Why we need to rethink South Asia's agrarian history

In conversation with David Ludden

David Ludden, Professor Emeritus of History at New York University, is a distinguished historian of South Asia whose research has transformed our understanding of agrarian societies, peasant life and the historical forces shaping the region. In this interview with The Daily Star, he discusses his intellectual journey, the transformation of agrarian societies under colonial rule, the historical roots of Bengal's regional divisions, and the relationship between agriculture, nationalism and political power. He also reflects on the changing place of agrarian studies in an increasingly urbanised world facing a deepening climate crisis.



A village in a clearing in the Sundarbans, depicted in an 1843 sketch by Frederic Peter Layard, based on an earlier drawing from January 1839. The scene reflects the expansion of agrarian frontiers into Bengal's forested and riverine landscapes.

The Daily Star (TDS): Could you tell us about your journey as a historian and what drew you to South Asian agrarian history? You began conducting fieldwork in villages in Tamil Nadu when few historians pursued such research. What inspired this unconventional approach?

David Ludden (DL): I became serious about academic work when I was studying public health in college. A fellowship enabled me to spend a year working in a village clinic near Chennai. I was already troubled by inequality in America. In India, I learned about inequality on a global scale. I learned how poverty causes health problems.

I returned to university determined to study the Tamil language, which I had learned in the village, and the political economy of inequity, which I had come to believe was entrenched in capitalism and spread by imperialism. My studies led me to conclude that economic inequality is a global public health issue: it makes richer people healthier, while poor people (everywhere) suffer, separating rich and poor countries, rich cities and poor villages, rustic elites and poor village workers. That would be the subject of courses I would teach for forty years at the University of Pennsylvania and New York University.



David Ludden, Professor Emeritus of History at New York University

My first academic work, however, was to translate and interpret ancient Tamil poetry. Like much of Bengali literature, it is filled with images of social life in nature. It would lead me to a lifelong interest in the intimate details of social life and culture in natural and ecological environments.

For my dissertation, I brought the study of culture and political economy together in agrarian history. My research began by asking how British rule changed the system of land rights in India and, thus, the legal and cultural foundations of agrarian inequity. I quickly discovered that little was known about the history of the agrarian system that the British were changing, and that led me back into the history of landed property and agrarian society, which required the study of Tamil literature and inscriptions.

That is how I came to my distinctive long-term view of agrarian history. I became committed to studying agrarian history by combining local engagements with people in the present – fieldwork – with all kinds of historical evidence, including poetry, inscriptions, architecture, music and the natural landscape that people have transformed over centuries to create agrarian environments.

My original travels from New Haven to Chennai to Reddipalayam also became a template for my mobile career. I have now travelled for fifty years from Philadelphia, New York and London to cities, towns and villages in India and Bangladesh, where I married in 1994.

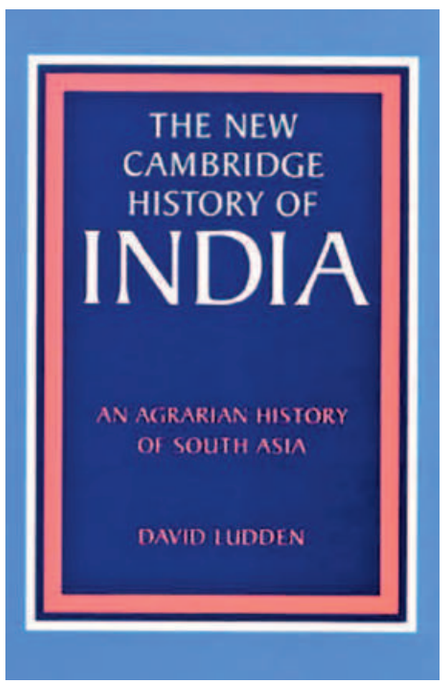
TDS: How did agrarian frontiers shape the history of South Asia?

DL: I shifted my studies to Bangladesh in the 1990s, when I was writing An Agrarian History of South Asia, to pursue the study of agrarian frontiers. I had discovered that local agrarian change results from the influence of mobile social forces – including merchants, armies, migrant settlers, new technologies, missionaries and ruling powers – which expand and transform agrarian territories. Over the centuries, forests become farms; migrant settlers displace forest dwellers; investors build irrigation works; dry land and rivers become paddy fields: agrarian territory expands and changes shape and substance as mobile social forces do their work on the land. Those mobile spaces are agrarian frontiers.

Agrarian societies thus change shape and substance through the local arrival of many kinds of mobile elements, which transform local worlds within the very specific natural ecologies that lay the groundwork for agrarian diversity. My first book concentrated on ecological diversity in one small region of South India; my second book followed agrarian frontiers across the vast diversity of agrarian South Asia. Since then, I have been focusing on Sylhet and on the diversity of agrarian spaces all around Bangladesh.

