

CHAPTER-IV: LAND REVENUE SETTLEMENT, NATURE OF AGRICULTURE AND TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP PATTERN IN COOCHBEHAR.

In the rural areas, the position of person in the society and power structure is determined to a great extent by the land tenure pattern. One, therefore, needs a thorough understanding of the land tenure and the land revenue settlement in Cooch Behar with a view to analyse the history and evolution of rural leadership pattern. The present chapter is an attempt to this end.

To analyse land tenure, land relations and related leadership structure of CoochBehar somewhat systematically, this chapter has been broadly divided into two modules. The scope of the first one ends at 1950, the year when the existence of Cooch Behar as a feudatory state ceases and from hereon, the scope of the second module starts and it extends till the Panchayat General Election in 1978. In each module, the endeavour has been made to find out the social and economic nexus of the prevalent rural leadership pattern with a view to highlight the fact that land ownership pattern played a substantive role in the making of rural leaders through the history of Cooch Behar.

4.1.:The pre-merger period, i.e., before, 1950.

4.1.1:The nature of class differentiation and rural power structure vis-a-vis the early settlement history:

If the class differentiation, nature of inequality and the land relations in the pre-British period are analysed with an eye to ethnic factor of the society, it will be evident that the oppression was less, if not absent in the rural society. The class differentiation was there but the cleavages between landlords and the tenants or cultivators was almost absent. Dr. S.Mukharjee¹ observed that in this society, there was no class differentiation, no oppressed and oppressor relationship, there was no financial inequality and unlike other parts of Bengal as well as India, no caste based society also cropped up. He further observed that eight or nine centuries latter, when Dr. Buchanon-Hamilton travelled through this region (1810 A.D.), the society was extended horizontally, not vertically.

The reason for absence of class differentiation may be traced to early settlement history of this region and the ethnic composition of the society. The people mostly belong to Rajbanshi community. The early settler leased a considerable portion of land from the King in lieu of a negligible rent or no rent at all. All that he had to do was to clear the land. The farmer brought in some of relatives to clear as much forest land as they required and made them arable. The main farmer became superior

cultivating farmer and his relatives became his undertenures (*Praja*)². As they all belonged to same race, same caste, same profession, they hardly had any class conflict among themselves. Agriculture was mainly for consumption only and there was no surplus production as market for surplus production was not there. In rural Cooch Behar, there was no non-cultivating landlord. Some generations later, offsprings of cultivating landlords were attracted by the urban life and they naturally became non-cultivating landlords. The role of education, proximity to bureaucrats and their lifestyle also made some impact in this respect. Oppression as a social fact took birth at this turn of history.³

As per the account of Dr. Buchanon-Hamilton (1810 A.D.), the financial condition of the area in general was not good. The land was occupied by few influential people. "..... the relatives of the king, that is, the Rajgans and the principal amlahs of the State used to take out the Ijara *benami* and by virtue of their position, they could easily make exactations from the *ryots*."⁴ There were a large number of people to share the burden of the landlords (*jotedars*) to till the land as bonded labour. So, the power structure was very much tilted in favour of the 'jotedars'.

This class of non-cultivating owners became closer to king in administration.

In addition to that, the king brought in some upper caste Hindus to perform different works in administration. Their successors settled down in Cooch Behar by purchase or receiving a good portion of land (Jotes) from the king and become absentee landlords. Their kith and kin still possess a good amount of land in different parts of Cooch Behar.⁵ As a result, in Cooch Behar two types of 'Jotedars'(landlords) emerged : a)Local resident Jotedars and b)Non-resident and resident outsider landlords.⁶

Below the Jotedars, various types of undertenures were created. The lowest rung in the ladder lies the '*Adhiars*'. The '*Adhiars*' used to have the agricultural implements from his master. The Adhiar could change his master as per his desire. The master also could replace his Adhiar. So ,in fact, these Adhiars were the band of tenants at will as well as hired labourers. Hunter depicted a picture on conditions of Adhiars in Mekhliganj Paragana which will be pertinent to refer here. In Mekhliganj Paragana, 36.75% of the land was cultivated by Adhiars. 56.89% of the undertenures of 'Jotedars' are 'Adhiars'.⁷ Thus the necessity and extent of creation of Adhiars at that time may be estimated properly.

