

**Ecology, Infrastructure and Institutions in Bengal: A Study  
of an Eighteenth Century Regional Economy**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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### DECLARATION

I, Baijayanti Chatterjee, hereby declare that the thesis titled "*Ecology, Infrastructure and Institutions in Bengal: A Study of an Eighteenth Century Regional Economy*" submitted by me to the Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD.) of this University has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University and is my original work.

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### CERTIFICATE

It is hereby recommended that this thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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‘A drop of water and everything came to life in the heart of the land.’

- Fernand Braudel

Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800

## **Introduction**

### **Scope of the Work:**

This study aims to add the ecological dimension to the history of eighteenth century Bengal and also looks at human-environment relation and interaction through the medium of the state and its infrastructure and institutions in the context of eighteenth century Bengal. Agricultural production, transport, trade and commerce were in the Bengal province determined largely by the peculiar fluvial ecology of the region. The well-known economic prosperity of Bengal was a result of the fact that the land was intersected by many rivers that deposited silt and made the region one of the most fertile regions of the world. The rivers also aided the movement of people and goods and thereby facilitated trade and commerce. Towards the middle of the century a transition in political authority occurred as the English East Company replaced the Nizamat as the sovereign power within the Province. The Nizamat and later the Company created institutions and built up an infrastructure to cater to the needs of the state keeping in mind the peculiar fluvial ecology of Bengal. It was through these institutions and infrastructure that the state interacted with the environment and attempted to manage and control it. A control over institutions and infrastructure was also crucial for effective administration and hence a change of regime meant a change in institutional and infrastructural control and the way the State interacted with the environment in attempting to control and manage it. This interaction between ecology on the one hand and the State and its institutions on the other forms the subject matter of this study. The ecological dimension to the history of eighteenth century Bengal has been inadequately emphasized in current historiography and this study attempts to fill this lacuna.

### **Environmental History in the Indian Context**

Globally, the study of environmental history has been gaining momentum over the years as historians attempt to understand and evaluate the nature of human impact over the environment and vice-versa. In the U.S. the study of

environmental history emerged ‘in the wake of modern environmental movement’<sup>1</sup> while in France it developed as a result of ‘the close relationship between history and geography in that country.’ The works of the leading French historians particularly belonging to the Annales School clearly demonstrate the close link between history and geography.<sup>2</sup> Ramchandra Guha points out that the writing of environmental history in India has been influenced by both the American and the French experience so that some work on environmental history has emerged as a result of environmental movements (for instance ‘the on-going conflicts over large dams have prompted critical analyses of large irrigation systems as well as ethnohistorical studies of small-scale indigenous systems of water management’) while following the French tradition historians working on agrarian history have underscored the importance of the ecological setting – climate, soil types – in causing changes in the agricultural economy. Guha argues that environmental history ‘for its further development should not be justified in ideological terms (that is, as helping to bring about a more just and environmentally benign society) but rather as constituting a major expansion of the intellectual horizons of history.’ Generally the historian analyses history in terms of a four- fold division of society into economy, polity, social structure and culture. The environmental perspective according to Guha ‘adds a fifth basic category to this scheme’ what he calls ‘the *ecological infrastructure* of human society.’ The research agenda of environmental history would therefore be a narrative of the ‘reciprocal interactions’ between the ecological infrastructure on the one hand and society/polity/economy/culture on the other. Alternatively, Guha points out one could also think of ‘total’ environmental histories ‘which simultaneously study, in one inclusive framework, the reciprocal relations’ between the ecological infrastructure and society, polity, economy and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Ramachandra Guha, ‘Writing Environmental History in India’, *Studies in History*, vol. 9, issue 1, February 1993, p. 119. A few significant works by American environmental historians would include, Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900*, New York, 1986; Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*, New York, 1985. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England*, New York, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, English translation, New York 1972; Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism : 15th-18th century*, v. 1: *The structures of everyday life*, v. 2.: *The wheels of commerce*, v. 3. : *The perspective of the world*, London, 1984. Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its Essential Characteristics*, English translation, London, 1978;

This study attempts to add the ecological dimension to the study of eighteenth century Bengal and thus tries to emphasize on what Guha regards as the ‘fifth basic category’ of analysis of the past – the ‘ecological infrastructure.’

Of late, the study of the environmental history of South Asia has become very vibrant. The works of Conrad Totman<sup>3</sup>, Mark Elvin<sup>4</sup> or Robert B. Marks<sup>5</sup> on the ecological history of Japan and China have given us a new understanding of the history of the region. In India too environmental history has made great strides over the past two decades. In 1996, Mahesh Rangarajan lamented that ‘historians of South Asia have largely neglected the question of how far the imperial phase saw a qualitative change in the relationship between people and the natural environment. Yet scholars of other societies have shown that ecologically informed history can help reassess issues of wider significance.’<sup>6</sup>The situation however has greatly altered since then as a plethora of work has emerged on the ecological history of Bengal. We will provide a short survey of these works based on the themes that they deal with.

The earliest works on the environmental history of India has been authored by Ramachandra Guha. A sociologist and a historian, Guha emphasized on the analysis of history from an ecological standpoint in his work *The Unquiet Woods* (1989) where he provided a historical perspective on the *Chipko Andolan*. ‘The union of history and ecology’, writes Guha, ‘is ... not merely a methodological imperative; it is also an invaluable guide to the understanding of contemporary social concerns.’<sup>7</sup> In the *Unquiet Woods* Guha gave an account of peasant resistance to colonial forest policies. In 1992, Guha and Gadgil wrote another pioneering work on the ecological history of India. In their book, *This Fissured Land* (1992), Gadgil and Guha argued that

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<sup>3</sup> Conrad D. Totman, *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Preindustrial Japan*, Ohio, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, New Haven, 2004;

<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860-1914*, Delhi, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, Delhi, 1991 (first published, 1989), p. 8.

colonialism was an ‘ecological watershed’<sup>8</sup> because it resulted in unprecedented environmental degradation. The two scholars argued that prior to the advent of colonialism in the Indian sub-continent, there was limited exploitation of nature, but the contact with Europe, then on the throes of industrialization led to a greater exploitation of nature and natural resources which in its turn was detrimental to the ecology of the region. Guha and Gadgil draw our attention to colonial ‘onslaught’ over the forests in India. As the railway network in India expanded, forests were destroyed to meet the demand for railway sleepers. In Madras Presidency alone, the authors point out 250,000 sleepers or 35,000 trees were required annually.<sup>9</sup> The authors argue that colonial forest policy was motivated by commercial interests of Britain and hence it was characterised by over-exploitation of forest resources. Gadgil and Guha’s contention has been challenged by many scholars. It has been recently shown that exploitation of resources were carried out by traditional societies in Rajasthan.<sup>10</sup> Hence it would be incorrect to argue as Gadgil and Guha have done that pre-colonial societies always lived in harmony with nature.

Not just on the flora but the colonial policy also put increasing stress on the fauna in the Indian forests. Mahesh Rangarajan also addresses the impact of colonial forest policy on Indian wildlife.<sup>11</sup> Mackenzie<sup>12</sup> has shown that England had its own culture of hunting and hence it should not come as surprise that the British officials should enthusiastically turn to hunting in India. Hunting however was more than just a sport for the British. Hunting as Mackenzie argues was a ‘part of the culture of imperialism.’<sup>13</sup> Hunting symbolized ‘a dominance over the environment.’<sup>14</sup> This symbolic dominance over the environment must have become particularly crucial in British colonies. Hunting was also important in the construction of notions of

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<sup>8</sup> Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Delhi, 1995, p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Mayank Kumar, ‘Claims on Natural Resources: Exploring the Role of Political Power in Pre-Colonial Rajasthan, India’, *Conservation and Society*, vol. III, no.1, June 2005, pp. 134-49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-197.

<sup>12</sup> John M. Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, Manchester, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

masculinity for ‘the imperial hunt was largely a male affair...its rituals and its alleged character-forming qualities were depicted as being ‘manly’, a masculine training for imperial rule and racial domination.’<sup>15</sup> Already Company officials like Orme had constructed the myth of the effeminate Indian. Therefore it was expected that the masculine British official would protect the helpless and effeminate Indians from the ravages of savage beasts. Joseph Sramek thus points out that the ‘perceptions of total Indian helplessness’ when faced with large beasts of prey like the tiger, were important in the constructions of the notions of British masculinity for it was only the Briton who ‘could be relied upon to kill tigers’<sup>16</sup> and that ‘only by successfully vanquishing tigers would Britons prove their manliness and their fitness to rule over Indians.’<sup>17</sup> As a sport and as a ‘part of the culture of imperialism’ hunting was enthusiastically pursued by the British in India. Yet it would be very incorrect to suppose that large beasts of prey were not hunted by the natives. Taylor in his survey of Dacca points out that during the Mughal administration *jagirs* were assigned to *Bagh Maras* or hunters of tigers but on account of the oppression committed by these persons the grants were resumed and the zamindars were called on to provide persons for this purpose. In the early years, British hunters often took the aid of Indian *shikaris* (hunters) while going on tiger-hunting. These native *shikaris* were indispensable to the British hunter for a number of reasons. These *shikaris* were gun carriers ‘whose constant responsibility it was to reload the multiple guns usually needed in this era of more primitive weaponry.’<sup>18</sup> They were used for ‘tracking tigers and reporting their likely whereabouts.’<sup>19</sup> The system of giving rewards for large carnivorous beasts like the tiger also led to their increased hunting by the natives. Over all therefore there was a large depletion in the number of large mammals like the tiger due to the combined hunting of British and native hunters.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Sramek, ‘“Face Him like a Briton”: Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800-1875’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (summer, 2006), pp. 659-680.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 659.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 673

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 674.



Mahesh Rangarajan argues that the colonial encounter was an 'ecological water-shed.'<sup>20</sup> because the system was characterised by a sort of rigidity that had not existed before. Pre-colonial Indian polities were more fluid where the shifting-cultivator or the hunter-gatherers existed along with sedentary populations but the degree of Company's intrusion was much greater and it began to act against groups that did not take to settled cultivation. However the extents to which tribal/pastoralists were integrated into the pre-colonial regimes varied across the sub-continent and therefore the degree of colonial intrusion in different parts of India also varied. The colonial ecological impact therefore should not be seen as a uniform process. This relationship of the state with tribal/pastoralists in the pre-colonial and colonial period has been extensively studied by scholars like Sumit Guha<sup>21</sup>, Ajay Skaria<sup>22</sup>, Felix Padel<sup>23</sup>, K. Sivaramakrishnan<sup>24</sup> and others. Sumit Guha for instance draws our attention to the primitivisation of forest dwellers and their reduction into a 'silvicultural proletariat' which was a 'recent consequence of the breakdown of their political system'. Guha suggests that the forest dwellers were not an isolated community but that 'the communities of the riverain plains, the forest, the savannah, the desert and the high mountains co-evolved in continuous interaction involving both conflict and cooperation.' However the participation of these so called isolated populations in the politics of their regions was 'curtailed only by the centralising drive of the colonial state in comparatively recent times' leading to primitivisation of these peoples. Indeed, in colonial records, the stereotypification of the mountains and forest dwellers as 'wild' 'savage' is a recurrent theme. Thus a report in the *Pioneer* dated 18<sup>th</sup> August 1870, wrote:

We have more than once drawn attention to the progress  
which civilisation and order are making in the Garo hills...  
We doubt if the resident in towns and favoured stations the

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<sup>20</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 207.

<sup>21</sup> Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa*, Delhi, 1995.

<sup>24</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: State-making and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, New Delhi, 1999.

frequenters of band-stands and lovers of croquet, ever realize *the position and life of the gallant young fellows who amidst jungles and swamps in the rugged hills are rough-hewing the savage peoples of the frontiers into shapely members of the body-politic...*The solitude and self-sacrifice of such a life are but little understood. With no companions but his police guard, no recreation save that afforded by his gun...his house a hut, his food uncertain...the Hill Tracts officer must have heart in his work...But if he sees his efforts prospering, if he sees savage communities abandoning their lawlessness and burying their feuds...if barbarous customs drop quietly out of use, new industries spring up, new wants arise, if he knows that a nation is awakening to new being in his hands, we can imagine no reward more rich, no satisfaction more pure than his.<sup>25</sup>

This accusation of the hill and forest dwellers as ‘savage’ and ‘barbarous’ deserves scrutiny. In the context of the Konds of Orissa who practiced human sacrifice, Felix Padel has argued that ‘in terms of numbers, the British probably *sacrificed* (emphasis in text itself) more lives in suppressing the practice and imposing ‘peace’ on the Konds, than were killed in the sacrifices over many years.’<sup>26</sup>Skaria on the other hand argues that wildness was seen as a separate way of life by tribes who ‘participated in a distinctive discourse of wildness.’<sup>27</sup>

It must be however be pointed out here that environmental histories in the context of the Indian subcontinent have tended to focus on largely land-based issues like expanding population, increased area of cultivation at cost of forests, human-animal confrontations and consequences of increased resource-exploitation. There has been very little engagement with water in terms of techniques water conservation in arid landscapes or the mechanisms of flood control in fluvial landscapes. Exceptions to this general trend would be the

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, p. 554.

<sup>26</sup> Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, p. v.

works of Tripta Wahi,<sup>28</sup> B.L. Bhadani,<sup>29</sup> Yogesh Sharma,<sup>30</sup> David Mosse,<sup>31</sup> R. D'Souza,<sup>32</sup> and most recently Mayank Kumar.<sup>33</sup> Sharma for instance focuses on the role of artificial reservoirs or *tanks* and step-wells in supplying water in parts of western and south India. Mayank Kumar on the other hand looks at techniques of water-conservation in the semi-arid landscape of desert Rajasthan. Our work tries to make an effort to contribute to this growing body of literature on waterscapes and the management of water. The introduction of colonialism had significant impact on waterscapes as well as on indigenous methods of water-management and these themes need more attention and much wider discussion than they have so far received. This thesis attempts to do that in the context of eighteenth century Bengal.

### **Eighteenth Century Bengal: The Lack of the Ecological Dimension in History**

In most works on the agrarian and commercial history of Bengal the ecological factor has been sadly ignored. N.K. Sinha's *Economic History of Bengal* (vol.2) does not emphasise on the ecological variable in determining agricultural production. The focus of Sinha's work is on the increased level of revenue extraction under the Company and what impact it had on the landholding classes of Bengal. Again Ratnalekha Ray's work on the agrarian history of Bengal tends to mainly focus on the question as to whether the Permanent Settlement of 1793 introduced any drastic changes in the structure of landholding in agrarian Bengal. The role of the ecology in causing changes in rural Bengal is not enquired into except in the context of the famine of 1769-70.

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<sup>28</sup> Tripta Wahi, 'Water Resources and Agricultural landscape – Pre- Colonial Punjab' in Indu Banga ed., *Five Punjabi Centuries*, Delhi, 1997, pp.267-84;

<sup>29</sup> B.L. Bhadani, *Water Harvesting, Conservation and Irrigation in Mewar (AD 800-1700)*, Manohar, Delhi, 2012

<sup>30</sup> Yogesh Sharma, "The Circuit of Life: Water and Water-Reservoirs in Pre-modern India, *Studies in History*, 25,1, n.s. (2009), pp. 69-108;

<sup>31</sup> David Mosse, *The Rule of Water: Statecraft, Ecology and Collective Action in South India*, Delhi, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> R. D'Souza, 'Water in British India: The Making of a Colonial Hydrology', *History Compass*, vol.4:4, pp. 621-28

<sup>33</sup> Mayank Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies: Irrigation, Agriculture and Settlement Patterns in Rajasthan during the Pre-Colonial Period*, Manohar, 2013.

However in course of the eighteenth century significant changes were taking place in the ecology of Bengal. The active portion of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta shifted eastwards so that while portions of eastern Bengal became agriculturally prosperous parts of western Bengal saw decline in agricultural production. The consequence of this ecological change has been noted by Richard Eaton in *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier*. Eaton argues that due to the eastward movement of the Ganges delta portions of eastern Bengal become more fertile than the west. Agricultural expansion then proceeded in the east whereby forests are cut down and the cultivation of wet-rice is introduced in these parts. The process of land reclamation proceeded centering around the mosque. Usually a Muslim *pir* with the authorization of the *zamindar* or the primary holder of a land, built a mosque and then the Mughal state authorities granted virgin lands for the upkeep of the mosque its functionaries and its large number of dependents who helped clear the virgin land and put it to cultivation. Under the aegis of the Muslim *pir* therefore proceeded the clearing and cultivation of East Bengal and the Islamization of the peasantry of those parts. Hence eastern Bengal has a vast majority of Muslim population (unlike western Bengal with a Hindu majority) although it is situated in the far eastern corner of the Mughal Empire. Eaton underscores the ecological aspect of economic expansion in the east but he solely focuses on the role of the holy *pir*. The role of the landed gentry like the zamindars and taluqdars and merchants in bringing about agricultural reclamation in east Bengal has not been looked into. This aspect has been dealt with by Rajat Datta who focuses on the commercialization of Bengal's small peasant economy in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Datta shows that in course of the eighteenth century forest lands of eastern Bengal were increasingly cleared for cultivation even as parts of western Bengal declined in terms of agricultural productivity. This process of land reclamation did not just proceed under *pirs* and other religious personages but also under the landed gentry. Datta also underscores the importance of the ecological variable in agricultural production and discusses effects of ecological dislocations like droughts and floods in the economy of eighteenth century Bengal.

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<sup>34</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal c. 1760-1800*, New Delhi, 2000.

The ecological factor has been similarly under emphasized in works focussing on trade and commerce in eighteenth century Bengal. Sushil Chaudhury's book that concentrates on commercial decline in Bengal after the colonial takeover, inspite of discussing the issues of trade and commerce extensively does not focus on the transport networks that sustained trade and commerce and were largely water-borne. The Ganga-Bramhaputra rivers together with their tributaries and distributaries criss-crossed the entire Province acting as channels of transport of men and goods. This was a peculiarity of the province of Bengal where land carriage was of secondary importance to water transport. K.K. Datta's *Economic Condition of the Bengal Subah* does give an account of trade, commerce and transport networks but the chronology of his work is limited to the first half of the eighteenth century. More recently Tilottama Mukherjee<sup>35</sup> has attempted 'to use markets and transport as a lens through which to view the economy and state in eighteenth century Bengal from 1750-1800 CE.' The ecological factor is discussed in Mukherjee's work in some detail in the context of the organization of the transport network. Mukherjee underscores the role of the riverine transport networks in sustaining the economy of the region.

What this work tries to do is to add the ecological dimension to the agrarian and commercial history of Bengal in the eighteenth century. It shows how agricultural production as well as commercial transactions were influenced by the ecology of the region and it also studies the kind of infrastructure the state built to cater to its administrative needs even as it was cognizant of the peculiar ecology of the region.

### **Eighteenth Century Bengal: An Ecological Survey**

We may begin our study by delineating the frontiers of Bengal. Towards the south the Province was bounded by the sea but it was landlocked to the east, the north and the west. The northern limit of the Province was the state of Kuch Bihar which had been conquered by the expanding Mughal empire but nevertheless owed a very loose allegiance to Bengal. In course of the

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<sup>35</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication*, New Delhi, 2013.

eighteenth century however, under the East India Company, the state of Koch Behar was well-integrated into Bengal. Towards the east of the Bengal province lay Assam which had been in a state of constant war with the expanding Mughal state. While for the eighteenth century Assam retained its independence, yet the Province was beset with succession disputes which resulted in the Company's intervention and soon afterwards, Assam became a British possession.<sup>36</sup> Towards the west of Bengal lay the two *subas* of Bihar and Orissa of which Bihar became a part of Bengal *suba* from 1733 and Orissa from 1727.<sup>37</sup> This study however does not include all three provinces. The western limit of this study is the province of Midnapur, towards the north-west Rajmehal, towards the north the country of Kuch Bihar, towards east the Province of Sylhet and Tipperah and to the south-east Chittagong. Physiographically, the greater portion of the territory included is a flat alluvial land. But the western portion of Midnapur is a hilly and forested tract and so are portions of Rajmehal, Koch Behar, Sylhet, Tipperah and Chittagong. The mountainous and forested tracts may therefore be said to form an outer frontier enclosing the fertile plains from the northern, eastern and western sides. The southern portion of Bengal is deltaic. Here the Ganga-Bramhaputra rivers before emptying themselves into the sea branch off in a thousand rivulets giving this area a very distinctive physiography.

### **A Land of Rivers**

Even a cursory glance at the map would show that Bengal is a land of many rivers. The most significant among these are the Ganges and the Bramhaputra. These two rivers with their innumerable tributaries and distributaries criss-cross the Province finally emptying themselves in the Bay of Bengal which forms the southern boundary of the Province. The major portion of the Province is plain land drained by these rivers which by depositing fertile alluvium make the plains of Bengal agriculturally productive. Not only did the rivers make Bengal agriculturally fertile, they also aided the movement of people and goods throughout the length and breadth of the Province.

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<sup>36</sup> Mackenzie, *History of the Relations*, Introduction, pp. 1-8.

<sup>37</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 4.

Since the rivers were the bestowers of economic prosperity, great awe and reverence was attached to them. Abul Fazl says that the Hindus believed the river Ganges to have originated from the hair of Mahadeva's head and hence the river and its waters were sacred to every Hindu. Linschoten mentions 'this [river] is holden and accounted of all the Indians to be a holy and a blessed water and they do certainly believe, that such as they wash and bathe themselves therein...all their sinnes are [cleane] forgiven them, and that from thenceforth they are so cleane and pure[ from sin] as if they were born again.'<sup>38</sup> Bowry mentions the water of the Ganges together with the seal of the Brahmans in it to have been carried as far as Gombroon where the people received it with great respect.<sup>39</sup> Tavernier mentions that the water of the Ganges was necessary in weddings and the ritual often became difficult for those situated far away from the river.<sup>40</sup>

From a very early period the rivers of Bengal had played their part in shaping the province's history. Richard Eaton points out that the rivers of Bengal 'have defined Bengal's physical and ancient cultural subregions- Varendra, the Bhagirathi-Hooghly basin, Vanga, Samatata and Harikela.'<sup>41</sup> Barrie M. Morrison points out that the rivers of Bengal had been of 'strategic importance' which is 'attested by the establishment of the principal political centres beside the rivers commanding access to the different geographic areas of the delta.'<sup>42</sup> The westernmost of these centres located on the Ganges were capitals such as Ramavati and Laukhnati in the early period or Gauda and Ekdala during the Muslim period. The Bhagirathi basin which provided easy access to both the sea and the Ganges supported such important centres as Tamralipti, Karnasuvarna and Vardhamana and later Murshidabad and Calcutta.<sup>43</sup> Further to the east near the old confluence Bramhaputra with the Meghna-Surma were established some more important historical centres of the

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<sup>38</sup> Linschoten, *The Voyages of John Huyghen Van Linschoten to the East Indies*, vol. 1, ed. A.C. Burnell, London, 1885, pp. 92-97.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Delhi, 1997, p. 216.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, tr. Valentine Ball and ed. William Crooke vol. I, part ii. , p-181, cited in Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p. 216(fn).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Delhi, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, Jaipur, 1980, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

delta like Vikrampura followed by Sonargaon and Dacca.<sup>44</sup> Another important historical centre was Chatigrama, or the modern day Chittagong located on the Karnaphuli river. Morrison points out, that ‘the historical continuity of these political centres located close to the rivers strongly suggests that control or access to the rivers has always been a significant factor in the history of the delta.’<sup>45</sup>

The rivers were the principal channels through which people and goods were moved from one part of the province to the other. Niharranjan Ray points out that an examination of inscriptions reveal that boat traffic was particularly great in eastern Vanga, Pundravardhana and Samatata- ‘the pervasively riverine lowlands.’ Some evidence of the domestic waterways can be gleaned from the Jataka tales. ‘In these stories we read of merchants from the central region setting out from Varanasi or Campa by boat, sailing along the Ganga-Bhagirathi to Tamralipti, and from there following the coast of the Bay of Bengal to Ceylon or Sumatra. Megasthenes pointed out that merchant ships went upstream on the Ganga-Bhagirathi to Pataliputra. Vanga was linked to north India by the water route of the Ganga-Bhagirathi. Ray points out that ‘From the pre-historic times until the construction of railways this route reflected a commercial prosperity, and in the nineteenth century people were still making pilgrimages by boat to Varanasi.’<sup>46</sup>

Yet the fate of towns and cities and ports were sealed if the rivers changed their courses. R.C. Majumdar points out that sometime after the eighth century A.D. the port of Tamruk lost its importance on account of the silting up of the mouth of the Sarasvati and the consequent shifting of its course. Its place was taken by Saptagrama or Satgaon higher up the river. In the sixteenth century however the main waters of the Bhagirathi began to flow through the Hooghly channel so Satgaon was ruined and first Hooghly and then Calcutta took its place.<sup>47</sup> From a very early period therefore the rivers of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People: From the earliest Times to the Fall of the Sena Dynasty*, New Delhi, 2013, p. 70.

<sup>47</sup> R.C. Majumder, *The History of Bengal*, vol. 1 Hindu Period, Dacca, 2006 (reprint), p. 4.



Bengal had played their part in shaping the history of the region and they continued to do so in the eighteenth century.

### **Climate**

The climate of Bengal was hot and humid with a short cold season from November to the beginning of February. It rained for six months starting from April and during the rainy season, the author of the *Riyaz* laments, 'the lowlands of Bengal get flooded, and the climate becomes bad...human beings as well as animals become sick and die.'<sup>48</sup> While the author of the *Riyaz* views the rainy season in Bengal as one of sickness and death the native Bengali poet Bharatchandra for instance looks at the rainy season from an erotic perspective.<sup>49</sup> It is perhaps true that the Mughal officials coming to Bengal were accustomed to a much less humid climate of upper India found the climate of Bengal in the rainy season insalubrious.

The rains in Bengal were caused by the south-west monsoon. The monsoonal rainfall was essential for agriculture. Inadequate rainfall or excessive rainfall could also lead to decline in agricultural productivity leading to severe famines in the province. Of the two most severe famines in Bengal in course of the eighteenth century, the famine of 1769-70 was caused by a prolonged drought while the famine of 1787-8 was caused by flooding of the rivers. The effect of such climatic hazards and the mode of coping with these shall be discussed in course of our work.

### **Hilly and Forested Tracts**

While the greater portion of Bengal is a flat alluvial plain intersected by many rivers towards the west, north, east and south-east there are hills covered with impenetrable forests which enclose the fertile plains from the western, northern and eastern sides. The eighteenth century saw a reduction in forest cover in south Bengal as reclamation activities in the Bakarganj and Jessore Sunderbunds gained momentum. According to J.C. Jack's estimates, the land area of Bakarganj was about 3,000 square miles in 1770 A.D., of which not

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<sup>48</sup> Ghulam Husain Salim's, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, tr. Maulavi Abdus Salam, Calcutta, 1902, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Bharatchandra Ray 'Borshabornona' in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das ed. *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, Calcutta, 2012, p. 498.

more than 1,675 square miles or 56 per cent, can have been occupied. In 1905 the land area had become 3,490 square miles, of which 3,230 or 92 per cent, was occupied.<sup>50</sup> These figures very well indicate the expansion cultivation in Bakarganj from 1770-1905 and this expansion of the cultivated area was at the cost of the forests. Since increase of the cultivated area meant increasing revenues for the state, agricultural reclamation at the cost of depletion of forest cover was generally encouraged by the State and in this respect the Company was continuing the pre-colonial practice. The expansion of the cultivated land at the cost of forests in east Bengal had begun in the seventeenth century. From the perspective of the State these forest areas were regions that were difficult to bring under effective control and were known to harbour rebels. In 1778 the jungle Mehals of Midnapore were described as follows:

The western jungle is an extent of country about eight miles in breadth and sixty in length. On the east it is bounded by Midnapur, on the west by Sinhbhum, on the north by Panchet, and on the south by Morbhanj. There is very little land cultivated in its whole extent, and a very disproportionate part of it is capable of cultivation. The soil is very rocky. The country is mountainous, and overspread with thick forests, which render it in many places utterly impassable. It has always been annexed to the Province of Midnapur, but from its barrenness it was never very greatly regarded by the Nawab's Government, and the zamindars sometimes paid their rent, or rather tribute, and sometimes not.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the zamindars of the Jungle Mehals the letter further mentioned:

These zamindars are mere freebooters, who plunder their neighbours and one another; and their tenants are banditti, whom they chiefly employ in their outrages. These depredations keep the zamindars and their servants

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<sup>50</sup> J.C., Jack, *Economic Life of a Bengal District*, p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: The District of Midnapur*, vol. 3 Part I, Calcutta, 1997 (reprint), p-3

continually in arms; for after the harvest is gathered there is scarcely one of them who does not call his tenants together, either to defend his own property or attack his neighbour.<sup>52</sup>

The way these hilly and forested areas would become what Sivaramakrishnan calls 'zones of anomaly'<sup>53</sup> and a threat to Company's governance and the collection of revenue shall also be discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

### **Plan of the Work**

Having given a brief description of the ecological condition in Bengal we may now proceed to outline the arrangement of this work. Chapter 1 deals with the ecological factor in determining agricultural production. The riverine ecology of Bengal was well suited for rice cultivation and the dominance of rice cultivation in overall agricultural production in its turn had significant consequences for the economy of the region. The next chapter (Chapter 2) deals with the variegated process of revenue extraction in the different regions of Bengal. Our study shows that in the remote hilly and forested regions of Bengal and in the deltaic area the Company encountered stiff opposition in carrying out its revenue operations. Under the Nizamat in the first half of the eighteenth century, the state exercised a loose sovereignty over the outlying hilly and forested tracts. It was also unable to establish its absolute control over the lower reaches of the delta which were continuously plagued by the incursions of the Magh and in some cases native pirates. After the transition to Company administration in the second half of the eighteenth century however these far flung areas were sought to be brought within the more direct control of the state but the process of penetration proved to be extremely difficult as the Company tried to overcome the natural barriers to centralization. Chapter 3

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p-4.

<sup>53</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'British Imperium and Forested Zones of Anomaly in Bengal, 1767-1833', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 33, issue 3, September, 1996, pp. 243-282. 'Zones of anomaly' were according to Sivramakrishnan 'geographical spaces in the terrain targeted by the Permanent Settlement where its application was thwarted.' Sivaramakrishnan points out that 'in Bengal the zones of anomaly were areas of poor agricultural development, a terrain where field and farmers were not readily visible, where commerce was most vulnerable to predation, and where revenue was collected through tribute rather than taxation. They were also places where the turbulence did not yield swiftly to standard pacification strategies.' The forested areas of western Bengal were according to Sivaramakrishnan a 'zone of anomaly.'

deals with the transport network within the Province – that was largely waterborne - and how the presence of this very efficient system of water-borne transport sustained trade and commerce and a very mobile society. Chapter 4 deals with infrastructural control both agrarian and commercial. Embanking was an important function of the state in riverine Bengal and we will examine how the performance of this function which was for long entirely left to the local lords (zamindars), now came to be increasingly interfered on by the Company-State since it was trying to create a more powerful state-apparatus than had previously existed in Bengal. For this purpose the Company also monopolised the right to tax trade and commerce which privilege had been previously allowed to the zamindars. By the end of the eighteenth century the Company had also taken in its own hands the management of law and order within the Province and the military troops of the zamindars had been largely disbanded. Thus in the plains of Bengal the Company was able to impose its authority with ease but in the more remote hill-forests on the outer frontier of Bengal the imposition of the Company's authority was a much more protracted process. Finally Chapter 5 deals with natural hazards like droughts and floods and their effect upon the population and economy of Bengal. Every society has its own way of dealing with natural disasters and in chapter 5, I compare and contrast famine relief measures in eighteenth century China and Bengal and argue that China had managed to develop an adequate infrastructure for dealing with natural hazards and resultant famines while Bengal under the Nazims had been unable to develop any systematic methods of dealing with natural crisis. The chapters together attempt to highlight the role of ecology in shaping the history of eighteenth century Bengal and at the same time show the nature of human-environment interaction through the development of institutions and infrastructure.

## Chapter-1

### The Ecological factor in Land Use and Agricultural Production

This chapter gives discusses agricultural production in Bengal and looks at the influence of ecological factors in influencing agricultural production. The ecological conditions of Bengal favoured the cultivation of rice and this chapter tries to explore whether the dominance of rice cultivation in agricultural production had any specific impacts on the economy of the region.

### The Dominance of Rice Cultivation in Agricultural Production

The plains of Bengal intersected by a large number of rivers depositing fertile alluvium were ideal for the cultivation of rice which required well watered plains and abundant rainfall in order to thrive. From the very ancient times paddy (*dhanya*) was the staple food-crop of the people of the Bengal region.<sup>54</sup> The Mahasthan Brahmi inscription referred to a rice granary located at Pudanagala (*Pundranagara*). The *Ramcharita* mentions “paddy plants of various kinds” grown in Varendri. The inscriptions of the Sena kings mention “smooth fields excellent paddy”, and “myriads of villages, consisting of land growing paddy in excessive quantities.” That the transplantation of rice was known and practiced in Bengal as early as the fifth century A.D. is clear from a statement in Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsa* where Kalidasa describing Raghu’s conquest of the Vangas, remarks that Raghu uprooted and replanted them (*utkhata-pratiropita*) like rice plants.<sup>55</sup>

Ralph Fitch writing in the second half of the sixteenth century pointed out Bakla and Sonargaon as the places in Bengal where there was ‘store of rice’ that was also exported to other parts of India and to places outside India such as Ceylon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra.<sup>56</sup> By the seventeenth century Bengal

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<sup>54</sup> R.C. Majumder ed. *The History of Bengal*, vol. 1 Hindu Period, Dacca, 2006 (reprint), p.649.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 649-650.

<sup>56</sup> William Foster ed. *Early Travels in India 1583-1619*, New Delhi, 1985, Chapter on Ralph Fitch 1583-91, pp. 1-47. Regarding Bakla Fitch writes, ‘the king whereof is a Gentile, a man very well disposed and deligteth much to shoot in a gun. His country is very great and fruitful and hath store of rice, much cotton cloth, and cloth of silk. The houses be very fair and high

had emerged as a great producer and a major exporter of the commodity.<sup>57</sup> This dominance of rice production in the agriculture of Bengal continued in the eighteenth century. The Persian sources for the eighteenth century and the regional surveys made by the officials of the East India Company note the predominance of rice cultivation in the agricultural production of Bengal.

The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* mentions that ‘the crop of that country [Bengal] is all paddy, whether fine or coarse. Other crops, such as wheat, barley and pulse, &c, are scarce.’<sup>58</sup> The *Risala-i-Ziraat* mentions that in Bengal the cultivation of paddy is predominant and the cultivation of wheat etc. is secondary.<sup>59</sup> Colebrooke points out that ‘the several seasons of cultivation, added to the influence of soil and climate, have multiplied the different species of rice to an endless diversity’ in Bengal.<sup>60</sup> Taylor in his survey of Dacca mentions that rice was among the principal articles of cultivation in the District and was grown in the inundated lands.<sup>61</sup> Five crops of rice designated ‘Amoun’, ‘Chotna’ or ‘Deega’, ‘Aoos’, ‘Bora’, and ‘Seyele’, were raised in Dacca but the first, third and the fourth were principal and constituted about three-fourths of the whole grain cultivation of the district. The southern division of Dacca was particularly fertile and ‘during the rains it is an extensive plain growing rice through which boats sail from one part of the country to another.’<sup>62</sup> In Jessore and Backergunj located in deltaic parts of Bengal rice was also extensively cultivated. Westland in his survey of Jessore mentions that there was a large flow of rice from Jessore and Backergunj Sunderbans to Calcutta. When Westland was making his survey of Jessore

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built the streets large...’ Regarding Sonargaon Fitch points out, ‘...Many of the people are very rich. Here they will eat no flesh nor kill no beast they live of rice, milk, and fruits...Great store of cotton cloth goeth from hence and much rice wherewith they serve all India, Ceylon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra and many other places.’

<sup>57</sup> Abul Fazl mentions that there were various kinds of rice grown in Bengal such that if a single grain of each kind collected, they would fill a large vase. (Abul Fazl Allami’s *Ain-i-Akbar*, vol. II, tr. H.S. Jarrett, Delhi, 1997, p. 134) Grandpre, the French traveller to eighteenth century Bengal, considers the country as ‘the granary of rice to all India.’ (L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bay of Bengal 1789-1790*, New Delhi, 1995, vol ii. p. 51).

<sup>58</sup> *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> *The Risala-i-Ziraat* by anonymous author, tr. in Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, New Delhi, 1993, p. 268.

<sup>60</sup> H.T. Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1804, p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, Calcutta, 1840, p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

parts of the forested areas in the south- the Jessore sunderbans were being cleared for the cultivation of rice.<sup>63</sup> Beveridge points out that rice was also the staple product of Bakergunj and the *Aman* variety was the most cultivated one in the district.<sup>64</sup> Although there was a large variety of rice in Bengal the three principal varieties were the *Aman*, the *Aus*, and the *Boro*. Regarding the process of cultivating the *Aman* rice Beveridge points out the following:

*Aman* rice is grown all over Bakarganj, wherever there is low land...the ploughing of the ground commences as early as the latter part of February in the northern parts of the district, and continues in the south as late as the beginning of September. These late ploughings, however, are of land into which the rice is to be transplanted. The chief ploughings take place in April & May. They begin earlier in the northern parts of the district, as it is the first to be flooded, owing to the lowness of much of the Gournadi *thana*, and its proximity to the Arial Khan. Cattle are generally used for ploughing, but in Dakhin Shahbazpur and the south of the district buffaloes are often employed. *Aman* is generally transplanted, but in chars and other places it is sometimes sown broadcast. It is not unfrequent, especially in the northern parts of the district, to sow *aman* and *owsh* [aus] - i.e. early rice together. It is not usual to weed *aman*, and the crop gives little trouble to the ryot after it has been transplanted. The process of transplanting, however is a very laborious one, and the ryot often "homewards plods his weary way" after his back has been almost broken from stooping for hours amidst mud and water, and after having been drenched with rain two or three times in the course of the day.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> J. Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore: Its Antiquities, Its History and Its Commerce*, Calcutta, 1871.

<sup>64</sup> H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics*, London, 1876, p. 278.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278-279.

