

Disappearance of the Bengali Farm?

The Future of Agrarian Bangladesh

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Introduction

- <http://www.ras.org.in/rentiersandcontractors>
- Quasi-feudalism and antediluvian capital
- Bangladesh's own liberation narrative: a nation of small farmers?
- Food security and irri-boro
- Overcoming the depressor: the real subsumption of labour under capital
- Agrarian change in BD rather than land reform in WB/Bihar
- Operational rather than ownership consolidation of land
- Opening door to increased agricultural productivity

Context: Legacy of Colonial Feudalism across Bengal

- Sub-infeudation via a hierarchy of revenue collecting tenure holders and petty landlords receiving rents from occupancy tenants (rai-yats/peasants)
- Depressor upon agricultural productivity setting conditions for chronic food insecurity and famine
- For Bangladesh, ‘diversion’ of the liberation narrative of the small family, subsistence farmer in contrast to ‘Punjabi’ landlords, derived from Cumilla action-research and cooperative programme
- Dhaka-Cumilla belt: limitations of the special case for countrywide agrarian, agricultural policy/strategy
- Ignored both capture of Cumilla (KSS) cooperatives even under minifundist conditions; and feudal legacies elsewhere, including widespread landlessness
- widespread problem of ‘squared fragmentation’ (plots not just land area) inhibiting optimisation of new technologies
- Such conditions shape the pattern of capital intrusion into agrarian structure leading to rentiers and contractors

3 Agrarian Trajectories

1. continuation of a nation of small, petty commodity farmers, with some shift from subsistence motivation towards increasing net marketable surplus;
 2. Bangladesh agriculture will be dominated increasingly by large-scale commercialised farming, as corporate interests dispossess the peasantry;
 3. contextualised hybrid in which the present family farms become a ‘rentier’ class of small landholders, having in effect handed over some or all their scattered plots to agriculture service contractors acting commercially and capturing most of the gains from the enhanced productivity of such ‘consolidated’ land use.
- 3rd option is my null hypothesis: Disarticulation of the BD farm, and re-articulation of agricultural system through services and investment entailing rurbanisation and new forms of class relations
 - A de-peasantisation thesis

Outline of Argument

- Food insecurity at liberation and rural infrastructure investment across the 1980s
- Expanding rural, non-farm sector comprising: expanding agricultural services connected to technical innovations in cultivation; alongside more diversification away from field crops and towards horticultural crops, major (meat and dairy) and minor (poultry/eggs) livestock, and, especially, inland culture fisheries.
- The earlier Green Revolution initiated a demand for inputs (variable and fixed -especially irrigation) and services, entailing new supply chains and rural interventions via dealerships for hybrid seeds, machinery (irrigation pump sets, power tillers and post-harvest equipment), chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and repair and maintenance services
- In agricultural ‘system’ terms, the farm is losing its pre-eminence to services and other activities, which are also increasingly shifting from public to private hands
- The returns to agriculture are therefore shifting within the overall system from ‘farmers’ to other players, entailing new external flows of liquidity: initially through public subsidies, but later via private credit (including micro-credit for smaller operators in minor livestock and handicrafts), and strongly from remittances.

Disarticulation Re-articulation

- Post-liberation transition from subsistence mode to semi-commercial (Razzaque)
- Squared fragmentation—endogenous driver of change
- Bounded personal relation between land and family labour moves to impersonal exchange between rentier landholders and local service providers
- Consistent with consolidation/productivity link via operational management rather ownership, but not fully penetrated by capital, esp in Aman season
- Thus element of labour intensive, but more commodified via contractors
- Therefore BD hybrid rather than ‘Punjabi’ model (Mandal)
- Thus disappearance or at least transformation of ‘Bengal’ farm

'Endogenous' counter forces to 'disappearance'

- Affinity with land: cultural and hedge against uncertainty
- But compatible with rentier status
- Hybridity of labour: rural labour not a single employment
- Family farm supported by other sources of income, also an indicator of family farm vulnerability—cross subsidy?

