



Asiatic mode of production and the development of capitalism in Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this theoretical paper is to relate the Marxian modes of production to the development of the economy of Bengal basin with particular emphasis on the nation known as Bangladesh. Data for this study were obtained from existing literatures on Marxian modes of production and the economic history of Bengal basin as well. The methodology heavily relied on existing previous literatures on the subject being dealt with. The findings indicate that the co-existence of the urban, and the now technical industrial sectors, where the service economy and the hard-goods manufacture have little or no relationship with the geography and climatology of the land, is not treated by Marx, and there is no mixed-mode which analogizes the reality of the Bangladesh economy. Further existence of the real possibility of continued mass natural disasters in this land, and the truth of the population density and oppression of the power of the land to feed its own population, cannot be collated into any given mode of production.

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to relate the Marxian modes of production to the development of the economy of the Bengal basin with a particular emphasis on the nation known today as the People's Republic of Bangladesh. As the focus of this paper is to follow the growth of this sector's economy as it has moved toward capitalism, it is necessary to understand the various Marxian modes of pre-capitalist modes of production, not only in concept, but as they actually have applied to this region. Every mode of production posits a necessary surplus labor supply which can be appropriated by the economy in either a communal or socialist manner, where the laborers themselves appropriate the surplus for the general benefit of the community, or it can be appropriated by a non-labor class, thus developing a capital-holding caste which controls the means of production setting up the antagonism between labor and capital that colors all production relations (Marx, 1990).

The forces of production are those forces which appropriate the raw material and transform it into a utile product. The three elements that Marx defined as comprising the force of production are work itself, the subject of the work, and the instrument of that work (Hindess and Hirst, 1975). Forces of production are dependent on the combination of these elements. One must remember that a mode of production is a concept, not a finite reality. It is not the equipment of production that defines the mode, but the integration of that equipment and system into the work in process that would define the mode (Mandel, 1971). For the region of this study, the delta of Bengal, the integration of the forces of production has led the region through a history of modes of production, many of which existed concurrently (Alamgir and Ahmed, 1988). It is the relations of production, then, that define the modular concept of production.

Background of the study:

The economic processes of a given geographical area onto genetically recapitulate the phylogeny of its socio-economic development in an ever-tightening cycle, as modern elements are added bringing the economy to a higher state of development (Marx, 1993). Phases that once took millennia to complete their cycles of growth, later took centuries, then decades, and perhaps now years or even months. Phases of economic development that once were distinct precursors of following stages are now found concomitant with later stages of development in the same economic organism. More antiquated means of production find themselves extant in the same area as more modern means. It is not merely a conservatism of spirit that defines this coexistence, but a necessity of survival. Until the economic organism can fully sustain itself in its newest avatar, the underpinnings of the old ways cannot atrophy and eject themselves into obscurity. Therefore we argue that economic development history of the Bengal area can amplify this hypothesis.

Problem statement:

Bangladesh, the largest country in the Bengal delta, is the subject for the examples in this paper. It has been a nation for about forty years, yet it has a remarkable ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The land itself is mostly riverine, fed by five major river systems. It is low land, fertile and renewable from river overruns. The same benefit of the plethora of river water for irrigation is Bangladesh's main source of potential and real disaster. River flooding and tidal bores occur on a Homeric scale with great regularity, washing off the alluvial deposits that have only recently acquired soil nutrients, replacing that soil with mud which, although cultivable, is not nearly as rich as previously planted soil. The land's location just south of the Himalayan mountains create recoil wind patterns that bring with them tornadoes, typhoons and hurricanes that lash the land with great destructive power. The climate of the land has always

allowed it a high level of fertility, drought has not been its heritage, nor has frost. Highland vetch and barley were replaced in these lowlands by wetland grains such as rice, tea, jute, and reed products (Ali, 1980). Therefore, it has been of prime interest to examine the relationship of Marxian mode of production to the development of capitalism in Bengal basin with particular emphasis on Bangladesh. Accordingly the research questions for this study are:

1. What are Marxian modes of production?
2. Are there any relationship between Marxian modes of production and the development of capitalism

Objectives of the study:

1. To identify Marxian modes of productions
2. To examine the relationship between Marxian modes of production and development of capitalism in Bengal.

