



# The Envelope of Global Trade: The Political Economy and Intellectual History of Jute in the Bengal Delta, 1850s to 1950s

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The Envelope of Global Trade: The Political Economy and Intellectual History of  
Jute in the Bengal Delta, 1850s to 1950s

Abstract

During the second half of the nineteenth century, peasant smallholders in the Bengal delta – an alluvial tract formed out of the silt deposits of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna river-systems – expanded their cultivation of jute, a fibrous plant that was the world’s primary packaging material. Jute fibres were spun and woven into course cloths used to pack the world’s commodities – its grains, sugar, coffee, cotton, wool, and so forth – in their journey from farms and plantations to urban and industrial centres of consumption. The fibre connected the Bengal delta and its peasant smallholders to the vicissitudes of global commodity markets. This dissertation examines connections between the delta and international commodity markets from the 1850s to the 1950s – it is a local history of global capital.

I explore how the commodity shaped the delta’s economic, political and intellectual history, how economic lives, social and cultural formations, and political processes in eastern Bengal were informed and influenced by the cultivation and trade of jute fibres. First, I look at how commodity production changed peasant households’ economic lives, particularly intensifying peasant interactions with markets. I focus on peasant households’ market-based consumption, and argue that consumption informed peasant politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, I look at how the circulation of the commodity transformed the

physical and ecological landscape of the delta. I focus on the emergence of jute-specialized market towns along the delta's rivers and railways, where jute was bulked, assorted and packaged before being dispatched to metropolitan Calcutta. Third, I look at how the commodity emerged as a political and intellectual concept, as imperialists, anti-colonial nationalists, post-colonial statesmen, intellectuals and poets imbued fibre with meaning – relating jute to ideas of poverty and prosperity, religious ethics and practice, economic development and modernization and territorial nationalism.

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## Abbreviations

NAI	National Archives India
NAB	National Archives Bangladesh
DUA	Dundee University Archives
IOR	India Office Library and Records
BLC	Bengal Legislative Council
BLA	Bengal Legislative Assembly
EBLA	East Bengal Legislative Assembly
EPA	East Pakistan Assembly
SSR	Survey and Settlement Report
BPBEC	Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Commission
RCA	Royal Commission on Agriculture
FIC	The Famine Inquiry Commission
MAS	Modern Asian Studies
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review
IJMA	Indian Jute Mills Association
BNCC	Bengal National Chamber of Commerce
BCC	Bengal Chamber of Commerce
KPP	Krishak Praja Party

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## Introduction

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, jute fabrics – gunnies, hessians, burlap – were the premier packaging material in world trade. Jute sacks were used to pack the world’s grains, cotton, sugar, coffee, guano, cement, and even bacon, as these commodities made their journey from farms and mines to centres of consumption. While the fabric circulated globally, the production of fibre was concentrated in a small corner of the world – the Bengal delta, an alluvial tract formed out of the silt deposits of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna river-systems. Peasant smallholders in the delta cultivated jute on small lots of land, using a combination of household and hired labour and stored and borrowed capital. Peasant produce journeyed westwards from the peasant homestead, along the delta’s waterways and railways, through river-ports and railway towns, to Calcutta. From Calcutta, part of the crop went north, to the jute mills along the banks of the Hooghly and the rest was exported overseas, to jute mills in Britain, continental Europe and North America. The mills spun and wove the fibres into fabrics that were dispatched to the world’s farms, plantations, and mines. From there, wrapped around a multitude of primary products, jute sacks traveled the globe.

The sack connected the delta’s jute tracts to circuits of global capital, to the rhythms and vicissitudes of global commodity markets. My dissertation focuses on the transformations wrought by the cultivation and circulation of fibre on the Bengal delta. I examine how fibre shaped the delta’s economic, political and intellectual history from the 1850s to the 1950s, exploring how economic lives, social and cultural formations, and political processes in eastern Bengal were informed and

influenced by the region's connections to global circuits of capital forged by jute.

The emergence of jute cultivation in the Bengal delta should not be seen as a moment in the region's transitions to capitalism, a one-off event with a less capitalist before and a more capitalist after.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between commodity-producing region and global commodity markets was continuous – repeated and reiterated and sometimes reshaped and reoriented each time Bengal's cultivators sowed their lands with jute and bought fibres to sale into global markets.

I examine the relationship between commodity-producing region and global commodity markets during the hundred years spanning the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Korean War (1950-53). The Crimean War interrupted Britain's supplies of Russian flax and hemp leading textile mills in Dundee, Scotland, to switch en masse to jute. Though initially concentrated in Dundee, jute mills were established in continental Europe, the USA and in western Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By 1910, about half of the world's jute manufacturing capacity was located along the banks of the Hooghly, to the north of Calcutta.<sup>2</sup>

Bengal's peasant smallholders responded to the sharp rise in global manufacturing

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<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of transitions to capitalism, and the consignment of nations and societies to the "waiting room of history," awaiting this transition, is apt. Chakrabarty argues that the story of capitalism and colonial societies should be seen as an open-ended process, constituted of two intertwined narratives – which he labels History 1 and History 2. History 1 is the story of capital transforming the world it encounters in its own image and History 2 is that of local culture and meanings which predate and survive the onslaught of capital, and subsequently subvert and interrupt the course of History 1. While I am not convinced that History 2 should be placed exclusively in the pre-capitalist or understood solely as histories of culture and meaning, Chatterjee's categories certainly provide a more useful and productive framework to study the history of capital in colonial societies than that of "transitions to capitalism." Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2000, Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> D.R. Wallace, *The Romance of Jute: A Short History of the Calcutta Jute Mill Industry*, Calcutta: 1928, provides an entertaining and first hand account of the tremendous growth of the Calcutta jute industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Donald Stewart's *Jute and Empire: Calcutta Jute Mills and the Landscapes of Empire*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998 provides an account of the increasing competition between Dundee and Calcutta jute mills in an imperial context.

requirements, and the delta's jute acreage increased from about 50,000 acres in the 1850s to close to 3 million acres in the 1900s.<sup>3</sup> I conclude my narrative of how global jute markets shaped the history of the world's sole jute tracts with the Korean War of the 1950s, when jute prices spiraled upwards and provided a brief but significant economic boom to the post-colonial Pakistani state and its impoverished jute cultivators.

This hundred-year span covers two distinct time periods with respect to the standard of living in the Bengal delta. The period between 1850 and 1913 was an era of prosperity, as cultivators with larger landholdings produced both sufficient rice for household subsistence and commercial fibre for sale. They were thus relatively insulated from sharp falls in commodity prices, and could use jute revenue to consume market-place goods and colonial governments' services, specially legal services and, to a much lesser extent, educational services. Peasant prosperity manifested most visibly in their rising consumption of market goods – imported cloth, corrugated tin-sheets for houses, household utensils, children's toys, and so forth. By the turn of the century, however, conditions were beginning to change. First, land fragmentation driven by a rapidly growing population meant that cultivators adopted a market-based subsistence livelihood strategy: exchanging jute for rice in local markets to secure household subsistence needs. Second, cultivators slid into debt, and interest payments were taking up an increasing proportion of peasant expenditures. Third, the ecology of the delta deteriorated, and peasant households were struck by more frequent and intense ecological shocks, especially

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<sup>3</sup> Ali, M.W., *Jute in the Agrarian History of Bengal, 1870-1914*, Rajshahi, 1998 describes the steady increase in jute cultivation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

floods and water-borne epidemics.<sup>4</sup> The period after World War I was marked by a rapid and thorough process of agrarian immiseration in the delta, culminating in the tragedy of the 1943 famine, when about 3 million people died of starvation or hunger-related causes.<sup>5</sup>

In the dissertation, I explore three inter-related aspects of this relationship between the global and the local over a hundred years spanning the 1850s and the 1950s. First, I look at peasant commodity production, especially how jute cultivation changed agrarian relations of production and at how peasant prosperity, poverty, and hunger became closely integrated with global commodity prices. Second, I look at the jute commodity chain and the spatial configurations of metropolis, hinterland, and intermediary market towns. I especially focus on the market town, arguing that these towns were crucial nodes connecting peasants and their smallholdings to global markets. Third, I look at how ideas and politics of jute in the world's sole jute tracts changed along with changes in peasant production and livelihoods. In the remainder of this introduction, I will expand on these inter-related themes of peasant production, commodity circulation, and the politics of jute.

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<sup>4</sup> Sugata Bose discusses the demographic impact of landholding and the increasing debt burden during the twentieth century, particularly after the Great Depression: Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure, and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Omkar Goswami describes the impact of worsening market conditions and the declining returns to peasant production after WWI: Goswami, Omkar, *Industry, Trade, and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern India, 1900-1947*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991. Iftexhar Iqbal describes the ecological deterioration of the delta from the beginning of twentieth century, as delta's drainage was blocked by railways and the invasive weed, the water hyacinth. Iqbal, Iftexhar, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State, and Social Change, 1840-1943*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> As Amartya Sen has argued, hunger and starvation came about due to loss of "exchange entitlements," as a wide-range of people could no longer afford to purchase rise in exchange for their labour or other resources. Famine, as always, was the result of poverty; not, as Sen has convincingly demonstrated, from crop failures and food availability decline. Sen, Amartya, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981

## JUTE AND PEASANT COMMODITY PRODUCTION

The late nineteenth century witnessed a rise in the peasant production of “commodities of empire” in Europe’s colonial possessions in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In these peripheral economies, peasant smallholders and sharecroppers devoted more of their land and labour to produce industrial raw materials and consumer comestibles for global commodity markets housed in distant imperial metropolises.<sup>6</sup> In addition to jute, peasant smallholders in British India produced cotton, sugar, indigo, opium, rice and wheat for distant colonial markets.<sup>7</sup> Peasant smallholders produced rubber in colonial Malaya,<sup>8</sup> sisal and coffee in East Africa,<sup>9</sup> cocoa on the Gold Coast,<sup>10</sup> and so forth. Perhaps the most stunning example of the rise of peasant commodity production during the late nineteenth century was the “rapid geographic expansion of the worldwide web of cotton production,” to use

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<sup>6</sup> The tremendous rise of commodity production in Europe’s colonial possessions during the nineteenth and twentieth century is the focus of a special issue of the *Journal of Global History* titled “Commodities, Empires, and Global History.” As the editors of the issue, Sandeep Hazareesingh and Jonathan Curry-Machado note, “The growing resource, manufacturing, and consumption needs of industrializing society, the emergence of the steamship and the railways ... escalated demand for raw materials and foodstuffs, and quickened and intensified commodity transactions, bringing profound changes to regions and societies in both south and north.” Hazareesingh, Sandeep and Curry-Machado, Jonathan, “Editorial – Commodities, Empire and Global History,” *Journal of Global History*, 4(1), March, 2009

<sup>7</sup> For sugar in the United Provinces, see Amin, Shahid, *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur: An Inquiry into Peasant Production for Capitalist Enterprise in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984. For cotton in the Berar, see Satya, Laxman, *Cotton and Famine in Berar, 1850-1900*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1997. On peasant production of opium, see Richards, John, “The Indian Empire and Peasant Production of Opium in the Nineteenth Century,” *MAS*, 15(1), 1981, pp. 59-82.

<sup>8</sup> Rubber was grown both on plantations and by indentured labour and peasant smallholdings with peasant labour. Drabble, John H., *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Peasant production of sisal in Tanganyika began in the 1920s, during a less favourable period in commodity markets. Westcott, N., “The East African Sisal Industry, 1929-1949: The Marketing of a Colonial Commodity During Depression and War,” *The Journal of African History*, 25(4), 1984, pp. 445-461. A good overview of peasant coffee cultivation also in Tanzania is provided in Mbilinyi, Simon M., *The Economics of Peasant Coffee Production: the Case of Tanzania*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1976

<sup>10</sup> Polly Hill’s excellent study of cocoa farmers in southern Ghana is a classic in the field of peasant commodity production in colonial contexts. Hill, Polly, *The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963

Sven Beckert's phrase. In the wake of the American Civil War and emancipation, cotton cultivation expanded rapidly in India, Turkestan, Egypt, and Brazil, and was everywhere, including in post-emancipation southern USA, produced by "cultivators who would work their own or rented land with the input of family labor and metropolitan capital."<sup>11</sup> The rise of jute cultivation in Bengal was, therefore, a specific instance in the sweeping and global history of the rise of peasant production of commodities of empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The emergence of commodity production was often preceded and accompanied by changes in the social relations of agrarian production. Imperial commodity production was often more credit-intensive than subsistence production and moneylenders were ubiquitous in peasant commodity producing regimes in the colonial world.<sup>12</sup> The rise of jute cultivation in Bengal was accompanied by increasing agrarian indebtedness, as credit emerged as the major mechanism of surplus appropriation of peasant labour during the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Credit markets and produce markets were closely integrated, a fact that was borne out during the Great Depression of 1930, when the crash in commodity prices was accompanied by a credit squeeze in Bengal's jute tracts and other primary commodity producing regions in the colonial world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Beckert, Sven, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," *American Historical Review*, 109(5), 2004, p. 35

<sup>12</sup> This was the case with peasant cotton cultivation around the world and sugar cultivation in northern India, to cite just two instances. See, Beckert's "Emancipation and Empire" for cotton and indebtedness in India, Egypt and Brazil, and Amin's *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur* for sugar in north India.

<sup>13</sup> Sugata Bose has argued that the late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of debt in the Bengal countryside. Bose, Sugata, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, especially Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Sugata Bose has demonstrated the devastating effects of the global depression on Bengal's agrarian economy. Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal*, chapter 4

Peasant commodity production was also often preceded and accompanied by significant changes in relationships of land. Commodity production was spurred by colonial reforms of agrarian land tenure. Revenue-hungry colonial governments were primarily interested in revenue extraction and law and order and their reforms tended to crystallize relations of domination and authority in agrarian land tenure.<sup>15</sup> Superior tenure holders often coerced peasants and sharecroppers to produce imperial commodities. This was most notably the case with indigo, where peasants rebelled against landlords and planters forcing indigo cultivation.<sup>16</sup> After the “blue mutiny,” indigo cultivation was restricted to Bihar, where landlords had far greater power over their tenants and their allocation of resources to particular crops.<sup>17</sup>

Peasant commodity production did not necessarily involve the coercion of superior tenure holders. Unlike indigo, peasants were never coerced to cultivate jute. Peasant jute production involved cultivators’ decisions – within the context of prevailing social relations of agrarian production – on how to allocate land and labour between imperial commodities and articles of household consumption. This decision relied not only on the social relations of the land but on the land itself – the size and quality of peasant holdings. In the late nineteenth century, the decision to grow jute was driven by land availability. Peasants cultivated jute on new lands thrown up by the delta’s active river-systems, augmenting cash incomes without compromising household food security. As landholdings fragmented and land became scarce, the logic of peasant jute production changed. In the twentieth century, cultivators grew

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<sup>15</sup> Washbrook, David, “Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 15(3), 1981, pp. 649-721.

<sup>16</sup> Kling, Blair, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966

<sup>17</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Colonial Capital and Peasant Labour*, p. 52

jute as part of a market-oriented subsistence livelihood strategy. The earlier period of expansion has parallels with peasant cocoa cultivation in West Africa, while the latter has more in common with commodity production in East Africa, particularly Kenya, where peasant holdings were reduced by land alienation for European settlers.

The most significant impact of peasant commodity production in Bengal, as in other parts of colonial Asia and Africa, lay in intensifying peasant households' engagements with markets, not only as producers but also as consumers. A "natural economy," consisting of the production of use-values and simple exchange between producers, did not exist in the Bengal delta or other parts of South Asia characterized by settled agriculture. Settled agriculturists in Asia and Africa produced commodities for regional and inter-regional markets along the Indian Ocean rim prior to the advent of European empires. Imperial commodity production, however, intensified peasants' market-engagements and linked the peasant household not just to regional or inter-regional markets but to distant markets connected by the flows of European colonial capital.

Before the 1850s, Bengal's major cash crop doubled as its subsistence crop. Bengal rice was exported inland to northern India and along the Bay of Bengal coast to Madras and Ceylon from at least the sixteenth century onwards. Markets for Bengal rice expanded in the era of European empires – in the growing colonial metropolis of Calcutta, in the specialized sugar islands of the Indian Ocean, and in Britain and Europe itself.<sup>18</sup> Jute displaced rice in stages. Initially, in the 1850s and 1860s, jute was cultivated on new lands accreted by the delta's active rivers, on

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<sup>18</sup> For the pre-colonial rice trade in the Bay of Bengal, see Arasaratnam, S., "The Rice Trade in Eastern India, 1650-1740," *MAS*, 22(3), 1988, pp. 531-549



uncultivated lands, or lands that formerly grew indigo. As cultivation expanded further, during the 1870s and 1880s, jute displaced commercial grain production, but most cultivators would try to sow enough rice for secure household subsistence before allocating land to jute. Peasant households cultivated jute to finance the consumption of goods and services, including Manchester cloth, corrugated tin sheets for housing, ornaments, toys, foodstuffs, utensils, cooking and lamp oil, salt, and the colonial governments' legal and educational services. In the 1900s, as landholdings fragmented, cultivators were no longer able to produce sufficient rice for household subsistence and substituted grain for commercial fibre. Although the delta's agrarian economy was already commercialized, it was only with the advent of jute that peasant households' subsistence became tied to markets. With the emergence and rise of jute, the exchange of peasant produce for articles of household of consumption and subsistence in these markets came to constitute the core of peasant livelihoods and survival.

Peasant commodity production also led to peasant differentiation in Bengal as in other colonial worlds. One group of peasants households, endowed with greater landholdings, capital stocks, or political and social connections, prospered through a combination of commodity production, moneylending, and trade. Another group, with smaller landholdings and limited stocks of capital, were impoverished through market shocks and increasing indebtedness.<sup>19</sup> With respect to agrarian Bengal, the

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<sup>19</sup> For India, David Washbrook has argued that cash crops like cotton, oilseeds, tobacco and sugar strengthened and enriched a small section of wealthy peasants in Madras: Washbrook, David, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 68-93. Frederick Cooper has warned against exaggerating this process of peasant differentiation and the emergence of a capitalist elite peasantry in African history. Cooper, Frederick, "Peasants, Capitalists, and Historians: A Review Article," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7(2), 1981, pp. 284-314. The story of impoverishment through commodity production in Berar's cotton tracts has been narrated by Laxman Satya, *Cotton and Famine in Berar*.

debate on peasant differentiation has been dominated by Rajat and Ratna Ray's "jotedar thesis" – the argument that *jotedars*, rural households with very large landholdings who had their lands cultivated by sharecroppers and wage labourers, replaced zamindars as the dominant power in the countryside.<sup>20</sup> Sugata Bose has demonstrated that the *jotedar* was limited to northern Bengal particularly the Rangpur district while landholdings in eastern Bengal – the jute tracts of Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh and Tippera – were more evenly distributed between cultivators.<sup>21</sup>

However, even small variations in the size of landholdings could and did make a difference in the economic trajectory of peasant fortunes. Peasant households with enough land to grow sufficient subsistence grain for the household and commercial fibre for markets were relatively insulated from global market shocks. A difference between 1 or 2 acres and 5 or 6 acres of landholdings could and did lead to significant divergences in the fortunes of peasant households. Market and ecological shocks drove the former group deeper into debt and, especially during the depression years of the 1930s, led to loss of lands. This group of farmers was steadily converted into sharecroppers and agricultural wage-labourers, were most vulnerable to market and ecological shocks, and perished in large numbers in the 1943 famine. On the other hand, peasant households with larger landholdings managed to prosper during favourable years and hold their own during economic and ecological shocks. They were able to diversify sources of income, by going into the petty jute trade or other forms of small business, to purchase intermediary tenures, such as talukdaris, go into petty moneylending, and, in some case, to even send their sons to formal

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<sup>20</sup> Rajat and Ratna Ray, "Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal," *MAS*, 9(1), 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal*, Chapter 1.

schools and enter the ranks of the salaried middle-classes. This group developed stronger connections to the market towns that emerged along the delta's waterways and railways.<sup>22</sup>

## JUTE AND MARKET TOWNS

Commodities circulated through routes of built-up capital, or capital that had been fixed into the land – railways, ports, docks, warehouses, baling presses, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> In the jute tracts, built-up capital concentrated in small market along the delta's waterways and railways. With populations ranging from 10,000 to 25,000 inhabitants, these small market towns were nodes connecting peasant smallholdings to global commodity markets. In the towns, intermediary traders purchased small lots of unassorted peasant produce, and bulked, stored, quality graded, and packaged fibres before dispatching it to Calcutta, and thence to mills. Peasant produce was converted into a standardized unit of quantity, quality, and price – the bale, which was used in forward purchases, futures transactions, and commodity exchanges. As the volume of jute circulating through the delta increased, so did concentrations of built-up capital in the delta's small towns. The tremendous increase in jute production during

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<sup>22</sup> A similar argument about the political rise of a class of relatively wealthy peasants is made by Joya Chatterji in *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Chatterji revisits the jotedar argument, taking issue with Bose's characterization of an undifferentiated peasantry. Bose is correct in his depiction of patterns of land distribution. The peasants who came to form a new group of political elites were not *jotedars* – they were small landholders with just enough lands to benefit from jute cultivation without compromising household food security.

<sup>23</sup> Harvey, David, *The Limits to Capital*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982. Harvey's larger argument is that circulations of commodity and liquid capital through concentrations of built-up or fixed capital leads to competing geographical spaces and consequently war. The small-towns in question represent much smaller concentrations of capital that were cogs within the broader geographical space marked out by circulations of jute which included the delta's farms and the mills along the Hooghly. There never was any question of market towns going to war.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was accompanied by the growth of the hinterland's market towns.

Historians of imperial commodities and colonial India have, by and large, neglected these hinterland market towns, and have focused more exclusively on metropolitan centres of finance and trade.<sup>24</sup> Metropolitan nodes in circuits of global capital have been the focus of several excellent histories of global capital in the colonial world.<sup>25</sup> Yet each of these cities was connected to small market-towns deeper in the hinterland, often along the waterways connecting coasts to interior farms and along the railways introduced by colonial governments.<sup>26</sup> In these market towns in Africa, Asia and the Americas, as in the *ganjes* of Bengal, cultivators and petty traders brought in peasant produce from the surrounding countryside for sale to larger traders or agents of metropolitan firms.

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<sup>24</sup> Two important exceptions Indian history are Chris Bayly's study of the north Indian qasbah and Anand Yang's detailed analysis of intermediary and secondary markets in Bihar: Bayly, Chris, *Rulers Townsmen, Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 and Yang, Anand, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. By and large, however, historians of colonial Asia and Africa have neglected the small market town. Charles Good's 1973 review article on African market towns notes that "markets [in Africa] were hardly likely subjects for serious scholarly attention ... [because] during the colonial period markets and African commerce generally had a low level of official encouragement and visibility." Good, Charles, "Markets in Africa: A Review of Research Themes and the Question of Market Origins," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 13, Cahier 52, 1973, pp. 769-780

<sup>25</sup> The classic study of a commodity metropolis is William Cronon's history of Chicago and its relationship to its hinterland: Cronon, William, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1992. On the other hand, histories of colonial metropolises have not focused on the relationship of the city to the countryside, but on industry and labour. For example: Cooper, Frederick, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; Chandavarkar, Raj, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; and Dutta, Partha, *Urbanization, Local Politics, and Labour Protest: A Case Study of Jute Mills Area of 24-Parganas (North), 1900-1959*, Malda: Dipali Publishers, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> There are a few monographs explicitly concerned with the small market town in colonial Africa. For instance, P.O. Pedersen's *Small African Towns: Between Rural Networks and Urban Hierarchies*, Aldershot: 1997, is an ethnology of two market-towns in Zimbabwe – Gotu and Gokwe – emphasizing these towns' "external relations to the rural hinterland, the larger urban centres and the national and international economy." Pederson and Jonathan Baker have developed this theme of the small market town in Africa in two edited volumes: Baker, Jonathan (ed.), *Small Town Africa: Studies in Rural-Urban Interaction*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1990; and Baker, and Pederson, P.O., (ed.) *The Rural-Urban Interface in Africa: Expansion and Adaption*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1992.

These towns were also centres of state administration and of cultural and intellectual production. They housed not only the built-up facilities of commodity trade, but also branches of government that were charged with administering, monitoring, regulating, policing, and extracting revenue out of agrarian production and transactions of agricultural produce. The expansion of peasant commodity production was accompanied by the penetration of the state and its various branches into rural hinterlands. Small towns were sites of state formation in agrarian hinterlands.

These *mofussil* towns – to use the term employed by colonial government and European capitalists – were located in-between the jute hinterland and metropolitan Calcutta. They provided settings for encounters between the countryside and the city, and between rural peasants and urban capitalists, lawyers, government officials, and school-teachers. Cultivators from the surrounding countryside visited these towns to sell and buy commodities, conduct legal and financial affairs, send their children to school, attend fairs, participate in organized politics, and so forth. The small towns were centres of cultural and intellectual life, many of which operated printing presses, accommodated bookstores and literary societies, and published local newspapers. By and large, historians have ignored the cultural and intellectual production of these small towns and have focused on more vibrant metropolitan settings.

This bias towards the metropolis is even more pronounced in Bengal, where Calcutta was the centre of an admittedly remarkable flowering of creativity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the words of Aurobindo Ghosh, the Indian nationalist leader of the early 1900s, “Calcutta is to Bengal what Paris is to France, it is from Calcutta that Bengal takes its opinions, its inspirations, its leaders,

its tone, its programme of action.”<sup>27</sup> Dazzled by Calcutta’s intellectual production, historians have tended not to take the small-town intelligentsia seriously, relegating them to the status of “rustics” who expressed “peasant consciousness” rather than well-formulated ideas worthy of intellectual histories.<sup>28</sup> As I argue in this dissertation, a distinctive intellectual and political culture, influenced but certainly not determined by the metropolis, emerged out of the jute tracts’ *mofussil* towns.

## **POLITICS**

The relationship between bourgeois nationalism and subaltern politics has been one of the major themes of the subaltern school of Indian history. Subalternist scholars have argued that subaltern politics occupied an autonomous domain, and operated independently of elite nationalist politics. Ranajit Guha has argued that the nationalist project of “mobilizing the masses” took place in the absence of hegemony, as nationalist elites relied on coercion rather than persuasion in enlisting subaltern participation in the nationalist movement.<sup>29</sup> Partha Chatterjee describes a “moment of maneuver” in the development of anti-colonial nationalism, when bourgeois nationalism suspended its discourse of modernity and rationality to gain subaltern support. The moment of maneuver was exemplified by Gandhi’s anti-modernist

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<sup>27</sup> *Karmayogin*, No. 27, January 8, 1910.

<sup>28</sup> Partha Chatterjee has argued that mofussil poets and pamphlets represented a “complex of peasant sentiments,” in “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935,” *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, 1982, pp. 27-30. Sugata Bose and Omkar Goswami use these mofussil texts as sources for the economic history, of peasant prosperity and poverty and the changing social relations of agrarian production. Bose, *Colonial Capital and Peasant Labour* and *Agrarian Bengal*, and Omkar Goswami, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society*. These historians do not, however, consider these texts as expressions of a distinctive and coherent mofussil discourse on agrarian political economy.

<sup>29</sup> Guha, Ranajit, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, particularly Chapter 2 titled, “Discipline and Mobilize: Hegemony and Elite Control in Nationalist Campaigns.”

ideas, particularly his critique of bourgeois “civil society.”<sup>30</sup> More convincingly, Shahid Amin has argued that the subaltern idea of the “Mahatma,” as worked out in the “popular imagination,” was distinct from Gandhi the person. Hence, peasants in Gorakhpur were responding to their own idea of Gandhi rather than to Gandhi himself.<sup>31</sup> If Gandhian and Congress nationalism consisted of elites, masses, and mobilization, Bengali Muslim politics has sometimes been seen as the relationship of elites, masses and “communalization.” Tajul Islam Hashemi has argued that an alliance of Muslim upper-peasantry, Muslim landlords and members of the Bengali-speaking *ulama* “communalized” cultivators in the 1920s and 1930s, that is, instructed them to place religious identity above class identity.<sup>32</sup>

I overlay the class categories of elite and subaltern and the religious categories of Muslim and Hindu with the spatial categories of hinterland, metropolis and *mofussil*. I focus especially on politics in the hinterland’s small towns, a distinctive *mofussil* political culture emerged in these towns in the early twentieth century. The nationalist project of mobilization – an attempt to enlist the hinterland in the nationalist project – was conducted from the metropolis and through the *mofussil*. Mobilization often consisted of whistle-stop tours of mofussil towns by charismatic nationalist leaders. The hinterland’s small towns also provided settings for peasant politics, which often consisted of groups of peasants from the countryside attacking

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<sup>30</sup> Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Zed Books, 1986, particularly Chapter 4, “The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society.”

<sup>31</sup> Amin, Shahid, “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2” in *Subaltern Studies III*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984. Amin’s longer study of the Chauri Chaura incident in 1922 is a detailed analysis of the Gandhian mass mobilization movement in Gorakhpur: Amin, Shahid, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Hashmi, Tajul Islam, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992. For a more focused analysis of “communalization” during the 1920s, see Hashmi’s article, “The Communalization of Class Struggle: East Bengal peasantry, 1923-1929,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1988, 25(1),

agents and symbols of economic exploitation in the towns. Further, and most significantly, the *mofussil* market town emerged as a distinctive centre of intellectual production and political activism, influenced but certainly not determined by metropolitan nationalism. *Mofussil* ideas of jute production and peasant livelihoods were in the political ascendancy during the 1920s and 1930s, and constituted a significant challenge to metropolitan and bourgeois nationalism.

Focusing on *mofussil* politics, I argue, enables us to take apart the notion of an autonomous domain of a peasant politics and, relatedly, to shift the focus from the peasant insurgent to the everyday stuff of peasant politics. The dominant image of peasant politics in colonial South Asia has been of armed and violent insurgency against agents and symbols of peasant exploitation.<sup>33</sup> However, as I argue, peasants did participate in the more mundane and day-to-day forms of electoral, representative and legislative politics. This was particularly the case after the Montagu Chelmsford reforms of 1919 carved the jute hinterland into constituencies, where a very limited numbers of voters elected representatives to the legislature in Calcutta. The Government of India Act of 1935 increased the number of *mofussil* constituencies and considerably expanded the franchise. The populist Krishak Praja Party was the main vehicle of peasant participation in electoral and representative politics in the 1930s. Drawing its support primarily from the *mofussil*, the KPP scored significant electoral victories in the 1936 elections in rural, hinterland constituencies on a campaign promising legislative reforms of land tenure and credit markets. Joya

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<sup>33</sup> The focus on the peasant insurgent is probably due to Ranajit Guha's brilliant study of peasant insurgencies: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983



Chatterji has described the KPP's electoral triumph as the "emergence of the *mofussil* in Bengal politics."<sup>34</sup>

The idea of Pakistan was not solely the preserve of metropolitan intellectuals and politicians – it was also a peasant idea, worked out in the *mofussil* and in the context of party politics and electoral campaigns. The delta's inhabitants voted in overwhelming numbers for the Muslim League in the provincial elections of 1946, which the League had converted into a referendum on Pakistan. The Muslim League contested the election with slogans like "Land Belongs to the Plough," "Abolish Zamindari Without Compensation," "Labourers will be Owners," and "Pakistan for Peasants and Labourers."<sup>35</sup> Pakistan was portrayed a post-famine peasant utopia, a land without hunger. Pakistan was to be the "land of eternal Eid," the Muslim festival celebrating the end of Ramadan.<sup>36</sup> The campaign worked – as evidenced not only by the Muslim League's electoral victory, but also the fanfare and enthusiasm with which the delta's inhabitants celebrated the birth of Pakistan on August 14, 1947.

In the immediate post-partition years, these hinterland ideas of Pakistan came into conflict with the post-colonial projects of state building, as the new Pakistani state attempted to impose their authority and control over commodity production and circulation. The Pakistani state's territorial inheritance comprised solely the impoverished agrarian jute tracts, shorn of the metropolitan and industrial centres of

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<sup>34</sup> Chatterji, Joya, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. See especially Chapter 2 titled "The Emergence of the *Mofussil* in Bengal Politics," pp. 55-102

<sup>35</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochor*, Dhaka: Srijan Publishers, 1988, p. 248

<sup>36</sup> Hashmi, Tajul Islam, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992. Ahmed Kamal provides a more focused discussion of the various utopian ideas that east Bengalis attached to the idea of Pakistan in, Kamal, Ahmed, "A Land of Eternal Eid: Independence, People and Politics in East Bengal," *Dhaka University Studies* 46, June 1989.

western Bengal. Upon this hinterland without a metropolis, the Pakistani state undertook an ambitious project of industrialization and economic modernization. In order to carry out this project, the government imposed territorial and national sovereignty over jute, attempting to transform the former commodity of empire into a national resource producing revenue for the state. This statist project the heightened regulation and policing of the production and circulation of fibre that, I will argue, translated into the everyday harassment of its citizenry, and occasionally took the form of state-sponsored violence. Ahmed Kamal has chronicled the brutal and violent suppression of peasant movements by the post-colonial Pakistani government in East Bengal's jute tracts. In East Pakistan, he argues, the "state" turned against the "nation" and the vision of Pakistan as peasant utopia died a cruel and swift death in the Bengal delta.<sup>37</sup>

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In Chapter 1, I look at the emergence and expansion of jute cultivation between 1853 and 1913, arguing that the conditions of peasant production allowed many of them to benefit from commodity production. The most visible manifestations of increased prosperity lay in cultivators' consumption of market-based goods and the colonial governments' legal and, to a lesser extent, educational services. Peasant politics was

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<sup>37</sup> Kamal, Ahmed, *State against the Nation: The Decline of the Muslim League in pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947-1954*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2009. See also Ahmed Kamal's article on the violent suppression of the nankar movement by the state in East Pakistan, "Peasant Rebellions and the Muslim League Government in East Bengal, 1947-54," in Chakrabarty, Majumdar and Sartori (ed.) *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

the politics of consumption – on the consumption of enhanced property rights through the colonial government’s legal institutions during the rent disputes of the 1870s and on resisting the nationalist boycott of imported goods during the Swadeshi movement of 1905-06. The relatively prosperous delta was an anomaly for the emerging Indian nationalist movement, a space that defied the nationalist charge against the British Empire – impoverishing the nation, draining her of her wealth. I argue that metropolitan nationalists resolved this anomaly by accusing jute cultivators of selfishly aggrandizing themselves at the expense of their community.

In Chapter 2, I look at the emergence of market towns along waterways and railways in the deltaic hinterland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These towns were nodes connecting primary commodity producers to global commodity markets, spaces where peasant produce was bulked, stored and assorted before being dispatched to Calcutta and, thence, to jute mills across the world. As the volumes of jute circulating through the delta expanded, more capital was invested in warehouses, docks, and baling presses in these towns. The overlaying of the delta’s existing transport infrastructure of oar and sail-powered boats with the coal-powered river-steamers and railways during the late nineteenth century drove the distribution and growth of mofussil towns. Further, these towns were not only intermediary centres of the jute trade, but also housed branches of the colonial state and were sites of the metropolitan nationalist encounter with the hinterland subaltern.

These mofussil towns were also centres of intellectual production and political activism that, though influenced by metropolitan Calcutta, was certainly not determined by it. In Chapter 3, I examine a distinctively mofussil economic and political discourse that emerged in jute tracts after WWI, during an era of agrarian

immiseration. This mofussil discourse consisted, on the one hand, of reforms to peasant production and consumption and, on the other, of legislative reforms of agrarian factor markets. Mofussil ideas of agrarian immiseration, I argue, came to constitute the stuff of everyday peasant politics, peasant participation in electoral, representative and legislative politics rather than the more spectacular episodes of peasant insurgency. An examination of mofussil discourses of agrarian political economy illuminates the intellectual and political conditions that gave rise to the Krishak Praja Party and its particularly brand of peasant populism during the 1930s.

The Krishak Praja Party scored significant electoral victories in the 1936 elections, and its charismatic leader A.K. Fazlul Haq was appointed the premier of colonial Bengal. In Chapter 4, I examine the limits of peasant populism under the colonial context, by focusing on attempts and failures of the new government to bolster jute prices between 1939 and 1943. Operating under colonial constraints and in the context of World War II, the populist government was unable to crack the price-setting powers of Calcutta mills – with tragic consequences. The great Bengal famine of 1943 was caused, at least partly, by the unfavourable terms of trade between fibre and grain, and was a consequence of the peasant populist government's failure to bolster jute prices.

The final chapter examines partition and Pakistan in the immediate post-colonial period. Muslim League politicians portrayed Pakistan as a post-famine utopia – a place characterized by abundance, “the land of eternal Eid” in the words of a contemporary poet. The idea of Pakistan as peasant utopia came into conflict with the exigencies of state-building in a post-partition, post-colonial context. Partition had carved out the impoverished jute tracts, separating farms from the

existing metropolis in Calcutta – East Pakistan was a hinterland without a metropolis. The post-colonial Pakistani state aspired to build a modern, metropolitan and industrial economy on the hinterland. From the state's perspective, jute was a national resource that would provide revenue and for the basis of economic modernization. However, the idea of jute as national resource came into conflict with ideas of Pakistan as peasant utopia and with the realities of fibre as means of peasant livelihood.

## Chapter 1

### **The Politics of Peasant Consumption: Jute Cultivation in the Bengal Delta, 1853 to 1918**

In this chapter, I look at how participation in global markets transformed material and political life in the delta during the late nineteenth century, from the outbreak of the Crimean War to the outbreak of World War I. The Crimean War inaugurated the large-scale production and trade of jute as it interrupted Britain's supplies of Russian flax and hemp and led textile mills in Dundee, Scotland, to switch en masse to jute. Over the following half-century, the production of jute fibre and fabric rose rapidly – until World War I. The outbreak of war in Europe, in August 1914, known in the jute tracts as the “German War,” caused a sudden collapse in prices and the virtual disappearance of jute markets just as cultivators were bringing the fibre to market. WWI brought to an end a prolonged period of expanding jute cultivation and relative prosperity in eastern Bengal. After 1918, very few people would speak of eastern Bengal and jute cultivators as anything but impoverished.

Prior to WWI, the prosperity of the delta was manifested in jute cultivators' new and varied forms of cash-based consumption. Consumption and prosperity, I will argue, came to constitute the core of material and political life in the delta. Consumption lay at the heart of peasant movements prior to World War I – the anti-rent movement between 1872 and 1885 and resistance to the Swadeshi economic programme of boycott in 1905/06. Jute consumers' prosperity also informed nationalist and colonial perceptions of eastern Bengal's jute tracts and these perceptions changed along with the changes in jute production. As jute acreage was extended and rice cultivation receded, seasonal food shortages and indebtedness

became important aspects of peasant livelihoods. For most commentators in the 1870s, consumption was an uncomplicated indication of the jute cultivators' progress and prosperity; at the turn of the century, consumption came to be associated with indebtedness and extravagance. The Swadeshi movement and its associated programme of economic boycott was a broad attack on peasant consumption. This attack was informed by an emerging nationalist discourse of Indian poverty and it was accompanied by a Bengali middle-class antipathy towards jute cultivation. The failure of the Swadeshi movement to gain traction in eastern Bengal's jute tracts should be, I argue, seen in terms of nationalist economic ideas.

## **PRODUCTION**

Jute remained inextricably tied to the soil of the Bengal delta. Attempts to transfer jute cultivation to other parts of the world during the nineteenth century failed. In 1873, the Queensland society requested and received jute seeds from Bengal, though little seems to have come out of it.<sup>1</sup> A more concerted attempt to introduce jute cultivation in Louisiana, in the Mississippi delta, also failed – though it caused consternation amongst colonial officials in Bengal.<sup>2</sup> A report by the United States agricultural department noted success in growing the plant in the Mississippi delta's ecology but concluded that unless the process of extracting the fibre was mechanized,

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<sup>1</sup> Supply of jute seed to the Queensland Acclimitization Society, NAI, Revenue and Agriculture, Fibres and Silk, 9/13, Part B, January, 1874

<sup>2</sup> In a government resolution to investigate the cultivation and trade of jute, George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, noted: "the Americans are actively prosecuting the experimental growth of the plant in various parts of their country." "Resolution," February 4, 1876, GoB, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB.

farmers would not take up large-scale cultivation.<sup>3</sup> Agricultural wages were too high and farm families in the American south were unwilling to exploit family labour. Bengal's monopoly over jute cultivation was maintained through low wages and through the exploitation of women's and children's labour. Agriculturists in other parts of the world were simply not willing to work for as little as the Bengali farmer.

The world's increasing consumption of jute fibre and fabrics was met entirely by the land and labour of peasant smallholders in eastern Bengal. As demand rose through the late nineteenth century, so did the quantity of land devoted to cultivating the jute plant. M.W. Ali has estimated that the quantity of land under jute increased from 50,000 acres annually in the 1850s to close to 420,000 acres in the early 1870s.<sup>4</sup> Omkar Goswami estimates that 553,000 acres were under jute in 1876, which increased to 1.6 million acres in 1896-97.<sup>5</sup> The colonial government's statistics of jute acreage began in 1896-97 but were notoriously inaccurate; they indicate that jute acreage increased until World War I, from 2.1 million acres in 1900 to 3.1 million acres in 1913, with a peak of close to 3.5 million acres in 1912-13.<sup>6</sup>

The bulk of Bengal's jute was produced in the eastern and northern districts of the province (see Table 1). These districts were located on the alluvial lands formed out of the delta's shifting river-systems: in the northern districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Pabna, Bogra and western Mymensingh on lands accreted by the

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<sup>3</sup> Waterhouse, S., *Report on Jute Culture and the Importance of the Industry*, Department of Agriculture: Special Report, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1883, p. 14

<sup>4</sup> Ali, M.W., *Jute in the Agrarian History of Bengal, 1870-1914*, Rajshahi, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Goswami, Omkar, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern Bengal*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 4

<sup>6</sup> Government of India, *Agricultural Statistics of British India 1904-05 to 1914-15*, Calcutta, 1916



Brahmaputra, in the central districts of Faridpur and western Dacca on the deposits of the Ganges; and in eastern Mymensingh, eastern Dacca and Tipperah by the Meghna. The jute tract was bound in the south by the estuaries of the rivers as they entered the Bay of Bengal, to the west by the relatively high and dry Barendra region, and in the north and east by the foothills of the Himalayas in Assam and Hill Tipperah. Within these bounds lay the Bengal delta, an alluvial tract formed out of the silt deposits of the three river-systems and crisscrossed by their numerous tributaries.

**Table 1.1: Acreage of jute in major jute-districts of northern and eastern Bengal, 1872 to 1910<sup>7</sup>**

District	1872	1880	1890	1900	1910
Jalpaiguri	50,000	15,400	20,500	63,000	94,800
Rangpur	100,000	131,200	600,000	277,000	237,600
Dinajpur	117,600	14,600	96,000	80,000	92,000
Pabna	122,900	102,300	150,000	136,500	180,100
Bogra	46,600	36,600	35,000	88,000	120,000
Mymensingh	48,000	160,900	301,000	519,000	717,500
Dacca	40,000	115,000	180,000	161,000	184,600
Faridpur	16,600	79,600	80,000	100,000	120,200
Tippera	78,400	0	190,800	219,000	236,900
Rest of Bengal	139,205	140,200	272,800	321,100	447,900
Total	759,305	795,800	1,926,100	1,964,600	2,431,600
Proportion of Bengal's jute cultivated in above districts	81.7	82.4	85.8	83.7	81.6

It was difficult to distinguish land and water in the delta. The shifting rivers were constantly swallowing up land from its banks, and throwing up new lands, both on its edges and out of the riverbed. The delta flooded each year, during July and August, when the monsoon rains and the summer snowmelt in the high Himalayas

<sup>7</sup> Chaudhuri, N.C., *Jute in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1921, pp. 210-211

caused the rivers to swell and spill their banks. The colonial bureaucrat J.C. Jack's description of the delta, published in 1916, points to all of the above features:

The delta of the Ganges ... is a peculiar country, worth knowledge and worth description. It is made up of new mud, old mud and marsh; it contains rivers as large as any in the world, linked together by an amazing network of lesser rivers, streams and ditches; it mostly disappears under water for several months in the year; yet it grows abundant crops everywhere and supports a very considerable population in considerable idleness.<sup>8</sup>

Jute grew abundantly in the delta's unique ecology of soil and water. The fast-growing plant survived and prospered in standing water. Unless floods arrived early or sowing was delayed – because April showers were late – the plant would outpace the rising rivers. Jute was harvested in August and September, at the height of the annual floods, and peasants and labourers would wade into knee or even waist-deep water to cut the stems. The stems were steeped in water for a week or more before the fibre was stripped, a task rendered much easier by the ready availability of water in the flooded delta. The floods also facilitated transport – every part of the delta was accessible by wooden country boats. When the fibres were ready to be marketed, they could be transported cheaply from the farmer's home to the delta's river-ports and railway towns.

Jute competed with a plant equally suited to the delta's ecology, a plant with an older and richer heritage: rice. The region produced two rice crops – spring rice or aus, and winter rice or aman. The crop calendars for aus and jute overlapped exactly. Both plants were sown broadcast with the spring rains, both grew rapidly to escape the rising floodwaters, and both were harvested at about the same time – aus

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<sup>8</sup> Jack, J.C. *The Economic Life of a Bengal District: A Study*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1916, p. 2

slightly earlier in July and August and jute in August and September. The winter rice crop, aman, on the other hand was transplanted in September and October, when floodwaters receded, and harvested in early January. Though it was possible to transplant aman onto land from which jute had been just harvested, it was not profitable. Jute is an exhaustive plant, and transplanting aman seedlings onto land just cleared of jute seriously reduced yields. Jute cultivation implied forgone rice production. The rapid increase in jute acreage during the nineteenth century came at the expense of rice and commercial fibre displaced subsistence grain.

This displacement took place over stages. Initially, jute was not cultivated on rice lands – but on new lands accreted by the regions’ rivers, recently cleared wastelands or on land that would otherwise be left fallow. Contemporary colonial bureaucrats commented on the importance of new accretions of land to the expansion of jute cultivation. According to the Collector of Brahmanbaria, these lands, “the large churs thrown up by the Meghna ... opened his [the cultivators’] eyes, and the plant [jute] now forms the staple produce of the country next to paddy.”<sup>9</sup> Jute also replaced indigo cultivation and may have been one of the motivating factors behind the indigo riots of the 1850s.<sup>10</sup> The remarkable productivity of the delta meant that, until the early 1870s, jute and rice production increased simultaneously. In the early 1870s, it was reported that in the important jute-growing district of Mymensingh, “the extent of land under rice cultivation ... [has] increased in quantity

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpted in the report of the Chittagong Commissioner, 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1872, in D.J. McNeile, Secy, Board of Revenue, Lower Bengal to Secy, GoB, Gen Dept., 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1873, in GoB, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4

<sup>10</sup> Several witnesses before the Indigo Commission of 1860 claimed that cultivators were reluctant to sow their lands with indigo because greater profits could be made from jute, safflower and rice cultivation. *Report of the Indigo Commission, 1860*, ed. Das, Pulin, Darjeeling: University of North Bengal, 1992, pp. 91-92 and p. 160

within the last twenty years by about twenty per cent.”<sup>11</sup> The emergence and expansion of jute cultivation in the same period had not hindered the expansion of rice acreage in Mymensingh, or in other parts of the delta.<sup>12</sup> Most districts in eastern Bengal, with the exception of densely populated and relatively urban Dacca district, were net exporters of paddy until almost the end of the century.<sup>13</sup>

For much of the nineteenth century, cultivators in eastern Bengal switched back and forth between commercial grain and commercial fibre cultivation. In the jute-cum-rice tracts of the Bengal delta even small variations in landholdings could and did come to make a huge difference to peasant household’s prosperity and poverty. Peasants with enough land to grow subsistence rice in addition to commercial fibre could absorb sudden price shocks without being pushed into hunger, debt and poverty by a sudden collapse in jute prices. Such farmers were also better able to cope with ecological shocks and reduced yields. Unfortunately, as the population of the delta rose rapidly during the late nineteenth century, farm sizes fragmented and landholdings shrank.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, jute cultivation continued to be extended at the expense of rice cultivation. According to J.C. Jack, by 1916, jute had almost completely replaced subsistence rice cultivation in Faridpur:

some of the cultivators have given up the growing of their whole food supply on a calculation that it would be more profitable to grow jute and buy grain. ... Nowadays the cultivator tends to grow jute on all the land fit for the purpose and to grow rice and other food crops only on the remainder. If that

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. V, London: Trubner & Co., 1877, p. 420

<sup>12</sup> In Tipperah, similarly, the expansion of jute cultivation was accompanied by rising rice acreage, Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VI, London: Trubner & Co., 1876, 392

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, W.W., *Statistical Account*, Vol. V, p. 90

<sup>14</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital*, Cambridge University Press, 1993

remainder is insufficient to supply the family requirements in food, he prefers to buy rather than to reduce the amount of land under jute.<sup>15</sup>

The reduction in subsistence rice production meant that the region as a whole had become dependent on imported rice. This dependence was timed with the opening up of the Irrawaddy delta in Burma, the British Empire's latest imperial acquisitions in South Asia.<sup>16</sup> By the 1890s, eastern Bengal's rice production had been reduced to dangerously low levels and peasant smallholders were vulnerable to seasonal scarcity, especially if crops failed or jute prices dropped precipitously. Peasant vulnerability to ecological and market shocks took the form of seasonal hunger. The aus crop was harvested in July and August while the aman crop was harvested in December. Hunger most often reared its head in the months immediately preceding the two harvests – when stocks of grain (or cash) from the previous harvest crop were running low, and the new crop was yet to come in. The consequences of hunger was most frequently debt and as jute gradually displaced subsistence rice, levels of indebtedness in the delta and instances of cultivators' mortgaging their lands to secure loans increased.

In August and September 1893, large portions of Brahmanbaria subdivision in Tipperah flooded, when the Gumti – a tributary of the Meghna river-system – breached its embankment. This flood was an early indicator of the increased vulnerability of cultivators to external shocks as a result of reduced food production. The floods affected the standing aman crop, destroying fields and severely reducing

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<sup>15</sup> Jack, J.C., *The Economic Life of a Bengal District: A Study*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1916, p. 85

<sup>16</sup> Adas, Michael. *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011,

yields, which, according to government estimates, were about half of what may be expected in a good year. Even in the 1890s, after almost three decades of continually expanding jute cultivation, a portion of Brahmanbaria's aman crop was normally exported. However, the reduced yields of that year meant that rice had to be imported into the delta: in other words, cultivators had to purchase rice from marketplaces. In May of the following year, a serious shortage of grain was felt in the district, or to use the colonial government's euphemism for seasonal hunger, residents in Brahmanbaria experienced "distress."<sup>17</sup> This distress lasted from April and May until July and August, until the aus and jute harvests came in. During those months, farmers in Brahmanbaria whose severely reduced aman harvest had run out, "managed to subsist by mortgaging their lands, selling some property, or borrowing to get enough to carry them on to till the aus paddy and jute are cut."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to ecological shocks, peasant smallholders were more vulnerable to market shocks. Farmers with sufficient stocks of subsistence grain to feed their households between aman and aus harvests would not be driven to market their fibre out of hunger – they would be able to hold on to their crop for longer. If the aus harvest was sufficient to feed the peasant household between September and December, when the aman harvest came in, the farmer would not be forced to sell his fibre out of hunger. The pressure for cash did not come from landlords, who found it difficult to exercise power in the fluid ecology of the delta, or from moneylenders, who were known for making emergency loans in times of trouble

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<sup>17</sup> R.M. Waller, Commissioner of Chittagong Division to GOB, Revenue Dept., 19 May, 1894, GoB, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 14, NAB

<sup>18</sup> M. Waller, Commissioner of Chittagong Division to GOB, Revenue Dept., 21 June, 1894 in *ibid*.

rather than recalling outstanding loans.<sup>19</sup> Moneylenders did tide subsistence cultivators through such hard times, though they did so at high interest and frequently with devastating consequences for the peasant producer.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, however, price falls were often accompanied by credit crunches.<sup>21</sup>

Subsistence jute cultivators were much more dependent on moneylenders and as fibre replaced grain, credit became the main means of combating hunger. The pressure to borrow was felt most sharply when the aus harvest ran out, jute earnings had been spent, and the aman harvest was yet to come in.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, seasonal hunger drove cultivators to borrow during April and May, when the aman harvest was running out and the aus harvest was yet to come in. The pressure to borrow during these months was compounded by the need to hire labour to thin and weed the jute fields.<sup>23</sup> Agricultural workers in jute fields had to be paid in cash, while those employed to harvest rice tended to be paid in grain. Jute cultivation and the substitution of rice with jute during the nineteenth century increased the use of credit in peasant livelihoods. Sugata Bose has argued, credit replaced rent as the main mechanism of surplus extraction in the delta during the late nineteenth century: the

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<sup>19</sup> Iftexhar Iqbal discusses difficulties in assessing and collecting land taxes in the Bengal delta in the nineteenth century, Iqbal, Iftexhar, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> I discuss one such incident below, spanning 1914 to 1922.

<sup>21</sup> This was most notably and devastatingly the case with the Great Depression of 1930-31 (see Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure, and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). As I discuss below, this would also be the case with the price collapse of World War I.

<sup>22</sup> F.A. Sachse, Settlement Officer, Mymensingh discusses the relationship between credit and the jute crop calendar in detail in his letter to the Secy, GoB, Rev Dept, 21st February, 1914, in "Jute Cultivation: Enquiry as to the causes which hamper further extension, Agriculture Dept, August, 1914, Nos. 1-25, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 22, NAB

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

rise of credit was, at least partly, due to the rise of jute production, the displacement of rice cultivation and seasonal hunger.<sup>24</sup>

In the following section, I will compare jute cultivators' responses to two price shocks – in 1872, when the onset of the Long Depression led to a sudden collapse in prices, and in 1914, when World War I broke out just as cultivators were beginning to harvest the crop. The mostly rice-surplus jute cultivators of the early 1870s were much better able to absorb the sudden fall in prices of the fibre than the mostly rice-deficient cultivators of 1914.

#### *Two market shocks: 1872 and 1914*

Between 1866 and 1872, high and rising prices for the commodity in London and Dundee markets drove the acreage of jute up rapidly. Several colonial officials stationed in the delta dated the emergence of jute cultivation in their region to the rising prices of 1866. The Collector of Bogra stated that “the growth of jute has extended enormously since 1866.”<sup>25</sup> Prices for the fibre reached record levels at the opening of the season in 1871. High prices spurred cultivators to sow a hitherto unprecedented quantity of land with jute during 1872. The royal commission enquiry into jute estimated that there was a 30% increase in jute production in 1872 over 1871, “induced” by “high prices and heavy demand.”<sup>26</sup> In August and September 1872, just as cultivators were bringing the largest jute crop that they had ever

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<sup>24</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Colonial Capital and Peasant Labour*.

<sup>25</sup> D.J. McNeil, Secy, Board of Revenue, Lower Bengal to Secy, GoB, General Dept., 6th February, 1873, Agriculture Department, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

<sup>26</sup> Kerr, Hemm Chunder, Report on the Cultivation of, and Trade in Jute, in Bengal, London, 1874, p. 47



produced to market, prices collapsed. One of the more serious economic recessions of the nineteenth century, the Long Depression had set in, and – in consequence – commodity prices collapsed across the board.<sup>27</sup> As demand for jute disappeared, markets were glutted and prices collapsed. The Royal Report estimates that the prices of best quality jute in Sirajganj fell from Rs. 5 per maund to Rs. 3 and a half per maund. The collapse in prices was even steeper in the case of inferior fibres, which were selling in Narayanganj for “as low as” 1 rupee per maund.<sup>28</sup>

The communication of prices between Calcutta – most directly exposed to the global market, interior markets like Sirajganj and Narayanganj, and the village trader is captured in a Calcutta-based jute shippers market report for November, 1872.

This market has become dull ... All the regular buyers are in the bazaar, but do not exhibit much inclination to operate, whilst holders of stocks on the other hand, appear very eager in their endeavours to carry through sales. The daily importations continue freely, and are now in excess of deliveries, which have fallen off considerably, in consequence of which our local stocks have increased to over 80,000 maunds. The dullness prevailing locally has already affected the up-country marts, and values there have fallen from 3 to 5 annas per maund. The cultivators are now withholding their fibre from the export depots, in the hope that prices may again rally, but we consider it doubtful that these people can afford to hold their jute back long enough to have any serious effects on rates in this bazaar.<sup>29</sup>

As the above report notes, cultivators were still holding on to their fibre in November 1872. The Jute Commissioner’s tour of the jute tracts of western Bengal in March and April of the following year, 1873, confirmed that some jute cultivators

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<sup>27</sup> The Long Depression, which lasted from 1873 to 1879 has been described as “the first truly international crisis.” See Glasner, David and Cooley, Thomas F., “Crisis of 1873”, *Business Cycles and Depressions: An Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 132-133

<sup>28</sup> Kerr, *Report on Jute*, p. 62

<sup>29</sup> Economist, “Commercial Epitome,” 18 January 1873, p. 18, Vol 031, Issue 1534.

were still holding on to their crop, “all those who could afford to do so had held in hopes of better prices.”<sup>30</sup> In the eastern delta, however, the Commissioners discovered that cultivators had not even bothered reaping their crop when prices fell: “In both Dacca and Mymensingh districts we were informed, everywhere, that quantities of jute grown last season had been left abandoned in the fields.”<sup>31</sup> The Collector of Tipperah reported a similar phenomenon in his district, particularly in the subdivision of Bardakhat, where jute cultivation was most concentrated: “the rayats [in Bardakhat] left one-fourth of the crops rotting in the fields uncut.”<sup>32</sup>

Why were cultivators able to simply abandon their crop, absorbing the sunk costs of cultivation? I suggest that this was mainly because most of them were still cultivating sufficient subsistence rice, their need for cash was not driven by hunger. The entire jute crop in eastern Bengal had not been abandoned and, what had been harvested, was dispatched to Calcutta. The Commissioners found that the entire jute produced in eastern Bengal had been exported to Calcutta.<sup>33</sup> They harvested and sold at least some of their jute to pay landlords or finance other forms of market-based consumption, not to purchase subsistence. They cut down on market consumption and many borrowed to tide them over their difficulties. The increase in indebtedness came to the attention of colonial officials stationed in the jute tracts. As the Collector of Bogra reported in 1872: “The cultivators of jute, however, have

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<sup>30</sup> H. Anstruther and H.C. Kerr, Jute Commissioners to Secy, GoB, Statistical Dept, 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1873, GoB, Proc A, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB.

