

Radicalism, Intelligentsia and the Permanent Settlement in Nineteenth Century Bengal

Pramita Mukherjee*

Abstract

The crucial change brought by the colonial rulers to the agricultural system of India was the introduction of Permanent Settlement by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. Under it the Zaminders were recognized as permanent proprietors of land while the peasants were placed at their mercy. The native intelligentsia wrote at length on the sufferings of the ryots under the new system. This paper aims to analyze the attitude of the nineteenth century Bengali intelligentsia through their writings. The objective is to find out the extent of their sympathy with the ryots while giving due consideration to their position within the colonial framework.

Key words : Agriculture, radicalism, intelligentsia, permanent settlement.

Introduction

The foundation of British rule in Bengal with the defeat of Sirajaudaulah in the battle of Plassey in 1757 is regarded, though arbitrarily as the beginning of 'Modern Age in India'¹. Leaving aside questions like what constitutes 'modernity' and why should the British Rule be regarded as the pioneer of that modernity, it can nevertheless be asserted that foundation of British rule constitutes of watersheds in the history of India. For the said foundation entailed profound changes in various spheres of Indian life. In Bengal the most noticeable reflection of this process was the introduction of Permanent Settlement in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. Under this system Zamindars were formally recognized as proprietors of land with whom the colonial state entered into a contract permanently fixing thereby the amount of revenue to be paid by them. Permanent Settlement in land was however not the first British attempt at systematization of revenue administration in Bengal. Efforts in this direction were being made since 1772 when annual settlement was introduced by which land was auctioned to the highest bidder. But this settlement, as those that followed it (Five years settlement , ten years settlement, the last being subsequently declared permanent) did not yield any positive result as far as the main British objective was concerned --- security of revenue collection. For the highest bidders to whom the lands were auctioned often became defaulters. Moreover the British had to bear the burnt of enmity of local landlords who were deprived of their estates. The failure of the farming system then paved the way for Permanent Settlement. In fact, the defects and abuses of the farming system became the central plank in the arguments put forward by the advocates of Permanent Settlement. Thus for example, Philip Francis, one of the pioneer advocates of Permanent Settlement felt that farming system “ annihilated every idea of private property”² and lack of security of property impeded improvement in agriculture as under the system increase in output was offset by proportionate increase in government revenue demand.

The British aimed, not only at ensuring security of revenue collection, but also in the words of Philip Francis 'permanence of dominion'³ of English in India. For that purpose a class of intermediaries between the crown and the people was of absolute necessity and Bengal Zamindars were best suited for that role. For Cornwallis whose aristocratic sympathies were in a large way responsible for transforming the idea of Permanent Settlement into a law , the main motivating force was improvement already anticipated to a certain extent by Francis. His concern was to fashion Bengali Zamindars in the image of contemporary English improving landlords.⁴

What was missing from all the above considerations was concerned for the peasant. Francis, while recognizing that land is useless to the Zamindars without the assistance of the ryot and deploring the misery of the latter, for him the Zamindar was the real proprietor and his interest were primary. Thus for him conferring proprietorship on the peasant 'injustice against the Zamindars'⁴ and that the government ought not to limit the Zamindar in his agreement with the tenants.⁵ For Cornwallis, as already seen, Zamindar occupied the center stage in the process. However he made a commitment which was reflected in article 7 of the Proclamation

* Assistant Professor and Head, Department of History, Shirakole Mahavidyalaya

under obligation “to protect all classes of people, particularly those who from their situation are most helpless, the Governor General, can as he may think necessary enact regulation for protection of dependant talukdars, ryots and other cultivators of the soil.”⁶ But this had no concrete significance and determination of what constituted necessary situation lay with the government which was predisposed in favour of the Zamindars.

The consideration of peasants' interests who formed the majority of the population was the work of the indigenous elite who made a searching analysis of the real condition under which the peasant resided in the villages and his relationship with the Zamindars. It is to their analysis that the central thrust of the paper is directed. In the process I will also try to identify to what extent the Bengal intelligentsia can be labelled as radical.

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUE

The relationship between intelligentsia and the peasants in Bengal has often tricked the scholars. Stalwarts like Amalendu De and Chittabrata Palit have argued that the intelligentsia had little or no concern for the peasantry. Being a member of the landed aristocracy their sympathies were always with the zaminders. Even when they wrote at length on the sufferings of the ryots, they argue, they refrained from advocating eradication of the system.⁷ For Amalendu De, the attitude of the intelligentsia towards the peasants was 'indifferent but conservative'.⁸ Marxist historians like Sumit Sarker are also of the opinion that Bengali Intelligentsia as landlords had little sympathy for the ryots.⁹ By analysis of the writings of nineteenth century Bengali Hindu intelligentsia, this paper aims to find out if and to what extent we can deviate from these established assumptions. The second objective will be to find out whether, if at all the intelligentsia can be called radical.