Related literatures:

Literatures for the study are based on the economic development history of Bengal. The economic development history is organized as follows:

Pre-Historic Times to the First Empire Period:

In the most ancient recorded times, the annals of the early trading lords of Sumer, ca. 2800 A. D., indicate reed boats from the Bengal area coming up into the lower Euphrates valley carrying cloth, rice, garlic and spices from the fabled East. In these early economic texts, inscribed on cuneiform tablets, one hears of the Kings of Palau and Kengu sending artisan slaves who brought their skills at brickmaking and clay-brick construction for work to the court of Esarhaddon who was rebuilding the Esagila, the large Ziggurat of Ur (Pettinato, 1981). The wholesale movement of peoples for corvee work from the Bengal area to the more western Euphrates valley indicates that slavery was practiced by the city state rulers of both communities. Sumerian counterparts of pre-Bengal princes would not "retain these peoples beyond their time in a foreign land. The request was simply stated that the slave labor was the "property" of the Sumerian lord's "brother" in the Bengali territory, in this case brother meaning equal in sovereign power. There was a gift-mercantile relationship between the Mesopotamian Sumerians and the peoples of the Four-Rivers (Bengal) who had moved down from the mountains into the lowlands of both river deltas. They were called the "black-headed ones" of the god's choice of peoples and their relations were always amicable. The trading pacts between Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the Bangladesh peoples today are merely an echo of patterns begun far back in history, detailed again during the Babylonian and Median Empires. Although there has not been much analysis done on the economics of the period of the Islamization of the Bengal area, it was an area already acquainted with the Arab world, and even though it had survived for millennia in a Hindu caste system, the earlier contacts with the pre-Muslim Arab world had provided a matrix of commonality that made Islam a viable alternative to the harsh structuring of Hindu society, a rigidity that had to have been alien to a people that had once been primitive capitalists. Capitalism, whatever else it may be, requires a mind-set of this world Hegelian type. Where the strict Hindu mentality might hamper the aggressive pursuit of wealth that makes true capitalism work, Islam places no such restraints upon the achievements of this world; in fact, in subtle ways it encourages the gradus ad parnassum (O'Donnell, 1984).

During the three millennia from the earliest mention of trade between the pre-Bengal city-state prices, the greatness of

whose cities are evident in ruins like those at Mohenjo Daro, and the beginnings of the Empire Period, this territory saw the decline of these city lords with their slave-based labor. The land itself could not withstand this type of organization. As populations grew and cities did not expand, the centralization of rule by overlord became less possible for the majority of the territory (Heitzman and Worden, 1989). Even now the vast ruralization of Bangladesh (more than 80%) makes any attempt by a central government to effectuate control or reform almost impossible. Where the fertility of the land is localized to a small segment of the overall governed territory, then it is possible to control the labor force as a unified entity, allocate parcels of land, and account to a central government for the productivity on that land. It is only with the most modern of assessment mechanisms today that one can even think of accounting for agricultural development sectors. The village superseded the city-state as the area of production and remained the focal point for agrarian production ever since (Hartman and Boyce, 1979).

The Period of the Indigenous Empires:

From 320 to 180 B. C. the land mass of Bengal, along with most of Pakistan and India, was ruled by the Mauryan Empire, with its famous ruler Asoka. This dynasty produced the Mahinda, the son of Asoka who introduced Buddhism to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). All land was owned by the ruling house, and in the method of a feudal production, droit de seigneur (putative legal rights), rights of the lord were given over the lands which a given lord, having taken an oath of fealty, and in recompense for providing and provisioning an army to protect the landholdings of the ruling house, was given the usufruct of the property under his protection, or demesne. The lord of the demesne apportioned the arable property to his serfs, from whom he collected a rent-in-kind plus taxation on the home-made products. The land was owned, however, by the ruling house, as part of its eminent domain. The means for production were owned by the lords of the land. The metal-working artisans, the technicians of the time were centrally located within the confines of the lord's dwellings. There were no medieval type towns in the Bengal area. The land was, and for the most part today is still, completely rural. Services of a technical nature were then, and now available only by making one's way to the nearest central district, perhaps hundreds of miles away. The crop and the seed for the future crop belonged to the lord of the land, and a residual amount remained for the peasant. From the produce and product collected by the feudal lord, he in turn had to remit a good portion of this product to the ruling house either in kind or in coin (Wolf: 1977).

The Indian Gupta Empire (A. D. 319-540), saw the cessation of East Bengal into a tributary yet autonomous state called Samatata. The third or Harsha Empire (A. D. 606-647) reincorporated Samatata as part of the overall empire.

