Toward Understanding Peasants' Politics in Bangladesh : A Historical Perspective Since 1920

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In spite of a substantial number of monographs and articles on different aspects of the socio-political and economic history of East Bengal, there has been little discussion of the peasantry in the region. Various factors are responsible for historians, anthropologists and other social scientists' inadequate treatment of the bulk of the population in this predominantly agrarian region of South Asia. The study of peasants in general, and their politics in particular, is often subject to our "global" and "imperialistic consciousness" in the language of D. B. Miller. Our preconceived notion that the peasants are homogeneous and politically inert "leads us once again to concentrate on what we see as the centre of the political stage, the metropolis, ... until such time as they [peasants] are again defined as of historical significance."[1] Hamza Alavi and other scholars are also critical of that historiography which only portrays the "dramatic moments" when the peasants have "in-

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fluenced the course of constitutional devolution" or have participated in political actions leading to the eventual withdrawal of colonial rule.[2]

A bird's eye view of the socio-political history of East Bengal during 1920-1947 suggests that there is little scope for writing the story of the region in the thrilling terms of revolutionary peasant war. The twentieth-century may be the century of "peasant revolution"[3] but not in East Bengal. The paucity of discussion of the politics of the peasants in the region is not because there has been "uneventful normality" in the life of the region, but because of the nature of the "bourgeois nationalist" historians who regard the pre-First World War period as the "pre-history" of the freedom movement.[4]

It is difficult to establish the peasantry as the "maker and breaker of revolutions"[5] in the light of the oft-quoted remarks of Marx, made in the context of the nineteenth-century French peasants. Peasants in East Bengal in the first half of the twentieth-century cannot be simply ignored as "representatives of the unchanging remnants of the past," totally dependent on their masters, and as "rural idiots" or a "such of potatoes", to paraphrase the *Eightaenth Brumaire*[6] of Marx.

Peasant politics connotes much more than the "periodic irruption of the peasantry." The case of East Bengal confirms the view that "the river of historical change" issued from the villages, and that numerous peasant movements under colonial rule were ignored as problems of "law and order" or 'communalism' by

the ruling class. The conscious efforts of peasants to change oppressive systems under colonial rule have been compared to natural phenomena like storms, earthquakes, bushfires and epidemics. Their insurgencies throughout the sub-continent have been regarded as "external" to their consciousness.[7]

In actuality, peasants in this industrially backward, predominantly agricultural sub-region of south Asia had been the most important political force during the inter-War period. Their political activities, motivated by consciuns efforts to improve their socio-economic conditions, led to the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of the sub-region, East Pakistan, and in the long-run to the state of Bangladesh.

In order to understand the intricacies of the politics of the peasants in East Bengal, culminating to the communalization of class struggle between predominantly high-caste Hindu landlord-moneylenders and Muslim peasants often religious, kinship and factional ties had cut across class alignments, we must define "peasants" and "politics" in the context of the region during the period under review.

Due to the many variations in the definition of peasants it is difficult to define the term. Eric Wolf's definition of peasants as cultivators who are existentially involved in agriculture and make "autonomous dicision regarding the process of cultivation" may help us in comprehending the term with reference to East Bangal. His exclusion of the landless labourers from the category of peasants'[8] is however, not acceptable, as landless labourers of the region identi-

fied themselves as peasants vis-a-vis landlords and other agents of exploitation. Most of them being dispossessed tenants, they aspired to become land-holding cultivators, though by 1940 about 21 per cent of the cultivating families of East Bengal had been agricultural labourers,[9] their position always fluctuated between the status of total landlessness and semi-landlessness, at least prior to the Great Famine of 1943-1944. We may agree with Teodor Shanin that to be a peasant, one does not need to have legal ownership of the land one cultivates ; that may lie with ihe tiller, the landlord, or the state.[10] So long as one takes "autonomous decisions" and participates in the process of cultivation, one remains a peasant. In respect of the different categories of cultivating classes in the region, the sense of belonging to, and above all, identifying with, a particular group on the part of a category for political purposes, should determine its place in the agrarian structure.

Unlike commercial farmers peasants have only incomplete access to the market. They mainly produce for subsistence and sell their surplus to buy goods they do not produce and to pay rental and taxes. In short they run households, not business concerns in the economic sense.[11] But the rich categories, who sometimes sublet their holdings to members of the lower peasantry and themselves are hardly engaged in cultivation, may be regarded as exception. Since they take part in agricultural pursuits unlike the landlords, they remain peasants—in spite of their exploitation of wage labourers and sharecroppers.[12] In relation to the land-

lord classes, who obtained rent from their tenants and paid revenue to the government, all tenants in East Bengal, irrespective of their wealth and status, were peasants.

