Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited

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1 Introduction

Khadija, a rich peasant widow, called me into her house. She was clearly upset: “I inherited 9 bigha (3 acres) of land from my mama (mother’s brother) who brought me up, but my sons have registered my land in their names, they took my fingerprint.”

Anselma, a middle peasant woman looked at me and said: “I have to listen to my husband. If he talks bad I have to listen, if he talks good I have to listen, whatever he talks I have to listen. Otherwise there is no peace.”

The above quotes from women in Jhagrapur (pseudonym), a village in Bangladesh, illustrate the diversity of experiences and positions of women with regard to land ownership and power. This study is about the relationship between women, land, empowerment and social transformation. Do women who own land have more power in their social relations than women who do not, and can land ownership contribute to a structural transformation of gender and class relations? Theories and debates on women’s land rights, structure-agency and women’s agency/empowerment will be used to examine factors that facilitate or constrain women’s land ownership and to explore the question of women’s land ownership as a facilitator in their role in structural transformation of society. I will juxtapose these theories and debates with empirical findings collected in Jhagrapur in 1974/1975 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980) and between 1998 and 2009. In chapter 2 these theories and debates will be discussed in more detail.

1.1 Why this study?
My aim is to contribute to theories and debates on processes of structural transformation of Bangladesh society, in particular with regard to gender and class relations, and their applications in practice. Surprisingly there are only a few studies on women and land ownership in Bangladesh, although land is the most important means of production in rural Bangladesh. Some studies on women and gender issues have included a section on women and land, but gender issues and the gender aspect of land relations have been largely ignored in studies that focus on land, poverty and peasantry questions. Reflecting the non-recognition of women’s contribution to agricultural production, there are only few programmes in Bangladesh that focus on women’s land rights and land ownership. Instead, income-generating and microfinance programmes form the bulk of existing programmes targeting women. These programmes ignore the importance of land as the main source of livelihood security. As a result of the lack of studies and programmes, information on the extent of women’s land ownership and its impact on the position of women is scarce. This study aims to fill this gap.

My main social motivation to take up this study lies in the extremely precarious situation of poor peasant women in Bangladesh, especially of landless widows and divorced women; they have very few opportunities to earn an income to survive. The root causes of their poverty and exclusion from productive resources lie in the structurally unequal and oppressive class and gender relations as well as in
unequal global relations. With this study I hope to contribute to an insight into what land ownership could mean for a significant structural improvement of the lives of poor women (and men) in Bangladesh. I also hope that these insights will lead to the acknowledgement of poor people’s just demand for land redistribution and consequently bold steps by the state, NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) and national and international civil society resulting in the implementation of existing policies for gender and class equality and the design of new effective policies to structurally eradicate these injustices. To design and implement such new policies will certainly require courage and determination, as they will have to go against dominant neoliberal forces.

1.2 Women and land rights
Despite decades of struggle by women against male domination and discriminating patriarchal norms, gender inequalities are still prevailing and there is a great gender imbalance in the ownership of land. The central issue in the debate on women and land rights is the demand for women’s equal access to and ownership of land as the most important productive resource and source of livelihood security for households in rural agrarian societies. Productive resources are also related to both economic and political power; thus inequality in access to and ownership of resources translates into a gap in access to and utilisation of power (Deere & Doss 2006). Feminist activists and scholars worldwide have since long emphasised the importance of women’s rights to productive resources for their economic and social position. They have argued that women’s lack of ownership of resources and a denial of their active role in the production process are important factors in their low socio-economic status (Beneria & Sen 1981; Mies 1987, Clark 1993). Studies have also shown that household members do not necessarily benefit equally from a household’s resources. Women and children often lose out (Folbre 1986; Agarwal 1994). Women’s independent land rights can make an important difference to their livelihood and wellbeing. However, opinions differ as to how much land rights change women’s position in the household and in society, and under which circumstances. This question will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Land rights for women have been advocated in particular by feminists and scholars from countries in the South with largely rural agrarian economies. However, even in countries where women have land rights many women still do not own any land, although it is often difficult to assess to what extent land is owned by women. This is also the case in Bangladesh. An obstacle in the assessment of the extent of women’s ownership of land is that in many countries the proportion of land owned by women is not exactly known because there are no reliable gender-disaggregated statistics on land ownership, i.e. in statistical data it is not recorded whether land is owned by women or by men.

