

CHAPTER - III

AGRICULTURE

1. INTRODUCTION

The theories of underdevelopment which emphasize the shortage of factors of production as the primary explanation, generally follow the traditional grouping of factors of production under four heads : Land, Labour, Capital and Organisation or "entrepreneurship". In this chapter, we are concerned only with land ; more specifically, we are concerned with agriculture.

Cooch Behar was, as it is today, a predominantly agricultural state. A vast majority of its population derived its livelihood from land. Agriculture, however, was organised by the landlords.

Agriculture then as now, was a "Gamble in rains". The failure of rains means a sure famine. Means of artificial irrigation like canals and tanks were few. The methods of cultivation were old and primitive. Implements were few, and, over wide areas, practically the only mechanical aid to cultivation was the plough. In matters connected with agriculture as in other things the people had their peculiar superstition. New modes of cultivation or the rearing of new crops were regarded with fear as being injurious¹.

2. SOIL

The soil of Cooch Behar is of alluvial formation and has a large admixture of sand. The greater portion of it is a light loam that can retain moisture and easily give it out, and does not become water-logged. When dry it does not cake up, but yields to light pressure, and easily gets dissolved. Ploughing is not thus difficult, and does not entail much labour on the cultivator or his cattle².

Five main river systems flow through Cooch Behar and the soil is a formation of the river system. Though the general character of the soil is sandy loam throughout the state but there are large variation in the content of clay and silt and these variations may be related to the river system which originally formed the land. The western part of Mekhliganj pargana to the west of the Tista may be considered to be a formation of the Karatya and the Tista and this area contains more clay than sand. The eastern portion of Mekhliganj pargana is a creation of the Tista and contains more of sand. Similar is the nature of the soil in pargana Lalbazar which was a creation of the Western Dharala river. The river Jaldhaka, the Mausai, the Mujnai and the Torsa have created pargana Mathabhanga and the western part of pargana Cooch Behar. Thus the soil of Mathabhanga has more of clay and the soil of Cooch Behar has slightly more of sand. Again the different parts of the same pargana do not often possess soil of the same quality³.

3. USE OF MANURE AND IRRIGATION

Almost every cultivator has cattle of his own and uses cowdung and litter as manure for his tobacco, sugarcane, jute, mustard-seed, wheat and barely as far as his own supply goes. Little or no manure is applied to the soil in the case of other crops. Oil-cake is also sometimes used as manure⁴.

The abundant and generally seasonable rainfall enables the cultivator to do without irrigation. The soil also retains sufficient moisture. Tobacco plants, however, need frequent watering both in the nursery and in the field. Draughts are of exceedingly rare occurrence in the State. A cheap and simple process of irrigation can, however, largely improve the condition of agriculture in this state⁵.

4. CROPS

Rice forms the staple crop and is divided into two classes, namely, bitri (early rice) and haimanti (winter rice), each of which is subdivided into a great many varieties. The winter rice is much the more important crop. The other principal crops are jute, tobacco and mustard, jute and tobacco are paying crops. Wheat, barley, pulses, maize, til, sunnhemp, Sugar-cane and the millets like Cheeria (*Panicum miliaceum*) and vegetables are grown in the state on a small scale. Bamboos grow extensively in the state. As for the rotation of crops, bitri rice and jute generally follow mustard seed, pulses, wheat, barley and tile. Haimante rice is sometimes grown after the bitri rice is harvested. Jute and tobacco are also sometimes successively grown on the same land, but as both these crops require manuring this rotation is not largely followed.

Crop statement and agricultural statement were never prepared in Cooch Behar in the course of the settlement operations nor were attempts made to collect the necessary information at the Khanapuri stage. As there were no proposal of compilation of the agricultural statistics (prepared in Bengal and Behar during the initial recess) the form of Khasra used in Cooch Behar does not even contain the necessary columns for entries regarding the crops grown on each plot of land during the periods of last settlement of Cooch Behar State in 1920-27. The necessary rules and instructions for making detailed enquiries in this respect were not issued to the Amins during Khanapuri⁶.

The crops raised by the people in Cooch Behar may be roughly divided into the following five main groups :

- I. Food grains - Paddy, Wheat, Barley, Pulses, Makai
- II. Oil-seeds - Rape and Mustard seeds,
- III. Tobacco
- IV. Manufactural crops - Jute and Sugar-cane
- V. Roots and Bulbs - Potato, Onion, Garlic, Ginger.

All of these crops are raised in every part of the State in a more or less degree. With the exception of paddy all other crops are only of a secondary nature, and the extent of their cultivation is not large. Although paddy is grown all over the state there are special tracts known for the excellence and abundance of this crop. The western portion of Mekhliganj, the northern portion of Mathabhanga, the north of Cooch Behar and almost the whole of Tufanganj are well known paddy growing areas. Twenty seven different varieties of Bitri and seventy six of Haimanti paddy are cultivated in the country.