In the presence of so many contradictory definitions of the rich, middle and poor peasants, it is difficult to fit the different categories of East Bengali peasants into the above mentioned categories. In order to avoid confusion one can broadly characterize the rich peasants as those who mainly employed labourers, sharecroppers or tenants with no rights on their holdings, to farm their land. The middle peasants were mainly dependent on family labour, while the poor ones worked for others as labourers, sharecroppers or tenants-at-will. Broadly, the *jotedars*, *ryots* and under-*ryots* can be categorized respectively as the rich, middle and poor peasants of East Bengal during the period under review.

The *jotedars* or intermediaries between *zamindars* and the lower peasants, overlapped both landlords and rich peasants. All *jotedars* holding more than one hundred standard *bighas* or thirty-three acres of land should be presumed to be "tenure-holders", holding land directly under a proprietor or *zamindar*, until the contrary is shown, under the provision of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.[1] Though misleading, this differentiation of tenants mainly on the basis of wealth, not on the basis of differences in the production relations, helps us to locate the category of rich peasants, who due to the sheer quantum of land in their possession had to employ wage labourers, sub-tenants and sharecroppers in farming. The *jotedars* can be characterized

as rich peasants, because they also engaged in commercial and industrial pursuits and often had moneylending businesses in the countryside.[14] Besides the *jotedars*, there were other categories of rich peasants employing sharecroppers and different categories of sub-tenants, throughout the region. In different districts they were known as *talukdars, haoladars, latdars, basunias* and *mandals*. For avoiding confusion, all these intermediaries between the *zamindars*—proprietors and the *ryots*—under-*ryots* may be broadly classified as *jotedars*. Rich peasants besides the intermediary rent-collecting *jotedars*, who mostly depended on wage labourers and servants for cultivation, were broadly known as *projas* or tenants of *zamindars*, although technically most *jotedars*, excepting the independent tenure holders, were *projas* too.

Locating the middle peasants in the region is more difficult than locating the rich ones. Middle peasants are independent peasant proprietors who normally do not exploit the labour of others nor is whose labour exploited by others. A middle peasant in East Bengal could be a sharecropper or labourer as well to supplement his income. His class should be determined by the principal relation of production from which he drew his livelihood.[15] Broadly, we can characterize *ryot* or *raiyat*, meaning "a person who has acquired a right to hold land or the purpose of cultivating it by himself or by members of his family, or by servants or labourers',[16] as middle peasant. Despite the usages of the terms "*ryot*" and "*proja*" to denote an amorphous tenant monolith vis-a-vis the *zamindars*, *ryots* holding

more than thirty-three acres should be presumed to be rich peasants. However, this does not mean that they should be regarded as "tenure-holders" as defined by the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.[17] Peasants holding more than thirty-three acres had greater affinity with rich peasants than with the middle or poor ones so far as the mode of production and production relations were concerned. They were chiefly dependent on hired labourers or sharecroppers, not on family labour, for production.

All categories below the middle peasants can be broadly classified as poor peasants in the region. The non-occupancy *ryots* and under-*ryots* or tenants of the *ryots*, who did not enjoy security of tenure, as their rental could be enhanced and they could be even ejected from their holdings more easily than the *ryots*, came within this category.[18] They were sometimes called *krishaks* or cultivators. But this term again does not specify any particular class of peasants, as the middle peasants are also known as *krishaks*. In short, irrespective of their wealth, the rich sharecroppers, called *bargadars* or *adhiars* in the region, and the landless agricultural labourers, known as *khet mazdoors*, or *krishans*, in spite or their different production relations, can be classified as poor peasants because local custom as their sense of belonging put them in this category, which played a vital role in the history of peasant mobilization in the region during the period under review.

There are some inner contradictions in every peasant society, which are well reflected in the political

activities and alignments of the different categories. Though some Marxists tend to ignore these contradictions simply by ascribing the "class in itself" mentality to the peasantry, throughout history it mostly acted as a "class for itself", far from being a "fading remnant of pre-capitalist society", in relation to the non-peasant outsiders.[19] The basic contradiction in the peasant society is its perpetual sense of deprivation and exploitation in the hands of non-peasant outsiders and its servility to the non-peasant urban leaders at the same time. There is no reason to doubt that East Bengali peasants, like their counterparts elsewhere, regarded themselves as the "basic type of humanity" harbouring a deep sense of injustice against the "untypical minority",[20] the non-peasants. Any study on Bangladesh peasants' politics has to explore why in most cases middle and poor peasants accepted the non-peasant outsiders and rich peasants as their leaders. Was it due to their "class in itself" or fatalist mentality or some other socio-economic and political factors ?

