Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited
Arens, A.M.J.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
5 Jhagrapur revisited, class and gender

The following chapters provide empirical data on how economic and social transformations in Bangladesh have taken shape in Jhagrapur, in particular with regard to class and gender relations and women’s agency. They provide the background against which the questions on women’s land ownership and empowerment will be examined. I will start with my findings with changes in class relations as a result of the Green Revolution. The classification of the households in the village is not only needed to analyse the impact of the economic transformation on land and labour relations, but also to analyse class differences between women with regard to their relation to land and their empowerment. A separate section will deal with the gender bias of the Green Revolution and its consequences for the economic position of women. Specific attention will be paid to women’s income opportunities and experiences with microfinance programmes because these are mostly aimed at ‘poverty alleviation’. The lack of income opportunities and the failure of microfinance programmes to bring poor women out of poverty provide another argument for securing women’s land ownership through inheritance and the distribution of khas land; land will give women more livelihood security. Finally, as a concrete example of the gender and class consequences of the economic transformation I will discuss the rise of the dowry system.

5.1 Changes in class relations

Compared to other regions in Bangladesh, the Green Revolution was introduced rather late in Jhagrapur and its surroundings. Only in 1985 four deep tube wells were installed in the village; this enabled an extra paddy crop per year. A few rich peasants had taken the initiative to apply with the government’s IRDP programme for these deep tube wells and, in order to fulfil the conditions set by the government they had formed four groups of ten (mostly rich) peasants to each manage one of the four deep tube wells. To operate the power pumps for the deep tube wells, electricity was also installed in the village. With this development a lot of other changes occurred in the lives of the people transforming not only agriculture, but the economy and society as a whole impacting both class and gender relations.

In order to analyse the impact of the economic transformation on class relations in Jhagrapur we need to assess the changes in class relations. For that purpose, I compared my data from 1975 and 1998/1999. To classify the 419 households in the village in 1998/99, I used the same criteria that we used in the earlier study for the sake of comparison (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 81-93. The main criteria were control over means of production and production relations, as measured by ownership and de facto control over land, hiring in or out of labour power, and subsidiary incomes. These criteria largely determine the level of self-sufficiency of a household and the degree to which the labour power of a household is exploited, or a household exploits the labour power of other households. In case there was doubt about the class position of a household, other criteria, such as household size and possession of machinery and other means of production were taken into...
consideration as well, and villagers were asked for their opinion. It should be noted that it is important to measure de facto control over land and not only ownership of land. Some households own only little land but they have a considerable amount of land in sharecrop or lease. On the other hand, households with a good amount of land may have mortgaged most of their land due to various circumstances. For instance, in 1999 one household owned only 2 *bigha* of land, but they had 19 *bigha* of land in sharecrop from one of the absentee landowners. Therefore this household has been classified as middle peasant. Another household had to sell and mortgage almost all their land and had become practically landless (see Box 5.11 in section 5.7). They have been classified as semi-proletarian peasants. To give an idea of approximately how much land is needed to be self-sufficient, in 1999 semi-proletarian peasant households (SPP) had less than one *bigha*, small peasant (SP) households had roughly between 1 and 6 *bigha*, while rich peasant (RP) households owned on average more than 15 *bigha* (3 acres). Middle peasant (MP) households rank between SP and RP households. One *bigha* of land produces roughly 10 to 12 *maund* (around 400 kilograms) of paddy per harvest.

**Classification of peasant households**

Semi-proletarian peasant (SPP) households are not in control of any or very little means of production and depend on selling their labour power.  
Small peasant (SP) households do not have sufficient means of production to survive and next to cultivating their land they have to sell their labour power.  
SPP and SP together are called Poor peasants (PP).  
Middle peasant households (MP) generally own just sufficient means of production to be able to make ends meet.  
Rich peasant households (RP) own a surplus of means of production, they hire in labour power, and sublet part of their land.  
Capitalist Entrepreneur households (CE) engage in a wide variety of commercial activities next to the cultivation of their land. I added this class for the 1999 classification although it concerned only one household at that time.

I am aware of critiques regarding the method of classification that was used, particularly from the side of feminist scholars. They have argued that such a class analysis is too narrow as it deals only with class contradictions and ignores contradictions between the sexes (Beneria & Sen 1982; Mies 1988; Chen 1986; White 1992). Class is defined on the basis of means of production that are mostly owned by men, or under the control of men and the class position of a woman is mostly derived from the position of the male head of the family. I agree with this criticism, but nevertheless, for the sake of comparison, and for lack of other satisfactory
models of classification, I have used these criteria again. To include women implicitly in the classification I consequently use ‘peasant households’ rather than ‘peasants’, as we have done in the earlier study as well.

As we can see in Table 5.1 my findings show that the percentage of poor peasant households (SPP+SP) increased from 54 to 65 percent between 1975 and 1999. In other words, in 1975 a little over half of all the households in the village (54 percent) lived in poverty, but by 1999 this had increased to almost two-thirds of all the households (65 percent). Thus the percentage of peasants who had to work as day-labourers or find some other additional income for their survival had increased (Plate 17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Proletarian Peasant (SPP)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Peasant (SP)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Peasant (MP)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Peasant (RP)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlord (LL)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist Entrepreneur (CE)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>173</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is particularly striking that the percentage of semi-proletarian peasant households (SPP) has more than doubled from 20 to 43 percent, while the percentage of small peasant households (SP) has decreased from 34 to 22. Most likely many of the small peasant households had become semi-proletarian peasants. The only landlord in the village had died and his land had been divided among his sons and his widow who were mostly living in Gangni by 1999; they became rich peasants. 81 Table 5.1 also shows that there are proportionally less middle and rich peasant households than in 1975, their percentages have decreased. This suggests that, on the whole, middle and rich peasant households are on the decline as well, but it should also be noted that seven middle peasant families, nine rich peasant families and the landlord family (and nine poor peasant families) had moved to Gangni or elsewhere; their households were not included in the survey.

---

80 In 1975 about 15 percent of the, mostly rich peasant, households were joint households. Now many of these joint households have split up into nuclear households. Apart from the increased population, this is the reason for the large increase of the number of households.

81 The landlord’s widow stays mostly with her three sons, but on and off spends time in the village, in particular during the harvest season. The sons visit the village regularly to manage their land. In neighbouring villages there are still some landlord families.
To examine these data further, I compared the class position of the households of 1975 to their class position in 1999. Table 5.2 shows the upward and downward mobility of all the households. In total 49 percent of the small peasant households, 44 percent of the middle peasant households and 40 percent of the rich peasant households showed a downward mobility. In other words, these households had a higher class position in 1975. Only 11 percent of the middle peasant households, 15 percent of the small peasant households and 16 percent of the semi-proletarian peasant households had moved up since 1975.

Table 5.2 Class mobility of households between 1975 and 1999 per class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobility</th>
<th>% SPP’75</th>
<th>% SP’75</th>
<th>% MP’75</th>
<th>% RP’75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upward by 1999</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same by 1999</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward by 1999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To calculate the mobility I have taken the 1975 classification of the households as the baseline. The 1999 class status of sons of households of 1975 who have set up their independent households between 1975 and 1999 has been compared to their father’s class status in 1975.

Three families who moved to the village after 1975 have not been counted here.

This is the household that has been classified as Capitalist Entrepreneur.
Thus the status of a large part of the households of all classes in Jhagrapur has declined, while a few households have moved upwards. It is also interesting to note that 84 of the SPP households and 59 percent of the rich peasant households have stayed in the same position. The largest mobility is seen among the small and middle peasant households, while the large majority of semi-proletarian peasant households have remained in poverty and more households have joined their ranks. Given the above results, it is surprising that many people in the village told me that their situation had improved, including some people from poor peasant households. My own observation that there was less starvation than in 1974/75 was in tune with that. So, how to explain these seemingly contradictory results?

The explanation should be sought in the changes that have occurred in land ownership and in the demand for agricultural labourers. On the one hand, landholdings had become smaller (see section 5.2), but on the other hand productivity of the land had increased (Plate 18) and there was an increased demand for agricultural labourers combined with higher wages (see section 5.3). Owing to these changes the classification results show a downward mobility, while many people said that their situation had improved. So although, on the whole, resources have reduced and more people had become dependent on daily wages or other income activities, people’s income had increased due to the higher productivity of the land, availability of work and higher wages.

The reason for the decreased landholdings that partly caused the downward mobility can be found in the inheritance system. Because the parental landed property is divided among the children after the death of their parents, the landholdings become smaller and smaller with the result that many households of the younger
generation do not have sufficient land to survive any more. Moreover, there is a growing tendency for joint families to split up. In 1975 there were 173 households in the village with a total population of 1017 persons and by 1999 there were 419 households with a total population of 1678. Thus there were more, but proportionally smaller households by 1999. Whereas in the 1970s, most sons initially stayed with their parents after marriage, many of them now set up their independent household soon after marriage, even if their parents were still alive and the paternal property had not yet been divided. (I will elaborate on the reasons for this later on.) Their households became landless, unless they had been able to purchase land or their in-laws had given them land. Some of them were sharecropping or leasing part of their father’s land and had other sources of income, but a number of them worked regularly or incidentally as agricultural labourer and have therefore been classified as poor peasants. However, in case their parents own land, their landlessness is only temporarily; they will get the inheritance share later. So, after the death of their parents their class position may go up again. Hence my data give only a temporary picture, a snapshot of a particular point in time.

If the above explanation for the downward mobility of households as indicated by the classification results is correct, it would mean that the class status of households of the new generations would have declined more than the old generation households. In order to examine this, I made a distinction between the 1975 households and the households that have been newly formed after 1975, the new generation households. If we compare Table 5.3 and 5.4 we see very different patterns of mobility.

| Table 5.3 Class mobility of new generation households as of 1999 (N=272) |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Mobility % hhs  | % SPP'75 | % SP'75 | % MP'75 | % RP'75 | % Total |
| Moved upward     | 9     | 12     | 2      | 0      | 6      |
| Same             | 91    | 31     | 40     | 51     | 52     |
| Moved downward   | 0     | 58     | 58     | 49     | 42     |
| Total            | 100   | 100    | 100    | 100    | 100    |


| Table 5.4 Class mobility of 1975 generation households as of 1999 |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Mobility % hhs  | % SPP'75 | % SP'75 | % MP'75 | % RP'75 | % Total |
| Moved upward     | 33    | 20     | 26     | 4      | 21     |
| Same             | 67    | 48     | 54     | 75     | 58     |
| Moved downward   | 0     | 33     | 20     | 21     | 21     |
| Total (N=144)    | 100   | 100    | 100    | 100    | 100    |

The downward mobility trend is much clearer in the new generation households. In total 42 percent of the new generation households have a lower class position than their parents’ household had in 1975 (see last column Table 5.3); they moved downward. Of the 1975 generation households, only 21 percent has a lower class position than they had in 1975 (see last column Table 5.4).

