

The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943

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This is an unusual book in terms of the range of its discrete and varied chapters. Its strongest continuing themes are ecology and the Sundarbans. Despite an occasional lack of context and connection, each section is of interest, and some are original and thought-provoking.

We start with the ecology of the Gangetic delta, and the ways Indian rural populations have been discussed by others. Dynamism is a consistent theme, in particular the importance of shifting, alluvial land-forms. Other key issues include features of colonial agrarian policy and the importance of its initially slight but increasing knowledge and reach, and, secondly, the possibly-related emergence of rich peasants, particularly the pre-history of their alleged prominence after the 1930s depression. Later, worsening communal feeling around the same time is briefly discussed (pp. 187–8).

The argument hinges partly on ‘anomalies’ produced by variations in effective state knowledge and capacity. Iqbal thinks this idea gives insufficient weight to Indian agency. But one might see that as central; and, more important, anomalies imply rules and trends. As I have previously claimed ([1](#)), indeterminate zones of authority and a panoply of exceptions existed, over different peoples, practices and areas, despite British claims to absolute sovereignty; and yet the trend *was* towards standardization.

This is relevant to Iqbal’s second chapter, on state policy towards wasteland and alluvial lands, and the favourable revenue or rental terms used to encouraged land reclamation, both for ‘actual cultivators’ and for superior landholders (*hawaladars*). Such arrangements were very common, from the earliest expansions of cultivation in the eastern delta; but here is an important addition to our understanding of land-management. However, the Sundarbans are presented rather as the norm. Examples, on policy, include a preference on *diara*

(alluvial) lands for temporary settlements and for *khas* (state) management through contractors; a general desire (p. 25) to bring as much land as possible under direct government control; and an emphasis on maximizing land revenue. This book links such policies to a political-ideological rejection of the permanent settlement, and a lack of attention to existing rights.

My understanding is that, though much of this is true, its broader contexts need more nuance. First, *diara* lands, often rich and cultivable, were managed according to prevailing conditions, including existing rights. This book notes the lack of powerful intermediary groups in the eastern delta; arrangements were different where such groups dominated the countryside. Secondly, it is true that *diara*, created and taken away by the action of rivers, posed a fundamental difficulty for a land-system based on permanence. (Nitin Sinha is working on this.) River action also led to disputes over boundaries and jurisdiction between British provinces. Regulation XI of 1825 tried to ensure that alluvium was settled with the estate to which the river 'awarded' it; but it might equally be returned to another if the river 'gave it back'. It was an obvious confusion that led to attempts (some described in this book) to award temporary leases. Bengal's higher revenue authorities generally tried to represent these as a step towards permanence.

Thirdly, behind these immediate conundrums, there *were* new ideas about revenue policy, marked by the closer, less rule-bound administration of the temporary *raiayatwari* settlements, or of the village and coparcenary settlements encouraged by Metcalfe's famous image of village communities and theories about castes and tribes; and some officials did manage to apply these ideas in Bengal, including it seems in the Sundarbans; but the possibilities for doing so were limited, and risky politically. *Khas* management was often regarded as undesirable, sometimes even when reclamation was needed. As Palit (not cited here) wrote, of the aftermath of resumption proceedings in Nadia district, 'the pious wish of promoting cash crops by rent control was given up and over assessment led to the sale of resumed estates'. Though resumption was useful in providing information, *khas* management was dropped, and 'a further row over landlord rights ... avoided'.⁽²⁾ Adjustments also followed a *zamindari* backlash in the great rent debate of the 1870s and 1880s, and in the 20th century. Pro-landlord policies, though hotly contested, did not periodically vanish. Hence, in permanently-settled areas, both *khas* management and temporary settlement directly with the *raiya*t were 'anomalies', needing explanation.

Finally, revenue considerations did not always trump all others, even in the extended battles from the 1830s to resume *lakhiraj* (rent-free) holdings for the revenue-roll. In the 1830s scheme to encourage reclamation in the Sundarbans (chapter two), the terms were one quarter of the area permanently rent-free, and the remainder free for 20 years, subject a quarter of the land being under cultivation within five years. This underlines the emphasis placed, above *short-term* revenue gains, not only on politics but on development.

