

## **Chapter-II**

# **Traditional Agrarian Social Structure of Cooch Behar**

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#### Changing Political Status of Cooch Behar

Historically, the political status of Cooch Behar had been in a flux- from a kingdom to a district town. Before it came into being in its present status- a district, it was a part of a bigger Kingdom of Kamrup in ancient times; known as Prajyotishpur. The present Assam, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur ( now in Bangladesh) were the parts of Kamrup. The Kingdom- Kamrup was divided into four parts viz *Kampith, Ratnapith, Subarnapith and Soumarpith*. The present Cooch Behar was the part of *Ratnapith*. During the period of 16th century the Cooch Behar turned into an independent state. Again, in 1773, it became a revenue paying estate of the East India Company. Finally, on 28th August 1949, Cooch Behar became a part of Indian domination; a district of West Bengal on 1st January 1950.

Different dynasties ruled this region; *Koch* dynasty ruled from 1510 A.D. to 1949. Before the advent of *Koch* dynasty, *Khen* dynasty ruled this region. Bisw later known as Biswa Singha, an adventure *Koch* chief laid the foundation of his kingdom in about A.D. 1515 on the ruins of the kingdom of Kamata. His son and successor Naranarayan ( A.D 1540-1587) was not only the greatest of the *Koch* kings, but also he was one of the illustrious rulers of North East India of his times ( Nath : 1989 : 1 ). Regarding the establishment of the present *Koch* Behar, Dalton ( 1973 ) wrote " it appears to be about the year 1550 A.D. that the two powers came into collision, when the *Koch* under their great leader Haju expelled the *Kacharis* and established a dynasty which lasted two hundred years. These *Koch* princes were driven from power in western Kamrup, Rangpur and Gawalpara by the Muhammadans and from eastern Kamrup by the *Ahoms*; but the descendants of Haju still exercise jura regalia in that portion of the ancient possession of his family which is called *Koch* Behar " ( Dalton : 1973 : 89 ). Several Muslim rulers like Hussain Shah, Mir-Jumla invaded this land. Political relations with the Mughal emperors were also established.

## Population Structure

Following the compilation report of the Census 1872, Hunter (1974) classified the population of Cooch Behar as Asiatics and non-Asiatics. Again, Asiatics were classified into two groups- Natives of India and British Burma, and other than Natives of India and British Burma. Natives of India and British Burma were again divided into five groups viz., Aboriginal Tribes, Semi-Hindu Aboriginals, Hindu, Vaishnav ( a religious group ) and Mahammadans. Further, Hindu into eleven occupational groups viz., High caste ( Brahman, Chhatri or Rajput), Intermediate ( Baidya, Kayastha ), Trading ( Marwari, Banik, Khatri, Oswal ), Pastoral ( Goala, Gareri), Agricultural ( Barui, Koeri, Kaibarta, Kurmi, Kolita, Mali), caste engaged in personal service ( Dhawa, Dhanuk, Dhobi, Kahan, Napit ), Artisan ( Kamars, Kumar, Swarnakar, Sutradhar, Sunri, Tali, Weavers ( Jugi, Tanti ), labour ( Nuniya), Boating and Fishing ( Manjhi, Nalua). ( Hunter : 1974 : 341 & 342 ). Thus the composition of population in Cooch Behar was a heterogeneous in nature.

## Population Ranking

Chaudhury ( 1903) made a ranking of the population of Cooch Behar. First of all, he divided the whole population into three major groups viz Aryan race, subject tribes, and aboriginal tribes besides the Muslims. He placed the aryan race on the top and aboriginal at the bottom. The subject tribes had been placed in between the two. Secondly, he observed that each group had a number of subgroups having different social status. Thus the people of the Aryan race were divided into three subgroups like high caste hindus, low caste hindus and the unclean caste. *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Baidya and Kayastha* were included in the high caste hindu; and they were placed at the top of the hierarchy. The low caste hindus were grouped into two categories viz Navasaks or pure functional sub-castes and the unclean castes. *Barui, Baniya, Gowala, Halwai, Kaibarta, Kahar, Kumar, Kumar, Mali, Moira, Napit, Sadgope, Tanti & Teli* were included in the low caste hindu group and were placed above the unclean caste and below the high caste . The third group, the unclean caste included the *Dhopa, Hari,*

