

There are crucial ecological elements in the partition of Bengal in 1947 and an exploration of the pre-history and history of the partition from the vantage point of ecology is more important than ever as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the event. This takes us to some of the political-economic issues evolving since the early years of colonial rule.

The decline of Bengal's industrial sector in the early colonial period was followed by a phase of 'peasantisation' from around 1840s. The resultant



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HOW COMMUNAL POLITICS RUINED AGRARIAN SOCIETY

Political ecology of the Partition of Bengal

change in the economy and society was reflected in the bulk of internal and external trade and a corresponding increase of flow of cash into Eastern Bengal, higher labour wages, and a remarkable absence of landless people. These social dynamics were reflected in remarkable income generation in rural areas and a growing sense of independence and demand for social justice. The socio-economic transformation took place because of Eastern Bengal's riverine ecology, which created new and fertile lands fit for cultivation of major subsistence and commercial crops of rice and jute, among other items. The architects of a vibrant agrarian society were the active, cultivating peasantry who created vast spaces of production through reclamation of char lands, wastelands, and forest tracts. The majority of the peasantry were Muslims who were joined by a smaller number of relatively lower ranking Hindus.

By the turn of the 20th century, however, Eastern Bengal's economy and social mobility declined as reflected in the lower productivity of agriculture, increase of cultivable wasteland, landlessness, and acute poverty and finally the great Bengal famine of 1943-4. If the 19th-century Bengal Delta reflected a state of considerable upward mobility in the society and economy, why did things deteriorate during the few decades

running up to the partition? One answer is that the deltaic ecology, particularly the water regime, deteriorated to a great extent. This was largely caused by extensive railway and protective embankments which crisscrossed the country leading to water-logging, unpredictable flooding due to the bursting of embankments, absence of

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overflow irrigation, declining spatial spread of silt and the elevation of river-beds. The problems caused by embankments were complicated by the growth of the water hyacinth, which choked different types of water bodies affecting water transport and agricultural fields from the first decade of the century. The combined effect of the presence of the embankments, water hyacinth, and deforestation was reflected in lower agricultural output, growth of cultivable waste lands, and the spread of a number of fatal water-

borne diseases. But these ecological problems were further complicated by a new turn in agrarian relations that could be properly understood only from a political-ecological perspective. By the turn of the 20th century, agricultural lands in the relatively fertile areas of Eastern Bengal began to be transferred to non-cultivating middle class people, historically known as *bhadralok*, the majority of who were upper-caste Hindus, joined by a small group of Muslims who aspired to attain the ranks of the *bhadralok*. The entry of the *bhadralok* into the peasant world proved problematic because they vied for appropriating relatively better agricultural lands amidst worsening ecological conditions. This may be understood by the fact that most acute pre-partition Hindu-Muslim communal violence took place, excepting in Kolkata, in those relatively fertile regions of Eastern Bengal where the rate of land-transfer to the non-agricultural people was highest, i.e. Noakhali, Comilla, Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Pabna.



Zainul Abedin, *Famine Sketch* (1943), ink on paper, 43x56.5 cm.

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In other words, the communalisation of the pre-partition politics in Bengal was integrally related to the question of access to ecological resources by the two communities of the Muslims and the Hindus, who had lived in relative peace in the course of the 19th century. The role of the colonial administration in this communalisation of politics was intriguing, to say the least. Since the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the British administration reviewed the issue of Muslim social and economic backwardness sympathetically. The birth of the University of