In the past, for most parts of north Bengal, the dominant form of Land management was based on Jotedary-Adhiary (Share-Cropping) system, leaving little scope for cultivation by hired labour. Most part of Cooch Behar differed

considerably in this respect from parts of West Bengal. In southern Bengal, sharecropping, though prevalent, was more an adjunct to the more dominant form of ownership cultivation by hired labourers. Further, south Bengal's *Bargadari* System differed from north Bengal's 'adhiary' in one important respect and that was the provision of the supply of the means of production.⁸

The sharecropping as the dominant form of land tenure in some parts of Cooch Behar, may have emerged historically as the result of a combination of circumstances . First, large areas of reclaimed lands resulted in a favourable land-man ratio which would enable the extension of cultivation mainly through the labour intensive methods. Complementarily, there was available a sizeable labour force of scheduled caste population habituated to a low subsistence level and monocrop cultivation with negligible material inputs.

4.1.2: Land Revenue Settlement In Cooch Behar :

As in some other states and countries ,the regular source of information regarding history of Cooch Behar State in general and its land tenure pattern in particular started to be available from the advent of the British in Cooch Behar in 1773 when Mr. Purling, the Collector of Rangpur prepared a 'hast-o-bud' of the land revenue in CoochBehar as observed by Durgadas Mazumdar⁹. He also observed that the land in

Cooch Behar was categorised into two groups from long ago: a) Revenue paying b) Rent free estates. Persons holding the first kind of land had to pay revenue to the State and they were called 'Jotedars'. The holders of the rent free land were private individuals and they obtained it for some special services rendered to King. There were various types of rent free land: *Brahmattar*, *Jaigir*, *Lekhiraj*, *Pirpal*, etc. The rent paying land was divided into three sub-groups: *Mal*, *Devottar* and *Khangī*. *Mal* was revenue proper which would go to the resources of the State, the incomes from *Devottar* was appropriated for the worship of the deities and other religious purposes. The income from *Khangī* land used to go for the maintenance of the household of the Maharaja. After introducing the budget by Col. Haughton, the Commissioner, the *Khangī* land were merged with the *Mal*.

The persons paying revenue to the State were called the 'Jotdars'. The regular patta would have not been granted and the land had never been measured. The land settlement was renewed year to year and the assessment was not fixed. The unit of land was '*Bish*' which equals to twelve bighas¹⁰ and sixteen kathas. The mode of assessment for different qualities of land and the system of revenue collection were both irregular and the dishonesty and greed of the State Officials caused great sufferings to the peoples. The large portions of land were alienated, exactations were imposed and the administration of justice was perverted for the purpose of securing gratification. The harassed and oppressed tenants left the States in large numbers. As

a result the net revenue of the State dwindled.¹¹

To improve this state of affairs Douglas introduced the Ijaradari system in 1790. The State was divided into small parcels and put up to auction and the highest bid with approved security was accepted. The Ijaradar then distributed the land amongst 'Jotes' to collect his expected revenue of his 'Ijara'. In addition to the 'Jama' formally fixed by the Ijaradar, he used to collect some additional revenue as 'Ijaradari' and 'Saranjami' charges. The Jotedars then were bound to pass off the pressure to his next in the tenancy pattern. As a result, the general people had to pay a huge amount as revenue on land. Mr. Ahmuty, the Commissioners writes, "Consequently whole villages deserted and retired into adjacent Districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur, where they found greater security and encouragement of their labour under established regulations of Government." ¹²

In order to remove all these evils, the necessity of a general survey of the whole State and preparation of a Record of Rights of all tenants from the 'Jotedars' downwards and to determine the rents at each level was felt. Accordingly, the first survey of Cooch Behar by O'Donnell was concluded in 1870. O'Donnells' survey measured the country in standard '*Bighas*' of eighty cubits square (cubits=18 inches) and in 'kathas' and 'Dhurs'. He divided the country into six paraganas or circuits and

within the paraganas ,the taluks were geographically demarcated. The Jotes in each taluk were demarcated. Under order of George Campbell ,the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal ,the Ijaradari system was abolished and *Khas* collection was introduced from 1st April 1872 .The task of first land revenue settlement of CoochBehar was concluded in 1877. The under tenures running upto six degree were noted at this Settlement .They were in order of successive lower grade : *Jote, Chukani, Dar Chukani, Dar-a-dar -Chukani, Tasya Chukani, and Tasya-tali-Chukani*. The profit of each upper stage in collecting the rent from the next lower stage was also recorded.

