

C H A P T E R - I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

I.0.1 The chief objective of this study is to reconstruct the nature of land-tenure system and to examine the changes that have taken place in the agrarian economy and society of the Duars region of North Bengal over the period 1774-1988, and their impact (as far as can be identified) on the social and economic developments in the region during the period. The study of the land-tenure system in the post-independence era with a special emphasis on the impact of "Operation Barga" programme adopted in the Duars region, along with other parts of the State to record the names of sharecroppers in the record-of-rights forms a special part of this study.

SECTION 1 : BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

I.1.1 It has almost become customary to treat land revenue and tenancy systems, prevalent throughout the undivided Bengal as homogeneous. It is well known that the Zamindari system was introduced in the British Bengal along with many other parts of British India since 1793 when Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement in lands. But a fact which is very often neglected is that the Zamindari system, as prevalent in the southern parts of undivided Bengal, was not in vogue in various parts of North Bengal. In fact, in some parts of North Bengal¹, the Acts and Regulations regarding land

prevalent in other parts of Bengal did not come into force unless those were specifically extended to these areas. These specific parts, technically called "non-regulated areas", remained outside the purview of the Permanent Settlement. The land revenue and tenancy systems that were introduced by the British in these areas of North Bengal may be termed as "Jotedary system".

I.1.2 There are certain historical factors behind the introduction and evolution of this system in this area. It is known that the various parts of North Bengal, especially the Duars region, came under the direct British rule only a hundred years after the Battle of Plassey. The British consolidation of empire in the Duars was complete as late as 1865 after the Anglo-Bhutanese War.

I.1.3 The Bhutanese laws and customs regulated the land revenue and tenancy laws of Bengal Duars, technically called "Western Duars" or commonly known as "Duars" before its annexation to the British empire. It is also evident from the old historical records that the land revenue and tenancy systems of the region at times were regulated by the laws and customs of the 'Koch Kings' of the then Cooch Behar State (the present Cooch Behar district of West Bengal) before the subjugation of the entire region by the Bhutanese.

I.1.4 Thus, prior to the British annexation of the Western Duars, the region was ruled sometimes by the powerful Koch Kings and sometimes

by the Bhutanese "Durbar" in different periods of history. Consequently, the land revenue and tenancy systems that prevailed in this region were not British till the middle-half of the nineteenth century.

I.1.5 When the area was annexed to the British empire, population was very low but there was vast area of land available for cultivation. The density of population per square mile was ^{also} low and village localities were few and far between. Beverly, in his Census Report of 1872 noted, "In the recently acquired Duars the population is 67 to the square mile. As it is, it appears to have doubled since it came under British rule and still to be increasing at a rapid rate, the increase being due of course to the immigration from the more populous part around"². All available records show that in most parts of this area, "jhum", i.e., shifting cultivation with "slash and burn" method prevailed³.

I.1.6 The first full-fledged settlement of the Duars area was undertaken by Mr. Sunder in 1889⁴. He followed the British policy of "least resistance" and gave due recognition to the prevailing local customs, needs and tradition. The British understood the potentialities of this area and declared a large tract of land as "waste" and utilised the "waste land" for cultivation and plantation of tea. By declaring some areas of the Duars as "waste", the British

authority separated this area from the rest of Bengal. The land laws and regulations which were relevant in other parts of Bengal were declared "inapplicable" in this area. The whole Duars area was brought under direct control of the Government. Moreover, the British Government declared the whole area "underdeveloped". Apart from declaring a large tract as waste land, the British tried to settle lands with the individuals, locally called "jotedars". The relationship between the cultivators who were "jotedars" and the paramount power, i.e., the British Government was direct and not many intermediaries existed, as could be found in permanently settled tracts. Ultimately, the system that evolved in this area may be termed as "Jotedary System".

