

## The Agrarian Structure and Social Change: Cooch Behar

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[Editorial Note: The present paper talks in detail about the process of the transformation of Cooch Behar from a kingdom to state to a district in the present times. The transformation also led to a rise of complexities in the society and also marginalised the status and contributions of the Rajbanshis especially.]

**Abstract:** *Cooch Behar has been transformed from an earlier kingdom to a State and from a State to the present status of a district. By colonial intervention (1772) the state was transformed into a quasi-feudal State. Several settlements had occurred by the East-India Company in the consecutive years. It fabricated a new social order in terms of caste hierarchies and caste differences. A group of people who migrated from the adjacent state of Cooch Behar to hold the lease of Land as well as administrative posts. This phenomenon created a complexity in the society where the best parts of Rajbashi were marginalized.*

**Key Words:** *Koch kingdom, Colonial intervention, feudal system, Settlements, revenue revision, rent revision, social change.*

Cooch Behar, the former princely state was located in the far eastern part of northern West Bengal in the vicinity of Bangladesh, Assam, Jalpaiguri district and the Alipurduar district of West Bengal. The political dignity of the district has kept on changing, from a Koch Kingdom, to a Princely State, then to a feudatory state to the British, and permanently it became a district town of West Bengal by its merger with India in 1949. With the end of Khen dynasty the kingdom of Kamatapura was disintegrated into various small princedoms under local rulers. The Kamrupa was frequently being raided by tribal heads from the north east region India meanwhile the Koch chiefs gradually rose into power. The political transformation of vanquishment, supreme-position and assimilation ultimately led to the formation of Koch kingdom or Cooch Behar State in the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

From several conquerors such as Muslim rulers of Bengal, the Mughals and sometimes by the kings of Bhutan the Cooch Behar state got far fetched consequences. Being challenged by periodic Bhutanese attack during the period of 1771-1772, Khagendra Narayan, the Nazir Deo<sup>2</sup> of Cooch Behar applied to the East India Company for help against Bhutan, who had commenced malevolence and carried away the Raja and the Dewan Deo<sup>3</sup> of Cooch Behar as captives. By extending military aid to Cooch Behar against Bhutan, Warren Hastings concluded a treaty with Cooch Behar on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1773<sup>4</sup>. It is clearly mentioned in 4<sup>th</sup> Article

of the treaty "That the Raja further agrees to give over to the English East India Company one-half of the annual revenue for Cooch Behar for ever"<sup>5</sup>. The East India Company had honoured it as it was a golden opportunity to expand their territorial boundary up to Rangpur. The Cooch Behar state turned into a feudatory of the East India Company<sup>6</sup>.

Before the intervention of the British, Cooch Behar State had an independent character from all aspects. The then economy of the state was solely agrarian based in nature. Consequently, the central source of revenue of the Cooch Behar State was land revenue through no proper accounts of land settlement system. After the intrusion of the Company in the State, the land revenue system had experienced a discernible variation in terms of its nature and its suitability<sup>8</sup>. Being transformed into a revenue paying estate of the British, the interest on land revenue took a new dimension. The Company therefore, took a keen interest in land to raise the revenue collection of the estate.

To achieve the highest accessible revenue for a short period, the Ijaradari system was introduced<sup>9</sup>. In 1870 to cease the greater offences and its malicious aftermath of the system a general survey of the Cooch Behar state was executed under the supervision of O'Donell. In 1877 the First Settlement was concluded in the whole state<sup>10</sup>. It is decided by the Jotdars where to pay their revenues to the sub divisional kutchairs. Wrong doing of payment resulted in annulment of the patta. Later the non-payment jotes were to be put to auction and sold for arrears of revenue. Thereupon the amount of the revenue raised<sup>11</sup>. The second settlement locally called "Ratam Charcha " (classification of land) settlement was completed in 1888-89. Another petty settlement known as the Palit Charcha (follow land) had taken place between First and second settlement<sup>12</sup>. The third settlement inscribed to rent revision was completed between 1912 and 1920 followed by the Final Settlement in 1920-27. Owing to these consecutive settlements revenue of Cooch Behar State went up from 3 lakhs to 18 lakhs nearly<sup>13</sup>.

The revenue recorded an increase from Rs. 3,64,140 in 1872 to Rs. 17,98,984 in 1927. Enhancement of 2.38% land was achieved by conversion of waste land arable land grants and reclamation for revenue purposes a good part of Debattar, Brohmattor, Mukarrari and other service grants. Besides these, at every stage of revised settlement a part of the total jotes had been surrendered by the former jotedars due to their incapacity to pay revised revenue rate. The jotes thus obtained had been settled with new jotedars, many of them were immigrants from

neighbouring areas. In the economic field the First World War, subsequent great depression of the 30s and famine in Bengal also severely affected the subsisting model of land ownership in the Princely Cooch Behar. A big crisis in rural credit that succeeded the depression coerced many small jotedars to sell their lands<sup>14</sup>.

