

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

Throughout the preceding survey the intensity of Colonial penetration in the economy of the Jalpaiguri district has been shown. A number of momentous socio-economic changes have originated from those economic measures and for which the regularisation of the *jotedari* system in the non-regulated areas and the introduction of new policy of revenue farming according to the convenience of administration in the regulated area are held to be responsible. By shifting the data under a theoretical scrutiny one may tentatively conclude that a great deal of 'predatoriness in the Colonial policy *vis-à-vis* the district under study is more pronounced than otherwise'. It is presumable that the operation of the Colonial economy could not be any different in this case from other parts of Bengal. Nevertheless, the specific objective conditions of the area, as we have explored in the preceding chapters, tend to suggest that there are some characteristic properties in the Colonial encounter with region, which cannot be ignored. It is needless to say that the discussion about state assumed some new complexities after the participation of the neo-classical economists. In their urgency to signify state function as a major operative system in the developmental economies they have sought to posit 'predatoriness' as the negation of the normative 'welfarism' as the mandated objective of a state. For a colonial state 'welfarism' is not an invariant adjectival property and so to incarcerate it on its disqualification on that account would be no less than a very far-fetched exercise in social hermeneutics. So, the only search question that we can possibly formulate by being qualified by our exploration of the micro-level data is to underline how other is the pattern of colonial encounter here than is ordinarily held. However, a brief reiteration of the theoretical nature of 'predatoriness' in order to locate our question may not be all too irrelevant.

In comparative historical studies, the state is seen as a central and influencing factor in determining different growth patterns. Therefore, it is

consequential that the taxonomy of states has grown so fast – predatory states, minimalist states, developmental states, organic states are only some of the terms used in the recent literature.¹ Although the term ‘predatory state’ has not got currency in India but in most of the literature the Colonial state is perceived as a form of predatory state. Revenue maximisation is generally taken to be a major feature for the characterisation of the predatory state. Interestingly enough, this term could be applied in the case of pre-colonial India as well. Dharma Kumar suggests that there has been an attempt to equate organic state with predatory state but the element of internal constraint as found in organic state in the form of parliament is absent in a predatory state. She laments that while discussing the Colonial economy the critics fail to point out the ‘predatory’ nature of the pre-British economy.² Of late the reversal of process is observed.

The Aligarh view finely expounded by Irfan Habib in the first volume of the *Cambridge Economic History of India* stated that the Mughal empire with its tiny ruling group was able to extract a huge ‘surplus’ from the economy, unconstrained by political opposition or by other wielders of economic power such as merchants.³

The most recent work of the Aligarh school is that of Shireen Moosvi who reinforced the view of the Mughal state as predatory.⁴ She estimated that the land revenue demand was generally one half of the total agricultural product; 30% of agricultural output was actually collected by the Mughal state at the end of sixteenth century. Further, she stated that 82% of the ‘effective jama’ (or collected revenue) went to the nobility, 13.79% supported the emperor’s personal establishment and 4.73% was hoarded.⁵ Raymond Goldsmith too concluded that the revenue of the imperial Government alone amounted to well over one-fifth of the national product, the Zaminders’ charges further escalated this burden on the peasants to one-fourth of the national product.⁶ Although this Aligarh view has been criticised for reading the whole period in terms of a simple rigid governmental structure and of ignoring processes of change and the strength of non-governmental forces in

particular, the merchants⁷ but there is no denying the fact that the Mughal State collected a huge proportion of the land revenue than its contemporaries outside India.⁸

So in such atmosphere of indiscriminate exaction of land revenues and in a state of 'oriental despotism' capitalism could not flourish in full form. Such condition is vividly explained by Marx. He stated that the pre-British economy closely resembled the Asiatic Mode typology.⁹ This system of production in Marx's conception consisted of two elements, the village community and oriental despotism. The former element signified self-sustaining petty production without individual bondage but with fixed occupations while the term 'despotism' expressed two features, *i.e.*, equation of tax with rent and the appropriation of the surplus through the agency of the state.¹⁰ In such a society the village communities developed the character of an enclave. The system of production and consumption was guided by their own norms and there were hardly any capitalist intrusion into the village economy, and so the villages had developed a culture of self-sustenance which was not disturbed by demographic change or by money economy.