The first Buddhist Empire succeeded the Harsha dynasty in the form of Gopala, a Buddhist warrior chieftain who founded the Pala Dynasty (A. D. 750-1150). It was during this period that a stability of government coincided with a period of prosperity. Trade during the Pala Dynasty extended as far as Tibet and Sumatra.

From the end of the Pala Dynasty to the beginning of Turkish rule in 1202, the land was ruled by orthodox and militant Hindus known as the Senas. The rigid caste system of the Senas was most objectionable to the Bengalis and set the stage for the mass conversion of the Bengali peoples, particularly those of the lower castes, to Islam.

The Period of Turkish Rule:

For five and one-half centuries, Turkish sultans ruled the area of Bengal (Wittfogel, 1957). At first part of a loose association with the Delhi Sultanate, Bengal paid tribute in the form of war elephants to maintain its autonomy. This tribute was collected by native overlords who had inherited their positions from earlier feudal times. Land was then, as before, the ultimate property of the state, (in this case the sultan), but there were no feudal under-lords in support of an over-lords. The management of the land, and its apportionment reverted to a more primitive clan basis, an organization which is still present in today's rural Bangladesh. There was the family (paribar or gushti) which consisted of a patrilineal extended household living in a home (bari). It was, however, the larger voluntary mutual benefit group of neighbors known as samaj or millat that provided a council of elders to settle village disputes. These matabdars (village leaders) frequently came from the wealthier peasant families, and as Islam became more and more a focus of village life, they came from amongst those men learned in the Koran and hadith or "the ways." From the more feudal Empire, mode of production, the economy of the land had tipped backward-toward the Asiatic mode.

As part of the Mughal Empire, Bengal was integrated with the rest of the Indian subcontinent as a political entity, but, although physically conquered by Akbar in A. D. 1583, it was never truly subjugated, thanks to its remoteness from the center of Turkish government at Delhi. The difficulty in communication from one area to another allowed a certain measure of ignorance to militate in favor of Bengali autonomy. It was from the time of Akbar that a postal service and a road were planned to help bring the Bengal area into central empire operations. It was this same Akbar who introduced the Bengali calendar and whose son introduced the latest development in managing the mode of production. It was Jahangir the son of Akbar who created the position of zamindar (landlord and tax-collector), non-Bengalese officials who were assigned as civil and military officials with the right to collect taxes on the land. Once again the peoples of Bengal were not to experience a feudal mode of production, only this time the lords of the land were not native to the land, nor did they acquire ownership of the land per se. The zamindar would develop into a district landlord class.

The development of the zamindar class and its later interaction with the British would have immense economic and social implications for twentieth-century Bengal. Bengal was treated as the "breadbasket of India" and, as the richest province in the empire, was drained of its resources to maintain the Mughal army (Wikipedia). Even though there was fierce peasant resistance to these policies, which then required harsher Mughalese governors, Bengal prospered during these last centuries of the Mughal lords: agriculture expanded, trade increased and Dhaka became one the centers of the textile trade in South Asia. Down to the closing days of the Mughal Empire in 1757, the Mughal overlords continued to exact tribute from the Bengali peoples, and during the final fifty years of the Empire, the central government weakened, allowing the local governors to find themselves centers of independent power.

The Period of European Colonization:

Because the land route between the European continent and Indian subcontinent has always been traversable, from the earliest of times these peoples have been in contact and one only has to examine the movement of the Indo-Aryan language group

from east to west to confirm this fact. There were overland as well as sea-routes between the lands.

It was in the fifteen century that the Europeans felt compelled to find ways to circumvent the middle-man in the spice trade, the Arab caravaner. It was the high prices charged by the Arab spice traders that propelled the Europeans to seek their own trade relations with the East.

The European method of colonization took a typical form. Merchant companies would establish trade relations with local governing groups. It was always an assumption on the part of the Europeans that some entity "owned" the land on which the product was produced, be that a raw or finished product. It was always a European assumption that some local had the "right" to either transfer that "ownership" for a fee, or the usufruct of that property for payment, either in kind or in coin.

It was the British East India Company that established a factory on the Hoogly River in western Bengal in 1650 and founded the city of Calcutta in 1690 on land leased from the Mughal emperor for the standard ninety-nine years, with rights to renew.