In this study concrete data will be given about the extent and nature of women’s land ownership in Jhagrapur, the village under study. I will also explore the question of what women’s relationship to land is and how this has changed over the last 35
years. Factors that play a role in women claiming their land rights, such as class, education and marital practices, and the impact of land ownership on the position of women have been examined as well and will be discussed in detail. Apart from ownership of land, control over the land owned and its produce turned out to be equally important. As we will see, a woman’s ownership of land does not guarantee that she will have control over it; women face various obstacles in having control over their land and its produce.

1.3 Structure-agency and empowerment

In her path-breaking study *A Field of One's Own* on women and land issues in South Asia Agarwal (1994:38, 39) has argued that gender equality of land rights is an indicator of women’s economic empowerment and that it can act as a facilitator in challenging gender inequities. These are important arguments; it means that land would be an effective asset for women’s agency to come out of their subordinate position and could play an important role in structural social transformation.

In capitalist male-dominated societies the distribution of land is highly skewed, both between rich and poor and between men and women. This unequal distribution of land is a result of structurally unequal class and gender relations. Gender and class structures are interrelated and both concern power hierarchies and subordination of the less powerful. The position of women in gender and in class relations determines the advantages or disadvantages and the choices that women have as individuals and collectively within these structures. Their position also largely determines the amount of power that women have to change or maintain social structures. In other words, structures mould and constrain women’s agency. However, the shape that gender and class relations take varies in different societies as a result of structural variables like differences in history, culture, religion, ideology, moral values and the structure of the state. Moreover, as we will see, structures can be contradictory and this can sometimes provide space for women’s agency as well. When studying women’s relation to land, gender and class inequalities in the distribution of land and its impact on the position of women should therefore be placed in the specific social context (Jacobs 2003) and the various aspects of both gender and class structures should be taken into account. For this reason an important part of this study will deal with the specific social context (culture, religion, ideologies, moral values) of Bangladesh society and of the village (chapters 4 and 6).

A complete study should not be limited to structural aspects alone as a structural approach is mostly concerned with large processes in the wider social context.

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1 Gender relations are socially constructed relations of power between women and men and are reflected among others in the division of resources and labour between women and men. As is now common practice, I use the term ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’. The term ‘sex’ has a more biological connotation, whereas ‘gender’ refers to sociological factors that account for inequalities between men and women. Men and women are also shaped by the structure, culture and ideology of their society. For an excellent and elaborate definition of gender see for instance Beneria & Roldan (1987). Class is a model of stratification and is ‘primarily concerned with who has control over key economic resources in society’ (Grant Evans 1993: 208, 224).
while the impact of smaller social units like the household and the family tends to be ignored. The latter, however, are particularly relevant for a study concerning the position of women. Women’s lives and their actions mostly take place in these settings and are mostly shaped by these structures, within the larger context of society, of course. Therefore, the question regarding the role of women’s agency in structural social transformation needs to be studied within both the smaller and the wider arenas.

Giddens (1979) has argued that structure and agency are mutually dependent and that structure is not only constraining but also enabling. The question then becomes can structure (gender and class relations, culture, religion, ideologies, etc.) enable women’s agency to transform gender oppressive structures if women are shaped by these same structures or is this contradictory? In how far does structure determine women’s agency. Do women only reproduce existing oppressive structures? Or can women’s actions go around these structures and produce new liberating structures? To what extent are women agents of change and can they challenge and change structures? If so what factors play a role? I will explore each of these questions in the context of Jhagrapur.

