

CHAPTER-III: LAND AND PEOPLE

Cooch Behar is the north-eastern district in the Jalpaiguri Division of West Bengal. The name Cooch Behar is of a very recent origin. Previously, the area was known by the name 'Kamrupa'. Even during the reign of the last but one line of kings, the 'Khens'¹, about 450 years ago, the country was known by the name 'Kamatapur'. Major Rennell's maps prepared in the 18th century designated Cooch Behar as simply 'Bihar'². The area came to be known as Cooch Behar only after accession of Koch kings in the throne. The name Cooch Behar is compounded of two words - Cooch and Bihar. In all probabilities, the term Cooch has derived from Koch, the name of the race which dominated the area for a long time; Bihar meaning the abode of land. Thus, so far as the meaning of the term is concerned, Cooch Behar means the land of the Koches³.

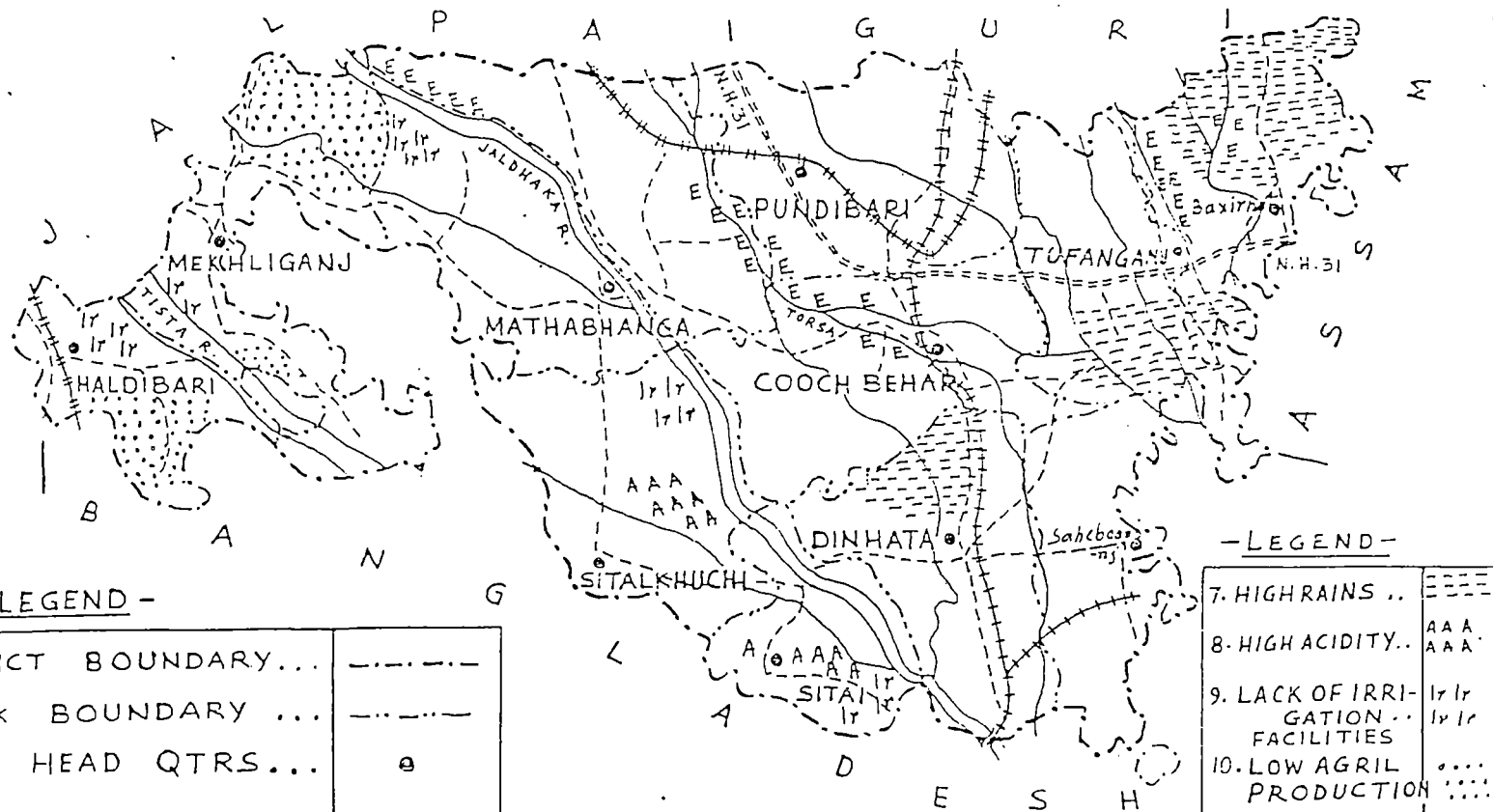
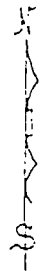
3.1: Location And Boundaries.