<sup>31</sup> H. Anstruther and H.C. Kerr, Jute Commissioners to Secy, GoB, Statistical Dept, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1873 GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

<sup>32</sup> Hunter, W.W., *Statistical Account*, Vol. V, p. 391

<sup>33</sup> H. Anstruther and H.C. Kerr, Jute Commissioners to Secy, GoB, Statistical Dept, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1873 GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

suffered a check during the year under review, from the fall in its market price; and the greatly increased sale of non-judicial two-anna stamps seems to indicate that the rayats in many cases have preferred borrowing to reducing their expenditure.”<sup>34</sup>

The bulk of the peasantry was able to absorb losses from jute cultivation in 1872 because those losses did not translate into hunger and food deprivation. The ecology of the delta and average landholdings were such that most peasants could produce both subsistence rice and surplus fibre.<sup>35</sup> The tremendous rise in jute production between 1866 and 1872 had not even displaced the production of surplus commercial rice in the delta. In the early 1870s right through to the 1890s, eastern Bengal produced surplus rice for export to the rest of India. The jute-cum-rice cultivators of Eastern Bengal had profited considerably from the spike in rice prices during the Madras famine of 1866. In the early 1870s, it was said about Tipperah, that “a famine in any other part of Bengal forms a source of prosperity; each man keeps for himself and his family all the food that he requires, and he is enabled to sell his surplus rice at an enhanced rate for exportation.”<sup>36</sup> Even the estimated 30% expansion between 1871 and ’72 did not displace subsistence rice, though it did come at the expense of rice. Every district except Dacca was a net exporter of rice in 1872 and even in Dacca, the Collector of the district reported, farmers only cultivated jute after securing sufficient rice to feed their household.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VIII, London: Trubner & Co., 1876, p. 206

<sup>35</sup> Iqbal, Iftekhhar, *The Bengal Delta*, p. 91

<sup>36</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, Vol. VI, p. 388

<sup>37</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, Vol V, p. 92

However, as jute cultivation extended during the rest of the century, commercial rice production was displaced and then finally so was the production of subsistence rice. The tremendous rise in jute cultivation between 1900 and 1913 took place under very different material conditions. Farmers were now producing jute as part of a market-based subsistence strategy, that is, jute-cum-rice producing households subsisted by purchasing grain out of revenues from sales of jute. With increasing import of rice from Burma, peasant subsistence in eastern Bengal depended on the exchange – in *global* commodity markets – of Bengal's jute for Burma's rice. As long as the price of Bengal jute to relative to Burmese rice was high, farmers benefitted from these market-based subsistence strategies – earning enough cash from sales of jute to purchase subsistence rice and finance other forms of consumption. As Omkar Goswami has demonstrated, jute-cum-rice cultivators financially benefitted from substituting rice with jute between 1900 and 1913.<sup>38</sup> During those years, jute acreage expanded rapidly as high fibre prices encouraged more and more farmers to abandon subsistence rice for commercial jute and throw their very survival on the course of global markets. However, there were more serious implications of the rise in subsistence jute production: it led to the increasing importance of debt and credit for peasant livelihoods.

The expansion of jute cultivation between 1900 and 1913 was accompanied by increasing levels of indebtedness, despite the high prices commanded by the commodity. On the other hand, the extension between 1866 and 1872 was accompanied by a reduction in debt, as many peasants used their incomes to pay off existing debts. In the 1860s and 70s, fibre had not displaced subsistence grain and

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<sup>38</sup> Goswami, Omkar, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society*, p. 52

the production of jute did not entail market purchases of grain. Hence, jute cultivation did not entail accumulating debt to stave off hunger and jute profits could be used to pay off outstanding loans. The displacement of subsistence grain in the 1900s meant that jute cultivators incurred debt and jute earnings serviced, rather than paid down, debt.

Not only did jute cultivation as a market-based subsistence strategy increase levels of debt, it also heightened the cultivators' vulnerability to price shocks. This vulnerability would be cruelly revealed in August 1914, when the outbreak of World War I led to a virtual cessation of all shipping and trade and markets for jute virtually disappeared. When selling resumed in September, prices were absurdly low – 2 rupees a maund for the best jute, compared to the 10 to 12 rupees that ordinary jute sold for during 1913.<sup>39</sup> Fearful of panic spreading through the delta, the colonial government distributed pamphlets through the jute tracts urging cultivators to hold on to their crop, as markets would be restored and prices would rise again. The pamphlet issued on August 15, 1914 read “On account of the sudden outbreak of war in Europe buyers have stopped buying jute temporarily ... but such a state of things will not last long. ... If you can wait a little, there will not be any big loss, but if you sell in a hurry, the loss will be great.”<sup>40</sup>

However, as their own officials would discover, many cultivators were unable to hold on for any length of time. L. Birley, the Magistrate of Dacca, toured the jute-growing villages in the district during August and September 1914 to keep an eye on

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<sup>39</sup> L. Birley, District Magistrate, Dacca, to Commissioner of Dacca, 5th October 1914, in “Depression in jute trade on account of the outbreak of war in Europe,” February, 1915, Gob, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 29, NAB

<sup>40</sup> Note dated 15th August 1914, in *ibid.*

developments. He noticed that cultivators had decided to forego employed labour and exploit household labour: “I was informed by all classes that cultivators were stripping their jute for themselves instead of by hired labour; in many places I saw a man with one or two small boys stripping jute and I think that this statement is correct.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike in 1872, cultivators did not – *could not* – abandon their crop in the fields and instead they intensified the exploitation of household labour. Their inability to hold on to the crop was related to hunger. As Birley said: “the tour had left me with the impression that the raiyats had more staying power than we had credited them with at first, but that they were feeling anxious, and that if they could not sell their jute soon those who did not get a good crop of aus *dhan* would feel the pinch until the time of the harvesting of the winter rice.”<sup>42</sup> The most desperate cultivators had already sold their jute at very low prices, but found that they could not buy rice with their returns from jute. Birley spoke to a group of “small cultivators who had sold all their jute at this price [Rs. 2 a maund] and were subsisting on loans of rice from friendly cultivators.”<sup>43</sup>

The market shock of 1914 proved a decisive push into poverty for many of the delta’s inhabitants. In 1921, on his way from Kishoreganj to Mymensingh, Shah Abdul Hamid – a native of Kishoreganj and the author of several tracts on the Muslim peasantry of eastern Bengal – observed the following scene of a tearful farewell at a rural railway station.<sup>44</sup> An elderly man was standing in the entrance to a

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<sup>41</sup> L. Birley, District Magistrate, Dacca, to Commissioner of Dacca, 5th October 1914, in *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Hamid, Shah Abdul, *Krishak Bilap*, Bandulia, 1328 b.e., (1921). The title translates as “extinction of the peasantry,” the main theme of this pamphlet. His two previous publications, mentioned in the foreword

third-class carriage. His wife and children, with their belongings wrapped up in sheets, were inside the car, behind him. On the platform stood another teary-eyed family, congregated to say farewell. A man was holding on to the elderly man's legs, kneeling on the platform and wailing and weeping. As the train started, he refused to let go, and had to be dragged away. After the train departed, Hamid asked this man what happened. The man replied that that was his brother, who had lost all his possessions and was going away with his family to build a new life in the jungles of Assam. The man proceeded to narrate how his brother was reduced to such destitution:

In the last German war, when the price of rice was 16 takas a maund and that of jute, one taka, my older brother fell into trouble. He had about fifteen or sixteen mouths to feed in his family and they had to buy rice from the market. Driven by hunger, he went to see a large moneylender – who has over a lakh takas outstanding in loans at any time – in a nearby bazaar. From the moneylender, my brother borrowed six and a half maunds of rice, valued at 100 rupees.<sup>45</sup>

Three years later, he had not repaid anything and the moneylender sent a message that he was on “his way, with papers, to the courthouse in Mymensingh.” The brothers interrupted the moneylender at the railway station, with fifty rupees in cash. The debt was renegotiated – under the new terms, the moneylender was owed 300 rupees and his farm mortgaged. Misfortune, however, piled on misfortune. His two oldest sons, who looked after the farm, died of small-pox within a few days of each other. He lost his crop to floods one year. For five years, debt continued to pile up until finally the moneylender claimed his mortgage – taking away the

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to *Krishak Bilap* are titled *Prajakabini* (Stories of Prajas) and *Shashon-shongskarey Gramya Mussalman* (Rural Muslims in Political Reforms). I was not able to locate either of those publications.

<sup>45</sup> Hamid, *Krishak Bilap*, pp. 9-10

unfortunate farmer's arable land and, finally, even the tin sheets out of which his house was built. In the end, losing everything, he left with his family for the Assam jungles.<sup>46</sup>

The above events began with the market shock produced at the onset of World War I – when jute markets virtually disappeared and rice prices spiked. This was not an unusual or unique narrative in the delta, as low jute prices forced many subsistence cultivators to mortgage their lands in lieu of loans, and they lost their lands when unable to repay and were forced into the Assam jungles. Market shocks did not produce poverty to a similar extent and depth during the nineteenth century because, I have argued, most peasant households were not dependent on markets for subsistence and hence could absorb market shocks. As population increased and farm sizes fragmented, more and more cultivators sacrificed subsistence rice for the sake of commercial fibre, especially during the sharp rise in jute production between 1900 and 1913. Increased peasant dependence on markets for subsistence led to increasing levels of indebtedness – during the early 1900s, credit and interest had been firmly established as the major mechanism for the expropriation of peasant surplus. Increased indebtedness was accompanied by a heightened vulnerability to market shocks. Market shocks were compounded with environmental shocks, as the ecology of the delta deteriorated during the early 1900s, peasants households were hit more frequently by water-borne epidemics and floods.<sup>47</sup> After World War I, jute was no longer associated with wealth and vitality but with poverty, with debt, hunger and disease.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p. 11

<sup>47</sup> Iftekhar Iqbal argues strongly that ecological conditions worsened in the early twentieth century as the delta's drainage was blocked by railways and water hyacinth. Iqbal, Iftekhar, *The Bengal Delta*, 2010



## CONSUMPTION

Kaminikumar Chakrabarty, an employee of a zamindari estate in Sherpur, described the jute cultivators' relationship with the plant in an agricultural manual published in that town in 1882:

These days there is a lot of affection (*ador*) towards jute in this country. For this reason cultivators plant an excessive (*odhik*) quantity of jute. The romantic (*shuromik*) Cultivators love (*bhalobasha*) jute so much that they sing songs like “there is no crop like jute” while working the fields.<sup>48</sup>

It is unusual to think of the cultivators' relationship to the plant as one of “love” and “affection.” The above phrase seems particularly out of place in an otherwise dry and technical treatise on the best cultivation practices for a variety of crops, including exotic European fruits and vegetables. Chakrabarty appears to be critical of jute cultivators, accusing peasants of an irrational attachment to the plant and “excessive” cultivation. The cultivation for the fibre, I argue below, was related to consumption and prosperity. As Bengali poets liked to point out, you could not eat your jute; that is, cultivators could not consume the fibre in the same sense that they could consume rice or their other edible produce.<sup>49</sup> However, the cash earned from jute financed modern forms of consumption and consumption was associated with prosperity.

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<sup>48</sup> Chakrabarty, Kaminikumar, *Krishak*, Sherpur, Published by Sree Tamijuddin Ahmed, 1893, p. 38

<sup>49</sup> Amongst many other poets from eastern Bengal, Abed Ali Mian, from Mymensingh, wrote extensively on the inedibility of the fibre, contrasting it with the taste of home-grown rice. Mian, Abed Ali, *Kali Chitra*, Rangpur, Alamnagar Lokaranjan Press, 1917

Nineteenth century colonial officials and Bengali *bhadralok* noted – occasionally with wonder – the increasing numbers of possessions of cultivators. Sambhucharan Mukherjee, a prominent member of the Calcutta intellectual scene and editor of *Mukherjee's Magazine*, described his impressions while floating down the Meghna, through the jute tracts of Tipperah, en route from Calcutta to Agartala: “It is something that so many about here are well protected in this cold weather by the cheap cottons and woolens of Europe. The women have all more costly ornaments ... Silver clearly predominates. ... It was all due to jute.”<sup>50</sup> Jute cultivator’s shiny new tin homes were perhaps the most noticeable indicator of increased prosperity – even more so than the Manchester fabrics and silver ornaments that caught Shambhucharan’s eye. A nineteenth century proverb about the wealth of jute cultivators ran: “One who deals in jute has seven huts in his home and his home is built with strong Joanshahi timber.”<sup>51</sup> The sub-inspector of madrassas in Sirajganj, Mokhtar Ahmed Siddiqi, wrote about Sirajganj subdivision in 1914, “The jute trade has improved the conditions of ordinary people so much that there is no poverty in these parts. In every village and in every neighbourhood we see many tin houses – only because of jute.”<sup>52</sup> A poem titled “The Jute Song”, also published in Sirajganj in 1914, makes a similar observation on tin homes: “Those who did not have straw hovels/ now their houses are covered/ four-cornered, eight-cornered, shining.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Mookerjee, Sambhu Chandra, *Travels and Voyages between Calcutta and Independent Tipperah*, Calcutta, 1887, p. 10

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, p. 80

<sup>52</sup> Siddiqi, Maulvi Mokhtar Ahmed, *Sirajganjer Itibas*, Sirajganj, 1916, p. 53

<sup>53</sup> “Jar chhilo na chhoner kurey/Tahar ekhon bari jurey/Chouchala atchala koto jhilmil kopat!” Gobindo Chandra Das, “Paater Gaan,” *Islam Robi*, Bhadro, 1321. (September 1914), Reprinted in Siddiqi, *Sirajganjer Itibas*, p. 88

Cultivators consumed a wide variety of goods. The Collector of Bogra, writing in 1873, noted the wealth of the jute cultivators in a variety of consumer goods – brass utensils, umbrellas and ponies: “those who used to do very well with earthen pots and pans now have vessels of brass and copper. Vendors of these vessels say that they now sell as many at a single fair as they formerly sold at three. Well-to-do raiyats constantly walk about with umbrellas, and import small ponies for their own use.”<sup>54</sup> Conversely, contemporaries saw poverty as absence of goods – tin for houses, brass utensils, etc. J.C. Jack, in his 1916 account of Faridpur, wrote: “in the poorer homesteads the most obvious signs of poverty will be holes in the walls of the huts and the absence of brass plates, pots and jars.”<sup>55</sup>

Visible manifestations of consumption were not only in housing, furnishing, utensils, clothing and ornamentation, but also in diet. In 1916, Mokhtar Ahmed Siddiqi was complaining that jute cultivators were driving up prices of *hilsa*, the quintessential Bengali fish: “They [jute cultivators] pay one taka, one and a half takas for a simple hilsa. On the other hand, bhadraloks, salaried men and businessmen do not dare to pay more than 10 or 11 annas for the same fish.”<sup>56</sup> J.C. Jack commented on more cultivators’ buying sweets and fruits at country bazaars: “In the harvest season nine out of every ten cultivators returning from the market will carry an earthen jar full of sweetmeats and at least a pair of the best fish obtainable, whatever

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<sup>54</sup> Hunter, W.W., *Statistical Account*, Vol. VIII, p. 205

<sup>55</sup> Jack, J.C. , *Economic Life*, p. 29

<sup>56</sup> Siddiqi, Maulvi Mokhtar Ahmed, *Sirajganjer Itihās*, Sirajganj, B.E. 1322. p. 25

may be their price; if the large jack-fruit, which is not unlike a melon and a great favourite of the cultivator, is in season, he will carry home two or three also.”<sup>57</sup>

The increased consumption of goods was matched by the consumption of services, particularly services provided by the colonial state. During the late nineteenth century, cultivators contested more lawsuits and more of them – though still quite a small number – were likelier to send their sons to village schools. The colonial state constructed and staffed courtrooms, police-stations, and school-houses in the delta during the nineteenth century. The expansion of education took place through a programme of state-supported government schools at the district level and grant-in-aid for private schools following the Woods dispatch of 1854. In an influential essay, David Washbrook has argued that the colonial state brought agrarian society under the rule of law during this period through changes in agrarian law, the construction of courtrooms and the appointments of judges.<sup>58</sup>

It is not, however, sufficient to look at the increased penetration of state educational and legal services in the delta as a purely supply-side phenomenon. There was considerable demand for such services and, moreover, jute cultivators had the money to purchase such services. Aminur Rahim has argued that jute earnings financed the increased enrollment of Muslims in government schools and drove demand for government-aided schools in the jute tracts.<sup>59</sup> Numerous contemporaries noted the cultivators’ fondness for lawsuits and associated litigiousness with jute

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<sup>57</sup> Jack, J.C., *Economic Life*, p. 48

<sup>58</sup> Washbrook, David, “Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 15(3), 1981, pp. 649-721

<sup>59</sup> Rahim, Aminur, “The Political Economy of English Education in Muslim Bengal, 1871-1912,” *Comparative Education Review*, 36(3), Aug 1992, pp.309-321

earnings. For example, the Collector of Tipperah thought of litigation as a form of entertainment:

The absurd quarrels among the people, which result in the most wantonly false charges at the police-station, show they must take a positive pleasure in the progress of the case, quite apart from any idea of getting justice or obtaining any solid advantage... I can only suppose that the investigation of a case is a pleasurable break in the monotony of a dull life; but it is at least to be regretted that choice should be made of so extravagant a diversion.<sup>60</sup>

More than anything else, the image of peasant litigiousness appeared to confirm the view that peasant expenditure was “frivolous.” The notion of “frivolous” and “recklessly extravagant” jute cultivators gained in currency during the 1890s and 1900s as levels of indebtedness in the delta soared. In some contemporary’s minds, consumption became associated with indebtedness rather than prosperity, informing the widespread charge that peasants spent frivolously. The colonial government’s report on material conditions of the Bengal peasantry noted about Dacca district, “Unhappily thrift is the last passion which dominates the Dacca peasant’s breast.”<sup>61</sup> Writing in 1913, F.A. Sachse, the District Magistrate of Mymensingh, associated peasant consumption with poverty rather than prosperity:

The crores of rupees paid for the raw article have had no visible effect on the manliness or contentedness of the agricultural classes or even on their material prosperity. They have no idea of saving, and in most cases their earnings from jute are frittered away on profitless extravagances long before the next crop is on the ground. By increasing their credit the inflated prices of jute have deepened rather than diminished their general indebtedness.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hunter, *Tipperah*, p. 388

<sup>61</sup> *Memorandum on the Material Conditions of the Lower Orders in Bengal*, (1892), in GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 12, NAB.

<sup>62</sup> F.A. Sachse, Settlement Officer, Mymensingh to Revenue Dept, Government of Bengal, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1914. GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 28, NAB

The shift from a dominant view of consumption as a simple indicator of prosperity to one of frivolousness, extravagance and indolence took place gradually, as fibre displaced grain, seasonal food-scarcity reared its head and debt emerged as the main strategy of staving off hunger. For most external observers in the 1900s, prior to World War I, the jute cultivator's prosperity was undeniable and consumption continued to be the clearest and most visible manifestation of such prosperity. K.C. Dey, a junior colleague of Sachse in the colonial civil service, held similar views on extravagance and indebtedness, while painting an altogether more positive portrait of the conditions of the cultivator:

The jute cultivator is notoriously improvident. The high prices he has been getting during the past ten years has turned his head altogether and upset his domestic economy. The large amount of cash that he handles has made him extravagant, and his style of living has risen in a remarkable degree. He eats much better, wears better clothes, and lives a cleaner and more sanitary life than before. His house has improved, corrugated-iron has taken the place of thatch, and the compounds and gardens are cleaner. He educates his children in many cases, sending them to English schools, which are fast springing up, and calls in doctors in case of illness. He indulges more frequently in litigation and marries more wives, paying a good deal more for each than before. But all this advance in the ways of living is much more than is warranted by his material prosperity. The money that he gets by the sale of his crop he squanders in a few months, and very often, I am inclined to think, almost universally, he runs into debt before he can sell his next harvest.<sup>63</sup>

From the cultivators' perspective, consumption was not frivolous: it was serious business. The two major peasant political movements in the jute tracts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revolved around peasant consumption – the anti-rent movement of the 1870s and early 80s, and the anti-

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<sup>63</sup> K.C. Dey to GOB, Revenue Dept., 4<sup>th</sup> February 1914, in Agriculture Dept, GoB, August 1914, in *ibid.*

Swadeshi resistance of the 1900s. In the following sections I will discuss these peasant political movements as instances in the politics of peasant consumption.

The anti-rent movement of the 1870s and early 1880s centred on courtrooms, as peasants brought lawsuits against landlords attempting to enhance their rent. The large numbers of rent-suits instituted in the period were a concerted attempt by jute cultivators to reconfigure relations of power between landlord and cultivator through the consumption of colonial state's legal services. The consumption of legal services more generally was related to the reconfiguration of a range of power-relations in the countryside – between peasant smallholders and sharecroppers or between men and women within peasant households, with men gaining increasing control over women's resources. Lawsuits were not merely a form of frivolous entertainment.

The anti-Swadeshi resistance of the 1900s took place when educated, middle-class Bengalis attempted to introduce the doctrine of boycott – of not consuming imported articles – into the rural bazaars of eastern Bengal. Resistance to the boycott transformed the rural bazaars – weekly or biweekly *bats*, where peasants bought cloth, salt, oil, hilsa, jackfruit and sweetmeats from itinerant traders – into sites of violence and conflict. As I argue, the anti-Swadeshi movement demonstrates the significance of the marketplace, the site of consumption, as a political sphere. As the failure of the Swadeshi movement to gain currency amongst peasants and small traders demonstrated, the consumption of imported goods was integral to peasant economic life in the delta.

In May 1873, peasant smallholders in the Yusufshahi pargana of Pabna district organized and resisted their landlords' attempts to enhance their rents. Yusufshahi pargana probably had one of the highest densities of jute cultivation in all of Bengal. Yusufshahi was in the Sirajganj subdivision, close to the port-city Sirajganj, at the time the "greatest jute mart in eastern Bengal." It was estimated that of the 192 square miles sown with jute in Pabna during 1872-73, 123 square miles was in Sirajganj subdivision.<sup>64</sup> Within two months, agrarian leagues had emerged throughout Pabna and, over the following years, landlord and cultivator tensions spread throughout the jute tracts of eastern Bengal, as cultivators organized themselves into agrarian leagues and resisted landlords' demands for enhanced rents. With the exception of Rangpur, all of the jute tracts of the region were scenes of organized peasant resistance.<sup>65</sup> Tensions between landlords and cultivators simmered, occasionally boiling over into violence all through the latter half of the 1870s and the first half of the 1880s. The rent-disputes were brought to a close only in 1885, with the introduction of a new Tenancy Act by the colonial state, granting cultivators enhanced security of tenure and further protection against rent enhancements.

K.K. Sengupta, the historian of the Pabna disturbances, ascribed an important role in the movement to a group of "substantial ryots," and proceeds to define that group in terms of its ability to make "huge profits through the cultivation of jute."

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<sup>64</sup> The relatively small district of Pabna had the most land sown with jute in 1872-73 according to government estimates. Kerr, *Report on Jute*, 1874.

<sup>65</sup> With the exception of Bakarganj and – to a lesser degree – Faridpur, all of the affected districts had significant jute acreage. Also, agrarian leagues did not emerge in western Bengal, not even in the jute-tracts of Hooghly and 24-Parganas.



The leadership of the league, therefore, was provided by men of considerable means such as petty landlords ... village headmen ... and jotedars ... This disgruntled section of the rural gentry found a large number of supporters amongst the occupancy ryots described by Sir Richard Temple, “as the most influential section of ryots.” Some of the occupancy ryots made huge profits through the cultivation of jute, a cash crop which only the substantial ryots could afford to cultivate. ... These substantial ryots were sufficiently well-to-do to offer an effectual resistance to the zamindars.<sup>66</sup>

The role of the substantial, “sufficiently well-to-do,” jute cultivating peasantry across the jute tracts of eastern Bengal was underpinned by their ability to finance expensive and lengthy lawsuits. Peasants conducted their anti-rent struggle, for the most part, through colonial legal institutions. The formation of an Agrarian League in Pabna was immediately preceded and probably inspired by the conclusion of a court case in Sirajanj, where a ryot had successfully sued against the landlords’ enhancement of rent. The primary function of the Pabna Agrarian League was to raise subscriptions to support members in legal disputes. Each of the districts convulsed by the anti-rent movement, witnessed steep increases in rent suits during the period.<sup>67</sup>

These suits were being conducted under the Rent Act of 1859, particularly Act X, which created a class of occupancy ryots with enhanced security of tenure and protection against rent enhancements.<sup>68</sup> From the perspective of the peasantry, the legal conduct of the dispute of the 1870s and early 1880s was a success. The costs of instituting and running suits in the colonial courts drained zamindars’ resources

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<sup>66</sup> Sengupta, K.K., *Pabna Disturbances and the Politics of Rent, 1873-1885*, New Delhi: People’s Pub. House, 1974, p. 13

<sup>67</sup> Sengupta, *Pabna Disturbances*, pp. 45-46

<sup>68</sup> Given how long-running and widespread agrarian protests of 1873-1885 were, outbreaks of violence were rare.

quicker than that of the peasantry. K.K. Sengupta argues, “the landlords who had enough resources in 1875 to harass their tenants in the civil courts had become by 1878 quite impoverished,” which suggests that the Agrarian Leagues were effectively pooling resources, but was more directly due to the fact that peasants had stopped paying all rents to their zamindars while the cases were pending.<sup>69</sup>

Is it appropriate to talk about legal suits between jute cultivators and their landlords as the consumption of legal services, in the same class as a wider set of market-based consumption? Tenancy legislation in 1859 had created a new class of peasantry with more security to their land and greater protection against landlord’s enhancements of rent. However, in order to enjoy such rights, cultivators had to be able to finance prolonged lawsuits against their zamindars. After 1864, provincial civil-courts – rather than the local Revenue Department – were empowered to adjudicate rent suits.<sup>70</sup> Hence, the courthouse became a vendor for enhanced property-rights, not solely a refuge from landlord extraction and oppression. By incurring the necessary expenditure in sustaining lawsuits at these courthouses, cultivators were able to enjoy these enhanced rights. In the absence of this expenditure, to contest these lawsuits, they would have been denied those rights by the zamindars. Like the consumption of Manchester cloth and tin sheets, the consumption of enhanced property rights in colonial courtrooms was financed by jute earnings.

The colonial government had a different perspective on the links between jute prosperity and anti-rent disputes. The official theory of the rent disputes was that

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<sup>69</sup> Sengupta, *Pabna Disturbances*, p. 91

<sup>70</sup> Sengupta, K.K., *Pabna Disturbances*, p. 75

landlords were attempting to raise rents to gain an increasing share of the rising prosperity of the cultivators. In the words of the Commissioner of Chittagong Division, “the rise which has taken place during the last few years in the price of produce and in the value of land, combined with the absence of any well-defined rules to regulate the rate of rent has caused a feeling of uncertainty to rise, which has alienated the tenantry from their landlords and embittered relations.”<sup>71</sup> Act X of 1859 specified that increases to rents had to be passed through the civil courts of the government and peasants were aware of this stipulation. Hence, all attempts to enhance rents made their way into the courtroom. However, while Act X allowed for rates to be enhanced because of rising value of the produce, it was vague about the extent to which rents could be enhanced. Hence, the cases lingered in the courts. In the meantime, peasants had, in an organized fashion closed off all payments of rent, and an uneasy tension prevailed between landlords and tenants. This chain of events is neatly captured by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal’s three step of model of the anti-rent disputes:

1<sup>st</sup>- That there are large disputes pending between zemindars and ryots regarding the degree in which rent may be enhanced by reason of the increase during recent years in the value of the produce of land;

2<sup>nd</sup>- That when these disputes become embittered, then, besides the question of enhancement, other questions become involved, such as the levy of certain cesses, the payment of alleged arrears, the past rate of rent, the area of actual holdings – the end of all this being that the payment of rent altogether in some places is likely to be held in abeyance for some time;

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<sup>71</sup> From the Commissioner of Chittagong to the Revenue Department, GoB, July 29, 1875, in *Proposed Amendment of the Rent Law in Bengal*, Dept of Rev, Agri and Comm, Land Revenue and Settlements, Feb, 1879, Nos. 11-29, File 21, 1879, NAI

3<sup>rd</sup>- That under such circumstances zemindars have sometimes attempted, or may attempt, to collect rents by force, which attempts are forcibly resisted, - the result being breaches of the peace.<sup>72</sup>

The colonial diagnosis of the issue as one of vagueness in property laws led to a lengthy discussion in bureaucratic circles about necessary reforms to agrarian property rights in Bengal. In 1881, the colonial government circulated a draft Tenancy Bill, further enhancing security of tenure and offering even greater protection against rent enhancements to the occupancy ryot. The zamindars reacted angrily, claiming loudly that the new bill would destroy them.<sup>73</sup> The Tenancy Act of 1885 curbed the zamindar's powers vis-à-vis their tenants and, as Sugata Bose has argued, brought to an end the rent and revenue offensive against the peasantry of Bengal: from then onwards, zamindari rents would no longer be the primary mechanism of surplus extraction from the Bengal peasantry.<sup>74</sup>

The legal codification of enhanced property rights was not, however, sufficient in itself to bring an end to the zamindari exaction. It had to be accompanied by the occupancy ryot's ability to pay the necessary court fees to enjoy those rights – an ability that was, at least in part, created by the occupancy ryots' ability to profitably cultivate jute. In other words, the end of the rent and revenue offensive took place when a section of cultivators had *purchased*, out of cash earnings from jute, enhanced property rights to the land they tilled at provincial courthouses in

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<sup>72</sup> "Minute," Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, August 21, 1875, in *Rent Disputes Between Landlords and their Tenants in Bengali*, Rev, Agri and Comm, Land Revenue and Settlements, Pros No. 3-5, February 1876, NAI

<sup>73</sup> Petition by zemindars and other landholders of Bengal and Behar against the Tenancy Bill, Rev and Agri, Revenue, File N. 21, Part B, December 1883, NAI

<sup>74</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Colonial Capital and Peasant Labour*,

the delta. The colonial government's supply of legal services, in the form of new agrarian laws, courthouses and judges, was accompanied by – in fact, *had* to be accompanied by – an effective demand for such services.

*Swadeshi, 1905-06*

Between 1905 and 1906, in scores of rural marketplaces throughout rural eastern Bengal, groups of school children, lawyers and doctors, and employees of zamindars attempted to prevent the sale and purchase of imported articles.<sup>75</sup> During the first half of 1906, the government of eastern Bengal and Assam received reports of Swadeshi activists picketing against the sale of foreign merchandise from across eastern Bengal, especially the districts of Pabna, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Dacca, Barisal, Khulna, Faridpur and Tippera districts.<sup>76</sup> Rumours that colonial authorities had enforced the ban on imported goods and that imported salt and sugar contained pig and cow bones were also circulating in those areas.<sup>77</sup>

The boycott programme relied much more on intimidation and coercion than it did on persuasion. P.C. Lyons, the senior bureaucrat in the Home Department of the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam reported that schoolboys were being organized, sometimes by their teachers, to “picket the shops and prevent the sale of

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<sup>75</sup> Statement of the Inspector General of Police, December 1, 1905, in State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906

<sup>76</sup> See the numerous reports from the various districts in *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> According to the Inspector General of Police, the movement “was given a fillip by Judgish Chundra Roy, a pleader, who in a meeting at Pabna made the claim that English sugar was purified with the blood and bones of cows.” *Ibid.*

European goods by forcible interference with both purchasers and sellers.”<sup>78</sup>

Resistance by “purchasers and sellers” was met with retribution, often along caste-lines, as in the case of a shopkeeper in Brahmanbaria, who, “under grave provocation, struck a Brahmin boy picket, was made to tender an apology, shave his head, and give away ten pairs of English cloth, which were carried in procession through the streets to the accompaniment of patriotic songs and finally burnt.”<sup>79</sup>

Swadeshi coercion bred resentment and resistance. In eastern Bengal, this resentment took a communal form, as the cultivators who were the main consumers of foreign-goods tended to be Muslim and the Swadeshi activists Hindu. As early as February, 1906, the resentment amongst Muslims and the danger of Hindu-Muslim violence as a result of the Swadeshi boycott was noted by F.C. Lyons, in a report to the central Government of India:

And, in all places, the members of the Muhammadan community were more specially subjected to oppression of this kind [forcible purchase of Swadeshi goods], until, at the time that the agitation reached its height, a danger had arisen of organized reprisals, which would have raised trouble of a very serious nature. Muhammadans form 60 per cent of the population of Eastern Bengal, chiefly belonging to the cultivating class. The effect of the artificial demand for country-made goods was to raise prices very greatly, and the cultivators have suffered heavy pecuniary losses from the ostracism of imported articles.<sup>80</sup>

For P.C. Lyons, as for almost everyone else at the time, in eastern Bengal the religious category “Muslim” was interchangeable with the livelihood category “cultivator.” However, the religious tag took on greater significance during the

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<sup>78</sup> From P.C. Lyon, Chief Secy, G of EB&A to Secy, Home Dept, GoI, February 21, 1906, *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> From R.W. Carlyle, Chief Secy, G of EB&A to Secy, Home Dept, GoI, January 25, 1906, *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> From P.C. Lyon, Chief Secy, G of EB&A to Secy, Home Dept, GoI, February 21, 1906, *ibid.*

Swadeshi movement, as the mostly-Muslim cultivators encountered the mostly-Hindu Swadeshi activists. Religious symbols, as Sumit Sarkar has demonstrated, certainly played a role in Swadeshi related conflicts in eastern Bengal.<sup>81</sup> The Swadeshi movement had alienated Muslims through the explicit use of Hindu symbols, slogans, and caste distinctions, for example, the slogan “Bande Mataram” or in shaving the head of the Brahmanbaria shopkeeper for striking a Brahmin youth. Moreover, the counter-Swadeshi movement spearheaded by the Nawab of Dacca and the newly formed Muslim League played an important role in mobilizing Muslim religious sentiment against the Swadeshi movement. However, as the events at Brahmanbaria and Jamalpur subdivision described below demonstrate, the livelihoods of cultivators played at least as significant a role as their religious sentiments in shaping the encounter between jute cultivators and anti-colonial nationalists during the Swadeshi movement.

### Mogra Hat

The Swadeshi movement arrived in Tippera in the persons of A. Rasul and Bepin Chandra Pal and through the medium of a mass meeting. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1907, Rasul presided over and Pal addressed a meeting of a mostly Hindu middle-class audience consisting of pleaders, schoolteachers, and schoolboys.<sup>82</sup> The meeting resolved to oppose the partition of Bengal, boycott foreign-made goods, government education and legal services, and to promote scientific agriculture and sanitary

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<sup>81</sup> Sarkar, Sumit, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, Bangalore: Permanent Black, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> From the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1907; reprinted in *Riots at Comilla and certain other places in Tippera District*, Home, Public, 159-171, Part A, May 1907,

improvements. They also decided to form a Tippera People's Association, headquartered in Comilla but with branches all over the district, to further these goals. A sub-conference was held at Kasba, a small town in Brahmanbaria subdivision, where it was decided to start 80 branch committees in the jurisdiction of the Kasba police station.<sup>83</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, 1907, the first of these branch committee met at Mogra, a *bat* or market town, 29 miles north of Comilla, very close to the Agartala railway station on the Assam-Bengal Railway and in the Chakla Rawshanabad estates owned by the Maharaja of Hill Tippera. At this meeting it was resolved to disallow the sale of foreign goods at Mogra, particularly Liverpool salt which was traded in significant quantities at the bazaar. This attempt to implement the Swadeshi goal of economic self-reliance erupted in violence.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, a public swadeshi meeting was held in Mogra. The next day, a Tuesday and a bazaar-day, Swadeshi activists went around the market warning vendors not to deal in foreign goods. The activists were entirely Hindu and traders and shoppers were overwhelmingly Muslim. On the next bazaar-day, Saturday, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Swadeshi activists tried to physically stop a Muslim trader, who had come from Brahmanbaria, from selling Liverpool salt. In the ensuing row, two men were injured and the Brahmanbaria trader's stall upturned.<sup>84</sup> Fearing that there would be an escalation of violence on the following hat day, the 26<sup>th</sup>, D.H. Wares, the SDO of Brahmanbaria arrived in person, accompanied by two of his inspectors – one Muslim and one Hindu – and a small contingent of village chowkidars. Over the course of an eventful afternoon, Wares had to intervene twice: once to separate

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> D.H. Wares, SDO, Brahmanbaria to Collector, Tipperah, 25th March, 1907, in *ibid.*



“about 300 Muhammadans ... and about half the number of Hindus [who were] thrashing each other with lathis and throwing stones at each other” and then to defuse the situation between “perhaps a couple of hundred Hindus endeavouring to guard [the bazaar] against a larger number of Muhammadans.”<sup>85</sup>

There was no looting involved, this was a show of force: as the District Magistrate of Tippera notes, “both sides came... prepared to fight.”<sup>86</sup> It seemed that the Muslims, being in a numerical majority, were prepared to carry on the fight. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, a group of Muslims attacked seven Hindu shops and several stalls at a small hat in Ghatiara, between three and four miles from Mogra, and part of the Sarail zamindari. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, a group of 500 Muslims collected to attack the village of Binauti, 3 miles south of Mogra, and home to a number of wealthy and “respectable” Hindu families. D.H. Lees, District Magistrate of Tipperah, received an anxious call for help from these prominent Hindus and arrived in time to avert violence. The arrival of 25 armed gurkhas on the 26<sup>th</sup> and a further contingent of 15 armed policemen on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March ensured that an uneasy peace prevailed.<sup>87</sup>

The colonial authorities did take one further measure to defuse the situation – they reasserted the doctrine of free and unrestricted trade. They arranged with the Maharaja of Tipperah Hill State, to have the following notices circulated in Mogra hat and surrounding areas:

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> D.H. Lees, District Magistrate, Tipperah, to Commissioner, Chittagong, in *ibid.*

It is hereby notified that in Hats, Bazaars and Melas ... there is full liberty for all persons to buy and sell any article they please. In case of any interference in this connection information should be given by the aggrieved party to the sub-manager of the district concerned.<sup>88</sup>

A similar notification was issued in Ghatiara and surrounding villages, this time by the Collector of Tippera in his role as the manager of the Sarail zamindari, which was at that time under the Court of Wards:

Allegations having been made that in certain bazaars and other places undue pressure has been put on sellers as well as buyers not to deal in certain articles, it is hereby notified that in all bazaars, hats, melas, etc. in the Sarail estate, full liberty exists for people to buy and sell what they please. If there is any interference in this respect, information should be given by the aggrieved party to the undersigned.<sup>89</sup>

### Nangalband

On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1907, B.C. Allen, the District Magistrate of Dacca, went to the Nangalband fair, to find “things fairly quiet, but bands of young men ... walking about carrying big lathis and shouting ‘Bande Mataram.’”<sup>90</sup> That evening, at 7 pm, “some Muhammadan shopkeepers came up and complained of picketing.” They also had a specific complaint: a small boy who had bought a German looking glass, for an anna or two, and then subsequently returned it, allegedly after being coerced by Swadeshi activists. Allen went to the fair and found a “certain number of ‘volunteers’ there with lathis but no overt sign of picketing.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Reprinted in *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Copy of Mr. B.C. Allen’s diary, dated 21st April, 1907, in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

The following morning, at 7:30 am, he received another complaint: a small boy had been coerced into returning a small box labeled “Made in Germany.”<sup>92</sup> After breakfast, however, the situation - which had been clearly simmering – boiled over. Seeing a number of men running from the direction of the fair, B.C. Allen went there to find that “the Muhammadans had shut their shops and one man excitedly said that there had been looting.” While inquiring about the looting, which Allen felt was “highly exaggerated,” a group of volunteers with lathis gathered around. He managed to eject them and continue his enquiry into the alleged looting, when all hell broke loose. The subsequent events in Allen’s narrative are confused, reflecting the confusion of the melee that ensued after a “crowd of one or two hundred men came running down the road ... shouting Bande Mataram and brandishing lathis.”<sup>93</sup>

A more coherent description of the events at Nangalband on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, is provided by R. Nathan, the Commissioner of Dacca who arrived on the scene a couple of days after the incident and was presumably able to piece together a coherent narrative out of several accounts:

... things went on smoothly to 3 or 3-30 P.M. At this time some two hundred zamindari servants, pleaders, mukhtears and volunteers, with lathis, with an elephant, marched round and entered the Mela shouting “Bande Mataram.” The volunteers wore conspicuous badges. They molested the shopkeepers and destroyed a certain amount of European toys and sweetmeats and scattered some Liverpool salt. The shop-keepers and the Muhammadans attending the Mela became enraged and attacked the volunteers, using sticks and booth poles and lathis which it is said were snatched from the “volunteers.” The “volunteers” scattered and fled ... The Muhammadans pursued striking and shouting ... and endeavouring to get at the fugitives ... ten Muhammadans entered the Durgabari in pursuit of fugitives and ... partly damaged the image which had been prepared for the [Janmasthan] festival and did some other damage. ... [they also] entered

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

three *swadeshi* shops, and damaged some of the stalls ... they pelted the cutcheries of the ... Gauripur estates and of the Ramgopalpur estate.<sup>94</sup>

Upon Nathan's arrival on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, "some local Hindu and Muslim leaders" approached him, and a meeting of local leaders of both communities was arranged for that evening. The Dacca Commissioner had the local leaders – 10 Hindus and 7 Muslims – sign a written statement, saying that they "deeply deplore" the disturbances and that they would use their "utmost influence on their communities to promote peace." Nathan's description of the signing ceremony is quite revealing:

They [the leaders] promised me that their signatures meant that they would do their utmost to prevent provocation, oppression and violence against the other community. At the request of the Muhammadans, I asked the Hindus if their promise included "swadeshi" oppression, and in the presence of the Muhammadans they replied that it did.<sup>95</sup>

## **POLITICS**

The Swadeshi movement was a failed attempt to introduce an elite, urban nationalist ideology and politics into a rural, agrarian setting. This failure, as has been rightly noted, was mostly due to religious and cultural differences between mostly-Hindu nationalists and mostly-Muslim cultivators. Cultural differences, however, were matched by a difference in economic ideas – as events in marketplaces demonstrated, elite nationalists alienated Muslim support not only with the very-Hindu rallying cry of "Bande Mataram" but also by adopting an economic programme hostile to the market-based livelihoods of cultivators. Peace was restored when the colonial state

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<sup>94</sup> Confidential Report of R. Nathan, Commissioner of Dacca, 24th April 1907, *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

intervened, by announcing the “full liberty exists for people to buy and sell what they please” in Brahmanbaria and brokering an end to “Swadeshi oppression” in Jamalpur. The hats, bazaars and marketplaces of eastern Bengal became, due to Swadeshi activism, battlegrounds for economic ideas, particularly ideas of poverty and prosperity.

Bipan Chandra has argued that late nineteenth century Indian nationalist thought revolved around the crucial question of poverty: was India poor and had British rule impoverished India?<sup>96</sup> The champion on the nationalist side was Dadabhai Naoroji, the “Grand Old Man of India.” In the 1870s and 80s, Naoroji delivered a series of lectures in Bombay and London proving Indian poverty through back of the envelope calculations of India’s per capita wealth and an estimate of a poverty line.<sup>97</sup> Naoroji attributed India’s poverty to the “drain of wealth” out of India, which was captured in India’s balance of payments surplus. Naoroji argued that this surplus represented a flow of wealth out of India without a corresponding return in the form of consumer goods or bullion. Naoroji argued that this surplus paid for Home Charges, remittances by colonial officials stationed in India, and interest payments on loans made to India.<sup>98</sup> The concept of a “drain of wealth” was considered dangerous by the colonial government, which in 1908 issued a

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<sup>96</sup> Chandra, Bipan, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2010

<sup>97</sup> Naoroji, Dadabhai, “Poverty in India,” paper read before the Bombay Branch of the East India Association in London in 1876, reprinted in *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1901, pp. 2-25

<sup>98</sup> Naoroji, Dadabhai, “On the Commerce of India,” Read before a meeting at the Society of Arts, London, February 15, 1871, reprinted in *Essays, Speeches, Addresses, and Writings of the Hon’ble Dadabhai Naoroji*, ed. C.L. Parekh, Bombay, Canton Printing Works, 1887, pp. 112-134

memorandum urging its officials to “study the arguments put forward in support of it [the drain theory] and to seize upon every opportunity of exposing their fallacy.”<sup>99</sup>

Between 1897 and 1900, a series of devastating famines swept through central and western India claiming, according to the contemporary British medical journal *Lancet*, nineteen million lives.<sup>100</sup> Turn of the century famines made it impossible for the British to deny the charge of poverty. The famines provided Naoroji’s arguments with not only credibility but also much wider circulation. During the early 1900s, the years leading up to the Swadeshi movement, several popular and influential books were published arguing that colonialism had caused poverty in India. Naoroji’s economic writings from the 1870s and 1880s were collected and published in the enormously influential *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* in 1901.<sup>101</sup> William Digby’s “Prosperous” *British India*, also published in 1901 had estimates of India’s per capita wealth running down its spine, a powerful visual demonstration of the pauperization of India.<sup>102</sup> R.C. Dutt’s hugely popular two-volume *Economic History of British India*, where Dutt traced the course of impoverishment from the days of the Company Raj to the Victorian era, was published in 1902.<sup>103</sup> The horrors of turn of the century famines had been extensively covered in the western press, replete with graphic photographs of starving victims.<sup>104</sup> Confronted by these devastating famines, the

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<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Goswami, Manu, “From Swadeshi to Swaraj: Nation, Economy, Territory in Colonial South Asia, 1870 to 1907,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40(4), Oct. 1998, pp. 621-622

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Davis, Mike, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Verso Books, 2001, p. 7

<sup>101</sup> Naoroji, Dadabhai, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, 1901

<sup>102</sup> Digby, William, “Prosperous” *British India: A Revelation from Official Records*, London: T.F. Unwin, 1901

<sup>103</sup> Dutt, R.C., *The Economic History of British India*, London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1902

<sup>104</sup> Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s son, covered the Indian famine in 1897 for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Mike Davis’ *Late Victorian Holocausts* discusses the graphic coverage of Indian famines in the US press in some detail.

charge of poverty and pauperization was undeniable – with the notable exception of eastern Bengal’s jute tracts.

Eastern Bengal had been spared the horrors of late nineteenth century famines. There was widespread consensus that eastern Bengal, and in particular its jute cultivators, were a prosperous lot – as evidenced by their consumption of market goods. Colonial officials often seized on the example of eastern Bengal to disprove growing accusations of pauperization. The colonial government would occasionally instruct local officials to collect information “in order that, when occasion arises, material may be provided for dealing effectually with the allegations that are frequently made as to the poverty and want of the lower classes.”<sup>105</sup> This information was occasionally collated into Moral and Material Progress Reports, which claimed that, with the exception of a few regions, India was prospering. Nowhere was this claim of prosperity made as strongly as with respect to the jute tracts of eastern Bengal. Jute, it was claimed in an 1892 memorandum on material conditions of the peasantry, “pours a flood of wealth into Central and East Bengal ... [and] it would be difficult to over-state the influence for good on the material condition of the peasant exercised by the vast and ever-growing volume of international trade.”<sup>106</sup> The report went on to the familiar association of prosperity with consumption, though as described above. With regard to Dacca division, the report claimed:

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<sup>105</sup> Demi-official, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Government of India, September 2, 1887, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 9, NAB

<sup>106</sup> Memorandum on the Material Conditions of the Lower Orders in Bengal, (1892), GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 12, NAB

Owing to the improved facilities for export, and the growing value of jute, the standard of comfort in the cultivating class has definitely advanced during the decade. The raiyat wears better clothes and shoes than his father, eats more abundantly, and sleeps on a more luxurious bed. His cottage is brightly and cheaply lit by a rude kerosene lamp. He kindles his fire with Swedish safety matches which have driven this English product from the market. When ill, he calls in a doctor, and uses quinine and other costly drugs.<sup>107</sup>

While colonial claims of material progress in other parts of India could be dismissed – especially in light of famines – Indian nationalists found it difficult to square their doctrine of pauperization with the apparent prosperity of eastern Bengal’s jute tracts. One approach to accounting for this anomaly was to attribute Bengal’s relative prosperity to a relatively low incidence of land tax.<sup>108</sup> R.C. Dutt developed this argument fully by correlating famines with the level of land tax: Bengal came out best – lowest land tax, zero famine.<sup>109</sup> Dutt argued that eastern Bengal was wealthier than the west because land assessments were lower: “If the cultivators of India generally were as prosperous as in Eastern Bengal, famines would be rare in India, even in years of bad harvests. But rents in Western Bengal are higher, in proportion to the produce, than in Eastern Bengal; and this Land Tax in Madras, Bombay and elsewhere is higher than in Bengal.”<sup>110</sup>

R.C. Dutt, along with several other nineteenth century nationalists, explained the anomaly of eastern Bengal through reference to its less onerous tax burden – a problematic argument given the rise of credit, rather than rent, as the major

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.* p. 14

<sup>108</sup> *Indian Spectator*, 11 and 18 September, 1881. Cited in Chandra, Bipan, *Economic Nationalism*, p. 365

<sup>109</sup> Dutt, R.C., *Open Letters to Lord Curzon on Famines and Land Assessments in India*, London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1900.

<sup>110</sup> Dutt, R.C., *India in the Victorian Age: An Economic History of the People*, Delhi (1985), First published 1904, p. v



mechanism of surplus extraction from the peasantry. Dutt was pointedly reserved about the role of jute in eastern Bengal's prosperity. In over 600 pages devoted to the economic history of British India, he devotes barely two paragraphs to the subject of jute, noting that "while this new article of export added to the resource of cultivators, it restricted the area of land under rice cultivation."<sup>111</sup> While acknowledging that jute did enrich cultivators, Dutt pointed out its negative consequences. In a much earlier publication on the Bengal peasantry, published in 1874, when Dutt was a younger man with very different political and economic views, he expressed similarly mixed feelings towards the fibre:

The cultivation of jute has considerably increased within the last few years, and in several districts specially in the east, the peasantry have much improved in their condition by jute cultivation. There is considerable diversity of opinion as to whether the production of jute improves or impairs the productive powers of the soil. Another contested point with regard to jute production is whether it is unhealthy. It is generally supposed that the production is not unhealthy, but that the process of rotting the stalks is injurious to health if it takes place in or near villages.<sup>112</sup>

R.C. Dutt's statements on the negative consequences of jute cultivation – that it displaces rice, reduces productivity of the soil, and affects public health – were part of a broader elite discourse of jute cultivation. Shambhu Chandra Mookerjee, who commented extensively on the prosperity of jute cultivators while floating along the Meghna, described the fibre as "anti-piscine," a serious charge for fish-loving Bengalis. In October 1882, while in Agartala in the employ of the Maharajah of Hill Tipperah, Mookerjee met Nabakumar Sen, a lawyer, who had just returned from a

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 350

<sup>112</sup> Dutt, R.C., *The Peasantry of Bengal*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1874, p. 136

short trip into the country on a case. Sen related the “sufferings” he had endured, all of which was due to the effects of rotting jute:

The air is filled with the stink of jute – it was impossible to breathe – not a square inch of pure air is to be had in the whole country. ... It was worse than dung – the jute decomposition. Worse than the vilest animal excreta! he [Sen] exclaimed. My own language! thought I, as I remembered my experience ... when walking from the boat to the mansion of the Mookerjees, I was obliged to run for life from the stench.

Sen got no fish to eat and had to live on pulse, which is the detestation of the Eastern Bengalis who, by the way, don’t know how to cook it. ... There is no fish in consequence of the state of the water from jute decomposition. I wonder whether Government ever heard of this fish famine. ... Here is a bad prospect for fishy Bengal.<sup>113</sup>

The ecological damage wreaked by jute decomposition was an oft-repeated complaint of the urban bhadralok, who blamed it for fish famines, malaria and a generally unhealthy environment. Government-sponsored scientific examinations “proved” that retting was not harmful to health, but the complaints continued.<sup>114</sup>

The middle-class had a long list of complaints against jute production. A poem published in 1918 in Calcutta, *Shekal-ekal* (“Those days, These days”) by Chandrashkar Kar attributed reduced supplies of fish, milk and the adulteration of *ghee* to the spread of jute cultivation on to land formerly left fallow for cattle to graze:

[Those days] there were fish in the canals and lakes, rice on the fields  
Cows would give plenty of milk  
There was no jute cultivation anywhere in the country  
There were fields of grass here, there, and everywhere.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Mookerjee, Sambhu Chandra, *Travels and Voyages between Calcutta and Independent Tipperah*, Calcutta, 1887, pp. 255-256

<sup>114</sup> Kerr, H.C., *Report on Jute*.

<sup>115</sup> Kar, Chandrashekhar, *Shekal-ekal*, Calcutta 1918, p. 7

The most often-repeated and serious accusation leveled against jute was that it had displaced rice – the “war” between subsistence grain for local consumption and “fibre” for export to Europe. The following depiction of fibre and grain at war is taken from an essay by Dwijdas Datta, a lecturer in agriculture at Shibpur engineering college: “Jute is now in competition with paddy. Both are involved in a great war. Who can predict whether our own food-grain will win or whether the foreign-required fibre will win in this Kurukshetra and whether we will have to learn to eat jute in order to survive.”<sup>116</sup> The charge that expanding jute cultivation would reduce Bengalis would to eating the fibre was repeated in essays, poems, pamphlets and novels of the early twentieth century.

The litany of elite complaints against the “excessive” cultivation of jute points to the way in which nationalists squared jute cultivators’ apparent prosperity with a more generalized narrative of national decline and impoverishment. Jute cultivators were prospering at the expense of the nation, they were selfishly forsaking the interests of their own community and producing for global markets. Nikilnath Roy’s pro-Swadeshi pamphlet, *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal), published in Calcutta in 1906, at the peak of the Swadeshi movement explicitly leveled the accusation of selfishness at jute cultivators:

From outside it seems that in this life-struggle [jute production], our cultivators are winning. But what is happening inside? The cultivation of rice has been reduced to such an extent, that ordinary people are experiencing starvation every year ... *it is true that a few cultivators may have made some money*, but there is no doubt that lack of rice cultivation has driven ordinary people and even some cultivators to hunger and death. On top of that, the rotting of jute in rural waterbodies has destroyed the health of these areas and the very cultivators who grow jute are spending their money on quinine and other

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<sup>116</sup> Datta, Dwijdas, *Pat ba nalita*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 1. Kurukshetra was the scene of the final battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the Mahabharat.

foreign medicines. ... *only if everyone can survive equally out of this*, can we say that we are winning this life-struggle. Otherwise there is no value to victory.<sup>117</sup>

Dwijdas Datta, the agriculture professor at Shibpur engineering, took a different tack – instead of accusing jute cultivators of selfishness, Datta tried to convince them that jute was not as profitable a crop as they supposed. In an imaginary dialogue between himself as expert, and a jute cultivator, Datta goes about teaching the farmer the proper way of calculating profit and loss:

Amongst jute cultivators, those who have a little bit of business knowledge – they may say, while scratching their heads, that they make a profit of 10 takas per bigha out of jute. We have got this answer from a lot of cultivators we have questioned. Then I ask the cultivator, “did you take into account your own and your family’s labour?” Answer, “of course.” “Have you included their wages into your calculations?” “No I did not include that.” “The food that you give labourers that work in the field – have you included the cost of that food?” “No I did not include that.”<sup>118</sup>

The imagined conversation continue in this vein, with the expert asking the cultivator if he included interest payments to the moneylender, the legal expenses when a cow wanders into the jute fields, and so forth. In each case, the answer is no. The conversation concludes when the author asks, “with all these expenses taken into account tell me, is jute profitable or loss-making?” The answer, inevitably, “very loss-making.”<sup>119</sup>

Swadeshi ideology vilified the consumption of imported goods even more than it did jute cultivation. The economic boycott programme was informed by a particular theory of commercial relations, whereby commerce with Britain had de-

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<sup>117</sup> Ray, Nikhilmath, *Sonar Bangla*, Calcutta, 1906, p. 132, emphases added.

<sup>118</sup> Datta, p. 36

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37

industrialised Bengal; it was hoped that protection from European competition, offered by the boycott, would re-industrialise the region. The consumption of foreign-made goods – Manchester cloths, imported salt, and, in the Nangalband fair, German-made toys – was portrayed as anti-national and people were urged, or coerced, to purchase more expensive Swadeshi commodities, for the national good. In the nationalist charge that the consumption of foreign-made goods had de-industrialised and impoverished India, the main villains were – once again – jute cultivators. In the previous section, I had discussed two very different responses to jute cultivators’ consumption: a celebration of cultivators’ prosperity and “comparative civilization,” on the one hand, and a condemnation of cultivators as indulgent, extravagant and indolent, on the other. Swadeshi economic discourse had added another dimension to the condemnation of jute cultivators’ consumption – impoverishing the entire subcontinent.

The middle-classes who spearheaded the Swadeshi movement had suffered from the jute cultivators’ increased consumption. Jute cultivators’ cash earnings had, it was widely reported, pushed up the prices of consumer goods, squeezing middle-class household budgets. In January 1914, J.A.L. Swan, the Collector of Rajshahi reported that the “bhadrakalok class ... oppose jute cultivation because it sends up the price of rice, and pollutes the water-supply.” Swan proceeded to depict a tragic image of the impoverishment of the salaried middle-class:

People who a few years ago lived comfortably on Rs. 20 a month are now hard put to it to make both ends meet on Rs. 30, while the salaries paid to some Government servants, which were formerly, if not generous, at all events reasonable, are now the merest pittance ... This ever-growing dearness of food, coupled with the corresponding rise in the price of other necessities of life, the high house-rents, and the difficulty of obtaining employment, is

gradually reducing the majority of the *bhadralok* class to comparative poverty.<sup>120</sup>

The sub-inspector of madrassas in Sirajganj, Mokhtar Ahmed Siddiqi complained that cultivators, upon selling their harvest, lost all sense of proportion and paid far more for commodities than ordinary middle-class salary-holders would dare.<sup>121</sup> The reckless extravagance of jute cultivators pushed prices of simple consumer goods up beyond the reach of their non-jute cultivating neighbours. Market-based consumption benefitted the individual jute cultivator at the expense of their community – much like jute production.

Nationalist economic discourse vilified jute cultivators portraying them, at best, as stupid and recklessly extravagant and, at worst, as selfishly aggrandizing themselves at the expense of their communities. Jute cultivation and the consumption practices of jute cultivators were blamed for shortages of fish, the lack of pure ghee, the price of hilsa, the import of low-quality Burmese rice, deterioration in public health, the unaffordability of consumer goods, and the de-industrialisation and pauperization of India. Given that the fibre and its producers were the villains of Swadeshi economic ideas, it should not be surprising that Swadeshi activism proved unpopular in the jute tracts. Elite nationalists alienated the jute tracts not only through explicitly Hindu religious symbols and slogans, but also through economic ideas hostile to the very livelihoods of jute farmers. Swadeshi activists, however, remained focused on the religious rather than economic categories, and addressed

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<sup>120</sup> J.A.L.Swan, Collector of Rajshahi to Revenue Dept., GOB, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1914, GOB, Agriculture Dept., August 1914, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 22, NAB

<sup>121</sup> Siddiqi, *Sirajganjer Itihas*, p. 53

appeals to join the movement towards “Muslims” rather than “jute farmers.” A pamphlet circulated in the jute tracts read:

Mussalmans, mother entertains high hopes in you. Strong as you are, broad as your chests are, strong as your arms are, fear not to die, to save our mother from dishonour. Say once “Din!” “Din!” “Allah ho akbar” and take possession of the towns by whatever means you find to hand, *latbi* or sword, sticks or guns, or anything.<sup>122</sup>

## WWI AND AFTER

If nationalist economic discourse lost the battle of economic ideas, does that imply that colonial economic thought was victorious? Were jute cultivators more responsive to the colonial government’s doctrines of free trade, to proclamations of the liberty to buy and sell as posted around Brahmanbaria after the Mogra riots? If the colonial government believed that jute cultivators were doctrinaire free traders, they would be disabused by incidences of looting in eastern Bengal’s rural markets in December 1917 and January 1918, barely ten years later. These cases of looting demonstrated that peasant politics in the jute tract were about the viability of their market-based livelihoods – about prosperity and poverty – rather than about doctrinaire ideas of free trade or economic boycott.

During December 1917, the colonial government reported 91 cases of looting in rural marketplaces in eastern Bengal and another 28 during January 1918. A majority of these incidents took place in the jute tracts of eastern and northern Bengal: 22 of them in the jute-regions of Rangpur.<sup>123</sup> Similar incidents took place in

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<sup>122</sup> State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906, NAI

<sup>123</sup> Govt of Bengal to the Home Department, Govt of India, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1918, *Report of the cases of looting of hats in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam*, Home, Public, Part B, No.184-205, NAI

the jute-growing region of Purnea, in the province of Bihar, and in the Sylhet district in Assam: Sylhet was in the Meghna valley, adjacent to Mymensingh and Tipperah, and ecologically, economically, and culturally similar to those important jute-growing districts.<sup>124</sup> The Government of Bengal stated: “there can be no doubt that the main cause of these disturbances is the high price of salt and cloth, which people attribute to the greed of shopkeepers. The discontent is accentuated by the low prices obtained for paddy and jute.”<sup>125</sup> In several instances, looters claimed that the Government had given permission to loot shops charging excessively high prices: “an absurd idea had got abroad that Government would not be adverse to people taking the law into their own hands and compelling the vendors of cloth and salt to bring down their prices.”<sup>126</sup>

The government of Bengal decided to respond in December, 1917 by enlisting the support of prominent locals “who can explain to their tenants and others the economic causes of the high prices and the futility of the looting.”<sup>127</sup> The futility of attempting to control riots through economic theory became apparent to the Government of Bengal when cases of looting did not abate during January 1918. The situation “eased” in February and it was “attributed partly to the fall which had taken place in the price of salt and partly to the promptness with which the rioters have been apprehended and placed on trial.” Significantly, a public announcement was made that the Government would bring the prices of salt and cloth under

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<sup>124</sup> Govt of Bihar and Orissa to Home Department, Govt of India, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1918 and Govt of Assam to Govt of India, February 1, 1918, *ibid*.