I

The broad theoretical position today being what has been stated above our area suggests some exploratory work not completed by the broad-spectrum praxis of the contemporary debate. A good part of the pre-independence Jalpaiguri district was neither controlled by the Mughals, nor by their predecessors namely the Pathan Sultans of Bengal. It was for them a virtual *terra incognita*; their revenue decisions understandably could not have possibly influenced the rental customs of a territory which they did not own. The entire territory being controlled by the Cooch Behar state till the early decades of the eighteenth century a regional policy of land control evolved in this region, which was specific to the ethno-cultural overtones. It was

regularised by the Cooch Behar state ever since the ruler Naranarayan set out to expand and organise the state in the sixteenth century.¹² The disruption caused by Hussain Shah, the ruler of Bengal to the state formation process of the Kamatapur chieftains in the fourteenth century was confined to the institutional layer of the emerging state, the society and a economy virtually remained the same. So, Naranarayan, the successor of the Koch chieftain lineage of Biswa Singha and Siswa Singha did not find it too difficult to augment the appropriate state-building forces upon the cultural foundation of the previous state. The invasion of Sulaiman Karrani was too short lived to destabilise the state and the society, nor was the subsequent invasion of a fugitive Bengal Sultan of any significance. The protection tendered by the Mughal Governor Raja Mansingh on account of a treaty secured the economy and society very effectively indeed. The invasion of Mir Jumla, the Mughal Governor in the year 1661 threatened to be very destabilizing at the initial phase, but his pre-occupation with Assam and his final retreat from this region after a severe defeat in Assam set at naught the Mughal political and cultural influence.¹³ The only visible influence of the invasions mentioned was the growth of a Muslim population either by migration and settlement or by conversion or both. The Jalpaiguri region ceded from the Cooch Behar state sometimes in the early eighteenth century to become an independent administrative entity under the *Raikats*, the umbrella bearers of the Cooch Behar kings and descendents of Siswa Singha.¹⁴ Perhaps, on account of strong kinship bond with the erstwhile landed-aristocracy neither the structure of land control altered by the *Raikats*, nor did they seek to revise the customary rent policy. Even the territory that was periodically transferred by the British to Bhutan between 1773 to 1817 from the estate of Darpadeva comprising Damdim, Chamurchi, Mainaguri and Mekhliganj (Maclane Gunj) did not experience any imposition of any new revenue policy.¹⁵ The Devraj of Bhutan appeared to have been specifically interested in kidnapping, labour tax and in extra-rentals.

But the British entry into this region first in 1772 in Cooch Behar and later after the occupation of the Bengal Duars in 1865 had radically altered the economic profile of the region. A great transition took place in the economy through the introduction of a quasi-feudalist order and capitalist exploitations of waste land through commercialisation of crops. The Jalpaiguri district under the British regime attained all the distinctive characteristics of a colonialised economic establishment. The system of special administrative arrangement in the form of demarcation of an extensive tract as non-regulated area implied the urgency to endow the particular administration with extended authority to devise policies and to bring them forthwith to operation in colonial interest. Application of an identical policy resulted in five settlement operation in the state of Cooch Behar escalating the rent to 450% over a period of seventy years or so. They intended to enhance the absolute value of the 50% share of the Cooch Behar revenue.¹⁶ Although at the outset the British Government showed ambivalence in determining the classificatory attributes of *chukanidar*, *dar-chukanidar*, *dar-dar-chukanidar* as tenants and their tenurial rights particularly in the Western Duars region, but with the passage of time it became clearer that in the regular portion the Zaminders and in the non-regulated Western Duars areas the *jotedars* would be the supreme agent of the Colonial administration in realising the revenues. And whatever may be the terms the fact remains that the Government was always the supreme proprietor.¹⁷ The *Raikats* of Jalpaiguri were initially treated as chieftains of a native state¹⁸ but the arbitrary enhancement of revenue demand even during the life time of Darpa Deva served to indicate that the British Collector of Rangpur, the British controlled district of the border, altered his policy towards Baikunthapur. Though no formal settlement was executed after 1793, the Baikunthapur rulers were basically reduced to the position of a Bengal Zamindar.¹⁹