Before beginning to answer the above questions we need to define agency more clearly. The concepts of agency and empowerment are closely related. Both refer to (a process of) taking control of one’s own life. Empowerment has been conceptualised as a process of transformation of structural social inequalities (DAWN 1985; Moser 1989). The term ‘agency’ does not necessarily imply structural transformation; agency can also reinforce structure. Thus, when studying social transformation, ‘empowerment’ in the above sense would be a more appropriate term. However, as I will elaborate later, the term ‘empowerment’ has become problematic. Gradually over the last few decades the aspect of social transformation has largely disappeared resulting in a multi-interpretable use of ‘empowerment’. This has severely reduced the appeal and usefulness of the concept of empowerment for people interested in social change from a grassroots perspective. Nevertheless I will mostly use the term ‘empowerment’ in its original conceptualisation.

When studying empowerment an important question is how to assess empowerment. I will largely draw on Kabeer’s reflections on the measurement of empowerment (Kabeer 1999) and discuss these in more detail in chapter 2. In chapter 9 I will make an assessment of the usefulness of this measurement of empowerment.

In summary, this study examines the relation between women’s land ownership, their empowerment and their role in structural social transformation. What impact does land ownership have concretely on women’s lives and on existing power relations, not only at the individual level in the household and family but also in the wider context on the community and at the ideological level? I will place these questions in the specific context of oppressive class and gender structures and processes of economic and social transformation that are taking place in rural Bangladesh, particularly seen from the point of view of the women in Jhagrapur.
1.4 Methodology
This study has gone through a long process; it has spread over a period of 35 years (1974-2009). To examine the questions posed I have used research data collected in 1974/75 in the village ‘Jhagrapur’ (literally ‘Quarrel Village’) in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District in western Bangladesh (Map 2 on page viii, Plate 1) and a restudy of the same village between 1998 and 2009. In 2004 I decided to use the village restudy specifically to examine the issue of women, land and empowerment and the changes therein over the years. I have known Jhagrapur and its people since 1974 when I lived there with Jos van Beurden for one year to study power relations between rich and poor peasants and the position of women (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980). Since, I kept in contact with the people through visits and letters and I kept up my knowledge of the Bengali language.

Advantages and disadvantages of village (re)studies
I am aware of my own limitations as a white western outsider in the village and not mastering the Bengali language perfectly. Nevertheless, an advantage of such a long-term village study is that it is an opportunity to study the issues more deeply, establish more personal contacts and get more acquainted with people’s lives and problems. This creates mutual familiarity and friendship and builds trust; it certainly helped in collecting reliable data and assessing these correctly. Besides, by studying the village over a longer period it was possible to check and cross check information. Another advantage is that not only a picture of women, land and empowerment can be given at particular moments in time, but also of changes that have taken place over time. I realise, however, that the time-span between snapshots taken at different points in time cannot be taken as linear; it does not say anything about the process in between (Kloos 1997). Also the researcher’s own
memory plays a role, but memory is often coloured and distorted. To avoid this I have relied as much as possible on the written material of the earlier study.

A disadvantage of a village restudy is that it may be more difficult to look critically at one’s own previous work, potentially resulting in repeating errors. Moreover, the researcher as researcher and as a person may have changed and therefore may look at things differently, consciously or unconsciously (Streefkerk 1993). My earlier belief in revolutions that would fundamentally change societies has undergone some changes as a result of outcomes of revolutions elsewhere. These revolutions did not bring about the egalitarian society that was aimed for and especially did not fundamentally change gender and class relations. This may have affected my perceptions then and now, although my main aim to struggle against structural injustices and inequalities between people still stands firm. Fundamental structural change has proven to be a much more complex process than was imagined in the 1960s and 70s. The world has gone through a process of extensive penetration of capitalism and the present onslaught of neo-liberal globalisation.