<sup>125</sup> Govt of Bengal to Govt of India, 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1917, *ibid*.

<sup>126</sup> Govt of Assam to Govt of India, 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1918. Also, Govt of Bengal to Govt of India, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1918 and Govt of Bihar and Assam to Govt of India, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1918, *ibid*.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*.



control. Looting came to an end with price controls – the very opposite of the proclamation of “full liberty for all persons to buy and sell” in Mogra and Nangalband in 1905.

The cases of looting also took place in a particularly vulnerable period in the crop calendar – during December and early January, just before the aman harvest came in. The situation eased in late January and February, as the aman crop was harvested. The Government of Bengal feared that violence would recur once more, in the “hot weather” as the aman crop depleted and before the aus and jute harvest came in: “It is ... far from improbable that disturbances may break out again in the hot weather, when the resources of the cultivating classes will be depleted owing to the poor prices which they have received both for jute and for rice.”<sup>128</sup>

The lootings of 1917/18 were about the viability of market-based livelihoods and a response to high prices of consumer goods and low prices of agricultural produces. When shopkeepers charged high prices for consumer goods, beyond the affordability of cultivators impoverished by several years of low prices for jute, cultivators targeted them. Similarly, ten years previously, when Swadeshi activists attacked jute cultivators’ consumption of goods in markets, they were resisted and even attacked. While the colonial state and Indian nationalists were debating free trade or economic boycott, progress or pauperisation, jute cultivators were focused on the viability of market-based livelihoods. Their politics of commercial life was played out in centres of commerce and exchange – the *bats*, bazaars and marketplaces of eastern Bengal.

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<sup>128</sup> Govt of Bengal to Govt of India, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918, *ibid*.

An important shift in this politics had taken place between the anti-Swadeshi resistance of 1905/06 and the looting of 1917/18. Prior to World War I, the politics of jute cultivation revolved around notions of prosperity, but the disappearance of jute markets at the outbreak of World War I and consistently low prices between 1914 and 1918 drove large numbers of cultivators into destitution. After World War I, politics in the delta revolved around questions of poverty, deprivation and destitution. I will conclude this chapter with a poem titled “The Jute Song,” written by Gobinda Chandra Das, nicknamed Saurabh, that appeared on September 2, 1914 in a journal published out of the jute-town of Sirajganj. The poem captured the rising prosperity and political autonomy of jute cultivators until World War I and was a prescient foretelling of the sharp reversal of fortunes for Bengal’s jute cultivators.

### **“Jute Song”**

Oh! My tasty jute!  
 You are spread out over Bengal’s crown, Bengal’s fields  
 Where ever I go, I see you,  
 In every village you have an office, in every neighbourhood a market.  
 They leave rice and cultivate you,  
 They don’t listen to objections,  
 In every home they count money, the cultivator has more guts.  
 He who had a straw hovel,  
 Now has across his house,  
 Four-cornered, eight-cornered so much shiny tin!  
 If your yield is low,  
 It is difficult to pay the landlord,  
 King and subject are both in trouble, serious hardship.  
 Serbia Austria are fighting,  
 We are not scared of that,  
 But if your sales come to a stop, then “Gourango” wood.  
 The moneylender gives no money  
 How are we supposed to survive,  
 Desperation in Punjab, Madras, in Bangla, Gujarat.

## Chapter 2

### The Metropolis, the Hinterland, and the Mofussil: The Spatial Formations of Jute, 1853 to 1918

Jute produced by peasant households traveled through the delta's river-ways and railways, westwards to the jute mills and seaports of Calcutta. En route to Calcutta, the fibres changed hands, traveled on ox-carts, country-boats, steamships and railway-wagons, and were bought and sold, stored, bulked, and assorted in the jute tract's river-port and railroad market towns. As it passed through layers of intermediary traders, jute also changed in form – from small lots of peasant produce of variable quality to standardized units of quantity, quality and price. The built-up capital through which jute circulated – steamships, railways, jetties, docks and warehouses – connected the delta's jute tracts to metropolitan Calcutta. At the turn of the twentieth century, Calcutta was home to half the world's jute mills and the bulk of jute presses in Bengal. The flow of fibre transformed eastern Bengal's jute tracts into Calcutta's hinterland and, conversely, Calcutta into the delta's metropolis.

The relationship between the hinterland and the metropolis was mediated through small towns – or the mofussil.<sup>1</sup> These small towns, housing about 2% of the total population, was estimated in the 1901 census to have grown by 12.7% in the last decade. Growth was most marked in the railway and river markets that specialized in the jute trade – the population of jute marts like Chandpur, Narayanganj, Jamalpur,

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, as the Hobson-Jobson describes it, the mofussil was a relational term, from the perspective of Calcutta, the delta's small-towns were the mofussil, but from those small towns themselves, the surrounding countryside was the mofussil. The Hobson-Jobson definition of the mofussil is "The provinces – the country stations and districts, as contra-distinguished from 'the Presidency; or, relatively rural localities of district as contra-distinguished from the sudder or chief station, which is the residence of the district authorities." p. 570.

and Madaripur had increased by more than 20% in the last decade, and Narayanganj's had doubled in the last two decades. Amongst these towns, only Narayanganj had a population of more than 20,000. New mofussil towns had also emerged along recently constructed railway tracks, and were being enumerated for the first time in 1901: Akhaura in Tippera, and Domar, Haldibari and Nilphamari in Rangpur district. The 1901 census report – like most official publications of the period – celebrated the growth of small-towns as manifestations of the jute-tract's prosperity: “the country is prosperous and trade is increasing, and the most progressive towns are those connected with the export trade in jute.”<sup>2</sup>

These small-towns were intermediate spaces between the metropolis and the hinterland. They were the settings for encounters between the hinterland and the metropolis. Peasant households visited these towns to sell their produce, purchase imported goods, attend fairs, contest lawsuits, register land tenure contracts, and so forth. In the towns, they encountered various agents of the metropolis – jute purchasers and other traders, pleaders and *mukhtears*, and government clerks. This chapter will look at three interactions between the hinterland and the metropolis that took place in the mofussil – in transacting jute, in interacting with the state, and in nationalist politics.

Mofussil jute markets grew up along the delta's waterways and railways, along the routes connecting peasant farms to Calcutta. Small village-level traders known as *farias* or *beparis* sold fibres purchased from peasant smallholders to *mahajans*, more substantial capitalists usually acting as agents of jute balers in these markets. During the nineteenth century, intermediary jute traders invested in mofussil towns, building

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<sup>2</sup> Government of India, *Census of India*, 1901, Part VI, pp. 31-33

warehouses, river-docks, railway-sidings and kutchra presses – hand-powered screws that packed fibres into bales of 4 to 6 maunds (160 to 240 kilograms). In the first section of this chapter, I argue that the patterns of mofussil growth in the delta was underpinned by the overlaying of coal-powered transportation, railways and river-steamers, over the delta’s existing infrastructure of oar and sail-powered boats during the late nineteenth century.

As was usually the case in the British Empire, colonial capital was accompanied by the colonial state. The mofussil towns housed not only the warehouses and baling presses of jute capitalists, but also the paraphernalia of the colonial government. The forward institutions of the colonial state in the mofussil were those of revenue extraction and law and order. Courthouses, police-stations, and land administration offices in mofussil towns were perhaps the most visible signs of colonial authority in the hinterland. By the early twentieth century, the colonial government had established branches of a different type of government institution – the developmental. The extension of the Agricultural Department, formed in 1885, into the hinterland was carried out at the behest of global jute capital, as the government published forecasts of the probable outturn of jute and attempted to “improve” peasant production by increasing yields and alleviating quality. In the second section, I will look at the increasing penetration of the state into the delta.

The third section will look at the mofussil as a site for nationalist politics, especially as metropolitan nationalists attempted to mobilize the hinterland’s peasant masses into the Swadeshi movement. Metropolitan activists introduced Swadeshi ideology into the hinterland through whistle-stop tours of eastern Bengal’s mofussil towns, traveling on the very railways and steamers that conveyed jute and stopping to

address public meetings in the very towns that served as centres of the jute trade. The core of eastern Bengal's Swadeshi activists were drawn from *bhadralok*, Hindu *mofussil* middle-classes – pleaders and *mukhtears*, school-teachers, doctors, clerks, and *zamindari amlas* residing in the *mofussil*. While *mofussil* towns were mostly Hindu and middle-class, the surrounding countryside was overwhelmingly Muslim and peasant. Attempts to enforce the Swadeshi economic program of boycott pitted the *mofussil* town against the surrounding countryside. I will argue that these conflicts took place between the overlapping categories of Hindu and Muslim, *bhadralok* and peasant, and town and countryside.

## **CIRCULATION**

In its journey from farm to factory, peasant produce stopped at the *mofussil* town, where it was bulked, stored, assorted and packed before being dispatched to Calcutta. The distribution and growth of these market towns in the delta was driven by the overlaying of a coal-powered transport infrastructure of railways and river-steamers on top of the delta's existing infrastructure of sail and oar-powered boats. In the initial days of the jute trade, the bulk of Bengal's jute was conveyed to Calcutta by boats, entering Calcutta through the Nadia canal and to a far lesser extent through the Midnapore and Hidgellee canals.

The largest proportion of Calcutta's jute was consigned on boats in *ganjes* or large wholesale marts in Bengal. Sirajganj and Narayanganj emerged as the premier jute marts of Bengal in the 1870s. These towns were ideally located on the delta's river-routes to collect jute from the surrounding countryside and dispatch it to

Calcutta. Sirajganj was on the banks of the Jamuna, the major tributary of the Brahmaputra river-system, and collected jute from northern Bengal and western Mymensingh. Narayanganj was on the confluence of the Buriganga and Dhaleswari rivers, and collected jute from eastern Mymensingh, Dacca, and Tippera. Further, these towns became the centres of operation for two different trading communities who played hugely important roles in the jute trade – the Marwaris and the Armenians. In Sirajganj, the jute trade was dominated by Marwari merchants who arrived in large numbers from western India in the late nineteenth century; in Narayanganj, trade was dominated by Armenian merchants who had been trading hides, skins, and salt in nearby Dacca.

Sirajganj and Narayanganj were served by smaller river-ports scattered throughout the region. Pabna, Mymensingh (or Nasirabad), Kishoreganj, Jamalpur, Munshiganj, Dacca, Bhairab Bazaar, Brahmanbaria and Chandpur were smaller but still significant river-ports in the delta's jute trade, though most often fibres were consigned to Narayanganj or Sirajganj rather than direct to Calcutta. The notable exception was Madaripur, in Faridpur district and on the banks of the Kumar, close to the Sundarbans route to Calcutta. Madaripur was a depot for the jute produced in Faridpur and an important jute mart that, between 1877 and 1880, consigned an annual average of 450,000 maunds jute directly to Calcutta.<sup>3</sup>

Sirajganj and Narayanganj's importance as river-mart preceded the rise of jute as a major global commodity in the 1860s. In 1854, an American missionary described a brief visit to Sirajganj: "As we approached Serajgunge [traveling from Pabna, up the Jamuna] the forests of masts reminded me of the shipping of New

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<sup>3</sup> Government of Bengal, *Reports on the Internal Trade of Bengal*, 1877-80.

York or Liverpool. We were ten hours and half passing by them, as they were moored to the bank, two, three, or five deep. I computed them at the time above 600, but was afterwards informed they were more than a thousand.”<sup>4</sup> In the late 1860s, Sirajganj was considered to be the “emporium of Bengal jute.” Sirajganj’s pre-eminent position in the hinterland’s jute trade declined from the 1880s onwards, as river-routes were overlaid with railways and country-boats displaced by river-steamers.

In 1862, the Eastern Bengal Railway, consisting of a line from Sealdah station in Calcutta to Kushtia was opened. In 1870, the Eastern Bengal Railway opened a 45-mile extension to Goalundo, on the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Meghna river systems, in an attempt to capture Bengal’s riverine trade. The Eastern Bengal Railway also operated a steamer service connecting Goalundo to the important jute towns of Narayanganj and Chandpur to the east and Sirajganj to the north. The rivers, however, did not prove cooperative – substantial portions of the railway and the town itself was washed away during floods in 1875. After that, Goalundo was no longer a fixed space, but a “wandering terminus” shifting frequently to avoid the unpredictable and unstoppable rivers. The town consisted solely of “a very large bazar and railway and steamers officers’ quarters which follow the terminus in its wanderings.”<sup>5</sup>

Through its location at the terminus of the region’s largest rivers, Goalundo became the central transshipment point for the delta’s jute. Jute from inland marts traveled through Goalundo en route to Calcutta. Though country-boats passed

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<sup>4</sup> “Letter from Dr. Peck,” *The Missionary Magazine*, XXXIV (6), June, 1854 p. 164

<sup>5</sup> W.W. Hunter, et. al., *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 12, Oxford: 1908, p. 279. In 1908, after numerous shifts, Goalundo was located 7 miles from its original location 1865 location. Further, enormous sums were expended in dredging the Padma near the rail-terminus, in an effort to prevent the rivers from displacing excessively.



through Goalundo, their cargo was not necessarily transferred to railway wagons. The railway would not displace country boats until the 1890s, only after tracks penetrated deeper into the countryside. Between 1870 and 1872, more than half of Calcutta's jute arrived by countryboat: 8.5 million maunds by countryboats, 6 million by railway, and 2 million by river steamer.<sup>6</sup> The *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal for 1876-77* noted the inability of railways to displace country-boats with some concern: "it is evident that the railway has not succeeded in displacing the waterways of Bengal as the favoured channel for the supply of this important staple to Calcutta. And yet almost the whole of this jute passes by the railway station of Goalundo."<sup>7</sup> However, coal and steam would replace oar and sail, as railway lines and river-steamer services were extended throughout the delta. Between 1876-77 and 1889-90, arrivals of jute in Calcutta by boat rose from 3.8 million maunds to 4.5 million maunds. On the other hand, arrivals by railway more than doubled from 3.4 million to 8.4 million maunds and by river-steamer almost quadrupled from 860,000 to 3 million maunds (see Table 2.1).

The next major colonial railway project was the Northern Bengal State Railway opened in 1878 and connecting Calcutta with Assam and traversing the jute districts of northern Bengal, particularly Rangpur. Within two years of the line opening, the government of Bengal proclaimed that "the easy communication afforded by the railway has given a powerful impetus to the development of the jute

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<sup>6</sup> Kerr, *Report on Jute*, 1873, p. 59

<sup>7</sup> *Reports on the Internal Trade of Bengal for the year 1876-77*, Calcutta, Government of Bengal: 1877, p. 69. In 1872-73, George Burnett reported that there were two ways to send jute from Sirajganj to Calcutta: "the steamers of the Eastern Bengal Railway, and the rail itself from Goalundo to Calcutta, at six annas per maund, while by native boats it costs three to four annas per maund, but occupies thirty to forty days in transit." Burnett, George, *The Jute-Growing Districts and Markets of India with Notes of a Tour, 1872-73*, (Reprinted from the Dundee Advertiser), Dundee, 1873, p. 15

trade in this district [Rangpur].”<sup>8</sup> By 1880, two Calcutta firms had opened agencies in Rangpur and Domar, hitherto a relatively small hinterland town and over the following years many more agencies would follow. During the 1880s, quantities of jute consigned in towns along the Northern Bengal State Railway increased rapidly: in Rangpur itself from 18,000 maunds in 1879-80 to 241,024 maunds in 1889-90, in Domar from 186,000 maunds to 326,674 maunds, and in Haldibari from 44,000 to 292,592. By the early twentieth century, Domar was described as “a large jute-exporting centre, containing jute presses.”<sup>9</sup> The emergence of the jute trade in these towns meant a corresponding diminution of Sirajganj’s trade, as the Rangpur jute that was previously dispatched to Calcutta via Sirajganj was now consigned directly to the metropolis in railway wagons.

**Table 2.1: Arrivals of jute into Calcutta (in maunds of 40 kg)<sup>1</sup>**

	<i>By boat</i>	<i>By rail</i>	<i>By steamer</i>
1876-77	3,839,404	3,382,406	857,829
1877-78	4,784,000	3,978,000	1,072,000
1878-79	5,802,593	3,008,233	1,207,921
1879-80	4,455,549	4,331,058	1,480,696
1880-81	4,086,302	3,701,097	1,339,809
1881-82	4,569,560	5,783,536	4,569,560
1882-83	5,973,703	7,001,350	2,085,968
1883-84	4,908,379	3,252,194	1,888,244
1884-85	4,910,687	4,875,739	2,756,718
1885-86	4,113,237	4,543,907	2,959,478
1886-87	3,661,176	5,289,909	2,788,585
1887-88	4,012,692	6,772,599	2,959,382
1888-89	4,818,743	7,428,638	3,218,564
1889-90	4,491,833	8,398,930	3,053,984

<sup>8</sup> *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal for the year 1879-80*, Calcutta: 1880, p. 63

<sup>9</sup> W.W. Hunter, et. al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. XI, Oxford: 1908, p. 367

In 1885, the Dacca section of the Eastern Bengal Railway, connecting Narayanganj and Mymensingh was opened. With the opening of the Dacca section of the EBR, Narayanganj gained in importance as a jute depot. It was connected both to Calcutta and hinterland markets by steam powered transport technologies. The river-steamer trade between Narayanganj and Calcutta increased rapidly. In 1889-90, Narayanganj sent 1,585,000 maunds of jute to Calcutta by river-steamers, while Sirajganj sent just 945,000 maunds. Sirajganj had, however, retained its importance as a centre of the country-boat trade: that same year, Sirajganj sent more than 780,000 maunds of jute to Calcutta by country-boat against the mere 165,000 maunds dispatched from Narayanganj. As railways and river-steamers displaced country-boats in the hinterland's jute trade Narayanganj eclipsed Sirajganj as east Bengal's main jute emporium. Sirajganj was not connected to the railway network until 1915, with the opening of the Sara-Sirajganj line. By this point, Narayanganj had already eclipsed Sirajganj as the premier jute entrepot of the Bengal delta. Sirajganj's decline as Bengal's pre-eminent jute emporium was not solely due to competition from railways. As the imperial gazetteer of India commented in 1908: "Sirajganj has of late somewhat declined in importance owing to the damage done by the earthquake of 1897, and to a change in the course of the Brahmaputra, which is now three miles distant from the town." The earthquake had destroyed the Serajgunge Jute Company, the only jute manufacturing concern in eastern Bengal prior to 1947.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of steamer and railway services connecting Narayanganj to both the jute-tracts of Dacca and Mymensingh to the north and Calcutta to the west

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter, W.W., et. al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 23, Oxford: 1908, p. 17.

led to the rapid growth of this river port. By the turn of the century Narayanganj had displaced Sirajganj as east Bengal's premier jute mart. Narayanganj's population had more than doubled between 1881 and 1901, and stood at 24,472 people. In 1908, there were 53 jute packaging factories employing 73 presses and employing 6,000 workers in Narayanganj.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there were only 14 presses in Sirajganj and another 5 more in the neighbouring jute town of Bera.<sup>12</sup> While Narayanganj's population had doubled between 1881 and 1901, Sirajganj's population had increased from 21,037 to only 23,114.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike in Sirajganj, where Marwari traders from Rajasthan dominated the jute trade, European capital concentrated in Narayanganj. This, perhaps, explains why Narayanganj was widely considered the model colonial "upcountry" market town.<sup>14</sup> According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India of 1908: "Narayanganj has the appearance of a Western rather than of an Eastern town, and has not unjustly been called the model municipality of Bengal."<sup>15</sup> European traders formed the Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce in 1904, and until 1912 represented "the jute interest" in the Governor of Bengal's Legislative Council. The dominance of the European-dominated NCC in local municipal politics, to the exclusion of Indian traders, lasted into the 1930s. In 1926, Tarit Bhushan Roy of the Bengal Mahajan Sabha, an association of mofussil Bengali traders and financiers, complained in the Legislative

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter, W.W., et. al., *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 23, Oxford: 1908, p. 373

<sup>12</sup> Hunter, W.W., et. a., *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 19, Oxford: 1908, p. 301

<sup>13</sup> Census of India, 1901, Volume 6, Part 1, p. 19

<sup>14</sup> Rumer Godden's 1946 novel *The River*, and Jean Renoir's 1951 film based on it, depicts the social life of a British family in Narayanganj, whose income earner is employed at a jute press.

<sup>15</sup> Hunter, W.W., et. a., *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 18, Oxford: 1908, p. 301

Council that the Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce dominated the Narayanganj Municipal Board despite the fact that the Indian commercial community paid about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of municipal taxes.<sup>16</sup>

The last major colonial railway project in eastern Bengal was the Assam Bengal Railway, opened in 1892, connecting the southeastern port of Chittagong with Assam's tea plantations. The branch line from Laksham to Chandpur, an important jute trading station on the banks of the Meghna, was opened in 1903. Chandpur was already an important jute-trading town, and the terminus of the EBR steamers running to Narayanganj and Goalundo. The Census Report for 1901 ascribed the 37% growth in the population of Chandpur subdivision (not just the town) to "the development of trade in Chandpur town."<sup>17</sup> In proposing the branch line in 1895, the ABR stated that it would make Chittagong the "port for all jute from Narainganj and the country north of that place."<sup>18</sup> Calcutta jute interests, represented by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, the Indian Jute Mills Association, and the Calcutta Baled Jute Association, opposed the Chandpur branch as its object was to "compete with a long-established private enterprise."<sup>19</sup>

The ABR captured a sizeable portion of the jute trade, in 1903-04, their wagons carried 45,000 tons (about 1,115,000 maunds) of jute.<sup>20</sup> However, Calcutta jute interests' fears did not materialize. Though Chittagong's exports of jute

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<sup>16</sup> Roy's request for one seat for the Indian commercial community on the municipal board was refused. BLC, Vol. XX, No. 3, p. 112

<sup>17</sup> Census of India, 1901, Volume 6, Part 1, p. 79. Chandpur was not officially recognized as a town and the census figures did not include the urban population.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in "Assam-Bengal Railway," *Herapath's Railway Journal*, Vol. 60, Sept. 9, 1898, p. 935

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Hunter, W.W., et. al., *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 23, Oxford: 1908, p. 384

increased somewhat, the bulk of Chandpur's jute trade was with Calcutta. The EBR ran two steamers daily from Chandpur to Narayanganj and Goalundo. The steamers would arrive from Calcutta in the morning; after their arrival, two trains would depart – one north for Assam and the other south for Chittagong; and the steamers would return to Goalundo and Narayanganj the following morning.<sup>21</sup> The overlaying of river-steamers and railways spurred the growth of Chandpur as a jute mart: by 1910, there were seven European and two Indian firms operating jute presses in the town.<sup>22</sup>

The Assam Bengal Railway also led to the growth of Akhaura, a town equally served by the railway and the Titas, a tributary of the Meghna. In 1901 it was reported that Akhaura was “coming into importance as the railway station for Brahmanbaria subdivision” and by 1908, jute presses had been established in the town.<sup>23</sup> In April 1910, a branch-line of the ABR from Akhaura to Ashuganj on the banks of the Meghna and opposite the important jute mart of Bhairab Bazaar was opened. Akhaura became *the* railway junction town of eastern Bengal, connecting Tippera's jute tracts to Narayanganj and to Calcutta. In 1937, the King George VI Railway Bridge across the river Meghna – connecting the Ashuganj and Bhairab Bazaar stations – was opened to traffic. The Assam Bengal Railway was now directly connected to the Dacca section of the Eastern Bengal Railway, and to the hinterland's premiere jute emporium, Narayanganj. By the time the railway bridge

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<sup>21</sup> BLC, Vol. III, 1921, p. 321

<sup>22</sup> Webster, J.E., *Bengal District Gazetteer, Tippera*, Calcutta 1910, p. 55. In 1947, after partition, the only hydraulic baling presses in the newly created territory of East Pakistan were in Narayanganj and Chandpur.

<sup>23</sup> Census of India, 1901, Volume 6, Part 1, p. 31; W.W. Hunter, et. al. , *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 23, Oxford, 1908 p. 384

opened, a series of significant jute trading stations had emerged along the ABR's tracks, notably in Chandpur, Akhaura, Brahmanbaria and Ashuganj.

The overlaying of different transport infrastructures and the enormous growth in the jute trade in the late nineteenth century led to distinctive patterns of small-town growth in the jute hinterland. While certain jute marts were physically larger and dealt with greater quantities of fibre – notably Narayanganj and to a lesser degree Chandpur and Sirajganj – the overall pattern was one of diffusion, as purchasing agencies were established deeper inside the hinterland. Diffusion resulted from increasing competition amongst jute purchasers. As the Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce wrote to the Government of Bengal in 1916, “With increasing competition [Narayanganj] balers went further afield and established buying stations in smaller places in the interior.”<sup>24</sup> The NCC referred solely to large European jute baling firms, who according to an estimate in the *Capital* operated at least 500 purchasing stations in eastern Bengal.<sup>25</sup> The hinterland trade, however, was dominated by indigenous jute merchants known as *mahajans* rather than European purchasing agencies. The majority of *mahajans* were Marwaris from Rajasthan and there were some Bengalis Hindus, particularly from the Saha caste. Like the European balers, *mahajans* also went “further afield” as the volume of trade increased and competition intensified. Marwari traders were usually the first to begin operations in towns just opened by railway lines or steamer connections and they dominated the jute trade in towns along the Northern Bengal State Railway, in Rangpur, Domar, and Haldibari.

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<sup>24</sup> From Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce to Commissioner, Dacca Division, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1916, in GoB, Agri Dept, September 1916, Proc A, Agri, Agri, List 14, Bundle 30, NAB

<sup>25</sup> “The Jute Trade in Bengal,” *Capital*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1915, reprinted in GoB, Agri Dept, Sept. 1916, NAB

Another aspect of the growth of mofussil market-towns during the late nineteenth century was the establishment of kutcha baling presses – hand-powered screws that would pack jute into bales of about five maunds or 200 kilograms. In the 1870s, Calcutta received almost solely “hanked” or “drummed” jute – “stricks of fibre” that had been “rolled into the shape of a drum and tied with three strings.”<sup>26</sup> By the early 1900, almost all of Calcutta’s imports of jute from eastern Bengal arrived kutcha baled. Narayanganj had the largest number of kutcha presses in the delta and there were also pressing facilities in smaller jute marts throughout the hinterland. Further, Marwari merchants (and a few Bengali traders) moved into the kutcha baling trade during the late nineteenth century. In the early years of the jute trade, baling was a preserve of European capital; by 1900, the majority of jute-baling firms were Marwari concerns.<sup>27</sup> Between 1870 and 1900, kutcha baling had transformed from a primarily metropolitan and European to a mostly mofussil and mostly Indian business.

Mofussil or upcountry market towns provided the settings for encounters between *farias* and *beparis* – village-level petty traders – and *mahajans* or balers’ agents. The *mahajan* operated either on his own account or on the account of a jute baling firm and either owned warehouses, or rented one from an *aratdar* – literally warehouse owner. Balers’ agents, on the other hand, were salaried employees of Calcutta or Narayanganj-based baling firms. These mostly Bengali men were appointed in either the Calcutta headquarters or Narayanganj offices of jute baling

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<sup>26</sup> Burnett, George, *The Jute-Growing Districts and Markets of India with Notes of a Tour, 1872-73*, (Reprinted from the Dundee Advertiser), Dundee, 1873, p. 10

<sup>27</sup> Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Traders to Industrialists*, Delhi: 1978, p. 57



firms for a monthly wage to conduct the firms' purchases in a mofussil market.<sup>28</sup> A 1915 article in the *Capital*, the mouthpiece of Calcutta jute interests, complained that "purchasing Babus" augmented their incomes by cheating their white bosses. The "theft," the *Capital* claimed, amounted to more 4,000 rupees per purchasing agent.<sup>29</sup> The balers' agent, as the Registrar of Cooperative Societies argued in 1927, was in fact another intermediary trader between farm and factory instead of simply the balers' representative "as his salary is not fixed on the principle that it represents the whole of his remuneration."<sup>30</sup>

*Farias* and *beparis* were village-level jute traders, often peasant households with larger landholdings who had invested accumulated capital from cultivation into trading jute. The district officer in Jalpaiguri, in northern Bengal, described "the *paikars* ... [as] generally well-to-do Muhammadans of this district."<sup>31</sup> According to the Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce "*beparis* were generally the large boat owners of their villages."<sup>32</sup> *Farias* and *beparis* were familiar and local individuals: J.M. Mitra, Registrar of the Co-operative Societies of Bengal, described *farias* and *beparis* as "familiar figures in the village. The *faria* is usually a resident of the village and is well known to the cultivators."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In 1915, they were paid 25 to 30 rupees per month, according to an article in the *Capital*. "The Jute Trade in Bengal," *Capital*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1915, reprinted in GoB, Agri Dept, Sept. 1916, NAB.

<sup>29</sup> "The Jute Trade in Bengal," *Capital*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1915, reprinted in GoB, Agri Dept, Sept. 1916, NAB.

<sup>30</sup> "A Note by Registrar, Co-operative Societies, Bengal, on Marketing of Agriculture Produce" in *Agriculture and Industries, Agriculture, March 1927, List #14, Bundle #24, NAB*

<sup>31</sup> Collector of Jalpaiguri to Divisional Commissioner, Rajshahi, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1916, in Agriculture Dept, Agriculture Branch, Proc A, List 14, Bundle 30, NAB.

<sup>32</sup> Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce to Commissioner, Dacca, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1916, *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> J.M. Mitra, Registrar, Co-op Societies, Bengal, to Rev. Dept, GoB, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1916, *ibid*.

At the start of the jute season, in July and August, *farias* and *beparis* rowed their country boats between peasant homesteads and rural *bats* buying up jute to fill the hold of their boats. Once their boat was filled to capacity, the *bepari* would row it to the nearest riverine market town and usually sell their entire cargo to a particular *mahajan*. *Beparis* operated either on their own accounts, or on advances from a more substantial merchant in nearby market towns. *Mahajan's* advanced money to *beparis* on the "condition ... that the latter must bring to the *mahajans* all the jute they can get from the raiyat. The money is not realized from season to season, but is allowed to be in the hands of the *beparis*, one *bepari* sometimes having an advance of Rs. 5,000 or Rs. 10,000, and occasionally no less than Rs. 20,000."<sup>34</sup> In other words, advance contracts were meant to secure the *mahajan's* supplies of fibre, not squeeze profits out of *beparis* by specifying sales prices or by extracting interest payments.

The transaction often took place in "floating bazaars," where the *mahajans'* and agents' boats maneuvered through a throng of *beparis'* jute-laden boats. Negotiations were conducted through *dalals* or brokers representing the *faria*. The buyer would be given a sample of the fibre and prices would then be negotiated. In many hinterland bazaars, *dalals* and the *mahajans* would bargain in silence and in secret, drawing the Bengali character for numbers as prices on each other's palms, which were hidden under cloth. If an agreement was reached, the *dalal* would hand the *mahajan* a sample, and the *mahajan's* assistant would record the agreement and the *faria's* particulars. The *faria* would return to the *mahajan's* or *aratdar's* warehouse with his entire boat-load of jute, where quality would be usually disputed and prices

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<sup>34</sup> Chaudhuri, *Jute in Bengal*, p. 77

renegotiated. Jute would be weighed out – though the purchasers’ maund was often more than the standard 40 kg. Further, a variety of deductions in weight and/or price would be charged to the *bepari*. The *mahajan*’s workers would then make up drums of jute – by doubling up and rolling together a maund of jute stricks and tying the whole together with rope. Jute would be transported to Calcutta and mofussil baling presses in these one-maund drums.

Colonial capitalists viewed these hinterland transactions with intermingled fascination and anxiety. The teeming masses of jute-laden *beparis*’ boats along river-banks and the hustle of floating bazaars as buyers’ boats made their way through the crowd was the stuff of the colonial exotic – a traveller’s fantasy of India. At the same time, the hinterland market was a murky space, where inscrutable natives operated in indecipherable and potentially dangerous ways. What was taking place underneath the cloth? What exactly was a *maund*? What were the charges and deductions made in transactions? While drawn by the exotic, the travellers’ gaze could not penetrate through the activity and felt that important things were being concealed from their sight. Managers of British jute baling and manufacturing firms were particularly fascinated by the system of hand signals in negotiating prices. The silent negotiations and the hidden hands captured British anxieties about impenetrable and indecipherable mofussil markets. Below, I cite two instances of colonial capital’s anxieties of hinterland transactions traders, the first from 1873 and the second from 1915.

In the winter of 1872-73, George Burnett, a Dundee “jute expert” who had recently arrived in Calcutta to assist in establishing the Champdany jute mills, undertook a tour of the jute-growing districts. The account of his tour was published

in the pages of the *Dundee Advertiser* and re-printed as a pamphlet titled *The Jute-Growing Districts and Markets of India*. Burnett's descriptions of jute transactions in Sirajganj combined the travellers' gaze – "the floating bazaar is an interesting and amusing scene" – with capitalist anxieties. His account dwells at length on how hand signals keep the seller and onlookers ignorant of prices, on how variable weights and the array of charges and deductions inflate the prices paid by mills, and how the *mahajan's* drums "serves only to conceal the defects" and "renders ... the trade ... liable to the deception arising from concealed defects."<sup>35</sup>

Since Burnett's tour of Sirajganj, the volume of jute traded in hinterland markets increased tremendously, hinterland markets were diffused throughout the delta, and balers dispatched paid employees to conduct operations in remote purchasing stations. This expansion had not allayed colonial capital's anxieties. In May 1915, an article titled "The Jute Trade in Bengal: Methods of Business" was published in *Capital*, the mouthpiece of Calcutta's British jute interests. The article focused on the "purchasing Babu," who "at the most moderate estimate of robbery" was stealing 4,000 rupees from his European bosses. In the *Capital's* portrait, the "purchasing Babu" was knowledgeable about the hinterland markets' arcane ways and could manipulate weights and qualities against the interests of their European bosses in Calcutta. In the article's account of the transaction the *bepari* had the upper hand in transactions with the purchasing *babu*. As an imaginary balers' agent tells the author of the article, "present day Beparis very shrewd; if weighman weigh excess, he catch scale and stop if, and if I do "teri beri" he come with big bamboo to smash my head! He rough Mahomedan, I poor *dal bhat* Bengali Babu, what I do to him?"

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<sup>35</sup> Burnett, George, *The Jute-Growing Districts and Markets of India with Notes of a Tour, 1872-73*, (Reprinted from the *Dundee Advertiser*), Dundee, 1873, pp. 8-9

Unable to do “teri beri” with “rough” Muslim *bepari*, the “cunning native purchasers” cheated their European bosses – by short-weighting them and misreporting purchasing prices. As the imaginary *Babu* informs the author: “Sahib in my hand, I no in Sahib hand! He not know Bengali man. We can buy and sell Sahib, his father, grandfather, and his fourteen generations, and he not understand how!”<sup>36</sup>

Jute manufacturers depended on peasant smallholders and indigenous capitalists in the deltaic markets to deliver their raw materials in sufficient quantities, of suitable qualities, and at remunerative prices. Manufacturers’ anxieties about jute cultivation and trade in the hinterland increased as capital was poured into jute mills in Dundee, Calcutta, continental Europe, and the USA. Would cultivators be able to meet the increased consumption of the mills? Would the quality of fibre deteriorate, driving up production costs and decreasing the value of the manufactured product? Would cultivators and middlemen drive up prices of raw materials, cutting down on mills’ profitability or allowing jute-substitutes into the market? Anxious about the impenetrable and indecipherable hinterland and the wiles of cunning indigenous intermediaries, colonial capitalists turned to the colonial state.

## THE STATE

The massive rise in the jute trade during the late nineteenth century took place concurrently with the increased penetration of the colonial government and its institutions in the jute-producing hinterland. In addition to the facilities of the jute

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<sup>36</sup> “The Jute Trade in Bengal,” *Capital*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1915, reprinted in GoB, Agri Dept, Sept. 1916, NAB.

trade, mofussil towns housed branches of the colonial state – their built structures and their personnel. The colonial administration manifested itself through hierarchy of administrative towns – the district headquarters, sub-divisional towns, and police stations. While police stations, or *thanas*, merely accommodated a constabulary force of the colonial police, district and sub-divisional towns included full complements of the state’s law and order and revenue extraction institutions – courthouses, police stations, jails and the offices of land administration and revenue departments. These towns also accommodated the colonial “man on the spot” – district magistrates/collectors and sub-divisional officers, autocratic figures who had wide-ranging powers to govern portions of the hinterland. Railway development and river-steamer services also led to an expansion of the state into the hinterland. River-port and railway towns housed railway administration, ticketing offices, and the railway and river police.

Administrative and market mofussil towns did not, however, always overlap. The most important jute towns were not located in district headquarters, but in subdivisional headquarters – Narayanganj was a subdivisional town under Dacca, Sirajganj in Pabna, Chandpur in Tippera, and Madaripur in Faridpur. Significantly, the colonial government created the new subdivision of Narayanganj in 1882, only after the town had already emerged as a significant centre of the jute trade.<sup>37</sup> Some of the most important jute towns were not even sub-divisional headquarters – Akhaura’s sub-divisional headquarter was Brahmanbaria and Domar’s was Nilphamari. Akhaura and Domar housed only railway offices and railway police, rather than the usual compliment of colonial services that were located in Brahmanbaria and

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<sup>37</sup> *Report on the State of Police in the Lower Provinces*, 1882, Calcutta: 1883 p. 4

Nilphamari.<sup>38</sup> The attempt to combine state institutions and trade facilities in Goalundo failed spectacularly, as the entire town was washed away in floods within five years of its establishment. After the flood, sub-divisional and railway officers were moved inland to the town of Rajbari, and Goalundo became a “wandering terminus.” In 1908, Rajbari had a Deputy-Magistrate Collector (who combined judicial and revenue collection responsibilities), two Munsiffs (the lowest level judicial officer in the colonial government) and a jail accommodating up to 58 prisoners – though the subdivision was still called Goalundo.<sup>39</sup>

The growth in mofussil towns during the late nineteenth century was not only driven by the growing facilities and built-up capital of the jute trade, but also by the expansion and diffusion of state administration into the delta. Perhaps the most visible manifestations of the colonial state penetration in the mofussil were courthouses and police stations. In the previous chapter, I argued that the expansion of colonial judiciary into the delta during the late nineteenth century was driven by peasant households’ consumption of legal services, financed by revenues from jute sales. These courts were also used by indigenous capitalists in hinterland markets, though European jute capitalists tended to stay away, preferring to fight legal battles over hinterland transactions in metropolitan courts in Calcutta, rather than the district courts in the mofussil. When proposals to partition the administration of Bengal were floated in 1903, colonial jute capitalists supported the scheme with the

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<sup>38</sup> In 1907, Akhaura was made into a Union, the lowest unit of local government.. Akhaura Union was more of a village than small-town institution – its membership was drawn from surrounding villages and the Board had no permanent structures in the town. *Report on the Administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1906-07*, Shillong: 1908, p. 35

<sup>39</sup> W.W. Hunter, et. al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. XII, Oxford: 1908, p. 279

caveat that Calcutta High Court would retain jurisdiction over the partitioned province.

In addition to legal institutions, the state penetrated the hinterland through its police force. The Indian Police Commission of 1860 created an administrative structure for a mofussil police force, with a District Superintendent in charge of the district; an Inspector over a several police stations, and the Head Daroga in charge of a police station.<sup>40</sup> The colonial police force was augmented steadily over the remainder of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of new police stations and the creation of a railway and – more modest – river police. The mofussil police force was thoroughly incapable of preventing or investigating crime. As David Washbrook has argued about late nineteenth century India: “the essential development of an efficient and centrally-disciplined police force, to protect ‘legal’ rights, safeguard the emancipation of the individual from community constraint and impose the rule of law, was neglected.”<sup>41</sup> Washbrook goes on to argue that the modernization of the police took place in the early twentieth century and was primarily directed at suppressing the anti-colonial nationalist movement rather than in preventing crime.

The delta was a difficult place to police. The Commissioner of Dacca division complained in 1882 that “resignations” were frequent as police work was “distasteful and hard” and policemen “see in the towns of Dacca and Naraingunge men of the laboring classes earning a good deal more than they do.”<sup>42</sup> In 1884, constables in

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<sup>40</sup> *Report of the Indian Police Commission*, London: 1905, p. 11

<sup>41</sup> Washbrook, David, “Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India,” *MAS*, 15(3), 1981, p. 677

<sup>42</sup> *Report on the State of the Police in the Lower Provinces of Bengal*, 1882, Calcutta: 1883, p. 6



Noakhali and Tipperah districts complained that “the beats are ... unduly large, which is another way of saying that the municipalities are unsuited to police as being too rural.” The Commissioner of Dacca reported in the same year that it was difficult to police the EBR terminus at Goalundo, “where the so-called town stretches over six square miles of country. ... In the collections of scattered hamlets, of which Bengal municipalities generally consist, real watch and ward is impossible, and the police can do little more than report crime and keep order.”<sup>43</sup> Piracy on the delta’s extensive waterways was similarly difficult to investigate. E.C. Ryland, Assistant Inspector General of Police, Railways and River, described river dacoities: “these occurrences take place on dark nights, on big rivers and people have no idea in what direction the dacoits have gone after the occurrence.”<sup>44</sup>

Surprisingly, the inadequacies of the colonial government’s provisions of security in the delta did not disturb colonial jute capital. During the jute season between July and October, millions of rupees in cash were disbursed throughout the hinterland’s market towns. European jute capitalists had provided for their own security: they employed private armed guards to protect their property in mofussil towns. Though instances of petty theft abounded, there were few instances of armed robberies of the mofussil facilities of jute traders. Further, jute-capitalists steam-powered craft were immune from river pirates, as they could outrun dacoits’ oar and

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<sup>43</sup> *Report on the State of the Police in the Lower Provinces of Bengal*, 1884, Calcutta: 1885, pp. 4-5

<sup>44</sup> “Crime on Navigable Waterways”, *Com & Ind, Com & Trade*, 10/11, Part B, Nov., 1906, NAI

sail-powered boats. The largest jute purchasing firms employed expensive motorboats to distribute cash amongst its hinterland purchasers.<sup>45</sup>

Armed robberies on river-ways affected smaller traders relying on country craft – the *farias* and *beparis* – much more than it did larger capitalist concerns that organized their own security and provided their own motor-boats. In meetings with business interests to discuss an expanded river police scheme in 1905 and 1906, the colonial government found European jute traders vaguely supportive but somewhat indifferent.<sup>46</sup> Colonial capitalists felt that the government was “over-reaching,” and urged a less ambitious and expensive scheme. Responding to the seeming apathy of Calcutta jute capitalists, E.C. Ryland found it necessary to impress upon his audience that “there is a great deal of crime [on waterways]... which does not come to the knowledge of people in Calcutta, and in which you are perhaps not, therefore, much interested, but it seriously affects the poorer classes ... They suffer to a great extent. To us perhaps they would be small sums, to them they are fortunes.”<sup>47</sup>

Colonial capitalists did not lobby the government for provisions of law and order in the *mofussil*, for the judicial and police services to enforce contracts and protect private property, however defined. Instead, they asked the government to intervene in peasant production and hinterland trade. The lasting legacy of colonial

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<sup>45</sup> Messrs. David and Company used a motor-boat costing over 100,000 rupees to distribute cash amongst its out-agencies. P.C. Bramley, District Superintendent of Police (Benares), 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1905, “Crime on Navigable Waterways”, Com & Ind, Com & Trade, 10/11, Part B, Nov., 1906, NAI

<sup>46</sup> In 1911, the post-partition government of Eastern Bengal and Assam created a special river police force to patrol the major water-ways of Bengal – the highways of the Jamuna, Padma and Meghna and also smaller rivers like the Gorai, Dhaleswari, Surma, Buriganga, Titas and Gumti that served as the delta’s trade routes. *Constitution of a “general police district” to be controlled by the Eastern Bengal and Assam river police*, Home, Police-A, 181-182, March, 1912, NAI. The river-police was, however, unsatisfactory and river dacoities continued unabated - in between 1912 and 1920, only about 22 cases of river dacoities were on average annually reported to the river police. BLC, Vol. III, 1921, p. 223

<sup>47</sup> E.C. Ryland, October 15, 1906, “Crime on Navigable Waterways”, Com & Ind, Com & Trade, 10/11, Part B, Nov., 1906, NAI

jute capital with regard to state formation in the hinterland was neither the delta's legal system (a product of peasant consumption of legal services) nor its police force (oriented towards suppressing anti-colonial nationalist movements). Instead, it was in the government agencies that forecast the probable outturn of jute and worked to "improve" peasant production in order to increase output and alleviate quality. The state's developmental role vis-à-vis peasant production in the Bengal hinterland was, I will argue, an outcome of colonial jute capital lobbying the colonial government to improve quality and increase production of the fibre.

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Upon his return to Calcutta from the mofussil in the winter of 1873, George Burnett wrote a memorandum to George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. Burnett's memorandum consisted of a program for "foster[ing] ... the jute industry."<sup>48</sup> His primary concern was with peasant production, which he characterized as careless and lazy. In Burnett's narrative of jute, Bengal's cultivators had done nothing to "improve" the plant since finding it growing wild in the delta. Jute cultivators were unintelligent and unthinking and produced poor quality and low-yielding jute plants. Burnett recommended that the colonial government set up "model" farms to devise and disseminate best production methods amongst cultivators. Burnett was also scathingly critical of the multitude of charges and the irregularity of weights used in hinterland transactions. Arguing that such practices ate

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<sup>48</sup> Burnett, George, *The Jute-Growing Districts and Markets of India with Notes of a Tour, 1872-73*, (Reprinted from the Dundee Advertiser), Dundee, 1873, p. 16

into manufacturers' profits and denied cultivators a fair price for their produce, Burnett urged the state to "endeavor to eliminate middlemen." Third, Burnett was concerned about price instability. At the opening of the 1871 jute season in July, prices had risen sharply before falling again in November causing, according to Burnett, significant losses to jute manufacturing. Burnett suggested that the government publish forecasts of jute acreage and yield in order to reduce price instabilities arising from uncertainties about the size of the forthcoming crop. The "energetic and intelligent" collector in Dacca had assured Burnett that the government would be able to provide a reasonably accurate forecast.<sup>49</sup>

Colonial jute capitalists lobbied the government to intervene into jute cultivation and trade in the hinterland throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Capitalists urged the government to improve the plant and its cultivation, provide crop forecasts, extend jute acreage, regulate hinterland markets, and to fix quality grades. In 1874, jute spinners in Dunkirk urged the Government of India for "attention [to] ... three special points, viz., the establishment of a Government scale of marks or brands, the frequent change of seed and greater care in the preparation of jute for the market."<sup>50</sup> In October 1885, the Dundee Chamber of Commerce lobbied the Government of Bengal to furnish "statistics of the probable outturn of the jute crop ... between the seasons of sowing and reaping."<sup>51</sup> The Calcutta Baled Jute Association (an association of raw jute exporters) the Dundee Jute Importers' Association petitioned the government to "improve" peasant

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* pp. 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> From the India Office in London to the Governor General of India in Council, 26/11/1874, *Report drawn up by the Vice-Counsel at Dunkirk on the Jute Trade of that place*, Revenue and Agriculture, Fibres and Silk, January, 1875, Nos. 1/3

<sup>51</sup> "Crop Reports: Notes and Orders, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1894, Agricultural Bundle, April 1894, NAB

cultivation so as to ensure better quality fibre.<sup>52</sup> Between 1906 and 1914, as global jute manufacturing capacity rose sharply, a variety of international jute interests lobbied the colonial government to oversee the extension of jute cultivation so as to avoid shortfalls in supplies to the growing numbers of mills across the world.<sup>53</sup> In their lobbying to improve quality and quantity of peasant production, jute capitalists characterized jute cultivators as Burnett had done – as lazy, careless, and unresponsive to markets.

The government was generally responsive to capitalists' demands to intervene in peasant production. Burnett's 1873 memorandum was received sympathetically by Campbell, the Lieutenant-Governor. Burnett's programme of "fostering the jute trade" fit in with Campbell's theory of "positive government," characterized by Peter Robb as a form of liberal developmentalism.<sup>54</sup> Upon receiving Burnett's memorandum, Campbell issued an "Official Note" on jute, expressing his desire for information about "Bengal's greatest commercial staple ... where and how it is grown; from what plants; what are the qualities and varieties; how it is prepared for the market; how brought to market; and through what hands it passes, &c., &c." More complete information about jute cultivation and trade in the hinterland would, Campbell argued, underpin a programme of positive government in the hinterland, as the state took on measures to "improve" cultivation and trade in the hinterland.

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<sup>52</sup> Report on the extension of Jute Cultivation in India by Mr. R.S. Finlow, Jute specialist to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue and Agriculture, Agriculture, January 1907, Proc. A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 22.

<sup>53</sup> The Dundee Chamber of Commerce, the European Jute Association, the American Trade Consul in India, and the Indian Jute Mills Association, in addition to individual businessmen, particularly Marcus Koch in Calcutta, wrote a series of letters to the Government urging special measures to increase the cultivation of jute.

<sup>54</sup> Robb, Peter, "Law and Agrarian Society in India: The Case of Bihar and the Nineteenth Century Tenancy Debate," *MAS*, 22(2), 1988, pp. 319-354

“The Americans are actively prosecuting the experimental growth of Jute,” Campbell said, “while we are, as a Government, doing nothing to extend it.” He wanted to know “whether the quality of the fibre can be improved by careful preparation, and what are the best processes for its preparation.” He also stated that “the necessities of the Jute trade must have a very great influence on all our plans for roads, railways, and canals.”<sup>55</sup>

Campbell also acted promptly on Burnett’s recommendation to establish experimental jute farms in the interior of the jute tracts. Just four days after receiving Burnett’s memorandum, Campbell’s office sent a letter to the Commissioner of Dacca Division informing him of “the desires of His Honor ... to see a farm established in this division for the experimental cultivation of jute and preparation of the fibre for market.”<sup>56</sup> By the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, D.R. Lyall, the Collector of Dacca described by George Burnett as “energetic and intelligent,” had selected a plot of eighty bighas near the Dacca cantonment and had estimated a budget for establishing an experimental jute farm there.<sup>57</sup> The project was approved in less than a week and 1000 rupees were sanctioned for initial expenses and 3,336 rupees for working expenses.<sup>58</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the state was actively implementing two of Burnett’s three recommendations – publishing crop forecasts and improving the

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<sup>55</sup> Campbell’s note, January 23, 1872, Agriculture Department, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

<sup>56</sup> A. Abercrombie, Commissioner of Dacca, to General Department, GoB, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1873, Agriculture Department, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

<sup>57</sup> D.R. Lyall, Collector of Dacca, to Commissioner of Dacca, 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1873, Agriculture Department, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

<sup>58</sup> H.J.S. Cotton, Asst. Secy to GoB, to Commissioner of Dacca, 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1873, Agriculture Department, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 4, NAB

quality and yield of the jute plant. In 1885, the government of Bengal created an Agricultural Department with the primary purpose of “collect[ing] and embody[ing] in convenient forms of the statistics of vital, agricultural and economic facts” and bring about “the general improvement of Indian agriculture with a view to increasing the food-supply and general resources of the people.”<sup>59</sup> These functions had been recommended by the Famine Commissioners’ report of 1880, which had focused on forecasting food shortages and increasing food supply. The Agricultural Department of Bengal was a product of devastating famines in southern and western India during the late 1870s, and particularly of the colonial government’s face-saving measures in response to the moral crisis created by famine.<sup>60</sup>

Given the origins of the Agricultural Department as a famine-prevention institution, it is ironic that the department focused its energies on commercial fibre rather than subsistence grain. They did so, however, at the behest of colonial capital. In October 1885, the Dundee Chamber of Commerce requested the government of Bengal to publish forecasts of the probable jute crop sometime between its sowing and reaping. The Government of Bengal responded promptly and positively, stating that they would pilot a scheme for the “collection and publication of information regarding the area sown with jute and the prospects of the crop as it approaches maturity.”<sup>61</sup> The provincial governments’ decision met with approval from the

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<sup>59</sup> GoB to GoI, proposing the establishment of an Agricultural Dept in Bengal, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1883; in Agricultural Department, May 1885, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 9, NAB

<sup>60</sup> The Famine Commission and the much celebrated Famine Code was the colonial government’s response to the devastating famines of the late 1870s and early 1880s in southern and western India. These famines had led to the dominant theme of Indian nationalist thought in the late nineteenth century – the poverty debate. In the nationalist framing of the debate, the very legitimacy of empire rested on the question: had British rule impoverished India?

<sup>61</sup> GoB to GoI, proposing the establishment of an Agricultural Dept in Bengal, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1883; in Agricultural Department, May 1885, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 8, NAB

central government “The Governor-General in Council concurs with His Honor the Lieutenant Governor ... that attempts to prepare crop estimates should in the first instance be confined to jute.”<sup>62</sup> In 1887, the provincial government proudly noted its service to Scottish jute manufacturing: “Mr. Finucane [the Director of Agriculture] was able, in response to a call from the Secretary of State, to make to the satisfaction of the Dundee Chamber of Commerce, a forecast of the outturn of this year’s crop.”<sup>63</sup>

The department produced its first rice forecast in 1891, but even after that, considerably greater departmental resources would be devoted to forecasting the outturn of fibre rather than grain. As department officials admitted in 1894, “these forecasts are not particularly intended to indicate the approach of famine” and “were intended to supply information to the commercial public.”<sup>64</sup> The department’s jute forecast had become an international event, reported in the commercial pages of newspapers and magazines in London, Dundee, New York, Hamburg, Paris and so forth. The publication of the forecast would have an immediate effect on jute prices. The forecast was based on nothing more scientific than colonial district and sub-divisional officers’ “guesses” as to probable acreage and output of jute. As the forecast came to play an increasingly important role in markets, its lack of accuracy came in for sharper criticisms.

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<sup>62</sup> C.S. Bayley, Under-Secy, GoI, to Secy, GoB, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1886, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 9, NAB

<sup>63</sup> From P. Nolan, Offg. Secy to GoB, to Rev and Agri Dept, GoI, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1886, GoB, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 9, NAB

<sup>64</sup> “Notes and Orders,” T.W.R., Feb 14, 1894, GoB, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 14, NAB



In October 1903, the Dundee Jute Importers' Association and in December, 1903 the Syndicate of the Jute Industry, Paris wrote to the colonial state complaining about the unreliability of forecasts and discrepancies between initial and final forecasts.<sup>65</sup> Dundee complained, "the forecasts ... instead of being reliable guides, have proved misleading and have caused considerable loss to those interested."<sup>66</sup> In response, the department introduced a new scheme for estimating the probable outturn of jute in 1913, where information was provided by village panchayats, proclaiming it a "great improvement over the old system of guess work."<sup>67</sup> However, the Panchayat's figures were never crosschecked and the system proved equally faulty. During the 1910s and 1920s, a variety of schemes for forecasting were tried out, usually in consultation with Calcutta and international jute capitalists. None of these schemes would prove satisfactory, and traders ultimately came to disregard government forecasts and rely on their own estimates instead.

The department's attempts to bring about "the general improvement of Indian agriculture with a view to increasing the food-supply" also – even more remarkably – focused on fibre rather than grain. The department had decided early to leave "even ... the introduction of the most promising improvements" to a later date when "a very much more intimate and thorough acquaintance with the agricultural facts and circumstances... [had] been obtained."<sup>68</sup> In 1902, they finally

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<sup>65</sup> Forecasts issued by the Government of Bengal of the jute crop of 1903, Revenue and Agriculture, Agriculture, 10-13, Part A, 1904, NAI

<sup>66</sup> Dundee Chamber of Commerce to Dept of Rev & Agri, GoI, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1903, *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Proceedings of a meeting held on the 28<sup>th</sup> November to discuss various questions affecting the jute trade, Agriculture Dept, GoB, March, 1914, Proc. A, Agri Dept, List 14, Bundle 27, NAB

<sup>68</sup> From E.C. Buck, Secy to GoI, to Secy, Rev & Agri Dept, GoB, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1885, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 9, NAB

commenced on a programme of scientific agriculture based out of agricultural research stations throughout the jute hinterland. This programme focused on jute, and the department conducted investigations into different varieties of jute in Bengal, collecting sample seeds. In 1905, R.S. Finlow was appointed as the Agricultural Department's first jute expert.<sup>69</sup> R.S. Finlow served as Fibre Expert for more than a decade, before becoming Director of Agriculture, in which position he served into the 1930s. Under Finlow's leadership, the department attempted to improve jute yields and to extend jute cultivation into new parts of British India – primarily through producing better quality seeds and distributing them amongst farmers.

These activities were carried out at the behest of colonial capitalists and their concerns during the early 1900s, as global jute manufacturing capacity rose, that demand would outstrip the supply of fibre. These concerns were global. In 1905, the American consul in Bombay wrote, "The jute producing districts at present are restricted in the provinces of Bengal and eastern Bengal, and it is said that these will soon have reached the limit of their productive power, and that they will be utterly unable to keep pace with the enormous increase demanded."<sup>70</sup> In June 1914, the Indian Jute Mills Association sounded the warnings of a commodity famine: "Extensive additions to the consuming power, both in India and elsewhere, will come into play during the next few months, and unless material increases take place next

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<sup>69</sup> Creation of the post of a specialist in jute and indigo for the Bengal Agricultural Department and the appointment to it of Mr. R.S. Finlow, Revenue and Agriculture, Agriculture, 1-5, Part A, August, 1905, NAI

<sup>70</sup> Department of Commerce and Labour, USA, *Monthly Consular and Trade Reports*, May 1907, p. 209

year in both acreage and yield, it will be impossible for consumers to secure their requirements of the raw material.”<sup>71</sup>

Robert Finlow admitted the validity of capitalists’ concerns that demand was outstripping supply in a 1906 note: “although it would appear that the area under jute cultivation and the weight of fibre produced are expanding considerably year by year, yet it also seems equally certain that the demand for the fibre is outstripping the supply.”<sup>72</sup> The solution, Finlow and his department decided, was to extending jute cultivation to other parts of British India where jute was not grown. This was a priority task for the Department of Agriculture. The Inspector General of Agriculture stated in September 1906: “the most important work of the year has been the investigation of the possibilities of the *extension of jute cultivation* into other parts of India.”<sup>73</sup> R.S. Finlow also advocated seed development and improved agricultural practices – particularly fertilization with manure – to increase yields.<sup>74</sup>

Under Finlow’s leadership, the Agricultural Department commenced on an intensive examination of jute varieties from across Bengal, and even developed their own seeds that they claimed provided better yields. The department established “seed multiplication farms” and distributed these seeds amongst cultivators. Between 1918 and 1926, the government sold between 1,000 and 2,000 maunds of seed

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<sup>71</sup> H.M. Haywood, Secretary, IJMA, to Secy, Rev. Dept., GoB, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1913, Proc. A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 27, NAB

<sup>72</sup> Report on the extension of Jute Cultivation in India by Mr. R.S. Finlow, Jute specialist to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue and Agriculture, Agriculture, January 1907, 14-16, Part A, NAI

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> “Suggestions made by Robert S. Finlow, Fibre Expert, for increasing the output of Jute from India,” 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1914, Agriculture Department, June 1914, Proc A, Agri Dept, Agri Branch, List 14, Bundle 28, NAB

annually to jute cultivators. Given the annual seed requirements of jute cultivators, this was a miniscule quantity. But seed multiplication and distribution was useful in extending jute cultivation to other parts of British India. In 1926, the Agricultural Department received funding from the London Jute Association – Rs. 20,000 annually for five years – to distribute seeds in parts of Bengal, Bihar and Assam where jute was not grown. M. Azizul Huque, the representative of Nadia, a non-jute growing province in western Bengal where the department's seed distribution program was particularly intensive, complained in March 1930: "the Fibre Expert is entirely devoting himself to jute experimentation. They are always trying to produce jute where cultivators cannot possibly take to jute owing to the conditions of the soil."<sup>75</sup>

In carrying out these programmes of jute forecasting, agricultural research, seed production and distribution, the agricultural department considerably increased its presence in the delta and its mofussil towns. The extension of the agricultural department into the agrarian hinterland is an important phenomenon in the history of state formation in the delta. The agricultural department's presence in the countryside increased sharply during the twentieth century. In the 1920s, the department came to employ a full-time staff charged with estimating forecasts for output. From 1942 onwards, jute cultivators were individually licensed to grow fixed quantities of fibre through the department's agencies in the mofussil. Much later, in the 1960s, the department was charged with diffusing green revolution technologies of rice production amongst cultivators. During the twentieth century, the

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<sup>75</sup> The details of jute sales and the government's agreement with the London Jute Association are from a speech in the Legislative Council by Azizul Huque in March 1930. Huque accuses the department of acting in the interests of foreign capital to increase jute output and lower its price. BLC, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, pp. 558-559

Agricultural Department was a focal point in state interactions with the peasantry in the jute hinterland.

