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# Introduction

FROM THE mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, jute fabrics—gunnies, hessians, burlap—were the premier packaging material in world trade. Before the advent of artificial fibers and the shipping container, jute sacks packed the world's grains, cotton, sugar, coffee, guano, cement, and bacon, as these commodities made their journey from farms to centers of consumption.<sup>1</sup> While the fabric circulated globally, the plant was cultivated in a small corner of the world: the Bengal delta, an alluvial tract formed out of the silt deposits of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna river systems.<sup>2</sup> Peasant smallholders cultivated jute on small lots of land, using a combination of household and hired labor, and stored and borrowed capital. Peasant-produced fiber journeyed westward from the peasant homestead, along the delta's waterways and railways, through river ports and railway towns, to Calcutta. From Calcutta, part of the crop went north, to the jute mills along the banks of the Hooghly, and the remainder was exported overseas, to jute mills in Britain, Continental Europe, and North America. The mills spun and wove fibers into fabrics that were dispatched to the world's farms, plantations, mines, and quarries. From there, wrapped around a multitude of primary products, jute sacks traveled the globe. Jute connected the Bengal delta's peasant smallholder to global circuits of commodities and capital, to the rhythms and vicissitudes of global commodity prices.

Jute emerged as a global commodity in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Crimean War (1853–56) interrupted Britain's supply of Russian flax and hemp, and manufacturers in Dundee, Scotland, switched en masse to jute. Over the following decades, jute sacks cornered the global packaging market. In addition to Dundee, jute manufacturing industries emerged in Continental Europe, the United States, and, most importantly, in the vicinity of Calcutta, to the north and south of the city and along the banks of the Hooghly: by the turn of the century, jute mills along the Hooghly housed half the world's jute manufacturing capacity.<sup>3</sup> The Bengal delta's peasant smallholders responded

readily to rising global demand for fiber: jute acreage increased from about fifty thousand acres prior to the Crimean War to just under four million acres, close to 20 percent of the delta's farmland, in 1906.<sup>4</sup> Calcutta's jute exports increased from eighteen tons of raw fiber in 1829 to thirteen million tons of fabric and fiber in 1910.<sup>5</sup> In the half century since the Crimean War, jute transformed from a little-traded and little-known commodity into a major commodity of empire, the second most widely consumed fiber in the world after cotton.

Jute entangled the delta's peasant households in a dense web of commodity exchanges, as cultivators traded fiber for food, clothing, intoxicants, illumination, construction materials, and household utensils. Market entanglements transformed peasant households' material and bodily practices of work, subsistence, consumption, leisure, domesticity, and sociality. Market entanglements also created new forms of vulnerability. Peasant households' well-being was dependent on prices in distant European metropolises. A sudden collapse in prices—a recurrent feature in the boom-and-bust global economy—caused severe hardship. Depending on their abilities and means, peasant households responded to price shocks by scaling back consumption, taking emergency loans, or selling assets. If they did not have the means, they starved. Market entanglements entailed consumerism, risk, and vulnerability and, in turn, informed new ideas and discourses of markets and prices, property and credit, class and community, morality, ethics and justice, piety and religiosity, and governance and statecraft.

This book examines the history of jute in the Bengal delta over the hundred years spanning the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the emergence of jute as a global commodity and concluding in the early years of the postcolonial period, after South Asia's partition had carved the delta's jute tracts out of the colonial province of Bengal and incorporated them into the postcolonial nation-state of Pakistan. This hundred-year span covers two distinct periods with respect to the jute-cultivating peasantry's quality of life. The period between the Crimean War and World War I was an era of relative prosperity, when favorable markets enabled new forms of consumption: of machine-made textiles, corrugated iron roofs, kerosene lamps, children's toys, English-language education, and lawsuits. World War I brought this period of prosperity to an abrupt end, as jute prices collapsed, devastating floods caused crop failures, and waterborne epidemics ravaged peasant households. World War I began a thorough and rapid process of immiseration in the agrarian delta, as fragmented smallholdings, a rising debt burden, unfavorable commodity markets, and deteriorating ecology drove

peasant households into penury. The scale and scope of immiseration intensified during the depression decade of the 1930s—a prolonged period of extremely low prices for peasant-produced commodities. Following World War I, the focus of peasant economic life shifted from the pleasures and possibilities of consumption toward a struggle to ensure the viability of market-entangled livelihoods.

Further, by tracing the history of jute over a hundred years, I demonstrate that the local history of capital in the Bengal delta was continuous and ongoing. Each time cultivators sowed land with jute, brought fiber to sale, or used earnings from fiber to purchase consumer goods, they reiterated, reimagined, and renewed their connections to global circuits of commodities and capital. Instead of a singular moment of a transition to capitalism, with a less capitalist before and a more capitalist after, this book posits local histories of global capital that are continuous and repetitive, where material lives and structures of meaning were continually constructed and reconstructed through ongoing engagements with global flows of commodities and capital.

The first section of this introduction contextualizes jute cultivation within the global rise of peasant commodity production during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as peasant communities in colonized Asia and Africa began to specialize in producing plant-based raw materials for European industry and calories for European industrial workers. The second section discusses and elaborates the analytical categories through which this book narrates the history of jute cultivators in the Bengal delta as a local history of global capital. The third section introduces readers to the main protagonists of the book: the Bengal delta's jute-cultivating peasantry. I conclude the introduction with a description of the book's narrative trajectory and a chapter outline.

