

CHAPTER - IV

Commissioner's rule in Cooch Behar 1789-1800.

By the appointment of British Commissioner in Cooch Behar in 1789, Lord Cornwallis wanted to put an end to the long 'years of misrule' in the State. The State had been convulsed by the traditional rivalry of the Nazir Dev and the Dewan Dev. Also the role of the dowager-queen Kamateswari and that of the royal preceptor Sarbananda in this commotion were not negligible. However the Nazir Dev and the Dewan Dev, ignoring the welfare of the country wanted to enrich themselves by grabbing as much state property as they could lay hands upon and thus consolidate their own power in the State. Inevitably Cooch Behar presented a tragic picture produced by economic decadence and administrative corruption. The minority of the ruler (Harendra Narayan) was the occasion for this.

This unsettled state of affairs brought the British to the scene. Not that appeal had been made to the British on behalf of the minor king but the Company's Government, too was very much concerned for its own Share of Cooch Behar's revenue that had fallen in default on the plea of Civil disturbances in the state. The result was the enquiry team of John Mercer and Lewis Chauvets', appointed by the

(1)
Company's government. The Commissioners were directed to report on the pretensions of the rival parties, and on various other subjects connected with the State of the country. They were also asked to enquire into the mode in which British influence should be exercised for better management in future.

The Commissioners submitted their report on 10th December, 1788. In this report, among other matters the Commissioners recommended the appointment of a Commissioner or Resident at Cooch Behar for superintending the affairs of the State during the minority of Maharaja Harendra Narayan. (2) They also recommended that the Governor-General in Council should assume the temporary management of Cooch Behar, with a view to protect it from the ignorant and designing persons. The full management of the country was to be restored to the Raja as soon as he will attain maturity. The Commissioner's upheld the view that the Board of Control should exercise such control (3) over the Commissioner as they did over the resident at Benaras. On the recommendation of the team, Lord Cornwallis appointed a British Commissioner for Cooch Behar. It might be reasonably expected that after a long period of misrule Cooch Behar would enjoy the benefit of the British Commissioner's regime. From 1789 to 1800, Henry Douglas, C.A. Bruce, T. W. Smith and Richard Ahmuty were the successive Commissioners of Cooch Behar and they

1. Choudhury, H. N. op. cit., p. 251.

2. Ibid., p. 252.

3. Mercer and Chauvet's Report, Vol. II, p. 205.

occupied a vital position in controlling Cooch Behar's administration, particularly the revenue administration, during this period.

It may be noted in this connection that, the Commissioners - from Henry Douglas to Richard Ahmuty (1789 to 1800) were instructed by the authority about the administrative steps they followed in Cooch Behar. A series of letters were exchanged with the Governor General, the Secretary and the sub-Secretary to Government and the Commissioners from time to time. The Commissioners informed the Government of their day to day decisions with regard to the numerous problems of the State.

Before going into the detailed history of the Commissioner's regime in Cooch Behar, a review of the general economic condition of the State is essential to understand the situation in which the British Commissioner had to work. Whatever information regarding the material prosperity of the State could be obtained was mainly due to the efforts of British administrators placed in Cooch Behar since the late 18th century.⁽⁴⁾ The economy of the State rested on agriculture but nothing definite could be known about the system of land tenure, mode of assessment of Revenue, total quantity of land or its distribution till the British had made a probe into these.⁽⁵⁾ From

4. Choudhury, H. N., op. cit., p. 441.

5. Ibid.

very early times the lands were divided into two categories, (a) Revenue paying and (b) Rent free. Persons holding the first variety of land had to pay revenue to the state. The holders of rent free land, on the other hand, were private individuals who obtained such lands for special purposes and enjoyed them free of any charge as Debutter, Brahmatter, Lakheraj and Petbhata according to the purposes for which these were allotted. (6) Lands were also granted to persons for doing personal service to the State, and they were called Jaigirs.

(a) Debutter grants are lands given for the support of an idol, they can not be sold or alienated in any way. In Cooch Behar there are two kinds of such grants : (i) state Debutteras, or grants made to idols which are supported and looked after directly by the officers of the state, the necessary Pujas or acts of worship, being performed under the superintendence of the State Officers.

(b) Private Devotteras for instance a Brahman asks the reigning Raja for a Devotter grant to support his own idol.

(c) Brahmatter lands given to Brahmanas for their support; when made by a reigning Raja, such grants are hereditary and transferable.

6. Hunter, op.cit., Vol. x, p. 391.

(d) Lakherjaj-Lands allotted to persons for doing some praise-worthy work for the welfare of the state.

(e) Petbhata lands are rent free holdings, generally given by a Raja for the maintenance of their relatives during their lives. A Petbhata grant lapsed at the death of the original guarantee, and his heirs must apply to the Raja for a renewal.

