

Historical Background

A) Physical Features and Location of Rajshahi

Rajshahi was one of the leading districts of undivided Bengal. The location of the district seems to be southwest of the erstwhile Rajshahi division. This district lies between 24°3'0" and 24°59'0" north latitude and 88°20'45" and 39°23'30" east longitude. According to a record¹ the present area of the district, after partition of India spreads to 236082 sq. miles excluding the of river area and as per the Census of 1872, the total population of which was of 1310729 heads.² The number of population has varied time and after for example in 1911 we find the population to be 1480587 which has increased to 28,10,964 in the light of 1961 census.

At the time of partition of India in 1947, 5 police stations namely Nawabganj, Bholahat, Nachole, Gamastapur and Shibganj of Malda district were included within Rajshahi. It was done according to the awards of Sir C. Radcliffe Boundary Commission. Before Partition Rajshahi had three subdivisions and twenty two police stations and at present there are 4 subdivisions and 30 police stations within the district. The headquarters are at Rampur Boalia, a town on the left bank of the Ganges which is popularly known as the Padma. The postal and official name of the town is however not Rampur Boalia but Rajshahi.

The name 'Rajshahi' deserves a thorough study. In a distorted ways it is said that the district was given this designation of Royal territory because it was the home of many Rajas. The origin of the name is doubtful but a probable hypothesis established the fact that the origin of the place can be traced back to the beginning of the 15th century A.D. when this region was ruled over by one person called Raja Kans or Ganesh, a Hindu chief of Bhaturia (i.e. the country on both sides of the

river Atrai in Dinajpur and Rajshahi.)³ It is said that the Raja after dethroning the Sultan of Gaur, became the ruler of Bengal and as per the information given by Blochmann he was subsequently known as Raja-Shah i.e. Hindu Raja who occupied a Muslim throne and thus the territory got its name as 'Rajshahi'.⁴ It is fact that the river Ganges forms natural boundary to the south and south-west. The Ganges separates Rajshahi from the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad (West Bengal, India). The other neighboring districts are Dinajpur and Bogra on the north, Bogra and Pabna on the east Malda (India) on the west.

Up to the time of permanent settlement in 1793 A.D., Rajshahi formed one of the important administrative divisions of undivided Bengal. It could hardly be called a district as it was connected with the great Zamindari of Rajshahi and was estimated in 1786 to have an area about 13,000 sq. miles. In fact it corresponded to about five times the size of the present districts. Thus it is obvious that there were difficulties to administer the division by a single collector. As a result, the first change in the size of the district took place in 1793, a general policy of redistribution of Bengal districts was made by the government. The extensive tract of land located at south of the Ganges was then taken from the parent district and divided among the adjoining districts of Nadia, Jessore and Murshidabad. The question of law and order as well as of prevalence of crime in various parts of the districts made further division necessary. Accordingly, in March 1830, the police stations of Rahanpur and Champai were separated from Rajshahi and together with a few from Dinajpur and Purnia, were formed into the present district of Malda. In the year 1821, four police stations namely Nowkhila, Sherpur, Bogra and Adamdighi were separated from Rajshahi and along with two other police stations from Rangpur and three from Dinajpur formed the present district of Bogra. Again in 16th October 1828 steps were taken to form the District of Pabna taking five police stations from Rajshahi and three from Jessore.⁵ In 1875, there was further adjustment of the Pabna

and Dinajpur boundaries and in 1896-97 (or 1897-98) Mahadevpur Police Station from Dinajpur and portions of Adamdighi and Nawabganj were incorporated with the district of Rajshahi.⁶

Geologically Rajshahi is a part of the Indo Gangetic valley and also part of Assam, On the other hand, physiognomically, Rajshahi district can be divided into three broad divisions –

- i) The marshy areas of the *beel* region;
- ii) The barren region;
- iii) Alluvial region along the banks of the Padma.

In the *beel* areas, there are numerous *beels* whose size increases as one move from west to east and in the extreme east the whole boundary of the district is covered with a series of *beels*. There are debates on the formation of these *beels*. In some cases a number of *beels* are found along a line of drainage out of the Great River which might have dissected in earlier times its main chanel to flow along new ones in earlier times. In other cases there might be some depositional function of the rivers which over centuries have silt deposits.