In these respects Iqbal's book does not always engage fully with wider policy debates. Discussing actual agrarian conditions, it cites polemics from the great rent law debate, including *zamindari* special-pleading. On tenurial rights and issues relating to so-called resident (*khudkashta*) and non-resident (*pahikashta*) status, it claims occupancy *raiya*t generally enjoyed fixed rents (p. 36), though occupancy as defined in 1859 and again in 1885 conferred a right of possession; one of the longest-running arguments was about ways to ensure it was not nullified by unfair rent increases.

Iqbal's third chapter turns to production and well-being. The picture is slightly blurred by reliance on the evidence of British observers, all convinced of the benefits of free trade and by the Board of Revenue's consistent animus against *zamindari* market-dues based on transactions rather than ground-rents. But suitable scepticism is shown over the optimism of the Dufferin report (1888) regarding the reasonable comfort of the semi-landless and a paucity of landless labourers. It is suggested that, despite lower mean temperatures than on the inland plains, high humidity encouraged malaria and cholera epidemics, worst of all for women kept in seclusion (perhaps an echo of the miasma theory of disease). Finally, reclamation introduced larger populations into areas vulnerable to flooding and cyclones.

On the other hand, this book endorses the relative prosperity, low indebtedness, and lack of socio-economic differentiation that others also have found in the eastern, deltaic districts of Bengal, later contributing to an

emerging Muslim middle class. The book provides a pre-history of these conditions, which cannot have appeared from nowhere. The delta, it argues, was ecologically suited to rice and jute; price competition and reclamation opportunities enhanced many cultivators' independence. Though *zamindari* influence was felt socially, there were few very wealthy families but large numbers (many Muslims; also Namasudras and others) engaged in reclamation and benefiting from jute production. The region experienced high population growth, not only from inward migration, but from live births, the availability of work for family members, and, probably, improved nutrition.

Chapter four is most concerned to take a new look at the Fara'izi movement, showing its adherents' economic grievances coinciding with their religious ideals, at times overriding them in protests that were social and non-communal in nature. One interesting conjuncture is between Hajji Shariatullah's religious objection to paying certain dues to (Hindu) *zamindars*, and the interests of those being coerced into growing indigo. Conversely, lack of resistance in the Sundarbans is ascribed to its moderate and accommodating landholding regime.

The chapter starts with the old canard about Bengalis' want of the physical and mental stamina needed to resist outsiders. It seems the wrong assertion to refute: there was plenty of resistance in Bengal, but more interesting, in fact considered here, is the shaping of diverse forms of resistance by experience and socio-political influences. In Bengal, armed attacks on British rule (and criminality) occurred at all periods, but so did support from powerful, self-interested people co-opted by money, jobs and ideas.

The short account of Fara'izi organization, communications (pp. 70–2) and methods (for example against indigo planters, pp. 77–8) would be interesting to compare with those of other socio-religious protest movements, such as the so-called Indian Wahhabis. There are salutary reminders, finally, of the pitfalls of colonial categorization, in the officials' lumping together of diverse protests under the title 'fara'izi', though George Campbell's 'encouragement' of Fara'izi claims for occupancy rights and fair rents (pp. 81–2) would have benefited from a wider discussion of his views on land reform.

There is no reason to doubt Iqbal's conclusion that peasant opposition effectively forced indigo production out of Bengal proper. There is no puzzle about its continuing in Bihar. Not due to distance or ignorant cultivators (p.79), it is explained by *rai-yats* acquiescing in temporary allies against greedy landlords; the lack of profitable alternative crops until other prices rose; the coercive power of indigo factories and agents under *thikadari* (usufructuary) leases; collusion between European officials and planters (despite the former's sometime pro-tenant leanings and the latter's 'voluntary' promises of good behaviour); and finally the immense influence of the great zamindars in Darbhanga, Champaran, and Saran.