Revenue paying lands were classified under Mal Debutter and Khangi. The first were available for State purposes; the Second was devoted to religious purposes; and the third was set apart for the maintenance of the King's household. (7)

Persons paying the charge on the land immediately to the State, or to the persons authorised to receive the same, were called the jotedars and formed the first grade in the tenancy of the country. (8) Originally these men were perhaps the cultivators of the soil and residents of the State, and the different grades of under-tenure did not probably exist. When Mr. Purling prepared the account of the Revenue of Cooch Behar in 1180 B.E. corresponding to 1774 A.D., he found that the Revenue payable by the rayat consisted of two parts, viz. assal or original rent

7. Hunter, W. W., op. cit., p. 391.

8. Tbid.

and abwab or additional cesses, which were consolidated into one. ⁽⁹⁾ There was, however, no fixation of rent and regular Pattas were not granted to the tenants. The settlement of land-revenue was made annually, but the land was never measured and assessed. ⁽¹⁰⁾ The system of collection and the mode of assessment were under no fixed rule. The condition of the country was very deplorable particularly due to the Chaos and dissensions before and after the first Anglo-Bhutanese war. The dishonesty and the greed of the State Officials further aggravated it. ⁽¹¹⁾ The royal palace was a hotbed of Villainy, conspiracy and debauchery. In the second half of the 18th century these influential state officials acquired illegal grants of Lakheraj and Petbhata lands. Taking the opportunity of Harendra Narayan's minority they acquired vast lands with the help of queen Kamateswari.

⁽¹²⁾ The rent-free lands were hereditary and transferable. There was also another category of rent-free lands called "Jaigir". This "Jaigir" did not connote the same meaning of Jaigir system of the remaining parts of Bengal. The Jaigirdars of Cooch Behar essentially belonged to labour class. They enjoyed the Jaigir land against their labour in the

9. C.B.S.R., Vol. 1, p. 47.

10. Ibid.

11. Choudhury, H. N., op. cit., pp. 441-43.

12. Todarmal, Bhumi, Rajasya O Jarip (In Bengali) - p. 70.

'Palace' (Rajbari). These Jaigir lands were not hereditary and transferable. These Jaigirdari system, in later years was converted into the 'Chakran' system which was prevalent in Bengal. (13) In Cooch Behar this Jaigirdari system was first introduced during the time of Maharaja Nara Narayan. In the later part of the 16th century, the king of Morang, presented some Morangi slaves to King Nara Narayan as a token of goodwill. (14) These slaves were given settlement to Kodalkheti, Bhogmara in the Pargana of Mathabhanga. They were allotted lands as Jaigir in exchange of their personal service in the Palace. If the jaigirdars became unable to work, his lands were forfeited. (15) With the passage of time these jaigir system was abolished in the second half of the 20th century.

We have already mentioned that Revenue paying lands were classified under Mal (Khalsa), Debettara and Khangi. Apart from these there were other classifications also such as Dewanbos, Khasbos and Baje Mahal. (16) Mal or Khalsa land means Government's land proper. The revenue collection of these lands was made by Dewan himself. About 2/3% of the total revenue was collected from the Khalsa. There was a peculiarity with regards to the Khangi lands. It appears that it was only in Cooch Behar that Khangi was officially applied to the demesne lands

13. Ibid.

14. Choudhury, H. N., op.cit., p. 546.

15. Todarmal, op. cit., p. 71.

16. Hunter, W. W., op. cit., pp. 428-30.

(17)
of the Raja. The follow lands which were converted into cultivable lands is called 'Dewanbos'. Dewan himself was in charge of these Mahals. Khasbos and Baje Mahal were the two branches of Khangī Mahal. (18)

Khangī Mahal was divided into three parts and was under the supervision of three different officers. Above them was the Chief Supervisor who also the Faujdari Ahilkar. The Revenue of the Khangī Mahal and this Revenue was allotted for Maharaja's personal expenditure. In the 1814 all the Khangī Mahals were incorporated with the Khalsa lands. But when Maharaja Harandra Narayan took charge of the administration in his own hand, the Khalsa and Khangī lands were again separated. This practice continued upto 1863.

The earliest information available about the land Revenue of Cooch Behar dates from 1773 when Purling, the Collector of Rangpur, prepared a hast-O-bud (Revenue Accounts) of Cooch Behar. The land Revenue was then realised in three parts appropriated respectfully to the Maharaja, the Nazir Dev and the Dewan Dev. The total hast-O-bud was Rs. 2,71,587 inclusive of Abwabs. Of these the share of the Maharaja was Rs. 1,51,031 and the share of Dewan Dev was Rs. 19,331. (19)

17. Ibid.

18. Todārmal, op. cit. p. 73.

19. Majumdar, Durgādās, C. B. Dist. Gazetters - p. 142.

Purling deducted Rs. 12,558 from this on account of collection charges, Jaagir, Brahmottar, Devottora etc. Half the net amount was of Rs. 199,120 i.e. Rs. 99,560 was determined as the tribute payable in Narayani Rupees. In 1777 this was converted into Rs. 72,207 Sicca Rs. (20)

Cooch Behar's tribute payable to the British by the treaty of 1773 was collected by the Collector of Rangpur. (21) Upto 1780 the tribute was realised by committing the total collections of the State to Sezwals or Teshildars appointed by British government. The collection was made twice from each jotedar, once by the East India Company's Sezwal for half the amount and a second time by the Revenue Collector of the Maharaja for the remaining half. (22) The amount of tribute was permanently fixed at Rs. 67,70000-15-0 in 1780 on the strength of Purling's Revenue accounts. (23) From the year 1780 to 1789 Izaradar Debi Singh appointed the Sezwals. Oppression which he committed on the ryots at the time of collection led to the outburst of the well-known 'Peasant Revolt' (1783) at Rangpur. (24) The ryots of Cooch Behar also were subjected to torture and extortion by Hararam Sen, one of the agents of Debi Singh. (25)

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Choudhury, H. N. Op. cit., p. 243.