WHAT IS RADICALISM

The term itself has been subject to various debates. It is an oft used word in various disciplines of social sciences. The dictionary defines the term as the 'political orientation of those who favour a revolutionary change in government and society.'¹⁰ It is a particular belief and mode of thought. It strongly believes in the need for a change in society which can happen only through revolutionary means. In other words it seeks to change the status quo in politics, society or economy. Applying the term in the context of Bengali intelligentsia's attitude to the peasantry would be subject to a lot of questions. But the aim of this paper will be to use the term to decipher the attitude or the extent of sympathy of the nineteenth century Bengali Intelligentsia towards the peasantry. The paper, through the analysis of the writings of the intelligentsia will try to find out whether they can be labelled as 'indifferent but conservative'.¹¹

IDENTIFYING THE INTELLIGENTSIA

The term 'intelligentsia' was first coined in Russia in 19th century to refer to those who had received University education suitable for professional occupation. Tom Bottomore argues that notwithstanding its initial connotation, the term was subsequently utilized to refer to all those who are engaged in non manual occupations. Bottomore further identifies the intelligentsia with 'new middle classes'.¹² Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels were first to engage with the term middle class. Engels in his 'The condition of working class in England' used the term 'Mittelklasse' to connote English middle class as a possessing class distinct from the aristocracy. Karl Marx also regarded increasing size of middle class as an important feature of developing the capitalism. Middle class for him, was a vastly heterogeneous group --- shopkeepers, small producers, highly paid professional & managerial persons, lower paid technical professional or supervisory workers, clerical workers etc.¹³

G. Mosca (The ruling class) regarded the intelligentsia or the middle class as a sub-elite. He argues initially that in all societies, from lowly developed to the most advanced two classes can be distinguished— 'a class that rules and a class that is ruled'. But subsequently he clarifies that in modern societies the elite (i.e. the rulers) are connected to the society through a sub-elite which according to him consists of civil servants, managers, white collar workers, scientists, engineers & scholars.¹⁴

John Goldthorpe also speaks of the development of a 'service class' and their increasing numerical strength in context of post second world war period owing to immense demand of professional, administrative and managerial employees. Goldthorpe argues that the distinguishing feature of this class is the possession of a 'cultural capital' that is high levels of education and training. Their middling character is also emphasized by him in that they can be distinguished from owners of capital on one hand and labourers on the other.¹⁵

The Bhadrakalok of 19th century Bengali society were the intelligentsia of Tom Bottomore's description and middle class of Marxian terminology in that the Bengali term Bhadrakalok encompassed diverse roots from shopkeepers & clerical workers to highly paid professionals. However what is unique of Bengal is that this middle class had strong aristocratic leanings. In fact, the Bhadrakalok was economically rooted in landed wealth. This in turn has to be attributed to the new land revenue system in the form of permanent settlement introduced by the British. The rigours of the 'sunset law' under the permanent settlement displaced the traditional Zamindars in course of the 19th century. In their place came the Bhadrakalok who, enticed by the lucrative opportunities in the form of expansion of overseas trade in primary produce like cotton, tea, oil seeds and steady growth of agrarian prices invested in land, enjoying tenurial rights to rent. With the growth of population, increasing desires for land ownership had to be satisfied by subdivision of holdings and sub-infeudation of tenures. It resulted in diminishing economic returns from individual holdings. However by this period land ownership had come to be invested with substantial social prestige.

But simultaneously as such a large number of people had landed interest, the size of holdings varied considerably. Thus not all could obtain equal access into the opportunities of western education available from early 19th century. Thus on one hand we have Bakimchandra Chattapadhyaya, a leading intellectual of his time who was the son of a rich landed family and hence was able to reach highest level of new western education passing through modern school, Presidency college, Calcutta University and a law course which secured him a post of deputy magistrate with an income between 480—600 £. On the other hand, we have that section of the Bhadrakalok whose earnings as rent were not adequate to finance expensive education and lodgings in a city and hence was able to acquire only a smattering knowledge of English suitable for a low paid clerical job. But what was common in both sections of the Bhadrakalok was their landed interest. Even while the Bhadrakalok settled in Calcutta or district towns for professional purposes they retained strong connections with the rural home which to them was the bari (home) as distinguished from basha (a temporary lodging) their dwelling in the city.¹⁶ We can now clearly discern what John Goldthorpe calls, though in a different context a service class. However possession of cultural capital which Goldthorpe speaks of as distinguishing feature of this class cannot be applicable to the entire social class of Bhadrakalok i.e. as already seen high levels of education and training was the monopoly of few rich families. The service class in Bengal was thus not homogeneous. But the middling character of this class which Goldthorpe speaks of is very much apparent in Bengal – the Bhadrakalok was neither owner of capital which was in the hand of colonial state nor was engaged in manual occupation like cultivation of land. Also the distinction between intelligentsia and intellectuals – the latter being engaged in transmission of ideas like writers, scientists, philosophers, social theorists which Tom Bottomore draws is also not rigid in case of Bengal. Here the intelligentsia who acquired the University education necessary