The proprietary right which the *jotedars* obtained after the Sunder's Settlement practically did not create any property in land for the *jotedars*. The *jotedars* utilised only the usufructuary rights either for a fixed term or for an agreement to pay enhanced rent whenever the Government would revise it.

In the classical feudal structure the real privatisation of land took place through transfer of property right. But here in the case of the *jotedars* of the Jalpaiguri district no such developments took place. Further, the inapplicability of the law of pre-emption, as was done in the case of zamindary estate, put the *jotedars* of the Western Duars region in an adverse situation. Such type of economy has been aptly described in the following manner: "It is feudalism of the Bloch, Gyanshop type originating from the recognition of the necessity to create serfdom of a different character and differentiable from the European model by denuded proprietary right and torturous revision of rent often enough.²⁰ The other model of feudalism as espoused by Henry Pirrine, Maurice Dobb, Takahashi, Eric Hobsbawm etc. where the emphasis was laid on the existence of class totality delinked from the production process and subsisting on surplus value from land and given to a consumer culture has no relevance to our situation.²¹ In recent years Brenner, Terence Byers and the members of the Feudalism Study Society launched an attack on some of the basic tenets of the argument of Mark Bloch.²² They have shifted unlike the orthodox Marxists, from the study of production organisation to production relations. In our study area all colonial legislations seemed to harden the production organisation than simplifying the terms of production-relations. A definite class character of the different components of the production organisation would privilege a production-relation analysis. But in the Jalpaiguri district the kinship linkages of the Rajbansis and of the Koches transcended the class categories of influence relational stereotypes in production. Only after the settlement operations escalation of revenue demand to the extent of 250% caused land transfer to the migrants, a new term of relational norm had emerged between the land holders and the rentier communities on account of caste influence.²³ During a period of three decades from Sunder's Settlement to that of Milligan native land holders mostly the Rajbansis and partly the Koches were dislodged from their holdings to the extent of 45% due to inability to pay revenue in time.²⁴ The process continued till the final settlement executed by B.B. Mukherjee in 1931-35 and even after it. Besides, a land market had gradually emerged due

to the new farming policy. The entry of caste Hindu professionals from the neighbouring districts and the Marwari business community in the area of investment in land within the Jalpaiguri district had, among other things, triggered land price movement. In some tehsils (revenue districts) such as Mainaguri, Falakata etc. land price had doubled, trebled and even quadrupled, and the price movement had partly induced the land holders, particularly those whose holdings turned out to be unprofitable, to sell their estates to the affluent migrants.

Just as enhancements of revenue distressed the local *jotedars* fragmentation of estates amongst the successors economically beleaguered many of them. Besides, in each settlement some waste-lands were sought to be converted into revenue-yielding arable land to maximise revenue income. Consequently, new and enterprising revenue farmers were attracted from outside the district to execute new revenue contracts. The revenue rate in the district varying between Rs. 3.00 to Rs. 4.50 per acre depending on the quality of the land classified as *rupit*, *faringhati* etc. though exorbitant with reference to the pre-annexation rate was nevertheless cheaper in comparison with the rates in the neighbouring districts. It was found to be between Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 6.00 in the Cooch Behar State, Rs. 7.00 in Rangpur, Rs. 7.00 to Rs. 7.50 in Dinajpore and Rs. 9.00 per acre in Dhaka. In the zamindari settlement area the picture was no different; from a payment of Rs. 18,650.00 as annual tribute in the 1780s the *Raikats* were burdened subsequently with the imposition of an annual revenue of Rs. 30,000.00 or so without even a formal negotiation for Permanent Settlement with them. The pressure of over-assessment gradually filtered down to the bottom layer of the under-tenants and landless cultivators who had to pay rent to the extent of 120% of the original rental settlement. Annexation of land transferred to Bhutan in the pre-Duars war period from the *Raikat* estate reduced the rental income from the estate to the extent of 20% of its initial rental receipts.

