Agriculture, Knowledge and Society: Insights from Medieval Bengali Literary Sources

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The history of agriculture is often narrated through the language of economics, state policy, and technological changes. Yet, some of the most revealing insights into agrarian societies emerge not from administrative records or royal chronicles, but from literary sources. In Bengal, medieval literary traditions from *Chandimangal* and *Shivayan* to the *Maimansingha Gitika* and *Charjapada* preserve a remarkably detailed account of agricultural life. Beneath stories of gods, merchants, heroes, and romance lies another narrative: the story of farmers, crops, irrigation systems, seasonal rhythms, and rural communities that sustained one of South Asia's most fertile regions.

Bengal's geographical setting played a decisive role in shaping its agrarian civilisation. The fertile alluvial plains formed by the Ganga river system provided favourable conditions for intensive cultivation, while seasonal cycles governed agricultural activities and rural life. In the text *Maimansingha Gitika's Malua* part repeatedly emphasises this close relationship between nature and farming.

"Agan masete hoiba khete Kartika shail,
Sakal koira khete yai amar Yadumani.." P. 46-47

This verse reflects the close relationship between agricultural labour, seasonal time, and everyday rural life in medieval Bengal.

Medieval Bengali literature is embedded with the rich agricultural knowledge. Literary sources describe diverse crops, including varieties of rice including *Shali* and *Binni,* mustard, sesame, sugarcane, cotton, fruits, vegetables, and spices, reflecting a highly diversified agricultural system adapted to local ecological conditions rather than a narrow range of cultivation. The richness of Bengal's agricultural landscape is reflected in literary descriptions of diverse crops like "*dhana, calu, masa, muga, chola, arahara, masuradi, barabati, batula, matara* "*(Manshingha-Bhabananda Upakhyan*, pp. 59-60). Such references demonstrate that medieval Bengal possessed a remarkably diversified agrarian economy long before the emergence of modern agricultural science.

Sunyapurana, *Chandimangal*, *Shivayan*, and *Mymensingh Geetika* describe agricultural implements such as the plough, ploughshare, yoke, harrow, and sickle. *Chandimangal* portrays the Hindu God Shiva as an ideal cultivator, highlighting agriculture as a respected household, social, and religious duty. *Sunyapurana* further celebrates the plough as a symbol of agricultural prosperity, reflecting Bengal's rich tradition of indigenous farming technologies.

Shivmangala also preserve descriptions of farming implements *"gacha kati garaiba langala joyali"* (pp.216) mentions the preparation and use of the plough and other cultivation tools, demonstrating the technological foundations of agriculture. The significance of these descriptions challenges a persistent misconception that scientific and technical innovation is exclusively an urban phenomenon. Medieval Bengal's villages functioned as centres of environmental knowledge where farmers continuously adapted cultivation practices to changing circumstances. The ability to select crops, regulate water, preserve seeds, and manage soil reflected sophisticated indigenous knowledge that anticipated modern principles of sustainable agriculture.

Medieval literature also records the uncertainties of agrarian life such as floods, crop failures, debt, food shortages, and land disputes. Farmers are portrayed as living within a delicate balance between productivity and uncertainty. A failed harvest could force families to sell livestock, mortgage land, or depend upon moneylenders. Such experiences reveal a reality that remains familiar across many agrarian societies even today. In *Dosshu Kenaram* pala *Maimansingha Gitika* also records the hardships faced by cultivators during times of scarcity.

eka musti dhanya nahi grihasther ghare,
anahare pathe ghate yata loka mare. pp. 195-96

Above verse describes a time when not a handful of grain remained in households and people suffered from hunger. These poignant lines remind us that agricultural abundance and vulnerability often coexisted within the same rural landscape. The social position of farmers further illustrates the complexities of medieval Bengal. While agriculture sustained the entire economy, cultivators did not always enjoy corresponding social status. Literary evidence suggests the coexistence of wealthy landholders, independent farmers, and landless sharecroppers. Many cultivators struggled to secure economic stability despite their central role in food production. This paradox the dependence of society upon farmers combined with the marginalisation of many agricultural communities continues to resonate in contemporary debates about rural development and agrarian justice.as well as William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy* provides valuable insights into the lives of farmers and the Bengal Famine of 1770, highlighting how the East India Company's exploitative revenue policies intensified the crisis. In the context of later colonial famines, William Digby estimated that nearly 19 million Indians died between 1891 and 1900, a comparison later cited by Shashi Tharoor in *An Era of Darkness* to emphasize the devastating human cost of colonial rule.