With regard to upward mobility, only 6 percent of the new generation households have a higher class position than their parents’ household had in 1975 (Table 5.3), whereas 21 percent (one-fifth) of the 1975 generation households have moved upwards (Table 5.4). So, most likely, many of the new generation households that broke away from landed households will first experience a downward mobility. Later in life, after the father or both parents have died, they will move up the ladder again when their parents’ property is divided. Hence lifecycle is a factor here.

If we look at the downward mobility of the different classes, we see that in all classes roughly half of the new generation households have moved down the ladder, while 91 percent of the SPP households have remained in the same class. In the 1975 generation, however, there is a clear class difference: a much higher percentage of the small peasants households (33 percent) have moved down (Table 5.4) compared to the middle and rich peasant households (respectively 20 and 21 percent), while the majority (67 percent) of the SPP households has remained in the same position. On the whole, the poor peasant households are clearly at a disadvantage, while the rich peasant households are at an advantage. Half of the new generation households and two-thirds of the 1975 generation of rich peasant households versus a large majority of the SPP households in both generations (respectively 91 and 67 percent) have stayed in the same class position. The majority of the rich have stayed rich and the majority of the SPP have stayed practically landless and their numbers have grown. These findings correspond to the findings of Atiur Rahman (1986: 86-92). Nevertheless, as many as 33 percent of the 1975 generation SPP households (mostly becoming small peasants) and 20 percent of the SP households have moved up the ladder. One factor here is certainly the inheritance/lifecycle. In 1974/75 households had also broken away from their parents before having received their inheritance share. Another factor is the increased value of land owing to the higher yields and extra crop per year. Although the cost of cultivation has also gone up, there are individual poor peasant households that have managed to improve their position and proved that this is not impossible. Some landless and poor peasant households have managed to purchase a small plot of land, which gives them an income for a few months of the year. Nevertheless, we should not forget that as a class the percentage of poor peasant households has increased from 54 to 65 percent of all the households as we have seen in Table 5.1). Van Schendel (1980: 296) has argued that “the

---

85 The data obviously show a static picture of two particular moments in time and should therefore be considered with some caution.

86 The total number of households in 1975 was 173, but 28 household heads have died and their sons have split up, and 1 household has moved out of the village.
desirability and perceived possibility of upward mobility” is one of the factors that explain the absence of intra-peasantry class consciousness.

Apart from the inheritance/life cycle factor and the breaking up of joint families, there is another factor that plays a role in the decline of households. With the introduction of the Green Revolution the cost of cultivation has increased many-fold. Now peasants have to buy seeds from the market and these seeds need fertiliser and pesticides instead of the natural manure of cow dung; irrigation pumps need diesel, and peasants who do not have a share in a deep tube well or have a shallow tube well have to pay for irrigation water. Besides, many peasants do not have a plough and bullocks anymore; they have to rent a power-tiller to plough their land (Plate 19). This means that much more cash money is needed for cultivation nowadays. In 1998, I asked a few peasants to calculate the costs of paddy cultivation for one bigha. The estimates varied depending on whether labourers were hired in or most of the work was done by the peasant himself and the amount of fertiliser and pesticide used also varied considerably, with middle and rich peasants using far more. A middle peasant’s estimate was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of paddy cultivation for one bigha in 1998 (in Taka)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hiring power tiller and labourers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harrow after sowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irrigation by shallow tube well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labourers for re-sowing empty places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fertiliser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pesticide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labourers for weeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(= approx. the price of 310 kilo paddy)

Earlier cultivation expenses were much less. Peasants used their own seeds left over from the previous crops, they only needed to buy fertiliser and there were no irrigation facilities. Only rich peasants hired in labourers while other peasants used mostly their own labour power. Now everybody has to hire labourers as the work needs to be done in a much shorter time span. Especially for poor peasants it is difficult to bear the high expenses for cultivation. As a result, they have to take loans and become indebted. Money lending is again on the rise. If peasants cannot obtain a microfinance loan, they have to resort to moneylenders who take 10 percent interest per month (adding up to 120 percent per year). If peasants are unable to repay their loans, their last resort is to mortgage their already scarce land, leading to further impoverishment and eventually potentially losing their land.

In 1999 there was a more diverse variety of subsidiary income sources compared to 1975. For instance, in 1999 several poor peasants owned a van (goods carrier
rickshaw or rickshaw and trading activities had increased, especially paddy trading. These sources of income have been facilitated by the improvement of roads. As rice production more than doubled, there are now four rice mills in the village. The mill owners are all rich peasants, as it requires large investments. Some poor peasant men are employed at the rice mills to load or unload and weigh the paddy or operate the machines and the rice mills give facilities to paddy traders who employ women to boil and dry paddy. Men from all classes are involved in paddy trade, they make use of the rice mills to process the paddy and sell the rice at a profit. But rich and middle peasants benefit more than poor peasants as they can afford to trade much larger quantities than poor peasants who lack the necessary capital to invest. There is a clear class difference here and the introduction of the rice mills has again led to a greater class inequality.

Most subsidiary income sources were still agriculture-related and on the whole there were not more households that had one or more subsidiary incomes than in 1975; only rich peasant household had expanded their subsidiary income sources. One of the joint rich peasant households with a rice mill had further diversified its income into various directions. They were involved in different kinds of commercial activities and they were jobholders as well; three of the five brothers and their wives were teachers. I classified this household as capitalist entrepreneurs (Box 5.1).

The introduction of irrigation has given rich peasants another income opportunity by hiring out the deep tube wells under their control or a shallow tube well or power tiller that they own. In this they are at an advantage as well. Moreover, the collective management of the deep tube wells has given some people the opportunity to appropriate even more money (Box 5.2).
Box 5.1 Capitalist entrepreneur joint household

This is the richest and most influential family in the village. The mother and three sons with their families live in the village, two sons live in Gangni where they own a big building and run a spare parts shop. In 1999 the mother told me: “Two labourers live with us permanently, one for the mill and one supervises the agriculture. Five other labourers come and work for us daily and one woman is our domestic help, she also cooks for us.” One of the brothers told me: “We have developed in different directions so that we do not depend only on agriculture; we also have jobs and do business.” They own more than 100 bigha of land in the village. In the past they grabbed land from several other villagers. They had a brick factory in the village for several years (Plate 20 and 21) and were the first to grow tobacco. When they gave up the brickfield because it was not profitable enough they installed a rice mill on the land, the first rice mill in Jhagrapur. Apart from the commercial activities of the joint family, three of the brothers and some of their wives are teachers in various schools and colleges. They are said to have paid big bribes to get those jobs.

The eldest brother is the most influential. He has been elected as Union Council chairman twice; the third time he lost the elections by a mere 65 votes, but he won again in 2003. Some people praised him for advancing money from his own pocket to improve the road through the village. When the money sanctioned by the government came he got his money back. He moved to Gangni after being threatened by a group of ‘sontrasi’ (‘criminals’, ‘terrorist’, as underground party members are now usually referred to, following the government jargon); they tried to extort money from him. He comes to the village regularly in the daytime, but leaves again before dark. He managed to get the name of the college changed after the initiators had called it ‘Jhagrapur College’ (see also Chapter 6.7).

In 2007, the youngest brother won the bidding for the lease of the communal boro pukur (big pond) together with three others. He had a lot of money to invest and is making big money with fish cultivation of a very popular new variety of fish, which is marketed in Dhaka (see also Box 6.6).

Box 5.2 Irregularities with Deep Tube wells

The deep tube wells (DTW) that have been installed in the village can each irrigate 300 bigha of land. Landowners who are not a member of the DTW management committee have to pay for the DTW irrigation. This gave rise to irregularities and misappropriation of money. E.g. in 1999 I heard that the person in charge of the accounts of one of the DTWs, one of the village leaders, was caught by another
villager when he had claimed that the DTW irrigated only 60 acres of land and had pocketed the rest of the money himself. He denied when confronted with it and no measures were taken against him. On another occasion the DTW had to be repaired. This was to be paid for by IRDP, who had installed the DTWs. The same person made a false receipt of 50,000 Taka saying that the DTW had been repaired, claimed the money from IRDP and together with another committee member pocketed the money. On information of some villagers, IRDP came to investigate the matter. Villagers testified that the DTW had not been repaired, but after that they did not hear any more about the case. Most probably the culprits had bribed the IRDP officer. Several members of the management committee were in fact not interested any more in the operation of the DTW. They had bought shallow tube wells (STW) for themselves in the mean time and could make more money with those and with less hassle. An STW runs on diesel and not on electricity and can irrigate only 10 to 15 bigha. The charge for irrigation is 4 maund87 paddy per bigha against 3 maund for irrigation from a DTW. Irregularities also led to quarrles between the members of the management committee and the DTW was abandoned.

From the above it is clear that the economic transformation has been much more profitable for rich and to some extent middle peasant households while for poor peasant households the impact has been mixed. In the next sections, we will have a more detailed look at the impact of the economic transformation on land and labour relations.
5.2 Land relations

This section deals with land ownership of households. No distinction has been made between land owned by men and by women in the households here. Women’s ownership of land will be dealt with separately in chapter 7. This section serves to show the class dynamics of land relations while chapter 7 deals more specifically with the gender dynamics. Apart from changes in the distribution of the classes in the village, it is important to look at changes in the distribution of land. Table 5.5 shows the unequal distribution of land between households, both in 1975 and in 1999. In 1975, twenty percent of the households owned 60 percent of the land, while in 1999 they owned 72 percent of the land. This clearly shows the increasing concentration of land. These findings are in line with those of other researchers (Motiur Rahman 1994; Atiur Rahman 1986; FIAN 2003).