A debate is going on between the "moral" and "rational" economists whether or not peasants are fatalistic or "traditional". The former group of scholars believe that peasants are satisfied with bare subsistence and rebel only when their subsistence is threatened, especially after the advent of "capitalism" in the agrarian aector.[21] A section of the Bengali Muslim politicians, who fought against the exacting *zamindars* and money lenders on behalf of the peasants in the region, also believed that Muslim peasnts were fatalistic, as they were found praying to God "in the hot blazing sun" for the salvation

of their souls when their children were dying of malaria as they were too poor to buy medicine for them.[22]

In the 1870's, about one hundred years before the modern exponents of the "rational economy" theory, Sir Henry Sumner Mainer in his *Village Communiy* questioned the validity of the theory that authority, chance and custom were the main sources of law in "primitive communities" of India. He is right in his observations that the Indian peasants' faith in traditional "brotherhood" was shaken as the co-sharers wished to have their shares separately. Individualism and the self interest of peasants were stronger than their sense of identification with the needs of their community.[23]

The "rational economists" are probably correct that the Indian peasants' attempts to establish an "alternative order" or "peasant utopia" have been wrongly presented as their "restorative" struggle by some modern historians.[24] It is not altogether difficult to establish that the peasants of East Bengal were rational beings, who were prepared to take risks or gamble for a better future, as they were not always satisfied with bare subsistence. There is again no standard scale to measure the "subsistence level" of peasants as stipulated by the "moral economists".[25] Peasants, like normal human beings, always aspire to a better socio-economic condition.

In short, peasants have similar characteristics everywhere.[26] There can be hardly any specimen of "active" and "revolutionary" Buddhist peasants or "passive" and "fatalistic" non-Buddhist Bengali peasants.[27] They are not at all different kinds of human beings, but are in more difficult circumstances than the urban people.

But peasants in general are God-fearing and awe-stricken by the ravages of nature and nourish a tremendous inferiority complex. They consider it better to "work with one's head" than with one's hands, yet they compromise with the society by selling their labour, paying taxes and respecting the non-peasant outsiders. In their heart of hearts they often cherish the desire that their posterity will one day become like a townsman, educated and well placed in life.[28]

There is yet another problem in understanding peasant politics—the controversy regarding the role of different categories of peasants in the overall politics of a region. Most scholars engaged in the debate are, however, concerned with the violent revolutionary politics of peasants which aim to change the socio-economic and political structures of societies in the modern period. No social structure is, however, totally immune to revolutions; only some are more vulnerable to revolutionary tendencies depending on the "structural differences."[29] The mere economic distress of the masses does not bring about revolutions and there is no hard and fast rule that a particular category of peasants will behave in a similar way in every society vis-a-vis revolutionary movements. Relatively better off peasants became revolutionary in France and south-western Germany, while the poorer peasants remained passive in Russia and Britain. In China, on the other hand, poor peasants were the vanguards of the revolution of 1949. One can possibly agree in this regard with the notion that weak landlords or state machinery and strong peasants help the cause of revolution.[30] Gurr's explana-

tion that the relative deprivation of a given population leads to frustration and ultimately to aggressive behaviour is only partly correct. Muller is more acceptable, in this regard. According to him : "Many people in a state of objective deprivation adjust their expectations to their situation." To them their "low socio-economic rewards are simply their just deserts." Rejecting the "psychological explanation" of Gurr as the chief cause of aggressive political behaviour on the part of the masses he holds that a "dissident or challenging group" is needed to stir them.[31]

In spite of their immoderate analyses of peasants violent behaviour, Hobsbawm and Migdal can be useful in explaining both the violent and non-violent political behaviour of East Bengali peasants. The former holds that peasants revolt when they experience "new and unexpected hardships" during and after a famine or war and "when the jaws of the dynamic modern world seize the static communities in order to destroy and transform them."[32]

Though Migdal with his anti-Marxist approach holds that all elements of social change trickle down to the masses from above while the masses are incapable of comprehending their problems, still less able to solve those by themselves, we cannot reject outright the importance of "culture contact" of peasants with the outside world in bringing about peasant movements. It is, however, difficult to agree with him that "culture contact" is more important than economic constraints and exploitation by the upper classes in bringing about peasant rebellions.[33]

The reciprocity between peasants and non-peasant outsiders – "culture contact" in the language of Migdal— plays an important role in involving peasants in non-violent political activities as well. This involvement takes place on a give and take basis. "Politics for peasants starts at the level at which they can trust outsiders... Increases in market participation have taught peasants that outsiders are willing to fill certain needs, if there is something to be given to them in return" observes Migdal.[34] This observation can be regarded as a linchpin of this study.

As discussed earlier, peasants' chances of revolt increase in times of national crisis. The decline of the power of the landlords, commercialization of agriculture on a large scale, the enfranchisement of the middle classes and above all, peasants' demand for higher social status are all correlated.[35] The large scale cultivation of jute as a cash crop in the wake of the First World War and the simultaneous extension of the franchise among the upper peasantry in the region contributed to making the lower peasantry restive. The potential of making more profit out of jute under a better land tenure system from the view point of the *ryots* and under *ryots* and their desire to get the vote as a means to attain more power to improve their socio-economic conditions, were largely responsible for greater political activity among them.

