

NOTE ON CONCENTRATION OF AGRICULTURAL WEALTH IN BENGAL

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The author (1948) jointly with Mani Mohan Mukherjee has recently shown that in two samples of village people in Bengal the income distributions have been found to be sharply differentiated and polarised. In the samples from Birbhum and Bogra respectively, 47 % and 41 % of the total income had been found to be concentrated in the hands of only 10% of all families, while the remaining 90% of families had only 53 % and 59 %, that is rest of the income. The samples were not large enough to draw final conclusions but the close agreement between distributions relating to two sets of villages lying wide apart (one sample from West and the other from North Bengal) probably indicates a general tendency.

Bengal is an agrarian country of which about 75 % of the population depend on agriculture. In consequence, such a concentration of income is obviously the result of marked inequality in land distribution. Paddy is the main crop of the province being sown on about 88 % of all cultivated land in Bengal. In a recent study of the economic condition of rural Bengal (*A sample survey of after-effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943* by P. C. Mahalanobis, Ramkrishna Mukherjee and Ambika Ghosh), it has been shown that in April 1943, before the famine, 36 % of all rural families did not possess any paddy land, 41% had only upto 2 acres, 15 % had between 2 and 5 acres, and only 8 % had above 5 acres of paddy land. This well defined hierarchy and acute concentration of paddy land in the hands of a few families explain the polarisation of income in rural areas to a great extent.

Such polarisation of income arising out of property inequality is further enhanced by the similar concentration of agricultural wealth. This can be realised by studying the different types of people interested in land in relation to production and the proportional distribution of these types in the society as a whole. As noted earlier, paddy is the main crop of the province, so that the production relation of the different types as regards the cultivation of this crop will indicate the nature and extent of concentration of agricultural wealth. Also it is only in the cultivation of paddy (because it is the main crop) all the types of interest are found to occur, such as, self-cultivation, cultivation by hired labour (found in regard to all other crops) as well as share-cropping.

There are in all seven types of interest in regard to the cultivation of paddy.

- (1) State, receiving the revenue from the land.
- (2) *Zamindar* and subinfeudatory landlords who collect the revenue and along with it realise a share of the agricultural wealth as rent.
- (3) *Jotdar* who lends his holding for share-cropping and receives half share of the crop in return of paying the rent only.
- (4) Rich farmer who owns the land as a non-cultivating owner and have it cultivated by the agricultural labourers.
- (5) *Ryot*, the traditional peasant, who owns the land and cultivates it himself with occasional help of an agricultural labourer in times of expediency, such as, for transplantation of *aman* paddy and harvest. He gets the total crop.
- (6) *Bargadar* who cultivates the land lent by the *jotdar* and receives half share of the crop, bearing the entire cost of production minus the rent of the land.
- (7) Agricultural labourer who serves as the hired labour for the rich farmer (and occasionally for a *ryot*) and derives his income as daily wages.

Aman, *aus* and *boro* are the three varieties of paddy grown in Bengal. Of those *boro* is grown on a negligible area. *Aus* comprises of about 23% and *aman* about 77% of the total area under paddy. The land under *aus* is usually never kept fallow for the rest of the year, after the harvest of the crop, and *aman* is grown on that field. Therefore, the study of production relation in regard to the *aman* paddy alone (the principal food and money crop of the province) will indicate the nature of concentration of agricultural wealth in Bengal.

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The Table I below gives the amount and proportion of net income to gross obtained from *aman* and under *aman* paddy by the seven types of interest as noted above. The table is derived from table V (b) and appendix 11 of the "Report on the cost of production of crops in the principal sugar and cotton tracts in India, volume VI Bengal" published by the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research in 1938. The survey was carried out in six villages of Rajshahi-Bogra and six villages of Birbhum districts by regular observation for a period of three years, 1934-35, 1935-36 and 1936-37. The authenticity of the data, therefore cannot be doubted.

In the table the income of the agricultural labourer has been derived from the proportion of the cost of production spent on human labour. The income of *bargadar* has been derived as half share of the total crop plus the interest earned on the capital invested for cultivation (cattle, plough, etc.) minus the cost of production from which rent has been deducted. The income of the *ryot* is the farm business income derived as the margin of profit from the cash price and the cost of production of the crop plus the interest earned on the capital invested. The income of the rich farmer is derived as the farm business income minus the cost on hired labour. The *jotdar*'s income is half the share of produce minus the rent. The *zamindar*'s income is the rent minus the revenue to the State which is the income of the latter. Incidence of revenue in the two areas has been adopted from "Man behind the plough" by Sir Azizul Haque.

It should be noted that the cost of production does not include the charges for self-labour.