There are two kinds of oil-seeds, - mustard and til. They are grown in every part of the state to a more or less extent.

Tobacco is one of the principal crops of the state and the most profitable of all agricultural products of the people. With the exception of the north of Cooch Behar and Tufanganj the cultivation of tobacco is extensive almost every where in the state. Lalbazar is specially famous for the excellence of its tobacco. This crop is also very largely raised in Mekhliganj, Mathabhanga and Dinhata, and forms one of the staple products of agriculture of those areas.

The traffic is large, and the people make a good deal of money by it. Tobacco is sent down in boats to the eastern districts of Bengal in large quantities.

The Burhmesese merchants annually take away thousands maunds of tobacco from Mekhliganj and Lalbazar. The value of the annual exports of this crop was about 10 lakhs of rupees in 1876. It is by no means less than double the amount in 1902.

Jute is one of the principal crops of the people of Cooch Behar. It is largely grown in every part of the state. The traffic in this article is large and has helped the springing up of Bunders all over the country. Haldibari owes its prosperity to jute traffic only.

The cultivation of sugar-cane is extensive in the south-west of Dinahata and in the south of Lalbazar. The cultivation of this crop is gradually extending to every part of the state. Besides raising the crop the people draw juice from it, and prepare molasses out of the same. Sugar-cane pays better than paddy or mustard-seed⁸.

5. PRICES OF CHIEF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

The prices of agricultural products were gradually rising from the time of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, with the opening up of the country by roads and railways, and the facility thus offered to the export-trade. During the time of Narendra Narayan, food-grains was extremely cheap, probably because what was grown in the State remained in it, and few people had any occasion to buy food. In 1867 Mr. Smith, the then Deputy Commissioner, Cooch Behar remarked as follows⁹ :-

"Coarse cleaned rice is now selling at Rs. 2½ per maund. This kind of rice twenty five years ago is said to have been sold at two maunds for the rupee, and in one of Mr. Ahmuty's letters' I observed it is noted that rice was 3½ maunds to the rupee". During the period of minority of Maharaja Harendra Narayan, Mr. Ahmuty was Commissioner of Cooch Behar from 1797 to 1801. The price of paddy was then 4½ annas per maund in the beginning, and 8 annas per maund in the middle of the nineteenth century, and at its close it came up to Rs. 4 maund.

6. CONDITION OF THE CULTIVATING CLASSES

In the early days of Cooch Behar history, the Raja of Cooch Behar was the sole owner of the soil, and therefore, there were no cases in Cooch Behar of small proprietors, who own, occupy, or cultivate their hereditary lands, without either a superior landlord above them, or a sub-tenant or labourer of any kind under them¹⁰.

But during the process of different survey and settlements of Cooch Behar state, the land rights were extended to different under-tenants which have been discussed in different chapters of settlement in this work.

It was very seldom that a large jotedar, who holds his land direct from the State, cultivates himself all the land in his possession. Small farmers cultivate their land themselves. Big cultivators of almost every nature of tenancy have a class of farm labours under them called adhiars. They are generally very poor and occasionally possess their own plough and bullocks and a bit of rented land too. Generally the adhiars live in the farmer's premises, and employ the plough and cattle of the latter for cultivation, and is fed by his Grihi or master till the harvest time. Both these classes of adhiars are

remunerated by half the produce of the field. The quantity of seeds required and expended is often deducted from the gross produce, and the remainder is then divided into two¹¹. There were very few agricultural day-labourers in Cooch Behar. Many of the smaller cultivators, when not employed in tilling their own fields, occasionally hire themselves out as day - labourers.

7. AGRICULTURAL IMPROVEMENTS

The backwardness of the agriculture throughout the State is remarkable, the more so as the climate is so favourable. Not only is the variety and in some cases the quantity of the crops grown, exceedingly meagre, but the implements of agriculture are absolutely primitive and agricultural live-stock are of the poorest quality. No attempt is made to exploit the possibilities which the soil and the climate hold out but the cultivators go on doggedly growing rice, tobacco and jute, rice, tobacco and jute and again rice, tobacco and jute. It matters little that the situation of his land is much better suited for the growth of other crops, the cultivator pins his faith on rice, tobacco and jute. There are patches of sugarcane fields in Lalbazar, mustard is grown a good deal in Tufanganj and Cooch Behar, pulses in Cooch Behar and Dinhata to some extent. This with a few miscellaneous seed crops and some quantity of a poor variety of potatoes, vegetables and fruit make up the total produce. The system of agriculture which obtained in the country several generations ago, remains unaltered even at the period of last settlement of Cooch Behar State. Only at that time agriculture on scientific lines was started by Mr. Priyalal Ghosh, retired Inspector of Police of the State, in his farm at Falimari (Tufanganj) where motor-tractors and other upto date appliances were used.