Until the time of the downfall of the Mughal emperors in 1858, the chief source of state revenue was the productivity of the peasants on the land. During the last centuries of the Mughal emperors there was constant dynastic warfare which ravaged the countryside and displaced the peasants from the land, cutting the underpinnings of the state economy (Habib, 1969). The British, in the meantime, helped foster this dynastic infighting, and played no small part in the eventual downfall of the Mughal Empire.

Because the British had chosen to emphasize Calcutta as their commercial and administrative center in South Asia, rather than Dhaka which was already the seat of a thriving agrarian economy, the development of East Bengal became more and more limited to agriculture, and specifically as the primary producer of rice and jute for processors in Calcutta and Europe.

British policy viewed their colonies as suppliers of raw materials and purchasers of manufactured goods. The historical period of the British conquest of India was concomitant with the height of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. This, as is well known, was triggered by the mechanization of the textile industry. As the British policy forced the colonies to purchase machine-made goods, the domestic craft of Indian industries virtually collapsed along with trade and commerce from India outward. The Muslin cloth made in Dhaka, East Bengal, was an especially heavily struck commodity, as it had been all the rage in Europe until British machine-made cloth drove it from the market.

During the British Raj life expectancy increased as did the birth rate, so that the land of East Bengal experienced a vast increase in population density, so much so that the homeostasis of land: people ratios were negatively imbalanced. A substantial pauperized class emerged from the peasantry, having no access to the land, not even as share cropper (Rahman:1980). Traditional agricultural methods that had existed for millennia became an entrenched obstacle to modernization of agriculture, and geography limited the development and maintenance of transportation and communication systems.

Other cultural trends were shaping the area, ripening it for upheaval. The Bengalis were predominantly Muslims, yet the British appointed managerial class was Hindu. The saying circa 1900 in this area ran, "The landlord is a Hindu, the peasant Muslim. The money lender is Hindu, the client Muslim. The

jailor is Hindu, the prisoner Muslim. The magistrate is Hindu, the accused Muslim.”

The isolationist stance of the Muslim majority in the Bengal area, versus the Hindu minority made it difficult for the Muslims to form a middle class and to benefit from an entrepreneurship (Stevens:84).

In 1905 the British governor general divided Bengal into eastern and western zones. Lord George Curzon established a new province known as eastern Bengal and Assam with its capital at Dhaka. Hindu boycotts of British made products in response to this realignment of territories made the British rescind its restructuring in 1912, further alienating the Muslims in the Eastern sector.

The period from the First World War through the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was marked by a series of cultural and economic confrontations. Power and landownership was in Hindu hands while the peasantry continued to be predominantly Muslim in the East Bengal area, yet the population majority in this area was predominantly Muslim.

1947 to Bangladesh Independence in 1971:

Partition into two separate states, India and Pakistan, in August of 1947 caused the largest cross transfer of peoples the world had heretofore known. Of the twelve million people that migrated, Muslims from India to Pakistan, Hindus from Pakistan to India, and two million did not survive the transition, but died in communal bloodbaths that accompanied these movable hordes. As with the future colonies that the British and European nations would abandon into independence, only the scantiest preparations had been made to turn over an orderly form of government into capable and waiting hands. Until the partition, Hindus controlled about 80% of all large rural holdings, urban real estate and government jobs in the area and dominated finance, commerce and the professions. After partition, the massive flight of Hindus out of the area left a vacuum where there had been Hindu political and economic elite. The reality for Bangladesh was that, although Muslims moved into these vacated positions, most of these posts were taken over by West Pakistanis. It was not until Bangladesh independence that Bangladeshi Muslims, although ill-prepared for service, moved into these areas.

The colonial economic system that had kept East Bengal as a producer of jute and rice for the urban industrial economy which was centered in Calcutta was disrupted. East Bengal (then East Pakistan) was required to find ways to build a new industrial base and to modernize agriculture, all during the throes of a vast population explosion (Gordon, 1973). The trend continued for the rural populations to grow and to grow poorer during this period, for no improvements could keep pace with the population growth. Five- year plans were put in place based on industrialization, but the major share of funds for these plans went toward West Pakistan and not Bengal.

East Pakistan did not have the natural resources requisite for industrial production and was forced to depend heavily on imports. This created a balance of payments problem. The area was faced with a steadily increasing problem of less than substantial industrialization and inadequate expansion of the agronomy (Feldman, 1971).