As far as resolving the problem regarding the political role of different categories of peasants is concerned, it does not appear that it can be resolved without

settling the meaning of the terms "politics" and "political" ?

Literally everything that concerns or belongs to the "polis" or city, or the community as a whole, is politics. But generally "the term is reserved for those common affairs which are under the direction of an authority... the State".[36] A political act is one "exercised in power perspectives", and a political movement "is a continuing political act performed by an aggregate of persons in a power perspective of elaborate identifications, demands and expectations".[37] What is power ? Power is different from influence and authority. A priest or a teacher may be influential and a court has authority. Power, on the other hand, is "the capacity of an individual or group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups *in the manner which he desires, and to prevent his own conduct being modified in the manner in which he does not* [italics mine]". Most forms of power again have "economic roots and produce, in turn, economic consequences". Another important aspect of power is that it is not legal recognition which makes it, rather it secures legal recognition.[38]

Hobsbawm defines the politics of the peasats as those activities in power perspectives "in which peasants are involved with the larger societies of which they form part...the relations of peasants with other social groups, both those whih are their economic, social and political 'superiors' or exploiters and those which are not".[39] Understaning the politics ot the peasants becomes easier when one includes all activities performed in power perspectives by peasants in private clubs, unions,

religious organizations, clans, tribes and factions.[40]

Although F. G. Bailey has excluded violence from the scope of politics, as it is more "warlike" to him,[41] one should include violent peasant movements, which are often short lived, sporadic, confined to a small territory, "unpremeditated" against a particular individual or group of individuals for the redress of their immediate grievances, within the scope of this study. These violent movements often described as jacqueries and/or "Mafia-type" acts of "social banditry", can be regarded as expressions of the elementary stage of political consciousness of the illiterate, "primitive rebels". Hobsbawm has not underestimated these pre-political activities, which expressed inarticulate people's "aspirations about the world", as their acquisition of political consciousness "has made our century the most revolutionary in history".[42] Guha has gone a step forward by including all violent and non-violent acts committed by Indian peasants against their exploiters within the scope of politics. He thinks violent or the so-called pre-political activities of peasants confined to small areas are nothing but political activities of peasants.[43] Although peasants have "a very limited political horizon" as they are primarily concerned with the "politics" of their "family, village and caste",[44] they cannot be called "pre-political" simply for these reasons. The average townsman is not altogether different from the peasant so far as his indifference to active politics is concerned. Like his urban counterpart, the peasant also forgets his internal, factional and other conflicts when he confronts a common enemy.

In the case of East Bengal it is difficult to present the peasants as the main participants in the nationalist movement, as Johnson has done with the Chinese peasants.[45] This is not merely because of the differences between the Chinese and East Bengali socio-political structures, but also because nationalism is an elite concept. Masses receive the idea from urban politicians, mostly without understanding the implications and meaning of it. "Left to himself, the peasant is self-absorbed and introspective, a byword of parochialism."[46] Nationalism might have partially aroused the *patidar* middle peasants of Gujarat, but it is difficult to agree with Hardiman that both Myron Weiner and David Washbrook[47] are wrong for arguing that "nationalist" agitations by Indian peasants were nothing more than local protest movements, byproducts of factional and other local conflcts.[48] It is equally difficult to subscribe to the views of Sumit Sarkar that "peasant passivity" was possibly a "third objective limitation" to the nationalist movement of Indian elites. So far as East Bengali peasants' indifference and hostility to Hindu *bhadralok* nationalism are concerned, these may be imputed to many other factors than their "passivity".

Local, horizontal or inter-class and vertical or intra class, factional cleavages between different categories of tenants and landlords, typical of a stratified peasant society,[49] determined the politics of East Bengal villages. Peasant leaders, often of the same status fought each other for "land, loot and pre-eminence", while their followers were socially heterogeneous and attached to their factional chiefs by kinship and economic ties.

Unequal land distribution and scarcity of land promoted factionalism or patron-client relationship in the region. Under this arrangement the patrons were acknowledged as the legitimate authorities of the clients, typical of all patron-client relationships.[50] These factional ties, as usual,[51] divided the lower peasantry to such an extent that in most cases it developed sharp vertical cleavages among neighbours belonging to the same class. Among Namasudra peasants as well, intra-village rather than caste ties were stronger throughout the region.[52]

The strong patronage of landlords indicates that peasant mobilization in East Bengal must have been locally organized under the guidance of local patrons, mostly *jotedars* or immediate landlords. Since strong patronage weakens peasant solidarity and as economic development and job opportunities enable clients, that is, peasants to break the link with their patrons, the growth of large scale peasant mobilization by outsiders was the least expected phenomenon in this economically underdeveloped and backward region. The "cultural obstacles" to widespread peasant movements, caused by peasants' dependence on their patrons, could only be overcome by leaders who were trusted by the peasants, and the economic motive behind such movements must have been "realistic", in the language of Galjart.[53]

In this respect one may ask why many East Bengali peasants could not be mobilized by outside leadership. Did some urban leaders then put forward "unrealistic" economic programmes ? It aims to investigate the faciors leading to the mobilization[54] of the different categories of peasants mostly by vague programmes emanating

from the elites transmitted through village headmen, priests and "patrons". In short, this will examine why mobilization on class lines failed and that on communal lines succeeded in the region.