24. Firminger, W. K., The District of Rangpur, p. 20.

Roy, Nikhilnath, Murshidabad Kahini (Bengali), p. 23

25. Ghosal, S. C., op. cit., p. 281.

The ruler of Cooch Behar was a helpless spectator and could not protest against this injustice upon his subjects; the King's own officers were also equally helpless. This was the year of the death of Maharaja Dhairjendra Narayan and accession of Harendra Narayan as a minor king, with queen Kamateswari as the guardian. Practically the stability and the strength of the state began to diminish after the return of Dhairjendra Narayan from Bhutan. There was none amongst his officials to run the administration properly. So Cooch Behar became too weak even to protest against the oppression committed by Debi Singh and his agents. In the year 1790, Douglas, the Commissioner of Cooch Behar reported to Cornwallis "Since that time of the Hastabood (Rev. Account) of Behar, made by Purling the tribute suffered a very considerable diminution owing principally to the mal-administration of the Raja's minister, who has not only himself been guilty of the greatest oppressions, but also connived at them in his dependants. Large portions of lands have been alienated, a variety of new taxes introduced, every species of abuse committed in the collection of Revenues, and the administration of justice has been perverted to the purpose of emolument"⁽²⁶⁾
⁽²⁷⁾
This oppression ultimately led many ryots to leave the country.

26. C.B.S.R., Vol. 1, pp. 28-32.

27. Ibid.

The officers of the Company also began a money-lending business in Cooch Behar. In 1784 A.D. Captain Duncanson lent Rs. 14,901 to the Maharaja and was apparently dissatisfied with a return of Rs. 21,000 after one year. The Company's sepoys also engaged themselves in the money-lending business and lent money to the peasants and charged a monthly interest of two to three annas in the rupee. They even used force to realise their dues. On account of these undesirable conditions many people left the country. To borrow money was to be ruined. Generally the rate of interest was not less than 72 per cent per annum. But there was no regulation about the rate of interest. But sometimes it exceeded all limitations and in many instances rose upto 360%.

Nearly all the Commerce of Cooch Behar was in the hands of the foreign merchants. They were chiefly of Marwaris from Bikanir, who had more energy and enterprise than the Koch Beharis. The chief export from the state were tobacco, jute, mustard seed, rice and mustard oil. The principal imports in the state were piece-goods, salt, brass and copper utensils,

28. Ghosal, S.C., op. cit., p. 280

In his letter dated the 21st August, 1788 A.D. Capt. Duncanson did not admit receiving this amount - Mercer and Chauvet's Report Vol. II, p. 74.

29. Munshi, Jayanath Ghosh, Rajopakhyan, Pratyaksha Khanda, Adhyaya-4.

30. C. B. S.R., Vol. I, p. 29.

○ Ghosh, Munshi Jayanath,

sugar, molasses, pulses of sorts, spices, coconuts, betel-nuts,
(31)
dried fish etc.

The tone of the society was that of medieval age. Usury was a thriving occupation and any one who could spare some money for investment had the chance of a lucrative return. Slavery was tolerated by the society and there was a regular slave trade. Poor people mortgaged or sold themselves as slaves. Their children were sold in the hats or bazars. (32) Every year, boys and girls from Cooch Behar and Assam were sent to various parts of Bengal for sale. About 100 of boys and girls were annually sold to Bengal. The price of a girl varied from Rs. 12 to Rs. 15. (33) But a Koch boy cost Rs. 25; a Kalita boy Rs. 50.

Children of the lower castes were sold to the Garos. Some were exported to Burma through Assam. People of the neighbouring Bhot or Garo tribe often abducted men and women from Mughal or Cooch Behar territory and made them slaves. (34)

At this time there was only one law court in Cooch Behar. There was no system of realising costs of proceedings. No register of cases was maintained. The Kotowal who was responsible for law and order in the country, had no judicial powers. There

31. Turner, S., Embassy to Tibet, p. 11.
32. Martin, M., Eastern India, Vol. III, p. 681.
33. Hunter - p. 398.
34. Ibid. Ghosal, S.C., op.cit., p. 279.

was no system of fixing dates of hearings. All paper regarding Revenue and finance were preserved. (35)

W. W. Hunter depicted a picture of general economic condition of Cooch Behar. He narrated that a well-to-do shop-keeper having 5 adult and 4 child members would meet the expenses of his family on Rs. 20/- per month. A well off husbandman would meet the expense of his family on Rs. 14/- having his own rice and fuel from forests. (36) The mean value of the produce of one Bigha of the first quality of land was Rs. 8.12 as and the worst quality of land was 5.4 as. So, a small farm of 15 bighas might be considered comfortable holding for a peasant. (37) Between the years 1797 to 1801, the price of paddy in Cooch Behar was 4½ mds. to the rupee. In the middle of the 19th century it was 2 mds to the rupee. (38) The picture of the contemporary Bengal Subah, (almost) during the same period, shows that in 1729, the prices of the necessaries of life in Murshidabad were: (a) bansephool fine rice - first sort 1 md, 10 seers a rupees; second sort 1 md. 23 seers a rupees, and third short 1 md., 35 seers a rupee. (39) In 1754 fine rice was sold in Calcutta at 32½ seers a rupee and coarse rice 40 seers. (40) In 1776 some articles of necessity

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35. Mercer and Chauvets Report, Vol. II, pp. 149-151.
36. Hunter, W. W., op. cit., p. 371.
37. Ibid., p. 465.
38. Chaudhury, H. W., op. cit., p. 190.
39. Datta, K. K., Bengal Subah, p. 463.
40. Ibid., p. 465.