The landholdings per class show the same picture from a different angle (Table 5.6). In 1999, rich peasant households constituted a smaller percentage of all the households than in 1975 (respectively 15 and 22 percent), but they still owned 55 percent of all the land. Middle peasant households show a similar trend. Poor peasant households, on the other hand, constituted 54 percent of the households in 1975, but 65 percent in 1999, while their share of the land has remained more

---

88 In fact, the concentration of land is even higher than the figures in Table 5.5 indicate. Some twenty households (mostly rich and middle peasant) have not been included in this survey as they had moved out of the village, mostly because they had jobs elsewhere, were running a business, or were too scared to live in the village fearing extortion or attacks from so-called ‘sontras’ (criminals, terrorists, armed cadres of outlawed political parties). Most of these households still own land in Jhagrapur; they are absentee landholders. Some have given their land in sharecrop or lease, but others come to the village regularly to manage the cultivation of their land.
or less the same. Thus, rich and middle peasants had accumulated land by 1999, while poor peasant households had lost land. The gap between poor and rich had grown and poor peasant households had been hit the hardest by the economic transformation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.5 Distribution of land among households 1975/1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of households</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.6 Distribution of land among the classes 1975/1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% hhs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average land per hh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average land p.p. (bigha)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.6 also shows the average land holdings per household and per person per class. By 1999, the average landholding of all households had reduced considerably compared to 1975, but here also poor peasant households had been most impacted with their average landholding decreasing by two-thirds. However, since the size of households had decreased from an average of six members in 1975 to an average of four members in 1999, the average landholding per person gives a more realistic picture. The last row of Table 5.6 shows that the average landholding per person in the poor peasant class had more than halved while it had reduced by less than one-fourth for persons from the middle peasant class and by about one-sixth for rich peasants. An important reason for the reduction in average landholding per household and per person is the inheritance system. Parental land is divided among all the children after the death of the parents. However, given the class variation in reduction of average land holdings, the inheritance system cannot
be the only explanation. The average landholding of middle and rich peasant households had decreased to a much lesser extent because they also bought land over the years, while poor peasant households mostly lost land. Poverty forced many poor peasants to sell or mortgage part of their already scarce land. A compensating factor that needs to be taken into account is that the productivity of land has gone up with the HYV technology. This has clearly been more advantageous for middle and rich peasant households because they have bigger landholdings and have been able to accumulate more land.

There is another factor that plays a role in the greater class differentiation. In 1974/75 many poor and middle peasants could sharecrop land of rich peasants and landlords and so increase their income. About 14 percent of the land was cultivated in sharecrop (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 122). In 1999 sharecropping arrangements had become much less and partly made place for a system of short term land ‘lease’. In a sharecropping arrangement, the amount to be paid to the landowner was half of the crop, so it was dependent on the yield and was to be paid in kind after the harvest. In a lease agreement, a fixed amount of cash has to be paid, independent of the output, and is to be paid in advance. Thus to lease a plot of land, a large amount of cash is needed beforehand and all the risk is for the tiller. Moreover, a sharecropping agreement was often for several years, but a lease agreement is only for one or at most two seasons. This change has been especially disadvantageous for poor peasant households as many of them cannot afford to pay a large sum of money to lease land at once and in advance of the yields of the land, unless they have made money on contract work (see further), taken a loan or received dowry money. Another system that has developed since 1975 is giving or taking land in contract. Like lease, land is given in contract only for one or two seasons. The difference with lease is that the sum paid for the contract is paid partly in cash at the time of making the contract and partly in kind after the harvest. Few rich peasants now give their land in sharecrop; most of them give land only in lease or in contract. Some of the peasants used to sharecrop land belonging to a big absentee landlord of a neighbouring village who owns 450 bigha, but not any more. One of the peasants told me in 1998:

*Boro* Mia (Big Lord) used to give a lot of land in sharecrop but now he gives it all in contract. He gets Tk 2000 per bigha per crop plus part of the harvest. He is also turning a lot of his land into *pukur* [ponds], that is much more profitable. He has 7 *pukur* for fish cultivation. From the fish alone he has a monthly income of Tk 40,000.

---

89 Or one-third of the crop if the sharecropper had paid for all the inputs.
90 This is an old measurement. One maund is 40 sheer and equivalent to 37.33 kilograms.
91 The price rise was among others also a result of diversion of 5 percent of the world’s food grains to bio-fuel and speculation in food commodities since the start of the financial crisis. This price hike was clearly manmade as according to the FAO there was more than enough food to feed the world population. See: Anup Shah, Global Food Crisis 2008, available at [http://www.globalissues.org/article/758/global-food-crisis-2008#Causesshorttermissuesandlongtermfundamentalproblems](http://www.globalissues.org/article/758/global-food-crisis-2008#Causesshorttermissuesandlongtermfundamentalproblems) (accessed 14 May 2010).
92 Compared to other villages in the area foreign labour migration is limited in Jhagrapur. Quite a few other men have tried to go abroad but lost their money to cheating middlemen.
This is another trend that has developed. More and more peasants are digging fishponds on their agricultural land (Plate 22). Growing fish has become a more profitable business than growing paddy. All these developments are particularly advantageous for rich peasants but they have added to the impoverishment of poor peasants and some middle peasants as well.

Growing scarcity of land combined with intensification of agricultural production with high expenses for inputs and, consequently, a need for quick cash has had other consequences. The price of land has increased manifold. In 1975 one bigha of agricultural land in the village cost about Tk 2000-3000, but by the early 1990s it had gone up to Tk 20,000; the price of land had increased ten times. By 1998, land was Tk 50-60,000 per bigha. After the global financial crisis started in 2007, and with the sudden rise in food prices worldwide in 2008, the price of land also shot up. As a poor peasant explained in August 2008:

The price of land is now Tk 200,000 to 250,000 per bigha. Last year it was only 80,000 to 100,000. It shot up because the price of paddy shot up to Tk 800-1000 per maund, now it is Tk 450 to 500. Before it had even come down again to 350 to 400 but the price of land did not come down again.

So the worldwide rise in food prices was also felt in the village and this poor peasant connected the increase in the price of land to the increase in the price of paddy. In the same period a middle peasant woman gave a different explanation:

Since two years land has become very expensive, because people go to bidesh [abroad]. Otherwise we would buy land for Tk 50,000, now it is 200,000 or 300,000 per bigha. They bring black money from bidesh. They say you give me land, I will give so much money, even more. Here in front of our house this land is 500,000, the person who bought it is in bidesh. He has bought it for Tk 13000 per katha a few days ago to build a house. Elsewhere land for cultivation is 200,000 per bigha. Especially since last year prices have gone up very much. Last year paddy was Tk 400 per maund, now it is 800, 900. Munish [day labourer] was Tk 50, now Tk 100. Everything has doubled since 6 months, one year.
Labour migration to foreign countries may play a role here as well. In 1998/99 only four men were working abroad, by 2009 some ten persons had gone (and many more tried but were cheated by middlemen). The money they send back home is often invested in land or a house. Moreover, with the growth of the village population and the splitting up of households more and more agricultural land on the fringes of the village is converted into homesteads. This increases the pressure on agricultural land even more and is another reason for the increase in land prices.

With the increased price of land and growing scarcity, land conflicts are still endemic, but poor peasant households who have been robbed of their land have started fighting back (Box 5.3).

**Box 5.3 Poor peasants take land back**

In 1974/75, Wahid told us that a gang of notorious landgrabbers in Jhagrapur had stolen some 35 bigha of his family's land; this had happened before the Bangladesh liberation war. The landgrabbers must have found out that Wahid's family did not have all the proper ownership documents of their land. Wahid’s family still had enough land left to be self-sufficient. In 1998, when I started my fieldwork for this study, the family told me that they finally had all their land back. They had won the court case and there had also been a lathi (long stick) fight. But in 2006 their land was again disputed. The case turned out to be very complicated and I can only tell here what I heard from both sides. This time, their land ownership was challenged from a different side: some poor peasant families who were offspring from two of Wahid’s father’s brothers. They claimed that the latter had not received their rightful share of the 88 bigha that their ancestor owned and that all that land was in the possession of Wahid’s father. Abed, the great-grandson of one of Wahid’s father’s three brothers told me in 2005 that he had studied all the court documents and discovered that Wahid’s father had taken all of his grandfather’s land and also the land of his grandfather’s cousin’s sister in 1956. They had since lived in poverty. Wahid’s family, on the other hand, claimed that their father had bought the land of two of his aunts and had been given the land of two other aunts who had died without having any children. They also claimed that their father had given a share to the daughter of one of his brothers (the other party’s grandfather’s cousin’s sister, whom I mentioned above) and that she had claimed that she should be given more, but that she had no right to the rest of their father’s land as it had been bought and gifted and therefore was not part of his father’s inherited ancestral land. Moreover, Wahid’s family claimed that Abed’s grandfather had sold all his land, including part of Wahid’s father’s land. But Abed’s party also claims that Wahid’s family has sold land that should belong to them. The conflict culminated in a big fight in which sickles and big knives were used. Wahid’s mother
told me in 2006 that in July 2005 the other party had brought ‘son-tras’. Wahid’s sister showed me big scars all over her body; she and other women and men from the family had fought back hard. Several people on both sides were wounded and had to undergo treatment for several months. During Wahid’s family’s absence the other party started cultivating part of their land and also started a court case. In 2009, I heard from Abed’s party that the court case was still running; in the meantime they had occupied all the land that they claimed and had divided it among the families concerned. They claimed that Wahid’s family has no records of the land that their father had bought and been gifted, and that they could not show any documents and had only obtained it by word of mouth.

In June 2010, while in Holland, I read in the Daily Star online of a dramatic turn of the case. One of the claimants, Nurul Huda, had been killed: “On the fateful night his rivals stabbed him to dead during an arbitration.” I have yet to hear the story from the villages. This case also shows how women’s inheritance shares can be manipulated.

5.3 Labour relations

Another major change that came about with the introduction of the Green Revolution is that, with one more paddy crop per year, there was much more work for agricultural labourers which resulted in a shortage of agricultural labourers and an increase in daily wages. In 1974/1975, the daily wage for male labourers was Tk 5, while the price of one kilo of rice was Tk 6. In 1984, the Agricultural Labour Ordinance set the minimum daily wage for agricultural labour at 3.28 kilograms of rice or its cash equivalent. By 1985, wages had gone up to Tk 10, then equivalent to about 1.5 kilo of rice, so still much below the minimum wage set by the 1984 Ordinance. In 1998, the daily wage was Tk 30, equivalent to around 2.25 kilograms of rice and only around 2006, with Tk 50, the daily wage arrived more or less at the set minimum wage level. By 2008, a daily labourer earned Tk 80-100 as the price of rice had shot up like everywhere else in the world due to financial speculations.

In the 1970s, apart from the paddy, jute or sugarcane was cultivated on some of the land and in the winter season pulses or other crops like mustard seed, but the work for agricultural labourers was very limited. As a consequence, there was a lot of starvation in the lean season. Many poor peasant families did not even have one full meal per day. Now there are two or three paddy crops per year instead of one or two (depending on the quality of the land) and as a result the lean season is shorter. Yet, although there is more work for agricultural labourers, the number of households that depend on hiring out their labour daily has also grown due to population growth and pauperisation. As we have seen before, the percentage of poor peasant households in the village that depends on daily wages fully or partly
has gone up from 54 to 65 percent. Nevertheless there is a shortage of agricultural labourers in the peak seasons. What a rich peasant told me in 1999 is an indication for this:

“Before munish [day labourers] came to ask for work, nowadays we ourselves have to come and ask the munish and they come only on contract [see further down], otherwise they don’t come.”