## The Global Countryside

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the twinned impetus of European empire and European capital, peasant households in colonized Asia and Africa devoted ever-increasing proportions of land and labor to producing cotton, jute, hemp, cocoa, sugar, rice, palm oil, peanuts, and rubber to feed and fuel European industry. The enormous expansion in jute production (an eightyfold increase in acreage between 1850 and 1910) was mirrored in agrarian localities across the colonized tropics: Ghanaian cocoa production increased from 95 *pounds* to 100,000 *tons* between 1890

and 1920; Senegalese peanut production increased from 5 metric tons in 1850 to 95,000 metric tons in 1898; in the Philippines, peasant production of *abaca*, or Manila hemp, increased from 18,000 tons to more than 160,000 tons between the 1850s and the 1920s; in colonial Malaya, peasant households planted 918,000 acres of rubber trees between 1910 and 1922; Burmese peasants increased their rice lands from 700,000 to 5 million acres and increased rice exports from 162,000 tons to 2 million tons between 1855 and 1905; and India's exports of raw cotton rose from about 76,500 tons during the 1830s to 310,500 tons during the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> This enormous expansion of peasant commodity production knitted disparate agrarian localities in the colonized tropics into what Sven Beckert has called the "global countryside," a vast hinterland devoted to the production of calories and raw materials for imperial metropolises in Europe and North America.<sup>7</sup>

This emerging global countryside was constituted by the technologies of commodification, whereby small lots of peasant-produced jute fibers, cotton bolls, cocoa beans, and rubber sap were transformed into exchange values in European markets. The power of global capital found its most succinct expression in imperial marketplaces, where peasant labor, agrarian ecologies, and plant biologies were transformed into lists and tables of quantities, qualities, and prices available to the speculations of global capital—"cocoa: common to good, at 46s. 6d. to 75s 6d.; fine and very fine, 80s to 95s per cwt."<sup>8</sup> The transformation of peasant produce into abstraction was made possible by railways, steamships, and the telegraph. Commodity production was accompanied by railways linking peasant farms to colonial port cities and, thence, to the global marketplace. Railways and steamships not only made the journey of peasant produce to imperial markets faster, cheaper, and safer, but also made it possible to bulk, assort, and pack small lots of peasant produce into the standardized units of international shipping, to transform, for example, the one or two hundred pounds of cotton bolls produced by a sharecropper in Berar into standardized and quality-graded four-hundred-pound bales.<sup>9</sup> The telegraph enabled the abstract form of the commodity to circulate faster, more frequently, and independent of its material and physical form. Through the global telegraph system, merchants, financiers, and industrialists across the world transmitted information ceaselessly, as orders to buy and sell and information on availability and demand, weather conditions, crop forecasts, and worker strikes pinged back and forth across the world. The telegraph subjected peasant labor to the continuous speculations of capital, from before the plant was sown to after it was harvested.

The Bengal delta's jute cultivators, in common with other peasant inhabitants of the global countryside, lived under the shadow and at the mercy of global capital. Global capital imposed conditions, promised opportunities, and created risks and vulnerabilities for the commodity-producing peasantry. First, global markets demanded that peasant households respond to capitalist speculations by reapportioning labor and land between the production of household subsistence and exchange values—to scale up or scale back production according to the diktats of global prices. Second, market entanglements created new forms of vulnerability, as peasant households' well-being depended on the fluctuations of prices in distant markets. Third, commodity production was accompanied by its corollary, commodity consumption. Peasant households across the colonized tropics consumed from similar bundles of goods: clothing, accessories, foods, intoxicants, construction materials, household utensils, indoor illumination, and so on. However, though global capital imposed similar conditions, it did not produce uniformity and homogeneity. Instead, peasant households responded to the challenges and opportunities of global commodity markets with initiative and creativity, and constructed agrarian localities that were diverse and distinct. Local histories were shaped as much by the particularities and specificities of peasant communities as they were by global capital's attempt to conjure an abstract universality.

Sven Beckert masterfully demonstrates the formation of the global countryside through a single commodity—cotton. Beckert shows that the cotton manufacturers in Manchester responded to the cotton famine caused by the American Civil War by lobbying British imperial institutions to promote peasant cotton cultivation in its far-flung empire, particularly in India. The British Empire's apparatuses of "war capitalism" went to work, transforming the social relations of land, labor, and debt to force peasants into producing cotton. These efforts consisted mostly of introducing railways, telegraphs, and cotton gins and of reforming property and contract laws that would enable colonial capital to finance and speculate on peasant produce. These efforts were successful: exports of peasant-produced raw cotton from India and Egypt rose sharply, and commercial cultivation soon spread to west and east Africa, central Asia, and Latin America. Beckert describes the rise of peasant-produced cotton as a "reconstruction" of global capitalism, as the old world of slaves and cotton planters in the American South was replaced by a new global structure based on the coercion of peasant labor through imperial state power and debt bondage.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas Beckert emphasizes the power of European empires and capitalists, this book focuses on the initiative and creativity of peasant households. Sugata Bose has argued that jute represented the “second phase” in the commercialization of agriculture in Bengal, as the statist and capitalist coercion that characterized an earlier period of indigo cultivation gave way to market forces and pressures.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in Dutch Java, the colonial state relaxed its brutal system of forced cultivation, known as the “Cultivation System,” after the sugar crisis of 1884. Historians of peasant production of cocoa in Ghana, peanuts in Senegal, rice in Burma, rubber in Borneo, and Manila hemp in the Philippines have emphasized peasant initiative over colonial coercion.<sup>12</sup> For instance, peanut cultivation in Senegal was driven not by colonial coercion but by the expansion of a Sufi brotherhood, the Murudiyya. During the late nineteenth century, the Mouride brotherhood founded new villages, which established themselves financially and commercially through the cultivation and sale of peanuts.<sup>13</sup>