were sold as : fine bausephool Rice - first sort 16 seers a rupee, second sort 18 seers a rupee and third sort 21 seers rupee. (41)

The economic degeneration of the Bengal Subah can be viewed not only by the oppressions of the Company's servants also and gomosthas but was a natural sequel to the general political disorders which had began many years before plassey. In Cooch Behar, the weakness of royal authority, want of strong governance in the country, conflicts amongst the elites for power, the oppression of the Revenue Collectors all these together led to its economic degradation very quickly. The material condition of the people was poor. Beveridge, the Deputy Commissioner, in his Report of 1865-67 points out that mal-administration and want of communication was mainly responsible for the degeneration in Cooch Behar. (42)

Under the circumstances the Commissioners were appointed in Cooch Behar. Henry Douglas was the first Commissioner of Cooch Behar. On the assumption of charge by Mr. Douglas, changes were introduced in every sphere of administration in the state. The Gossain, the Khasnobis all were deprived of their offices and services. Commissioner's seal was put on side by side with the Maharajas Seal. Separate seals were prepared for the criminal and Revenue Courts. The Maharaja's orders were carried out under the

41. Ibid., p. 473.

42. Choudhury, H. N., op.cit., pp. 296-98.
Annual Administrative Report - 1864-65, No. 73.

commissioner's signature. (43) After his arrival in Cooch Behar Douglas found the pitiable condition of the State. Unlimited power in the hands of Kamateswari and Sarbananda had paralysed the administration of the country. The whole of private lands of the Maharaja had been enjoyed by the Rani. (44) Very considerable grants of Jaigir and Brahmottar lands had been made since the death of Dhairjendra Narayan. The greater portion of the Nazir Dev's Petbhata lands which had been confiscated, has been divided between Kashikanta and Sarbananda. (45) The maintenance of law and order in the royal palace was among others, a tough and complicated problems for the commissioner.

Douglas entirely supplanted the authority of the Rani and her favourite Goswami. All the possessions of Maharani were confiscated and she was granted a monthly pension of 600 Narayani rupees. (46) With the appointment of Douglas as Commissioner, a regular law course of procedure was introduced in the administration of the State. He took his hand all the offices, whether judicial or Revenue of the State, superintended the proceedings of the courts, and influenced their decisions. He made quarterly returns to the Sadar Diwani Adalat and the Revenue Board of Calcutta, according to the different departments to which his work belonged. (47)

43. Choudhury, H. N., op. cit., p. 252.

44. Ibid., p. 253.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Hunter, W. W., op. cit., Vol. x, p. 420.

Besides these duties Douglas had to look after several other business of the state which was a hindrance to his smooth management of the administration. He was given the charge of the management of the Raja's estates at Rangpur. Nevertheless the sole charge of the District which was under the superintendence of the Resident at Goalpara was also transferred to Douglas. (48) This district, together with a few Zamindaries, were then in a very unsettled state; and they continued for a long time to distract the attention of the successive commissioners of Cooch Behar. (49)

The reform in the system of Land Revenue Administration engaged Douglas' first attention. When he took charge of his office, the condition of the exchequer was very deplorable. Douglas made a detailed report to the Governor General on the affairs of the country on the 19th May, 1790. He observed, "From the monthly accounts, which have been transmitted to your Lordship, will have been perceived the very impoverished State of the Cooch Behar Treasury : that the expenses have exceeded the revenue, and the deficiency has been obliged to be supplied by loans". (50)

According to the Must-O-bood of Purling in 1774 the annual Revenue of Cooch Behar exclusive of jaigir and private

48. Ibid., pp. 420-21.

49. Ibid.

50. C.E.S.R., Vol. I, p. 30.

lands was Rs. 1,99,120-3-0-15 (Narayani). Since that time mal-administration of the country by the Raja's minister and his dependents led to the exaction of various new taxes. Large portions of lands were alienated. The Ryots were oppressed severely. There was no justice in the law court. In the year 1195 i.e. 1789 the revenue including the whole of Nazir Deo and part of Dewan Deo's private lands amounted to Rs. 141-230-3-3 and next year came down to Rs. 119-946-11-16-1. (51) Douglas failed to get from the Raja's officers any authentic information relative to the state of Cooch Behar. (52) The interests of the Officers (of the Raja) were deeply involved in the matter and they tried their best to prevent any knowledge being acquired by the commissioner of the abuses which had so long prevailed in Cooch Behar. They injected in the minds of the common people the idea that the interference of the British Commissioner was of a short duration and henceforth any complaint to the commissioner would be fruitless. (53) Douglas, after his arrival in Cooch Behar as a Commissioner, noticed many abuses and irregularities with regards to the land Revenue Settlement (of Cooch Behar). There were too many taxes in the state. It was not the practice to fix rent. (54) No regular deed of agreement was given to the cultivators.

51. C.B.S.R., Vol. 1, pp. 29-32.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

* There were certain charges called Mufassil Khurcha which were not inserted in public accounts. This was as equal to one fifth part of the whole revenue. This will be in the next page.

1/3rd of the whole revenue was realised was consumed by those engaged in the collection Mufussil Khurtha* and not shown in public accounts. The ryots had to pay Nazzars and Salamis to the officials entrusted with the collection of Revenue and for this purpose as well as for clearing the arrears of rent, they had to borrow money at an exorbitant rate of interest. (55) Douglas came to know that quite a large portion of the lands had been in the possession of Sarbananda Goswami. The Maharani herself enjoyed the whole of the Raja's private lands, the revenue of which amounted to Rs. 15,883/- per year. (56) The high officers of the state also did not lag behind. All these were possible due to the infancy of the ruler.