*Aman* was generally reckoned as yielding twelve annas, or three-fourths of all the rice grown in the Bakarganj district. The other fourth was chiefly made up of *aus*, which was grown on the high lands, and especially in the northern parts of the district. A small quantity of *boro* rice was grown in the *chars* and *bils* in the north of the district.<sup>66</sup> Regarding the cultivation of *Boro* rice Beveridge points out:-

*Boro* is sown at the end of the rains, when the waters are beginning to recede. It is sometimes sown broadcast but is I believe as a general rule transplanted like *aman*. The sowing takes place in October, the transplanting in December and January, and the harvest in April. *Boro* is a coarse red grain, and is only eaten by the poorer classes. It is prized by them because it ripens earlier in the year (the Bengali year) than any other kind of paddy, and thus gives them food at a time when rice is scarce.<sup>67</sup>

The *Aus* variety of rice was sown in Chait and Baisackh (March and April), and was reaped in July and August. The bulk of the *Aman* harvest took place in Agrahan and Paus i.e. December and January.<sup>68</sup>

Beveridge points out that 'the average produce of rice per bigha (about two-thirds of an acre) was ten mans of paddy, representing about six mans of rice.'<sup>69</sup> Paddy was sold by the ryots chiefly to *paikars* or middlemen, who came to their houses or to local markets for it. The *paikars* were of two sorts—large and small. The large *paikars* were also called *aratdars* or brokers and they had their offices at the principal bazaars, and shipped the rice from thence to Calcutta. The smaller *paikars* were called *Farias*, and their business *fariami*. They went about to the villages and to the petty hats to buy paddy and rice, which they took to marts such as Bakarganj, Niamati and Nalchiti. Beveridge points out that 'these marts are not fed directly from the threshing floor; all the little hats in the country are feeders to them, and the marts are

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 280-281.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 281



chiefly entrepots where the rice brought into the village markets is collected and eventually shipped off to Calcutta.<sup>70</sup>

A good deal of paddy was also disposed by barter to supply the wants of less grain-producing districts.

Thus in the cold weather boats come from Dacca laden with earthen pots. These the boatmen sell to the villagers for paddy, filling up their boat with it as their trade progresses, and eventually after a cruise of a month or two, they return to their homes with a cargo of paddy. The reason why this trade in pot is so brisk is that the Bakarganj earth is in general saltish and not suitable for pottery, and therefore the inhabitants have to depend on other districts for their supply of pots for household purposes, and for the making of molasses &c. The price of a pot is generally its contents in paddy.<sup>71</sup>

The rice export trade began in November and continued till March. The principal marts for this export trade were Bakarganj or Sahebganj, Nalchiti, Jhalukatti and Niamati to which came boats from all parts of Bengal during the rice season.<sup>72</sup>

The Bakarganj rice was of superior quality, and was therefore exported to such an extent that a sufficient stock of rice did not remain in the country for local consumption, and *aus* rice had to be imported, during the rains, from the districts of Tipperah, Mymensing, and Sylhet. The chief seats of this import trade are Jhalukatti, Babuganj, and Mirganj.<sup>73</sup>

Beveridge points out that Bakarganj being very easily connected to Calcutta by the river network rice readily flowed out of the district, whereas

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p-284

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p-284

Tipperah and other eastern districts were to a certain extent 'shut out from the Calcutta market by their remoteness and defective water communication.'<sup>74</sup>

Towards the north in Dinajpur, rice cultivation thrived in the *Doangash* or mixed soil region (where the common ash coloured stiff soil had sand particles making it looser and easier for the plough to operate) which could produce two crops of rice. The quality of the rice crop and the labour required depended on the levels of elevation of the *Doangash* soil. The lowest parts of the *Doangash* soil were eagerly sought after by farmers and these produced the finest varieties of rice while in the higher parts of the *Doangash* soil, if rice was being cultivated it required double the usual labour and the quality was not superior to the one grown in regions of lower elevation.<sup>75</sup> In such areas of higher elevation *pat* and *son* plants used for making cordage was cultivated. Even the areas of stiff soil which were not as amenable to cultivation as the mixed soil region could at least produce one crop of rice. If it rained during the winter and spring months, this soil could produce a second crop of rice as well.<sup>76</sup>

In Dinajpur the kinds of rice cultivated were numerous but there were three principal varieties.<sup>77</sup> The first variety was the *Boro* rice which ripened in the hot weather of Spring. It was sown in the inundated lands and marshes. The second variety was the *Bhaduyi* or the summer rice which is a coarser variety of rice that was consumed by the labourers in the farm and were seldom sold. The winter rice was called the *Henguti* which was cut in the cold months. The winter rice itself consisted of a large variety. The coarsest kinds were consumed by the poor and these were also used for the manufacture of puffed rice and flattened rice or *muri* and *chira* as called by the natives.<sup>78</sup> As a principle, the coarser variety of winter rice was grown on

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p-284

<sup>75</sup> R.M. Martin, *The History Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, volume 2: Bhagulpoor, Goruckpoor, Dinajepoor*, London, 1838, p. 587.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 584.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 816-819.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 818

heavily inundated lands while the finer varieties were transplanted on higher lands.<sup>79</sup>

### **Bengal: A Rice Economy?**

From the above the discussion it is clear that the cultivation of rice in Bengal pre-dominated the cultivation of any other crop in it since very early times and this trend continued in the eighteenth century. In 1794, food grains (rice, paddy and millet) constituted 45.5% of the total agricultural output, cash crops (cotton, mulberry and tobacco) 20.5 %, pulses 16 %, oil seeds 4% and sundry other crops 6% of the total agricultural output.<sup>80</sup> Such predominance of rice cultivation was because of the fact that ecologically Bengal was well suited to the cultivation of rice. But the question that arises in this regard is whether the dominance of the rice cultivation had any specific impact on the economy of the region.

### **Characteristics of a Rice Economy**

Francesca Bray has suggested that the trajectory of economic development in most Asian states has been very different from that of Europe. Bray points out that European historical methodology had been profoundly influenced by the growth of capitalism 'but it is dubious to what extent models derived from Europe's highly specific experience are applicable to other parts of the world.'<sup>81</sup> For instance, in the context of Indian history an 'obsession' with classifying India as 'feudal' or 'non-feudal' has 'diverted attention from India's specific path of historical development.'<sup>82</sup> Bray argues that the reason behind the historical development of the economies of the Europe and Asia along different lines 'lies in the peculiar nature of wet-rice agriculture, on which most Far Eastern economies are based and which manifests a quite different dynamic of technical development from that which operates in the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 818-819.

<sup>80</sup> Calculated from Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* by Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800*, Manohar 2000, p. 56 and p. 76 (Figure 1).

<sup>81</sup> Francesca Bray, 'Patterns of Evolution in Rice-Growing Societies', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 11, No. 1, October, pp. 3-33.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 26

dry-grain farming systems of the West.’<sup>83</sup> In her work, Bray primarily focuses her attention on China and Japan. However I would like to point out here that her model of a ‘rice-economy’ can be applied to Bengal as well and that the assumption of this economic model for Bengal helps explain the so-called backwardness and rudimentary nature of Bengal’s agriculture as noted by contemporary European observers in the eighteenth century.

Bray points out that the climate of Northern Europe did not permit more intensive cultivation than three grain crops in two years and that even this was a very recent development achieved by the use of fertilizers and scientific crop rotations.

The farming system of Northern Europe thus used land extensively and could not support high population densities. The size of a family subsistence holding was necessarily large- a feudal manse in the ninth century was often as big as 40 hectares.<sup>84</sup>

Secondly, livestock played a very important role in this farming system. They were the chief source of manure and ‘since yields were so low draught animals were essential, for it was impossible to till sufficient land for subsistence by manpower alone.’<sup>85</sup>

Thirdly, the productivity of land in Europe in the absence of modern scientific crop breeding methods and inorganic fertilizers could only be achieved by the increasing use of manure and the upkeep of more cattle. Another way of increasing the productivity was to bring more land under the plough. Hence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as population pressures increased new lands were cleared and brought under cultivation although it had been suggested that much of such reclaimed lands had to be abandoned after a few decades as its fertility was rapidly exhausted. Further improved farming techniques involving the increased use of human and labour could increase the productivity of land. For instance, ‘several ploughings and careful harrowing could improve germination rates and keep down weeds,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>84</sup> Slicher van Bath, 1963: 42 and Mukhia, 1981:278 cited in Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> Bray, ‘Patterns of Evolution in Rice-Growing Societies’, p. 6.

contributing to higher yields and permitting the field to be cropped more frequently,<sup>86</sup> and ‘modifications in both bovine and equine harness, which started to gain currency in Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries, may have contributed to improved farming practice, facilitating, for example, the replacement of the light scratch-plough or *ard* by the heavy but more efficacious mouldboard plough.’<sup>87</sup> Following Duby, Bray argues, that the slight increase in grain yields between the ninth and thirteenth centuries was largely due to such intensive working of the soil. From this Bray argues, that ‘where draught animals and heavy equipment like turn-ploughs and harrows play such a crucial role in agricultural production, it is clear that large farms, which could afford more animals and equipment and organize their use more efficiently, will have a significant advantage over small holdings.’<sup>88</sup> Thus larger the farm was the more likely it was to produce a surplus. However, by the twelfth or thirteenth century urbanization was providing an increasing market for agricultural produce and many territorial lords conscious of the advantage of large farms over small holdings begun to ‘withdraw their demesne land from the village farms, to consolidate, enclose, and cultivate them in separate ownership.’<sup>89</sup>

Thus Bray points out that ‘the transition to private ownership of land was directly related to the superior economic performance of large farms, for under feudal relations it was extremely difficult for the farmer to increase the quantity of land, or labour, at his disposal.’<sup>90</sup> By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries villeinage was dying out in many parts of Northern Europe. The peasants were freed from their feudal obligations but in many cases they lost some or all of their land to which they had previously had hereditary rights, and were reduced to the condition of working as wage-labourers. Consolidated landholdings were becoming more popular but such part of the lands which the estate owners could not manage directly they leased out to rent-paying tenants. As tenants the landlords preferred not the smallholders but ‘well-to-do farmers who could afford to invest in animals and equipment.’ Overall this

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.7

was a ‘period of land hunger and widespread enclosure’ during which large estates emerged on one hand and on the other many peasants found themselves unable to survive as independent farmers and were forced to work as wage-labourers. Capitalist relations in agriculture were apparent in many parts of Northwest Europe before the fifteenth century and by that time markets in both land and labour were well-developed. As agricultural techniques improved the farmers continued to add to the size of their holdings. Bray points out that ‘throughout its development, the dynamic of the agricultural system of Northwest Europe was the superior performance of large, centrally-managed units of production.’<sup>91</sup>

By the early nineteenth century however machines came to replace the large number of wage-labourers in Europe. The first successful mechanical threshers came in the market around 1830 and agricultural labourers all over England rioted seeing their livelihood threatened. The increasing use of machinery in agriculture continued which led to substantial reduction in the number of agricultural labourers. Bray points out that ‘the pattern of agricultural development which leads towards increasingly large production units and the replacement of human labour by ever larger and more complex machinery is directly related to the basic conditions of agricultural production in Northwest Europe in the mediaeval period. It is not equally clear that this pattern of progress is universally valid: given different conditions of production, the development of the productive forces might have radically different results.’<sup>92</sup>

Bray’s model of a rice-economy assigned a separate and exclusive structure of economic development for Europe which according to her cannot be applied to wet-rice economies of Asia. Her work therefore suffers from European exceptionalism. A fuller critique of Bray’s work follows in a subsequent section.

Returning to Bray’s analysis, the author charts a different pattern of economic development for large areas in Asia where the cultivation of wet-

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 9

rice is predominant. Water supply is the most important factor in rice cultivation as water usually supplies all the nutrients required for the healthy growth of the plant. Extensive manuring therefore is not essential for rice cultivation and livestock plays a much less significant role here than in European farming systems. Moreover rice is by nature a relatively high-yielding crop and since water's fertilising power enables irrigated fields to be cultivated continuously without fallowing, the area required for a subsistence farm is comparatively small. Also, such areas where wet-rice cultivation is practiced can generally support higher population densities than for instance the wheat regions.

In order to increase productivity wet-rice farmers generally prefer to intensify production on existing fields than expand the cultivated area because in case of wet-rice cultivation land productivity and labour inputs are higher. Secondly 'paddy fields even when built on poor or marginal land, improve over the first few years as continuous irrigation podzolises the soil, and then maintain their indefinitely.'<sup>93</sup>

If water supplies are adequate then instead of a single crop two or even three crops of rice a year can be grown. But the natural growth period of the plant is six or seven months; hence to permit multiple cropping and to make the most effective use of the available water, the period that the rice plants spend in the irrigated field must be reduced. The solution to this problem was the process of transplanting in which

the rice-seed is sown densely in a nursery-bed, where it is carefully manured and watered to ensure healthy growth; once the seedlings are 20-25 cm. tall they are pulled up and transplanted into the main field. Transplanting not only reduces the period in the main field, it also contributes to higher yields: the process of pulling-up strengthens the root system and encourages tillering, so that each plant bears several panicles instead of one; the seedlings can be placed at regular intervals, encouraging healthy growth and

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<sup>93</sup> Buck, 1937:155 and Grist, 1975: 18 cited in *Ibid.*, p.10.

facilitating weeding and pest-control. A switch from broadcast sowing to transplanting will easily increase yields by 40 per cent.<sup>94</sup>

Further careful seed selection has from a very early period, allowed Asian rice farmers to choose between a wide range of local varieties, differing in height, yield, flavour, growth period and other characteristics. By planting several varieties in their fields each season they were able to protect was themselves in some measure against the threat of drought, floods and disease. It was also possible to select for quick-ripening varieties, so that multi-cropping could be practiced. Other methods of raising yields include the use of additional fertilizers applied before transplanting.

Bray points out that ‘while wet-rice agriculture has enormous potential for increasing land productivity, most improvements are either scale-neutral and relatively cheap, or else they involve increasingly not capital inputs but inputs of manual labour.’<sup>95</sup>

Bray points out that unlike in Europe where the trend is towards the consolidation of holdings to create larger farms in wet-rice societies, ‘there is little trend towards the consolidation of holdings and the polarization of rural society into managerial farmers and landless labourers. Units of management remain small, usually at the scale of the family farm, and the producers are not separated from control of the means of production.’<sup>96</sup> The reasons for this is outlined by Bray as follows:-

As production intensifies and the size of holding necessary for subsistence decreases, a typical farmer’s equipment may be reduced to a few hoes and a sickle, but this by no means implies that his techniques are primitive, nor is it necessarily a reflection of poverty: it simply means that animal-drawn implements are not suited to such small-scale, highly-skilled farming techniques. Since

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<sup>94</sup> Girst, 1975: 149 cited in Bray, ‘Patterns of Evolution in Rice-Growing Societies’, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Bray, ‘Patterns of Evolution in Rice-Growing Societies’, pp. 11-12.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.13.



efficiency depends less upon the range of equipment than on the quality of labour, a skilled and experienced smallholder or tenant farmer is in just as good a position to raise the productivity of his land as a wealthy landlord. Indeed as productivity rises the costs of adequately supervising the many minute tasks involved in wet-rice farming become prohibitive: inspecting an irrigated field for weeds is almost as onerous as weeding it oneself. So although prices of land rise as production is intensified and yields increase, and there are often very high rates of tenancy in areas where wet-rice is intensively farmed, the difficulty of effective supervision means that landlords find little or no economic advantage in evicting their tenants to run large, centrally managed estates. Instead they generally prefer to leave their tenants to manage their small farms independently, shouldering all or part of the risks of production.<sup>97</sup>

Bray further points out that ‘in rice-growing areas where cultivation techniques were undeveloped and extensive, we often find relations of production which share features with those of feudal Europe: since the land’s productivity and thus its population-carrying capacity are low, control over labour is crucial to the dominant class; the peasant producers have access to land only through establishing tributary relations with a member of this dominant class, and there is no market through which producers might acquire proprietary rights in land.’<sup>98</sup>

But as cultivation techniques became more complex and the supervision of tenants more difficult, landlords started taking less and less direct interest in the way their land was farmed, and the position of the tenants vis-à-vis the landlords greatly improved. They ‘acquired rights to greater security of tenure or even, eventually, to permanent tenancy.’<sup>99</sup> Moreover ‘as agricultural methods improved and the economy expanded and became more

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 20

commercialized, the social and legal status of the dependent rural classes improved rapidly. The servant classes decreased in numbers while the lower echelons of the landholding class grew, and tenants who had previously been obliged to provide their landlords with various free labour services acquired a far greater measure of economic independence. With the expansion of agricultural production and the growth of non-agricultural sources of income, labour farms gradually acquired greater freedom, until at last the transition to wage labour was complete; under these conditions tenants too demanded payment for any work undertaken on the landlord's farm.'<sup>100</sup> Such increases in labour cost made the large holdings of the formerly privileged landowners uneconomic and they could not effectively compete with the smallholdings.

Thus Bray points out that 'initially at least, then, the transition from subsistence to commercial production in wet-rice economies appears to increase the value of skilled labour and to sustain a general expansion of the economy. But eventually a developed wet-rice economy, like capitalism, reaches a point of crisis. Once the population grows beyond certain limits, pressure on land reaches a point where returns to labour begin to diminish, and the rural population becomes increasingly impoverished. The competition for land enables landlords to impose heavier burdens on their tenants, and in addition, as more and more mouths have to be fed off the same area of land, rents which once seem fair become extortionate.'<sup>101</sup> Bray cites as illustration the poverty of nineteenth and twentieth century Javanese peasantry. In China Bray points out the expansion of agricultural production appears to have kept pace with population growth until about 1800, after which the situation turned for the worse with tenants withholding payment of revenues to their landlords. But even though under such conditions landlessness increased yet 'the transition to capitalist relations of production, whereby land owners evict their tenants in order to run large, consolidated farms using cheap wage labour', did not develop in either China or Java.<sup>102</sup> Bray points out that despite commercialization of rice-farming in Asia, capitalist relations of production have not resulted. It is impossible to discern the polarization of rural society

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 22

into 'large farmer-operators' and landless wage-labourers and the basic unit of production remained the family farm.<sup>103</sup> Even in cases where small farmers are forced to sell their lands, they did not become landless as many of them had access to lands as tenants. Despite the existence of a landless labour force, landowners preferred to lease out their lands to tenants than running large consolidated farms with landless wage labourers because in terms of land productivity wet-rice smallholdings were more productive than large farms, even where modern inputs were used.<sup>104</sup>

Bray further points out that 'the organization of resources typical of intensive rice-farming dovetails very neatly with petty commodity production,'<sup>105</sup> which requires very little capital to set up a family enterprise. The products can be conveyed to local or national markets by merchants, who pay the villagers for their labour and often provide raw materials as well as information on the state of the market. But intensive rice-farming combined with petty commodity production 'effectively inhibited technical and social changes of the type prerequisite for mechanization and industrialization.'<sup>106</sup>

### **The Case of Eighteenth Century Bengal**

If we now turn our attention to agricultural production in Bengal in the eighteenth century we will discern many features characteristic of Rice economies. Our primary source of information on agricultural production in the eighteenth century being the regional surveys conducted by the officials of the English East India Company the agricultural practices that were characteristic of Bengal's wet-rice economy has been often looked at as backward or primitive by European observers in comparison to the agricultural practices they were familiar with in Europe. But as outlined in the previous section economic development in Europe and the rice growing societies of Asia proceeded along very different lines.

With regard to the absence of rotation of crops Colebrooke points out thus:

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 25

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 25

The rotation of crops, which engages so much the attention of enlightened cultivators in Europe, and on which principally rests the success of a well conducted husbandry, is not understood in India. A course, extending beyond the year, has never been dreamt of by a Bengal farmer : in the succession of crops within the year, he is guided to no choice of an article adapted to restore the fertility of land impoverished by a former crop.....<sup>107</sup>

Regarding fallowing Tennant mentions, 'the Indian allows [the land] a lea, but never a fallow.'<sup>108</sup> Colebrooke further denounces the practice of dung being used as fuel instead of as manure.<sup>109</sup> Taylor in his survey of Dacca points out that manuring of fields in Dacca was entirely confined to the gardens of Sunergong and Bickrampore where more valuable crops were raised. In Sunergong mustard oil-cakes were used as manure for the pan gardens and in Bickrampore, 'the bedding of cow houses' and the alluvial and vegetable compost on the sides of ditches are used as manure in gardens of plaintains. The weed called Pana (*Pistia stratiotes*) which grew on the surface of morasses was used to manure the roots of betel and coconut trees.<sup>110</sup> Colebrooke further deplores the want of capital and large farms in Bengal's agricultural production. He points out thus:-

The want of capital in manufactures and agriculture prevents the division of labour. Every manufacturer, every artist, working for his own account, conducts the whole process of his art from the formation of his tools to the sale of his production. Unable to wait the market or to anticipate its demand, he can only follow his regular occupation, as immediately called to it by the wants of his neighbours. In the intervals, he must apply to some other employment which is in present request: and the

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<sup>107</sup> H.T. Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1804, p. 39

<sup>108</sup> Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, vol.2, p. 16 cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 55

<sup>109</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 41.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *Dacca*, p. 144.

labours of agriculture, ever wanted, are the general resource. The mechanick, finding himself as fully competent, as the constant cultivator, to the management of common husbandry, is not discouraged from undertaking it at his own risk. Every labourer, every artisan, who has frequent occasion to recur to the labours of the field, becomes a husbandman. Such farmers are ill qualified to plan or to conduct a well judged course of husbandry, and are idly employed, to the great waste of useful time, in carrying to market the paltry produce of their petty farms. If Bengal had a capital in the hands of enterprising proprietors who employed it in agriculture, manufactures, and internal commerce, these arts would be improved : and with more and better productions from the same labour, the situation of the labourers would be less precarious, and more affluent : although the greatest part of the profit might vest with the owners of the money adventured. In agriculture particularly, which is the basis of the prosperity of a country, the want of pecuniary funds is a bar to all improvement. While, on the contrary, the employment of money in agriculture would introduce large farms ; and from these would flow every improvement that is wanted in husbandry; and such improvements must naturally extend from agriculture into every branch of arts and commerce. Without capital and enterprise, improvement can never be obtained.<sup>111</sup>

However from our discussion in the previous section on the characteristics of a wet-rice economy we can infer that crop-rotation, fallowing, or the extensive use of manure were not required in wet-rice cultivation. In wet-rice cultivation the soil type was much less important than the water-supply. Further rice cultivation did not exhaust the productive capacity of the soil. On the contrary, several years continuous cultivation increased the fertility of the rice fields which could then be maintained indefinitely. This was because water seepage

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<sup>111</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 45-46.

altered the chemical composition and structure of the different soil layers in a process known as podzolisation. It was for this reason that rice farmers preferred to work existing fields more intensely rather than opening up of new fields which would at least for the first few years be less productive than the ones that have been cultivated for long. Small wonder then if the Bengali peasant did not use manure for the rice land. Fallowing and crop-rotation were equally unnecessary in rice lands as the rice crop did not exhaust the fertility of the soil. The practices of fallowing, crop-rotation and manuring were however not altogether unknown and were used where required specially in cases of soil-exhausting crops like sugarcane, betel or tobacco.<sup>112</sup>

The want of capital and large farms whose absence Colebrooke deplores was again a characteristic of wet-rice economy where small-holdings proved to be more productive than centrally controlled large farms. Rajat Datta in his study on the commercialization of Bengal's economy in the second half of the eighteenth century points out that 'Bengal's agriculture was overwhelmingly undertaken on small peasant farms operated by individual peasant families with the use of domestic labour. It was, therefore, a classic

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<sup>112</sup> Rajat Datta points out that 'leaving the roots of a previous harvest to rot in the ground was a commonly used natural manure for the cultivation of *aman* rice. Burning the rooted stubble of one crop and then ploughing in its ashes for the next was another widespread form of manuring used for the cultivation of rice and lentils.' For cultivating sugar-cane, tobacco, cotton and betel-leaf more elaborate and costly forms of manure were used. In these cases, 'expressed oil seed (especially mustard) cakes were mixed with the top soil and then evenly distributed over the beds and rows in order to provide additional nutrients to the plant and to replenish the soil subsequently.' Rajat Datta, *Society Economy and the Market*, p. 54.

Datta also points out that 'In Europe, fallowing was essential to restore the fertility of the heavy and wet clay soil after two or three years of successive cropping. Here fallowing was more than giving some respite to the land; it also entailed successive ploughings to break the surface thoroughly and get rid of weeds.' On the contrary, fallowing was not an essential feature of Bengal's agriculture "because the soil here was more amenable, i.e. it could be broken up more easily by 'scratching the superficies of the earth to make it yield.' In such situations, fallowing would mean an unnecessary loss of output and unduly high average costs of production. But the awareness that lands tended to get exhausted by repeated cultivation and needed time to recuperate was there and lands bearing soil-exhausting crops like sugarcane, cotton and mulberry were rejuvenated in a four-yearly cycle. Further Datta argues that crop rotation was very much practiced in Bengal and reasons why European observers like Colebrooke and Tennant noted its absence is unclear. The simplest form of crop-rotation was the rotation of rice and lentils on the relatively lower lands and on higher lands rice and mustard were sown in regular succession. *Sih-fasli* (three harvest) lands, which were of the best intrinsic quality produced rice with either two crops of oil seeds or lentils, or they were used for producing successive crops of mustard, cotton and lentils in a regular annual rotation. Moreover, Buchanan noted 'alternate-cropping' as one principal agricultural practice to prevent soil exhaustion in parts of Rungpore. Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 54-56

example of petty production: household centred and labour intensive, where the majority of the producers were perennially constrained by a shortage of productive resources.<sup>113</sup> The peasants received cash advances from grain merchants without which they would be unable to begin cultivation. These loans from grain merchants ‘were aimed at denying the peasantry any direct access to local markets, and to ensure the advanced hypothecation of their product prior to the completion of the production cycle.’ Datta’s work has clearly outlined the commercialization of the rice economy of Bengal in the eighteenth century. Bray however argues that despite commercialization wet-rice societies are immune to the development of capitalist relations in agriculture where ‘we do not find the polarization of rural society into large farmer-operators and landless wage-labourers’. Granted that, it can be also argued that although capitalism in the form of a polarized rural society into large farmer-operators and landless wage-labourers may not develop yet capitalist relations may still exist in agricultural production in the form of cash-advances made to cultivators. This was the case of the high commercialized economy of eighteenth century Bengal where agricultural production depended on cash advances made by merchants to the cultivators.

### **Problems with Bray’s model of a Rice- Economy**

Though Bray’s model of a rice-economy does explain agricultural practices peculiar to wet-rice societies yet her assumption that wet-rice societies do not evolve capitalist relations is problematic.

Willem Van Schendel points out that Bray’s definition of agrarian capitalism rests on two factors: 1) the consolidation of agricultural holdings and 2) relations of production that involve large farmer-operators who employ landless labourers on their fields. Hence Bray ‘takes the persistence of family-operated smallholdings and the enduring importance of tenancy in wet-rice cultivation as evidence of the absence of agrarian capitalism.’<sup>114</sup> Schendel

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>114</sup> Willem Van Schendel, ‘Rural Transformation in Asia: Models and the Interpretation of Local Change’, in Jan Breman and Sudipto Mundle ed. *Rural Transformation in Asia*, Delhi, 1991, p. 284.

refutes her views in this regard by examining three basic components of Bray's argument: 1) size of holdings, 2) the family-farm and 3) tenancy.

### **1) Size of the holdings**

Schendel points out that the term 'small-holding' is rather misleading because the sizes of wet-rice 'small-holdings' vary considerably. He cites an example that around 1960 wet-rice holdings in Bangladesh averaged 0.8 ha, whereas in neighbouring lower Burma they were very much larger: 6.0 ha on average and lower Burmese rice yields exceeded that of Bangladesh by 50 per cent. Schendel thus points out that 'there is little reason to expect such enormous differences in size and productivity to be of minor importance when it comes to management, cultivation methods, or labour inputs, as the blanket term 'smallholding' implies.'<sup>115</sup>

Secondly there is a problem with Bray's assumption that capitalist rice cultivation depends on the size of holdings, and that consolidated holdings were a crucial factor in identifying agrarian capitalism. Schendel points out that her own argument refutes this for 'Why should there be consolidation under capitalism if wet-rice cultivation is not subject to economies of scale and does not respond positively to centralization and mechanization?' Moreover the high productivity of rice implies that 'consolidated holdings' can be quite small. Hence 'it is not sufficient to adduce the failure of large rice estates as evidence of the failure of consolidated holdings to establish themselves as predominant units of production and management.' Again the size of the 'consolidated holdings' may show enormous variation between societies and regions and also over time. For example, 'any Bangladeshi holding of 3 ha or more could have qualified as a consolidated holding around 1960, whereas similar sizes in lower Burma would have been considered quite small holdings. Conversely, less than 1 per cent of the Bangladeshi holdings were larger than 6 ha as against almost 50 per cent of those in lower Burma where holdings over 12 ha were not uncommon.'<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>116</sup> According to Pfanner, p-208, reported in R. Barker, R.W. Herdt, and Beth Rose, *The Rice Economy of Asia*, p. 34 cited in Schendel 'Rural Transformation', p. 285.



Schendel concludes that Bray's argument 'can be turned upside down' by hypothesizing that 'given the peculiar characteristics of wet-rice cultivation-agrarian capitalism in rice-growing societies may well develop without the prior creation of large holdings.'<sup>117</sup>

## **2) The Family Farm**

Another reason for Bray to accept that wet-rice societies are 'resistant to the transition to capitalist farming' is the absence of capitalist relations of production where rural society is polarized between into large farmer-operators and landless wage labourers. According to Bray's model of economic development the family farm remains the basic unit of production in wet-rice societies.

Schendel however points out that the analysis of rice-growing societies in terms of persisting family farms may be misleading. Throughout the colonial era the Kaveri delta in south India was well known for its striking rural inequalities. It boasted large rice estates, often owned by religious trusts, which were managed by non-cultivating Brahmans and worked by landless, low-caste cultivators. Many of the primary producers were debt-bonded labourers, but even where they were nominally tenants it was common for the landlords or their stewards to take all important decisions regarding cultivation themselves. In this context it is not easy to detect the family farm as the basic unit of production and management.

As in the Kaveri delta in early twentieth century lower Burma differentiation and proletarianization was also pronounced. Moreover rice-production was based on a division of labour which is not compatible with Bray's assumption that 'the specialization of labour, often regarded as a precondition for mechanization, is also limited where production units are small.' In many parts of lower Burma the agrarian labour process was broken up into separate operations. Every operation formed a separate contract and it

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<sup>117</sup> Schendel 'Rural Transformation', p. 285.

was rare for any one labourer to be employed on more than two units of work.<sup>118</sup>

Thus both in the Kaveri delta and lower Burma there was a ‘remarkably proletarianized work-force that was employed in commercialized rice production whose profits flowed largely to others: the owners of land and the providers of capital.’

### 3) Tenancy

The third barrier to capitalism in rice-growing societies, Bray points out, is the persistence of tenancy. Schendel however points out that

...many kinds of relations of production are commonly subsumed under the heading of ‘tenancy’, and their consequences for social and economic change differ. There is an important distinction between share-cropping and fixed-rent tenancy, and there are significant differences in rent levels, security of tenure, division of inputs, mode and timing of payment, and autonomy in decision making. It is therefore hazardous to assume that tenancy hampers the rise of agrarian capitalism; in fact, it has been a crucial instrument in that rise in some historical cases.<sup>119</sup>

Secondly Schendel points out that it is ‘somewhat confusing to posit a close link between tenancy, the family farm and smallholding.’ These may be associated but in many cases they are not. Tenants may be large, wealthy rural producers who rent land from absentee landlords and cultivate their substantial holdings with hired labour or subtenants. At the other end of the scale there are tenants who are barely distinguishable from permanent farm labourers because they own no substantial means of production, their work is planned and supervised by their landlord, and they are paid a fixed amount or fixed share of the crop. Moreover these different types of tenants co-exist in a society: tenancy relations themselves can be ordered hierarchically and often

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<sup>118</sup> Furnivall, J.S. *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, p.75, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>119</sup> Schendel, ‘Rural Transformation’, p. 286.

these hierarchies are highly localized. All this makes it difficult to establish a close link between tenancy, family farms and smallholdings and “collapsing them into an archetypal ‘tenant family small holding’ serves little purpose.”

Schendel opines that the eco-technological paradigm as set out by Bray was not convincing in its present form. ‘A rice-centred interpretation of social and economic change seems untenable, and so does the assumption that irrigated rice is somehow a non-capitalist crop.’<sup>120</sup>

### **Bengal: ‘Commercialization without Capitalism’<sup>121</sup>**

With regard to Bengal it can be said that rice was indeed its primary production from very ancient times till the modern period and it was certainly so in the eighteenth century. The production of rice did not require large investments of capital as in cases of other crops like sugar-cane, betel, or tobacco because of the nature of rice-cultivation. The peasant ‘small-holding’ was the unit of production but was hardly self-sufficient. Cash advances were received by the peasants from merchants with which to begin cultivation as the peasantry was perennially resource-constrained. This ensured the commercialization of the rice producing small peasant economy. According to scholars like N.K. Sinha rural differentiation was prevalent in the Bengal countryside where there existed an elite class of peasant munduls or headmen. Similarly Ratnalekha Ray has also emphasized the role of a superior peasantry of jotedars. Rajat Datta however denies the existence of a superior class of peasantry in Bengal. The capital inputs required for cultivation according to him came from merchants and the profits too were incurred by them. Hence rural proletarianization was not absent even if there may not have been sufficient rural differentiation. However peasant production still thrived during the hey-day of colonial capitalism in Bengal and the transition to capitalist farming ‘based on wage-labour, rationalization, mechanization and profit-maximization’ did not occur in Bengal. According to Schendel these were due to largely three factors:

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<sup>120</sup> Schendel, ‘Rural Transformation’, p-288

<sup>121</sup> The phrase ‘Commercialization without Capitalism’ has been borrowed from Robert B. Marks, ‘Commercialization without Capitalism: Processes of Environmental Change in South China 1550-1850,’ *Environmental History*, vol. 1, No. 1, (Jan. 1996), pp. 56-82.

First, ecological conditions obtaining in Bengal made the growth of certain crops more favourable while many other cash crops that became important in the world economy could not be grown at all. The plains of Bengal intersected by the tributaries and the distributaries of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system were for the cultivation of rice but rubber, coffee, tea, tobacco and timber could not be grown, or only in small pockets, and the sugar-cane crop was of poor quality and 'could not be processed to the required degree of purity.' Schendel points out that 'cash cropping in Bengal was therefore based on indigenous crops that found new markets.' According to Schendel the two major cash crops of Bengal from mid-nineteenth century to the present were jute and rice.

Secondly, the very low labour costs made the introduction of labour-saving technology 'unnecessary and unattractive.' Family labour was cheaper than wage-labour and it was employed in the production of rice and jute- the two highly labour intensive crops.

The third factor was 'the system of land-ownership and land taxation.' Schendel points out that in Bengal, the alliance between the landed gentry or the zamindar and the state prevented the growth of agrarian capitalism. He writes:

Commercialized agriculture soon came into conflict with the provisions of the Permanent Settlement which hampered the accumulation of land in the hands of agrarian capitalists. Widespread agitations headed by commercial farmers effected legal changes facilitating land transfers from 1885. But resistance by zamindars and the state was effective in upholding the Permanent Settlement and thereby shackling agrarian capitalism till the end of colonial rule. It was crucially important that the commercial farmers had no clear position within the Permanent Settlement or even within rural social structure. In a few areas they belonged to the zamindari category, but in most parts of Bengal they were

middling peasants or even quite small ones. This made it difficult for them to unite and fight for common interests.<sup>122</sup>

Schendel argues that the colonial state was dependant on the zamindars for the extraction of the surplus and maintenance of rural law and order and further that the state did not intend to antagonize this powerful group. Secondly there was ‘the fear that unshackled agrarian capitalism might dispossess millions of small peasants and produce a vast proletariat for which little employment was available.’ For these reasons the colonial state retained the Permanent Settlement but gradually gave commercial agriculture more facilities as the state was profiting from export duties as well ‘but could not allow them to overtake land taxation.’ Hence according to Schendel it was not the eco-technological proprieties of wet-rice cultivation that blocked agrarian capitalism in Bengal, ‘but a conjuncture of historical developments that could be observed, with local variations, in many peripheral societies.’

Schendel points out that ‘Bengal was a society that became incorporated into the capitalist world system without experiencing the rise of agrarian capitalism. Its agriculture became highly, if unevenly, commercialized but the impact of capitalism on local relations of production was muted by an alliance between the colonial state and zamindars who extracted surplus mainly by means of extra-economic coercion. This fact indicates that comparative research into the dynamics of colonial and post-colonial societies, including those that grow rice, should investigate the conditions under which states side with or against capitalists, whether western or local.’<sup>123</sup>

Thus while Bray’s model of a rice-economy may explain and elucidate certain aspects of Bengal’s agrarian economy, it cannot fully account for the way in which it was shaped in course of the eighteenth century and afterwards. The absence of the growth of capitalism in Bengal was not due to the fact that in Bengal rice was the pre-dominant article of production which did not require heavy capital investments and capitalists to finance these who

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<sup>122</sup> Schendel, ‘Rural Transformation’, pp. 298-299.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

would evict the small peasants in order to work large consolidated farms. Capital did enter production in the form of advances made to peasants by merchants which ensured the commercialization of the rice growing small peasant economy. Colonialism also imposed impediments to the growth of capitalism but the question why capitalism in its full form did not flourish in Bengal is a question that lies outside the purview of our discussion.