Consistently suspicious about 'autonomous' classes, I have argued, at least since the mid-1980s, against exaggerated notions of the isolation from rural affairs of the Bengali *bhadralok* ('respectable people') – 'these Calcutta residents with their foreign ideas were not after all cut off as a separate sect in a land made of separate sects'.⁽³⁾ I was therefore happy to find Iqbal's chapter five arguing against placing this educated middle-class 'squarely in the urban milieu, implying a gradual decline of their rural connections in the late colonial period', alongside the rise of an 'autonomous' rich peasantry. He suggests the *bhadralok* remained 'an active force in the agrarian relations of eastern Bengal' (p.93).

In my arguments, I had thought of landownership, or work as estate managers, lawyers and publicists, as well as continuing ties to natal villagers and smallholdings. A recent London PhD thesis ⁽⁴⁾ illustrated keen *bhadralok* involvement in ideas, events and organizations for agricultural improvement, from the 1870s to the 1930s. Iqbal provides valuable insights into both these perspectives, and extends them significantly. He stresses the importance of the images of 'Sonar [golden] Bengal', its decline, and potential, as aspects of the *swadeshi* (own-country) movement of the early 20th century. He describes an influx of 'upper-class' Hindus and Muslims into the active deltaic areas, where they had previously been scarce, and how significant numbers engaged directly in agriculture, in some cases with official British encouragement, through training and a new focus on self-sustaining holdings (larger than average for *bhadralok* farmers) rather than commercial enterprises. *Bhadralok* acquisition of occupancy rights and a rise in sharecropping, Iqbal claims,

were also permitted by provisions in law and policy allowing the transfer of agricultural holdings, and by the failure of legislation to protect ‘actual cultivators’, as also discussed at length in my *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort*.⁽⁵⁾ The occupancy *raiyyat* and hence *bhadralok* positions were entrenched, as others also have shown, by revisions of the tenancy laws in 1928 and 1938. Many of these people, Iqbal claims, were not just newly-rich peasants but newly ‘peasants’. Their power was consolidated through credit networks, including those of the cooperative societies – often liable to capture by elites, as I and others have suggested for earlier periods and elsewhere, and here, according to Iqbal, effectively ‘a project for the rehabilitation of the *bhadralok*’ (p.113). The actual cultivators suffered, terribly in the 1943 famine.

The next chapters turn to railways and water, and then to weeds, making one feel one has strayed into a landscape populated by Elizabeth Whitcombe. Her celebrated diatribe on colonial agrarian policy, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India* ⁽⁶⁾ is not cited, though reference is made to Ira Klein’s contemporaneous article linking railways and disease. After a few rather discursive pages, ranging from Marx and Gandhi on modernization to obscure early pamphlets proposing railway lines, we reach the nub: rivalry between water and rail transport, with the latter receiving attention and resources, and the economic and ecological consequences of railway construction in the delta. The broad picture is familiar enough, of squabbles between experts and departments, and lack of attention to indigenous knowledge and conditions, though a more nuanced account might have spent more time on changing opinions – here about interruptions of water-flow when railway and road embankments were built with insufficient culverts or attention to the natural fall of the land. It is easy to find arrogance and, with hindsight, grave errors; further probing often reveals people who fully appreciated complexities and dangers. Standing in for that here, we have some bullish lectures by engineers, sandwiched between contrary articles in *The Times* of 1846 and 1922. Case studies then document adaptations of policy from the first experiences of flooding: the early Sealdah-Goalundo line was constructed with hardly any outlets for water, but 2,000 lineal feet of openings were added between 1868 and 1885, and a further 400 after 1890.

The view of officialdom may be over-simplified, but the overall consequences remain: deleterious effects on agriculture and health. All these railway embankments (the Assam line is also discussed) created formidable obstacles to drainage, causing water-logging, damage to standing crops, interruptions of the agricultural rhythm, and disease. Similarly, the Hardinge bridge at Sara required embankments to channel water and restrain the river from wandering across the plain. After works were completed (1915), the impact was felt in flooding and other disturbances over hundreds of square miles above and below the bridge.

Chapter seven is a catalogue of the woes caused by the Amazonian water hyacinth that arrived in Bengal in the late 19th century, and by the 1920s was clogging the water channels. There ensued a debate between some scientists and the agricultural department, who believed the weed could become a useful fertiliser, and others including the government of Bengal, with an eye to the revenue perhaps, who were anxious to see it eradicated, while also admitting they could not mount a campaign of the necessary scale. None of the means available and tried was effective, not legislation (including a strong but muddled Bengal Act of 1936), nor the various attempts to spread awareness and encourage efforts by members of the public.