## **POLITICS**

The tremendous growth in jute cultivation and trade during the late nineteenth century led to a particular configuration of the spaces of metropolitan Calcutta, the agrarian hinterland and mofussil towns. The circulations of ever-increasing volumes of jute between the delta's farms and Calcutta's factories and seaport had carved out this spatial configuration. These relationships were also constituted by the spatial practices of colonial administration, as branches of the colonial state were established in district and sub-divisional towns. In 1905, during a period of high prices and rapid increases in jute cultivation and trade, the government partitioned the province of Bengal – separating the administration of the hinterland from that of the metropolis.

Curzon's spatial rearrangement of the Bengal administration was informed by the configurations of hinterland and metropolis that had been wrought by the circulations of jute. The plan was not merely a cynical ploy to divide and rule South Asia's Hindus and Muslims, as has been alleged by Indian nationalist historiography. It was also a well thought out territorial plan. The new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was comprised of the jute tracts of the delta and the tea plantations of the hills, and was provided with a more proximate provincial capital in Dacca and a more "natural" outlet to the sea through Chittagong.<sup>76</sup> Curzon's plan was an attempt to

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<sup>76</sup> The idea that Chittagong was a natural outlet for the delta's produce had been floated since the 1870s, and was premised on the north to south flow of the Brahmaputra and the Meghna, and the easier river route from Narayanganj to Chittagong.

solve the rising administrative burden on metropolitan Calcutta as the scale of state operations and functions in the deltaic hinterland expanded. The government's oft-repeated explanation for partition was that Bengal was too large a province to be under a single administration. Further, partition was a developmental plan for the under-developed hinterland – an attempt to increase and improve state administration, revenue collection, enforcement of law and order, extraction of resources, and transportation infrastructure in the relatively “backward” delta. Economically and administratively, the spatial re-arrangement of the administration of Bengal made sense to Curzon and his colleagues.

Opposition to the partition focused on preserving Calcutta's position as the delta's metropolis. When the government announced its plans to partition Bengal in 1903, a flurry of petitions poured in from eastern Bengal protesting the separation of hinterland from metropolis. For the petitioners, partition implied the severance of ties with a well-developed metropolis that served as the seat of commerce, culture, and administration for eastern Bengal. The “loss of Calcutta,” as many petitioners pointed out, would lead to economic dislocation and civilizational decline – the latter exacerbated by its attachment to Assam, seen as “uncivilized” and home to “savages.”<sup>77</sup> Petitioners wrote at length about Calcutta's civilizing effect on the backward hinterland, due to Calcutta's Bengali literary scene, headquarters of government administration, education system, and opportunities for middle-class careers. As a memorial from Noakhali argued, their district's connections with Calcutta had enabled “the most backward district in Bengal ... to steadily work up to

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<sup>77</sup> The petitioners attitudes towards Assam are telling of Bengali cultural chauvinism. As Rajanikanta Ray from Iswargunge wrote in a petition dated January 14, 1904, “being associated with the Assamese, who are savages .. we shall be subjected to endless miseries by their evil company.” *Petition from the residents of certain districts of Eastern Bengal protesting against the proposed partition of Bengal*, Home Public, 193/215 Part B, April, 1904

the high ideal set up by other enlightened parts of Bengal.” The petitioners feared that the transfer to Assam, “a backward province with a lower form of administration” would destroy Noakhali’s civilizational progress.<sup>78</sup>

These concerns about civilizational decline from the loss of Calcutta were accompanied by fears of economic dislocation from the loss of Calcutta as seat of commerce. In the eyes of the petitioners, the hinterland had prospered from its material connections with this great “Metropolis of India,” to use a phrase from a memorial from Fatehpur, Mymensingh. Opponents of partition feared that the severance of commercial ties with Calcutta would impoverish Bengal. Mahim Chandra Bhaumik from Mymensingh wrote: “Calcutta is a great centre of commerce, where people of almost every country in the world are making large profits by the import and export of goods. No other place in Bengal or Assam can be so convenient to a trader or offer so lucrative a market to him as Calcutta. On its transfer to Assam, East Bengal will lose its commercial prosperity.”<sup>79</sup>

Eastern Bengal’s traders and zamindars were among the most vocal and active opponents of partition. Many of them had invested considerable sums of money in Calcutta, particularly in Hatkhola bazaar, the largest wholesale jute market in the metropolis. In a December 1905 report, the government noted: “the most ardent workers in spreading the agitation [against partition] from Calcutta were the brothers of the Roy family of Bhagyakul, who in addition to being land-owners in Dacca have

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<sup>78</sup> Petitioners from Noakhali, n.d., *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Mahim Chandra Bhaumik, Gayhata, Mymensingh January 17, 1904, *ibid.*

large trade interests, particularly in jute.”<sup>80</sup> The Bhagyakul Roys operated a steamer service between eastern Bengal and Calcutta and had considerable investments in Hatkhola bazaar. Sita Nath Roy was president of the Congress-affiliated Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and wrote and spoke at length against the partition proposal. The petitions received by the colonial government from eastern Bengal pleaded the case for Dhaka and Mymensingh traders and their investments in Calcutta. The following petition from Sahadepur in Tangail was emblematic of an oft-repeated concern:

In Calcutta, a very large number of merchants from Dacca and Mymensingh carry on trade in which they have made large investments. They have built houses in Calcutta by spending lakhs of rupees. If they are compelled to remove all these from Calcutta to Chittagong, they will have to undergo very heavy loss. ... All the jute is sent to Calcutta. But if they are to send the jute to Chittagong, their expenses will be much greater and their profits will be greatly reduced.<sup>81</sup>

While eastern Bengal’s hinterland jute traders, led by the Roy family of Bhagyakul, wholeheartedly opposed Curzon’s spatial rearrangement of the province, European jute capital lent his partition plans conditional support. The Indian Jute Mills Association did not think that partition would affect their mills’ supplies of raw material: “the bulk of the crop will be attracted to Calcutta, regardless of any re-arrangement, or re-distribution, of the provinces in which it is grown.”<sup>82</sup> The Bengal

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<sup>80</sup> “Report on the Agitation against the Partition of Bengal”, 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1903, in *State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement*, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906, NAI

<sup>81</sup> Petition from the residents of certain districts of Eastern Bengal protesting against the proposed partition of Bengal, Home Public, 193/215 Part B, April, 1904, NAI

<sup>82</sup> From the IJMA to the BCC, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1904, Representation from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the European and Anglo-Indian Defence Association regarding the jurisdiction of the High Court, Calcutta over the new Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Home, Public, nos.19-23, Part A, October 1905, NAI



Chamber of Commerce noted that a simple administrative partition would not lead to a diversion of trade: “trade will always follow the cheaper route, regardless of the jurisdiction under which it is carried on.”<sup>83</sup> The BCC offered the partition plan conditional support. First, they said they would oppose state subsidies to divert trade away from Calcutta to Chittagong: “[the BCC] would strongly deprecate any attempt to force trade in the direction of Chittagong by the expenditure of State revenues in creating and maintaining what would be distinctly unfair competition between the Assam-Bengal Railway and the existing means of communication both by rail and river between the jute and tea districts and Calcutta.”<sup>84</sup> Second, the BCC insisted that the Calcutta High Court should continue to maintain juridical authority over the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. They refused to fight their legal battles in the hinterland. The second of these objections was more serious. “The Bengal Chamber of Commerce,” the government concluded, “saw no objection from a commercial point of view to the transfer ... but strongly objected to the proposals generally without a guarantee that the jurisdiction of the High Court over the transferred districts would not be interfered with in the slightest degree.”<sup>85</sup> Curzon readily provided the Chamber its guarantee.

Curzon’s 1905 partition of Bengal and the opposition to it was informed by spatial ideas about the relationship between the eastern Bengal hinterland and

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<sup>83</sup> From the BCC to the Judicial Dept, GoB, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1904, in Representation from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the European and Anglo-Indian Defence Association regarding the jurisdiction of the High Court, Calcutta over the new Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Home, Public, nos.19-23, Part A, October 1905, NAI

<sup>84</sup> From the BCC to the Judicial Dept, GoB, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1904, *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> “Report on the Agitation against the Partition of Bengal,” February 8, 1906, in *State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement*, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906

metropolitan Calcutta. While the colonial government talked up plans of developing Dhaka and Chittagong and providing better government services in the hinterland, opponents of partition in eastern Bengal spoke of the “loss of Calcutta.” The hinterland’s connections with metropolitan Calcutta, anti-partition petitioners argued, had provided commercial prosperity and civilization to the backward delta, and severing that connection would bring about impoverishment and cultural “degeneration.” Supporters and detractors of Curzon’s partition did not distinguish mofussil towns from the rest of the hinterland; eastern Bengal’s small-towns and villages were not differentiated in arguments about the positive or negative effects of partition. The only exceptions were Dhaka, which was to be catapulted from district town to provincial capital, and Chittagong, which was to be developed as a seaport. The importance of the *mofussil* in the partition of 1905 was not as a conceptual spatial category, but as the stage for the anti-partition Swadeshi movements, as the meeting place between metropolitan nationalists and eastern Bengal’s peasant masses.

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The mofussil was a crucial element in the spatial practices of nationalist politics, particularly in attempts to mobilize peasant masses into the Swadeshi movement. The attempt to mobilize the countryside was conducted from the metropolis and took place through the mofussil. The Swadeshi movement arrived in eastern Bengal in the persons of metropolitan politicians, who undertook whistle-stop tours of the jute tracts on railways and steamers, stopping to address public meetings in mofussil

towns along railtracks and waterways. Between 1906 and 1909, Swadeshi leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh and Abdullah Rasul undertook extensive tours of eastern Bengal, stopping to speak in towns like Chandpur, Brahmanbaria, Narayanganj, Sirajganj and so forth.<sup>86</sup> In 1906, before their eventual falling apart, Pal and Ghosh undertook a joint-tour of eastern Bengal. During the course of the Swadeshi movement, over 500 meetings were organized in eastern Bengal's mofussil towns protesting partition and promoting Swadeshi. The colonial government kept close watch on these meetings, and were fearful of the oratory powers of nationalist leaders – particularly of Bipin Chandra Pal. Audiences attended these meetings not just to listen to oratory, but also to see or catch a glimpse – do *darshan* – of famous figures. As Nolini Kanta Gupta, accompanied Aurobindo Ghosh on a tour of Assam and Eastern Bengal in 1909 and reported that “village folks ... came in crowds just to hear him [Ghosh] speak and have his *darshan*.”<sup>87</sup> As the Inspector General of Police noted in January 1905, “the strength of feeling in the Mufassil and the progress of the Swadeshi movement varied considerably ... The determining influences were probably the attitude of the local zamindars and *visits to the towns of certain leading agitators*.”<sup>88</sup>

Nationalists' speaking tours were successful in mobilizing support amongst mostly-Hindu salaried professionals in mofussil towns, schoolmasters, pleaders and

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<sup>86</sup> During the non-cooperation/khilafat movement, Gandhi undertook much more extensive whistlestop tours on railways across the length and breadth of India, firmly establishing the space of the mofussil as a meeting point of metropolitan anti-colonial nationalism and peasant politics. See Amin, Shahid, “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22,” *Subaltern Studies III*, Delhi: 1984, pp. 1-61.

<sup>87</sup> Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Smitir Pata*, cited in Rishabchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1981, p.328.

<sup>88</sup> Statement of the Inspector General of Police, January 12, 1905, in *State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement*, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906. Emphasis added.

mukhtears, doctors, zamindari *amlas*, clerks and so forth. Mofussil towns housed a small but growing population of the professional salaried middle-classes and this group formed the core of Swadeshi support in the deltaic hinterland. Many of them had recently arrived from Calcutta or other parts of Bengal. In 1907, the Mymensingh Magistrate-Collector, L.C. Clarke reported that Swadeshi activists in Jamalpur consisted of “the less permanent Hindu residents of the town, I mean pleaders, doctors and zamindars’ servants who have only been here a few years or less.” He further stated that the “more permanent residents ... have no sympathy with the ‘Bande Mataram walas’ as they call them.”<sup>89</sup> Mostly-Hindu mofussil townsmen were at the front line of the Swadeshi movement, occasionally sharing the platform with visiting nationalist politicians.<sup>90</sup> While investigating picketing at the Nangalband fair, the Collector of Dacca, met with local Swadeshi leaders – a doctor and a pleader of Narayanganj and a pleader from Narshingdi.<sup>91</sup>

In the previous chapter, I described clashes in Nangalband mela in Jamalpur town and Mogra Hat in Brahmanbaria subdivision between mostly-Hindu Swadeshi activists and mostly-Muslim jute cultivators over the boycott of imported goods in the hinterland’s *bats* and fairs. In this chapter, I will return to the events in Jamalpur town, following the clashes between mostly-Hindu Swadeshi activists and mostly-Muslim stall-owners and consumers at the fair on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1907. On the 21<sup>st</sup> and

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<sup>89</sup> Tour Diary of Mr. L.C. Clarke, Magistrate Collector of Mymensingh, April-May 1907, in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

<sup>90</sup> Jugdish Chandra Roy, a pleader in Pabna, was credited by the IG of police with giving a “fillip” to the movement, by claiming in a public meeting that “English sugar was purified with the blood and bones of cows – and added to that, later, pigs.” Statement of the Inspector General of Police, January 12, 1905, in *State of Affairs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and Bengal in connection with the partition and the swadeshi movement*, Home, Public-A, Nos. 169-186, June 1906

<sup>91</sup> Copy of Mr. B.C. Allen’s diary, dated 21st April, 1907, in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1907, Swadeshi volunteers – consisting largely of students – attempted to prevent the sale of European goods at the fair. On the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, after students’ persuasion had failed, “some two hundred zamindari servants, pleaders, mukhtears, and volunteers, with lathis, with an elephant, marched around the and entered the Mela shouting Bande Mataram.” They attacked stalls and destroyed “European toys and sweetmeats and scattered some Liverpool salt.” The mostly-Muslim visitors and shop-keepers at the fair attacked the volunteers, chasing them along the streets of Jamalpur, chasing them to the river, the railway station, and to the Durga temple, where an image for the Janmasthami festival was defaced.

This incident, as I argued in the previous chapter, was a manifestation of the politics of market-based consumption in the delta. Subsequent events in Jamalpur town after the “hangama” of April 21<sup>st</sup>, was a clash between the mostly-Hindu town and the mostly-Muslim countryside. Jamalpur was a sub-divisional headquarter and on the Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Jagannathganj railway line, connecting Mymensingh district to the Jagannathganj steamer station on the Brahmaputra. By eastern Bengal’s standards, it was a fairly large town, with a population in 1901 of 17,965 people. The town was, however dwarfed by the surrounding countryside: the population of Jamalpur thana was 282,000 and of the entire subdivision, 673,000.<sup>92</sup>

On the following evening, fearful of reprisals against fellow-Muslims and an attack on the town’s mosque in retaliation of the defacement of the image at the Durgabari, Muslim cultivators from the surrounding countryside laid siege to the town, in a calculated show of strength. “Muhammadans of the outskirts and of the other side of the river ... assembled in considerable numbers on the opposite bank of

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<sup>92</sup> *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. 6, p. 71

the river and some crossed: others collected from the railway side. They shouted for a long time, but finally were reassured and dispersed.”<sup>93</sup> Tensions between mostly-Hindu townsmen and mostly-Muslim villagers however continued to simmer. On the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> April, at around 9:30 pm, a group of young Hindu men, including a mukhtear’s son and the son of the superintendent of a nearby zamindar’s cutcherry, shot at another group of men. The reasons behind the shooting were unclear to M.A. Luffman, the police superintendent at Jamalpur, but Genda Sheikh, a Muslim, was hit in the thigh. Luffman described what followed: “the news that a Muhammadan had been shot spread like wildfire and the Muhammadans from the surrounding country began to pour into the town in large numbers.”<sup>94</sup>

During the following days, Muslims from the surrounding villages wandered the streets of Jamalpur ostensibly providing support for their co-religionists in the town. The Dhaka Commissioner, R. Nathan, wrote on May 2: “at first there were a good many Muhammadans from outside the town, and they tended to collect in groups. I made the leaders tell them that they must go away, and during the past three days the streets have been quite normal.” Nathan also reported that the town had been emptied of the mostly-Hindu middle-class Swadeshi activists – “the majority of the Hindus of the Pleader, zemindari amla and *bhadra log* classes have left the place.”<sup>95</sup> As the events in Jamalpur demonstrated, the religious categories of

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<sup>93</sup> R. Nathan, Collector of Dacca, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1907, in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

<sup>94</sup> M.A. Luffman, Officiating Superintendent of Police, to District Magistrate, Mymensingh 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1907 in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

<sup>95</sup> R. Nathan, Commissioner, Dacca Division, to LeMesurier, Chief Secy, GoEB, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1907, in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

Hindu and Muslim, the class categories of bhadralok and peasant, and the spatial categories of town and countryside all overlapped and, further, came into conflict over the Swadeshi boycott program.

The Jamalpur incident was reported in sharply communal terms by the Calcutta nationalist press. A Mymensingh journalist of the *Hitabadi* sent out a telegram to Calcutta describing events: “Hindus menaced by 1000 Muhammadans, shops all closed and town absolutely deserted. Anarchy and lawlessness prevail. Magistrate and District Superintendent of Police are there; but are doing nothing, and appear to be egging on the rioters. Hindus leaving by every train. 200 respectable females left packed in cattle trucks, soiling their clothes and the platform, a pitiable spectacle.”<sup>96</sup> Jamalpur was the epitome of the metropolitan nationalist’s failure to generate support in the mostly-Muslim countryside through mostly-Hindu mofussil political activists.

The Nangalband clashes were immediately preceded by the Bengal Provincial Conference in Mymensingh, Jamalpur’s district headquarters. In sharp contrast to the portrayal of the events at Jamalpur, the nationalist press celebrated the Mymensingh Provincial Conference as an all-too rare moment of Hindu-Muslim and zamindar-ryot unity. The presence of Muslim landlords and cultivators on a nationalist Congress stage was especially celebrated, particularly during those times of heightened religious conflict. A.K. Ghaznavi, a prominent Muslim landlord from Tangail, chaired the meeting and three jute cultivators – Sheikh Nazer-udddin, Sheikh Azim and Sheikh Yokubali – addressed the meeting. As the nationalist press proudly

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<sup>96</sup> “Mr. Garlick’s report, Mymensingh, April 29<sup>th</sup>,” in *Hindu-Muhammadan Riots in Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Proc-A, Home Dept, Political, July 1907, Nos. 6-16, NAI.

noted, the Hindus, Muslims, zamindars and ryots shared a common platform at the Mymensingh conference.

The platform did bring together the over-lapping categories of peasant and middle-class, Muslim and Hindu, and countryside and city. Bhupendranath Basu, a Calcutta-based Congress politician, with no social or familial connections to Mymensingh district, presided over the meeting. Radharaman Kar, a Calcutta jute baler and member of the Calcutta Baled Jute Association, moved a resolution opposing government legislation to prevent the watering of jute – it was feared such legislation would lead to the legal harassment of peasant producers and village-traders. Sheikh Nazer-uddin, Sheikh Azim and Sheikh Yokubali spoke in support of Kar's motion. The official report on the meeting does not reproduce their actual statements, but makes the following observation: "Their [the cultivator's] rustic speeches made great impression upon the vast audience. The simplicity with which they refuted the accusations of mixing water and sand surprised the whole audience. Their speeches were a magnificent success. None ever expected such simplicity of eloquence."<sup>97</sup> This, then, was how metropolitan nationalists imagined peasant participation in the nationalist movement: the peaceful, reasonable and possibly even "eloquent" participation of "rural rustics," in rehearsed and orchestrated mofussil events, presided over by metropolitan political and economic interests.

During the Swadeshi movement, the mofussil provided the stage for metropolitan nationalists to mobilize peasant masses. The mostly-Hindu mofussil middle-classes who constituted the frontline of the movement, as Aurobindo Ghosh wrote in 1910, "always waited for an intellectual initiative and sanction from the

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p. 44



leaders in Calcutta.” For Ghosh, this was because the “greater independence” and “higher organization of life, resources, activity in this great centre of humanity” made it a vibrant centre of higher intellectual thought. “Calcutta is to Bengal what Paris is to France,” wrote Ghosh, “it is from Calcutta that Bengal takes its opinions, its inspirations, its leaders, its tone, its programme of action.”<sup>98</sup>

Calcutta’s intellectual and political dominance over mofussil towns was challenged after World War I, as the mofussil emerged as a significant centre of political thought and action. The numbers of mofussil middle-classes increased and their religious composition altered, as educated Muslims, with close family and social ties to the surrounding countryside took up professional employment in the hinterland towns. Far from being under the thrall of metropolitan culture, this mofussil middle-class developed a distinctive political culture, challenging the intellectual supremacy of Calcutta. The emergence of a distinctive mofussil political culture during the 1920s took place against the backdrop of agrarian immiseration. Unlike the prosperous boom years of the 1900s, the post-WWI years was a period of impoverishment, as fluctuating commodity markets, rising debt burdens and fragmenting landholdings drove more and more peasant households into penury. In the next chapter, I examine the emergence of a distinctively mofussil politics of jute during the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>98</sup> Karmayogin, No. 27, January 8, 1910.

## Chapter 3

### The Poetry of Jute: Mofussil Muslim Politics of Agrarian Immiseration, 1919 to 1936

The sharp reversal in terms of trade between jute and consumer goods during and after World War I began a rapid, lengthy, and thorough process of agrarian immiseration in the jute hinterland. The prolonged commodity boom of 1906 to 1913 was brought to a close by the outbreak of WWI, when jute prices collapsed just as cultivators were bringing fibres into market. Throughout the war years, markets were unfavourable to jute cultivators leading to hunger, increasing indebtedness and, in many cases, loss of arable lands. The process of immiseration continued through the twenties, a period of volatile prices and rising indebtedness, and was completed in the 1930s, the depression decade marked by persistently low commodity prices and ruptured credit relations. By the 1930s, the shiny tin roofs that had marked nineteenth-century prosperity had lost their lustre, and appeared as ruins of former wealth dotting the countryside. The survey and settlement report of Rangpur (1930-38) noted that in “the principal jute area [to the south-east of the district, along the Brahmaputra] ... the country is open evincing by its large tin-roofed homesteads and orchards of graceful betel-nut palms, *evidence of past prosperity*.”<sup>1</sup>

Agrarian immiseration was accompanied by a period of intellectual creativity and political activity in the hinterland. Peasant impoverishment was the most discussed issue in the intellectual milieu of the hinterland during the 1920s. The post-WWI period witnessed an explosion of literary production in the delta and a

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<sup>1</sup> *Rangpur SSR, 1930-38*, p. 4 (emphasis added)

large body of pamphlets poems addressing agrarian immiseration, its causes, and remedies were published out of mofussil towns.<sup>2</sup> As I argue in this chapter, these published texts indicate the emergence of distinctively Muslim *mofussil* economic discourse of peasant poverty. The historiography of Bengal has tended to portray Muslim politics in the jute hinterland in terms of “communal,” a nationalist pejorative used to devalue all forms of Islamic politics.<sup>3</sup> Historians have focused on “communal riots,” episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency during and after the 1920s, notably in Pabna in 1926, in Dacca in 1930, in Kishoreganj in 1930, and in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946. More careful research, such as Sugata Bose’s detailed analysis of the 1930 Kishoreganj riots, have shown that strains in the social relations of agrarian production during this era of immiseration led to these clashes between mostly-Muslim cultivators and mostly-Hindu moneylenders, traders and rentiers.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the material contexts of immiseration, I argue that these episodes of peasant violence need to be understood in terms of prevailing ideas and thoughts, especially Muslim economic discourses of peasant impoverishment.

Tajul Islam Hashmi, in his important work on the “communalization of class relations” in Bengal, has argued that an alliance of Muslim upper-peasantry, Muslim

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<sup>2</sup> The catalogs of Bengali language publications in the British Library and the National Library in Kolkata indicate a sudden increase in output in printing presses in towns like Mymensingh, Rangpur, Comilla, Bogra, Faridpur and Dacca. Arguably, this may merely be the result of increased colonial surveillance of the printed materials in the hinterland, but I would argue that the circles of authorship and readership in the towns had grown, and a new mofussil Muslim middle-class – with origins in the countryside – had begun to participate in it.

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of communalism as an analytical concept, see Jalal, Ayesha, “Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia,” in Bose and Jalal (ed.) *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*, Delhi, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Bose, Sugata, “The Roots of ‘Communal’ Violence in Rural Bengal: A Study of the Kishoreganj Riots, 1930,” *MLAS*, 16(3), 1982. Also, Partha Chatterjee’s “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935,” *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, 1982 looks at the class dimensions of riots in Pabna in 1926.

landlords and members of the Bengali-speaking *ulama* “communalized” cultivators, that is, instructed them to place religious identity above class identity.<sup>5</sup>

“Communalization,” I argue, is a misrepresentation of a rich and nuanced body of ideas that constituted a distinctively Muslim economic discourse of agrarian immiseration. In this chapter, I investigate how a section of mofussil Muslim intellectuals, who had origins in the countryside’s peasant economy and had joined the ranks of the small-town middle-class in the 1910s and 1920s, thought about jute cultivation, peasant impoverishment, and Islam. Their ideas were not “communal” in the pejorative sense nor were they Islamic just because the authors were Muslim. Their economic discourses were Muslim, I argue, because they identified poverty was a specifically Muslim issue, their agendas of peasant reform were informed by ideas of Islam as a world religion emphasizing capital accumulation and the ethical conduct of livelihoods, and their depiction of agrarian relations of production focused on the oppression of Muslims by non-Muslims.

I examine this Muslim mofussil discourse through the literature of peasant impoverishment produced out of the hinterland’s small-town print and publishing industry during the 1920s. I focus on two kinds of texts – first, didactic texts instructing peasants into more sustainable and Islamic livelihood practices and, second, policy texts advocating for legislative reforms of tenancy laws and credit markets. Texts of Muslim peasant self-reform were influenced by Gandhian ideas of sacrifice, self-denial and self-sufficiency, but were substantially different. First, they recommended not disengagement from markets but savvier market operations and,

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<sup>5</sup> Hashmi, Tajul Islam, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992. For a more focused analysis of “communalization” during the 1920s, see Hashmi’s article, “The Communalization of Class Struggle: East Bengal peasantry, 1923-1929,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1988, 25(1),

second, they grounded peasant reform in an understanding of Islam as the ethical conduct of livelihoods. Texts of legislative reforms were not grounded in the praja movement of the 1900s – a movement of occupancy ryots’ rights seeking to enhance their rights with respect to zamindars. Such texts were about liberating Muslims from the oppression of non-Muslims.

Gandhian ideas of Swadesh and Swaraj played an important role in the emergence of a Muslim economic discourse, especially during the Khilafat and Non-cooperation campaigns of 1920 to 1922. While the Swadeshi movement had notably failed to gain support amongst mostly-Muslim jute cultivators in a period of booming markets, the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements succeeded during the era of agrarian immiseration. I will argue that one of the more important and less appreciated legacies of the Khilafat movement was in politicizing a generation of idealistic, educated young men in the mofussil towns – of educating them in Gandhian economic ideas of Swadeshi and Swaraj and in practices and modes of engaging with the peasantry. Khilafat activists in eastern Bengal would go on to play important roles in intellectual life in the hinterland and representative and legislative politics in the metropolis. While the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement provided impetus to intellectual and political life in the delta, it did not determine the content of mofussil economic ideas of peasant poverty and impoverishment. Though deeply influenced by nationalist economic ideas – particularly Gandhian reformulations of Swadeshi ideas – mofussil economic discourses were distinctively Muslim and specific to the jute hinterland.

Partha Chatterjee has argued that the mofussil Muslim print literature provide indexes of peasant’s growing “anger,” “distrust” and “resentment” of moneylenders and traders in the jute tracts. According to Chatterjee, the texts contain an “entire

complex of feelings against feudal authority [that is, zamindars] and commercial exploitation [that, is traders and moneylenders].” This “complex of feelings” was “transformed ideologically into political action against the enemies of a peasant community united by religion.”<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Chatterjee, I argue that these texts contain the ideas of a mofussil intelligentsia rather than expressions of peasant consciousness. These texts were not transformed into spectacular episodes of peasant violence, but into the more mundane arenas of hinterland politics – the processes of electoral, legislative and representative politics.

The 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms introduced electoral politics into the delta. It carved the jute tracts into political constituencies, with separate Hindu and Muslim electorates and a very limited franchise – less than 3% of the population. These rural constituencies voted in 68 (33 of them Muslim) of the 139 members of the Bengal Legislative Council. Elected representatives’ actual legislative powers were highly constrained: the most powerful state institutions – finance and political, for instance – were reserved for unelected colonial officials. Despite these limitations, the introduction of representative and legislative politics was an important development in the political history of the jute tracts. For the first time, the hinterland sent its “representatives” to the metropolis, and the powerless legislature provided a soapbox for some of the most vocal mofussil intellectuals. The final section in this chapter looks at mofussil voices in the metropolitan legislature, and how a section of mofussil Muslim politicians came to be identified with peasant interests.

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<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, Partha, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935,” *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, 1982, pp. 27-30.

A further round of reforms in 1935 extended the franchise, increased the powers of the elected provincial government, and gave Muslims a larger proportion of seats – through the “communal award” as it was known. While the 1919 reforms merely allowed for a distinctively mofussil politics to be heard on the floor of the Calcutta legislature, the 1935 reforms led to what Joya Chatterji has described as the “emergence of the mofussil” in Bengal’s provincial politics.<sup>7</sup> The spectacular victory of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) in elections in 1936 in rural Bengal’s “Muhammudan constituencies” over the more established Muslim League was achieved on a pro-peasant campaign promising land to the plough (*langol jar jomi tar*), rice and daal for everyone (*shobar jonno daal bhat*), and abolishing outstanding debt. The KPP’s electoral victory was nothing less than the hinterland’s conquest of the metropolis. I argue that this conquest was short-lived in the next chapter, where I look at the elected government’s failed attempts to control jute prices in the years leading up to the Great Bengal Famine of 1942-43. Before turning to the mofussil discourses of peasant impoverishment, I will describe the processes of immiseration that were set in motion during and after WWI.

## **IMMISERATION**

Agrarian immiseration was driven by a combination of factors that converged at the outbreak of WWI: fragmenting landholdings, deteriorating ecological conditions, uncertain, unfavourable, and rigged produce markets, and exploitative credit markets. The hinterland population had grown rapidly during the late nineteenth century and

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<sup>7</sup> Chatterji, Joya, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. See especially Chapter 2 titled “The Emergence of the Mofussil in Bengal Politics,” pp. 55-102

early twentieth centuries and the limits of cultivation had been reached by the 1900s. Peasant landholdings fragmented, as Muslim inheritance laws stipulated the division of property amongst children. In 1929-30, the average landholding of “occupancy ryots” paying cash rents varied from just over 1 acre in Pabna to about 2.8 acres in Mymensingh. Sharecroppers paying produce rents had much smaller lands – estimated at less than an acre in Mymensingh and Tippera (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: Average Landholdings in Jute-growing districts, 1929-30<sup>8</sup>**

District	Average Landholdings
Dacca	1.52 acres
Mymensingh	2.79 acres when rent is paid in cash 0.86 acres when rent is paid in produce
Faridpur	1.39 acres
Tippera	2.03 acres when rent is paid in cash 0.86 acres when rent is paid in produce
Pabna	1.09 acres
Bogra	2.05 acres

Most cultivators’ landholdings were less than the averages tabulated above. In Mymensingh in 1919, 60% of farmers cultivated about 2 acres on average and were considered “subsistence ryots,” 36% cultivated 5 acres on average and 4% cultivated 12 acres.<sup>9</sup> In the jute-growing Pabna subdivision during the 1920s, 36% of cultivators held less than an acre, 20% had holdings of between 1 and 2 acres and 12.5% had holdings of between 2 and 3 acres.<sup>10</sup> In both Sirajganj and Pabna, about half of all cultivators had less than one acre of land. The author of Pabna and Bogra settlement report noted, “This condition of land tenure is uneconomic. Even in the most fertile tracts, a holding of 3 bighas, of which about ¼ has to be deducted for the

<sup>8</sup> *Report Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, p. 27

<sup>9</sup> *Mymensingh SSR, 1910-1919*, p. 25

<sup>10</sup> *Pabna SSR*, p. 35



homestead site, will not suffice to keep a cultivator with his family in the barest necessities of life. In order to exist he has to take a few extra bighas in barga, or to undertake a little labour such as carting jute to market.”<sup>11</sup>

As landholdings fragmented, the acreage of land devoted to jute increased. Jute acreage increased from a low of 2.6 million acres in 1921-22 to a high of 3.7 million acres in 1929-30, against an average acreage of about 2.9 million acres between 1909 and 1913.<sup>12</sup> The increase in acreage came at the expense of *aus* or autumn rice and reflected the market-based subsistence strategies pursued by cultivators on small plots of land. Unable to raise sufficient subsistence grain for the household, cultivators produced jute and purchased grain from sales of jute. As D. Macpherson noted regarding Pabna district in the 1920s: “The cultivator grows sufficient paddy to last for 8-10 months and trust to the profit from the jute to provide him with food for the remaining months.”<sup>13</sup> Based on his personal experience in his home constituency of Tippera, Indu Bhushan Dutta stated on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Council that “not more than 25 per cent of the agriculturists can grow sufficient rice for their own consumption. The rest of the people have to buy, even if for a few months of the year.”<sup>14</sup>

In their attempt to eke out a living from fragmenting landholdings, cultivators deepened their dependence on global markets to deliver households’ simple subsistence needs. Unfortunately, global commodity markets turned sharply against jute cultivators during and after WWI. As Table 3.2 demonstrates, jute prices were

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<sup>11</sup> D. Macpherson, *Pabna and Bogra SSR*, p. 35

<sup>12</sup> IJMA, *Report of the Committee 1949*, Calcutta, 1950, pp. 99-100, cited in Goswami, Omkar, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society*, p. 116

<sup>13</sup> *Pabna and Bogra SSR*, p. 35

<sup>14</sup> BLC, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 188

extremely volatile during the 1920s, rising after WWI, falling sharply during 1920 and '21, rising again in 1922, before falling in 1923, rising again and reaching a peak in 1925 and 1926. Prices dropped steeply in 1930 and remained depressed at unremunerative and very low levels throughout the 1930s, and only recovered towards the end of the decade with the outbreak of World War II. For the entirety of the 1930s and for periods during the 1920s jute prices were too low to cover the costs of cultivation.<sup>15</sup>

Jute prices were not only uncertain from year, but also fluctuated within the year. Prices were generally low in the beginning of the season, when cultivators had to sell off at least a portion of their crop in order to meet their immediate cash needs. As the Indian Chamber of Commerce testified to the Banking Enquiry Committee in early 1930, “The jute market is always dull in the months of September, October and November ... It is only after the first rush is over that the arrivals of jute in the mofussil are to some extent affected by the prices ruling in the market.”<sup>16</sup> Further, it was widely held that jute markets were rigged against cultivators, as buyers acted as cartels to influence prices. Narayan Chandra Ghosh, SDO of Netrokona in Mymensingh district, informed the Banking Committee that “It sometimes appears that the agents of firms and companies, dealing in the export trade, stop buying of jute whenever there is a tendency towards increase in the buying rate.”<sup>17</sup> Members of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce also alleged that buyers manipulated quality grades – by eliminating higher qualities so they had to be sold under lower

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<sup>15</sup> Goswami, Omkar, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern India, 1900-1947*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991

<sup>16</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, p. 346

<sup>17</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, p. 210

grades – and this caused the loss of several crore rupees to the Bengal’s jute cultivators.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 3.2: Index of prices in Bengal (1914=100)<sup>19</sup>**

Year	Rice	Jute	All Commodities
1917	n.a.	65	145
1918	n.a.	75	178
1919	n.a.	115	196
1920	166	104	201
1921	144	83	178
1922	125	110	176
1923	112	90	172
1924	104	102	173
1925	147	154	159
1926	133	120	148
1927	144	93	148
1928	141	100	145
1929	114	95	141
1930	105	63	116
1931	71	49	96
1932	58	45	91
1933	57	41	87
1934	63	39	89
1935	62	50	91
1936	71	50	91
1937	67	56	92
1938	69	48	95
1939	75	51	96

Further, buyers of raw jute – particularly the Calcutta jute mills – had gained control over prices paid to cultivators and petty traders lower down the commodity chain during World War I. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, jute exporters had expanded their purchasing and baling operations deep into the

<sup>18</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, p. 375

<sup>19</sup> Compiled in Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 84

hinterland (see Chapter 2). Second, WWI had witnessed a considerable expansion in Calcutta's jute manufacturing capacity, transforming the IJMA – which aspired to behave like a cartel by controlling output, wages and prices of raw materials – into the single largest consumer of the delta's fibre. Third, and perhaps most significantly, diminished landholdings and reduced *aus* rice production meant that cultivators could no longer hold on to fibres in the hope of better prices. They had to sell their produce almost immediately to pay off rents, service debt and purchase subsistence grains.

Under these transformed market conditions, cultivators could not benefit even during years of high jute prices. Instead, the benefit of high prices accrued to traders and middlemen with the financial wherewithal to hold on to jute. It was widely reported that relatively higher prices in 1926 had benefited wealthier inhabitants of the agrarian delta rather than the direct producers of the fibre. As the Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce reported to the Banking Enquiry Committee, “the middlemen or wealthier inhabitants of the village do all the holding of jute for better prices by financing the raiyat during the period for which the jute is held, and this has become more prevalent since 1926 when they made fabulous profits and put up corrugated iron sheds all over the country in order to store up their holdings, thereby minimizing the risk of fibre.”<sup>20</sup> The Agent of the Imperial Bank in Dacca similarly reported that, “The wealthier inhabitants, not necessarily cultivators, in the interior however are increasingly inclined to speculate and buy under the market price from their own raiyats if they are zamindars . Numbers of the latter classes made fortunes during the high price year – 1926.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, No. 1, p. 396

<sup>21</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, No. 1, p. 398

Jute cultivators not only had to contend with unfavourable, uncertain, and rigged commodity jute markets – they were also confronted with a rapidly deteriorating ecology. The inhabitants of eastern Bengal had enjoyed a healthy and productive ecology of land and water, mainly because the drainage of the delta was unobstructed. However, two factors combined to block the delta’s natural north-to-south drainage during the early twentieth century, leading to more frequent and devastating floods and epidemics of water-borne diseases: first, high railway embankments with insufficient openings for the passage of water and, second, an invasive weed – the water hyacinth, dubbed the “lilac killer” – which choked the delta’s arteries.<sup>22</sup>

The two railway lines that were responsible for perhaps the greatest damage in the Bengal delta were the Sara-Sirajganj railway line in northern Bengal, opened in 1918 and the Akhaura-Ashuganj line on the Assam Bengal Railway, opened in 1915. The important jute-growing areas of Brahmanbaria subdivision in Tippera and along the banks of the Jamuna river in northern Bengal were particularly flood-prone during the 1910s and 1920s. Serious floods occurred in Brahmanbaria in 1915/16, the year the Akhaura-Ashuganj railway line opened, leading to “real famine” according to the Survey and Settlement Report for Tippera. Floods recurred in Brahmanbaria 1919, 1924 and then again in 1929. Floods had occurred in Tippera prior to railway construction but, according to the Tippera Survey and Settlement Report of 1919, “it seems that ... they [floods] have been more frequent and violent than ever before.”<sup>23</sup> According to official estimates, the floods of 1929 affected

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<sup>22</sup> Iqbal, Iftekhar, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State, and Social Change, 1840-1943*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

<sup>23</sup> SSR *Tippera*, p. 37

250,000 people, 50,000 of them severely, and covered over 250 square miles.

Ashrafuddin Chaudhuri, the member of the BLC from Brahmanbaria, alleged that floods had caused famine and starvation deaths. P.C. Mitter, representing the government, responded that deaths had not been due to starvation but disease.<sup>24</sup> In addition to frequent and devastating floods, there was a permanent decline in productivity in many areas abutting the railways, where high embankments caused water to pool and stagnate. In the low-lying areas in eastern Brahmanbaria “the cultivators seem to have lost much of the winter rice crops every year since the railway embankment on the Branch Line to Asuganj was completed.”<sup>25</sup>

The poor drainage of the delta led not only to loss of crops, but also to water-borne epidemics – previously unknown in the relatively healthy active delta of eastern Bengal. Disease and death constituted yet another external shock to peasant households that increased in frequency during the 1910s and 1920s. Ihtesham Kazi has illustrated how the construction of railways was followed, often immediately, by the outbreak of malaria epidemics in the eastern Bengal districts of Pabna, Mymensingh and Tippera and he has convincingly argued that stagnant pools of water, due to high railway embankments, provided fertile breeding grounds for malaria-bearing mosquitoes.<sup>26</sup> The Annual Report of the Sanitary Commissioner of Bengal for 1922 calculated that the prevalence of malaria in Eastern Bengal had more than doubled in the previous decade.<sup>27</sup> Kala-azar, or black fever, was another water-

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<sup>24</sup> Response of P.C. Mitter to Ashrafuddin Chaudhuri, Bengal Legislative Council, Vol. XXXIV, No.2, p. 89

<sup>25</sup> *SSR Tippera*, p. 7

<sup>26</sup> Kazi, Ihtesham, *A Historical Study of Malaria in Bengal, 1860-1920*, Dhaka, 2004, pp. 154-157

<sup>27</sup> *Annual Report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal for the Year 1922*, Calcutta, 1923, p. 61, cited in Kazi, Ihtesham, *A Historical Study of Malaria in Bengal, 1860-1920*, Dhaka, 2004, p. 132

borne disease that took on the epidemic proportions in the period. An investigation by the Public Health Department in 1919 found that 54% of surveyed villages in Mymensingh, 30% in Dacca, and 15% in Tippera had cases of kala-azar.<sup>28</sup> In addition to malaria and kala-azar, epidemics of small pox and cholera were reported from throughout the delta.

“More railways, more malaria” became a common saying in Bengal.

Legislators in the Bengal Council frequently attributed epidemics to high railway embankments. In 1926, Emdadul Huq – the member from Tippera – informed the council that, ““it is a well known fact that in Bengal the high railway embankments and water hyacinth have jointly contributed to spread malaria and kala-azar by interfering with the natural drainage and choking up all the bils and canals.”<sup>29</sup> In March 1930, Tamizuddin Khan, a member from Faridpur, spoke poignantly of the destruction wrought by water-borne epidemics in eastern Bengal: “the areas which were once flourishing and prosperous and teeming with a smiling population are now de-populated hot-beds of malaria and other disease.”<sup>30</sup>

For peasant households who experienced floods, disease, and market shocks, there was only one safety net and that came at a high price – emergency loans from moneylenders. Farmers who with a favourable climate and commodity markets make a bare subsistence living would be pushed into debt in unfavourable years. As climate and market shocks increased in frequency and intensity after WWI, levels of debt rose rapidly. The sharp increase in indebtedness was, in the words of the Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, “a mark of distress.” The authors of the

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<sup>28</sup> BLC, Vol. X, 1922, p. 51

<sup>29</sup> BLC, Vol. XX, 1926, p. 211

<sup>30</sup> BLC, Vol. XXXIV, Calcutta, 1930, p. 192

report argued “there is a kind of poverty, which while not amounting to insolvency, nevertheless makes for precarious and uncertain living. It is this latter class of poverty, which is the real cause of indebtedness among agriculturists in Bengal.”<sup>31</sup>

Debt was incurred as a regular part of peasant production, particularly in the case of jute cultivation where hired labour was paid in cash rather than food-grain. Cultivators borrowed cash in April and May to hire labour to thin and weed jute fields and then again in July and August to harvest and prepare the crop. Around the same time, cultivators would be running out of their stores of grain, and would be forced to purchase subsistence food from markets. Interest rates rose sharply during those months. In Munshiganj subdivision in Dacca district, monthly interest rates on “petty loans” were at their lowest between November and January – 3 per cent per month – and then steadily rose from February, and interest rates up to 16% per month were charged during May and June, just before the jute and *ams* harvests.<sup>32</sup> Interest rates were correlated not only with the financial requirements of peasant production, but also the availability of liquid cash in the delta. Interest rates were lowest during the jute and *aman* harvests because cash would flow into the delta to pay for fibre and grain during these months.

<sup>31</sup> BPBEC, Vol. I, pp. 73-74

<sup>32</sup> Evidence of S. Basu, SDO Munshiganj, to the BPBEC. Basu provided the following table of variation in interest rates, BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, 1929-1930, p. 194

	General Loans (Monthly interest rates)	Petty loans (Monthly interest rates)
Agrahayan	2%	3%
Paush	2%	3%
Magh	2%	3%
Phalgoon	3%	4%
Chaitra	5%	6%
Baishakh	6%	7%
Jaishtha	7 to 8%	Anything upto 16%



Debt was also incurred during market shocks and ecological disasters. Peasant households took loans to tide them over emergencies - if crops failed due to floods or drought, plough cattle died, household members fell sick or died, prices of their produce fell, or of their consumer goods rose. As the frequency of such incidents multiplied during and after WWI, so did levels of peasant indebtedness. Emaduddin Ahmed, Chairman of the Rajshahi District Board testified to the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1926 that “the highly lowering down of the prices of jute” was one of the causes of agricultural indebtedness.<sup>33</sup> M. Fariduddin, Khas Mahal Officer in Faridpur testified to the Banking Enquiry Committee in 1929: “when they [cultivators] do not get a good harvest they have to incur debts to meet their ordinary wants.”<sup>34</sup>

Interest rates on these “distress” loans were much higher. In his evidence to the Banking Enquiry Committee, Bhabesh Chandra Roy, SDO of Naogaon in Rajshahi, reported that interest rates varied proportionately according to the “urgent necessity of the borrower.” Umesh Chandra Chakladar, Vice-Chairman of the Mymensingh District Board, said that interest rates rose according to the “exigencies of the borrower.” Further, Chakladar reported that if the monsoon rains failed or were delayed, “credit is invariably dear in every quarter.”<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Khayer Ali’s long poem about the floods in North Bengal in 1922, *Bonya Kabini* (Flood Event) was especially critical of moneylenders who taking advantage of the situation raised their interest rates too high: “A few moneylenders take advantage/and increase interest

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<sup>33</sup> RCA, Vol. 4, p. 558.

<sup>34</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, p. 217

<sup>35</sup> BPBEC, Vol. II, Part I, Evidence of Bhabesh Chandra Roy, SDO, Naogaon, p. 187; Evidence of Umesh Chandra Chakladar, Vice-Chairman, Mymensingh District Board, p. 282

rates very high ... All the mahajans of the country/They are sucking the blood of farmers.”<sup>36</sup> Moneylenders were not, however, simply taking cynical advantage of their borrowers’ desperation – though undoubtedly many were. Ecological and market shocks led to a sharp increase in the demand for loans across the board, and consequently drove up interest rates.

Economic volatility and ecological shocks led to a massive increase in peasant indebtedness during the 1920s. For the most part, peasant households obtained loans from professional moneylenders – *mahajans* who combined moneylending with rent-collection or trading.<sup>37</sup> *Dadans*, or produce loans in exchange for standing crops increased in frequency during and after WWI.<sup>38</sup> Professional moneylenders – trader-mahajans and talukdar-mahajans – however, were not generally interested in taking over rights to peasant lands, but preferred to keep them in debt bondage with regular payments of interest on existing loans. There were, however, increasing incidents of cultivators converted into sharecroppers, or bargadars. Muazzam Hossain, Deputy Collector in Mymensingh testified to the Banking Enquiry Committee in 1926 that in the eastern parts of the district “a very large proportion of the raiyats ... now work as bargadars.”<sup>39</sup> B.B. Dutt testified that in Brahmanbaria, the jute-growing subdivision of Tippera, “good farmers were being converted into bargadars.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Kono kono mahajan shujog bujhia/shudder har otyadhik diyechhe bariya ... Desher je shomosto achhe mahajan/Krishaker rokto shob korichhe shoshon.” Ali, Md. Khayer, *Bonya Kabini*, Calcutta, 1922.

<sup>37</sup> Sugata Bose distinguishes between “talukdar-mahajans” and “trader-mahajans,” the former group being the largest by far in Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 1

<sup>39</sup> BPBEC, Vol. 2., p. 237

<sup>40</sup> BPBEC, Vol. 2., p. 534

The great depression and prolonged low prices of agricultural produce hit the land-poor and indebted peasantry of the jute tracts hard. The 1930 jute season opened with a sharp drop in prices. Prices of fibre fell from close to Rs. 9 per maund on average between 1926 and 1929 to about Rs. 3 per maund. Unlike previous price falls, jute prices did not recover until the outbreak of WWII: for the entire 1930s average prices were almost half that of the 1920s.<sup>41</sup> Rice prices fell sharply in 1931 and did not recover until the beginning of WWII. On average, the price of rice during the 1930s was about half the average of the 1920s. This prolonged depression in prices was devastating for the delta's market-dependent jute and rice cultivators.

Omkar Goswami has calculated that permanently-settled, occupancy ryots with three acres of land – far more than the average landholding in the delta – were simply not able to make ends meet during the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> The Survey and Settlement Report on Rangpur presented several peasant household budgets from the decade. A family with six acres of land in possession was living just “above starvation”, earning Rs. 150 from the produce of land. “In normal times,” the report noted, “it should be reasonably prosperous.” A family with almost thirteen acres of land was living in “comfort,” but as the report noted hardly in luxury: “[their] expenditure is all in necessities.” This family “would be normally prosperous but has been badly hit by the slump in price of jute.”<sup>43</sup>

In times of difficulty, peasant households usually turned to moneylenders. However, the depression had resulted in the drying up of cash flows from overseas

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<sup>41</sup> Goswami, *Industry, Trade, and Peasant Society*, pp. 153-154

<sup>42</sup> Goswami, Omkar, “Agriculture in Slump: The Peasant Economy of East and North Bengal in the 1930s,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21, 1984, p. 351

<sup>43</sup> *Rangpur SSR*, pp. 20-22

commodity purchasers, and this led to a liquidity crisis in the countryside. Not only were moneylenders unwilling to advance further loans, but they were also trying to recoup outstanding debt. The mahajans were divesting from the countryside in droves. Unable to obtain emergency loans, peasant smallholders sold off whatever valuables that they possessed and, ultimately, arable lands. The 1930s witnessed an astounding rise in sales of land, even as land prices tumbled. Former peasant proprietors were converted into under-tenants, sharecroppers, or agricultural wage labour.

## **KHILAFAT**

The Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements launched by Gandhi and the Ali brothers in 1920 accompanied the onset of agrarian immiseration. The sharp fall in jute prices and the relatively high terms of trade between jute and rice between 1920 and 1922 hit the market-subsistent jute cultivators of eastern Bengal particularly hard. According to Omkar Goswami's calculations peasants holding three acres of land would have a real surplus of *negative* 16 rupees in 1921-22. Most cultivators held far less than three acres. In February 1921, when rice prices rose to new highs, the delta's subsistence jute cultivators were hit hard.<sup>44</sup> Kishori Mohan Chaudhuri (Rajshahi) informed the legislature that the vast majority of cultivators "were in difficulty, not being able to get a market for their jute, and the result was that they were on the brink of starvation, which was partly due, I think, to the shortage of

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<sup>44</sup> Tarit Bhushan Roy stated in the Legislative Council that "the prevailing prices of *balam* and *dakshini* rice [local varieties beyond the reach of poor peasants] are universally higher than what they were at season time in the last 12 years," BLC Vol, I, No. 1, p. 29

food-grains.”<sup>45</sup> Indu Bhushan Dutta (Tippera) spoke in agreement “for the last few years, the prices [of rice] have reached the extraordinary limit of Rs. 9 to Rs. 10 per maund at this season of the year. The agriculturists who has to pay this price for his staple food cannot bless the system which causes this high price and spells utter ruination for him and his like.”<sup>46</sup>

While the Swadeshi movement failed to generate support amongst the delta’s cultivators during a period of favourable global commodity markets, the Khilafat movement was enormously successful during this period of unfavourable markets. In May 1921, there was a strike by servants of Europeans in the jute-trading, railway junction town, Akhaura, after the European employee of a jute-purchasing agency slapped an “insolent khitmagar.” In June 1921, simultaneous strikes of transport workers at river-ports and railway towns in East Bengal brought the region’s transport system to a halt. In November 1921, peasants in Pabna and Bogra opposed the government’s survey and settlement operations. In January 1922, the colonial government received reports of the non-payments of *chaukidari* taxes and *zamindari* or *jotedari* rents, refusals to obey magistrate’s orders and the open defiance of government authority from throughout Bengal. Between January and March, 1922, the colonial government lost authority over large tracts of the Bengal delta, as cultivators refused to pay taxes and rents or allow policemen to enter their villages. Violent clashes took place between contingents of armed police, Khilafat and Swaraj activists and villagers in Brahmanbaria in Tippera and Nilphamari in Rangpur. The movement affected every district in Bengal except Murshidabad, but was most active

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<sup>45</sup> BLC, Vol I, No. 2, p. 184

<sup>46</sup> BLC, Vol I, No. 2, p. 206

in Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong in the east and southeast and Rangpur, Pabna and Bogra in the north, where there was a complete breakdown of civil authority.<sup>47</sup>

Colonial authority was restored in these regions between March and April 1922, after Gandhi brought the movement to an end. The peasant movement in Bengal's jute tracts, as in other part of South Asia, died down well before Mustafa Kemal officially abolished the Caliphate in March 1924. By 1923, Naeem Qureishi has argued, "the Khilafat movement had come to be confined to academic discussions and unproductive resolutions."<sup>48</sup> The colonial government's official narrative of the movement emphasized the economic backdrop and deprecated the ideological appeal of Gandhi and the nationalist leadership. P.C. Bamford, the Deputy Director of the Government of India's Intelligence Bureau, in his 1924 account of the movement wrote: "The success which attended the Non-co-operation and Khilafat movements in India is undoubtedly attributable to the Great War, for neither agitation could have attained the dimensions which it did but for the economic pressure to which the people were subjected in consequence of the prolonged and wide-spread hostilities."<sup>49</sup> In Bengal, Bamford states that the success of the movement was primarily due to its no-tax and no-rent movement, and the promise that there would be no rents in Swaraj: "when the economic pinch was so severe and the listener so ignorant and gullible, it need be no matter for surprise that

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<sup>47</sup> Ray, Rajat, "Masses in Politics: the Non-Cooperation Movement in Bengal, 1920-1922" *IESHR*, 11(4), 1974, pp. 343-410 provides a detailed description of various forms of peasant political action during the Khilafat movement.

<sup>48</sup> Qureishi, Naeem M., *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918-1924*, Boston, Brill, 1999, p.343

<sup>49</sup> Bamford, P.C., *Histories of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement*, Delhi, Government of India Press, 1925 p. xii

the propaganda proved effective.”<sup>50</sup> Bamford noted, seemingly triumphantly, that the movement came to a stop with improved harvests and market conditions: “There is ... no greater proof of the hollowness of these agitations than the manner in which they succumbed to improved economic conditions.”

Bamford’s materialist reading of the peasant movements willfully disregarded the conceptual content of the ideas of Swaraj and Khilafat. The popularity of the khilafat cause in South Asia has been ascribed to the “pan-Islamist” sentiments – the colonial term used to describe a global Muslim threat to the British Empire. In Bengal, World War I had tested Bengali Muslim loyalties by pitting the Khalifa of Mecca, the Ottoman Sultan, against the British Empire, and many of them sided with the Khilafat. Nirad Chaudhuri described an incident from “when Britain declared war against Turkey in November 1914, a mullah hoisted the Turkish flag in a field near Kishorganj and proclaimed it as the Caliph’s territory. He was, of course, promptly arrested.”<sup>51</sup> The Survey and Settlement Report of Bogra in 1921 noted that during the movement “the cultivators talked glibly of Kemal Pasha, the king of the Hedjaz, and political trials.”<sup>52</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed’s memoirs of his childhood in Mymensingh provide an example of lived pan-Islamism in the deltaic jute tracts. Ahmed came from a well-to-do and devout Muslim family in Dhanikhola village, south of Mymensingh town, and his forefathers had participated in Sayyid Ahmed of Rai Bareilly’s jihad against the British Empire in the 1820s.<sup>53</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed

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<sup>50</sup> Bamford, P.C., pp. 59-60

<sup>51</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand Great Anarch!*, India 1921-1952, Reading, Mass: 1987, p. 37

<sup>52</sup> Pabna and Bogra SSR, p. 93

<sup>53</sup> Curiously, Ahmed’s autobiography does not discuss the economic livelihoods of his family. It appears most likely that they held larger holdings that were cultivated by sharecroppers or wage-labourers, though such figures do not make an appearance in his text. Ahmed, Abul Mansur, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochor*, Dhaka, 1998.

described how Italy's attack on Libya and the Ottoman Empire – on “our Khalifa” – in 1911 angered him. Subsequently, he supported Germany against Britain in WWI but because he believed the Kaiser was Muslim – a belief that was only confirmed by the Ottoman Empire joining the war on the German side. Ahmed recounts how he felt that Britain's victory in the Great War only proved to him “that the Muslims have no greater enemy than the English.”<sup>54</sup>

Scattered pieces of evidence also suggest that peasant participation in the Khilafat movement was informed by a millennial and utopian reading of Swaraj. Gandhi's proclamation that Swaraj would be achieved within the year was taken at face value, and the delta's resident believed that the British Raj's end was nigh. This belief in imminent and impending Swaraj informed the specific forms of peasant political action: the non-payment of taxes and rents, the refusal to obey magistrates' orders, and the resistance of armed contingents of colonial police. During resistance to the survey and settlement operations in Bogra in November 1921, it was reported that, “there was wild talk of Swaraj and rumours were current of the impending or accomplished abdication of the Sarkar.” Further, villagers refused food or shelter to government surveyors as “in the *bats*, word had gone round that those who assisted the amins or sold them food would be boycotted and excluded from Swaraj when Swaraj was obtained.”<sup>55</sup> P.C. Bamford, the Deputy Director of the Government of India's Intelligence Bureau, reported that in Bengal, “the peasantry were also led to

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochbor*, p. 23

<sup>55</sup> Pabna and Bogra SSR, pp. 93-94



believe that under a Swaraj government, which was to come into being in 1922, the payment of rent and revenue would be no longer required of them.”<sup>56</sup>

The impending end of the British Raj informed the Bengal peasantry’s willful disregard of the colonial state’s authority – arguably the defining feature of the peasant movement in Bengal between January and March 1922. When Gandhi called an abrupt halt to the movement in February 1922, the idea of Swaraj lost its millenarian edge. Contrary to Bamford’s assertions, the abrupt end to the movement did not coincide with a sudden reversal in global markets. Neither did the peasantry simply heed Gandhi’s command to halt the movement. Instead, Gandhi’s cry of halt was a broken pledge that extinguished the millenarian vision of an impending Swaraj and rendered resistance to state authority meaningless. As the end of the sarkar was no longer imminent, peasants resumed paying taxes and obeying state authority.