I.1.7 With the resumption of peace after the British annexation of the Western Duars, there was huge influx of population from the neighbouring districts. As the soil was virgin it attracted a large number of people. Pressure of population on land increased. Railway lines were opened up. Tea was introduced in the district in 1874.⁵ There was gradual monetisation of the economy of Duars and commercialisation of its agriculture. These had a far reaching effect on the land-tenure system itself. Fragmentation and alienation of land holding took place which further brought forth profound changes in the structure of the economy. Introduction of tea in the region uprooted the sons of the soil on the one hand, and swelled the number of competitors for agricultural land on the other. New jotedars from the tea gardens, mostly became absentee tillers and thereby introduced a new phenomenon in the agrarian structure, viz., the emergence of

agricultural labourers, who were originally the owners and tillers of the soil. On the one hand there had been concentration of land-holding in a few hands of jotedars; on the other hand, there were many sharecroppers who cultivated small plots of lands without any right on land.

I.1.8 Just after independence the Duars region inherited the above features. In the post-independence period, along with other states of India, West Bengal also had enacted land reform legislations. Land-tenure system was made homogeneous for the whole State. All intermediary interests in land were abolished. Ceiling on land holding was imposed. Surplus vested lands were distributed to the landless people through various land reform measures. Despite these measures, there had been a continuous rise in the number of marginal farmers as well as in the number of landless persons, i.e., agricultural labourers. The Duars region of North Bengal is not an exception to this trend. Moreover, the initial land reform legislations enacted by the West Bengal Government did not provide any protection to sharecroppers against illegal eviction until it launched a special drive called "Operation Barga" programme. It is a programme for recording the names of sharecroppers in the record-of-rights to give them security of tenure. This is a landmark in the history of evolution of tenurial rights in land in the Duars region as well as in the State as a whole.

I.1.9 The term land-tenure is viewed in this study to denote something more than mere rights in land and intended to cover also

such relationships in society as are governed by the various rights in the use of land. The study in its widest sense aims at an analysis of the changes in agrarian structure. Since land is a crucial productive factor, at least in the initial stages of economic development, an enquiry of this kind is likely to throw some light on the institutional factors which have facilitated or retarded economic development.

I.1.10 But, it involves an incursion into various disciplines; such as, economics, history, sociology, law, political science and geography for an analysis of agrarian institutions and their effects on social and economic development by the very nature of the problem⁶. This interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry not only places heavy responsibilities on any one who undertakes it but also necessitates, in the case of research by individual scholars, delimitation of its scope, so that, it can be handled by methods they are familiar with in their particular areas of specialisation. In terms of the concepts and methods of analysis used, this study can be described as one which falls in the border-land of economics and history.