For professional occupation also were engaged in creation and transmission of ideas as writers, philosophers etc. Bankimchandra Chattapadhyaya, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyaya, Rangalal Bandopadhyaya provide the typical examples. The colonial state on its part, sought to fashion them by means of western education as what G. Mosca calls a sub-elite through whom rulers could be connected to the ruled. This can be seen from Macaulay's Education Minute, the Magna Carta of western education in India. The purpose of imparting western education according to Macaulay was creation of a "class of persons between us and the millions whom we govern.....".¹⁷

Rammohan Roy

Raja Rammohan Roy, the father of Indian Renaissance was also the pioneer in publicisation of the peasant question. He was a transitional figure and witnessed the entire process of disintegration of Mughal empire and foundation of the British rule on its ruins. Rammohan had a realization that re-generation of India in tandem with modern values was possible only through contact with British civilization and he became a firm believer in western values like liberalism and rationalism. His admiration for western values has made Marxists like Sumit Sarkar to label him as comprador, as an agent of British capital.¹⁸

To begin with, Rammohan did argue in favour of settlement of planters in Bengal. He, along with Dwarkanath Tagore in the Town Hall meeting of 15th December 1829 vociferously advocated the planters' cause. He supported the Charter Act of 1813 attacking the monopoly of the East India company and designed to throw Indian market to free traders and to remove restrictions against settlement of Europeans in India.¹⁹

Sarkar argues that Rammohan – Dwarkanath section of the intelligentsia internalised free trader logic of reciprocity of trade between India and Britain to be affected by the throwing open the Indian market the English manufacturers. As for the planters, Rammohan ,despite accepting 'partial injury done by indigo planters ' he “found the natives residing in the neighbourhood of indigo plantations evidently better clothed and better conditioned than those who lived at a distance from such stations.....”.²⁰ Then again, before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, while speaking of the advantages of the settlement in India by the Europeans, Rammohan felt that indigo planters had introduced “the knowledge they possess of superior modes of cultivating the soil and improving its products”.²¹ His pro-Zamindari inclination also came forth when he petitioned along with others against the government Regulation 3 of 1828 which advocated resumption of Kabiraj (rent free tenures) in Bengal.

But the Marxists have captured only one side of the picture. Rammohan no doubt welcomed the Europeans settlers in India, but not indiscriminately. In his evidence before the Select Committee he made a clear demarcation between “ higher and educated classes of Europeans and the lower and uneducated classes “.²² He also stated that the “common Europeans are often disposed to annoy the native inhabitants “²³ and hence only “Europeans of character and capital “ should be allowed to settle in the country to affect improvement of resources of the country and condition of native inhabitants.²⁴