A more lasting influence of the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements was in politicizing a generation of educated and idealistic young men in the delta’s mofussil towns. Abul Mansur Ahmed, whose support for the “Muslim” Kaiser was discussed earlier, joined the Khilafat movement after sitting his B.A. exams in Dacca College, returning to his village of Dhanikhola in Mymensingh to work as a volunteer. Ahmed was not, however, only moved by extra-territorial loyalties; he was also deeply influenced by Gandhi. He took out a subscription to *Young India* in 1920, while a student at Dacca College, and read it with “deep concentration and utter admiration. His [Gandhi’s] writings had a huge influence on my thinking. In my later life, I have not been able to get over this influence.”<sup>57</sup> Gandhi was a very important figure for

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<sup>56</sup> Bamford, P.C., *Histories of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement*, Delhi, Government of India Press, 1925, pp. 59-60

<sup>57</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochhor*, p. 26

educated young men who volunteered for the movement. Ahmed probably appreciated Gandhi's wholehearted support of the "just and reasonable" khilafat cause, but he and other young volunteers were also deeply influenced by Gandhi's reformulation of Swadeshi economic ideas.<sup>58</sup>

In the pages of *Young India*, Gandhi repeated and reiterated his firm conviction that Swadeshi, or economic self-reliance, was an essential prerequisite for Swaraj. Gandhi imbued Swadeshi ideas with the spiritual virtues of self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-reliance. It meant more than the boycott of consumption of imported goods, but also abstaining from producing for British consumers. In a Swaraj pamphlet published in Bogra in 1921, Sureshchandra Dasgupta urged cultivators to "stop trading with the English, and handing our homes over to them. Instead, keep our things in our own hands." In the Bengal, jute emerged as the symbol of peasants' dependence on colonial markets, the opposite of the spinning wheel, the Gandhian symbol of economic self-sufficiency. Swaraj and Khilafat volunteers launched an "anti-jute campaign," and according to Bamford, "cultivators who persisted in growing this crop on occasions found that it had been willfully destroyed by Non-co-operators."<sup>59</sup> In one instance in Noakhali, during the summer of 1920, volunteers played football on a field they had just cleared of the standing jute crop.

Swaraj and Khilafat activists did a lot more in pursuit of peasant self-reliance than destroying standing jute crops. They responded enthusiastically to Gandhi's "back to the villages appeal," and set up committees throughout the hinterland to

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<sup>58</sup> *Young India*, July, 1920, Quoted in Bose, Sugata "Nation, Reason and Religion: India's Independence in International Perspective," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1-7 August, 1998.

<sup>59</sup> Bamford, p. 57

engage in the urgent tasks of rural renewal. These tasks appeared especially urgent in the context of rapid rural immiseration. In a non-cooperation pamphlet published in Bogra in 1921, Sureshchandra Dasgupta described villages as places of despair and destruction, where “we have no food in our stomachs, clothes on our backs, homes over our heads, medicines for our diseases, education, joy in our souls or, in the end relief, in our deaths.”<sup>60</sup> Dasgupta urged educated, motivated, and idealistic young men to return to villages and devote themselves to rural renewal, inspiring other young men and taking the advice of elders. He asked these idealistic young men to form “village societies,” organize *panchayats* (arbitration councils) of respected elders, encourage the cultivation of cotton, and introduce spinning wheels into every home.

These are exactly the tasks that Abul Mansur Ahmed and his comrades set about as Khilafat volunteers in the village of Dhanikhola. They set up a *palli samaj* (village society) covering Dhanikhola and neighbouring villages, raised and managed funds, set up a high school and a technical school to teach weaving and spinning, established arbitration facilities for disputes, and distributed cotton seeds and encouraged cotton cultivation. Popular support for the movement was evident in the enthusiasm with which people donated grain or small sums of cash to the volunteers. Ahmed’s village did not experience violent conflict with armed police and the general breakdown of colonial authority as in parts of Rangpur and Tippera. Instead, Mymensingh’s main experience of the movement consisted of a group of idealistic young men setting up the educational, juridical, and economic institutions designed to restore the viability of agrarian livelihoods.

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<sup>60</sup> Dasgupta, Sureshchandra, *Gramer Katha* (On the Village), Bogra, 1921, p. 2

Gandhi's sudden halt brought an end to this kind of developmental work by Swaraj and Khilafat activists. Abul Mansur Ahmed writes: "Our enthusiasm did not last more than a year. Swaraj had not come within the year, as Gandhi promised. And then he withdrew civil disobedience [*sharbojonin ain omanno*] because of the *hangama* [troubles] at Chauri Chaura." With the decline in enthusiasm, the young volunteers began to experience difficulties: students were leaving their alternative school and rejoining the government school, they were unable to sell their cloth or pay salaries to weaving and spinning instructors, and villagers gradually stopped donating grain or money to the movement.<sup>61</sup>

While the movement itself came to a stop, it had a lasting influence in the hinterland – specifically, as it politicized a generation of young idealistic men and educated them in Gandhian economic discourses and practices. Arguably, the movement also lit the spark that led to the burst of intellectual and creative production during the 1920s. Poems, songs, and pamphlets were integral to the movement. Abul Mansur Ahmed and his comrades would wander the village roads at night, after a hard day's work, singing "Swadesh and Khilafat songs" at the top of their voices.<sup>62</sup> Muhammad Abdul Hakim Ruhani, from Chandpur, the important jute-trading town in Tippera wrote poems urging Muslims to join Hindus in ousting the British; celebrating the achievements of Islam and calling for a global brotherhood of Muslims; rejoicing in the rise of a global anti-colonial movement led by "Gandhi, Lenin and Zaghul (Pasha);" and urging the adoption of the charka.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, pp. 28-29

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>63</sup> A collection of Ruhani's Khilafat and Non-cooperation poems was published in 1924 in Dhaka, *Ruhani Shongit Mala*, Dhaka, 1924 Ruhani wrote poems celebrating Islam across history and the globe, the global anti-colonial movement led by "Gandhi, Lenin and Zaghul (Pasha), and the charkah. He wrote several

Nirad Chaudhuri describes a visit from “elderly uncle” from “an out-of-the-way village” during the movement, who “besides being the village squire was also a poet and composer.” He performed a song he had composed to Gandhi: “Who is that is blowing his horn, and from which high peak, to pierce the heart in this manner?”<sup>64</sup>

The years following the Khilafat movement witnessed a burst of literary output out of the hinterland’s small-town print and publishing industry, especially of texts concerning agrarian immiseration, its causes and remedies. The mofussil literature of peasant impoverishment shared the Swadeshi critiques of jute cultivators’ market-based livelihoods, but differed in several important respects. First, while Swadeshi preached self-reliance and self-sufficiency as spiritual and national goals worthy in themselves, the mofussil thinkers attempted to instruct cultivators into becoming cleverer market operators, capable of adjusted production and consumption according to the state of commodity markets. Second, the hinterland’s economic discourses were shaped by an interpretation of Islam as a worldly religion concerned with the ethical conduct of livelihoods. Third, mofussil economic ideas were informed by social relations of agrarian production in the delta, particularly between mostly-Muslim cultivators and mostly-Hindu zamindars and moneylenders. I now turn to the production of a distinctively mofussil economic discourse during the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement.

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poems – “Dak,” “Obhoy-bani,” and “Jaago” – urging Muslims to join Hindus in ousting the British. He also wrote a poem urging Muslims to take up business and trade.

<sup>64</sup> This is Nirad Chaudhuri’s translation. The original was: “Ke phukichhe singa,/Kon tunga sringe,/Emana marma bhediye.” *Thy Hand Great Anarch*, p. 12

## MOFUSSIL INTELLIGENTSIA

Agrarian immiseration was the burning intellectual and political issue of the period in the hinterland. Narratives of peasant households losing their possessions through debt, disease, hunger, rent, and dispossession and being forced into the jungles of Assam in search of livelihood were standard tropes in mofussil texts of agrarian immiseration. These texts, I will argue, constituted a distinctively *mofussil* economic discourse of impoverishment, that was influenced but certainly not determined by nationalist economic ideas emanating from the metropolis. In the following sections, I focus on two literary genres that dominated mofussil discourses on agrarian immiseration – the political pamphlet and the *boyan*, a form of spoken poetry consisting of rhyming couplets of even beat.

Before proceeding on to these pamphlets and *boyans*, I wish to briefly discuss the production of these texts out of the mofussil context. Pamphlets and *boyans* were products of a mofussil intellectual milieu and the spaces they inhabited in the delta's small-towns and villages. This milieu was composed of the miniscule educated minority of the delta. The mofussil intelligentsia was drawn from the households of wealthier peasants, jotedars, zamindars, traders, and mahajans, who had obtained a colonial education in district headquarter towns. The formally educated minority worked as salaried professionals in these towns – lawyers, schoolteachers, doctors, clerks in government or private agencies. While mofussil professionals were overwhelmingly Hindu, there were an increasing number of Muslims, who had origins in the surrounding countryside and retained strong connections to the villages – an outcome of the consumption of education by the wealthiest jute cultivating households during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This mofussil middle-class constituted circles of readership and authorship of the small-town print and publishing industry of the delta – they were the mofussil intelligentsia. Though quite small, this mofussil intelligentsia was able to sustain local newspapers published in hinterland towns. The circulation figures of these small-town newspapers varied from a few hundred to a few thousand, 200 in the case of *Praja Bandhu* in Brahmanbaria to 2,828 for the Faridpur Hitoishini (Table 3.3)

**Table 3.3: Circulation of Local Newspapers in Eastern Bengal<sup>65</sup>**

Town	Newspaper Title	Circulation
Faridpur	The Sonjoy	1,104
	Faridpur Hitoishini	2,828
Dacca	Dacca Prakash	1,521
Noakhali	Noakhali Sammilan	unkown
Comilla	Tippera Hitaishini	800
Brahmanbaria	Praja Bandhu	200
Chandpur	Naba Banga	465
Pabna and Bogra	The Pabna-Bogra Hitaishi	1,100
	Suraj	1,200
Mymensingh	Charu Mihir	1,500

Agrarian immiseration was the burning issue of the day for the mofussil intelligentsia. In his foreword to Shah Abdul Hamid's *Krishak Bilap* (Peasant Extinction), Mymensingh, 1922, Sheikh Bashiruddin Ahmed of Banduldia writes, "The Bengal peasant's sorrows and difficulties (*dukkho durdosha*) have been discussed in civil society (*shudhi shamaj*) for some time. But no one could have thought that the last moment of their lives (*jibon lila*) would come so soon, no one could have foreseen

<sup>65</sup> BLC, Vol. IX, 1922, p. 172. It should be noted that when Indu Bhushan Dutta, the member from Tippera, asked if these figures had been verified, the local government minister responded that he did not know.

that.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in his preface to Abul Hossain’s *Bangla’r Bolsbi (Bengal’s Bolsheviks)*, Dacca, 1926), Muhammad Fazlul Karim Mullick – a zamindar in Dacca district – wrote that the book will “benefit those who are engaging themselves in serving the country (*desb*) or wish to think about the real condition (*bastobik obostha*) of the nation.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, these texts were seen as contributions to a mofussil intellectual circle – *shudhi shamaj* – concerned with peasant poverty and rural regeneration.

In addition to circles of readership and authorship, the mofussil intellectual milieu was also composed of patronage networks, which financed the printing and distribution costs of these texts. Wealthy notables from the hinterland – often zamindars and wealthier townsmen – patronized mofussil authors. In exchange for finance, patrons were usually eulogized in the texts. For example, the second, enlarged, and illustrated version of *Adarsha Krishak* published in 1922 was financed partly by the Mymensingh District Board and the book was dedicated with “great respect and sincere gratitude” to Khan Bahadur Maulvi Syed Ahmed Chowdhury, a zamindar in Perduar and the first Chairman of the Mymensingh District Board.<sup>68</sup> Ashrafuddin Ahmed’s *boyan, Muslim Bani* (Comilla, 1927), was partially financed by Munshi Keramat Ali, the patron of the school in Laksham, Noakhali, where Ahmed taught.<sup>69</sup> Networks of patronage that led to the publication of these texts were, sometimes, more complex. The story of how Md. Khayer Ali’s *boyan* about the

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<sup>66</sup> Hamid, Shah Abdul, *Krishak Bilap*, Mymensing ,1922

<sup>67</sup> Abul Hossain, *Banglar Bolsbi*, Dacca, 1926. At the time of publication of this pamphlet, Abul Hussain was a lecturer at Dacca University but the essays in the book were written in the early 1920s when he was still a student. Fazlul Karim was a landlord in Dacca, who had purchased the estate of Haturia – 60 miles from Dacca city - in 1919.

<sup>68</sup> Hai, A.F.M., *Adarsha Krishak*, Mymensingh: 1922, p. ii

<sup>69</sup> Ashrafuddin Ahmed, *Moslem Bani*, Comilla, 1927, p. 1.



floods in north Bengal in 1921 written in Shingra thana, Natore, came to be published in Calcutta indicates just how complex and extended these patronage works could be.

Khayer Ali introduces himself as a resident of Shingra *thana* in Natore district. He thanks two friends – Mafizuddin Mian and Mohammad Shoyebuddin Mian – for encouraging him to write about the floods in a rural idiom (“*gramyo bhasha*”). A “Hindu *bhadralok* that I cannot name” provided some financial assistance and encouragement. Then, Shubodh Chandra Majumdar – an “open-minded (*udar-prokriti*) and enthusiastic (*uthsabbo-purno*) young man” – sent him to Bogra to enquire into publishing the poem, where he found a press that would print the poem for a payment of a 180 rupees. The publication was, in the end, made possible by a “god-like great man” (*debota shodrishho mahapurush*) – who also refused to be named – who undertook the entire cost of the publication and even funded the poet’s visit to Calcutta.<sup>70</sup>

Occupying a position in-between the hinterland and the metropolis, these mofussil texts and their authors faced in both directions – towards cultivators in the countryside and towards metropolitan state institutions in Calcutta. Texts addressed to cultivators consisted of didactic poems and pamphlets that held peasants responsible for their poverty and urged them to work harder, forego consumption, become savvier market operators, and – in some cases – become better Muslims. The second group of texts concerned legislative and representative politics, and were produced in the contexts of elections, colonial legislation, and the hinterland’s representation in the metropolis. Below, I look at didactic texts written at cultivators

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<sup>70</sup> Ali, Md. Khayer, *Bonyo Kabini*, Calcutta, 1922, pp. ii-iii

and, following that, I look at the printed materials of representative and legislative politics from the deltaic hinterland.

## **REFORMING (MUSLIM) CULTIVATORS**

The primary question faced by mofussil intellectuals was how to restore the viability of market-based agrarian livelihoods. One solution was to reform peasant production: for peasant households to work harder, reduce consumption, and produce commodities according to prevailing market prices. In proposing this solution, mofussil intellectuals wrote didactic texts instructing cultivators to reform their livelihood practices. Perhaps the most widely circulated, glossiest, and celebrated didactic text produced out of the mofussil during the 1920s was A.F.M. Abdul Hai's pamphlet *Adarsha Krishak* or *Ideal Peasant*. The first edition was published in 1920 in Mymensingh, and the second, expanded illustration replete with illustrations for "the benefit of illiterate cultivators" was published in 1922. In his introduction, to *Krishak Bilap* (Mymensing, 1922) Shah Abdul Hamid acknowledged *Adarsha Krishak* as the Bengal peasant's "*buker dhon*," or heart-wealth.<sup>71</sup>

Hai states that he has written *Adarsha Krishak* to "advise peasants on the way out of poverty" and has presented vignettes of ideal peasant life as examples to be emulated. The first such ideal farmer is Osman. Osman is characterized by hard and constant work, a man who says "I will do first and then if I have time, I will advice other people to do the same." At the end of a hard days' work in the fields he returns home to tend the chili plants and betel vines, spin cloth, make his own

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<sup>71</sup> Shah Abdul Hamid, *Krishak Bilap*, Banduldia: 1921, p. ii.

furniture, and dig a pond, scooping out earth bit by bit. With hard work and abstinence (Osman does not smoke the hookah), he has managed to not just survive but prosper. Osman is the counter-example to the general Bengal peasantry:

Hey Bengal's illiterate peasant brothers, it was just the other day that you had used money from jute sales to build tin houses, borrowed 500 rupees to dig a large pond, borrowed money to pay for the wedding of your adored, piece-of-your-liver son ... but today almost all of you are taking your families into the jungles of Assam. Shame, shame shame, (*chhi: chhi: chhi:*), weren't you the brave warriors who had won this country.

Know for certain that no one has defeated you; you have defeated yourselves. Greed, cupidity, materialism and ignorance (*lobh, mouho, maya o murkhoti*) are your eternal enemies.<sup>72</sup>

The second vignette is of an ideal farm called Shahbagh, where 2.5 acres of land supported rice, jute, a vegetable garden growing potatoes, chilis, garlic, onions, peas, tobacco and all kinds of vegetables, betel-nuts and vines, fruit trees, climbers that produce gourd and beans, and ducks, chickens, pigeons and goats. The third vignette is of a farmer who has two tamarind trees in his house and supplements his income by making tamarind chutney and selling that in town. The fourth vignette is of a zamindar returning from fishing – having caught a large carp or *rui* – and running into two boys returning from market, one having purchased a gourd and the other having bought *keoi* fish, a kind of small perch. The zamindar's lectures the children on abstaining from purchasing such goods from market.

Hai's pamphlet concludes with a 21-point programme for freedom, or *mukti*. The first of these points was about balancing household expenditure: "Every peasant will keep accounts of revenue and expenditure and will completely desist from all wasteful expenditure." The 21-point programme consisted reforming peasant

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<sup>72</sup> Hai, Adorsho Krishak, p. 33

production and consumption: farmers should keep aside enough land to grow paddy; they should plant cotton, sugar-cane, date-palms, betel-vines, and tobacco; they should not visit markets empty-handed but with some goods to sell; they should avoid litigation; they must not sell their land and use cash earnings to buy more land; they should not buy fish but catch their own fish; they should make their own umbrellas from bamboo, rather than purchase expensive imported umbrellas for 5 or 6 rupees at market-places; and so forth. In other words, the mofussil programme of peasant reform consisted of reducing market consumption by working harder to produce household necessities – a la Osman.

*Adarsha Krishak* does not provide a discussion of Islam, other than noting that Osman was pious as well as hardworking – he sang the call to prayers in the village mosque in between bouts of labour. Islam was hardly invoked in depictions of ideal peasants or farms and piety was not part of Hai's 21-point programme. Hai's text does, however, conform to an Islamic understanding of peasant immiseration and its remedies. As I argue below, Islamic discourses of agrarian immiseration emphasized diligence, honesty, abstinence, and fairness as the religious ideals in the day-to-day conduct of market-based peasant livelihoods. Despite this emphasis on Islam as an ethical basis for peasant production and consumption, Islamic and non-Islamic narratives of agrarian immiseration showed the same concatenation of forces at work – commodity markets, frivolous consumption, indebtedness, and dispossession. I now turn to the main genre of peasant advice literature in the mofussil during the 1920s – the *boyan*.

As a form of spoken poetry of rhyming couplets of even beat – meant to be recited aloud in public spaces – the *boyan* was particularly suited for the didactic purposes of instructing cultivators. A series of *boyans* focused on agrarian

immiseration and jute cultivation were published in the delta's small towns during the 1920s. Some of these *boyans* are so similar as to constitute almost the same poem, and shared the same stock phrases and couplets. I would argue that the following poems can almost be read as the same poem: Abed Ali Mian's *Kali Chitra* (Rangpur, 1918) and *Desb Shanti*, (Rangpur, 1925), Kedaresvar Bandopadhyay's *Nabajug* (Tangail, 1922), Srinath Sarkar's *Desber Kotba*, (Rangpur, 1922), Haripad Bandhopadhyay's *Desber Katha* (Faridpur, 1927), Nagendrakumar De's *Bogra'r Kabini* (Bogra, 1927), and Mahendranath Gun's *Pat Kabini*, (Nilphamari, 1929).

These *boyans* constitute what may be called a non-Islamic discourse on jute, narrating how commodity and credit markets caused immiseration and instructing cultivators in the secular arts of savvy market operations. For another group of poets, however, production and exchange were decidedly religious activities and impoverishment was a specifically Muslim issue. I have included a Muslim poet, Abed Ali Mian, in the "non-Islamic" group because my division is not based on the religion of the author, but on narratives of peasant immiseration that were based on understandings of Islam. The Islamic *boyans* that I discuss subsequently include Md. Akram Ali's *Keno Lok Gorib Hoy* or *Why People are Poor* (Tippera, 1917), Abdul Aziz's *Najat* (Noakhali, 1923), Ashrafuddin Ahmed's *Muslim Bani* (Tippera, 1927), Abul Mohsen Mohammad Asghar Hossain's *Kalamal Haq ba Hok Katha* (Sirajganj, 1932). Asghar Hossain's *Haq Katha* (True Words) signals Muslim-ness not only by using Arabic word in the title (*Haq*), but also by having the book open to the right, like an Arabic book.

The *boyans* – whether Islamic or not – presented remarkably similar narratives of peasant pauperization through commodity markets and indebtedness. They begin with graphic descriptions of peasant poverty. Nagendrakumar De writes: "Half dead,

and wearing nothing but a loin cloth/Can't get food, the loincloth wrapped body is skin and bones."<sup>73</sup> Impoverishment, the poets argued, was the cultivators' fault. Cultivators chose to cultivate excessive quantities of jute and to rely on jute earnings to finance market-based livelihoods. The poets offer stinging critique of jute cultivators' market-dependent livelihoods and their consumption of market goods, addressing cultivators directly and accusing them of sowing jute out of greed (*lobh*) and stupidity (*buddhinashok*). Haripod Bandopadhyay's *Desher Kotha* states: "What have you done this time, *krishak buddhinashok*/Out of greed you sowed jute and now you sit and wonder why."<sup>74</sup> Almost all of the poems take advantage of the rhyme *chasha* (farmer) and *buddhinasha* (lacking intelligence), or *krishak* and *buddhinashok*. The following lines are from Abed Ali Mian's *Kali Chitra*:

Why did you sow much jute, *chasha*?  
 This time you have drowned the country in jute, *orey buddhinasha*.  
 I have been telling you won't get returns, you didn't listen *krishokjona*  
 You lost rice by sowing jute, *orey buddhinasha*<sup>75</sup>

The critique of market-oriented production was accompanied by a stinging critique of market-based consumption. In these poets' narratives, the primary driver of debt was frivolous and extravagant consumption: the rapidity with which cultivators blew their jute earnings on weddings, fancy clothes, toys, and haircuts and then fell into debt when they ran out of money to purchase rice. Abed Ali Mian writes, in a standard trope that recurs in many of the poems: "With money from jute

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<sup>73</sup> "Adha mora kore chhara lengti obotar/pete bhat mile na lengti tena osthhi chormo shar," Nagendrakumar De, *Bogra'r Kabini*, Bogra, 1927, p. 3

<sup>74</sup> "Ebar krishak buddhinashok ki koriley bhai/lobhey poriyee pat buniye ekhon bhabchho boshe tai." Bandopadhyay, Haripad, *Desher Kotha*, Faridpur, 1926

<sup>75</sup> "Eto paat dili ken tui chasha/Ebar pater chashey desh dubali ore buddhinasha/Boltey achhi dor hobey na, shunli na to krishokjona/Pat diye dhan harali, ore buddhinasha." Mian, Abed Ali, *Kali Chitra*, Rangpur: 1918, p. 3

sales/you have colorful weddings.”<sup>76</sup> Frivolous consumption was frequently put down to *babu-giri*, the attempt to appear like middle-class *babus* rather than good, honest, down to earth farmers. Several poets focus on cultivators’ “Albert cuts”, a distinctive hairstyle with a side-parting named for Prince Albert, Victoria’s grandson, who had toured India in 1889-90. Mahendranath Gun wrote:

Reddening your lips with paan and your hair with henna  
 Albert cut with a slanted parting and fragrant oils  
 You sit dressed as a full Babu  
 And all the work is done by coolies from the west.<sup>77</sup>

These poets criticized not only frivolous expenditure, but also subsistence consumption from markets. Cultivators had forsaken subsistence rice cultivation out of greed, and were now forced to depend on markets for foods. The following lines were repeated in both Abed Ali and Haripad Bandopadhyay’s poems: “Cultivating for twelve months and buying food for thirteen/Tell me, how many cultivators like that do you know in this country.”<sup>78</sup> A recurring image was of jute cultivators forced to consume the inedible plant. Abed Ali Mian writes: “You didn’t understand/Abed does not speak false/Mark my words in the end you will have to eat jute stalks.”<sup>79</sup> Nagendrakumar De is even more colourful: “You cultivate so much yet you don’t fill

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<sup>76</sup> “Pat bechi taka niya/rongo tamashay kori biya,” Abed Ali Mian *Kali Chitra*, 1918, p. 3

<sup>77</sup> Paan kheye thhot rangiye kolop diye chuley/Tera sheete Albert kete gondhoraj toiley./Ful babuti shejey tora thhakish boshiya./Kaaj korey shob pashchim hotey kuli ashiya.” Gun, Mahendranath, *Pat Kabini*, Nilphamari, 1929, p. 2

<sup>78</sup> “Baro mash abad kori tero mash khao kine/bolo dekhi she shob krishak deshe kojon chiney.” Haripad Bandopadhyay, *Desher Katha*, p. 8

<sup>79</sup> “Bujhli na tui bura’r beta/Abed’er kothha naiko jhuta/Khete hobe pat’er gora thhik janish mor bhasha.” Abed Ali Mian, *Kali Chitra*, Rangpur, p. 6

your stomachs, what will you eat?/ We will eat jute-seed rice and the jute-plant will give ghee.”<sup>80</sup>

These poems locate peasant pauperization in the operations of markets and prevailing prices of peasant produce and articles of consumption which drove peasant households into indebtedness.<sup>81</sup> The focus on markets and commodity prices is most explicit in Haripad Bandopdhyay’s *Desher Kotba*, whose lines often read like a running ticker of prices of articles of consumption – rice, hilsa fish, salt, and cloth –and production – jute, sesame, mustard, tobacco, and garden vegetables. The poets also focus on the unpredictability of jute prices. Jute markets promise high prices and profits but in the end fail to deliver according to expectations. Abed Ali Mian writes in *Kali Chitra*:

What you got last year  
You won’t this year  
That year’s monsoons fulfilled your wishes  
You hoped to take home money  
That hope will be empty  
You will be ruined and you will be caught in debt.<sup>82</sup>

The villains of the marketplace are wily Marwari jute purchasers. The enormous wealth amassed by Marwari jute traders was a common theme for these poets: “The Marwari comes from Bikaner/Empty-handed, turbaned with a *lota* in his hands/Within ten years his safe can’t contain his wealth/They have become

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<sup>80</sup> “Eto abad kore pet na bhore aar khaibo ki/pater bichir bhat khaibo gachhe hobe ghee” Nagendra Kumar De, *Bogra Kabini*, p. 2

<sup>81</sup> As I argued earlier in the chapter, debt was a regular feature of jute cultivation and debt was often incurred during periods of ecological and market crises.

<sup>82</sup> Goto shale peyechho jaha/E shale hobe na taha/Oi shaler borshar jonno mitechhe toder asha/Mone korechho nibo taka/She asha tor jabe phaka/Pochisher powa hobe tor, riney porbi thasha,” Abed Ali Mian, *Kali Chitra*, Rangpur, p. 5



millionaires in Bikaner.”<sup>83</sup> Marwari jute traders were generally referred to as “rokto-shoshok” or bloodsuckers, who had enriched themselves by impoverishing cultivators. The following verses are in both Abed Ali and Haripad Bandopadhyay’s poems:

You take takas and takas in loans and hire labour to grow your jute  
Marwaris sit at home and offer a price of five takas  
They make mountains out of molehills, who understands them  
They sit on their beds, their stomachs weighing down on your shoulders.<sup>84</sup>

Another cause of immiseration through expenditure was litigiousness. The poets decry “*gramya daladali*,” village factionalization that leads to frequent and expensive lawsuits. Much like frivolous expenditure, drive peasant households into debt and poverty. Haripad Bandopadhyay describes a lawsuit over a small plot of land, leading to litigation and ultimately enriching lawyers who build mansions in the mofussil towns.<sup>85</sup>

The solution to impoverishment lay in market-savviness, in being cleverer market operators. The poets urge cultivators to reduce market consumption by forsaking luxuries, producing household necessities, and by being clever in choosing the right mix of crops to produce judging by prevailing commodity prices. The poets instruct cultivators in how to become savvier market operators. Abed Ali Mian advises cultivators to stay away from jute for one year:

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<sup>83</sup> “Marwari gari chori ashe bikani hoitey/Khali hatey pagri mathha lota kore hatey.” Gun, Mahendranath, *Pat Kabini*, Nilphamari, 1929, p. 6

<sup>84</sup> “Taka taka mojur niya niran kulan kam/Marwarira ghore boshe pach take dey tham/Tiley tara talk ore ke bujhite pare/Thhake tara goditey boshey petta tomar ghare.”

<sup>85</sup> Bandopadhyay, *Deshar Katha*, pp. 10-11

So I tell you there is still time if you want to do well  
Sit for a year and do not go to the jute fields  
The following year that jute will be forty takas  
Tell me then where will sorrow remain.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, Kedareshvar Bandopadhyay urges cultivators to grow more rice and less jute and to demand thirty rupees a maund for the jute they offered to market.<sup>87</sup> Haripad Bandopadhyay lists out the relatively high prices of other crops, urging cultivators to grow those instead of jute:

Sesame is four annas a *sher*, ten takas a maund  
You leave that behind and try to repay the mahajan with jute  
Tobacco is now selling for twenty-five takas a maund  
Leaving that behind you sow jute and sit and wonder  
Sow less jute in your fields  
Grow potatoes, ginger, tobacco, your desires will be fulfilled.<sup>88</sup>

This was a non-Islamic discourse on agrarian immiseration that located impoverishment in commodity markets and aimed to instruct cultivators in the secular arts of savvy market operations. But production and exchange, as another set of poets maintained, were religious practices that were informed, or should have been informed, by Islamic ethics. Similar to secular narratives of immiseration, Islamic economic discourses emphasized the role of commodity markets, frivolous expenditure, and litigiousness as the drivers of peasant poverty. Narratives of Muslim

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<sup>86</sup> “Tai boli bhai achhe shomoy jodi bhalo chao/Ek bochor boshe thako paater khete na jao/Shei paat porer shale chollish taka hobe/bolo dekhi.” Abed Ali Mian, *Kali Chitra*, p. 12

<sup>87</sup> “Dhanyer abaad koro, pat kicchu dao/She pater protti mon tringsho mudra chao”, Kedareshvar Bandopadhyay, *Nabajug*, p. 8

<sup>88</sup> “Tiler sher chari anna, dosh taka tar maun/Sheshob krishi chhere diye pate shodh koribi mahajan/Tamak ekhon pochish taka maun bikri hoi deshe/Ta chhariya koshta diye bhabchho boshe boshe/Khetro poti koro he goti olpo pater chash/Alu ada tamak lagao mitiye jabe ash.” Haripad Bandopadhyay, *Desher Katha*, p. 6

immiseration are distinct from non-Islamic narratives in that they identify poverty as specifically Muslim and the processes of immiseration as arising from failures in practicing Islam as a worldly religion.

Abdul Aziz begins his poem *Najat* (Noakhali, 1922) with the couplet: “Looking at Muslims today/*Hai hai*, my heart explodes.”<sup>89</sup> Abdul Aziz proceeds to ask and answer: Who are the beggars? Muslims. Who lose their lands and homes through debt? Muslims. Whose households are depleted by malaria, cholera, small-pox, kala-azar, and plague? Again, Muslims. Aziz bemoans the decline of a once proud race that had taught the world civilization (*shobbbota*) but is now widely addressed as uncivilized (*oshobbho*). Having identified poverty as a Muslim issue, Aziz seeks to explain how the processes of immiseration were also specifically Muslim. He argues that there were five causes of impoverishment – which constitute five sections of the long poem. First, he faults Muslims for a loss of *iman* or faith, which manifests in Muslims not practicing their religion. Second, Aziz blames impoverishment on a lack of unity (*ekota*) amongst Muslims, which results in village factionalism (*gramya daladali*), litigation, and the additional sin of lying. Third, Aziz argues that Muslims aversion to business and trade has led to immiseration, and emphasizes that commerce and the accumulation of capital is “*halal*,” or permitted in Islam. Fourth, Aziz states that Muslims are impoverished by frivolous expenditure – a thoroughly un-Islamic activity: “Those who spend unnecessarily/*Are the Devil’s brother.*”<sup>90</sup> Fifth, the lack of education amongst Muslims keeps them below that of other races – specifically Hindus.

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<sup>89</sup> “Mussalman goney aaj dekhiya/ Hai Hai bukta jai fatiya,” Aziz, Abdul, *Najat*, Noakhali, 1922, p. 1

<sup>90</sup> “Behuda khoroch jeba korilo/Shoitaner bhai shei hoilo”, *ibid.*, p. 8

Aziz's program constitutes a program of personal reform through the practice of Islamic virtues and ethics in the day-to-day conduct of livelihoods. For Aziz, *ebadat* or prayer was not only about the prescribed motions of *namaaz*, but also in the worldly affairs of livelihoods:

Listen all Mussalmans to this truth,  
All of a Mussalman's works are prayer.  
Business, trade and sharecropping  
These are nothing but prayer (*ebadat*).<sup>91</sup>

Mofussil Muslim intellectuals often portrayed Islam in terms of the everyday conduct of Muslims in household and commercial affairs. Abdur Rahim's *boyan Nurul Islam* or *The Light of Islam* (Dacca, 1924) describes the prevailing era of immiseration as *kali kal*, the dark ages, marked by sin (*pap*), the inability to distinguish right and wrong, and faithlessness. Rahim's book consists of five *boyans* depicting the un-Islamic lives led by the hinterland's Muslims. He locates "un-Islam" in two spheres – production and commerce and the peasant household. The first *boyan* is about a Muslim cultivator cheating a fellow Muslim cultivator after falling into debt and ultimately swearing a lie with his hand on the Koran in the village arbitration; the second is the story of a boatman who steals part of a cargo of delicious mangos entrusted to him, selling a portion at a *bepari's* river-dock; the third, about wayward, irreligious sons spoiled by their rich, indulgent fathers; the fourth about irreligious, wives who are out of purdah (*beparda*) and bad-tempered (*bod mejaji*); and the fifth about an extravagant wedding that leads to an unsuccessful marriage. In each of these instances, good and bad Islamic practice is located in the day-to-day conduct of lives and livelihoods.

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<sup>91</sup> "Shuno bhai Mussalman ek hakikat/Mussalmaner shob kam ebadat./Babsha, banijya, adi karbar/Ebadat bina kichhu nahi aar." *ibid.*, p. 2

From this perspective of Islam as the ethics of everyday livelihood practices, jute markets were particularly un-Islamic. Asghar Hussain's *Haq Katha* (Sirajganj, 1933) was published out of one of the largest jute towns' of Bengal, and unsurprisingly Hussain provides a detailed account of jute transactions. Hussain writes: "In jute all I see is theft/Look and see for yourselves, men and women."<sup>92</sup> He then proceeds to narrate a long list of thefts that take place in jute cultivation and trade: the theft of seeds from a neighbour's field, the theft of a few strands of fibre to buy a cigarette in the market, the beparis theft when weighing small lots of peasant produce, the graders' bribe in assessing quality, the theft in prices by dalals at the market, and the theft on rails and steamers. Jute was a dishonest trade and participation in that trade was un-Islamic and, hence, impoverishing:

The price of everything is revealed openly,  
But with jute the hand is under the cloth.  
When jute is sold you are cheated,  
Judge for yourself see how stupid you are.<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, both Islamic and non-Islamic poems of agrarian immiseration provided similar narratives of impoverishment through market dependence, frivolous consumption, litigiousness and indebtedness. Both Islamic and non-Islamic poets preached reforms in cultivators' engagements with commodity markets. While one group instructed cultivators to become savvier market operators, producing according to prevailing commodity prices, the other urged cultivators to conduct

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<sup>92</sup>"Koshta's majhetey bhai shudhu dekhi churi/Kheyal koriya bujho joto noro nari" Asghar Hussain, *Haq Katha*, Sirajganj, 1933, p. 18

<sup>93</sup> "Shokol chizer dor prokashiya bole/Paat Becha kaley haat kaporer toley/ Paat becha shesh holey dey torey roka/Bichar koriya dekho tumi koto boka" Asghar Hussain, *Haq Katha*, Sirajganj, 1933, p. 19

their worldly activities according to Islamic ethics – to be hardworking, diligent, honest, and fair. In both instances, this meant reducing the cultivation of jute, diversifying production, forgoing consumption, working harder, being honest, avoiding factionalism, and so forth. More significant differences emerged between Hindu and Muslim mofussil intellectuals over legislative reforms of tenancy laws and credit markets.

## LEGISLATIVE REFORMS

Shah Abdul Hamid's *Krishak Bilap* or *Peasant Extinction* (Mymensingh, 1922) is a very different text than the didactic *boyans* discussed above. Hamid's text focuses on the state legislation of factor markets, rather than peasant self-reform. He locates the beginnings of pauperization, as this thesis has done, to World War I and the disjuncture of rice and jute prices: "The price of rice rose from four takas a maund to seventeen takas and the price of jute, the Bengal peasant's only source of wealth, fell to fourteen annas a maund. As a result they simply could not survive out of the cash from jute sales."<sup>94</sup> He then narrates tales of impoverishment through indebtedness, hunger, floods and epidemics, indebtedness, dispossession, and ultimately flight to the "jungles of Assam."

Unlike the didactic texts discussed previously, Hamid advocated legislative solutions rather than instructing peasants to reform their livelihoods. While Hamid recognized that a complex of factors worked in conjunction to impoverish cultivators, he identifies "Bengal's uncompassionate, usurious moneylenders" as the primary

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<sup>94</sup> Shah, *Krishak Bilap*, p. 27

villain of the countryside. The unscrupulous mahajan took advantage of cultivators' distress by charging usurious interest rates and were currently dispossessing cultivators of their lands. Hamid proposes legislating maximum rates of interest and that the return of peasant's lands that had been sold on default. He also advocates legislation of land tenure: cultivators' rights to buy and sell land, the revision of land-tax to lower rates, and making rent payable in two installments. Hamid urged *zamindars* and *mahajans* to support such legislation as, in their absence, the Bengal peasantry would become extinct – and landlords and moneylenders would lose their sources of livelihood.

Hamid's text does not invoke Islam or make much of the fact that peasants were Muslim and *zamindars* and *mahajans* were Hindu. In fact, he leans in the opposite direction – making much of the entry of Muslim *jotedars* into the moneylending business. However, his mofussil readers would have immediately recognized *Krishak Bilap* as a Muslim text. The politics of tenancy reforms had its roots in the *praja* movement, which began in the early 1900s and consisted of demands for enhanced tenancy rights for Muslim occupancy ryots vis-à-vis their Hindu zamindars. Abul Mansur Ahmed dates the beginnings of the movement to a conference in Kamariar Char in Jamalpur in 1914. This meeting was addressed by the leading mofussil Muslim intellectuals of the day – rising political stars of the hinterland, such as A.K. Fazlul Haq from Barisal and members of the ulama like Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, born in a village in Chittagong. During the conference, speakers spoke against the oppression of zamindars, for the abolition of *abwabs* or payments in addition to rent, the right to buy and sell land at will, and the right to full

use of their land and its resources, such as cutting trees, digging ponds, and so forth.<sup>95</sup>

The *praja* movement was not only about greater rights to the land and its resources, but also to demand for respectful treatment from Hindu zamindars. Abul Mansur Ahmed's remembrances of his childhood in rural Mymensingh are replete with stories of the struggle of his well to do and proud Muslim family's to gain respect from their Hindu zamindar and his amlas. As a child, Ahmed was particularly piqued at the fact that zamindari amlas referred to even older members of Muslim peasant families – *murubbis* – in the informal and disrespectful *tui*. Ahmed even claims to have organized a praja conference in 1908, as a 9-year old boy, in his Mymensingh village, sending out invitations to various mosques, on “behalf of Dhanikhala's ordinary prajas,” on torn out pieces of paper from his school notebook. The meeting resulted in a set of demands, including the provision of chairs for Muslim villagers in the zamindar's cutcherry and the abolition of *abwabs* from Muslim cultivators for Hindu festivals.<sup>96</sup>

The politics of tenancy reform took on urgency with the onset of peasant impoverishment. In Shah Abdul Hamid's pen, *praja* demands were transformed into a question of the very existence of the Bengal peasantry. Additionally, the movement took on the advocacy of credit market reforms in recognition of the sharply increased rates of interest. Several political pamphlets authored by mofussil Muslims presented lists of ryots' demands, which invariably included: the right to buy and sell land without paying fees, the rights to cut trees or dig ponds on the land, protection from

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<sup>95</sup> Ahmed, Abul Mansur, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochhor*, p. 23

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 10-12



zamindari oppression, the abolition of *abwabs*, limits to rates of interests, protection of land from alienation by moneylenders, the dissolution of outstanding debts, and so forth.<sup>97</sup> Even though these texts do not always explicitly invoke Islam, their *mofussil* readers would have immediately recognized these arguments as Muslim. The categories of religion and class had become so closely identified that arguing for peasants or against zamindars and mahajans was, in the eyes of contemporaries, the equivalent of arguing for Muslims or against Hindus.

The poetry of the jute tracts from the 1920s is replete with citations of Hindu zamindars, traders and moneylenders exploiting Muslim cultivators. The exploitation of Muslim cultivators by “*bijatis*” or “other communities” was a dominant theme in the poetry of the 1920s. Abbas Ali Nazir (Dacca, 1920) writes: “I think ... of the great zamindar, Who does not recite the name of Allah even once in a month. The raja, the zamindar, and their amla suck the praja like jackals and dogs.”<sup>98</sup> The Muslim poets’ imperative to cultivators to go into business and commerce was to reverse the tide of exploitation. Abdul Aziz (Noakhali, 1925) wrote: “Look other communities do business, and loot our money.”<sup>99</sup> Aziz further urges Muslims to buy goods from Muslim shopkeepers, stating: “Remember, always buy from a Mussalman. When you buy from a *bijati*’s shop, he will spend that money to worship his Shiva and Kali and Durga. For a saving of two or four pice, do not disregard Islam.”<sup>100</sup> In addition to

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<sup>97</sup> For example, the secretary of a ryot association of Faridpur, Nazir-uddin Ahmed’s open letter to the Governor of Bengal, published in Calcutta in 1921 contained a long list of peasant demands, highlighting reforms of land and credit. Ahmed, Nazir-uddin, *Banglar Governor Bahadur Shomipe Abedon Nibedoner Khola Chitthi*, Calcutta, 1921.

<sup>98</sup> Abbas Ali Nazir, *Kali Fakirer Khela o Alimnagarer Nasibat*, Dacca, 1920, cited in Chatterjee, Partha, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism,” p. 27

<sup>99</sup> “Dekho bhinno jati babosha koriya/amaderi taka nei lutiya.” Abdul Aziz, *Najat*, p. 12

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Hashmi, Taj, “The Communalization of Class Struggle: East Bengal peasantry, 1923-1929,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1988, 25(1), p. 174

Hindu zamindars and traders, the oppression of lawyers was also identified as specifically Hindu. Ashrafuddin Ahmed (Tippera, 1927) writes: “The Hindu lawyer *babu*, if he ever gets you, kicks you in the ass.”<sup>101</sup> The image of a complex of non-Muslim or *bijati* oppressors exploiting the Muslim peasantry was deeply entrenched in the mofussil worldview.

The politics of agrarian relations of production in the delta were always and already religious politics— even if religion was not explicitly invoked. Bengal’s Hindus also perceived land and credit reforms as specifically Muslim and, hence not national, issues. Hindu nationalists saw state-promoted reforms of agrarian political economy – the Tenancy Amendment Bill, introduced in 1923, and the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1926 – as methods of colonial “divide and rule,” of buying Muslim support by conceding Muslim demands.<sup>102</sup> Further, Hindu politicians feared that tenancy and credit reforms would erode their economic and political power in the countryside. As the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* noted in April 1927 about the proposed Tenancy Bill: “Muhammadan peasants will try to take advantage of this opportunity to place the *zamindars* in a tight corner.”<sup>103</sup>

Historians have identified bitter debates in the legislative council over the Tenancy Amendment Act in 1928 as a key moment in the divergence of Hindu and Muslim politics during the 1920s.<sup>104</sup> In the debates, mofussil Muslim members like

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<sup>101</sup> “Hindu ukil babu, pailey kobu, pondo mari dey boshi.” Ashrafuddin Ahmed, *Moslem Bani*, Tippera, 1927, p. 8

<sup>102</sup> Hashmi, “Communalization of Class Struggle,” pp. 176-177

<sup>103</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 April 1927, cited in Hashmi, *ibid.*, p. 176

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Chatterjee, Partha, “Agrarian Relations and Politics in Bengal: Some Considerations on the Making of the Tenancy Act Amendment 1928,” Occasional Paper 30, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1980.

Tamizuddin Khan (Faridpur), Nurul Haq Chaudhuri (Noakhali), Asimuddin Ahmed (Tippera), Muhammad Ismail (Mymensingh), Muazzam Ali Khan (Pabna), Kasiruddin Ahmed (Rangpur), Nausher Ali (Jessore), Nurul Haq Chaudhuri (Noakhali), Azizul Haque (Nadia), and Ekramul Haque (Murshidabad) proposed and voted en bloc series of amendments to enhance raiyat, under-raiyat and sharecropper rights to land vis-à-vis landlords. They encountered a unified Hindu opposition, led by members of the Congress and including *all* the Hindu representatives from the jute tracts. Mofussil Muslim members were voted down and the Act did not significantly enhance cultivators' property rights, though it did grant the right to alienate peasant lands. The acrimonious tenancy debates led eighteen Muslim members to form a loose parliamentary group to champion tenancy rights, known as the Bengal Praja Party, which would subsequently transform into the Krishak Praja Party. The Praja party emerged as a champion of agrarian factor market reforms. In the 1936 elections the campaign pledge of liberating cultivators from landlord and moneylender exploitation saw them secure a spectacular electoral victory over the Muslim League in the hinterland's rural constituencies. Mostly-Muslim jute cultivators' politics should not be seen purely in terms of spectacular episodes of peasant violence, but also in the everyday forms of electoral, representative and legislative politics that lay behind the peasant populist movement of the Krishak Praja Party.

## **THE LEGISLATURE**

While falling far short of nationalist expectations, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 introduced the processes of electoral, representative and legislative politics

into the jute hinterland. Even though entirely toothless, the legislature provided a platform for mofussil voices to speak in representation of the jute hinterland. In the very first budget session of the reformed council, mofussil members spoke out against the neglect of the hinterland. Emaduddin Ahmed from Rajshahi stated: “I, being a mufassal member, turn over the pages of the Budget to see what provision has been made for mufassal towns and villages in the way of improving education, sanitation and medical relief; and I am forced to say that I turn over page after page only to be disappointed.”<sup>105</sup> Wasimuddin Ahmed from Pabna also spoke for the mofussil: “The people in the mufassal pay the major portion of the first revenue of the province, and they are the people who contribute largely towards the export duty on jute and stamps which items go to swell the financial revenue of the province, and Government should provide largely for the material prosperity and the health of those people.”<sup>106</sup> During budget discussions in 1927, Mohammad Sadeque of Noakhali protested against expenditures of the Calcutta Improvement Trust:

This year Rs. 1,50,000 have been budgeted for the Calcutta Improvement Trust. The funds for its operation are mainly derived from the terminus tax and jute cess, both of which come from the resources of the country. It is a matter of great wonder that the civilized government of the twentieth century should tax the jute growers of Bengal, who live in the swamps of Eastern Bengal wrecking with malaria, kala-azar and every form of epidemic, underfed, underclothed, scarcely able to find a glass of pure drinking water within 20 miles of their cottage, to rear palaces in Calcutta and to pave the streets of the city with dust-proof-tar-macadam.<sup>107</sup>

Members from the mofussil could and did agree on certain pieces of legislation that favoured the hinterland. Indu Bhushan Dutt from Tippera moved a

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<sup>105</sup> BLC, Vol, I, No. 4, p. 113

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>107</sup> BLC, Vol. XXV, No. 2, 1927, p. 72

resolution in 1921 recommending that “the Government to take steps to circulate in Bengali, to all the union boards, municipalities, and co-operative societies in Bengal, weekly statements of the price of jute, cotton, oilseeds and other country produce, prevailing in the foreign importing markets.”<sup>108</sup> Dutt argued that lack of information about markets for global commodities was “one of the numerous causes of scarcity in India” and that “it is the duty of Government to supply the cultivator with accurate information as to what price his produce is getting in the foreign markets.” Mofussil members across the board supported Dutt; in the words of Shah Abdur Rauf of Rangpur they saw in the proposal a means of “protecting these illiterate people from being duped by middlemen, who make a large profit out of the labours of these poor agriculturists.”<sup>109</sup> Haridhan Dutt, a member from Calcutta, opposed the bill on the grounds that the money on circulating this information to illiterate cultivators would be better spent on educating them to read, but he carefully noted: “coming here as a representative of this city [Calcutta], I am very loath to do anything or to take any step that might offend our mufassal friends.”<sup>110</sup> The resolution was passed with a large margin, with Haridhan Dutt’s “mufassal friends” voting in block against metropolitan representatives. Indu Bhushan Dutt was not surprised: “I am glad that I have got the support of the mufassal members; that was only natural.”<sup>111</sup>

However, the mofussil members split along Hindu and Muslim lines when it came to discussions of tenancy reform. Muslim legislators’ focus on agrarian factor markets enabled them to claim the mantle of peasant leadership in Bengal politics

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<sup>108</sup> BLC, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 117

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.* p. 126

from mofussil Hindu members. In the aftermath of the Great Depression and the accompanying credit crisis, the legislative council shifted its focus to credit market reforms. In August 1933, Azizul Huque moved the Bengal Moneylenders Bill which intended to set maximum interest rates and provide for the retrospective recalculation of debts based on these lower rates. In November 1935, Khwaja Nizamuddin on behalf of the government moved the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Bill, a bill introduced by the central government into all of British India's provinces, proposing to establish Debt Conciliation Boards to reach settlements on outstanding loans.<sup>112</sup>

Hindu mofussil members doggedly opposed both pieces of legislation. With regard to the Moneylenders Bill, a section of Congress-aligned mofussil Hindu members argued for limitations on the geographic scope of the act, stricter definitions of who is a moneylender, and to raise the ceiling on interest rates. Similarly, in discussions on the Agricultural Debtors Bill, Congress-aligned politicians attempted to set limits on how low debts could be re-settled or how long repayment of the newly-negotiated debt could be delayed. In both debates, Muslim mofussil members positioned themselves on the side of debtors and in sync with the popular demand for factor reforms. Discussions on tenancy reform in 1928 and credit reforms in 1933 and 1935, allowed Muslim mofussil members to burnish pro-peasant and Muslim credentials and depict the Congress as a party of zamindars, moneylenders, and traders – that is, of Hindu exploiters.

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<sup>112</sup> The Bill was based on the recommendations of the Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry and an experiment with debt reconciliation in Chandpur. In Chandpur, 39 debt conciliation boards dealt with 1,996 cases, and awarded 244,795 rupees to creditors against a total claimed debt of Rs. 506,234, BLC, Vol. XLVI, No. 2, p. 495

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The Government of India Act of 1935 extended the franchise and empowered provincial governments, even while centralizing more powers at the centre. The “communal award” created 117 reserved seats for Muslims, 78 general seats, and 10 reserved seats for the depressed classes in an assembly out of a total 250 seats. Of the 117 Muslim constituencies, 111 were rural and of the 78 general, 66 were rural. The campaign to capture provincial power in Bengal was conducted in the countryside. Under the leadership of A.K. Fazlul Huq, mofussil Muslim legislators and politicians broke away from the Nikhil Bangla Praja Samiti and formed the Krishak Praja Party. Joya Chatterji describes the leadership of the KPP – Fazlul Huq, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Abdul Majid, Shamsuddin Ahmed, Tamizuddin Khan, Shah Abdul Hamid and Nausher Ali – as “men [who] had acquired some education and had made their careers in mofussil towns, while retaining the cultural mannerisms of the country-side.”<sup>113</sup>

This grouping of mofussil Muslim politicians focused their campaign on tenancy and credit reforms. At a conference in Dacca in April 1936, the KPP announced its fourteen-point campaign platform. They promised to abolish zamindari without compensation, to reduce rents, to provide for agricultural credit, to enact legislation to protect cultivators from tenants. Of the fourteen demands, three related to the tenancy reforms and four to credit market reforms. In addition to land and credit reforms, the KPP promised irrigation, health-care, primary education, provincial autonomy, reductions in administrative expenditure and the release of

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<sup>113</sup> Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 74

political prisoners. The KPP's campaign did not focus on Islam, unlike their Muslim League rivals in the hinterlands' Muslim constituencies. They did not need to invoke Islam – their politics of agrarian factor markets were recognizably a part of Muslim politics. The campaign of “rice and daal for everyone,” “the land belongs to the tiller,” and the abolition of debt was enormously successful amongst eastern Bengal's mostly-Muslim cultivators, and the KPP trounced the Muslim League in Bengal's rural Muslim constituencies. In the next chapter, I look at how this avowedly pro-peasant political party struggled to reverse the course of agrarian imiseration under colonial conditions.



## Chapter 4

### **The Politics of Jute Prices: The state, commodity markets, and the Bengal Famine, 1930 to 1944**

In 1943 and 1944, around 3 million people died in Bengal from starvation and hunger-related causes.<sup>1</sup> The jute tracts of eastern and northern Bengal were hit hardest by famine. The most immediate cause of famine was a sharp rise in the price of rice in late 1942 and early 1943. Rice prices began to rise in November 1942, from Rs. 8/8/- a maund and reached about Rs. 12/8/- in early January.<sup>2</sup> Between January and March 1943, rice prices rose steeply across Bengal, increasing from Rs. 12/4/- to Rs. 31/- in Faridpur and from Rs. 9/8/- to Rs. 25/- in Tippera.<sup>3</sup> Hunger was most acute between March and November 1943, but famine mortality continued into 1944, as starvation, disease and government mismanagement of post-famine food distribution programs took their full toll.

Death and destitution was highest amongst landless agricultural labourers and amongst individuals who earned cash incomes from trades and crafts – fishermen, barbers, etc. The delta's subsistence jute cultivators were also severely affected by rising rice prices, as the price of jute did not rise nearly as rapidly as that of rice.<sup>4</sup> On

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen puts the figure at 2.7 to 3 million and Paul Greenough at between 3.2 and 3.8 million.

<sup>2</sup> FIC, p. 28

<sup>3</sup> FIC, p. 40

<sup>4</sup> The Famine Inquiry Commission Report of 1945 and Mahalanobis, et. al.'s statistical study of the "After-effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943" - the two most thorough investigations into the famine in the 1940s - does not mention of jute. As Sugata Bose has remarked, Amartya Sen's pioneering study of the Bengal famine does not consider terms of trade between rice and jute, though he does look at exchanges between rice and wheat, mustard-oil, cloth, bamboo umbrellas, milk, fish and haircuts. Bose has argued that this strange neglect of the region's most significant cash crop in the scholarly literature means that "there is no explanation of the ways in which the famine affected the whole spectrum of the poor in the Bengal countryside." Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, p. 94.

July 21, 1942, at the opening of the jute season, Calcutta jute mills were paying Rs. 6/8/- per maund for the lowest quality jute and Rs. 9/8/- for better qualities. Cultivators in the mofussil were most likely receiving between Rs. 5 and 5/8/- per maund for their jute – barely sufficient to cover costs of cultivation. In November 1942, when news of Britain’s victories over Germany in North Africa reached Calcutta, prices rose by about Rs. 1/8/- per maund across the board. By May 1943, prices were greater than Rs. 14 and Rs. 17 depending on quality and continuing to rise. In June, the Indian Jute Mills Association put a stop to the increase in jute prices by setting maximum prices at Rs. 14 and Rs. 16/8 for bottoms and mediums.<sup>5</sup> Jute prices had doubled between July 1942 and May 1943, while Calcutta rice prices had almost quadrupled from Rs. 8 in July 1942 to Rs. 30/10/- in mid May, 1943. More significantly, however, for subsistence jute cultivators the rise in fibre prices occurred too late. The bulk of the delta’s cultivators would have already sold their jute at the very low prices prevailing at the opening of the 1943 season.<sup>6</sup> Jute cultivators’ meager earnings from jute sales from prices prevailing between July and October 1942 could not finance purchases of subsistence grain between March and May 1943.

High rice prices had affected small agriculturists very differently than it had landless labourers and poorer occupational categories. As P.C. Mahalanobis and his colleagues argue, based on a sample survey of the after-effects of famine conducted in 1945, people living by agriculture or a combination of agriculture and labour

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<sup>5</sup> As I will show later in the chapter, the IJMA was able to act as a cartel and set jute prices during the War as their mills consumed about 70% of Bengal’s raw jute.

<sup>6</sup> H.S.M Ishaque, Director of Rural Reconstruction and Chief Controller of Jute Regulation noted in March or April 1943 that the improvement in jute prices had benefitted middlemen rather than cultivators. Quoted in Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal*, pp. 91-92.

suffered from “economic deterioration” rather than “destitution.” Small cultivators without sufficient grain for household subsistence certainly suffered hunger and deprivation of a magnitude not experienced in Bengal since the late eighteenth century. Cultivators did not have recourse to high interest loans as they had in previous times of distress - the moneylender had departed agrarian Bengal, driven out by debt settlement boards established in large numbers after 1937. Subsistence jute cultivators sold their limited assets and their cultivable lands in a desperate attempt to purchase subsistence grain. Mahalanobis has estimated that between April 1943 and April 1944, about 920,000 families sold arable lands, out of whom 260,000 sold all their lands. 670,000 families mortgaged arable land, out of whom about 103,000 also sold some of their land.<sup>7</sup> The incidence of land-sales was greatest amongst cultivators with smaller landholdings, that is, amongst subsistence jute cultivators (Table 4.1).