*Taliya, Munchi, and Patni*. The subject Tribes were divided into two subgroups viz clean hindu and unclean hindu.. *Khen, Morangia, and Rajbanshi* were included in the former subgroup. *Bediya, Daoi, Dom, Namasudra or Chandal* and *Nuniya* were included in the latter subgroup and were placed at the bottom. In the third category *Garo and Mech* were included in the aboriginal tribe. Besides these, there were a good number of Muslims who were not included in the above categories. Most of the high castes like *Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthan* were migrants who either hold service under the state, or carry on business in the country. There were some native brahmins and kayasthas. They had migrated from Bengal and Assam. Most of the native *Brahmins* belonged to the *vaidic* class. They were the descendants of those who were brought from time to time into the country by the *Khen* Kings of Kamatapur and Maharajas - Biswa Singh, Nara Narayan and Pran Narayan of the present dynasty from Kaunij (Oudh), Mithila (Tirhoot) and Assam (Chaudhury 1903 : 121 & 122). However the Rajbanshi formed the major ethnic group in the region. Next to the Rajbanshi there were Muslims.

## Major Ethnic Groups

### The Rajbanshi

In 1872, the Rajbanshis constituted about 63 percent of the total population. There has been an age-old controversy of their identity. To some scholars, Rajbanshi belonged to Mangolian stock. While others identified them as Dravidian. "Rajbanshi a Dravidian caste of Northern Bengal, originally *Koch*, but now claiming to be an outlying branch of Kshatriyas" (Risley : 1998 : 183 ). The *Koches* were of Mongoloid origin having close affinities with other bodo tribes like the *Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs, and Garos*. But in course of time and in some limited areas, they intermarried the Dravidians and gave birth to a mixed Mongolo-Dravidian race but having preponderant Mongoloid characters (Nath : 1989 : 4 ). Chatterji (1998) identified Rajbanshi as Indo -Mongoloid Bodo people or mixed Austric-Dravidian-Mangoloid People. "... during the days of Visva Simha and Nara-Narayana, they are proud

to call themselves Raj-bansis and to claim to be called *Kshatriyas* " ( Chatterji : 1998 : 112). The *Koches* were also designated both as Rajbansis and *Bangakshatriyas*. Most of the scholars agreed that the *Koch* tribe after adopting Hinduism, claimed themselves as Rajbansi ( Dalton : 1973 : 90) Etymological, Rajbansi means men of the royal lineage. They identified themselves as Kshatriyas.

Polygamy was common among the Rajbansis. Hunter (1974) identified the three forms of marriage<sup>here</sup> prevalent among the Rajbansis viz Gandharba, Brahma and Widow marriage. Practice of bride price was found among them. Divorcee was also permitted in their society. It was a simple affair since there was no question of maintenance allowance after divorce. There was no social count to grant the divorce. Family was the basic social unit among the Rajbansis. Their family was patrilineal and patrilocal. Marriage took place within the same clan as the Rajbansis claimed to be belonging to one and single clan *Kashyap*.

### **The Muslim**

In Cooch Behar the Muslim, being a second largest community, occupied a unique position. In 1891 about 30 percent of the total population were muslims. Penetration of Muslims started during the period of thirteenth century when Bakhtiar Khilji invaded Tibet. Several Muslim rulers also attacked this region . Mir Jumla occupied Koch-Bihar in the year 1661. However, establishment of political relations with Muslim rulers helped to immigrants. Along with the process of migration there were also instances of conversion of the local population. Dalton (1973) also expressed the same view. To Chaudhury (1903) " By far the majority of the Musalmans are the Sheks, or as they are popularly called, *Nasyas*. They are like greater portion of the Mahamedans of India, descended from the Hindu converts to the religion of Mahammed ". ( Chaudhury : 1903:120). Even the Muslims of Cooch Behar were used to govern by the same law of inheritance as applicable to the Hindus." The Muslims of Koch Behar are also generally guided by the Hindu law of inheritance unless any Muslim dissent proves in the court

that his family was guided by the Muslim law from before" ( Majumdar : 1977 : 57).

