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**STUDIES IN THE
LAND ECONOMICS OF BENGAL**

STUDIES IN THE LAND ECONOMICS OF BENGAL

BY

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With A Foreword By

The Hon'ble Sir B. P. SINGH ROY, Kt.
MINISTER, LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT, BENGAL.

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To
The Late Hon'ble Sir P. C. MITTER
K.C.S.I., C.I.E.
In Grateful Remembrance.

FOREWORD

The land system of Bengal touches the life of nearly 48 million of the inhabitants of this Province out of fifty. Her social and economic structure is greatly influenced by the land tenure. The system has brought into existence different grades of interest beginning from proprietorship of land to annual tenancy of the under-ryot, enjoying the right of cultivation of the holding and appropriation of a share of the produce. The system is as old as the Bengalee civilization, though modified in detail from time to time to suit the exigencies of the situation brought about by the change in the ruling power, and adapted to their administrative needs. It is by no means correct to suggest that the Zemindary system is an introduction of the British. The Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis did no doubt effect a change in the status of the Zemindars by elevating them to the position of owners of land from farmers of revenue. But this change had a far-reaching effect in creating a large number of tenureholders, under-tenureholders, ryots and under-ryots, all of whom except the few at the bottom of the hierarchy secured permanent or semi-permanent interests in land. The Zemindars, besides being mere collectors of revenue on behalf of the Government of the country, were also important units of police and revenue administration of the Province. Under them were the Khudkast and Paikast ryots, enjoying in their turn a comparative immunity from eviction. But their status was in actual practice less secure than that of the occupancy ryot of the present day. Below the Khudkast and the Paikast ryots were the under-ryots who were merely tenants at will or agricultural labourers paid in kind. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement not only made the Zemindars proprietors of the soil subject to the payment of a

fixed jama but transmitted through them a security of tenure to a large number of holders of subordinate interests such as Mukraridars, Patnidars and Darpatnidars, besides the occupancy ryots and occupancy under-ryots of very recent origin. This transformation from the system that prevailed in the Hindu and the Mahammedan periods to the one of the present time was naturally gradual and the process complex. It was through partly legislative enactments based on the customary rights of the old and partly through judicial interpretations of those statutes that the rights of the various grades of holders of landed interests had been settled.

The human memory anxious to drop the details of the complicated process of this evolution, retains only its results and not how they were achieved. Thus at this distance of time, because we have travelled a long way since 1793, the genesis of the present land system of Bengal appears to be lost sight of and shrouded in mystery. Except to those who made a special study of this difficult and somewhat dry subject, it is an unknown past. Ignorance is always a bliss. It naturally does not deter us from suggesting alterations in the arrangement governing the relation between the landlord and the tenant, nor does one hesitate to criticise it as uneconomic and unfair. Many of us do honestly believe that the Permanent Settlement and all its concomitants are absolute anachronisms in the present economic structure of the country, and the sooner they are removed the better for all concerned. Government are faced with a chronic deficit of revenue, the Zemindars are mostly insolvent, and suppliants for being given protection as wards of court, the tenants find their holdings uneconomic, and look upon the landlords as an unnecessary interceptor of the profit from land, the politician who is in the happy position of an on-looker, though not necessarily seeing always the best of the game, feels a righteous indignation against the landlord and

is out on a crusade against this enjoyer of earned income. These are serious suggestions for nationalisation of land. Thus the moment is undoubtedly psychological and changes are almost inevitable either for better or worse.

Retrospection is always salutary but it is more so before a momentous decision in the affairs of a nation. The time has come for a careful scrutiny of the genesis of the complicated land tenure for a correct appreciation of the difficulties that had to be overcome by its authors—so that the present problem might be approached from a proper perspective. Experience gained during 140 years is undoubtedly a valuable asset which if properly applied might prove to be a finger post to the right direction.

Knowledge is power and ignorance is weakness. Mr. Sachin Sen's compendium on this intricate subject deals with it lucidly and in an interesting manner. He has tried to trace the origin and development of the present system and its evolution through the different stages. The back ground of history, and quotations from important documents have rendered the subject attractive and its treatment realistic. The book besides supplying many useful information about the landtenure, and agricultural interests in Bengal, presents some of the facts clearly and concisely. There are very few books which deal with the up-to-date problems on the subject, focussing attention to the realities of the situation. There are authorities that deal with the historical portion of the landtenure but throw no light on the present day problem or make no attempt to explain the situation which is an outcome of the Permanent Settlement, as modified by later legislations and impositions. Mr. Sen's book is an admirable endeavour in that direction and thereby removes a long-felt want, regarding a subject which is of supreme importance to the community.