If we accept Shanin's broad classification of peasant movements — first, independent class action; second, guided political action; and thirdly, fully spontaneous, amorphous political action[55] — it seems that, "guided political action", the most common type throughout the world, was the most common type in East Bengal. The "fully spontaneous" political action, symptomatic of peasants' accumulated frustration, being violent on many occasions, was no longer an isolated instance of unpremeditated pre-political actions on the part of East Bengali peasantry during 1920–1947. The politics of the elites devoured the politics of the peasants in the long run, sometimes by arousing genuine consciousness but mostly by arousing "false consciousness" among them. Like elsewhere, by promising land refom and a better fife, urban leaders succeeded in mobilizing peasant support in the region.[56] Joseph Gabel's definition of "false consciousness" helps us understand the phenomenon in the context of the peasants' eventual mobilization on communal rather than class lines. He thinks that: "False consciousness is a diffused state of mind; ideology is a theoretical crystalization". His analysis of anti-Semitism is pertinent for understanding the ascendancy of anti-Hindu communalism among East Bengli peasants. According to him, "racist *false consciousness* denies history; racist *ideology* tends to build on false consciousness a pseudo-history which, instead of explaining

the Jew through history, claims to explain History through the Jew [italics in original]", Ron Eyerman on the other hand, in consonance with Marxists, believes that "consciousness is always something individual", while "false consciousness" is a creation of capitalism His explanation might be accepted that, "false consciousness" a by-product of "ideologies" of the upper classes, which is incorporated into individual consciousness through the mass media, educational institutions, and other means tends to blunt the class consciousness of the lower classes to maintain the hegemony of the upper classes.[57]

Besides the politicians, the government can also influence peasants by arousing false hopes and aspirations. Peasants in South Asia learnt many things from the British government. In Bengal, at one stage, the government was the only "protector" and "ally" of the peasants. By the turn of the twentieth-century when the Bengali Hindu middle classes, commonly known as the *bhadralok* or "gentlemen",[58] had become disillusioned with the Raj to a great extent and promoted anti-British agitation, the government became more interested in promoting the cause of the peasants, who had conflicting class interests with the *bhadralok*. Their communal differences—pro-landlord *bhadralok* being predominantly Hindu and peasants predominantly Muslim—accentuated the conflict. The core of East Bengal peasant and Hindu *bhadralok* politics in the first half of the twentieth-century lies in the following assertion of Sumit Sarkar :

The intelligentsia's [*bhadralok's*] indifference to

> peasant problems did not result merely from immediate material interests ; behind it lay also the long bhadralok tradition of contempt or at least condescension for the men who worked with their hands, the sense of alienation flowing from education through a foreign medium [English], as well as by the fact that the line of demarction between bhadralok landholders and peasant commoner tended in some districts to merge with that separating Hindus from Muslims.[59]

Without involving ourselves with the details of the *bhadralok*—peasant dichotomy now, it can be held that peasants in East Bengal were much influenced by the government as well as by *bhadralok* politicians. Peasants' methods of implementing their political programme, like those of their counterparts elsewhere in the subcontinent were : petitioning ; voting ; demonstrations and marches ; Hijrats or mass emigrations (to Assam or other sub-regions) ; Satyagraha or passive resistance ; no-rent and no-tax movements ; spontaneous elemental revolts ; organized armed struggles and guerilla warfare.[60] Not all categories of peasants, however, responded in the same way to government's and landlord's exactions and oppressions. To understand this one must understand the psychology and political *modus operandi* of different categories of peasants.