Another indication for the shortage of agricultural labourers is that nowadays labourers from outside the village come to Jhagrapur during peak seasons to work as day-labourers (Box 5.4). By contrast, in the 1970s, landless peasants from Jhagrapur regularly went to some other districts for work for several months, mostly around harvest time, as there was not enough work in the village. Landless peasants still go to other districts to work temporarily as seasonal migrant labourers when wages are higher there, but this is mostly in the lean seasons when there is not enough work in Jhagrapur. (Box 5.5)

**Box 5.4 Labourers hired from other villages during peak seasons**

The labourers who now come to Jhagrapur during peak seasons for work either come from neighbouring villages that have no deep tube wells for irrigation, and therefore not an extra paddy crop, as some of them explained to me, or they come from an area where a third paddy crop is not possible as the soil is more sandy. These labourers gather at dawn at certain places in the village where landowners come to hire them for the day. After work, they return to their own villages. Some migrant labourers from sandy river areas in a neighbouring district work on contract and stay for the whole

**Plate 23** Transporting paddy by buffalo cart. On the left a landless woman and her children are gleaning the field for left over ears of paddy.
harvest season which lasts about one month. They come with their buffalo carts to transport the paddy from the fields to the homestead as most rich peasants don’t have a bullock cart any more (Plate 23). Since most people now plough their land by power tiller there are only few bullocks, buffaloes and carts left in the village. Usually, some 10 to 12 buffalo carts come from outside the village during harvest time for the November harvest of the rain-fed paddy crop only. The irrigated paddy crop that is harvested in April/May cannot be transported by these buffalo carts because the fields are too wet and muddy due to the irrigation. At that time, the paddy is transported by labourers on their head. The same goes for the paddy harvest in the rainy season in August.

Box 5.5 Labourers from Jhagrapur go for work to other districts in the lean seasons

“Yesterday my brother left for Faridpur to plant garlic. He went with 10 other men from our para. They phoned some others who were already there and heard that they get Tk 150 per day and 4 times food and that there is a lot of work, so they left yesterday. I also went six or seven times, but I don’t want to go any more. Last time was very bad. After we worked three days we heard from villagers there that the boss was bad, so we left, but boss refused to give any money. We had no money for the bus, so we walked back; we walked for a few days. A lot of women work on the land there; they work with their child on their back. It was very cold; they keep a plate with fire in front of them to keep warm. Their men don’t work, only play cards; they send their women for work.”

Siddiqui, a poor peasant, 6 November 2006

An aspect of the labour shortage that has a more cultural and gender dimension needs to be mentioned as well. The prevailing gender ideology in Bangladesh is that women do not work on the land, unlike in other Asian countries such as India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This drastically reduces the number of available labourers. Despite the shortage of labourers, women did not join the ranks of agricultural labourers, even though there are hardly any income opportunities for women. In a few other areas in Bangladesh women reportedly do work on the land now.94 This may be an indication that as a result of the economic and social transformation that is taking place, the norm that women do not work outside the house may eventually change in Jhagrapur as well. To change a given culture, norms and values, is an often slow process; ideas are often fixed in people’s minds and do not

94 E.g. Chen (1990: 215) mentions that women work as agricultural labourer, but she does not give any details.
change overnight as they require a change in people’s mindset. It may be only a matter of time before women in Jhagrapur start working on the land as well.\footnote{The question is whether this would be progress for women or not. If they could earn a decent daily wage it would be an improvement, but only if they would be relieved of some tasks in the household; otherwise it would just mean an even heavier workload for women.}

There are several reasons for the labour shortage in the peak seasons. The first reason is a direct consequence of the intensification of agriculture. The period in between two paddy crops is much shorter than before. Soon after the harvest of one crop, the land has to be prepared again for the next paddy crop. This means that more labourers are needed during a shorter period. Another reason is that there is a growing tendency in all classes to engage in off-farm work (although most of the work is still agriculture-related). Fewer landless peasants want to work as agricultural day labourer and if they do, they want to work on contract. They prefer to drive a rickshaw or ‘van’ (Plate 24), or do some petty trade. That way they are more independent and can often make more money and besides, they are not dependent on the agricultural seasons, but they can work the whole year round. In 1998, about 13 people owned a van; the price of a new van was 4000 Taka. This was even before the road through the village was metalled, but they operated on the main road just outside the village, which was already metalled. By 2009, the number of poor peasants who owned a van was manifold; they had often bought their van with a loan from an NGO. Even though the competition was much more, all the van drivers assured me that driving a van was better than working as a day labourer as they could earn money any day.

Not only has the introduction of the Green Revolution resulted in a greater demand for daily labourers and a labour shortage in the peak seasons, there has also been a shift in the nature of wage labour and in production relations. Nowadays, most labourers in the village work on contract basis in the peak seasons rather than on a daily wage basis, as they can earn more that way (Plate 25). In 2009, daily wages were Tk 100 per day in the peak season, but labourers who worked on contract could make an average of Tk 200 to 250 per day. In a contract arrangement, four or five labourers form a group and make an agreement with (preferably) rich peasants to do a fixed job such as harvesting or threshing paddy for a mutually agreed price. In the mid 1990s threshing machines have appeared in the village and they are mostly owned and operated collectively by small groups of labourers. Abdul, a small peasant, was one of the first persons in the village to buy a threshing machine, which he now shares with four other labourers. Both landowners and labourers generally prefer a contract arrangement: with one extra cycle of cultivation, the landowners need to get the work done much faster and it is equally in the interest of the contract labourers to complete the work as fast as possible so that they can move on to the next contract and make more money. Often during the harvest season I heard labourers start their threshing work long before daybreak. Labourers working on contract make much longer hours than labourers hired for the day. As
one middle peasant complained: “day labourers work very little nowadays, they usually stop working around 2 o’clock in the afternoon.” (But he didn’t mention that they usually start working at daybreak, which means they work eight hours per day). The contract system has improved the bargaining position of labourers. This is also reflected in the complaints of some middle peasant households that it is very difficult to get labourers nowadays. “Labourers don’t want to work for choto lok [literally: small people], only for boro lok [big people], then they can earn more”, a middle peasant woman complained to me one day.
Yet, another reason for the scarcity of labourers in the peak seasons, is the availability of land for lease. Labourers who work on contract have some capital available after the harvest season, which enables them to invest in the lease or mortgage of land. This means that they are only partly available as labourers, as they also have to cultivate their leased land. As we have also seen above in the case of rickshaw drivers, there is a trend that poor peasants prefer to work independently which is often more profitable for them (although also more risky in the case of crop failure). If they have the chance they prefer to cultivate their ‘own’ plot.

Finally, the shortage in daily labourers is also caused by the shorter time span in which agricultural operations have to be performed. People in Jhagrapur used to have a system of exchange of labour. Peasants, often within the same bangsa [lineage], but also e.g. neighbours, exchanged labour during the peak season. In groups they would harvest paddy or transplant seedling, moving from one peasant’s fields to the next. That way they did not need to hire in labourers. Although in decline, this system was still in use in the 1970s but has now almost totally disappeared. Due to the time pressure, as there is only a short time between the paddy crops now, all peasants are busy with getting their own field ready and therefore have to hire in labourers. Even poor peasants now sometimes hire in labourers although they try to do as much as possible by themselves. As a result, collectivity is disappearing more and more and instead there is competition in finding day labourers.

Box 5.6 Abdul, an energetic hard working poor peasant

When I first met Abdul in 1998 he and his brother were still living jointly with their parents. Abdul was married and had built a small house next to his parent’s house. They had no children yet. Things were going well, their situation was better than before. Abdul was a hard working labourer. “I bought a threshing machine several years ago in Chuadanga [a neighbouring district] for 2000 Taka. Later I shared it with four others because I couldn’t do all the work myself. We work on contract. For threshing 80 katha paddy we get 5 katha paddy.96 There are now about 15 threshing machines in the village.” He further told me: “We have 2 bigha of land and we have taken 8 katha of land in sharecrop and 2 bigha in lease for 3 years for 10,000 Taka per bigha per year. We also have 3 cows. Before we had more land, but when I was little my brother and sister were very ill and then my father sold 0.4 bigha to Hanif [a middle peasant] for 3,000 Taka. Now the value of that land is Tk 30,000.” But in 1999, Abdul had an accident. At the start of the harvest season in November he badly hurt his ribs while installing the threshing machine and he could not work during the whole season. This became a big loss for him and his family. Moreover, he had to spend several thousand Taka on doctors and medicines for which he had to mortgage some of his scarce land. In 2002 Abdul’s injury was still
bothering him. “I cannot work fully any more. That is why I’m not happy. I and my brother both separated from my parents as I have two sons now while my brother has no children and my parents are also only with the two of them, so we are more persons and that gave tensions. Besides I cannot work so much any more due to the accident a few years ago. If I would be healthy I would have shanti [peace].”

In 2005 Abdul started catching fish for fish traders; that was less strenuous work. He had never fully recovered from the accident and stayed rather weak. If he had been able to continue like before the accident their situation would most probably have improved, but now their daily struggle for survival continues.

Labour shortage and the increasing demands of labourers may be important reasons why there is a growing trend to use labour-saving technologies such as power tillers for ploughing and rice varieties that need less weeding. A few rich peasants have even started renting a tractor to plough their fields. Only few peasants plough their field by plough nowadays, but some peasants have bought a plough and oxen again to save on the increasing charges for rent of a power tiller. Because bullocks have been mostly replaced by power-tillers, there has been resulting decline in livestock, and consequently a loss of demand for boys from poor families that used to be employed as cowherds. It also means that there is hardly any natural manure from cow dung that can be used as (more environmental friendly) fertiliser or fuel. Despite the improved opportunities for income earning and higher wages, labourers who depend on a daily income remain extremely vulnerable. If they fall ill or get an accident and they cannot work for some time, they do not have any income and their situation deteriorates. The case of Abdul illustrates this very well (Box 5.6). So, although daily labourers have more work for higher wages than before, and consequently less acute starvation than in the 1970s when many landless peasant households had hardly one square meal a day, inequality between rich and poor households has increased further and the situation of the latter remains very vulnerable. Many landless peasant households still do not eat one full meal a day in the lean seasons, let alone three meals a day.

For elderly landless peasant households, such as Ali and Fatima (Box 5.7) it is even more difficult to survive; there is hardly any employment for them because of their age. Like Fatima, a few women are forced by poverty to go to the rice mill regularly to winnow rice. They do not earn any money but they get a kilo of rice at the end of the day. The rice mill is their last resort when they have nothing to eat. In 1998 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina introduced a pension scheme that provides Tk 100

96 Katha is not only a land measurement but also a weight measurement. 80 katha is acc. to Abdul 374 kilos (10 maund), paddy, so 5 katha is roughly 23 kilos (25 seer). So they got one-sixteenth share of the paddy that they threshed. Some other labourers told me that they get 4 katha for 80 katha paddy threshed; apparently they got a lesser deal than Abdul.
per month to the ten poorest and most vulnerable aged persons in each ward (lowest administrative level, consisting of a few villages). Of these ten, at least five must be women. The Union Council decides who receives a pension. In 1998 Fatima got such a pension, but only for 3 months.