Cooch Behar District lies between 26°32'20" north latitude and 25°57'40" north latitude. The longitude of the easternmost point is 89°54'35" east and the longitude of the westernmost point is 88°47'40" east.

The district has no natural boundary with the exception of a few miles at the

COOCH BEHAR

BLOCK BOUNDARIES, COMMUNICATION & OTHER IMPORTANT
SCALE 1" INCH TO 8 MILES. AREAS.



- LEGEND -

1. DISTRICT BOUNDARY...	-----
2. BLOCK BOUNDARY ...	- - - - -
3. BLOCK HEAD QTRS...	o
4. ROADS.	-----
5. RIVERS	~~~~~
6. B.G.&M.G.LINE ...	+++++

- LEGEND -

7. HIGH RAINS ..	=====
8. HIGH ACIDITY..	AAA AAA
9. LACK OF IRRIGATION FACILITIES	lr lr lr lr
10. LOW AGRIL PRODUCTION	o... o...o
11. EROSION PROBLEM...	EEE EEE

extreme southern tip of Tufanganj Subdivision where the river Raidak forms the natural boundary and for about five miles (8 K.M.) to the north of Mekliganj thana where the river Jaldhaka forms the boundary. Most part of northern and western boundary are formed by the district of Jalpaiguri. Most part of southern boundary are formed by the Rangpur district of Bangladesh (earstwhile East Pakistan). The eastern part of the boundary is formed by the district of Goalpara of Assam. The total area of the district according to the Survey of India is 3386 square K.M. (as on July 1, 1971)⁴. Besides, there are some '*Chhits*'⁵ or enclaves inside the territory of Bangladesh and some enclaves or '*Chhits*' of Bangladesh are inside the territory of CoochBehar. This peculiar situation has raised controversy between India and Bangladesh over the administration of the enclaves and free movement of the people.

3.2: History:

The early history of the district is closely related with the history of Assam or '*Kamrupa*'. The early mention of the area is found in Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The area was then described as '*Pragjyotisha*'. Various dynasties ruled over the area. In the Mughal period, the area was annexed by a Muslim army in 1493 A.D. led by Hossain Shah, the ruler of Gour, and Kamatapura with Nilambara as the king was conquered⁶. After a period of anarchy and split up of principalities under small

chiefs, the Koch kings were gradually becoming powerful. The accession of Biswasingha in 1496 A.D. marks the beginning of a new era in the history of Cooch Behar. The dynasty with all upheavals continued till the merger in January, 1950, though in 1773, the State of Cooch Behar came under the British rule as a feudatory state with only the internal administration in the hands of the Kings.

On 28th August, 1949, an agreement was signed between the Governor General of India and His Highness the Maharaja of Cooch Behar which came to be known as the Cooch Behar Merger Agreement in which His Highness the Maharaja of Cooch Behar ceded to the Government of India "full and exclusive authority, jurisdiction and powers for and in relation to the governance of the State" and "agreed to transfer the administration of the State to the Dominion Government on the 12th day of September, 1949" ⁷.