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Table 4.1: Peasant families’ sales of land, April 1943 to April 1944<sup>8</sup>  
*(percentages out of total number of peasants families in each landholding category)*

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	Sold all arable land	Sold part arable land
Less than 2 acres	240,000 (6.1%)	300,000 (7.4%)
Between 2 and 5 acres	20,000 (1.2%)	250,000 (15.3%)
More than 5 acres	4,000 (0.4%)	110,000 (12.5%)

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Another, less tragic, fatality of the famine was the image and reputation of Bengal’s populist Chief Minister, A.K. Fazlul Haq. Fazlul Haq and his Krishak Praja Party had come to power in the 1936 elections on a campaign pledge of rice and dal

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<sup>7</sup> Mahalanobis, p. 339

<sup>8</sup> Compiled from Mahalanobis, pp. 339-340

for everyone. As early as 1940, Fazlul Haq and his government were being attacked for failing to provide for everyone's dal bhat. In a remarkable speech in the assembly, Haq disavowed the popular election slogan: "What I said in the manifesto was this: 'the problem of dal bhat is the problem to-day.' That does not mean I have got dal bhat in my house ... which anybody can come and eat ... If there was anyone who believed that I would give dal bhat to five crores of people he must be a fool. Not only that, he must be living in a fool's paradise."<sup>9</sup> Even before the famine struck, Fazlul Haq's reputation as the champion of the peasantry had been challenged. As Atul Krishna Ghose announced in September 1941, "a large section of the people in Bengal have lost their confidence in Mr. A.K. Fazlul Haq. He knows it, I know it, and everybody knows it ... The people who once adored Maulvi A.K. Fazlul Haq ... have now lost their confidence in him."<sup>10</sup>

Famine was the deathblow to the political reputation of an already beleaguered Chief Minister. In March 1943, John Herbert, Bengal's autocratic imperial governor, forced Haq's resignation on grounds of incompetence and loss of legitimacy. Just prior to his forced resignation, Haq had delivered a forceful speech condemning the Governor and the colonial bureaucracy for the impending humanitarian crisis and the hugely unpopular boat-denial and rice-denial policies of the government. In early 1942, after the Japanese invasion of Burma, the government seized boats that could carry ten or more passengers and procured rice in coastal districts - to deny food-stocks and transportation to an invading Japanese army from across the Bay of Bengal. In speeches after his forced resignation, Haq

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<sup>9</sup> An exasperated Nalikshya Sanyal, the party whip of the opposition Congress, blurted out, "This is just like you!", BLA, 9<sup>th</sup> Session, 1940 Calcutta, p. 187

<sup>10</sup> BLA, LX, No. 4, 1941, p. 73

pinned the blame for famine on the colonial Governor and the “whims and caprices of hardened bureaucrats to many of whom autocratic ideals are bound up with the very breath of their lives.”<sup>11</sup>

Without absolving or assigning blame and responsibility for causing famine, it is worth remembering that the root cause of the famine was the unequal rise in commodity prices during World War II and the worsening exchange between rice and other commodities – especially labour. One way of thinking about the state’s “failure” in famine is, therefore, to consider the government’s role in commodity markets, and its ability or lack thereof to influence commodity prices. In this chapter, I will look at ideas and practices of government intervention into jute markets and regulation of jute prices during the depression years of the 1930s and the turbulent years of World War II.

The sharp drop in commodity prices in the great depression had sparked considerable global debate on what governments could and should do to control commodity prices. In Bengal, the discussion focused on jute, the “life-blood of Bengal’s economy.” In the next section, I will look at various ideas of government intervention into jute markets between 1930 and 1936, prior to the political reforms of Government of India Act. The Montagu-Chelmsford era provincial government’s sole measure was a “voluntary restriction scheme” – a government-run propaganda campaign to persuade cultivators to produce less jute. Nationalists of all stripes pilloried the provincial government for its lack of action. A wide variety of schemes of government involvement in the jute trade were aired by various stripes of politicians in Bengal. The critique of government’s inaction constituted a nationalist

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<sup>11</sup> BLA, LXV, 1943, p. 46

vision of a more pro-active state, actively intervening in markets for the good of the nation and the nation's peasants.

In 1937, A.K. Fazlul Haq's Krishak Praja-Muslim League coalition government came to power, following a populist campaign promising reforms in land tenure and credit markets, higher prices in produce markets, and rice and dal for everyone. The second section of this chapter looks at measures taken by the new government to influence jute prices. The peasant populist government was slow in turning its attention to jute prices, focusing their initial energies on establishing debt settlement boards and wiping clean cultivators' debt burdens. The government only turned its attention to jute produce markets when prices slumped at the opening of the 1939 jute season in July. Government intervention was almost immediately followed by the beginnings of WWII, with Britain declaring war on Germany on September 1939. The government's attempts to "stabilize" jute prices took place against the backdrop of extreme market turbulence driven by war-related events. Under the leadership of the H.S. Suhrawardy, Commerce and Labour Minister from 1937 to 1941, the government attempted to influence spot-prices in the hinterland by setting minimum and maximum prices in futures markets, to create bull runs by issuing press communiqués, and by persuading or cajoling the IJMA to agree to minimum prices and purchase schedules. Under the leadership of the Tamizuddin Khan, Agriculture Minister from 1939 to 1941, the government tried to influence prices by reducing supply – through the compulsory restriction of jute acreage. These measures failed to establish government control over the price of jute.

Before turning to a detailed account of ideas and practices of state intervention in jute markets, I will briefly sketch equally failed attempts to regulate

rice prices just before and during the 1943 famine. Rice prices began to rise from May 1942 after the Japanese invasion of Burma, an important source of grain for Bengal. In June, the Government of Bengal issued an order fixing maximum wholesale prices of medium and coarse rice in Calcutta markets at Rs. 5/12/- per maund. The prevailing theory was that hinterland prices were determined by metropolitan prices and that “breaking the Calcutta market” was key to setting prices. Maximum prices drove stocks underground, as traders held back stocks, dealt in black markets, or exported rice out of Bengal. The last factor led the government to ban all exports of rice except under permit in July 1942. As stocks of rice ran low in Calcutta, the government distributed the “denial rice” it had procured from coastal districts in case of a Japanese invasion through controlled shops at maximum prices. Despite these measures, prices of rice did not fall to the stipulated minimum and government fought shy of enforcing its rules: “district officers were instructed not to enforce the control prices except in cases of gross profiteering.”<sup>12</sup>

The alarming rise in rice prices in November and December 1942, once again forced government action. The government’s primary concern was to feed metropolitan Calcutta without driving up rice prices. In order to do so, the government setup a procurement scheme. On December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942, District Officers in Rajshahi Division were instructed to purchase 4,700 tons of rice at maximum prices. Air raids over Calcutta in late 1942 led to a sense of panic, and the government adopted a more ambitious procurement scheme to ensure that the metropolis would be fed. When the scheme was abandoned on January 9, 1943, the government had managed to procure only 2,800 tons. Under the new scheme,

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<sup>12</sup> FIC, p. 29

private grain-dealing agencies were appointed to purchase 11,021 maunds of rice and 16,532 tons of paddy at prescribed ceiling prices. The agents were warned that their licenses would be cancelled if they were found to be trading at higher than those prices. Rice was still not forthcoming. Between January 10 and February 17, when the scheme was abandoned, agents had procured only about 2,200 tons. The government then decided to purchase grain on its own account, through a Foodgrains Purchasing Officer. The government too failed to procure any meaningful quantity of rice – about 3,000 tons between February 18 and March 11.

At government's ceiling prices rice was simply not forthcoming. In its determination to feed the metropolis, the government reversed its price policies – they would remove maximum price restrictions and allow prices to rise in the hope that rice would begin to flow into Calcutta. On March 11, 1943, the provincial government announced “No Price Control in Wholesale Rice and Paddy markets.” District officers were instructed to purchase up to 20,000 maunds of rice in the first three days irrespective of price, and to report all subsequent offers to the Foodgrains Purchasing Officer. Prices rose sharply in Calcutta markets from Rs. 15/- per maund on March 3 to Rs. 30/10/- on May 17. High prices did the trick – grain was released and Calcutta was fed. The countryside, however, starved. The famine was thus preceded by the government's failure to regulate rice prices. Later in this chapter, I will provide a more detailed account of similarly disastrous attempts by the government to regulate jute prices in the years leading up to the famine. Before that, I will discuss the range of ideas and schemes of state intervention in commodity markets in the aftermath of the great depression.



## **IDEAS OF STATE INTERVENTION, 1930-36**

One of the most widely discussed topics in Bengal, in the aftermath of the great depression, was what governments should and could do to raise the prices of fibre? The Montagu-Chemsford era government was not, however, willing to take any substantive measures. Their main response to the depression was fiscal retrenchment – cutting down expenditure in line with the sharp falls in government revenue from the various jute-related taxes and from peasants' non-payment of rents. The sharpest cuts were in the so-called nation-building departments – agriculture, irrigation, and local government. On the other hand, in the face of Congress's Civil Disobedience Program and rising revolutionary terrorism – highlighted by the daring Chittagong armoury raid in April 1930 – the cash-strapped colonial government increased expenditure on police and prisons. Far from offering material assistance to those affected – aside from token disbursements of small loans to a handful – the colonial government retrenched.

Anti-colonial nationalists seized upon the colonial government's inaction at the onset of the depression. K.G.M. Faroqui, the Agriculture Minister and a prominent Muslim zamindar with landholdings spread over several districts of eastern Bengal, was singled out for particular criticism. Naresh Chandra Sengupta, a representative from Mymeningh and the leader of the Congress-affiliated Peasants and Workers Party, castigated Faroqui for “sit[ting] tight in his cool Himalayan home” while the “great crisis ... made people frantic with fear.”<sup>13</sup> In discussing the depression era budget of 1931-32, Hassan Ali, the member from Dinajpur, asked the following rhetorical questions: “Have the Government ... ever thought of the poor

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<sup>13</sup> BLC, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1931, Calcutta, p. 692

agriculturists of Bengal? Have they ever given any thought over the controlling of prices of jute? Have the Government ... ever bothered themselves about how to organize the rice market so that the poor cultivators might not have fallen a hopeless victim to such a serious slump in commodity prices? The answer is 'No.'"<sup>14</sup>

The solitary measure undertaken by government to raise jute prices was a scheme of voluntary restriction – a state-sponsored propaganda campaign urging cultivators in the delta to sow less jute. This was risk-free government action on the cheap and fell far short of the much more comprehensive state interventions championed by anti-colonial nationalists. And even then the state's voluntary restriction campaign was slow to get underway. In the March and April 1931 sowing season, it was limited to distributing just three pamphlets – two urging a reduction in the area under jute and the third suggesting sugarcane as an alternative to jute – in the delta's jute tracts.<sup>15</sup> The reduction in acreage in 1931 – by almost 50% - was almost certainly due to the disastrous collapse in prices in 1930 rather than the three pamphlets, but this did not stop K.G.M. Farouqi from proclaiming that the government's campaign was successful. However, as acreage steadied and prices stagnated in following years, it became difficult to continue claiming success.

The provincial government responded by intensifying its propaganda scheme. During the sowing seasons – March and April – of each year during the 1930s, the government conducted an intensive anti-jute propaganda campaign in the delta's jute tracts. In March 1935, Farouqi informed the Legislative Council that 1,084 officials

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154

<sup>15</sup> BLC, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1931, p. 175

and 40,384 non-officials had participated in anti-jute propaganda.<sup>16</sup> District-level administrations competed with each other over the success of their restriction programmes.<sup>17</sup> Government ministers and prominent provincial politicians – men like Faroqui and Azizul Huque, Minister of Education – toured the jute tracts extensively and spoke to cultivators on the need to reduce cultivation.<sup>18</sup> Further, state propaganda message was spread through a wider variety of media than just printed leaflets. In 1934 Jute Commission recommended the use of ““wireless, cinema and magic lanterns” in anti-jute propaganda.<sup>19</sup> Government distributed posters with captions like: “Intelligence is the gift of God. Utilize properly and you will get plenty. If you cultivate like a fool you will have to suffer afterwards” and “Who is the fool who says wealth comes in abundance by cultivating Jute. Did people die of starvation when there was no cultivation of Jute in our land?”<sup>20</sup> These captions show the affinity between government propaganda and the anti-jute *boyans* discussed in the previous chapter. “Restrictionism,” which emerged as an international economic concept in the aftermath of the depression, took its particular form in Bengal from well-established and local anti-jute discourse.

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<sup>16</sup> BLC, Vol. XLV, No. 1, 1935, p. 432

<sup>17</sup> The Collector of Tipperah took particular pride in the success of the restriction program in his district, as he noted in a circular distributed during the sowing season of 1934. Enclosed in, Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Batchelor, Thomas Duff & Co., 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1936, MS/86/V/7/2, DUA.

<sup>18</sup> In a lunch meeting at the Calcutta Club with Sir Alexander Murray, a Director of Thomas Duff & Co visiting from Dundee, Education Minister Azizul Huque announced his “determined object of doing all he can to influence the ryot to curtail sowings.” rom Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Batchelor, Thomas Duff & Co., 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1936, MS/86/V/7/2, DUA.

<sup>19</sup> *Jute Commission Report*, 1934. 9

<sup>20</sup> Enclosed in from Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1937, MS/86/V/7/3, DUA

Intensive propaganda failed to raise jute prices. Jute production did not decrease below that of 1931 levels and, in fact increased in 1933, as jute prices stabilized around Rs. 5 per maund. While still barely profitable, jute was a more paying cash crop than rice and, despite the state's championing of alternative cash-crops, the low-lying alluvial floodplains that formed most of the jute tracts were not suitable for sugar-cane or tobacco. More significantly, reducing output was unlikely to raise prices. Jute mills had taken advantage of the unusually low prices of 1931-32 to build up enormous stocks of jute, and could stay away from markets for extended periods. In 1935, after four consecutive years of propaganda and persistently low fibre prices, K.G.M. Farouqi admitted to the legislature that restriction was not affecting futures market prices: "It is well known that there are speculative elements in the jute market which affect prices. It is not possible to point to a particular cause or causes which might have led to this weakness in the market, nor can one foretell whether this is only temporary or not."<sup>21</sup>

The failures of voluntary restriction led to the proposal of alternative government measures to raise jute prices. The most widely voiced alternative was compulsory restriction – setting acreage quotas for individual peasant households and punishing them if they exceeded set quotas. In February 1931, as the provincial government commenced its leaflet programme for voluntary restriction, Naresh Chandra Sengupta moved the Bengal Jute Bill (II) in the legislative council. The son of a District Magistrate from Tangail in East Bengal, Sengupta was a graduate of

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<sup>21</sup> BLC, Vol. XLVI, No. 2, 1935, p. 339

Presidency College, a successful lawyer, and a prominent Bengali novelist.<sup>22</sup> He was also the founder-chairperson of the Congress-affiliated Peasants' and Workers' Party. The Bengal Jute Bill (II) was a watered-down version of Bengal Jute Bill (I) which never made it on to the floor of the legislative council for discussion as it required the Governor-General's approval. Bill (I) provided for compulsory restriction by legislation and required approval; Bill (II) merely empowered Union Boards to specify actual quantities of land to be sowed by each individual cultivator. Aggregate quantities of jute to be cultivated in Bengal would be set by a committee of experts who would forecast likely demand for the fibre, and those numbers would be translated into precise targets for each union. Though significantly diluted from its original version, the Bengal Jute Bill (II) was consistent with Sengupta's broader economic vision – total state control over jute cultivation and trade.

Sengupta's political opponents included the mofussil Muslim members of the Council Praja Party, particularly Azizul Huque and Tamizuddin Khan. They opposed Sengupta's scheme on grounds that "Union Boards had not yet reached that standard of efficiency."<sup>23</sup> As the government's propaganda campaign failed to reduce acreage, the popularity for compulsory restriction schemes increased. In a December 1934 speech opposing compulsory restriction on the grounds that "at the present state of development of union boards ... there is a danger of the law being abused, and poor people being oppressed," Tamizuddin Khan admitted that "opinion gradually has grown in the country in favour of restriction."<sup>24</sup> While registering his opposition to

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<sup>22</sup> Sengupta was the chairman of the All-India Association of Progressive Writers formed in 1936 to condole the death of Maxim Gorky and, like the more celebrated Urdu progressive writers, was accused of indecency and immorality for his depictions of sexuality in a short story, "Thandidi."

<sup>23</sup> BLC, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, 1931, p. 320

<sup>24</sup> BLC, Vol. XLIV, No. 1, 1934, p. 81

compulsory restriction in the report of the jute committee, Azizul Huque admitted that: “mofussil opinion ... is almost unanimously and emphatically in favour of such restriction by legislation.”<sup>25</sup> By 1935 with persistently low jute prices, Tamizuddin Khan admitted that compulsory restriction could be required in the future.<sup>26</sup>

Restriction, however, was not the only policy option on the table. In October, 1930, in a conference of metropolitan capital organized by the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar proposed two forms of state intervention – voluntary restriction and a permanent, state-owned entity to regulate and intervene in markets. Originally from Mymensingh, Sarkar was one of the “big five” of the Bengal Congress, a self-made businessman who had made a fortune in insurance, and president of the BNCC. Sarkar proposed a scheme of “intensive and extensive propaganda so as to bring home to the cultivators the need for growing only a limited quantity of jute government.” He was against compulsory restriction on the grounds that “the smallness of the holdings, the number of cultivators, the wide area of jute cultivation” made state-enforced production quotas impossible. The colonial government took up this scheme of voluntary restriction quite readily but ignored the second part of Sarkar’s proposals, which were much more ambitious, interventionist and potentially costly.

Sarkar proposed the creation of an “Institute for the Permanent Defence of Jute.”<sup>27</sup> Sarkar’s Institute would be financed by a tax on jute, and would perform

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187

<sup>26</sup> BLC, Vol. XLVI, No. 1, 1935, p. 344

<sup>27</sup> Sarkar modeled his institute after the identically named Institute for the Permanent Defense of Coffee in Brazil. The idea of a Jute Institute had precedence. The Royal Commission on Agriculture had proposed the creation of a jute committee focusing on cultivation and marketing in 1926. In March 1930, Khetter Mohan Roy spoke in the legislative council about the need for a “permanent machinery to initiate

three primary functions: first, own and operate warehouses to enable cultivators to stock jute; second, advance credit to farmers against their stocks of jute; and, third, disseminate information about the state of commodity markets amongst cultivators and implement the voluntary restriction programme. In addition, Sarkar argued that the Institute should purchase jute in open markets to reduce stocks and support prices. He also advocated the injection of liquidity into the cash-starved agrarian economy. Sarkar recommended large-scale short-term loans to be immediately disbursed amongst cultivators to tide them through difficult times. Sarkar repeated his arguments for injections of liquidity into the agricultural economy, though the government was clearly unwilling to undertake such programmes. In a quarterly meeting of the BNCC in August 1931, Sarkar said: “The provision of adequate loans to the agriculturists and those dependent on agriculture should be made, even if it entails an expansion of currency.”<sup>28</sup>

Faced with widespread criticisms for its failures to raise jute prices, the colonial government responded with the classic ploy of bureaucratic delay: they established a committee to investigate the jute trade and propose legislative solutions. The terms of reference of the committee was to consider regulating the cultivation of jute, the marketing of the fibre, the scope and constitution of a Jute Committee, the threat of substitutes to jute, and the possibilities of other uses of the fibre to expand markets. The committee included five representatives of various chambers of commerce, three representatives from the legislative council, four civil servants from the colonial government, and a professor of economics from Presidency College.

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measures to improve and develop the growing and marketing and manufacture of jute and to control its production according to the needs of the world market.” BLC, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1930, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> “Second Quarterly General Meeting,” *Journal of the BNCC*, p. 73

The thirteen members could not agree on a course of action and produced a bewildering array of reports and minutes of dissents.

The committee produced three different reports. Government officials, British representatives from the BCC and IJMA, and the economics professor wrote the majority report, though the Indian signatories – J.C. Sinha, the lone academic and Arshad Ali and G.S. Dutt, members of the Indian Civil Service– wrote notes of dissent. The representatives of the BNCC, Indian Chamber of Commerce and Muslim Chamber of Commerce and two of three MLCs signed the minority report. Naresh Chandra Sen Gupta wrote a minute of dissent from the minority report. Finally, M. Azizul Huque, Minister of Education at the time, individually authored a second minority report.

The majority report, which constituted the official viewpoint, advocated minimal state intervention into jute markets, declaring itself against any “attack on the time-honoured freedom of the raiyat to cultivate his land as he likes.”<sup>29</sup> The majority authors, however, disagreed on the question of legislating the jute trade. The British members of the majority were against legislation intervention in any aspect of the jute trade, while the Indian members (J.C. Sinha, G.S. Dutt, and M. Arshad Ali, the Registrar of Co-operative Societies) advocated legislation to fix quality grades for loose jute, establish state-operated “regulated jute markets” in the hinterland, and regulate jute futures markets in Calcutta. In a separate minute of dissent, G.S. Dutt argued for the creation of “Village Associations” that would carry out developmental

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 8-9



activities in agriculture, trade, education, sanitation and health in localities.<sup>30</sup> Dutt was a development-minded ICS officer who had actively interested in rural regeneration during his postings during the late 1910s and early twenties in Birbhum, Bankura and Mymensingh. It is interesting that Dutt's "Village Associations," which had its sources in the non-cooperation period and Gandhi's "back to villages" appeal, found space in the minute of dissent of the majority report.

The minority report did not recommend compulsory restriction by legislation and only differed from the majority view of colonial officials and British trade in stating that legislation should be resorted to if propaganda schemes failed. They did differ from the majority in recommending a wide range of legislative interventions in product markets – abolishing extra charges in hinterland markets, standardizing quality, establishing regulated markets in the delta, standardizing weights, and regulating futures markets. The authors of the minority report also advocated a scheme to establish licensed warehouses throughout Bengal, which would provide advances to cultivators against their stored jute. Licensed warehouses, they argued, would enable cultivators to hold on to their fibre by providing storage space and credit facilities. In his dissent, N.C. Sen Gupta disagreed with his colleagues on two "fundamental points." First, he urged for compulsory restriction of jute cultivation through legislation and, second, he advocated a concerted state effort to run the "entire jute business on co-operative lines."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dutt models his Village Associations on Sir F.A. Nicholson's, a senior official in the Madras Government during the late nineteenth century, descriptions of agricultural associations in Japan in *Note on Agriculture in Japan*, Madras Government Press, 1907.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174

Azizul Huque's individually-authored second minority report was brief and did not offer any substantially different policy points from the minority report. Huque supported voluntary restriction and was in favour of regulating the very same aspects of jute markets as the minority report – standardizing quality, abolishing extra payments, establishing regulated markets, regulating futures markets, and so forth. It is possible that Huque, as both a minister of the government and a leading personality in the Council Praja Party, found himself in a politically untenable position. Should he put his signature with the colonial government, the villains of the piece who were not willing abandon laissez-faire for the sake of cultivators? Or should he join the supporters of the Congress, his political opponents that Huque, along with others, had quite successfully portrayed as anti-peasant and anti-Muslim? Instead, he attempted to strike out a third path, different from the colonial government and Congress nationalists. While his policy positions were substantially the same as that of the Congress-affiliated first minority report, Huque tried to stake out a difference through constant referral to “mofussil opinion” rather than technical expertise. For example, proposing the regulation of futures markets, Huque stated: “Whatever may be the nature or theoretical and economic explanation in favour of Fatka market, I have been struck by the unanimity of mufassal opinion of all shades that Fatka is causing unnecessary fluctuations in what would have otherwise been a fairly steady market.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, due to illness as he claimed, Huque was unable to fully flesh out an alternative policy stance and, in the end, could only

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 190

register that he was “unable to agree with the recommendations either of the majority or of the minority reports.”<sup>33</sup>

The array of majority and minority reports and minutes of dissent amongst the jute committee did not nearly exhaust the full range of policy options that were being discussed in Bengal. The terms of reference of the committee – restriction, legislating product markets, and the constitution of a permanent jute institute – excluded the state interventions envisioned by the Congress-led anti-colonial nationalist movement. The jute committee could not, for instance, consider the manufacturing sector, even as criticism grew louder that manufacturers were depressing prices for their own benefits. In March 1933, as the Jute Committee was being formed, Shanti Shekhareswar Ray urged the commission “to examine to what extent the present attitude of the jute mills is a contributory cause to the low level of the prices of jute.”<sup>34</sup>

The accusation that jute mills were acting as a cartel to control fibre prices informed Satyendra Kumar De’s proposal, in February 1936, to fix minimum prices of jute and rice through legislation. Proposing this measure in the Council, De argued that theories of demand and supply are “academic” in Bengal, where “the buyers of our agricultural products combine themselves to reduce the prices of our agricultural crops.” He went on to state the “formidable power of the millowners of jute and their unholy combinations to undersell the jute cultivators is a palpable fact. They are the real terror. Everybody knows it.”<sup>35</sup> The policy did not pass, but it did

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181

<sup>34</sup> BLC, Vol. XLI, No. 2, 1933, p. 667

<sup>35</sup> BLC, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1, 1936, p. 44

split the mofussil Muslim vote. Opponents of the Bill, which included Tamizuddin Khan and Abul Kasem, argued that the motion was not “practicable,” – that is, government lacked the capacity to implement minimum prices. Supporters of the Bill, including Emaduddin Ahmed, Hassan Ali, Rajibuddin Tarafdar, urged that action was necessary and were clearly keen to take on colonial capital.

Naresh Chandra Sengupta supported the bill, but he described it as a tinkering measure whereas what was required was the “wholesale reorganization of the rural economy.”<sup>36</sup> In Bengal, as in other parts of India, the Depression had informed a growing nationalist economic vision of state-planned and directed economies. Under the leadership of its young left, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, the Congress formally endorsed state planning as its economic ideology. In speeches to the BNCC’s quarterly general meetings, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar constantly reminded his audience of the “special strength might have been imparted to the country if only her economic destiny were entrusted to the control of a national Government.” Sarkar drew particular inspiration from the “bold, constructive scheme of a ten years’ programme in China ... envisaging a steady development of the mining, metallurgical, textile and chemical industries, credit organization and shipping of the country.”<sup>37</sup> A contingent of Congress aligned politicians in the Bengal legislature, with Naresh Chandra Sengupta as its loudest and most insistent voice, proposed measures for the “economic organization” of peasant cultivation and nationalizing raw jute trade – that is, for centrally planned agricultural production and state purchases of the entire jute crop.

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>37</sup> “Second Quarterly General Meeting,” *Journal of the BNCC*, p. 88

Mofussil Muslim members, as argued in the previous chapter, had focused their political energies on agrarian factor markets rather than produce markets. Unlike the Congress, the Krishak Praja Party had not formulated coherent plans for controlling jute prices. This did not, however, prevent members of the Krishak Praja Party from making eloquent promises of higher jute prices while campaigning in the 1936 elections. When the KPP and the Muslim League formed a coalition government with A.K. Fazlul Haq as chief minister in 1937, they inherited a depression-wracked economy, an incoherent economic discourse of state intervention to fix prices, and heightened expectations arising from their peasant populist campaign. Further, the new government depended on the votes of the European contingent of the assembly to remain in power. Fazlul Haq had excluded the KPP stalwarts who had fought a largely victorious campaign over their Muslim League rivals. With respect to economic policy-making, Muslim Leaguers, zamindari families, and former Congress members held the most important ministries: Nalini Ranjan Sarkar was Finance Minister, Khwaja Habibullah, the Nawab of Dacca, was Minister of Agriculture and Industry, and H.S. Suhrawardy was Minister of Commerce and Labour. At the very beginning of his premiership, Haq thus alienated the mofussil Muslim politicians who propelled him to power. Formed out of inherently unstable parliamentary coalitions, faced with an economic crisis of unprecedented magnitude, and without clear ideas about how to revive the economy, the new government was in for a torrid time.

### **PRACTICES OF STATE INTERVENTION, 1936-1943**

In 1937, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar presented the first budget of the representative provincial government. The budget was heavily criticized for not deviating from the policies of the Montagu-Chelmsford period. The Congress member Narendra Chandra Datta criticized the lack of “any national programme or progressive planning which the electorate naturally expected.” Datta and his Congress colleagues urged the government to take on the economic programme of the Congress party and compared the Bengal government unfavourably with Congress ministries in other provinces of British India. The new government was not spared the criticisms of its own members, particularly from dissident Krishak Praja Party members. Aatur Rahman stated: “Although I am sitting physically behind the Government benches, my heart is on the other side to fight with the Ministry over the question of the budget.” Rahman agreed that there was “no indication of a change in policy [in the budget.]” Humayun Kabir, an Oxford-educated philosophy professor, literateur, and member of the Krishak Praja Party, focused his criticism on the government’s jute policy, or lack thereof. He said: “With regard to jute, I do not find any provisions for remedial measures for the agriculturists.”<sup>38</sup> Kabir suggested legislating minimum prices, researching alternative uses to raise demand, and long-term measures such as state provision of credit to cultivators, the elimination of middlemen, and the exclusion of all but legitimate trade from futures markets.

Throughout 1937 and 1938, the government had to field a barrage of questions and criticisms from the opposition Congress and from dissident Krishak Praja members about their lack of intervention in product markets. What was A.K. Fazlul Haq’s government doing, Lalit Chandra Das demanded to know in 1938, “to

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<sup>38</sup> Council Debates, BLC, Sitting of both Chambers of the Legislature, Vol. II, 1937, p. 184

show that the Government is alive to the great importance of jute crop in the economic sphere of Bengal and to the urgent necessity of keeping the interests of the jute growers in the forefront?"<sup>39</sup> The new cabinet was indeed slow to take up measures to address jute prices. In the first two years they concentrate their efforts in agricultural factor markets – that is, land and credit – rather than produce markets. The government gave effect to the Bengal Moneylender's Bill with gusto: within a year of its formation the new government had established debt conciliation boards in 3,000 villages. They were also far more responsive and pro-peasant with regards to rent payments and tenurial rights. As Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya has shown, between 1937 and 1939, the government conceded demands for fresh cadastral surveys, tenants' rights, and rent reduction in the Hajang tracts of northern Mymensing, "attesting to the ... existence of pro-peasant forces within the newly constituted provincial ministry."<sup>40</sup> In September 1939, the manager of the Thomas Duff group of jute mills in Calcutta wrote to the company's directors in Dundee concerned that cultivators "may hold on to a portion of the crop, particularly when Government, from a political point of view, nowadays are much more lenient in regard to granting extension for payment of taxes."<sup>41</sup>

As the provincial ministry's critics and some more recent historians, such as Omkar Goswami and Donald Stewart have argued, the government shied away from intervening in product markets as some ministers had material and financial interests in jute. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar held "substantial jute shares," and "half a dozen

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<sup>39</sup> This particular question was asked by Lalit Chandra Das, BLA, Vol. II, No. 1, 1938, Calcutta, p. 54. Similar questions were asked by Kamini Kumar Dutta in the same session, p. 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> Bhattacharyya, Jnanabrata, "An Examination of Leadership Entry in Bengal Peasant Revolts, 1937-1947," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 37(4), August 1978, p. 613

<sup>41</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., September 30, 1939

ministers depended on jute mill futures.”<sup>42</sup> The prominent jute magnate Edward Benthall gloated privately: “what a wonderful position we have with the Government. In fact, if we work things rightly I believe they would adopt any policy we liked to press on them.”<sup>43</sup> H.S. Suhrawardy, the Commerce and Labour Minister, is one of the villains in Stewart’s account. Suhrawardy was the leading Muslim League politician in metropolitan Calcutta, and had organized unions of Muslim jute mill workers. . Upon becoming labour minister he directly propositioned the IJMA for funds to support his unions “against the activities of the ‘red’ unions,” promising that “no one would know.”<sup>44</sup> Under Suhrawardy’s stewardship, the government extended support to the IJMA in restricting output amongst the mills – the IJMA was struggling to restrict output because of mills outside the association were refusing to comply. In September 1938, in an unsolicited act of assistance to the IJMA, the government issued an ordinance restricting jute mills to a forty-five hour workweek.

This cozy relationship between a peasant populist government and European jute manufacturing interests did not last. When the cabinet finally turned its attention to jute prices in July and August 1939, the relationship between jute mills and Fazlul Haq’s cabinet soured. When prices tumbled in the beginning of the 1939 jute season, the provincial government finally changed tack from the Montagu-Chelmsford era policies of voluntary restriction to a new policy of price stabilization. In a press communiqué issued on August 12, the government formally announced price stabilization as a policy goal. The government declared its intention to implement a

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<sup>42</sup> Stewart, Donald, p. 119

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Stewart, p. 120

<sup>44</sup> Stewart, p. 119



compulsory restriction scheme, to investigate measures to regulate futures markets, and committed to “stabiliz[ing] jute prices.” Although openly hostile to state intervention into markets, the IJMA did not issue an official statement. Instead, they decided, according to G.M. Garrie, IJMA Chairman and general manager of the Thomas, Duff & Company mills, “to say nothing ... at the present time. ... It is true that the European vote against the Government would put them out of power, and what is the alternative that faces us? – a Congress Government who are openly antagonistic towards European interests and who have just as openly stated that they would not hesitate to discriminate against us.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of official statements, IJMA members wrote scathing criticisms of government intervention into markets in the pages of *Capital* and *The Statesman*.

Between 1939 and 1942, the provincial government of Bengal and the Indian Jute Mills Association clashed frequently over stabilizing prices. Far from the intimate relationship described by Stewart, the relationship between the provincial government was increasingly antagonistic. In the narrative of European-owned jute manufacturing, the cold affairs of business had been clouded over by political passions and peasant populism. The views of G.M. Garrie, manager of the Thomas Duff group of mills, are representative of the views of the British jute manufacturing sector:

There is no question or doubt that the Local Government cannot see past the interests of the ryot and they are showing no concern for the manufacturing side of the trade, the shippers and eventual consumers. It is perfectly obvious that what they are doing is by way of implementing platform promises and justification of political ambition. It does seem wrong that such a state of affairs should have come about and that an industry such as ours should be

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<sup>45</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., August 15, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

liable to be upset at the whim of Ministers who have no practical knowledge of the trade they are interfering with to the extent they are.<sup>46</sup>

The provincial government, however, embarked on price stabilization during a particularly turbulent period in jute markets. Britain declared war on Germany on September 10 1939, barely a month after the provincial government's August 12 press communiqué. Jute markets responded immediately, with prices soaring in expectation of heavy war requirements of jute. Over the following years, jute prices fluctuated wildly, buffeted by war-related events, news, and rumours. Varying expectations of the extent of Britain and the allies' war requirements of jute manufactures drove prices both up and down. News from the war-front of victories and defeats caused markets to fall or rise spectacularly. The arrival of war closer to home, with the Japanese invasion of Burma, caused transport and coal shortages which, in turn, affected prices. The provincial government's attempts to stabilize prices during wartime turbulence were tragically unsuccessful. Though jute prices had increased during the war period, the price of rice rose far more sharply. The worsening terms of trade between jute and rice severely affected the viability of jute cultivating households' market-base subsistence livelihoods. In the winter of 1942-43, hunger, starvation and death stalked the delta's jute tracts.

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<sup>46</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., January 30, 1940, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA.

1939-40

The government intervened in jute markets when fibre prices tumbled at the opening of the 1939 season, mere weeks before Britain declared war on Germany in September. On the morning of August 8, 1939, the Indian Jute Mills' Association president, chairman and vice-chairman was summoned to a "full meeting of the Bengal cabinet." The director of Thomas Duff & Company and serving Chairman of the IJMA noted to his directors in Dundee, "the whole discussion centred round the sharp decline that has taken place in the price of raw jute and we had been asked to attend to have a frank discussion on the subject and offer Government whatever suggestions or advice we could."<sup>47</sup> The IJMA representatives blamed the fall in prices on futures markets speculation, particularly "the arrival in this market of one of the big Bombay bullion speculators," and urged for the abolition of the *fatka* market.

The government refused to close futures markets. Instead they suggested fixing a minimum price for futures trades, suggesting Rs. 35 per 5 maund kutchra bale. The provincial government consistently refused to close futures markets over the following years, arguing that such markets were useful to traders, provided a barometer for cultivators in gauging demand, and ensured that the Calcutta mills did not have a monopoly over fibre. Moreover, the government attempted to control spot prices in hinterland markets by setting minimum and maximum prices in futures trades. During the meeting with the IJMA, the government also stated their intention to compulsorily restrict jute acreage. A compulsory jute restriction bill was presented in the legislative assembly in December 1939 then February 1940, though in both instances the government withdrew the bill. The 1941 crop was the first instance of a

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, August 9, 1939, in MS/86/V/7/7, DUA.

compulsorily restricted crop in the delta. Third, and much to the alarm of jute mills, the cabinet raised the possibility of fixing prices of raw jute. A.K. Fazlul Haq – who according to Barrie – was “not really au fait with the position and indeed some of his other colleagues were in a similar position” – put the costs of cultivation at 5 rupees a maund and Rs. 7 per maund (35 per bale) as a possible minimum price. This policy was not followed through either, as the government had no mechanisms of implementing minimum prices – by effectively policing all jute transactions or by making purchases on their own account. Lastly, the government hinted at yet another price stabilization strategy – mandating the IJMA mills’ jute purchasing policy. Suhrawardy informed the IJMA that he was “very anxious that the association should do its best to get members to buy the bulk of their requirements during July/October, when the ryot was disposing of the main portion of his holdings.”<sup>48</sup> Over the following years, Suhrawardy would repeatedly try to persuade, threaten, or cajole the IJMA into adopting certain purchase policies with a view to stabilizing prices.

As was clear from the meeting between the Cabinet and the IJMA, the provincial government had plenty of ideas about how to stabilize prices but nothing like a comprehensive and well-formulated plan. The government tried out these ideas over following years with, as I will argue, limited success. On August 21, 1939, the government promulgated an ordinance setting the minimum price of raw jute in futures markets at Rs. 36 per bale. The ordinance was accompanied by a vigorous propaganda campaign in the countryside urging cultivators to hold on to their fibre until prices rose. This campaign of leaflets, public meetings, and announcements

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<sup>48</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., August 9, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

through the beating of drums was significantly more intensive than past government propaganda efforts at voluntary restriction. As the managers of Duff noted, this program was not:

a passing phase and one which might have been on a parity with the propaganda employed under the voluntary restriction schemes of the past. The Government are spreading their net upcountry very thoroughly and efficiently and are constantly urging the cultivator by beat of drum not to sell his jute at the present time, and reports to hand indicate that even threats are being held out to any cultivators who do not pay heed to Government's recommendations.<sup>49</sup>

M. David & Co., one of the largest raw jute traders in Bengal, received reports of government propaganda activities from their agencies in hinterland markets in late August, 1939. From Elashin in Mymensingh, it was reported that "Cultivators have been advised to hold on to stocks and not to sell under 7 Rs. local, otherwise they might be penalized by Government." From Goalundo, it was reported that "Anti-Selling Propaganda is going on on an extensive scale. Even at the smallest hats, men deputed by the Union Boards are present. By the beating of drums they attract attention and then strongly advise cultivators not to sell below Rs. 7 per md in 80 sicca weight." In Chandpur, it was reported that "picketing is being resorted to at various haunts by Moslem Associations" to prevent cultivators from selling their jute. The government also made much of their ordinance fixing minimum prices in futures markets. In Goalunda, "all the Bengali newspapers had printed in large letters that the Government had brought into force an Ordinance forbidding the sale or purchase of "kutch" jute below Rs. 36 per bale." The David & Co representative in

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<sup>49</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co, August 22, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

Goalundo complained that the papers had not specified that the act referred to futures markets, “caus[ing] a great deal of misunderstanding in the mofussil.”<sup>50</sup>

The provincial government traded on the considerably reputation of the iconic chief minister, A.K. Fazlul Haq, in persuading cultivators to hold back their jute. This populist leader had been voted in on a tide of peasant support, and Haq personally undertook the responsibility of raising jute prices. A pamphlet published by the Public Institute in Choumohani, Noakhali stated: “the Chief Minister, Hon. Mr. A.K. Fazlul Huque is trying to increase the price of jute and has requested the cultivators not to sell their jute at a reduced rate, as the price of jute will go higher. So, it is evident that the price of jute must go higher.” This, I would argue, was a momentous announcement: an elected government had taken direct responsibility for commodity prices. Merchants and mill-owners were not, however, convinced that the propaganda campaign would work: “Opinion upcountry is divided as to whether the effect of this propaganda will last, as it is generally recognized that the ryots are not in a financial position to hold back crop they have harvested.”<sup>51</sup>

Before the cultivators’ ability to hold back the crop could be seriously tested, Britain declared war on Germany, changing the complexion of markets entirely. The following day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, the IJMA leadership made an urgent trip to Simla to meet with the central government with regard to wartime requirements of jute – looms were unsealed, workweek of 45 hours decided, and Britain placed an immediate order for 60 million sandbags. Raw jute prices in future and spot markets rose sharply, as

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<sup>50</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., September 5, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>51</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co, August 22, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

speculation of the empire's war requirements of jute goods ran wild. Concerned by sharp price rises, Garrie and W.A.M. Walker, vice-chairman of the IJMA, met with Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy asking them to either close futures markets or to set maximum prices in futures trades. They refused, stating that "they had pledged themselves to get as much as they could for the ryot and that politically they would stand the risk of being put out of office if they were any party to restricting the full advantage the ryot might get from present circumstances."<sup>52</sup> Unable to gain any concessions from the provincial government, the IJMA mills decided to agree upon a maximum price for their members. On September 12, the IJMA mills decided a maximum price of between Rs. 8/4/- to Rs. 9/8/- per maund, depending on the quality of jute. The IJMA mills consumed about 70% of Bengal's jute – a sufficient proportion to effectively act as a cartel and decide prices by agreement.

The "gentlemanly agreement" was decried in nationalist quarters as an "unholy agreement" or an "ungentlemanly agreement amongst gentlemen." Garrie's fear that the price agreement would "blacken our faces in the eyes of nearly all sections outside the mills" was realized.<sup>53</sup> The maximum price agreement was also difficult to maintain, as speculators predicting a long drawn out war and high wartime requirements of jute goods created a spectacular bull run in futures markets. Despite such difficulties, the provincial government estimated that mills managed to purchase

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<sup>52</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., September 11, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>53</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 7, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

between 4.5 million and 5 million bales within their maximum prices between September and the beginning of November 1939.<sup>54</sup>

On 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, Suhrawardy wrote to the IJMA strongly criticizing the gentleman's agreement. He described the standstill in jute markets as a "a tug-of-war between a highly organized group of purchasers with infinite resources, and an unorganized group of sellers whose daily requirements compel them to part with their jute at any price they can get." Suhrawardy warned of government intervention, as "it is not possible for Government to watch this unequal tug-of-war idly and I shall be compelled to take steps to end this unequal contest." He urged the mills to take action before "you drive me to this course," and he recommended that they either substantially raise maximum prices or rescind the agreement. Suhrawardy does not specify what actions he would take – quite possibly, he himself did not know: "I do not feel called upon to disclose what steps I propose to take to come to the rescue of the cultivators in case you decline to accept either of my suggestions."<sup>55</sup>

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, a two and a half hour meeting took place between A.K. Fazlul Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy and the IJMA Chairman. G.M. Garrie's description of the meeting reveals the intimate yet antagonistic relationship that had developed between the new government and the jute mills. On the one hand, the ministers were committed to raising prices for cultivators and, on the other, they were dependent on the jute mills and the European votes in the legislature to

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<sup>54</sup> This was the figure given by A.K. Fazlul Haq in a meeting with the IJMA on November 6, 1939. From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 7, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Suhrawardy to P.S. MacDonald, Secy, IJMA, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1939. Enclosed in From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 7, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA



stay in power. The ministry brought up the fears of a Congress government and asked that the mills “should not embarrass them in the legislature or outside as being in league with the mills against the cultivator.” They used a combination of economic logic (rise in prices of manufactured goods, the considerable purchases by mills at maximum prices or lower), threats (strikes in jute mills, the possibility of a Congress government), and promises (legislating a larger crop the following year, discontinuing propaganda) to persuade the jute mills to rescind the agreement.

The IJMA mills rescinded their agreement on maximum prices. The end of the so-called “gentlemanly agreement” was followed by immediate and sharp rise in the prices in hinterland jute markets. On November 14 1939, Garrie reported to the Dundee managers, “Upcountry markets have ruled strong and excited since mills’ maximum prices were rescinded last Tuesday (November 7). Encouraged by a strong Futures market here, prices at all upcountry centres soared daily.”<sup>56</sup> Prices offered for medium grade jute was Rs. 18/8/- per maund, almost double the IJMA maximum of Rs. 9/8/-. Rescission had been followed with the news that the British government had placed an order for 500 million sandbags for the war. Prices shot up dramatically and reached Rs. 26/- per maund in futures markets.<sup>57</sup>

The government’s concern with abysmally low prices in the beginning of August had transformed into concerns about the spectacular rise by November. In

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<sup>56</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 14, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>57</sup> Garrie complained to his managers in Dundee that the government had leaked information to its two most important supporters, Ispahani and Adamjee (about whom more later). He said, “although I have no definite proof, I am inclined to agree that there is a leakage of information in regard to Government orders for Sandbags, and it is common talk here that both Ispahani and Adamjee have the ear of certain cabinet ministers as these two parties were certainly operating on an unusual scale a day or two before receipt of the last order for 500 million.” Further, “Birla as usual is credited with getting the information 24 hours in advance of me.” From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 14, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

November 21, 1939, Garrie reported that he “had a long talk yesterday afternoon with Suhrawardy and he is genuinely worried about the extent to which prices for raw materials have risen.”<sup>58</sup> Suhrawardy was, he later claimed, worried about a speculative bubble that was destined to burst. “The prices in the speculative market rose as high as Rs. 26/- [per maund],” he wrote to Jeremy Raisman the central finance minister almost exactly a year later, “without any support from the world market and it was quite clear that the market was heading for a crash.”<sup>59</sup>

Concerned by the expanding speculative bubble, Suhrawardy struck an oral agreement with the IJMA: the mills should suspend all purchases for a few days in order to lower prices. If prices fell, he promised that the government would fix maximum prices in the raw jute futures market. Legislation to prevent the rise in prices in futures markets was precisely the state intervention that the mills had been demanding for so long. The mills complied and prices duly fell. Suhrawardy did not, however, follow through on his end of the bargain. Speaking with Garrie, Suhrawardy “admitted making the promise and stated that he himself wished to fix a maximum, he told me that he was unable to get other members of the Cabinet to agree and therefore he was unable to do anything further in the matter.”<sup>60</sup>

Garrie and the IJMA were bitterly disappointed. “Badly let down,” they complained to the central government about government interference in the industry.

In a meeting with the “big guns from Delhi” – Central Commerce Minister, Sir

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<sup>58</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 21, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>59</sup> H.S. Suhrawardy to Jeremy Raisman, Finance Member, GoI, September 1, 1940, in Education, Health, and Lands, Agriculture, 68-40/40A, 1940, NAI

<sup>60</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., November 28, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

Ramaswamy Mudaliar, the Economic Advisor, Dr. Gregory, and Director General of Supply, Mr. Dow – on November 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup>, 1939, Garrie complained that “trade is being seriously interfered with and has become a happy playground for the speculator by the constant rumours that Ministers are buying in Fatka or selling in Fatka, that they are going to fix maximum prices or that they are not going to fix these, or that they are going to do this or that.”<sup>61</sup> Garrie’s complaint was that government action was driven by their “determination to implement platform promises and improve, if possible, their political position ... [and] they had no concern with the repercussions that might take place on the other side of the trade.”

While the mills accused the government of meddling with markets out of peasant populism, the opposition parties in the legislature accused the government of corruption. In December 1939, in response to the Agriculture Minister Tamizuddin Khan’s statement about a bill for compulsory jute restriction, Nalinakshya Sanyal, the Chief Whip of the Congress in the legislative assembly, publicly accused members of the Cabinet of deliberately manipulating prices in futures markets: “The method of issuing communiqué after communiqué upsetting the position of the market has been going on in a scandalous manner.” He further stated that he could name the merchants who had transacted in futures markets on behalf of the ministers. Sanyal did not name names – of either ministers or merchants – but when Tamizuddin Khan tried to repudiate the allegations Sanyal said, “we know that you have not made any money.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, November 29, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>62</sup> BLA, XLV-3, 6<sup>th</sup> Session, 1939, pp. 314-315

Sanyal's public accusation was carried in the Calcutta dailies, and Garrie reported to his Dundee that these accusations were "the chief topic of week."<sup>63</sup> On December 28, 1939, Garrie met with the Viceroy who asked him point blank about "the various rumours that were being circulated in connection with operations of Local Ministers in the Futures markets and about the allegations that were being laid at their door. He told me I could speak perfectly frankly and I did so." Garrie's response was diplomatic. On the one hand, he accused the Congress of "circulat[ing] ugly rumours" and, at the same time, said that the Ministers could have "done much to allay the suspicion if they had ... curbed the violent speculation that was going on." Interestingly, the Viceroy was more concerned with the "good name" and "possible embarrassment" of the Ministers than he was about the "moral aspect in such transactions."<sup>64</sup>

Accusations of government corruption only grew over the following months, as the government continued on this tack of influencing prices through communiqués and rumours of possible state action. Such accusations were leveled not only by the cabinet's political opponents but also by European trade interests. At a conference in Darjeeling on May 4, 1940, between the government and jute-related trade associations, J.E. Ordish, of M. David & Company, one of the largest jute purchasing agencies and president of the European Mofussil Balers Association, said: "They [members of his association] had suffered much by chaotic movements of markets resulting from unheralded Government communiqués and Press Announcements in the past, and they had certainly mistrusted the motive of

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<sup>63</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, December 26, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

<sup>64</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., December 28, 1939, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

Government on more than one occasion in the past jute season.”<sup>65</sup> I do not have the evidence to evaluate these accusations of corruption through manipulating prices in futures markets but, as I will argue, Suhrawardy – one of the chief accused – tried to justify the government’s actions by claiming that he was trying to create bull runs in the futures market for the benefit of cultivators.

In the beginning of 1940, jute prices had begun to decline as the speculative bubble about expectations of wartime jute requirements began to deflate. In January 1940, the delivery period for the government’s order for 500 million sandbags was extended – a signal that war requirements of jute was going to be less than anticipated. As prices began to fall, the government considered its options as to how to support prices for the coming jute season. The cabinet appeared divided over the one policy option on the table – a compulsory restriction scheme. Suhrawardy was willing to allow an unrestricted crop if the jute mills could guarantee that prices did not fall below Rs. 7 or Rs. 8 per maund. On the other hand, Nazimuddin, Tamizuddin Khan (the new minister of agriculture) and Khwaja Habibullah, the Nawab of Dacca were pushing hard for compulsory restriction.<sup>66</sup>

The restriction scheme was brought up for approval in the assembly in February, 1940. It was opposed by both political opponents in the legislative assembly and by powerful jute manufacturing and trading interests in Calcutta. Nalinaksha Sanyal argued in the legislative assembly that Britain’s war requirements of jute was likely to drive prices up and asked government to delay compulsory

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<sup>65</sup> “Burder’s Note,” enclosed in from Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, May 21, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>66</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co, February 6, 1940, MS/86/V/7/7, DUA

restriction until they had a more accurate statistics regarding the jute crop.<sup>67</sup> W.A.M. Walker, the IJMA representative in the Assembly, expressed surprise that “for once perhaps” he was “fully” in agreement with Sanyal and the Provincial Congress.<sup>68</sup> Privately, the IJMA warned the provincial government of the dangers of restriction during war: “they would never be able to justify their position if there happened to be a shortage and the British and Allied Governments were clamouring for war requirements which the Mills, because of that shortage, were unable to turn out.” Garrie stated to the ministers that the IJMA “consider[ed] it a shocking state of affairs that political ambition should cloud the issue of war requirements”<sup>69</sup>

Through February and March, the government issued a series of press communiqués stating that they intended to restrict jute acreage for the following year. To A.K. Fazlul Haq’s disappointment, prices continued to fall despite these public statements of intent.<sup>70</sup> Markets had not taken the restriction scheme seriously. The sowing season would begin in a month – in March – and the government had clearly not gathered sufficient information nor built up the necessary administrative structures to regulate jute sowings of several million peasant households. As Garrie noted, “I feel that this latest move [restriction of jute acreage] is more in the nature of political “eye-wash” and the Government are not really serious about actual restriction.”<sup>71</sup> The government withdrew its restriction scheme for the coming jute

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<sup>67</sup> BLA, Vol LVI, No. 2, 1940, p. 243

<sup>68</sup> BLA, Vol LVI, No. 2, 1940, p. 245

<sup>69</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co, February 6, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>70</sup> Garrie reported to the Dundee directors that “the Chief Minister told me that he was very disappointed that, following Government’s announcement of restriction, the market actually went down.” From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co, February 6, 1940 MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>71</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., February 13, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

season and, instead, focused on collecting output statistics to form the basis for restriction in the future. As prices continued to fall, Suhrawardy privately expressed the cabinet's disappointment to the IJMA: "one or two of his colleagues [Garrie reported] feel that the mills have let the Ministry down, inasmuch as it was through their representations that restriction was dropped for the current season and that Government, therefore, looked to the mills to support the jute market in return."<sup>72</sup>

Facing the prospect of low prices and a large crop at the opening of the 1940 season, the government called an emergency meeting of the various Bengal trade associations in Darjeeling in May. The invitation stated "great concern [about] the lower prices which are now being offered for the new crop," and they desired to "consult all those interested in the jute trade to ascertain their views on what steps may be taken to secure a price ... which is justified by the world conditions which prevail today."<sup>73</sup> Representatives of the various jute-related trade associations in Bengal met in the summer capital: the IJMA, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, the Muslim Chamber of Commerce, the Marwari Association, the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, the East India Jute Association, the Calcutta Baled Jute Shippers Association, the European Mofussil Balers' Association, the Indian Chamber of Commerce, the Calcutta Baled Jute Association, the Jute Balers' Association, the Calcutta Jute Fabric Shippers Association, the Bengal Jute Dealers' Association, the Calcutta Jute Dealers' Association, and the Calcutta Jute Exchange. According to Garrie, who did not attend, "practically all who attended at Darjeeling

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<sup>72</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Mr. Mason, Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, April 12, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>73</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, April 30, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

returned with the feeling that the Conference was more or less a farce from start to finish.”<sup>74</sup>

The Chief Minister opened the conference with a speech promising a balance between realizing a profitable price for cultivators without raising the price of the manufactured goods to levels encouraging substitutes. Tamizuddin Khan, the Agriculture Minister, made it clear that the government would not hesitate to bring in minimum prices if jute prices dropped any lower. After the Chief Minister and Agricultural Minister’s opening remarks, representatives of the numerous trade associations stood up one by one to make their statements. In his report of the meeting, Sir John Henry Burder of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce said that the associations had split up along “racial lines.” The European-dominated Chambers of Commerce opposed any government intervention on trade. The Muslim Chamber of Commerce, closely allied with the ruling Ministry, and associations representing futures exchanges and traders, supported the government. Lastly, associations aligned with the opposition Congress - the Indian Chamber of Commerce, the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, the Marwari Association, and the Calcutta Jute Dealers Association – were opposed to fixing price, but thought that a “scheme to protect ryots should be put in place.” The IJMA presented government interventions in jute markets as an existential threat to the jute manufacturing sector. W.A.M. Walker of the IJMA said: “We cannot ... remain silent and see Government destroying the fabric which it has taken so many years to build up.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, May 14, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>75</sup> “Remarks made by the Chairman of the IJMA at the Darjeeling Conference,” enclosed in From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., May 14, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA



The government's main supporters were the Muslim Chamber of Commerce and interests representing futures exchanges and traders - the East India Jute Association, the Calcutta Jute Exchange and the Marwari Chamber. The Muslim Chamber of Commerce launched a frontal attack on the jute mills. M.M. Ispahani of the Muslim Chamber, and one of the largest shippers of jute fabrics and fibre from Calcutta, stated that given the large forthcoming crop, government had to do take action to – in Ispahani's words – “force the hands of the Mills.” If the mills were not responsive to such pressure – that is, they “employ[ed] obstructive methods” – the Government “should be prepared to fix the minimum prices and maintain them by purchase of jute.” Sir Adamjee Hajee Dawood, who like Ispahani was a prominent manufacturer and raw jute shipper and a member of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce spoke in Hindustani. From what Burder understood, “he accused the Jute Mills of artificially depressing prices by issuing Bogus Delivery Orders.”<sup>76</sup> The Muslim Chamber of Commerce, and particularly Ispahani and Adamjee, were closely allied with the Muslim League and were socially and politically close to the two Muslim League ministers – Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin.

If not farce, the Darjeeling Conference was certainly political theatre. It was a show put on by the government to force jute mills – particularly the IJMA mills – to purchase jute at higher prices. If the IJMA did not comply, the government would be forced to take some sort of unspecified action to fix minimum prices in the market.

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<sup>76</sup> All of the associations who spoke out in favour of fixing minimum prices spoke strongly against the mills. H.P. Bagaria, whose association represented futures dealers, described mills as “enemies of the roys and instanced the ‘unholy Gentleman’s Agreement.’” “Burder’s Description of the meeting in Darjeeling from May 4-5, with all trade interests invited to Darjeeling,” enclosed in from Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., May 21, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

Suhrawardy stated the bargain of higher prices for no intervention plainly in his closing remarks: “He said that if the price of jute was maintained and the agriculturist got a fair price then Government would not intervene. He said that if Mills would guarantee buying at prices comparable with the prices they got for their goods he would admit it was fair.” Tamizuddin Khan closed the conference, stating that he was disappointed that the trade associations had offered no concrete suggestions and that he would wait a fortnight for any suggestions – “if they received nothing they would act on their own.”

The government threat was clearly unspecified, beyond some measure to enforce minimum prices. How would government do this? Will they simply fix prices in futures markets, as they had done earlier – a policy whose efficacy had not really been verified, given the rapid rise in prices after the Ordinance. It was unclear whether the government actually had a scheme, as the following exchange between Suhrawardy, Walker and Ordish demonstrates:

Walker: Have you got a scheme?  
Suhrawardy: We shall prepare it.  
Walker: Then you have not got it.  
Suhrawardy: We have, but it is a Cabinet secret.  
Ordish: Have you taken any advice of any outside body on it?  
Suhrawardy: That would be improper.  
Ordish: Does anyone outside the Cabinet know about it?  
Suhrawardy: (Doubtfully) No. (Brightly) But they may have some idea by intelligent anticipation.<sup>77</sup>

*1940-41*

The Darjeeling “farce” was not followed by any concrete action. In the absence of a “comprehensive scheme”, the government was pushed into a kneejerk response

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<sup>77</sup> “Burder’s Note,” enclosed in from Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, May 21, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

when news about Germany over-running western Europe reached Calcutta jute markets in the second half of May 1940. Markets become “panicky” and, on May 18, a Saturday, “prices in all speculative markets literally tumbled down.” The government responded immediately – that very Saturday –with an ordinance fixing maximum and minimum prices for raw jute and jute goods in futures markets: prices from raw jute were set at a minimum of Rs. 60 per bale and maximum of Rs. 90 and prices for Hessians at a minimum of Rs. 13 per yard and maximum at Rs. 21. Even strident critics of government intervention admitted that “the promulgation [of the ordinance]... under conditions such as obtained on Saturday was ... only to be expected.” The ordinance had an immediate though brief effect in supporting jute goods markets. The USA, the largest purchaser of Calcutta jute manufactures, entered the market at minimum prices, believing that the minimum represented a floor below which prices could not fall. On the other hand, raw jute prices steadied but transactions came to a standstill, with traders waiting on the government’s next move.

Then, in the beginning of June, news that Germany had over-run Belgium and Holland and the fall of Paris was imminent hit Calcutta jute markets. Raw jute and hessian futures tumbled and futures transactions were suspended. Garrie described the reaction of jute markets to war news in a note on June 4, 1940:

It must be many years since Calcutta experienced conditions such as obtained in all markets during the past week ... when the capitulation of Belgium became known. Alarming rumours there were in plenty so much so that the Commissioner of the Calcutta Police came out with a warning that the dissemination of news, true or untrue, likely to cause panic, would be punishable by heavy fines. Despite this, prices kept literally tumbling down and by Thursday [May 30] both the Jute and Hessian Fatka markets were temporarily suspended, as already 9 Porters [Hessians] were available at Rs. 11

[per yard] and while Firsts [top quality raw jute] had been done at Rs. 50 [per bale].<sup>78</sup>

The closing of the futures market was a blow to the government – an end to all plans to control hinterland spot prices through Calcutta futures prices. The government responded immediately by issuing yet another press communiqué stating that they would take up all offers of the old crop at Rs. 60 per bale. Though ambitious on paper, the provincial government lacked the financial resources to affect prices through open market operations: in the end, they purchased just 50,000 bales of jute for Rs. 3 million, at Rs. 60 per bale. As the government struggled to put together a scheme to support prices, it tried its best to create the impression of impending action. There was considerable “talk in the market” that government would fix minimum prices for raw jute within the next few weeks. Amongst jute mills, there was very real anxiety about what steps the government might take. As Burder indicated in a letter to Walker, the Government of Bengal “are genuinely anxious about the position from the economic point of view of the cultivator,” “are unlikely to think that discretion is the better part of valour” and “not always prepared to concede to reason.” Given British capitals’ anxieties about a deranged pro-peasant government with a flair for the spectacular, the IJMA decided to make an offer.<sup>79</sup>

In early June 1940, the association’s mills proposed to government that they would pay minimum prices for raw jute, varying from Rs. 7/8 and Rs. 8/8 per maund depending on quality, and also prices for jute goods. The IJMA’s offer was not

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<sup>78</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, June 4, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>79</sup> From Mr. Burder, Messrs Barry & Co., to Mr. Walker, Chairman, IJMA, June 3, 1940, enclosed in From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., June 11, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

motivated solely by their fears of unilateral government action – prices of jute goods had nosedived and the IJMA was looking to guarantee profits. On July 2 1940, the government and the IJMA came to an agreement regarding the minimum prices of raw jute and jute goods. The IJMA would pay between Rs. 7 and Rs. 9 per maund for raw jute and receive between Rs. 12 and Rs. 32 for different grades of finished jute goods. The deal was to last till December, when the IJMA would reconsider the position and government refrain from intervening in markets.