Though his protest against Regulation of 1828 reveals his pro-Zamindar inclination, yet his evidence abounds with concern and sympathy for the peasantry which the Marxists have entirely ignored. When questioned whether the rate of rent was a burden for the cultivator, Rammohan replied that half of the produce which the cultivator had to pay was a 'heavy demand' upon him after bearing the 'whole expense of seed and labour' himself.²⁵ Added to this was the whim of the landlords who “have adopted every measure to raise the rents by means of the power put into their hands” since 1793.²⁶ The British government, Rammohan feels had superseded the rights of Khud-Kasht ryots (i.e. cultivators of the lands of their own village) who “were considered as having an absolute right to continue the possession of their lands in perpetuity on payment of a certain fixed rent “ in ancient times. Rammohan then questions the very standards of assessments made by the Zamindars. He argues that in theory the different plots of an estates are classed into 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th quality and rates per bigha are fixed accordingly. But owing to dispute over precise quality of land, dependents of classification of land on the discretion of the Zamindars or government surveyors and loop holes in measurements resulting from “ignorance, ill will or intentional errors of the measurers, there is in practice no fixed standards to afford security to the cultivators for the rate or amount of rent” payable by them.²⁷ He regarded the condition of the cultivators to be very 'miserable' under the Zamindari settlement being placed at the “mercy of the Zamindar's avarice and ambition “. The latter he feels prospers at the expense of the ryots who are compelled to sell whole of their crop in “an abundant season when the price of corn is low” to meet the demand of the landholder. In the process “little or nothing “is left “for seed or subsistence to the labourer or his family”.²⁸ Even less merciful than Zamindars for Rammohan were the middle men frequently employed by the former for receipt of rent. The power of the landholder and the middlemen moreover, is not merely economic but extends to the judicial sphere as well. Judicial authorities are few in number and situated at great distance. Hence landholders and middlemen armed with “great local influence and pecuniary means “are situated in a superior position vis-à-vis the “too poor and too timid cultivator “unable to “undertake the hazardous and expensive enterprise of seeking redress”.²⁹ However Rammohan did not merely expose the evils of Zamindari system encountered by the ryot, he also suggested reforms for eradication of these evils. He urged the government to “interdict any further increase of rent on any pretence whatsoever “ and ensure the security of “present settled and recognized extent of land “ against “pretended re-measurements “. To make the ryots aware of those two protective measures“. To make the ryots aware of those two protective measures “public notices in current languages of the people should be stuck up in every village” and the police officers should ensure the persistence of these notices “for at least 12 months “. To make the prohibition of increase of rent effective, collectors should “prepare a general register of all cultivators containing their names, their respective portions of land, respective rents.” Most importantly, Rammohan urges the impartiality of the police and judicial authorities. The judge or magistrate should, he proposes “on finding any Zamindar guilty of demanding more rent than preceding years” subject him to a “severe fine”. A police officer or native commissioner if found guilty of “connivance or neglect “ should be expelled from service. Formulation of regulation was not adequate : to ensure their enforcement therefore, the judge or magistrate should make

annual tour of his district in the cold season to “see that laws and regulation for the protection of the poor peasantry are properly carried into effect”.³⁰

Later in his paper on the Revenue System of India he raised a really radical question – while the government concluded perpetual settlement with the Zamindars, he was “at a loss to conceive why this indulgence was not extended to their tenants by requiring proprietors to follow the example of government, in fixing a definite rent to be received from each cultivators, according to the average sum actually collected from him during a given term of years”.³¹ He then draws attention of the government to Regulation I of 1793 by which the latter committed itself to protect talukdars, ryots and other cultivators of the soil.

Young Bengal

Young Bengal – the name given to the circle of students centered round Henry Louis Vivian Derozio created a great stir in the varying sphere of Bengali life in the 19th century. Influenced by their newly acquired western education and western ideas like liberalism and rationalism, the Young Bengal delighted in attacking established prejudices and orthodoxies like idol worship and Brahmanical cast hierarchy. It was natural therefore that a group characterized by such extensive social radicalism could not keep itself aloof from the peasant question. The writings of its members and its journals like Bengal Spectator and Jnananvesana are abound with sympathy for the oppressed ryot and staunch criticism of the Zamindari brutalities. The Bengal Spectator commented that peasants had to live with two forms of oppression – a) of the Zamindars. b) of the government which legalized the former. Permanent Settlement was described as a system which “enabled its farmers and revenue payers to squeeze the last price from their under tenants”.³² Then again, the journal even while accepting the grievances of the Zamindars does not hesitate to comment “..... but they are universally looked upon as oppressors of their peasantry”.³³

Moreover in its columns, the journal narrated in details the evils of Zamindari oppression like rack renting, illegal imposition and Mahajani oppression. The law of distraint was also severely criticized—the oppression of the Zamindars was described as “inseparable from the operation of those summary powers ...”. Tarachand Chakraborty in an article published in Jnananvesana cited the authority of Manu to prove that land belonged to the tiller who therefore should be honoured by the government. Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee read two papers in a session of Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge. In 'Revenue Administration of Bengal' Dakshinaranjan by a comparison of condition of ryots under Hindu, Muslim and British rulers came to a radical conclusion, unlike many of the 19th century Bengali Hindu intelligentsia that Mughal revenue system was more pro-peasant with lower assessment and remissions in cases of natural calamities. Moreover he also held that ryots were the real owners of land but they had been replaced by the British with Zamindars who were merely tax collectors.³⁴

Pearichand Mitra's 'the Zamindar and the ryot' also questioned the “radically wrong bases of Permanent Settlement” in that it was made not with the actual owner of the soil “who cut away the wood or whoured with man”. Hence government can never possess any proprietary right which it might transfer at its will, for private property gives rise to the government and not vice versa.³⁵

