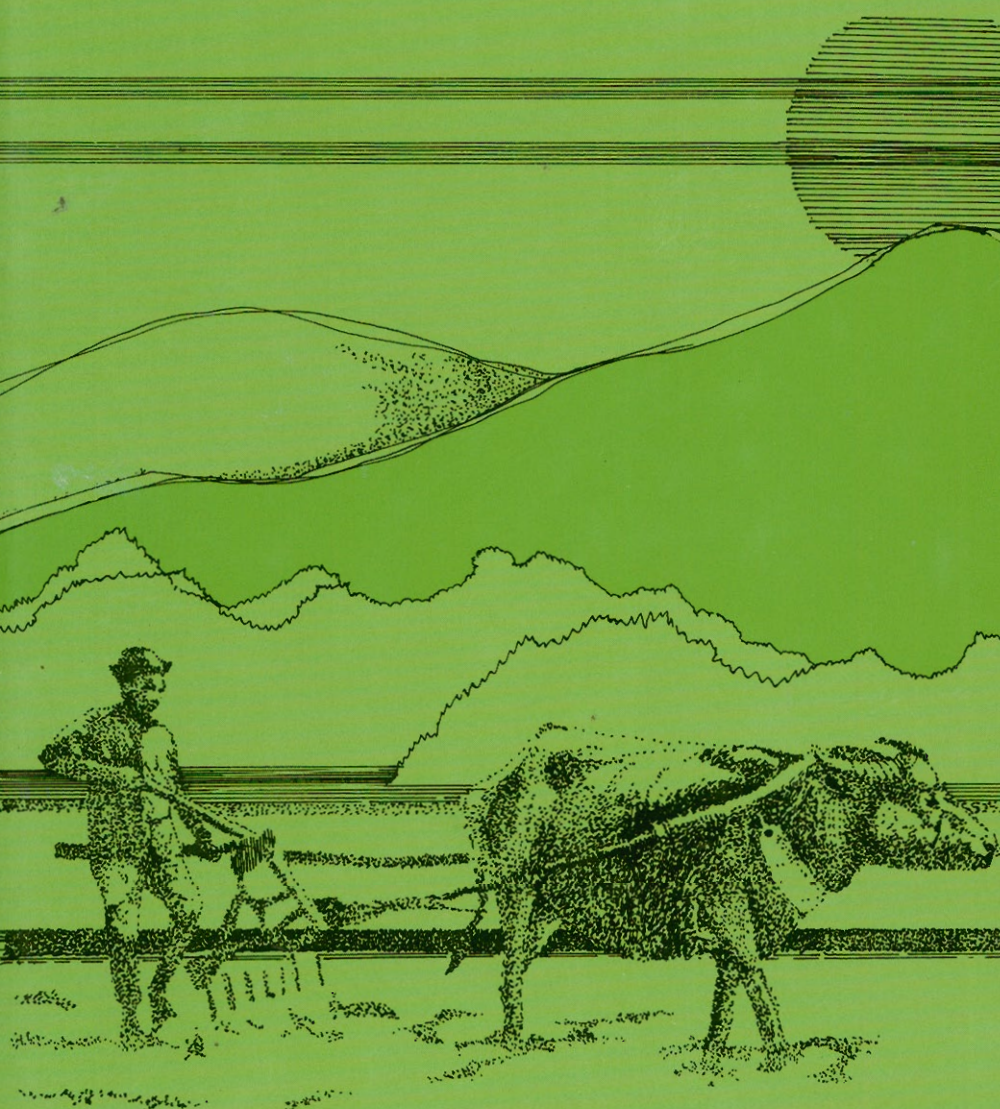


PEASANTS IN THE MAKING Malaysia's Green Revolution

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The Empirical Setting: The Green Revolution and Muda

INTRODUCTION

In the late sixties, a massive drive to improve agricultural production with the aid of new technology, in particular new varieties of high-yielding grain, was launched in many countries of the Third World. This new phase of "agricultural modernization" and the tremendous changes it wrought in the lives of millions of farmers all over the world soon earned the epithet the "Green Revolution". By the end of the decade, the "Green Revolution" had reached Malaysian shores as well, unleashing its waves of change most extensively in the traditional rice bowl states of Kedah and Perlis. Beginning in 1970, irrigation facilities made available under the Muda Irrigation Scheme have allowed for the double-cropping there of rice, the food staple of the country.

What has been the Muda experience of ten years of the "Green Revolution"? How have these changes been felt at the village level? What impact has the adoption of the new technology had on income distribution, labour relations, land tenure and other related issues? How, in short, has the process of agrarian transformation unfolded in this one particular part of the world under conditions, one could say, of peripheral capitalism? These are the questions to which this book addresses itself.

Before descending into the view from the village, which shall come into sharper focus in the following chapters, a review of the literature, comparing the generalizations which have been made for the Muda region to that of other Asian countries, is in order.

THE GREEN REVOLUTION: THE GLOBAL RECORD

It should be borne in mind that the "Green Revolution" is nothing more than a descriptive term covering a wide range of programmes which were undertaken in various countries. The actual form that these programmes took differed, of course, from country to country, but in general, the following five components were found in all such "Green Revolution" programmes:

1. A technological 'package' or recipe produced in scientific research centres and designed to fit the environmental conditions of the region in which it is to be applied;
2. Arrangements whereby knowledge of this technology could be communicated to cultivators;
3. Measures to ensure the availability of physical inputs, that is, HYV seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, machinery and fuel;
4. Measures to favour the prospect of profitable sale sufficiently attractive to compensate for the greatly increased production costs and risks involved;
5. Indispensably, some system of credit so that the payment for inputs and additional cultivation expenses could be financed, pending the receipt of income from the sales of the product after the harvest.¹

The main feature of this new technology was the indispensability of new physical inputs which had to be paid for in cash. Furthermore, in order to maximize the chances of success for this new technology, planners tended to favour the best agricultural areas in the distribution of their programmes and investment, as well as the so-called "progressive" farmer, that is, the already well-to-do farmer who was most likely to accept the new technological innovations. The consequence, according to Pearse, who headed a global United Nations study on the effects of the "Green Revolution" between the years 1970 and 1974, has been "a further bias towards polarization and uneven growth" in the affected areas. The bigger farmers benefit; the poor are increasingly marginalized.

The studies showed that cultivators who had no more land than an area capable of supporting a minimal family suffered handicaps in most cases which prevented them from benefitting from the higher production potential of the technology, in spite of the willingness of such cultivators to devote increased labour to production.²

Furthermore,

It did not perceptibly improve levels of livelihood, nor its quality, for the poorer sections of the rural populations, which may be considered as including between one and two-thirds of the national populations in the countries studied. Moreover, it has failed to prevent a further impoverishment of a considerable proportion of the poor.³

The experience of the Southeast Asian countries seems to support this view. In his summary of various studies done on Java, Hartmann comes to the following conclusion: