

CHAPTER - IX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

IX.0.1 Broadly speaking, the present study is an exercise in analysing, as far as practicable, the origin and development of land-tenurial relations and its consequences in different periods of history, especially from the days of the Bhutanese administration down to the present age in the Duars region of the district of Jalpaiguri of the northern part of West Bengal. Although historical periods have their own distinctive features, they more or less form inseparable parts of one continuous process. A relatively longer period has been chosen in our study for a comparative analysis of the changes in tenurial relations and their economic consequences. The evolution of the relationship between the tenants, the landlords and the Government has, in course of more than two hundred years, taken place in three definite periods which we have termed as the Bhutanese, the British and the modern periods respectively.

IX.0.2 In the Bhutanese period, land-tenure "system" as used in the modern sense, did not develop. The historical materials as we could have collected, permitted us to believe that the Bhutias did not introduce anything new in land-tenurial arrangement in the region of our study, but allowed the customary Cooch Behari arrangement to prevail as long as their demands for revenue were fulfilled. Most of the historical records that were available to us suggest that the mode of collection of land revenue of the Bhutias was

oppressive. The Western Duars region was a free squeezing field to the Bhutias. In such an arrangement of revenue collection our study suggests that the Bhutias constantly violated the existing tenurial arrangements with the result that the tenure holders did not have any privilege of enjoying uninterrupted rights in their properties. It is our belief that the peculiar revenue collection arrangement of the Bhutias gave temporary property rights to any person who would be in a position to fulfil their demand for revenue and this, our study suggests, was oral which amounted to complete absence of any property rights in the modern sense. The whole tenurial arrangement was based on a very fragile foundation leading to its instability. In an insecure tenurial condition, our study suggests that any development, worth its name, in agriculture was not possible. Therefore, the whole economy became stagnant and the inhabitants of the Western Duars region were compelled to face endless sufferings at the hands of the Bhutias who did not care to live permanently in the region.

IX.0.3 Our study points out the fact that the Britishers after annexation of the Western Duars made an attempt for the first time to systematise the tenurial as well as land revenue arrangements of the region. However, the Britishers, after annexing the territory, initially kept the land relations undisturbed for sometime. Thereafter, they gradually introduced changes and reforms. As an attempt to systematise the land relations, they conducted periodical surveys and settlements of land. Lands were measured and classified. Revenues

were fixed keeping in view the qualities, location and relative development of various parts of the region. Lands were leased out to capitalist farmers called jotedars. Various forms of leases were issued in different times. These leases governed the terms and conditions of holding land. Occasionally, conditions laid down in leases were reformed so as to cope with the changing situations. The Bengal Tenancy (B.T) Act, 1885, was applicable here only in a restricted manner. Legal matters relating to land were guided by the Bhutan Duars Act, 1864, Waste Land Claims Act, 1863 and Scheduled District Act, 1874 and finally by the B.T. Act which was extended to this area since 1899 with some modifications. Rights and obligations of jotedars were specified in the form of leases and sub-infeudation was permitted by one degree only below jotedars, called chukanidars whose rights and status were clearly defined and rental obligation specified.

IX.0.4 From our study it is revealed that contrary to the intention of the government further sub-infeudation below the permitted degree could not be checked as there were no provisions for punitive action. Our study suggests that as a result there remained always a scope for rack-renting of unrecognised sub-tenants below chukanidars. Moreover, we have pointed out in our study that a bulk of the peasantry called adhiars (sharecroppers) had no rights in or title to land. They were treated like agricultural labourers, though literally they were the tillers of soil. They were exploited

to the best advantage of their landlords. All efforts for improving their status or giving them some rights were frustrated by the vested interests. This exploitation and oppression of the adhiars by their landlords reached at such a state at the later years of the British rule that adhiars organised a strong movement to end those exploitations. They also raised demand for a higher share of the produce. Though the struggle ultimately failed, it made the bulk of the peasantry conscious of their legitimate rights and actually prepared the ground for progressive legislations in their favour in the post-independence period.