The economic consequences cannot be precisely measured, as is admitted. (No attempt is made to weigh the harm from embankments against the benefits earlier attributed to trade.) But the disasters were introduced to bridge the gap between the growing if partial prosperity described earlier, and the deprivation and poverty described in chapter eight, where they are explained by a halt to the extension of cultivation (in some districts) and a decline in intensity (productivity per acre), relative to population, features observable also in other parts of India, from the 1920s. Data on productivity are often dubious, and the subject of great controversy, but a crisis in the making is suggested by somewhat more robust demographic information. Iqbal adds a litany of decline: waterlogging and hyacinths, but also salinity, and disease in crops and humans. Increases in cultivated area in many districts (Khulna, Dhaka, Rajshahi, Mymensingh) either did not keep ahead of migration, or brought poorer, more vulnerable lands under the plough.

Large imports of Burma rice, which related to price, and to changes in milling and marketing in Bengal (considered here, pp. 173–4), nonetheless testify to a continuing ability to buy food, at least for some.

Therefore, the next argument is that the availability of work also declined, partly due to the changing ratio between rent-receivers and sharecroppers from the 1920s, also observed in most other parts of the subcontinent (strongly in Sindh and Punjab). By the 1940s, in Bengal, 29 per cent of the agricultural population were sharecroppers, subjected by occupancy *raiyyats* determined to maintain or increase their take. Iqbal attributes some blame to the state's 'alienation' from the cultivators and its greater pretensions to knowledge of agrarian conditions. I suspect the changes derived from politics and political will, and that we are seeing the logic of the 1885 Tenancy Act, deliberately favouring 'entrepreneurial' occupancy-holders over 'actual cultivators' as the best agents of growth, and providing secure tenures that invited indebtedness (as here) as much as investment, but hence opportunities for local and especially 'agricultural' moneylenders, from eastern Bengal to Bihar. Revenue officers on *khas mahals* may or may not have been more zealous than other intermediaries in collecting dues from impoverished cultivators; but it was not the difference between permanently and temporarily-settled areas that mattered, as claimed, but the local mix of power, ecology, output, and vulnerability. The 1943 Bengal famine still needs specific explanations.

A final section considers nutrition and disease. Eastern Bengal suffered a decline in the nutritional value of rice normally consumed, and in the availability of fish (hyacinth again, and rivers drying up, to the accompaniment of increased malaria). In regard to disease, if its role in famine deaths has been neglected (though a later theme of Whitcombe and known to demographers), it is not really considered here, most of the evidence being earlier. Malaria was controlled ineffectually, with initially feeble anti-larval measures and acute rather than prophylactic use of quinine. In the case of cholera, despite long recognition of the need for sanitation and uncontaminated drinking water, even quite large-scale efforts (it is said) did not keep pace with the declining ecological conditions.

The book's conclusion claims its special contribution is to emphasize the environment. That is indeed a consistent theme, and a welcome one. Claiming a continuity of some policies, conditions and problems from the colonial era into present-day Bangladesh, Iqbal concludes that it is necessary to understand 'the state's adjustment to changing social power' and the 'plurality of social forces' (p.192). These seem important parts of the task yet to be completed. Hinted at also is the antagonism between modernization and ecology. At best a descant to the book's themes, that too is obviously a subject worth investigating.

Notes

1. Peter Robb, 'The colonial state and constructions of Indian identity: an example on the North-East Frontier in the 1880s', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 2 (1997), 245–83.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule (1830-1860)* (London, 1998), pp. 54–5.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter Robb, *The Evolution of British Policy towards Indian Politics, 1880–1920* (New Delhi, 1992), p. 94.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sanjukta Ghosh, 'Colonial State, Agricultural Knowledge Transfers and Indigenous Response: Bengal Presidency 1870-1930' (PhD thesis, University of London, 2010).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort: Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India* (Richmond, 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India* (Berkeley, CA, 1972).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5490>