Akshay Kumar Dutta

He dealt with the peasant question in Tattvabodhini Patrika. He wrote 3 articles on the issue under the title “Palligramastha prajader durabastha” He began his essay “Palligramastha prajader durabastha barnan” with an assertion that land for Bengalis and peasants played the supreme nurturing role. However for the author their misery is heart rendering. He brought to light the dual face of the landlords.³⁶ The author exposes the predominating evil in the country side ----- extraction of extra legal cesses from the poor peasantry apart from the rent on the pretext of various festivals and celebrations in the house of the landlords.³⁷ Such illegal cesses are extracted even in cases of some festival in their own homes. The Zamindar moreover imposes taxes on crimes like theft and infanticide not for the purpose of preventing the occurrence of crime within his area, but only for satisfaction of his greed. Criminals are often acquitted on receipt of handsome bribes. Many Zamindars, the author goes on to argue impose road cess, commodity tax and monopoly trading rights within his own jurisdiction.³⁸

The author also brings to light the oppression committed by agents and middlemen appointed by the absentee landlords with the total consent of the latter. He also exposes the adversities encountered by the

peasants owing to subinfeudation of tenures leading to emergence of various intermediaries like *ijjaradars*, *pattanidars*, *dar ijaradars*, etc.³⁹

Sanjib Chandra Chatterjee

His 'Bengal Ryots : Their Rights and Liabilities' (1864) argues that the arrival of the British was looked upon as a ray of hope and these hopes to a large extent have been realized by "the progressive state of education and commerce fast raising up a middle class".⁴⁰ However, the author maintains that the condition of the ryot has not undergone any material change even though there has been an increase in the price of agricultural products. But the ryot has not got a share of this prosperity he remains "as ragged and penniless as before, he can scarcely afford to provide himself with the most urgent necessities of life ...".⁴¹ Such evils are attributed by the author to the permanent settlement by virtue of which the Zamindars have been vested with permanent proprietary rights over land. The Zamindar, moreover had been allowed to raise the rent or oust the occupying ryots. They the author feels have abused this permission "as a license for unlimited exaction and oppressions".⁴² The settlement however made no provision adequate to act as a check upon such coercive tendencies of the Zamindars. Sanjib Chandra quotes the Select Committee of the House of Commons which reporting on the consequences of the permanent settlement considered it to be an error to have assumed the Zamindars as proprietors of land whereas originally they were "near hereditary steward, Representative, or officer of the government and his undeniable hereditary property in the land revenue was totally distinct from property in the land itself."⁴³

Bankim Chandra Chattterjee

His *Bangadesher Krishak* published in the magazine *Bangadarshan* is, again a crucial tract on the condition of peasants under the Permanent Settlement. He begins his essay with a ridicule of the notion of growing prosperity of the country. He accepts the various improvements in the life of the people under the British rule ----- development of railways, telegraph, medical science ----- all these are indicators of the development.⁴⁴

He then raises an important question as to who have benefited from this prosperity.⁴⁵ He speaks of two imaginary individuals as representative of the peasants ----- Hasim Seikh and Rama Kaibartya who led a miserable life, living under constant fear of losing their lands to Zamindars which would leave him and his family nothing for subsistence. The elite with their western education have done nothing for those poor people. However peasants are the most numerous and most important people of the country and hence no welfare of the country is possible without an improvement in their condition."⁴⁶

Similar to Akshay Kumar Dutta, Bankim exposes the oppression encountered by the peasants from Zamindar's agent. The value of the peasant's produce, the author argues is not considerable, but out of it the peasant has to bear the expenses of seed, fodder etc. What remains after these expenses is extracted by the Mahajan as interest for the loan taken earlier. "47 The gomosthas, through forgery in the account books often overstate the amount of rent paid by the peasants.".....⁴⁸ The gomosthas moreover extract money from the peasants on various other pretexts. Unlike Akshay Kumar Dutta, Bankim does not hold the Zamindar directly responsible for brutalities of his agents.⁴⁹ But he cannot escape the blame entirely in that it is because of the paltry salary which Zamindar pays to the naibs and gomosthas that the latter engage in such brutalities.⁵⁰

Bankim then goes into the deep roots of acute poverty of the peasants which he argues is not entirely due to the Zamindars. The colonial state is to be blamed for the oppression which the Zamindar unleashes on the peasant.⁵¹ The radical in Bankim comes out when he regards it as a blunder on the part of Cornwallis to consider that Zamindars were not concerned with improvement of land as they had no proprietary right. He makes a further radical assertion that the peasants were real landlords Zamindars being mere *tahsildars*.⁵² He even goes a step further in arguing that the Permanent Settlement should have been concluded with the peasants instead of with the zamindars. Then it would have been flawless.