15, Lansdowne Road,
Calcutta.

B. P. SINGH ROY.

PREFACE

In presenting the book before the reading public I offer no apology. The preparation of the volume was undertaken at the instance and under the guidance of the Hon'ble Sir P. C. Mitter, Kt., K. C. S. I., C. I. E., then Revenue Member to the Government of Bengal but his unfortunate death was an irreparable loss to me. However, I worked on and finished the book by the end of 1934 and I find some consolation in dedicating the book to the Hon'ble Sir P. C. Mitter in grateful remembrance of his affection for me.

The Hon'ble Sir B. P. Singh Roy, Kt., Minister, Local Self-Government, Bengal, who has always evinced keen interest in my work has laid me under a deep debt of gratitude by writing the foreword to my book. Sir Bijoy Prasad whose reputation as a publicist is great is one of the most competent authorities on the land problems of the province, and this foreword, I am proud to confess, has greatly enhanced the value of my work.

The library of the British Indian Association has been the chief laboratory for my work. Mr. P. N. Tagore, President of the Association, made the progress of my work smooth by extending his sympathetic encouragement. I shall fondly treasure his unflinching interest in my work.

This publication would have been long delayed but for the appreciative encouragement of Mr. Probhanath Singh Roy, one of those brilliant youngmen of whom the land-holding community may justly be proud.

Of the numerous friends and well-wishers I must particularly mention my friend Mr. Karuna Kumar Nandi (Editor, Insurance and Finance Review) to whom my thanks are due for the proof-reading of the book. For many valuable suggestions I am indebted to my friend Mr A. K. Ghose, Bar-at-law.

Ballygunje.
25th March, 1935.

S. S.

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INTRODUCTION

Agricultural economics is the study of man in his relation to land. Agriculture is the fundamental industry in Bengal and it is also the greatest of our industries. Land is the farmer's factory. It is to be noted that profit can never be the sole object of farming. "Love of it for its own sake, attachment to the soil, the desire for independence, family tradition, and other quite irrational causes combine to balance the purely economic side of the question."

Agricultural population remains for humanity a reservoir of energy whereas an excessive growth of industry brings about rapid human wastage.

Agriculture produces wealth: it employs the largest number of human units in our province; it is a fine mode of life, an industry which develops some of the finest qualities in those engaged in it. Ours is an agricultural province but the most interesting phenomenon is the absence of our interest in the land. In any economic discussion, we hear of reconstruction, rationalisation and reorganisation; "they have been thrown like lifebuoys to the various industries that have shown signs of distress in the economic blizzard." But now all the remedies go under the label of "planning."

In agriculture, the first essential thing is that the farming unit must be economic. What is an economic unit is of course a delicate question. "The optimum size of a farming unit depends so much on the factor of management, and that factor is so personal, variable and incapable of measurement that it is impossible to decide on the economic size of unit except by empirical methods." The size and shape of fields is a question deserving close attention.

Agriculture is a kind of dual partnership between the landlord and the tenant. Before the Bengal Tenancy Act

of 1885, the landlord was the dominant partner. The landlord was responsible for many improvements; he sunk capital in drainage, land reclamation and other necessary improvements and relief works. But now legislation has relegated the landlord to the position of a receiver of rent. His power of control is negligible, low returns or no returns on the investment in agriculture have made capital extremely shy. The landlord's powers have been crippled, so his interest has slackened. The tenant has now security of tenure, the right to enjoy the fruits of his investment.

The Bengal Tenancy Act is not a measure for the improvement of land: it has taken away the powers of the landlords on the plea of protecting the welfare of ryots and it has also managed to screw better revenue under stamps by promising to decide every dispute in court. Since the Act, litigation has increased to a considerable extent: the relations of landlords and tenants have been strained whereas the Government could enjoy more revenue out of the suits. It is a case of sowing the seeds of disunion among the landlords and tenants for the financial interest of Government. The Act has done another mischief: there is evident rivalry among the tenants to usurp the due rights and privileges of landlords but they have forgotten the interests of lands. Every one talks of land ownership: no one talks of land improvement. Conflict breeds conflict and our attention has gravitated from the land to the landlord. The soil goes on deteriorating but the conflict among landlords and tenants grows more acute and more bitter.

