalist class; and westernised Muslim elites from similar regions who constituted a professional middle class and who had staffed the bureaucratic and military apparatuses of the colonial State. East Bengal had been dominated by Hindu traders and officials (as well as landlords) as part of the Calcutta hinterland. Thus Muslims of East Bengal were historically disadvantaged at the time of Pakistan's formation in 1947. This facilitated their colonial exploitation by the western region up to 1971, and accounts for the restricted and undeveloped nature of a bourgeois class indigenous to East Bengal.

East Bengal had a virtual world monopoly in jute production, but the foreign exchange earned by the export of this peasant-produced cash crop was redirected by the military-bureaucratic oligarchy in West Pakistan (Alavi 1972) on behalf of the development of its indigenous, industrial capitalist class. The compulsory purchase of West Pakistani manufactures by the East at inflated monopoly prices led to a further outflow of capital which might have been deployed locally. Further aspects of this colonialism indirectly restricted the development of the Bengali classes. West Pakistani capital and its entrepreneurs were significantly present and in control of East Bengal industry, with Bengali Muslims owning less than 2.9 per cent of private industrial assets. Thus much of the wealth created in East Bengal industry was repatriated to the West in the form of salaries, dividends, interests and profits; and the related opportunity for multiplier effects from

indigenous capital accumulation was also lost. Add to the picture the evidence from the First and Second Five Year Plans, in particular, that the greater proportion of funds for development was allocated to the Western Province, and the failure of an East Bengali bourgeoisie to emerge is hardly surprising. The dominant classes in West Pakistan were engaged in an exercise of primitive capital accumulation.

The development of social relations of production in Bangladesh and the pattern of rural class formation cannot be isolated from these colonial effects. The principal contradiction was that the appropriation of East Bengal's rural surplus by the emerging capitalist classes of the West (including an unwillingness to re-invest in East Bengal's agriculture) jeopardised the reproduction of social relations required to produce that surplus. During the 1950s agricultural output virtually stagnated (Bose 1973: 35; Government of Bangladesh 1973: 84, *passim*). For example, rice production increased at 0.7 per cent per annum compared with a population growth of nearly 3 per cent per annum. Even the production of jute declined in the 1950s, picking up in the 1960s only because of a large increase in the acreage, since yields were declining. This evidence on jute is consistent with the tendency for land-holding to polarise, with land being transferred out of the hands of small, mainly subsistence and rice-cultivating peasants. The squeeze on agriculture, both through adverse terms of trade and the low level of state investment, restricted the capacity of richer peasants to expand their control directly over productive assets. However, this squeeze, together with increases in population, increased the vulnerability of the poorest peasants. Without the dubious advantages of a *zamindari* system to rely on, their urgent requirements for credit, for land to sharecrop, or to sell their labour could only be met by the richer, surplus peasants—at a cost.

By thus restricting the development of rural capitalism in East Bengal, Pakistani colonialism encouraged the development of other relations of exploitation: usurious moneylending often related to the mortgaging of land; leasing of land for sharecropping even where the owner's holding is small and within the capacity of family labour; and the use of hired labour, sometimes migratory, at depressed wage rates (Alamgir 1974: 737-818; Clay 1976). In addition to taking on the money-lending functions of the 'deported' Hindu *Banias*, the Muslim surplus peasants extended their participation in petty trade, either diversifying themselves into retail and marketing businesses in

local *hats* (bazaars) and towns, or financing the petty, peripatetic trading activities of the landless and near-landless at usurious rates (Wood 1976).

Although the context is different, Patnaik's analysis of the role of metropolitan capital in structuring the transition from 'feudalism' in India has many parallels for the East Bengal colony (Patnaik 1972). Pakistan broke up East Bengal's pre-capitalist economy but restricted and distorted the development of capitalist relations. She argues that under conditions of manipulated stagnation by imperial exploitation it is the 'antediluvian' forms of capital which emerge and flourish: moneylending capital for usury, trading capital, and capital for purchasing land to lease out to petty tenants.

These 'antediluvian' forms of capital represent capital in the sphere of exchange, and have to be distinguished from capital in the sphere of agricultural production which alone would be consistent with the development of capitalist social relations in the countryside. Thus under these conditions the distortion of the pre-capitalist mode of production does not necessarily entail its substitution by a capitalist mode.

This development of capital in the sphere of circulation of commodities with the related 'antediluvian' forms has the effect of undermining independent small peasant production. There is an increase in landlessness and mortgaging. Indebtedness abounds and the small peasants' land is gradually expropriated *de facto* if not *de jure* so that the small peasant is transformed into a sharecropper (of his own legal holding); a dependent labourer and servant; an insecure peripatetic trader carrying shoulder loads; a migrant agricultural labourer; a hopeful on the urban labour market; or a vagrant (Wood 1976). In these circumstances the extension of wage labour cannot be interpreted as a sign of advancing capitalist relations. Labour is free neither in the sense of being unbonded, nor in the sense of the availability of alternative employment since the industrial development of East Bengal was also restricted.

These exploitative relations are institutionally disguised at the level of social relations in the village, both consciously through verbal agreements and informal arrangements backed by sanctions; and more pervasively through the class-based management of the hegemonic, egalitarian Muslim kinship ideology which denounces interest rates and the like.

But the specificity of agrarian conditions in East Bengal goes beyond that derived from the status of the province as a sub-colony of Pakistan when the variations in rural class structure are considered. The general effect of Pakistani imperialism was not to produce a uniform set of responses all over East Bengal, instead it was articulated through the inherited regional differences in social relations. Thus under the 'minifundist' conditions of the Dacca-Comilla region the relationships of debt and mortgage were the dominant 'antediluvian' form to emerge; while sharecropping and landlessness became more prevalent in the West and North-West, where a class of 'surplus' Muslim peasants was established in the form of larger landholder and petty landlords. This is not to suggest that the other forms of non-productive relation were not present in each of the areas, but that the variations above constituted the determining relation in each case.

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