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Everyday Politics of *Dadan* Contracts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

Bablu Chakma 

ABSTRACT

This article analyses processes of *dadan* contract negotiations between Bengali intermediaries and indigenous Tanchangya peasants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, in the culantro sector. The research extends the debates on the *dadan* system and interlocked market relationships by highlighting everyday dynamics of *dadan* and the issue of ‘just price’ that arises from such contracts. The article argues that the *dadan* loan system leads to greater spaces for exploitation. While it facilitates peasants’ access to credit for agricultural and social reproduction and the supply of culantro to wider national markets, it also creates a dependency of Tanchangya peasants on Bengali moneylending traders. Such an analysis reveals the limitations of existing studies on *dadan* in accounting for the social, cultural and political aspects of *dadan* contracts, alongside their economic aspects. The article concludes that contested moralities associated with the pursuit of familial subsistence and contractual obligations shape peasants’ decisions and strategies concerning such contracts.

INTRODUCTION

The Persian term *dadan*, meaning to give, developed as a technical term in Bengal to denote an arrangement of providing loans or working capital advances (Habib, 1964: 399).¹ By the second half of the 17th century, most commodities involved in long-distance trade were secured through *dadan* arrangements; the expansion of European trade facilitated the further growth of the *dadan* system until around the beginning of the 19th century (Crow,

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1. Traders advance loans against standing crops for the purchase of those crops at predetermined prices that are below the market rate.

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1989: 227, note 4). From that point on, however, ‘the British East India Company’s domination of trade ... excluded *dadni* merchants from most branches of export trade’ (ibid.). Patnaik (1999) illustrates how merchant capital in the form of cash advances acted as a key factor in the expansion of commercial crops (for example, cotton and indigo) under colonial conditions. Despite shifts in these conditions and various developmentalist interventions (such as microcredit) during post-colonial eras, *dadan* persists as a commonly found credit arrangement in agrarian South Asia. In the deltaic plains of Bangladesh, the *dadan* system is prevalent in various sectors, including food grains, cash crops, fisheries and ‘forest resources’ (Crow, 1989; Islam, 2010; Lewis, 1991; Nowsad Alam et al., 2021).

This article analyses processes of negotiations between Bengali intermediaries and indigenous Tanchangya peasants over *dadan* contracts in the culantro² (*eryngium foetidum*) sector. Culantro, a culinary herb, was once grown by indigenous cultivators of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (hereafter Hill Tracts) region of Bangladesh mainly for consumption. The gradual increase of its popularity locally and in the plains of Bangladesh over the past decades facilitated the emergence of culantro as a major crop among indigenous peasants of the Kawkhali–Kaptai–Rangamati Sadar belt of the Hill Tracts. This area currently supplies culantro to the entire country through a network of Bengali intermediaries. Drawing on ethnographic data collected from May to November 2019 from Meyachara,³ an ethnic Tanchangya village, this research extends scholarly debates on the *dadan* system and highlights the everyday politics of *dadan* contracts. Primary data were collected through participatory observations and in-depth interviews with local villagers.

The *dadan* system is a mechanism through which different markets become interlocked (Lewis, 1991: 296). In an interlocked market (ILM), actors simultaneously engage in two or more markets, and transactions in the conjoint markets are contingent upon the transaction in the initial market (Swain, 2000: 308). Neoclassical scholars argue that the aim of such interlinkages is to achieve improved allocative efficiency by reducing transaction costs and risks and uncertainties in markets (ibid.). However, others (including Adnan, 1984; Bhaduri, 1973, 1986; Bharadwaj, 1974) suggest the interlinkages are a possible mechanism of surplus extraction, facilitated by existing power relations and the access the actors have to resources. Bharadwaj (1974: 4) claims that while there can be ‘limits’ of exploitation in any one market, the interlinking of markets magnifies the exploitative power of dominant actors by extending surplus extraction from the initial to the conjoint markets. While reiterative exchanges between agents in ‘impersonalized markets’ determine the price of a product, in an ILM relationship, it is often the superordinate actors that contractually involve the subordinate

2. Also known as spiny coriander, *bilati dhania* and *baor*.

3. Pseudonyms are used throughout for the names of research participants and for the village.

actors in multiple markets and impose a product price upon the latter (Adnan, 1984: 80–119; Polanyi, 1957: 247). In credit–product interlinkage, the dominant actor usually stipulates that the subordinate actor sells their produce to her/him, thereby depriving the latter of access to the open market (Adnan, 1984: 88). Notably, although ILM can be a purely economic relationship, it can often overlap with the patron–client ties of the actors by serving as a kind of social insurance in times of crisis (Bhaduri, 1986: 269). Scholars have analysed *dadan* both as a mechanism of exploitation as well as a patron–client relationship (K. Islam, 2010; M. Islam, 2017).

While acknowledging the significance of studying *dadan* from the perspective of surplus extraction and patron–client dimensions, the examination of the everyday dynamics of *dadan* presented in this article explores two propositions. First, while the *dadan* system leads to greater spaces for exploitation, it facilitates peasants’ access to credit for agricultural and social reproduction and the supply of *culantro* to wider national markets. This eventually results in a relationship whereby the peasant becomes dependent on the creditor. Therefore, *dadan* can be viewed as a contested arrangement of exploitation. Second, by specifying the ‘social embeddedness’ of market transactions (Polanyi, 1944/2001), studies on *dadan* must pay *additional* attention to the extra-economic (socio-cultural-political) aspects (Bhaduri, 1986: 268) of these contracts, alongside their economic aspects. This allows the documentation of complex power struggles over *dadan* contracts, in which multiple actors, relations, processes and structures become entangled.

Thus, this research highlights some aspects of *dadan* contracts that remain under-analysed in the existing scholarship. First, in contrast to the ‘mainstream’ peasantry of deltaic Bangladesh, ethnicity plays a pre-eminent role in *dadan* relations in the Hill Tracts — that is, there is a broad convergence between economic roles and ethnic (Bengali–indigenous) segmentation. As this article will show, the current *culantro* intermediary–peasant relations are rooted in the historical processes of ‘deep ethnicization’ of markets in the Hill Tracts. Second, Bengali moneylending traders⁴ employ additional measures such as surveillance networks and social sanctions, alongside economic tools, to enforce *dadan* contracts. Third, this research shows that everyday peasant politics involves a complex mixture of strategies whereby individuals are supported by community-based solidarity groups. The struggle for a ‘just price’,⁵ associated with family subsistence, remains at the

4. Typically, Bengali traders and moneylenders are two separate categories and, where this applies, they are identified separately as ‘traders’ and ‘moneylenders’ in this article. However, through the interlocking of product and credit markets, the same individuals can simultaneously take up the role of both trader and moneylender. In such cases, they are referred to here as ‘moneylending traders’.