In the case of Rajshahi district from west to east the first *beel* worth mentioning is 'Bhatia' of the Nawabganj subdivision. It is considered to be the largest *beel* that lies along the river Mahananda. Likewise in the barren region there are some important *beels* in Porsa Police Station Apart from Chakki, Manda, Bagsimuli Utrail, there are Angra, Podda, Ajum etc. which play a significant role in the life of the people of the region. The most reputed one and by far the largest amongst all is the Chalan *beel* with its numerous constituents extended over the adjacent districts named Rajshahi and Pabna. It lies between Singra Police Station (Natore subdivision) and the north bank of the river Gumani. It is said that the *Chalan beel* was

formed when the old Brahmaputra diverted its course into the new Channel called the Jamuna. The principal feeder of the *beel* is the river Atrai by name. The water of the Atrai passes touching the *chalan beel*. 'Varendra' in the Sanskrit literature and 'Barind' in modern term is a tract of comparatively high land which includes portions of Malda (India), Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Bogra districts. Geologically, Barind is the part of old alluvium of middle Pliocene age which has abundance of impure calcareous locally known as 'Kankar'. This portion of the district is physiographically rich with alluvial deposits along the banks of the Padma. Its soil is sandy to sandy loam grey in colour, absolutely different from the soil of the Barind.

In recent time, however, the whole of Rajshahi district has been divided into six physiographic units which are mentioned below:

- i) The *Barind* tracts
- ii) The Ganges river flood plains
- iii) The upper middle Atrai flood plains
- iv) The lower Atrai flood plains
- v) The little Jamuna flood plains
- vi) The Punarbhava flood plains.⁷

In fact all these units are of recent origin and have varieties of their own. Some of these surfaces are of *Kankar*, *Khair* and *Poli* and the fertility of this land is proverbial. Some of the regions under these divisions face insufficient rainfall a result of thin population. There are also *diar* (dry region) and *char* (alluvial land) adjacent to the large rivers and as the *chars* are fertile, variety of crops are found in its silty soil. In fine, the Rajshahi district or in the broad sense the division cell is a region with enormous varieties and excellence.

Rajshahi division or the region under consideration is endowed with several rivers. Except the Ganges or the Padma, most of the rivers like Mahananda and Atrai are inactive as most of them are moribund during all seasons other than the rainy season.

The River Padma has no important tributaries excepting the Mahananda. The Boral is the only tributary on the left bank which flows through the district to meet the Atrai and the Gumany. Among the rivers Jalongi and Mathabhanga the first one takes off from a point south-west of Sardah and the second one Mathabhanga about ten miles further down the stream.

Every year the river Padma is forming and cutting way land along its coast by constant alteration, deposition and erosion. Large island within the rivers, called chars are also formed, some of which extend over many miles. It may be noted that the river Padma, the portion of the Ganges which falls within Rajshahi is not considered as sacred, but it remains to say the Padma has all the attributes of grandeur and utility attached to the upper channel.

As we have seen that the river Mahananda is an important river of the district and is a major tributary of the Padma. The exact point of the origin of the Mahananda is still in confusion but it appears that it has originated some where in the district of Darjeeling (India) and after crossing the border it enters into Rajshahi near Bholahat.

After wards its flows through Nawabganj subdivision to meet the Padma near Nawabganj town. The portion of the Mahananda which falls within Rajshahi has Unique feature. Its banks are alternately sheer and slopping. The width of the river at this part is in between 400-600 yards and deep enough giving facility for cargo-boats. For a few miles it touches Rajshahi and the river has neither any tributary nor any distributary.

Another important river of this region is Atrai which is connected with Karotoya or Koratoya which is virtually designated as Atrai when it reaches Khansamea Police Station in Dinajpur. This channel is divided itself into two north west of Chirirbandar of Dinajpur district but again reunites in south west of Chirirbandar. The united channel is again named as Atrai and enters Rajshahi district at a point about eight miles north of Mahadevpur Police Station. When it enters into the Barind it receives many streams and rivulets and the width of the river expands to a few miles. The western Jamuna joins the Atrai near Suktigacha. A few miles further down streams the said channel again bifurcates into two parts and get there names as Gur and old Atrai. The southern channel is the old Atrai and when the river turns a little east it is joined by the Baranai. Two other rivers named Narad and the 'Nanda kuja', join the river from the south.

Before 1787 A.D., the Atrai was one of the great rivers of North Bengal and through this channel, the Tista used to discharge its water into the Padma. But in 1787 A.D., an unprecedented flood took place and as a result the Tista broke away from its old channel and found new course directed to eastward to be joined with the Brahmaputra instead of joining the Padma. In fact, since that time Atrai has lost its traditional glamour but still it is navigable by large country – boats during the rainy season.