Finally, a disadvantage of village studies is that it is difficult to generalise findings, especially in a country with more than 60,000 villages, a total population of some 160 million people and some regional variations from coastal and river areas to relatively dry areas such as the Jhagrapur area which is only seldom hit by floods. Similarly, the proximity of the District to the Indian border creates different dynamics than in Districts that are in the middle of the country or that are close to the capital Dhaka. To balance this disadvantage to some extent my research has not been completely confined to the village. Like the study in 1975 it covers a wider area of social networks and issues with wider relevance. Furthermore, I have regularly visited other villages in the area and gained relevant information from people there. By comparing the information gathered in this way to Jhagrapur and to what people in Jhagrapur told me about the area, I obtained a good insight into the area as a whole. In turn I could compare this insight with my general knowledge of Bangladesh from frequent visits, interactions with friends and colleagues, publications, the media and the Bangladesh solidarity work that I have been involved in since the late 1970s. Finally, my experiences as an activist engaged in various social issues and my general knowledge about global issues has helped me place developments in Jhagrapur in a much wider perspective.

**Fieldwork and data collection**

Between 1998 and 2009 I spent roughly seven months altogether doing fieldwork. The almost yearly fieldwork visits (except 2003) lasted from several months to a few days and took place during different months and different seasons - harvest, pre-harvest, post-harvest and the monsoon season. As in the 1974/75 study, I collected data mostly through participant observation, daily interaction and informal individual and group conversations with a wide variety of people and a few in-depth case studies, paying special attention to women’s own perceptions. In-depth interviews and (group) discussions were usually more difficult than the informal
daily conversations and other interactions. Often other household members or visitors passed by, a child had to be attended to, or there were other interferences that changed the dynamics. Several women and men from all classes were key informants. They contributed greatly to this study as they knew much, were eager to talk, and often because they were friends who entrusted me with sensitive information.

Other important sources of information have been the village Union Council member and the village chowkidar;2 NGO workers and primary and high school teachers, who provided me with official and sometimes informal information. After a few fruitless attempts to obtain official land records I gave up on it, also because I doubted the usefulness of such records as they are mostly not up to date.

To assess the changes in the socio-economic position of the households since 1975 I carried out a survey of all 419 households in the village in December 1998 and January 1999. The survey concentrated on land holdings, sharecropping, hiring in or out labour power, other sources of income, household composition and enrolment in education. The village had expanded considerably since 1975 because sons had grown up and started their own households and a lot of families had moved within the village. Hence, it was difficult at first to identify all the different households, but with the help of villagers and the old data and by means of the survey, I managed to map the new village settings in my mind again. Because I decided to focus specifically on women and land during the course of this study I performed a second survey on women’s land ownership in December 2006 and January 2007. This survey covered 85 percent of all the households.

When I started fieldwork in 1998 I noticed that I was able to take notes and write down people’s answers in their presence which was not the case in 1974/75, as it would scare them from telling anything or make them tell things in a different way (Arens 1982). The villagers had become used to things being written down by outsiders due to activities and surveys by NGOs. The downside of doing a survey was that some people thought that this meant that they would get benefits out of it and therefore would tell what they thought might maximize their benefits. By cross checking with other villagers and casually asking people similar questions at other times, I am confident that most of the data I obtained is correct.

I always made it clear that my work would not benefit any villager directly; it was purely for my own purpose - to write a book. I also told people that I hoped that one day this book would be of some benefit to poor people in Bangladesh, like the earlier Jhagrapur book which they were all familiar with by then (in 1999 I distributed sixty copies of the Bengali version of the book to villagers).

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2 Chowkidar means literally guard. The village chowkidar is an officially appointed liaison between the village and the police and administration. He has to report births, deaths, etc. He also has to inform villagers about meetings, when to come to receive their food rations, etc.
Whereas in 1974/75 we stayed independently, this was not possible for this study as my stays were more temporary and with long intermissions; besides I was ‘a woman alone’. One of the befriended middle class families in the village with whom I had stayed during earlier visits welcomed me in their home and till 2007 I stayed with them during my fieldwork periods. In 2006 I received a letter from them that they had moved to Gangni and when I came for fieldwork in October that year they explained the reason why. They had been scared by a country bomb thrown by underground party members at their house because they had not paid the demanded toll money. The bomb had not hurt anyone and only left a burn mark on a wall of the house, but it had been enough to scare my friends out of the village. Fearing for my safety they did not allow me to stay in Jhagrapur and made me commute to the village daily. During my next fieldwork visits I decided to stay in Jhagrapur itself again, this time with a befriended poor peasant couple.