East and West Bengal provide a good example of how the interaction of mobile forces and ecological diversity organises agrarian societies: Calcutta bhadralok landlords formed an agrarian power structure that separated West Bengal from the modern agrarian frontiers in East Bengal. That difference has a wider context and relevance because agrarian frontiers form political territories all over Eurasia.

Agrarian frontiers in Western Europe were formed by imperial conquerors imposing settler colonies, when Roman armies formed latifundia, worked by slaves, which became the foundations of agrarian Europe. Conqueror settler colonialism drove European expansion into agrarian frontiers overseas. By contrast, in the arid Roman East (West Asia) and Persia, armies and merchants in city-centred territories used local landlords to rule agrarian economies and invest in expanding frontiers. That West Asian model travelled into semi-arid South Asia, through Persia, and into the wetlands of Bengal: Indian imperial territory broadly came to be dominated by warriors and merchants in cities who ruled farmers in agrarian frontiers through landlords.



The cover of *An Agrarian History of South Asia* by David Ludden, published in paperback by Cambridge University Press in February 2011.

The British adapted the Indian imperial model, using landlords to rule the countryside and heaping wealth and power on Calcutta and on the landlords who opposed the creation of East Bengal and Assam in 1905 because it empowered people in the ecologically unique, high-rainfall wetlands of the Jamuna-Meghna delta, where local village farmers propelled agrarian frontiers by investing their own labour and capital. Landlords lost local power to those village and small-town investors in farming frontiers, and Bangladesh emerged as an agrarian revolt against the Indian imperial model of city-centred landlord domination of agrarian society.

TDS: In your book An Agrarian History of South Asia, you identify the late nineteenth century as a turning point when colonial bureaucracy, development ideologies and industrial technologies transformed agrarian life. How did these changes give rise to what you call the 'Development Regime', and why did its inequalities persist after independence?

DL: I invented the idea of the Development Regime to describe the new assemblage of social powers that travelled with industrial capitalism into agrarian environments in the nineteenth century. Elites in British India organised that assemblage, but similar regimes emerged in the Native State of Mysore and in Russian, Chinese, Ottoman and American territories at the same time.

Development regimes include all forms of technical expertise, social power and technology that governments organise to increase economic growth and strengthen their ruling elites. Development regimes became foundational to modernity and imperialism, as well as to anti-colonial nationalism and independent nation-states. The idea that the British impoverished India was fundamental to Indian nationalists, and national governments always claim to be developing the nation. Development statistics measure every nation's status in the global rankings, forming a picture of the global development regime that emerged after 1950 and embraced all the new nations carved out of imperial territories across Africa and Asia.



The cover of *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalisation of South Asia*, edited by David Ludden and published by Permanent Black in 2003.

Nationalism in South Asia evolved within the inequities of the imperial development regime in British India. That regime was designed to enrich investors in British India and overseas who built global supply chains to deliver labour, wealth and raw materials to people in areas of industrial demand. The 1947 Partition of British India left most of the imperial development regime in place within national territories, where radical change became unsustainable as the global development regime wrapped national regimes in capitalist supply chains that moved manufactured goods, labour and primary products up the ranks of wealth and power, from poorer to richer places around the world. As a result, the social and spatial inequities of the imperial development regime continued to operate within national territories.

TDS: You argue that agrarian societies underwent major transformations long before British colonial rule, although these changes are less visible in historical records. Why, then, has colonialism been regarded as the decisive turning point in South Asia's agrarian history?

DL: From a historian's academic perspective, the most dramatic change that occurs in agrarian history in the nineteenth century is the increase in documentation. Historians focus primarily on the 19th and 20th centuries because that is when social change became more clearly documented. In addition, all the social theory that we inherit pushes us to believe that Western imperialism, modern capitalists and British rule changed everything. The billiard ball metaphor is justified by social theory and, empirically, by the fact that, all of a sudden, the colonial archive portrays changes that are poorly documented, if at all, in earlier times.

The truth is, however, that looking more closely at older evidence reveals major changes already underway during pre-modern millennia. The Pala-Sena period in Bengal, the Chola period in South India, the Tang-Song period in China and the Abbasid period in Persia – circa 900–1200 – followed by the Mongol and post-Mongol periods across Asia – circa 1200–1800 – witnessed dramatic changes throughout Asia, which I have described for South India and now for various other areas, including Sylhet.

With all that change in view, we can summarise the dramatic changes in agrarian life in the 19th century as resulting not specifically from British policies but rather from technological, social and economic changes related to the industrialisation and urbanisation of market demand and control over agrarian relations. Increasing government power as a force in agrarian societies only really becomes visible in the late 19th century, and then it becomes much more prominent after 1947.