The British Government had no hesitation in declaring itself as the holder of 'superior interests in agricultural land so as to bring the actual cultivators into the position of the tenants directly under the Government.'²⁵

But in order to place them in that said position it was necessary to check the process of sub-infeudation and subletting. In fact one of the objectives of tenancy legislations was to check unrestricted subletting. When the Act X of 1859 was passed the occupancy rights which it created were intended for the actual tillers. But the Act of 1885 failed to protect the actual tillers of soil. So, contrary to the Colonial Government's intention the process of sub-infeudation took place.

Sir Francis Floud who was the Chairman of Land Revenue Commission admitted that "the practical difficulties of preventing subletting".²⁶ Not only in the Western Duars but also in Chittagong Hill tracts and in the Cooch Behar State the experiences relating to issue of sub-infeudation were the same. Further, lack of any provision for punitive action created further scope for rack-renting of unrecognised sub-tenants below *Chukanidars*. As mentioned earlier the *adhiar* class were like agricultural serfs without any rights or title or deed; always at the mercy of their respective *Giris* or superiors. Although they were the actual producers but they were exploited to the best advantages of their landlords. The exploitation and oppression of the *adhiars* led to a strong movement organised by the *adhiars*.²⁷ They demanded for a higher share of the produce. Though the struggle ultimately failed but it was able to bring consciousness among the peasants particularly the *adhiars* about their legitimate rights and prepared the ground for progressive legislations in their favour in the post-independence period. In the regulated portion of the district the total picture was not different. In the Baikunthapur Zamindary area the *Raikats* were the supreme owner of the land.

It is quite-interesting that neither of the two major landlord families of the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar areas belonged to higher caste Hindu category.²⁸ The *Raikats* in particular belonged to a Hinduised autochthonous group Rajbansi/Koch and on account of certain privileges historically attributed to them they rose to the position of a feudal power. As a result the kind of tension and contradiction found in most of the eastern and northern Bengal districts between landowning classes culturally, socially and ethnically

different from the peasant masses²⁹ were initially almost absent in Jalpaiguri. Further the benevolent attitude of the *Raikats* created a conducive rentier structure before the implementation of J.A. Milligan's cess regulations. Related to this feature was that oppression by petty zamindari officials or *amlas* belonging to caste Hindus was not very marked feature in Jalpaiguri.

The position changed considerably when a large number of migrant participation came to settle both in the district town and in the farm lands. Hindu and some Muslim professionals chose to acquire urban property. A good number of Muslims from the agricultural communities migrated from Noakhali and became *adhiars*. The morphology of the tenant *jotedars* in the regulated area too became very complex. Bengali Hindus, some Bengali Muslims, Marwaris, etc. entered into rental contracts with the *Raikats*, because the cess evaluation after Milligan's cess regulation caused sharp hike in the rate of rent. This factor on the one hand compelled the *Raikats* to involve the non-local participation in revenue management and on the other worsened the material condition of the peasant class. A great number of *adhiar* population lived in the zamindari areas but neither the *Raikats* nor the Government made any alteration in their semi-servile status.