### **Bengal: A Monsoon Economy?**<sup>124</sup>

Harry T. Oshima in his book 'Economic Growth in Monsoon Asia: A Comparative Survey'<sup>125</sup> has argued that the monsoon winds in Asia made a definite impact on the economy of the region. Oshima points that the poverty of Monsoon Asia was the direct result of the way the economy was organized depending on monsoon winds that brought heavy rains for half the year and very little for the other half of the year. Oshima points out:

We find that it was the nature of the monsoon winds, which brought heavy rains half of the year and very little in the other half, which gave rise to a type of agriculture different in many aspects from that of the West. The heavy rains led to paddy rice growing, which required a great deal of labor for transplantation and harvesting and which was responsible for the great population densities of monsoon Asia. This immense population, however, was unable to find adequate jobs during the drier half-year, and annual output per worker was low. The nub of the problem of the monsoon economy

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<sup>124</sup> I decided to examine the two conceptual frameworks of 'rice-economy' and 'monsoon-economy' in the context of Bengal after going through Schendel's *Three Deltas*. However my methodology is different from that of Schendel. He examines the ecological conditions of the three deltas- the Bengal delta, the Kaveri delta and the Lower Burma delta and the nature of their economy. In spite of having similar ecological conditions the trajectory of economic development in these three deltas differ. Hence according to Schendel 'conceptual straitjacket's like 'rice-economy' or 'monsoon economy' cannot be applied for these regions altogether for the pre-colonial period. See, Willem van Schendel, *Three Deltas: Accumulation and Poverty in Rural Burma, Bengal and South India*, New Delhi, 1991, p-64. In my work I only focus on the region of Bengal and examine whether the economy of the region in the eighteenth century can be characterised as 'rice-economy' or 'monsoon economy.' I conclude that both these models suffer from the defect of ecological determinism by attributing too much significance to the role of ecology in shaping the economy of the region.

<sup>125</sup> Harry T. Oshima, *Economic Growth in Monsoon Asia: A Comparative Survey*, Tokyo, 1987.

was to transform an economy operating at low levels of underemployment equilibrium to high levels of full employment equilibrium if it was to grow at full speed.<sup>126</sup>

This according to Oshima was the reason for the poverty of Monsoon Asia ‘before the arrival of the Western colonialists.’ Oshima proceeds to outline how economic growth can take place in such a scenario. But here we would like to point out that in eighteenth century Bengal paddy was cultivated throughout the year. As mentioned earlier rice in Bengal consisted of three principal varieties. The *aus* variety was sown about the end of March or beginning of April and was cut in August-September. The *aman* or the winter rice was sown about the middle of May or the beginning of June and reaped in November-December. The *boro dhan* was sown about January-February or cut in April or May. Located in the delta of the Ganges Bengal was intersected by numerous tributaries and distributaries of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system so that the Province was not solely dependent on the monsoon rains for the necessary supply of water for agriculture. We shall point out in chapter 4 that for purposes of irrigation large tanks existed in Bengal which supplied water for agriculture for that part of the year when the monsoon rains did not fall. Thus water from the rivers and tanks made it possible for the Bengali ryott to practice agriculture throughout the year. In addition to rice a wide variety of other crops like sugarcane, betel, tobacco, too were grown in Bengal. The cultivation of these crops was labour intensive and kept the peasants employed throughout the year. Undoubtedly the peasants of Bengal were poor but their poverty was not a result of being idle and unemployed once the monsoon rains ceased. As pointed out earlier the Bengal peasants worked on a system of receiving advances from merchants in order to begin cultivation which were repaid at the time of harvest. By taking advances from the merchants the peasant was denied the privilege of taking his produce to the market. The peasants also lacked the wherewithal to purchase oxen for transporting the grain to the market hence they were dependant on the merchants. This inability of the peasant to access the markets directly resulted in their poverty and not due to the seasonal monsoon rains.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 8

## Extension of the Agrarian Frontier

Although the characteristic feature of wet-rice societies was intensive rather than extensive cultivation of lands, from the sixteenth century onwards Bengal witnessed a rapid reclamation of forest lands where wet-rice cultivation was introduced. This drive of reclamation of forest lands was necessary and occurred towards the eastern parts of Bengal because the active portion of Ganges delta had started moving eastwards.<sup>127</sup> Hence the productivity of lands towards the west declined while the lands towards the east became more fertile and productivity in those parts rose. Richard Eaton has outlined how in the seventeenth century the agricultural expansion in the *Bhati* region proceeded under the aegis of the Muslim *pirs*. Usually a *pir* or some charismatic leader with the authorization of the *zamindar* or the primary holder of a land, built a mosque and then the Mughal state authorities granted virgin lands for the upkeep of the mosque its functionaries and its large number of dependents who helped clear the virgin land and put it to cultivation. This trend of agricultural reclamation of the jungle lands in the east continued for the eighteenth century. However such reclamation of forest lands did not proceed under the aegis of the holy *pir* alone. The landed gentry as well as grain merchants provided the initiative for reclamation of forest lands.<sup>128</sup> In 1791 Robert Kyd remarked that the granaries of Bengal had shifted to Dhaka and Bakarganj when previously these were in Burdwan, Hughli and Rajshahi.<sup>129</sup> In the west though productivity declined in many parts new areas were being

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<sup>127</sup> Kanagopal Bagchi points out that in course of years the area of active delta formation had shifted towards the east making the eastern lands more fertile than the ones in the west. In the areas to the east an increase in the total population had occurred compared to the west. Bagchi points out that the northern part of the delta consisting of the districts of Murshidabad (eastern half), Nadia, Jessore, north-western part of Faridpur, and northern borders of 24 *parganas* and Khulna formed a tract which had been termed the "moribund delta". The area was once prosperous but the active stage of the formation of deltas having moved southward, the fields had become less fertile and the climate unhealthy due to which reason population in some parts had decreased. The 24 *parganas* and Khulna represent that part of the formation of deltas which had been termed "the mature" stage of deltaic formation. The rivers in these parts did not carry a heavy amount of silt and the progressive stages of deltaic formation cannot be observed here. The land supported a considerably large population but there was no rapid increase of it. The active parts of deltaic formation can be observed in Faridpur and Backergunj. The rivers here were still carrying alluvium and depositing it so that this area was highly fertile and supported a large population. See Kanagopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, Calcutta, 1944.

<sup>128</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 68-75.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Kyd cited in *Ibid*, p. 68.



opened up for cultivation in Midnapur and 24 pergunnahs. In eastern Bengal Bakarganj, Jessore and Chittagong underwent rapid reclamation.<sup>130</sup>

In Bakarganj the reclamation work had been started in the early years of the eighteenth century by the combined initiative of the state or the Nizamat and the *talluqdars*<sup>131</sup> and holders of charitable grants of land and by the 1750s it had become the main exporter of rice to Calcutta as well as other towns like Qasimbazar.<sup>132</sup> In Jessore reclamation work was carried out by the landed gentry as well as by grain merchants who made advances of grain to peasants and encouraged them to cultivate new lands. In the east the estuarine forests of Jessore Sunderbans was another area that was being opened up for cultivation.

These wastelands and forested lands that were being reclaimed were assessed at concessional rates to provide incentive to the peasant for undertaking reclamation work. In case of Jessore along with the *zaminders* the grain merchants played an important role in carrying out reclamation work by giving the peasants grain to sow in the newly reclaimed lands. A great part of the reclamation work involved embanking so that channels might not overflow their basins and join the other *khals*, and the marsh land inside could be rendered cultivable. In Jessore the process of reclamation came to a close around 1870s when 'the great forests of the estuarine Jessore had almost entirely been converted into immense rice tracts.'<sup>133</sup> Two other areas in eastern Bengal being opened up for reclamation were Chittagong and Tipperah. Francis Buchanan testifies to reclamation work going on in Chittagong and Tipperah in 1798.

In the district of 24-Parganas the pull of Calcutta was the major factor in facilitating reclamation work in the district. Here too the cultivation of rice was undertaken by peasants by taking advances from grain merchants who sent their agents to the different villages in August or September to make such advances which were to be repaid, with interest, after the harvest.

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<sup>130</sup> Rajat Datta, *Ibid*, p. 70

<sup>131</sup> The *talluqdars* were a part of the landed gentry in Bengal. This form of property emerged in the district of Bengal in the eighteenth century. *Ibid.*, p. 75, pp. 138-147, pp. 161-164.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

Zamindars too made such advances but in their case the repayment was made in cash.

In the 24-parganas wastelands were classified into *khas pateet* and *mahsulat pateet*, the former being land never previously cultivated and the latter referred to lands ‘only fallen waste from the desertion of the Ryotts.’ The *abadi pattadars* were entrusted with the task of reclaiming waste land in the 24 parganas. Peasants who had deserted their lands elsewhere being unable to pay the revenue demanded of them entered into the service of the *abadi pattadars*. Datta points out, “in 1758 out of a measured area of 8,16,416 bighas, ‘zamindars collect Rents on only 4,54,804 *bighas*, the rest being either barren or untenanted or assigned over to servants, idols & ca. In 1779, 433 *abadi pattadars* were instrumental in reclaiming 97,950 *bighas* of land, and by 1791 the ground cleared had increased by another 1,06,219.3 bighas.”<sup>134</sup> The amount of paddy produced in the *puttitabaddy Mehalls* or reclaimed wastelands of Twenty-four pergunnahs is outlined below:

Table: 1

Abstract of the Paddy produced in the Twenty Four Pergunnahs for the Bengal years 1192 (1785-86), 1193 (1786-87) and 1194 (1787-88)

Mehals	Quantity of ground the Paddy is produced on	Quantity of Paddy produced in the following years			Total	Rate of the Paddy sold at 80 Siccas weight in the under-mentioned years	Rate of the Rice sold at 80 Siccas weight in the under-mentioned years
		1192	1193	1194			
	Bighas	Maunds	Maunds	Maunds	Maunds		
<b>Zamindari</b>	6,55,985.05	26,25,541.75	25,85,434.87	19,42,159.40	71,53,134.05	3 Maunds per Rupee	1 Maund 8 seer per Rupee
<b>Mustazery</b>	2,02,987.95	7,54,766.35	8,13,838.72	6,48,692.95	22,17,298.05	2 Maunds 8 Seer per Rupee	1 Maund per Rupee
<b>Puttitabady</b>	28,763.30	1,28,157.75	1,25,152.75	1,21,550.00	3,74,860.50	2 Maund P Rupee	32 Seer per Rupee
	8,87,736.80	35,08,465.85	35,24,426.35	27,12,402.35	97,45,292.60		

**Source:** WBSA, Board of Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings 9<sup>th</sup> May to 16<sup>th</sup> May 1788, vol. no. 40 Part I, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1788.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

In Midnapur waste lands were reclaimed for the cultivation of rice by 'adventurers' who had received grants from Government and invested capital to bring such lands under cultivation. Such 'adventurers' consisted of firstly of the ryotts who were engaged in the cultivation of a type of waste land called 'Poroah' in Tamluk.<sup>135</sup> This was 'common waste land which had not been cultivated' and which the peasants were allowed to hold revenue free for the first three years. Datta argues that as the minimum cost of bringing a *bigha* of such land into cultivation was Rs. 1.52 it would be logical to infer that such reclamation work could only be undertaken by peasants with substantial resources. For larger project of reclamation or those which involved the clearance of *shikast-pateet* or broken waste ground' the initiative was taken by the landed gentry especially the *talluqdars*.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Rajat Datta *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 74.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

## Chapter 2

### The Company, Zamindar and the Peasant: Revenue, Pacification and Opposition

The Company's victory at Plassey was the result of a *coup-de-etat*. Only at Buxar did the Company display its military power. However the victory at these two battles did not secure for the Company its control over Bengal. The zamindars or local powerholders were a class of influential men in the countryside and for the remaining half of the eighteenth century the Company set itself to dismantling the power of the zamindars. While in the plain areas of Bengal it was easier for the Company to impose its control over the zamindars, the remote and inaccessible tracts were more difficult to pacify. By pacification we mean that the inhabitants of these areas would acknowledge subservience to the Company's authority and display no opposition towards it. But the zamindars of these areas had enjoyed a degree of autonomy under previous regimes and would not easily submit to the Company's increasing intrusion. For the greater part of the eighteenth century therefore the Company was involved in various military campaigns aimed at pacification of several hostile territories within the province. Since the control of the Company over the hill-forests was precarious they did not get their due share of revenue from these parts unlike in the plains of Bengal where the Company generally usurped the zamindari of a defaulting zamindar. Nevertheless even in the plains of Bengal, the displacement of the traditional zamindars by revenue farmers led to opposition from the peasants. Without the help of the zamindar's local militia which was disbanded [see next chapter] the Company also had great difficulties in suppressing dacoity and *sanyasi-fakir* incursions that came to plague the Bengal countryside [see Appendix 1 &2]. Deltaic Bengal was another zone where the Company's revenue operations were thwarted by *Magh* as well native piracy. This chapter looks at the variegated process of revenue extraction in the three different eco-zones of Bengal – the plains, the outlying forests and hilly tracts and the delta. It looks at the opposition that the Company encounters in the collection of revenue in these areas and how it negotiated such opposition to create a state-structure and a revenue machinery that was stronger than any of its predecessors.

## Revenue Extraction in the Plains of Bengal

The fertile plains of Bengal were the areas where the state's revenue extraction was maximum both under the Nizamat and the Company-State. In these areas the economy was based on settled agriculture. The zamindars, or the local powerholders were easily made subservient to the will of the state unlike the chieftains of the jungle or the mountains.

## The Nizamat and its Revenue Machinery in the Plains

Murshid Quli Khan founded the Nizamat in Bengal when Mughal authority started to decline in Delhi. By remitting increased amounts of revenue from the Bengal *suba* Murshid Quli gained imperial favours. From 1700-1722 revenues from the Bengal *suba* rose from Rs. 11,728,541 to Rs. 14,115,363-an increase of over 20 percent in 22 years, compared to an increase of about 22 ½ percent during the entire 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>137</sup> Revenue, according to the long-standing custom, was collected from the peasants by the zamindars. The method of revenue collection from the peasant by the zamindar through the channel of intermediaries is described by the author of the *Risala-i-Ziraat*<sup>138</sup> thus:

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<sup>137</sup> Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700-1740", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Aug., 1970), pp. 799-806, p. 802. Calkins points out that if we compared the figures for the revenue demand of Bengal in 1580 with those for the revenue demand of 150 years later, we find that the total increase for the province was about 22 ½ per cent. Calkins points out that 'compared to the increases in the revenue demand which were made in most of the provinces of northern India during the seventeenth century, this increase in Bengal was proportionately very slight.' The low levels of revenue extraction was not because Bengal was a province with poor resources rather in course of the seventeenth century there was extension of the agrarian frontier and trade with Europeans increased. Since the state did not appropriate the increased resources Calkins points out that these increased resources was appropriated by three groups- 'those *mansabdars* (Mughal officials) who held *jagirs* (revenue assignments) in Bengal; the zamindars, who held title to the revenue- collecting rights from the Mughal government; and the intermediate collectors who held revenue rights between the village level and that of the zamindari.'

<sup>138</sup> *Risala-i-Ziraat: A Treatise on Agriculture* tr. by Harbans Mukhia in *Perspectives in Medieval History*, Delhi, 1993, p-270. Prof. Harbans Mukhia on the basis of the Murray Papers unearthed by Prof. Rajat Datta from the Home Misc. Series of the India Office Library, fixed the date of composition of the treatise at 1785. Prof. Mukhia points out that this was the time when the Company officials were trying to make sense of the nature of land tenure and landed property in Bengal. They were consulting the native *qanungoes* and *mutasaddis* in order to understand the nature of land tenure in Bengal. The *Risala* as Prof. Mukhia points out 'fits into this genre perfectly.' Prof. Mukhia postulates that 'James Graham was closely associated with the early revenue experiments of the Company in Bengal. It is probable that Murray, an otherwise obscure official, was assigned by Graham the task of getting a *mutasaddi* to give details of his version of the working of the system...that the author was a

First, the watchman would collect revenue from the cultivators according to the *patwari*'s demand order (*chitthi*) and bring it over to the *patwari* and the *gumashta*<sup>139</sup>;

Second, the *patwari* and the *gumashta* would collect the revenue of the village at one place and, after deducting the expense of the *mufassal* would remit the rest to the *tarafdar*<sup>140</sup>;

Third, the *tarafdar* would remit the revenue from one village or three or four village-settlements that fell within his jurisdiction to the *shiqdar*<sup>141</sup> after deducting the expenses of the *mufassal*;

Fourth, the *shiqdar* who looked after four or five villages passed on the revenues of the *mufassal* to the revenue-farmer (*mustajir*) or the zamindar at the *sadr* after deducting the expenses;

Fifth, the revenue-farmer or the zamindar would prepare an invoice (*chalan*) of the *pargana* revenues after deducting the expenses of the *mufassal*, also called expenses of the *pargana*,...<sup>142</sup>

Apart from the collection of revenue the zamindars were also supposed to maintain law and order within their jurisdictions, to keep the lines of communication functioning by assisting the *dak*-bearers, to advance loans to the ryotts for them to begin cultivation, and to look after irrigation and embankments. The zamindars had vast resources in men and money and in

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*mutasaddi* seems fairly certain, going by the emphasis he places on his central role in the system.'

<sup>139</sup> The *patwari* and the *gumashta* according to the *Risala* were to be found in every village which implies that these two were village officials who sent the watchman to collect the revenues from the cultivators.

<sup>140</sup> The *Risala* points out: 'the *tarafdar*, also called *inhtimamdar*, looked after from one to four or five villages.'

<sup>141</sup> The *shiqdar* was in charge of four or five villages, *Risala*, p. 269

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

order for the state to be strong and centralized it was imperative that the local power holders be kept in check.

Murshid Quli, the founder of the Nizamat in Bengal, made some significant financial reforms aimed at the maximization of revenues. First, he transferred many of the *jagirs* of the *mansabdars* from Bengal to Orissa whereby the rich lands of Bengal came under *khalisa* lands whose revenue went directly to government and less fertile lands of Orissa was given to the *mansabdars*. By this means Murshid Quli augmented the income of the state. Second he made a measurement of the cultivable and waste lands. Third he made a *hustabood* or a comparative statement of the collections of former years with the present. Finally he collected the rents due from the zamindars with great severity and punctuality. Regarding the severity in the collection of revenue under Murshid Quli the *Riyaz* points out:

And fear of his personality was so deeply impressed on the hearts of all, both the high and the low, that the courage of lion-hearted persons quailed in his presence. The Khan did not allow petty zamindars access to his presence. And the *mutسادis* and *amilis* and leading zamindars had not the heart to sit down in his presence; on the contrary, they remained standing breathless like statues. Hindu zamindars were forbidden to ride on *palkis*,... At the close of each month, he used to seize all the agreements of *Khalsah* (crown lands) and *Jagirs*. Till the dues on account of those agreements were paid up into the Imperial Treasury, he caused *mutسادis*, *amilis*, *zamindars*, *qanungos* and other officers to remain in duress in the *DiwanKhana* of the *Chihel Satun* Palace. Setting collecting peons to realise the dues, he did not allow the defaulters leave for eating or drinking or for answering calls of nature, and posted spies over the peons, so that none of the latter, owing to temptations of bribe, might supply a drop of water to the thirsty defaulters. Week after week they had to pass without food and drink, and at the same time he had them suspended, head downwards, to

triangles off the ground, and had their feet rubbed against stones, and had them whipped ; and in beating with sticks he shewed no quarter. And he converted to the Mohammedan religion the *amlahs* of zamindars with their wives and children, who, in spite of being scourged with sticks, failed to pay up the State revenue-collections that they had misappropriated.<sup>143</sup>

In another instance the *Riyaz* mentions,

At that time Syed Akram Khan who held the office of Diwan of Bengal died, and Syed Razi Khan, husband of Nafisah Khanam, a daughter of Shujau-d-diu Muhammad Khan, (Nawab Nazim of the Suba of Orissa and son-in-law of Nawab Jafar Khan,) who was the scion of a leading Syed family of Arabia, was appointed *Diwan* of Bengal. And he was a bigoted and short-tempered man, and in collection of dues was extremely strict, and by adopting harsh measures collected the revenue. It is said he prepared a Reservoir full of filth, and as in the language of the Hindus Paradise is called '*Baikant*', he sneeringly named this Reservoir "*baikant*." He used to thrust into this Reservoir the defaulting Zamindars and defaulting Collectors of Revenue. After torturing them in various ways and making them undergo various privations, he used to collect in entirety the arrears.<sup>144</sup>

Gladwin's translation *Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal* corroborates this account and adds that the defaulting zamindars were also obliged by Syed Razi Khan 'to wear leather long drawers, filled with live cats. He would force them to drink buffaloes milk mixed with salt, till he brought them to death's

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<sup>143</sup> *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, pp. 257-259.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265



door by a diarrhoea. By these means he used to collect the revenues to the uttermost dam.<sup>145</sup>

Another significant revenue reform under Murshid Quli was the changes he made in the structure of landholding in Bengal. Murshid Quli encouraged the formation of big zamindaris. Under him half of the land revenue of Bengal was paid by six large zamindars.<sup>146</sup> Rajshahi, Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, Birbhum and Bishnupur were the big zamindaris of Bengal under him.<sup>147</sup> From Murshid Quli's time there also began the practice of levying a Subadari *abwab* or a 'permanent pecuniary levy' upon the zamindars.<sup>148</sup>

Murshid Quli also extended the authority of the Nizamat over zamindars in the outlying areas of the plains of Bengal. The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* thus points out:

The zamindars of Birbhum and Bishanpur [Bishnupur], being protected by dense forests, mountains and hills, did not personally appear before the Nawab, but deputed instead their agents to carry on transactions on their behalf, and through them used to pay in the usual tributes, presents, and gifts. In consideration of the fact that Asadullah, zamindar of Birbhum, was a pious and saintly person and had bestowed half of his property as *Madad-i-mash* grants on learned, pious and saintly persons, and had fixed daily doles of charity for the poor and the indigent, the Khan refrained from molesting him. He directed his attention, however, to the chastisement of the zamindar of Bishanpur, whose items of expenditure were heavy, and whose collections of rents from *mahals* were low.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Francis Gladwin tr. *Narrative of the Transaction in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1788, p. 79

<sup>146</sup> N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 2, p. 17.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>149</sup> *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, pp. 256-257.

Towards the deltaic area in the south the Nizamat authority was challenged by one rebel zamindar named Sitaram. The biggest zamindari rebellion under Murshid Quli was that of Sitaram, the zamindar of Mahmudabad. According to the Gladwin's *Narrative* 'Sitaram, the zamindar of *pergunnah* Mahmoodabad, entertained a band of robbers, with whom he used to infest the roads, and carry off the cattle from the neighbouring country; and, when pursued, they took refuge in jungles and lakes.'<sup>150</sup> The *Riyaz* points out, that 'Sitaram, zamindar of Parganah Mahmudabad, being sheltered by forests and rivers, had placed the hat of revolt on the head of vanity. Not submitting to the Viceroy, he declined to meet the Imperial officers, and closed against the latter all the avenues of access to his tract. He pillaged and raided the lands adjoining to his Zamindari, and also quarrelled with the Imperial garrisons and Faujdars.'<sup>151</sup> While in Gladwin's *Narrative* Sitaram has been dubbed as a 'robber' yet the available evidence seems to point otherwise.

Aniruddha Ray points out that 'the number of expensive temples and extensive ruins along with the construction of at least two big tanks, allegedly attributed to him, would suggest more than average collection of revenue, which, in this period and in such an area, would mostly come from agriculture. In that case, his zamindari would be quite extensive to be able to invest on such constructions.'<sup>152</sup> According to Abdul Karim the fortification of Sitaram's residence would indicate that Sitaram had 'gathered a strong force under him' which was probably organised for the sake of protecting his territory from the Magh and Portuguese pirates who came from further south.<sup>153</sup>

According to both Gladwin's *Narrative of the Transactions* and Ghulam Husain Salim's account it is clear that the *faujdar* Abu Turab was unable to defeat Sitaram. The *Narrative* points out that this was because the *faujdar*'s forces were inadequate and that Murshid Quli did not reinforce these forces as the *faujdar* was not in good terms with him. Subsequently Sitaram

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<sup>150</sup> Gladwin, *Narrative of the Transactions*, p. 89.

<sup>151</sup> *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, pp. 265-266.

<sup>152</sup> Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels: Bengal c. 1575- c. 1715*, New Delhi, 1998, p.176.

<sup>153</sup> Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and his Times*, Dacca, 1963, p. 52.

accidentally murdered the *faujdar* Abu Turab mistaking him for Pir Khan, Abu Turab's general. For this he was chastised by Murshid Quli who feared the resentment of the Emperor on hearing of the killing of the imperial *faujdar* by a rebel leader. With the help of other zamindars Murshid Quli extirpated Sitaram. Although the killing of Abu Tarab has been taken as the primary reason by the Persian chronicles for the downfall of Sitaram yet there may be another reason why Murshid Quli chose to depose him. Aniruddha Ray has pointed out that Sitaram may not have been a rebel. As a part of his revenue reforms Murshid Quli created six large zamindaris which would be responsible for collecting revenues from the smaller zamindaris. These big zamindars would be his creation and entirely dependent on him and 'in case of another change in Delhi or if his position becomes untenable, these new zamindaris would be far more dependable, than the officials and the Mansabdars, most of whom were transferred outside Bengal.' Sitaram was not his creation and had managed to make himself powerful taking advantage of the weakness of the Mughal administration in the province. After his death Murshid Quli was free to create a new structure.<sup>154</sup>

Philip Calkins has argued that there developed a partnership between the Nizamat administration and 'the more important members of the indigenous landed ruling group.'<sup>155</sup> This partnership became complete when the group of merchant bankers joined it. The power of this partnership was demonstrated when Sarfaraz Khan was overthrown in favour of Alivardi Khan in 1740. Shirin Akhtar however disagreed with Calkins theory in pointing out that there was not any 'partnership' between the zamindars and the Nizamat administration but rather the zamindars were a class of opportunists who sided with whoever granted them the maximum benefits.<sup>156</sup> After the death of Murshid Quli Khan, there was a succession dispute. Shuja Khan and his son Sarfaraz Khan, whom Murshid Quli had nominated as his successor, were the rival contenders trying to establish themselves as the Nawab of Bengal. Later on, Sarfaraz Khan stepped aside in favour of his father. However Sarfaraz Khan was ousted by Alivardi Khan as the Nawab of Bengal. During these two

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<sup>154</sup> Aniruddha Ray, *Merchants, Landowners, Rebels*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>155</sup> Philip B. Calkins, 'Formation...' p. 800

<sup>156</sup> Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of Zamindars in Bengal 1707-1772*, Dacca, 1982, p. 29.

periods of crisis the zamindars displayed their opportunism. Many of the zamindars who had sided with Shuja Khan were ready to transfer their allegiance to Alivardi Khan, instead of Shuja Khan's successor Sarfaraz Khan. Again though the zamindars remained faithful to Alivardi Khan during the Maratha invasion, they brought about the downfall of Alivardi's successor Siraj-ud-dowlah by siding with the English and Mir Jafar.<sup>157</sup> The support or the opposition of the zamindar was therefore crucial in politics of Bengal. This was because the bigger zamindars of Bengal had vast resources at their disposal both economic and military.

Murshid Quli's administration was strong and he managed to extract the obedience from even the zamindars in the outlying areas of the plains of Bengal but after him the control over such areas lessened. For instance, even though Murshid Quli made the Raja of Bishnupur subservient to his authority, the Raja asserted his independence under the successors of Murshid Quli. Thus Holwell points out that the Raja of Bishnupur defied all attempts to bring him under the subservience of the Nizamat. Holwell writes:

To the west of Burdwan, somewhat northerly lie the lands belonging to Rajah Gopaul Sing, of the Raazpoot [Rajput] Bramhin tribe.; they possess an extent of sixteen days travel, this district possesses an annual revenue of between thirty and forty lac; but from happiness of his situation, he is perhaps the most independent Rajah of *Indostan*, having it always in his power to overflow his country, and drown any enemy that comes against him; as happened in the beginning of Sujah Khan's government, who sent a strong body of horse to reduce him, these he suffered to advance far into his country, then opening the dams of the rivers destroyed them to a man; this action deterred any subsequent attempts to reduce him- but if the frontiers of the district were so invested, as to prevent the exit of the merchandize of his country, which might easily be done, he would be presently

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

brought to obedience and glad to compound for a treaty of twenty lac per Annum; as it is, he can hardly be said to acknowledge any allegiance to the Mogul or the Soubah, an acknowledgement by way of Selammy (or present) of 15,000 Rupees, sometimes 20,000 and some years not anything at all.<sup>158</sup>

Meanwhile the East India Company was becoming stronger day by day so that in 1757 they could act as king-makers in league with other powerful factions of the Nizamat court by deposing Nawab Sirajud-Daulah. From then onwards the power of the Company over the Bengal affairs kept increasing and after defeating Mir Qasim in the battle of Buxar the Company's authority over Bengal was firmly established. In 1765 the Company obtained the grant of Diwani by which the Company became the Diwan and was entitled to collect the revenues of Bengal. For the next few years continued the dual administration of the Nizamat and the Company. The devastating famine of 1769-1770 occasioned a change in the policy of the East India Company. In 1772 they decided to assume full Diwani powers.

### **The Company-State and its Revenue Machinery in the Plains**

The revenue machinery of the Company-State worked with more vigour than that of the Nizamat. In the plains the Company followed a systematic policy of eroding the authority of the local powerholders. From 1772-1793 the Company made a series of revenue experiments in Bengal. The cumulative effect of these revenue experiments was increased revenue extraction from the Bengal countryside.

The most effective method of decreasing the resources at the disposal of the zamindars was increased revenue extraction that curtailed the resources of the zamindar and at the same time enriched the coffers of the state. Thus over-assessment became a characteristic feature of the revenue experiments of the Company whether the Farming System, the Zamindari Settlement, the Decennial Settlement or the Permanent Settlement. While the demands of the

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<sup>158</sup> J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*, London, 1776, Part I, p. 198.

Company-state on the zamindars increased, their incomes further decreased as a result of the prohibition of collecting tolls (to which we turn in chapter-4). The zamindar as a mark of his authority over his subjects also imposed miscellaneous charges on them. Under Murshid Quli Khan the Nizamat imposed *abwabs* on the zamindars who in turn passed on the burden of these new impositions upon the ryotts. For instance the *abwab Mangun* was imposed on the ryott for a 'major life-cycle ceremony in the zamindar's family,' like marriages, birth of a son or daughter and *shraddhas*. Part of this *mangun* was returned back to the community when the zamindar gave a feast on these occasions. The zamindar also collected fines on the 'occasion of villagers' marriages and other life-cycle ceremonies, as well as on a violation of sanctioned standards of conduct.' The most common such fine was fine given on a subject's marriage (*marucha* or *bie-dan*). McLane points out that 'these fines were not of much economic importance to the zamindar but were symbols of his mastership over his *prajas* or subjects.'<sup>159</sup> But the Company-State forbade the levying of these cesses upon the ryotts.<sup>160</sup> By this measure the Company challenged the traditional authority of the zamindars over the ryotts. *Abwabs* however continued to be collected as the Revenue Department noted in 1873<sup>161</sup> but the authority of the zamindar for collecting these cesses was no longer legally valid.

By the five year farming system revenue collecting rights were sold to the highest bidders for a term of five years. In many areas the old zamindars

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<sup>159</sup> John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-century Bengal*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 62.

<sup>160</sup> The *Bundobusty Sunnud* given to those zamindars with whom a settlement was made for their own zamindaries in 1777 categorically pointed out: 'He [the Zamindar] is not to collect from the Ryotts the articles of *Dery Maungun*, *Sood*, *Batta*, and other *aboabs*... The *Bazee Jumma* and *Marocha* &ca having been prohibited by Government and deducted in the former settlement, he is not to collect these articles from the Ryotts.' WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 2<sup>nd</sup> June to 29<sup>th</sup> September 1777 (sect. series.) vol. 16, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1777. In 1771, in response to Rajah Byjenaut's, (zamindar of Dinajpur) *arzee* to the Company, expressing dissatisfaction over his allowance of 1 lakh of Rupees, the Naib Diwan pointed out that Rajah Byjenaut, zamindar of Dinajpur, could not collect *Mangun*, *Parbonee* from the ryotts and therefore should be allowed an increased allowance of 1,50,000 without which he would be unable to maintain himself. This shows that the collection of additional cesses from the ryotts, by the zamindars, was forbidden by 1771-1772. W.K. Firminger ed. *Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad* (henceforth, CCRM), vol. VII (A): 2<sup>nd</sup> September to 21<sup>st</sup> October 1771, Calcutta, 1923, pp. 78-79.

<sup>161</sup> John McLane, *Land and Local Kingship*, p. 68.

were converted into farmers under the British Government or became under-renters under the farmers of their own hereditary property. For instance Rani Bhowani of Rajshahi outbided all competitors<sup>162</sup> and became a farmer of her own zamindari. The zamindars who were deprived of their zamindaris were granted *moshaira*, or maintenance allowance.<sup>163</sup> But the five year farming experiment also marked the entry of the Calcutta *banian* as farmers of estates in the ceded districts. For instance, forty-two *parganas* of Midnapore were given to Krishna Kanta Nandi of Cossimbazar, governor's *banian* and two to Kasinath Babu, a Calcutta *banian*.<sup>164</sup> By this the old class of hereditary zamindars was being broken up in the areas ceded to the Company.

Secondly the Company began to interfere in matters that were so long under the sole authority of the zamindars. The zamindars were in charge of irrigation and embanking within their zamindaris. The Nizamat is not known to have interfered in these matters but the Company appointed a Superintendent to ensure that the zamindars executed this task properly. The zamindars were also forbidden to collect tolls on merchandize passing through their territories. Although they were required to ensure that thefts and decoity did not take place within their zamindaris they were not allowed to keep troops for that purpose. Under the Nizamat the zamindars were accustomed to collecting tolls and also had a body of armed retainers in their service. But under the Company administration the zamindars no longer had the wherewithal to keep bodies of *thanadars* and *paiks* and pay compensation for crimes committed within their jurisdiction. The Company state now interfered in these matters although they were unable to take complete responsibility. [A full discussion on the infrastructural control of the zamindars in which the Company-State now began to interfere is given in Chapter-4].

A very important function of the zamindar in the rural economy of Bengal was his duty to advance loans or *taqavi* to help the indigent ryotts to

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<sup>162</sup> N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 2, p. 69.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

purchase seed and agricultural implements in order to begin cultivation.<sup>165</sup> However since the resources of the zamindar came to be reduced they in their turn borrowed the money to be advanced in *taqavi* to the peasants from the Company-State. In May 1770, Jacob Rider the Supervisor of Nadia wrote that the ryotts of Nadia were in dire need for *taqavi* but the Nadia Raja was so much in arrears that they could not expect him to grant them this indulgence.<sup>166</sup> The Company records show that for the years 1777, 1778, 1779, 1780 the zamindars of Purnea requested for *taqavi* loans from the state.<sup>167</sup> It would be perhaps not wrong to surmise that this was the case in other years as well when the zamindar could not advance loan to the ryotts. In

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<sup>165</sup> The state too could advance *taqavi* loans as the *Riyaz-us-Salatin* points out that Murshid Quli advanced loans to the ryotts. *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p. 256. But this practice may have been for the *khalisa* lands that were directly under state management.

<sup>166</sup> W.K. Firminger ed., *The Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Durbar at Murshidabad 1769-1770*, Calcutta, 1919, pp. 112-113.

<sup>167</sup> 'The Purnea zamindars send in the following *arzee* requesting Tuccavy -  
From Rajah Inder narrain &ca.  
Zamindars of Purnea.

In the Month of Faugon it is usual to advance Tuccavy to the Ryotts to enable them to cultivate the Lands for the Baudon Harvest but as we are unable to give them this assistance we hope you will favor us with the usual loan, which we will punctually repay. As it has always been usual to advance Tuccavy to the Ryotts of Purnea to enable them to proceed in the cultivation of their Lands, and as it will be particularly useful and greatly promote the success of the ensuing years' Revenue, to afford them this assistance at an early season-

Agreed we address the Honble Governor General and Council of Revenue on the subject as follows:-

To the Honble Warren Hastings, Esqr.  
Governor General &ca. Council of Revenue  
At Fort William

Honble Sir and Sirs,

The zamindars of Purnea have applied to us for an advance of Tuccavy to enable him to proceed in the cultivation of their lands for the ensuing year.-

In this district it has always been usual for Government to grant the assistance of Tuccavy to those who had charge of the Revenue, and it will be particularly useful and greatly promote the success of the next year's revenue if your Honour &ca. will please to allow its being advanced at this early season. We apprehend the sum of 60,000 Rupees will be sufficient for this purpose.

We are &ca.

/signed/ Chief & Council'

See, WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue ay Dinajpur, vol. no. 10, 6<sup>th</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1778, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1778; For 1779, see WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 19<sup>th</sup> January to 18<sup>th</sup> May 1779, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1779; For 1780 see, WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 4<sup>th</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> May 1780, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1780.



1777, the state gave  $\frac{3}{4}$  th of the *taqavi* loans demanded by the zamindars of Purnea:

**Table: 2**

Amount of the *Taqavi* Loans Demanded by the Zamindar and Amount advanced by the State

Names of the Zamindaris	Amount of <i>Taqavi</i> loan demanded by the Zamindar	Amount Advanced by the State
	Rupees	Rupees
Havilly Purnea	21,700	16,275
Surjapore	7,000	5,270
Tajepore	2,500	1,875
Usjah	1,000	750
Coolrah	2,500	1,875
Dulaarpore	1,500	1,125
Boerah	500	375
Kuddah	1,100	825
Durrampore	6,700	5,025
Duppah	700	525
Teracordah	350	262.5
Bahdore	6,000	4,500
Powah Colley	500	375
<b>Total:</b>	<b>52,050</b>	<b>39,037.5</b>

**Source:** WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1777 to 30 September 1777, vol. 8, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1777

With regard to revenue another important privilege enjoyed by the zamindar was his authority to give tax-free lands to his servants (*chakeran*) and as charity to religious men (*baz-i-zemin*). These lands were known by the general denomination of *la-kharaj* lands. *La-kharaj* grants were initially made by the state to bring into cultivation the frontier tracts like lands in Chittagong and Sylhet.<sup>168</sup> However emulating the example of the state the zamindars also gave *la-kharaj* lands to their servants and religious men. So did the inferior landholders under them. (See Table 3).