Apart from two male college students from Jhagrapur who helped me initially with the survey in 1998, I never worked with a research assistant. I would have liked to have an English-speaking assistant for some time, especially because my Bengali was not always sufficient to understand everything the villagers told me. There were no villagers who could help me with this, as none of them knew English beyond their limited high school or college English. When I proposed to my host family in 2006 to bring a friend from Dhaka to assist me for some time they advised against this. Their advice was mainly related to the fact that armed underground groups had intensified their activities in the area again. They argued that it would be difficult for them to give protection to a person who would be completely new to the area. My presence was different, they argued, because of my position as a foreigner and being known in the area since long. (I myself have never faced any problems with underground groups.)

1.5 A village in Bangladesh

Jhagrapur is situated in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District in western Bangladesh. An important motivation to select this village in 1974 was that it was remote and therefore would be more representative as the majority of villages in Bangladesh were remote. Proximity to Dhaka or other big cities would show different dynamics, e.g. people would more easily move to the city to find work. Another motivation was that there were no village leaders with an apparent ‘relief mentality’ and no influential political party leaders, as that would influence the power dynamics. Lastly, hardly any socio-

3 The villagers had decided to give us a small house behind the school that had been used by the youth club of the village and we had made it suitable for living, adding windowpanes and doors.

4 In 1975 Meherpur District was still part of Kushtia District. Thana literally means police station, but also refers to an administrative unit. Gangni is a small town at about 5 km. from Jhagrapur. It used to be a one-hour walk from Gangni to Jhagrapur, 3 km on the clay road from Gangni to Alamdanga and then 2 km on mud roads. These roads were very slippery in the rainy season and sometimes people would sink knee-deep in the mud. Now all the roads are metalled. The road through the village was metalled only in 2002. Since then the village is accessible by rickshaws and vans and there is a bus service on the main road at 1 km from the village.
economic research had been done in the relatively backward district (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 8,9).

Over the years Jhagrapur has become less remote (Plate 2). Whereas in 1974/75 it was impossible to reach Dhaka in one day from the village, now Dhaka is only 8 hours away from Gangni by direct bus. Like most villages, Jhagrapur has become a ‘global village’ due to improved infrastructure, the penetration of mass media and mobile phones, and the influence of multinational companies. The Green Revolution has been introduced and NGOs have entered the village (although not until the mid 1990s). Similar developments have taken place all over the country and they have led to the economic and social transformation of Bangladesh society. We will see in particular what effect this has had on gender and class relations.

The village has expanded considerably since 1975 (Map 3), both area-wise and population-wise, mostly due to population growth and the nuclearisation of households. Only two families have immigrated into the village. In 1975 we counted 173 households with a total population of 1017 persons; in 1999 the number of households had increased to 419 with a population of 1678 and by 2007 there were 506 households (I did not register the total population number at that time). During the period of this study three more paras (neighbourhoods) were created; Jhagrapur

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5 85 percent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, around 10 percent is Hindu and the rest is Christian, Buddhist or Animist.
6 “After the cyclone of 1970 and the 1971 Independence War, Bangladesh had received fantastic amounts of money and relief materials ‘most of which never reached the poor while it degraded many to the position of helpless beggars’, as people complained.” (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 8)
now counts 8 paras instead of 5 paras in 1975. More and more agricultural land has been converted into homesteads; this process is still continuing.

With regard to the pseudonym ‘Jhagrapur’ that we had given to the village in the 1970s, opinions of villagers differed whether to change the nickname, keep it, or use the real name of the village for this study. Finally I decided to stick to ‘Jhagrapur’ for the sake of continuation and recognition since this is the name under which the village has become known through the 1974/75 study. For reasons of privacy I have not used people’s real names. None of the names used in this study refer to people who have accidentally the same name.

1.6 Research questions
In summary, the following main questions will be investigated in this study:

1. What is women’s relationship to land and has this changed over the last three decades? To what extent do women own and control land and what factors facilitate or constrain this? Are there any class differences in women’s relationship to land?