The Tenancy Act is an open recognition of the principle that the welfare of ryots is the concern of the State and the indifference of landlords to agricultural improvements is largely due to the Tenancy Act. Rural Bengal in the nineteenth century was the creation of landlordism and even to day, the landlords are the unrecognised financiers of the ryots.

It is well-known that the net return on capital invested in agricultural is not equal to the income derived from other long-term investment. Over and above the low return, the shrinkage in world trade has made agriculture a losing concern. In Bengal, we have to export tea and jute ; we cannot absolutely depend on internal trade. If there is no recovery of world-trade, our jute would be less exported and that would spell economic ruin for the province. The farmer only produces: the business of marketing lies in the hands of specialists. The farmer has no control over price and is therefore suffering. Moreover, the marketing cost of agricultural commodities is higher. We cannot forget that in agriculture we get small-scale and widely-dispersed production, perishable produce, market variation, quantitatively and qualitatively, seasonally and from year to year, both in production and consumption.

Our agriculture receives no assistance from the Government. Agricultural loans are negligible ; Co-operative Banks are hopelessly inadequate ; land-mortgage banks, five in number, are very stiff in granting loans. But in Britain, agriculture receives better treatment from the Government : direct grants are estimated to have amounted to F 70 millions in the last thirteen years, that is, about F 6 millions a year ; indirect grants to another F 4 millions a year : relief by derating amounts to about F 16 millions per annum ; preferential rail rates are estimated to be worth F 800,000 per annum to agriculture.

It is claimed that any money spent on agriculture in a permanently settled area is to be taken as money wasted from the Government standpoint. The claim is based on the obvious hypothesis that any improvement in agriculture would give no corresponding return to the State-exchequer in the form of an enhancement of land revenue. First, it is

very bad economics to dry up the resources of the agriculturists by refusing any help because impoverished ryots are bound to affect the general revenue of the Government. Secondly, an increase in the purchasing power of ryots would set in motion all other economic forces in the country which would compensate the Government. Thirdly, the scope for indirect taxation expands along with the economic sufficiency of the ryots. In any case, improved agriculture should be the desideratum of every State and any deviation therefrom on the plea of inelastic land revenue is economically unsound.

Agricultural depression in a very obstinate form has been operative since 1929. The return on capital invested in agriculture has dwindled to nothing. The cost of production and the prices received are out of line. The economic structure is competitive and in a competitive order it is the job of price to equate supply and demand. The accepted law¹ of supply and demand is that prices tend to rise or fall as supplies decrease or increase or as demand increases or decreases. But the price fluctuations are violent and necessarily pernicious and disturbing. The price-mechanism is not working well: it can no longer regulate the output of goods in accordance with the demand. It is the steadiness of price that is desired.

The fall of prices clearly demonstrates that money and price have not fulfilled their function, that is, the equating of supply and demand. "The price level," as the Macmillian Committee state, "is the outcome of interaction between monetary and non-monetary factors. The recent world-wide fall of prices is best described as a monetary phenomenon which has occurred as the result of the monetary

1. "The term 'law' means nothing more than a general proposition or statement of tendencies, more or less certain, more or less definite."

system failing to solve successfully a problem of unprecedented difficulty and complexity set it by a conjunction of highly intractable non-monetary phenomena.”

The problem then is: how to bring production and consumption into line with one another. There are two schools of thought: (a) it is held that the regulation of production and consumption by price is still a workable system which would respond to modern needs, (b) others think that some method of control is necessary in the place of price. Here the agitation for planning comes in.

It must be made clear that if planning come in, the competitive system goes out. The competitive system is based on private property and freedom of enterprise. Frankness requires it to be told that to *laissez faire*, we owe industrial developments and industrial instability, political institutions and social maladjustments.