Medieval Bengali literature also describes the rhythms of everyday rural life. This literature gives details about food habits, housing, hospitality, clothing, festivals, and entertainment. Rice, fish, milk, and seasonal produce formed the basis of everyday life, while festivals and hospitality reflected the central role of agriculture in Bengal's culture. Literary narratives frequently connect agricultural prosperity with food and hospitality:

Ghore chhilo sachi pan chun khoyar diya.
Bhaiyer lagya boine dil pan banaiya.
Uttam shailer chira gishtete bandhilo.
Ghore chhilo shabari kola tao songe dil.
Maimansingha Gitika's Malua, p.50

The verse illustrates how agricultural prosperity shaped social customs, hospitality, and everyday consumption in rural Bengal. Literary descriptions of hospitality further illustrate the agricultural abundance of rural Bengal. One account describes an elaborate feast comprising fish preparations, pitha, payesh and numerous seasonal delicacies, revealing both agricultural prosperity and the cultural importance of hospitality. *"chatrisha prakara byanjana, puli pitha, pata pitha, citai pitha, chandrapuli, ksira o payesa." (Maimansingha Gitika, Malua,* p.103) This verse describes thirty-six types of food dishes as well as *pata pitha*, *chandrapuli, kheer* and *payesh* different homemade sweet dishes.

In an era of climate change and ecological uncertainty, medieval Bengali literature preserves valuable indigenous agricultural knowledge. As reflected in *"Krsi utpadaner bahu paddhati, bibhinna krsi prajukti o seca-byabasthar byabahar,"* an integral part of Bengal's agrarian heritage, highlighting their continuing value for understanding traditional knowledge systems.

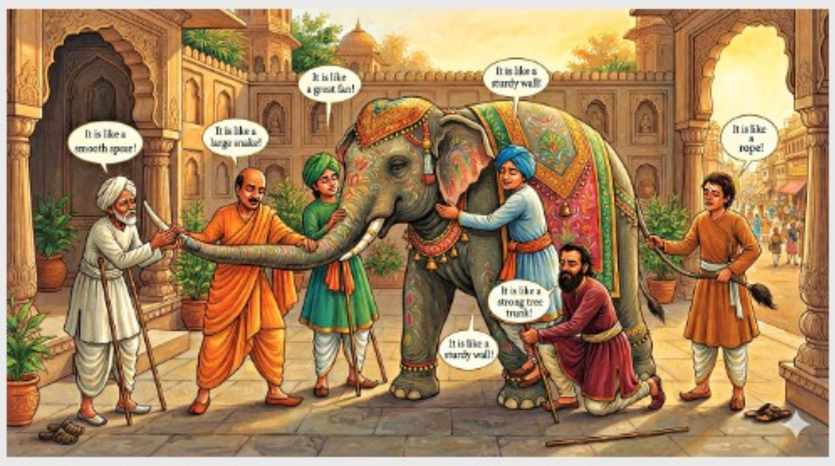
Why should focus

Traditional agricultural wisdom reminds us that sustainable farming rests on ecological balance, crop diversity, and a deep understanding of the land lessons that remain vital for building climate resilience. This study suggests that agricultural policy and research can benefit from treating literary texts as repositories of long-term social memory. Medieval Bengali literature records not only farming practices but also how communities perceived risk, organised labour, negotiated scarcity, and adapted to changing circumstances. Many regional traditional farming systems are preserved in diverse forms, including literary texts, ritual practices, and oral traditions. Critical engagement with these historical knowledge systems can provide scholars and policymakers with valuable insights for developing sustainable agricultural strategies as well as society.

Fable with Moral

The Elephant and the 6 Blind Men

(A Jain fable)



The story of the Elephant and 6 blind men is most famously used to explain *Anekantvad* (many-sidedness), teaching that reality is complex and no single human view can capture it entirely. In a small village, six blind men encountered an elephant for the first time. Unable to see, each man touched a different part of the animal and formed an entirely different conclusion.