The British ushered in the Jalpaiguri district a phase of commercialisation of crops. They started tea plantation and partly induced by the requirement of the jute mills of Kolkata controlled by the British capital and in response to the market demands in England jute and tobacco cultivation added a new dimension to the crop commercialisation process. The amazing growth of tea industry in the Jalpaiguri district initially with foreign capital and being managed by the Kolkata Managing Agency Houses like Andrew-Yule, the Duncans, the Goodricks, etc. and later modestly under Indian entrepreneurship would suggest a quantum jump in the economic growth of the region. Of the two hundred and forty five tea-gardens or so and thirty of them being owned by the Indian shareholders a considerable quantity of capital inflow had taken place in the plantation industry.³⁰ Given the fact that production fluctuated on account of climate and market the dividend statistics furnished in the different Annual Reports of the Duars Tea

Planters' Association was revealing. From 50% to 215%³¹ did the annual rate of dividends vary making the tea-garden shares very edifying investment proposition. However, not even 1% of the combined profit from the tea gardens appeared to have flown into the regional investment sector either to generate local employment or to improve agricultural productivity. The tea auctions were held in Kolkata and so even a profitable retail trade in tea was stunted. That the industry had no spread-effect in the hinterland and was suggested by the fact that no tea-chest manufacturing industry came into existence in this region in spite of ready availability of timber. Whatever effort the industry could have made to generate any secondary or tertiary economy was not very focussed. Its transformative role was limited. It was primarily exhausted in clearing forests and in organising labour settlements centering around plantation. So the industry's contribution in building an economic infrastructure in the hinterland of Duars was of very limited consequence.

Apart from tea, cultivation of jute was the next popular venture in the Duars region. Incidentally this region turned into a mere supplier of raw jute to the Kolkata jute mills; no significant industry was built up here centering around this crop. Cultivation of jute was done at the expense of *aus* or *bhadoi* rice crops. Partly being induced by the Marwari land-holders and money-lenders and partly due to better income margin a large number of farmers had opted out for jute cultivation. Jute fetching Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 7.00 per maund was appreciably more than the income from paddy ranging from Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 3.00 per maund.³² But the small *jotedars* and small peasants who were the cultivators of jute crop had to bear the burnt of price fluctuations due to uncertainties of international demand, and these fluctuations often meant impoverishment of the poorer sections and the consequent strengthening of the position of the large landed interests. The latter were the only class who derived some significant benefits from the jute economy.

One of the significant developments that was observed during the period was the phenomenal growth of grain markets. Larger quantity of paddy land being transferred to jute cultivation scarcity of food grains severely hit the area. To partly retrieve the area from this predicament an

import-market in food grains grew under the aegis of the Marwari business community. Grains were imported from the neighbouring food-surplus districts. Rice import from Bhutan was often recorded in the Bengal Annual Administrative Reports. Scarcity did certainly affect price in the local market, but its benefit could not be reaped by the farmers on account of the fact that the Marwari land-owners with commercial interest in the jute industry of Kolkata did not allow the farmers to exercise their options. Due to this import business in grains the local *huts* had not only proliferated but they did also assume new commercial significance. Imposition of administrative control over the *huts*, as we have discussed in a previous chapter, is explained by the revenue paying capacity of the *huts* freshly acquired from the grain trade.

II

The second important change in the Jalpaiguri district is noted in the structural changes in the society principally based on the emergence of a new landlord community. The Colonial Government's desire to bring all the waste land under rent and to extract maximum possible revenue through *jotedary* settlement could only be materialised with a corollary creation of a land market. And in the Jalpaiguri district particularly in the Western Duars region this dream was materialised. Various factors such as commercialisation of agriculture, land speculations, periodic enhancement of revenue through successive settlement operations and immigration into the Duars region prompted the rapid sale of *jotes* to the outsiders who had no previous connection with the land. The new settlers brought with them a caste-based hierarchical social structure that was not specific to the local society.