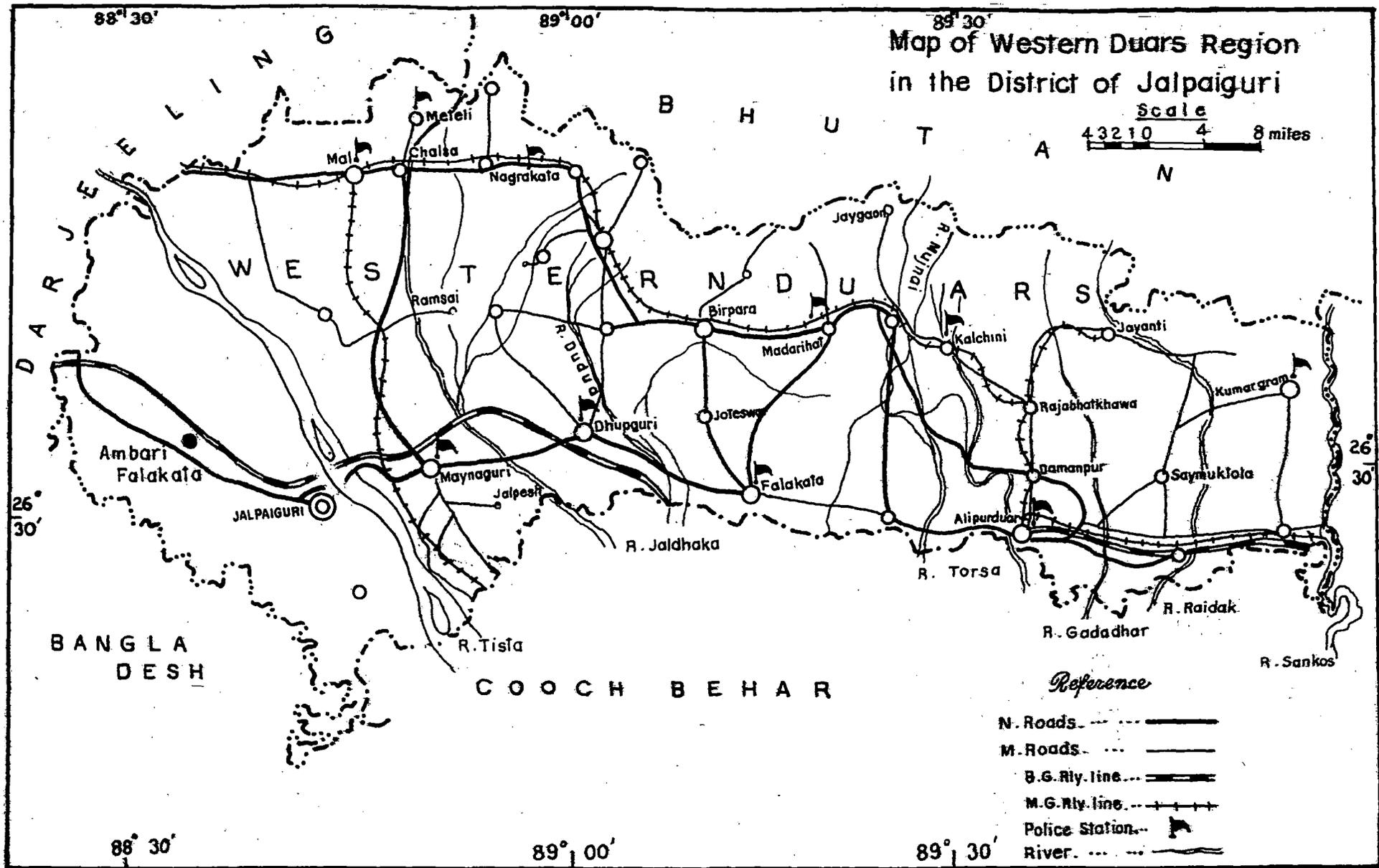
SECTION 2 : A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION OF OUR STUDY

I.2.1 Before discussing the scheme of work and the layout of chapters we shall make an attempt to give a brief sketch of the region.

I.2.2 Our region of study was a separate political and administrative unit during the Bhutanese period and for about four years during the British period. At present, it is more a geographical entity than having a separate administrative jurisdiction of its own. The district of Jalpaiguri was formed in 1869 by the amalgamation of the Western Duars district with the Jalpaiguri sub division of Rangpur⁷. The reasons for selecting this region to study the evolutionary process of its land-tenure system are its historical uniqueness compared to the other parts of the district of Jalpaiguri as well as other parts of West Bengal, its exclusion from the purview of Permanent Settlement and its special type of land-tenure system in the pre-independence era, and its socio-economic specificities.

I.2.3 The name "Duars" refers to that tract of country which affords gateways or duars to Bhutan from India⁸. The Duars region is a strip of land along the foot of the Himalayas, about 25 miles in breadth from north to south and about 180 miles in length from east to west⁹.

I.2.4 There are supposed to be 11 recognised duars or passes into Bhutan from India, of which five are located in the Western Duars, which from the west to eastwards are Chamurchi, Lakhimpur, Balla, Baksha (Buxa) and Kumargram¹⁰. Chamurchi is by far the most important commercial route. Lakhimpur is reached from Lankapara Tea Estate or Totopara. It is a difficult route and is used only by those



Map. 2 .

who are settled along the route. The Balla route through Jaigaon does not have much commercial importance. Buxa has virtually two routes. One goes via Buxa to the third big town of Bhutan and the other goes direct from Jayanti. The second important commercial route is through Kumargram Tea Estate falling within Kumargram Duar. This road passes through to Kalikhola, an important Bazar in Bhutan, which is at the trijunction of Bhutan, West Bengal and Assam¹¹.