The first touched its broad side and declared, "An elephant is like a wall!".The second touched the sharp tusk and said, "No, it is like a spear!". The third grasped the long trunk and argued, "It is clearly like a snake!".The fourth felt its leg and said, "It is like a thick tree!".The fifth touched the giant ear and claimed it was like a fan. The sixth grabbed the tail and stated, "It is nothing but a rope!"

This led to a heated argument as every man fiercely claimed his perspective was the only correct one. Consequently, the men began to quarrel.

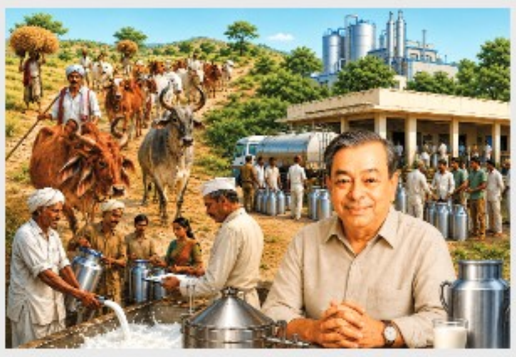
A wise man passing by heard their loud words and stopped. He told them, "All of you are right. Because you each touched a different part, you all have a piece of the truth. But to know what the whole animal is like, you must put all your partial truths together."

Moral of the Fable: Never be impulsive; consider all perspectives before reaching a conclusion

The story teaches us that truth is often multifaceted, and our individual perspectives are naturally limited by our personal experiences and the information available to us. Instead of aggressively arguing with others over differing opinions, we should acknowledge that there is likely some truth in their viewpoints as well. The philosophy of *Anekantvad* (literally "non-one-sidedness") is a practical tool for modern life, not just an abstract concept.

Arguments often stall when both sides insist on being "right." *Anekantvad* teaches that two opposing emotions can be valid simultaneously. It is about seeing merit in different perspectives.

Did you know?



Long before modern irrigation, Gujarat's pastoral communities like the Maldharis mastered cattle rearing. Using native Kankrej and Gir breeds, adapted to extreme heat and scarce water, they relied on nomadic migration and common pastures to survive harsh climates.

This ancient survival blueprint evolved in 1946 when local farmers formed an Anand-based cooperative to eliminate exploitative middlemen, creating AMUL (Anand Milk Union Limited). Led by Dr. Verghese Kurien, it institutionalized the cooperative model, introduced advanced processing technology, and drove the nation's White Revolution.

Today, Amul is a global dairy titan, empowering over 3.6 million small-scale farmers by returning up to 85 percent of consumer revenue directly to them. This model made India the world's leading milk producer, contributing nearly 25 percent of global output. Widely known as the "Milkman of India," Dr. Kurien received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, World Food Prize and Padma Vibhushan, among other honours.

Wisdom Word Search

A	V	C	H	A	R	A	F	V	W	J
N	G	A	L	I	B	A	N	A	A	A
K	K	B	A	P	A	N	A	I	N	K
U	P	U	S	P	O	E	B	I	Y	A
R	H	A	D	G	J	A	L	K	O	R
O	A	J	Y	I	S	A	H	A	A	S
D	L	T	L	H	S	A	G	H	T	H
G	A	H	A	O	M	S	V	A	H	A
A	N	R	D	A	F	G	L	I	A	N
M	A	Q	R	O	P	A	N	A	Z	A
A	I	D	Q	W	M	A	R	A	I	G
Y	N	I	R	A	N	I	B	S	R	J

WORDS TO FIND
Ankurodgama, Bapana, Chara, Jaiba-shara, Karshana, Khamar, Marai, Nirani, Phalana, Ropana

THE WISDOM LEXICON

ANKURODGAMA - Germination of a seed.
BAPANA - Sowing seeds in the field
CHARA - Young plant prepared for transplantation
JAIBA-SHARA - Organic manure derived from natural sources
KARSHANA - Ploughing or tilling the soil
KHAMAR - Farm used for agricultural production.
MARAI - Separation of grain from harvested plants
NIRANI - Removal of weeds from cultivated land
PHALANA - Yield obtained from cultivation
ROPANA - Planting seedlings in the field

Note: These terms come from Bengali, one of India's 22 Scheduled Languages.

Marvels of India

GRANARIES OF SINDHU-SARASWATI CIVILISATION

At sites such as Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Lothal and Rakhigarhi, archaeologists have found massive storage structures associated with surplus grain management and organised civic life. Their historical evidence shows that production exceeded immediate consumption, allowing communities to store grain against drought, floods or seasonal shortages.