However, the Muslims themselves were not homogeneous. The Muslims of Cooch Behar constituted with sects-Sunnis and Shia. Numerically the former was the majority. The local converts and immigrated muslims were known as *Nashya* and *Bhatia* respectively . Most of them belonged to Sunnis sect. Among the muslims of Cooch Behar the Ashraff or Miyan enjoyed the higher status than that of the Ajlafas or Garosthi. Ajlafas belonged to the Nasya group and were associated with agriculture.

## Land Tenure System

As I earlier pointed out that before the establishment of Koch dynasty, the Khens ruled this region. They ruled only three generations. The agrarian society had been evolved during the reign of *Khen* dynasty . The *Khens* were Hindus. Agriculture was their main occupation. Two classes of peasants were found viz landlord and peasants. The landlords were also cultivators. After the fall of *Khen* dynasty, we find the emergence of Koch dynasty.

## Jotedari System

Jotedari system had been developed in this region. Ecological and social factors were responsible for such development. Large tracts of area were covered with forest and waste land. Vast areas were uncultivated. Man powers were necessitated for reclamation of jungle. Bose observed, "vast areas in this region were uncultivated jungle and settled for reclamation with enterprising tenant farmers called jotedars. .... large tracts of land were assigned to substantial men of capital at low fixed rents and with permanent and transferable rights to facilitate organization of large scale reclamation from jungle. The reserves of labour provided by the semi-tribal Koches and Paliyas- the Rajbansis of later years and by the immigrant Santal tribes were utilized to conquer the inhospitable wasteland. Once the work of reclamation was completed, they remained as sharecroppers with no right of continued occupancy of the land

they tilled and often only in permissive possession of a little homestead on a fragment of the wasteland they themselves had cleared" ( Bose 1986 : 11 &12 ).

The Bengali word '*jote*' is derived from the sanskrit word '*jotra*' means cultivation or cultivable land . Thus *jotedar* means proprietors of *jote*. The *jotedari* system ensured the king a major source of revenue. Since the *jotedars* were allowed to create sub-tenants, land reclamation works used to continue and ultimately earnings of the king used to raise. Baden Powel (1977) observed some similarity between the *Khel* system and *jotedari* system to the point that both the systems helped the chiefs or kings to receive services or to collect revenue from their subjects. Both the systems were found among the Tibeto-Burmeese origin of the King. "Every male above sixteen years of age was designated a paik. Each group of three paiks formed a got... Again, the got were further aggregated into larger bodies called *Khel* ..... A nearly similar organization was, however, imposed on the Kuc and Mec tribes by conquering Bhutiya in the west Dwars. The individual holdings of the land ( there called *jot*) were made to pay land-revenue; and small cluster of houses was headed by a *pradhan*. Over several of these groups was a *Siyana*. Over these, again, was a local collector, and finally a chief of the district aided by a deputy ( Bowel :1977 :137, 138 and 139). Thus the social factor also contributed to the development of *jotedari* system in the region. In Bengal the *jotedari* system was found in other frontier regions like Sundarban regions of 24-Parganas ( Bose : 1986 :7) . The *jotedars* were the head of the little community. He generally manages the affairs of the whole *jot*.

In the traditional Cooch Behar like other parts of India, land was the principal source of revenue of the king. Cooch Behar became a revenue paying estate in the year 1773. Being transformed in to a revenue paying estate of the British, the interest on land revenue took a new dimension. Following an agreement with the East India Company, the King was bound to pay the English East India Company one -half of the annual revenues of Cooch Behar for ever. The company therefore, took a keen interest on land to raise the revenue collection of the estate.