The first Settlement was concluded with the Jotedars, varied from 8 to 13 years and ended in 1877. An extension of five years on the same terms was made and from 1886-87 Resettlement (which was known as Rakamcharcha Settlement) was started. In the mean time, another petty Settlement of *Patit* (fallow) lands ,which was known as Patit Charcha settlement had taken place between 1884 and 1886 . In the Resettlement rate of rent to be paid by the undertenure was also fixed.¹³

The Rakamcharcha Resettlement was to expire in about 1918-1920 . The order that the next Resettlement might come into force soon after the expiry of the above period, the operations in this connection with the present Resettlement were started in 1912-1913. A new survey was conducted from 1912 and ended in 1916-1917. The

expiring settlements of the Rakamcharcha settlement were extended upto 1927 and in 1927 a new Resettlement was made.

A careful study of these land revenue settlements of the district will show that the intentions of the King and the British Agents in Cooch Behar revolved on three principles during the various settlement operations : a) creation of a intermediary class between King and the people, b) extorting maximum possible revenue through these intermediary class and c) enthusing people to make settlements in the large uninhabited tracts of land. As a result, the intermediary class became closer to king and became his representative in rural areas with more possession of land.

4.1.3: The rural administration in Cooch Behar and its transition.

The rural administration was officially run by the system '*dewania*'. These dewanias were large Jotedars residing on their farms; the neighbouring areas contained their tenants. There had been no survey or settlement of the country and the tenants were completely under the thumb of the jotedars or dewanias"¹⁴

Those dewanias ruled as the Civil Heads of the rural areas and arbitrated in all disputes amongst their tenants and dependents. Much depended upon the personal character as well as the temperament of the individual '*dewania*'. For good or evil, he reigned supreme and the only redress any one had against his vagaries was to appeal

to the '*Rajsabha*'. After the settlement operations, the power of the 'dewaniyas' was, to a great extent reduced. People then had a recorded right in their land which the State acknowledged. Agriculture improved and by and large the condition of people in general improved considerably.¹⁵

But land as the basis and source of power and authority was proved at that time, through the settlement operations, the jotedars retained their predominant position in the rural society and unofficially, the 'dewaniyas' continued to enjoy their erstwhile official position. They exercised power and authority to the undertenures.

After the initial relief from the old '*Dewania*' system (after the settlement operation by O'Donnel) and with the increasing opulence, the people began to feel the necessity of some organisation for their security. In 1876, some petitions were sent to the Deputy Commissioner for organising a village Chowkidari system on the pattern obtaining in Rangpur and Jalpaiguri. The inhabitants of the taluk volunteered to raise subscriptions for the payment of the Chowkidars. The State was requested to give them a badge and invest them with police functions. The prayer was granted and the scheme became popular; till 1882-83 there were 1576 'Chowkidars' in the State. As it becomes increasingly difficult to pay this large body of men regularly by raising subscriptions, the Cooch Behar Village Chowkidari Act was passed in

1893-94 on the model of Bengal Act of the same name of 1891.¹⁶

In the Act, there was a provision to constitute panchayats consisting of three to five members for each village. The responsibility for the constitution of Panchayat bodies was vested with the 'Faujdari Ahilkar'(District Magistrate). There were three eligibility conditions for becoming a panchayat, namely: 1) Permanent resident of the village, 2) must have a land of his own or in occupation, 3) if a person has land in a particular village but resides in another, he must reside within one mile from the particular village. But most important point in selecting the panchayat member was that a Deputy Magistrate on behalf of the '*Faujdari Ahilkar*' was entrusted with the duty to select the panchayat member amongst the selectable persons in the village. These selectable persons mostly belonged to the topmost ladder of socio-economic stratification.¹⁷

The collecting member of the panchayat was appointed by the State and a '*Chowkidari*' rate in terms of the Act was levied on the residents of the panchayat area by the '*Collecting Panchayat*' and deposited with the Subdivisional Officer. The Subdivisional Officer paid the salaries of the Chowkidars at quarterly pay parades at the Thanas.

In 1941, there was an amendment of the Panchayat act. A provision was included

for constitution of one union consisting of some villages with one elected panchayat. 'Faujdari Ahilkar' used to select one person with leadership qualities to function as President. Though the essential qualities are not mentioned clearly, the Presidents, in all probabilities, were chosen from the rural elites at that time. There is another interesting part of the provision ; though the enactment was made for an elected President, in practice they were selected by the bureaucrats. So, to continue the inferences, the Presidents were more close to bureaucracy than the ordinary rural mass and they were rural vanguards of the class interests of the bureaucracy.¹⁸

4.2: The post-merger period.

4.2.1: Land Revenue settlement after merger.

