

CHAPTER-ONE

THE CONDITION OF THE RURAL SOCIETY OF NORTH BENGAL ON THE EVE OF THE ADVENT OF COLONIAL RULE

Bengal's different parts were known as Rarh, Varendra and Pundravardhana. Among them Pundravardhana region was expanded as an administrative unit.¹ In the pre-Muslim age Pundravardhana had a great importance in the field of state and culture and Pundravardhana was later named as Dinajpur.² Dinajpur was also split up in several times. Malda and West Dinajpur played a significant role and spread a new culture in the socio-economic field. Later *Uttarbanga* i.e. North Bengal's socio-cultural variation in the rural areas established their own identities.³ But in eastern India there was no regional strength so the people were not conscious at that time. According to Morrison, in the Mughal and British period *Bengalees* had their own culture. Even in the pre-Mughal age people of Bengal were culturally sound. He also commented that there was sufficient evidence in copper plates as well as in the texts and traditions to suggest that a more homogenous local culture was being developed within the sub-regions of Bengal at that time. These local cultures were expressed in the material culture with distinct agricultural implements, housing types and forms of village organization. They were reflected in caste distributions and social practices within families. At various times these differences have been observed in religious distributions with Buddhists, Brahmanas, Chaitanya, Vaishnavas and Muslims.⁴

In the pre-Muslim age Bengali culture flourished but due to Turkish attack, cultural dimension began to move and remain static. Turkish administration system and politics created a new system. As a result of which in the 14th century Ilyas Shah founded

an independent state in eastern India which was free from Delhi Sultanate.⁵ This was for the first time Gour-Varendra-Banga-Samatat-Hariel became centralized in an independent sovereign state. Other Sultans also accepted this economic-social system of the Hindu social elite class.

The Sultans of Bengal fight against the ruler of Delhi, Jaipur, Aracan, Tripura, Assam, Coochbehar and Orissa.⁶ At the time Iliyas Shah and Hussein Shah increased their strength with the help of local people. The entire political and military strength were depended upon the revenue which was entirely controlled by the hands of Hindu *zamindars*. Hence, by the patrons of the Muslim ruler elite Hindu Service Man's social status got increased. From that time the structure of Bengal's rural society faced a rapid change. The middle class people changed the dimension of the social structure of the society to a great extent. In the 14th and 15th century '*Brihatdharma Purana*', '*Brahmavaivarta Purana*' explain the similar structure of the rural society and in the 16th century Raghunandan wrote '*Smrititatta*' which tells about the structure of the society.⁷ However, even at that period of time the Bengali speaking Muslim middle class people were not in the fore front. But Bengali Hindu middle class people expanded their branches throughout the societies. In the Mughal period *Farsi* culture was far behind and the mental setup of the non-Muslim was totally changed. Besides, it influenced the prevailing Vaishnava culture and as an effect of this made a drastic change in the rural society.⁸

Throughout the mediaeval period, the culture of Bengal was closely interlinked with the religious life of the people. Religion was the chief source of inspiration of mediaeval Bengali culture which is most clearly indicated by the literature of the period.⁹ *Mongal-kavyas* played a significant role in the rural society of North Bengal. *Chandi-Mongal*, *Manasha-Mongal*, *Ganga-Mongal*, *Sri Krishna-Mongal*, *Chaitnnaya-Mongal* and *Dharma-Mongal* created a new dimension in the rural society of North Bengal.¹⁰ The advent of the

colonial rule brought a good many changes. Influence of the Neo-Vaisnavism on the Bengali society changed the rural character and pattern of the society. Goddess *Manasha* was worshipped by both the Hindus and the Muslims.¹¹ On the other hand, Muslims' *Satya Pir* was also worshipped by the Hindus.¹² In the Mughal period as much as in the days of the Sultans concerned, the poets and literary works expressed themselves either in ecstatic lyrics of a mystic symbolic type or sought to immortalize the popular legends associated with the worship of the particular deities. Aryans or local sang the miraculous powers and activities of saints like *Gorakshanatha* or *Gopichand* and a large number of works related with the rituals of particular cults.¹³