The tenural and revenue system had been rearranged.

There were two kinds of jotes- revenue paying and non-revenue paying . Non-revenue paying jotes were provided to those persons who used to provide special services to the king. However, the system suffered a lot due to the dishonesty and greed of the State officials caused great suffering to the peasants. Hence to increase the collection of revenue and to improve the conditions of peasants Douglas introduced the *Ijaradari* system in 1790.

### **Ijaradari System**

Under the system of *Ijaradari*, the whole estate was divided into small parcels and put up to auction and the highest bid with approved security was accepted. The *Ijaradar* then distributed the total amount he expected to collect amongst the jotes comprised in his *ijara*. But, this system was also failed to improve the actual conditions of the cultivators because many non-cultivators even the known or relatives of the high officials of the king who had no connection with land, used to take out *ijara* for appropriations of profit. So the *ijradari* system of collection was abolished by George Campbell, the <sup>then</sup> Lietenant Governor from March 1872. However, to make the land revenue system more effective, settlements were made. The work of the first Land Revenue Settlement of Koch Bihar was concluded by 1877. Again, the settlement operation were completed in 1889. Historically *jotedari* system was the backbone of the agrarian structure of Cooch Behar.

### **Revenue Paying Estates**

**Jotedari** : The revenue paying estates in the country are called '*jotes*' and the holders of these estates are called '*jotedars*'. The *jotedars* are thus, in one sense analogous to Zamindars and Talukdars of British India. Two kinds of jotes were found in the state. One was Mokarari or permanently settled; and the other was Sarasari or ordinarily or temporarily settled. The revenue of the former was fixed in perpetuity and no increase was allowed where as revenue of

the latter could be increased after expiry of the term of the lease. From the available statistics the number of temporary *jotes* with their average size of holding at the time of Resettlement in Cooch Behar is shown in Table-1

**Table -1** Distribution of jotes by Paragana ( sub-division) and size in Cooch Behar.

Name of Paragana	No of Jotes	Average Area of a Jote ( Land in Bigha)
Mekhliganj	2321	128.1
Mathabhanga	2529	151.1
Lal Bazar	2604	110.5
Dinhata	3980	90.6
Cooch Behar	5337	90.5
Tufanganj	2065	138.6
Total	18836	112.8

( Source : H . Chaudhury : 1903 : 516)

Table-1 shows that at the time of resettlement the total number of temporary jotes was 18,836; Cooch Behar had the highest number (5337) and lowest in Tufanganj (2065). The average size of the *jote* was biggest in Mathabhanga (151.1 bigha) and lowest in Cooch Behar (90.5 bigha) . Average size of a *jote* of Cooch Behar is 112.8 bigha. The size of *jotes* was not uniform. The *jotedar* had to pay the revenue fixed by the state. A fixed profit was allowed to the *jotedar* to ensure security of the revenue of the state and to keep the *jotes* attractive. There were six under tenants found in the estate. They were as follow: **Chukanidari** : The word '*Chukani*' was the general name for an undertenure and the prefix Dar, Dara-Dar etc. marked its place in the scale of subordinate tenancy. A *chukanidar* was the immediate undertenant of the *jotedar*. He was a holder of a certain portion of the *jote* or farm. A *Chukanidar* would sell his land with the

concurrent of the *jotedar*. However, it would be attached or sold in execution of a decree of the civil or revenue court without the assent of the *jotedar*. A *Chukanidar* used to pay a sum not exceeding twenty five percent over the rate that the *jotedar* used to pay to the state.

**Dar-Chukani:** A *dar-chukanidar* was the under-tenant of a *chukanidar*. *Dar-chukani* under tenure was hereditary and transferable. Occupancy right of a *dar-chukanidar* was recognised. A *dar-chukanidar* used to pay fifty percent over the *jotedar's* rate as rent to *chukanidar*.