5. From the peasants’ perspective, the issue of just price relates to how ‘just’ or ‘fair’ the price is that they receive from *culantro* sales in relation to capital investment and open market prices. This is further elaborated on below.

core of everyday peasant politics and points to the notion of ‘contested moralities’.

In the following sections the article outlines the methodology of the study and analyses the conceptual framework for everyday politics that it adopts. It explores the nation-state building processes that shaped ethnic differences in terms of access to and control over markets in the Hill Tracts. It then turns to a detailed study of how *dadan* is linked to the agricultural and social reproduction of Tanchangya peasants; the issue of ‘just price’; and the control measures put in place by Bengali intermediaries. The analysis then examines the everyday politics of peasants in dealing with surplus extraction by these market intermediaries. The article concludes that contested moralities associated with the pursuit of subsistence and contractual obligations shape peasants’ decisions and strategies concerning *dadan* contracts. Thus, by highlighting the everyday dimensions of *dadan* contracts — the pre-eminent role of ethnicity, usage of surveillance networks and social sanctions by moneylending traders, and the situated strategies of peasants, which revolve around the issue of ‘just price’ of *culantro* — the article links debates on everyday politics with economic theories on interlocked markets.

METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic fieldwork from which data are derived was carried out between May and November 2019 as a part of the author’s PhD research. The fieldwork began with participatory observation in the everyday life of the Tanchangya villagers of Meyachara. To provide deeper knowledge about the lifeworld of the villagers, 50 in-depth interviews were conducted in and around Meyachara, using purposive sampling. Participants included local peasants, public representatives, customary leaders, NGO workers and schoolteachers. However, all the interviews cited in the article are those of the peasants. As some peasants also work as agents and activists, additional information has been provided in the text to identify them. Furthermore, in order to understand the connection between local realities of the villagers and the larger context of the country, interviews were also conducted with government officials, political activists, customary chiefs, NGO workers, lawyers and academics in Rangamati and Dhaka.

The author’s positionality as an indigenous researcher hailing from the Hill Tracts worked to his advantage in gaining access to the ‘field’, building trust with the villagers and engaging with them in the inner dialogues of indigenous peoples. While his positionality as an indigenous researcher granted him with ‘insider knowledge’ about the community, his membership of a different ethnic group (Chakma) and affiliation with a university in Germany maintained a certain distance. Such an ambivalent positionality of being an ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ at the same time shaped the processes involving data collection, analysis and the writing of this article.

EVERYDAY POLITICS

The notion of ‘everyday resistance’ (Adas, 1986; Scott, 1985) was a critical departure from conventional understandings of resistance as open, collective and organized confrontations. In highlighting the role of such mundane, dispersed and disguised forms of resistance, it was pointed out that collective and public defiance can be potentially catastrophic for peasants and other subordinate groups. Scholars claim that the survival and effectiveness of everyday acts of resistance are founded on their surreptitious and anonymous nature (Adnan, 2007a; Kerkvliet, 2005). Using Tilly’s (1993) ‘repertoire’ concept, Johansson and Vinthagen (2016: 421) termed these quotidian acts collectively as a ‘repertoire of everyday resistance’, implying ‘a combined result of the interplay between social structures and power relations, as well as activists’ creative experimentation with tactics and experiences of earlier attempts to practise resistance, together with the situational circumstances in which the resistance is played out’. Such acts require little or no organization to ‘embrace, comply with, adjust, and contest norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources’ (Gyapong, 2019: 4). They seem to be particularly critical in contexts such as dadan where subordinate actors are in a relationship of dependency emanating from distinct power positions. These power relations can play out in intersections of arenas, such as ethnicity and class (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016). Nevertheless, anonymous acts do not always go unnoticed and unpunished, because of systems of surveillance and control by dominant actors (*ibid.*).

Building on this literature, this article extrapolates from the situated and dynamic nature of the everyday politics that actors employ from their ‘localized repertoire’, either individually or using informal village-based networks. However, rather than focusing on the differences between discrete acts, this article argues that all interconnected acts — compliance, resistance and avoidance — of the localized repertoire can be taken into consideration. While resistance involves showing dissent against the superordinate, compliance reinforces class and status differences (Kerkvliet, 2009: 233–36), avoidance is ‘the act of not engaging with the space, time or relation where power is exercised’ (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 24). Scholars claim that resistance and compliance are not mutually exclusive concepts; rather, subordinate groups may make use of both depending on time and space (see, for example, Camp, 2004; Kerkvliet, 2009). Therefore, it is important to view strategies such as ‘compliance’, ‘resistance’ or ‘avoidance’ not as either/or choices, but as a combination of situated techniques. Moreover, the possibility of departures from everyday politics cannot be ruled out. Other scholars have delineated how occasional shifts between everyday and organized forms of resistance can take place under special circumstances (e.g., Adnan, 2007a; Lilja et al., 2017). Such exceptional departures, however, can fail due to the lack of organizational network, command structure

and political strategy among subordinated actors (Adnan, 2007a: 220–21). Nevertheless, taking the whole repertoire into consideration can help us understand how the same actor is making use of creative and complex combinations of contradictory acts in dealing with power (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 23–26).

Just as Gupta (2001: 91) critiqued Scott on the potential of everyday acts to make ‘utter shambles of policy’, one should remain cautious against romanticizing the implications of such unorganized acts. These quotidian acts are not aimed at seizing the positions of the dominant classes, but rather at negotiating with those who extract resources from ‘the weak’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2019: 151). They are not intended to collapse structures but rather to ‘erode’ them (ibid.: 153). They are aimed at ‘minor’ yet immediate gains for survival. Indeed, actors perform such acts ‘not as a deliberate political act; rather, they are driven by the force of necessity — the necessity to survive and improve a dignified life’ (Bayat, 2000: 547). This moral drive for survival shapes how subordinate actors view justice vis-à-vis other actors (Scott, 1977). This research is therefore attentive to such acts, and their moral aspects, and not to long-term outcomes. I argue that paying attention to everyday politics is a useful framework for understanding the complexities of dadan contracts, where organized actions rarely take place. It is also important to locate the broader context within which dadan contracts are negotiated, as detailed below.

