

## Colonial Penetration, Land Revenue Reforms and Transition of Cooch Behar from a Benevolent to a Predatory State 1772-1923

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### ***Abstract:***

*Cooch Behar a native state of India in Colonial terminology is situated in the North-Eastern part of India. The territory of modern Cooch Behar originally formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup, and had no separate existence of its own as a district principality before the division of that country between the King Nara Narayan and his brother Sukladwaj, commonly known as Chila Rai, in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. CoochBehar became 'feudatory state' to the English East India Company by virtue of the Treaty of 1773. It as because of colonial penetration and the Land Revenue Reforms that totally metamorphosed the Cooch Behar State.*

***Keywords:*** Settlements, Pargana, Jotedars, patits, kshetrya

Cooch Behar a native state of India in Colonial terminology and situated in the North-Eastern part of India. The territory of modern Cooch Behar originally formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup, and had no separate existence of its own as a district principality before the division of that country between the King Nara Narayan and his brother Sukladwaj, commonly known as Chila Rai, in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Cooch Behar had never had a peaceful time since its birth<sup>(1)</sup>. Earlier

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Cooch Behar was invaded by Muhammadan rulers of Bengal and later from Bhutan. British relation with Cooch Behar State developed in the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of Cooch Behar -Bhutan conflict. Being threatened by Bhutan<sup>(2)</sup>, Cooch Behar asked to help of the East India Company. The appeal for military help by Cooch Behar offered the company not only a golden opportunity to fulfil their commercial interests through the Himalayas, and thereby link the British territories in India with the vast regions of Tibet and China, but also opened a new path to the Company for political foothold in this region which she was yearning for since the occupation of Rangpur. The occupation of Cooch Behar would secure their northern boundary as well. The company, under the governor generalship of Warren Hastings agreed to help Cooch Behar and a treaty was signed in the year April 15, 1773<sup>(3)</sup>. Cooch Behar first comes into close political relation with the British Govt. in 1773. A regular history of the land revenue administration of the state begun from that year when East India Company made a provision that "the Raja farther agrees to make over to the East India Company one-half of the annual revenues of Cooch Behar forever<sup>(4)</sup>."

Cooch Behar became a feudatory state to the East India Company by virtue of the treaty of 1773. Concerning Anglo-Cooch Behar treaty, it may be remarked, that the option and ratification, implied in clause-9, does not appear to have been carried into effect<sup>(5)</sup>. As a matter of fact, the precise amount was not finally agreed upon until 1780 when it was placed by Mr. Purling, collector of Rangpur. In that time the mode of assessment and the system of collection were both irregular and the dishonesty and greed of the State Officials caused great sufferings to the people. In subsequent years attempts were made by the British Government to introduce regulated

administration in the state but the refusal of the Maharaja prevented any further interference<sup>(6)</sup>.

In order to finalise a comprehensive settlement in the State initiatives were taken in 1872. The entire settlement operation in the six parganas (Mathabhanga, Lal Bazar, Dinhata, Cooch Behar, Tufanganj and Mekhliganj) of the state are generally known as the First Settlement. The settlement which had been carried out by Mr. W.O.A. Beckett, Assistant Commissioner, directly fixes the rates of rent payable by all classes of tenants. This settlement will last for a period of 12 years. One important feature of the settlement operation was resumption of the invalid rent-free lands, mukarrari (lands given at a fixed rate, free from all abwabs, with the exception of batta) and Jagirs<sup>(7)</sup>.

By this first settlement Cooch Behar State appears to have been enhanced by roughly 267.76% only. It was a major quantum jump and the enhancement of revenue could be made on the one hand by drastically revising the rate of rent and on the other bringing more land under revenue settlement. The total amount of revenue secured by the settlement was ` 9, 38,610 giving an increase of `5, 75,471 as detailed below in the first settlement.

Table 1: The Total Amount of Revenue

Pargana	Old Jama	First Settlement	Increasing
Mekhliganj	54,169	1,29,55	75,386
Mathabhanga	71,246	5	1,01,658
Lal Bazar	74,476	1,72,90	59,722
Dinhata	76,451	4	97,583

Cooch Behar	71,520	1,34,19	1,60,520
Tufanganj	16,277	8	79,602
		1,74,03	
		4	
		2,32,04	
		0	
		95,879	
Total	3,64,139	9,38,61	5,74,471
		0	

Source: K. C. Ganguly, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operation in the Cooch Behar 1913-1927.