**Table: 3**

Account of the *La-kharaj* Lands in the Zamindari of Havilly Purnea

Denominations of lands	Quantity granted by the Zamindars, Nabobs, &ca <i>Bighas</i>	Quantity granted by Zamindar's Gomastahs, servants & Farmers <i>Bighas</i>	Quantity held by <i>Soorhuthauls</i> <i>Bighas</i>	Total <i>Bighas</i>	Estimated value at 6 annas per <i>bigha</i> <i>Bighas</i>
<i>Bermooter</i>	63,787.50	25761.30	959.90	90,508.70	33,940.75
<i>Debutter</i>	1,517.10	1223.75	-	2,740.85	1,027.81
<i>Shebbawn</i>	166.10	522.50	-	688.60	258.18
<i>Boutoutter</i>	514.50	464.50	-	979.00	367.12
<i>Muddutmash</i>	19,801.65	4262.35	1793.90	25,857.90	9,696.68
<i>Khyraut</i>	6,674.30	6020.10	789.40	13,483.80	5,056.30
<i>Zurr Khurrid</i>	2,033.85	2396.20	204.50	4,634.55	1,737.93
<i>Enamaut</i>	5,378.90	1760.30	27.00	7,166.20	2,687.31
<i>Suddah Birr</i>	501.00	205.00	-	706.00	264.75
<i>Hebbah Namma</i>	439.50	37.00	-	476.50	178.68
<i>Mauffey</i>	1,033.65	1428.30	32.55	2,494.50	935.43
	1,01,848.05	44081.30	3,807.25	1,49,736.60	56,151.18

<sup>168</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 147.

**Source:** WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 9<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> August 1782, vol. 17, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1782.

On 27<sup>th</sup> November 1771 James Harris, the Supervisor of Dacca wrote to James Alexander and the members of the Controlling Council of Revenue,

I shall use my utmost endeavours to procure a statement of the *Bazee Zemin*, or charity lands, in my district, As not only the *Suba*, the Nabobs under him, but even the zamindars and *talukdars* themselves have been permitted to make grants of this kind, it will be a work of time, before they can be ascertained with any degree of justness.<sup>169</sup>

In his discussion on *la-kharaj* property in eighteenth century Bengal Rajat Datta points out that the East India Company regarded *la-kharaj* grants as detrimental to the state's financial interest because they did not pay revenue. They found that zamindars 'carried this practice so far as to leave the *malguzzary* [revenue-paying] land totally incapable of yielding the *jama* and suffered the nominal zamindari to be sold for the balance, retaining the *bazee zemin*, a profitable estate, for their support.'<sup>170</sup>

On October 18<sup>th</sup> 1771, a letter was dispatched from Fort William written by John Cartier, Samuel Middleton and Claud Russell to James Alexander Chief and the Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, stating,

We have also under our consideration the immense sums alienated from the public revenue, by grants of lands under denomination of charity, in which we are persuaded there have been and still exist many abuses. We do not wish to invalidate such grants as are authentic, that are appropriated to pious abuses, or the maintenance of the real objects of charity, but we cannot approve of vast drawbacks from the

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<sup>169</sup> CCRM, vol.8, p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society Economy and the Market*, p. 148.

revenue, either from unauthorized grants or unmerited claims to indulgencies of this kind.<sup>171</sup>

The Company authorities therefore wanted a thorough enquiry to be carried out with regard to tax-free lands and who according to the custom of the country were entitled to make tax-free grants and whether these were hereditary in nature.<sup>172</sup> Subsequently the Company decided that all grants of this tax-free lands 'made since the date of the cession of the Duane to the Company, unless they have been authorized by the administration at this place, may be considered rather as collusive deeds, calculated to alienate the public revenue, than lawful regular *sunnuds* founded upon proper and justifiable pretensions.'<sup>173</sup> But the tax-free land grants that were made under the Nizamat were not resumed. This may be because the Company was apprehensive that doing away with these charitable grants altogether would be a harsh and unpopular measure for the natives were used to enjoying such grants under the previous administrations. In some instances where the holders of tax-free lands failed to register their *sunnuds* in due time the Company was lenient. On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1771, the Council at Murshidabad censured Henry Cottrell, the Supervisor of Dinajpur for seizing the lands and crops of a Bazee Zemin holder who had failed to register his *sunnud* in time.

We are sorry to be under the necessity of signifying our disapprobation of the steps you have taken relative to the *bazee zemeen* Lands. Allowances should be made for the superstitious prejudices of the Natives and instead of enforcing our orders on them with rigour and severity all lenient measures should be adopted to ingratiate their affections to our government, admitting therefore in the present case that the proprietors of the *bazee zemeen*, have been guilty of an infringement of the publication for registering their *sunnuds*, we think you were too hasty in immediately ordering these lands to be resumed and what

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<sup>171</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 7, p. 121.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> W.K. Firminger ed. *The Letter Copy Books of the Resident*, p.184.

crops were upon them to [.....] & brought to account, and that you ought not to have taken these steps without express authority from us. We ... desire that you will prolong the publication until the period of concluding the new year's settlement & in the [...] restore to the proprietors the lands from which they have been dispossessed together with the produce of the crops that have been sold. Should they notwithstanding this Extension of indulgence still persist in disobedience in particular, you will then represent what arguments and objections they may urge and apply to us for our final determination.<sup>174</sup>

The proceedings of 1<sup>st</sup> August 1771 record that Mr. James Harris, Supervisor of Dacca was instructed to put in possession proprietors of some charity lands in Sylhet when the proprietors complained that the officers of Sylhet were trying to deprive them of their possession by making exorbitant and unjust demands on them. The complainant was one Hukkim Nussur Ullah who had received the grant from Nabob Shumshair Khan for them to procure a subsistence out of it and for defraying hospital expenses. They had enjoyed the grant of land for upwards of 40 years and had proper *sunnuds* to substantiate their claim. Hence as the establishment and rights of the petitioners were judged to be of long standing and it was recommended that they should be put in possession of their lands.<sup>175</sup>

But the general policy of the Company was to put it out of the power of the zamindars to either grant or resume tax-free lands<sup>176</sup> a privilege which they had enjoyed under the Nizamat.<sup>177</sup> Similarly the Farmers of lands

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<sup>174</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 4, p. 98.

<sup>175</sup> *CCRM*, vol.6 pp. 50-51.

<sup>176</sup> The Bundobusty Sunnud given to those zamindars with whom a settlement is made for their own zamindaries in 1777 pointed out: he [the zamindar] is religiously, and faithfully and with truth and rectitude to carry on, and attend to the duties and offices annexed there unto... He is not without the orders of Government to Resume any gardens or Tanks, or any Lands known under the Denomination of Dewitter, Burmoter, Mohuteran, aima, Muctut (?), Mash, Peeran, Tackeeran Lackerage, and Dehaat asstemrar, neither is he to make any new grants without the sunnud of Government...'

<sup>177</sup> *La-khiraj* grants were made by the zamindars and talluqdars with the approval of the state before 1765, See, Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-148.

were also prohibited from either making or resuming tax-free lands.<sup>178</sup> Because, if the zamindars and the farmers were allowed to give *bazee zemin* grants then the Company-State would suffer a loss in its revenues and hence the practice was prohibited.

The Company also interfered in the internal affairs of the zamindari like the management of expenditure. Many of the zamindars were prone to spending above their incomes. The Company records show that the Company, in case of some zamindars, made a blue-print for reducing the expenditure of the zamindars after calculating their income from different sources and their expenditure on different items. Table:4 gives the plan proposed by the Company for reducing the expenditure of the zamindars. As the table shows the proposed reductions were drastic. The expenditure of the zamindar of Dinajpur, which exceeded his income by a large margin, was reduced by about 68% in the Company's scheme. The records however do not mention if the plan proposed by the Company was implemented.

**Table: 4**

Plan for Reduction of Zamindari Expenses

Zamindaris	Income (from private lands, <i>moshaira</i> and other sources) Rupees	Expenditure Rupees	Expenditure above Income Rupees	Expenditure proposed by Company Rupees	% reduction in expenditure (as proposed by the Company)
zamindar of	8,439.75	16,745.50	8,305.75	5,454.93	67.4

<sup>178</sup> Amalnama given to the Farmers in 1777 pointed out: 'He [the Farmer] is not without the orders of Government to resume any Garden or Tanks or any Lands known under the denomination of Devotter, Bermutter, ayma, mudut maish, puran Takeeran, Lakherage, and Etemrar Detract neither is he to make new grants of any such lands without Sunnud from Government.' WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 2<sup>nd</sup> June to 29<sup>th</sup> September 1777, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1777.

<b>Satsyka</b>					
<b>zamindar of the 3 Annas 4 Gundas Division of Jelalpore</b>	3,373.43	2,839.18	(-)534.25	1,570.30	44.69
<b>zamindar of Dinajpur</b>	4,01,423.75	5,66,738.37	1,65,314.62	1,79,452.0	68.33
<b>13 Anna Division of Chundlee</b>	6,630.06	6,818.06	188.0	4,268.0	37.3
<b>8 Anna Division of FuttaSing</b>	7,591.37	6,868.18	(-) 723.19	3,524.0	48.69
<b>Moysadol</b>	48,296.87	43,616.87	(-) 4,680.0	30,079.18	31.03
<b>4 Annas Division of Momensing</b>	7456.37	10,311.68	2,855.31	5,407.0	47.56
<b>6 Annas Division of Mahomed Aminpoor</b>	10,784.75	14,949.06	4,164.31	7,200.0	51.83
<b>4 Anna Division of Seidpoor</b>	13,337.43	15,601.50	2,264.07	7,103.81	54.4

**Source:** WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 3<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1783, vol. 23, Appendix for the month of January 1783

**Table: 5**

A Comparative Account of the Original Items of Expenditure of the Dinajpur Zamindar together with an Account of Reduction Proposed by the Company.

A.	B.	C.
<b>Individual Items of Expenditure as percentage of total expenditure</b>	<b>Annual expense at present incurred by the zamindar on various items as listed in A.</b>	<b>Proposed Expenditure by the Company</b>
	<b>Rupees</b>	<b>Rupees</b>
<b>Religious (including charities and expense incurred on account <i>Shraddh</i> ceremony) - 48.29 %</b>	2,73,706.99	88,195.0
<b>House Expenses - 12.02%</b>	68,152.37	11,581.0
<b>Wearing Apparel – 3.14 %</b>	17,818.93	9,569.0
<b>Charges on account of Relations and Dependants – 0.01 %</b>	7835.0	3917.0
<b>Office charges (including servants and workmen’s wages, <i>Buxis</i> or rewards, house charges, paper, cloth, repairs etc.) – 14.36 %</b>	81,403.06	44,127.5
<b>Sundry other expenses – 20.7 %</b>	1,17,848.93	22,068.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,66,765.28</b>	<b>1,79,457.5</b>

**Source:** WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 3<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1783, vol. 23, Appendix for the month of January 1783.

In 1777, a letter from Warren Hastings to Mr. Alexander Higginson Chief & other members of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan directed that zamindars and farmers were to be put under ‘close confinement’ if they failed to pay one month’s Kist by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the next month. The letter also directed that ‘if after the Term of 15 days from the first day of their confinement they shall still remain in arrears you must declare to them that we



will take into our own hands the means for recovering the same.<sup>179</sup> The 23<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Instructions given to the Collector given in 1787 also mention that if any Farmer or Zamindar failed to make good his monthly payments by the stipulated periods, the Collector was authorized to put him into confinement.<sup>180</sup>

Not just in the management of the zamindari expenses, the Company also began to interfere in the appointment of the servants of the zamindari. In the Bengal year 1174 Maharaja Tilakchand died and left his Infant son Maharajah Tejchand as his Heir successor appointing Lalla Omichund guardian to his son and sole Administrator of his affairs.<sup>181</sup> The Rani of Burdwan however complained that one of her servants named Brijoo Kishore by appropriating for his own use some of her gold jewels and distributing them in the Durbar had obtained for himself the office of the Diwan.<sup>182</sup> However as the late Rajah of Burdwan Tilakchand had appointed Lalla Omichund who was a relation and Faithful friend to the Family, sole Administrator of his Affairs and Guardian to his son the Rani did not confirm Brije Kishore in the office of Diwan and dismissed him.<sup>183</sup> The Rani however alleged that Brije Kishore being on good terms with Mr.Graham the Chief of Burdwan at that time forcibly retained possession of the Diwanny and transacted the business of the Zamindarry.<sup>184</sup> The Rani being unable to resist was forced to let Brije Kishore continue in charge of the Diwanny. Brije Kishore was also appointed as the young Raja's guardian probably by the Company for the Rani was clearly not in favour of him.<sup>185</sup>

Meanwhile, Lalla Kushal Chund<sup>186</sup>, Manager on the part of Meha Rajah Tejchand, was replaced by Brije Kishore as being in charge of the Collections of Burdwan because under Lalla Kushal Chund's management there were

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<sup>179</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 12<sup>th</sup> August to 28 October 1777, vol. 21, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1777.

<sup>180</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue Proceedings 22<sup>nd</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> May 1787, vol. no. 17, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1787.

<sup>181</sup> Petition from the Burdwan Rani, WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 2<sup>nd</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1775, vol. no. 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 12<sup>th</sup> August to 28 October 1777, vol. 21, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1777.

<sup>186</sup> Spelt in the records as Lalla Cossaul Chund.

large arrears in revenue collections.<sup>187</sup> Further Brije Kishore complained that notwithstanding the orders which were given to Lalla Kushal Chund for stopping the Rajah's allowances, there were sums daily advanced by them on account the charges of the Rajah's household.<sup>188</sup> For these reasons the Company thought it fit to put Brijekishore at the charge of the affairs of the Burdwan zamindarry instead of Lolla Kushal Chund whose loyalty clearly was to the zamindar. The appointment of Brije Kishore was a great blow to the authority of the Rani in the zamindari. Brije Kishore with his ally in Mr.Graham soon became all in all in the affairs of Burdwan zamindari while the Rani and the minor Raja were bereft of all actual powers in zamindari. A petition from Rani of Burdwan to the Company authorities clearly brings out the situation. The Rani wrote:

Some time I applied to Brije Kisshore for an Explanation of the state of the Zamindary, but having entered into a fraudulent confederacy with Ram Kunt Roy, Gocul Mojendar, Kishen Praun Metre and Gourychurn Mullick, persons in principal employments of the Zamindary and there having all bound themselves in this association by a solemn oath; Brije Kishore absolutely refused to give any account of the Zamindary, I represented my situation in an application to the Governor & Council and they were pleased to summon Brije Kishore to appear before them. Brije Kishore was upon this much alarmed, and wrote an account of the Affair to Mr. John Graham at Moorshedabad. He then went to Calcutta with Kissen Praun and Gocul Mojendar, and sent Lolla Omichund on my part. In consequence of Brije Kishore's Letter Mr. Graham came to Calcutta and having exerted his utmost influence amongst the Gentlemen of Council in support of Brije Kisshore he obtained his confirmation in the Diwanny. My son's seal

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<sup>187</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 12<sup>th</sup> August to 28 October 1777, vol. 21, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1777.

<sup>188</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 12<sup>th</sup> August to 28 October 1777, vol. 21, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1777.

was in my own Possession, and as I affixed it to no Paper without first perusing it, Brije endeavoured by every Method to get it into his own hands, which I constantly persisted in refusing him. Upon this in the Bengal year 1179 Brije Kishore having prevailed up [or upon?] Mr. John Graham to come to Burdwan took from me my son Tagechund then about nine years of Age and confined him in a separate place under a guard. In this situation, through affliction and apprehension having remained more than seven days without sustenance to the absolute endangering my life and finding no resource I gave up the seal. Having now the seal in his possession, Birje Kisshore appropriated to himself and distributed amongst his partisans large quantities of Lands under the title of charity Lands to the great Prejudice of Government as a considerable Revenue was before collected from them. These alienations strike at the very root of the Zamindary and indeed the conduct of Birje Kisshore as a servant is totally unprecedented as every action of his tends to the entire subversion of my family.<sup>189</sup>

This account of the affairs of the Burdwan zamindari clearly points out the extent to which the zamindars had lost their authority and autonomy in areas where the Company's revenue machinery worked with more vigour.<sup>190</sup>

#### B. Revenue Operations in the Mountainous and Forested Zones

The most spectacular assertion of Company's authority was in areas that had been out of the reach of the Nizamat. Unlike the plains of Bengal, where the zamindars powers were easily subverted by the Company, the zamindars in the mountainous and forested areas retained their autonomy for a longer period. The Company however after a protracted struggle managed to penetrate these

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<sup>189</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 2<sup>nd</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1775, vol. no. 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775.

<sup>190</sup> This episode of tussle between the Burdwan zamindari and the East India Company is analysed in great detail in John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship*.

areas but the process of penetration was more difficult and long-drawn than in the plains of Bengal.

Although the greater part of Bengal is a level plain but the country is not altogether free of mountains and hills. According to the estimates of Ardenwood<sup>191</sup> the mountains comprise about one-third of the territory of Bengal consisting of: (1) A portion of Northern Bengal and Sikkim where the mountains are a part of the Himalayas, (2) the greater portion of Chotanagpur and Orissa, (3) Hill Tipperah and the eastern portion of the Chittagong Division.<sup>192</sup> The hills areas of western Bengal are also covered by thick impenetrable jungles.

### **1) The Mountains to the north-east : The hill Rajas of Koch Behar and Rungpore**

In the 1680s the expanding Mughal empire had annexed parts of Koch Behar like the parganas of Kakina, Tapa, Manthana, Katpur Kazirhat, Boda, Patgram and Purub-bhaj.<sup>193</sup> These however were imperfectly integrated to Bengal. The *Riyaz* mentions that the Raja of Koch Behar submitted to Murshid Quli's authority and sent him presents and that the Khan in return 'sent Khilats for them and this practice was observed year after year.'<sup>194</sup> However, during the years of confusion when the Nizamat-State was subverted by the Company, the zamindars of areas that had previously belonged to Koch Behar must have decided to end their allegiance to the Bengal authorities and revert back to the Koch kings. The zamindars of Boda and Bycuntpore in the north were particularly refractory. Bycuntpur like Boda had belonged to Koch Behar. The *Raikats* of Baikunthpur for eight generations had the hereditary privilege of holding the *chhatra* or umbrella over the head of the Koch Behar Rajas at their installation. The *Raikats* once under Bhagi Deo and Jag Deo had attempted to possess themselves of the crown of Cooch Behar.<sup>195</sup> During the early years of Company administration the zamindars of Boda and Bycuntpur openly

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<sup>191</sup> W.H. Ardenwood, *A Short Geography of Bengal*, London, 1895.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>193</sup> W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. x: *Districts of Darjiling and Jalpaiguri and State of Koch Behar*, Delhi, 1974 (reprint), p. 410.

<sup>194</sup> *Riyaz*, p. 257.

<sup>195</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. x, p. 410

declared that they were answerable to the Koch Behar Raja for their proceedings and not to the Company authorities. Initially the Company authorities did not retaliate to this open defiance. Rather Richard Becher in a letter to John Grose supervisor of Rungpore pointed out, ‘... regarding the zamindars of Boda and Bycantpore, I cannot help remarking that if the Frontier Rajas whose subjection has never been perfectly effected, continue to pay us the customary Revenue we ought to be contented.’<sup>196</sup>

Again on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1771 the Supervisor of Rungpore C. Purling, complained to James Alexander the Council at Murshidabad that some of the hill chieftains had not paid their quota of elephants as revenue and that they have refused several attempts to pursue them to pay in specie and have declared that ‘if we do not receive the Elephants they will deliver nothing in lieu of them.’<sup>197</sup> Again the approach of the Council of Murshidabad was lukewarm. Instead of reducing the disobedient chieftains they wrote in reply to Mr. Purling that:

The Elephants received in lieu of Revenue, are we understand from one or two tributary zamindars who have their residence in the hills and have not been regularly reduced to subjection we therefore apprehend that the amount must be very inconsiderable and should you not be able to effect the receipt of it in money you must certainly take the elephants and dispose of them for whatever they will fetch. Indeed we understand from the Naib Duan that the elephants caught in those parts are so bad and unserviceable as to render this matter an object hardly worthy our consideration.<sup>198</sup>

The Company’s attitude of ignoring the zamindars of Boda and Bykuntpur and other hill chieftains in the years 1770-1771 can be explained by the fact that these were the years when the province was still recovering from the ravages

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<sup>196</sup> Firminger ed. *Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Durbar*, p. 133.

<sup>197</sup> *CCRM*, vol.7, p. 130.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

of the great famine of 1769-70 and the Company may have deemed it imprudent to enter into large scale military operations in the north.

However in 1772, the English had to interfere in the affairs of Koch Behar. The Bhutias had been extending their influence into Koch Behar for some time. Around 1772, the Bhutias and the *Nazir Deo* (or hereditary commander-in-chief) Khagendra Narayan put up rival candidates for the Rajaship of Koch Behar. *Nazir Deo* being defeated in the ensuing struggle approached the English for help in 1772. In return for their help the *Nazir Deo* agreed to assign to the English forever one-half of the revenues of Koch Behar. The Bhutias were defeated and sued for peace. In 1773 a treaty was concluded between Raja Darendra Narayan – the *Nazir Deo*'s candidate for the Rajaship of Koch Behar- and the English. By the terms of this treaty the English were to send a force to assist the Raja of Koch Behar against the neighbouring independent Rajas who wanted to depose him and the said Raja in return of this was to 'pay into the hands of the Collector of Rangpur Rs.50,000, to defray the expenses of the force sent to assist him.' The other major terms of the treaty were as follows:

- 1) That the Raja will acknowledge subjection to the English East India Company upon his country being cleared of his enemies, and will allow the Koch Behar country to be annexed to the Province of Bengal.
- 2) That the Raja further agrees to make over to the English East India Company one-half of the annual revenues of Koch Behar forever.

The amount of this tribute was not agreed upon until 1780 when Mr. Purling the Collector of Rungpur put it at Rs. 67,700.<sup>199</sup> After the death of Raja Darendra, who had signed the treaty with the English there was a tussle for power between the *Nazir Deo* and the Rani of Koch Behar,( the wife of Raja Dhairjendra father of Darendra), and her favourite Sarbanand Gosain. The English authorities interfered in this tussle at various stages. In 1788 there was a conspiracy against the Rani, by all the discontented nobles of the state under the leadership of Bhagabant Narayan, the brother of the *Nazir Deo*. The

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<sup>199</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. x, p. 416.

Company intervened in favour of the Rani the young Raja Harendra Narayan, the late Raja Dhairjendra Narayan's son by another wife. The conspirators were captured and brought as prisoners to Rangpur. Moreover a Commission was appointed in April 1788, consisting of two Civil Servants, 'to make a report on the pretensions of the rival parties, on various subjects connected with the state of the country, and on the mode in which English influence should be exercised for its better management in the future.'

The Commissioners accepted some of the claims of the *Nazir Deo* while some they rejected. The Commissioners also asserted that the Raja by the terms of the treaty of 1773 was an independent though a tributary prince. He had the right to coin money in his own name and to administer justice within his territories. The Commissioners also recommended the appointment of a Resident with the Raja and Mr. H. Douglas was nominated Resident in 1789. Before 1780 the collection of tribute was entrusted to the Collector of Rangpur. He appointed *sazawals* for that purpose who deducted half of the revenues as the Company's share and paid over the remainder into the Rajas treasury. They did not have to collect any definite sum of money. In 1780, however Mr. Purling the then Collector of Rangpur was directed to make a *hastabud*, or general revenue statement, of the whole of Koch Behar. On the basis of it the amount of tribute to be paid by the Raja was decided. The tribute as per the treaty was fixed and not subject to any alterations in future. But the duty of realizing the tribute gave the Collector 'frequent occasion for irregular interference in the affairs of Koch Behar.'

Further interference by the Company followed so that 'the Raja's mint was stopped, because the *narayani* half-rupees were not readily negotiable; the coinage was limited to Rs.1000 a month, for the same reason; and the chief officers of the State were called to Rangpur, and suspended, imprisoned, and punished for alleged contumacy, according as each successive Collector sided with one or other of the rival parties in Koch Behar.' In 1799 it seems the mint was again in operation but by the close of the century the Company's control over the Koch Behar affairs were firmly established. The developments after 1800 are outside the purview of our present discussion but from Hunter's account it is clear that the authority of the English over the Koch Behar affairs

did not decrease. In 1876, the young Raja of Koch Behar was being educated at the Patna College, under the supervision of an English tutor.<sup>200</sup>

## 2) Western Bengal: Zamindar of Ghatsila

Ghatsila is located beside the River Subarnarekha in Hunter's map.<sup>201</sup> In the middle of the eighteenth century the country of Ghatsila had its own Raja who came into conflict with the Company that was now extending its control in the more interior areas of Midnapur. Midnapur was among the districts ceded by Mir Qasim to the Company before the grant of Dewani. Hence the Company's penetration here started earlier than most other places in Bengal.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1768 G Vansittart in a letter from Midnapur, to Richard Becher pointed out, that the zamindar of Ghatsila was rebellious against the Company's authority and that the other hill Rajas in the area were likely to follow his example.<sup>202</sup> In order to remedy the situation Vansittart dispatched Lieut. Rooke with two Company's of seapoys to establish his authority over the pargana and to 'remove the principal of the zamindar's present advisers.' As far as the zamindar was concerned, Vansittart was not eager to remove him if he submitted to the Company's regulations.<sup>203</sup> The rebellious chief referred to here is Jaggernaut Dhal who succeeded to the zamindari of the pargana of Ghatsila, in Assar 1175 after NerSing Dhal had been deposed in the month of Bysack 1174(1767). Jaggernaut Dhal however 'withheld payment of his Revenue absconded from the *Tahsildar* and a Peon and *Hircarrah* of Government being sent to require payment of his Revenue murdered them...and concealed himself in the Jungles.'<sup>204</sup>

In trying to reduce the country about Ghatsila, Mr. Morgan who had joined Mr. Rooke<sup>205</sup> optimistically wrote on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1768 to G. Vansittart thus:

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 425.

<sup>201</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol.4: *Districts of Burdwan, Bankura and Beerbhoom* (Map).

<sup>202</sup> W.K. Firminger ed. *Bengal District Records: Midnapur vol. 2: 1768-1770* (henceforth MDR), Calcutta, 1915, p.70.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>204</sup> WBSA, *Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 1<sup>st</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> April 1776*, vol. 13, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1776.

<sup>205</sup> MDR, vol.2, p. 91.



It is all a joke to talk of licking these jungle fellows: they have not the least idea of fighting, they are like a parcel of wasps: they endeavour to sting you with their arrows, and then fly off. It is impossible almost to kill any of them as they always keep at a great distance and fling their arrows at you which you may suppose seldom or ever do any execution. As the thing is to frighten these fellows as much as possible I wish you would send one of the One Pounders with a pair of the new wheels as soon as possible. It will be necessary always to keep that gun in this Fort which I believe will be of more service than an extraordinary Company of Seapoys.<sup>206</sup>

However in a further stage of the campaign Capt. Morgan pointed out that he was facing difficulty in crossing the Subarnarekha as he was unable to find boats.<sup>207</sup> The captain also mentioned that he was running short of provisions and were he to go after the refractory Raja of Ghatsila he needed provisions which he would not be able to procure on his way it being entirely through jungles.<sup>208</sup> On the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1768 Captain Morgan wrote, ‘at present I can’t stir, nor do I know when I shall be able, as very heavy rains have fallen for these two days past which must consequently swell the river very much. I can get no boats, nor I have any carpenters to make any, so that I see little prospect of my being able to follow the Rajah and as little of making the zamindars come in tomorrow.’<sup>209</sup> Capt. Morgan also pointed out that ‘the pikes I have with me want very much to leave me, as this is the season for setting their rice, which they will lose if they remain much longer here.’<sup>210</sup>

Thus the jungle, the rivers and the rains made it difficult for the Company to subdue the independent chieftain in these areas and consequently revenue operations of the Company could not be carried out here with as much ease as in the plains. The Company therefore decided to place such a person in

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 83

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p-84

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

charge who would be loyal to the Company. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1768 Vansittart in a letter to Richard Becher the collector-General pointed out, that because of the 'misbehaviour & obstinate folly' of Jagganaut Dhal, the late zamindar of Ghatsila he had been supplanted by a new one. The pargana was now settled again but the disturbances that occurred before the authority of the new zamindar could be established have occasioned a deficiency in the rents of Sa. Rupees 721-5-11.<sup>211</sup> This however would be collected in about a month's time.<sup>212</sup> The new Rajah of Ghatsila was first Nemoo Dhal and then then Company records speak of another chief Bycunt Dhal.

So far as the military were concerned the western jungles of Midnapur was not a place where the troops would be happy to carry out military operations. On 4<sup>th</sup> September G. Vansittart wrote to the President and Governor and Council, 'I take the liberty however of representing to you, that in the western Jungulls dependant on Midnapur, provisions are in general so dear, that it will some time be impossible for the Seapoys on that service to subsist without their *Batta*, unless by contribution from the zamindars, which would open a door for many irregularities and unavoidably occasion a loss in the revenue. At the same time the extreme unhealthiness of that station which they never fail severely to experience might be urged as an additional argument for granting them some indulgence and as there is seldom above one Company on command there, the Expense would scarcely be more than that of the Clothing...'<sup>213</sup>

However the same year disturbances again broke out. October 26<sup>th</sup> 1776, Mr. Hugh Austen wrote:

Bycunt Doll the present Rajah of Gatseelah being a man in every respect, unqualified for the office of zamindar, extremely unpopular, and of a timid and irresolute character, who has neither ability to liquidate his Ballances to the Honble Company, or Friends to assist him, in supporting his authority, and influence, in opposition to the pretensions of

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-117

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

Jaggernaut Doll the former Zamindar, who for some years past has made himself obnoxious to Government by making continual invasions, laying waste the country & endeavouring to recover his Hereditary right by force of arms; and some of his Choars have lately killed a Soubadar and several Sepoys who were sent into the Jungles... The ryotts to the number of three thousand, finding themselves insecure either of their lives or property from the continual invasions of Jaggernaut Doll on the one hand, and the oppressions of Bycaunt Doll, on the other, have deserted to the Mharattah Districts and other places, whence they may hope to live more quietly in their possessions and receive better encouragement from their industry, the country choars &c have from natural attachment gone over to Jaggernaut Dolls party, and have with great inflexibility adhered to him in every fortune: from these circumstances, the country is in many parts entirely unpopulated and vast tracts of arable land, from a total want of Ryotts, remain uncultivated.<sup>214</sup>

Although Bycunt Dhal was given the Rajaship of Ghatsila by the Company, he was not loyal to the Company authorities. He collected large sums from the ryotts but did not pay any of his dues to the Company by making false declarations of having received no money from the ryotts.<sup>215</sup> Ryotts on the other hand complained of Bycunt Doll's oppressions and wanted back their hereditary zamindar Jaggernaut Dhal. Meanwhile the incursions of Jaggernaut Dhal disturbed the peace and quiet of Ghatsila. The Company as a result of the oppressions of Bycunt Dhal, the incursions of Jaggernaut Dhal and the desertion of the ryotts was not getting its due share of the revenues. Mr. Austen was of opinion that to stop the oppression of Bycunt Dhal and the incursions of Jaggernaut Dhal it was necessary that Jaggernaut Dhal be once again put in management of the affairs at Ghatsila. Mr Austen pointed out:

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<sup>214</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1776 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1776, vol. 17, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1776.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

Jaggernaut Doll from his situation in the Jungles, will always be troublesome, and as he has been able for many years in opposition to Large bodies of Military Troops, to prevent the attachment of his Person, It is not probable, should Government be induced to act offensively towards him, He will soon be made a prisoner and by his connections with the Singboom and other independent people He may probably be the means of disturbing the general tranquility of the country...The people in general express their wish in the strongest terms for the reinstatement of their former hereditary zamindar, and until that takes place, I am very apprehensive the country will never be in a thriving state, the deserted Ryotts Return, the inhabitants be satisfied or any Revenue accrue to Government, and to affect these important points, I would presume to recommend his [ Jaggernaut Dhal's] being restored to the zamindary, as the only measure I am acquainted with that would produce these salutary consequences... From what information I have acquired, I am firmly of opinion He will never desist from invading so long as Bycunt Doll continues to usurp his Hereditary zamindary.<sup>216</sup>

Soon after, the Council at Fort William mentioned that they 'are sensible of the Expediency of an accommodation with Jaggernaut Doll,' if it could be effected 'without a Breach of the faith which is due to the present zamindar Bycunt Doll.'<sup>217</sup> In 1777 the Company's records refer to Bycunt Dhal as the 'former zamindar' of Ghatsila and Jaggernaut Dhal as the present zamindar. The Company here therefore had to make a compromise. In order to retain their hold over Ghatsila the Company had to restore the zamindar they had dispossessed on account of rebellious behaviour.

### **3) South-eastern Bengal: Sylhet**

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1776 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1776, vol. 17, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1776.

The Province of Sylhet may be itself divided into two- the settled and cultivated areas where the Company could make settlements with the zamindars and the mountainous areas inhabited by the Khasias. A relationship of interaction existed between the hills and the plains of Sylhet. The defaulting zamindars of the plains often took refuge in the hills. The proximity of such places of refuge made the zamindars of Sylhet more refractory than any other part of Bengal. We will first discuss the Company's relationship with the hill dwellers and then turn our attention to the zamindars in the settled areas.

### The Khasia hill men

The Khasias because of their raids upon the settled areas of Sylhet seems to have drawn the Company's attention. Rennell gave the following account of the Khasia territories in Sylhet:

The Soormah (or Sylhet) River is the general boundary of the Sylhet Province on the north, except in the neighbourhood of the town of Sylhet, where the boundary is from 5 to 8 miles beyond the river, a chain of high mountains on the northside runs nearly [text missing] to its course (which is from east to west) at the distance of 10 to 16 miles from it, forming a narrow tract of flat country in extent 60 miles long, and from 10 to 16 broad. This tract which is known by the general name of Cossyah [Khasia] or the country of the Cossyahs meaning in the Silhet dialect Freebooter or Plunderers is subject to several petty Rajahs among which the Gentyah Rajah is the principal...The western Cossyahs possess the country between Gentyah & Laour. I understand that they are subject to several distinct Rajahs or zamindars and that they are often quarrelling and fighting among themselves. The only town of note in these parts is Pundua, which is the mark where the Bengall, Assam, and Garrow goods are bought and sold. The Cossyah's country in general and especially the western part of it, is woody and almost impenetrable. Their force is very

contemptible, both from the smallness of their numbers, and the nature of their weapons which last are bows and arrows and short lances: but when attacked in their woods, they are reported to make use of a variety of stratagems to ensnare their pursuers. In this respect they in some measure resemble the Collieries of the Coast of Coromandel. Sometimes they infest the banks of the Soormah between Inchalus and Solagur so as to interrupt the navigation of the River and they often plunder the Laour districts. The Phousdars of Silhet kept up a small military establishment to curb the Cossyahs. They built a pucca fort at Laour, and stationed a force there; and they also erected 4 Tannaahs or small mud forts on the river bank. Most of these have either been suffered to decay, or [text missing] have been withdrawn from them since the time of Cossim Ally Cawn...I am of opinion that the force of 2 Companies of Brigade Seapoys with a gun is more than a match for all the Cossyahs and Gentyahs between Laour and Cachar...<sup>218</sup>

But the Company carried out no offensive operations against Khasias but had forces stationed to counteract their incursions.<sup>219</sup> By 1784 the Company had erected a fort at Ponduah, for the protection of the province from the incursions of the hill people.<sup>220</sup> The Company avoided any direct confrontation with the hill men although sometimes they entered into accidental clashes with them which could assume serious proportions for the hill men valued their pride and independence and were always united in their

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<sup>218</sup> On the east side of Gentyah lies the country of Cachar or Cashar, subject to an independent Rajah. Cachar appear to be a wild mountainous country, very thinly inhabited, and it produces very few articles of trade except timber. It is supposed to join to Ava; at least Mr. Verelst was so informed, when he penetrated to Cospour, the capital in 1763.' Rennell's letter. WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings 1<sup>st</sup> September 1774 to 21<sup>st</sup> February 1774, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1774.

<sup>219</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> March 1783, Lindsay wrote, 'Sylhet is a frontier province liable to frequent incursions by the hill people and neighbouring free-booters. I am always obliged to station two-thirds of the force at the established Tannaahs under the mountains, from whence they are immediately assembled upon emergency.' Walter K. Firminger ed. *The Sylhet District Records* (henceforth SDR) vol.1: 1770-1785, Shillong, 1913, p. 133.

<sup>220</sup> SDR, vol. 1, p. 190.

resistance against outsiders. On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1783, Mr. Lindsay wrote to John Shore and the members of the committee of Revenue the following:

One of the Cosseahs an inhabitant of the mountains, having been treated with indignity by a Havildar of the Seapoys, the affront was considered an insult upon the community, and the petty Rajahs, though constantly at enmity with each other, united upon this occasion to claim redress. This they demanded of me, and I certainly would have given it on the spot, had their expectations been confined within reasonable bounds; but nothing less than the Havilda's head would appease them, which of course, could not be granted. In consequence of the refusal they attacked the Tannah of Ponduah, a small kallah for the protection of the merchants, which they repeatedly assaulted with considerable loss on both sides, but, not succeeding in carrying it, the place has been blockaded for near two months; and my whole Seebundee corps is now employed in its defence. Nor is there a probability of the matter being soon accommodated, for they have shown a greater degree of courage and perseverance than I ever experienced before, and brought against me a number of fire arms, which they never had at any former period...there is impracticability of resenting the insult by acting against them upon the offensive, owing to the situation of that part of the country and their inaccessible places of abode...<sup>221</sup>

On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1784, Mr. Lindsay wrote to John Shore and the members of the Committee of Revenue Fort William, 'that the hill people having collected additional forces, have become more troublesome...My whole *seebundee* Corps<sup>222</sup> have been employed in the defence of the Ponduah Tannah for

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>222</sup> From Persian *sihbandi* (*sih* meaning three). 'The *rationale* of the word is obscure to us...it is applied to irregular native soldiery, a sort of militia, or imperfectly disciplined troops for revenue or police duties &c. Certain local infantry regiments were formerly officially termed *Sebundy*.' The *Sebundies* were a local corps fit for mountain work who were armed and

upwards of five months without the possibility of their acting from the situation of the country offensively. Of late we have had no intelligence from thence, as the hill people have taken possession of all the neighbouring jungles and passes leading to that place, and cut off the supplies of provision.’<sup>223</sup>

It was impossible for the Company to fight with the hill inhabitants as upon an attack these people generally retreated to inaccessible areas in the mountains where the Company’s troops were not able to follow them. The Company therefore followed a sticks and carrot policy with regard to the hill men. They conciliated them on occasions but when the hill men became too bold to conduct raids on the settled areas the Company took them to task. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1788, Edward Hay in a letter to John Willes, Collector of Sylhet pointed out , ‘it has been agreed that in order to conciliate and familiarize the Khasias or Hill Rajahs you should be authorized to distribute small presents occasionally among them, the whole amount of which shall not exceed two thousand Sicca Rupees.’<sup>224</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1788, J Willes wrote that ‘The Khasias of the hills may with management be taught to respect our Government but I am fully convinced that nothing but coercion will suit with the dastardly and savage disposition of the Bengalle Cosseahs of the lowlands.’<sup>225</sup> Who were the Bengali Khasias? J. Willes pointed out, ‘The primitive Cosseahs are solely the inhabitants of the hills, from whence they came down into the plains in search of the necessaries of life and Articles of commerce. This intercourse increasing, they amicably agreed for the low lands and on a stipulated rent, and from this intercourse, and inter-marriages has arisen the degenerate race of Bengallee Cosseahs.’ J. Willes pointed out that the boats of the Bengali Khasias were ‘calculated for carrying Dekoits or fighting men.’ Many of these boats are called *khulnaa*, there are others called

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expected to fight. Their pay was 6 rs. a month, instead of a Sepoy’s 7 ½ . Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Geographical and Discursive*, New Delhi, 2012 (Reprint), pp. 805-806.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>224</sup> *SDR*, vol. 3, p. 39

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 87.