**Dara-Dar Chukani:** A *dara-dar chukani*<sup>dar</sup> was an under tenant of a *dar-chukanidar* having the same right as *dar-chukanidar*. The rate of rent payable by him was seventy five percent over the *jotedar's* assessment.

**Tasia-Chukani:** A *tasia chukanidar* was an undertenant of *dara-dar chukanidar*. This type of undertenants was very rare. Besides the above four there were also other two forms viz Tuli-Chukanidar and Tuli-Tosio-Chukanidar. But they were not found in all the paragons and their number was insignificant. Table No 2 shows the percentage of different undertenants to total undertenant at the time of resettlement.

**Table -2** Percentage distribution of different undertenants by paragona.

Name of the Parganas	Undertenants			
	Chukani	Dar-chukani	Daradar-chukani	Tasia-chukani
Mekhliganj	62	29	08	01
Mathabhanga	43	38	16	03
Lal bazar	56	35	08	01
Dinhata	38	41	17	01
Cooch Behar	55	35	09	01
Tufanganj	57	33	09	01
Total	49	37	12	02

Source : Choudhury :1903:525.

Of all the above under tenants *Chukanidar* formed the highest (49 percent) and *Tasia chukani* was the lowest (02 percent). The Paragana of Mekhliganj had the highest percentage of *chukani dar*. Size of holding is not uniform for all the under tenures. The variations are also observed in different paragana. Average area of an undertenant is shown in table 3.

**Table 3** Distribution of average size of holding ( in bigha) by types of undertenants and paragana.

Name of the Parganas	Undertenants					
	Chukani	Dar chukani	Dara-dar chukani	Tasia chukani	Tali chukani	Tasia Tali chukani
Mekhliganj	33	24	22	20	06	2.3
Mathabhanga	53	29	20	16	14	14.9
Lal bazar	41	25	20	21	08	-
Dinhata	25	15	07	05	04	1.5
Cooch Behar	33	18	13	09	06	-
Tufanganj	42	22	18	13	-	-
Total (average)	35	19	13	08	08	05

Source : Choudhury : 1903: 532.

Hierarchy of size of holding is observed according to hierarchy of undertenures. All the paragans did not have all categories of undertenures. Tasia chukani was not found in Lal bazar and Cooch Behar Paragana. *Tali Chukani* and *Tasy Tali Chukani* were not available in Tufanganj sub-division. Thus inequality is observed in terms of size of holding among the different undertenures. Land sharing among the different undertenures is shown in table 4.

**Table 4** Percentage of cultivated land held by the different class of tenants and undertenants.

Sl No.	Class of tenants or under-tenants	Percentage of Land hold.
1	Jotedar	27.5
2	Chukanidar	47.0
3	Dar-chukanidar	21.5
4	Dara-dar chukanidar	3.50
5	Tosio-chukanidar	.002
6	Tuli-chukanidar	.0001
7	Tulli - tosio-chukanidar	.0000008

( Source : Correspondence relating to the Patit Charcha settlement and the Resettlement of the State of Cooch Behar 1882-1885, Authority Cooch Behar, 1903.)

### **Non-Revenue Paying Estate**

The king of Koch Behar allowed his subjects to enjoy non-revenue paying land for different specialised services rendered by them. The rent free lands were of different types as below-

**Brahmottar Land** : Brahmins were given the Brahmottar lands for their support when they were made by the reigning king. It was hereditary and transferable. **Debattor Land** : This type of land was granted to Brahmins or other religious persons for worship of a particular deity. Two types of Debattor land were found -(a) persons engaged with for the maintenance of the deity were given such land; and the other (b) the persons engaged in services of the Kings own deity also given such land. However, the debattor land would not be sold or transferable. It would be inherited if the successor be appointed to the same post by the king. **Pirpal** : Just as debattor was given to the hindus for support of an idol, Muslims were also given the pirpal grants for their support to their Pirpal or saints. **Lakhiraj** : This type of land was given to persons for their meritorious act.