On the other hand, Chaitanya movement opened new ideas for literary activity, the immense output in Bengali and Sanskrit, often experimenting with such entirely new themes. For example, biography proved to be not merely religions, but positively sectarian in outlook and what was true of literature was nearly as true of other forms of cultural activity.¹⁴ If religion was the dominant note of mediaeval Bengali culture, it was particularly so during the period under review. The first half-century of Mughal rule in Bengal saw the high tide of the *Bhakti* movement which had received its most powerful impetus from the life and work of Sri Chaitanya Dev.¹⁵ Later *Sufi* movement also developed. The deep impression of Vaishnava faith and dogmas on the thought-habits of the people was perhaps the most significant feature of the culture of this epoch. Even if we leave aside the overt acceptance of Vaishnava ideas in non-Vaishnava works, we seem to detect a more elusive element in the culture-pattern of the period, almost certainly related to the new doctrine of faith and cult of emotional love for the Supreme Being.¹⁶

God or His men had also less obvious connections with another branch of culture, like the secular romantic literature which began to develop in this period under the patronage of the Arakan countries. But even in these preliminary secular works, the deeply religious

temper of the age has often been clearly reflected. Hinduism and Islam were obviously the two most clearly distinguishable elements in the religious life of the people. The neo-Vaishnava thought system, Vaishnava Sahajiya thought, ideas and practices of the Sakta-Tantric cults in the 16th and 17th centuries change the social structure of the society of North Bengal.

But in the sharp contrast to the proselytizing, Vaishnava and fanatical Tantrika and the common man of Bengal were undoubtedly tolerant. The poets of the mediaeval Bengali ‘*Panchalis*’, ‘*Kavyas*’, bowed before shrines of every cult, including universal eclecticism, evidently reflecting the general religious temper of the people and the numerous local deities were perhaps the most characteristic feature of mediaeval Bengali folk-religion. The *Smriti* of Raghunandan, written in the earlier half of the 16th century, which regulates the life of the orthodox Bengali Hindu, generally supposed to have embodied the contemporary practices approved by orthodoxy, prescribes in its rituals.¹⁷

Besides religion, another fact of Bengal’s life which deeply influenced the culture of Mughal Bengal was the social and cultural milieu of the epoch. Literature, the most important product of North Bengal’s culture during our period, was marked by a number of socially significant trends. According to Moreland, mediaeval Bengali society differed broadly under two heads, the producing and the consuming classes. The *zamindars* and the higher government officials constituted the upper most strata of the consuming classes. In Bengal the *zamindars* and the *rajas* did constitute an independent aristocracy for all practical purposes. Apart from this, the chiefs who had become *mansabdars* and *jaigirdars* of the empire, suffered little change so far as their position vis-à-vis their own estates were concerned. Even ‘*Ain-i-Akbari*’ recognized the existence of the Bengal *zamindars* as a distinct class.

In the 15th and 16th centuries the relations between the various classes was meager but not without interest. The chiefs and *zamindars*, as already noted, often acted as patrons to

certain professional classes. The state of agriculture, piscaries and forests, industrial productions were all related with Bengal's economic life. A growing commerce was the most notable feature of Bengal's economic life in this epoch. Portuguese played a significant role in this time. They gave a touch of exotic colour to the life of the period. But there were the others too. Ralph Fitch sailed down from Agra, walked or rowed across a considerable part of the province as far as Coochbehar, visited practically all the important places and sailed away again in a Portuguese ship from Sripur to Pagu.¹⁸

Modes of life of the Hindus and the Muslims were different. The social life of the Hindus was mainly related with rituals and customs. On the other hand, the life of the Muslims community in Bengal was marked by some distinctive characteristics. They were divided into Saiyads, the Mughals, the Pathans and the natives of Bengal. The new converts from Hinduism were known by the name of *Gaysal*.