*jelkah*.<sup>226</sup> Among the Bengali Khasias one named Gunga Sing committed murders and ‘become the terror of all the pergunnah adjacent to Bagao.’

The Jaintia Rajah according to Rennell’s account was the principal among the Cosseah petty chieftains. The Raja along with his party carried out raids which damaged the Company’s revenue operations in Sylhet. Subsequently Captain Ellerker made an attack on the Jaintia Rajah and reduced him to offering peaceable terms. A letter from Warren Hastings, President and Council of Revenue to Richard Barwell Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca pointed out, ‘As it never was our intention to make a conquest of the Gentiah [Jaintia] country but to chastise the Rajah for the violent outrage committed on our territory and ryotts, this having been in some measure effected from the first attack Captain Ellerker made on the Rajah and his capital, and considering the further terms he now offers as expiatory of his offence, we approve of your accepting the same...’<sup>227</sup> The Company entered into a truce with the Jaintia Rajah. The Rajah was restored to his country on the terms of paying fifteen thousand arcot Rupees to the Honble Company as tribute and that ‘he will never in future interfere in any respect with whatever may concern the Honble Company.’ It was hoped by the Company that the chastisement of the Jaintia Rajah would keep the other hill Rajas in check and that the Company would be able to carry on their revenue operations in the plains without being interrupted by raids from the hill men.

#### The Zamindars of the Sylhet plains

While the inhabitants of the mountains the Khasias were a source of constant problem the zamindars in the plains of Sylhet too were refractory and withheld their revenue and took shelter in the hills when the Company demanded their just dues. The Company authorities also alleged that in many cases the incursions of the hill men were encouraged by the zamindars in the plains who upon that plea obtained remissions of revenue from the

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<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>227</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings May to August 1774, July the 14<sup>th</sup> 1774.

Government.<sup>228</sup> Thus the hills and their inhabitants were not completely isolated from the plains. This interaction made matters even more difficult for the Company. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1779, Mr. Lindsay, in a letter to John Shakespear wrote that the merchants residing at Ponduah under the protection of the Company had represented ‘that they had lately not only been insulted but sustained considerable losses by the Hill Rajahs compelling them to dispose of their goods at an arbitrary price...’ This development according to Lindsay was the result of some ‘low Europeans residing at Ponduah, by admitting the petty Rajahs to be their superiors than equals, have taught them to consider themselves totally independent of the Company, and infused into them a spirit of independence they had before no idea of, which if not checked will be the means of putting a stop to the trade of that market.’<sup>229</sup> This incident occasioned the construction of the fort at Ponduah to check the incursions of the hill inhabitants.

The revenues of Sylhet were small. A large amount of the lands were untaxed because these were charity grants exempt from the collection of revenue. The collection of revenue from the remaining portion of Sylhet was very difficult because of the refractory nature of the zamindars. On 21<sup>st</sup> July 1778, R. Lindsay wrote to John Shakespear Chief and the Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, ‘This and the ensuing months being the season of the heavy collection in the Sylhet Province, and the close of the revenue of the present year approaching, the Zemindars of Bairahparrah, Chowkee, Minderkondy, Chowallees, Tuppah Muzeony,... have according to their usual custom, taken refuge in the hills, to avoid discharging the demands of the Government.’<sup>230</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1782, Mr. Lindsay pointed out to John Shore, ‘...I never yet found so much difficulty in collecting the revenues as at present. At the commencement of the year there appeared a general

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<sup>228</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1788, J Willes wrote, ‘I have the strongest grounds to believe that the incursions of the Cosseahs are frequently encouraged by the Sylhet zamindars, who suffering in one year, obtain on that pretence remission for years which is jointly divided by them and their neighbours.’ (vol.3, p-86). . In another letter Mr. Thackeray pointed out ‘...am now very apprehensive that the Gentiah Rajah is determined to plunder Sylhet or the Pergunnah on the borders of the Province and I have the greatest reason to think that he is encouraged to do this, by some of the principal people, belonging to Sylhet.’ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings 1<sup>st</sup> September 1774 to 21<sup>st</sup> February 1774, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1774.

<sup>229</sup> *SDR*, vol.1, p. 64.

<sup>230</sup> *SDR*, vol. 1, p. 39.

combination throughout the District to withhold the payment of the increase, but this I have in a great measure got better of it....It is highly equitable to distinguish such as have not ability to pay from those who have but will not, and who at the same time, consider themselves or are considered by others, in a light superior to the other landholders, from being able in every instance to evade the orders of the government. The Zemindars of Lunglah pergunnah, Tuppah Mantabed pergunnah, Chowallees, Tappah Muscoorey, Pergunnah Betal, have always particularly distinguished themselves by this refractory disposition, and from the *Towjee* account you will find they are several *kists* in arrears...<sup>231</sup> The Company's method of dealing with the erring zamindars of Sylhet was similar to what they did elsewhere in Bengal that is the Company tried putting the lands of the defaulting zamindars to public auction on account of non-payment of revenue.

Yet, the Company found it difficult to establish the authority of the person who purchased lands sold in auction. For instance when the 11 *annas* 3 *gundahs* Division of Balserrah Pergunnah was sold on account of arrears of revenue it was purchased by an individual named Gholaum Ally but the previous possessor of the land Mahomed Reza made it impossible for Gholaum Ally to take charge of his newly acquired possession. Mr. Lindsay in charge of the affairs at Sylhet recounts the entire confrontation thus:

I immediately dispatched a Havildar and 10 Sepoys to put Golaum Ally in possession of the 11.3.2 Division of Balserrah Pergunnah purchased by him at Publick Auction. On their Arrival at the Cutcherry they found that Mahomed Reza the late Proprietor had assembled upwards of 1000 men armed with Matchlocks, Bows and Spears to oppose their Landing, upon the Party's endeavouring to carry into Execution the orders of Government, they were fired upon, two Dandies killed and several wounded, upon which the Party was under the necessity of retreating and are now returned to Sylhet for a Reinforcement. The ensuing Day

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

two Boats bringing to Sylhet 10,000 Cawns, the Revenues of Bejoorah, came too in the Dusk of the Evening at the Cutcherry of Chowkee Pergunnah of the 6 Annas Division, of which Mahmud Reza is also the Proprietor, a few Minutes after their arrival he assembled the Ryotts, who plundered the Boats, and immediately transported their cargoes to Balserrah- This I am afraid will be a dead Loss to Government, as the Bejoorah Zemindars will not have it in their Power to replace so large an Amount before the conclusion of the year, there being yet a very considerable Balance outstanding.

Mahmud Reza is not only supported by the remaining 5 Anna Zemindars of Balserrah, but I have certain Information that he has received private Assistance from all the neighbouring Zemindars, both under Dacca and Sylhet, and is encouraged in opposing the orders of Government, with the above sum he has also been enabled to assemble and retain a very formidable Body of Dakoyts and Hill People to waylay the Revenues, on which Accounts the Collections of all the adjoining Pergunnahs are at present entirely at a stand.<sup>232</sup>

The Company records point out that Mahomed Reza was later put in confinement<sup>233</sup> but the entire episode proved to the Company the difficulty of removing zamindars of Sylhet on accounts of revenue arrears. Mahomed Reza the previous possessor had managed to acquire support and sympathy of other proprietors in Sylhet. The servants of Gholaum Ally charged Reaz-ul-Ramah Zemindar of the 6 Anna Division of Balserrah with having furnished him with People and offered him refuge.<sup>234</sup> Mr. Holland in his report of the incident pointed out that ‘that every Inhabitant of the Pergunnah were Accomplices’

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<sup>232</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 1<sup>st</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> April 1782, vol. 13, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1782.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

with Mahomed Reza.<sup>235</sup> It was perhaps because of this reason that the Company did not more frequently put to public auction the lands of zamindars who became defaulters to Government and took refuge in the hills.

The Company officials also complained that some of the zamindars in Sylhet were refractory to the extent that they were openly sheltering dacoits. On 4<sup>th</sup> September 1778, R. Lindsay reported to John Shakespear, Chief of Dacca that the Aurungpore zamindars openly encouraged dacoits to settle in the pargana. These dacoits rob boats coming to Sylhet with treasure and kill the *majhis* and *dandies* that is the boatmen.<sup>236</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1779, Mr. Lindsay again complained about the zamindars of Aurungpore sheltering dacoits. Mahamed Hyatt and Hossein Rezah, zamindars of the Aurungpore pergunnah encouraged dacoits to settle within their jurisdiction.<sup>237</sup> Willes pointed out that in the several parganas of Sylhet there were about three or four thousand dacoits. The apprehension of these answers no purpose as they cannot be easily convicted. Many zamindars were notoriously supporters of bandits and shared in their profits.<sup>238</sup> Thus the south-eastern frontier of Bengal continued to be fluid inspite of the Company's best efforts. The interaction between the hill men and dwellers of the plains further complicated the situation.

### **C. Deltaic Bengal**

Before emptying itself into the sea the Ganga-Bramhaputra rivers branch off into a thousand rivulets. These rivulets crisscross entire lower Bengal which therefore gets a different physiography compared to the rest of Bengal. These areas were extremely fertile but were exposed to devastating raids by the Maghs and other pirates. These pirates after committing their depredations could escape through any one of the innumerable river channels that intersected lower Bengal without any fear of being caught as it was impossible to pursue the culprits in the maze of rivulets. Bakarganj, Sundeeep, Dakhin Shahbazpur, Hattea, Bulluah, Bozergomedpore and the other southern districts

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> *SDR*, vol.1, p. 41.

<sup>237</sup> *SDR*, vol.1, p. 65.

<sup>238</sup> *SDR*, vol.3, p. 154.

of Bengal were prone to Magh attacks. The Maghs were generally held in contempt by the inhabitants of Bengal who were subjected to their raids. Shihabuddin Talish's description of Arakan and its inhabitants the Maghs is as follows:

[The kingdom of Arakan] is a large country and great port of the East... The land and water routes alike for entering the country are very difficult. Its conquest is an extremely hard task... The people of the country [of Arakan] are called Muggs which is an abbreviation of *Muhamil-i-Sag* (despicable dog)...They do not admit into their country any tribe other than the Christians who visit it by the sea-route for the purposes of trade. Their canon are beyond numbering, their flotilla (*nawwara*) exceeds the waves of the sea [in number]<sup>239</sup>

Throughout the course of the seventeenth century the Maghs in alliance with the Portuguese pirates carried out raids in the deltaic region of Bengal. As a result of the Magh raids coastal areas of Bengal were rendered desolate and 'not a single householder was left on both sides of the river of their track from Dacca to Chittagong.' The Bengal navy was not well maintained. The strength of the Mughal forces lay in their cavalry which was of no use in the riverine tracts of southern Bengal. In southern Bengal then Mughal state-formation was thwarted by the peculiar ecology of the region. Shihabuddin Talish therefore lamented:

In no other part of Mughal empire has any neighbouring infidel [king] the power to oppress and domineer over Muslims; but rather do [infidel kings] show all kinds of submission and humility in order to save their homes and lands and the [Mughal] officers of those places engage in making new acquisitions by conquest; In Bengal

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<sup>239</sup> Shihabuddin Talish, in Jadunath Sarkar ed. *Anecdotes of Aurangzeb and Historical Essays*, Calcutta, 1912, pp. 192-194.

alone the opposite is the case; Here the preservation of the Imperial dominion is considered a great boon.<sup>240</sup>

In 1666 the conquest of Chittagong by Shaista Khan did not end the Magh raids. Neither was the Nizamat able to subdue the Magh pirates. The Company therefore inherited the problem of these pirates in deltaic Bengal from their predecessors.

In course of the eighteenth century, the economic activity of the East India Company, in lower Bengal was salt making and the extension of agriculture in hitherto forested lands. As pointed out in our first chapter there was a rapid increase of cultivation in Jessore and Bakarganj Sunderbunds as a result of the on-going reclamation activities.<sup>241</sup> The extension of cultivation in these parts meant the increase of revenue for the state but the devastating raid carried out by the Maghs became a serious obstacle to the Company's revenue operations. The Maghs upon leaving Arakan generally proceeded to the islands that were situated at the mouth of the Padma River like the Dominic islands. The Dominic islands were uninhabited, 'and totally covered with timber and underwood' and being considerably detached from the mainland these places ideally served as 'places of secrecy and of shelter' for the Maghs. From these islands the Maghs ventured forth to 'make frequent excursions to the inhabited islands, as well as to the mainland, plundering the country of everything that is valuable or useful, and carrying off the people, especially females and children into captivity, and perpetual bondage.'<sup>242</sup> Dakhin Shahbazpur and the islands Chara-Luckypore, in the mouth of the Padma with Hatteah and Sundeep to the eastward, were exposed to the Magh depredations.<sup>243</sup> Mr. Ritchie summed up the situation thus:

...and during the whole fair season, the people are under continual alarms. The weaver makes cloth which he shall never wear nor sell, and the husbandman labours for fruits of the earth of which he shall never receive the smallest benefit.

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>241</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 68-75.

<sup>242</sup> NAI, Secret Proceedings, 5 May to 30 June 1777, 12 June 1777.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

If a man leaves his home about any little business on his return he may find that he has neither wife nor children; that neither cow, sheep, goat nor any one moveable is left to him; and consequently, that life itself is at once become a burden to him- cattle are often unyoked from the Plow, to carry their owner's effects to the enemy's boats, and afterwards slain to serve them in provisions. Thus the situation of the inhabitants is truly lamentable although in possession of a rich and luxuriant soil; and the whole border of Bengal from Hoorengottah river to the extremity of Chittagong, is more or less exposed to such depredations.<sup>244</sup>

To remedy the situation the Company complained to the Arakan Rajah. But the Arakan Rajah sent a haughty letter to Company stating that the latter had given shelter to the fugitives of Arakan for which reason the Company's subjects had been carried off and that they will be delivered over only when the fugitives from Arakan were returned to him.<sup>245</sup> Meanwhile the Company's business suffered. In 1776, Bhabani Charan Roy, the Farmer of the salt *mahl* of pargana Selimabad complained that the Maghs had taken many of the *molunghies* who boiled salt in pargana Sundeep and that the other *molunghies* out of fear of being captured by the Maghs have deserted. Consequently the business of salt-making in those parts had stopped.<sup>246</sup> It was also pointed out that the woodcutters having deserted the Sunderbans the business of boatbuilding had stopped.<sup>247</sup> Bakarganj which was a an important centre for the production and sale of rice was badly affected by Magh raids. In 1776, Mr. Elias Abraham in the Company's employ wrote from Bakarganj thus:

In Honour and as a British subject I cannot refrain laying before you the calamity, distress and misfortunes this open country is subject to the parts all about from Duckensavagepore to the Soondrybons are infested with

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 7<sup>th</sup> October to 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1776 (Sectt. Series) vol. 13, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1776.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.



Muggs seizing all persons they can lay their hands on... It is necessary to represent that from this Gunge is transported annually from five to seven Lack Maund of Rice which brings to this place in ready cash at least ten Lacks of Rupees many other articles are purchased and the people's wages. It is with concern I say above half of the people of this pergunnah and gunge has already fled for safety if the people cannot sell their Rice &ca. commodities the annual sales not made and the customary cash not brought here how can the Ryotts pay the zamindar and he or they again the Company.<sup>248</sup>

Again the Consultations of the East India Company for 20<sup>th</sup> December 1776 record a complaint from Mr. Elias Abraham from Dakhin Shahbazpur that 7 men, and 5 women while cutting paddy were carried off and that the others will now no longer cut the paddy in fear of meeting with a similar fate.<sup>249</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> January 1777, Mr. Abraham the salt agent at Bakarganj wrote that the Maghs had carried off 256 men and 14 women and 'that an entire stop is put to the salt manufactory owing to the Maghs being round the pargana daily carrying off as many people as they can catch.'<sup>250</sup>

To meet the Magh threat the Company decided to station guard vessels like the Amazon Snow to cruise the southern coastline.<sup>251</sup> The zamindars in the southern districts were also required to supply intelligence<sup>252</sup> to the Company's military detachment to meet the Magh threat. In 1784 we hear that the Magh Rajah has been made to render tribute to the Company

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 7<sup>th</sup> October to 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1776, (sectt. Series), vol.13, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1776

<sup>250</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 6<sup>th</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1777, sectt. series, vol. 14, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1777

<sup>251</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 7<sup>th</sup> October to 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1776, (sectt. Series), vol.13, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1776 ; In 1777 F. Law the chief at Chittagong in a letter to Charles Purling acting chief and the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, pointed out that 'The Amazon will be keeping her constant cruises between Cuttobdea and the Island of Sundeep'. see WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 6<sup>th</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1777, January the 9<sup>th</sup> 1777.

<sup>252</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 6<sup>th</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1777, January the 9<sup>th</sup> 1777; also, WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 7<sup>th</sup> October to 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1776 (Sectt. Series) vol. 13, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1776.

although he was opposed, the records point out, to having an English Resident at his court.<sup>253</sup> This implied that in the intervening years between 1777-1784 the Company had made sufficient progress in penetrating and reducing the kingdom of Arakan. But in 1785 the Burmese invaded Arakan and conquered it. Many Arakanese sought refuge in Chittagong, from where some of them launched guerrilla attacks on Arakan. Buchanan points out ‘Burmese troops were occasionally sent into Chittagong not only to stop further emigration and attacks but also to test whether the area could be occupied permanently.’ This led to collision between the Burmese and English which continued till 1826 when the Anglo-Burmese war broke out. After the end of the war Arakan became a British possession.<sup>254</sup>

Not just the Maghs but banditry was the livelihood of many of the inhabitants of lower Bengal. These bandits for the most part were ‘Mangeys and Dandies of boats, which have been long used to the Sunderbunds and are acquainted with every creek and passage in the woods.’<sup>255</sup> These bandits used to build *pansways*<sup>256</sup> in one of the many uninhabited islands near the mouth of the sea, arm these boats with matchlocks and at night carry on their raids. Their intelligence was supposed to be very good. These dacoits lived among the ordinary inhabitants unsuspected. Some of the petty zamindars in the southern parts were also bandits who kept boats and men for the purposes of robbery. In most cases the Maghs were made responsible for these robberies ‘for in the day they seldom shew their boats near the inhabited country, and in the night it is difficult to distinguish a Panswah from one of the Mog boats.’<sup>257</sup> Beveridge in his survey of Bakarganj points out ‘great trade of Bakarganj, and the facilities for escape offered by its rivers and jungles rendered it a favourite haunt of dacoits or gang-robbers, and the English

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<sup>253</sup> WBSA, Chittagong Records: Letters received and sent, January to October 1784, vol. no. 12.

<sup>254</sup> Francis Buchanan in South-East Bengal (1798) ed. by Willem van Schendel, New Delhi, 1992, p-xvi.

<sup>255</sup> NAI, Secret Proceedings, 5 May to 30 June 1777, 12 June 1777.

<sup>256</sup> The *pansi* or *pansway* was a light river boat of Bengal. They were about 20-30 feet in length, with 3 to 6 oars. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. compiled, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 45. Our next chapter gives a more elaborate description of the different varieties of boats sailing in the rivers of Bengal.

<sup>257</sup> NAI, Secret Proceedings, 5 May to 30 June 1777, 12 June 1777.

Government was early obliged to take notice of their depredations.<sup>258</sup> It was because of these dacoities that the Government was forced to take measures for the better administration of the District. An officer called the Commissioner of the Sundarbans, was appointed, who had his headquarters at Bakarganj.<sup>259</sup> Nevertheless the problem of law and order persisted due to the peculiar ecology of the region. On 29<sup>th</sup> June 1775, in a letter to Hastings the members of the Provincial Council of Revenue anxiously reported that in the riverine Provinces of Dacca robbery was frequent for the rivers provided an easy refuge to the dacoits.<sup>260</sup> The point is made clear in the following passage from Allen's survey of Dacca:

... But even when the government is firmly established administration in these water districts must of necessity be less efficient than in drier country. Elsewhere it is not so easy for a person who is wanted by the authorities to abscond. A man who travels by land is likely to be seen by villagers who live along the route he takes, and if he wishes to carry property with him he is tied to a few high roads and to a slowly moving cart. But in the flooded tracts a person who is wanted by the police can at a moment's notice disappear. He has only to step into a boat with his belongings and in five minutes he is swallowed up into that waste of waters, leaving no tracks behind him, no traces of his movements...On land it is not so easy to escape from justice, the criminal can be followed and tracked down, but amidst these gigantic rivers, with their network of minor channels and huge swamps, he vanishes from mortal ken and none, even if they wished to do so, can say where he is gone.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Beveridge, *Bakarganj*, p. 308.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>260</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca 1<sup>st</sup> June to 31<sup>st</sup> July 1775, vol.7 (Sectt. Series), 29<sup>th</sup> June 1775.

<sup>261</sup> B.C. Allen, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca*, Allahabad, 1912, p. 143.

## The Condition of the Peasant and the Question of Peasant Insurgency

This section deals with the opposition that the Company encountered from the peasants in the settled parts of Bengal as a result of the increasing tax burdens placed upon them by the State. Such opposition did not always have to take violent forms. The most effective way by which a peasant could oppose the State was to desert his land. Since there was more land than there were cultivators to till it the State had to do everything in its power to conciliate the discontented ryotts. Before entering upon the forms of peasant resistance it is necessary to give an account of categories of peasants in Bengal and their condition.

### Categories of Peasants in Bengal

On the categories of cultivators the *Risala-i-Ziraat* elaborates as follows:

First, muqarrari or patti cultivator, or cultivator in possession of a patta. He paid revenue in every circumstance according to the document whether his crop was perfect or damaged;

Second, fasli, also called basati (resident) or khud-kasht (self-cultivating) agriculturist; he secured a patta every year in order to engage in cultivation and paid revenue on the land under actual cultivation. He resided in the pargana where he cultivated the land;

Third, the paikasht cultivators who resided in a village other than the one in which their field was located;

Fourth, the Kaljanah cultivator, or one who tilled land as a subordinate of another cultivator.

In this categorisation of the ryotts in the *Risala* nothing is pointed out with regard to the economic condition of different groups of cultivators. It does not indicate if there was a strata of rich peasants who had more resources than those below him and who by virtue of such excess resources wielded more power and authority within the village.

Whether there was a class of rich or superior ryotts in Bengal has been a source of debate among scholars. Ratnalekha Ray for instance asserts the presence of a rich class of peasants for whom she uses the generic term of 'jotedar.' These *jotedars* held large estates and in addition to landholding they also practiced money-lending, and grain dealing. Since the peasants did not have facilities of storage and means of transporting their produce to the market they sold their grain to the grain dealing *jotedars* immediately after the harvest when the price of grain was lowest. The *jotedars* in their turn being equipped with store-houses or *golas*, stored the grain and sold it only when prices were high.<sup>262</sup> Moreover the *jotedars* as a price of their assistance in the collection of the *jama* insisted that they should be allowed to settle the demand on the cultivators within the village without outside interference. By this means they managed to pass off some of their own burden upon the inferior ryotts. While Ray indicated 'jotedars' as a class of superior ryotts in the Bengal countryside, N.K. Sinha indicated the 'mandals' or village headmen as a class of superior ryotts in Bengal.<sup>263</sup> On the contrary Rajat Datta argues against the assumption that there was a class of superior ryotts in Bengal. Datta regards *jotedars* as 'middling-peasants'<sup>264</sup> who may have acquired extra resources during a favourable season but they were certainly not a class of rich peasants with extensive powers over the Bengal countryside. According to Datta resources in Bengal were not in hands of the peasants but in the hands of the landed gentry and the grain-merchants.

#### Some General Constraints on the Peasantry in Bengal

The ideal method of revenue assessment was what was known as the *taksis* method by which the amount of revenue payable by the peasant was first worked out and then in a pyramid fashion the share of revenue to be paid by the intermediaries above the peasant and finally the zamindar class was ascertained. This method took into account the condition and capacity of the peasant first and on that basis adjusted the demands of the zamindar and the state hence it was a just and equitable method of revenue assessment. But the

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<sup>262</sup> Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>263</sup> N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 2, pp.131-133

<sup>264</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 106.

*taksis* method however was rarely resorted to. The *taksim* method was the usual method applied in Bengal and it was just the opposite of the *taksis* method. This method 'assessed the revenue from the top downwards in a conjectural manner and was most uneven in its effects.'<sup>265</sup> The state fixed an assessment upon the zamindar and the zemindar upon the principal ryotts and the principal ryotts then decided the sum to be paid by each individual ryott.

Secondly, the State had no knowledge of how much was actually collected from the ryotts and how much this actual collection exceeded the authorized collection from the ryotts. Natural factors too prohibited any attempts by the state to work at the level of the peasant. Philip Francis made a remark in 1776 that the government could not descend to the ryotts so as to fix any general assessment upon them because the rates of land depended upon a number of precarious circumstances such as the quality of the soil, the articles it produces, vicinity to markets or water carriage. He was emphatic in his opinion that it was a business of detail which in no sense belonged to government and which the East India Company's government was in no sense equal to. His suggestion was that zamindars and ryotts should be left to themselves and they would soon come to an agreement that would be profitable to both.<sup>266</sup>

Third, the peasants were resource constrained. Rajat Datta in explaining the process of commercialization in Bengal in the second half of the eighteenth century points out that the peasants were unable to commence agricultural operations without financial aid from either the zamindar or the grain-merchant. The grain-merchant on the other by advancing money to the ryotts denied them direct access to the local markets and ensured 'the advance hypothecation of their product prior to the completion of the production cycle.'<sup>267</sup>

Fourthly, although a network of rivers, providing cheap transportation made the peasant mobile but the peasant did not have the

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<sup>265</sup> R.B. Ramsbotham, *Studies in the Land Revenue History of Bengal 1769-1787*, London, 1926, p.16.

<sup>266</sup> N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 2, pp. 138-139.

<sup>267</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 25.

wherewithal to transport his produce to the market. He also lacked store-houses or *golas* to store grain and sell it when prices were high. For marketing his produce the peasant had to depend again on the grain-merchants.

Finally since the peasants did not have surplus resources, a natural calamity such as a drought or a flood meant a subsistence-crisis for them.

### The Peasants Means of Manoeuvre

How did the peasants then deal with the general constraints that were already imposed upon them and new ones that were imposed upon them by a changing order of things? For the eighteenth century, inspite of the increasing revenue demands of the state and the replacement of the traditional class of landlords by a new class of farmers, there occurred only one large-scale peasant rebellion. How then is the silence of the rest of the century explained? How did the peasants manoeuvre the existing and the new set of constraints imposed upon them? We will show here that the peasants generally followed three courses to manoeuvre against the constraints imposed upon them. These were 1) Complaint 2) Desertion and 3) Rebellion. The option of open rebellion was the last choice of the peasant for usually the first two strategies especially the threat of desertion forced the authorities to look into their difficulties.

#### **1) Complaint**

The peasants were far from mute sufferers of what the state or the zamindar decreed. The records of the East India Company pointed out that the peasants voiced their complaints frequently. In 1779, in the midst of a drought, the mofussil Naibs from different parts of Rajshahi noted the distress of the ryotts on account of the drought but also pointed out that there was 'no sitting in the Cutcherry for the clamours of the Ryotts.'<sup>268</sup> In 1776, it was noted by Yar Mahomed the Aumil of Surjapore in defending himself against the complain of the ryott's against him to the Company pointed out that the ryotts of Surjapore were particularly refractory so that 'at the time when they are to pay their rents they assemble in a body and repair to the Sudder, where they prefer

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<sup>268</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 7<sup>th</sup> June to 4<sup>th</sup> November 1779, vol. 21, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1779.

false complaints of oppression, of more being collected from them than is really due &c &c., this is done with a view of putting off time, hoping by this means to avoid paying their rents.<sup>269</sup> In 1782 the ryott's of Dinagepore employed a vakil to represent their grievances against Raja Devi Singh. Davi Singh had taken in farm the Chuckla of Dinagepore in the name of his brother Behadur Sing and himself become the Security.<sup>270</sup>

## 2) Desertion

But a more powerful means in the hands of the ryotts to have their demands accepted was desertion. Desertion was in effect 'a strike'.<sup>271</sup> If the ryott deserted in search of a more liberal master there would be no one to cultivate the land. The zamindar would be unable to pay his dues to the State. Moreover, there was a large quantity of uncultivated land that was capable of cultivation. The estimate of cultivable waste lands varied from one-third to two-thirds of Bengal's 90,000 square miles.<sup>272</sup> With such a quantity of cultivable waste it is but natural that the ryott's enjoyed an upper-hand over the zamindar in so far as if he was oppressive the ryotts could leave. A petition submitted to Richard Goodlad, the district officer in Rangpur, by the ryott's concluded with the following words: 'You are head of one country, we have a thousand countries to go to, You are Chief, we are Ryotts [raiats], you will therefore order us Justice'. Desertion was a more powerful weapon than any armed rebellion and the records of the Company point out that the ryotts would often take recourse to this measure.

In times of a natural calamity migration was a strategy used by the cultivator to survive. In times of political upheavals for instance the Maratha incursions in Bengal people deserted their habitations in search of more peaceful areas.<sup>273</sup> But apart from these extraordinary circumstances peasants also deserted when they found their master exacting and left their lands in

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<sup>269</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 16<sup>th</sup> January to 25<sup>th</sup> June 1776, vol. 5, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1776.

<sup>270</sup> WBSA, Committee of Revenue 1<sup>st</sup> April 1782 to 29<sup>th</sup> April 1782, vol. 13, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1782.

<sup>271</sup> Ramsbotham, *Studies in Land Revenue History*, p.15.

<sup>272</sup> Fifth Report, 1812, vol. I, p-25, cited in John McLane, *Land and Local Kingship*, p. 12.

<sup>273</sup> Gangaram, *The Maharashta Purana: An Eighteenth Century Bengali Historical Text* tr. Edward C. Dimock, Honolulu, 1965, pp. 26-30.



search of a more liberal one. When grain prices fell peasants deserted apprehensive that they would not be able to pay the revenue.<sup>274</sup>

But could desertion be equally resorted to by all classes of peasants? While desertion would be a ready means to cope with increased revenue exaction or oppression by the *paikasht* ryott it was not so easy for the *khudkasht* ryott to leave his belongings. The *khud-kasht* ryott cultivated lands in the village where he resided and 'having erected his own dwelling, he improved the cultivation, and almost invariably took in more land than he actually accounted for with the revenue authorities; this type of cultivator had obvious reasons for clinging to his holding.' He would not quit his holding till he had 'suffered much' and 'therefore they were made to suffer much.'<sup>275</sup> The *pahikasht* ryott on the other hand held his holding in a village where he did not belong. According Hastings these vagrant ryotts could impose their own terms upon the zamindar for if the zamindar refused they would desert.<sup>276</sup> Thus while the *paikasht* raiyats would more easily desert the *khudkasht* ryott did not do so until the severity of the demands imposed upon them rose to an unprecedented degree.

In 1774, the Raja of Dinajpur was already in arrears with the government and his allowance was taken by the Company to discharge the revenue arrears. The zamindar was in debt and great distress and pointed out that without some relief being given him the Company would not be able to receive its revenue for the ryotts had taken to flight. He wrote:

The Riots this year were in hopes, that on the arrival of the Gentlemen, some deduction would have been made in the Bundobust, for which reason they remained in their Habitations that they might be able to cultivate the Company's Lands, but even till this time no Bundobust

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<sup>274</sup> An Arzee from the *Shaikdar* of Baharbund Ram Niddey Shaikdar pointed out: Grain is at this Time so cheap that many of the Riotts have quitted their Lands so that instead of being strict in the collection I am obliged to use the most gentle and encouraging means- WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur, 12<sup>th</sup> October to 27<sup>th</sup> December 1775, vol. 4 Part II, the 7<sup>th</sup> November 1775.

<sup>275</sup> W.K. Firminger ed. *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons*, Calcutta, 1917, vol.1, Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

being made , the whole of them have quitted their Malguzzarry Land and are fled, and cannot be brought to settle- Likewise the Farmers, and Holders of the villages will not continue them but have delivered in papers of resignation by which it is evident that the loss that will be incurred in the Malguzzarry will exceed that of the last year, and unless relief is given in the Bundobust, the cultivation of the country, Preservation of the Ryotts and the Collection of the Company's Revenue will be extremely difficult. Whatever Property and Effects I was in possession of have been sold and carried into the Company's cash; and being destitute of everything I retired from Business. For a means to supply my necessary subsistence I took a few Mhals on my own account. They likewise through my ill luck failed me, and only involves me deeper in misfortune, and should the Bundobust not be alleviated, it will not only be hard upon me but will almost lead me to destruction. As it is from you Gentlemen, I am to look for favour, I hope that on your seeing the impoverished state of the country, that you will deduct the *Najai* from the Bundobust, *that the Company's Lands may remain cultivated.* (emphasis ours.)<sup>277</sup>

Ryotts also deserted when a zamindari or state official oppressed them. Gournaut Zemindar of Edrackpore represented that his ryotts were deserting due to the oppression of Meer Sali Ali the *faujdar* at Sham Gunge and that a certain loss would accrue to the *Malguzary* if the said *faujdar* was not removed from his station and his oppressions put an end to.<sup>278</sup> In areas that were close to the hills the ryotts deserted when the hill men attacked. In 1781, Nandalal, the Farmer of Rajshahi, pointed out that the Hill people of Amar and Sultanabad have attacked the Rarah villages and carried away all the cattle and killed and wounded the ryotts as a result the ryotts of Rarah

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<sup>277</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur, 22 March to 25<sup>th</sup> July 1774, vol. no. 1, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1774.

<sup>278</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 1<sup>st</sup> June to 28<sup>th</sup> December 1779, vol.13, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1779.

were deserting and that this was likely to cause a loss in the revenues.<sup>279</sup> In 1782, Rammohun Sezawul of Bishenpore pointed out that ‘the Ryotts of this Pergunnah are assembled in a tumultuous manner and after disputing with the Mokuddums and Farmers are gone off in a body to the borders of Burdwan without paying their Rents, in consequence of which the Collections are fallen short.’<sup>280</sup> The Sezawul of Burdwan was requested by the Company to not give shelter to fleeing ryotts.<sup>281</sup> The Company records mention large scale desertion of ryotts from Nadia in 1781-82 although the cause for their desertion is not stated. The Company incurred a loss in the *jama* of Rs.59,731.67. In 1773-74 or 1180 B.S., the *jama* of Nadia was settled at 10,40,367. In 1781-82 therefore the province of Nadia lost about 5.7 % of its *jama* in 1773-74, on account of desertion of the peasants.

**Table: 6**

Abstract Account of the Ryotts deserted from the following Parganas in the Province of Nadia during the Bengal year 1188 (1781-82) specifying the amount of their *Jama*.-

<i>Parganas</i>	Number of families	of <i>Jama</i>
<b>Ookra</b>	306	15,127.87
<b>Huldeah</b>	288	3,783.56
<b>Pagenour</b>	194	6,228.50

<sup>279</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 3<sup>rd</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> September 1781, vol. 7, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1781.

<sup>280</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 4<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> March 1782, vol.12, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1782

<sup>281</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 4<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> March 1782, vol.12, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1782

<b>Maamjewan</b>	148	1,734.00
<b>Matiaree</b>	1246	19,640.50
<b>Baugwan</b>	859	8,417.81
<b>Soonapore</b>	61	831.25
<b>Munseebpore</b>	544	3,968.18
<b>Total</b>	Families 3,446	Rs.59,731.67

**Source:** WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1782 to 29<sup>th</sup> April 1782, vol. 13, Appendix for the month of April 1782.

Apart from being a strategy of coping, implicit within the act of desertion was the peasant's assertion of their power and place in the Bengal countryside. Thus the petition of the Rangpur ryott's to Richard Goodlad concluded with the lines : 'You are head of one country, we have a thousand countries to go to, You are Chief, we are Ryotts [raiyats], you will therefore order us Justice.'<sup>282</sup> Even if the ryott's did not actually desert the threat of desertion gave them the power to negotiate. When such ability to negotiate was snatched away from them that the peasants decided to rebel.

<sup>282</sup> Jon E. Wilson, ' "A Thousand Countries to Go to": Peasants and Rulers in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal', *Past & Present*, No. 189 (Nov., 2005), pp. 81-109.

### 3) Rebellion

The last resort of the peasant against undue oppression was open rebellion. But this was not an option that the peasants readily resorted to for the threat of desertion or actual desertion was generally enough to force the authorities to listen to their grievances. The peasants rose in armed rebellion only when negotiations with the authorities broke down or they were forcefully prevented from deserting.