It was also hereditary and transferable. But all lakhiraj grants escheat to the state on failure of heirs. **Petbhata** : Relatives of the King were given this type of land for their maintenance. A petbhata grant lapsed at the death of the original grantee and his heirs must apply for renewal to the Raja. It was not transferable. **Jaigir** : Besides the above five categories of rent-free lands, there was also another type of freeland-the Jaigirs. The persons holding Jaigir land had to render personal services to the King. If the holder of Jaigir land failed to render services, their land had been resumed by the king. Jaigir lands were neither transferable or saleable. A jaigirdar could not create any subordinate tenures.

## Agriculture

Agriculture was the sole occupation of the people of Cooch Behar during the reign of Koch king. Paddy, Jute and Tobacco formed the principal crops of the area. The others included wheat, mustered seed, pulses and vegetables like potato, onion, garlic etc.

Primitive type of handmade technology used for land preparation. It includes the wooden plough, the *bida*, the harrow or *main*, the sickle, the *hatchini*, the spade, the *kursi*, the hoe etc. Manure was neither extensively used nor it was considered necessary for all crops. Sometimes only cow dung and oil cake were used as manure. Similarly use of irrigation was also limited to tobacco cultivation. Thus it resulted in low productivity in agriculture in the past.

## Agrarian Relations

The rural society during the reign of Koch Kingdom was stratified as it appeared from the land tenure system. The society was feudalistic in nature. The king was the absolute owner of the land. The size of *jote* was not uniform. Inequality of holding was also found among the different under tenures. *Jotedars* were placed at the top of the hierarchy where as *tulli Tosio Chukanidar* at the bottom. However, the existence of the last three under tenure viz *Tosio-Chukandar*, *Tuli-Chukanidar* and *Tulli -Tosio Chukanidar* was insignificant in terms of their numbers as it ap-

pears from the table. The jotedars and other under tenures usually used to cultivate their land with the help of *adhiars*. These *adhiars* were found in each grade of under tenants. Thus *Jotedar-adhiar* relation was the backbone of agrarian relation during the reign of *Koch* Kingdom.

## **Adhiars**

To Chaudhury (1903 :164) " small farmers cultivate their lands themselves. Big cultivators of almost every grade of tenancy have a class of farm servants under them called *adhiars*". Those *adhiars* were mostly poor men who occasionally possessed their own plough and bullock and a bit of rented land too. They could be identified in two categories. One, those who used to reside in the premises of their landlords and cultivate their lands with landlord' plough and bullock. He was also fed by his landlord. The other, includes those *adhiars* who used to cultivate another man's land with his own plough and bullock and they *adhiars* were called *Utangkara Praja*. In both cases, *adhiars* shared half of the produce. The cost of production was also equally shared by both the landlord and *adhiars*. These *adhiars-jotedars* maintained a harmonious social relations. To Mukharjee (1986) the structure of the *jotedari* system was based on a patrimonial feudal culture of the Rajbanshi. Both of them exhibited some common features. They had the same social status as they belonged to the same community. Both of them were illiterate. Like *adhiars*, *jotedars* also participated in agricultural operation. Apart from their social and cultural similarity, reciprocal behaviour was also found among the jotedars. They used to supply materials for construction of houses of *adhiars*. Agricultural inputs like seed, plough, cattle and other instruments of production were often supplied to the *adhiars* by *jotedars*. Moreover, consumption loans as well as supply of credit as and when required by the *adhiars* were also supplied by the *jotedars*. Similarly the *adhiars* also behaved in the reciprocal way. They used to provide free services other than agricultural operation to their *jotedars*. Unlike the zamindars of other parts of Bengal, these *jotedars* did not have their own musclemen or sepays for collection of revenue. Thus class conflict between the *jotedar* and *adhiars* was not prominent.