Under these circumstances Douglas proposed some regular system for the future management of Cooch Behar. He suggested certain measures which were absolutely necessary at the time. He proposed that the different taxes which existed in Cooch Behar, should be consolidated into one sum, which will be a great relief to the ryots, as the ^{ryots} ~~ryots~~ will then know exactly what they would have to pay and less room will be left for extortion than if their rent consisted of so many distinct articles. Regular Pattas (deed of agreement) should be granted to the ryots

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

so that they would be confident of their position. Moreover every exaction beyond the amount of specified in them should be severely punished. Nazar and Salami granted to the Raja's officers should be abolished, as these officers had no right whatsoever to receive nazar and Salami, and if the ryots from Casalties of season should fall into arrears of rent, suspension should be granted to them. The rate of interest on borrowing should be fixed at 9% for each month and this in future if required also should be reduced. As very considerable grants of jaigir Brahmottar lands had been made, the possessor of them should produce their Sands^A and where the grant appears to be illegal, it should be resumed. (57)

With regard to the revenue of Boda, Patgram and Purbabhag to be paid to the Company, Douglas informed the Governor General that the revenue of the above mentioned chaklas for the year 1191 (1785) amounted to Arcot Rupees 1,74,734-14-6. (58)

However, the rent of these Chaklas had reduced in the following year. The Assal had been increased in these areas. Exclusive of charges the revenue of the above mentioned Chaklas for 1195 (1789) was Arcot Rupees 1,24,954-7-14-1. The produce of the Khas Mahals or confiscated lands (those of Nazir Deo excepted) in Cooch Behar was in Narainy Rupees 1,1009 in Boda, Arcot Rupees

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

7,769-14-6-2. From these statements Douglas gave an idea of the amount of the Revenues of Cooch Behar Raja for the year 1196 (59) (1790).

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|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Behar : Narainy Rs..... | 1,19,946-11-16-1 | |
| or | | |
| Sicca Rs. | 88,034-4-17-0 | |
| Boda + Sc - Arcot Rs..... | 1,06,085-7-14-1 | 1790 A.D. |
| or | | |
| Rs..... | 97,103-6-13-0 | |
| Khas mehals-Narainy Rs.... | 1,100-0-0-0 | |
| or | | |
| Arcot Rs. | 9,769-14-6-3 | |
| Total: | <u>1,94,887-12-2-0</u> | |

The proposal of Douglas was approved by the Government and from July 28, 1790 settlement work for Cooch Behar started. (60) The ryots were assessed at the same rate as that of the preceding year. The undue exactions upon them by the Raja's officers stopped. As a result, the production considerably increased and there was progressive improvement in the State. All the taxes were consolidated into one, and the servants of the Raja and farmers for the greater part of the country to whom the collection of Revenue had been formed for the year 1773 A.D. had to

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., pp. 43-44.

execute a muchelkas (bonds) to pay a penalty amounting to ten times the amount of illegal exactions made by them. (61) The rents of the private lands of the Raja as well as the rents of the Khas Mahal or confiscated land of Dangar Deo (Nazir Deo's aunt) were also increased. With Government's permission Douglas abolished the duties on several of the gunjes, hats and bazars in Cooch Behar whose vicinity to the Company's districts where no duties were collected, rendered such a measure absolutely necessary. This would also facilitate larger amount of trade between Cooch Behar and neighbouring districts of British India, which was restricted for the exaction of the duties. This disparity with regard to exaction of duties between Cooch Behar and the neighbouring districts hampered the trade-intercourse. Moreover, the people of Cooch Behar had to suffer a great loss. The amount of exemption was Narainy Rs. 1,083-15-7-1 and Douglas informed the Government that if occasion to extend this exemption further necessitate, the Government would be duly intimated. (62)

On July, 1791 Douglas put before Lord Cornwallis some proposals relative to the Settlement of Cooch Behar. (63) The Commissioner wanted the settlement to be concluded for a term of ten years, provided it should be thought proper to extend

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Douglas to Cornwallis, 1st July, 1791.
C.E.S.R., Vol. I, p. 45.

it beyond the expiration of the minority of the Rajah who was then eleven years of age. It was decided that the settlement was to be made at the same rate of assessment payable by each individual ryot as for the year 1197, when the assal, abooabs and curtesy (or different taxes bearing these names) were consolidated. The charges for collection payable by the ryots were to be fixed at a certain rate on the consolidated taxes in order to put a stop to any abuses in future. (64)

The country was divided into lots of one or more villages each and these were to be put up to auction. The system of holding the lands khas was very much disadvantageous. At there was twenty to thirty thousand ryots, it was not possible for the proprietor or his manager to be minutely acquainted with the circumstances of every individual. He had not the idea when to assist the honest and industrious husbandman and when to exact with regour his revenue from the Knavish ryot. (65) The ill-organised machinery of government could not prevent frauds or oppression. For, the officers had no interest in the improvements of the lands. (66) A general measurement of the country had never been made before. Each villages was divided into so many Challas or parcels of land bearing the name of the ryot