The Company records do point to cases where the peasants rose in rebellion against the revenue collecting authorities and the Rungpore *dhing* was not the first case of such violent protest by the peasants. Such cases are reported also reported from Rajshahi. Rajshahi had badly suffered by the famine of 1769-1770. After which the five year settlement was made with the Rani of Rajshahi who offered the highest terms outbidding all farmers. But the Rani had agreed to pay an amount of revenue that was beyond what the country could produce.<sup>283</sup> In an attempt to preserve the zamindari that belonged to her family for generations she offered terms that could not be realized. Soon enough she fell in arrears. So the district was given in farm to one Dulol Roy. Under his management the situation became worse. In a mass petition the ryotts of Rajshahi complained to the board that the rents had been doubled and there had been extraordinary increase of *mathots* and the Dulal Roy was responsible for the levying of several other new and oppressive taxes.<sup>284</sup> In 1778-79 the district was still in the hands of Rani of Rajshahi , who held it subject to the payment of an annual Government rental of sicca rupees 2,285,649.<sup>285</sup> But whenever the Rani fell in arrears the Government either took upon itself the management of the estate in the name of the Rani or farmed it out to revenue contractors. In 1779 the officers of *pargana* Rajshahi noted that ryotts of the *pargana* Surroorpoor, and *pargana* Umbaury had ‘raised Disturbances in the critical season of the collections, have gone against the *Naibs* in the Cutchurry, have tampered with all the Malguzarry Ryotts and

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<sup>283</sup> Narahari Kaviraj, A Peasant Uprising in Bengal 1783: The First Formidable Peasant Uprising against the Rule of East India Company, New Delhi, 1972, p. 14.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>285</sup> Hunter, W.W., A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol. 8, Rajshahi and Bogra, New Delhi, 1974 (reprint), p.

having brought confusion on the Collections, have absconded and are roving about the Boundaries of the Denagepore Division'<sup>286</sup> and although the *Naib* of Umbarry had sent Praun Doss the *aumeen* of the Purgunnah with a conciliatory writing to bring back the Rioters, but the ryotts, 'marched to the Cutcherry of Mahomedpore, and beat the aumeen till he was almost dead. Some *Sirdars* and Pykes also who had gone with the *aumeen* they wounded with their clubs and absconded to the boundaries of Denagepore, and keeping within the jurisdiction of that Division they refuse to attend for the payment of their arrears.'<sup>287</sup> Again in 1782 the *gomastah* of the Farmer of Rajeshahy reported that

The Ryotts of 3 or 4 of the Pergunnahs of the Chucklah Buttooriah are risen in a tumultuous manner. Peer Khan, Peer Mahommed, Taje Mahomed Mochary, Peer Mahommed Sirdar &ca. Ryotts of Pergunnah Amrole having assembled near fifteen hundred men to the great interruption of the Collections, I sent one Anoop Narayon Mudgemoodar, the Naib of the Pergunnah, to endeavour to satisfy and disperse them; but as soon as they saw him approach they fell upon him in a violent manner so that his arm was broke in the fray- Mr. Kinlock being informed of this disturbance came to the Cutcherry and issued a Proclamation for the dispersion of the Mob, to which they paid no attention; after this, Information was brought me that Sudick Sirdar, and Ghoog Mall Sirdar, and others to the amount of 4 or 500 hundred Ryotts of the Pergunnah Caligong, had assembled in a riotous manner and carried off 250 Rupees which they found in the Cutcherry of Amilla and released several Gomastahs who were in confinement for

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<sup>286</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 19<sup>th</sup> January to 18<sup>th</sup> May 1779, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1779.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

their Revenue. I have also been informed of a disturbance of the Ryotts of Serooppore....<sup>288</sup>

The records do not mention the exact causes as to why the Rajshahi ryotts rose in armed rebellion, instead of simply deserting but it will not be perhaps incorrect to surmise that there must have been some constraints imposed upon their desertion. For as we shall see in case of the Rangpur *dhing* that the ryotts chose to rebel only when their powers of negotiation by means of either complaint or desertion was denied them.

As to the Company-State they were reluctant to use military against the ryott and first fell on measures of conciliation. For instance when the *gomastah* of the Farmer of Rajshahi reported that the rebellious activities of the ryotts of Chucklah Buttooriah, Pergunnah Amrole, Pergunnah Caligong, the Company very particularly instructed Captain Kinlock 'by no means to employ the Force you have with you against the Ryotts, but endeavour to prevail upon them to return to their Duty by every encouragement in your power.'<sup>289</sup> The Captain was further instructed:

should you find it necessary from the refractory Behaviour of any of the Ryotts to apprehend them, you will require a written Request from the Farmer or his agent for this purpose, stating the Grounds on which the Request is made, and you will not attend to such Request, until after milder methods have proved ineffectual. We desire also that you direct the Farmer, to endeavour by every means in his power to conciliate the minds of the Ryotts, and to be particularly careful, that no demands are made upon them, but what are just and authorized.<sup>290</sup>

In a situation where the land-man ratio was favourable the state had to be conciliatory in their attitude towards the ryotts.

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<sup>288</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 6<sup>th</sup> February to 28<sup>th</sup> February 1782, vol. 11, Part II, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1782.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

### The Rungpore *dhing* (1783)

The districts of Rungpur, Dinajpur and Edrackpore were given in Calcutta in farm for the years 1188-89 .B.S. (1781-83 A.D.), at an increased revenue. The Dewan of Dinagepore, Rajah Devi Singh, became surety for the farmer 'and in the end himself appears as the real farmer.'<sup>291</sup> Large balances accrued during his management 'to realize which before the expiration of his lease, the farmer had recourse to every means, fair or foul, that lay in his power.'<sup>292</sup> Regarding the genesis and course of the revolt Glazier wrote:

In January 1783, the ryotts of chaklas Cazeerhat and Kankina, and Tapa, chakla Fattehpor, suddenly rose in rebellion, and drove out the collecting officers. Their grievances are set forth in a statement they sent to the collector, who, on first hearing of the rising, had made an attempt to appease them. They complained of the levy of the durreevilla tax, which amounted to 5 annas on the rent; and secondly of the discount which they had to pay for the exchange of narainy rupees into French arcots, which was another three annas. The Collector agreed to revert to the demand of 1187 B.S. and the ryotts expressed themselves satisfied, and apparently dispersed; but this adjustment did not dispose of the question of the large balances, and the malcontents soon again assembled in larger numbers than before. The revolt now extended throughout the whole of Futtehpor, and the insurgents forced the ryotts of Cooch Behar to join them, and sent parties into Dinagepore to bring over the people there. They murdered at Dimla, in Cazeerhat, an under-renter, and the naib of Tapa with seven or eight of his people, and issued a proclamation that they would pay no more revenue. One of the leaders assumed the title of nawab, and another became his dewan, and a tax,

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<sup>292</sup> E.G. Glazier, *A Report on the District of Rungpore*, Calcutta, 1873.



called dingkhurcha or sedition tax, was levied for the expenses of the insurrection.<sup>293</sup>

In order to suppress the insurrection the Company-state utilized its military and several engagements with the rebel ryotts took place. Soon afterwards their 'nawab' was taken prisoner and the insurrection suppressed. But a special commission was deputed in the person of David Paterson to Rangpur with the task of investigating the true cause of the insurrection.

It should be mentioned here that the ryott's tried to follow the first two strategies i.e. complaint and desertion before rising in open rebellion against the authorities. The records of the Committee of Revenue point out that in 1782 the ryott's of Dinagepore employed a *vakil* to represent their grievances against Raja Devi Singh. Narahari Kaviraj mentions two instances where ryotts sent *arzees* against Devi Singh to Goodlad. In 1189 the ryotts of *pargana* Kundi assembled together and presented a petition to Goodlad, the chief of the district. Goodlad referred the matter to the farmer – Debi Singh 'who abused the petitioner and threatened them with dire consequences.'<sup>294</sup> Again the small talluqdars and *bosneahs* (or village headmen) filed a complaint before Goodlad against the farmer. Goodlad however told them to go to Debi Singh. When the talluqdars and *bosneahs* went to Debi Singh and presented their petition Debi Singh, he 'had them flogged with split bamboos and detained them in his private prison.'<sup>295</sup> After this the raiyats and the *bosneahs* stopped making complaints to Goodlad.<sup>296</sup>

Again the rebel leader Dirjinarain in his answers to Rangpur commission's questions pointed out:

It is customary for raiyats, when greatly distressed, to abscond and go to other places, and that they should be encouraged in such cases to return by the indulgences

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Muchelka given in writing by Habshee Mandal and Cabel Pramanik, inhabitants of pargana Kundi enclosed in Paterson's Report, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1783, cited in Narahari Kaviraj, *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal 1783: The First Formidable Peasant Uprising against the Rule of East India Company*, New Delhi, 1972, p-40.

<sup>295</sup> Narahari Kaviraj, *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal*, p.40

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

granted to them by the zamindars or farmers, whereas Debi Singh's officers used to bring the raiyats back by force and used them ill.<sup>297</sup>

Debi Singh issued *parwanas* in which he gave orders to his local agents to punish the absconders by destroying their houses and cutting down whatever crops there were in the field. It is therefore clear that in 1783 the peasants rose in rebellion against the authorities in a final attempt to have their grievances redressed.

### The Rangpur Dhing: The Re-Configuration of the Old Order

In the title of his book, Marxist historian Narahari Kaviraja calls the Rangpur *dhing* of 1783 as 'the first formidable Peasant Uprising against the Rule of the East India Company.' In his exhaustive study of peasant insurgency in colonial India Ranajit Guha sees a fundamental dichotomy of interests between the collusion of *sarkar* and *zamindar* on the one hand and the peasant on the other. According to Guha the relationship between the landlord and the peasant was one of 'dominance and subordination' a 'semi-feudal' relationship that was revitalized by colonial rule 'by transferring resources from the older and less effective members of the landlord class to younger and, for the regime politically and financially more dependable ones.'

For the peasant this meant not less but in many cases more intensive and systematic exploitation: the crude medieval type of oppression in the countryside emanating from the arbitrary will of local despots under the previous system was replaced now by the more regulated will of a foreign power which for a long time to come was to leave the landlords free to collect *abwab* and *mathot* from their tenants and rack-rent and evict them. Obligated under pressure eventually to legislate against such abuses, it was unable to eliminate them altogether because its law-enforcing agencies at the local level served as instruments of landlord authority, and the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

law, so right on paper, allowed itself to be manipulated by court officials and lawyers in favour of landlordism. The Raj even left the power of punishment, that ultimate power of the state, to be shared to some extent by the rural elite in the name of respect for indigenous tradition, which meant in effect turning a blind eye to the gentry dispensing criminal justice either as members of the dominant class operating from *kachari* and *gadi* or as those of dominant castes entrenched in village panchayats. The collusion between *sarkar* and *zamindar* was indeed a part of the common experience of the poor and the subaltern at the local level nearly everywhere.<sup>298</sup>

Guha's analysis of the relationship between the state, the *zamindar*, and *ryott* is open to many questions. The exploitation of the *ryott* by the collusion of *sarkar* and *zamindar* is a rather simplified version of a complex relationship. In the old order of things, that is before the transition to colonial rule, the peasant and the *zamindar* were bound by patrimonial ties in spite of the fact that the peasants were oppressed. Under the new order, with a creation of a new class of landlords such ties dissolved and the relationship between the State, the *zamindar* and the peasant was configured anew.

Before however elaborating on this it is necessary to state here John E. Wilson's very important objection to Guha's analysis of subaltern consciousness in the context of the Rangpur *dhing*. Wilson argues that Guha's analysis of the 'subaltern' mentality does not explain the case of the Rangpur *dhing* of 1783. Wilson has pointed out that 'in Rangpur, peasants were not driven to revolt by their antagonism towards a rigid, oppressive structure of authority. Instead, the social imagination of Rangpur's eighteenth-century peasantry perceived the world in which they acted as a complex network of fluid and constantly changing authorities. For them, 'rebellion' was not full-frontal assault on a political system they were excluded from. It was an attempt to assert their ability to negotiate within a flexible political order in

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<sup>298</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, p-7.

which they believed they were participants.<sup>299</sup> In 1782-83 the ryott's had found their right to negotiate snatched away from them by Devi Singh. The forceful sale of their cattle and the restrictions imposed upon their mobility denied the ryott their ability to negotiate with the authorities. Implicit behind their threat of desertion was the belief of the ryott that the authority of their superiors in the system like Goodlad depended on their ability to protect them from economic insecurity and to make benevolent concessions when necessary. But 'where the capacity to do so was not visible, the land- holder's power and material livelihood could quickly melt away and a new political entity be formed.' Hence the peasants petition to Goodlad (that concluded with the following words: 'You are head of one country, we have a thousand countries to go to, You are Chief, we are Ryotts [raiyats], you will therefore order us Justice'. ) while acknowledging the British Collector's authority also contained a threat ; that if Goodlad did not prove a good ruler and order justice the peasants would migrate elsewhere where they would be treated better and this would leave Goodlad without any subjects to rule and consequently no authority to exercise.<sup>300</sup> By their rebellion the ryotts were re-asserting their right to negotiate in a system of which they thought they were a part.

Secondly the kind of antagonism that that Guha propounds to have existed between the ryotts on the one hand and the state and zamindar on the other is not corroborated by evidence. For instance the ryotts of *mauza* Uljerrah were in league with the Mahomedshahi zamindar against revenue collection by the state. *Mauza* Uljerrah was part of the khas taaluc but in 1776 it was reported that one Sherruff-ud-deen Biswas and near 20 other Ryotts 'are gone to Calcutta, where they will procure the *mouza* to be separated from the *khas-taalucs* and annexed to Mahomoodshahy.' The *arzee* of the *khas talluq vakeel* pointed out that the zamindar of Mahomedshahi had by similar means taken possession of Jeel Jungul Dyah, the *jama* of which was 400 Rupees, and the *mauzas* of Mynaparrah and Chunderporah.<sup>301</sup> Here the zamindar of Mahomedshahi was clearly in league with the ryotts and increasing his

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<sup>299</sup> Jon E. Wilson, "A Thousand Countries to Go to", p.84.

<sup>300</sup> Jon E. Wilson, "A Thousand Countries to Go to", p. 85.

<sup>301</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 2<sup>nd</sup> May to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1776, vol. 9, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1776.

territory at the cost of the *khas-talluqs*. This was therefore a case of class collaboration rather than class antagonism.

In the context of the Rangpur *dhing* of 1783 too no such class antagonism between the ryott and the class of the old zamindars were to be found. Here again I would like to refer to McLane's work who has pointed out that the zamindars were the local version of the Hindu Raja whose duty it was to patronize the worthy, punish the culprit, and be a benevolent ruler for his subjects. But owing to the increased incidence of revenue imposed upon them by the state the zamindars could show less indulgence towards the ryotts than they had previously. Moreover the class of traditional landholders with large landed estates who acted the Raja and were paternalistic in their attitude towards the ryotts were being broken up. Lands were assigned to smaller landholders or revenue farmers who did not share similar values. McLane thus points out 'By the end of the century, rights to collect rents and act out the role of the local raja were being delegated, sold, and mortgaged to smaller and smaller landholders. As a result kingship became less benevolent and familiar and it fitted less well with Hindu expectations of how a good king should behave and sustain the ritually oriented community.'<sup>302</sup> This change of the old order by the new and the peasants dislike for the new order is clearly brought in the *Rangpurer Jager Gan*, a Bengali verse, and one of the non-official sources of the Rangpur *dhing*. It thus went:

In Rangpur, Fatehpur was a big chakla and king Rajarai lived there all alone. A deeply religious man, Rajarai was given to charities and many Brahmins were gifted land. The plots of land that he gave away to Brahmins and physicians, or consecrated to gods, cannot be measured...Sivachadra Roy was Rajarai's son; everybody praised him as equal to Siva...When the country was perishing in famine, Debi Singh, the arch villain, was busy plundering the people. Their misery touched the heart of Sivachadra...He went down to the court of Debi Singh and narrated the story of the

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<sup>302</sup> John R. McLane, *Land and Local kingship*, p. xiv.

people's suffering...On hearing this his (Debi Singh's) angry eyes turned red...Sivchandra was put behind the bars, his feet in iron-fetters. Later, when his dewan learned all this, he had Sivchandra freed...on paying a lot of money. Sivchandra was the pride of the Baidya family; he could not bear Debi Singh's oppression any longer. He wrote letters to all zamindars in Rangpur asking them to come over, he sent out an open letter to all the people of his area as well as to those outside it...One by one they were all seated in the Conference Hall...The raiyats kept standing, hands folded and tears rolling down their chests...Sivchandra stood up with folded hands to speak; as he spoke he wept in anger. Pointing out the subjects to the zamindars, he said: "How could you eat without a thought for the sufferings of these people? Too often there were floods when the waters came down from the north, in which all the paddy was destroyed. I spent a good deal of time, labour and money to have the mouth of Caroah dyked. The subjects perish for the sins of the king. There is no water for irrigation; the paddy in the field is scorched down, and there is nothing left at home. Every year, we have a famine..."<sup>303</sup>

The *Jager Gan* clearly showed how the old order of things- the patrimonial zamindar who was known for his benevolence and beneficence in granting lands to the pious and looking after his subjects – was different from Devi Singh the intruder. In one place of the *Jager gan* the Ryott's regarded Devi Singh as an incarnation of "Koli" and to the Bengalis, Koli is a mythical period when the right order of things is subverted. Debi Singh was the representative of the new order of things that were fundamentally wrong and reverse of the correct order of things in peasant consciousness. It perhaps may not be incorrect to say that in 1783, the Rangpur peasants in rising up in rebellion were looking to restore the old order of things which were ideal in their perception. Contrary to Guha's analysis this old class of zamindars were

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<sup>303</sup> Narahari Kabiraj, *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal*, pp. 102-103

not oppressors in the perception of the peasant which does not imply that they were not oppressing the peasantry but in the perception of the peasant it was the correct order of things. A similarity between the Rajshahi and the Rangpur uprising was that in both cases the authority of the traditional zamindar was superseded by the authority of the intruding revenue farmer.

A second point that the *Jager gan* illustrates is that in the rebellion the old class of zamindars who had been displaced by the farmer Debi Singh was also responsible for goading the ryott's into rebellion. The participation of the ryotts was over-whelming but the role of the displaced zamindars in inciting them also cannot be ignored. Thus the *Jager gan* went:

Sivchandra Roy lost his temper and spoke again: "Since the Rajput robber is a scoundrel, you [ the other zemindars who had assembled] should all drive him out..."

At this stage Mother Joydurga flared up: " Are you not men – aren't you strong? Though I am born a woman, I can seize him and cut him to pieces with a sword. Nobody would be required to do anything, everything will be done by the subjects. But we shall never bow down."

Sivachandra spoke, trembling with anger, like a charging hooded king-cobra. Sivchandra Nandy said: "Listen, my subjects. You provide the king's food, his riches. Go out to Rangpur in your thousands, plunder Debi Singh's palace and pull it down. Get him, bring him here along with his henchmen, and I will with my own hands, cut his ears off."

At Sivchandra's command all the people took heart and rushed together in their thousands. They took sticks, spears, sickles, choppers; ...On their shoulders, they carried a balance of load and the yoke. They were made beggars – so they ran like savages.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid, pp. 103-104.

To summarize our argument, there were many constraints on the Bengali peasant under the old order of things and the transition from the Nizamat to the Company administration imposed a new set of constraints upon them. The peasants means of manoeuvring these constraints were primarily threefold – complaint, desertion and rebellion although the last option was rarely resorted to as the threat of desertion, in a situation where the land-man ratio was favourable was enough to force the authorities to acquiesce to the demands of the peasantry. Rebellion occurred only when the ryotts were denied the right to desert and thereby negotiate his position within the agrarian order. The Rangpur *dhing* was an instance where the denial to negotiate their position in the agrarian order led the peasants to rebellion. The rebellion also brought into focus the complex relationship that had evolved between the state, the landlord and the peasant. The class of landlords now had two elements – the old class of displaced zamindars who sided with the peasants and on whom the peasants reposed their trust and loyalty and the class of new landlords that were a creation of the Company-State whom the ryotts despised. The transition from the Nizamat to the Company-State created a new order of things and complex changes between the relationship of the State with the intermediaries and the peasantry.



## Chapter-3

### Trade and Transport in Riverine Bengal

From very early times and up till the introduction of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century transport in Bengal was largely water-borne. The Ganga and the Bramhaputra rivers together with their numerous tributaries and distributaries intersected the Province. These rivers were navigable at most places, often throughout the year thus giving Bengal a most complete system of inland navigation. Transport by land via a network of roads was also common but the water route was generally preferred because it was a cheaper and faster way of travelling. In the eighteenth century underpinning the developments in trade and commerce in the region of Bengal was this efficient system of transport provided by rivers of the Province. Not only was the system of transport efficient it was also ecologically sustainable. The existence of myriad varieties of boats – from the humble *dingis* to the elaborate *bajras* – testifies to the fact that the inhabitants of Bengal had adapted themselves well with the water regime of the Province. This should be contrasted with the introduction of railways in the mid-nineteenth century. In the fluvial landscape of Bengal railways were an ecologically unsustainable mode of transport and its introduction caused major ecological and economic disruption.

Since transport networks were well developed, the eighteenth century saw a great movement of both people and goods. Mobility resulted in flow of information. C.A. Bayly has argued that the British were able to conquer the Indian subcontinent within a period of two generations because they commanded the Indian seas and had the resources of Bengal at their disposal but another factor that was the reason behind the quick domination of the British over the Indian subcontinent was their ability to obtain knowledge of the country. Bayly argues that prior to the arrival of the British, ‘the subcontinent was straddled by complex and highly sophisticated information systems and the British had learned the art of listening in on these internal communications.’<sup>305</sup> By establishing their control over the networks of

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<sup>305</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (South Asian Edition) New Delhi, 2007 (Reprint), p- 97.

communication the British were able to anticipate the moves of their enemies and establish effective control over the Indian subcontinent. In Bengal, under the Nizamat the networks of communication were well established. News of the different parts of the Province reached the Nawab by means of the establishment of the *daks*. The East India Company inherited this system and modified it to its own advantage. In areas which did not have the networks of communication already established, as in Nepal or Burma, conquest proved to be more costly and long-drawn.<sup>306</sup>

### **The Advantages of River Transport in Bengal**

Transport costs on land were estimated to be 28 times more than that through the river.<sup>307</sup> Thus merchants preferred to store grain during the non-navigable seasons and transport it when the rivers became navigable again. Although this implied additional cost for storage the traders did not lose their profits as it was cheaper to transport goods through the water route than through the land route. Thus Martin in the context of Dinajpur observes, that the district is intersected everywhere by rivers which serve as channels for transport and communication. During the rainy season travel by land was nearly suspended and the rivers provided an alternative means of communication. The traders did not export or import commodities during the dry season. During this time the export goods were stored in warehouses located on the banks of the river from where they were carried to their destinations during the rainy season when the rivers could be used as means of communication. The imports too were made during the rainy season and during the dry season they were distributed to the various market places of the Province. The rivers also connected the intermediary markets the *hats* and the *ganjs* and were therefore crucial to the economy of the region. The *ganjs* and the *hats* were usually established at points where the transport of goods and the assemblage of buyers and sellers were facilitated by the existence of roads and waterways.<sup>308</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee writes that ‘The sinews of the transport organization

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>307</sup> John Crawford cited in Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835*, London, 1995, p-113 cited in Tilottama Mukherjee ‘Of Rivers and Roads: Transport Networks and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal’ in Yogesh Sharma ed. *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in pre-modern India*, Delhi, 2010.

<sup>308</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, Ibid, p. 33-4.

bolstered and sustained the integrated yet decentralized commercial economy.<sup>309</sup> Direct river routes existed to the four cities of Calcutta, Dacca, Murshidabad and Patna. There was also a kind of hierarchy based on the extent of connectivity where places like Chittagong, Dinajpur, Lakshmipur, Rangpur, Kumarkhali and Sylhet occupied a higher rung as compared to the rest.

### **Trade and Transport**

The roads and the rivers in Bengal together provided yearlong mobility.<sup>310</sup> As a result of the high degree of connectivity within the province, the eighteenth century saw the emergence of an integrated provincial market in food grains.<sup>311</sup> This emergence of an integrated provincial market on food grains as a result of the easy communication provided by the rivers is evident from Sherwill's survey of the grain-marts in Dinajpur that were located near the banks of the navigable rivers which connected them with one another and with the main markets of Calcutta. Sherwill writes:-

The Kurroteea is a sluggish and tortuous river, navigable for large boats during the rains, and for small boats and canoes during the dry season. The principal grain marts are Raneegunge, and Ghoraghat, and further south in the Bogra district, the large towns of Seebgunge and Bograh...The Juboona is also navigable for large boats during the rains, and possesses several large grain marts, Berampur, Kantla, Hillee, Joypoor, Jamalgunge, &c...The Mahanuddy, the most important of all these rivers, forms the south-western boundary of the district for about 15 miles. The large grain mart of Chooramun is situated on its left bank...These rivers together with numerous minor ones, and endless small streams and khalls, all of which more or less have a southerly course and flow eventually into the great Ganges,

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid, p-22

<sup>310</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 172.

<sup>311</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 28; Tilottama Mukherjee, 'Of Roads and Rivers: Aspects of Travel and Transport in Eighteenth Century Bengal', M.Phil dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University 1997.

are so connected with each other as to form a complete intersection of network over the entire district...Rice is exported largely from every part of the Dinajpur district. During the rains when the rivers are swollen, and admit of boats of all sizes ascending from the Ganges to the numerous Golahs or granaries situated in the most convenient spots, along the banks of the rivers, for making shipments, large quantities are then conveyed by these minor arteries of commerce to the great Ganges, whence the greater proportion finds its way to the Calcutta and Chandernagore markets.<sup>312</sup>

The large scale grain-trade in Bengal thus depended on efficient system of transport provided by the rivers. Even the small scale exchange of goods by means of barter depended on river transport. In Bakarganj the daily utensils of the people were obtained by means of barter so efficient was the means of transport. In cold weather boats came from Dacca laden with earthen pots. These are sold by the boatmen in exchange of paddy. This is because the earth in Bakergunj had a quantity of salt in its composition and was consequently not suitable for pottery. The inhabitants therefore depended on other districts for their supply of pots and earthenware for domestic purposes.<sup>313</sup>

It seems from the Company records that salt *golahs* also would ideally be placed near the water courses to make it easier for the salt to be loaded on boats. If the *golahs* were located in much interior parts additional expense of hiring coolies was incurred for the purpose of transporting the salt.<sup>314</sup> Thus one Mr. William Driver complained that the salt *golahs* were 'at such an extraordinary distance from the waterside' that it had become difficult for him to load the salt on boats and that he had been forced to hire and had to take the assistance of 100 Coolies.<sup>315</sup> The Company deputed Mr. John Evelyn to enquire into the matter. It was found by Mr. Evelyn's examination that

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<sup>312</sup> J.L. Sherwill, *Geographical and Statistical Report of the Dinagepore District*, Calcutta, 1865, p. 16.

<sup>313</sup> Sourindro Mohun Tagore, *A Brief History of Bakarganj*, Calcutta, 1892.

<sup>314</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings 4 January to 24 April 1775, January the 4<sup>th</sup> 1775.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

many of these Golahs were 4-8 miles within land and that hence those who made purchases at the Company's sales would incur a considerable charge in transporting the salt over land.<sup>316</sup> Hence Mr. James Crisp salt agent of Belluah and other districts was instructed thus:

We think each Golah...should be as near as possible to the places of Loading but in such situation as not to be in danger of being decremented by the high tides and it would be better if you could obtain acquiesce of the contractor for the situations you fix upon, to prevent any disputes hereafter...<sup>317</sup>

### **The Speed of Travelling**

The following table gives an idea of the duration of river voyages.

**Table 7: No. of kilometers covered in one day on the Ganga in a bajara**

With the stream		Against the stream	
Low water	High water	Low Water	High Water
65	80-110	27 or 32	60

**Source:** Memoirs of Rennell, p. 230-61 cited in Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India, Prior to Steam Locomotion, vol. 2 Water Transport*, Delhi, 1994 vol. 2, p.176.

So far as land transit was concerned the speed was not uniform. The private *qasid* could cover as much as 40-60 kms. a day. Daily and Express Couriers could cover about 80 km. and messengers relaying at each stage could cover more than 100 kms. But these messengers were professionally trained to cover

<sup>316</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings 4 January to 24 April 1775, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1775.

<sup>317</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, Proceedings May-August 1775, May the 4<sup>th</sup> 1775.

large distances. The speed depended on the quality of roads, security etc. Deloche points out that the greatest daily distances travelled were from Agra to Lahore, as it was the best maintained road on Hindustan where travellers could cover as much as 40 km/day and with trade caravans as much as 30 km. Conveyance by palanquin or saddled craft on road was much rapid but the maximum speed was 60 km/day and this was not commonly achieved as one had to adapt oneself to the slow rhythm of the pack animals. On an average it may be said the distance covered on road was 35 or 40 km per day which is much less compared to the distance that can be covered going by the water route.

The usual mode of conveyance of goods on land was the oxen in back loads. There were also carts drawn by oxen which could carry a burthen from seven to ten *maunds*. Many of the *Paikars* or petty traders kept such oxens for conveying their goods to and from the warehouses. On the other hand the small peasant's lack of means for carrying his produce to the market made him dependant on those who possessed such means.

### **The disadvantages of Water-Transport**

The disadvantages of an over dependence on water transport was manifested in case of change in river courses. Martin writes in context of Dinajpur, that in case of a change in the course of a river, which was bound to occur in country 'so level and so loose a soil,' 'the vicinity of the new course is deluged with water from the smallness of the channel, and the banks of the old course are often deprived of fertility, and still more certainly of the means for conveying their produce to the market. The towns must therefore disappear...' Bishop Heber mentions the great corn fairs of Bhagwangola but also adds that, 'Bogwangola has been several times, within these few years, removed to different situations in consequence of the havoc made by the Ganges. It has therefore no ancient building, and neither pagoda nor mosque of any kind that I could discover. Indeed it has the appearance rather of an encampment than a town, but is not on that account the less pretty.'<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Bishop Heber, *Narrative of a journey through the Upper Provinces of India*, vol.1, London, 1828, p. 183.

Inclement weather also stopped navigation. From March to May navigation in the rivers of Bengal was rendered almost impossible because of the Nor-westers<sup>319</sup> also called by Bengalis the *kal baisaki*, or ‘disasters of May.’ Solvyns gives the following description of the Nor-westers:

The phenomenon which I am going to describe borrows its name from the wind by which it is occasioned: it takes place in the gulf of Bengal and the rivers of Hindustan, more particularly in the south-east monsoon...In the morning a south wind, warmer than usual, reigns upon the river; from sunrise the sky is clear till about noon, when some clouds, which appear to come from the high mountains, meet on the horizon to the north, and soon accumulate so as to cover nearly the whole of the sky: the south wind ceases and a dead calm succeeds for a few minutes. On a sudden this momentary silence of nature is followed by a dreadful noise which seems to announce the confusion of all the elements. The clouds thicken, and are torn by continual flashes of lightning, the thunder roars, and torrents of rain often deluge the country: the atmosphere becomes a few degrees cooler. The river then assumes the appearance of a boisterous sea, and sometimes overwhelms the vessels which have not had the produce to fly for shelter to the creeks or canals. These disasters are but too frequent, and I myself have seen ships at anchor with their topmasts lowered veer round and disappear under the waves: these accidents are often too sudden to be prevented.<sup>320</sup>

Bishop Heber en route to Dacca in a 16 oared pinnace had to brave a nor-wester around Chandernagore. He writes, ‘About two o’ clock this morning we had a north-wester, accompanied with violent thunder and

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<sup>319</sup> A letter from Mr. Lindsay to John Shakespear Chief &c. Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca points out the following:

‘...It was my intention to have accompanied these accounts with the balance of revenue now in the treasury... but finding great difficulty in procuring heavy boats to freight from Sylhet during months of March, April and May few merchants choosing to risk their property on the river at this tempestuous season, I have judged it prudent to decline making you any dispatch of cowries till the commencement of June...’ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1779 to 30<sup>th</sup> July 1779, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1779.

Again the records of the Committee of Circuit point out, ‘That from the month of March till June no boats be required to attend the chunam works, the navigation then rendered very dangerous by the sudden and frequent North-Westers that happen. The remaining part of the year the chunam to be transported...at either three or four stated times.’ WBSA, Committee of Circuit Dacca, 3<sup>rd</sup> October to 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1772, November 3, 1772.

<sup>320</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *Boats of Bengal*, p. 14.

lightning. It lasted about two hours, and was so severe, that we could not but feel thankful that it had not overtaken us the night before, while we were under sail. I have never heard louder thunder, or seen so vivid and formidable lightening.... Indeed there really ran something like a sea in the channel of the river where we now lay.’<sup>321</sup>

### **Kinds of Boats**

However inspite of such dangers, traveling by water was much more preferred over traveling by land as water-transport was cheaper and quicker than land transport the province everywhere being intersected by the channels of the Ganga and the Bramhaputra rivers. There existed a wide variety of boats in Bengal. Of these some belonged to category of luxury vehicles that were to be used for pleasure-trips upon the rivers or for long journeys to be made by wealthy Englishmen and natives. Some were used for the purposes of commerce and some for their speed. The constructions of these boats were made according to the purpose for which it was to be used.

The pinnacle or yacht was used for journey by wealthy Europeans from Calcutta to Benares, Lucknow etc. These boats were very commodious ‘they carry sail, and are strongly masted: each one is divided into two or three apartments, one for company, another for the beds, and a third as a cabinet, besides a place called *verandah* forwards for the servants. The yacht has several attendant boats to carry provisions and serve for kitchen and other offices, which keep to leeward not to incommode their masters with the smoke. They have in general as many conveniences as a small house.’<sup>322</sup>

Pinnaces were owned privately by wealthy officials and merchants and they could also be hired in Calcutta for pleasure trips or short journeys but their rates of hire being very high they were not used for lengthy journeys except by the very wealthy. Governor-General Wellesley had, as the East India Company’s state yacht, a pinnacle, called the “Soonamooky”. The

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<sup>321</sup> Bishop Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25*, Philadelphia, 1828, vol. 1, pp. 102-103.

<sup>322</sup> Hardgrave, *Boats of Bengal*, p. 17.



vessel had 30 oars and was constructed “of teak, sheathed with copper, and fitted up in a style suited to the dignity of a Viceroy.”<sup>323</sup>

The Budgerow like the pinnace was a commodious vessel, a floating-house of sorts although it was less swift than the pinnace. A bajra like the pinnace was also usually accompanied by attendant boats serving as the kitchen.<sup>324</sup>

Among the pleasure boats were also included the *fil-chera* and the *mor-pankhi* but they belonged to a genre of long and narrow pleasure boats known generally as “snake boats.”<sup>325</sup>

The Bhauliya boats on the other hand were noted for their speed. These boats were of light construction and very swift.<sup>326</sup> There was also the Pansway which was a ‘passage boat very convenient for inland navigation.’<sup>327</sup> Bishop Heber describes a Pansway thus: ‘This was a very characteristic and interesting vessel, large and broad, shaped like a snuffer dish, a deck fore and aft, and the middle covered with a roof of palm branches, over which again was lashed a coarse cloth, the whole forming an excellent shade from the sun; but as I should apprehend intolerably close. The Serang or master stood on the little after-deck, steering with a long oar; another man a little before him, had a similar oar on the starboard quarter; six rowers were seated cross-legged on the deck upon the tilt, and plied their short paddles with much dexterity; not however as paddles usually are plied, but in the manner of oars, resting them instead of rullocks, on bamboos, which rose upright from the sides. A large long sail of thin transparent sackcloth in three pieces, very loosely tacked to each other, completed the equipment.’<sup>328</sup> Heber mentions that the crew of the pansway offered their services for 15 rupees to carry any passengers to Calcutta from Saugor, a distance of above 100 miles.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Williamson cited in *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>324</sup> Hardgrave, *Boats of Bengal*, p. 30.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>328</sup> Reverend Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*, Philadelphia, 1828, vol. 1, pp. 43-44.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

The *ulak* was a “bulky baggage boat of Bengal”.<sup>330</sup> The *Pulwars* were cargo river boats of the Dacca region that were used for the purposes of commerce as they could carry very heavy loads at the lowest possible cost. The East India Company preferred to transport its precious goods like silver, muslins, opium, indigo etc. on *Pulwars*.<sup>331</sup> The Sloops were ‘used to carry goods to and from the merchant-ships which are laded or unladed.’<sup>332</sup> The East India Company had special need for them for purposes of commerce. The *Bhur* was also a cargo-river boat.<sup>333</sup> William Hodges points out that *Bhurs* were used ‘for the ferrying of cotton, and other bulky materials, the weight of which cannot bear any proportion to their size.’<sup>334</sup>

Some boats like the *kosa* were peculiar to East-Bengal particularly Chittagong. The *kosas* were very much used by the Mugs.<sup>335</sup> The *kosas* could be used for fishing and ferrying and when fitted with a thatched covering (*chauni*) they could be used as cargo carriers.<sup>336</sup>

There were also the *Dingis* ‘half-decked, round-bottomed boats build of planks’<sup>337</sup> that were used ‘to keep up the communication between the ships and the different ports and landing places.’<sup>338</sup> *Dingis* were used for short journeys on the river ‘as in ferry-crossings from Calcutta to the opposite shore, for fishing, and in transport back and forth from ship to shore’ carrying provisions and whatever other necessaries the ship’s crew may need when

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<sup>330</sup> Colesworthy Grant, *Rural Life in Bengal*, p-25, cited in Robert L. Hardgrave, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001.

<sup>331</sup> Balthazar Solvyns cited in Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. compiled *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 108.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>333</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, *Boats of Bengal*, p-118.

<sup>334</sup> William Hodges, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783*, London, MDCCXCIII, p- 38.

<sup>335</sup> Balthazar Solvyns cited in Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. compiled *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p-103.

<sup>336</sup> Greenhill, *Boats and Boatmen of Pakistan*, p-110 cited in Robert L. Hardgrave’s commentary in his own compilation, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p-105.

<sup>337</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave’s commentary in his own compilation, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p-51.

<sup>338</sup> Balthazar Solvyns cited in Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. compiled *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p-51.

anchored.<sup>339</sup> Dingeers were generally managed by a single rower although in some cases there may be two rowers.<sup>340</sup>

**Table 8: Rate of hire of Boats**

Boat	Rate of hire per month
Budgerow	50 Rupees
Panchwoy	25 Rupees
Pulwar	15 Rupees.

**Source :** WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 7<sup>th</sup> June to 25 August 1774, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1774.

### **Transport Workers**

Those employed in the transport sector differed in their social and economic status. At one end of the spectrum were rich merchants and sloop contractors like the family of Akur Dutta who made a fortune for themselves in doing business with the Company<sup>341</sup> while at the other end were the bulk of poor boatmen whose job was laborious and remuneration very low.