While Wolf, Alavi and other scholars hold that the poor peasants are the least militant class while the middle peasants sustain struggles longer than other categories, others think that the poor peasants demonstrate the greatest militancy and radical political action

despite their "servile habits" and dependancy on landlords.[61] Charlesworth and Pouchepadass are the bitterest critics of the "middle peasant thesis." The former rejects outright the middle peasants as the most revolutionary category. To him, "a strengthened middle peasantry" can be a "consequence" not the "cause" of successful peasant militancy. The latter, it seems, supports Mao Tse-tung's view on the positive role of poor peasants in relation to the Chinese revolution of 1949.[62] Mao, the greatest peasant-mobilizer of the twentieth-century, not only rates the poorest peasants as the most revolutionary, but also rates the middle peasants as "vacillating," because they think that the revolution will not do them "much good." He include the rich peasant category within the enemies of peasant revolution.[63] Engels has also identified the poorest peasants, especially the wage labourers, as the "natural allies" of revolution.[64]

In the context of South Asian peasantry, Mao's and Engel's analyses seem to have been corroborated by Stokes, and Tharamangalam. The former has not only identified the rich peasants as the upholders of the status quo, but has also termed the *jotedars* of Bengal "parasitic" and agents of communalism. The latter has shown the revolutionary role of the poor and landless peasants and "indifferent" and "hostile" attitude of the middle and rich categories respectively towards "class struggle."[65]

Hardiman, on the other hand, holds that it was the rich peasants of Gujarat, who first demanded a share of the political power, 'which had gradually been

transferred to the bourgeoisie from the British.[66] Lenin has also visualised the anti-feudal potential of the *kulaks* or rich peasants in Russia.[67]

Without being polemical about the role of different categories of peasants in bringing about politico-economic and social changes in a society, it must be pointed out that we are not only concerned with "peasant revolutions" but also peasants' role in political changes through constitutional means, so, far as the peasants in modern East Bengal are concerned. Different categories of peasants can become "revolutionary" in different contexts. Rich peasants, for example, can be revolutionary when their objects are the abolition of feudalism or sharing political power with the bourgeoisie.

> Since most *zamindars*, moneylenders and professional elites in East Bengal were high-caste Hindus, peasants and other working class people mostly Muslims, the class-conflict in the region always had the potential to turn communal. Before the 1920s the peasantry registered its contempt for the upper classes in numerous sporadic rebellions, which being escapist and violent and not aimed at changing the socio-political structures, remained pre-political. Under the changed circumstances of the 1920s – after the introduction of separate electorates, local self government, the extension of the franchise and the post-War economic distress of peasants – peasants were politicized or convinced of the efficacy of improving their condition, not by rioting but by changing the socio-political and economic systems through legislative measures.

> The government, being apprehensive of the Hindu nationalists, wanted to establish the Muslim and low-caste Hindu peasants as a counterpoise to the nationalists by promoting the peasant cause. The Muslim elites and bourgeoisie supported the government as they had conflicting interests with their more advanced Hindu counterparts. These classes made common cause with peasants through common religious and other bonds. The rich peasants, who had aspirations to politico-economic power, collaborated with the Muslim upper classes and mobilized the lower peasants through religious leaders and strong factional and patronage ties.

Although under the changed circumstances in the post First World War period the peasants' methods of expressing their aspirations about the world sometimes remained pre-political in the Hobsbawmian sense of the term, besides the short-lived violent peasant insurrections peasant movements throughout the period mostly reflected the political aspirations of peasants to change the socio-economic and political structures.

With the emergence of western educated leaders in the arena of the politics of the peasants, transcending the boundaries of villages and communities, the rural-based upper peasant leaders and the rural elites, including the *ulama*, emerged as a political force to play an important role in moulding the subsequent politics of the region. The Namasudra and other non-muslim peasants had their indigenous leaders, too, who had close links with urban Hindu as well as Muslim *bhadralok* leaders, to champion their cause. The leader-

ship, however, did not emerge out of the blue. Under the changed socio-economic and political circumstances, which precipitated a significant shift in the attitude of the government towards the *bhadralok* and non-*bhadralok* classes, both the urban leaders and their rural followers needed each other more than ever before.

Most peasants believed that, being illiterate and poor, they were incapable of leading their movements against the exacting landlords and moneylenders without the help of educated outsider and their educated, well-to-do "kith and kin"—patrons and religious leaders with strong rural connections. The leaders, both urban and rural based, on the other hand, needed not only peasant votes after the extensions of the franchise in 1919 and of the Hindu *zamindars*, moneylenders and *bhadralok* classes. The urban-based Muslim *ashraf*—the Nawabs, Khwajas, Ispahanis, Suhrawardys and Adamjees—wanted a foothold in the *mofussil* to fight their politico-economic rivals, and established common ground with the *jotedars*, *ulama* and other elements of the budding Muslim middle classes from peasant backgrounds by laying increasing stress on the themes of the "common enemy" and "Islam in danger."