The Rajbansi society was basically egalitarian in their code of social conduct. Even though they are a significant component of the Bengali Hindu society of North Bengal they have not imbibed the culture of hypergamy in their marriages. Nor do they entertain untouchability as it is ritualised in caste Hindu ethics. It is true that they belonged to the Hindu community but the

traditional Hindu cultures or norms failed to make an impact on them. The erstwhile Rajbansi society was held together on the kinship network than by the ideology of caste differentiations and caste immobility. So a non-caste society had operated despite the structural functional differences between the *jotedars*, *chukanidars* and *adhiars* enjoying social authority and legitimacy. Interestingly enough, in the stated situation of functional differences no rigid structure formation along feudal lines did take place in clearer terms with the potential to espouse class-conflict. The answer to this question perhaps lies in the operation of traditional philogenetic ties which had caused the above mentioned functional groups to overlap and fuse at different stages of social intercourse. At this stage of egalitarian social order the transfer of *jotes* understandably disturbed specially the traditional fabric of the society. As the new purchasers of the *jotes* belonged to different social, cultural backgrounds as restructuration of the society to perform multiple acts of new social requirements was all but inevitable. Stratification of the society both in terms of caste hierarchies and class differences gradually assumed a discernable shape by partial rejection of the erstwhile kinship dominated society.³³

The professional communities which were purchasers of *jotes* had gathered in different urban centres in the district and their urban and middle class (*bhadralok*) backgrounds were not congenial to the growth of economic class stereotypes. But their influence on the traditional Rajbansi society was not at all negligible. It was the English education and the process of urbanisation that influenced the old society and they served to displace the traditional rural elites which was the stronghold of the Rajbansis. Both due to the governmental and private initiatives schools were set up even in the rural sectors. Rajbansi student population too had increased over the years.³⁴ The new elitist outlook gradually spread among the Rajbansi *jotedars* who encouraged their children to go to schools. Further, caste consciousness and absenteeism among the Rajbansi *jotedars* grew. One tangible result of this alienation was the derogation of physical labour or professions like farming which would involve physical labour by the new class of *jotedars*. The

formation of this 'bhadrlok' mentality among the Rajbansi a section of the *jotedar* community created a social strata which was clearly distinguished from its parental background. Besides, occupancy rights being granted to a particular class of tenants by the Government a non-agriculturist class other than the *jotedars/zaminders* came into existence. Certain features of caste-based society also became pronounced. For long untouchability, even after their claimed assertion to the status of 'Bratya Kshatriyas' was kept at bay. But after the settlement of outsiders in the Jalpaiguri district particularly in the Western Duars region the influence of Hindu caste society turned out to be too overwhelming for them to resist. A feeling of caste consciousness could be found to operate among the Rajbansis of the Jalpaiguri district; the Rajbansi *jotedars* being payers of revenue held themselves superior to the rentier Rajbansi *jotedars* in the Permanent Settlement area of Rangpur.³⁵ For marriages particularly the Western Duars Rajbansis started refusing to consider their counterparts from Rangpur as equal in ritual status. In addition to that the Rajbansis of Western Duars did not consider Kochs or Rabhas to their status equivalent to and they tried to socially dissociate themselves from them. It is important to note that the position held by the Cooch Behar rulers on the Rajbansi-Koch issue was likely to have confused them. The rulers were taken for the political and cultural icons for the Rajbansi people. But the notification of Nripendra Narayan ordering the officials to use "Cooch Behar State" in all transactions as the only status affix state weakened the Rajbansi argument. This tendency manifests a trend towards the adoption of the culture of the 'primordial' public by those from the social periphery who had been pushed forward by their education and economy in their desperate effort for retrieval of status.

Due to a sense of professional conservation among the Rajbansis they were normally disinclined to change their traditional profession, *i.e.*, farming. After the opening of the tea gardens the Rajbansis refused to work as labourer in tea gardens. Consequently, the planters were forced to recruit workers from among the tribals of Behar. The Railways too failed to attract the local

population and thus created job opportunities for the workers who came from the United Provinces and Behar. Even during peak time when a labourer could earn as much as Rs. 1.00 a day in jute godowns the Rajbansi labourers were not available.³⁶ A total abstention from the non-family professionals was the marked feature of the Rajbansi society. But it began to change after the intrusion of the migrants. New professional strata gradually began to grow in Rajbansi society, who could be readily identified for their middle class orientations.