Hence, a picture of mixed culture changed the social base of the rural society. Jaggajivan's '*Manasha Mongal*', Jayananda's '*Chaitnaya Mongal*', Bharat Chandra's '*Annada Mongal*' and Mukunda Ram's '*Chandi Mongal*' depicted a pen picture of rural society.¹⁹ There were two other distinctive figure, Mukundaram and Kshemananda Ketakedasa and out of them the latter, long after the consolidation of the Mughal rule in Bengal, incidently wrote in the middle of 17th century how *zamindar's* oppression forced people long settled in a locality to quit and seek new shelters. An oppressive *zamindar* might even turn the poor *raiya*s overnight into slaves. But in the socio-economic life *zamindars* and *izaradars* collected taxes in a brutal method. '*Chaitanya Charitamrita*' explains these type of pictures as follows²⁰

“Ekdin loke asi prabhure nibadilo

Gopinathke bar jana change charailo

Tale kharga pati tar upre dhari dilo”

(One day someone came and reported the Master that some people (nearly twelve men) came and made Gopinath stand on the roof. They then lay sharp instrument like sickle on the ground and put him on it.)

The first half-century of Mughal rule is one of the most significant epochs in the annals of mediaeval Bengal. Viewed superficially from the standpoint of manners and morals, habits and practices and generally in the way of life, there is little to distinguish it from the periods that immediately followed or preceded it. The years 1575-1627, saw the culmination of processes long at work. It witnessed also the first pulsations of new vital forces destined to shape the future of Bengal. ²¹

The other process which now reached its climax, or rather yielded its last glorious harvest, was the literary-cultural renaissance of the Turko-Afghan period. During the Iliyas Shahi rule, in the middle of the 14th century peace came for the time being after a long period of misrule.²² With the return of peace, cultural pursuits were resumed. This new development assumed significant proportions towards the middle of the 15th century. From 16th and 17th century rural society of Bengal gradually turned into new dimension.

After the end of the Mughal rule *zamindar* classes take their place. Frontier *zamindars* played a significant role. Apart from these, revenue Collectors of the *zamindars* emerged as a powerful class and they played an important role in the socio-economic life of the society. This class of people constituted a new class in the society. In the mediaeval age there created a feudal tendency among the *zamindars* and *rai-yats*. In this period many regional literature mention the *zamindars* as *Raja* or *Maharaja*. There were a lot of differences between the *zamindars* and the common people and these differences had a long root which ultimately spread its branches in the social life. *Zamindars* maintained many voluntary organizations such as schools, collages, hospitals etc. They constructed dams, ponds, water tanks etc. for irrigational work and others. ²³

Zamindars also founded many temples and many temple lands were transferred as *Debottar* or *Brahmottar* land.²⁴ In the case of *Pir*, for Muslims, many lands were transferred in the name of *Pir* and gradually this type of land came to be known as *Pirottar* land. *Lakhiraj* lands are in all cases exempted from any payments to their donors.²⁵ Most of the holders of these tenures were purchasers from the original guarantees. Hunter gives a list-

Table No: 1.1 (Types of land and their Purpose)

Type of land	Purpose
i) <i>Brahmottar</i>	For the maintenance of Brahmanas.
ii) <i>Vaishnavottar</i>	For the maintenance of Vaishnavas.
iii) <i>Pirottar</i>	For the maintenance of mosques, raised to the memory of Muhammad as <i>pirs</i> or <i>saints</i>
iv) <i>Aima Lakhiraj</i>	Lands granted in charity, or as a reward for services rendered, etc.
Source: W.W. Hunter, <i>A Statistical Account of Bengal</i> , Vol-vii, Districts of Malda, Rangpur and Dinajpur, Trubner and co; London, 1876, p.404	

Thus culture was developed to a large scale by the patrons of *zamindars*. In the pre-British period *zamindars* of Bengal never left their region. Even the rank of ‘*Qanungo*’ or ‘*Chowdhury*’ dominated in their region. They decorated their court in the similar style of Mughal court. *Zamindars* never interested in city life. Some cases they showed their faith on *Nawabi* culture and in this way Mughal culture got mixed with indigenous culture.²⁶