The western Jamuna or sometime called as Jabuna is the leading tributary of the Atrai within the district of Rajshahi. This river takes its origin in Jalpaiguri district of India and having its directions more or less southwards through the eastern part of Dinajpur and western corner of Bogra enters into Rajshahi district. It passes by the town of Naogaon and joins the Atrai at Sulgacha. The Jamuna is also joined by some insignificant streams and one of them is Tulsiganga situated near the village Iterate. Tulsiganga enters Rajshahi from Bogra and it flows parallel to the western Jamuna.

One of the important distributaries of the Padma in Rajshahi is the river Baral. The Baral leaves the parent streams near the Charghat Police Station and having its direction to eastwards it passes into the Padma after touching the Atrai Gumani system. The Baral river has two off-shoots to the north namely, the Musakhan and the Nanda Kuja, a river of some magnitude which flows through a part of Natore and then joins into the *Chalan beel*.

It is a fact that 'Rajshahi' is a region with having huge natural varieties and in addition to the above mentioned rivers, there are some important rivers which have added much beauty to its treasure of natural varieties. Its flora and fauna, climate, temperature and even rainfall have drawn the attention of various scholars of India and abroad who have ever been attracted with the varieties of the region and left valuable account about the region and its people at large.

B) Rise of the Zamindars and Zamindari system in Bengal

- An overview

Agriculture started since the dawn of human civilization. In ancient times the farmer would clear the forest and cultivate the land. Because of the increase of population, the necessity of additional production of crops was seen and the demand of cultivable land also increased. On the other hand as a result of the emergence of feudalism and monarchy the ownership of land gradually went under their control.

The kings of the Western countries, to fulfil their administrative demand offered land to influential persons in exchange of civil and military support. Again in many cases local *Izaradars* were appointed to collect revenue from farmers. They were indeed a new class of employees who were faithful and obedient and they got a part of the collected revenue as salary. In the British period many persons described them as Zamindars.⁸

The word 'Zamindar' is originally a Persian word and the word 'Zamindar' was originated from it. The word *Zamin* means land and *dar* means lord, possessor,

owner or caretaker.⁹ According to the available dictionary meaning, he who is the owner of the land is the Zamindar. The word 'Zamindar' prevailing in the Persian language is converted into Bengali as 'Zamidar' and has become customary. Naturally a question arises whether those who are the owner of the land or a special class of persons who are the owner of a vast land or the persons who are involved in the revenue administration of a vast land are Zamindars.

According to a recent study on the land system of Bangladesh, the real owner of a vast land was called a Zamindar during the Muslim period.¹⁰ From another source it appears that the title of 'Zamindar' or 'Zamidar' means caretaker, occupant or employee-in-charge instead of the permanent owner.¹¹

While explaining the term what Zamindar or Zamindari stands for, Narendra Krishna Sinha, a reputed historian says, 'A Zamindar is a person possessing hereditarily on the conditions of obedience to the ordinance of government a tract of land under the denomination of a pargana or *chakla* subject to the payment of revenue. A Zamindari is that kind of land registered in the records of government in the name of such a person.'¹² The relation of the Zamindar with the British Govt. is again a matter of controversy. On this point it is almost certain that the relation of Zamindar to government and of a ryot to a Zamindar was neither that of a proprietor nor a vassal but a compound of both. The former is said to have acted as authority unconnected with property rights. The latter had rights without real property and the property of the one and the rights of the other were in a measure held at discretion.¹³

When the Zamindar of Mughal India is taken to be a owner of huge tracts of land, naturally a question arises, Who was really a Zamindar? Was he the owner of the land or the collector of revenue or the government employee who was supposed to collect revenue or the collector of revenue of the land or locality according to the

settlement made by the government? On this premise it may be than resolved that the Zamindar was the person who would collect revenue of a particular pargana according to the settlement made by the government, keep a definite portion of it for himself / herself and give the remaining portion of it to the government. He /she was not an employee of the government. The responsibility of the Zamindar was confined not only to the collection of revenue or sending it to the government but also he would maintain law and order, check crimes like stealing, robbery and perform development work like the construction of roads and high ways, dig canals, maintain bridges and culverts.¹⁴

It is, however, worthwhile to mention that with the passage of time 'Revenue Collectors' were being honored as Zamindars.¹⁵ Though this definition about the Zamindar was consistent prior to the British administration, their position began to change after 1765 when a series of experiments and short term settlements were made by the British after the Dewani of 1765,^{15(a)} The Zamindar got permanent ownership of the land and consequently the Zamindar could enjoy the Zamindari (estate) permanently if he /she would pay the fixed amount of revenue to the government regularly and in time.¹⁶ Provision was also there that if it would fail to comply with the specified condition i.e., regular payment of revenue in time the respective Zamindari (estate) would be put on auction.