I.2.5 In the text both the terms "Duars" and "Western Duars" will be used synonymously to mean the same region. The Western Duars tract consists of so much of the present Jalpaiguri district as was ceded to the British Government by the Bhutias in the year 1864-65¹². Except for a small patch of about 15 square miles, named Ambari Falakata, which lies on the west of the river Tista, the whole area forms a parallelogram with a length, east to west, of 86.75 miles; and breadth, north and south, of about 38 miles. It lies between the parallels of 26°13' and 27°0' north latitude, and between 88°30' and 89°55' east longitude¹³. The total area of the tract is 1928 square miles¹⁴. The present area of the region is bounded in the north by the State of Bhutan and Darjeeling district; on the east by the Goalpara district of Assam, the right bank of Sankos river marking the boundary line; on the south by Bangladesh and the district of Cooch Behar and on the west by the river Tista. The outlying pargana of Ambari Falakata, on the west of the Tista river is bounded on all sides by pargana Baikunthapur of the Jalpaiguri district¹⁵.

I.2.6 The geographical speciality of the Western Duars region may be described as follows. The chief characteristics of the Western Duars are the numerous rivers and hill streams which intersect it in every direction and the large tracts of sal forests, tall grasses and reeds, especially dense and luxuriant along the banks of rivers and streams. The entire region, but for intervals of patches of land for ordinary cultivation, is studded with tea gardens and large patches of reserved forests. They make a beautiful sight along miles after miles. The largest area of ordinary cultivation in this tract is between Dalgaon and Falakata in the heart of the Western Duars. In the neighbourhood of Bhutan range, from five to ten miles before reaching the hills, the land rises gradually. In this tract, the soil is only 3 to 4 feet deep with a sub-stratum of gravel and shingle containing red top soil, valuable for tea plant. This is the only mountainous tract in this region. In the dry season the beds of some of the streams, for some miles after leaving the hills, remain dry, the water re-appearing further down. The principal rivers are the Tista, the Jalchaka, the Dudua, the Mujnai, the Torsa, the Kaljani, the Raidak and the Sankos.

SECTION 3 : METHODOLOGY USED IN THE STUDY

I.3.1 In our present study we have mostly relied on and delved into the historical records and contemporary literature. We have also depended largely on the Government Reports and documents and other literature available. To find answers to some of our questions, a

field investigation had been undertaken during 1985-86 in six villages of the Western Duars. The six villages have been selected from three categories of Land Revenue Settlement Circles, taking two villages from each Circle. The first category contains Circle where recording of the sharecroppers in relation to probable number has become highest among all the 5 Circles comprising the Western Duars region, the second category of Circle is that where the recording is the lowest among all the Circles, and the third category of Circle falls between these two extremes in respect of recording in relation to probable number of sharecroppers. Again, from each Circle two villages have been selected, one with the highest number of recorded sharecroppers and the other with the lowest number of recorded sharecroppers of the Circle. As some special emphasis in our dissertation has been added to show the extent of success of "Operation Barga" programme in the region of our study, we have selected three Settlement Circles in such a way so that our selection recognises the fact of non-uniformity in the matter of recording of sharecroppers over different parts of the Western Duars region. With due recognition to this particular fact, our selection of the two villages within each Circle depicting two extremes in the matter of recording, would help us in throwing light on some of the features of the "Operation Barga" programme clearly discernible in the region of study. Our analysis also wants to point out the fact that under the same set of circumstances, the "Operation Barga" programme would be qualified with the same features as we have encountered in our field of investigation.

SECTION 4 : THE SCHEME OF THE PRESENT WORK

I.4.1 The present dissertation contains altogether nine chapters of which Chapter I forms the introductory part. Chapter II deals with an analysis of the land-tenurial system as was prevalent during the Bhutanese subjugation of the Western Duars region. An attempt has also been made in this chapter to indicate the possible ways in which the reforms in the tenurial system should have to be brought about once the region passes through an ordered administration.