From 1201 to 1757 the political dominance of Bangladesh was in the hands of Muslims. In this long period Muslim ascendancy were in the control of the outsiders especially in the Turkish, Afghan, Habshi, Mughal and Irani people. Most of them lived in

the city. But the Muslims of Bengal were comprised of mostly cultivator, weaver, fisherman and craftsman who lived in the rural areas. The economic conditions of the Bengali Muslim were very weak. Most of the Muslims were not interested in trade and commerce. All these sections were under the dominations of the Hindu merchant and *mahajans*. Even in the pre-British period most of the land owners were Hindu. In 1689 Ibrahim ascended to the throne of Bengal.²⁷ Next year Aurangzeb was compelled to issue an order that English rulers can trade in this country because British soldiers captured some Mughal ships and they caused obstacle to the Muslims to go to Mecca through the water ways from India. Aurangzeb was not interested in English trade and commerce but due to the initiatives of Ibrahim Khan English trade got a good flourishment.

Aurangzeb died in 1707 and after that there started a great problem of successorship. In 1717 Murshid Quli Khan became the *Subedar* of Bengal. He introduced a new revenue system and gradually it expanded the treasury of the *Nawab*. This land related system of Murshid Quli later came to be known as '*Malzamini System*'.²⁸ According to Abdul Karim, Murshid Quli Khan collected a good rate of revenue from the *zamindars*. For this reason he holds the post of *Nawab* for a long time.²⁹

Land revenue system of Mughal period which flourished by the hands of Todarmal and gradually expanded from Murshid Quli to Siraj-ud-daula (1700-1757) has a huge impact in the life of Bengal's people. Todarmal's land revenue system known as '*Asal Jumma Tumar*'.³⁰ He collected the accounts of rents paid by the *raiyyats* with the help of *Qanungoes*. In the *Khalsa* or revenue lands as also in the *jagir* or assigned lands *zamindari* system prevailed in the Mughal period. In Mughal times rent was only realized from such portions as were in an immediate state of cultivation and had produced a crop during the year of assessment. It should be noted that variation in the public demand upon the *zamindars* was

small and profits to continued management must have been considerable. In 1582 total land revenue demand was RS. 10,693,152. In 1700 total assessment was RS. 11,728,541.³¹

Murshid Quli Khan was responsible for measures of the greatest severity in the collection of land revenue. He changed the so called revenue policy (which was introduced by Todarmal) and introduced a new revenue system with strict principles.³² His attention to details led to this increase of the standard revenue. His unremitting severity introduced regularity in revenue payment and put an end to disorder. Thus began a new illustrious era of finance. The *zamindari* system in Bengal was strengthened rather than weakened by the severity of Murshid Quli Khan who was responsible for the imposition of a *Subahdari abwab* or permanent pecuniary levy upon the *zamindars*.³³ The increased demands upon the *zamindars* perpetuated the *zamindari* impositions upon the *raiyyats*. What was more; the door was opened for further exactions from the *raiyyats* which continued throughout later periods.

During the reign of Murshid Quli Khan (1700-27) $\frac{3}{4}$ of the big and small *zamindars* were mostly Hindu *talukdars*.³⁴ Apart from this, *Nawab* appointed Bengali Hindus in the government jobs. In the Muslim period government jobs of revenue department became the monopoly of the Hindus, but in the judicial department many Muslims were appointed as lawyer, officers of law department etc. But among them indigenous Muslims were very few in number.³⁵

Murshid Quli Khan died in 1727.³⁶ Again massacre starts in Bengal. But from the time of Alivardi Khan there started a great deterioration. Due to the attacks of the Maratha, Bengal's administration and social life got polluted and the same time the foreign attack continued. Bhaskar Pandit also exploited the Bengal's economy and he attacked the common people and plunder continued for at least ten more years. Alivardi Khan was not able to stop the chaos. English East India Company started to capture the power. A large section of indigenous merchants helped East India Company and the economic condition degraded

gradually and many *zamindars* lost their *zamindari*s as an effect. On the other hand, several *zamindari*s were bought by several company servants and thus there emerged a new section of class in North Bengal's rural society.

