

Changes in Land ownership and usage in Rural Bangladesh: A study of seven mouzas of Bogra district 1920-1987

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a) Researchers' Identity

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b) Objectives

The principal objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To identify the nature, extent and direction of changes in land ownership and land usage in the study mouzas;
- ii. To study the actual incidence of no ownership of land in these mouzas;
- iii. To find out the present cropping patterns in the study area and compare them with the cropping pattern identified during the cadastral survey (CS) operation in Bogra district in the 1920s;
- iv. To obtain data regarding stock of cattle and poultry in these mouzas and compare the same with their available data from the cadastral survey operation; and
- v. To create a data base through a comprehensive socio-economic survey of the study mouzas to facilitate the periodic monitoring of changes in these mouzas as part of long term agrarian research at the Rural Development Academy(RDA), Bogra.

c) Executive summary

Historically the ownership of land in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the subcontinent theoretically belonged to the state until the British taken-over the country, but the actual owners of land were the cultivators who used to enjoy not only a heritable right of possession but also the right of transfer of

possession. The state collected taxes from the cultivators through the institution of tax collectors. The structure and composition of the institution varied in different periods, but their fundamental characters centered round non-interference with the cultivator's right to the land. The British, the first as traders and then as rulers, took a series of repressive measures in land administration including the enactment of the infamous permanent settlement. This measure seriously infringed the rights of the cultivator's to land. As a result of the measures, a considerable number of cultivators lost their land and the majority became poor.

In the latter part of the British rule, committees and commissions were set up from time to time to look into the country's land system. While taking care of the major British interests, they recommended some measures for the amelioration of the conditions of the pauperised peasantry. But the several tiers of intermediate interests created and patronized by the British themselves, always thwarted attempts made by the government in favor of the peasantry. The interests of the British Raj coincided with those of the intermediary interests. Land reform measures of any significance were against the dominant theme of imperialism.

After the British left the country, successive governments initiated and enacted land reform measures including the abolition of intermediary interests. Although there are disagreements about the degree of progressiveness of the content of the measures taken, it is agreed that the measures have not been implemented substantially because of the lack of political will of the government and clever manipulation by the big landowners on the one hand, and the inadequacy, inefficiency and corruption in land administration on the other. The present government of the country has also undertaken land reform measures and has been taking bold steps to strengthen and restructure the land administration mechanism to implement its programmes.

The success of the government efforts towards the amelioration of the socio-economic condition of the poor including the small scale farmers, tenants and the landless rural poor will largely depend on the successful implementation of its land reform programmes. The socio-economic survey conducted under the study clearly shows this fact. The survey shows that small scale farms and landless households constitute about 80 % of total rural households. The majority of them depend on agriculture for their livelihood. They work on their small scale farms till land taken from others and work as agricultural laborers. The survey reveals that the access of rural households to credit and their ownership of agricultural implements and bullock power are determined by their access to land. The majority of poor farm household does

not own the necessary agricultural implements and bullock-power to till their land efficiently and do not get credit to finance their farming activities. The survey shows that the rural households' ownerships of livestock and poultry and even trees which can augment their income, improves as owned-land increases. Access to housing and household goods (furniture, etc.) and access to education are also determined by the ownership of land. In a word, as in the past, land plays the single most important role in the socio-economic life of the rural people even today. The poor are poor, because either they do not own land or they own only an insignificant quantity of land. In the survey area the landless and the small scale farm households, who constitute about 80% of the total households, own only 30% of the total land and only 26.6% of the cultivable land. More than 25% of the total cultivable land is under various forms of tenancy and most of this land is cultivated by the poor. Unfortunately their tenancy rights are not secured. Field observations reveal that the recent legal measures in this respect have not yet been implemented. The survey shows that more than 20% of the families depend on agricultural wages. But they do not get minimum wage despite of legal measures introduced by the present government. The rural poor do not have the strength, money or organization to enforce their legal rights. This is more so because their employment opportunities are insignificant as compared to the number of unemployed in the rural areas. The policy implication explicit in these findings is that access of the poor to land ownership should be increased and their tenancy rights should be secured and the minimum wage law should be strictly enforced.

The study further reveals that while access to land ownership is characterized by gross inequity, the land holding of all categories of households is decreasing. The pressure of a burgeoning population on a limited land area and the lack of opportunities for employment in the industrial and urban sectors are major reasons for this. The policy indication is that side by side with the implementation of land reform measures must come with industrialization and population control. Land alone can not feed the ever-increasing rural population and in the context of the limited availability of total land and the decreasing land: man ratio, land reform, whatever can be caused for the degree of its progressiveness can not be the only answer in the long run to the development of the pauperised peasantry of Bangladesh.

Another major finding of the study is that the total agricultural land over a period of fifty years has not been decreased although rural population has increased significantly. This does not leave room for complacency because (a) as we have pointed out per household land area is decreasing (and will decrease further) (b) the existing rural homestead land, field observation reveals, has been used more than optimally and in not too distant future there

will be a very sharp increase in the use of agricultural land for homestead, (c) as it is evident, the demand for land for other non-agricultural uses besides homesteads will also increase in future, (d) the fallow land and land under jungle, bamboo groves and gardens have been decreased significantly, so these too can not be exploited much in future to meet additional requirements for land for non-agricultural uses. All these imply that not very distant future, the land available for cultivation will be decreased substantially. The policy implications are (a) there should be serious land use planning in the country to make economic use of land for non-agricultural purposes (b) the intensity of use of agricultural land should be increased to increase gross cropped area, and(c) all low-yielding variety of crops should be replaced with high yielding ones. Research must be strengthened in this area to evolve new varieties which are not available now.

Unfortunately however in these areas the country has done a little. The present study finds that the intensity of land use has been increased over the last fifty years by only 60%. With regard to the crop varieties, some improvement has been made with the introduction of the HYV of paddy crop. But much remains to be done in this field especially in respect of other crops. Finally the study is not aware of any serious or major effort towards non-agricultural rural land-use planning. This should be received immediate attention from the government.