

Towards a Revised Understanding of Agrarian Bangladesh

Geof Wood

BIDS-ABCD Conference 1-3 December

Session: Agrarian Transitions

Introduction: challenge of food security

- What will BD look like in another 50 years?
- What are we learning from last 50 yrs since Liberation?
 - Nation of small, pt, petty commodity farmers?
 - Rentier class of landholders dominated by ag services?
 - Large scale commercial contract farming?

Hypothesis:

Disarticulation/Rearticulation

- Disappearance of the family operated farm
- A rentier class of landholders: disarticulation
- Management of scattered plots by external ag services contractors: rearticulation as ag system
- Consolidation of land via management rather than ownership
- E.g. command areas for irrigation
- To achieve optimum 'farm' size
- Loss of control leading to loss of ownership?

Agrarian context at liberation and for a decade

- Colonial legacy of underdeveloping Bengal
- Underdevelopment during Pakistan 'colonial' period: diversion of jute income
- From Zamindars to Jotedars:
 - Quasi-feudalism
 - Antediluvian capital: depressor on ag progress?
 - Class relationships via tenancy, usury and pre-commodified labour(personalised, multi-stranded, multi-period, interlocked ties)
Abdullah, Wood 1981 etc.

Liberation: A nation of small farmers?

BD's liberation 'theology':

- Bengali 'peasants' versus Punjabi 'landlords'
- Denial of access for Bengali petty bourgeoisie
- Suppression of culture (language, students and rural folk traditions)

Dhaka-Cumilla belt: minifundist agrarian conditions (soil fertility, pop density, under-capitalised family farms, low tenancy and landlessness) misapplied to BD as a whole

Limits of the Special Case

- BARD-Comilla
- ‘Minifundist homogeneity’ (soil fertility, pop density, small landholdings)
- Socio-economic foundation for KSS
- Roll out as IRDP, later BRDP
- But ‘Exploitation and the Rural Poor’ reported class inequalities, refuted ‘cyclical kulakism’, hidden land accumulation via ‘bandak’, and KSS capture (following AH Khan TTT)

Land Occupancy Survey and other studies

- Januzzi and Peach 1977. Rural pop 90%, 50% of which effectively landless. Thus limited value of IRDP small farmer approach.
- Persistence of quasi-feudalism as institutional 'depressor' for ag productivity reinforced by other village studies (e.g. Rangpur, Kustia, Mymensingh)
- NGO focus upon landless—tenancy access, escape from usury, improved labour wages

Food Security and Irri-Boro

- 1970 cyclone, 1971 war, 1974-5 famine, reliance on imports (PL480), liberation without sovereignty, awareness of GR innovations from BARD, public sector institutions (BARC, BIRRI, BADC etc), 1979 WB Food Issues Report-PFDS.
- Irrigation dependent *irri-boro*—a secure season
- Expansion of ag services intersecting with structural adjustment from early 80s

Overcoming the Depressor: Land Reform or Agrarian Reform?

- Contrast between N.India and BD
- *Sonar Bangla* conference 1995: how to explain a decade of ag growth
- WB LFG: institutional reform (land redistribution and Operation Barga) versus mechanisation (Leiten and Harriss)—strong state?
- BD: technological innovation generating ag entrepreneurialism, esp via groundwater, services (Adnan, Wood) and market integration—weak state?

Real subsumption of labour under capital

- Replacement of antediluvian by productive capital in agriculture: endogenous drivers
- From Absolute to Relative Surplus Value: changing the labour relationship
- But constraints to pace of transition: *bargadar* contracts, squared fragmentation, credit access, lumpy fixed inputs (mechanisation)
- Problem of farmer cooperation: self-supply versus consumer of external services
- Land 'consolidation' via command areas and services refracting lumpy mechanisation
- Move towards partial commodification of labour

Rentiers or Petty Commodity Production

- A nation of part-time smallholders with other non cultivating occupations i.e. petty commodity producers delivering in aggregate sufficient net marketable surplus (diversified from cereals leading to diet changes) for national needs (Taiwan?)
- Or ‘disappearing’ rentiers via commercialised services dominating land use decisions and returns—disarticulation/rearticulation
- from ‘farm’ to ‘system’

2 Antidotes to rentier thesis

- Attachment to Land: Sentiment or Rational Hedge? A counter point to disarticulation?
 - A preference for use of enhanced income: land is like livestock and gold—available for disasters
 - A rationale hedge against institutional uncertainties as a function of low accountability
- Also hybridity of labour

Might slow up move away from family farm, but also consistent with rentier options

Agrarian Change and the Wider Context

- Exogenous as well as endogenous drivers of agrarian change:
- Consider: infrastructure and communications; garments manufacturing; urban expansion and construction; international migration and remittances; flight from agriculture (esp youth) and absentee landholders; backward linkages stimulating rural non-farm investment; wages and prices; credit expansion; mobility and gender

The Significance of Rurbanisation

- *Upazila* , feeder roads and growth poles (80s and LGED)
- Rurban hinterlands and land use/crop diversification
- Market integration and fluidity of migration and information
- Proliferation of intermediaries—*dadon, faria, bepari, arotdars* (shifting returns from farmers 40% to middlemen 45%)
- Mastaanisation of the countryside and labour *sardars*
- Links to political penetration: young bucks in jeans
- New patron-clientelism

Conclusion: Implications for Class and Poverty

- New political economy characterised by density and fluidity of interaction between city and countryside across the delta—thus rurbanisation rather than centre-periphery, embracing sectors not just space
- Capital intensive agric services supplied by external contractors—thus shift in ownership of means of production and modes of exploitation (from absolute to relative SV)
- Breakdown of previous land/labour monopolies and associated forms of power
- Ag labour more commodified, like urban, leading to new forms of managing inequality (new forms of patron-clientelism)
- Tension between: new modes of exchange characterised by imperfect, embedded, *mastaan* dominated markets for goods, services and finance; challenged by democratisation of credit and labour mobility
- Poverty elasticity to growth: maybe for moderate poor (But imperfect markets); still inelastic for extreme poor (socio-cultural marginalisation: ethnic and religious minorities, geographical concentrations, poverty pockets, climate change vulnerability, access); and NB continuation of widespread vulnerability of non-poor