A Sloop-contractor was essential for the Company's business. Ships could not ply through the narrow creeks and canals of Bengal and were anchored in deep water. The export goods from the inland marts and factories were brought to the ship by the sloops that could easily navigate in shallow water. Again it were the sloops that transported the cargo from incoming ships to the ware-houses. Thus with the increased volume of exports the sloop business became a profitable one and from the 1780s Akur Dutta became the most important sloop contractor of Bengal. The Bengal-built ships carried cargoes of rice, cotton, sugar, salt and silk to London and other places and were also used in country trade. Akur Dutta's sloops carried these

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<sup>339</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. compiled *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, p-51.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Shubhra Chakrabarti, 'The English East India Company and the Indigenous Sloop Merchants of Bengal: Akur Dutta and His Family, 1757-1857', *Studies in History*, 20, 1, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 131-157.

commodities to the ships and when the ships returned his sloops brought back the return cargo of Madeira, iron, lead, copper, small pipes, bundles, large bellows and large guns to the import warehouses.<sup>342</sup>

There was another influential class of transport workers- the *ghat majhis*. At each *ghat* or landing place there was a *ghat-majhi* who had to be approached if one wished to procure a boat. These *ghat-majhis* kept a meticulous account of the names and places of residence of all *majhis*, *dandies* and owners of boats.<sup>343</sup>

At the very bottom of the transport sector were the boatmen- the *majhi* and the Dandies and bearers and coolies whose job was laborious but wages very low. The author of the *Sketches of India* gives a very vivid description of the day long toil of the *majhi* and their simple yet contended lifestyle:

The constant labour and fatigue the dandies or rowers of a budgerow undergo excites, at first, pity and astonishment in the breast of a stranger. For hours together, when the wind happens to be unfavourable, they are plunged up to their necks in water, under a burning sun, dragging the boat along with ropes. On the shore, they pass, ten or twelve in a string, working like horses. For the whole day they remain thus, nor does their labour terminate until the anchor is given at sunset. With what glee do they then eat their simple meal. Everything is forgotten, and they rise, at daybreak, to a renewal of this slavery, with all the content possible. To a European, one of their days would be death. To sustain it, as these helpless creatures do, is scarcely credible.<sup>344</sup>

Among the transport workers the wage of a *majhi* was Rs. 4 per month , that of a *mahout* of Elephants Rs. 4 per month, that of a coolie Rs.3 per month, a

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p-137.

<sup>343</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth Century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication*, New Delhi, 2013, p. 153.

<sup>344</sup> *Sketches of India or Observations Descriptive of the Scenery &c. in Bengal: Written in India, in the years 1811, 12, 13, 14, Together with notes on the Cape of Good-Hope, and St. Helena, written at those places in Feb, March and April 1815*, London 1816, p. 15.

*hircarrah* Rs. 5 per month .<sup>345</sup> These lower rung of transport workers were very poor and in times of famines and scarcity which were quite frequent in the eighteenth century they were severely affected. The Consultations of December 13<sup>th</sup> 1770 point out a letter from the Supervisor of Houghly to Richard Becher mentioning that the loss of Dandies by the late famine ‘has rendered every expedient for the transportation of the salt to the Bunder more or less ineffectual.’<sup>346</sup> Those who were most severely affected during the famine of 1769-70 were ‘the workmen, manufacturers and people employed in the river [boatmen]’, because they ‘were without the same means of laying by stores of grain as the husbandmen.’<sup>347</sup> The boatmen generally rented a small piece of ground by cultivating which he obtained his food and raw materials for clothing. His wages and his wife’s spinning supplied him with clothes and enabled him to meet other necessary expenses.<sup>348</sup> So far as the labourers were concerned the landed proprietors controlled their supply within their own domains. The landed proprietors generally gave these labourers lands at low rates for their subsistence besides which they received their daily wages when called on for work.<sup>349</sup>

### **Urban Transport: Calcutta in the eighteenth century**

Long points out that roads were few in old Calcutta and transport was mainly by water for the purposes of trade as well as leisure.<sup>350</sup> Since roads were scarce carriages were few and travelling by the palanquin was considered a luxury. In a bid to check the tendency towards extravagance and unnecessary luxury among its servants, the Company passed laws restricting the use of ‘either horse, chair or palankeen’ by the writers of the Company for going to office. But they were afterwards allowed to use them in for such months of the year when the ‘excessive heat and violent rains’ made it impossible to go on

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<sup>345</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 7<sup>th</sup> March to 27<sup>th</sup> May 1774 (Sectt Series) vol. 2, April 12<sup>th</sup> 1774.

<sup>346</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 2, pp. 55.

<sup>347</sup> Memoir of Sir George Campbell, in J.C. Geddes *Administrative Experience*, p-18, cited in Rajat Datta *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 252.

<sup>348</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 156.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>350</sup> Revd. J. Long, *Selections From Unpublished Records of Government for the Years 1748 to 1767 inclusive relating mainly to the Social Condition of Bengal with a map of Calcutta in 1784, Calcutta 1869*, vol. 1, p. xxxii (Introduction)

foot.<sup>351</sup> The Barasat road was oldest road in Calcutta and according Long was probably *kutch*a as the expense for repairing the Barasat and Dum-Dum roads in 1752 was Rs.20.<sup>352</sup>

Frank E. Bushby in his account of the ‘Old-Time Conveyances in Calcutta’ points out that ‘the palki which was carried by four coolies, was the oldest type of closed, or “bund”, gari. They were used principally for zenana purposes, although they were still on hire in the Calcutta Streets as late as 1900.’<sup>353</sup> The *tonjon* was the male equivalent of the *palki* meant for those men who did not ride on horseback. It ‘was a kind of open chair with poles extending at the back and front and carried by four coolies in the same way as the palki.’<sup>354</sup> The *palki-gari* which was ‘a palki on wheels’ was for the better classes who could afford horses. The *palki gari* too ‘was essentially a vehicle for family and *zenana* purposes, having blinds all round and sometimes glasses in addition which could be opened or closed by the occupants.’<sup>355</sup> The *palki-gari* was later replaced by the Brownberry and office *gari* or *jaun*. The Brownberry was so named after its designer- a man who was in the employ of an old coach-building firms. The Brownberry was not for *zenana* purposes but was mainly used by Europeans. ‘The office gari or jaun was similar to the Brownberry except that it had no bottom door, and it was necessary to step over the “bottom side”, or framing of the body into the well. It was lighter in weight and cheaper to build than the Brownberry, and, as its name implies, was used almost exclusively by brokers and businessmen.’<sup>356</sup> The Greenfield was a cross between the Brownberry and the *palki gari*. It was expensive to build and as a result less popular.

The cost of a palanquin purchased for the Cossimbazar factory set with silver tassels was valued at 400 Rs.<sup>357</sup> Balthazar Solvyns the Flemish artist embroidered palanquins for Mr. Stewart the coach-maker. These

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<sup>351</sup> James Long, *Selections*, p-xxii (Introduction) and p-54.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, p-xxxii

<sup>353</sup> Frank E. Bushby, ‘Old-Time Conveyances in Calcutta’, *Bengal Past and Present* vol. 41, Calcutta, January- June 1931, pp. 137-141.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, p-139.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid*, p-140.

<sup>357</sup> James Long, *Selections*, p-94

embroidered palanquins were meant for the use of country princes. The first two were ordered by Lord Cornwallis for the Mysore Princes and were valued at Rs.6 or 7000.<sup>358</sup> Carriages could also be hired in Calcutta.<sup>359</sup> What was remarkable about Calcutta as Hodges noted was the ‘mixture of European and Asiatic manners.’ Coaches, phaetons and single horse chaises could be seen in Calcutta together with the *palanquins* and *hackeries* of the natives.<sup>360</sup>

### **European perceptions of Native modes of traveling**

The network of rivers intersecting Bengal provided a means of transport that was both fast and cheap. As table 1 shows a maximum of 80-110 km could be covered in a day on the Ganges travelling on a *bajra*. Comparatively freight traffic in 18<sup>th</sup> century France seldom went beyond 3-4 km per hour (i.e. 72-96 km. a day) and passenger traffic in England was 3.3 kilometres per hour (i.e. 79.2 km. a day) in c.1700.<sup>361</sup> Transport costs on land were also estimated higher than on the rivers. The rivers connected the towns and markets and therefore sustained the economy of the region. Ecological factors did hinder communication via the rivers dangerous and difficult at times. Changes in river courses led to decline of towns and markets. But if one were to overlook these shortcomings the system of transport in pre-colonial Bengal functioned with an overall speed and efficiency. However the European opinion of the native transport systems in spite of their speed and efficiency was not very favourable because of the lack of security in travelling. Bishop Heber writes:

A Bengalee boat is the simplest and rudest of all possible structures. It is decked over throughout its whole length, with bamboo; and on this is erected a low light fabric of bamboo and straw exactly like a small cottage without a

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<sup>358</sup> William Baillie in a letter of October 4, 1795, to Ozias Humphry. Editor's notes to Frank E. Bushby's 'Old-Time Conveyances in Calcutta', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 41, Calcutta, January- June 1931.

<sup>359</sup> W.S. Seton Kerr, Selection from Calcutta Gazettes of the Years 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, 1804 and 1805, showing the political and social condition of the English in India, Calcutta, 1868, vol. 3, p-551-552.

<sup>360</sup> William Hodges, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783*, London, MDCCXCIII, p-16.

<sup>361</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Rajat Datta for providing me with this detail to be found in Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: The Five Revolutions that Made Modern Europe, 1648-1815*, London, 2007, pp. 8, 11.

chimney. This is the cabin, baggage room &c; here the passengers sit and sleep, and here if it be intended for a cooking boat, are one or two small ranges of brick-work, like English hot-hearths, but not rising more than a few inches above the deck, with small round sugarloaf holes, like those on a lime-kiln, adapted for dressing victuals with charcoal. As the roof of this apartment is far too fragile for men to stand or sit on, and as the apartment itself takes up nearly two-thirds of the vessel, upright bamboos are fixed by its side, which support a kind of grating of the same material immediately above the roof, on which at the height probably of six or eight feet above the surface of the water, the boatmen sit or stand to work the vessel. They have for oars, long bamboos, with circular boards at the end, a longer one of the same sort to steer with, a long rough bamboo for a mast, and one or sometimes two sails, of a square form, (or rather broader above than below) of very coarse and flimsy canvas. Nothing can seem more clumsy and dangerous than these boats. Dangerous I believe they are, but with a fair wind they sail over the water merrily.<sup>362</sup>

Thomas Bacon with a much more critical eye than Heber and in his characteristic witty manner describes his journey by water in a *Bajra* thus:

A budgerow, then, is an elegant, dangerous, uncomfortable-looking boat, something after the fashion of an inverted military cocked-hat...In fair weather, this sort of boating is tolerable enough, and may be pursued without danger or discomfort; but in a gale of wind, I would fifty times rather find myself in a snug little square-rigged vessel, upon the wide Atlantic, than in one of these crank, whizmagig craft, brought-to upon the banks of the Ganges. It is utterly impossible to induce the natives to build their boats after any

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<sup>362</sup> Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*, vol.1, Philadelphia, 1828, pp. 100-101.



improved system. Year after year, though they have beautiful European models before their eyes, the obstinate fools persist in turning out hundreds of these execrably-devised boats, to supply the places of those which annually perish ; still, all the persuasion in the world would never win the idiots to fashion them without their odious cock-up sterns, planned, one would conceive, for no other purpose than to catch the wind, and be as inconvenient as possible in every other respect; and why? because their fathers, and their grandfathers, and their fathers before them, from time immemorial, have continued to build their boats so.<sup>363</sup>

Bacon regarded traveling by a palanquin as a ‘demi-barbarous method of locomotion.’ He has the following to say in the context of traveling by palanquins:-

A palanquin, *vulgariter* palki, and its *modus operandi*, should be familiar to the imagination of every one who condescends to peruse the wanderings of a traveller in India... It is borne upon the shoulders of four black men, who are bred to the office, and who perform their hard duty with astonishing activity and long-suffering. A *dak* stage is usually from 12 to 16 miles, and to perform this eight men only are requisite, and these relieve each other alternately about every quarter of a mile; but for the purpose of running about Calcutta, it is not necessary to employ more than four men. The posture adopted by Europeans, when riding in a palki, is almost recumbent ; but a native is most frequently to be seen sitting cross-legged, like a tailor ; which latter is undoubtedly the more comfortable, or rather the less disagreeable of the two; for it is an execrable mode of travelling take it which way you will, and would be avoided

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<sup>363</sup> Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions and Studies from Nature in Hindostan embracing an outline of the voyage to Calcutta and Five Years Residence in Bengal and the Doab from MDCCCXXXI to MDCCCXXXVI*, London, 1837, vol. 1, pp-229-233

by any person having the option of riding in a wheeled vehicle, both on account of the abominable shaking and the slow rate of progression : the jog-trot averages about four miles an hour.<sup>364</sup>

This lack of safety and comfort in native modes of traveling induced the British to introduce changes in the native modes of conveyance. In the late eighteenth century William Hodges wrote, ‘The English Gentlemen have made great improvements on the *bajra* in Bengal, by introducing a broad flat floor, square sterns, and broad bows. These boats are much safer, sail near and keep their wind and there is no danger attending their taking the ground; they are, besides, calculated for carrying a greater quantity of sail.’<sup>365</sup> The introduction of railways in the mid-nineteenth century was altogether a path-breaking effort by the British to modernise the transport systems. The use of steamers and railways made transport quicker, safer, and more comfortable. It also meant an end of the means of traveling that were peculiar to the eighteenth century- the *palki*, and the extra-ordinary variety of boats that sailed on Bengal rivers. Thus William H. Carey wrote in 1882, “Budgerows are now extinct. Steamers nearly drove them off the river, and the railroad has extinguished them. But in days previous to steam navigation, they were the principal conveyance for officers, and others proceeding to the north-western provinces.”<sup>366</sup>

But while the railways made transport safer and much more quicker it seriously disrupted and undermined the water-regime of the province. The railway embankments led to the drying up of rivers resulting in agricultural decline<sup>367</sup>. The stagnant waters of drying rivers also became a breeding ground of mosquitoes and a reason for the spread of malaria.

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-127

<sup>365</sup> William Hodges, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 & 1783*, London, 1793, p. 40

<sup>366</sup> “Sidelights and Reminiscences of the Good Old Days”, 1882 in Charles Robert Wilson and W. H. Carey *Glimpses of the Olden Times: India Under East India Company*, p-184 cited in Robert L. Hardgrave’s commentary in his own compilation, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, New Delhi, 2001, 30-32.

<sup>367</sup> Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943*, Hampshire (UK), 2010, pp. 137-138.

## Security on Roads

While the nineteenth century witnessed a great modernization of the transport system the improvement was due to increased technological know-how. But so far as providing security to the travellers on roads and looking after their comforts the Nizamat state fared better than the East India Company. In the early years of the Company administration the threat of dacoits and armed bands of *sanyasis* jeopardized the travellers safety. The condition under the Nizamat was quite to the contrary. In the hay days of the Nizamat robberies were very uncommon, the *Riyaz-us-salatin* eulogises on the peace and order under the Nizamat at the time of Murshid Quli Khan. The *Riyaz* mentions,

About that time, news arrived that the Afghans. Shujait Khan and Nijat Khan, zamindars of Tonki Sarubpur,<sup>368</sup> in the Sarkar of Mahmudabad, who were notorious for their lawlessness, had plundered the revenue of Mahmudabad amounting to sixty thousand rupees, whilst on its way to Murshidabad. Nawab Jafar Khan, who thirsted for the blood of thieves and robbers, hearing this news, appointed a Superintendent of Dacoity with spies under him, and after ascertaining the reality and origin of this affair, he issued an order to Ahsanu-1-lab Khan, Faujdar of the Chaklah of Hughli, directing their arrest. The aforesaid Khan, ostensibly marching out on a hunting expedition, like a sudden calamity, surprised their stronghold, arrested and captured all the brigands, put them in chains and fetters, mutilated their hands and feet, tied them strongly and securely with pieces of stirrup-leather, and sent them to Nawab Jafar Khan. The Nawab imprisoned them for life, and confiscated their treasures. After they were thus banished and extirpated, the Nawab settled their aforesaid zamindari with Ram Jivan. Levying indemnity equal to the plundered revenue from the

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Iqbal points out that by the early part of the twentieth century Eastern Bengal had become an importer of rice although it had exported rice throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>368</sup> This is a place about five miles from Jessore head-quarters, [editors notes, *Riyaz*, p-278 (fn)]

landholders of the neighbourhood, the Nawab credited it to the Imperial treasury. *During the Nawab's administration, the names of free-booters, night-marauders, and assassins were blotted out from the annals of the Bengal Satrapy, and the dwellers, both of towns and villages, lived in perfect peace and comfort.*<sup>369</sup> (emphasis added)

The *thanahs* of Katwah and Murshidganj, on the highway leading to Bardwan, were established by the Nawab. He established these *thanahs* for guarding the above highway, and their control and administration was entrusted by the Nawab to Muhammad Jan. Muhammad Jan became well known for his severity against thieves and robbers. In the environs of Fanachor, which was on the highway leading from Nadia to Hughli, thefts took place in broad daylight. Muhammad Jan established an outpost at Pupthal, subordinate to the *thanah* of Katwah after which 'capturing the thieves and robbers, and chopping them into bits, Muhammad Jan hanged them on the trees of the highway, to serve as warnings to others.' As in his retinue, hatchet-men used to go ahead, he became known as Muhammad Jan Kolharah.

Under the Mughal administration the criminal and police administration of the *suba* of Bengal was placed in the hands of a *faujdar* or military Governor who with the forces under his disposal was entrusted with the task of suppressing rebellions and ensuring the smooth collection of the revenue. The *faujdar*s moreover were supposed to keep the zamindars in check.<sup>370</sup> Although the *faujdar*s were appointed by the state to maintain local law and order with their own forces, yet in performing this task the *faujdar*s sought the co-operation of the local landholders or the zamindars.<sup>371</sup> Under a strong Government the zamindar's forces and the *faujdar*'s troops were supposed to work harmoniously in apprehending thieves and dacoits.<sup>372</sup> The *sanads* granted to the zamindar specifically mentioned of the police duties to be

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<sup>369</sup> Ghulam Husain Salim's *The Riyaz-us-Salatin*, translated from the Original Persian by Maulavi Abdus Salam, Calcutta, 1902, pp-278-279.

<sup>370</sup> Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars in Bengal 1707-1772*, p. 115.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134

performed by him. It was the zamindars duty to see that travelers travel safely on the roads without being robbed or plundered and in case of a theft or robbery he was required to produce the culprits and punish them and restore the goods robbed and in case he could not produce the culprits he was himself to become responsible for the property stolen.<sup>373</sup> During the heydays of the Nizamat this rule was rigidly observed.<sup>374</sup> But the decline of the Nawab's authority after the battle of Plassey destroyed the balance between the power of the *faujdar* and the zamindar. The faujdari institution gradually declined and the zamindars without any fear of interference from the centre neglected their police duties.<sup>375</sup> The situation did not improve under Company administration. The policy of farming lands to outsiders damaged the zemindari police system. The zamindars had previously felt the imposition of law and order as conducive to their own interests. But with the farming of the zamindari lands to outsiders the zamindars no longer felt the need to impose law and order as any profit from their exertions would go to the outsiders. The new farmers on the other hand were not required to keep police forces as the expense would ultimately fall on the Company.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-117. The *sanad* given to Raja Ramkanta, Zemindar of Rajshahi in 1735-1736 stated that "he observe a commendable conduct towards the class of ryots and common people at large; and employ himself diligently in expelling and punishing and refractory; and exert his utmost endeavours that no trace of thieves, robbers, and disorderly persons, may remain within his boundaries;...that he take special care of the high-roads, so that travelers and passengers may pass and repass in perfect confidence; and if at any time the property of any person shall be stolen or plundered, that he produce the thieves and robbers together with the property; and, delivering the latter to the owner, consign the former to punishment: that in case he do not produce them, he himself become responsible for the property; that he exert his vigilance that no one be guilty of drunkenness or irregularities of behaviour within the boundaries of his zemindary;..."

<sup>374</sup> When Thomas Cooke, a member of the Dacca Factory, was plundered by robbers a few miles away from Dacca the zamindar was compelled by the Nawab to compensate his loss. In another case a zamindar was made to compensate the loss of Rs 1000 of Niaz Beg, a commandant of Sepoys. See Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars in Bengal*, p. 134.

<sup>375</sup> Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars In Bengal*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>376</sup> The whole situation was described by Hastings thus: "The Farming system- useful as this is to the general welfare of the state, and of the people, it is one of the principal sources of the disorderly state of the Mofussil, by the removal of that claim which the public by immemorial usage before possessed to the restitution of all damages and losses sustained by robbers, on the Zemindars of the country. These having no longer the same authority cannot be held accountable as they formerly were for the effects of it, although the right of Government has never been formally renounced. The farmers who stand in their places ought indeed to be made answerable for the disorders proceeding from their neglect, but whatever they were compelled to pay on this account would be brought into their balances at the end of the year, and would thus fall ultimately upon the Government itself." Board of Revenue Consultations, April 19, 1774, R49/45, 1210, cited in Shirin Akhtar *The Role of the Zemindars in Bengal*, p. 136.

Even where the zamindars managed to retain their farming rights there was a partial or full resumption of *chakeran* lands supporting the police establishment. In some zamindaris the police staff of the zamindar was reduced for the sake of economy.<sup>377</sup> In the districts of Dinajpur, Jessore, Purnea, Rajmahal and Rungpur the post of the *faujdar* was abolished.<sup>378</sup> All these factors dealt a severe blow to the traditional police organization of Bengal and the Company did not substitute it with any alternative system. The sepoy placed with the Supervisors were insufficient in number for the task of maintaining law and order in the districts under their charge.<sup>379</sup> As a result during the second half of the eighteenth century Bengal was plagued by frequent dacoities on roads and rivers. The famine of 1769-1770 was again a great de-stabilizer. Many people took to dacoity due to dire need of circumstances. The zamindars under their current reduced circumstances were incapable of checking the disorder and restoring stability. In many cases the zamindars themselves protected and sheltered dacoits.<sup>380</sup> All this endangered the safety of the trader and the traveller on the rivers and roads. The geography of Bengal was also very much responsible for furthering these disturbances. The law-breakers took shelter in the impenetrable forests. East Bengal which was intersected by innumerable rivers and *nalas* gave the robbers opportunity of disappearing after having committed their crimes. It was for nothing that the Mughals chose to designate the Province as *bulghkhana* (house of sedition) a century earlier.

Again from the second half of the eighteenth century the raids of the Sanyasis in Bengal became very frequent. The Sanyasis were not pious religious men who had renounced the world rather they constituted large bodies of armed mobile groups Sanyasis who would levy impositions on the

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<sup>377</sup> Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zemindars in Bengal*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p-137.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> 'On the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1770 the Supervisor of Rungpore John Grose wrote, 'As the zamindars, Boustneas, & Munduls of villages, whose duty it is from their station to apprehend the Dekoits, and to protect their Ryots from Oppression, have been the chief Encouragers of them from a lucrative motive, I think an Example among them equally necessary...' *CCRM*, vol.1, pp. 194-95.

inhabitants of the places they passed. The movement of such large bodies of men carrying arms and imposing contributions on the people was a direct challenge to the Company's authority. If the Company were to maintain their control over the routes the Sanyasis needed to be subdued. In 1773 Mr. Bentley Collector of Chittagong was ordered to see that no person travelled with arms on the roads.<sup>381</sup> However the order was later on revised and the prohibition on carrying arms was imposed only upon the Sanyasis. Merchants and other travellers 'travelling on lawful business' were allowed to carry arms.<sup>382</sup> A fuller account of the activities of the dacoits and sanyasis in Bengal is given in Appendix 1 & 2. Here we have tried to emphasize the lack of security in traveling under the Company administration while in the first half of the eighteenth century the Nizamat had been able to guarantee the inhabitants relatively safe transit across the rivers and roads.

### **Mobility and Mobile Groups**

Throughout the eighteenth century in Bengal there was a prodigious movement of both people and goods. The presence of an efficient transport network in the Province by means of its waterways facilitated the movement of people. While trade and commerce was the primary incentive for long distance journeys yet people travelled for many other reasons than trade and commerce.

The ruling class of Nazims moved about on hunting expeditions or for military operations. When the East India Company became the administrator of the Province post-Plassey its administrators and officials moved and penetrated different parts of Bengal. Already in eighteenth century Europe the concept of the 'Grand Tour' had developed that was 'predominantly elitist in character, and educative rather than exploratory in intention.'<sup>383</sup> However in

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<sup>381</sup> WBSA, Revenue Records, Chittagong Records: Letters Received, 9<sup>th</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> December 1773, vol. no. 2.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> 'The grand tourist was usually a young English aristocrat sojourning in France and Italy, prime cultural destinations that encapsulated the essence of civilized Europe. Exposure to such 'civilized' foreign countries was an adjunct to a liberal education and a part of the Lockean empirical project of enhancing knowledge by coming in contact with varied external stimuli. So the travel paradigm involved was the journey from a 'civilized' locale to a 'more civilized' centre rather than from periphery to metropolis.' See Jayati Gupta, 'Modernity and the Global

the context of early colonial India tours through the country undertaken by the colonial administrators 'were a vastly more challenging experience of confronting the uncivilized and barbaric unknown.'<sup>384</sup> Some of these tours were administrative exercises in the form of carrying out surveys, gathering data for administrative purposes while some represented 'efforts to decipher difference and concentrate on the exotic in people, customs, and cultural practices.'<sup>385</sup>

In 1764 Major James Rennell was employed to make a survey of the Ganges delta 'with a special object in view of finding a shorter passage suitable for large vessels from the Ganges to Calcutta, than that through the Sunderbans and the Meghna.'<sup>386</sup> He was also instructed by Governor Henry Vansittart to 'keep a very particular Journal of your Proceedings, noting the Appearance and Produce of the Countries thro' which you pass ; the name of every Village, & whatever else may seem remarkable, of which Journal you will give me a Copy along with the Drafts you are to make of the Rivers and Creeks.'<sup>387</sup> Rennell in course of three more expeditions surveyed a great part of eastern and northern Bengal penetrating beyond Goalpara on the Bramhaputra.<sup>388</sup> On the frontier of Kuch Behar he was surrounded by a party of belligerent Sannayasi Fakirs. In the ensuing skirmish Rennell was wounded but managed to escape with his life.<sup>389</sup> From the early part of the nineteenth century the number of surveys made by Europeans increased. In 1831 Captain Pogson made a tour to Chittagong and wrote a detailed account of his journey and the physical features, the flora and fauna of Chittagong and the revenues generated by the country.<sup>390</sup> In 1840 was published Taylor's survey of Dacca. In 1871 James Westland former Magistrate and Collector of Jessore made his survey of the country and in 1876 was published Magistrate and Collector- H.

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"Hindoo": The Concept of the Grand Tour in Colonial India', *The Global South*, vol. 2, No.1, India in a Global Age (Spring, 2008), p. 60.

<sup>384</sup> Jayati Gupta, 'Modernity and the Global "Hindoo"', p. 60

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> T.H.D. La Touche edited *The Journals of Major James Rennell First Surveyor General of India Written For The Information Of The Governors Of Bengal During His Surveys Of The Ganges and Bramhaputra Rivers 1764 to 1767*, Calcutta, 1910, p. 3 (Introduction).

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> W.R. Pogson, *Captain Pogson's narrative during a tour to Chateegaon*, Serampore, 1831.



Beveridge's survey of Bakarganj.<sup>391</sup> In 1854 J.J. Pemberton made his survey of Malda<sup>392</sup> and finally W.W. Hunter wrote his voluminous *Statistical Account of Bengal* based on his elaborate survey of the region. For making these surveys the surveyors for the purpose of collecting information must have made local enquiries which would induce them to travel throughout the length and breadth of the region under their survey. This movement of East India Company officials for the purpose of making surveys continued well into the twentieth century<sup>393</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century a new trend also developed whereby the educated Bengalis themselves began to write regional surveys giving an account of the topographical features, agriculture, trade and commerce and means of transport of the regions surveyed by them. Raja Surindro Mohun Tagore's survey of Bakarganj<sup>394</sup> is an instance of how Bengalis themselves were feeling the necessity and beginning to write topographical surveys.

While the necessity of making surveys and knowing the country imposed the need for extensive movement among the Company officials a second reason for travel by Europeans was the desire to study and understand the people that they governed. Bishop Heber's account of his journey in Bengal reflects a sense of curiosity on the part of the author in knowing and understanding the ways of the natives. Again in Thomas Bacon's *First Impressions* we find an attempt to truthfully understand and depict a country where to use his own words, 'the scenery, objects, and people are so different from those in Europe.'

While the European in Bengal was highly mobile for reasons of administrative necessity and curiosity, the image of the native in the mind of a

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<sup>391</sup> H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics*, London, 1876.

<sup>392</sup> J.J. Pemberton, *Report of the District of Malda*, Calcutta, 1854.

<sup>393</sup> For instance B.C. Allen's survey of Dacca ( B.C. Allen, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca*, Allahabad, 1912), J.C. Jack's survey of Bakarganj (J.C. Jack, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Bakarganj*, Calcutta, 1918), J.H.E. Garrett's survey of Nadia (J.H.E. Garrett, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Nadia*, Calcutta, 1910), F.A. Sachse's survey of Mymensingh ( F.A. Sachse, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Mymensingh*, Calcutta, 1917), and L.S.S. O'Malley's survey of Murshidabad (L.S.S. O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, Calcutta, 1914).

<sup>394</sup> Sourindro Mohun Tagore, *A Brief History of Bakarganj*, Calcutta, 1892.

European was that of class of people who were very averse to movement. Thus Sherwill writes in the context of Dinajpur:

They [the inhabitants of Dinajpur] have a great repugnance to go far from home, more especially to remain away from it at night. They seldom venture beyond the limits of their own or neighbouring villages, or the nearest market place or hat. If a man ventures a few mile beyond, on his return home he speaks of the “foreign land” he has visited... None enter the army, or quit their country for service elsewhere. They are very averse to improvements, or the introduction of any novelty. When a new road is meant to pass near their villages, they abandon them, and remove to some distance off, in order to avoid the importunities of strangers...

Yet to accept this stereotypical image of the indolent and lazy Indian who was averse to movement of any kind would be a mistake. Nitin Sinha points out that ‘while the image of the indolent native who could be induced to move only by necessity thrived as typical throughout the early phase of colonial rule, in fact there existed a diverse range of mobile people and groups of which the Company-state was well aware.’ Sinha draws our attention to activities and movements of peripatetic groups such as Sanyasis in Bihar and Bengal<sup>395</sup> whose ‘very mobility made the Company state anxious.’<sup>396</sup> But apart from these peripatetic groups the ordinary man in Bengal was forced to be mobile when necessity arose.

The movement of the people for diverse reasons is in fact a recurrent theme in Bengali literature and folk tales. In the folk tales Princes moved for the spirit of adventure and Bramhins travelled in order to collect alms from rich people during weddings and funerals.<sup>397</sup> In Bharatchandra’s *Vidya Sundar* the prince Sundar travelled from the far land of Kanci to Burdwan to see the princess Vidya after a messenger from the king Virasimha, the princess

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<sup>395</sup> Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India, Bihar, 1760s-1880s*, Delhi, 2013, See Chapter 5, ‘Controlling the Routes’, pp. 117-154.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid, p-117.

<sup>397</sup> Lal Behari Day, *Folk Tales of Bengal*, London, 1912.

Vidya's father, informed the prince Sundar of her beauty. The journey from Kanci to Burdwan took about 6 months but the prince Sundar with his wishing-horse covered it in 6 days.<sup>398</sup> The stories also depict the anxiety of the traveller over unknown dangers that necessarily beset a long voyage. Stories of a magical serpent devouring horses or a *rakhshasi* enchanting and devouring men on their journey were perhaps reflective of this anxiety.<sup>399</sup>

While Sherwill highlights the Bengalis aversion to make long journeys to distant lands he also points out that necessity may make him mobile. Mobility was very much induced by political turmoils or natural disasters. Desertion was a readily available means of coping with political turmoils and natural calamities. Thus the *Maharashtra Purana* very graphically recounts that during the Maratha invasions people deserted their habitations *en masse* with all their belongings to seek refuge elsewhere.

Then the Bargis began to plunder the villages, and all the people fled in terror. Brahman *pandits* fled, taking with them loads of manuscripts, goldsmiths fled with their scales and weights; and petty traders fled with their wares, and coppersmiths with their coppers and brasses, and blacksmiths and potters, taking with them their wheels and equipment; and fishermen of all kinds with their nets and lines, and conch merchants with their tools- all fled. The people fled in all directions; who could count their numbers? Kaestras, Baidyas, - all who lived in villages fled, when they heard the name of the Bargis. Ladies of good family, who had never before set foot on road fled from the Bargis with baskets on their heads. And land-owning Rajputs, who had gained their wealth by the sword, threw down their swords and fled. And Gosanis and Mohantas fled, riding on litters, their bearers carrying bag and baggage on their shoulders; and many farmers and Kaibarttas fled, their seed for next

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<sup>398</sup> Bharatchandra's Vidya-Sundara translated by Edward C. Dimock Jr. in *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village*, Chicago, 1963, pp. 29-31.

<sup>399</sup> Lal Behari Day, *Folk Tales of Bengal*, London, 1912.

year's crops on the backs of the bullocks, and plows on their shoulders. And all the Sheikhs and Saiyads, and Mogals and Pathans who were in the villages fled when they heard the name of the Bargis. And pregnant women, all but unable to walk, began their labour on the road and were delivered there. And all the Sikdars and village officials fled for their lives when they heard the name "Bargi."<sup>400</sup>

In case of natural calamities too people sought refuge in areas that were not affected by these calamities. The southern parts of Bengal were more affected by floods than drought while the northern parts of Bengal suffered more from drought than floods. Hence when a natural calamity hit one part of Bengal people of those parts traveled to those areas which had been relatively unaffected by the calamity. Migration was used as a strategy of survival by people under such circumstances of crisis.<sup>401</sup>

Peasants too generally moved. The *pahi-kasht* peasants were so characterized because of their movement. Glazier points out that the ryotts of Kazirhat were in the habit of going to Calcutta to make complaint if they were ill-treated in any special degree<sup>402</sup>; During the insurrection of 1783 in Rungpore the ryots displayed surprising mobility. The ryotts of *chaklas* Kazirhat, Kankina, and Fattehpore, rose in rebellion in 1783 and these insurgents also forced the ryotts of Cooch Behar to join them, and sent parties into Dinajpur to bring over the people there.<sup>403</sup> But as pointed out in chapter two rebellion was a secondary option for the peasants of Bengal as the peasant households were dispersed all over the countryside so that it was difficult to mobilize a whole group into rebellion against the authorities. But when oppressed for rent or any other reason the peasants readily took to flight. Thus although engaged in agriculture the peasants were not an altogether immobile group. Whenever necessity arose they became mobile.

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<sup>400</sup> Gangaram, *The Maharashtra Purana*, pp. 26-28.

<sup>401</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 268

<sup>402</sup> Glazier, *Rungpore*, p. 22-23.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

Geographical mobility was also induced by social occasions such as marriages. A plate of Balthazar Solvyns shows an entire wedding party with people and the palanquin being conveyed by a fleet of boats. The marriages of the elite like the zamindars was a grand affair. People from far and near came to attend the wedding. Thus the mother of Maharajah Tej Chund in her petition to the Company for providing her with funds to defray the costs of her son's wedding pointed out:

...at marriages all ranks of People expend as much as their circumstances will bear, I have it very much at heart therefore that my sons should not only be celebrated in the same manner to the full as the marriage of other Rajahs of the Family used to be under former administrations but that it should by your bounty even exceed them in elegance and splendour...at a marriage of this kind it is the indispensable custom to send invitations accompanied by Presents to the Rajahs, Zemindars and Kaitrees [Khatris] &ca. of Bengal and the People of Rank both far and near for all of whom entertainment and presents must be prepared, Provision must be also made for others who will come uninvited...as the Burdwan Family by the blessing of God bears an honorable name in the books of fame, People will assemble on this occasion from all quarters...<sup>404</sup>

Pilgrimage was another reason for long-distance travel and was undertaken by the elite as well as the common man. Pilgrims traveled not only within the province- to Gangasagar, Tarapur, Vakresvara, Burrampooter, Byjinant, and to the temples of Nadia and Birbhum but also to Puri in Orissa and Mathura, Vrindavan, Allahabad, Gaya, Banaras and Haridwar.<sup>405</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee has shown that the movement of the pilgrims also generated revenue for the state. Marathas collected Rs.300,000 per year from pilgrims who came to Jagannath from the different parts of India. Those

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<sup>404</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 1<sup>st</sup> September to 30<sup>th</sup> October 1775, vol. no. 10, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1775.

<sup>405</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 93-94.

coming from the Deccan paid six rupees, while those from Bengal who were generally considered as richer paid ten rupees. When the province of Orissa was annexed to the Company's territories from the Marathas in 1802-04 pilgrim tax gave an average revenue of nearly a lakh and half of rupees, or about £15,000 annually after deducting cost and expenditures incurred in repairs etc. In 1806 officials estimated the taxes collected at Jagannath and Allahabad at Rs.200,000 per annum.<sup>406</sup>

Tavernier pointed out that pilgrimages were not undertaken in ones or twos as in Europe but the population of a whole town or village gathered together to go on a pilgrimage.<sup>407</sup> Sometimes these travels were financed by the wealthy but was joined by many others on the way who desired to visit the places of pilgrimage but did not have enough means. Bijayaram Sen's *Tirthamangal* gives an account of the pilgrimage made by the zamindar Krishnachandra Ghosal around 1769.<sup>408</sup> Krishnachandra had a very large party of pilgrims some of whom belonged to his own village and some who had joined him on the way like the author Bijayaram Sen himself.

Pilgrimages in eighteenth century Bengal were not just an act of piety but were an expression also of the curiosity of the people.<sup>409</sup> Krishnachandra Ghosal's party en route to Kasi not only visited places that were known for their religious significance but also visited places of historical interest for instance where the Nawab Siraj-ud-doulah was betrayed by a fakir or where the forces of Mir Qasim fought with the English troops. Moreover Krishnachandra Ghosal's younger brother Goculchandra became the diwan of Governor Verelest. Therefore it has been interpreted that Krishnachandra Ghosal's pilgrimage was not only inspired by motives of piety but to seek the opinion of the common people and of important personages about British rule. Indeed during his *tirthayatra* Krishnachandra met some of his very important contemporaries like Raja Shitab Rai in Patna.