Peasant households demonstrated considerable creativity in adapting the rhythms of work and leisure, ecologies of soil and water, and seasons of rain and sunshine to the biological requirements of plants. In most agrarian localities, including the Bengal delta’s jute tracts, peasant households devised ecological and labor strategies in order to produce a combination of exchange values for global markets and household subsistence out of their smallholdings. Consider, for example, peasant rubber cultivation in Southeast Asia. The colonial state provided the impetus to peasant rubber production through the sale and distribution of saplings to peasant households. Peasant households planted saplings into dense copses, carefully distributed throughout the smallholding so as to align the labor of tapping rubber with the labor of tending and harvesting other crops.<sup>14</sup> To ascribe the making of the global countryside purely to the power of European empire and capital is to erase peasant creativity in responding to the dictates of global capitalist speculation.

Commodity production provided peasant households access to new and novel consumer products: umbrellas, clothing, corrugated iron sheets, soaps, tea, coffee, tobacco, kerosene oil, metal and porcelain utensils, toys, and confections. Historians of peasant commodity producers have not written at length on the practices of peasant consumption, though their narratives hint at its significance. For instance, a critical factor in the rise of rice production in Burma, Michael Adas argues, was Britain’s nonenforcement of precolonial sumptuary laws that regulated the types and sizes of homes, clothing, jewelry, and domestic implements upon its conquest of the Irrawaddy delta.<sup>15</sup> Amadou

Bamba, the founder of the Mouride brotherhood which was critical to the expansion of peanut cultivation in Senegal, wrote treatises praising God for creating tea and coffee, stimulants that had only recently become available to the rural Senegalese consumer.<sup>16</sup>

C. A. Bayly has argued that the nineteenth-century “making of the modern world” consisted of simultaneous processes of economic specialization and cultural homogenization. Bayly demonstrates that communities began specializing in the production of particular commodities for export and, at the same time, adopted uniform types of dress, diet, time keeping, naming practices, sports, and language that were considered modern by their contemporaries. Though elite male city dwellers were the exemplars of modern uniformity, Bayly suggests that subaltern communities could also access modernity through consumption. The nineteenth century, he argues, was “a modern age because poorer and subordinated people around the world thought that they could improve their status and life-chances by adopting badges of this mythical modernity, whether these were fob watches, umbrellas, or new religious texts.”<sup>17</sup> Expanding on Bayly’s insight, this book argues that consumer goods constituted the raw materials through which peasant men and women fashioned new and distinctive material lives.

Through consumption, peasant households transformed their bodies, dwellings, and diets and fashioned new practices of domesticity, sociality, and religiosity. However, their bodily and social practices did not conform to European or urban ideals of the modern: most peasant men did not adopt trousers and buttoned shirts; peasant homes did not change into multiroom dwellings with specialized spaces for entertaining, eating, and sleeping; and peasant families did not dine at raised tables, seated upright on chairs, using forks, knives, and spoons to convey food to their mouths. The distinctiveness of peasant bodies, dwellings, and diets probably explains why peasant men and women are represented as the quintessential nonmodern. Anticolonial nationalists depicted peasant men and women as the “timeless essence of the nation,” Marxists scholars have characterized peasant modes of production as “semi-feudal” or “proto-capitalist,” and subalternist history has placed “peasant consciousness” in an autonomous domain outside the reach of modern forms of rationality. However, as I demonstrate in this book, Bengal’s jute cultivators fashioned new material and intellectual lives through their very *modern* entanglements with global commodity markets.

These entanglements also created an experience of simultaneity across the global countryside. As telegraphs disseminated prices instantaneously,



peasant producers across the colonized tropics confronted the possibilities of hunger and starvation simultaneously. Commodity-producing peasant households in the colonized tropics were among the most precarious subjects of the global marketplace, utterly powerless to shape and influence the prices on which their well-being and indeed survival depended. Depressions of the nineteenth century were accompanied by devastating famines in the commodity-producing colonies, particularly the cotton tracts of India and Egypt; the Great Depression of the 1930s impoverished swaths of agrarian Asia and Africa, resulting in mass sales of peasant assets; and the price shocks of World War II resulted in severe famines in Bengal's jute tracts and the rice tracts of Southeast Asia.