Between 12th September, 1949 and 31st December, 1949, the State of Cooch Behar was known as the Chief Commissioner's Province. After a series of talks between the Union Government, the West Bengal Government and the Assam Government and taking into account the wishes of the people of Cooch Behar, the Union Government agreed to merge the State of Cooch Behar in the Province of West Bengal in the interest of the people of Cooch Behar. The merger took place with effect from

Table-3.1: COOCH BEHAR DISTRICT AT A GLANCE.

1. Geographical area:	3387 sq.KM.
2. Total population:	17.71,562 (1981 census)
3. No. of Agricultural Families:	2,66,400
4. No. of small farmers	: 70,300
5. No. of Agricultural labourers:	1,38,015
6. NO. of Blocks	: 12
7. No. of Mouza	: 1168
8. No. of Inhabited Mouza	: 1139
9. Gram Panchayat	: 128
10. Town	: 7
11. Municipalities	: 6
12. No. of A.E.O./ A.D.O. Office	: 11
13. No. of Block Seed Farm	: 4
14. No. of District Seed Farm	: 1
15. No. of cold storages	: 2
16. No. of Regulated Markets	: 4
17. No. of other recognised markets:	154
18. NO. of Co-operative Societies (PACS)	: 187
19. NO. of Bank	: 11
20. Branches	: 94
21. No. of Agril. Input Dealers	: 700

Source: District Census Handbook, 1981.

January 1, 1950⁸.

3.3: Administrative Units.

The district comprises five sub-divisions, namely, CoochBehar, Tufanganj, Mathabhanga, Dinhata and Mekhliganj. The sub-divisions have headquarters at the towns of their respective names. The headquarter of the district is the Cooch Behar town. There are in all eight police stations in the district: Kotowali, Tufanganj, Dinhata, Sitai, Mathabhanga, Sitalkuchi, Haldibari and Mekhliganj. The district have twelve Blocks, twelve Panchayat Samities, one hundred twenty eight Gram Panchayats one thousand one hundred sixty-eight Mouzas and one thousand one hundred thirty-nine inhabited villages of the district. Previously, there were only two municipalities - Cooch Behar and Dinhata. Now, there are in all six municipal towns in the district, namely, Cooch Behar, Dinhata, Tufanganj, Mathabhanga, Mekhliganj, and Haldibari. Among the statutory towns in the state of West Bengal, Mekhliganj with population of 4534 happens to be smallest urban unit according to 1981 census. The administrative units with all details are given in table 3.1.

3.4: Soil:

The soil of Cooch Behar is of alluvial formation and has a large admixture of sand. The greater portion of it is slightly loam that can contain moisture and easily give it out and rarely become water-logged. The soil is very soft and ploughing is thus not

difficult. The portion of the country east of Kaljani possesses the richest soil. High lands (*Danga* as called locally) in Cooch Behar are generally more sandy than low lands (*Dola* in local terms) and they are less fertile. The land between 'Dola' and 'Danga' is most fertile and grows jute and paddy.

3.5: Climate.

There are three well defined seasons in Cooch Behar, namely, winter, summer and rainy season. The winter sets in early November and summer starts from April onwards, just after closing of winter. The rain sets in by May and lasts till September. Formerly, the duration of rainy days was inconveniently long, though it becomes somewhat shorter now-a-days. The temperature reaches maximum in June or July and the lowest temperature is recorded in the month of January. The climate of CoochBehar is very damp and not so hot as in other parts of West Bengal.

3.6: Population- A Close Look.

It will be of interest to trace the growth of population in the District since 1872 when the first census was taken by the Settlement Department. The first census counted 532565 heads (males 278585, females 253980) in 1872. The next census in 1881 registered a substantial increase of 13.2 per cent. The increase is primarily due to more accurate counting, though the possibility of immigration was there also. Between 1881 and 1891, population decreased in all sub-divisions except Tufanganj

which continued to grow on account of immigration. During the decade 1891-1901 also the population decreased marginally.