Before and after the colonial intrusion Cooch Behar State consisted of the major ethnic group Koch or Rajbanshis<sup>15</sup> belonged to a semi tribal community. The rest of the people were upper class people and Muslims very few in number<sup>16</sup>. Rajbanshis transferred their land to the non-Rajbanshis who were merchants, moneylenders and speculators. Small Rajbanshi jotedars had transformed into under tenants, inferior to a latest class alien gentry. After a considerable time it grew a sense of sorrow and resentment among the expropriated Rajbanshi jentry. W. W. Hunter depicted that the Jotedars "can underlet their holdings to inferior tenants or farmers, and also transfer all the rights and privileges to their under tenants. These subtenants or farmers have the power of again subletting their lands to holders of the third degree and so on"<sup>17</sup>. They all exercised the occupancy rights in Cooch Behar<sup>18</sup>. There were adhiars under Chukanidars, Darchukanidars as well as Jotedars<sup>19</sup>. Hired labourers called adhiar or a praja who harvested lands on the condition that he got half of the produce of the crop though he had no rights on the soil<sup>20</sup>. With the change of the demographic composition the land control structure of the state was changed. There were, however, subsequent changes in the pattern of land control, with the result that the Rajbanshis were gradually pushed out by the non-Rajbanshi landholders from their position of eminence<sup>21</sup>. In Cooch Behar too, the people from outside those who were mostly in the administration of the Cooch Behar state and were perceptively more resourceful than the local inhabitants, grabbed a large number of jotes. By 1872 in Cooch Behar 54% of the revenue paying land had passed into the hands of the outsiders<sup>22</sup>.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the migration of upper caste Hindu gentry the situation began to change. They strengthened their stand as non-cultivating gentry and also succeeded to form a middle class at the village society. Gradual inflow of caste Hindus like Bengalis, Beharis, and Marwaris as also of Muslim from the neighbouring districts such as Kumilla, Rangpur, Pabna, Noakhali the Rajbanshis of this area met with a process of cultural assimilation and conversion through both Hinduization and Islamization. As the system of English education was not developed much in Cooch Behar the locals did not get the opportunity in administrative and judicial settings. The non-Rajbanshis Hindu upper castes having formal English education promoted themselves into a new employment advantage.

The non-Rajbanshi bureaucracy such as Babu Kalikadas Dutta (Dewan), Bulloram Mullick (Judicial member), W.O.A. Beekolt (Asstt. Commissioner Cooch Behar Div.), E.E. Lowis (Vice President in Council), Babu Karuna Niddan Palit (Head clerk to the State Council in 1884), Harinath Basu (Head clerk to the State Council in 1895), Harendra Narayan Choudhury (Settlement Naib Ahilkar), Sashi Bhushan Roy (Canoongo), Babu Priyanath Ghosh, M.A. (1885) etc. drawn from the correspondence relating to the re-settlement of the State of Cooch Behar are noteworthy<sup>23</sup>. The pattern of administration prevailing in Cooch Behar at this time was also ridden with medieval features which aggravate the misrule in the country<sup>24</sup>. As years rolled on under the British administrative system various merchants got mesmerized and set about migrating for. New road and the Cooch Behar State Railway for traffic (1893) expanded the export and import trade of the state<sup>25</sup>. Shekhar Sarkar in his Ph.D. work defined by 1872 in Cooch Behar 54% of the revenue paying land had passed into the hands of the outsiders. It is a paradox that outsiders possessed much land while in the Rajbansi community they were gradually ill-fated. The Rajbansis who once monopolized the local society and economy of the State were increasingly shattered by the freshly settled dominant upper caste gentry. Moreover, prevalent variant kinds of land grants and hierarchic structure of landlords incorporated a new constituent of complexity in the rural agrarian people of Cooch Behar.

The economic contour of the state had been becoming metamorphosed while the British by virtue of Anglo Cooch Treaty entered and took the charge to escalate revenue. A great transition took place in the economy through something that resembles feudalism, but is not exactly equal to it and capitalist exploitations of waste land through commercialization of crops. Though British administrations did never make any instantaneous changes in the land administration of the Princely State. With the change of the ethnic composition of the landholding class certainly the rural economic pattern of the state had been changed. Personal relationship between the landlords and the peasants was replaced by the emotionless contractual relationship. A new cultural influence originated from upper caste landlords on the jotedar. Rajbansi who were also jotedars or rich farmers came under the new flow as they were closer to this new section in terms of secular dignity.

The dilapidation of the barter system, commercialization of agriculture, the proliferation of English education in the urban Cooch Behar opened a new branch to getting opportunities for outsiders to migrate to the state. Keeping administrative needs at centre, all kinds of commercial activities grew up. Trade, commerce,

courts, judiciary, schools etc. led together an expanded employment base offering job opportunities to people.

The transfer of jotes in the hands of the non-Rajbansi people disorganised the traditional structure of the society. There were layers in terms of caste hierarchies and class differences presumed a noticeable form. It affected the egalitarian social order of the Rajbansi. It was not inconsequential that the English education and the process of urbanization served to force out the long established rural elite which were the parapet of the Rajbansis. When the Government and private enterprises schools were going to be set up even in the rural sectors the Rajbansi pupil population too had increased over the years. Rajbansi jotedars with a new elitist outlook motivated their next generation to enlighten themselves by the light of education. It resulted in the genesis of prosperous, we educated people, regarded as members of a social class, distinguished from the parental background. They took a crucial part to stir-up this community harmony and awareness owing to deploying the members of their caste for communal mobility. In the course of time through the Kshatriyaization movement, the Rajbansi pursued to uplift the social rank by declaring Kshatriya status i.e. asking for a stronger placement at the hierarchically arranged Hindu caste structure. Thus the movement simultaneously challenged the Hindu Brahmanical caste structure. The pre-colonial and post-colonial Cooch Behar carried on with agriculture as the main dominant key of economy with a few ornamental modifications in the consecutive periods. The best part of the poor Rajbansi lived the same as they were.

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