The simultaneity of global prices resulted in concurrent peasant political movements across the global countryside, as peasant commodity producers attempted to protest, resist, and disrupt unremunerative and unviable commodity markets. These movements, however, differed considerably in form and content. The extreme and prolonged price slump of the 1930s was accompanied by peasant protests across the global countryside: in Borneo, peasants dreamed that their rubber trees were eating subsistence rice, triggering a mass felling of standing rubber trees; in Sarawak, rubber cultivators perceived the collapse in prices as a breaking of faith on the part of the English rajah, prompting mass rebellions against the rajah; in Burma, rice cultivators professed their loyalty to Saya San, a Buddhist monk who had been proclaimed the Galon Raja, and attacked Indian merchants and moneylenders; in Bengal, peasant men organized raids of moneylenders' homes and destroyed their records of outstanding debts; in Ghana, cocoa farmers organized "cocoa hold-ups" and focused on the ability of tribal chiefs to organize and enforce an embargo on cocoa sales.<sup>18</sup> Capitalist speculations produced simultaneity in global commodity prices and concurrence in peasant political movements across the global countryside, but it did not determine the form and content of peasant political action. Even as global capital conjured a universal world of abstract commodities out of peasant land and labor, peasant communities fashioned distinctive and particular agrarian ecologies, material and intellectual lives, and political programs. Local histories of global capital, such as the one narrated in this book, focus on the heterogeneity and particularity produced out of global capital's universalizing drive.

## Local Histories of Global Capital

This book narrates the history of jute in the Bengal delta as a local history of global capital at three levels. First, fibers entangled peasant households in a dense web of commodity exchanges, as they exchanged jute for food, clothing, intoxicants, illumination, construction materials, and a host of other commodities required and desired by the households. These new forms of production and consumption constituted the market-entangled *economic lives* of jute cultivators. Second, global commodities flowed out of and into peasant households through a network of railways, river steamers, docks, stations, warehouses, and telegraph lines. These *spaces of capital* physically connected the peasant homestead to the circuits of global commodities, via small market towns within the hinterland and the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. Third, *peasant politics* was informed, shaped, and produced through the enactments of market-entangled economic lives against these spaces of capital. This book demonstrates that both spectacular episodes of peasant collective action and everyday peasant politics of elections and voting were informed by commodity markets as well as by the spatial relations of the countryside, towns, and cities.

The history of economic life narrated in this book is a critique of economic histories based on abstract categories, whether on Marxist concepts of peasant modes of production or liberal economic theories of market responsiveness. Instead of the abstract category of labor, I examine how jute production transformed the rhythms of work and leisure and the agrarian ecology of soil and water in the Bengal delta (chapter 1). In devoting ever-increasing quantities of land and labor to jute, the Bengal delta's peasant households altered agrarian space and time. They rearranged the distribution of plants over the delta's unique ecology of soil and water or, as a colonial official described it, the delta's landscape of "new mud, old mud, and marsh."<sup>19</sup> They reorganized rhythms of work and leisure through aligning the arduous tasks of sowing, thinning, reaping, rotting, stripping, and drying jute with the delta's seasons of rains, floods, and sunshine, and the growth cycles of plants.

Jute cultivators fashioned economic and material lives through the consumption of new and novel goods: corrugated iron roofs, metal utensils, kerosene oil and lamps, German-made toys, luxury fishes and fruits, English-language education, and colonial legal services (chapter 2). After World War I and the onset of rapid immiseration, however, consumption became an unviable strategy for peasant self-fashioning. During this period of adverse market conditions, the delta's peasantry formulated religious discourses

that promoted hard work, austerity, abstinence, and patriarchal authority as Islamic virtues that would restore the viability and even prosperity of market-entangled peasant households (chapter 5). My analysis of self-fashioning through market entanglements draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of History 2. Chakrabarty proposes a distinction between analytical and Marxist histories of capital (History 1) and hermeneutic and Heideggerian histories of the life-worlds of individuals and communities (History 2). Marxist histories of capital, History 1, examine the ways in which capital obliterates local specificities that provided resistance to the circulation, reproduction, and augmentation of capital. On the other hand, History 2 focuses on the multiple histories of life-worlds of individuals and communities that were not subsumed by capital, but exist alongside and occasionally interrupt and subvert the history of capital. As Chakrabarty formulates the difference: "the first [Marxist] tradition tends to evacuate the local by assimilating it to some abstract universal . . . the hermeneutic tradition, on the other hand, finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life."<sup>20</sup> Peasant self-fashioning through global market entanglements is an attempt to craft a "habitation of modernity," to create meaningful and authentic lives within the context of commodity production for global markets.

Peasant efforts to fashion lives out of market entanglements took place against a backdrop of shifting spatial relations traced out by the circulation of commodities into and out of peasant homes. David Harvey argues that the circulation and reproduction of capital—whether capital embodied as commodities or abstract and disembodied capital—entails "fixing capital into the land" in the form of farms, plantations, mines, factories, railways, steamers, telegraph lines, seaports, warehouses, and so forth.<sup>21</sup> Virtually the entirety of Bengal's jute was destined for Calcutta's seaport and mills, and the majority of peasant-consumed commodities were also imported from Calcutta. Thus the built-up capital through which jute circulated constituted the delta as Calcutta's hinterland and, conversely, Calcutta as the delta's metropolis.<sup>22</sup> The most significant spaces of capital in the Bengal delta were the intermediary spaces between the hinterland and the metropolis, the riverside and railway towns where peasant-produced jute and peasant-consumed goods were bulked, stored, and assorted on journeys in and out of peasant homes. These towns constituted the *mofussil*—an in-between space between the metropolis and the hinterland.<sup>23</sup> The *mofussil* was the most significant spatial formation of capital for jute-cultivating peasants, as peasant men visited *mofussil* towns to buy and sell commodities, contest lawsuits, and enroll

sons in government schools (chapter 3). During the early twentieth century, these towns emerged as vibrant and autonomous centers of cultural and intellectual production and political action. This book examines the burgeoning mofussil print industry and the constitution of a mofussil Muslim intelligentsia with roots in the countryside during the post-World War I years (chapter 5). The partition of Bengal severed the delta's jute tracts from its metropolis in Calcutta and incorporated it into the new nation-state of Pakistan—creating an East Pakistan that was a hinterland without a metropolis. The postcolonial Pakistani state sought to rearrange the spatial relations of hinterland, mofussil, and metropolis by asserting the state's sovereignty over fiber (chapter 7).