The IJMA mills occasionally broke the agreement. As G.M. Garrie noted on July 16, 1940: “reports current during the week indicate that certain mills are “sailing close to the wind” in their operations, and one purchase in particular by Kettlewells is not regarded by us as being transacted strictly in accordance with the spirit of the agreement.” Further, jute sellers were eager to sell at prices below the minimum: “if given any encouragement, I feel business with these sellers might be possible under the fixed limits.”<sup>80</sup> Bound by their minimum price agreement, mills held back from purchasing jute. During July and August 1940, the government had to plead several times with the mills to increase their purchases. G.D. Birla, Gandhi’s close associate, IJMA member, and one of the most important figures in the jute sector, Garrie reported: “is very short of jute and has all along been against not only the minimum price arrangement but having anything to do with Government. ... Birla would do anything to have the present Government unseated in favour of Congress, so we must regard his actions at their face value.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., July 16, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

<sup>81</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., September 10, 1940, MS/86/V/7/8, DUA

Prices continued to tumble in the hinterland, with mills either flouting minimum prices or holding out from purchasing till the price agreement collapsed. In July and August 1940, at the opening of the new season, jute was selling at below Rs. 5 per maund in hinterland *bats* throughout Bengal.<sup>82</sup> The benefits of the price agreement, as its critics alleged, were entirely derived by middlemen. Cultivators desperate to sell jute for subsistence accepted low prices offered by middlemen, middlemen in turn sold jute to the mills at agreement prices – or, if possible, at even below agreement prices. In August 1940, a theatrical and public post-mortem of government’s failures to affect prices through futures markets took place in the legislative assembly. Jalaluddin Hashemy, a dissident member of the Krishak Praja Party, and Nalinaksha Sanyal of the Congress moved a resolution criticizing the Ordinance of May 14. In criticizing government actions over the past year, Hashemy said: “I am pained to say that the Government do not know their own mind. Either they have no well-thought of and scientific plan ... or they are doing it [ordinances, communiqués] to help the IJMA ... the department concerned is either fool or knave or both – I cannot use a stronger term.”<sup>83</sup> Surendranath Biswas criticized the entire policy of fixing hinterland spot prices through ordinances regarding futures markets: “I ask the Hon’ble Ministers were they not aware that ... violent fluctuations of prices in futures markets were highly detrimental to the interests of jute growers?”<sup>84</sup>

Nalinaksha Sanyal reprised his argument about government corruption, and this time he did not hold back from naming names. “I do not insinuate anything,”

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<sup>82</sup> BLA, Vo. LVII, No. 2, 8<sup>th</sup> Session, 1940, p. 22

<sup>83</sup> BLA, Vol. LVII, No. 3, 1940, p. 237

<sup>84</sup> BLA, Vol. LVII, No. 3, 1940, p. 239

Sanyal said, but his speech was an extraordinary accusation of insider trading, and he outright accused ministers of “manipulating the market in connivance with, and for the benefit of, a Mr. Ram Chandra Daga.” Ram Chandra Daga, Sanyal alleged, received special benefits: “It is very strange that when a particular person anticipates [price trends], and when that person, as a result of his clever anticipation is faced with serious losses, another anticipatory measure comes forward.” Daga’s closeness to government was further evidenced by the fact that he wrote letters to the market from M.A. Ispahani’s offices. Further, Daga had gone bankrupt and his Hessian liabilities were taken up Ispahani’s firms.<sup>85</sup>

After this round of recriminations and accusations, Suhrawardy stood up to defend his record and the government’s efforts to stabilize prices. He said that the May ordinance had worked – it had put a floor in the market and brought in international business for jute. The present fall was caused by the course of the war in Europe, factors beyond the control of the provincial government – “events overtook us.” He celebrated the government deal with the mills, arguing that without such an agreement prices would have dropped even further. And, he even defended his relationship with Ram Chandra Daga, arguing that government actions would always support either bulls or bears, and he would rather support the bulls who keep prices up. Daga, however, could not maintain a bull position in the face of falling markets: “Unfortunately,” Suhrawardy said, “the man he [Sanyal] referred to could not maintain his position long enough, his business collapsed and he became bankrupt.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> BLA, Vol. LVII, No. 3, 1940, pp. 254-55

<sup>86</sup> BLA, Vol. LVII, No. 3, 1940, pp. 266-268

Despite Suhrawardy's public protestations, the deal with the IJMA was not working. On September 1, 1940, Suhrawardy wrote to the Jeremy Raisman, the central finance minister in Delhi begging for a loan of 150 million rupees to finance large-scale government purchases of jute. He wrote about the government's responsibility to cultivators: "we will not be permitted to lie back and absolve ourselves from the responsibility of seeing that the agriculturist is not ruined."<sup>87</sup> Under Suhrawardy's 150 million rupee scheme, the provincial government would purchase 3 million bales from the current crop and reduce production severely for the following two years under a compulsory restriction scheme. The loan would be repaid in two to three years, by selling jute after prices rose due to restriction. The loan was refused, but the exchange between Suhrawardy and Raisman reads very much like a post-mortem – private instead of the public grilling of the Legislative Assembly – on the provincial government's failed efforts at price stabilization.

Suhrawardy's letter to Raisman was a strong defense of his government's and his personal actions to stabilize jute prices during the previous year; in fact, a spirited defense of his government's attempts to control prices through ordinances, communiqués and rumours of unspecified government interventions. It was due to the August 1939 Ordinance, Suhrawardy claimed, that "demand was stimulated, the price of jute and of the manufactured commodity rose, the propaganda of an excessive crop was abandoned and the price in Futures Markets was more or less steady at Rs. 45/-."<sup>88</sup> He admitted that not imposing compulsory restriction was a mistake, but he explained that they were forced to withdraw the bill due to

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<sup>87</sup> H.S. Suhrawardy to Jeremy Raisman, Finance Member, GoI, September 1, 1940, in Education, Health, and Lands, Agriculture, 68-40/40A, 1940, NAI

<sup>88</sup> H.S. Suhrawardy to Jeremy Raisman, Finance Member, GoI, September 1, 1940, in Education, Health, and Lands, Agriculture, 68-40/40A, 1940, NAI



opposition from within the party, the Congress and jute manufacturers. Suhrawardy defended his actions when prices fell during May and June 1940, arguing that his government had convinced markets of government's intentions to act and had, thereby, forced the IJMA to enter into a price agreement:

The market took the view that we were in earnest regarding our policy of maintaining a fair level of prices and that we were determined to carry out our policy whether the market cooperated or not, and that we would do so by means of legislation or other executive action. The market which had hitherto not cooperated with us came to an agreement with the Government [the agreement with the IJMA].<sup>89</sup>

Raisman wrote back stating that the government had only itself to blame for provoking peasants to sow a larger crop than the market could handle by its misguided attempts to increase prices. "The general impression," Raisman wrote, "is that the Government of Bengal's concern was to maintain the price of jute as high as possible for as long as possible ... [and] it seems not unreasonable to attribute the excessive sowings in the current year to a general expectation of high prices ... aroused by the policy of the Bengal government." Further, Raisman was led to believe that opposition to restriction was informed by the "general belief that such a policy ... would not stand the slightest chance of success in the face of the stimulus offered by the high level of jute prices which it was known the Government desired to maintain."<sup>90</sup> In other words, the fault lay with the Bengal government and its misguided attempts to raise jute prices – very different from the criticisms of political opponents in the legislative assembly.

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Jeremy Raisman to H.S. Suhrawardy, April 10, 1940, in Education, Health, and Lands, Agriculture, 68-40/40A, 1940, NAI

With the closure of the futures markets and the government of India's refusal of a loan, the control of jute prices passed on to the mills, and their willingness to adhere to their minimum price agreement with the provincial government. The government continually threatened "measures which might in the end be to the disadvantage of the mills," but the mills were well aware that the provincial government could not carry through on such threats.<sup>91</sup> Far from cooperating with the government, the IJMA unilaterally revised their minimum price agreement – in fact, basically abrogated it. The new price schedule not only lowered prices across the board, they created a new bottom grade - "Low Bottoms." Prices for low bottoms, which would most certainly determine prices for most unsorted peasant produce, were as low as Rs. 4/8/- per maund. The IJMA implemented the revised schedule despite government entreaties to "defer" and "reconsider," and went as far as to state outright that they would not bow to government requests to purchase definite quantities of jute within certain timeframes.<sup>92</sup>

The provincial government repeated its plea for assistance to the central government, highlighting the intransigence of the mills to follow through on their agreements. The central government organized a conference in Delhi, in early December 1940, involving the Government of Bengal and the IJMA, to hammer out a new jute agreement. The purpose of the conference was to strong-arm the association mills to a purchase program of specified quantities, timeframes and prices.

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<sup>91</sup> Stevens, the Special Jute Officer appointed by the government, conveyed this message to Garrie of Thomas Duff. From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, October 29, 1940, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

<sup>92</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, November 19, 1940, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

On the day of his departure to Delhi, December 2, 1940, Suhrawardy continued his game of bluff in the Legislative Assembly:

We are going [to Delhi] in a spirit of co-operation. The Government of India feel that the industry itself is so well organized that it can come to the rescue of jute-growers. If the industry fails to do so, and if all the pressure that we bring to bear upon the Government of India and the jute industry fails, we shall have to take steps. What those steps are I am not prepared to disclose. ... I believe it is realized that there are weapons in our armoury with which we will be able to cope with the situation.<sup>93</sup>

At the conference, the Government of Bengal demanded was that the mills purchase 5 million bales by April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1941, stick to the original price agreement or fix the prices of Low Bottoms at Rs. 5 per maund (instead of Rs. 4/8/-). The mills agreed to purchase 3.75 million bales up to 15<sup>th</sup> April and a further 750,000 bales by 30<sup>th</sup> June – at the beginning of the new season. They could purchase according to their revised price agreement, but purchases of Low Bottoms would not count to the total – tellingly, the category of Low Bottoms virtually vanished after the agreement came into effect. The only reason that the IJMA came to the bargaining table was that the Government of India had threatened that it would provide the loan of Rs. 150 million to finance the provincial governments' jute purchase scheme. The Chairman of the IJMA informed his members that they had to agree to a purchase proposal because of the alternatives: "all things considered, this [the purchase agreement] is to be preferred to Government effecting purchases through Marwari sellers."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> BLA, Vol. LVII, No. 8, 1940, p.256

<sup>94</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, December 10, 1940, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

*1941-42, 1942-43, and famine*

More importantly, the provincial government for the first time adopted a compulsory restriction scheme, restricting sowings to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the previous year's acreage.

Through a combination of compulsory restriction and reduced sowings due to very low prices, jute output was reduced substantially the following year. According to estimates by mofussil jute balers, the 1941 acreage was less than half that of 1940.<sup>95</sup> The 1941 jute season opened well for the cultivator. In August and September 1941, jute prices ranged from Rs. 10/8/- to Rs. 16/8/- in Calcutta markets. Perhaps for the first time in two years, the government could proclaim success in price stabilization. In a pamphlet distributed throughout the jute tracts, titled *Instructions to Jute Growers*, the government "proclaim[ed] with very great pleasure that their hopeful efforts and cooperation of jute cultivators and their law abidedness had not been in vain. At present it may be safely expected that ... Government efforts to maintain permanently high price of Jute for jute cultivators will be successful."<sup>96</sup>

The cabinet could not relish this success in providing a good jute price in the 1941 season for long. The relationship between A.K. Fazlul Haq and the Muslim League had deteriorated, and Haq was ejected from the Muslim League in late 1941. The Muslim League, which following the defections of KPP dissidents, was virtually the sole party propping up Haq's government withdrew its support and the Cabinet collapsed. In December 1941, Haq managed to cobble together a new coalition

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<sup>95</sup> Sims, Landales, and Rallis estimated the 1941 acreage at 6 annas (or 6/16<sup>th</sup> of 1940 acreage), Davids estimated 7.5 annas, and Sinclair Murray 6.5 annas. From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., May 27, 1941, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

<sup>96</sup> Enclosed in from Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, September 16, 1941, , MS/86/V/7/10, DUA

cabinet – drawing support from a range of political platforms but excluding the Muslim League. Haq’s chief ally was to be Sarat Chandra Bose, except Bose was arrested. His senior coalition partner then became Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. The Shyama-Haq ministry lasted from December 1941 to March 1943, when John Arthur Herbert, the Governor of Bengal, dismissed the Cabinet on grounds of incompetence.

The new cabinet was formed as World War II arrived at Bengal’s doorstep, and war expenditure was causing rapid inflation. Confronted by rising raw materials prices, the jute mills were determined to substantially increase acreage for the following year. At a meeting on September 23, 1941, the IJMA suggested  $\frac{3}{4}$  the 1940 crop as the acreage for 1942. That was more than double the 1941 crop. In December 1941, the IJMA wrote to the central government urging strongly for an acreage at  $\frac{3}{4}$  of 1940 as “it was imperative for Mills to have ample stocks ... in order to cope with war orders.” The IJMA was backed up by Bemis Bags, the largest US importer of jute goods, who also pressed the central government for a  $\frac{3}{4}$  acreage.<sup>97</sup> In the end, under pressure from the central government Fazlul Haq’s new cabinet agreed to fix jute acreage at  $\frac{2}{3}$ rd the 1940 level. The Government of India, Haq assured the Assembly, had guaranteed that there would be demand for Bengal’s increased jute and promised that if jute prices fell below a certain level they would “come to our rescue and help us to the utmost possible limit.”<sup>98</sup>

As prices fell in March 1942, the provincial government made a belated effort to revise restriction downwards to half the 1940 acreage. This late attempt at a

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<sup>97</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, November 18, 1941, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

<sup>98</sup> BLA, Vol. LXII, No. 2, 1942, p. 71

downward revision failed. By mid-May most jute agencies were estimating a crop of more than the stipulated 2/3<sup>rd</sup> acreage. The manager of Thomas Duff reported with glee: “The crop has ... got an excellent start and ... there ought to be plenty of jute next season.”<sup>99</sup> At the opening of the 1942 season jute prices were much lower than they had been in 1941. Calcutta jute mills were paying Rs. 6/8/- per maund for Bottoms and Rs. 9/8/- for Mediums in July 1942 as against Rs. 9/8/- Bottoms and Rs. 11/8/- Mediums in July 1941. Under attack in the legislative assembly for failing to prevent the fall in prices, Haq admitted to missing Suhrawardy’s expertise on jute: “he really turned out to be a jute expert and it was really pleasant to find that even those who were in the market or who were experts in the Government of India could not cross swords with my friend, Mr. Suhrawardy, without admitting that he knows practically all that is necessary to know for dealing with the problem of jute.”<sup>100</sup>

The rise in jute prices from November 1942 had come too late to benefit the poorest jute cultivators who had already sold their stocks of jute. Further, the astronomical rise in rice prices dwarfed that of jute, and the worsening terms of exchange between the commodities had tragic consequences for the delta’s subsistence jute cultivators. As hunger and starvation swept through eastern Bengal’s jute tracts in the winter and spring of 1942-3, the IJMA’s concerns were solely about the rise in prices of jute. In a period of unprecedented rise in rice prices, where the very survival of market-based subsistence jute cultivators was at stake, the IJMA looked to set a maximum limit to jute prices. Control over jute prices had completely passed out of the hands of the Government of Bengal and into those of

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<sup>99</sup> From Thomas, Duff & Co, Calcutta, to Thomas Duff & Co., Dundee, May 19, 1942, MS/86/V/7/9, DUA

<sup>100</sup> BLA, Vol. LXII, No. 3, 1942, p. 41

the IJMA and the Government of India. The Government of India had appointed G.M. Garrie Acting Adviser on Jute Supplies, his main task being to ensure the supply of manufactured jute goods to the USA. The USA, in turn, had imposed maximum price limits on imported jute goods. Further, the USA had decided to place a blanket order for jute - 700 million yards of Hessian to be delivered between June 1943 and January 1944 at the US ceiling prices. The mills complained that they could not supply the USA jute goods at prevailing and rising prices.<sup>101</sup> The IJMA's maximum price agreement was, to say the least, callous. In a gesture at charity, the IJMA decided to contribute in September 1943 Rs. 5 per loom for the "relief of distress in Bengal."

## **END OF PEASANT POPULISM**

The famine was the deathblow to A.K. Fazlul Haq's political reputation and image. Conditions that led to three million people dying of starvation and hunger-related causes had emerged under the watch of the man who had promised rice and daal for everyone, who used to be considered the champion of the Bengal peasantry. His governments had notably failed to support jute prices and were powerless to prevent spiraling rice prices in the winter and spring of 1942-3 or to persuade the IJMA to remove its maximum prices in 1943. Admittedly, his government's attempts to regulate prices between 1939 and 1943 seemed misguided. Perhaps even, as his political opponents alleged, they were corrupt. The government's attempts to set

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<sup>101</sup> In a letter from Andrew Yule & Co, to G.M. Farrie, Acting Adviser on Jute Supplies to the Government of India, Yule & Co stated that they could make profits at prices ranging from Rs. 14 to Rs. 19 per maund for raw jute, "at current prices they make a loss of Rs. 8 per ton, and current costs of jute are rising."

prices in hinterland spot markets by manipulating futures markets were always doomed to fail. Persuading, cajoling and bullying jute mills to agreeing to minimum prices was a high-risk strategy. Once the government lost its only bargaining chips – the threat of concrete action against manufacturing interests – mills were free to determine prices in their interests, rather than that of cultivators. As the failure to bargain for reduced jute acreage in 1942 demonstrated, Haq and his colleagues were poor negotiators against the IJMA and the central Government of India.

Fazlul Haq's failures, however, do have to be placed in a colonial context, in the very limited powers and resources of the provincial government created by the 1935 Government of India Act. Fazlul Haq's governments lacked the authority or the resources to take meaningful and concerted measures to set commodity prices. In speeches after his forced resignation, Haq tried to absolve himself and his cabinet from responsibility for the famine by claiming that real authority resided with the colonial bureaucracy: "The Ministers have been given a mockery of authority, and the steel frame of the Imperial Services still remain intact, dominating the entire administration and casting somber shadows over the activities of Ministers."<sup>102</sup>

Regardless of the constraints under which he had operated, the 1943 famine destroyed Fazlul Haq's image as the champion of the Bengal peasantry. His loss of legitimacy left a void in Bengal's representative and electoral politics. Who would claim the support and votes of the Bengal peasantry? After 1943, the Muslim League, under the leadership of the Suhrawardy-Abul Hashim faction and with the assistance of mofussil Muslim politicians who had abandoned the Krishak Praja Party, built up

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<sup>102</sup> BLA, Vol. LXV, 1943, pp. 45-46



its organization and infrastructure in the rural hinterland. More significantly, as I discuss in the following chapter, the League propagated an idea of Pakistan as peasant utopia – where social and economic relations were governed by Islamic morality, cultivators received a fair price for their produce, and no one starved. The vision of Pakistan as peasant utopia found fertile ground in post-famine delta. Bengal's mostly Muslim-cultivators voted in overwhelming numbers for the Muslim League in 1946 elections, which the League had converted into a referendum on Pakistan. The Krishak Praja Party virtually disappeared.

## Chapter 5

### Sovereignty and Fibre: Post-partition Pakistan and Jute, 1947 to 1954

On August 14 and 15, 1947, just as cultivators were bringing their jute crop into market, the post-colonial nation-states of Pakistan and India came into existence. A 4,000-kilometre line carved out the Bengal delta and incorporated it into the territory of Pakistan. East Pakistan produced 75% of the world's jute, but more than 90% of that produce was dispatched westward, across the delta and over partition lines, to Calcutta, now part of India. Calcutta was the undisputed metropolis of Bengal jute. Mills to the north of the city, along the banks of the Hooghly, consumed more than half the annual produce; most of the hydraulic presses that compressed fibres into bales for export were in Calcutta; and jute was exported through the docks and jetties of Calcutta's seaport. Barely 10% of the region's jute was exported through the woefully underdeveloped port in Chittagong – the only seaport in East Pakistan. Partition and independence had separated the jute tracts from its industrial and commercial centre; East Pakistan was a hinterland without a metropolis.

Jute was also produced to the north and east of East Pakistan, in Cooch Behar, Assam, and Tripura. In 1945-46, Assam produced 1.5 million bales, Cooch Behar 36,000 bales and Tripura 25,000 bales.<sup>1</sup> In order to reach Calcutta, jute from these regions had to cross partition lines twice – once into Pakistan and then out of Pakistan into India. Further, there were Indian enclaves in Pakistan and Pakistani enclaves in India, particularly along the border between Cooch Behar and Rangpur in

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<sup>1</sup> Vakil, C.N. (ed.) *Economic Consequences of Divided India: A Study of the Economy of India and Pakistan*, Bombay: 1950, p. 264

north Bengal – 74 Pakistani enclaves were located within India, and 123 Indian enclaves in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> These enclaves included the astounding example of the world's only counter-counter enclave – a portion of India, surrounded by Pakistan, surrounded by India, surrounded by Pakistan. The transport of jute out of these enclaves into Calcutta also necessitated multiple crossings of freshly drawn boundary lines.

The partition of Bengal also cut across established internal trade routes of the region. The Calcutta-Goalundo railway line was split in two – a portion in India, running from Calcutta to the border with East Pakistan in Jessore and a portion in East Pakistan from the Jessore border to Goalundo. The northern Bengal railway was cut into three between West Bengal, East Pakistan, and Assam. The Assam Bengal Railway was severed in two, a length in Assam running to the border with Sylhet and a second length running from the Sylhet/Assam border to Chittagong port. Partition lines also divided the steamer route between East Bengal and Calcutta passing through the Sundarbans, the vast mangrove jungle at the mouths of the Ganges.

This arbitrary line through the mud and water of the delta, which not only carved out new nation-states but also severed the jute tracts from their primary market, could not have come at a worse time. August was the beginning of the jute season, when approximately five million peasant households were about to bring fibres produced on about two million acres of land onto market. Trade, however, was not disrupted. In the British haste to depart India, there was no time to work out

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<sup>2</sup> Schendel, Willem Van, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London: Anthem, 2005, p. 23

a trade and payments agreement between India and Pakistan. The two states agreed to a “standstill agreement,” whereby neither would interfere with bilateral trade until a more comprehensive agreement could be worked out. In the months immediately following partition, trade between the hinterland and the metropolis continued as before: jute prices barely registered a blip and more jute was transported to metropolitan Calcutta than in the previous pre-partition year.

This situation would not last. The post-colonial nation-states of India and Pakistan would assert their sovereignty over flows of commodities, capital and people across their territorial limits. In doing so, they would imbue arbitrary partition lines with meaning. In this chapter, I will look at the post-colonial Pakistani state’s attempts to monitor, police, regulate, and tax the production and circulation of fibre within the jute hinterland. Post-colonial states strived to assert sovereignty over fibre in a larger attempt to establish post-colonial nations as a modern, territorial and national economy. In pursuit of this project, the Pakistani government established customs offices, regulated currency exchanges, monitored the “national loyalties” of jute traders and merchants, and kick-started a jute baling and milling industry in the Bengal delta. Economic activities that subverted the post-colonial nation-state’s sovereignty over fibre was criminalized as smuggling or black-marketsteering and punished harshly.

Jute cultivators and traders in East Pakistan experienced the state’s efforts to assert sovereignty over fibre as harassment and oppression. The delta’s mostly-Muslim jute cultivators had enthusiastically supported Pakistan in the years leading up to partition. They voted in overwhelming numbers for the Muslim League in the provincial elections of 1946, which the League contested as a referendum on Pakistan.

They celebrated the creation of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 with much fanfare. The Bengal peasantry did not, however, necessarily subscribe to an idea of Pakistan as a territorially bounded national economy; instead, they saw in Pakistan the promise of peasant economic emancipation.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan was envisioned as a place where hunger did not rear its ugly head, the state was not oppressive, landlords and moneylenders did not siphon away earnings, and cultivators received fair prices for their produce. However, as the post-colonial Pakistani state attempted to give meaning to their territorial limits, assert control over flows of jute – in other words, create a modern, national economy – it became a source of harassment. Far from the embodiment of a peasant utopia, the Pakistani state became an entity to be avoided and evaded.

In the first section of this chapter, I look at two ideas of Pakistan that coexisted in eastern Bengal in the years leading up to partition: Pakistan as the promise of Muslim peasantry's economic emancipation and Pakistan as a territorial and national economy, with resources and revenues capable of supporting a modern nation-state with all its trappings. The two ideas coexisted prior to partition and the actual formation of the state but came increasingly into conflict after 1947, particularly as the post-colonial state attempted to create a national economy. In the second section, I examine how the central Pakistani state asserted territorial and national sovereignty over fibre: first, by policing flows of jute across its territorial limits and, second, by monitoring the nationality and loyalty of firms engaged in the

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<sup>3</sup> Taj-ul Islam Hashmi argues that elite Muslims in Bengal convinced cultivators that Pakistan would be a land of plenty, free from exploitation of Hindu zamindars and moneylenders. In his phrase, Pakistan carried the promise of "peasant utopia": Hashmi, Taj ul-Islam, *Pakistan as Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in Bengal: 1920-1947*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992. Ahmed Kamal has argued that the peasant vision of Pakistan included not only economic emancipation, but also the promise of a society founded on a peasant moral economy, rather than state laws and law enforcement agencies. Kamal, Ahmed, "A Land of Eternal Eid: Independence, People and Politics in East Bengal," *The Dhaka University Studies*, 46(1), 1989.

jute trade. The delta's citizenry experienced the post-colonial state's interventions into jute as harassment and oppression, and they responded with evasion and avoidance. In the third section of this chapter, I look at the dynamic of harassment and evasion that took place at every level of the jute commodity chain, from substantial jute exporters down to impoverished jute cultivators. The final section of the chapter examines how provincial politicians in East Bengal contested the Karachi-based central government's assumption of revenue and power over jute. In contesting sovereignty over fibre, however, provincial politicians continued to operate in the paradigm of the modern nation-state with territorial and national sovereignty over the production and flows of commodities within its borders.

## **PAKISTAN**

During the years leading up to partition and independence, there were many ideas of Pakistan. In Ayesha Jalal's formulation, South Asia's Muslims negotiated their territorial Indian identity with their extra-territorial Muslim identity in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I will look at two imaginings of Pakistan that co-existed in Bengal during the years leading up to partition. First, Pakistan represented the promise of Muslim peasants' economic emancipation, a post-famine peasant utopia where cultivators were not exploited by landlords and moneylenders, received fair prices for their produce, and did not experience hunger. Second, Pakistan was conceived as a territorial national economy, containing within its borders the

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<sup>4</sup> Jalal, Ayesha, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850*, New York: Routledge, 2000

resources and revenue to create and maintain a modern nation-state with all of its institutional trappings. Jute figured prominently in both these imaginings: in the former, as an integral component of peasant livelihoods and, in the latter, as a national resource.

### *Pakistan as Peasant Economic Emancipation*

The Muslim League contested the 1946 provincial elections across India, the first since 1936, as a referendum on Pakistan – to vote for or against the Muslim League was to vote for or against Pakistan. Their electoral success in reserved Muslim constituencies was in sharp contrast to the failures of 1936 and demonstrated the popularity of the Pakistan cause. The idea of Pakistan was, however, construed differently in electoral campaigns in different provinces. As David Gilmartin has argued, in the Punjab elections, Muslim League candidates portrayed Pakistan as a place of “Muslim unity and moral order.”<sup>5</sup> In agrarian Bengal, on the other hand, the Muslim League promoted Pakistan as the land of peasant utopia, carrying the promise of the post-famine Muslim peasantry’s economic emancipation.

Muslim League candidates contested the 1946 elections in Bengal on slogans like “Land Belongs to the Plough,” “Abolish Zamindari Without Compensation,” “Labourers will be Owners,” and “Pakistan for Peasants and Labourers.”<sup>6</sup> In a public meeting in Calcutta in December, 1945, Suhrawardy informed his audience, “[Pakistan] will mean raising the standards of living for the poor, the oppressed and the neglected; more food, wealth, resources, work, better living conditions and more

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<sup>5</sup> Gilmartin, David, “A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in Colonial Punjab,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40(3), July 1998, pp. 415-436

<sup>6</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed provides a first-hand account of the 1946 election campaign in his autobiography, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochhor*, p. 248

joy and happiness for the common people; opportunities for all and the establishment of a reign of truth and justice, of tolerance and fair play.”<sup>7</sup> The Muslim League’s electoral success in 1946 in Bengal was partly due to its ability to align the Pakistan cause with the *praja* movement in East Bengal and occupy the space of Muslim peasant politics vacated by the Krishak Praja Party. H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim, the so-called left-wing of the League, had taken over the leadership of the party, displacing a coalition of Muslim zamindars and capitalists, led by Khwaja Nazimuddin from the Dacca Nawab family, and M.M. Ispahani, one of the largest raw jute and jute fabric exporters in Calcutta.<sup>8</sup> The leaders built up the League’s organization in the deltaic hinterland, absorbing disaffected members of the Krishak Praja Party. The KPP had virtually ceased to exist as a political force, as its rank and file members in the hinterland left the party in droves and joined the Muslim League.

In contesting the 1946 elections the Muslim League adopted the slogans and symbols of the *praja* movement. In an editorial in the *Millat* just prior to the 1946 elections, Abul Mansur Ahmed wrote: “today the Muslim League is the carrier and conductor (*dharok ebong babok*) of the krishak praja movement.” The League had incorporated the *praja* cause into the idea of Pakistan: as Ahmed argued, “the Praja movement has been fully realized in the Pakistan movement.” In the idea of Pakistan, Ahmed saw the combination of two promises: “Muslim unity (*shonghoti*) and the economic freedom of the masses (*jonoshadaroner arthik mukti*).” “Pakistan will be the ordinary people’s (*jonoshadbaron*) state, where zamindars and the rich will have no

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Rashid, Haron-or, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengali Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1936-1947*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1987, p. 206

<sup>8</sup> Haron-or-Rashid and Taj-ul-Islam Hashemi provide political accounts of the contest for the Muslim League leadership between Suhrawardy/Hashim faction against Nazimuddin/Ispahani group during the early 1940s. Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, and Hashmi, *Pakistan as Peasant Utopia*.



place,” Ahmed stated, “the Pakistan demand is a symbol of Muslim mass aspiration (*gono-akanksha*).” Pakistan’s promise of economic emancipation, Ahmed argued, extended to all of India’s oppressed: “Pakistan’s message is of the right to self-determination (*atmo-niyontron*); it may have been uttered by Muslims, but it is the demand of all of India’s oppressed people’s (*nirjatito jati*). It is true that Bengal’s *praja* movement was started solely by Muslims, but the movement is that of all of Bengal’s oppressed masses.”<sup>9</sup>

This peasant-oriented and *praja*-inflected vision of Pakistan was framed in the context of a post-famine society. The 1943 famine (*panchasher monnontor*) figured prominently in the pages of the *Millat* during 1946 and 1947. In articles on abolishing zamindari, guaranteeing food security, or bolstering jute prices, the *Millat* repeatedly evoked the horrors of famine, fresh in the memories of its readers. An October 1946 article “Granary of the past Bengal – Yet people die starving here” urged for concerted measures to grow more food and for controlled distribution of food to combat any repeats of the horrors of 1943. The author of the article, Hashimuddin Ahmed, wrote of the lingering effects of famine on Bengal’s society: “The 1943 famine has ripped apart and emptied our political, social and economic lives (*rashtriya, shamaji, o arthanaitik jibon*). Three years later, we still feel the effects of the famine with every step.”<sup>10</sup> *Panchasher Monnontor* was also evoked in arguing for the “absolute necessity” of abolishing zamindari. The abolition of zamindari was the central plank of the *praja* movement and was at the core of the pro-peasant idea of Pakistan articulated in the pages of *Millat*. An editorial from July 4, 1946 argued: “it is clear

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, Abul Mansur, “Banglay Muslim Rajnitar Potobhumi o Porichoy,” *Millat*, 1946.

<sup>10</sup> “Prachyer gola-ghor Bangla – othhocho ekhane na khaiya manush morey,” *Millat*, October 2, 1946, p. 3

that the 1943 famine would not have taken this terrible form if zamindari law did not prevail over this country.”<sup>11</sup>

The villainy of colonial capital, particularly of jute mill-owners, also figured prominently in the pages of the *Millat*. When jute prices began to rise once more at the opening of the 1946 jute season, the IJMA pressured the central and provincial governments to maintain wartime controls over fibre prices. In July 1946, an article titled “Jute cultivators are on their way to the graveyard and profiteers are scheming” argued that “farias, mahajans, and mill owners are playing games with the life and death of jute cultivators.” The primary villains of the piece were “white jute millowners” (*shetango mill-malik*), who cheated cultivators of a “just price” (*nyajyo mulya*) and impoverished them while enriching themselves.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan, hence, was not only the promise of peasant economic emancipation, but also of freedom from *shamrajyobadi-pujibadi*, or imperialist-capitalism.

This pro-peasant, anti-imperialist Pakistan, at least in the eyes of the League’s leaders, depended upon their control over a strong state, capable of ensuring food security, just prices for produce, and taking on the landlords, moneylenders, and traders who exploited cultivators. Such a state would be dependent upon its territorial and national economy, to provide the revenues and resources for ambitious post-colonial projects of state and nation formation. For Pakistan’s promoters, the partitioned hinterland of East Bengal fell far short of such a territorial economy. In June 1947, in an interview with the United Press of India after the Muslim League

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<sup>11</sup> “Jamindari Pratha’r Bilupti,” *Millat*, July 4, 1946, p. 2

<sup>12</sup> The villainy of the shetango mill-malik was a dominant theme in the pages of the *Millat*, particularly after the IJMA moved to extend war-time controls during the opening of the 1946 season. See, for example, “Pat’er Bajar,” *Millat*, 10 Ashwin, 1354, and “Fatka bajarer je potobhumikay patchashider rokto biki-kini hoiya thhaey,” *Millat*, 4 Paush, 1353,

accepted Mountbatten's partition proposal, Abul Hashim warned of the new nation's dangerous reliance on jute and its probable future as a colonized economy of the United States of America, the new imperial power:

Eastern Pakistan will be mainly reliant on jute. This is probably the most densely populated region in the entire world. ... At anytime, artificial jute might be invented and, if that happens, it will be a disaster for jute cultivation ... In this situation, Eastern Pakistan will probably develop as a good market for American manufactured goods. America might give us loans and we will have to buy American cigarettes and other goods to repay those loans.<sup>13</sup>

*Pakistan as territorial, national economy*

Pakistan's promoters in Bengal imagined a greater East Pakistan, consisting not only of the entirety of Bengal but also all of Assam and, for some, parts of Bihar and Orissa. In 1944, members of the Bengal Muslim League mooted two very similar proposals for a greater East Pakistan. In an internal Muslim League memorandum, Raghbir Ahsan proposed a scheme titled a "Confederacy of East Pakistan and Adibasistan."<sup>14</sup> In Ahsan's scheme, East Pakistan would include all of Bengal and Assam and would form a confederation with Adibasistan, composed of adjoining "tribal" areas of Bihar. Simultaneously, Mujibur Rehman Khan, president of the Eastern Pakistan Renaissance Society in Calcutta, published a pamphlet titled *Eastern Pakistan: Its Population, Delimitation and Economics*.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Ahsan, Khan proposed a greater East Pakistan comprised of the entirety of Bengal and Assam, though he did not discuss the formation of an "Adibasistan."

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<sup>13</sup> "British porikolpona keno grihito hoilo," *Millat*, June 13, 1947, p. 1

<sup>14</sup> I have not seen original text and have, instead relied mostly on discussions of the text in secondary literature, especially in Haron-or-Rashid's *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 169-171

<sup>15</sup> Mujibur Rehman Khan, *Eastern Pakistan: Its Population, Delimitation, and Economics*, East Pakistan Renaissance Society, Calcutta: 1944

Rehman and Ahsan justified this expansive Eastern Pakistan not on the grounds of Muslim majority – though Rehman juggled numbers – but on the notion of a national economic territory capable of supporting a modern and modernizing state. As Ahsan stated, “it is one thing to constitute a separate province within the orbit of an Empire ... and it is quite a different thing to constitute a separate, sovereign and independent state, responsible for its own defense, internal and external security, financial solvency and economic self-sufficiency.”<sup>16</sup> Assam was included not because it had a Muslim majority – it did not – but because of its cultivable lands and mineral resources. As Khan said, “Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its large population and Assam will give it full scope for expansion and because Assam has abundant forest and natural resources such as coal, petroleum, etc, East Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong.”<sup>17</sup>

The plan to partition Bengal according to Hindu and Muslim-majority districts was a blow to these aspirations of a strong nation-state based on a resource-rich territory. A viable modern nation-state created and maintained out of this territory’s resources was unimaginable to contemporaries who described the delta as an “overcrowded rural slum.” A territorial and national economy comprised solely of eastern Bengal – and shorn of metropolitan Calcutta, the jute mills along the Hooghly, western Bengal’s mineral reserves, and outlets for emigration to Assam – was widely considered unviable. In a conference of provincial governors, it was stated that “economically [East Bengal] could not survive as all the coal mines, the minerals and the factories are in western Bengal, so are the jute processing mills with

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Rashid, Harun, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 169

<sup>17</sup> Mujibur Rehman Khan, *Eastern Pakistan: Its Population, Delimitation, and Economics*, p. 8

two exceptions.”<sup>18</sup> In 1943, O.H.K. Spate, a geographer at the London School of Economics, wrote gloomily about the economic prospects of “Bangistan” composed solely of the delta’s jute tracts: “If partition left this metropolis [Calcutta] out of Bangistan, the economic situation of the remnant state would not be enviable – a small territory suffering from severe agrarian overcrowding, cut off from the sources of power and raw materials on which Bengal's industries have flourished, and by the very communal hypothesis to which it owed its existence unable to seek relief in emigration.”<sup>19</sup>

The movement to partition Bengal - the “*Banga-bhanga andolon*” – was condemned in the *Millat* in the months preceding partition. Articles in the *Millat* alleged that the *Banga-bhanga andolon* was a plot by “imperialist-capitalists” hatched in conspiracy with their Congress allies. This plot would maintain imperialist-capitalists’ “control and ownership” (*sholo anna malikana*) over the wealth they had built up in Calcutta and its environs over two centuries of exploiting Bengali peasants and workers.<sup>20</sup> By denying the Muslim and peasant state of Pakistan control over industrial and commercial Calcutta, partition would enable the continued exploitation of imperialist capitalists after the formal end of British Empire. Partition was the last ploy by Islam’s global enemy – the British Empire – to keep Muslims impoverished and powerless, a deathblow to the aspirations of Muslim economic emancipation.<sup>21</sup> Articles in the *Millat* alleged that the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha were

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<sup>18</sup> “Ninth Miscellaneous Meeting,” in Mansergh, *Transfer of Power*, Vol. X, 1981, pp. 261-64,

<sup>19</sup> Spate, O.H.K. “Geographical Aspects of Pakistan Considered,” *The Geographical Journal*, 102(3), September 1943, p. 129

<sup>20</sup> “Bongo-bhongo andolon,” *Millat*, April 11, 1947

<sup>21</sup> “Matlabajerai Bongo-Bhonger Awaj Tulechhey,” *Millat*, May 16, 1947, p. 1.

playing into imperialist capitalist hands; in their desire to build a “caste-Hindu Raj” in western Bengal, they were ensuring the continuance of imperialist domination.

Bengali Muslim leaders mounted a last-ditch attempt to avert partition by proposing a united independent Bengal. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim joined with Sarat Chandra Bose, who rebelled against the Congress high command, to propose a United Independent Bengal. Suhrawardy argued that Bengal was indivisible because of its “economic integrity, mutual reliance and the necessity of creating a strong workable state.”<sup>22</sup> Jinnah gave the scheme his tacit support, as he considered a partitioned Bengal useless: “If Bengal remains united ... I should be delighted. What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta; they had much better to remain united and independent. I am sure they would be on friendly terms with us.”<sup>23</sup>

The British desire to depart India as quickly as possible prevented alternatives to partition from coming to fruition. On June 4, 1947, Mountbatten announced that if Muslim League wished for Pakistan, they would have to accept the partition of Bengal and the Punjab. The following issue of the *Millat* ran an editorial titled “Crippled Pakistan” (*Pongu Pakistan*), echoing Jinnah’s famous quote of a “maimed, mutilated, and moth-eaten” Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> “According to the British government’s announcement, Bengal will be partitioned (*dikbondito*),” the editorial announced, “and of this partitioned Bengal, the wealthiest, most advanced, and resource-rich portion will be snatched away from Bengali Muslim hands and given to a few self-interested

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Haron-or-Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 231

<sup>23</sup> “Record of an interview between Jinnah and Mountbatten, 26 April, 1947,” *Transfer of Power*, Vol. X, pp. 451-454.

<sup>24</sup> Jinnah’s quote is from September 1944 when, in talks with the Gandhi, he rejected C. Rajagopalachari’s formula of dividing India into Muslim and Hindu majority districts.

friends of the British.” The partition plan was, the editorial alleged, was intended to “squeeze Bengal’s Muslims into one corner of Bengal and to crush them to death.” The “crippled (*pongu*) Pakistan” would be an economic disaster with a bleak future; partition was a “fearsome cloud over the lives Bengali Muslims.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite their misgivings, the Bengal Muslim League accepted Mountbatten’s partition plan. Upon their return to Calcutta, the provincial Muslim League announced preparations for partition. Suhrawardy, whose political base was in metropolitan Calcutta, reportedly started scouting out a new constituency in Jessore. The Dacca Medical College, it was announced, would serve as government headquarters until new buildings were erected. Private individuals were barred from acquiring land in parts of Chittagong town that was to be set aside for the expansion of the port.<sup>26</sup> The mood in the Bengal Muslim League was, however, gloomy. As Abul Hashim stated, they had accepted partition not out of “satisfaction and hope but out of fear and helplessness.”<sup>27</sup>

## SOVEREIGNTY

The creation of the crippled, or the maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten, Pakistan on August 14, 1947, was celebrated with much fanfare in East Bengal – now Pakistan. In the new provincial capital of Dacca, gates were erected, buildings decorated, processions brought out, and flags of the new nation raised. Celebrations also took

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<sup>25</sup> “Pongu Pakistan,” *Millat*, June 6, 1947, p. 2

<sup>26</sup> “League Council British ghoshona maniya loilen,” *Millat*, June 13, 1947, p. 1

<sup>27</sup> “British porikolpona keno grihito hoilo,” *Millat*, June 13, 1947, p. 1

place in mofussil towns such as Barisal, Sylhet, and Rajshahi and in rural parts of Mymensingh and Tipperah.<sup>28</sup> Probohash Chandra Lahiry, a Congress politician in Rajshahi and participant in the celebrations, in 1964 remembered that on “every face of the vast population ... [showed] signs of radiant glow of fulfillment of a long cherished desire of winning freedom.”<sup>29</sup> Concerns about the viability of the territorial economy were put aside, as tens of thousands celebrated the inauguration of a new nation and its promise of freedom from exploitation, oppression, and hunger.

While newly created citizens celebrated the nation for its promise of economic emancipation, the newly created state grappled with the exigencies of state building and modernization – a task that many considered impossible given the new nation’s territorial inheritance.<sup>30</sup> However, the bureaucrats and politicians who had taken control of government were optimistic. O.H.K. Spate noted in January of 1948: “Morally, to judge from many conversations with young Muslim officials flocking into Western Pakistan there is a good spirit among them – a realization of the enormous difficulties, the shortages of resources and of technical cadres, but a determination to tackle them resolutely.”<sup>31</sup> While many thought that post-colonial Pakistan would not even be able to survive, much less thrive, bureaucrats in the new

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Kamal, *State against Nation*, pp. 11-14 provides an account of the celebrations with which the new state was inaugurated.

<sup>29</sup> Probohash Chandra Lahiry, *India Partitioned and Minorities in Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1964, p. 1

<sup>30</sup> The unequal share of the spoils of partition between India and Pakistan, and Pakistan’s underdeveloped territorial inheritance made it doubtful whether the state would be able to financially sustain itself, much less undertake the tasks of state and nation-building. Jalal, Ayesha, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan’s Political Economy of Defence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 details the uneven distribution of the spoils of partition and the difficulties under which the new state labored.

<sup>31</sup> Spate, O.H.K., “The Partition of India and the Prospects of Pakistan,” *Geographical Review*, 38(1), January 1948, p. 29



capital of Karachi announced a program of rapid industrialization and economic modernization, in order to bring “improvements in the standard of life of the people ... by harnessing, to the maximum extent possible, the forces and treasures of nature in the service of people by providing gainful and legitimate employment and by assuring freedom from want, equality of opportunity, and a more equitable distribution of wealth.”<sup>32</sup>

Post-colonial state-builders’ optimism stemmed in part from the Bengal delta’s jute. In August 1948, exactly a year after partition, the Pakistani government’s Publicity Department issued a pamphlet titled *The Golden Fibre*. The pamphlet celebrated eastern Bengal’s “virtual monopoly” over jute, and “practical monopoly” over “finer varieties of jute.” cultivation of this important global commodity. Pre-partition fears of economic unviability were reversed: “the emergence of Pakistan as a separate sovereign state has substantially altered the position of India ... While Pakistan has emerged with 80% of the world’s jute and 100% of the best varieties of the fibre, India has only about 18 to 20% of the jute fibre which is quite insufficient to feed her mills which number more than a hundred.”<sup>33</sup> The pamphlet proceeded to outline Pakistan’s plans in the expansion of baling capacity, Chittagong port’s cargo handling facilities, and in kick-starting a jute manufacturing industry in East Bengal. The Bengal delta’s jute was Pakistan’s “golden fibre,” a national resource that would support the new nation’s economy and finance ambitious industrialization and economic modernization programmes.

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<sup>32</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Industrial Development in Pakistan*, Karachi, October 1948, p. 8

<sup>33</sup> Hayat, Aslam *The Golden Fibre*, Karachi: Dept of Advertising, Films and Publications, Government of Pakistan, 1950, p. 9

Pakistan's national economy was critically dependent on primary commodity exports, especially those of jute and cotton and, to a lesser extent, of tea and hides and skins. Export duties on primary commodities contributed the lion's share of state revenue and, even more significantly, brought in foreign currency. The post-colonial state building project relied on foreign hard currency to finance imports of capital goods, military stores, and consumer goods. Pakistan benefited from high global commodity prices in the years following 1947, particularly during the Korean War commodity boom of 1950-51.<sup>34</sup> The high prices of its chief commodity exports enabled Pakistan to maintain a favourable balance of trade position and to finance economic and industrial development while maintaining a liberal trade regime. A pamphlet celebrating the first five years' of Pakistan in 1952 stated: "a favourable balance of trade position ... has, of course, been a cornerstone of Pakistan's economy."<sup>35</sup> The Commerce Minister, Fazlur Rahman, underscored Pakistan's reliance on jute and cotton in a broadcast on Radio Pakistan in February 1952:

Immediately after partition it was realized that Pakistan's internal economy as well as the external financial position will depend almost entirely upon the two major cash crops of jute and cotton. All our defense stores, capital equipment, materials required for industrial consumption and essential consumer goods had to be paid for out of our earnings of foreign exchange from the exports of jute and cotton... the export duties on jute and cotton ... constitute the single biggest source of internal revenue of the Central and Provincial Governments. In fact the entire fabric of Pakistan's economy is woven with these two fibres.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The value of Pakistan's exports in 1950-51 was \$406 million as opposed to \$171 million in 1949-50. Talbot, Ian, *Pakistan: A Modern History*, London: C. Hurst, 2009, p. 137

<sup>35</sup> *Just a Peep at Pakistan*, New York: Consulate General of Pakistan, 1953, p. 20

<sup>36</sup> "Jute Bargaining Factor with Bharat: Rahman on steps taken to sell more," *Dawn*, August 28, 1952, in MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

This Pakistani national economy did not, however, simply come into existence with the creation of the nation on August 14, 1947. The Pakistani state deliberately and actively weaved the “fabric of Pakistan’s economy” out of its territorial inheritance. The project of transforming commodities of empire into national resources entailed the assertion of territorial and national sovereignty over commodities. The state policed flows of jute across territorial boundaries, monitored jute transactions, and taxed cultivators, traders, and manufacturers. They erected customs offices, created and staffed government institutions, established processes of documentation and inspection. In the following sections, I look at two aspects of the post-colonial state’s assertion of sovereignty over the former commodity of empire: policing and controlling flows of jute across territorial borders and monitoring and regulating the national loyalties of jute traders.

### *Territorial Sovereignty*

On October 13, 1947, after two months of unobstructed flows of jute between East Bengal and Calcutta, the Government of Pakistan wrote to their counterparts in India complaining that they were not receiving their legitimate share of the export duty on jute.<sup>37</sup> The Pakistani government pointed out the injustice that “India is likely to receive over 90% of the jute revenue, although only 27% of the jute is grown in that Dominion.” They proposed that Pakistan should receive “at least 75% of the export duty on 5.9 million bales” as its legitimate share. The Government of India prevaricated in their response, arguing that any agreement on jute would have to

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<sup>37</sup> “Aide-Memoire,” From High Commissioner of Pakistan in India to Finance Minister, GoI, October 13, 1947 in Ministry of External Affairs, OSV Branch, File No. 9-5/47-OSV, NAI.

await a comprehensive trade and payments agreement. They stated that it would “scarcely be fair to question its equity isolating any particular source of revenue ... in regard to which one party may feel that it had any special claim.”<sup>38</sup>

The newly created Pakistani government desperately needed revenue, and was not willing to forego the export duty. On November 13, 1947, Liaqat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, wrote directly to Jawaharlal Nehru announcing that, “in the interests of their revenue my Government now feel compelled most reluctantly to charge export duty on jute leaving borders of East Bengal both by sea and land.” This was a momentous announcement: for the first time since its creation, Pakistan was to enforce arbitrarily drawn partition lines. Significantly, the decision to assert sovereignty over flows of fibre across its territory was driven by concerns of national economy – specifically, the desire for state revenue.

The Pakistani government hurriedly setup customs check-posts and appointed land-customs officers in thirteen key jute-trading towns, located on rail and steamer routes connecting the delta to Calcutta. The Central Board of Revenue in Karachi announced that “customs on raw jute exported from the Dominion of Pakistan by land” would be collected at river-ports like Chandpur, Narayanjanj, Sirajganj, Munshiganj, Dacca and railway towns like Sarishabari, Hajiganj, Bera, and Ishwardi. In these towns, the government hurriedly setup customs offices, appointed customs officials, and distributed the forms, receipts and the paperwork involved in customs collections. None of these towns were located on the physical border, which was still not demarcated. The government found it easier to police jute bulked on steamer

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<sup>38</sup> “Aide-Memoire,” from Secy, Ministry of Finance, GoI, to High Commissioner of Pakistan in India, October 20, 1947 in Ministry of External Affairs, OSV Branch, File No. 9-5/47-OSV, NAI.

flats and railway wagons in jute-trading towns, rather than smaller quantities loaded on country-boats and ox-carts along its borders. I will return to smuggling and the *beparis* and *farias* who moved jute-laden ox-carts and country-boats across Bengal's porous borders later in this chapter, when I discuss the dynamic of harassment and evasion in state-citizen relations.

In September 1948, when the governments of India and Pakistan signed a trade and payments agreement, Pakistan's jute export duty remained in place. The two governments specified their requirements of essential commodities from each other. India wanted 5.5 million bales of raw jute and 900,000 bales of raw cotton from Pakistan; Pakistan wanted 3.4 million tons of coal, 400,000 bales of cotton cloth and yarn, and 50,000 tons of jute manufactures from India. This trade would take place at "free" or market prices, between private merchants and traders. Under a separate payments agreement, the governments also agreed that Pakistani and Indian rupees should be of equal value, and balances of payments up to 150 million rupees should be settled in local currencies, the next 150 million rupees above it in "free sterling," and the remainder in "blocked sterling."

The two governments taxed a variety of commodities in mutual trade, despite agreeing that "saving regard to economic considerations, both Dominions should try to reduce the number of commodities which when moving from one Dominion to the other shall be subject to an import or export duty."<sup>39</sup> Customs duties formed a significant proportion of pre-partition India's state revenue, and revenue-hungry post-colonial governments were not willing to forego revenue from their mutual trade. India imposed duties on exports of cotton and jute manufactures and Pakistan

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<sup>39</sup> "Report on Trade," Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Jute Branch, 28-Pak(15)/52, NAI

on exports of raw cotton and jute. The two governments levied duties on commodities traded exclusively across Bengal's partition lines – Pakistan on exports of fish and bamboo to India, and their Indian counterparts on imports of raw tobacco.<sup>40</sup>

Post-colonial Pakistan and India's efforts to impose territorial sovereignty over their economies were also informed by their desire for economic independence and autonomy. Both governments pursued plans to reduce their dependence on each other – India on Pakistan for raw materials and food-grains, Pakistan on India for markets for its agricultural produce. Pakistan tried to build up East Bengal's jute baling, manufacturing, and shipping capacities so as to displace flows of jute from Calcutta. The Indian government tried to increase jute cultivation within its borders, with some success: India's output of raw jute increased from 1.6 million bales in 1946-47, to 2 million in 1947-48 and 2.8 million in 1948-49.<sup>41</sup> The provincial governments of Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa distributed jute seeds and provided advice and technical assistance to cultivators to encourage them to grow jute. India also announced the construction of the Assam Link railway, a single-track narrow gauge railway line connecting Calcutta with jute and tea-tracts in Cooch Behar, Assam, and Tripura without passing through Pakistan.

When the two governments' met to extend the trade and payments agreement in May 1949, Pakistan's trade surplus with India – the result of high commodity prices – emerged as the major issue. Under the terms of the payments agreement,

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<sup>40</sup> Summary of meeting between Ghulam Ahmed, Finance Minister Pakistan and Commerce Minister, India, April 8, 1949 in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/Economic Committee of the Cabinet, 15, 27, ECC(49), NAI.

<sup>41</sup> "Estimates of Abolition of Control," in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/Economic Committee of the Cabinet, File No. 6/1/ECC/50, NAI

Pakistan's surplus with India did not translate into hard currency, pound sterling or US dollars, but into Indian rupees that could only be used to purchase goods from India. When Indian and Pakistani trade delegates met at Karachi, the Pakistan State Bank was holding close to 140 million Indian rupees that it was unable to spend on anything but imports from India. The Pakistani trade negotiators insisted that Pakistan's holdings of Indian rupees should be settled in free sterling before a new payments agreement could be negotiated.<sup>42</sup> They demanded that subsequent payments agreements, trade balances should be payable in sterling. The Indian delegation responded: "India was not in a position to take on unlimited liability for payment in current sterling."<sup>43</sup>

Each government held the other responsible for the trade imbalance. Abdul Qadir, leading the Pakistani delegation, argued "India was not selling goods to Pakistan although the latter was very anxious to purchase." B.K. Nehru leading the Indians said "India was keen to sell goods to Pakistan but the latter was not keen to buy." The main issue was over Pakistan's purchases of cotton cloth from India – Pakistan was importing the bulk of their cloth from Japan because, Pakistani delegates claimed, Indian cloth was more expensive and of poorer quality. Neither side budged during the first round of negotiations, and they decided to reconvene in June. In the second round of negotiations, the dispute was resolved in India's favour: balance of payments up to 150 million rupees would still be settled in local currencies. The Indian delegation argued that Pakistan did not push for a new payments agreement as they forecast a much reduced trade surplus with India. Jute prices were

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<sup>42</sup> "Detailed Record of the Inter-Dominion Discussions Held at Karachi on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1949", in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15, 27 ECC(49), NAI

<sup>43</sup> "Detailed Record of the Inter-Dominion Discussions Held at Karachi on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1949", in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15, 27 ECC(49), NAI

falling and India's increased domestic production meant that they required less Pakistan jute.

The Indian government's "victory" at these trade negotiations was, however, short-lived. The second India-Pakistan trade agreement came into effect on September 1, 1949. Little over two weeks later, all official trade between Pakistan and India came to an abrupt halt. On September 19, following the devaluation of the British pound, India devalued its rupee and Pakistan did not. The exchange rate stood at 144 Indian rupees for a 100 Pakistani rupees. India refused to honour the new Pakistani rupee and official Indo-Pak trade came to an abrupt standstill. Official trade resumed in April 1950, when the two governments signed new and much limited trade agreement. The devaluation crisis and trade stoppage of 1949 and 1950, rather than the political partition of 1947, rent asunder the formerly united economic space of British India.

The devaluation crisis finally severed the jute commodity chain linking the deltaic hinterland and metropolitan Calcutta. In the aftermath of the crisis, both India and Pakistan stepped up efforts to reduce their dependency on the other. As India increased domestic jute cultivation and Pakistan expanded manufacturing capacity, the two formerly complementary economies began to compete with each other for international markets for jute manufactures. During the 1950s, the two governments openly discriminated against the other, engaging in frequent economic warfare. The Pakistan government imposed a License Duty payable only on sales of jute to India, and imposed higher export duties on exports of kutchha bales, only sold to India. India, for its part, imposed a surcharge on exports of coal to energy-starved Pakistan. When the Indian trade delegation accused their Pakistani counterparts of



discrimination in raw jute exports in July, 1952, the Pakistani delegates countered that, “this was, in fact, not an act of discrimination, but merely a matter of their commercial policy calculated to help the sale of raw jute ... India, having progressed towards self-sufficiency in raw jute, could only consume a small part of the raw jute which Pakistan had to sell. Therefore, Pakistan had no option but to offer jute to India’s competitors at cheaper prices so that the latter could stand in competition with India in the American market.”<sup>44</sup>

### *National Loyalties*

In addition to asserting territorial sovereignty over flows of jute across borderlines, the Pakistani government tried to police the national loyalties of traders and corporations engaged in the jute trade. The development discourse of the post-colonial Pakistani state envisioned private capitalists as the state’s development partners, cooperating with the state in the ambitious projects of nation and state building. The post-colonial state looked to private entrepreneurs to invest much-needed capital in kick-starting a jute-manufacturing sector in East Pakistan – in erecting mill-buildings, and importing machinery. In return, the state gave these privileged firms access to cheap credit, public contracts, privileged information, and policy-making. The close partnership of state and capital in carrying out an ambitious industrialization program meant that the state was anxious about the national loyalties of capital – fearful of the flight of capital and the possible sabotage of Pakistan’s budding national economy by “foreign” capitalists.

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<sup>44</sup> “Note for the Economic Committee of the Cabinet – Indo Pakistan Trade Agreement,” July 23, 1952, in Ministry of Com & Ind, Jute Branch, 28-Pak (15)/52

The Marwari and Hindu traders who dominated Bengal's hinterland jute trade were particularly suspicious in the government's eyes. The trope of "Indian Big Business" conspiring to sabotage East Pakistan was a dominant theme during the post-partition years. In July 1949, An editorial in *Dawn*, a Karachi-based daily and official mouth-piece of the Pakistan government, blamed the fall of jute prices at the start of the season on the operations of Indian Big Business. They pointed the finger of blame at "big Marwari business interests in Dacca and other places who, acting as the agents of jute manufacturers in India, are engaged in speculation in jute crops in order to force down prices." The *Dawn* urged the government to take the issue head-on, "with prompt and energetic action" instead of "shilly-shallying." "Tendering advice to the Big Business in India is as futile as preaching the gospel to an angry bison."<sup>45</sup> The fear of Marwari and Hindu businesses serving Indian interests and actively trying to undermine the Pakistani economy persisted throughout the 1950s. It was out of such concerns, that the Pakistani government sought to monitor and regulate the national loyalties and activities of jute traders.