Ramesh Chandra Dutt

Similar to Bankim's *Bangadesher Krishak* 'R.C Dutt's "The Peasantry of Bengal" (1874) begins with a note of self criticism. He feels that while the rights of the elite such as that to be employed in higher grades of public service, to be represented in, legislative councils, the rights of the Zamindars to exemption

from all kinds of taxes have been vociferously argued for, the rights of peasantry “to be freed from trammels of ignorance once and be saved from the oppression of the Zamindars” have been unceremoniously ignored. He laments “In advocating our rights, we often betray ourselves in sadly wanting in sympathy for the uneducated millions who really constitute the nation -----.”⁵³ Then again “It is an unfortunate fact ----- and we write thus in shame and sorrow ----- that the welfare of the country is identified by our educated countrymen with the interests of the Zamindars.”⁵⁴

Unlike Bankim, however R.C Dutt regards the Zamindari system to be a “fait accompli”, a result of “national character” of Bengal and not specifically instituted by any ruler. He goes on to argue that the motives of improvement with which the British sacrificed their own proprietary rights over land would have had a better chance to be fulfilled if the proprietary rights were invested in the ‘immediate cultivators of the soil’ “from whom alone in every country the principal improvement in agriculture must be derived.”⁵⁵

The author feels that even though a “liberal government” has severed the “chains of absolute servitude” yet, “the Zemindar still possesses a variety of means to harass the ryots, and these means are not infrequently exerted.”⁵⁶ He similar to Bankim and Akshay Kumar speaks of “illegal extortions” of Niabs and Gomosthas. Also, “in at least ninety percent of the Zamindaries”, collection of abwabs from the peasants on such pretexts as birth of a Zamindar's son or marriage of his daughter is a common occurrence. The ryots, the author argues “willingly pay” all those illegal cesses owing to the great “risk and danger of falling out with a Zamindar”.⁵⁷

R.C. Dutt therefore attributes the impression which holds the ryots responsible for the rent disputes to the fact that public opinion in the country is chiefly the opinion of the elite ----- the bhadrolok who in most cases is a Zamindar himself, owns the most influential newspapers (i.e the Hindu Patriot), and mans the most powerful association (i.e the British Indian Association). He therefore urges the “poor Bengal Ryot”. “Hope for relief from a band of alien rulers of the country, ----- but from thine own countrymen ---- Don't,-----”⁵⁸

Under such conditions whereby the ryots are both oppressed by the Zamindars and afforded no protection by the government, the author welcomes the rising of the ryots in masse against the Zamindars (as in case of indigo and Pabna uprising) as an “awakening from lethargy”,⁵⁹ “from a long sleep of servitude”⁶⁰ This reveals a sharp contrast from certain groups of intelligentsia which advised the peasant to shun the path of violence and adopt constitutional means for redressal of their grievances 100. Moreover, for him “putting down the rising with a strong hand would be illiberal and unjust”. He therefore suggests enactment of a Permanent Settlement between the Zamindar and the ryot similar to the one between Zamindars and the government.⁶¹ The status of the ryots, he argues, must be raised by permanently fixing the rate of rent payable by the ryot after an “extensive survey.”⁶²

Identification of the Attitude of the Intelligentsia

The intelligentsia or the “petty bourgeoisie” for Marx and Engels is a conservative element in society and ‘middle class radicalism’ is a feature only of developed capitalist societies.⁶³ However later scholars like Karl Manheim regarded the intelligentsia to be “socially unattached”, a “relatively classless stratum who is” capable of acting independently to promote more general social interests.⁶⁴ 19th century Bengal, it might be said presents a deviation from model of Marx and Engels. For, it definitely cannot be regarded as a developed capitalist society ; indeed it was a society where feudal remnants held on with substantial strength and only slowly and reluctantly paving the way for capitalism. Marxists like Sumit Sarkar argues, middle class radicalism in the form of pro-peasant sympathies did exist, but was of on extremely limited nature. According to him the members of the middle class “were only too eager to buy themselves positions in the vast and growing Permanent Settlement hierarchy through intermediate tenures or superior raiyat rights”⁶⁵ John Broomfield is also of the opinion that the most crucial demarcating line between ‘bhadra’ and ‘abhadra’ was the former's abstenation from the manual labour and their belief in inferiority of manual occupation. Hence coincidence of economic interests between two groups ----- one which laboured and other which appropriated the fruits of that labour could never be possible.⁶⁶

To a certain extent this paper cannot but conform to the existing literature with regard to the attitude of the intelligentsia to the peasantry. The intelligentsia of 19th century Bengal was not as Karl Manheim says socially unattached, classless stratum, on the contrary their views were often coloured by their what Tom ocate