Engineered for Stocking and Preservation
Large brick platforms at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were built with raised floors and strategically placed triangular air ducts, likely to keep stored grain dry and ventilated, away from moisture and pests. They possessed the capacity to store substantial quantities of grain.

Harappa Granaries
The granaries at Harappa are massive brick structures near the Ravi River. Archaeologists believe they were storage facilities because traces of wheat, barley and chaff were discovered in the crevices of the nearby circular brick platforms, indicating they were used for threshing grains. The "Great Granary" in the excavated Mound F is vast, measuring over 45 by 45 meters.

Urban Planning and Surplus Management
Their citadel-mound placement near rivers, alongside sophisticated drainage and grid-planned cities, reflects deliberate civic organisation aimed at managing agricultural surplus to ensure a stable, year-round food supply.

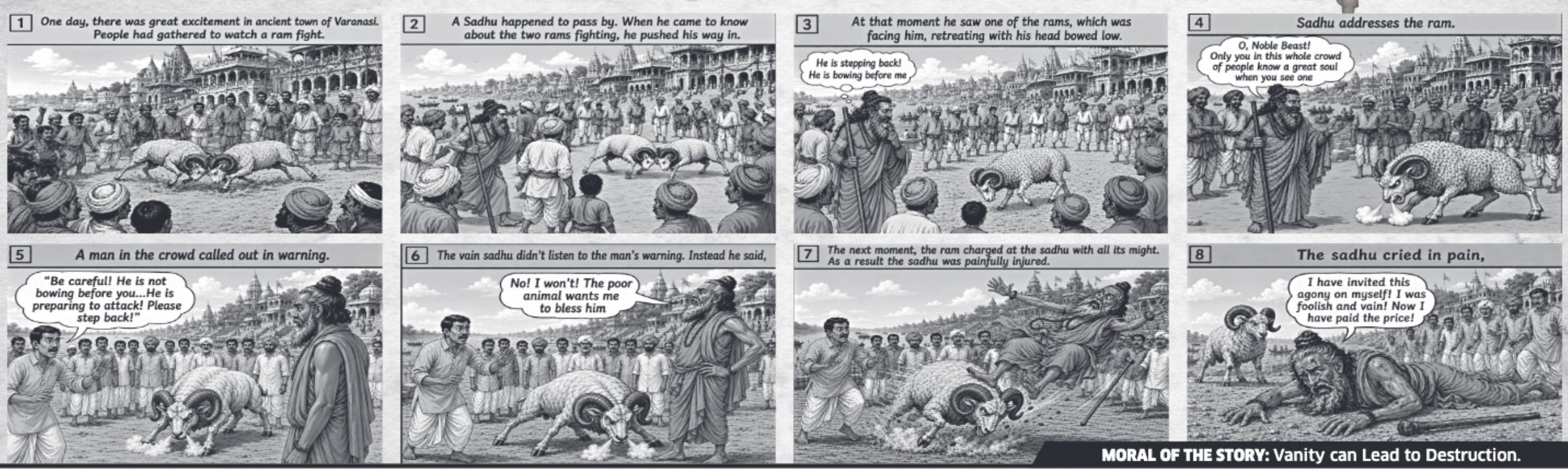
QUIZ Agriculture & Food Security

	Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1	Which of these crops was not known to the Harappan civilization?	Corn	Wheat	Barley	Millets
2	Which dynasty built one of the most spectacular engineering marvels of ancient India: The Kallanai Dam (Grand Anicut)?	Chola	Chera	Pandya	Maurya
3	Which Indian dynasty stands out in the field of agriculture and food security?	Gahadavalas	Tughlaqs	Bahmanis	Kalachuris
4	Ancient Indian texts like Krishi-Parashara advocated for rotating heavy grains with nitrogen-fixing pulses. What was the primary objective of this practice?	To attract pollinating creatures	To protect crops from pests	To reduce water required in dry season	To preserve long-term soil fertility
5	Which tribe from Arunachal Pradesh is known to cultivate crops and fish simultaneously in the same terraced fields?	Wancho	Khampti	Nyishi	Apatani

Answers: 1 - A, 2 - A, 3 - B, 4 - D, 5 - D

folktale

The Vain Sadhu



MORAL OF THE STORY: Vanity can Lead to Destruction.