The *ashraf-jotedar* understanding ultimately led to the absorption of the proja party by the Muslim League after the 1937 elections. This was essential for the success of Muslim upper peasantry and *jotedar*, who, unlike the radical *proja* and *krishak* leaders, did not want radical land reform to give land to the tillers. They were simply interested in the expropriation of the Hindu *zamindars* and *mahajans* to install themselves

as the supreme landlords and moneylenders. They also wanted to circumscribe the power of the Hindu *bhadralok* classes to get more job and professional opportunities. Most *jotedars* being as conservative as the *ashraf* in relation to giving more rights to the lower peasantry, assisted the *ashraf* and the *ulama* in nourishing the "culture of repression" and "negative consciousness"[68] among the lower peasantry by arousing communal and ethnic sentiments. Both the League and proja party leaders diffused "false consciousness" among the lower peasantry. The League successfully manouvred in creating a sense among Muslim peasants of belonging to a monolithic Muslim community, white the proja party tried to create a sense among all categories of Muslim and Namasudra peasants of belonging to an amorphous, monolithic *proja* or tenant community. After the virtual destruction of the non-communal *krishak* movement under communist and "nationalist" peasant leaders in late 1930s and after the failure of the proja party to enlist Namasudra peasant support, the two broad categories—Muslim and *proja* — become synonymous under the influence of the slogan "Islam in danger".

In accordance with the tenets of revivalist Islam, the prevalent hatred for everything Hindu was intensified among all categories of Muslim peasants. The contemptuous and derogatory expressions, coined long before the advent of the Raj, to denote non-Muslims, such as *kafirs* (non-believers), *mushriks* (polytheists) and *malauns* (the cursed ones), were used ever more frequently by the Muslim masses. Under the influence of the

mullas and folk-litterateurs, Muslims of the region learnt how to express their contempt for the Hindus and their religion, their gods and goddesses, during the period. Even a dead Hindu was not spared. The *mullas* taught Bengali Muslims to wish eternal hell-fire, or "Finaar-e jahannam", to all Hindu souls. This is still done in the region.

Morever the strengthening of religious, caste and ethnic solidarities paved the way for Muslim, Namasudra and communist leaders to lead Muslim, Namasudra and tribal peasants respectively, and strong kinship and factional ties between the upper and lower echelons of the peasantry strengthened patron-client relationships. These ties deterred the growth of the concept of a "class for itself" among the lower peasants. Unequal land distribution and demographic pressure further strengthened links of patronge. The intensification of the competition for the favour of a limited number of "patrons" among the swollen mass of poor, landless peasants, especially after the Famine of 1943-44, removed the *jotedars* and other well-to-do peasants from the position of exacting landlords to that of benevolent *annadatas* (providers of food) in the eyes of the landless and semi-landless peasants who were dependent on the *jotedars* for lands under cropsharing arrangements. The strong patronage and factionalism networks, as usual, widened the scope for vertical cleavages, that is for intraclass conflict, within the agrarian society of the region.[69]

Despite the increasing prevalence of these intraclass conflicts, members of the lower echelons of the

peasantry challenged the authority of Hindu *zamindars, mahajans* and *bhadralok* classes, though in some cases they did not have any direct conflict of interest with them. This cannot be explained in terms of Froissart's hypothesis that peasants revolt because they see others doing so, without knowing why they do so.[70] Neither can one agree with Guha that mere subordination of the masses has the potential to breed insubordination and that "this negative condition of their social existence rather than any revolutionary consciousness" enables the peasants to fight their enemies.[71] Contrary to these views, this study reveals that the lower peasantry partly succeeded in overcoming cultural obstacles to staging rebellions against its real or mythical exploiters mainly with the help of peasant leaders representing the upper peasantry. But at the same time, the lower peasantry was also deflected from attacking a major part of its real enemies—the *jotedars* and other rich peasants. Under the influence of "false consciousness" both Muslim and Namasudra poor peasants fought against each other.

The leaders belonging to the *ashraf, ulama* and other non-cultivating classes mobilized the lower peasantry through the rural *ashraf* and rich peasants by sympathising with the lower peasants' deplorable condition and justifying their demands for the redress of particular grievances. These leaders also assured peasants of "imminent support" from other quarters of society for the redress of their grievances, which included promises of a drastic land reform to grant more rights to the tillers. The peasants learnt from these leaders that the "promised land" of the Muslims

of the sub continent, Pakistan, stood for an egalitarian society, which would grant land to the tillers and higher socio-economic status and more job opportunities to the children of peasants. These opportunities, the leaders told them, were in the offing or just needed a little push through the concerted action of all categories of peasants either by attending Muslim League meetings or by attacking the Hindu *zamindars* and *mahajans*.

Both the League and Proja party leaders (before their formal subsumption by the League) urged the peasants to support them for the success of their respective programmes. The communist and 'nationalist' leaders, mostly, belonging to the Congress party, also promised land to the tiller and other socio-economic advantages to the lower peasantry. But appeals made in the name of religion, especially by the "patrons" and factional chiefs, proved to be the most effective in mobilizing peasant support for any movement in the region.