Bottomore calls 'social class origins'⁶⁷ ----- in case of Bengal their background as members of group of landed proprietors. The Zamindar in Rammohan comes forth when in his paper on Revenue System, despite admitting adverse effects of the Permanent Settlement on the peasantry, he expresses satisfaction at the increase of the income of landed proprietors owing to extension of cultivators "as every man is entitled by law and reason to enjoy the fruits of his honest labour and good management".⁶⁸ The question might pertinently be asked whether the extension of cultivation is due to the labours of proprietors (i.e. the Zamindars) or the actual cultivators. Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, a young Bengal member takes a step ahead in this regard in that he acknowledges the cultivators as real owners of the soil. Being a member of landed aristocracy however he does not advocate the abolition of Permanent Settlement; on the contrary he suggests education and legislation as remedy of all ills. He moreover felt that ryots had acquired 'Vices' such as evasion of payment of Khajna, Dharmaghat, breaking their agreements to indigo planters and the like. His appeal is to the good sense Zamindar to protect the ryots so that "they find it easier to pay your claims"⁶⁹ Bankim's membership of a rich landed family is revealed when he clarifies in his essay that his criticism are not directed against Zamindar community as such, but against some oppressive Zamindars. Similar to Dakshinaranjan Bankim appeals to Zamindars themselves for correction of evils committed by some of them ----- His suggestion was also not the abolition of Permanent settlement but reform within the existing system. For, he thinks that the former will lead to lawlessness in society. He explicitly states that he does not advocate 'social revolution'.⁷⁰

The above limitations notwithstanding, this paper will like to raise a question as to whether the attitude of the Bengali intelligentsia can really be dismissed as indifferent but conservative.⁷¹ Radicalism, as this paper has defined it seeks to change the status quo in society, economy and politics through revolutionary means. But the terms conservative and radical need to be judged by their context. They may not have same meaning in nineteenth century Bengal as they have today. Many members of the intelligentsia criticized the system sharply. Rammohan Roy raised a pertinent question as to why the zamindars did not conclude a similar settlement with the cultivators as the British did with them. Members of Young Bengal also questioned the Permanent Settlement as it was not made with the actual owner of the soil but with the tax collectors. Akshay Kumar Dutta was staunchly critical of the system. Ramesh Chandra Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee even display traits of self criticism. The former asked the peasants not to expect justice from their own countrymen-----i.e members of his own class. He also supported peasant uprisings and regarded suppression of the same as unjust.⁷² Bankim Chandra also did not hesitate to assert that the Bengali elite with their spectacles and western education had done nothing for the poor common people of the country. Also he stated that the permanent settlement should have been concluded with the peasants.⁷³

Conclusion

It is undeniable that no member of the intelligentsia advocated abolition of the Permanent Settlement. But in the colonial context it was perhaps not possible to drastically change the system. Even within those limitations the intelligentsia did assert that the land belonged to the peasant only and the government had committed a great blunder in concluding the settlement with mere tax collectors. For an intelligentsia dependant for its livelihood on the colonial state and hailing from a background of landed aristocracy, such assertions were indeed a big step forward. The intelligentsia did not try to break the status quo but strongly advocated a change in it. Judged by their limitations, the intelligentsia, were quite radical.

Endnotes

1. Sarker, Jadunath and Majumder, Ramesh Chandra (eds) History of Bengal ----Muslim Period (1200-1757 A.D)
2. Guha, Ranajit: A Rule of Property for Bengal pg 11.
3. Ibid, pg 93.
4. Ibid, pg 122.
5. Ibid, pg 123.
6. A.C Banerjee, Agrarian System of Bengal (Vol II). pg 294.
7. Palit, Chittabrata. "The Intelligentsia and The Peasant in Bengal in the first half of the 19th Century." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 29, Indian History Congress, 1967, pp. 132-39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44138008>.