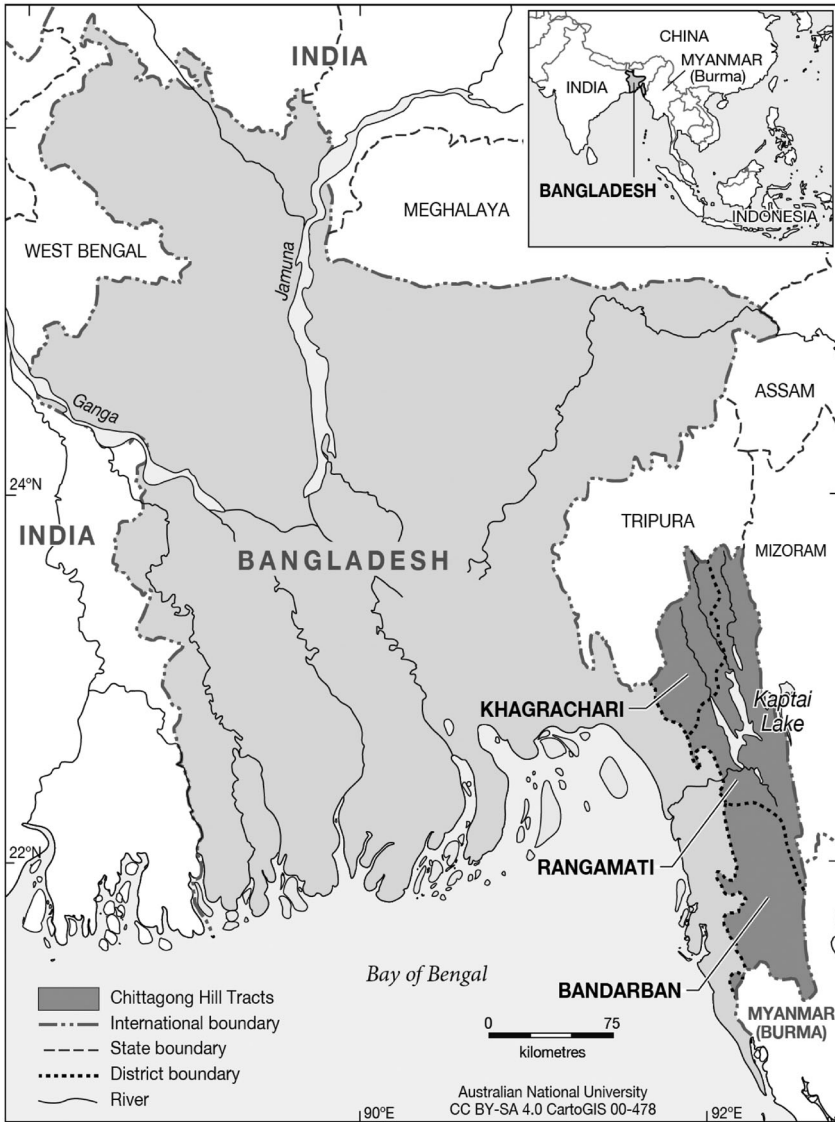
PROCESSES OF ETHNICIZATION OF MARKETS IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Situated in the southeast corner of Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts has a history and features that separate it from the rest of Bangladesh (see Figure 1). The area’s hilly and forested terrains are a complete contrast to the plains of Bangladesh. It is home to 11 indigenous peoples⁶ who are distinct in terms of their languages, cultures and beliefs in comparison to the Bengalis who constitute the country’s majority. Collectively these indigenous groups are known as Pahari (hill) peoples. British colonial policies of isolating the indigenous peoples from Bengalis and promoting nation-building processes based on homogeneous categories by Bangladeshi and Pakistani states led to the construction of dichotomous identities — Bengali versus Pahari Adivasi (indigenous peoples of the hills) (Uddin and Gerharz, 2017: 212). The construction of this dichotomy shaped the processes of ethnicization of markets in the Hill Tracts.

Unlike most of the plains, *jhum* (shifting or slash-and-burn) cultivation was once the main source of livelihood of the indigenous peoples of this

6. Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Marma, Mro, Pankhoa, Tanchangya and Tripura.

Figure 1. Chittagong Hill Tracts.



Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/chittagong-hill-tracts-bangladesh>

region (Lewin, 1869: 13). This jhum-centred way of life was grounded on community solidarity, reciprocity and redistributive practices that served as insurance in times of crises and exigencies (Adnan, 2004: 153; CHT Commission , 1991: 49; Mohsin, 2002: 81–87). The land was ‘owned’ by the

community, while selection and demarcation of land for each family was done in agreement with fellow villagers and the headman. All major activities related to farming — including slashing and burning the vegetation, fire management, sowing seeds and harvesting — required considerable labour and were done by mutually assisting working groups (Mohsin, 2002: 82). This subsistence-oriented mode of production required very limited market participation (Shelley, 1992: 81).

The jhum economy experienced dramatic shifts due to colonial policies. In 1787, the Chakma chief of the region agreed to pay a cash tribute (replacing the previous payment in cotton) to the East India Company (Shahabuddin, 2018: 230–34). The need for readily available cash led indigenous peoples to borrow from Bengali moneylenders and merchants from the plains, which accelerated the processes of commercialization, monetization and indebtedness of the hill economy (Adnan, 2004: 20; Mey, 1984: 19; Shahabuddin, 2018: 233). Soon after the British annexation of the Hill Tracts in 1860, Bengali traders and moneylenders were able to monopolize all major financial transactions in the region (Mey, 1984: 20; Shahabuddin, 2018: 234). Colonial administrator Thomas Lewin (1869: 25–26) noted the very exploitative nature of Bengali traders and moneylenders.

This indebtedness and the marginalized position of indigenous peoples in the Hill Tracts' economic spaces were aggravated by the promotion of plough cultivation from 1868 onwards (Mey, 1984: 76–79; Mohsin, 2002: 83). While indigenous peoples were not accustomed to plough cultivation, its introduction facilitated an importation of Bengali sharecroppers and other craftsmen with the requisite skills and technologies (Adnan, 2004: 21; Mohsin, 2002: 81–87; Sophor, 1964: 108). As plough cultivation began to yield surpluses, it was apparent that indigenous peoples did not have the market mechanism to dispose of agricultural products, facilitating the emergence of a class of Bengali middlemen (Shelley, 1992: 66). Bengali traders began to provide *dadan* contracts for different agricultural products (Mey, 1996: 116). During this time there was an increase in the number of bazaars (marketplaces), which were almost entirely in the hands of Bengali traders (Mey, 1996: 130; Shelley, 1992: 81–82).

The introduction of private rights as a part of the plough cultivation scheme created some cracks in the community-based land rights systems, thus facilitating a greater acceptance of Bengali credit systems associated with land and product markets among indigenous peoples (Mey, 1984: 79; Mohsin, 2002: 88). These developments led the British officials to formulate policies to control moneylending and in-migration of Bengalis, including through the promulgation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 which became effective on 1 May that year (Government of Bangladesh, 1971: 138–39, 171–72; Mohsin, 2002: 32–34). But such 'protective' measures had little effect, and since then Bengali businessmen have emerged as a class that was 'in absolute control of all monetary and credit transaction in the hills' (Mey, 1984: 79).

The 'protective' measures of the British were withdrawn and processes of 'opening up' of the Hill Tracts were accelerated some years after the formation of the state of Pakistan in 1947. This led to an influx of Bengali traders and moneylenders into the region who gradually tightened their grip on the hill economies (ibid.: 24–26). The state project of 'uplifting' the 'backward' and 'primitive' hill economies into the 'national mainstream' was implemented together with some large-scale 'development' initiatives (see, for example, the Karnaphuli Hydroelectric Project⁷) that resulted in the uprooting and displacement of many indigenous peoples (Adnan, 2004: 24; CHT Commission and IWGIA, 1991: 62; Mey, 1984: 102).