Price-fluctuations exercise the most pernicious and harmful effects in the competitive order. They convulse settled habits and throw the producers into the pits of insolvency. Price-fluctuations are due to variations in the value of money, in demand and in supply. The farmer cannot control variations in the value of money: he can only to an extremely limited extent influence the demand, such as, by an increase of the purchasing power, a reduction of distribution costs, an effort to improve consumption habits. It is only the supply side which is within the control of the farmer. Even the supply side, on examination, shows that it is limited by weather conditions,¹ planned production, seasonal production, market conditions, farmer's finances. Thus the possibilities of the control of supply are limited.

1. Agriculture is a partnership between Man and Nature and Man proposes while Nature disposes.

Production control is open to serious defects. The Stevenson Rubber Restriction Scheme failed; the Brazil Valorisation Scheme for Coffee failed; the control of nitrate supplies failed in Chile. If the control is voluntary, it is also bound to fail. The American Grain Stabilisation Corporation carried on an intensive campaign for voluntary reduction of the wheat acreage in 1930 but the net reduction was 2 p. c. One must appreciate the fact that the precision and accurate forecasting which could be applied to commerce can not be applied to agriculture which is governed by uncertain weather conditions, rapidly fluctuating prices of live-stock and produce, disappointing yields etc. The human element in the form of the agricultural labourer plays also an important part.

Moreover, production control, to be effective, must cover all products. But an all-round reduction is uneconomic, because "the efficient producer is penalised to the same extent as the inefficient; land suited to the crop is abandoned to the same extent as the ill-suited land. It is the sub-marginal producer who ought to disappear."

The best form of controlling production is through marketing. In agriculture, one expects better returns by efficient methods of distribution, stronger bargaining power on the farmer's side, reducing costs of production and by increasing consumption.

The control of production without public ownership of land is bound to have serious effects. This brings us to the question of nationalisation of land.

The landlord-tenant system prevails in our province. Now, there are economists who want to substitute public ownership for private ownership. They say that the landlord-tenant system is weakening. If it goes, it will go because the position of the present landlord has been made

economically unstable. The system shows defects because legislation and taxation have made the landlords useless and weak.¹

In England, the Conservative party does not contemplate public ownership of lands beyond the extension of small holdings. Mr. Lloyd George's Liberal Land Committee (1925) advocated the transfer of agricultural land to the State in return for land annuities and the adoption of a system of landholding to which they gave the name of "cultivating tenure" with reasonable security to the tenant practising good husbandry ; the immediate authorities for the administration the land were to be county authorities. The Labour policy advocates the acquisition of all agricultural lands by the State and its management by elected county authorities, compensation to present owners being made by land bonds. In 1926, the Labour policy adopted was that the existing agreements would be continued for the time being, (a) that the county agricultural committees would in suitable cases cultivate lands themselves on a considerable scale, (b) that the system of tenant-farmers of small holdings could be advantageously continued, (c) that the public utility companies or forms of collective or co-operative farming for the cultivation of large tracts of land could be established.

In our province, there is a regrettable amount of loose talk about the nationalisation of lands. If the Government pursue a policy of nationalising the lands, they can of course smoothly get all the lands under direct management.

1. "Let it be stated over again that no advantage on balance, is claimed for this system of land purchase (by the State) when contrasted with the system of private ownership which has prevailed so long ; it is only put forward to provide an orderly way out of the difficulties which the breakdown of the old system is creating"—Messrs Orwin and Peel in "The Tenure of Agricultural Land."

Let us take instances: when touzis are sold for arrears of revenue, the Government need not search out new bidders for resettlement; the Government can also issue instructions for the acceptance of the land in lieu of heavy taxes. If the Government are really serious and adopt some such methods, they can peacefully get large tracts of land under their direct management within a brief space of twenty-five years. But the question remains, if the Government would be well advised to break the landlord-tenant system in favour of public ownership. The growth of population, the ideal of equal inheritance for all sons, the importation of individualistic notions, the break up of the joint family—all these are working for the dismemberment of estates. Over and above these handicaps, the increased burdens of taxation of profits from lands, the deterioration of lands and agricultural depression with consequential low returns from capital invested in lands have combined to break the lure of landlordism. At this stage, the advocacy of nationalisation of lands has little force, less sense. Our agricultural problems are not bound up with the question of ownership; they lie deeper, and a more scientific approach to the question is desired.