From the above discussion some interesting characteristics about the responsibilities and duties of the Zamindar are found. The working sphere of the Zamindar may be divided into two categories (a) his/her work during the pre-British period, (b) his/her work after the grant of Dewani (stewardship) by the English East-India Company. Prior to the Dewani (stewardship) the Zamindar was a caretaker or owner of the land according to the settlement made by the government.

If he/she paid revenue fixed by the government regularly and was loyal to the government, he/she would remain Zamindar hereditarily. If he/she failed to pay the

revenue owing to natural calamity or other cause or because of revolt, the government would give him opportunity to pay the revenue later on. If he/she failed to pay the revenue consecutively or if he /she revolted, the government had the power to siege his/her estate. In some occasions, army was sent against a Zamindar in case he/she was a ruler and was brought and punished inhumanly for the offence. Here the case of Sitaram Ray, the Raja of Jessore may be cited as an example.¹⁷ If any obedient Zamindars died, their successors were expected to submit applications and they would be given the Zamindaris (estates) under the stipulated conditions.

The most important responsibility assigned to the Zamindar was to collect revenue from the tenant as fixed by the state and to keep a certain part of it as remuneration and pay the remaining amount to the government. It was the responsibility of the Zamindar to encourage the tenant to increase the production of the land and give security of life and property to the tenant under him. If the Zamindar failed to ensure security to the tenant, he /she would be called for explanation for it to the government.

The Zamindars were expected to contribute to the welfare work including the development of roads and high ways and even to take care of the local *hats* (markets) and bazaars. Sometimes the titles of 'Raja/Rani' or 'Maharaja/Maharani' were conferred on Zamindars for their respective efficiency and welfare work.

The Zamindar would assist the government with army during any fight or conflict with others, if necessary. The Zamindar was the mouth piece of the tenant to the government and the government was also as like as the bridge between the tenant and the Government.

It appears from the above study that during the pre-British period, the Zamindar had no right over the land he managed to cultivate but during the British rule he / she could enjoy a permanent right over land under certain conditions.

The Emergence and Development of the Zamindari System

The agriculture is an old profession and a source of economic growth. In ancient time, most of the land was covered with forest. The farmer cleared the jungle and cultivated the land and consequently he did not have to pay any revenue. Later on the feudal system emerged and the system of paying revenue and giving labour was introduced. Quoting Golam Hossain Salim, Dr. Ali Newaz holds that in Assam tenants did not have to pay revenue but one out of three persons of a family had to work for the king. If any body neglected the work, he was sentenced to death. It is not known whether such rule was introduced in Bengal after the establishment of the kingship. But it appears from the subsequent data that tenants were obedient and revenue was collected according to the amount of crops produced.¹⁸ It is difficult to conclude precisely who the owners of the land were during the pre-Muslim period, it is seen from the available data that management of land was not the same every where. In some places the owner of the land, was the farmer, in some other places the owner of the land was the king Zamindar and again in some other places the land was managed by joint ownership. But during the Pre-Muslim period there was no existence of intermediate class. There was direct relation between the king and the subjects.¹⁹

During the pre Muslim Period, Bengal was divided into five *Bhuktis* or administrative divisions. The *Bhuktis* were divided into *Mandals* (districts) and the *Mandals* were again divided into *Visayas* (subdivisions). Those who managed *Visayas* were called *Visayapatis*. They were some what like feudai kings or Zamindars who collected revenue form tenants and the government got a part of the same and the collector (*Zamindar/ Visayapati*) would get a fixed percentage of the remaining part.²⁰ Also during the reign of Sultans, the existence of a class of landlords can be noticed. As soon as Ali Mardan Khilji ascended the throne, the Hindu Zamindars began to pay land revenue to him.²¹ It appears from the same

available source that during the period between Firoz Shah Tughlaque, the Sultan of Delhi and Iliash Shah of Bengal, some Zamindars took the side of the Sultan and some others took the side of Iliash Shah.²² The existence of the system in the form of Zamindari can be noticed during the one of the obligations of the Pre Mughal Zamindari was, however to supply required any out their maintenance and the expenditure of the army. During the battle they assisted the Sultan with required army.²³ Most of the modern economic historians are inclined to pass such an opinion. It appears from such an analysis that the settlement of land on condition of regular payment of revenue and in some case supply of army was not at all a new tradition but prevailed in India some form or other over the ages.²⁴

It may be guessed from the above that during pre-Muslim period and Pre-Mughal period, revenue management was conducted through feudal chiefs and *ijaradars*. *Ijaradars*, Rajas and Zamindars worked as important part of the administration.