Tracking productivity

- Endogenous Linking: quasi-feudal depressor legacy with post-liberation narrative for food security to the rise in organic composition of capital via new biological, chemical and mechanical technologies, stimulated by processes of squared fragmentation
- Last decade: cereal production quadrupled despite drop in per capita landholding, similar trajectory for milk and meat, drop in agric labour force (47>39%), expansion of irrigation (esp groundwater) and other mechanical inputs.
- Policy support: bank lending, de-regulated dealerships, large scale agribusiness and seed companies
- Proliferation of other actors in agric system

Exogenous variables: synergies and tipping points

- Expansion of rural infrastructure and communications
- Garments manufacturing
- Urban expansion and construction
- International migration and remittances
- Flight from agric and rise of absentee landholders
- Effects on agric wages
- Microcredit and other targeted interventions
- Alteration of returns to different labouring activities
- Structural adjustment and great accelerations (Mahmood)

Significance of rurbanisation

- Upazila upgrade, feeder roads, national highways, other growth pole centres
- Expansion of distinctive micro hinterlands: re-diversification of crop choice; decline of rice production as share of agric gdp; rise in rice productivity a function of release of land to other crops (Razzaque); supplying local markets and more distant urban ones; shift in cereal based diets
- Who controls means of exchange across the emerging supply chain?
- Open or interlocked transactions entailing new rents? Mastaanism?
- Farmers get less than 40 per cent of the consumer retail price, while the middlemen get 45 per cent (Ifaz)

Framing the Hypothesis: Initial Conditions

- Feudal management of land and labour is dismantled, alongside process of de-peasantisation; intrusion of capital and new technologies
- Both contribute to overcoming depressor constraints to agricultural productivity
- Under conditions of pop density and high dependence on land for income and livelihoods, land continually divided between inheriting sons leading to squared fragmentation (even despite out-migration of some sons)
- Such receiving conditions for capital poses challenges for refracting lumpy technologies and managing labour across scattered plots
- Coherence of family farm threatened
- Agrarian change rather than land reform

Framing the hypothesis: the drivers

- Food security for livelihoods and sovereignty
- Post-liberation instinct for state management replaced by market in response to state rent-seeking and corruption, but market justice remains problematic
- Supported by policies for infrastructure and decentralisation
- Garments and urbanisation: increased demand for net marketable surpluses plus remittances to countryside
- Hitting wall of socio-technical depressors in form of family farms with scattered plots and inadequate savings to invest (despite expanding remittances to invest in fixed and variable inputs)

Framing the hypothesis: structural outcomes

- Hybrid, home grown version of agrarian change: land consolidation via operation rather than re-jigged ownership; separation of ownership from operation as peasants become rentiers leasing out scattered plots re-grouped for irrigation and other lumpy technology
- Cumilla coops proven not to be the solution—too much mutual suspicion of free-riding and capture
- Solution for raising land and labour productivity has to be the rentier-contractor equation

Framing the hypothesis: socio-economic implications

- Redistribution of returns from cultivation away from owner-rentier towards operator-contractor, with agro-industry and banks supporting capital investment
- Shifts appropriation of labour value from absolute to relative, commodifying labour in the process, thereby 'freeing' it
- But extended supply chains linking producers to consumers retain interlocked, even mastaan characteristics linked to political penetration
- Continuation of clientelism in new guises and opportunities

Conclusion: Longer Term Implications

- Increased bargaining power for labour—real wage rates up
- Seasonal scarcities and general flight from agric
- By 2050 agric labour in ‘farmhand’ sense might have disappeared
- 2 core processes of disarticulation: break up of clientelist production relations tying landlords to peasant cultivators; internal logic of family farm threatened by separation between ownership and management of land
- Material interdependency and morality of blood ties weakened
- Material domain undermining the moral domain through individuation and inter-generational fracture (flight of male youth)

Caveats

- Re-articulation far from complete
- Seasonality issues, with family faring stronger in lower technology Aman dhan
- Socio-cultural attachment to land remains strong: but as rentier or direct cultivation?
- Contract labour not fully commodified: labour is hybrid and still clientelist in post-harvest and supply chain sectors
- But a moving picture, with the hybrid Bengali model currently prevailing but maybe en route to full corporate commercialisation of land management