

Introduction

It is said that by the year 1790, a dozen of zamindar families emerged in Bengal and used to control more than half of the landed properties of Bengal.¹ Among these families the Zamindars of Rajshahi comprising of Puthia, Natore, Dighapatia, Taherpur, Dubalhati, Chaugram and so on played an important role in the economic life of Bengal. According to some the Rajshahi Raj (Natore) has been considered a single unit and has been taken to be the second largest - the first being the Burdwan Raj of Bengal.² It is something interesting that most of the Zamindars of Rajshahi assumed titles like '*Raja*', '*Maharaja*', '*Ray-Bahadur*', '*Khan-Chaudhury*', etc. and in some cases a few outstanding spouses of these Zamindars adopted the titles of '*Rani*' and '*Maharani*'. It is interesting to note that most of the available documents mention the Families of Zamindaris as '*Raj*', which seems to stand for zamindar. Thus, it may be noted that although the heads of these estates of Rajshahi were Zamindars they were never enjoying the status and dignity of a king or emperor in usual terms. Naturally the estates were simply Zamindaris and not '*Raj*' in any sense. In the present study all these terms have been used in the light of above explanation and meaning.

The Zamindars as a class played a significant role in Indian history right from the medieval time down to the British and even today, it is a fact that the surplus of agricultural production exacted from the peasants was being distributed among the Emperor, his nobles and the Zamindars, by virtue of their rights and position and they could also exercise unlimited power over agricultural products, trade and in some economic transactions although according to S.Narul Hassan, there was a continuous clash of interest between the zamindars and the Mughal Govt., for a greater share of produce, the two were virtually partners of economic exploitation.³ The situation of Rajshahi in terms of the origin and functions of the Zamindaris are

not different and in course of our study there would be an attempt to highlight the points in the light of the observation of S.Nurul Hassan.

As it is known that the zamindar has had a role in the management of land,⁴ the word '*zamindar*' is in fact, derived from a Persian word '*zamindar*' which stands for owner of land or '*zamin*'. But the status of a zamindar varied from time to time and for example, during the Mughals, they were not owners of land as like as Collectors of Revenue and accordingly they were simply caretakers and not absolute owners of land.⁵ It was customary that the zamindars would continue that position as long as the required land-revenues were paid to the state without fail. In addition to this custody they were also entrusted to look after local administration vis-a-vis law and order of his jurisdiction.⁶ Fact remains that this position of the zamindars began to change with the experiments of administrative setup under Murshid Kuli Khan with the beginning of 18th century.

As it has been stated above like other parts of Bengal, the zamindars of Rajshahi had a significant role in the economic transformation of Bengal under consideration. The history of the zamindars of Rajshahi is so fascinating that it links up the history of the Zamindari system introduced by the Mughals and blossomed during the British period. But unfortunately, very little attention has been given by the historians to explore a comprehensive study on them. There are, however, some stray references as to rise and fall of these zamindar families but unfortunately historians are silent about many facets of their interesting role they played in contemporary Bengal. For example, while we come across the history and various activities of the Natore Raj, Puthia Raj or that of Dighapatia, we find hardly any exhaustive account of the Dubalhati family in the historical works of the region. Over and above many of the issues like the interaction with the British and its consequences have neither been dealt with by the historians, nor even they have highlighted the internal crisis as well as the external forces which led to the ultimate extinction of these families.

Under such a position the present study is a humble attempt to explore some of the hitherto untouched aspects of the history of the zamindars of Rajshahi and how they played a significant role in the contemporary socioeconomic and political life of undivided Bengal and thereafter. In this study special attention has been taken to analyse the primary and secondary sources which have not been properly dealt by the scholars so far. The present work is, therefore, intended to embody the results of an intensive study of the rise of the zamindars in different pockets of the region namely, Puthia, Natore, Dighapatia etc. and side by side steps have been taken to highlight issues like zamindar-tenant relation and the forces that led to a the decline and fall of the zamindar families of Rajshahi. It may be noted that all the zamindar families were not rooted out at a time rather certain circumstances made them extinct and they ultimately became nonentity in the history of contemporary Bengal. It is a fact that the history of Rajshahi and the region proper as a whole have been reflected in various documents of both medieval age and British period. There are documents like Murshidabad Factory Records, Board of Revenue Proceedings, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue in Calcutta, original minutes of the council of Fort William, Parliamentary Papers and so on which highlight the importance of the place and certain events and incidents centering the personalities of the families concerned. Apart from these sources, there are certain medieval document which equally highlight as corroborative source materials of the families of Rajshahi zamindars. A few Gazetteers and Journals published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Royal Asiatic society, Bengali : Past and Present, annual Reports of Rajshahi College, William Adam's Report on State of education in Bengal, 1835- 1838 which supply as many interesting additional information for our study. These documents are very much supplemented by a huge number of letters and correspondences made by the zamindars and their spouse, (*Ranis and Maharanis*).

