

P R E F A C E

The present dissertation deals with the evolution of land-tenure system in the Duars region of North Bengal. Among several alternatives suggested by his research guide, the author's interest in this particular field was primarily due to his coming of a small peasant family which live in a village in the region of study. Having a first hand knowledge of the rural areas of this region the author has in mind the irresistible fascination of holding land by a farmer whatever small it might be. An evolutionary study of the land-tenure system of this region, therefore, roused the interest of the author. Possession of a plot of agricultural land carries with it high psychological and social value. It helps to raise the status of the weaker sections of society and give them a sense of belonging to the hub of social life. In fact "land is not only the most important economic asset in an agricultural economy, it is an essential resource because without land there can be no state, no habitation and no ground-work for carrying on human activities. Land is a mother resource giving rise to various other things of economic value. Even in urban societies, it is regarded as the most valuable resource from the economic point of view" (Wadhwa, D.C., "Guaranteeing Title to Land : A Preliminary Study" in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXIV, No. 41, October 14, 1989, p. 2323). It may be worthwhile to note here the dictum of

(II)

a Nigerian chief about land : "I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living, and countless members are still unborn" (Cited in Meek, C.K., Land Law and Custom in the Colonies, Oxford University Press, 1946, page opposite to the title page).

Obviously, the study of the evolution of land-tenure system assumes a special significance as land is one of the most important sources of production which has an important bearing on the lives of cultivators. The mode and quantum of holding land determines the economic, political and social status of a cultivator. Any move by the Government to change the existing land relations would therefore be reacted upon and change the status of the tenants. It is therefore important to see in what circumstances and in what manner the Government initiate the changes and how tenants are affected by these changes.

It was the inspiration of his research guide which provided the author further impetus to undertake the study. From a preliminary survey of literature it appeared that only some fragmented studies have been made on the topic having distinct historical and sociological leanings. But these studies did not focus the economic significance and implications of the changes in land-tenure system as evolved in different periods of history. In the present study an attempt has, therefore, been made to examine the economic importance of these changes.

(III)

It should be mentioned here that the author, while quoting from the relevant authorities, has retained the old spellings of some words as they have been found to be used in the original text. However, for his own text, he has used the usual spellings as are used in current publications.

Two appendices have been added at the end of the present dissertation. Appendix to Chapter III narrates the history of annexation of the Western Duars region to the British India, a note on the land laws of the Western Duars, evolution of different forms of jotes and leases and incidents of different classes of tenures, and appendix to Chapter VIII gives a profile of the villages that were investigated for studying the impact of land reform programmes of the Government of West Bengal in recent period.

Four maps have been inserted, one at the beginning of this dissertation and the other three in Chapters II, III and VIII showing respectively the district of Jalpaiguri and Western Duars region in the State of West Bengal; Western and Eastern Duars based on Rennel's Bengal Atlas, Pemberton's Maps and Survey of India Map; Western Duars region in the district of Jalpaiguri featuring police stations, transport and communications network and main rivers; and Western Duars region showing the location of the six villages investigated. A glossary of terms has also been appended at the end of the thesis.

(IV)

This is an occasion to acknowledge the author's indebtedness to various persons and institutions. The author is deeply indebted to Dr. Hillol Kumar Chakrabarti for his invaluable guidance. It was his constant encouragement and inspiration that made possible to complete this work. The author is also grateful to Dr. (Mrs) Bhaswati Chakrabarti, his guide's wife for her hospitality, affection and tolerance during the long course of preparation of the thesis.

In this occasion the author desires to mention with reverence the names of his teachers namely Prof. P.C. Sarkar, Prof. M. Dasgupta, Prof. J.C. Debnath, Dr. C. Mukhopadhyay and Dr. R.N. Bhattacharjee of the Department of Economics, Prof. T.K. Roy Chowdhury, Prof. (late) A. Deb and Dr. A. Ghosh of the Department of History, North Bengal University for their critical comments and suggestions.

The author's acknowledgements are due to Nripen Bandopadhyay, Fellow, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Dr. Samar Kumar Misra, Reader, Department of Commerce, Malda College, Malda, for their valuable suggestions. The author has benefited immensely by the discussion on the research topic with Mr. B.B.Chattopadhyay (Todarmal) of Siliguri town. The author is indebted to Mr. Nirmal Chowdhury of Jalpaiguri town who helped him in tracing old references which were otherwise unavailable.

(V)

The author acknowledges the help and assistance rendered by government officials for the collection of official data and Panchayat members for the collection of field level data. The author has been greatly encouraged by the whole hearted cooperation extended to him by the peasants of the villages which he has investigated, and therefore owes gratitude to them.

As to the collection of the secondary source materials, the author gratefully remembers the facilities he received from the librarian and staff of the North Bengal University Library, the National Library, Calcutta, the Cooch Behar State Library, Cooch Behar, the Office Library of the Commissioner of Jalpaiguri Division, Jalpaiguri, the Library of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and the Library of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (Eastern Regional Centre), Calcutta.

The author is extremely grateful to his friends and family for their moral support. Last but not the least the author thanks the University Grants Commission for granting him one year teacher fellowship under the Faculty Improvement Programme in 1989-90.

Department of Economics,
North Bengal University,
Raja Rammohunpur

Kanak Kanti Bagchi
(KANAK KANTI BAGCHI)

November 1990.