The social dynamics thus released gave rise to a complex crisis of identity in the Rajbansi society. Professional mobility unwittingly caused some sort of status mobility in inter-community relations. It had also indirectly influenced the intra-structural order within the Rajbansi society itself.

The occupational reasons forced the service class to leave the villages and thus it produced among them a sense of alienation from the villages and village communities. They adopted the new urban mode of living which accentuated the differences between them as a problematique in the rural-urban dichotomy. The professional changes in fact developed a sense of loss of identity both for those who adopted the new professions and those who choose to live within the fold of traditional economy.

The emergence of a professional category also disturbed the erstwhile patron-client diadic system of the traditional Rajbansi society. It is true it was not always possible for the service communities to play the role of patrons in relationship to the economically weaker section of the community. What was even more disorderly was the withdrawal of the structural and emotional linkage suggested by kinship and philogenesis. But the loss was partly compensated by the emergence of a new political elite. The new socio-economic situation had indeed given birth to a new generation of organic leadership. The Rajbansi Kshatriya movement which mainly centred on a demand for caste and status mobility was spearheaded by Panchanan Barman who was a lawyer by profession. Men like Panchanan Barman, Upendranth Barman with their high educational background had more proficiency in

communicative skills and in the mobilisation of opinion for their cause transformed them into the natural leaders of the community. In subsequent years also this leadership category gained in wider recognition and so it could extend the nationalist movement to the countryside with the active participation of some women leaders from amongst them. Therefore, the emergence of the new social structure opened an avenue for the Rajbansi society to reform the traditional outlook and their aversion to professional adaptations.

But the economic distress was so compulsive caused by land transfer and by the absence of any substitute gainful employment that the leaders could not sustain the logic of their caste status mobility movement within the framework of their initial agenda. They succeeded to secure a caste status in the subsequent census reports modification of the government policy to attribute to them a tribal status and therefore to include them in the tribal category in the population schedules of the early censuses. The *bratya Kshatriya* caste status too was legitimised by section of the Hindu interpreters of caste and personal laws. Later, in spite of the success achieved in the realms of caste mobility movement Panchanan Barman fought in the thirties for the scheduled caste status for the Rajbansis in the Bengal Legislative Assembly.³⁷ Scheduling of some castes was certainly suggested by the admission at the government level of the lower caste status of some Hindus at the foundation layer of the social hierarchy and their economic and social disabilities. Presumably, the *bratya Kshatriya* logic that was tended for status improvement of the Rajbansis was not in consonance with the caste status of the 'scheduled caste' community. Nevertheless, the economic benefit that was likely to be derived from the government policy of caste quarantine induced him to plead for the inclusion of the Rajbansis in the scheduled caste category.

III

Colonial land revenue policy entailing revenue and rent burden on the local agrarian community, commercialisation of crops, random disposal of

jotes for non-payment of revenue in time, and the inflation of the number of *adhiars* caused by the burden of revenue and rent nurtured a spirit of rejection. The whole region was rife with economic discontent. Consequently, it did not take much time to mobilise the disgruntled under the banners of different shades of political leadership. Particularly during the Non-Cooperation Movement a strong possibility had manifested to enable the political leadership to interweave the Hindu Rajbansis, the Rajbansi Muslims, peasants, labourers and the tribals by the thread of nationalism. An awareness of colonial exploitation had engendered in them a bond of fraternity. But the local leadership originating from the Congress was involved in class contradiction. With landed interest and investment in the plantation industry the Congress leadership could not circumvent their class affiliation and class interest for the greater interest of the mass. Besides, their urban centrality disqualified them to be able to effectively interpret the basic agenda of the non-cooperation movement in the practical terms of the local interest. So, it had turned out to be the characteristic feature of the movement that the urban leaders had tendered unqualified support to the Gandhian agenda *per se*, while the rural sector outside Congress influence tailored it according to their requirements.³⁸ The experience during the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements were not any different from the previous movement. Though there was an attempt made by the local workers of the CPI to narrow down the gap between the rank and file in addition to the efforts made by the limited number of revolutionary terrorists, but no substantial ground was gained.