The processes of ethnicization were further reinforced after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. The denial of indigenous political leaders' demands for autonomy and recognition of their rights by Bengali national leaders led to a period of tension. This eventually resulted in a protracted armed resistance of indigenous rebel forces led by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS — the CHT United Peoples' Party) from the mid-1970s. The state responded with full-scale counter-insurgency measures through deployment of the military (Shelley, 1992: 133). A massive Bengali transmigration programme was incorporated in the counter-insurgency measures as a strategy of demographic engineering through increasing the population of Bengalis in the region (Adnan, 2007b: 13). A range of economic measures was introduced, including integrating Hill Tracts economies with 'the mainstream', and promoting trade, commerce and industry (Arens, 1997: 1816; Gerharz, 2017: 141–43; Shelley, 1992: 135). Over the past four decades, state policies have been targeted at cash crop production which have increased the dependency of indigenous peoples on market economies over which they barely have any control (Adnan, 2004: 115–28; Arens, 1997: 1814).

The indigenous insurgency formally ended in 1997 through the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, a peace agreement that enshrines protection of rights and acceleration of 'development' of the populations of the region. Soon microcredit was introduced as a part of development interventions. However, Bengali traders and moneylenders continued to play a dominant role in providing loans to indigenous peoples (Adnan, 2004: 136). Dadan offered by Bengali moneylending traders served as a major credit arrangement in different agricultural sectors of the Hill Tracts (ibid.: 70). Such a consolidation of ethnically differentiated market engagement determines the current processes of everyday negotiations that take place in the culantro sector.

7. The construction of the Kaptai Dam, built on the Karnaphuli River in the heart of the Hill Tracts by the Pakistan government in 1963, displaced more than 100,000 indigenous peoples.

AGRO-SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE NEED FOR CREDIT IN MEYACHARA

Meyachara is a village of nearly 100 families. It is situated a few kilometres away from Ghagara Bazaar, a small yet important crossroads connecting three hill districts of the Hill Tracts region as well as the port city of Chittagong, thus serving as a melting pot for indigenous growers as well as predominantly Bengali market intermediaries. Smallholder peasants constitute the village's majority, alongside some petty entrepreneurs and government and NGO workers. Although originally a community of jhum cultivators, the drive to secure subsistence and to meet shifting market demands led the villagers of Meyachara to experiment with different cash crops in the hill slopes as well as some valley lands. Culantro has been a major crop for the livelihood of Tanchangya agriculturalists over the past two decades. It is now mainly grown in valley plots through a form of polyculture⁸ involving a mix of vegetables.

Culantro is a labour-intensive crop, requiring high capital investment. The investment in land rental depends on whether a family has enough land to farm culantro every year, after mandatory rotation with rice, which is required for regenerating soil quality. The question of how much land is sufficient depends on various factors (for example, family size and off-farm income), although plots of two *kanis* (0.8 acre) or above are generally considered adequate for rotation. Therefore, most peasant families meet their needs through a yearly land rental arrangement named *aga-wah*. Under this arrangement, they enjoy usufruct rights over the land for a season in exchange for a competitive market price. The lessors are families from the same, or from a neighbouring, village with 'more than enough' land or who are willing to lease (for example, due to urgent cash needs). Occasionally, cultivable lands are secured through long-term lease contracts called *bondhok* whereby land is mortgaged for cash, usually for several years. Under *bondhok*, the lessee enjoys usufruct rights over the plot for an agreed period and the lessor can rescue the land at the end of the period by repaying the loan.

Culantro seeds often require an even higher capital investment than land. At the start of the season (December/January) valley peasants procure these seed grains from cultivators growing culantro on hill slopes mainly for seeds. Because the whole culantro plant is sold, it is often not possible for the valley cultivators to preserve their own seeds for reproduction, except when one can grow culantro in the hills for the purpose of seeds. The third largest share of the production costs of culantro is spent on employing labour. Although the introduction of herbicides some years ago significantly reduced the need for manual weeding, several rounds of weeding are still required throughout the season. Additionally, during each harvest round⁹ a one-kani

8. Polyculture is a form of agriculture where several crops are simultaneously cultivated.

9. There can be three to five harvest rounds depending on the farm.

(0.4 acre) plot requires the labour of 8–12 workers for 4–5 days. Women from within and outside the village supply the labour, in exchange for a generally accepted daily wage rate of BDT 250 (US\$ 2.40). Total costs related to soil preparation, erection of sheds, fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, along with the above-mentioned expenses, amount to around BDT 100,000 for a one-kani plot. The decision to farm culantro thus rests on whether a peasant family has been able to secure enough capital either from its own or outside sources.

Despite having diversified strategies of farm and off-farm income generation, funds from such earnings are not enough for agricultural and social reproduction for many families. Virtually every family in Meyachara has borrowed some form of credit in recent years, from both formal and informal sources. Loans taken for agricultural purposes are not necessarily invested in agricultural production, but can be used for meeting urgent consumption needs, exigencies, acquiring assets, small businesses and investment in human capital. As observed elsewhere (Aliber, 2015; Islam, 2010), despite having access to ‘institutional’ sources of credit, such as NGOs, banks and specialized state interventions,¹⁰ ‘informal’ dadan credit is popular among the peasants of Meyachara.

In interviews, peasants from the village described several hindrances to accessing institutional credit. Depending on the credit source, these challenges concern collateral, processing time, formalities, bribes and networks. Although microcredit is easily accessible, the repayment regimes imposed by NGOs involving regular cash instalments are extremely difficult for culantro cultivators to meet since the bulk of their cash income becomes available only at the end of the production season (April/May) after the sale of the harvest. No other sources of credit can provide comparable flexibility and certainty of purchase and renewal of loans compared to the moneylending traders. Dadan requires little formality as it is mainly based on the interpersonal relationship and trust between peasants and intermediaries. Thus, while charity, gifts and reciprocity practices among the villagers provide minimum support in meeting various needs, recourse to dadan loans enables peasant families to mobilize major capital requirements for agricultural and social reproduction.

DADAN CONTRACTS AND ‘JUST PRICE’

With the gradual rise of demand for culantro in wider national markets and increased capacities of production due to the introduction of new

10. For example, loans from the Bangladesh Rural Development Board and the Amar Bari Amar Khamar project (a Bangladesh government social welfare programme designed to reduce rural poverty in Bangladesh through small loans).

agricultural technologies,¹¹ a growing number of Bengali line¹² intermediaries from surrounding urban areas have emerged as providers of dadan loans to Tanchangya peasants. This emergence of dadan in the culantro sector was also facilitated by two major state interventions in the 2000s — electricity connections and brick roads. Villagers collectively contributed the necessary ‘bribe’ money, and local leaders, particularly Union Parishad (Union Council)¹³ representatives, led the processes of achieving these developments by lobbying higher-level bureaucrats and politicians. While electricity allowed for expanded irrigation, the brick road facilitated the marketing of culantro. Thus, despite disruptions in some years caused by poor quality seeds in 2011–12 and flash floods in 2017, the dadan arrangement continues to grow in the culantro sector.