Table I. Average net and gross income received from an acre of land under *aman* paddy by the interested types during 1934-35, 1935-36 and 1936-37.

| interested types | net income in rupees | | percentage of net income to gross. | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| | Rajshahi & Bogra. | Birbhum | Rajshahi & Bogra. | Birbhum. |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| State | 0.6—0.5 | 1.0 | 2 | 3 |
| Zamindar | 1.3—1.4 | 3.1 | 4 | 9 |
| Jotdar | 13.8 | 13.6 | 44 | 38 |
| Rich farmer | 13.2 | 11.3 | 42 | 32 |
| Ryot | 10.8 | 14.8 | 33 | 42 |
| Bargadar | 8.3 | 5.5 | 26 | 15 |
| Agricultural labourer | 8.9 | 7.8 | 28 | 22 |
| Gross income | 31.4 | 35.5 | 100 | 100 |

It can be seen from the table that in both the areas, Rajshahi & Bogra and Birbhum, the proportion of net income to gross is highest for the *jotdar* (barring the *ryot* for the obvious reason that he owns the land and does the whole job himself) and lowest for the *bargadar*. The income of the latter is even lower than that of the agricultural labourer. The income of rich farmer is close but comes next to that of the *jotdar* even though he has to spend some time in supervision over the hired labourers as well as for the maintenance and provision of plough, cattle, seed, manure and such other necessities of cultivation. The *jotdar*, on the other hand, has nothing to bother about. Incidentally it is worth mentioning that the income of the *zamindar* and the subfeudatory landlords is found to be two to three times the revenue to the State indicating how terrible is the exploitation of our peasantry from various sources.

Similar maldistribution of agricultural wealth has also been noted in a survey of six villages in Bogra by the author in 1942 as shown in Table 2 below. It may be noted that well defined income hierarchy and marked concentration of income had been found in this sample of rural society as referred to earlier.

Table 2. Net and gross income received from an acre of land under *aman* paddy by the interested types during 1941-42 in the sample of six villages from Bogra.

| interested types | net income (in rupees) | percentage of net to gross income. |
|---------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| (1) | (2) | (3) |
| State | 0.5 | 1 |
| <i>Zemindar</i> | 4 | 9 |
| <i>Jotdar</i> | 18 | 40 |
| Rich farmer | 16 | 36 |
| <i>Ryot</i> | 31 | 69 |
| <i>Bargadar</i> | 15 | 32 |
| Agricultural labour | 16 | 36 |
| Gross income | 45 | 100 |

The tables indicate the nature of concentration of agricultural wealth in Bengal. Its extent, however, as is obvious from the tables, depends on the extent of share-cropping and cultivation by hired labourer in contrast to self-cultivation. The Land Revenue Commission Bengal 1940, expressed the view that "5 acres would be the minimum area required to keep an average family in reasonable comfort and if the land is capable of growing nothing but *aman* paddy the area required would be about 8 acres." Therefore, the agricultural population having less than 5 acres of paddy land is bound to depend on share-cropping for an economic holding or have to take to the occupation of agricultural labourer. On the other hand, self-cultivation can only be practised on economic holdings, that is, by the families owning atleast "above 5" acres of paddy land. But obviously in this group also belong the rich farmer and the *jotdar*. The extent of share-cropping and cultivation by hired labour can now be realised from the fact that, as noted earlier, 92% of all rural families possess paddy land below 5 acres and it is only for the remaining 8% that the holdings are of the size of above 5 acres.

Census of 1901 and 1941 indicate that the population of agricultural labourer has increased from 4.86 millions to 6.34 millions during the last 40 years. Unfortunately, precise statistical data on the number of share-croppers is hardly available. According to the previously mentioned Land Revenue Commission "two-fifths of the agricultural families", that is 40%, have taken to share-cropping, while 29% are agricultural labourers. This is quite possible because, as indicated by the tables, the relationship of the *jotdar* and the *bargadar* in our rural economy gives the highest profit to the non-cultivating owner and so the existence of the disintegrated peasantry (with uneconomic holdings as a result of loss of land) is conditioned by it.

Numerically the *jotdar* and the rich farmer represent a very small minority as they comprise of only a section of 8% of all rural families in Bengal. But the concentration of income in this group due to the concentration of the *means of production*, (namely land, as referred to earlier,) is further enhanced by the concentration of agricultural wealth through share-cropping and cultivation by hired labour. In consequence, this group is undoubtedly the master of rural Bengal today because of its importance in peasant economy as a whole, both in regard to the share it has of the total *means of production* owned by the peasantry and to its share of the total produce produced by the peasantry.

The author proposes to discuss the inter-relationship in the rural economy arising out of such concentration of agricultural wealth and income in a future communication.

REFERENCE

- MUKHERJĒA, R AND MUKERJEE, M.M. (1946). A note on concentration of income in Bengal villages. *Sankhya* 7 (3), p. 327-28

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