The evidence of the existence of some powerful landlords/Zamindars can be traced before the establishment of the Mughal administration. Those Zamindars were known as *Baro Bhuiyas* or *Bhumiyas* (Twelve landlords).

The *Baro Bhuiyas* conducted the administration of Bengal almost independently. They had their own administrative system and powerful army. Each of them conducted the administration almost independently though they could not form an united administrative system. They formed a strong defence against the Mughals at the point of theirs (i.e., Mughals) expansion towards Bengal region. The Mughals had to fight many battles to establish their supremacy in Bengal and the stiff resistance they received from the *Baro Bhuiyas* of Bengal.²⁵

The Mughal rule was partly established in Bengal as a result of the defeat of Daud Khan, the independent ruler of Bengal in 1575^{25a} In those days most of the regions of Bengal were under the control of the “*Baro Bhuiyas*”. To suppress or

root out the “Baro Bhuiyas”, Akbar and Jahangir had to take up many campaigns to suppress the Baro Bhuiyas. According to R. C. Majumdar “the conflict-between the Mughals and the Barobhuiyas may be taken to be a struggle for independence and that their position has been presented fairly by the writers of Bengali literature.

Abdul Karim in this regard says about the administration of the *Baro Bhuiyans* that they were the inheritors of the independent Sultans of Bengal for two hundred years.²⁶ But at long last they were defeated by the powerful Mughal army and lost their small territories²⁷

It may be noted that the history of the emergence of the Puthia Raj is still in obscurity and there is a legend as to the founder of this Raj. Some scholar is of the opinion that it was established some time during the time of Akbar, the great Mughal ruler of India.^{27a} But whether they had enjoyed the favour of the Mughals or the emperor himself and they were one of the Baro Bhuiyas of Bengal^{27b} are yet to be decided by any comprehensive reserch.

During the Mughal period, four settlements of land were carried out in the/ province of Bengal. There were : (a) the settlement of Todarmal, the minister of Akbar in 1582, (b) the settlement of Shah Suja, (c) the provincial governor of Bengal in 1668, the settlement of Murshid Kuli Khan in 1722. Sujauddin Khan again made some experiments in 1728.²⁸

A class of Zamindars was created during the reign of Murshid Kuli Khan. Those Izardars were not allowed to collect more revenue than what was fixed and they had to pay to the farthing of the revenue after their own part had been deduced.²⁹ If the Zamindars failed to pay the revenue properly, rigorous punishment was inflicted upon them.³⁰

Nawab Alivardi Khan followed the revenue management introduced by Murshid Kuli Khan and made settlement of revenue with Zamindars accordingly. During the conflict with the Marathas, Zamindars helped Nawab Alivardi Khan with additional money.³¹

It is guessed from the available data that during the reign of the Bengal Nawabs, the administrative system mostly depended upon the Zamindars.

After the defeat of Siraj-ud-daullah in the battle of Plassey in 1757A.D. and the occupation of the Dewani in 1765A.D. (stewardship) by the English, there was a radical change in the land administration of Bengal. Yearly, ten-yearly and later on Permanent Settlement were introduced. As a result of this Permanent Settlement 1793A.D., Zamindars instead of Izara or contract got the ownership of land.³² Consequently the Zamindars from this time onward could enjoy a full fledged right over land.

As a result of adopting different principles by the English at different times, many former big Zamindaries (estates) partly or entirely lost their Zamindari and many new Zamindaries (estates) were created. Some small land lords inferior to those of Zamindars like *Talukdars*, *pattandars* (lease holders), *Dar pattanidars* (sub lease holders), *gantidars* (small sub lease holders) emerged and they were known as petty Zamindars of Bengal. As a result, within hundred years after the Permanent Settlement, as per information, the number of Zamindars increased to near about 1.5 lakh.³³

The Zamindaries of Rajshahi occupied an important place in the rise and gradual development of Zamindaris (estates) of Bengal. The Zamindari (estate) of Puthia was very old and later on at the time of ten-year settlement when the number of large Zamindaries (estates) was twelve, the place of Rajshahi Raj (Natore Raj) was the second and the place of Puthia Raj was the 9th..³⁴

Among the Zamindaris (estates) of Rajshahi, Dubalhati was the oldest one but it was not as large as those of Natore and Puthia. Most of the other small Zamindaries originated during the British period. It may be said that the Zamindars of Rajshahi had also an important role in the collection of revenue of Bengal.

Notes and references

A

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