The settlement of 1913-27 which was given effect from the year 1927-28 was about to expire in 1956 when the Estates Acquisition Act was enforced in CoochBehar. The Revisional settlement operations in Cooch Behar started from 1955. Under Estates Acquisition Act, the Government issued notification for the preparation of Record Of Rights and the various types of undertenures which existed earlier in CoochBehar (under the Jotedary system) came under the category of rayats. *Rayats* of various grades actually cultivating land had been accepted as tenants directly under the Government and the ceiling of landholding had to be applied to each of them . An elaborate machinery had also been set up to collect rent direct from the

tenants. With the help of West Bengal Land Reforms Act land in excess of the ceiling prescribed in the Act, which was in occupation of the intermediaries or tenants become vested by the Government and was distributed among the landless cultivators.¹⁹

4.2.2: Adhiary system vis-a-vis rural landholding and land tenure pattern.

After partition in 1947, waves of refugees, many belonging to the peasant class, started moving into the comparatively less dense areas of Cooch Behar district . The increased pressure of population changed the nature of cultivation, ownership pattern and the traditional adhiary system. Further, since the late 50's an attack on the system of share-cropping both through extra-legal and legal methods added to the weakening of the institution. For example, the 'Tebhaga Movement'(33:66) just before independence highlighted the lack of distributive justice inherent in the adhiary (50:50) system. In the post-independence period , particularly after coming to the power by Left Front Government in the State of West Bengal in the late 70's , different laws in favour of the share-croppers regarding imposition of ceiling on landholding , security on tenancy rights on land share of produce and recording of *Barga Rights* on someone's land have been passed and enacted . As a result, the local or regional circumstances favourable to sharecropping as a form of cultivation now came under the pressure from several new factors. There was noticed the growing

demand for reducing the owners' share of return under share-cropping system.

The decline of the traditional adhiary system had wide effects on the whole economy of north Bengal, specially Cooch Behar. Such a process contributed most to the sharp increase in the number of agricultural labourers in all north Bengal Districts, including Cooch Behar. Large number of adhiars were converted to the status of agricultural labourers. Though de facto contribution of cultivation on adhiary terms is not at all uncommon, yet in the census enumeration, all such tillers of soil would not be accounted as sharecroppers. The reported claim of vast increase in the recording of adhiars in the wake of the current land settlement operations unmistakably indicates that a very large number cultivators operating on adhiary terms were previously included (till 1971) in the agricultural labour category. It is not improbable that the urge for recording as landless agricultural labourer rather than as poor cultivators might have been stoked by the movements of programme of vested land redistribution during the period. Often, the marginal landowners felt encouraged to declare themselves as agricultural labourers for the prospect of entitlement to portions of vested land. An excess amount of people is engaged in agriculture and out of this, a large proportion of people is either marginal or small farmer which is delineated in the table No.4.1.

Table 4.1: Position of Marginal Farmers, Small Farmers and Agricultural Labourers in CoochBehar District.

No. & Percentage	Total main workers	Number of farmers	No. of Agril. Labourers	No. of Industrial Workers	No. of other workers
Number	513590	267170	139914	10356	96147
Percentage	100	52.02	27.24	2.01	18.72

Source: Census Handbook, 1981.

It is seen from the above table 4.1 that the farmers consist of 52.02 per cent of the total working population in CoochBehar. It shows that the agricultural labourers in 1981 consist of a very large work force in rural Cooch Behar (27.24 per cent).

Table 4.2: Distribution of holdings according to size-class in Cooch Behar.

Sl. No.	Size of holdings	No. of holdings ('000 nos.)	% of total no. of holdings	% of total area covered	Average quantum (ha) of holdings
1	Upto 1.00 ha	157.84	60.87	26.17	0.43
2	Above 1.00 to 2.00 ha	65.55	25.28	34.48	1.36
3	Above 2.00 to 4.00 ha	30.68	11.84	29.82	2.52
4	Above 4.00 ha.	5.22	2.01	9.53	4.74
Total		259.29	100	100	

Sources: 1. Agricultural Census, 1980-81, West Bengal; "Number and area of Operational Holdings"; Published by Board Of Revenue and Directorate of Agriculture, Socio-Economic Evaluation Branch, Govt. of West Bengal, P-7.

2. Personal computation.

A size class distribution of land tenure pattern in CoochBehar (table 4.2) will be

pertinent here to understand the rural society in Cooch Behar. It is evident from the above table that there are 1,57,840 holdings in the size class 'upto one hectare' which consists of 60.87 per cent of the total number of holdings. But the total area covered by this class is only 26.17. Thus, the average quantum of holding in this category is very meagre, naturally (only 0.43 ha.). As a natural consequence, the average quantum of holding rises with the rise in the size of holding and in 'Above 4.00 ha' category, it becomes 4.74 hectare. The table 4.2 delineates that the two categories 'Above 1.00 to 2.00 ha' and 'Above 2.00 to 4.00 ha', together constitute 64.3 per cent of cultivable land in Cooch Behar. As such, these two middle level categories of landowners form a very formidable economic force to reckon with in the course of this study. On the other hand, the big landowners ('above 4 ha' category) owning less than 10 per cent of land do not seem to enjoy a very high position in the land distribution pattern in Cooch Behar.