The crisis was further deepened due to the fact that the Rajbansis in general were circumspect to the operation of the urban non-Rajbansi middle class political leadership. Rajbansi response to the *tebhaga* movement was not too enthusiastic. And even in the nationalist movement they were found to augment sufficient political will when the leadership originated from the rural elite and from with their own community. Significantly enough, wherever the movement roused spontaneous response it was specifically focussed on say reduction of *hut* tolls, non-payment of cess, no rent payment

etc. as the principal agenda of the movement. The tea-garden workers too had their praxis to interpret the nationalist movement. Revision of wages, regularisation of benefits of ration, equalization of male and female wages and labour exploitation by the managerial community appeared to be the most immediate and pressing demands to mobilise them under a political banner.

This fragmented political experience from the district is largely explained firstly by the sense of isolation which was engendered at the time of the *Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement*. Secondly, the *bahe* and *bhatia* economic and cultural dichotomy of the subsequent years waged a social fissure. The locals but socially out-distanced (*bahe*) and the immigrants (*bhatia*) turned out to be two ethno-cultural polarities with an intangible social linkage purported to be established by the middle class products of an indefinite urbanisation process. Being thwarted in quick measures from their primacy in the economy of the locality almost simultaneously by the plantation economy and the unequal competitiveness in land control from the migrants they came to nurture a condition of impossible social reconciliation between the *bahes* and the *bhatias* at every layer of the amorphous social structure of North Bengal. It assumed more complexity for the fact that the Santals, Oraons and the Mundas infesting the plantation labour population were set out to be bracketed as the *madesias*, the ethno-cultural order in the demographic mosaic of North Bengal. The colonial ethnology emphasised only on the Rajbansis and the Koches as the major ethno-cultural categories in the region, and in the process they ignored the Totos, the Dhimals, the Ravas and the Meches. It indeed baffles one seeking to explore the rationale of the ethnic classification in 1872, 1881, 1891 Censuses, in the context of the studies of Hamilton and Dalton,³⁹ during the same period, underpinning the Rajbansis and the Koches as two ethnological types. Further, the position which was held by Hunter in his *Statistical Accounts of Bengal*, Vol. X, also did not correspond with the position held by Risley in his *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I. In order to integrate the tribal labour population in the tea-gardens a *lingua franca*, namely, *Shadri* had been crafted to be used as a linguistic cultural marker. It had been dignified

by the Linguistic Survey of India by the attribution to it the status of a *dialect*, just as the Rajbansi language had been classified as a dialect of Bengali. All of it had happened since the second half of the nineteenth century.

The process of land alienation gained in an incredible momentum first after the partition of India in 1947 and later during and after the Bangladesh movement. Though there is no decadal cadastral survey to ascertain the quantity of land transferred to the migrants during this period, nonetheless the irresistible forces to destabilise the economy of the locals were easily discerned. Besides, the development of any new industry at the level of private and public sectors is not seriously considered; so the concealed unemployment in the rural sector which is the principal habitat of the natives continues to survive. The service sector that has expanded during the last six decades has only addressed the needs of the urban unemployed, though very insufficiently. Incidentally it may be mentioned that one of the remarkable features of the post partition migration in this region is the migration of the agricultural community from the East Bengal. This migration has exacerbated both a qualitative and quantitative change in the agricultural sector. Introduction of new agricultural crops, crop rotation, augmentation of ready response to the scientific know-how in agriculture are reasonably attributed to the immigrant agricultural workers. The fact however remains in spite of some appreciable change in the agricultural sector entitlement to a tangible means of livelihood still alludes the native populace very substantially. The undercurrent of social tension that comes to surface very often in recent years is assumed to be sustained by the frustration that the natives have partly inherited from the nineteenth century and the feeling is partly intensified by the inadequacy of the development measures suggested for North Bengal.

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