IX.0.5 But the socio-economic scenario of Western Duars went on changing constantly during the British period. Population in the tract rose gradually. Land became a salable asset. There were commercialisation of agriculture and gradual monetisation of the economy of Duars. Our study revealed that on the development of land market lands gradually began to pass into the hands of money lenders and traders. In certain cases, it gave rise to the phenomenon of absentee landlordism, although the original policy of the government was to settle lands only with resident cultivators. It was seen that there was no bar on acquiring land by non-resident non-cultivators, and no measure was taken to check the growth of absentee landlordism. We have suggested in our study that this new phenomenon had further accentuated the growth of sub-infeudation and adhiari (sharecropping) cultivation. The unique feature of land relation in the Western Duars was no doubt the jotedari-adhiari

system. But most of the jotedars owned large areas of land. As there were no ceiling on landholding, they owned as much land as possible under their management. Thus the ownership of land was concentrated in a few hands of jotedars, whereas the landless tillers began to swell in number. The study has further revealed the fact that the control of land passed from the indigenous holders of land to newcomers often giving rise to social tensions, the evil effect of which is felt even today.

IX.0.6 It should, however, be noted that the Britishers with a view to keep the possibility of raising land revenue from time to time, gave temporary rights to landholders. Moreover, as the entire region had a great possibility for tea cultivation, temporary rights for cultivating land for agricultural purposes opened up the possibility of transferring agricultural land into tea lands.

IX.0.7 Tea industry was introduced in the region within a decade of the inception of the British rule. Large investments of capital were made in it, and the government paid a lot of attention for its development. Development of rail and road communications mainly served the purpose of this industry. This study shows that in most of the cases this was done at the cost of the interest of the agricultural sector. Tea lands were leased out at lower rates of rent than agricultural lands. Arrangements were made to provide the required lands for tea cultivation. It is also suggested in our

study that although surplus was generated in the plantation sector, it was very seldom reinvested for the benefit of the subsistence agricultural sector. The employment of local people stayed at a minimum level in the tea plantations. Almost the whole army of tea garden labourers were recruited from outside the region. Even food and other consumption requirements of the plantation labourers were used to be procured from outside the region. Moreover, requirements of the industry for implements, machineries, fertilisers, tea chests etc. were used to be collected not from within but from outside the region and sometimes even from outside the State. The plantation industry utilised the agricultural sector for the satisfaction of a small fragment of their demand, resulting in the underdevelopment of the subsistence segment of the Duars economy. Our study, thus, points out that the plantation sector mostly developed as enclaves and did not produce any spread effect on the peripheral underdeveloped socio-economic milieu. Perhaps the most deleterious effect of the development of tea industry was the uprooting of some of the sons of the soil like the Mechés who became the victims of development of tea industry.

IX.0.8 The study further highlights the fact that the role of the Government as well as that of the capitalist jotedars were minimal in the improvement and development of Duars agriculture. Although the Government did think of taking several steps for the improvement of agriculture, unfortunately no concrete steps were

undertaken. On the contrary, the government was much more interested and careful in raising the maximum possible revenue from this area rather than looking after the prosperity and betterment of the people. Thus, from the point of view of exploitation of the inhabitants of the Western Duars, one is entitled to conclude from our study that there was no qualitative difference between the Bhutia and the British system of revenue collection. The study further points out that the jotedars and some chukanidars with large chunks of land also failed miserably in this respect. They were contented with whatever they could produce from land and procure from adhiars and sub-tenants. Their needs were minimum. They were idle and lethargic and mostly unconcerned to have a better standard of living. It was their idleness which was largely responsible for their contentment with the easy-going traditional life. It is thus suggested in our study that inspite of the fact that some of the rich landowners possessed substantial amount of surplus, there was no reinvestment of the surplus for the improvement of land, and consequently agriculture of this region had to remain in a backward state with production remaining at the rock-bottom level. It was not possible for the small farmers to invest sufficiently in agriculture due to lack of capital and resources, consequently production technique more or less remained traditional.

IX.0.9 Our study, however, points out that in the post-independence period, the land-tenure system has undergone major changes. Instead of different types of land-tenure system and application of different

types of land laws, all parts of the State have been brought under simple and uniform tenurial and revenue system and same set of laws has been made operative for the whole State. With the enactment of new legislations, all sorts of intermediary interests in land have been abolished and direct relationship has been established between the State and its tenants. The State has now returned to the Raiyatwari system of land-tenure. By enacting uniform land laws for the whole State, complexities in legal matters relating to land affairs have been sought to be dispensed with. Adhiars (i.e., bargadars) have been given the security of their tenures, and their share of produce has been raised. They have been provided with legal safeguards in such a way that it has become almost impossible for a landowner to evict his adhiar. On the whole, they have been provided with such rights and status that they are now almost semi-raiyas (tenants). But our study suggests that provision of such rights and safeguards is inconsistent with a two-tier Raiyatwari system of land-tenure, because, although an adhiar can not legally be called a raiyat, in practice he enjoys some of the rights and privileges as enjoyed by a raiyat. Thus, it may be said that the employers of adhiars, viz., their landowners, are intermediaries. In our view, to remove such inconsistency the adhiari or bargadari (sharecropping) system should be abolished, and all adhiars may be given the raiyat right by providing compensation to the owners of the adhi land where the beneficiaries may be asked to share a part of the burden of compensation.