Jute cultivators' political actions were produced out of their attempt to fashion meaningful lives out of their market entanglements against the backdrop of these shifting spatial relationships. Jute cultivators' resistance to the Swadeshi movement in 1905–6 is an instance of how market entanglements and spatial relations informed peasant politics (chapter 2). The Swadeshi movement was the first anticolonial nationalist movement that attempted to mobilize rural jute cultivators. Swadeshi activists imposed a consumer boycott of imported commodities, particularly Manchester cloth, but also European-made toys and confections. Market-entangled peasant households endeavored to protect rural and mofussil marketplaces as spaces of pleasurable consumption from metropolitan Swadeshi activists' attempts to forcibly prevent the sale of imported consumer goods. Peasant resistance to Swadeshi activists manifested spatially as peasant households in the *hinterland* resisted attempts by *metropolitan* nationalists to mobilize supporters in mofussil towns (chapter 3). After World War I, peasant politics focused on restoring the viability of market-entangled lives in the context of rapid peasant immiseration. Peasant rebellions against state authority during the Khilafat movement of 1920–22 were informed by the unviability of market-entangled lives during those years. Further, numerous episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were informed by processes of immiseration—by agrarian Islamic discourses and by the shifting relations of hinterland, mofussil, and metropolis (chapters 5 and 6).

Peasant politics did not consist solely of spectacular episodes of collective action, but also of more mundane acts of campaigning and voting. After World War I, colonial reforms carved the delta's jute tracts into territorial constituencies that formed the basis for municipal or village-level local government or elected representatives to the provincial legislature in Calcutta.

Chapter 6 examines jute cultivators' support for the peasant populist Krishak Praja Party during the 1937 elections as an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to restore the viability of market-entangled lives during the depression decade. Chapter 7 investigates jute cultivators' overwhelming support for the Muslim League and the Pakistan cause in the 1946 elections, arguing that it should be understood in terms of a post-famine politics of immiseration. The idea of Pakistan as peasant utopia, the book argues, was grounded in agrarian Islamic discourses that emerged in the context of agrarian immiseration. Remarkably, jute cultivators' utopian action consisted not of revolutionary violence but of votes for a political platform.<sup>24</sup>

The local history of jute cultivators is thus a history of how global market entanglements transformed peasant households' material, intellectual, and political lives: rhythms of work and leisure; agrarian ecology; practices and ideas of domesticity, sociality, and religiosity; and political actions and processes. Analogous yet distinct transformations took place across the disparate localities that constituted the global countryside, as peasant commodity producers restructured their lives around particular plants, purchased new kinds of consumer goods, and created meaning and significance out of their market-entangled lives. However, for many of these peasant communities, these commodities of empire did not threaten to disrupt their lives quite so thoroughly at the moment they took up their production. Peasant households combined commodity production with subsistence cultivation, distributing commercial and food crops on their lands so as to minimize disruptions to existing rhythms of work and leisure. Jute, as I indicate below, appealed to the Bengal delta's peasant smallholders precisely because it slotted relatively easily into their farmlands and work schedules. I will now introduce the major protagonists of this local history of global capital: the Bengal delta's peasant smallholders during the mid-nineteenth century, on the eve of jute's conquest of their land, labor, and lives.

### The Bengal Delta's Peasant Households

The majority of the Bengal delta's peasants were Muslim, and a significant minority belonged to low-caste Hindu communities, especially the Namasudras.<sup>25</sup> Most peasant households were family units that shared a hearth and jointly labored to produce plants for subsistence and sale on a small plot of arable land. The majority of households consisted of a male patriarch, his wife or wives, elderly parents, sons, sons' wives, grandchildren, and unmarried,

young daughters. Daughters would move to their husband's home upon marriage and sons' households would separate from the patriarch's—with arable lands divided equally among sons—upon or sometimes before the patriarch's death.

The peasant homestead consisted of several one-room dwellings facing an internal courtyard. One of the huts served as a kitchen, another as a granary and a cowshed, and the others were multipurpose spaces for sleeping, dining, socializing, and storage. The homestead was built on raised land, to protect dwellings and belongings from the annual monsoon floods. The earth excavated to raise the homestead land created a small tank or pond that provided the household with drinking, bathing, cleaning, and cooking water. The homestead was surrounded by a dense thicket of trees and plants that shielded the dwellings and courtyard from prying eyes and from the heat. Peasant homes were not clustered together into dense settlements, but separated from each other by farmlands. From afar, peasant homesteads appeared as isolated thickets of greenery surrounded by an expanse of farmland.<sup>26</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, peasants' holdings of arable land varied between small farms of one or two acres to large farms of around twenty acres, with the median holding of close to five acres. However, average holdings shrank during the nineteenth century, as the delta's population increased and lands were subdivided among sons. Substantial peasant households with very large holdings were present only in northern Bengal, notably in Rangpur district. These substantial peasant households, known as *jotedars*, cultivated their land through sharecroppers and wage laborers. However, in the rest of the delta, there was very little variation in peasant smallholders' landholdings.<sup>27</sup> Unlike substantial *jotedars*, most of the delta's peasantry used primarily household labor to cultivate their lands, hiring extra wageworkers during busier times in the crop calendar, during sowing, transplanting, or harvesting. The peasant households owned, maintained, and replaced their own capital equipment, iron hoes and scythes, wooden plows, and plow oxen—far and away the most important form of capital. For their right to occupy and cultivate their arable land, peasant households paid a tax to the state or to intermediary rent collectors, known as *zamindars*.