Loan advances are usually offered around the time seeds are procured (in December and January). The volume of seeds sown often serves as the basis of estimating the amount of credit issued. Although there is no fixed standard in this regard, a higher volume of seeds facilitates the possibility of more credit. Aside from seeds, the costs of land, labour and other inputs may also motivate borrowing. Peasants also ask for loans during the ‘lean period’ (March to April — the months before harvesting) and in times of emergency. A dadan contract is an oral agreement between a peasant family and a line intermediary whereby the former receives a monetary advance from the latter with the obligation to sell the produce to the intermediary as the condition of loan repayment. There is no explicit interest applied to the money borrowed, but once advances are received, the borrower is obliged to sell culantro to the intermediary at ‘negotiated’ rates, rather than open market rates, until advances are fully repaid.

These artificially set prices are *always* below competitive rates of local marketplaces (such as the bazaars of Ghagara and Ranihat). This differential poses the question of the ‘justness’ of the prices received by peasants. Locally, the justness of the price is understood from two viewpoints. The first is whether the prices received by peasants give them a viable margin above the cost incurred in producing the crop. Despite having a low margin, a price of BDT 50–60 per kg or above is considered ‘viable’. While this consideration applies to all peasants, the second specifically concerns the dadan takers. How wide is the gap between the open market and line prices? Since intermediaries do not charge any explicit interest for their advances, a generally accepted price differential is a maximum of BDT 10 per kg below the

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11. A major technological advance has been a herbicide named Panida which significantly reduces labour cost for weeding, while increasing the capacity of peasant families to handle larger plots for culantro production.
 12. Locally, ‘line’ implies the market space created by dadan-providing Bengali intermediaries. Bengali intermediaries who provide dadan loans are known as line intermediaries, while other Bengali intermediaries are known as non-line intermediaries.
 13. The lowest governance unit in Bangladesh.

market rate. This is generally considered 'just', while any differential above this ceiling is regarded by the peasants as 'unjust' and tantamount to 'exploitation'. During the harvest season in 2019, the gap between open market and line rates per kg was almost always higher than the accepted differential of BDT 10. In some weeks, the price difference was as high as BDT 70 per kg. Such intensity of exploitation leads one to ask how, and why, intermediaries can sustain their domination in the market despite unduly lowering the price paid to the indebted *culantro* cultivators.

CONTROL MECHANISMS

The Bengali intermediaries do not reside in and around Meyachara but come from surrounding urban centres. Nevertheless, routine interactions with peasants in the arena of dadan lead these intermediaries to develop certain economic and extra-economic mechanisms to maintain their surveillance and control over peasants. These mechanisms involve peasants themselves, market mechanisms, political actors and credit. The most visible mechanism that has developed is the network of employees of intermediaries. Virtually all the activities under dadan cycles are facilitated by intermediaries' 'agents', who are assisted by wage workers and auto-rickshaw drivers. Often these employees are themselves indigenous peasants from the same villages as dadan takers. The job responsibilities of agents include assisting in screening of peasant borrowers, dadan payment and recovery, keeping track of transactions, and the day-to-day supply of *culantro* from the dadan takers. They are also responsible for keeping an eye on fellow peasants to ensure their compliance with the terms of the dadan contracts. Thus, they serve as the first line of surveillance over the dadan borrowers. Despite enduring the routine domination of the intermediaries as their employers, these agents seem to remain largely loyal in carrying out their everyday duties. However, this loyalty is not blind submission to the authority of the intermediaries, especially since these actors are involved with not one but multiple social relations.

While the role of these employees is aimed at the smooth functioning of the dadan cycle, interpersonal relationships between dadan takers and intermediaries develop mainly through direct interactions. Their everyday interactions at various rural sites contribute to the reproduction of their interpersonal relationships. Occasional invites, visits and gifts further cement these relations. Some peasants cherish their memories of rare visits by intermediaries to their homes and sharing meals together. Notably, intermediaries are astute enough not to forget to invite 'their' peasants on major religious or social occasions. They even make the necessary arrangements so that their peasants do not miss out on such occasions. As one local villager called Badhan explained: 'He [the intermediary] has become like a family member. He visits us sometimes. We visited his home in Chittagong recently on

the occasion of Eid, after he had invited us. He even arranged a car for us. We did not have to pay any fare'. Such expressions of gratitude are rooted in the economic and ethnic differences between these actors. However, peasants understand that these invitations cannot be attributed to pure friendship, generosity or religiosity, but rather are issued to maintain (commercial) relations. As Shova, another local villager, noted: 'If we don't get meat [from a sacrificed animal during Eid], they would ask whether we have got [meat] or not. Ever since I moved [married in] to this community, they [husband and other peasants] have been visiting ['their' intermediary's home] during Eid. They invite peasants. Bengalis maintain that relationship. They know it very well'.

Secondly, the intermediaries use market mechanisms to maintain their control. The culantro market is largely monopolized by Bengali intermediaries, constituting an integral part of the broader process of ethnicization of market participation in the Hill Tracts. Bengali businessmen exclusively dominate the broader national markets, where participation requires high levels of capital, familiarity with complex market networks and various requisite skills. These resources and skills remain unattainable for most indigenous persons from the rural Hill Tracts. As a result, the role of indigenous peasants in the culantro supply chain is limited to handing in their produce to the Bengali intermediaries. In contrast, large amounts of culantro procured from the Kawkhali–Kaptai–Rangamati Sadar belt are transported everyday by Bengali traders to different parts of the country. Thus, Bengali traders have established themselves as essential gateways for the channelling of culantro to broader markets. This discrepancy in accessing broader markets allows the intermediaries to keep line prices below open market rates using the excuse of *arat* or dealer prices of culantro. An *arat* is a large wholesale market for fresh produce found in bigger cities like Dhaka and Chittagong that serves as the key point of the supply chain for different agricultural products. Fresh produce from across the country reaches *arats* every day for pooling and further distribution. Since Tanchangya peasants do not have any direct participation in *arats*, they have no mechanism to monitor and challenge the claims of intermediaries concerning *arat* prices. Locally, despite internal differences and competition, the dadan-providing intermediaries maintain one single agreed-upon (line) rate for culantro. Intermediaries claim that this collectively determined rate is required to maintain 'stability'.