Box 5.7 Ali and his wife Fatima, an old landless peasant couple

Ali and Fatima live in a part of the village that is not visible from the roadside. On the roadside one can see mostly nice brick houses of rich peasants and at first glance it seems like there are not many poor people living in the village at all. But as one gets to know the village more, a very different picture arises. Hidden away from the main road there are groups of houses of landless families, among them Ali and Fatima. Most of the time Ali has no work: “Who will take me, I am old and cannot work so much any more”, he sighed one day in 1998 when I visited their house. “My wife gets boisko bhata [pension] now. She gets Tk 100 per month, but for only 3 months. After that they will give it again to someone else. In the morning she has gone to the rice mill to winnow rice so that we will have something to eat today. She will get leftover broken grains and hopefully some extra rice…No she doesn’t get money, only once in a while a little.”

Another day in 2002, during harvest time, I met Ali when he had just returned from gleaning the paddy fields. He showed me a basket with some ears of paddy: “I picked up this leftover paddy from the fields. We have borrowed 1500 Taka and have to return it in paddy, 1.5 times more than we borrowed. We are not allowed to repay in money. We have 0.5 bigha of land, but we have given it in share-crop as we have no money to cultivate it. We have two sons and 5 daughters. Our sons are separate since a long time, they don’t take care of us. They also have no land, only some land in sharecrop. My father and grandfather did not have any land either. My grandfather was married to the sister of Ashraf’s grandfather [a rich peasant].” When I asked Ali why they didn’t have any land if his grandfather was married into such a rich family he replied: “Ekta karon ache [There is a reason]. At that time there was no land settlement yet. That came only after my grandmother died. If she had still been alive she might have gotten some land.”

---

97 According to a recent CPD-UNPA report the pension scheme reaches only 44,500 of the estimated several million of older people who live in extreme poverty (Kabir M. and M. A Salam 2001).
98 This is common practice of mahajans (moneylenders). The price of paddy is lower after harvest, so if they get their money repaid in paddy, they get actually even more in return because they will sell the paddy only after the price has increased again. So, Ali actually has to repay even much more than 1.5 times the amount that he borrowed. A rich peasant told me in 2002: that since 5 to 6 years there were again more mahajans practices. Even small peasants started lending out money in this way, e.g. money they earned with contract labour or dowry money.
99 Ali refers here to the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 by which the landlord system was abolished and tenants were given titles to the land they were tilling.
The Green Revolution and the position of women

In contrast to the increased work for agricultural labourers, income opportunities for women have become even less than before. With the large increase in paddy production rich peasants had much larger surpluses. To process the rice and to increase possibilities for trading rice, four big peasants each installed a rice mill in the village of which the first one was installed in 1985. Soon villagers also started going to one of the rice mills to get the paddy husked for their own consumption. The \textit{dheki} [traditional foot pedal] used for husking rice and \textit{jata} [hand operated grinding stones] (Plate 26) disappeared from almost all the houses. Initially some households kept their \textit{dheki} and \textit{jata} to husk or grind small quantities for their own use, but by 2010 I did not notice these any more. For poor women, the introduction of the rice mills has been disastrous. Many of them earned a meagre income by husking paddy and grinding wheat for rich families, but the rice mills have taken away their work. While the Green Revolution has given more opportunities to men, it has taken away opportunities to generate an income from women. In Jhagrapur poor women have not yet started working on the land as in some other areas in Bangladesh (Agarwal 1994; Centre for Policy Dialogue 2000), but it may be only a matter of time for poor women as they have hardly any alternatives.

Interestingly, White (1992: 76) describes how the rice mills have also given women (and men) an opportunity to go into small rice husking business in which paddy is bought and processed to husked rice for re-sale. In Jhagrapur, however, I have only come across men who are involved in rice business. Men from all classes are involved in rice trade, but only rich and to a lesser extent middle peasants can afford to trade on a large scale as they have money to invest. As parboiling and drying paddy is considered women’s work, traders employ women to do this work.
at the premises of the rice mills. The women at the mills work 7 days a week, each one for a particular rice trader, their *malik* [boss]. They are provided with a hut on the rice mill premises to live in during the period that they work there. One of them told me one day in 1999 when I visited one of the rice mills:

We are 5 women working here at this mill now, I have been working here longest, since three years. I earn 500 *Taka* per month\(^{100}\), and get clothes twice a year. Now and then I also get rice, oil, soap, etc. from the *malik*. Every month my 500 *Taka* are exhausted, I have to give quite some money to my mother. My father is still alive too, but they are poor, they have only 11 *katha* of land [approx. 0.5 acres]. I was married before, but my husband threw me out after 1 month. He wanted 15,000 *Taka* joutuk [dowry], but we didn’t have that.

Only then did I realise that all these women were from other villages. They all came to work there because they were poor and they had no husband to take care of them and to ‘protect’ them. Rather, they had to provide for others at home and some of them had children whom they kept with their parents. Not a single woman from the village was full-time employed at any of the rice mills (I will discuss the reason for this in detail in the next chapter).

Whereas things got worse for poor peasant women, the rice mills reduced the workload of rich and middle peasant women; they were relieved from some of their tasks. And so, the Green Revolution has led to a greater class differentiation between women as well. As Amena, a rich peasant woman told me while she was watching her drying paddy:

I am very happy; I have much less work now. I don’t have to husk paddy or grind wheat any more. During harvest time I have a lot of work such as boiling and drying the paddy, but that is only for about one month. After that it is quiet again. We can sit much more and gossip.

This relates mostly to middle and rich peasant women, in particular women whose children have grown up and these women have benefited from the introduction of the rice mills and other machines. The rice mills have actually made life easier for them as their heavy task of husking paddy and grinding wheat has now been taken over by the mill.

---

\(^{100}\) 500 *Taka* is approximately $10. One kg. of rice cost around 12 *Taka* in 1999 and a male day labourer earned an average of 35 *Taka* per day, approx. 3 kilo rice. These women earn only 17 *Taka* per day. However, they get free rice, but only for their own consumption, not for their family members who are in their home village. In 2007, the women earned 700 *Taka* per month while the price of rice was 18 to 20 *Taka* per kilo, so in fact their purchasing power had decreased.

\(^{101}\) *Poushani* is a system similar to sharecropping land. An owner of a goat or cow gives her animal to another woman to be taken care of. If the animal gets offspring half is for the woman who has taken care of it and the other half for the owner. For middle and rich class women this is an extra source of income (sometimes without the knowledge of the husband if she keeps the animal in her father’s or brothers’ house). For some landless women it can be a means of survival.
The economic transformation has not only led to greater class inequality but also to a greater gender inequality. The day-to-day survival of poor peasant women has become more difficult and they have become more dependent on the income of their husbands and sons or on handouts from other households. Especially for landless widows and divorced women it is very hard to survive; Shahnaz is one example (Box 5.8).

Latifa, a landless widow, is another example. She complained to me one day when I met her on the road:

I cannot go for the dinner in commemoration of the father of my daugh-
ter in law today because I have no good sari, it is all torn and I don’t want to embarrass my son. I don’t have anything, yesterday I didn’t cook because I had nothing. It is very difficult to survive. I have 5 katga [0.25 bigha] of land but I have given it in mortgage last year to buy tin sheets for my roof, it was leaking very much. I don’t have any work; there is no more dheki and jata work, nor any other work. I only have to depend now on what others give me. You see, I just got a little rice (showing rice which she had tied in her sari), they (nodding in the direction of the house of a rich distant relative) have given it.

**Box 5.8 Shahnaz, struggling hard for survival**

Shahnaz is a young widow. Her husband died in the early 1990s. He was sick and they had no money for treatment. Her two sons were about 8 and 10 years old when I started my fieldwork in 1998. She told me then: “I would have liked to marry again, but it is not possible with 2 children, nobody will take my children.” She lives in the same homestead as her widowed mother in law and her divorced sister in law. They each have separate households and no land. Her eldest son herds their own cow and goats which they got through a *poushani* [share raising] arrangement, the youngest herds a middle peasant’s buffalo in the neighbourhood. They have one more goat in *poushani* and will get half of its offspring. During my fieldwork they sold their cow and bought a small plot of land. Shahnaz works very hard and takes whatever work she can get. She works for several rich peasant households, whenever they call her for some work. When there is no other work at all, she goes to one of the rice mills to winnow rice. All she gets for her work is one kilo of rice and some broken grains. During the tobacco harvest she is lucky if she is called to help prepare the tobacco for curing. In 2000 Shahnaz was accepted as a (temporary) *Ansar* (paramilitary guard) to oversee the upcoming elections. “Seven people were selected from Jhagrapur, I was the only woman. They had advertised for it on the radio, I heard about it. I had to go to Meherpur to register for it. I had a 3-week training in Meherpur. I liked it. I got only food and accommodation, no money, but for the
day of the election I will get Tk 300 [in 2000 this was equivalent to 8 to 10 days working as a day labourer]. I could even join as Ansar permanently”, she told me. (See the next chapter for a follow up on Shahnaz.)

Since the 1990s peasants have started cultivating tobacco\footnote{The Capitalist Entrepreneur family was the first to start cultivating tobacco in the 1990s, gradually others followed when they realised it was profitable business. Most tobacco in the area is bought by BATC (British American Tobacco Company). Most of the tobacco quality is first class and is exported. Some peasants received a license from BATC; they get their inputs from the company and BATC buys the tobacco from them.} and occasionally a few women are hired to help prepare the tobacco leaves for curing (Plate 27). Generally, household members do this work themselves, but at times, poor women like Shahnaz are hired for a few days for this work.\footnote{Before selling the tobacco, it needs to be dried and all the leaves have to be hung one by one on bamboo poles which are then hung in small curing sheds. Inside there is a construction of pipes to circulate the hot air from a fire that is lit on the outside and that needs to be kept burning for days until the leaves have dried. The curing needs a lot of wood and other fuel such as rice straw and it produces a lot of smoke and pollution of the air.} Other temporary employment possibilities for landless women are in food for work programmes for road improvement, but such schemes are infrequent. Moreover, unmarried young women will often refuse this kind of employment, or are not allowed by their parents, as it would reduce their chances for a good marriage match. Another possibility for women to make money is to raise animals, such as chicken, ducks, goats or cows, but this needs investments, which poor women can hardly afford unless they get a goat or cow in poushani (Plate 28). Raising animals can be risky, especially chicken are difficult to raise as they attract diseases easily, so many poor women do not see this as an option for them. Another possibility to earn some money is making mats and khetas (bedcovers), but there is only a limited demand for these as most women make them themselves. In 1999, six women told me that they sold a kheta that they had made for Tk 100 to 150. Some women have no other option than to sell their bodies for sex from time to time. With the disappearance of the dhekhi and jata, the demand for domestic help has also decreased considerably. In the 1970s, thirteen poor women worked as domestic labourers in middle and rich peasant households, which, apart from husking rice and grinding wheat, was practically the only form of employment available to them. In 1999 only nine women still worked occasionally as domestic labourer.\footnote{Like before, women who do domestic work in other households generally do not get money for their work. They get paid only in kind – two meals for a full day’s work, and if they are lucky they are allowed to take home some food for their children. If they work regularly for a household they may also receive a sari once a year.} Women told me that they were hardly asked for domestic work anymore.