8. De, Amalendu. "Bengali Intelligentsia's Attitudes to the Permanent Settlement." *Social Scientist*, vol. 5, no. 8, Social Scientist, 1977, pp. 18–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516561>.
9. Sarkar, Sumit, *A Critique of Colonial India*
10. dictionary definition, www.vocabulary.com
11. De, Amalendu, *ibid*
12. Bottomore, Tom, *Elites and Society*, Ch IV, Pg 64
13. Bottomore, Tom, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*
14. Bottomore, Tom, *Elites and Society* Pg 61
15. Goldthorpe, John, "On the service class, its formation and future" in A. Giddens and Gavin Mackenzie (eds) "Social Class and Division of Labour". *Essays in honour of Ilya Meustadt*.
16. Chatterjee, Jaya, *Bengal Divided*
17. Bandyopadhyay, Shekhar, *From Plassey To Partition*, Pg 142
18. Sarkar, Sumit, *A Critique of Colonial India*.
19. *Ibid*, Pg 11
- 20) *Ibid*, pg 45.
21. Palit, Chittabrata "Tensions in Bengal Rural Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule, 1830 – 1860" Chapter – IV, pg 94.
22. Roy, Raja Rammohan, *Selected Works*, Pg 56
23. *Ibid*, pg 57
24. *Ibid*, pg 56
25. *Ibid*, pg 45.
26. *Ibid*.
27. *Ibid*, pg 46
28. *Ibid*, pg 51
29. *Ibid*, pg 52
30. *Ibid*, pg 63.
31. *Ibid*
32. *Bengal Spectator*, October, 1842 Quoted in Introduction by Narahari Kabiraj to "The Peasantry of Bengal" – R.C Dutt edited in Narahari Kabiraj. pg XXXV.
33. *Ibid*, pg XXXVI.
34. *Ibid*.
35. "The Zamindar and the Ryot" in *Calcutta review*, July 1846 Quoted in Chittabrata Palit *New Viewpoints on Nineteenth century Bengal* Chapter- VIII, pg
36. Akshay Kumar Dutta, *Tattvabodhini Patrika* (in Bengali), saka 1772 (Baishakh Srahan), 1850. I have mainly utilized the text: *Palligramastha Projader durabastha barnann*
37. *Ibid*.
38. *Ibid*
39. *Ibid*
40. Chatterjee, Sanjib Chandra, *Bengal Ryots : Their Rights and Liabilities : An Elementary Treatise on the Law of Landlord and Tenant*, ed. By A.C Banerjee and B.K Ghosh,
41. *Ibid*.
42. *Ibid*
43. *Ibid*.
44. Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra ' Bangadesher Krishak' in *Bankim Rachanabali* (Vol.2) edited by J.C Bagal,
45. *Ibid*.
46. *Ibid*.
47. *Ibid*.
48. *Ibid*.

49. Ibid
50. Ibid
51. Ibid
52. Ibid.
53. Dutt, Ramesh Chandra, The Peasantry of Bengal edited by Narahari Kabiraj
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid,
57. Ibid,.
58. Ibid,
59. Ibid,.
60. Ibid,
61. Ibid,
62. Ibid.
63. Bottomore, Tom, A Dictionary of Marxist Thought.
64. Bottomore, Tom Elites and Society,
65. Sarker, Sumit A Critique of Colonial India,
66. Broomfield, John, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society Twentieth Century Bengal,
67. Ibid.
68. Roy, Raja Rammohan, ibid
69. Quoted in Sarkar, Sumit, A Critique of Colonial India, Pg, 33
70. Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra, ibid.
69. Dutt, Ramesh Chandra, ibid.
70. Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra, ibid
71. De, Amalendu, ibid
72. Dutt, Ramesh Chandra, ibid
73. Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra, ibid

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bottomore, Tom: A Dictionary of Marxist Thought. Oxford, Basil, Blackwell, 1983.
2. Bottomore, Tom, Elites and Society C.A Watts And Company Ltd, London 1964.
3. Broomfield, John, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society : Twentieth Century Bengal. Oxford University Press, Bombay 1968.
4. Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra : Bankim Rachanabali (Vol. 2) (ed) by J.C.Bagal. Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, 1955.
5. Chattopadhyay, Sanjeeb Chandra Bengal Ryots (1864) : Their Rights and Liabilities: An Elementary Treatise on the Law of Landlord and Tenant (ed) by A.C Banerjee and B.K.Ghosh. K.P Bagchi and Company, Calcutta 1977 (Reprint).
6. De, Amalendu, "Bengali Intelligentsia's Attitudes to the Permanent Settlement." Social Scientist, vol. 5, no. 8, Social Scientist, 1977, pp. 18–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516561>
7. Dutta, Akshay Kumar, Palligramastha prajader durabastha
8. Dutta, Ramesh Chandra, The Peasantry of Bengal (1874) Ed by Narahari Kabiraj, Reprint, 1980.
9. Giddens, A and Mackenzie, G (eds) Social Class and Division of Labour : : Essays in honour of Ilya Neustadt. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1982.
10. Palit, Chittabrata, New Viewpoints on Nineteenth Century Bengal Progressive Publisher Kolkata, 1980.
11. Roy, Raja Rammohan, Selected works of Raja Rammohan Roy, Govt. of India Publication Division.
12. Sarkar, Sumit : A Critique of Colonial India. Papyrus, Calcutta, 1985.