Besides the sources mentioned above other materials which are generally considered to be pioneer but important works are :

- a) A. K. Moitra (Maitreya), *Short History of Natore Raj*, Natore, 1912.
- b) Abdur Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Karachi, 1967.
- c) Shirin Aktar, *Role of the Zamindars in Bengal, 1707-1772*, Dacca, 1982.
- d) Chitta Panda, *The decline of the Bengal Zamindars, Midnapur, 1870-1920*, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- e) Sirajul Islam, *Permanent Settlement in Bengal – A Study of its Operation (1790-1819)*, Dacca, 1979.
- f) S. A. Akanda, *The District of Rajshahi : Its Past and Present*, Rajshahi University, 1983.
- g) A.B.M. Mahmood, *The Revenue Administration of Bengal (1765-1793)*, Dacca, 1970.
- h) Kazi Muhammad Meser, *Rajshahir Itihas*, (Bengali), vols. I and II, Bogra, 1965.
- i) Kalinath Choudhury, *Rajshahir Sankhipta Itihas* (Bengali), Calcutta, 1308B.S.

The number of such works may be multiplied but facts remains that most of these works are basically dissected to enlighten political events if not other important sights of the history of the Zamindaris under consideration.

With the above sources and documents we have tried to embark upon the present study of *Rajshahi zamindars – A Historical Profile in the Colonial Period (1765-1947)*. The present work consists of several chapters. The **Introduction** has been followed by a chapter named as **Historical Background** dealing with the physical features and location of Rajshahi which is intended to identify the place and people

of the region. Here an attempt has been made to trace in short some of the up-to-date historical information of the region in question. A section of this chapter is also devoted to highlight some relevant points as to the origin and rise of the Zamindars of Bengal nay India with special reference to Rajshahi.

The second chapter is captioned as **The Puthia Zamindari - Its Origin and Growth** which is said to have had its origin during the Mughals.⁷ From the available information we are reported that one pious Brahmin named Batsacharyya was the founder of this Estate.⁸ It is said that the members of this family had the opportunity to rule the zamindari from the beginning to the end. It may be noted that this zamindari came to the limelight of history by the achievements of Rani Sarat Sundari Devi and Rani Hemanta Kumari Devi who are said to have taken interest not only in the management of zamindari affairs but also devoted in various humanitarian works. The details of these works as well as the crises of the zamindari have been dealt with the relevant chapter of this dissertation.

The history of the Natore Raj family entitled as **The Natore Raj - Its Rise, Stability and Estate Management** has been put in the third chapter of the dissertation. The founder of this family was Kamdev Moitra (Maitreya) who was a *Tahshildar* under the Puthia Raj⁹ Later on, his son Raghunandan and Ramjiban were employed as lower officials under Raja Darpa Narayan of Puthia. It is said that by virtue of some human qualities Raghunandan enjoyed the favour of Darpanarayan and accordingly, being educated under the care of Raja Darpanarayan he was educated and got service in the Royal Office. Both these two brothers were recognized for their efficiency and in no time they were promoted to higher posts. It is also noteworthy that once, Raghunandan was appointed a lawyer on behalf of Puthia Raj in the Court of the Nawab of Dhaka.¹⁰

Raghuandan took lease of properties in the name of his brother Ramjiban. At that time when Raja Sitaram Ray of Jessore revolted sometime in 1714, Nawab of Murshidabad sent huge soldiers to suppress this rebel and when it was successfully done Raghuandan had an opportunity to command over the situation and since he was favoured by Diwan Dayaram of Natore (Dighapatia), he managed to receive the zamindari of Jessore in the name of his brother Ramjiban and nephew Kalikaprasad.¹¹ Within a short time Raghuandan managed some other Zamindaris as bases and these were the defaulters of Revenue payments.¹² In fact, the Natore Raj was founded by Ramjiban during the reign of Murshid Kuli Khan.¹³ The Natore Raj became famous during 'Rani Bhavani' when she could rule over Dinajpur, Bogra, Pabna, Kusthia, Jessore, Rangpur, Murshidabad, Birbhum and Malda (the last three districts are now in India). Many eventful incidents had taken place during the regime of Rani Bhavani and for her extraordinary sympathy for her subjects during the famine of 1770, she was called '*Annapurna Devi*'.¹⁴ She had many interaction with the East India Company and as such the contemporary history suggests that this noble lady had to pass her last days miserably.

The Dighapatia Raj which is the fourth chapter of the thesis has been presented here as **The Dighapatia Estate - A Historical Reconstruction of the Zamindari** is intended to discuss a comprehensive history and activities of this family. It deals with the details of the Raj and it has been seen that one Dayaram, the Dewan of Natore Raj was the founder of this Estate, and being a clever man of that time he managed to receive a few pieces of landed property of deceased Sitaram Ray and Natore Raj.¹⁵ From the available sources it appears that the members of Dayaram's family were much enlightened and their achievements have been reflected by their efforts to establish Rajshahi Association in 1872 and Varendra Research Museum in 1912. The present chapter also highlighted the achievements of the Zamindars of this family in terms of economic development namely agriculture, sugar mills and agricultural forms.