Most rich peasant households manage the work by themselves and only on special occasions, when there is a lot of extra work, may they call on one of the poor women to help.
On the other hand, women from rich and middle peasant households complain that nowadays they can hardly get any women to work for them and that the women whom they do employ are often unreliable and demand too much, like money, saris, food, etc. Labourers cannot be controlled as much as before. Not surprising, then, that labourers have started demanding more since, as in the 1970s, women who do domestic work for others still get nothing but one or two meals, they do not receive any money for their work. When I pointed this out to one of the complaining rich peasant women, she replied: “Ghrihosto phakhi (fraud, trick) dei, kintu

Plate 27  Women taking tobacco leaves into the tobacco curing house.

Plate 28  Widow collecting leaves for her goats.
"[A well-off person plays tricks but a labourer plays double tricks.] This is a sign that labourers have become more independent and cannot be ordered around as easily any more. If there is a choice, they go where they get the most out of it. So if Shahnaz can help preparing tobacco for curing for which she gets a daily wage, she will not go to work in a rich peasant’s house for which she doesn’t get any money, even if they have asked her to come. Employers do not have the power over labourers any more to force them to work for them and, of course, they do not like that. They would like the poor to work for them whenever it suits them and only do what they say and want, but times are changing.

Poor peasant women have no chance on the very scarce job market in rural areas, even if they have had an education. In 1999, seven middle and rich peasant women had a job, mostly as teachers. Two poor peasant and two middle peasant women were employed as teachers in NGO schools in the village, but these schools had again disappeared a few years later. Apart from such scarce NGO jobs, no job opportunities are available for poor peasant women; they do not have money to pay a bribe or a middleman to obtain a job. The only chance for poor women to get a job is in the garment industry which has come up since the 1990s, but such a job means that they have to leave the village since almost all garment factories are concentrated in and around Dhaka and a few other industrial centres (Plate 29). Nevertheless, this is increasingly becoming an option. For a long time Dhaka was very far from the village and no one had gone there except a few rich peasants. While it was impossible to reach Dhaka in one day in the 1970s, and even in 1998 it was still very difficult, now with improved roads and transport facilities, there a direct bus from Gangni that can reach Dhaka in about 7 or 8 hours. In 2001 Saida, a

Plate 29  Sewing t-shirts in a garment factory in Savar near Dhaka. The majority of the employees are women.

A considerable number of women from around Dhaka have migrated abroad. (See e.g. Rudnick (2003).
poor peasant woman, was the first from Jhagrapur to work in a garment factory. She had joined her cousin who worked in a garment factory in Dhaka from a neighbouring village. Her two brothers and their wives followed her five years later. A few other poor women and men also followed her, but by 2008 the number of people from the village working in the garments was still rather low, at most about twenty. Saida turned out to be very enterprising. While in Dhaka she married a man of her own choice, a middleman who mediates for jobs abroad. In 2006 her mother told me that her daughter was working in the Middle East as a domestic worker. Her husband had arranged her job and he himself found work in Iraq a few months ago. Saida is the first woman from Jhagrapur who has migrated abroad; she is one of the very few women abroad in the entire area.

So, there is very little wage work for poor peasant women and microfinance schemes do not help them either (see next section). Except for a few enterprising poor women who have been able to manage their situation quite well, the large majority has to live from hand to mouth, sometimes even literally picking up whatever grains they can find in the fields. Forced by the situation, most of the poor women ignore gender norms and moral values. They have to take any possibility to survive and, consequently, they risk being stigmatised as ‘bad’ women. There is a great urgency for poor women to find alternative means of livelihood.

5.5 Microfinance and ‘poverty alleviation’

Since the mid 1990s, when NGOs first entered the village, there is the option of microfinance as an alternative possibility for women to generate an income. I have not studied microfinance activities in the village in-depth, but during the survey in 1998/99, the women were also asked whether they, or another household member, participated in a credit group, whether they had taken a loan and if so on what it had been spent. Their answers and my observations indicate that microfinance does not provide an alternative for poor women’s livelihood.

For a long time there were no NGOs active in Jhagrapur; they entered the village only around the mid 1990s. When I started my fieldwork in 1998, Proshika was the main NGO in the village. Their programmes focussed mostly on women, but Proshika also organised men’s groups. The Grameen Bank came to the area only in 1997 (Box 5.9) and BRAC had just stopped its credit activities in Jhagrapur (Box 5.10). Apart from microfinance activities, BRAC and Proshika also ran primary schools in different parts of the village for several years. Around 40 percent of the middle and poor peasant households were involved in a savings group during the time of my 1998/99 survey. Almost half of the poor peasant households had both the wife and the husband involved in a samiti (savings groups), while middle peasant households had generally only one member (more men than women) in a samiti. Less than 15 percent of the rich peasant households were samiti members. As some rich peasant women remarked: “That is not for us, that is only for the poor”, clearly indicating that they definitely did not belong to that group. Rich peasants do not need microfinance as they can easily get a (much bigger) loan from a bank if they need to; they have
enough land as collateral. As is the experience elsewhere too, (Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, 1996; Goetz and Sen, 1996) I have observed that although most microfinance groups are for women, the loans taken by women are mostly used by their husbands or sons, except for the loans that are just used for food for daily consumption.

Box 5.9 First meeting of a new Grameen Bank group in Jhagrapur

In 1999 I attended the very first meeting of a new Grameen Bank samiti, as the credit groups are called (Plate 30). One of the poor peasant women had told me about the meeting and had shown me a paper with the rules that the Grameen Bank worker had given her with instructions to read them carefully before coming to the first meeting. She read them for me: keep your house clean, cultivate vegetables and eat them yourselves, repair the house when it is broken, no more than 2 children, send the children to school, etc. (the Grameen Bank’s 16 Decisions). On the day of the meeting, two male Grameen Bank workers came from the Gangni office to conduct the meeting. They told me that the Grameen Bank is in Gangni Thana since 1997 and that they have six workers there, no female workers. This was the 3rd group that started in Jhagrapur. At the beginning of the meeting, all the women had to salute and yell out “Grameen Bank Zindabad Zindabad” [Long live Grameen Bank]. After that, one of the workers explained all the rules and procedures and what would be the benefits for the women. The women were also instructed to get a signboard to put up in their part of the village. “The office doesn’t provide it, it costs 60 Taka, so if you all share, it is only 3 Taka each.” Towards the end of the meeting all the women had to deposit some money into their group account. The Grameen Bank worker explained that they would put their group money on a bank account for 5 years and the group would get 8.5% interest. The women of the new group were told that only after they had saved some amount they would be allowed to take a loan. Then, finally, everybody had to salute again and yell out “Grameen Bank Zindabad Zindabad”; meeting over.

Against the background of the presence of a number of different NGOs competing with each other for customers, the signboard and slogans are obviously to imprint their membership and loyalty to the Grameen Bank in the minds of the women and to show its presence in the village. But there is more to this. Many people are members of several NGO samitis and take loans from all the NGOs, sometimes they even take a loan from one NGO to repay a loan from another. Lamia Karim (2008) argues that NGOs forestall this by demanding faithfulness to their organisation to prevent such practices. The signboard and slogans should be seen in this light as well.
Undoubtedly, some people have been able to invest their NGO loan in a useful way. For instance, as mentioned before, some poor peasants were able to buy a van, which gave them a daily income, or a means to lease land or cultivate leased land. Although the idea is that women are given a loan to start a business, I know of only one woman who has taken a loan and invested it in a small shop and of one woman who bought a sewing machine. They are both divorced women. Quite often loans are not used for the investment purpose that they were applied for. Several people in the village have used their loans from NGOs for a different purpose, including for consumption, house construction or house improvement or even dowry. In addition, NGOs often do not have the capacity or motivation to check properly whether a loan has indeed been used for the purpose it was given for.

Microfinance has become a debt trap for quite a few poor peasant households who manage to obtain a loan. It is often difficult to repay their loan, at least the first few instalments.\textsuperscript{106} In fact, this makes women more dependent on their husband or sons because the latter have to provide the money for the repayment for which the women are responsible. If they cannot meet their repayment deadline, they are shamed and have to suffer the consequences such as harassment by other group members, which leads to severe tensions for them. It happens regularly that a loan is taken from one NGO to use the money fully or partly to repay a loan from another NGO, thus leading only to further indebtedness. Interestingly, the reverse also happens sometimes. I heard of a few people who took an NGO loan and used it for a money lending business. They lent the money out to someone else against a much higher interest rate, in some cases as much as 10 to 15 % per month, the same usurious interest rate that rich peasant moneylenders demand. So these clever people manage to turn their loans into profit the easy way (provided that

\textsuperscript{106} BRAC and the Grameen Bank demanded weekly repayment of a fixed percentage of the loan, starting from the week after they have taken the loan. This hardly leaves the people any time to generate an income. But Proshika demands monthly payment, this is the reason why many people shifted from BRAC to Proshika.
their creditor is able to repay the loan), not shying away from extortion practices that they have previously suffered from themselves.

It is obvious that microfinance is not serving the poorest households. NGOs also admit that they cannot give loans to the poorest as the risk that they cannot repay is too big. This has also been confirmed by other studies (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Mallick, 2002). Especially for widows or divorced women, microfinance is no option. Many of the women complained: “How can I participate in a samiti, where do I get 5 Taka every week for kisti (instalment), from where do I get money?” Most of them have no male member in their household who can work as daily labourer to repay the weekly instalment. The claim that microfinance is a programme for poverty reduction and women’s empowerment is untenable as the poorest women are excluded.