IX.0.10. The study further suggests that the enactment of beneficial laws for bargadars has not been an unmixed blessing for them. From the enactment of the Bargadars' Act, 1950, upto the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 with its subsequent amendments of the sections pertaining to the provisions for safeguarding the rights of bargadars, many of them have been evicted by their landowners. The study shows that a large section of the bargadars have been reduced to the status of agricultural labourers.

IX.0.11. The enormous growth of agricultural labourers may be considered as one of the most important changes that the Duars economy of North Bengal along with other parts of West Bengal has witnessed since the attainment of independence of India. Our study has attempted to trace some of the causes for the growth of agricultural labourers in the region of our investigation. Break down of the jotedari-achhiari system, rate of growth of population, absence of alternative sources of livelihood of the rising number of population, eviction of bargadars and the decline of the bargadari system are some of the important causes identified by us. The end result is that there has been a gradual pauperisation of a large section of the rural population. As there are no alternative avenues of employment for the agricultural labourers, they are bound to accept, in most cases, wages at rates lower than the government stipulated minimum wage rates. That various rural employment and development programmes have not been able to make a perceptible dent on the rural poverty is evident from the swelling number of pauperised labour force in the rural front. Though in the district as a whole, new agricultural strategy of production has been introduced since ^{the} seventies of this

century, it has failed to absorb sufficient number of labourers. In addition, wherever it has been adopted, it has been largely seen that the landowners have evicted their bargadars, swelling the size of landless labourers.

IX.0.12 The structure of landholding as revealed in our study has also undergone some noticeable changes. The Lorenz Curves show that land has been concentrated in a few hands over time. The **Agricultural Census** data show that the number of marginal landholding has recorded a very big rise over the decade 1970-71 to 1980-81. The data further show that the agrarian economy in our region of study like other parts of West Bengal, is now dominated by the small and marginal farmers. The average size of holdings of almost all categories of operators has shown a decline over the period. Especially the average size of holdings of small farmers has been reduced to such a level that it can hardly be described as "economic". Our study shows that such a high pace of marginalisation is responsible for the immiseriation of the peasantry.

IX.0.13 Our investigation in six villages of the Duars region in respect of success of the Operation Barga programme in particular and land reforms in general has brought to surface some important findings. Our study shows that recorded bargadars are now in a secured position than the unrecorded ones. But the mode of sharing of produce has remained by and large 50:50, even when bargadars

provide the entire or most part of the cost of cultivation. The loyalty of bargadars to their landowners and the prevalence of age-old custom and tradition in the country side have appeared to be the main reasons for such a state of affair. It has been found that bargadars' dependence on landowners has declined so long as the satisfaction of consumption needs through borrowings are concerned. Some arrangements have been made to provide finance to bargadars from institutional sources, but on the whole they still depend on other forms of non-institutional sources of finance for which they borrow mostly on unfavourable terms. Our study also highlights the fact that recording has nothing to do with increasing the productivity of land. Yet our another finding is that mere legal provision may not be enough to ameliorate the poverty of the rural masses. It should be accompanied by other supportive measures. Any rural reform programme should take cognizance of this fact.

IX.0.14 But land reform programme, in most cases, has become land-centered only, whereas all round development of agriculture does not simply depend upon redistribution of land. Certain infrastructural development of non-land origin is a sine-qua-non of agricultural development which calls for agrarian reform. But it is a fact that in the absence of land reform measures, there is a danger that programmes designed for the benefit of the poorer sections may be pocketed by a small number of dominant rural elites who generally wield enormous control over the society. Therefore, land reform measures should always precede any agrarian reform measure. Together with this, what is most needed is a viable production organisation

of the marginal and small farmers. To achieve this goal, husbandry by these groups of farmers may be organised through cooperative and collective organisations for which appropriate legal measures should be evolved. This new form of agricultural organisation may also help in utilising land more intensively in the event when the size of holdings has a tendency to become small day by day and when there has appeared little scope for extending cultivation.