The delta's peasantry located their origins in acts of labor that resulted in ecological transformation—in the clearing of jungles, draining of swamps, and leveling the soil to prepare land for paddy cultivation. The moment of origin varies in different regions of the delta: some peasant households claim to have settled their land as far back as the thirteenth century and others as recently

as the nineteenth century. These peasant origin narratives are supported by the historical scholarship which describes the Bengal delta as an “agrarian frontier” that was gradually settled by peasant smallholders starting from the second millennium CE to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the delta’s agrarian limits were finally reached.<sup>28</sup> The eastward shift of the Ganges river system, which culminated in the shift of the Ganges’s main tributary to the river Padma during the sixteenth century, provided an impetus to peasant migration and settlement into eastern Bengal. Notably, this coincided with the establishment of Mughal rule in Bengal. The Mughal administration provided incentives for peasant households to clear land for cultivation. The East India Company and British Raj continued many of these incentives during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Peasant origin stories, Andrew Sartori has argued, are also stories of property: the peasant labor of transforming swamp and jungle into paddy land constituted a claim to property ownership.<sup>29</sup> The labor of ecological transformation inducted peasant households into Mughal property regimes and the Mughal Empire’s revenue-collection mechanisms, which were inherited and transformed by the East India Company after the Battle of Buxar in 1764. The Mughal Empire distinguished two kinds of rights to land: the right to live and labor on land and the right to collect revenue from the land. The former belonged to peasants who cleared the land and the latter to the empire’s military and bureaucratic elite—zamindars and *jagirdars* who had provided a service to the empire or were expected to provide military assistance when required. The East India Company collapsed this distinction between the right to occupy land and the right to collect revenue from land in the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. The Permanent Settlement Act fixed the dues of a zamindar in perpetuity and placed no limits on the zamindar’s power to extract revenue or evict peasant households from their lands.<sup>30</sup> *Zamindari* power in the delta was, however, limited. Iftekhar Iqbal has shown that recently settled lands were generally outside the ambit of the zamindari system and Jon Wilson has demonstrated that peasants who found a particular zamindar’s revenue demands too onerous during the eighteenth century found it easy to relocate in the delta’s expanding agrarian frontier.<sup>31</sup>

Peasant origin narratives are also stories of securing subsistence. Rice was the first plant cultivated on newly settled land, and rice provided for the simple subsistence and reproduction of the peasant household. The bulk of peasant land and labor was devoted to paddy, and the delta produced two major rice crops—a spring or *aus* paddy and an autumn or *aman* paddy. The

significance of rice cultivation to procure subsistence in peasant origin narratives should not, however, obscure the importance of commercial cash crops to the peasant economy. The Bengal delta, along with the rest of South Asia, experienced intensive commercialization during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through South Asia's burgeoning trade with European trading companies and its growing consumption of silver mined in the New World. Rice was not only subsistence food, but also a major commercial crop. The eighteenth century witnessed a sharp increase in the delta's rice trade, and the creation of networks of indigenous merchants and colonial capital that were involved in purchasing and trading peasant-produced rice.<sup>32</sup> Bengal rice was exported to the burgeoning British "factory towns" of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, to the sugar islands of the Indian Ocean, and to Europe. Rice was not the only important cash crop produced by the delta's peasantry. The "up-country" produce trade that enriched private European traders after the East India Company's conquest of Bengal included a long list of peasant-produced plant commodities in addition to rice: notably, tobacco, cotton, *ganja*, betel nuts, mustard, sesame, ginger, turmeric, and chilies. Many of these commercial crops were winter or *rabi* crops—oilseeds, vegetables, and spices. Indigo was also cultivated in the delta from the early nineteenth century. However, more than any other peasant-produced plant commodity, indigo relied on the coercive powers of planters and zamindars, and the dye was thus limited to those parts of the delta where zamindars were able to effectively exert authority over their tenants. Thus the delta's peasant households were connected to local, regional, and oceanic networks of commodities, cash, and credit even prior to the rise of jute.