There have been many saving groups in the village but most of them did not last for more than one or a few years. Usually when people have received a loan and repaid the amount they quit. Many people also told me that their samiti (savings group) had fallen apart because the members started quarrelling among themselves; the person who kept the accounts did not do it properly, or some members did not repay their loans at the expense of others. This is at least partly the result of the system of making the group members responsible for each other’s repayment. Instead of promoting cooperation and solidarity among the group members, it creates divisions and fights. In one case, a man from a men’s samiti ran away with his lover without having repaid the Tk 10,000 loan that he had taken; indicating that group members run the risk of losing their savings instalments. Some people also dissolved their samiti when they realised that they were actually paying much more than the 10 percent the NGO workers had told them. They realised that they had to repay a certain percentage interest over the full amount of the loan every week for the whole year instead of over the remaining balance, while the full amount actually reduced by each weekly instalment. This has also been reported elsewhere and it has been calculated that in fact NGOs charge 30 to 32 percent, even going up to 50 to 60 percent actual interest on their loans (Karim, 2008; Kelkar, 2004). In an unusual case, BRAC had withdrawn from the village because some of the members of their credit group had plainly refused to repay the loans that they had taken. BRAC has not been able to handle the case (Box 5.10).

My observations in Jhagrapur show that, at least for the village, the success of microfinance programmes is highly exaggerated. No household in the village has come out of poverty as the result of microfinance. Microfinance programmes can in fact never be a structural solution to poverty as they do not tackle the structural causes of poverty that lie in the unequal distribution of resources and power. As long as these causes are not removed and until women of all classes have equal economic and social power, they will remain excluded and kept quiet with rhetoric and palliative programmes implemented by NGOs and the state.
Box 5.10 BRAC lost Tk 150,000 on loans

In 1999 several people complained to me that they had deposited money in their BRAC samiti, but that they never got their money back. BRAC had dissolved the group. I decided to visit the BRAC office in Gangni one day to find out what had happened. The manager told me their side of the story: “We have problems there like we have had nowhere else like that. There were 2 big samitis there, 70 to 80 members, all women, but since about one year we are inactive in the village because most people refused to repay their loans. They still have to pay back about Tk 1.5 lakh altogether.” The manager confirmed that there are indeed a few people who still have to get their deposited money back, but according to him not more than 8 people and not more than about Tk 6000 altogether. He showed me all the papers with names and amount mentioned. People owed BRAC money, varying from Tk 800 to 4000. The manager continued: “A few times we tried to hold a meeting in the village to solve the problem, but then only the people who still have to get money back came. How is it possible for us to give them their money back, while others still owe us so much money? What will the head office say? Tk 150,000 not paid back!” He was at a loss for what to do about it.

5.6 Impact of global connections

Agricultural transformation and its impact on society are not limited to the above. Apart from the growing landlessness which has turned more men and a few women into day labourers, increased value of land, an increasing number of absentee landholders, and the changes in gender relations (that I will deal with in the next section), there are a few other changes in the village since the 1970s that have to be mentioned as they have had an impact on the culture and social relations. With the cultivation of HYV paddy, a new phase of globalisation has penetrated rural Bangladesh which has not only transformed agriculture but also society as a whole and has led to a growing commercialisation of society. All agricultural inputs have to be bought from outside the village now and with increased output has come a growing market penetration of the rural areas. Peasants have become dependent on seeds, fertilisers and pesticides produced by national and multinational companies, and this has led to the destruction of traditional knowledge such as preservation of seeds, using natural manure, and crop rotation. Multinational companies have penetrated deeply into the rural economy. The dependency on the corporate world has increased even further with the introduction of biotechnology and genetically manipulated seeds and plants that have made their way into Bangladesh. Under the guise of increased production and “freedom from hunger”, agriculture has become totally dependent on industrial corporations maximising their profits.107

Peasants now grow mostly paddy and less other food crops, such as pulses, which they used to grow in the winter season. This has resulted in a less varied and
nutritious diet and, as a consequence, in increasing health problems, especially of the poor who cannot afford to buy pulses from the market. An increasing number of people suffer from tumours, many of them had an operation and several have died. People told me that this did not happen before and I also never heard of such diseases in the 1970s. Some people relate the appearance of these health problems to the use of fertilisers and pesticides needed for HYVs. Often peasants use even more fertilisers than needed which has led to the fertility of the soil going down: while yields initially doubled after the introduction of the HYVs, people now complain that they have decreased again. People also complain that the taste of food items has reduced significantly and that they nowadays eat khali bis [literally: nothing but poison. Bis is also used to indicate pesticides, which they know are poisonous. Several people have killed themselves for a variety of reasons by taking pesticides.]

Migration to foreign countries is another phenomenon that is related to globalisation. When I started my fieldwork for this study, four middle peasants had migrated to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. By 2010 some ten men and one woman had migrated abroad, mostly to the Gulf States and Malaysia, and five men had returned in the mean time. Still, migration abroad is rather low in Jhagrapur compared to other villages. In fact, many more people have tried to get a job abroad, but most of them were cheated by middlemen who took a lot of money without actually ever delivering a job abroad. The possibility of foreign migration has given rise to a new form of exploitation with this time mostly rich peasants as victims. Altogether, people in the village have lost millions of Taka to middlemen. For instance, Rahman, one of the rich peasants lost most of land and is now mostly doing paddy business told me in 2008:

In total I lost Tk 600,000 to three dalals [middlemen] and sold 8 bigha of land for all my expenses. I had to go to Dhaka a few times, stay in a hotel there, etc. I came in contact with two of the middlemen in Dhaka through some contacts of relatives but later I could not trace them any more. The third middleman promised to return the 1.5 lakh I had given him, but I never got it. I can’t do anything about it, I am ruined now.

Like Rahman there are many more men who have lost large sums of money, and not only to get a job abroad; some men, including poor peasants, lost money in the same way to get a job within Bangladesh.

The penetration of the market and transnational companies can also be noticed from the commodities that are now common goods in the village. Whereas only a
few people had a radio and a bicycle in the 1970s, televisions and motorcycles are now common commodities for the rich. Moreover, the influence of commercialisation and the media that has penetrated more through television, can be noticed in the daily life of the people, in particular the middle and rich classes. People’s lifestyles are changing. Not only have commercial goods penetrated Jhagrapur, but with it also the specific gender ideology of women as consumers and beauty models. The gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation has strengthened this kind of gender ideology.

5.7 The dowry system and its impact
The rise of the dowry system is a concrete example of the consequences of the economic transformation for gender and class relations. It has had a tremendous impact on the situation of women and of poor peasant households with daughters and for households with sons it has become a new way to accumulate money. Dowry has also mistakenly been connected to inheritance and has in several cases been an obstacle for women receiving their inheritance share. What impact has this had on the position of women and their agency? In this section I share some of my observations and findings on dowry in Jhagrapur. In chapters 7 and 8, I will further discuss the impact of the dowry system.

In 1974/75 the practice of dowry (joutuk or dabi, as villagers usually call it) hardly existed in Jhagrapur. Sometimes people talked about gifts that had to be given to the bridegroom, such as a bicycle or a watch, but they did not call this dowry and it was mostly restricted to rich peasant families. At that time the term joutuk (dowry) was never used in the village for these gifts to the bridegroom. In 1974/75 neither dowry, nor the Muslim practice of mohr were problems. Mohr is a sum of money or golden jewellery, which the groom’s family gives to the bride (Plate 31). In 1985,
when I first revisited Jhagrapur, poor people complained that their condition had become worse due to dowry. A landless widow told me that she had to pay Tk 2000 dowry to marry off her daughter. ‘Where do I get so much money’, she complained. Another landless family had to give a cow as dowry for their daughter’s marriage. By 1998 dowry had become common practise in all classes and the demanded dowry sum has increased steadily and exponentially. As a rich peasant woman told me:

On the one hand it is now better for women, they now have more courage; on the other hand it is worse for women, dowry has increased very much. For my daughter we will now have to give at least Tk 50,000 plus a Honda motorcycle. Poor families have to pay at least 20,000. Otherwise the bridegroom will ask: ‘Am I worth nothing?’ and he will beat his wife. For most people it is only about money.

Most people in Jhagrapur claimed that dowry demands started in the 1970s, around the time of my first stay in Jhagrapur. Selima, a rich peasant widow, had a different opinion, she claimed: “Dowry started when my eldest son was a little boy.” He was born “in the same year as independence from the British”, thus around the time of Partition in 1947. Some villagers related dowry to a demonstration effect, or to the surplus of girls on the marriage market. Other villagers explained the increase in the practice of dowry in economic terms; they linked it to increasing landlessness and unemployment and so dowry was a way to get money. A few blamed the girls themselves for it; they said girls had lost their value due to love relationships they engage in. When I asked whether boys also lost their value, the answer was: “Boys never lose their value.” Given the patriarchal norms and values this was not a surprising reply.

Some villagers argued that dowry stands for a girl’s inheritance share, but I argue that dowry cannot substitute inheritance. Dowry is given to the bridegroom or his family and they are generally the ones who control it. There are numerous examples of the wife having no say in the use of the dowry money, although there are also couples who decide together what to do with the dowry and some women used dowry as an argument with their husbands to set up their own independent household. Two women told me that their parents had given a piece of land as

---

108 Both Ahmed and Naher (1987) and Kabeer (2000) state that dowry demands started in the urban rich classes and fully emerged only after 1971, but that incidents of dowry had occurred in preceding decennia. So this corresponds to what most people in the village told me.

109 Selima’s statement is in line with the findings of Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1971: 272) who reported dowry cases in upper class Muslim marriages as early as the 1940s. These may be the exceptional cases that Ahmed and Naher (1987) and Kabeer (2000) refer to.

110 After some anti dowry notifications had been put up villagers told me that people now do not talk about dowry any more but about dan kora (giving a gift) and they give money secretly if it is a big amount. When I asked people whether dowry had been given or taken for their daughter’s or sons marriage, some of them quickly said: “no we didn’t give dowry, we only gave out of happiness with the marriage while a several others told me the truth hesitantly, adding: “You’re not going to tell the police, are you?”

111 Saira Rahman Khan (2001; 90) also found that court cases against dowry are rare. She reported that only two cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act had been heard in the High Court between 1991 and 1996.
dowry and registered it in her name. In these cases, this is actually not dowry but giving the daughter her inheritance share in advance because it is clearly registered as her property. Most of the time, dowry is not given in the form of land, let alone registered in the name of the daughter.

Nowadays, only few marriages take place without dowry being given and dowry has become a serious problem for poor peasant households with one or more daughters. By 2009 a poor peasant family had to pay at least Tk 15-20 thousand dowry; middle and rich peasants had to pay much larger sums. Several people complained that Bangladesh has become a ‘nongra desh’ (dirty country) and that people have become very ‘hingsa’ (jealous, malicious). People know that dowry is forbidden by law, but they feel helpless. “If we say that we won’t give dowry, they will just go for another girl” is an often-heard complaint. Others comment that if they do not give dowry their daughter would be beaten up. I have not heard of dowry cases that have been taken to court. People are not willing to start a case as they feel it is not in their interest. Their main concern is that their daughter is married off in the best possible way to a bridegroom who can provide her with a secure and happy future and who will provide the family with a higher status.