However, peasants claim that this collusive price-setting mechanism is the key to keeping the rate paid to them low. They blame intermediaries for having a cartel of buyers — a 'syndicate' — to maintain the low price paid to cultivators. As Ananda, a peasant farmer and local villager, clarified: 'It is the intermediaries who decide the price of culantro. I sold for BDT 60 and BDT 50 for two days, and then the culantro price dropped. Intermediaries can just do a "hello" [speak over phone] and maintain a "syndicate" to keep the price down'. Indeed, according to peasants, this price does not change

immediately if there is a rise in open market prices but it drops as soon as market prices drop. Even when the price continues to rise in open markets, intermediaries first monitor for at least a week before raising the rate. Even then, this raise is rarely proportionate to open market rates. The goal is clear — to maintain a considerably higher margin of profit for the intermediaries based on lowering the price paid to the indebted peasants compared to the open market rates.

Thirdly, there is control involving political actors. When regular measures fail to keep *dadan* takers ‘under control’, and a breach of contract by peasants leads to bitter conflicts, intermediaries may consider social and economic sanctions to ‘teach a lesson’ to the recalcitrant peasants. An extreme mechanism in this regard is invoking *salish-bichar* (local arbitration) to ‘set a precedent’. While *salish-bichar* can take place at the village level, intermediaries prefer to take them to the level of political party members.¹⁴ These arbitrations led by political activists are different from normative *salish-bichar*, based on customary practices of dispute resolution (Adnan, 1997). Intermediaries prefer to involve indigenous political activists, because the judgements issued by the latter are often in their favour, while the cultivators accused of breaching their contracts can be easily persuaded to comply with the rulings due to political pressure. Although these political activists have diverse socio-economic backgrounds, being parts of wider political networks, they hold and can exercise power over peasants. Their rulings often involve (forced) return of the credit taken.

In their ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990) Tanchangya peasants express their frustration over such arbitrations. As Kumar, a peasant farmer, lamented: ‘If they [intermediaries] go to them [political activists] and an arbitration is staged, you have to repay the [*dadan*] money even by selling or keeping land or trees or whatever as mortgage [*bondhok*]. Do they [activists] understand the plight of the peasants?’ Kumar’s question reflects the peasant version of morality whereby peasants are forced to breach contracts because intermediaries violate the ‘moral economy’ of the peasant (Scott, 1977) by appropriating surplus through the imposition of ‘unjust’ prices, threatening their subsistence. On the other hand, political activists focus on moral obligations inherent in *dadan* contracts — that is, once one enters a contract, one is obliged to comply with the agreed terms. Shyam, a peasant farmer and activist, claimed that there are shortfalls on both sides: ‘When the price became BDT 60, the intermediaries were offering us BDT 40. On that side, intermediaries use such tricks. The peasants also use some tricks. When *culantro* is cheap, they want higher price and when the price is higher, they may supply outside (to non-line intermediaries). Thus, both sides have some faults’. Peasants believe that arbitrations are linked to the

14. Members of local chapters of PCJSS, sometimes together with members of the Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jatiya Party.

issue of *chanda*¹⁵ that intermediaries pay to some political parties. To defend high price differentials, intermediaries often argue that they have to recover the money that they have to pay every year as tolls and *chanda* to the Union Party, bazaar authorities and political parties. Each intermediary claims to pay BDT 200,000–300,000 every year. Political party members consulted, however, claim that the total amount is not above BDT 30,000–40,000. Whatever may be the amount, peasants express their resentment at being burdened with having to fund such ‘extortions’ through the lowering of prices received from intermediaries compared to the corresponding open market prices.

A final control mechanism involves perpetuation of credit. Each intermediary has money readily available for *dadan* loans, for ‘his’ existing, and particularly ‘good’ peasants, and when available, for new ones. While having access to easy credit is undoubtedly an advantage, ready availability puts peasants in recurrent loops of *dadan* contracts, resulting in perpetual indebtedness among them. As Shyam explained: ‘What the intermediary does is he would give money — take as much as you need. Thus, he keeps the peasants stuck’. The phrase ‘keeping stuck’ denotes that most *dadan* contracts do not terminate with the end of a *culantro* season but are carried forward to the next season, thus perpetuating the indebtedness among peasants. Bhaduri (1986: 268) refers to this situation as ‘borrower’s risk’ as opposed to ‘lender’s risk’ found in conventional literature on credit. Moti, a peasant farmer and an agent, noted: ‘there is always some money due from the previous periods. We cannot end collecting the old [*dadan*] money because peasants fail to repay all’. Peasants may fail to repay advances for different reasons including crop failure, price fluctuation and family needs. Vanu, a peasant farmer, explained why peasants usually remain ‘stuck’ to one particular intermediary:

If we are able, ending transactions [with one intermediary] is not a problem. When we are done [repaying] with one intermediary, we are free to go to another. We can then sell to anybody we want. But we are not able to do that because we experience loss. Last time I experienced *gula* [*culantro* disease]. Then I experienced sickness of my younger son. If the capital is lost like that, how can you repay the money?

Thus, the failure to repay loans is a major contributor to ‘perpetual indebtedness’. One failure can lead to further borrowing, usually from the same moneylending traders. As a major share of the income from harvest is almost immediately taken away as loan repayment, many peasants have to renew loans, often leaving them heavily indebted (Bhaduri, 1973: 122).

Moreover, there is a ‘voluntary’ aspect to this failure. Intermediaries rarely put pressure on cultivators for repayment of the total amount, and

15. ‘Chanda’ can mean ‘subscription’, ‘contribution’ and ‘extortion money’. Here *chanda* implies money demanded by local political parties. Political activists claim that *chanda* is a ‘voluntary contribution’ in support of their political programmes, while the state labels it as ‘extortion’.

even reissue additional credit, provided peasants continue to supply culantro to them. Taking advantage of this, some peasants may deliberately choose not to repay the whole amount. The attitude is: 'Let there be some due. I will get more when I ask'. Rather than creating pressure, intermediaries even encourage their 'good' clients to keep some amount due in order to keep their businesses as usual. As Julu, another peasant farmer, explained: 'Well, I am your permanent client; will you ever like to lose me? You are making money because of me. That is the benefit if we don't repay. Some [intermediaries] may say, "don't repay the whole amount"'.

THE REPERTOIRE OF EVERYDAY POLITICS

This nexus of surplus extraction, dependence and perpetual indebtedness raises questions concerning whether or how peasants should engage with dadan. In this regard, they display divergence of perspectives and possible strategies towards dadan due to differences in their socio-economic positions and relations. The repertoire of their possible options can be analysed in terms of compliance, covert resistance, avoidance and open confrontation.