After Independence: Bangladesh:

Upon independence, Bangladeshi Muslims established control over all small and medium-sized industrial and commercial enterprises. In 1972, non-Bengali owned large

industries were nationalized, thus accelerating the establishment of control and influence by the indigent community.

It was a sudden rise of a new managerial class coupled with the expansion of the civil and military bureaucracy that upset the balance in both the urban and rural sectors. Similar to the emerging West African states, one found that party affiliation, political contacts, service in the revolutionary regime, all became pre-requisites for admission to the new elite of functionaries. The established middle class became reduced in importance.

In the rural areas new elites developed as well, with links to the villages, and these elites purchased property in order to establish their political control. It was the birth of the jotdar, land-based rural elite that replaced many of the formerly entrenched wealthy peasants.

Although laws were promulgated limiting the allotment of ownable land to any one individual, the de facto situation did not change, as the new landlord elite simply opted to place their holdings in the names of various relatives, keeping control of their property in this manner.

There is a distinction between two economies that merge into the one national economy of Bangladesh. There is the rural economy, still mired in a semi-Asiatic mode where the ownership of the land is not with the farmer. Then there is the urban and technological economy that coexists with it.

By the late 1980's, although its reliance on the donor community had not diminished, Bangladesh was showing real strides in the areas of overcoming its dependence. Production of food grains increased yearly, the private sector showed greater generation of investment capital, and laudatory productivity and measurable growth and diversification of exports. For example,, Bangladesh has become a major producer and exporter of ready-made garments and frozen seafood. One must remember that the new nation was beset on all sides by natural disasters that would have incapacitated sturdier economies, yet managed to maintain the status quo, if not show signs of real improvement.

In the 1970's, because of the volatility of the Bangladesh government, the international jute market resorted to substitute products. This was a severe blow to the Bangladesh export market, as jute accounted for the large portion of the gross export product.

One still sees signs of the ancient past, interspersed with the present. Remembering the whole sale movement of artisans for work in ancient Iraq, one looks at the circular migration of workers who are sent to labor in Saudi Arabia and other Mid-East countries, and whose wages are sent home to their families in Bangladesh, and whose wages are taxed in Bangladesh. This area's largest saleable natural resource continues to be its labor force, and where it has not developed work at home, it is still benefitting from its work outside of the borders of the nation.

Findings and discussion

The following analysis allows us to deduce the following results and discussion:

i) Although the Marxist definition of the Asiatic mode postulates that first, it is the state which extracts the surplus-product and there is no exploiting class independent of the state; second, there is an absence of private property in land, all land being state property; and, third, that non-commodity production in agriculture is the dominant form of production (Hindess and Hirst: 1975), we can still agree that at certain periods of its history, and in certain areas of its present state, the area under study has operated in the Asiatic mode of production. As for the

first postulation, during the period of the Empires, the state owned the land and usufruct of the labors of the serfs on that land; landlords were only agents of the state. The same was true during the Mughal Dynasty. The sultan and the princes beneath him were the owners of the land, the farmers were subject to taxation and ground-rents, making postulate two true as well. During the British Raj (rule) and down to modern times, although there was a de facto private ownership of the land, the landowners were not, for the most part, the laborers on the land, nor were they agents of the state. This brings us to a modification of postulates one and two. There is now an intermediary between the labor and the state who earns capital from the labor of the share-croppers on his estates, and that we encounter the capitalization of the land and of the agricultural economy.

ii) The analysis reveals that Marx's modes of production cannot provide a background for understanding the true economic history of the land if they must exist as distinct concepts. As metaphors they serve only to emphasize the sameness of certain situations, but they cannot be found as absolutes in any sense. The co-existence of the urban, and the now technical industrial sectors, where the service economy and the hard-goods manufacture have little or no relationship with the geography and climatology of the land, is not treated by Marx, and there is no mixed-mode which analogizes the reality of the Bangladesh economy.

Conclusion

The existence of the real possibility of continued mass natural disasters in this land, and the truth of the population density and oppression of the power of the land to feed its own population, cannot be collated into any given mode of production. In any segment of the nation a major disaster could wipe out either the planting fields or the labor supply or both, at any time and with an awful swiftness. No five-year plan can account for when and where disaster will strike, and what form it will take. The mere application of capital investment cannot offset the unknown, or prevent its outcome.

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