The "rise of Islam" in the Bengal delta, Richard Eaton has demonstrated, was associated with the settlement of the agrarian frontier. Mughal incentives for land clearance encouraged conversions to Islam by offering tax exemptions to land adjoining mosques. The delta's particular practice of Islam, however, arrived not with conquerors coming overland from the west, but with Sufi saints from Arabia arriving across the sea from the Bay of Bengal.<sup>33</sup> These Sufi saints inspired Islamic practices that were syncretic, combining Islamic rituals and beliefs with the devotional practices of Vaishnavism and the continued worship of local deities.<sup>34</sup> During the first half of the nineteenth century, new Islamic movements emerged in Bengal that sought to purify Islam of un-Islamic, syncretic practices and to insist on a rigid monotheism. The most popular of these movements was the Faraizi movement, founded by Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840) in Faridpur in 1819. Shariatullah went to Mecca for



Haj at the age of eighteen and returned to Faridpur after spending twenty years studying Islam in Mecca. Shariatullah urged peasant Muslims to stop worshipping non-Muslim deities and Sufi saints and to discontinue “impure” ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and death. Under the leadership of Shariatullah’s son, Dudu Miyan (1819–1862), the Faraizi movement spread throughout the delta and established practices of dress, speech, and domesticity that became emblematic of the Bengali Muslim peasantry during the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, when jute entered the Bengal delta’s agrarian economy, peasant households were bringing more of the delta’s land under the plow; were combining subsistence rice cultivation with the production of a variety of cash crops; were integrated into regional and oceanic networks of trade and credit; were subsumed under imperial property regimes; enjoyed a degree of autonomy from intermediary revenue collectors like zamindars; and were undergoing a popular Muslim reform movement. Jute cultivation expanded rapidly during the late nineteenth century because the fiber did not disrupt peasant methods of production and labor, networks of credit and trade, the delta’s ecology of soil and water, and discourses and practices of Islam. Jute, however, would prove to be transformative. Fiber and the connections to global capital forged by fiber transformed local histories of peasant economic and political life in the Bengal delta.

## Chapter Outline

The first half of the book relates the broad transformations brought about by jute cultivation during the late nineteenth century, between the Crimean War and World War I. This was a period of relative prosperity, where favorable commodity markets, the size of peasant smallholdings, and the agrarian ecology enabled the jute cultivators to fashion new forms of self-presentation and sociality out of the proceeds of jute sales. The first three chapters describe how the rise of jute cultivation in the late nineteenth century transformed peasant production, consumption, and politics. World War I interrupted this prosperity, as unfavorable commodity markets, fragmenting smallholdings, deteriorating ecological conditions, and rising levels of indebtedness drove the bulk of the jute-cultivating peasantry into utter penury. Chapter 4 discusses these processes of immiseration and provides an interregnum between the nineteenth-century period of relative prosperity and the twentieth-century period of absolute poverty. The second half of the book examines how the

increasing unviability of market-entangled lives gave rise to new forms of self-fashioning and new kinds of political action. In the final three chapters, I discuss the emergence of new discourses of agrarian Islam which promoted hard work, abstinence, and patriarchal control as Muslim virtues that would restore the viability of market-entangled peasant lives; the increasing incidences of Hindu-Muslim violence in the Bengal delta; and jute cultivators' enthusiastic participation in electoral politics—particularly in their support for the peasant populist Krishak Praja Party in the 1937 elections and the utopian Pakistan program of the Muslim League in 1946. The book concludes with an examination of the postcolonial Pakistani state's attempts to harness jute as a source of national income. Jute cultivators experienced the postcolonial state's intrusions into their agrarian life as violence and harassment, leading to their rapid disillusionment with Pakistan.

Chapter 1 describes how the rise in jute cultivation between the Crimean War and World War I, when acreage increased from fifty thousand to close to four million acres, entailed a thorough reorganization of peasant life: of the rhythms of work and leisure and of abundance and scarcity. Peasant decisions to grow more jute were, correspondingly, decisions to grow less rice. By the 1900s, jute acreage in the Bengal delta was roughly equal to the acreage of spring or aus paddy and about one-third of winter or aman paddy. The simultaneous production of two major crops—fiber and grain—entailed a considerably greater amount of peasant labor. Reduced rice production created new vulnerabilities to hunger, as was cruelly revealed at the start of World War I, when jute prices plummeted, causing hunger throughout the jute tracts.

Chapter 2 examines jute cultivators' consumption of colonial legal services, clothing, ornaments, metal utensils, corrugated iron roofing, kerosene oil and lamps, and luxury fruits and fishes. I argue that jute-cultivating households fashioned distinctively rural, Muslim, and Bengali forms of modernity in dress, domesticity, and sociality through the consumption of these goods and services. The chapter also shows the defense by peasant households of their consumption practices during the Swadeshi movement, when metropolitan and mofussil nationalist activists attempted to forcibly impose a consumer boycott in rural marketplaces in the delta. I argue that clashes between peasants and nationalists were not simply due to financial motives, but were driven by psychic desires and by the possibilities of peasant self-fashioning through consumption during the boom in jute prices.

The Swadeshi movement and peasant resistance to the Swadeshi boycott were enacted in the spaces of capital carved out by circulations of jute. From

their headquarters in Calcutta, metropolitan Swadeshi activists undertook whistlestop tours of the jute-growing districts by train and river steamers, stopping to address mass meetings in the small towns located on rail and steamer routes. They thus followed in reverse the same routes through which jute traveled from peasant farms and homes to Calcutta. Chapter 3 examines how the circulation of peasant-produced jute and peasant-consumed commodities constituted the agrarian delta as Calcutta's hinterland and Calcutta as the delta's metropolis. The chapter focuses on intermediary towns between the hinterland and the metropolis—mofussil towns. These small towns accommodated the warehouses, docks, railway sidings, and presses of jute merchants and the courthouses, revenue offices, police stations, agricultural extension services, and other paraphernalia of the colonial state. Mofussil towns, the chapter demonstrates, were at the center of clashes between the hinterland peasantry and metropolitan nationalists.