Some spontaneous peasant movements—the Tanka movement, for example—were initiated by local peasant leaders who had poor peasant backgrounds. But as soon as these peasants came into contact with some non-peasant outsiders who demonstrated sympathy with their cause, they entrusted the outsiders with the onerous task of leading their movement against local landlords. This again reflects the poor tribal peasants lack of confidence in their own capabilities and lack of self-esteem. The intra and inter-class conflicts in the countryside, along with the outbreak of famine,

a slump in the prices of crops, a war or nationwide upheavals helped install outsiders as peasant leaders. Peasants accepted the outsiders—the *ashraf ulama* and *bhadralok* as their leaders, not considering them totally aliens or non-peasants. Many members of the *ulama* and *bhadralok* had peasant backgrounds and close links with their family villages. Though many of them lived in the neighbouring towns or Calcutta, they were regarded by the peasants as their kith and kin. The *ashraf*, including the upper clergy or the *Pir sahibs* had a special appeal to all sections of the peasantry.

In short, the marriage of convenience between the *ashraf* and the *jotedar* occupancy *ryot* categories was the determining factor in mobilizing the lower peasantry on communal lines throughout the region. The rich peasants thought that they had better socio-economic and political prospects in collaboration with the *ashraf*, who had wealth and influence to fight the powerful high-caste Hindu *zamindars*, *mahajans* and *bhadralok*, the common enemies of the *ashraf*, *ulama* *jotedars* and the lower peasantry. After the Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938, which further weakened the power and position of the *zamindars*, the *jotedars* and the occupancy *ryots* emerged as powerful classes in the countryside. This worked as a catalyst in the process of disestablishing the *zamindars* and Hindu *bhadralok* as dominant classes in the region. The recommendations of the Land Revenue Commission in 1940 in favour of the abolition of the *zamindari* system further emboldened the upper peasantry to

challenge the legitimacy of the *zamindari* system. The absence of any parallel piece of legislation to strengthen the position of the lower peasantry left it at the mercy of the rich peasants and non-peasant leaders long after 1947. The *ashraf* and *proja* leaders false promises, including the Bargadars Bill of early 1947, which the Muslim League government of Bengal never intended to enact into law, were mere carrots. By 1947 false promises, communalism and above all, the economic dependence of most peasants on the upper peasantry blurred the sub-regional differences in the nature of peasants political behaviour. The relatively independent middle peasants of the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, along with the lower peasants of the *jotedar* and *zamindar* dominated sub-regions, succumbed to the appeals made in the name of religion and radical economic reforms by the Muslim League. Meanwhile the bulk of the Namasudra peasants had been won over by the high-caste Hindu Congress leaders. Consequently the League was transformed into a mass organization by "channeling into a religious stream" the anti *zamindar* struggle of the peasantry and the reactionary aspect of bourgeois nationalism of the Bengali Muslim bourgeoisie (mainly with *jotedar* backgrounds).[72]

> In short, both the Muslim aristocracy and rich peasants aroused "false consciousness" among the lower peasants which weakened the class struggle between the upper and lower peasants and diverted the lower peasants into active collaboration with their class enemies and patrons (the rich peasants)

in their attack on the Hindu upper classes, the common class and communal enemies of both the upper and lower peasants. By 1947, the communalization of the class struggle of the peasants paved the way for Pakistan or the ascendancy of the Muslim elites and a section of the rich peasants. Though the political activities of the upper peasantry had culminated in the creation of Pakistan in its eastern wing, the joint exploitation by the *ashraf* and West Pakistani ruling classes frustrated the ambitious Bengali Muslim bourgeois and petitbourgeois classes emanating from the upper peasant families. This soon shook the foundation of the "two nation theory" of Jinnah. The lower peasants of East Pakistan were once again mobilized by their patrons—*jotedars* and professional elites —and the petit-bourgeoisie, in the name of Bengali Nationalism and a society free from exploitation. This led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, signalling the ascent of rich peasants and their urban allies to politico-economic power. The bulk of the lower peasantry was left to its miserable fate. Consequently poor peasants in general lost faith in the urban bourgeoisie and their rural counterparts. But being politically unorganized and economically dependent on rich peasants, the poor peasants of Bangladesh (more than 50 per cent being landless) turned fatalist not long after the emergence of Bangladesh. They had no central organization or leader to rely on for support. By 1975, the pro-Moscow leftist organizations joined hands with the ruling Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After the death of Maulana Bhashani in 1976, most

pro-Peking leftist organizations supported the quasi-military government of General Ziaur Rahman and other ultra-rightist forces in the name of containing the agents of "Russo-Indian Imperialism." Hence the tremendous increase in the activities of the Tabligh movement and Islamic fundamentalist groups, who literally attract millions of peasantry througout Bangladesh. Is it indicative of peasantys gradual loss of faith in conventional politics? Are they fast becoming de-politicised to become the future recruits of Islamic fundamentalist in this country achieved in the name of Bengali nationalism?

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