64. Ibid., p. 45.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

who first cultivated the land. But on the death of or relinquishment by any of the ryots his lands were encroached upon by neighbouring ryots which affects the Revenue of the state. The ryots were averse to re-measurement of their lands. So in order to prevent bad consequences Douglas wanted to proceed cautiously. Douglas' intention was to ascertain the quantity of land in the possession of the ryots and fixation without enhancing the rate of assessment per bigha. In Douglas' days these rates were Rs. 20 per 13 Bighas of first class land; Rs. 15 for the second class and Rs. 10 for the third class of land. (67) These proposals of Mr. Douglas with regards to the Revenue Settlement of Cooch Behar leads us to think that these ideas were not a new one. It was quite natural that as a service holder of the Company he had been largely influenced by the pattern of farming system of Bengal. Ifran Habib points out that in the eighteenth century, despite "administrative anarchy", "elements of the Mughal system of Revenue assessment still survived", which implied payment of revenue by the peasant on the basis of measurement of land. But in the Jaagir or assigned lands, even in the 17th century "many assignees found it simpler to farm out these assignment". (68) This system was known as ijara or Revenue farming. But Revenue farming gave rise to a class of bankers and speculators who invested their money in it and emerged as intermediaries distinct from

67. Choudhury, H. N. op. cit., p. 444.

68. Prasad, Bisweswar, Bondage and Freedom, Vol. I, p. 300.

that of hereditary zamindars (Absentee landlord). Thus developed a class of intermediaries between the state and the peasant. These middle agencies ranged from the village headman who contracted for payment of revenue on behalf of his community fixing the individual contribution by agreement or measurement, to a big zaminder or Revenue farmer. In Bengal by the middle of the century, the existence of such a class of intermediaries seems to have been well-established:

The basis of collection was generally one half of the produce but a large number of abwabs or cesses had cumulatively enhanced the burden of the peasants.

When Warren Hastings assumed the office of the Governor of Fort William, he plunged himself into the task of reorganising revenue administration. The settlement made in 1772 was based on two ideas; one was the "letting of the revenue in farm and the second one at a latter stage was the Settlement with the established Zamindars and Talukdars, on condition similar to those required from the farmers". The assessment was graduated to rise in five years. (69)

As we know that though Cooch Behar was a separate native state, it is geographically contiguous to the rest of Bengal. So Bouglas had an intention to introduce a uniform

69. Ibid.

system of Revenue collection pattern in this region also.

Douglas introduced the Ijaradari system in land revenue Settlement of Cooch Behar. In fact it was a necessity at the time of ensure collection of Revenue since organisation for and close supervision of revenue collection was not very easy under the loose form of Government of those days. The settlements were made annually. Before (Douglas') arrival the revenue of Cooch Behar appears to have been collected by the State officers under the name of Sazwals. As the country was extensive and the number of jotedars was large, the amlas could not be controlled properly and the consequences was much oppression on the ryots. Douglas let out the jotesin Ijaras or farms to persons in convenient lots, and made them responsible for the state revenue. (70) Under this system, the profits of the Ijaradars was that they used to collect from the ryots two charges called Ijaradari and Saranjami, each forming one twelfth, and the two together one sixth, part of the rent payable by the Ryots. (71)

The Ijaradari system, however, on which Mr. Douglas had placed so much faith as a suitable settlement for Cooch Behar, eventually proved to be unsuccessful and gave rise to greater abuses (which was not possible under the Khas collection system). The defect of the system was due to the loose

70. Choudhury, H. N., op. cit., 254.

71. Ibid., p. 444.

administrative organisation of the State. Moreover, any attempt at curing and reforming any particular drawback without going to the source of evil could not but be fruitless. (72)

Richard Ahmuty, another Commissioner, commented in 1798 that the system appeared to have been ill-calculated for the happiness of the people and permanent prosperity of the country. He was of opinion that the system adopted by Douglas was the mode to obtain the highest possible revenue for a short period. He observed "Exclusive of the loss sustained by the proprietor, the actual cultivators of the soil have suffered considerably from the lands being let at a rack - rent to individuals, many of whom could have no interest in their welfare and who availed themselves of every opportunity of extorting from them as much as possible. Consequently, whole villages deserted and retired into the adjacent districts of Rungpore, and Dinajpur, where they found greater security and encouragement of their labour." (73) In fact, the defects of the Ijaradari system was that it resulted in the degeneration of both the soil and the farmers. For, the tenure of the Ijaradars being of a limited duration, they tried to extract as much as possible out of the poor ryots, without spending a single pie on the improvement of the soil. The State meticulously realised the revenue from the Ijaradars but the con-

72. Ibid., p. 445.

73. Ahmuty to Charles Buller, Sub-Secretary to the Board of Revenue, C.B.S.R., Vol. I, p. 47, par II.

dition of the ryot continued to deteriorate owing to oppression. The system was subversive of any healthy village organisation. The "Ijaradar was a parasite on both the state and the ryot"⁽⁷⁴⁾.

The principal officers of the state used to take out the farms of mehals and could thus easily make exactions from the ryots. Even in the letting out of the mehals they were guided by their self-interests and got the farms on easy terms to the detriment of the interest of the state. These men rented the taluks of the state, and lands under them were much underrated. The deficiency caused by this process was sought to be made up by over-assessing such mehals as were farmed by the jotedars and natives of the country.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Mr. Beckett, in his completion report on the settlement of Pargana Mekhliganj mentioned that "The Ijaras, instead of being Geographically defined were composed of Jotes scattered all over the state. An Ijaradar could not himself tell where the jotes that made up his Ijara were situated; he only knew the names of the jotedars from whom he had to collect rent." There was no registers of Lakheraj holdings or of any thing else.⁽⁷⁶⁾

The evils of this system were recapitulated by Mr.