The aforesaid description of the landholding pattern not only gives some idea about the rural economy of Cooch Behar but it also intend to find out the probable source of power and influence the in rural areas of the district. In its present transitional form, axis of power may have shifted from big land owners to that of small and middle categories of farmers.

4.2.3: Rural leaders and rural administration after merger.

The Merger Agreement between His Highness Jagatdwipendra Narayan Bhupbahadur and the Governor General of India was signed in 1949 and it was effected from 1st January, 1950. But the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1957 was extended to the district in various stages from 1959 to 1964. So, for more than a decade, there was no official leader in rural Cooch Behar. Thus, the interim period - that is the period between the merger of the Cooch Behar State to West Bengal and the constitution of Panchayati Raj (1950 to 1959) was a period of political wilderness. The details of the rural administration in this period is not available in any departmental records of Cooch Behar. Dr.N.Pal²⁰ opined that though the panchayat election during 1959-64 period was apolitical officially, the candidates selected mostly belonged to Congress Party. It may be presumed that the traditional land-based leadership was dominant at that time.

The Govt. Of West Bengal started implementing the four-tier panchayat setup as per Panchayat Act,1957, in Cooch Behar from 1959. The people had to wait till 1964 for full set-up of the panchayat bodies. The whole district was covered by Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats. The old Chowkidari Panchayat under Cooch Behar Village Chowkidari Act,1893 was abolished and the new four tier Panchayati set-up was introduced. As the smallest territorial unit of the new system, a Gram

Panchayats had in its jurisdiction a revenue mauza with an approximate population of 1000 . The number of its members varied from 9 to 15 who used to hold office for four years. They elected from among themselves one 'Adkshaya' and one 'Upadhaksha'. They had a 'Gram Panchayat Fund' for its functioning.

An Anchal Panchayat, the next higher stratum, comprised of some contiguous Gram Panchayats or 'Gram Sabhas'. Normally it comprised eight to ten Gram Panchayats with a population of about 10,000 . The members of the Anchal Panchayat were elected by the members of Gram Sabha. The 'Pradhan' was the head of the Anchal Panchayat with 'Upa-Pradhan' to assist him. Officially, They should stay in offices for four years. Besides, the salaried Secretary, Dafadars and Chowkidars were there to help Pradhan to function smoothly.

There were eleven 'Anchalik Parisads' in the district. Anchalik Parisads were the next higher stage in the Panchayat hierarchy. The Anchalik Parisad consisted of the Pradhans within the Block (the jurisdiction of the Anchalik Parisad and Block being same), one Adhkshaya from each Anchal Panchayat, M.P.s and M.L.A.s elected from a constituency comprising the Block or part thereof, two women and two persons belonging to backward community. Each Anchalik Parisad had a President and a Vice-President elected by the members from among themselves for a period of four years. The Anchalik Parisad used to function through various Standing Committees.²¹

The Zilla Parisad was the apex body in the four-tier Panchayat set up. The Cooch Behar Zilla Parisad was constituted in 1964, consisted of members selected by the 'Anchalik Parisads'.²²

4.2.4: Socio-Economic Position Of Rural Leaders Between 1950-77.

The election to the four-tier panchayati set-up was held only once in Cooch Behar - from late 1959 to 1964, in different tiers and in different areas of Cooch Behar. So, the Panchayat functionaries in all tiers worked more than five years, i.e., more than the scheduled tenure of the members. Though Panchayati Raj was set up in CoochBehar with much fanfare and backing of the Government, it lasted not for long and by the end of sixties, all its strata became defunct. Only the social status of the panchayat members was retained and they were often informally called upon to mediate in rural conflicts and tensions. The panchayat members who were elected through the panchayat election in the four tier system were also interested to continue their dominant position as the rural elite. The socio-economic condition of the panchayat leaders can be inferred from two case studies of former panchayat leaders in two villages.