Especially in North Bengal, the social structure of the rural society got changed on the eve of the advent of the colonial rule. Jalpaiguri was under the suzerainty of Coochbehar and Coochbehar was under the domination of the *Raj* family. Bhutanese people later captured this region from Coochbehar.³⁷ Coochbehar state was also attacked by the Mughal fauj in 1687.³⁸ A long clash continued between Coochbehar and Mughals. Duars was a non-regulated area. West Dinajpur was dominated by the large section of *Mahisya*, *Rajbanshi*, *Polia*, and tribal class. Kaivarta clans also dominated in West Dinajpur. Kaivartas were divided into two sections especially the *jale-Kaivarta* (fisherman) and *hale-Kaivarta* (cultivators).³⁹ Malda region was dominated by the Muslims and *adivasis* (tribals). Malda was closely connected with the northern part of Bihar especially Purnia, Katihar, Darbhanga etc. Many Maithili peoples were the inhabitants of Malda. The exact date and year of the comings of the Maithili's have not yet been identified. Historians used to say that Maithili's came to Malda during the Sena period. There were many *Marwari* communities of people in Malda. Title of '*Satiar*' and '*Poddar*' of *Marwari* clans came during the time of the *Sultans* of Gaur. Only the *Satiars* have been mixed with the *Bengalees* of Malda.⁴⁰

With the passage of time a lot of changes took place between Plassey and Buxar's undivided North Bengal and the North Bengal of today. West bank of Tista and Darjeeling was not a part of East India Companies rule. It is also to be noted that at that time Coochbehar was a native state up to 1773.⁴¹ After the First Anglo-Bhutanese War, the role of East India Company was changed. For a long time Coochbehar economically played a separate role. So if we want to explain the conditions of the rural society of North Bengal on the eve of the advent of colonial rule, we have to analyse the conditions of Rajshahi

(Bangladesh) because the rural structure of undivided North Bengal and the divided North Bengal got changed from time to time. In 1793 Malda, Dinajpur and Rajshahi division were brought under the East India Company and this laid a change in the revenue structure.

Due to geographical division, North Bengal's structural pattern also changed gradually. If we meticulously find North Bengal of Rajshahi division, Muslims were consisted of basically as a class of peasants. North Bengal was dominated by the Hindus but Malda and Dinajpur's major population was dominated by the Muslims and tribals. Pabna, Rajshahi, Bogra and portion of Dinajpur was predominantly Muslim. Eastern bank of Jalpaiguri acted predominantly *Rajbanshi* peasant community and they were divided into Muslim and Hindu *Rajbanshi* and there came also a new formation which came to be known as *Nasya Rajbanshi*.⁴² Besides, there also formed a Muslim gentry class and the role of the prevailing Hindu community was not at all deniable. Here Hindu means *Kayasthas* and *Brahmanas*. In Bogra, Pabna converted Muslims and *Namasudra* peasant formed a community and they must also be accounted. This was the demographic picture of North Bengal.

It is true that some portion of Rangpur was occupied by the East India Company. We find that *jotdari* system was predominantly found in Rangpur i.e. Jalpaiguri, entire bank of Tista, Goalpara, and Duars of Bhutan. In 1822 Rangpur was divided as separate district and it was subsequently called Goalpara district. Similarly, Jalpaiguri was created after the 2nd Anglo-Bhutanese War. Before 1793 there were lots of changes in the rural life of North Bengal till 1869 i.e. the year of the creation of Jalpaiguri district.⁴³

The rural society of North Bengal was different from the rest of India. If we see the geographical location, India's position in northern North Bengal especially Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Alipurduar constitutes of ethnic composition. In the Darjeeling district, especially Siliguri, plain lands were populated by *Rajbanshi* but with the introduction of tea