## Agricultural Day Labourer

In the traditional Cooch Behar the agricultural labourers were almost absent since nearly every man in the state used to cultivate his small patch of ground. Only small cultivators when not employed in tilling their own fields occasionally hire themselves out as day labourers. However seasonal migration of day labourer used to happen in Cooch Behar. They were mainly from Bihar in the harvesting seasons. They were paid in cash and also supplied with meals.

## Rural Power Structure

No systematic information is available regarding the rural power structure of Cooch Behar before the middle of the nineteenth century. However, the Village Chaukidari Act was passed in the year 1893 for the governance of rural society. Immediately just before the implementation of the said act, the rural society was governed by an institution known as *Dewania*. These *dewanias* were the large *jotedars* residing on their farms. Their neighbours were mainly their tenants who leased-in lands from them and cultivated the same on share basis. These *dewans* reigned as the civil head of the community and arbitrated in all disputes of their neighbours. After the settlement operations the power of the *dewanias* was to a great extent reduced.

After the enactment of the Village Chaukidari Act in 1893, the village affairs were governed by the same. Thus *chaukidar* played an important role in the village affairs. The said act also created the provisions of *panchayats*. But, the system of *panchayat* was not like the present one. The said act did not provide the system of council of *panchayats*. Moreover, they were not elected representatives. They were appointed by the high officials of *Raja*. They were appointed mainly from the residents of proprietor holder of land and residing within one km from the village in which he was appointed. These *panchayats* used to exercise the civil and criminal affairs of the village through the chowkidar who was appointed by the *panchayats*. One of the most important functions of the *panchayats* was to assess the properties of the residents and made a liaison with outer administration of the village.

The Village Chaukidari act 1893 was amended several times. Following the amendment of 1941, the mode of appointment of *panchayat* had been changed from the selected *panchayats* to representative *panchayats*. The amendment provides " .... the adult male rate paying residents of any village shall select .... not less than any three nor more than five residents of the village to constitute the *panchayats* there of; and the *Fouzdari Ahilkar* shall, if he approves of the persons so selected, appoint such persons to be the *panchayats*; but if in his opinion any person so selected is, for reasons to be recorded by him in writing, unfit to be a member of the *panchayat*, the *Fouzdari Ahilkar* shall appoint a fit and proper resident to be a member of the *panchayat*. " [2(2)].

The above provision provides that in selecting the *panchayats* the opinions of adult male rate-paying villages were only considered. Adult women and non-rate paying male had no role in selection of *panchayats*. Moreover, the final selection was dependent on the satisfaction of the official of the king. Hence these *panchayats* were selected from the landed gentry and from those who were known to the officials of the king.

By amendment of 1943 of the Cooch Behar Chaukidari Act 1893, the president of the *panchayats* had been empowered with more civil and criminal affairs of the village than before. The section 3(3) of the said act empowered the President with the following:

- (a) powers under sections 64, 127 and 128 of the criminal Procedure code viz of arresting persons committing offences of ordering unlawful assemblies to disperse and of compelling them to disperse by the use of civil force;
- (b) presiding over the joint deliberations of the *panchayats* , and taking necessary action on the resolutions adopted by *panchayats*;
- (c) visiting primary schools, pounds and public ferries;
- (d) duties of registrars of births and deaths;
- (e) reporting about the out break of epidemics such as cholera, small box etc.

Thus traditional *panchayats* of Cooch Behar were concerned with welfare as well as criminal affairs of the village. However, the old *chaukidari panchayats* under the Cooch Behar Village Chaukidari Act of 1893 had been abolished with the merger of the estate in India and the same was replaced by *Gram* and *Anchal panchayats*. After merger, the West Bengal *Panchayat Act* of 1957 was extended to the district in various stages from 7th June 1958 to June 1960. The first *Panchayat* Election was held in the district in different phases during the period from 1961-1963. During this period the *panchayat* system was 4-tier. These were *Zilla Parisad*, *Anchalik Parishad*, *Anchal Panchayat* and *Gram Panchyat*. It was not a political *panchayat*. No political party contested in the *panchayat*.