Case study of Mr.Raj Chandra Roy: Mr. Roy is now about eighty years old. He is the resident of Ruerkuthi village in Bhetaguri-I G.P.. At present, he is the owner

of eighteen bigha (six acres) land. His father was a 'Panchayat' at the time of the erstwhile Cooch Behar State. His father maintained a close relation with the 'Nayab Ahilkar'(Subdivisional Officer) of Dinhata. His father possessed huge ancestral land. His relatives were engaged in his land as 'Praja' and lived in huts around their house. His father died in the 1920's. Mr. Roy has studied upto class-X in Dinhata. After studying, he engaged himself wholetime in agriculture. A considerable portion of his ancestral land was occupied by his relatives who used to till the land as '*Praja*'. In the forties he was again selected by the '*Nayab Ahilkar*' as panchayat.

Soon after merger, he became a member of the Congress Party. In the Panchayat election in 1960, he was elected as '*Adhakshya*' of the Gram Panchayat. As '*Adhakshya*', he could hardly work upto his satisfaction. But as a Congressman, he earned recognition in the party as well as in the locality. He become a close follower of the Congress M.L.A of Dinhata. His social status was thus upgraded. A large number of people in the area came to him with their problems for advice and redressal of the problem.

In 1978, he submitted nomination as an independent candidate in Panchayat General Election and was elected. As the Gram Panchayat was dominated by the CPI(M), he became an ordinary member of the Gram Panchayat. In the next Panchayat election in 1983, he filed his nomination as Congress candidate but was defeated. As the Gram Panchayat was controlled by the Congress this time, Mr. Roy

was consulted by the Pradhan and other Congress members in all important matters. In 1988 Panchayat Election, he filed his nomination again, but was defeated. He is still considered in the locality as the influential Congress leader and still he holds a good position in the Congress leadership in Dinahata.

For marriage of his daughter and education of his son, he had sold a considerable portion of his ancestral land.

Case study of Mr.Kantheswar Barman: Mr.Barman is the resident of Andaranfulbari village in Andaranfulbari-I G.P. He is sixtyfive years old now. He was a supporter and activist of Congress Party. His father was Collecting Panchayat before merger of the Cooch Behar State. Mr.Barman become panchayat in the first panchayat election to the four tier system. He owns thirty bighas of land and has eagerness for modern agriculture, the officials of the Agriculture Department of the Govt. of West Bengal helped him to level his land and make it a demonstration field for modern agriculture in Tufanganj subdivision He possesses a shallow tubewell and pumpset (diesel), paddy threshing machine, gobar gas plant (operative till now). Being a good farmer, he has close contact with the B.D.O. of Tufanganj and many other Govt. Officials of both Tufanganj and the District Town. He worked as Pradhan in the four tier system till 1978, when the Panchayat election in the three tier system was held.

He was elected as Panchayat member in the Anderanfulbari-I Gram Panchayat in

1978 as a Congress candidate. As the CPI(M) members in the G.P. were in majority, he became an ordinary member. In 1983 Panchayat Election, he changed his party affiliation and became CPI(M) candidate. After winning the election he became 'Upa-Pradhan' of the G.P. Since then he has been the 'Upa-Pradhan' of the Gram Panchayat and never lost in any Panchayat election.

He is a leading cultivator of vegetables in Tufanganj. In fact, he is one of the innovators of vegetable cultivation in this area and the present position of Tufanganj as a major exporter of vegetables owes much to his efforts. But, as a result of excessive use of chemical fertilizer the fertility of soil has been adversely affected.

To continue further the enquiry on the nature of the rural leadership during the last phases of feudatory rule in Cooch Behar and that of the transitional period till 1978, the year when the first partywise Panchayat General Election was held and to make out a possible correlation between the land-tenure pattern and the leadership, ten very old men of the seven Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar, namely: a) Bhetaguri-I, b) Bhetaguri-II, c) Lotapota, d) Ghokserdanga, e) Guriahati-I, f) Balarampur-I, and g) Andaranfulbari-I Gram Panchayats were interviewed by the researcher. On the basis of the information collected from them, the following facts seem to emerge. For clarity, these have been also divided between pre-merger and post-merger periods.

A.:pre-merger period:

- a) The king or his representatives in the sub-division (Sub-Divisional Heads)

appointed the panchayats. The panchayats nominated in this way had close contacts with the Sub-Divisional Officer (Nayab Ahilkar). These persons were well-known people, somewhat educated and economically well-off. Mostly, they were all aged people. They had no fixed tenure of office as a panchayat and their retention to the post depended exclusively at the wish of the king or the 'Nayab Ahilkar'. The titles of the persons selected as panchayats were often changed by the king who often conferred upon them the titles of 'Hisabia' or 'Patowari'²³, etc.