Chapter 4 describes the processes of immiseration that began during World War I, intensified during the depression decade of the 1930s, and culminated in the Great Bengal Famine of 1943–44. During these decades, market shocks, fragmenting peasant landholdings, ecological disasters, and rising indebtedness reduced the majority of jute cultivators to destitution. However, the era of peasant immiseration was also a period of peasant differentiation. A small minority of jute cultivators who had invested profits from the earlier boom years into diversifying their livelihoods not only survived but even prospered. The most common forms of diversification were moneylending and the acquisition of intermediary rent-collection rights, known as *talukdaris* and *jagirdaris*. Some families diversified by establishing business enterprises in mofussil towns, and an even smaller minority through educated sons who gained professional employment, also in mofussil towns or even in metropolitan Calcutta.

The arrival of Muslim men with origins in the countryside into mofussil towns during this era of immiseration changed the spatial relations of town and countryside in the Bengal delta. During the Swadeshi movement, mofussil towns appeared as islands of Hindu metropolitan culture surrounded by a Muslim rural hinterland. After World War I, the town became much more closely integrated into the surrounding countryside. One of the ways in which town and country became integrated, chapter 5 demonstrates, was through the mofussil print industry. Newly arrived Muslim men from the countryside constituted themselves as a mofussil Muslim intelligentsia by authoring and patronizing the publication of pamphlets, poems, and newspapers. Agrarian immiseration was the burning issue of the day for this intelligentsia and their writings on peasant

poverty circulated between the towns and the countryside. These writings, I explain in chapter 5, constituted a discourse of agrarian Islam that urged comprehensive reforms of everyday peasant life—of work, commerce, consumption, attire and hairstyle, patriarchal control over wives and children, and neighborly relations. These reforms would bring Muslim peasants this-worldly salvation, that is, an escape from poverty and, perhaps, even prosperity.

Chapter 6 explores peasant participation in the limited forms of representative and electoral politics introduced by the colonial state after World War I. The chapter shows how colonial reforms created new kinds of spaces in the delta's jute tracts—superimposing spatially demarcated electoral constituencies and local government bodies over existing spaces of hinterland, mofussil, and metropolis. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which elections to local government bodies were informed by discourses of agrarian Islam and shifts in the relationship between mofussil towns and the agrarian hinterland during the era of immiseration. In the 1937 elections, the first held after the reforms of 1935 expanded the franchise and redrew the territorial boundaries of constituencies, jute cultivators voted for the peasant populist Krishak Praja Party (KPP). The KPP's electoral victory, the chapter argues, was rooted in the discourses of agrarian Islam. The chapter also examines the KPP's inability to raise jute prices, despite numerous and varied efforts to intervene in produce and futures markets. The KPP's failure to assert control over jute prices foreshadowed the devastating famine of 1943–44, when rice prices rose faster and higher than jute prices causing mass hunger and starvation for marginal peasant households.

Famine spelled the end of peasant populism and gave rise to the utopian politics of Pakistan. For jute cultivators, Pakistan implied a society free of hunger and want, a place of justice, ethical behavior, and moral reciprocity. Chapter 7 examines the Muslim League's 1946 electoral campaign, when it swept the rural Muslim vote in the delta's jute tracts on the promise of Pakistan. However, while jute cultivators envisioned Pakistan as a post-famine utopia, Muslim elites envisioned Pakistan as a modern nation-state, endowed with the appropriate paraphernalia and pageantry. Partition and the severance of the jute tracts from their metropolis in Calcutta frustrated elite aspirations. Chapter 7 demonstrates the Pakistani state's efforts to transform jute from a commodity of empire into a national producer of revenue and resources for the postcolonial state. The Pakistani state was confounded by smuggling: the illicit trade of fiber across freshly drawn partition lines that evaded the state's mechanisms to monitor, police, and tax commodity flows across its borders. In

its desire to extract revenue from fiber, the Pakistani state undertook increasingly draconian measures against jute smuggling—including shoot-to-kill orders on their borders. Statist violence turned, in Ahmed Kamal's phrase, "the state against the nation" and thus destroyed jute cultivators' visions of Pakistan as a peasant utopia.<sup>36</sup>

Jute thus transformed the Bengal delta and its peasant inhabitants. The production and sale of jute entangled peasant households and the region in global circuits of commodities and capital that, in turn, transformed material and intellectual lives, the spaces of mofussil towns, ideas and practices of religiosity, and the form and content of political action. While the local history of global capital narrated in the following chapters is particular to the Bengal delta and jute, analogous yet distinct transformations took place across the global countryside, in the cocoa and peanut tracts of West Africa, the rubber and rice farms of Southeast Asia, and among cotton and sugar cultivators of northern and central South Asia. In each of these localities, the production and circulation of commodities resulted in new forms of peasant labor, urban spaces, and political commitments and engagements and peasant commodity producers fashioned distinctive and particular material and intellectual lives out of their entanglements with global commodity markets. Even as global capital sought to conjure a universal world of fungible labor and commodities, expressed in lists and tables of exchangeable commodities in metropolitan markets, peasant commodity producers created particular, distinctive, and incommensurable local histories of global capital. The following chapter commences the delta's history of global capital in the mid-nineteenth century, at the moment when the Bengal delta's peasant households began devoting an ever-increasing proportion of their land and labor to producing fiber.

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