Table-3.2: Rural-Urban Ratio and Growth Rate of Cooch Behar District during 1901-1991

Year	Total Population	Urban Population	Rural population	% of rural to total popu	Dcennial growth rate
1901	565116	14060	551056	97.51	---
1911	591012	15794	575218	97.33	4.58
1921	590599	17261	573338	97.08	- 0.07
1931	589053	18030	571023	96.94	- 0.26
1941	638703	26821	611882	95.80	8.43
1951	668949	50180	618769	92.50	4.73
1961	1019806	71446	948360	92.99	52.45
1971	1414183	96652	1317531	93.16	38.67
1981	1771643	122260	1649383	93.10	25.28
1991	2171145	169497	2001648	92.19	22.54

Sources : 1) District Census Handbook- Cooch Behar, 1951, 1961, 1971, 1981.

2) District Statistical Handbook, Cooch Behar, 1993; published by the Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Govt. of West Bengal.

The table 3.2 was prepared to get a close view of the growth of population from 1901 onwards. In the decade (1901-1911), population increased by 4.58 percent. The reason of this increase may definitely be ascribed to the fact of migration from Bengal Province under British Rule. Cultivation during the period expanded to a considerable extent. During the period from 1911 to 1931 the population of the state

decreased. From the decade 1931-41, the population has been increasing. It is in the decade 1951-61, the percentage of increase was maximum (52.45 percent). The partition of Bengal along with the influx of refugees in Cooch Behar is in fact, the main cause of the phenomenal growth of population. The District of Cooch Behar, in fact, recorded the highest rate of growth of population than any other district of West Bengal. The census of 1961 reveals that as many as 297879 persons came from outside the district.

In the 1971 census, it is seen that the district was inhabited by a population of 141483 of which 737931 were males and 676252 were females. The decennial population growth rate for the district (38.67%) was far higher than the decennial growth rate for the state of West Bengal (26.87%).

As per 1981 census, the population of Cooch Behar was 1771643 of which 915461 were males and 856182 were females. The population growth rate was registered as 25.28 per cent during the decade 1971-81 which is higher than the state growth rate (23.17 percent). The rate of growth of population in Cooch Behar district depends to a large extent on the immigrants from Bangladesh (earstwhile East Pakistan). An important feature of the district of Cooch Behar is the border which it has with the Bangladesh. The influx of refugees from across the international border has been an

important component of growth of population of the district and it had played an important role in pushing up the rate of growth during the decades.

3.7: Rural-Urban Composition Of Population.

There is a heavy concentration of population in rural areas of Cooch Behar. According to 1961 census, 93 percent of population in Cooch Behar are living in villages. In 1971, the percentage of rural population to total population is increased to 93.16 percent. The state percentage at that census was 75.25. Similarly, in 1981 census, the percentage of rural population to total population in Cooch Behar was recorded at 93.1 which was much higher than the state percentage (73.53). During the decade (1971-81), the rural population increased by 25.19 percent, while the urban population has gone up by 26.5 percent. The table 3.2 shows the rural urban ratio from 1901 onwards.

The table shows that the district is almost entirely rural. This is also an indication that a large part of the population of the district is almost entirely dependent on agriculture.

3.8: Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes population.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes form an important part of the population of the district. There is very high concentration of Scheduled Caste population in the district, though the Scheduled Tribes are numerically insignificant

in the total population of the district. In the 1961 census, it is found that the Scheduled Castes forms the 47 percent of the population, whereas, the state percentage was only 19.7. In 1971, percentage of Scheduled Castes to total population rose to 47.02 against state percentage of 19.9 only. In 1981, the percentage of Scheduled Caste rose to 49.84 against state percentage of 21.99.