74. Journal of Indian History, Diamond Jubilee Volume, pp. 107-119.

75. Choudhury, H. N., *op. cit.*, p. 446.

76. Beckett - Land Revenue Settlement of Cooch Behar, p. 52.

Smith, the Deputy Commissioner in the Administrative report of the State. ⁽⁷⁷⁾ As the report went, "The lands of the state are mostly let in farm, the farms being taken by the ladies of the palace the Amlas, and the friends and relatives of the Amlas etc. As the Amlas did not settle in the Raja's territory, a great portion of the farmers namely those who are retired Amla and Amla's relatives are absentees, and a great portion of those who are residents in the country remits their profits to their houses in British zillas. Owing to this cause and the practice of sub-letting, the profits of the farmers make scarcely any show and the country is devoid of any class corresponding to the zamindars, Talukdars etc. of British districts".

Another evil that grew up under this system was the extensive sub-infeudation. It is not known from what period the ~~under~~-tenures, known as Chukanies, Dar-Chukanies and so forth had their origin. It is probable that some of them at least existed in the pre-Ijaradari times. But it is also a fact that oppressions and undue influence exercised by these official farmers degraded many jotedaras into Chukanidars with a corresponding lowering of the status of the undertenants below the jotedaras ⁽⁷⁸⁾

After Douglas C.A. Bruce became the Commissioner of

77. Administrative Report of Cooch Behar - 1866-67.

Choudhury, N.N. op. cit.

78. Ibid., p. 447.

Cooch Behar. The Government acquainted Bruce about all the papers with regard to the Revenue Settlement. The Government also gave option to Bruce to continue the previous settlement or to adopt any other plan different from that suggested by the previous commissioner. (79) Bruce intimated the government that before him the revenues had been assessed "by giving the villages to the highest bidders on the best security", which increased the collection. But the mode had one defect. These villages were let by the Sudder farmers. to others who let them again and the intermediate 'agents lived upon the people to the detriment of the revenues.' (80) Bruce did not desire the system to continue. He put forward certain proposals to remedy the evils. He would introduce his reforms first in Boda, Patgram and Purbahag, the areas that were held in farm by Cooch Behar from the British. Accordingly, every village therein should be distinctly farmed by the Pradhan or the head-ryot of the village; that the ryots should pay the expense of the village Patwaries and other established charges that the Pradhan should take engagements for one year from the Commissioner and pay the revenue in instalments calculated on their crops. This system chalked out by Bruce was calculated to produce benefits both for the ryot and the government. Expense of the collection of revenues through Pradhan

79. Select Records, Vol. I, pp. 74-75.

Letter from G.H. Barlow to the Commissioner of Cooch Behar.

80. Ibid., p. 75.

would be less than that incurred presently through Teshildars or Sezvals. By these measures, Bruce thought that the exorbitant interest on money in Cooch Behar would fall. There would be little scope for undue influence on the ryots. The Commissioner imagined that "any deduction by losses from the calamities of the season could be exactly proportioned to each village that the Raja might raise his revenues in as much as the intermediate agents received for themselves, and that if the Rajah gave up the difference, the revenues would stand just as they were."⁽⁸¹⁾ In early October of 1795, the Government desired Commissioner W.T. Smith, who came to Cooch Behar as Bruce's successor to follow the recommendations of Bruce.⁽⁸²⁾ The Government, at the same time was anxious for settlement of lands by granting Pattas to ryots. But the government did not think it advisable to make a general measurement of lands "unless it was absolutely necessary in special cases."⁽⁸³⁾ In the meantime⁽⁸⁴⁾ the government received a letter from Harendra Narayan then a lad of 14 years only. Harendra Narayan possibly on pressure from Sarbananda Goswami wrote that Sarbananda was the guru of the royal family. From the days of his father the Guru enjoyed

81. Ibid., pp. 75-76.

82. Ibid., p. 76.

83. Letter to W. T. Smith, 15th July, 1796.

84. Ibid., p. 72.

a daily salami of Rs. 2/- as well as "a contribution of a rupee and a half levied upon every house within his Raj". Both the sources of the Guru's income were closed by orders of the Government. Harendra Narayan prayed for the reopening of the sources. The government turned down the claims of Guru Sarbananda Goswami. (85)

After Smith, Ahmuty took charge of the state in 1797 and continued the new system. During his time the revenue of the state increased to Narayani Rs. 2,23-647 and there was even an accumulation in promissory notes worth Rs. 69,638. (86) The system adopted upto the year 1796 was the mode to obtain the highest possible revenue for a short period without any regard for the happiness of the people and the permanent prosperity of the country. (87) A difference of Rupees 70,000/- was noticed in the Junmah of the year 1201 B.S. (1796 A.D.) upon this, Ahmuty considered a further increase of assessment, as impolitic. That would oblige the ryots to quit their lands. (88) More than 1/3 of the country was in waste. Ahmuty encouraged ryots to break new grounds and bring more areas under the plough and got a good response from the cultivators. Many new ryots had taken Pattas for lands of this description. Consequently a large portion of land, situated on the banks of the Teesta had been cultivated. Only