The fifth chapter entitled as **The Minor Zamindars of Rajshahi** is dedicated to carveout the history of a few minor Zamindars of Rajshahi. Among these, the family of Chougram, Karachmaria, Bishi Zamindar family of Joari, Balihar, Taherpur, Darikushi Zamindar family and so on have been taken into account. It may be noted that all these Zamindars were insignificant in comparison with the others, but attempt have been made here to focus the multifarious activities and events of these families.

The social character of the Rajshahi zamindars is one of the key points analysed in the sixth chapter of the dissertation. The main caption of the chapter is **Social Identity of the Zamindars of Rajshahi** which has been souht to analyse from two angles namely, **A. Social and Ethnic Composition of the Zamindars** and **B. Socio-Political Tensions and the Zamindars of Rajshahi** during the period under consideration.

The Zamindar- Tenant Relations have become the main theme of the chapter seven of the thesis. Here attempts have been made to present the condition of the tenants that prevailed under the respective zamindars.

The Zamindars of Rajshahi and the British Raj have been thoroughly discussed in eighth chapter of the dissertation. This has been judged from two stand points namely, the Condition of Zamindars and their interaction with the British in the pre-permanent settlement period, and the same issues that prevailed during the post-permanent settlement days.

The ninth chapter entitled as **Crises of the Zamindari Estates of Rajshahi - Decline** is to examine some fundamental issues which generated crises within the Zamindaris under consideration and effected the future of these Zamindar families. All these factors infact led to the ultimate extinction of the Zamindaris of Rajshahi. It is a fact that there were certain specific issues like over assessment, mismanagement, intrigue, *benami* purchases, and so on, which expedited the fall

of the Zamindaris of Rajshahi. There was, however, a factor like the policy of the British Government which equally intensified the crises of the Zamindaris and hastened the decline in the long run. The whole chapter is devoted to present an analytical explanation of the circumstances that sounded the collapse of the Zamindaris of Rajshahi.

A few Appendices form another interesting feature of the present work. Here attention has been made to present a few maps of Rajshahi, name of the founder, caste and location of the Zamindaris and also a genealogical list of the Zamindars of Rajshahi.

It may be noted that the main focus of the dissertation is to examine and analyse the Zamindaris of Rajshahi. Though the period of the investigation has been fixed up from the beginning of the '*Dewani*' (1765) of Bengal, some of the issues have been focused here before and after the specified period in order to have a clear idea of the tradition that had prevailed during the time of our study. In fact, the emergence of the Zamindaris of Rajshahi region can be traced from the time of the Mughals and a few of them like those of Natore and a few others came to the limelight of history during Murshid Kuli Khan, the Nawab of Bengal. Almost all these Zamindaris had some identities of their own but in course of time they had to face many problems and because of the change of the political scene of India i.e. coming of the British, they became victims of numerous crises which virtually the future of these families. An interesting point of the dissertation is to present a clear picture of a comprehensive history of these Zamindaris and the method they adopted independently or under pressure which in the long run intensified the crises that erupted only to be extinguished finally at a certain circumstances.

Notes and references

1. Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal – A Study of its Operation 1790-1819*, Dacca, 1979, p. 3.
2. *Loc.cit.*
3. *Zamindars Under the Mughals*, an article by S. Nurul Hassan in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* ed. by Robert Eric Frykenberg, New Delhi 1976, p.17
4. Mount Stuart Elphinstone, *History of India*, London 1889, p. 85; Irfan Habib , *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, London 1963, p.184; Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindar in Bengal*, Dacca 1982, p. 3; Anil Chandra Banerjee, *The Agrarian System in Bengal*, vol.1, Calcutta 1981, p. 16.
5. Bamacharan Majumdar, *Banglar Zamindar*, Calcutta,1320. pp. 34-35.
6. Anil Chandra Banerjee, *op.cit.* p.18.
7. Moksudur Rahman, *Natoreer Maharani Bhavani*, Rajshahi, 1988, p. 98
8. K.C. Mitra, *The Rajas of Rajshahi*, Calcutta Review, Vol. 56, Calcutta :1873, p.3; Kazi Muhammad Meser, *Rajshahir Itihas*, vol.2, Bogra, 1965,p.269
9. Moksudur Rahman, *op.cit.*, p.10, also, A.K.Moitra (Maitreya), *A Short History of Natore Raj*, Natore, 1912, p.1.
10. Kalinath Choudhury, *Rajshahir Sankshipta Itihas*, Calcutta 1308 (B.S), p.147
11. For details Moksudur Rahman, *op.cit.* pp.28-29 and also, M. Inamul Haque, *Bengal Towards the Close of Aurangzeb's Reign*, Dhaka, 1994, pp.75-81.
12. Kalinath Choudhury, *op.cit.* p.150.
13. Anil Chandra Banerjee, *op.cit.* pp.50-51; *The Rise of the Hindu Aristocracy Under the Bengal Nawabs*, an article by A.Rahim in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, vol. 4, Dacca, 1961, p. 107.
14. Moksudur Rahman, *op.cit.* p.179.
15. K.C.Mitra , *op.cit.* p.8.