Compliance

Like any other contract, entering a dadan contract implies that the parties involved are obligated to comply with the terms. That is, an intermediary provides money in advance, while the dadan-taking peasant supplies all of her/his crop to this intermediary throughout the season while repaying the loan. When there is repayment outstanding, the debt and associated obligations of the parties are automatically carried forward to the following season(s). Therefore, along with this perpetuity of indebtedness, the obligations to comply are also perpetuated. This also implies continuity of clientelist relationships, and hence power differences, between the dadan taker and the dadan provider. Despite high price variations, most peasants enter the contract and comply with the terms. This compliance is due not only to the controls mentioned above, but also for some practical reasons. First, it is hard for those families who grow larger volumes of culantro to sell in open marketplaces, where sales take place in relatively smaller volumes. Depending on the harvest round¹⁶ and quality of the crop, anywhere between 800 and 1,800 kg of culantro can be harvested from a one-kani plot in each round. It is easier for larger cultivators to supply to line intermediaries than to sell in marketplaces, not least because pickup takes place conveniently at the farm gate: it is a real hardship to carry hundreds of culantro bunches by auto-rickshaw to marketplaces before dawn on bazaar days (Saturday and

16. Harvest volume varies in each round.

Wednesday). Second, larger growers find it beneficial to enter *dadan* contracts because they offer relative security in terms of demand. Usually, line intermediaries accept whatever amount a family can supply in a given harvest round. Contrarily, non-line intermediaries, having no contractual obligation to accept, may stop accepting *culantro* at any time, especially when there is an abrupt drop in demand. For this reason, larger growers prefer accepting price differentials to risky sales. As Julu explained:

If we take [*dadan*], transactions with intermediaries continue. The business is not for one day. Now I am getting BDT 10 less than other people. Even if I get BDT 10 more (from non-line intermediaries), where would I supply my *culantro* to? After taking for half a day, they may not take my *culantro* anymore. We cannot say anything if the price goes down. But the line intermediary is bound to take. Why? Because I have transactions with him.

A final reason behind compliance is the moral obligation of keeping a promise. Some peasants highlighted this and the importance of complying with the terms because they have borrowed money and given their word they will repay that money. As Vanu, a peasant farmer, stated: 'Even if the price is not good enough, I always give to the [line] intermediary. ... Those who do not want to break trust, they supply *culantro* to [line] intermediaries'.

Nevertheless, compliance here does not mean absolute submission. *Dadan* takers can negotiate a raise in the rate before each harvest round begins. Most do this privately, while some do so in public. Even when intermediaries agree to raise prices, however, they never do so in terms of price per kg, because the news of a rise per kg by one intermediary affects the line price as a whole. As Aungshu, a peasant farmer, clarified: 'if the intermediary increases for me, and someone else gets this news, others will also ask for raise. ... Everyone's rate has to be increased. Then he would fall in trouble. That's why intermediaries do not allow that easily'. For this reason, in the event an intermediary agrees to a raise for an individual peasant, it is usually in the form of a lump sum or 'comfort' money. Aungshu expanded on his statement: 'when asked, intermediaries would offer, say, BDT 1,000 or 2,000 for "tea". It is up to that level. They give this money as consolation. But asking would not result in an increase of BDT 10 per kilogram'. Notably, even a small raise is never automatic but depends largely on the bargaining power and loyalty of peasants. Having the ability to supply *culantro* in bulk gives larger growers more bargaining power than smaller cultivators.

Covert Resistance

Although all contracts are intended to be complied with, not every peasant ultimately complies with the terms. Despite being aware of control and surveillance measures and the consequences of non-compliance, and even being generally loyal, some peasants occasionally choose to break their contracts. This is done in the form of surreptitious sales of *culantro* to non-line

intermediaries at the farm gates or in marketplaces and can happen after failing to get a favourable outcome in price negotiations with the contractual lender. This situation arises especially when open market prices soar, while the line rate either remains unchanged or increases disproportionately. When this happens, non-line intermediaries appear frequently and approach potential cultivators, irrespective of their dadan status. The news of a price hike spreads fast through village information systems and can lure dadan-taking peasants to sell their produce to these non-line intermediaries at higher rates.

Such surreptitious sales are privately negotiated, one-off and veiled under the cover of anonymity. They are often assisted by informal networks of fellow peasants, friends and kin. Village community members generally maintain a 'collective silence' concerning such transactions. Consequently, cases in which the news of such 'secret business' reaches intermediaries, and consequences follow, are exceptions rather than everyday phenomena. As Mantu, a peasant farmer and an agent, admitted: 'We keep them [transactions] secret, so the intermediary does not know about that even if someone sells [surreptitiously]. If we don't inform, how would he know!'. Agents were all aware of such cases but very few of them resulted in any repercussions from intermediaries, potentially indicating the ignorance of line intermediaries about them. Thus, this 'secret business' ostensibly delineates the presence of strong intra-community solidarity that supersedes patron-client relationships between intermediaries and peasants. As solidarity is 'a feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility which promotes mutual support' (Wilde, 2007: 171), peasants cannot easily deny community solidarity built on kinship, friendship and other societal ties. Moreover, such acts of covert resistance are safeguarded by the pragmatism of selling only a portion, not the entire harvest. As Amitav, another peasant farmer, told us:

It is common that peasants don't supply their entire produce 'outside'. In order to conceal the share that is sold, as well as to keep contacts with [line] intermediaries, we supply a share to [line] intermediaries. ... Some on this side [line] and some on that side [non-line]. But not supplying to them [line intermediaries] whatsoever is a problem. They would mind. They may do something [to 'teach a lesson'].

A second form of covert resistance is selling negligible amounts of culantro in bazaars at competitive rates on bazaar days. Such 'nibbling away' usually escapes the notice of line intermediaries. If this practice is noticed, or someone is 'busted', peasants can always claim that they have been forced to take some culantro to bazaar in exchange for money to purchase essentials (*bazaar khoroch*) because the rate offered by their line intermediary is too low to meet the consumption needs of the family. Additionally, in the event of a confrontation, the argument of a peasant's 'residual' rights over the farm can also be made. As Julita, a farmer and local villager, stated: 'Even though there is an agreement, he has not bought my entire farm with BDT 50,000. But one cannot sell all [produce]. She/he must sell them in small volumes. He would not say anything if it were five or ten kilos'. No case was observed

where such piecemeal resistance led to conflicts. Surreptitious sales can be related to the argument of a ‘subsistence ethic’ (Scott, 1977: 13–34). This imperative to ensure subsistence pushes some peasants to violate the moral obligations under *dadán* contracts and to be ‘immoral’. Vanu summarized as follows:

Peasants cannot survive if they act simply. The peasant owes money to the workers and a lot of money to the intermediary. She/he must pay to the workers because they have to survive as well. In such situations, the peasant becomes embarrassed because she/he must pay to the workers, and she/he has to feed her/his family too. Then what she/he does is supplies surreptitiously. Peasants normally do not like to do that.

Thus, surreptitious sales delineate a situation of competing moralities — the obligation of saving family, versus the obligation to comply with contractual terms. Poor peasants simultaneously deal with the material realities and the norms and expectations of being a ‘good’ peasant (Ripoll, 2022: 1574).