There is no scientific manuring of the fields. Notwithstanding the innate richness of the soil the land has begun to lose its ancient productivity. The Law of Diminishing Returns is constantly working with any corresponding nourishment. The soil is, however, allowed rest now and then but such cases are so few and far between that they hardly compensate the loss of power due to constant working ; and gradual exhaustion of the soil has been the result¹².

SUMMARY

Cooch Behar is a predominantly agricultural state. Majority of its population derived its livelihood from land. But the methods of cultivation were old and primitive in nature. Means of artificial irrigation like canals and tanks were few. New modes of cultivation or the rearing of new crop were regarded with fear as being injurious.

The soil of Cooch Behar is of alluvial formation and has a large admixture of sand. Ploughing is not at all difficult.

Five main river systems flow through Cooch Behar and the soil is a formation of the river system. The general character of the soil is sandy loam throughout the state.

Although every cultivator has cattle of his own and uses cowdung and litter as manure for tobacco, sugarcane, jute, mustard-seed, wheat and barely as far as his own supply goes. The abundant rainfall enables the cultivators to do without irrigation.

Rice forms the staple crop and is divided into two classes, namely, bitri (early rice) and haimanti (winter rice) each of which is subdivided into a

great many varieties. The other principal crops are jute, tobacco and mustard. Jute and tobacco are paying crops. Bamboos grow extensively in the state.

Crop statement and agricultural statement were never prepared in Cooch Behar in the course of the settlement operations.

The crops raised by the cultivators in Cooch Behar may be divided into the following five main groups :-

- [1] Food-grains
- [2] Oil-seeds
- [3] Tobacco
- [4] Manufactured Crops
- [5] Roots and Bulbs.

All these crops are grown in every part of the state in a more or less degree. With the exception of paddy all other crops are only of a secondary nature, and the extent of their cultivation is not large.

The traffic in tobacco is large, and the people make a good deal of money by it. The Burhmesese merchants take away thousands of maunds of tobacco annually from Cooch Behar. The value of the exports of this crop was about Rupees ten lakhs in 1876.

The prices of agricultural products were gradually rising from the time of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, with the opening up of the country by roads and railways. Mr. Smith, the then Deputy Commissioner Cooch Behar wrote in the year 1867 that coarse cleaned rice was then selling at Rs. 2½ per maund. This kind of rice twenty five years ago was said to have been

sold at two maunds for a rupee. The price of paddy was 4½ annas per maund in the beginning and 8 annas per maund in the middle of the nineteenth century and at its close it came up to Rs. 4 a maund.

In the early days in Cooch Behar State, the Raja was the sole owner of the soil and therefore, there were no cases in Cooch Behar of small proprietors of land.

It was very seldom that a large Jotedar who holds his land direct from the State, cultivates himself all the land in his possession. Small farmers cultivate their land themselves. Big cultivators of almost every nature of tenancy have a class of farm labours under them called adhiars.

In spite of favourable climate the condition of agriculture throughout the State is not in a good condition. The implements used in the agriculture are absolutely primitive and agricultural live-stock are of the poorest quality. No attempt is made to exploit the possibilities which the soil and the climate hold out but the cultivators do not agree to take any new measures in agriculture.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] Harendra Narayan Choudhuri, The Cooch Behar State and its land revenue settlements, Cooch Behar, 1903, p. 158.
- [2] A. Mitra, Census 1951, West Bengal, District Hand Books, Cooch Behar, Calcutta, 1953, P. X/VII.
- [3] Durgadas Mazumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, Calcutta, 1977, p. 67.
- [4] H. N. Choudhuri, Op.cit., p. 163.

- [5] Karali Charan Ganguli, Final report on the Survey and settlement operations in the Cooch Behar State, 1913-1927, Cooch Behar, 1930, p. 8.
- [6] Ibid, p. 7.
- [7] H. N. Choudhuri, Op.cit., p. 167.
- [8] Ibid, p. 168.
- [9] The Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State for the year 1867-68, Cooch Behar, 1868, p. 21.
- [10] W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. X, London, 1877, p. 385.
- [11] H. N. Coudhuri, Op.cit.,p. 164.
- [12] Karali Charan Ganguli, Final report on the Survey and Settlement operations in the Cooch Behar State, 1913-1927, Cooch Behar, 1930, pp. 13-14.