The absence of contact between the Government and agriculturists which is a regrettable feature of our rural economy should be remedied. Sir F. A. Nicholson, a distinguished authority on problems of Indian rural economy, said:—"It is impossible for a Government to influence individually millions of petty peasants; they are individually too isolated, too suspicious, too shy to accept new ideas or to undertake experiment in new methods; similarly, they are too poor, too powerless to produce the best products, to get the better of the middleman and the best of the markets. There must be some organisation which enables Government to act upon a body of men at once and to serve as intermediary between the Government and the individual: an

organisation which can be advised, educated, reasoned with and listened to, which will discuss together the suggestion of authority, and will through its better educated or bolder members provide intelligence to absorb new ideas, find courage and funds to attempt new methods and combine both for the improvement of products and better sale of the same."

To return to our question: low price is the root trouble. Our attempt should be to stabilise the general price-level; not only that, we should also try to raise the general price-level. Our objective should be, so far as it lies within the power of the country, to influence the international price-level, first of all to raise prices a long way above the present level and then to maintain them at the level thus reached with as much stability as can be managed.¹ It is well-known that stable prices do not indicate stable income. A short crop at stable price means less income but a short crop may be counter-balanced by higher prices.

The regulation of agricultural industry under a centralised control is open to serious limitations:

- (1) the agricultural products have no uniformity in quality,
- (2) farming does not require heavy initial capital, (3) there is no marked limitation in the raw material nor in production,
- (4) the demand for most products is not elastic.

The best way is to improve the marketing organisation. The restriction of supply undoubtedly results in higher prices but the danger is there that it may result in the restriction of the purchasing power. To quote Prof. Pigou, people want prices to rise in order that

¹ 1. The Macmillan Committee (1931)

more "people may be employed ; they do not want less people to be employed in order that prices may rise."

In our country, we need restriction of imported supplies¹ at least for two reasons; first, to raise prices of our indigenous products; secondly, we need a favourable balance of trade for meeting our foreign obligations. But we should see that our restriction policy should not make other countries hostile. That would prove suicidal.

Agriculture undoubtedly is the greatest of our industries. There is no thought-out national agriculture policy in our country. We are an uprooted people, with no vision, no consolidating outlook. Our Government have zigzagged from one policy to another with no definite programme. The problem is essentially not of production but of distribution. International trade cannot remain asphyxiated: it must move on. Debtor countries must be allowed to pay their debts or they must default; creditor countries must allow payment of debts or cancel them. The illusions of money must go: payment must be eventually in goods and services. Money is after all a medium of exchange² and a country cannot go on indefinitely paying in gold. A creditor country has great many responsibilities: she should not raise obstacles against payment of obligations in goods. If there are restrictions which go against payment of debts, it is the creditor country which would ultimately suffer.

Agricultural depression is to be counteracted by a steady increase of demand for its products and not by stifling human efforts in the production of wealth. That means that there must be a rise in the standard of living:

1. Import prohibitions, tariffs, voluntary compulsory quotas, import monopolies, exchange depreciation are some of the methods.
2. It is said that money is just like a belt: it fits in with the size of the wearer.

the power of consumption is to be increased, the demands for new things are to be created. This increase of the purchasing power of the agriculturists would help the re-absorption in productive occupations of the unemployed and this in its turn is of course dependent upon an improvement in the financial and economic conditions of the world.

The greatest stumbling-block to our agricultural improvement is the growth of our population. The land is deteriorating whereas the population is increasing. Thus the pressure on land is growing more intense. Mere increase of numbers enhances the problems, retards the increase of the purchasing power, requires more expenditure per head. It is the human unit that is to be improved, not the human numbers.

Unsound planning is more mischievous than no planning at all. Planning to be sound need not be revolutionary. Socialism or Communism or Dictatorship is not the *sine qua non* of planning. There are methods of planning and our planning of agriculture should not ignore the particular and peculiar conditions of our province.

An individualistic democratic State with freedom of competition and ownership of property can achieve a determinate and measurable economic goal by a greater integration of agricultural, industrial and monetary policies. In launching on an experiment of planning, the State is to play the role of a consummate architect: the country would be heading for a disaster if it is guided by those who are merely brokers of Russian ideas. Planning is a creation: it is not a mere decoration.

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