Box 5.11 Abdulla and Nazma have five daughters

Abdulla and Nazma are poor peasants. They used to be quite well off with their 12 bigha of land but over the years they have become practically landless. One day in October 1999 when I was doing the survey they told me: “We used to have 12 bigha [4 acres] of land, but now we have only 1 bigha left to cultivate. We have given some land in mortgage, the rest we sold. We had to get our five daughters married. The first daughter we married off about 20 years back. We had to pay 500 Taka dowry. For our other four daughters we paid respectively 1200, 5000, 8000 and 6000 Taka. We have not been able to recover from these expenses. Our youngest son is still with us, but our two eldest sons set up their own households after they married. We have no more income from their daily labour and we do not have enough money now to cultivate the land. Our sons married long back, they did not take much dowry, only about 500 Taka.” When I asked them more about the land that they had mortgaged they replied: “The papers are with P. [the person who had taken the land in mortgage] in the neighbouring village.” They did not remember exactly when they had given their land in mortgage, nor when they would be entitled to get it back. Apparently, they already regarded their land as lost forever. Moreover, they are involved in a land case since 10 years. As Abdulla told: “My mama [mother’s brother] has taken 7 bigha of our land. That case has cost us a lot of money, so our situation deteriorated further. Now we are in need, we just borrowed 4 maund paddy (160 kilo, costing about 1000 Taka). We have
112 Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagrapur revisited

Starting a case against a prospective bridegroom’s family does not enhance one’s chances on the marriage market. Instead, parents try to negotiate the best possible deal. For poor families, the choice is severely restricted by their financial situation and often determined by the height of the dowry demand. There are women who have been married to men who are divorced, or to an older widower or a man who already had one or two wives, as in those cases less or no dowry was demanded. Other girls have been married to boys whose parents urgently needed a woman to work in their household and therefore did not demand any dowry. In such cases it is always the woman who has to bear serious consequences if no dowry has been paid for her marriage.

Dowry is an important cause of impoverishment for poor families with daughters; it can completely ruin a family. Abdulla’s family is only one example (Box 5.11). The case of Abdulla and Nazma may be extreme, but unfortunately they are not alone in this. Many other families have told me that they had to mortgage or sell land or animals to meet dowry demands and by doing so entered a downward spiral. Poor peasant families generally do not have the means to save money for their daughters’ future marriage like many middle and rich class families do nowadays. The latter enter into various kinds of saving schemes that are now available where they deposit money monthly. As a middle peasant explained:

Monthly I give Tk 200 to a saving scheme for my daughter. She is 2 years old now. After 10 years she will have Tk 50,000, so the money has more than doubled by then. That money can be used for her marriage.

Some poor peasant families manage to raise a cow or goats, often in poushani. This provides them some security once they get offspring; they can sell the animal for a daughter’s marriage or in case of calamities. Yet, most poor peasant families cannot afford to invest this much money; they mostly depend on daily wages and live from hand to mouth. Obviously there is the other side of the coin: families with sons that...
can take advantage of the dowry system. Families from all classes demand dowry, but whereas rich and middle peasant families use the dowry mostly for investments e.g. to purchase, lease or cultivate land or to pay a broker for a job, poor peasant families often use the dowry for consumption or to repay a loan as those are their most urgent needs. In one case, it turned out that the bridegroom of a landless peasant woman needed dowry to repay the dowry sum to his previous wife whom he divorced. When the parents of the bride could pay only part of the amount on the wedding day, the bridegroom threatened to cancel the marriage. Immediately the parents had to borrow money from relatives and then the wedding continued. They had not been aware that the bridegroom had already married once before.

Dowry has also given rise to increased physical violence varying from harassment to physical and mental torture to even deaths of women. Dowry related violence is increasingly reported in the media from all parts of Bangladesh, but I have not heard of dowry deaths in Jhagrapur.\textsuperscript{112} This does not necessarily mean that they have not happened. At least nine women in the village have committed suicide and three women have been killed; I could not find out whether any of these were dowry related. But women have been harassed for dowry; one woman was thrown out by her husband after 1 month, as he wanted Tk 15,000 as dowry, but her parents did not have the money. One small peasant woman told me in 2009:

My son is \textit{khub harami} [doing very forbidden things]. He started asking for Tk 20,000 dowry from his wife and sent her to her father. He told her that she is not allowed to come back if her father doesn’t give the money. She went to her sister 6 days ago and has not yet returned.

\textbf{Box 5.12 Bibi, trapped by a rich peasant}

Bibi, daughter of a landless peasant, married a rich peasant from Jhagrapur whose first wife had died. “For Bibi we did not need to pay any dowry”, her mother told me. “After the marriage my husband and sons constructed a brick house for her husband. We did not ask for any wages; even if he had offered we would not have taken it. We thought we were lucky, but then when my daughter got pregnant her husband forced her to get an abortion. The second time the same thing happened, she had to go for an abortion. But when she got pregnant a third time we refused to get her an abortion. We promised to take care of the baby ourselves, no matter whether it would be a boy or a girl. Three months after the baby girl was born the construction of the house was completed. Then this man just sent my daughter away and took another wife…; that was about 8 years ago. Since then she lives next to us. Her daughter’s father has never paid a single penny for her, nor has he ever given her clothes or anything. My daughter is struggling hard to feed her daughter and
herself; she has to do whatever work she can get, whenever others call her. He is a boro lok [literally: a big person, meaning a rich person], isn’t it? At least that is what people say…” Bibi’s mother ended sarcastically. They had just been used by this rich peasant as free labour and for his sexual pleasures. When Bibi was of no more use he just dumped her. Bibi and her family fell into his trap because they could not afford any dowry.

Apart from physical violence, the dowry system has also given rise to a new form of structural violence (Box 5.12). Bibi’s case can be called a modern form of slavery and a new form of structural violence. Women whose parents have no means to pay a dowry for their daughter’s marriage become an easy prey of men who use them for their sexual pleasures and as free labour; they exploit not only these women but even their family members as well and when they have had enough they just dump the woman again.

In a few cases dowry been a source of power for women as they could turn it into their own advantage and used it to improve their economic situation. When parents are landless there is no land for a daughter to inherit, but if dowry is given for the daughter’s marriage and she manages to convince her husband to invest it in land, she herself also benefits. As Parul, a young woman who was married to a landless peasant in 2007 told me: “Joutuk mababer kosto, amader bhalo” (“Dowry is a burden for parents, for us it is good”). Her father had died when she was little and her mother had saved Tk 20,000 for her daughter’s dowry from raising cows, goats and chicken. With the money the young couple had bought a cow and taken 12 katha of land in lease.

The empowerment aspect that dowry can have for a woman in some cases is also illustrated by the fact that a few women found an interesting way to reverse their dependency and show their dignity. For instance, Zarina who had just been married told me in 2002: “Yes, I have bought a husband.” when I asked her whether they had paid dowry. So instead of complaining and making herself a victim of dowry she turned dowry from a means of subordination to the bridegroom into an act of asserting her agency and taking control. 113

So, while dowry has become a big burden for parents with several daughters, it can be an asset for their daughters as it gives them space to negotiate with their husband to use the dowry for their common benefit. However, this should not be taken as a justification for the dowry system as such. Dowry is a source of impoverishment, harassment and serious violence against women. Women are tortured and even killed by their husband and in-laws if they are not satisfied with the dowry they receive. On the whole, the dowry system has had far reaching

113 Similarly some mothers commented about dowry: “Do I have to sell my son? I won’t do that.”
negative consequences for women. Instead of giving dowry, a better option would be for parents to give a plot of land registered in their daughter’s name. So, rather than an argument for dowry, I am making an argument for giving women landed property and equal property rights, including the right to control their property themselves. Besides, as Agarwal (1994) suggested, if managed collectively by a group of women, it would mean real empowerment and a true change in gender relations.

5.8 Summary and Conclusion
The process of economic transformation in Bangladesh since 1975 has led to a greater class and gender differentiation at the village level as well. The classification of the households in Jhagrapur on the basis of a survey conducted in 1998/99 shows that the gap between poor and rich peasants has further increased. The percentage of poor peasant households had increased from 54 percent in 1975 to 65 percent in 1999. Although there is less starvation than in 1975, many of the landless still do not get a full meal per day in the lean season, let alone three meals. More peasants have become (near) landless and turned into wage labourers and land ownership is concentrated in even fewer hands. This greater class differentiation has to be attributed to fragmentation of land due to the inheritance system and to indebtedness leading to loss of land through mortgage or sale. The increased cost of cultivation after the introduction of the Green Revolution, the shift from sharecrop arrangements to a system of short term land lease, and the exponential growth of dowry demands are main causes of indebtedness. Although more people have been turned into wage labourers there is a labour shortage in peak seasons. This is mostly due to the fact that the time span in which operations have to be done is much shorter than before and because poor peasants prefer to work independently, for instance as rickshaw or van drivers or doing petty trade.

The shortage of labourers has not prompted women to become day labourers as has happened in other regions. Except in tobacco curing, I have not seen or heard of women who work as daily labourer in agriculture; the patriarchal norm that women do not work outside the house is still propagated. The greater class differentiation can also be seen between women. Middle and rich peasant women have been relieved from the heavy work of husking rice and grinding wheat with the introduction of the rice mills, but it has robbed poor women from their most important source of income without new or other opportunities to earn income. It is true that the economic transformation has given more income opportunities to poor women in urban areas, mainly in the garments industry, but not to rural poor women.

The economic transformation has also led to a greater gender differentiation. The social status and value of women has decreased as they have been further pushed out of the production process, while it has given men more opportunities for income earning.
I have argued that there is a relation between the gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation and the exponential growth of the dowry system. Dowry has become an easy way to acquire a large sum of money needed, for instance, for agricultural inputs or for the lease of land. It has also generated greed in families with marriageable sons. The dowry system has led to greater class and gender differentiation. Dowry demands have impoverished poor peasant families with one or more daughters and have led to a decrease in value and greater dependency of women on their families. Girls have become a bigger burden for their family. Women in the village do not have the option to get a job and earn their own dowry like many women in urban areas do nowadays. Nevertheless, there are indications that women have started using dowry to assert their agency in their relationship with their husbands. In Jhagrapur, I did not find evidence of increasing violence against women in relation to dowry. Finally, it was argued that microfinance brings no solution for landless families to come out of their poverty. These families mostly have no access to microfinance and if they do, it often leads to further indebtedness and a downwards spiral.

The above mentioned changes are closely related to socio-cultural and religious aspects of the position of women in Jhagrapur. These aspects will be dealt with in the next chapter, in particular Islam, moral values and changes in education, family planning and the declining authority of the traditional village leaders. The latter will be illustrated by an example of how poor peasant women working in rice mills in the village are stigmatised.