- b) In most cases, Panchayats were dependent on land and agriculture. Most of them had 200 to 300 bighas of land. In addition, some of them worked as 'Mokter'(lawyer) after the introduction of the court and the legal system following the pattern that prevailed in other parts of British India.
- c) The Panchayats were the representatives of their respective area to the King; they were also the final adjudicator of their areas. The people had to submit their prayer to the King through them. The Collecting Panchayat had the power to auction any household or part thereof in case of non-repayment of Chowkidari Tax. Though in most cases, the incumbent paid the amount as soon as the auction was notified.
- d) The Panchayats were Rajbanshis and original Muslim inhabitants of the state.
- e) After 1947, when the huge migration from the erstwhile East Pakistan took

place in this district, a honorary post of 'Captain' was created in the bordering areas of Cooch Behar with East Pakistan at the behest of the 'Nayab Ahilkar' and the local thanas (police out-posts). The primary duty of the 'Captain' was to mobilise people and keep vigil to the property of the new immigrants so that their property could not be taken away whenever they went back to East Pakistan to settle their property left there.

B: Post-marger period (till 1977):

- a) The 'Dewanias' continued their dominance, though they had lost the constitutional backing of the King. The common people still approached them for adjudication and consultation.
- b) The introduction of the 'Panchayati Raj' in the late '50s and the beginning of 1960 brought with it the system of 'Adhyaksha' and 'Pradhan'. The people elected members in a 'mouza' who on their part elect 'Adhyaksha' from themselves. The 'Pradhan' was elected by the 'Adhyakshas' from among themselves.
- c) Though the election was officially non-partisan, the Indian National Congress was successful in placing its candidates as 'Adhyaksha' and 'Pradhan'. As there was no other political party in the field, there was no organised competition.
- d) Mostly, the 'Dewanias' or their relatives were chosen by the people as their 'Adhyaksha' or 'Pradhan'. It was also the fact that these 'Dewanis' were the

only people who had the leadership qualities as well as the confidence of the people to give leadership at that stage.

- e) The dominance of the landed gentry continued. The panchayat functionaries mostly possessed 100 to 200 bighas of land. During the regime of United Front in West Bengal, and with the application of ceiling on land, a huge portion of land of some of these panchayats were made 'Khas'(forfeited by Govt.).
- f) Till 1977, the new-migrants who happened to be mostly the non-Rajbanshi Hindu and non-aboriginal Muslims, rarely had any role in the rural panchayat structure.
- g) The election to the Panchayat set-up was conducted only once (during 1959 to 1964) and as such many of Panchayats worked more than twenty years. As the panchayat system lost its relevance towards the end of 1960's, the Panchayats unofficially did the arbitration for the people during the residual period. Moreover, they formed the basis of the Congress Party and its politics in rural Cooch Behar.

4.2.5: The demographic transition and the consequent change in the power structure.

To comprehend the rural power structure in Cooch Behar and its rural areas, a discussion on demographic situation is necessary. The society in Cooch Behar till 1930's was more or less homogeneous. The Rajbanshis and the Muslims were the

principal ethnic groups in the region. There were a few Brahmins and high caste Hindus who mostly resided in the urban areas. A table showing the demographic situation from the beginning of the century is given to illustrate the situation (table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Population variation in decades in Cooch Behar.

Year	Total population	Variation in the last decade	% of Population variation in CoochBehar	% of Population variation in West Bengal
1901	565116	-13752	-2.38	N.A.
1911	591012	+25896	+4.58	N.A.
1921	590599	-413	-0.07	N.A.
1931	589053	-1546	-0.26	N.A.
1941	638703	+49650	+8.43	N.A.
1951	668949	+30206	+4.73	+13.18
1961	1019806	+350857	+52.45	+32.80
1971	1414183	+394377	+38.67	+26.87
1981	1771562	+357379	+25.28	+22.96
1991 (Provisio -nal figures)	2169784	+398222	+22.54	N.A.

Sources:

1. D.D.Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Cooch Behar, Feb.,1977, PP.-60,61.
2. District Statistical Office, Cooch Behar, Govt. of West Bengal.
3. Personal computation.

It is evident from the above table that from the decade 1951-61 onwards, there has been a steady increase in the population. In terms of percentage, the decade 1951-61 marks the most noticeable increase (52.45%) in population. The

corresponding increase in population of West Bengal during the decade was only 32.80 per cent. Compared to percentage increase in the previous decade (4.73), the percentage increase in 1951-61 is too high. The percentage increase in population is also very high in the next three decades, 38.67%, 25.28% & 22.54% in 1961-71, 1971-81, and 1981-91 decades respectively. In terms of actual population increase, all the four decades show the addition of 3.5 to almost 4 lakhs population to the population of Cooch Behar in each decade.