85. Ibid., Letter to W. T. Smith, p. 74.

86. Ibid., pp. 46-49.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

Mekhligung, which was rented the preceding year at 141 Rupees, had been let at 1,500 rupees during the year 1798 A.D. As there was no system of measurement of holdings, Ahmuty directed the lands to be measured wherever practicable, and granted pattas to the ryots for their holdings. ⁽⁸⁹⁾ As the annual settlement of revenue was not working well, Ahmuty raised the term to at least for five years. Then, he for the first time in the history of land revenue settlement, introduced a proper register of the lands. ⁽⁹⁰⁾ "In the meantime there was a decision of the Governor-General to reduce as far as practicable the establishment of Tehshildary in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Because the establishment did not benefit the Government. Accordingly a letter was sent to Ahmuty, Commissioner of Cooch Behar, on 21st June, 1799, telling him to make every proprietor or farmer of land living within 20 miles of the collector's office, or every proprietor or farmer paying Rs. 5,000/- or above pay at the Collector's office. Revenue payer, living beyond that ~~distance~~ or liable to pay less, might however, be permitted to pay to the Teshildar as before. ⁽⁹¹⁾ This letter of the Revenue Department proves that the Government wanted to set up a uniform pattern of Revenue collection system in Cooch Behar also

The reforming hands of Ahmuty largely benefited

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. Revenue Deptt.'s letter to Ahmuty, Cooch Behar Select Records, Vol. I, pp. 129-30.

Cooch Behar, and when he left the state in 1801, he had increased the revenue of the state to Rupees 2,33,771, besides an accumulated reserve in promissory notes worth Rs. 79,565. ⁽⁹²⁾ An abstract of the Jumma of the several years since Mr. Douglas took charge of the office as a Commissioner to the time of Richard Ahmuty would give a clear picture of this.

| Year | Rs. (Jumma) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1789 A.D. - 1195 B.S. - 1790 A.D. | - 1,28,534 |
| 1790 A.D. - 1196 B.S. - 1791 A.D. | - 1,26,391 |
| 1791 A.D. - 1197 B.S. - 1792 A.D. | - 1,58,562 |
| 1792 A.D. - 1198 B.S. - 1793 A.D. | - 1,92,990 |
| 1793 A.D. - 1199 B.S. - 1794 A.D. | - 2,34,917 |
| 1794 A.D. - 1200 B.S. - 1795 A.D. | - 2,56,967 |
| 1795 A.D. - 1201 B.S. - 1796 A.D. | - 2,64,187 |
| 1796 A.D. - 1202 B.S. - 1797 A.D. | - 1,94,778 |
| 1797 A.D. - 1203 B.S. - 1798 A.D. | - 2,23,647 |
| 1798 A.D. - 1204 B.S. - 1799 A.D. | - 2,27,261 |
| 1799 A.D. - 1205 B.S. - 1800 A.D. | - 2,33,771 (93) |

However, during the twelve years for which British Commissioners were posted in Cooch Behar, no remarkable improvement was visible in any sphere other than that of revenue

92. Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 46-49.

93. C.B.S.R., Vol. 1, p. 48.

administration. So, the condition of Cooch Behar remained as it was before the advent of British Commissioners. There was no doubt that the main concern of the British Government was to increase the amount of the total revenue of the state - so as to ensure regular payment of British government's tribute. From Henry Douglas to Richard Ahmuty the constant endeavour was towards the betterment of the revenue administration only. The British Officers never tried to eradicate the maladies in other spheres of the state or society. No remarkable change was visible in the administration of justice. Justice was dispensed by the Raja or his minister in primitive fashion. Douglas had taken administration of civil and criminal justice into his own hands. The court of the Dewani Ahilkar and that of the Faujdari Ahilkar had been constituted in imitation of the Muffusil courts of the East India Company. Hindu law was applied to in both civil and criminal cases. (94) Though civil and criminal justice was comparatively neglected by the Commissioners, their attention was not so serious in this respect as was with regards to land Revenue administration.

But the pay of all the officers was on a wretchedly small scale. In the case of judicial establishments, the officers had to pay themselves and bear the expenses of their establishments out of the collections of their courts. (95) The

94. Choudhury, H. N., op.cit. p. 303.

95. Ibid., p. 297.

only way in which an officer could honestly live was by holding three or four different offices. The Maharajas, too, appointed the nominal charge of an office. The pay of some very important offices was ridiculously low. There were several instances of pluralities of appointments. The number of offices was unduly large. Naturally, under the above circumstances and abuse and corruption were rampant in every branch of administration and instances of even the officers took ^{illegal} undue gratification were not uncommon. (96)

The state of the finances was also in a deplorable condition. There was no control over the receipts and expenditure of the different departments, which made their own collections and disbursements and only remitted the surplus to what was called the 'Majudut'. There was no system of framing budgets of revenue and expenditure. The receipts and disbursements were without proper control. Though there was an Account office in name, the accounts were kept in loose manner and were not properly checked. (97)

So a thorough reform in every sphere of administration was the need of the time which the Commissioners had failed to undertake. It was true that the Commissioner did not get proper information about the real sufferings of the people. We have already noted that Douglas regretted about peoples' non-cooperative attitude towards them. So, even if the commissioner had real intention for removing the existing maladies, that was not

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid., p. 411.

possible. A thorough reform of the state to be undertaken by British officers was not the policy of the British government either.

Under a weak and corrupt system of native administration, and owing to the want of proper arrangement for the suppression of crimes and maintenance of peace, the material prosperity of the people of Cooch Behar was at a low-ebb, notwithstanding its excellent natural resources. Absence of suitable means of communication kept the farmer and his produce confined within a limited market, and the products of agriculture fetched a fabulously low price. In short, Cooch Behar was far behind the British districts of Bengal in all respects.