plantation a good number of tribal people came from Chotonagpur and they were settled in Terai area. Tea planters have a great role in the demographic change of the North Bengal. On the other hand, the Darjeeling Hill areas were totally separated.⁴⁴ Kalimpong was an urban centre. In Darjeeling there were no plain lands. So there was no question of landed peasantry.⁴⁵ Let us explain diversified rural North Bengal. Dinajpur and Malda was under the Permanent Settlement but ruled by the *jotdari* system. In Malda some special tenancies were found such as '*Hal Hashila*'. This system indicates that the land was not of good quality and that it is necessary to keep it fallow for a year or two in order to restore its fertility.⁴⁶ Rangpur was under the *jotdari* and *zamindari* system. In Kalimpong there was *Longue-duree* system. Apart from these two types of land systems there were also introduced another types of system called '*Mashikata*' and '*Biaz*' system.⁴⁷ In Coochbehar *izaradari* system was developed.⁴⁸ These were developed in the 2nd Anglo-Bhutanese War. In Bhutan '*Mallick*' and '*Kathan*' collected revenue settlers and rural society developed gradually. This development generally flourished from 1864-65.

From 1869 major changes took place in the rural life of North Bengal. In the field of cultivation, fertility, peasant behaviour, *jotdar*-peasant relation, recreation etc. there is a depiction of the picture of rural life. At that time, there was no transport system. Frequently rubbery took place in the interior regions of North Bengal. In the case of transportation of goods, people of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar used elephant for the carrying of crops. On the other hand, in Malda and Dinajpur horses were used for the carrying of crops and vegetables. Hence, two different pictures were seen in the undivided North Bengal. In the educational field *tol*, *chatuspathi*, and *patshala* were the chief source of education in the rural society at that time. So, in the field of cultivation, *raiyyat-zamindar* relations, transport system, education in every sphere of branches, there found a completely different picture in this region.

With the advent of the British rule a new kind of population gathered which was officially called tribals. In fact, in the part of undivided North Bengal, indigenous tribal people played a significant role in the rural society of North Bengal on the eve of the advent of colonial rule. The East India Company started purchasing tea garden and brought a large number of tribals from Chotonagpur. Actually many tribals were migrated.⁴⁹ The migrated tribals from Chotonagpur started making their homeland in Malda, Tapan, Gazole, Habibpur and Kushmundi.⁵⁰ Tribals cleaned up the jungles and the cultivation process started. In the northern portion of North Bengal tea planters promoted tribals and tea garden workers liked Duars of Jalpaiguri. Hill tea gardens were under the Nepalese migrants and plain tea gardens were under the tribals.⁵¹ This migration has a peculiar habitation. Tribals of Tapan, Gazole, Malda, Raiganj, Kasba, Bhombra, and Sherpur were cultivators.⁵² Whereas, in the Terai-Duars region the workers came to be known as tea garden labourers.

Malda has long been famous for its mangoes. Apart from these *Bhadoi* rice, oil seeds, jute, mulberry etc. were major attractions. The comparatively high percentage of industrial workers is mainly due to the silk industry, which is the staple of the district.⁵³ Hunter, Buchanan Hamilton depicts the picture of social life and resources of Malda district. In the field of agriculture, Mohammadans and tribals played a significant role. There has been no regular survey and settlement of the district, and the figures for rents were taken from typical estates. *Awabs* were collected from the tenants. *Naiibs* and *gomastas* collected rent. Hence, *zamindar*, *naib*, *gomasta*, *mondal*, *raiylats* formed a new class in social system. The system of social government is the same for the Hindus, Mohamadans and *Santhals* appears to be independent of caste. Every village has its headman known as *mondal*, *pramanik* or *mohat*. It is also distinct from the village government by the headman, by which the internal economy of the village is regulated in matters of increase dealings, although the same individual may act in different capacities.⁵⁴

Undivided North Bengal's geo-political structure was totally different. It can be said that North Bengal was the miniature edition of India. Actually these regions were highly enriched with wealth. In the social life, a communal harmony conglomerated among the several castes and creeds. Rural society was deeply influenced in this ideology. For this reason an inter-mingling socio-cultural environment built up in this region.⁵⁵ In the 14th century the novel 'Gorkhavijaya' gives us a clear picture of the social life of Dinajpur-⁵⁶.

“Karo pokrer jal keo nahi khai

Mani-manikyo sab raudrate sukai”

(No one is interested in having the wealth of another, as valuable gems found scattered here and there)

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