TDS: How did the eastward expansion of agrarian frontiers create differences between East and West Bengal, and how did these differences contribute to the Partition of Bengal in 1947?

DL: Agrarian frontiers travelled from west to east across the Ganga Basin, where pastoral economies coexisted and merged into expanding agrarian territories. A new kind of agrarian frontier emerged where the Brahmaputra/Jamuna-Meghna rivers combine with the Ganga/Padma lowlands and Meghalaya/Tripura highland drainage systems to carry some of the world's highest rainfall out to sea through a vast floodplain in the lowlands of Bangladesh.

As Bengali farmers travelled to settle and cultivate farmland in the floodplains, their frontiers moved from west to east, with increasing force after the fifteenth century. The uplands to the north and east formed mobile agro-pastoral spaces extending into the lowlands, where Khasis travelled across the Sylhet lowlands before 1800 and mingled with Bengalis to form Bengali-Khasi communities; those mixed communities disappeared in the nineteenth century after the British military and Bengali farmers pushed the eastern Bengal floodplain frontier into the northern Sylhet foothills.

East and West Bengal took shape as farmers moved the frontiers eastward. They followed the original course of the Brahmaputra, which flowed southeast through Mymensingh to join the Meghna at Bhairab Bazar. The river shifted course over the decades after 1787, and its new course formed the north-south route of the Jamuna. East of the Jamuna, migrant Bengali settlers mingled with non-Bengali people from the uplands, from West and Southeast Asia and from overseas, resulting in a range of ethnolinguistic differences between Bengal east and west of the Brahmaputra/Jamuna.

British rule increased that divergence by introducing into the East a zamindari landlord system designed to organise agrarian territories in the semi-arid western Ganga Basin. As village farmers moved agrarian frontiers from the drier West into the wetter East, Gangetic landlordism became unstable in the eastern floodplain. Nineteenth-century zamindar landlords, introduced into eastern Bengal by the British, were unable to control the local political economy of agricultural expansion; economic opportunities also drew them, as a high-caste bhadralok elite, to invest in Calcutta. Zamindars invested in urban education, urban careers and the Congress nationalism that logically rejected eastern Bengal's agrarian demands for zamindari abolition, which expressed the rising aspirations of Bengali farmers on eastern frontiers.

Partition and Pakistan emerged because voters in Bengal (and Punjab) rejected the Indian National Congress in elections in the 1920s and 1930s. The main reason for rejecting Congress in Bengal was the demand for zamindari abolition, which Congress would not accept and which divided politicians in East and West Bengal.

The British used the 1931 census figures for Muslims and Hindus as a basis for dividing Punjab and Bengal between India and Pakistan, but religion was not the reason that division became necessary. For centuries, Brahmanism and Islam had served as effective religious technologies for constructing social bonds in agrarian territories in Bengal. A Muslim majority in East Bengal emerged from the British practice of counting people in the 1871 census; that majority became part of the imperial development regime and, subsequently, part of the national and imperial politics that eventually produced the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan.

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TDS: Bangladesh has experienced rapid urbanisation, with Dhaka emerging as the country's dominant economic and political centre. How do you explain this transformation, and what has it meant for the relationship between urban and agrarian societies?

DL: Countries that were least urbanised in 1900 have experienced the most dramatic rates of urbanisation since then. Bangladesh is at the top of the list. The reasons include the inherent mobility of the agrarian population, which is always on the move into new frontiers, and also the closure of the agricultural frontier as arable land became fully occupied. The urban-centric logic of modern development regimes also became increasingly dominant globally after 1950.

The city became a modern agrarian frontier in British India. Urban growth increased as the railway channelled agrarian wealth into cities and, most of all, into ports and capital cities. Calcutta dominated urban India until 1905; Dhaka grew during the short-lived Province of East Bengal and Assam; Calcutta fell behind Delhi and Bombay after 1911; and Dhaka only grew again after 1947, and still more after 1971.

As Bangladesh's population grew, opportunities for work and profits in Dhaka outpaced those in the rest of the country, and the garment sector boom increased rural migration into the city as Dhaka became a destination for capitalist investors in global supply chains. The economic and political centrality of Dhaka has created a single-city-centred country, where two-thirds of the population still lives in villages and where Dhaka's population floods back to the villages for Eid. Romantic images of rural Bengal produced by urban literati obscure the agrarian diversity of Bangladesh and bolster the idea of a homogeneous national population.

City-centred development regimes engage in that kind of flattening and standardisation of the countryside around the world. Modi's Hindutva regime is an egregious example, which we described the book Making India Hindu. Urban nationalist projects that turn complex, diverse, dynamic and borderless agrarian worlds into flat, stable, uniform national territories gain more popularity as cities absorb more and more of the world's population.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul.**