One of the main causes of this sudden increase in population from 1951-61 decade may well be attributed to migration from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. No serious endeavour has been made to explain the nature of migration into the district except in the 1951 Census report, wherein Dr. A.Mitra, Census Commissioner has put forward some data and tables on immigration in the District Census Handbook of Cooch Behar. He pointed out that the immigration included 99,9917 displaced persons from East Pakistan²⁴. In table No. 1.13 in the Census Handbook, it is seen that 84,154 persons took refuge in rural Cooch Behar and 15,763 persons in urban areas in Cooch Behar. The only and serious limitation of the data is that it is limited to 1951, when the process of immigration has just set in. If this data is made available for the later decades, a systematic analysis of migration history in this district could be made. But, even then, we can safely infer that with the beginning of post-partition years, large scale migration of displaced persons from East Pakistan started to alter

the demographic pattern of this district.

As a result, the homogeneity in terms of racial or cultural features of the rural areas began to change. The land-tenure and agricultural pattern also changed qualitatively. The Pradhans and Upa-Pradhans of all Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar, elected in 1988 Panchayat General Election, were taken for analysis in terms of their caste and ethnic affiliation. The table 4.4 gives an indication of the heterogeneity of ethnic groups in the rural power structure in Cooch Behar.

Table 4.4: Distribution of Pradhans and Upa-Pradhans (elected in 1988) according to caste and race.

Serial No.	Caste / Race	No.	Percentage
1.	Rajbanshi	145	56.64
2.	Muslim	48	18.75
3.	Kayastha	38	14.84
4.	Jalia Kaibarta	11	4.3
5.	Saha	6	2.34
6.	Brahmin	5	1.95
7.	Maroaries	1	0.4
8.	Sch. Tribes	2	0.78
TOTAL		256	100.00

N.B.: Total No. of Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar is 128; thus total no. of Pradhans and Upa-Pradhans comes to $128 \times 2 = 256$.

Sources: 1. The Panchayat Department, Cooch Behar, Govt. of West Bengal.

2. Personal computation.

4.3: Summary And Conclusion.

To summarise the above discussion on pre-merger and post-merger periods, the land-tenure and leadership pattern of the different periods in rural Cooch Behar it emerges that in the earlier period the leadership was very much based on land. It is this landed class who emerged as their community leaders by giving land settlement to their kinsmen. In the latter period, it is this landed class that helped the migrants to settle down in the district by selling land to them. But it may be pointed out that inequality in the pre-migration period was 'harmonic', as per the definition given by A. Beteille²⁵. It may be one of the causes that though Hindu Rajbanshis and indigenous Muslims lived in Cooch Behar for many centuries, no conflict between them occurred here. Bipan Chanda²⁶ holds that the basic cause of any ethnic conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India has been the exploitative relations between these two groups of people.

But gradually, the outsiders started coming in this district; infrequently before the partition of India (1947) as servicemen in the King's public offices. Many of them have settled in Cooch Behar and purchased '*Ijaradari*' from the King. After 1947, migrants from East Pakistan started infiltrating the district. They purchased land from the original settlers of Cooch Behar. And in course of time they started taking part in the decision making process. Here, at this turn of history, a qualitative change occurred in the rural relationships. The small but innovative rule of United Front in West Bengal with an emphasis on land reforms -taking out the surplus land from the

big land owners and reducing them to ordinary peasants left a lasting imprint on the social and economic relationship. The inequality largely became 'disharmonic' with this turn of the century.

So, the rural power structure in Cooch Behar has a long transitional history, from the homogeneous, non-exploitative power structure to the recent ethnically heterogeneous power structure with an abiding interest in rural development and distributive justice. In the next chapters, an endeavour will be made to explain the different facets of rural power structure as it exists now, after the reintroduction of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal in 1978.

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2. Ibid., P.107.
3. Ibid.,PP-109,110.
4. West Bengal District Gazetters,Koch Bihar; D.D.Majumdar, 1977. P.142
5. Chowdhuri H.N., Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement (1903),P-448.
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11. Majumdar, D.D., P.142.
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20. Dr. N.Pal, Kochbihare Panchayati Raj in Kochbiharer Itihas (Bengali); an addendum in the reprinted version of the book by Bhagabati Charan Bandhyopadhya (1882); Calcutta;1978;P-265.
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23. The title 'Hisabia' generally conferred upon the collecting panchayat who kept accounts, (i.e.'hisab'). The title 'Patowari' was generally given to the panchayats. The term came from 'patowar' meaning leader.
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