In April 1949, the East Bengal legislature passed the "Jute Dealers' Registration Act." Ostensibly meant to standardize weights and measures and prevent illegal exactions in hinterland markets, the central feature of the Act was to make it compulsory for all jute dealers to be registered. The Act became a means of controlling the national loyalties of jute dealers, as merchants and corporations whose Pakistani loyalties were suspect – mainly because they were Hindu – were frequently denied licenses or had their licenses canceled.<sup>46</sup> Marwari firms were also denied

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<sup>45</sup> Dawn, "Editorial: Jute Prices," July 6, 1949, in MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>46</sup> "Meeting of the Economic Committee of the Cabinet," November 6, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat (Economic Wing)/ Economic Committee of Cabinet, 6(II) ECC/50, NAI

access to state facilities and contracts. During the devaluation crisis, in an attempt to shore up jute prices, the National Bank of Pakistan provided credit on easy terms to dealers to purchase fibre. Only registered firms were eligible for state credit and, beyond that, the Pakistan Jute Board drew up lists of authorized buyers. Only three Marwari firms were included in the list.<sup>47</sup> While targeting Marwari and Hindu capital, the post-colonial Pakistani government sought to reassure European and American capital that their investments were safe. However, as the India Pakistan British Association, the leading organization of British commercial interests in South Asia, commented in January 1958, in response to a government announcement that only firms 25% owned by Pakistani citizens would be registered as jute dealers: “the old pretext that it is the Marwaris the policy is aimed at and not other foreign interests is wearing a bit thin.”<sup>48</sup>

While the Marwari and Hindu traders who had dominated the hinterland trade prior to partition were suspect, a group of Calcutta-based Muslim business families emerged as the state’s development partners – primarily, through investing capital into East Pakistan’s jute manufacturing. Foremost amongst these firms were the Ispahani and Adamjee business families, prominent Calcutta-based jute exporters in pre-partition Bengal. In the years preceding partition, the Ispahanis and Adamjees had been the Bengal Muslim League’s chief financiers and leading lights of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce, a business association closely aligned with the League. After partition, both families moved substantial capital into East Pakistan,

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<sup>47</sup> “Meeting of the Economic Committee of the Cabinet,” November 6, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat (Economic Wing)/ Economic Committee of Cabinet, 6(II) ECC/50, NAI

<sup>48</sup> India Pakistan British Association, “Confidential Report on Pakistan for January 1958,” in Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR. In the face of strong opposition from western capital, this policy was subsequently abandoned.

particularly into its jute-manufacturing sector. The Ispahanis took a leading role in East Pakistan's economy and politics. H.G. Smith, a Dundee jute businessman who visited Pakistan in late 1948, wrote: "M.M. Ispahani [the patriarch of the family] was in early after partition with ambitious plans as befitting a Moslem with the most influential Pakistan Government contacts."<sup>49</sup>

In the first months after partition, the Ispahanis had established three large warehouses in Chittagong – according to Smith, "of immense trading value" – and had imported second-hand machinery from Dundee to establish a 500-loom jute mill, also in Chittagong. The Ispahanis plans were dwarfed by the ambitions of the Adamjees, who announced plans to build a 3,000-loom jute mill near Narayanganj: it would be largest mill in the world, displacing the Ludlow Jute Mills in Massachusetts. By February 1952, the Adamjees had installed 2,000 looms, of which 1,200 were in production. Visiting the project site, G.A. Mason, one of the directors of the Thomas Duff mills in Calcutta wrote: "it is certainly a tremendous project and covers a vast area."<sup>50</sup> By the late 1950s, the Adamjee Mills were operating all 3,000 looms and employing 20,000 workers, and was the largest mill in the world. It became the symbol of the statist enterprise of creating a modern and industrial economy in the agrarian delta.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "H.G. Smith Travel Reports: reports from India and Eastern Pakistan, 1948 and 1954-56," MS/86/XIX/7/8, Dundee University Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Walton, Calcutta to Kidd, Dundee, April 4, 1952 in "Correspondence of Directors while visiting mills in India, 6 July 1946 to 4 August 1952, MS 86/V/7/35, DUA

<sup>51</sup> Fittingly, the Adamjee jute mills was also the centre of labour unrest in the newly-industrialized region. The Adamjee mill riots of 1954 – which took the form of clashes between Bengali and Bihari labourers in the factory – resulted in about 300 deaths. Park, Richard and Wheeler, Richard, "East Bengal Under Governor's Rule," *Far Eastern Survey*, 23(9), September 1954, pp. 129-134, provides a sketchy and pro-government account of the riots.

In return for investing their capital and entrepreneurship into building East Pakistan's industrial sector literally from scratch, these business families were granted close and privileged access to the colonial government. M.M. Ispahani, the patriarch of the Ispahani family, emerged as one of the most prominent public figures in post-colonial Pakistan. M.M. Ispahani was a close adviser of the government, a long-standing member of the Jute Board, and a founding-member of the Pakistan Jute Association.<sup>52</sup> However, the post-colonial state felt compelled to impose its vision of territorial sovereignty on even these most Pakistani firms. Prior to partition, the Adamjee and Ispahani businesses were headquartered in Calcutta and it did not make immediate sense to relocate headquarters from Calcutta to East Bengal. In October, 1953, the Jute Board complained to the Pakistan Jute Association that a "good deal of business in Pakistan jute was being done through firms in Calcutta and, in fact, supporting documents submitted with EPC [Export Control Procedure] forms were copies of telegrams [of jute orders] received at Calcutta." The Jute Board threatened that EPC forms would not be issued for businesses concluded through Calcutta. The Association agreed in principle but asked for time to implement measures: their member firms had to make arrangements and build up their organizational capacity in order to finalize orders in their East Pakistan offices. The PJA also expressed concerns about whether the East Pakistan Telegraph system could handle the volume of jute orders. The Jute Board granted a temporary allowance of three months and

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<sup>52</sup> Ispahani was particularly close to the Jute Board, the government institution where control and authority was centralized. He served as one of the three members of the Board since its formation in 1949, and was involved in its day to day operations. <sup>52</sup> In his evidence to the Agriculture Enquiry Committee, Chowdhury Afsar Ali, Member of the Jute Board stated that "Myself and Mr. Ispahani always attend daily [Jute Board meetings] and we dispose of the work so far as it lies within our authority." "Proceedings of Sub-Committee III of the Agricultural Enquiry Committee held on 6/12/51 at the East Bengal Secretariat, Dacca at 10 AM" in Proceedings in East Bengal (including evidence on jute and tea), 1951, MSS Eur F235/360, IOR.

promised that the Posts and Telegraphs Department would “strengthen their organization to cope with the expected increase in traffic.”<sup>53</sup>

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The delta’s jute traders, even those with strong pro-Pakistani credentials, experienced efforts to impose territorial and national sovereignty over fibre as bureaucratic harassment. Members of the Pakistan Jute Association complained that steamers carrying jute from Narayanganj to Calcutta had to pass through six customs or police checks, and that the steamer journey takes 60% longer than it did in pre-partition days. At each customs or police check, the shipment was stopped, inspected and the traders were harassed.<sup>54</sup> Jute shippers’ exports were monitored through a complex system of documentation and inspections, that the PJA described as “cumbersome, complicated and time-consuming.”<sup>55</sup> In 1954, B.A. Boldy, the President of the Pakistan Jute Association complained: “the export control procedure for jute which has been allowed to just grow since partition without a systematic overhaul, has become so unwieldy as to render it almost unworkable.” He proceeded to detail the delays and difficulties involved in exporting jute through official channels:

The procedure for obtaining State Bank permission to export through EPC forms, and obtaining export licenses from the Jute Board has become lengthy and unwieldy, it is still difficult to get the State Bank to allow remittances to buyers to their legitimate claims. The Customs Department ... are delaying

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<sup>53</sup> The Pakistan Jute Association, Annual Report for the year 1953-54, Narayanganj, 1954, p. 23

<sup>54</sup> The Pakistan Jute Association, Annual Report for the year 1953-54, Narayanganj: 1954, p. 10

<sup>55</sup> The Pakistan Jute Association, Annual Report for the year 1956-57, Narayanganj: 1957, p. 7

consignments where there is the slightest reason. All these difficulties are ... having effect on consumers of jute causing confusion and uncertainty not only within Pakistan but also in the trade and industry all over the world.<sup>56</sup>

Jute firms responded to state harassment by falsifying paperwork: “under-invoicing” and “grade manipulation” was rife in jute exports. Firms under-reported the value of exports in official documents, claiming that smaller quantities and/or poorer quality of fibre than the actual consignment. They then collected the difference between the officially reported value and the actually received value for themselves, denying the state the full amount of customs duties and hard currency. The state frequently took extraordinary measures in punishing firms suspected of falsifying papers. In November 1954, the government cancelled the licenses of thirteen firms, stating in a press release that “they were forced to take this measure owing to the alarming proportions that malpractices in the jute trade, such as under-invoicing, under-grading and registration of bogus contracts were assuming, resulting in loss of foreign exchange to the State and making it increasingly difficult for reputable shippers to carry on normal trade.”<sup>57</sup>

Even such punitive measures did not put an end to practices of under-invoicing and grade manipulation. Avoidance, evasion and corruption was so widespread that, in May 1955, H.A. Luke, the Chairman of the Calcutta Jute Brokers and Dealers Association wrote to the Indian government not to protest Pakistani trade policy, because “if the Pakistani authorities rigorously enforced their rules about currency exchange and correct grading, India would have to pay more for Pakistani

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<sup>56</sup> The Pakistan Jute Association, Annual Report for the year 1953-54, Narayanganj: 1954, p. 13

<sup>57</sup> The Pakistan Jute Association, Annual Report for the Year, 1954-55, Narayanganj, 1955, p. 55

jute than she has done in the past.”<sup>58</sup> He added, “If one takes the prices current in Pakistan, adds the cost of transport, insurance, export duty, etc. and converts into Indian currency at the Pakistani rate of exchange, it is obvious that Pakistani jute cannot be sold in India at the prices at which it is sold, unless there is undergrading or exchange manipulation or some such irregularity.”<sup>59</sup>

This dynamic of harassment, evasion and punishment was not limited to merchants with means in the export trade, but extended down to petty traders and cultivators. When the Jute Dealers Registration Act was floored in the Legislative Assembly, Mir Ahmed Ali, a member of the ruling Muslim League from a rural, jute-growing constituency, asked that the Act exclude *farias* and *beparis*. He said, “If the Act does not exclude those who do business with less money, who buy and sell less than 100 maunds of jute, these people will be oppressed (*zuloom*). I am saying these few words so that these poor people are not made to suffer and the police don’t go after them ... Please remember Pakistan is a country of the poor.”<sup>60</sup> As I argue in the following section, *farias*, *beparis*, and cultivators were just as adept at evading the post-colonial state as the more substantial capitalists at the top of the commodity chain. Far from the embodiment of peasant economic emancipation, post-colonial Pakistan was a source of harassment and oppression, an entity to be avoided and evaded.

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<sup>58</sup> “Note by Mr. H.A. Luke, Chairman, Calcutta Jute Brokers & Dealers Association,” in Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Jute (Pakistan) Section, File No. 28-Jute/55Pak, NAI.

<sup>59</sup> “Note by Mr. H.A. Luke, Chairman, Calcutta Jute Brokers & Dealers Association,” in Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Jute (Pakistan) Section, File No. 28-Jute/55Pak, NAI.

<sup>60</sup> EBLA, Vol. III, No. 4, p. 219



## HARASSMENT, EVASION, AND PUNISHMENT

When the devaluation of September 1949 put a stop to official trade between India and Pakistan, smuggling flourished. According to jute traders' estimates, 600,000 bales of jute were smuggled out of Pakistan in the first months of the trade stoppage – that is, transported to India without paying any customs and by exchanging currencies on the black market.<sup>61</sup> During the 1950s and the 1960s, the Indian and Pakistani Jute Mills Association included an estimate of the amount of jute smuggled out of Pakistan into India – these estimates ranged from 300,000 to 900,000 bales annually. Smuggling took place along East Pakistan's twisted and undemarcated border, on country-boats and ox-carts. P. Das Gupta, the Government of India's trade commissioner in Dacca, stated in a report on December, 1949: "On the Sylhet border, it would be quite true to say, that jute is smuggled into Assam and re-booked to Calcutta in bond through Pakistan."<sup>62</sup> Further, according to Das Gupta, the border districts of Khulna and Jessore in the southwest and close to Calcutta, "have gained some notoriety for smuggling to India."<sup>63</sup> Smuggling from Jessore and Khulna increased during the drier winter months, as waters receded and rural roads became usable by ox-carts. On December 8, 1949, the Indian government reported that smuggling "was expected to increase in a few weeks time with the drying up of

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<sup>61</sup> "The Economic Situation in Pakistan: Anxiety over Jute and Cotton" February 15, 1950 in MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>62</sup> P. Das Gupta, Asst. Indian Govt, Trade Commissioner in Eastern Pak, Dacca to C.C. Desai, Secy, GoI, Commerce Ministry, 14 December, 1949, Cabinet Secretariat [Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

<sup>63</sup> P. Das Gupta, Asst. Indian Govt, Trade Commissioner in Eastern Pak, Dacca to C.C. Desai, Secy, GoI, Commerce Ministry, 14 December, 1949, Cabinet Secretariat [Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

the roadways which were at present impassable. It was estimated that 2 to 3 lakhs bales in all would move into India by this means.”<sup>64</sup>

These transactions in smuggled jute were financed by black-market currency exchanges. The over-valuation of the Pakistani rupee, following Britain and India’s devaluation, had created a substantial black-market for the Pakistan rupee. In these unofficial markets, the Pakistani rupee traded at well under its official value. Within a month of devaluation a “free market on a strictly cash basis in Indian and Pakistani currency had sprung up in Calcutta at rates varying from Rs. 100 to Rs. 115 (Indian) to Rs. 100 (Pakistan).”<sup>65</sup> Rates for “Hundi transactions” – promisory notes – varied from Rs. 105 to Rs. 115 Indian to Rs. 100 Pakistan. Currency black markets sprung up all along the East Pakistan-India border in order to finance the illicit trade between the regions. In currency black markets in border areas the Pakistani rupee traded at par with the Indian rupee, and the value of the Pakistani rupee increased further from the border.

The Pakistani government sought to crack down on smuggling. Unofficial trade denied the Pakistani state export duties and foreign currency earnings and it weakened the Pakistani government’s bargaining position in trade negotiation with India. Pakistan sought to put pressure on India by starving their jute mills of raw materials. On their part, the Indian government sought to maintain flows of fibre and to remove barriers to smuggling. In November 1949, Rajaram Rao, the Collector of Land Customs, informed the Indian government’s committee on Indo-Eastern

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<sup>64</sup> “Twelfth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” December 8, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

<sup>65</sup> “Sixth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” October 27, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

Pakistan trade that “the only [Government of India] restriction in regard to jute smuggled into the Indian Union was insistence on the execution of a bond from the parties that sales would be made only to duly licensed purchasers. The committee were inclined to the view that no restrictions of any kind should be placed on the flow of jute across the border from Pakistan into India.”<sup>66</sup>

In response to increased smuggling, the Pakistani government intensified its surveillance of jute-laden steamers and railway wagons in East Pakistan’s market towns. In November 1949, the steamer companies claimed that between 700,000 and 800,000 maunds of raw jute loaded on to flats were being held up at Khulna. The Pakistani government refused to release flats without proof that payments for the jute, including that of export duties, had been made in Pakistani rupees at official exchange. The steamer companies complained that it was difficult to provide these documents as the seized jute was made up of small consignments purchased in small trading towns scattered throughout the delta.<sup>67</sup> The procedure was considered to be so “complex and difficult” that the Pakistani government never actually received a written request for the release of jute, though the IJMA sent several representatives to meet with Pakistani authorities, including Ghulam Faruque, the Chairman of the all-powerful Jute Board.<sup>68</sup>

The government also seized consignments of “India to India” jute – that is jute from Assam, Tripura or Cooch Behar – traveling through its territory. On

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<sup>66</sup> Tenth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” November 24, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

<sup>67</sup> Eighth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” November 10, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

<sup>68</sup> P. Das Gupta, Asst. Indian Gov Trade Comm in Eastern Pak, Dacca to C.C. Desai, Secy, GoI, Commerce Ministry, 14 December, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

December 22, 1949, the Indian Government was informed that “24 flats loaded with 3,45,116 mds (or 69,023 bales) of “India to India” jute were being held up at Khulna by the Pakistan authorities. It was also reported that Pakistan proposed to appoint a Jute expert for inspecting every consignment with a view to determining whether the jute was of Indian or Pakistan origin.”<sup>69</sup> The steamer companies responded by stopping loading jute for Calcutta in river-ports in Assam. Jute was stuck in Tipperah, unable to find transport through Pakistan. Pakistan’s barriers to the transit trade led to a rapid build up of raw jute in Tipperah and “some parties had found it worth their while to shift jute by air from Tipperah State to Calcutta.”<sup>70</sup>

While the state found it much easier found it much easier to police jute bulked on railway wagons and steamer flats in market towns, they found it much more difficult to police the nation’s largely undemarcated borders. The government attempted to control sales and movements of jute in border regions. In November 1949, the Jute Board appointed agents to buy up all jute within ten miles of Pakistan’s international boundary to prevent smuggling – the Ispahanis received the bulk of the contract. In subsequent years, the government intensified these controls. In 1953, the provincial government of East Bengal assumed the power to ban jute cultivation outright in parts of East Bengal for “improved quality, to prevent smuggling, and to bring more money to cultivators.”<sup>71</sup> In 1954, the government issued orders banning the movement of jute within five miles of the border, with only the Jute Board

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<sup>69</sup> “Thirteenth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” December 15, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI

<sup>70</sup> “Fifth Meeting of the Committee Appointed to review Indo-Eastern Pakistan Trade,” October 20, 1949, in Cabinet Secretariat[Economic Wing]/ECC, 15(108)-P/49, NAI. See also “Measures to move raw jute from Tipperah State,” in Com & Ind/Jute/12(24)-FTE/49, September 1950, NAI.

<sup>71</sup> EBLA, Vol. X, No. 1, 1953, p. 225

authorized to arrange for purchases of jute. All of these measures were experienced as oppression and harassment for the delta's citizenry. In October, 1954, Prohash Chandra Lahiry, the Congress member from Rajshahi, complained that jute could not move "to the bazaars of the interior of the country" as the Jute Board had not, as yet, arranged for purchases of jute from those areas.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to such measures, the government also stepped up its efforts to police its borders – primarily through the East Pakistan Rifles, reconstituted from the colonial Eastern Frontier Rifles. In 1951, the EPR seized three jute-laden country boats at the Assam/Mymensingh border, near Kaliarchar thana.<sup>73</sup> Later that year, the Officer-in-Charge of the Fulbari police station, at the Rangpur-Cooch Behar border, prevented a number of jute-laden ox-carts from going to India. The Indian government alleged that about 6000 maunds of jute from an Indian enclave in East Pakistan could not be transported "on account of harassment caused at the Rangpur border to the cartmen carrying jute by the East Bengal Police of the Fulbari police station."<sup>74</sup>

These measures, however, were not sufficient to put an end to smuggling, and the increasingly desperate state adopted more and more draconian measures. In February 1952, the civilian government called in the army – with "shoot-to-kill" orders – to put a stop to smuggling. This measure was justified on the grounds of national security, the economic and existential threat posed by India. In a speech in February 1952, Fazlur Rahman, Pakistan's Commerce Minister argued that "Instead

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<sup>72</sup> EBLA, Vol, IX, No. 1, 1952, Dacca, 1954, p. 45

<sup>73</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, BL Branch, File No. R/52/19319/202, NAI

<sup>74</sup> From S.N. Chatterjee, Dept Secy, Govt of West Bengal to Depy Secy, Home (Political) Dept, Govt of East Bengal, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1950, in Min of Com & Ind, Tariff (B) Branch, GoI, File No. 52(16)TB/53, NAI

of coming to an agreement with us, India is banking on smuggling jute from Pakistan. ... this therefore has thrown a challenge to the integrity of our people and the efficiency of our administration ... The issue is made one of national prestige and honour.”<sup>75</sup> The India Pakistan British Association catalogued the draconian anti-smuggling measures taken by the Pakistani state in 1952:

The Government are certainly taking determined steps to stop the smuggling of jute which has undermined the strength of their bargaining power with India. During the past two years, smuggled jute has done much to keep some of the Indian mills going. The Army has been called in to help deal with smugglers and orders are practically on a “shoot at sight” basis. The National Bank of Pakistan has advanced Rs 50 lakhs to the cooperative societies in East Pakistan and these societies, and some private firms, are to buy up all jute within five miles of the frontier. After six weeks, even possession of jute within the five-mile belt will be an offence.<sup>76</sup>

Even army intervention could not stop smuggling. The government of Pakistan called in the army once again to prevent smuggling in late 1957 – the military’s anti-smuggling mission was appropriately titled “Operation Close Door.” Defending the decision to call in the army, then prime minister of the East Pakistan provincial government, Ataur Rahman Khan said, “I considered it [smuggling] to be a war. It was one of the greatest menaces trying to strangulate East Pakistan.”<sup>77</sup> The military’s anti-smuggling drive led to accusations on the floor of the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly of “indignities, harassment, physical assault inflicted upon licensed businessmen and traders and citizens holding responsible positions.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “Jute Bargaining Factor with Bharat: Rahman on steps taken to sell more,” *Dawn*, August 28, 1952, in MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>76</sup> IPBA, “Confidential Report on Pakistan, August, 1952,” in MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>77</sup> Ataur Rahman Khan, EPLA, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 17-19 March, 1958, p. 51

<sup>78</sup> Monoranjan Dhar, EPLA, Vol, XVIII, No. 1, 13-15 March, 1958, p. 20

Fazlul Quader Chowdhury defended the army in the Assembly, pointing to its success in preventing smuggling – the army had seized 50,000 maunds or 10,000 bales of jute during the operation. 10,000 bales, however, was only a fraction of the several hundred thousand bales smuggled to India annually.

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This dynamic of harassment, evasion and punishment extended further down the jute commodity chain, down to the primary producers. In 1948, in a desperate attempt to raise revenue, the cash-strapped provincial government of East Bengal announced a tax of 1 rupee per acre on jute cultivation. The provincial government of East Bengal had inherited the onerous and expensive task of regulating the acreage of jute by issuing licenses to individual jute cultivators. In 1948, the Finance Ministry estimated that over 5 million licenses were to be issued at a total cost of 5.6 million rupees. They suggested, “the cultivators may perhaps pay a portion of the cost of the Jute Staff maintained for their benefit.”<sup>79</sup> They estimated a license fee of 4 annas per quarter of acre of land sown with jute would provide the government with about 2 million rupees. At a meeting of the provincial government of East Bengal’s Council of Ministers, with the Prime Minister Nazimuddin presiding, it was decided to bring the Finance Ministry’s proposal into action by Ordinance, bypassing the legislature.<sup>80</sup> On February 26 1948, the government promulgated the Bengal Jute Regulation (Amendment) Ordinance 1948 stating that “no grower of jute ... shall be granted a

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<sup>79</sup> “Memorandum – Finance Department,” in Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>80</sup> “Excerpt from the minutes of proceedings of the meeting of the Council of Ministers, 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1948,” in Jute Regulation Department, Bundle 1, NAB.

license unless he applies in writing to the licensing officer ... and that no such appliance shall be entertained unless it bears a court-fee stamp calculated at [four annas for every quarter acre of jute].”<sup>81</sup>

The ordinance was renewed in 1949, again through promulgation bypassing the Legislative Assembly. Jute regulation and the accompanying tax were extended to Sylhet district, formerly a part of Assam where jute cultivation had been unregulated prior to partition. In February 1950, after two years of collecting license fees, a bill was finally introduced on the floor of the legislative assembly. Tofazzal Ali, Agriculture Minister of the provincial government introduced the Bill, stating that “in the interests of the national economy that the cultivators should also pay a portion of the cost [of regulating acreage] in the shape of a jute license fee.”<sup>82</sup> Tofazzal Ali did not think that the fee was excessive: “I, for one, hailing from a rural area of this province, having been in constant touch with the jute growers, make bold to submit that this fee will not be a burden on the growers to an extent that they will find difficult to bear.”<sup>83</sup>

The jute license fee proved an extremely difficult tax to collect. In between 1948 and 1950, the government’s collection of license fees fell far below expectations. The Director of Agriculture wrote in September 1949 that “it now appears that a large sum on that account [of the Jute License fee] for both years [1948 and 1949] still remains unrealized. In majority of cases this was due to the intentional defaults of the growers.” In 1950, the Jute Regulation Department wrote a long note

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<sup>81</sup> “The Dacca Gazette, East Bengal Jute Regulation Amendment Ordinance, 1948,” in Jute Regulation Department, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>82</sup> EBLA, Vol. IV, No. 5, 1949, Dacca, 1949, p. 48

<sup>83</sup> EBLA, Vol. IV, No. 5, 1949, Dacca, 1949, p. 48



explaining why “the collection of license fees have been so far very unsatisfactory in most of the districts.” The reasons offered by the Department were the exodus of Hindu growers and Hindu government employees, “economic distress among the people,” the “scarcity of Pakistani small coins in Mufassal areas,” and the non-disposal of prosecution cases against cultivators for not paying fees in the previous two years.

The collection of the license fee was indeed an onerous task. The distribution of 5 million licenses required a lot of paper, and paper was scarce in East Bengal. In January 1949, S. Abdullah, the Director of Agriculture in East Bengal wrote that they would be delays in issuing licenses because “there is almost no chance of getting from the Government Press the Jute Regulation forms sent for printing.”<sup>84</sup> Further, the administrative hierarchy of the new government was weak. In April 1949, the Chairman of the Goalhari Jute Committee wrote to the Jute Regulation Department of the Government of East Bengal, stating that they had collected up to 60% of the license fee, and asked if the government would extend the allotted time period for collections. The telegram stated that “partial collection ... will create serious disturbances.”<sup>85</sup> The Jute department wrote back somewhat irritably that the period had been extended till June, and there should be no confusion about full collection.

The main problem with the collection of license fees was, however, that cultivators simply evaded and avoided them – they “intentionally” or “willfully” defaulted on payments. The Jute Department felt that this was due to “some parties

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<sup>84</sup> S. Abdullah, Director of Agriculture, to Joint Secy, Dept of Agri & Co-op, GoEB, January 20, 1949, in Jute Regulation Department, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>85</sup> “Collection of Jute License Fees – Telegram from Chairman Goalhari Jute Committee, September 1949, Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

... making anti-propaganda against collection of jute license fees which as a result is badly suffering in certain areas.”<sup>86</sup> “Anti-propaganda” was met with “counter-propaganda.” In April, 1949, the Directorate of Agriculture requested a 150 rupees to print and distribute propaganda leaflets in jute tracts in rural Bengal “to make counter-propaganda” – 100 rupees for Mymensingh and 50 rupees for other parts of Bengal. The following year, the department requested 965 rupees for distribution of pamphlets throughout the delta. The pamphlet distributed in Mymensingh, signed by the District Agricultural Officer and District Magistrate of Mymensingh, stated, “it is regrettable that in some place Pakistan’s bitter enemies (*ghorotor shotru*) are misinforming simple believing peasants (*shorol, bishwashi chashigon*), who are hesitating to pay the license fee.”<sup>87</sup>

The pamphlets also announced punishments for cultivators who sowed jute without paying license fees, warning that failure to pay the license fee in time would result in six months imprisonment or a 350 rupees fine. In the summer of 1949, the department prosecuted cultivators across the jute tracts for not paying the license fee. The government, however, was concerned that strict punishments would result in agrarian unrest. In August, 1949, when touring the jute-growing sub-division of Gaibandha in Rangpur, “certain people complained” to the provincial Minister of Relief “that cases have been instituted against cultivators who did not pay ‘jute licence fee’, and in some cases the court has fined the accused. The local grievance that it is a hardship on the part of the cultivators.”<sup>88</sup> To prevent these grievances

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<sup>86</sup> S. Hedayatullah, Director of Agriculture, to Joint Secy, Dept of Agri & Co-op, GoEB, April 9, 1949, in Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>87</sup> “Joruri Ghoshona”, Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>88</sup> Note by Malik, August 20, 1949, Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

from boiling over into agrarian unrest, the government proposed that prosecutions would be withdrawn “in cases ... in which the persons prosecuted pay up the license fee and apologise.”<sup>89</sup> The Jute Department tasked with collecting license fees, however, felt that lenience would only encourage evasion. The Director of Agriculture wrote that the withdrawal of prosecution cases “likely result in serious consequences and regulation of jute cultivation would become meaningless and collection of license fees would in course of time be impossible ... Once this is given out that the growers can get out of prosecution only by paying the licence fee it would be impossible to control such a large number of them.”<sup>90</sup>

In an effort to put more pressure on cultivators to pay license fees, the Agricultural Directorate requested permission to prosecute cultivators under the Public Demands Recovery Act. Under this act, the Department would be able to confiscate the cultivators’ property in punishment for non-payment of license fees. They “hoped that the mere fact of the grant of permission ... would have a salutary effect on growers and it may not be necessary to have recourse to that procedure in large scale.”<sup>91</sup> In the end, the government chose not to confiscate property, though the debate underlined the repressive tendencies of the post-colonial state as it set about realizing revenue from jute and the dynamics of harassment, evasion and punishment that characterized state and society relations throughout the jute commodity chain.

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<sup>89</sup> M.A. Majid, Joint Secy, Agri Dept, to Director, Agriculture, Jute Regulation Dept, August 2, 1949, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>90</sup> S. Hedayatullah, Director of Agriculture, to Secy, Dept of Agri, Coop, Relief, August 11, 1948, Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

<sup>91</sup> Director of Agriculture to Secy, Agri, Coop, Relief Dept, GoEB, September 17, 1949, Jute Regulation Dept, Bundle 1, NAB.

Far from the agent of peasant economic emancipation, the post-colonial Pakistani state was a source of harassment and oppression, an entity to be avoided and evaded. Ahmed Kamal has argued that in East Pakistan, during the years following independence and partition, the “state” turned against the “nation,” brutally suppressing peasant movements over sharecropper rights, water management, and food distribution.<sup>92</sup> This violent oppression of its agrarian citizenry, Kamal argues, extinguished the aspiration of Pakistan as peasant utopia leading to the resounding electoral defeat of the Muslim League in 1954.<sup>93</sup> While Kamal has focused on spectacular episodes of organized peasant protest and violent state suppression, I have charted the day-to-day dynamics of harassment and evasion in state and society relations. The disillusionment with Pakistan also arose out of the government’s everyday harassment of jute cultivators and petty traders, as the post-colonial state sought to extract revenue and exert authority over fibre.

## **CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY**

In its attempts to impose sovereignty over jute, the central government concentrated political power over fibre in the central capital in Karachi. The provincial government of East Pakistan contested the central government’s assumption of jute revenue and control and authority over fibre. East Bengal’s politician’s claimed jute for the province. Though they made this claim in the name of East Bengal’s

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<sup>92</sup> Kamal’s argument is an important corrective to the dominant narrative of Bangladeshi nationalism, demonstrating that the movement was not solely an urban and middle-class but had subaltern roots, particularly in the widespread political and economic discontent amongst East Bengal’s peasantry.

<sup>93</sup> The ruling Muslim League was routed. The United Front, a coalition of opposition parties, won 228 out of 304 seats, while the League managed only seven.

impoverished jute cultivators, provincial politicians did not put forward an alternative vision of the relationship of state and commodity, to the assertion state sovereignty over fibre and the harassment that it entailed. Instead, they feuded with the central government over the distribution of jute revenue and government power over the production and circulation of fibre. In this section, I look at the central and provincial governments' contest over sovereignty over fibre from the creation of Pakistan to October 1958, when General Iskander Mirza declared martial law and forcibly resolved the contest over sovereignty and fibre in favour of the central government.

The distribution of the Jute Export Duty was an early point of dissent between the central and the provincial. Under the Niemeyer Award, pre-partition Bengal received 62.5% of the export duty, while the central government in Delhi the remaining 37.5%. Although the award was continued after partition, the centre delayed in making payments to the province and was arbitrary in deciding how much the province should receive. In 1948-49, the award was supposed to have provided east Bengal with close to 55 million rupees, but the centre unilaterally reduced Bengal's award to 34 million rupees.<sup>94</sup> Nurul Amin, the Muslim League's Chief Minister in Bengal, complained bitterly that the centre had not granted the province its share of the jute export duty, and promised that "I will fight on and on till our Province's claim is accepted."<sup>95</sup> Bengal's politicians, even the ruling Muslim League, complained bitterly about the centre's refusal to grant the province its share of jute revenue. In 1951, Hamidul Haq Chowdhury, the provincial Finance Minister

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<sup>94</sup> Hamidul Haq Chowdhury, East Bengal's provincial finance minister between 1947 and 1949, speech at the Legislative Assembly on February 17, 1952. EBLA, Vol. V., No. 1, 1951, Dacca, 1952, p. 438

<sup>95</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, March 20, 1949, quoted in Maron, Stanley, "The Problem of East Pakistan," *Pacific Affairs*, 28(2), June 1955, p. 133

between 1947 and 1949, claimed that the centre had denied East Bengal close to a billion rupees in Jute Export Duty between 1948 and 1951. While the figure was an exaggeration, Chowdhury's claim shows the depth of feeling regarding the centre's appropriation of jute revenue.<sup>96</sup>

The province's complaints about its financial relationship with the centre were not limited to jute. The central government balanced its budget by squeezing the provincial governments, which ran budget deficits even while cutting down on development and welfare programs.<sup>97</sup> The provincial government complained at length about the centre taking the entirety of East Bengal's income tax revenues and a share of its sales tax. They were critical of the centre's discontinuance of subventions to the province from the pre-partition years. The government of undivided India used to subsidize half the cost of Grow More Food schemes in post-famine Bengal – mostly small-scale irrigation and drainage projects in rural Bengal. Post-partition, the provincial government of East Bengal asked Karachi to continue these subsidies, estimated at 600,000 to 800,000 rupees annually, but as the Muslim League Minister Hassan Ali said in 1949, "I am sorry to say that [the centre] have not agreed to the proposal."<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the distribution of revenue, East Pakistan's political representatives protested the concentration of power and authority over jute in the central government, particularly in the Jute Board, the Karachi-based government

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<sup>96</sup> EBLA, Vol. V., No. 1, 1951, Dacca, 1952, p. 438

<sup>97</sup> Jalal, Ayesha, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. It was symbolically important to balance the budget, as it demonstrated to the outside world that Pakistan was indeed a viable economy.

<sup>98</sup> EBLA, Vol. III, No. 3, Dacca, 1949, p. 75

institution that had acquired absolute power over fibre. The Jute Board was created in October 1949, in order to cope with the sudden disappearance of Pakistan's jute markets after the devaluation crisis. The Board was constituted of senior bureaucrats from the central government in Karachi and prominent jute traders. M.M. Ispahani was a long-standing member of the Jute Board and closely involved in its day-to-day operations. After its creation, the Jute Board assumed authority and control over all aspects of the jute trade: fixing prices, deciding acreage, regulating warehouses and baling presses, issuing export licenses, negotiating with overseas markets and so forth. As Afsar Ali Chowdhury, one of the members of the Jute Board, testified to the Agricultural Enquiry Committee in 1951: "The Board took the entire control of the marketing activities here. It took control of the baling presses. It took control of the godowns in which jute was kept. The Government of India was reluctant to establish continued and normal trade relations with Pakistan and the Jute Board of necessity had to take the entire control of jute."<sup>99</sup>

East Bengal's politicians, particularly members of the opposition in the Legislative Assembly, complained bitterly about the centre and the bureaucracy's assumption of absolute authority over fibre through the Jute Board. In March 1951 Manoranjan Dhar, leader of the opposition Pakistan Congress in the East Bengal Assembly, stated that the provincial government had lost even the ability to speak about jute: "for the last two years we have been raising the question of jute, but the only answer that has been hurled at us is that the subject pertains to the Centre and, therefore, this House is not in a position to discuss anything about it."<sup>100</sup> In October

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<sup>99</sup> Evidence of Afsar Ali Chowdhury, *Proceedings in East Bengal (including evidence on jute and tea)*, 1951, MSS Eur F235/360, IOR

<sup>100</sup> EBLA, Vol. V, No. 2, 1951, Dacca, 1953, p. 402

1952, Provash Chandra Lahiry argued to the House, “Even though jute is East Bengal’s wealth (*shompod*), the Jute Board is not under the control of the government of East Bengal. It does not seem that this centrally controlled Jute Board was formed for the interest of Bengalis.”<sup>101</sup>

Opposition politicians accused the Jute Board of acting in the interests of substantial capitalists, accusing them of manipulating prices, depressing prices at the start of the jute season when the fibre was in the hands of cultivators and then raising them once it had passed into the hands of merchants. Anwara Khatun stated in the East Bengal Assembly in 1951: “When we see these activities of the Jute Board [price manipulation] one feels that Pakistan was not created for the poor, Pakistan was created for people like Ispahani. Ispahani and his *chelas* have profited from the Jute Board.”<sup>102</sup> Employees of the Jute Board were widely perceived to be corrupt, particularly in their handling of state credit to merchants and jute export regulations. Khairat Hossain said in the assembly that “giving the Jute Board the responsibility of jute purchases is like giving a thief the keys to the police *thana*.”<sup>103</sup>

Criticisms of the Jute Board increased in pitch and volume when the Korean War commodity boom came to a close in 1952. In October 1952, at the height of the new jute season, Dhirendranath Datta, a Congress member from Tippera, moved a resolution to discuss the “serious situation created in East Bengal on account of abnormal fall in the price of jute.”<sup>104</sup> Opposition members argued that the fall in

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<sup>101</sup> EBLA, Vol. IX, No. 1, 1952, Dacca 1954, p. 46

<sup>102</sup> EBLA, Vol. V, No. 1, 1951, Dacca, 1952, p. 380

<sup>103</sup> EBLA, Vol. VI, No. 2, 1951, Dacca, 1953, p. 130

<sup>104</sup> EBLA, Vol IX, No. 1, 1952, Dacca, 1954, p. 42



prices was due to the corruption and incompetence of the government, particularly the Jute Board. Criticism of the Board was so widespread that many legislators felt it necessary to begin their speech by stating “much has been said about the mismanagement and corruption of the Jute Board,” before proceeding to detail their own observations.

East Bengal’s politicians urged that the provincial government assume the “administration of jute from the centre.”<sup>105</sup> Provincial control over jute and a greater share of jute revenue were major issues in the United Front’s electoral campaign in 1954. The Front was a coalition of opposition parties led by the most important Muslim Bengali politicians of the colonial era – A.K. Fazlul Haq and H.S. Suhrawardy. Their twenty-one point manifesto called for the recognition of Bangla as a state language of Pakistan, provincial autonomy in all spheres except foreign policy, defense and currency, and the nationalization of the jute trade. The third of 21 points in the manifesto promised: “To nationalize the jute trade, to make arrangements for securing fair price of jute to jute growers and to investigate into the jute-bungling during the Muslim League regime.”<sup>106</sup>

The United Front decimated the Muslim League in the 1954 elections, emerging victorious in 228 out of 304 constituencies. Despite their popular mandate, the United Front was unable to implement its goals of provincial autonomy and the nationalization of the jute sector. The central government resorted to military coups, impositions of martial law, and the dismissal of elected provincial governments and retained Karachi’s control over jute. The government formed on April 3, 1954 with

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<sup>105</sup> EBLA, Vol. IX, No. 1, 1952, Dhaka, 1954, p. 55

<sup>106</sup> Ghosh, Shyamali, *The Awami League, 1949-1971*, Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1990, p. 283

A.K. Fazlul Haq as Chief Minister was dissolved on May 30, 1954.<sup>107</sup> Between 1954 and 1956, East Bengal was under “Governor’s rule,” with General Iskander Mirza holding absolute autocratic power and the centre maintaining its hold over the East Bengal’s jute.

Parliamentary democracy returned to the province in September 1956, and the Awami League formed a government with Aatur Rahman Khan appointed Chief Minister. Upon forming his cabinet, Aatur Rahman Khan announced that he would implement the 1954 election manifesto, including the nationalization of the jute trade. In March 1957, the provincial assembly passed the East Pakistan Jute Marketing Corporation Bill, creating a state-owned entity to carry out large-scale purchases and sales of jute in order to stabilize prices for growers. The corporation was vigorously opposed by the central government and by Pakistani and international jute capitalists. In a statement, the PJA stated that the creation of a state-owned trading entity, in effect, nationalized Pakistan’s jute trade and would cause “economic and employment dislocation which ... will jeopardize the basis economic structure of East Pakistan.”<sup>108</sup> The India Pakistan British Association reported in its confidential report for July 1956: “The jute trade in East Pakistan is anything but sanguine about its future prospects at the hands of the Provincial Government and feels that year by

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<sup>107</sup> Haq was accused of treason because of statements about the unity of India made during a visit to Calcutta. Further, he was accused of being unable to control labour troubles at the Adamjee Jute Mills and Chandrakona paper mills. Barely a decade after being dismissed by the British Governor of Bengal in 1943, Fazlul Haq was once more unceremoniously thrown out of power by an unelected bureaucracy.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in India Pakistan British Association, “Confidential Report on Pakistan for March, 1957” in *Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67*, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

year by dint of regulations and controls it is being forced into, not a strait-jacket, but a Procrustean bed.”<sup>109</sup>

In its first full season of trading, the East Pakistan Jute Marketing Corporation found itself in financial difficulties: they were unable to dispose of large stocks of poor quality jute and reported enormous losses. When international jute prices dropped at the opening of the 1958 season, the Corporation was on the verge of bankruptcy – unable to dispose crops from purchases in the previous season and unable to make a profit on prevailing prices at the opening of the new season. In early October 1958, representatives of the East Pakistan government informed the National Economic Council in Karachi that unless the central government took immediate steps to “stop the rot in the jute industry the entire economy of the country would be ruined.”<sup>110</sup>

The centre did step in, but not in the manner that the provincial government hoped. On October 7, 1958, General Iskander Mirza declared martial law and appointed Ayub Khan, the central defense minister, Chief Martial Law Administrator. The provincial government was dissolved and its program of asserting provincial sovereignty over jute abandoned. In December, the new military government dissolved the Jute Marketing Corporation’s Board of Directors on grounds of mismanagement, leading to heavy losses. The bureaucrats who ran the Corporation were, however, absolved of blame and responsibility placed solely on provincial politicians. The military government’s announcement stated: ““The main reasons for the losses incurred were irresponsible and undue control exercised at ministerial level

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<sup>109</sup> IPBA, ““Confidential Report on Pakistan for July 1958” in *Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67*, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>110</sup> Reported in *The Times*, October 7, 1958. In *Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67*, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

in relation to important commercial advice tendered by officers.”<sup>111</sup> The military government placed the corporation under the control of Pakistan’s leading jute capitalists: G.M. Adamjee was placed in charge of the purchase committee and Sadri Ispahani of the sales committee.<sup>112</sup> Iskander Mirza’s 1958 coup had forcibly resolved the centre and province’s contest over sovereignty and jute in favour of the former, returning control over fibre to Karachi bureaucrats and prominent jute capitalists.

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The centre and the province’s contest over sovereignty over fibre did not address the fundamental issue facing Pakistan and many other commodity-producing, post-colonial nations. The exigencies of building a modern nation-state out of commodities of the former empire often entailed the intensified regulation and policing of citizens attempting to eke out livelihoods by producing and trading these commodities. Intensified state surveillance of economic activities frequently translated into the everyday harassment and oppression of its citizenry. In East Pakistan’s jute tracts, the post-colonial project of transforming jute from a commodity of empire into a national resource led to widespread disillusionment with the aspirations of Pakistan and independence. In contesting the central government’s assumption of sovereignty over fibre, East Bengal’s politicians did not provide a way

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<sup>111</sup> Reported in the *Times*, “East Pakistan Jute Board Dissolved,” December 29, 1958. In *Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67*, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

<sup>112</sup> IPBA, “Confidential Report on Pakistan for December 1958,” in *Jute: Pakistan, 1949-67*, MSS Eur F158/580A, IOR.

out of this post-colonial predicament. They continued to operate within the paradigm of the modern nation-state with absolute sovereignty over the production and circulation of commodities within its borders.

The predicament of post-colonial state-formation was perhaps best illustrated in Aaur Rahman Khan's description of an encounter with an elderly villager soon after independence in 1947, when widespread enthusiasm with Pakistan as peasant utopia was yet to be extinguished. The elderly man asked Aaur Rahman Khan: "Now that Pakistan has been achieved, should there still be police, courts and Kutcheries, soldiers and sentries, jails and lockups?" Khan replied, "Why not? How could you protect the state without these institutions?" With a sigh the old man replied, "then what kind of Pakistan have we got? Change the name please."<sup>113</sup> Far from being abolished, these repressive institutions were actually strengthened by the Pakistani government as it attempted to capture and punish the smugglers, under-invoicers, grade manipulators, and tax evaders involved in jute cultivation and trade, and subverting the state's attempts to assert sovereignty over fibre.

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<sup>113</sup> Khan, Aaur Rahman, *Shairacherar Dash Bochbor*, Dhaka: 1970. Quoted in Kamal, Ahmed, *State Against Nation*, p. 18

## Conclusion

Jute is no longer ubiquitous in global trade: containers, paper cartons, synthetic fibres, and grain elevators have replaced gunny sacks and hessian in packing and transporting the world's commodities. The decline of jute as a significant commodity of international trade took place gradually and over stages. In the 1960s, the consumption of jute in the industrial west began to decline – though this was compensated for by rising consumption in developing economies.<sup>1</sup> After the 1980s, the production of jute manufactures declined in absolute terms. In 1991-92, the global production of jute manufactures was 2 million tons against 3.85 million tons in 1978.<sup>2</sup> More recently, jute production has staged a minor comeback as an eco-friendly alternative to synthetics. While it is too early to predict whether jute will re-emerge as a significant global commodity, the possible revival of the fibre is widely discussed in Bangladesh, where jute occupies a prominent place in official, national memory.

In 1971, after a brutal 9-month civil war, East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan and became independent Bangladesh. The Bangladesh movement was informed by the provincial East Pakistan government's contest over sovereignty over jute and their continued attempts to wrest control over fibre and revenue generated by fibre

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<sup>1</sup> OECD nations' consumption of jute goods declined from about 1 million tons in 1961 to 750,000 tons in 1978 and that of developing countries rose from 1.4 million tons to 3 million tons. The increase in consumption was most marked in China – from 270,000 tons to 1.1 million tons in the same period. Mahmood, Muhammad, and Williams, Ross, "The World Jute Market," *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, 9(4), August 1981, p. 2

<sup>2</sup> The figures for 1978 are from Mahmood, Muhammad, and Williams, Ross, "The World Jute Market," *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, 9(4), August 1981 while that of 1991-92 are from the website of International Jute Study Group, at [http://www.jute.org/statistics\\_03.htm](http://www.jute.org/statistics_03.htm) (last accessed July 17, 2012).

away from the centre. In 1966, the Awami League launched a popular campaign against Ayub Khan's military regime in East Pakistan, on the basis of a six-point demand for provincial economic autonomy. They urged for two separate but freely convertible currencies, complete control over taxation, and separate accounts for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings. One of the authors of the six-point demand was Rehman Sobhan, an economist at Dacca University. Sobhan had written an influential article titled "The Problem of Regional Imbalance in the Economic Development of Pakistan" in 1962, highlighting growing disparity in incomes and standards of living between the two wings.<sup>3</sup> Sobhan argued that growing disparity was due to deliberate policies of the central government that led to greater public and private sector investments in West Pakistan. He highlighted the injustice of deliberate neglect with special reference to Pakistan's national resource – jute. "About 80% of all aids and loans went to West Pakistan as did the major part of exchange from national exports," Sobhan stated, "this was true in spite of the fact that East Pakistan earned 60-70% of Pakistan's foreign exchange, mainly from her exports of raw and manufactured jute."<sup>4</sup>

With the creation of Bangladesh, a government belonging exclusively to the delta and its inhabitants took control over the region's economy and resources – especially its jute. Part of the aspiration of Bangladesh was that jute would now fulfill its promise of delivering higher standards of living and economic development to the region's impoverished inhabitants, rather than for foreign capitalists and states in Britain or West Pakistan. This desire was not realized. The nationalization of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sobhan, Rehman, "The Problem of Regional Imbalance in the Economic Development of Pakistan," *Asian Survey*, 2(5), June 1962, pp. 31-37

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 37

jute industry, one of the promises of the liberation movement, led to mismanagement, corruption, and under-investment in the jute sector. Even more significantly, the emergence of Bangladesh was quickly followed by the decline of the global jute trade. Today, jute occupies an a far less significant position in Bangladesh's national economy – it does not lie at the heart of most Bangladeshi's livelihoods and fibre exports contribute a relatively small share of export earnings.<sup>5</sup> While fibre is no longer integral to the national economy, memories of jute constitutes an important aspect of public and nationalist discourse. Even as the economic significance of jute declines, the idea of jute retains significance in the delta's political discourse.

During my research in Bangladesh, I was often asked if I was “going to bring jute back.” If I protested that I was merely writing a history, I would be informed of the enormous benefits to be derived from a revival of the jute trade and industry – foreign exchange, employment, industrialization, and so forth. The desire to revive of jute as a significant global commodity is frequently repeated and reiterated by intellectuals, politicians, businessmen, and other public figures. Newspaper run editorials headlined “Revival of Golden Fibre” or “Lost Glory of Jute Needs to be Revived.”<sup>6</sup> The news that jute exports were to cross one billion dollars was celebrated, as was the recent decoding of the jute genome by Bangladeshi scientists or the announcement that Bangladesh's state-owned jute enterprises had finally turned a profit. Through its celebration of the potential revival of jute, Bangladeshi nationalist

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<sup>5</sup> The proportion of the population employed in the agricultural sector has fallen below 50%. For those who continue to make a living from agriculture, jute has become far less important as rice acreage has increased and market vegetables and oilseeds have displaced jute as the major cash crop. On the other hand, Bangladesh's exports primarily consist of readymade garments, with jute goods contributing less than 10% of Bangladesh's export earnings.

<sup>6</sup> There are many examples of such headlines, but I will cite the following three as instances: “Revival of Golden Fibre,” *New Age*, March 11, 2012; “Lost Glory of Jute Needs to be Revived,” *New Age*, February 29, 2012; “Jute Will Regain its Lost Glory,” *The Daily Star*, March 15, 2011.



discourse seemingly clings on to the possibility of the nation finally realizing the fibre as a national resource.

The demise of jute is widely and loudly lamented in Bangladesh. The closure of the Adamjee Jute Mills in 2002 was a moment of public mourning, leading one economist to ask, “Is it only the Adamjee that has gone into history or is it a trend of this economy to become a land of supermarkets destroying potential manufacturing enterprises?”<sup>7</sup> Assigning responsibility and blame for the demise of jute is an important aspect of political discourse in contemporary Bangladesh. Bangladeshis blame the demise of jute on different agencies and factors, depending primarily on their political and ideological leanings. For some, nationalization, state mismanagement and corruption are to blame for the demise of the fibre. According to others, the World Bank and agents of neo-imperialist capitalism perpetrated the death of Bangladesh’s jute industry. When the Bank cancelled an infrastructure loan to Bangladesh on grounds of corruption, the Prime Minister launched a “blistering attack on the World Bank,” stating that “the country’s jute industries ... had been destroyed through accepting the global lender’s prescriptions.”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of jute in national and public discourses in contemporary Bangladesh far outweighs its economic importance, whether in terms of the livelihoods of its citizenry or Bangladesh’s national macro-economy. This contemporary discourse of jute is a legacy of the Bangladesh nationalist movement of the 1960s and its project of claiming fibre for the projected nation. This public discourse is also a reaction to the demise of jute as a significant article of international

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<sup>7</sup> Muhammad, Anu, “Closure of Adamjee Jute Mill: Ominous Sign,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(38), Sept. 21-27, 2002, p. 3896

<sup>8</sup> “Padma Bridge with own funds,” *The Daily Star*, July 9, 2012

trade before the new nation could appropriate the fibre as its national resources. The national memory of jute in Bangladesh is premised on this idea of jute as a national resource – the basis of economic modernization and industrialization, a source of foreign exchange and state revenue. The nostalgia for jute in contemporary Bangladesh draws upon a statist idea of the commodity framed in post-colonial Pakistan. At the same time, this national memory erases other discourses of fibre that were historically important: for instance, discourses that focused on peasant livelihoods and lifestyles or on capitalist and imperialist exploitation.

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In this dissertation, I have tried to demonstrate how peasant production of a global commodity transformed the Bengal delta during the hundred years spanning the 1850s and the 1950s. I have argued that the production and circulation of fibre changed economic lives, livelihoods, and lifestyles, altered the physical landscape, created new social and cultural formations, and informed political and economic discourse. The transformation wrought by jute was not a one-off process that can be characterized as a transition to capitalism. Instead, jute cultivation inaugurated a continuous and on-going relationship between the region and global commodity markets. This relationship lasted from the mid-nineteenth until the 1970s, when jute began to lose significance as a major global commodity and the basis of livelihoods for the delta's inhabitants. The dissertation has traced the impact of jute cultivation

and trade during the heyday of the fibre during the hundred years spanning the 1850s to the 1950s.

First, the dissertation explores the impact of jute cultivation on peasant livelihoods and lifestyles. During the late nineteenth century, an era of relative prosperity, jute was associated with prosperity. Prosperity manifested in peasant households' consumption, and peasant politics of the period was closely related to their ability to consume goods and services out of their cash earnings from sales of jute. During the 1870s, peasant households launched a movement to protect their ability to purchase enhanced property rights from colonial law courts and during the 1900s they resisted the nationalist Swadeshi movements attempt to impose a boycott on the purchase of imported goods in marketplaces.

World War I was a turning point in the economic history of the delta. After WWI, a combination of increasing debt burdens and interest payments, uncertain commodity prices, fragmenting landholdings, and ecological deterioration drove peasant households into poverty. The peasant politics of poverty was substantially different from that of prosperity. While nineteenth century movements focused on the ability to consume goods from the marketplace, twentieth century politics focused on agrarian relations of production, particularly the main expropriators of peasant wealth – moneylenders and landlords. As historians of agrarian Bengal have pointed out, the class relations of agrarian production overlapped with religious categories. Hence, mostly-Muslim peasants protests and attacks against mostly-Hindu moneylenders and landlords was characterized as “communal riots.” As this dissertation has argued, following the work of more nuanced and sensitive historians,

these “communal riots” were jute cultivators’ responses to the increased difficulties of conducting market-oriented livelihoods after WWI.

Second, my dissertation has focused on the spatial formations carved out by the circulation of fibre. Almost the entirety of the jute produced in the delta was dispatched westwards, to Calcutta. The rise of jute in the late nineteenth century was accompanied by intensified by railway and river-steamers connections, as the journey between the delta and Calcutta was shortened. Jute transformed the delta into Calcutta’s hinterland and, conversely, Calcutta into the delta’s metropolis. The opposition to Curzon’s 1905 partition of Bengal was informed, to a great extent, by concerns of the economic, political, and cultural ramifications of severing the hinterland from its metropolis.

Another important spatial formation of jute were the market towns, or mofussil towns, that emerged along the delta’s rivers and railways to service the jute trade. These towns were entrepots in the jute trade, where the fibre was bulked, stored, assorted and packaged before being dispatched to Calcutta. These towns housed the agents of jute capitalists, intermediary traders, warehouses, baling presses, river-docks and railways. These mofussil towns were most important centre of political and intellectual thought and the introduction of representative and electoral politics – with the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 and, far more significantly, with the Government of India Act of 1935 – shifted the political centre of Bengal away from metropolitan Calcutta to the mofussil. The peasant populist Krishak Praja movement of the 1930s and the Pakistan movement of the 1940s had their bases in these mofussil towns which owed their growth and vibrancy to jute.

Pakistan and partition in August 1947 severed the spatial formations of hinterland and metropolis that had been carved out by jute during the past hundred years. The prospect of partition frightened the politicians who had championed the idea of Pakistan – a nation-state comprising the impoverished delta and shorn of the industrial and commercial metropolis of Calcutta was considered financially infeasible. Despite their misgivings, an East Pakistan comprising solely the delta's jute hinterland came into being on August 14, 1947. Over the following years, the post-colonial Pakistani state attempted to impose territorial sovereignty over flows of fibre – monitoring, policing and taxing flows of jute across its territorial boundaries. Through the frequently violent policing of its territorial limits, which included calling in the army with shoot-to-kill orders, the formerly united economic space of Bengal was gradually rent asunder.

Third, this dissertation has looked at the intellectual and political history of jute. Ideas of fibre varied between the eras of prosperity in the late nineteenth century and the period of impoverishment during the twentieth century. During the period of relative prosperity, metropolitan anti-colonial nationalist movement viewed jute during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries very negatively – identifying the fibre with imperialist economic exploitation and ecological degradation. In their view, jute cultivators were selfishly aggrandizing themselves at the expense of their communities and the imagined nation. This view of jute and jute cultivators informed nationalist attacks on peasant consumers during the Swadeshi movement and peasant opposition to nationalist activists.

As processes of pauperization and impoverishment set in after WWI, jute cultivators were no longer portrayed as aggrandizing themselves. Instead, they were

seen as ignorant and stupid, as being duped and seduced by markets into producing jute and thereby causing their own impoverishment. The period of impoverishment was accompanied by a burst of intellectual creativity in the delta's mofussil towns. The 1920s and 30s witnessed a boom in these towns' print and publishing industries, particularly of poems and pamphlets consisting of peasant advice literature. These didactic texts consisted of advice to peasants on how to survive and prosper in difficult economic conditions, preaching hard work, self-sufficiency, and austerity to peasant households. Another set of mofussil texts lobbied for legislative reforms of agrarian relations of production – particularly, the abolishment of zamindari and the credit market reforms. These texts together constituted mofussil ideas of jute and were closely related to the *praja* movement and its objectives of peasant economic emancipation.

Simultaneously, another idea of jute emerged in metropolitan Calcutta – that of jute as a national resource. During WWI, the colonial government imposed an export duty on jute, transforming the fibre into a significant source of government revenue. Nationalist politicians who began to enter the provincial legislature from 1919 onwards aspired to implement public programs – irrigation, education, and health projects – that required revenue. For many nationalists, the importance of jute lay in the revenue it provided to the state, that could be used for the public benefit – once they, rather than the imperialist Britons, had control over the levers of the state. When Pakistan came into being, the idea of jute as a national resource trumped all other conceptions of fibre in making state policies. The post-colonial state's primary objective was to transform the former commodity of empire into a national resource

that generated revenue for the state. As I have argued, this project led to the harassment, oppression, and alienation of Pakistan's citizenry from the state.

This dissertation has woven together a materialist narrative of peasant production and circulation of fibre with an intellectual and political history of the fibre. The separation of material and intellectual history impoverishes both schools of the academic discipline of history – the realms economic lives and economic ideas are, as Marx recognized, intimately related. Following David Harvey, I have overlaid Marxist categories of base and superstructure with the spatial categories of the metropolis, the hinterland, and the mofussil. The base, as I understand it, consisted not only of the modes and relations of peasant production but also of the routes through which fibre circulated on its journey from farm to factory – the railways, rivers, and most significantly, market-towns. Correspondingly, the superstructure is differentiated according to the location of ideas and politics – according to hinterland peasant producers, mofussil or small-town middle-classes, and metropolitan elites. The dynamics of base and superstructure – and of hinterland, mofussil, and metropolitan ideas of jute – constituted the political economy and intellectual history of fibre in the Bengal delta.

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