All the patit (waste land) lands included within the jotes during the First Settlement and brought under cultivation. In cases where the quantity of the patit land shown in the papers was small, namely 3.3 areas and under it was assessed as cultivated land without further enquiry. This settlement is known as the Patit charcha settlement (1884-86)<sup>(8)</sup>. The increase of revenue obtained by it was `68,824 for the whole state. During the general resettlement of 1886-91 known as the Rakamcharcha Settlement no reductions were, however, made in the rents already paid by contract and the parties were left free as regards future contracts<sup>(9)</sup>. According to the new survey and settlement i.e. Final Settlement the area of the state was 8, 50,766.33 acres. This settlement is infact the last settlement of the Cooch Behar state during the tenure of the rule of the royal dynasty. Because after the integration of the Cooch Behar state the independent India 1947 new settlement operations in terms with the settlement operations in the neighbouring district of Jalpaiguri had taken place by the abolition of the Jotedari system. The last settlement and the one namely the Dewani

Settlement before it achieved a radical change in the revenues income of this state. From a total revenue income `12,41,060 of the Rakamcharcha Settlement of 1889 to `17,98,984 in the 1927 settlement, an increase of 145% only was achieved. Consequently, a number of crucial issues have originated from drastic changes in the revenue assessment from the First Settlement to the Final Settlement. A number of areas of social unrest that caused a great deal of tension of the rural society of Cooch Behar may be attributed to the changes brought about in different settlement operations<sup>(10)</sup>

It has transpired from the settlement reports during a time period of fifty five years from 1872 to 1927 revenue of the state went up by about 394% only. Through seven periodic settlements the revenue income escalated from ` 3,64,140 in 1872 to `17,98,984 in 1927. From a total area of 24 ,82,183 bighas or 8,27,394.33 acres in 1872. The area increased in 1927 to 25,43,396 bighas or 8,47,798.66 acres in the Final Settlement i.e. an enhancement of 2.83% only. Further, the enhanced the area under final settlement i.e. 70,116 bighas or 23,372 acres are partly explained Patit charcha settlement and partly by resumption of land from the termination of the old service renures and reclamation of unauthorised holdings under the tenants. The enhancement of revenue, therefore, was caused by revision of revenue rates and the rental share of the tenants and undertenants. By allowing 35% profit to the Jotedars, 25% profit to the Chukanidars, 15% profit to Dar-Chukanidars, 10% to Dardar-Chukanidar, 10% to Tasya-Chukanidar, 5% to Tali-Chukanidar of the rental income the burden of rent upon the Tasya-Tali Chukanidar or the cultivating rayat had gone up to 95% in some cases even to 150% only. So the burden of rent appears to have been raised to 194.34% at the gross root level of the Krishiprajas in successive settlement.

Under the circumstances, it is likely that at every stage of revised settlement a part of the total jotes has been surrendered by the erstwhile Jotedars on account of inability to pay enhanced revenue. The Jotes, thus, obtained had been settled with new Jotedars, many of them were immigrants. On a rough calculation it is seen that 6.5% of the Jotedars in the Patit Charcha Settlement were outriders who executed the contract in allowance with the terms of enhanced revenue. It is presumable that in subsequent settlement operation in the Khasmehal and Jotedari Settlement areas large scale alienation of land from the local land-holders took place. Another noticeable feature in the land-control system of Cooch Behar is the prevalence of different kinds of land grants and hegemony, while Jotedars, Chukanidars, Dar-Chukanidars, Daradar-Chukanidars, Tali-Chukanidars, Tasya-Chukanidars etc. introduced as an element of linearity in the hierarchic structure, the segmentation of Krihni-prajas in to (a)Krishiprajas under the Jotedars and (b)Krishiprajas under the different grades of Chukanidars added a new element in the complexity of social structure in the Cooch Behar rural society. The other complexity that developed was the dichotomy between the locals and the immigrants on ethnic and cultural grounds.

Keeping in view these momentous developments one can hazard a conclusion from circumstantial evidences, as direct evidences are not too frequent, that some of the social movements in the Rajbansis society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century have had their roots in it. Movements to differentiate the Rajbansis from the Koches in the Census Reports, Caste mobility movements, social reform movements, rent revision movements seem to be integral to the economic policies of the Cooch Behar Government. Each of these issues suggests an in-depth study. Emergence of Thakur Panchanan Barman at this stage as a mass leader of the Rajbansi Community,

his differences with the rules and finally his expulsions from the Cooch Behar state appear to augur an era of protest.

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