I.4.2 Chapter III attempts a systematic presentation of the changes in land-tenure system in the British period. Having annexed the territory, the Britishers introduced many changes and reforms in different aspects of land relations and administration. Effects of these reforms and changes on the agrarian relations and social and economic development have also been shown in this chapter.

I.4.3 Chapter IV analyses the impact of the plantation sector on the subsistence sector, i.e., agricultural sector of the economy of Western Duars. Chapter V is devoted to a critical appraisal of the role of Jotedary system in agricultural development. A comparison in this regard has been made with the Zamindari system.

I.4.4 Chapter VI describes the changes in the pattern of land holding after the introduction of agrarian reform measures in the post-independence period and its consequent impact on the growth

of small farmers, marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and sub division and fragmentation of land holding. In Chapter VII causes and consequences of the rapid growth of agricultural labourers in the post-independence period have been explored.

I.4.5 Chapter VIII forms a special part of this dissertation. It analyses in some detail the extent of success achieved by the "Operation Barga" programme of the Government of West Bengal to record the names of sharecroppers in the record-of-rights to give security to their tenures. A cross-section study of the impact of this programme in the Duars area has been made. Problems connected with agricultural production and productivity have also been dealt with. Role of institutional finance for raising the efficiency of share-tenancy and the overall development of agriculture has been reviewed. The secondary data available were, however, found to be deficient and inadequate for this purpose. To get a clearer picture of the contemporary situation, and to attempt a more detailed analysis of the prevailing land relations a field investigation was undertaken during 1985-86. The data collected through this investigation forms the basis of the analysis in this part of the study.

I.4.6 The scope of the field survey was inevitably restricted by the scale of effort that could be put in on a one-man basis and by

the limited time available for carrying it through. In all 1903 households distributed over 6 revenue villages were covered by the survey.

I.4.7 Chapter IX summarises our whole discussion. Some attempts have also been made here to indicate the ways by which the development of the region of our study, especially the development of agriculture of the region can be brought about.

N O T E S A N D R E F E R E N C E S

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 4. Sunder, D.H.E., op. cit., pp. 16-19 (Mr. P. Nolan's Note). Milligan, J.A., Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Jalpaiguri District, 1906-16, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1919, pp. 78-80.
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 6. Warriner, D., Land Reforms and Economic Development, Cairo, 1955, p. 3.
- "In the discipline of economics, the subject matter field of land-tenure is essentially a 'bridge' sub-discipline involving as it does a combination of economics, law and sociology plus heavy borrowings from the field of political science". Philip Raup, quoted in F.O. Sargent, "A Methodological Schism in Agricultural Economics", Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1960, p. 49.
7. Milligan, J.A., op. cit., p. 2.

8. Mitra, A., Census of India, 1951, District Handbooks, Jalpaiguri, p. viii. Deb, A., Bhutan and India - A Study in Frontier Political Relations (1772-1865), Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1976, p. 112. Deb observed : "The term Duar is derived from dwar meaning passes, gate or entrance. It is inappropriately applied to the level tract upon which the mountain passes open. Thus a much wider meaning has become attached to the word than that etymologically belongs to it".
9. Selections from the Calcutta Review, Vol. XLVIII, Jan. 1869 to April, 1870, pp. 39-40 cited in Majumdar, A.B., Britain and the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhotan, Patna, Bharati Bhawan, 1984, p. 16. Sen, A.K., Western Duars - Past and Present, in Jalpaiguri District Centenary Souvenir, 1869-1968, p. 48.
10. Mitra, A., op. cit., p. viii.
11. Ibid.
12. Sunder, D.H.E., op. cit., p. 1.
13. Ibid. Mukherjee, B.B., Final Report on the Land Revenue Settlement Operations in the District of Jalpaiguri, 1931-35, Calcutta, B.G. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1939, p. 1.
14. Milligan, J.A., op.cit., p. 5.
15. Census of India, 1961, District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, p. (12).

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