2. What impact does women’s land ownership have on their agency/empowerment? Do women who own land have more power in the various arenas (such as household, family, community) than women who do not?
Does land ownership give women power to challenge or change unequal gender and class relations and in this way contributes to a structural transformation of existing power structures? Are there any class differences in women’s contribution to such social transformation?

1.7 Structure of this book

In chapter 2 I discuss the theories and debates that have informed this study and their relevance for the research questions. The structure-agency debate and Giddens structuration theory (Giddens 1979) is useful to analyse structural factors that facilitate or constrain women’s agency to acquire and control land as well as women’s role in structural social transformation. The concepts of agency and empowerment will be discussed in relation to the question how they connect to structural transformation. In order to be able to assess whether land ownership empowers women I will explore Kabeer’s proposed measurement of empowerment (Kabeer 1999) and a few other suggested indicators of empowerment, such as education and violence. Next, I will discuss debates on women’s land rights. These debates place the topic of this study in the context of feminist struggle against subjugation of women and their demands for gender equality. At the end of the chapter I will discuss the issue of land reform and its (ir)relevance for women’s acquisition of land.

Chapters 3 and 4 give background information and serve to place the study in the larger context of Bangladesh society and the processes of economic and social transformation that are taking place. In chapter 3 I discuss the economic transformation, in particular the introduction of the Green Revolution. I will deal with the serious consequences of this economic transformation for class and gender relations, especially for poor widows and divorced women. In this context specifically the rise of microfinance programmes and the rise of the dowry system will be discussed. Chapter 4 deals with the socio-cultural context, such as Islam, moral values and gender ideologies, and ongoing processes of social transformation, in particular in women’s mobility, education and family planning. I will argue that contradictory developments have taken place and that there is a decline of the traditional power structure.

Chapters 5 and 6 give the context for an analysis of women’s relationship to land and the impact of women’s land ownership on their position in the household and

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7 The real name of the village is Baniapukur, situated in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District. We gave this nickname to the village in 1975 because quarrels, in particular land quarrels, were one of the most striking features of the village to us at that time (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980, see in particular the chapter on endemic land quarrels: p.160-166). Some villagers were not happy with the nickname; they felt that we had put the village to shame, in particular with the chapter on illicit sexual relations. Some of them suggested that I call it ‘Shantipur’ (Peace village) now because there were not many quarrels any more. (But as we will see later there are still major land conflicts.) Other villagers contested this and said the name and the book were good, we had written the truth and it reflected the reality. Some villagers even argued that the village had become famous because of our ‘Jhagrapur book’ and had adopted the name ‘Jhagrapur’ as a name to take pride in. In the 1990s Proshika, a national NGO, used the Jhagrapur book in their training programmes; they had taken efforts and found the village.
the community. Factors that facilitate or constrain women’s de facto empowerment in Jhagrapur are also examined. In chapter 5 survey data will be used to analyse the changes in class and gender relations as they have taken shape in Jhagrapur since 1975, in particular with regard to the class composition, land and labour relations and the rise of the dowry system. In the second part of the chapter I examine the effects of microfinance programmes and dowry and what it has meant in practice for poor women and men in the village.

Chapter 6 provides background to socio-cultural and religious aspects of the position of women in Jhagrapur and how these have changed. I will deal with factors such as Islam, moral values and globalisation as well as changes in education, family planning and the village power structure that have taken place. An example of women working in rice mills will illustrate how poor women are stigmatised in an attempt by the powerful rich to assert their declining authority.

In chapter 7 we come to the question of women’s relationship to land. I will present my research data on women’s land ownership in Jhagrapur and analyse structural factors that enable or constrain women’s acquisition of land and their control over it.

Chapter 8 gives an analysis of what ownership of land means for women’s empowerment and for their position in the various arenas: in conjugal, domestic and kinship relations and in the village power structure.

In chapter 9 I present my overall conclusions on the question whether women’s land ownership contributes to their empowerment and whether land ownership gives women power to challenge and change gender and class inequalities and to contribute to processes of social transformation. Finally, I will reflect on the relevance of the outcome for the theories and practice.