Avoidance

Over recent years, most peasants have borrowed through *dadán*, while a handful of families have never entered such contracts. Some of those who previously borrowed may also have skipped *dadán* in some seasons by supplementing funds from other sources. The aim is simple — to augment family income by avoiding price differentials. As Sunil, a peasant farmer, explained: ‘We have never taken *dadán*. You will get the answer if you do some calculations. This year, I have supplied for three rounds. In these three rounds, I have made about BDT 50,000 additional’. When peasants are free from *dadán*, they enjoy the flexibility of monitoring changes in local market rates and making decisions accordingly. Sunil elaborated:

I supplied for five days at BDT 65. Because the price was rising, I said to the intermediary that there is no more *culantro* left. Thus, I cancelled this intermediary. Then I approached another intermediary. I supplied about 350 kg at BDT 75 to him. Then I said that the crops had been finished. Then I supplied to another one. I supplied to him about 256 kg at BDT 80.

Such practices are contingent upon the shrewd and pragmatic actions of peasants, making use of informal networks, and their ‘haggling’ skills. They are structured to take advantage of price changes in the open market and the freedom to switch from one trader to another to achieve higher returns. However, those that avoid taking *dadán* contracts find it difficult to deliver their product. While line intermediaries have the necessary arrangements in place to ensure smooth collection of the product, those that do not participate in *dadán* contracts often have to make own arrangements. As local villager and peasant farmer Sanjib argued: ‘It is easy for them [*dadán* takers] because their labour is less, while ours is more because we have to carry and sell them in the market. On the other hand, they just speak over phone

and agents come to take from here'. For this reason, peasants without dadan contracts who have larger plots prefer to sell at the farm gates. By contrast, those with smaller plots (0.2 acre or less) are in a position of relative advantage due to their 'smallness'. They can harvest culantro and take suitable amounts of the herb to the marketplace and trade at the best available price.

From the credit point of view, those who avoid dadan must cope with the lack of readily available credit from a wealthy patron who can provide insurance in times of crises and exigencies. Every year dadan avoiders may have to muddle through during the 'lean season', which coincides with lavish celebrations of Bishu, the largest social festival. Whereas dadan takers can meet their additional cash needs with dadan, those without a dadan contract may need to revise their consumption pattern during this time. As Sunil explained: 'I tell my wife that if we can survive for two months ("lean period"), we don't need anything else. Perhaps we will eat rice with salt or meat/fish once in a while only, but we will still be able to live. If we take [dadan], we will be doomed'. Those that avoid dadan mainly rely on institutional sources with relatively easy terms (for example, the Amar Bari Amar Khamar project mentioned above) to meet their credit needs.

Open Confrontation

The above analysis shows that even in the context of high exploitation, the complex situation of domination, dependence and indebtedness leaves little room for open confrontations. In recent years, peasants reported open confrontations only when some (undefined) 'lines' were crossed, and negotiation attempts turned into irreconcilable conflicts. Such sporadic incidents occurred in relation to prices, surreptitious delivery and, occasionally, denial of additional dadan loans. Such instances of conflict are often at the interpersonal level. The ultimate consequence of such rare confrontations is the break-up of relationships. Peasants then either switch to other intermediaries or stop selling to line intermediaries. Generally, peasants do not wish to be involved with public confrontations because of the inconveniences associated with credit and product delivery. Such conflicts are not supported by community norms, and being associated with an open conflict may result in a loss of respect. For example, in October 2019, Shimul, an NGO worker, became involved in an argument with Kudrat, the family dadan provider, in relation to 'surreptitious sales' made by his father Kumar. Kumar claimed that the sales were a 'protest' against Kudrat's denial of an additional BDT 20,000 as dadan that he had asked for. This resulted in some villagers criticizing Shimul in a village shop for having been involved in a dispute while he himself was not involved with farming. Moreover, non-repayment of dadan as 'overt resistance' is barely an option as there is a dominant morality among villagers in which repayment of debt is expected, and those who do not adhere to that, stand to lose respect within their own

community. As Kumar explained: ‘How can you not repay [a loan]? You will not get respect. You will not get friends’.

The only reported instance of collective public action was a ‘strike’ in 2014 that involved a large number of Meyachara peasants. Some joined openly, while others did so covertly. The strike occurred as a protest at the refusal of their demand for a raise in the line rate. The pickets were successful in preventing Meyachara villagers from supplying culantro for four to five days. Then some poor peasants and agents resumed supplying culantro claiming that they needed money for food and essentials. As Aungshu, one of the strike organizers, explained: ‘Some farmed one small *goda* (0.1 acre) only. They said, “You are feeling well! Where would I get money if I do not supply produce tomorrow? If I stop supplying for a week, where would I get money from? What will I eat?”’. Thus, the threat to the subsistence of poorer peasants emerged as a major obstacle against this collective resistance. As a result, the strike had little effect on the overall supply of culantro and ultimately ended with a minor raise in the line price as a kind of consolation. Peasants blamed the lack of unity among them as a failure in organization of collective actions. Aungshu claimed: ‘The live frogs cannot be weighed in one scale. If you put one on it, another jumps out. We are like that’. This lack of unity can be attributed to internal differences among peasants, in relation to resource endowment, and dependence on and loyalty to intermediaries, as well as atomistic competition among peasants to sell on the market or to gain a long-term clientelist relationship with a particular moneylending trader.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented here shows contestations of power between Tanchangya peasants and Bengali intermediaries over *dadán* in the culantro sector. By drawing on the everyday dynamics of such loan contracts, this article has argued that *dadán* facilitates greater spaces for exploitation, while it leaves peasants dependent on intermediaries for credit and product supply. The struggle over ‘just price’ remains at the core of this ‘symbiotic’ relationship of power. Furthermore, it is argued that moving beyond a purely economic analysis, *dadán* relations need to be historically situated and embedded within wider socio-cultural-political contexts. The specific context of the Hill Tracts, where ethnicity plays a pre-eminent role, adds some interesting insights to our understanding regarding *dadán*. Through the primary ethnographic research conducted in this study, the everyday dynamics of *dadán* contracts in the culantro sector reveal new insights. First, the domination of Bengali intermediaries over Tanchangya peasants involves a combination of economic and social measures, such as the monopoly and control of intermediaries over product and credit markets to allow artificially distressed culantro prices to exist, while surveillance networks and

socio-political sanctions enforce the terms of dadan contracts. Second, differences in terms of economic class cut across the ethnic divide, which is particularly evident in the collaborative role of indigenous peasants as surveillance agents of Bengali moneylending traders. Third, everyday peasant politics involves compliance, resistance and avoidance by individuals and community-based solidarity groups. Peasants display strong community solidarity by offering mutual assistance and maintaining 'collective silence' about surreptitious breaches of contracts by individual actors. Their micro-political everyday politics points to competing moral obligations associated with the pursuit of subsistence and agreed terms of dadan contracts that shape their decisions. Thus, this case widens the debates concerning everyday politics, a notion usually employed in subaltern, sociological and anthropological studies, by the novel connecting of everyday politics with economic theories on interlocked markets.

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