The census reports also reveal that a small percentage of population of the district is Scheduled Tribes. In 1961, their percentage to total population of the district was 0.86. This percentage was reduced to 0.75 in 1971 and 0.57 in 1981. The table 3.3 shows the police station-wise population figures of the district.

Table 3.3: Police Station-wise population figures of the District.

Police Station	Total Population	Sch. Caste population	Sch. Tribe population	% of S.C. to total population	% of S.T to Total Population.
1. Haldibari	73975	43344	249	58.59	0.34
2. Mekliganj	103268	73744	730	71.41	0.74
3. Mathabhanga	290380	186670	1972	64.28	0.68
4. CoochBehar (Kotowali)	467419	187170	2901	40.04	2.31
5. Sitalkuchi	125710	72374	38	57.57	0.03
6. Tufanganj	288370	124766	2833	43.27	1.91
7. Dinhata	353149	147286	1380	41.71	0.91
8. Sitai	69372	47730	2	68.80	Negligible
District Total	1771643	883084	10105	49.85	0.57

Source : District Census Handbook, Cooch Behar, 1981.

3.9: Literacy Level.

The level of literacy is one of the yardsticks in judging the quality of human resources available in an area. Literate peoples are absolutely necessary for the purpose of meaningful participation of the rural people in democratic process and developmental programmes, better farm mechanisms and use of fertilisers. As per the 1951 census reports, in CoochBehar the literates were only 15 percent of the total population against state percentage of 21.5. In 1971, the literacy rate rose to 21.92 percent against state percentage of 33.2. In 1981, the literacy rate was bettered to 30.1 compared to state rate of 40.94. So, it is seen that the literacy rate of the district has always been lagging behind the state literacy rate. As per 1991 census, the literacy rate in rural Cooch Behar is only 27.44 percent.

3.10: Agriculture, Electricity And Industry.

The district is dependent on agriculture and allied activities and is without any industrial activity of any importance. The percentage of workers engaged in agricultural sector is 79.44 percent of the main workers⁹. The agriculture may not be declared as much improved type as the land for cultivation of *Aush* paddy, *Aman* paddy and jute cultivation remains almost same, but cultivations of high yielding paddy and vegetables have increased very marginally.¹⁰

The total electricity consumption of the Cooch Behar district is lowest among the north Bengal districts and much lower than the state consumption average. This low consumption of electricity for productive purposes indicates the nature of poor development of the district. Above all, infrastructure facilities on which industrialisation and modern agriculture depend, are almost non-existent in CoochBehar. In recent times, only three cold storage have been set up and started functioning. But no other industry has been set up yet, though the West Bengal Infrastructure Development Corporation has developed a large area in Baburhat (Sadar Subdivision) as industrial growth centre to facilitate installation of industries in the area.

In this backdrop of demographic, climatic and economic factors, the researcher sets his foot to look into the different facets of the emerging rural leadership pattern that was grown after the first Panchayat election in 1978 and subsequently had taken the present shape through the Panchayat elections of 1983, 1988, 1993 and 1998 Panchayat elections.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. The Khens are the tribes who have been residing the area and formed a very developed civilisation during the rise of Kamatapur kingdom in Gossanimari in 15th century.

2. D.Mazumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteer, Calcutta,1977,P.1.
3. A.Mitra, District Census Handbook-1951, Cooch Behar District, West Bengal, Calcutta,1953,P.1.
4. D.Mazumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteer, Calcutta,1977,P.2.
5. Chhits are the small enclaves of India or Bangladesh (earstwhile East Pakistan) situated inside the territory of Bangladesh or India.
6. Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed, A History of Cooch Behar; Bengali version, P.46,1936
7. The Instrument Of Accession, signed in 20th August,1949.
8. B.Roy, District Census Handbooks, 1961, Cooch Behar District, West Bengal,PP.5-6.
9. District Statistical Handbook, Cooch Behar,1993, Publ. by the Bureau of Applied Economics and statistics,Govt.of W.Bengal,P.21.
10. Ibid.,P.55.