

Lesson 2 handout

Colonial agriculture in Bengal and Punjab: different experiences

Bengal: high rents, little support

In Bengal, the British introduced the Permanent Settlement in 1793. This meant that *zamindars* (landlords) became the owners of land and had to collect fixed taxes for the British. This system made tax collection easy for the British but was harsh for farmers. The *zamindars* often forced farmers to pay high rents, while doing nothing to improve farming conditions. In 1873, farmers in Bengal began protesting these high rents. This became known as the Pabna Revolt. At the same time, some educated people (called the Bengali literati) started talking about improving farming using new methods and science. They thought that this could happen even under the *zamindars*.

The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 tried to protect farmers by giving them more security, but it didn't solve bigger problems like debt or poverty. During the 1800s, Bengal started growing more cash crops, especially jute, which was sold overseas. But this mostly helped traders and middlemen, and not the farmers themselves. Bengal also had very little irrigation. By 1936, less than 6% of farmland was irrigated. Instead of building canals, the British spent more on railways, which helped to move crops out of Bengal but didn't help farmers to grow more food. The worst example of this weakness was the Bengal famine of 1943, when around three million people died. Some historians, like Amartya Sen, argue that famine happens not just when there is no food, but also when people can't afford food. In the 1930s, new political groups like the Kisan Sabha started pushing for land reforms and removing *zamindars*, but they didn't focus much on new farming techniques.

Overall, British rule in Bengal left farming unequal, underdeveloped and often in crisis, even when some people called for change.

Punjab: irrigation and growth

In Punjab, which the British took over in 1849, things were different. The British wanted Punjab to be stable and loyal, especially after the 1857 rebellion in other parts of India. Punjab became important to the British because it provided soldiers for the colonial army and was seen as a place where investment could bring quick results. The British made laws to protect farmers, like the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, which stopped moneylenders from taking peasant land. But the biggest change was irrigation. The British built huge canal networks, turning dry land into fields where farmers could grow wheat, cotton and other cash crops. By 1936, nearly half of Punjab's farmland had irrigation, much more than Bengal. This made farming more reliable and increased trade. Many Punjabi farmers, especially Jat Sikhs, became more prosperous. They often used their extra income to build better houses, buy more land or send their children to school. Towns grew bigger as trade increased, and new markets, roads and storage facilities were built to handle the growth in the crops being sold.

The British also introduced new crops and farming experiments. They encouraged farmers to use better seeds, different ploughs and new techniques. They wanted Punjab to be a 'model province' that showed the world that British rule could bring progress and modernisation. However, this success had limits. Some poorer groups, like landless labourers, didn't benefit from the canals and new crops. In addition, focusing on crops for sale (like wheat and cotton) sometimes meant that less land was used for food crops that local people needed. This could lead to problems during bad harvests or when prices fell in global markets.

Still, compared to Bengal, Punjab received more investment, more support and more infrastructure from the British. Many farmers saw the canals as an improvement that made them less dependent on unpredictable rain. Some historians argue that this created a form of accommodation, where farmers accepted British rule in return for new opportunities and security.

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