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<sup>406</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 104.

<sup>407</sup> Tavernier vol. 2, p-190, cited in Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth Century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication*, New Delhi, 2013.

<sup>408</sup> Bijayaram Sen's *Tirthamangala*, ed. by Nagendranath Basu, Calcutta, 1915.

<sup>409</sup> Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture*, p. 109

While mobility was a characteristic feature of all sections of people in society certain groups of people were more mobile than others. The Sanyasis and Fakirs for instance were a very mobile body of men. Some of the sanyasis often settled down as money-lenders but a large body of the sanyasis moved about the Province. That these religious mendicants were a highly mobile group is testified in Bishop Hebers account. Heber writes:

In the course of our halt this day a singular and painfully interesting character presented himself in the person of a Mussulman Fakir...He asked my leave to sit down on the bank to watch what we were doing, and said it gave his heart pleasure to see Englishmen; that he was a great traveller, had been in Bombay, Kabul &c. and wanted to see all the world, wherein he was bound to wander as long as it lasted.<sup>410</sup>

Warren Hastings considered the sanyasis as the 'gypsies of Hindostan'. In a letter to Josias De Pre dated 9<sup>th</sup> March 1773 he gave the following description of the sanyasis:

The history of the people [sanyasis] is curious. They inhabit or rather possess the country lying south of the hills of Thibet, from Cabul to China. They go mostly naked; they have neither towns, houses nor families; but rove continuously from place to place, recruiting their number with the healthiest children they can steal in the country through which they pass. Thus they are the stoutest and most active men of India. Many are merchants. They are all pilgrims, and held by all castes of Gentoos in great veneration. This infatuation prevents our obtaining any intelligence of their motions, and aid from the country against them, notwithstanding very rigid orders which have been published for these purposes, in so much that they often appear in the heart of the province as if they dropped from heaven. They are hardy, bold and enthusiastic to a degree

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<sup>410</sup> Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, vol. 1, p. 157.

surpassing credit. Such are the sanyasis, the gypsies of Hindustan.<sup>411</sup>

Behar was a significant hunting ground for the sanyasis because of its links to the northern districts of Bengal- Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur, to Morung in southern Nepal and with places like Benares, Allahabad and Mirzapur in Northern India. The Fakirs and sanyasi could therefore travel from the Northwest to Behar and Bengal by the river routes. The sanyasis carried out their raids in Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Cooch Behar or in other parts of eastern Bengal by using the rivers Ganga, Kushi, Gandak. The Bramhaputra, Teesta and Mahananda provided them access to Assam and Bhutan. Since Bihar was connected to northern India as well as Nepal the Sunnyasis when chased by the Company's forces in Northern or eastern Bengal took refuge in Bihar from where they escaped to either Northern India or Nepal.<sup>412</sup> In 1773 sanyasi incursions were reported as far as at Chittagong.<sup>413</sup>

While the primary purpose of the sanyasi was to conduct raids but sometimes because of their movement the sanyasis were often entrusted with messages or important news. In the early eighteenth century apart from the *hircarrahs* itinerant sanyasis or monks too carried official letters and messages.<sup>414</sup> It should also be mentioned here that individuals in rural India scarcely had the means to send their messages by post hence they transmitted their messages through wayfarers, monks or pilgrims.<sup>415</sup>

Perhaps the only section of the society whose movement was in any way restricted were women. Such restrictions were imposed as a result of custom which forbade respectable women from appearing in public. Beveridge opines that the only time a native lady 'has a chance of seeing the world' is

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<sup>411</sup> F.A. Sachse, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Mymensingh*, Calcutta, 1917, p. 28.

<sup>412</sup> Ananda Bhattacharyya, 'Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Lower Bengal', *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, New Series, vol. xxx, No 1-2, January-December, 2014, pp. 87-88.

<sup>413</sup> WBSA, Revenue Records, Chittagong Records: Letters Received, 9<sup>th</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> December 1773, vol. no. 2.

<sup>414</sup> Seid Gholam Hussein Khan, *Seir Mutaqherin or Review of Modern Times*, translated by J. Briggs in four volumes, Calcutta, 1902, vol.2, p. 349.

<sup>415</sup> Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 1, Land Transport, translated from French by James Walker, Oxford, 1993, p. 219.



when she goes on a pilgrimage and that was the reason behind the popularity of pilgrimages.

It is by no means entirely or even chiefly from religious motives that women crowd to Hurdwar or to Puri &c, and I think our missionaries are wrong when they refuse to see anything in pilgrimages but the degrading superstition of the Hindu religion. It is, of course, foolish and pitiable that Hindu women should suppose that bathing in the Ganges or Brahmaputra will cleanse them from their sins, but the change of scene and the novelty must do some good. I am persuaded that many rich old women go to the Ganges or to Kamrup for much the same reason that rich women in England go to Brighton or Homburg.<sup>416</sup>

But the seclusion of women which Beveridge speaks of could not have been universal. With regard to the women of Bengal Abul Fazl makes a curious remark. He says, 'The people [of Bengal] are submissive and pay their rents duly...their staple food is rice and fish...the chief public transactions fall to the lot of women.'<sup>417</sup> Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Sherwill makes another curious remark:

On the approach of Europeans, they [the natives] hurriedly conceal themselves in their villages, thereby giving them the appearance of being deserted; the men in particular do so, and whilst they themselves retreat into a place of safety, they cede to their wives the dreaded duty of having to reply to the interrogatories of European strangers. I have known an able-bodied man, when required to show the way from his own to the adjoining village, call loudly upon his aged mother to accompany and protect him.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Beveridge, *Bakarganj*, p. 227.

<sup>417</sup> *Ain*, vol ii, p. 134.

<sup>418</sup> J.L. Sherwill, *Geographical and Statistical Report of the Dinagepore District*, Calcutta, 1865.

It perhaps follows from this that the principle of seclusion would perhaps be more rigidly adhered to by women of the wealthier classes while women who belonged to the poorer classes could not afford to adhere to the strict policy of seclusion for 'they must go to the tank or the well to draw water, and they have to go on foot if they want to visit a temple or witness a religious ceremony.'<sup>419</sup>

The flow of information was the direct result of this extensive movement of people. Even before the East India Company established its authority in Bengal the networks of communication were well developed. The gathering of information and intelligence was necessary for governance and the Nizam state in this respect followed the example of the Mughals by keeping a large body of messengers and spies who gathered and communicated news and information for the use of the state. The local power holders or the zamindars co-operated in this system of gathering information and intelligence by the state. The East India Company from very early on learnt to use these communication networks to their advantage. However their conscious policy of reducing the authority of the local powerholders led to a disruption in the system. In many cases the Company found themselves incapable of obtaining intelligence about dacoits because the zamindars were either in league with them or did not have the means of gathering intelligence of their activities.

### **The Development of the Communication Networks: The Case of the *Dak-chaukis***

An efficient transport system strengthened the networks of communication. Both trade and governance required that information could be quickly dispatched and received. The establishment of control over the communication networks of the Indian sub-continent was a vital part of the strategy of empire-building of the East India Company. In this respect however, the Company utilized and took charge of communication networks that had already been built by the pre-colonial regimes. The Mughals had established an efficient

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<sup>419</sup> Beveridge, *Bakarganj*, p. 228.

system of communication and information gathering in India by means of the *dak-chaukis*<sup>420</sup> which the Nizamat followed in Bengal.

Although this system of information gathering was meant for the utility of the state it could not function without the aid of the local elements particularly the zamindars. The zamindars were obliged to ensure the safe conduct of the *dak* (post) through the area under their jurisdiction. The zamindar was responsible if any hindrance occurred to the safe dispatch of letters. According to the *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, when an imperial postal runner set out on his duty he had with him a permit duly sealed and signed by the *Darogah-i-dak-chauki*. This required zamindars and *thanadars* to secure his safety and furnish him with guides.<sup>421</sup> As a part of their police establishment, the zamindars, themselves, maintained spies and *dak* servants.<sup>422</sup>

Thus, when the East India Company entered Bengal they found in existence an efficient system of information gathering which they further organized and systematized. The East India Company, were during the troubles with the Shahzadah<sup>423</sup> first permitted to station *chaukis* between Patna and Calcutta.<sup>424</sup> The functioning of their *chaukis* was seriously interrupted during the conflict with Mir Qasim. But after Buxar the Company's authority was much more firmly established and a recurrence of the troubles that they had under Mir Qasim was not possible. In 1764, daks were stationed on the route from Calcutta to Madras and the zamindars according to custom were to furnish the *daks* with oil, *mash'als* and other necessities.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> The word *dak* meant 'Post' or transport by relays of men and horses. The term however was used not just for transport of letters but of men as well. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and Phrases and of Kindred terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, ed. by William Crooke, New Delhi, 2012 (reprint), p. 299.

<sup>421</sup> M.F. Lokhandwala tr. *Mirat*, Supplement, p-150-151, cited in Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the zamindars in Bengal, 1707-1772*, Dacca 1982.

<sup>422</sup> Shirin Akhtar, *Ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>423</sup> According to the *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, *shahzadah* here refers to Shah Alam, Emperor of India, *Calendar of Persian Correspondence* (henceforth, *CPC*), with an Introduction by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, New Delhi, 2013, vol.1, p. 506.

<sup>424</sup> *Calendar of Persian Correspondence* (henceforth *CPC*), with an Introduction by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Delhi, 2013, vol.1, Letter No. 1763.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter No. 2191.

This system of communication via the *daks* was further organized and systematized by Clive and Hastings. Under the East India Company new *dak* routes were established. In 1789, a weekly Dawk was established between Calcutta and Bombay. The *dak* was dispatched from Calcutta regularly every Monday in the evening. The *Dak* was to proceed via Masulipatam and Poona, and it may be expected to reach Bombay in a month or five weeks.<sup>426</sup> In 1795, we hear of a post-office at Diamond Harbour.<sup>427</sup>

The establishment of new *Dak* routes led to the further development of surveys and cartography because many of the *dak* routes had to be established through unchartered territories. In 1821 the Post Master General P. Treves, requested to be furnished with proper maps for the better functioning of the postal department.<sup>428</sup> In the eighteenth century, the word *dak* meant 'Post' or transport by relays of men and horses. The term however was used not just for transport of letters but of men as well. Those who could afford it, preferred traveling by *Dawk*.<sup>429</sup>

The private postal services utilized by the merchants were slower than the couriers entrusted with the dispatch of imperial orders. The merchants demanded their messengers cover daily distances of from 40 to 50 km and to convey urgent messages they could obtain from the couriers, 60 and even 80 km. by additional payment. The messengers at princely court worked at higher speeds which were determined by precise regulation.<sup>430</sup> Some of these runners went at extraordinary speeds but generally the very good couriers covered in 24 hours at the maximum 110km. In 1764, news from Delhi was brought by a *qasid* who arrived at Patna in sixteen days.<sup>431</sup> Prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century letters were carried between Kalikata (Calcutta) and Madras (1,760 km.) by private messengers in two or three months. In 1712 with the introduction of a relay system the period of

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<sup>426</sup> W.S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes*, Calcutta 1865, vol.2, p. 224.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, vol.2, p. 439.

<sup>428</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue, Post Office, January-December 1821, January 1821.

<sup>429</sup> For instance on Thursday, April 8th, 1784 the Calcutta Gazette records 'The Honble the Governor General was at Manickpoor on the 24th, and intended to proceed on the 26th to Lucknow, by Dawk.' Seton-Kerr, *Selections From Calcutta Gazettes*, vol. 1, p.16.

<sup>430</sup> Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 1, *Land Transport*, translated from French by James Walker, Oxford, 1993, p-222

<sup>431</sup> *CPC*, vol. 1, Letter No. 2457.

transmission was reduced to approximately thirty days.<sup>432</sup>In 1789 the system was further improved and messages arrived in nineteen days.<sup>433</sup>

Postal Organisation (*dak*) of the British East India Company

Table 9: Foot Couriers on the route: Madras-Calcutta, 1,760 km.<sup>434</sup>

Period	Number of days	Daily Average in Km.	References
Prior to the eighteenth century	60-90	29.3-19.5	Love, Vestiges of Old Madras, vol. ii, 136.
1712	30	58.6	Ibid, vol. II, 136
1789	19	92.6	Ibid, vol.III, 344
1796	12 ½	140.8	Misra, Central Administration, 433
1824	10	176	Seely, Ellora,86
1836	7 ½	234.6	Bengal Past and Present vol. xxii, 176.

Table 10: “Dak bearers” on the routes radiating from Calcutta in 1813 (“Bengal Public Consultations, 21 May 1813 in Misra, *Central Administration*, 440)<sup>435</sup>

From Kalikata to	Distance covered in Km.	Number of days	Daily average in Km.
Balesvara	249	2 ½	99.6
Banaras	912	8	114
Dhaka	273	3	91

<sup>432</sup> Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India Prior to Steam Locomotion, vol. 1, Land Transport*, translated from French by James Walker, Oxford, 1993, p-223.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p-224

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p-282

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 283.

<b>Jagannatha-Puri</b>	468	5	<b>93.6</b>
<b>Patna</b>	675	5 ½	<b>122.7</b>
<b>Rajmahal</b>	337	3 ½	<b>96.2</b>

## Chapter 4

### Infrastructural control: The Nizamat and the Company-State

In the second half of the eighteenth century, after coming into power in Bengal the Company created a state-structure that was far more centralized and powerful than the Nizamat. While the Nawabs depended on the zamindars for local administration the Company state showed more direct interest in controlling the commercial and agrarian infrastructure and delegated less and less power to them. The transition from the Nizamat to the Company-State did not just involve a change of authority at the regional level but at the local level there was also transition of authority. The intermediary landholders or the zamindars who had so long dominated the Bengal countryside were forced to cede much of their power to the newly emerging Company-State. The Company sought to diminish the control of the zamindars over local resources and infrastructure. Under the initiative of the Company a more powerful state apparatus was emerging at the cost of intermediaries. We shall analyse this transfer of power at the local level in terms of shifting control over administrative, agricultural and commercial infrastructure.

#### A. Agrarian Infrastructure: Embanking or *Pulbandi*

In riverine Bengal where rivers often flooded embanking or *pulbandi* was an object of immense importance for agriculture and embanking was thus practiced since very early times in the *suba* of Bengal. Abul Fazl thus mentions the story of how the original name of the province of Bengal was *Bang* and that the suffix *al* was added to it on account of the large *maunds* that its rulers built for embanking.

The materials used for *pulbandi* according to the Company Records were bamboos, jute strings and earth.<sup>436</sup> The ideal time for making the embankments was when the water-level of the river was low for an embankment constructed when the river was full often gave away.<sup>437</sup> This

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<sup>436</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1774; also Appendix 15 in the same record.

<sup>437</sup> IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to Murshidabad the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1772. [elaborate]

meant that the task of embanking would have to be completed before the rains started swelling the rivers. In 1773 Mr. Burges claimed that the embankments which he would build out of earth and bamboo will require no repair for 20 years<sup>438</sup> but in practice these early embankments required very frequent repairs. Some idea of the proportion of the Bunds can be obtained from the Company Records. In the context of resolving a *pulbandi* dispute which had arose on account of the one of the *bunds* giving away in Lushkerpore, it was recorded that the Bund that had collapsed was ‘90 feet broad at the base and completed to the height of 33 feet.’<sup>439</sup>

Traditionally the zamindar was responsible for ensuring that *bandhs* were repaired regularly within their jurisdictions so that the country may not be flooded. The cost of *pulbandi* was however borne by the ryotts because an *abwab* was collected from them on account of *pulbandi*. This however was initially not understood by the Company for the authorities in 1772 asserted that the Government may be reimbursed on account of *pulbandi* charges by levying a small *pulbandi* tax on the ryotts.<sup>440</sup> While Rous the Supervisor of Rajshahi assented to the imposition of a *pulbandi* tax<sup>441</sup> on the ryotts Jacob Rider, the Supervisor of Nadia asserted that he had got information from the zamindar’s officers that one of the *abwabs* in the present *jama* of the province was a *pulbandi* tax although ‘there was no *hustabood* forthcoming wherein this article is particularly specified’<sup>442</sup> and therefore ‘the Ryotts have a right to expect to be secured from the depredation of the waters as they have for a length of time and do now in fact contribute to this public work.’<sup>443</sup> Rider opined that since the ryotts were already assessed on account of *pulbandi* it would be a cause of great distress to them if another *pulbandi* tax was imposed

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<sup>438</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1774.

<sup>439</sup> IOR/G/27/4, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1771 to 30<sup>th</sup> December 1771, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1771.

<sup>440</sup> IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1772 and 27<sup>th</sup> January 1772.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1772.

<sup>442</sup> IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to Murshidabad the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1772.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.



upon them.<sup>444</sup> The Council at Murshidabad accepted Rider's request but also suggested 'that as expence of this work shall rest upon Government we recommend to you that it be conducted with the greatest frugality.' It can be speculated from the above discussion that before the advent of the Company, the zamindars were responsible for the task of embanking within their jurisdictions and the cost of the public work was borne by the ryotts from whom the zamindar exacted an *abwab* for defraying the *pulbandi* expenses. The Nizamat State does not seem to have interfered in this local management of embanking. Under Company administration however it seems that in the case of *zamindarry pulbandi*, the cost of *pulbandi* was initially given as advance by the Company State to the zamindars and farmers who later paid it back with interest along with his rent. Thus Charles Stuart Resident at Burdwan pointed out:

.....the Rivers are confined again within their Former Channels before the felling in of the approaching Rains. It is a work so essential to the welfare of a great part of the province by securing the Lands and Crops, that the Expence attending it is unavoidable, and has hitherto been readily born by the Inhabitants. But as the Sum required for such Extensive works cannot be laid out by the Farmers, it is the Custom to make the advances from the Government and to Collect it again with the Rents of the province in the proper Season.<sup>445</sup>

The *pulbandi* allowance was therefore in the nature of 'a loan which is repaid with Interest by the Farmers and Ryauts.'<sup>446</sup>

However not all tasks of *pulbandi* were made by the zamindars. The zamindari pools were separate from the pools maintained by the state termed *khas pulbandi*. *Khas pulbandi* referred to the pools of the city of Murshidabad

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, 4<sup>th</sup> February to 10<sup>th</sup> October 1772, vol. 3, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1772.

<sup>446</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 1<sup>st</sup> September to 30<sup>th</sup> October 1775, vol. no. 10, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1775.

which was the seat of Government under the Nizamat. The zamindari *pulbandi* was under the charge of the zamindars the *khas pulbandi* was under the charge of Government. The cost of *Khas pulbandi* was met by levying *mathot* or imposts on the zamindars.<sup>447</sup> The Committee of Circuit however forbade the separate collection of *mathots* but made them a part of the *jama* so that the *mal* or the land revenue and the *mathots* 'were incorporated and composed the revenue.'<sup>448</sup> Henceforth no separate exactions were to be made upon the zamindars but the state advanced money to private contractors for *khas pulbandi*. Although the Company decided sometimes to give the charge of *khas pulbandi* to private contractors but it was also decided that Inspectors would be appointed from time to time to oversee and report about the works.<sup>449</sup> Such private contractors undertaking the task of *pooshtabundy* had also to vouch that if the *pooshta* broke down or if there was any neglect in repairing it they would have to 'refund the money received from the Sircar.'<sup>450</sup> For instance the Moorshedabad *pulbandi* contract in 1775 was held by one Haji Mustepha.<sup>451</sup> Upon the expiry of Mustapha's contract one Mr. John Bayne applied for the contract. Mr. Bayne however later withdrew his proposals and John Wattell proposed to 'contract with the Honble Company to keep in constant and sufficient repair the city and Bomineah Pools for the space of Five years at the Rate of Sa. Rs.82,400 p. annum.' Mr. Wattle's proposals were accepted but only for the term of two years.<sup>452</sup>

The task of making the *pulbandi* repairs was labour intensive. More than 6000 Coolies were annually sent from the different parganas of Lushkerpore and Bhetoreah for working at the pool of the Ganges and River Burril and 4,500 Coolies were sent from Boosnah for working at the pools of

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<sup>447</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1775.

<sup>448</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1775.

<sup>449</sup> *CCRM*, vol.5, p. 56.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132

<sup>451</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1775.

<sup>452</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 4<sup>th</sup> September to 12<sup>th</sup> December 1777, vol. 13, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1777.

Ganges and other small rivers.<sup>453</sup> Each of the *parganas* had a fixed quota of coolies to be supplied annually.<sup>454</sup> These coolies were known by the denomination of *pargana coolies*. Their rate of hire in 1773 was 1 anna per day.<sup>455</sup> Apart from the *pargana coolies* there were also ‘Monthly Coolies’ whose rates of hire were higher 2 annas per day.<sup>456</sup> These monthly coolies were probably hired when the quotas of coolies from the *parganas* fell short of the requirement. Customarily the task of making *pulbandi* repairs fell to the ‘the most wretched of the inhabitants’ who ‘were for the most part compelled to labour by the most violent exertions of power, without receiving any pay at all.’ The Company abolished this practice of making the poorer ryotts work without remuneration and instead appointed coolies who were paid for their work. This in its turn increased the cost of *pulbandi* repairs substantially. The Company agreed to incur this extra expenditure since they believed that cultivation and revenues derived from it would materially suffer if the ryotts were forced to make the *pulbandi* repairs during the season of cultivation.<sup>457</sup>

Table 11: Monthly Expenditure for Repairing the Pools in the different Districts of Bengal for the year 1790

District	Monthly Expenditure on Pulbandi In Sicca Rupees
Nuddea	773
Rungpoor	53
Salt Districts (Beercool etc., Jellasure)	212
Beerbhoom	221

<sup>453</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 9<sup>th</sup> October 1775 to 28<sup>th</sup> December 1775, vol. no. 7, Appendix.

<sup>454</sup> Letter of Thomas Burges, Superintendent Of the *pulbandi*, to Edward Baber , Chief, and the other members of the Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, “Permit me to request you, to issue your *perwannahs* to the Naibs of those *parganas* that sends annual supply of Coolies to the Pulbandi directing them to furnish their respective quotas with all possible despatch...” WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 1<sup>st</sup> May to 29<sup>th</sup> June 1775, vol. no. 5, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1775.

<sup>455</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26th 1774, Appendix No. 3.

<sup>456</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26th 1774, Appendix No. 4.

<sup>457</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 1<sup>st</sup> May to 29<sup>th</sup> June 1775, vol. no. 5, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1775.

Moorshedabad (consisting of the zamindarries of Rokunpore and Futy Sing)	287
Rajeshahy	4353
Cossimbuzar Pools	4186

**Source :** WBSA, Board of Revenue Proceedings 1<sup>st</sup> June to 8<sup>th</sup> June 1791, vol. 113, Part I, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1791

While the Nizamat exercised little authority over water-control and left it to local management the Company exercised a more direct authority over the zamindars who were responsible for the repair of the zamindari pools and to see that the money advanced for *pulbandi* by the state was expended in making the proper repairs. For this purpose the Company appointed a Supervisor to inspect whether the Bunds were kept in proper repair by the local authorities. The Supervisor inspecting the *pulbandi* works was sometimes met with hostility from the farmers and zamindars who were so long entirely responsible for the management of pulbandi works. In 1774, Thomas Shaw, in a letter informed of the hostile attitude he had to encounter at Magurah Pergunnah. Shaw wrote:-

I take the liberty to represent to you the treatment I met with in Maugrah pergunnah. On my visiting a place called Sotell, to view the Pool Bunday works, I was informed by an under Farmer who rents three Dhees or Turfs; that as he had received no money this year from the head Farmer, the works at that place had got no repairs.

I then went to Chittalau the head Cocheery in said pergunnah and informed the Sickdars that by your orders I was come to view the Poolbundee works and desired Manick Mundell and Jagatrammundell to order one of their people to shew me the works I received for answer by two men called Jemdars, Araick and Nalmamood, that if I either went or insisted further on seeing Poolbundee works in said Pergunnah they had orders to assemble twenty Peons to repel

any men, and a great deal of foolish language unnecessary to trouble you with at present as interpreted by my Sircar.<sup>458</sup>

From 1775 onwards we hear of an officer designated as the 'Superintendent of *Pulbandi*'. In 1775, Thomas Burges was the Superintendent of *Pulbandi*<sup>459</sup> and the superintendence and repairs of the Rajshahi and Lushkerpore pools were in his hands.<sup>460</sup> In 1777 John Kinlock was the Superintendent of *Pulbandi* for Burdwan.<sup>461</sup> The task of the Superintendent was to see that the Bunds were in proper repair. Additionally he was to see receive complaints from the ryotts in case there were breaches in Bunds. He was to investigate when these breaches were made and what amount of land was damaged by inundation as a result of breaches being there in the pools and whether these were *malguzzary* lands. The *munduls* and *thanadars* were instructed to assist the Superintendent in his investigation.<sup>462</sup>

These Superintendents appointed by the State often came into conflict with the zamindar. Thomas Burges the Superintendant of pulbandi for Bheetoreah, Bhoosnah and Lushkerpore came into conflict with the zamindar of Rajeshahy. In 1775 Thomas Burges complained that the mutsuddy of the Ranny, seized and confined the *daroga* appointed by Mr. Burges to carry on *pulbandi* works in Bhetoreah and as a result the other *darogas* in fear of the *mutsuddy* had deserted their work.<sup>463</sup> The records of the following year document that the Rani of Rajshahi made several complaints against Burges for underpaying the Coolies and forcibly seizing the ryots to work in the pools

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<sup>458</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue 26 August to 30 December 1774, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1774.

<sup>459</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to Murshidabad the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1775. Before being appointed the Superintendant of pulbandi, Burges it appears from one of his own letters dated 31<sup>st</sup> December 1773 that he was entrusted with the task of repairing of the pools of Bazetpore and Chinnapore. IOR/G/27/8 Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774. [where is bazetpore and chinnapore?]

3<sup>rd</sup> January 1774.

<sup>460</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to Murshidabad the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1775.

<sup>461</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 6<sup>th</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1777, vol. 18, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1777. It is not clear from the records if there were only one or more than one Superintendant of Pulbandi.

<sup>462</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 6<sup>th</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> February 1777, vol. 18, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1777.

<sup>463</sup> IOR/G/27/9, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1775 to Murshidabad the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1775, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1775.

and exacting money from them under the pretext of ‘necessary expences’.<sup>464</sup> The Company decided that the zamindar’s complaints were ‘in general without foundation or greatly exaggerated’ but nevertheless decided to enquire into Mr. Burges conduct. Meanwhile Mr. Burges complained of the Naib of Nattore having seized the workmen and impeding the Business of the *pulbandi*. On August 12<sup>th</sup> 1776, James Grant was sent to ‘to release any workmen that are confined, to support the superintendent against the power of the zamindar in executing his Business.’<sup>465</sup> In 1776 the Rani of Rajeshahy complained against Durpnarain one of the *darogas* under the employ of Mr. Burges of oppressing the ryotts.<sup>466</sup> On another occasion Mr. Burges complained that the ryotts forcefully made breaches on the bunds which he supposed was done under the tacit encouragement of the local zamindar. Neetanun Roy *daroga* of the pool of Hazarhati in Lushkerpore reported that between Balouckgur and Morcutty Goranpore, the villagers have forcibly cut seven or eight places in the pool, despite orders to the contrary.<sup>467</sup> The cause of this dispute between Mr. Burges and the local zamindar lay in the fact that it was customary for the local inhabitants as the Provincial Council of Murshidabad noted ‘to make small openings in the pools to communicate the water to their Tanks and Reservoirs.’<sup>468</sup> However Mr. Burges on the other hand viewed this incident as ‘a total subversion of all order and decorum.’ The Council at Murshidabad however took a pragmatic attitude towards the problem. The Council wrote to Mr. Burges stating that they have directed the zamindars to apply to Mr. Burges when in need of making the necessary breaches on the Bunds for supplying their reservoirs and Mr. Burges was authorized to sanction the opening of such breaches if he thought it necessary and the zamindar themselves undertook to repair the Breaches made on this account The Board however cautioned Mr. Burges ‘to be careful on such Representations to ascertain whether the zamindars who prefers them is the only person who can be affected by your compliance, or whether there may

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<sup>464</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 2<sup>nd</sup> May to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1776, vol. 9, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1776.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1776.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1776.

<sup>467</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 2<sup>nd</sup> May to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1776, vol. 9, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1776.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*

not be other zamindars whose Lands may be thereby exposed to suffer by Inundations.’<sup>469</sup>

While the deputies of the Company-State venturing into the *mofussil* to supervise *pulbandi* often came into conflict with the zamindars and farmers in many cases the Company-State also acted as a mediator with regard to disputes over water supply between native zamindars and farmers. Such disputes were numerous for the erection of a Bund by one zamindar may have detrimental effects on the land of another zamindar. Our records mention that in 1775, there was dispute between the Farmer of Chitwa and the Zamindar of Cossijurah with regard to the Bublatoolla *bandh*. The inhabitants of Chitwa had frequently cut it open and those of Cossijurah as often closed it up. The Company sent an *amin* to enquire into the dispute. The *amin* produced ‘a map of that part of the River where the Bunds in question are situated’ and it was ascertained that the stoppage of the river channel by means of a Bund would ‘inevitably occasion the entire Inundation of 6,000 *bighas* of Land, in the pargana Chitwa, whereas the adjacent Grounds of Cossijurah consist only of 900 *bighas* which the Zamindars *vakeel* acknowledges to suffer only in part for want of the necessary supplies of water, when the above Bunds are kept open.’ The Company in this regard came to a pragmatic compromise. The Bund was allowed to be kept open so that 6000 Begas of land of the Chitwa farmer was not inundated. But since the opening up of the Bund meant deficient supply of water for 900 *bighas* of land of the zamindar of Cossijurah, the Farmer of Chitwa was directed to furnish the zamindar of Cossijurah with the necessary supplies of water for those 900 *bighas* from a neighbouring reservoir.<sup>470</sup> In this manner the Company came up with an amicable solution to the dispute between the farmer and the zamindar that was acceptable to both parties.

The zamindars were entitled to a deduction in revenue in case of inundations only if they had kept the Bunds in proper repair. A letter from Fort

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan 2<sup>nd</sup> March to 28<sup>th</sup> April 1775, vol. no. 6, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1775.

William addressed to Mr. James Archdekin, Salt Agent at Hidgelee thus pointed out:

The Farmer of Hidgelee by tenor [...] his engagements with Government is entitled to a [...] for any loss which may be sustained by inundations occasioned by the breaking of the great Bund near [text missing] sea. This however is only conditionally that the [...] exert himself to keep it in proper repair and that [...] loss happen by an unavoidable accident without any neglect of his. You will therefore cause this Bund [...] inspected and report to us the condition of it and you also give notice to the Farmer if it is represented to, if not to be in a good state of Repair.<sup>471</sup>

The Company-State accepted and put into practice the existing mechanisms of water supply and water management. The practice of *pulbandi* or embanking continued to be performed by the zamindars. What was new however in the system of water control and water management was the increasing hold of the state in it. Previously the Nizamat-State had rarely involved itself in water management in the local areas. These had been left to the charge of the zamindars. The Company on the other hand took direct interest in water management. The money for embanking came to be advanced by the state and the state appointed its own representative to see that the money was well-spent. Therefore the level of intrusion of the Company-State in water management was much more than its predecessors. This intervention in turn transformed the pre-colonial hydraulic relationships. Previously water supply and water management was a local affair; the state had no part in it. The zamindars ensured that the *puls* were kept in proper repair so that the lands were not flooded. Responsibility was combined with profit motive for it was in the interest of the zamindar to keep his lands from being flooded and his peasantry contented. However the increasing demands for revenue placed upon the zamindar by the Company created an atmosphere of tension where the zamindar was constantly threatened by the loss of his property as a result

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<sup>471</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue 2<sup>nd</sup> March to 22 April 1774, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1774.



of accumulation of revenue arrears. This made them neglect their traditional duty of keeping the *puls* in proper repair. The state on the other hand did not take up the task of *pulbandi* entirely in its own hands. The result was a dual control over the system of embanking.<sup>472</sup> The exercise of such dual control by the state as well as the zamindar led to friction between the two parties at the local level as we have already seen and a general neglect of the *puls* as each party tried to blame the other for neglect of duty. In 1794 Rani Bishnukumari accused the *pulbandi* contractor Mr. Foxcroft of having neglected the necessary *pulbandi* repairs. The Collector found the Rani's complaint justified after a tour of the country. As a result the charge of *pulbandi* was given over to the Rani and J. Thompson was appointed *pulbandi* officer under her. But it was found that the Rani herself had neglected the *pulbandi* repairs

There is another aspect from which colonial water management has been criticized. William Willcocks for instance upheld that the British did not understand the necessity of overflow irrigation in Bengal.<sup>473</sup> They solely focused on the protective aspects of the zamindari embankment and its irrigational aspect was completely forgotten by the Company. Willcocks asserted that embanking the river to prevent floods was not enough to make agriculture flourish. Overflow irrigation was an essential part of the Bengal agriculture. The rice crop could thrive on rain water but if the cultivation of rice was unaided by flood irrigation 'it impoverishes the soil and can produce malaria.' The flooding of the rivers also brought fishes into the ponds and tanks and fish supplied nourishment to the impoverished peasantry. The fishes in fact were the reason for combating malaria in case of overflow irrigation because the young fish fed on the mosquito larvae. Therefore the peasantry sometimes made secret breaches in the embankments which were thought by the authorities to have been made by the river itself.<sup>474</sup> Such incidents have been noted by Gastrell in his survey of Murshidabad. Analysing the causes for the breaking of the *bandhs* Gastrell writes:

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<sup>472</sup> Ranajit Guha and A. Mitra ed. *West Bengal District Records (New Series): Burdwan, Letters issued 1788-1800*, West Bengal, 1956, Introduction, pp. lxxiv-lxxvii.

<sup>473</sup> Sir William Willcocks "Lectures on the Ancient System of Irrigation in Bengal and Its Application to Modern Problems", in Kumud Ranjan Biswas ed. *Rivers of Bengal: A Compilation*, vol. 1, Kolkata, 2001.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the Fishermen of the interior Beels and Khalls have also often the credit of coming in the night and making small cuts in them (the Bunds), to secure a fresh influx of Fish from the large rivers to supply their fishing grounds in the various jheels. A very small injury suffices to destroy a Bund in a single night. The end of a sharp Bamboo thrust through is quite enough. But great as is the present misery caused by such accidents, they are not entirely unaccompanied by advantage. Fresh and rich deposits are brought in by the inundation waters, re-fertilizing, raising the soil, and greatly benefiting future crops. The reverse sometimes happens, and a layer of sand impoverishes what was formerly rich soil.<sup>475</sup>

The act of the peasant in making secret breaches in the *bandhs* should not be therefore taken either as an irrational act or an act deliberately done to disobey the Company authorities. As noted earlier in the context of Rajshahi it was customary to make such breaches for the supply of water and fishes into the reservoirs.

### **B. Commercial Infrastructure: *Chowkis* and the Collection of Inland Customs**

Apart from land revenue which was the most important source of revenue of the Nizamat and the Company state in Bengal, profits were also derived by the State by taxing trade and commerce within their jurisdiction. The merchants had to pay custom dues and duties on goods in transit or at the place of sale.

The customs and transit dues were collected at places called *chowkis*. The *Pachotra* was the principal custom house in a district. Under the Nizamat, before the time of Nawab Shuja Khan there were two *chowkis* established by the state one at Buxsh Bundar and the other at AzimGunge.<sup>476</sup> Soujah Khan increased the number of these *chowkis* to 20 and thereby effected an increase

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<sup>475</sup> Captain J.E. Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Moorshedabad District*, Calcutta, 1860, p-6

<sup>476</sup> Holwell Interesting Historical Events, Part I, p-56.

in the royal revenues.<sup>477</sup> Customs collected at these *chowkis* was a source of income for the state. Thus while the average land revenue collected by the Murshidabad Council of Revenue between 1770 and 1780 was Rs. 43,60,314 a year, the amount of money collected as customs at the *pachotra* or principal custom house of Murshidabad for the same period averaged Rs. 1,71,421 a year so that the inland customs duty of Murshidabad contributed about 4 per cent of the total revenues of the District.<sup>478</sup>

However apart from the Nawabs, *chowkis* were also erected by the local powerholders or zamindars within their jurisdiction. The zamindari *chowkis* were places of customs erected in various parts of the province on the banks of the rivers. By these means the zamindars augmented their incomes although practice was greatly injurious to trade and commerce. Moreover the *chowkidars* at these inferior *chaukis* also made undue exactions on merchants. By the *firman* of Farukhsiyar the East India Company's trade was exempt from such duties. But the employees of the Company abused this privilege for their private trade so that there was great loss to the Nawab's income from customs. This became the bone of contention between the English East India Company and Nawab Mir Qasim whereby Mir Qasim was overthrown.

Unlike the Nizamat the East India Company was interested in exercising a more direct and closer control over the zamindars. From very early on the Company took note that undue exactions were carried out on traders. On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1770 the Supervisor of Purnea pointed out that the traders who traded in Timbers 'who after they have paid the duties here, and taken out a *perwannah* under the seal of the *Foujdar*' are again stopped for duties at the *chowkis* of Rajmehal contrary to the established practice. The article of timber being principally produced in Purnea duties were paid on the spot and a certificate thereby being issued they were nowhere else molested. Moreover boats also loaded with grain that paid no *Rahdaree* duties but only those at the *gunges* where it was sold were daily stopped either in the zamindari of Hettendeh or in those of Rajmehal. On 15<sup>th</sup> December 1770, the

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Mohammad Mohsin Khan, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad 1765-1793*, Dacca, 1973, p-79

Supervisor of Purnea complained of the obstructions experienced by boats laden with grains that are stopped either at the chokies of Akberpoor or Hittendeh.<sup>479</sup>

On 29<sup>th</sup> November 1770 the Supervisor of Rajmehal, W. Harwood, gave an account of the duties of Syer as had been hitherto collected at Rajmehal. Harwood pointed out that the original established duty was no more than 2.5 %. But in the subaships of Serfraz Cawn & Aliverdi Cawn it being discovered that the *faujders* levied private taxes on all goods passing this chokey, the articles which were thus secretly imposed were added to the former duty of 2.5 % and the whole brought to the credit of government. By this the authorized duty on Syer amounted to 3 ½ PCt. Harwood however complained that in addition to these duties large sums have been exacted from the merchants trading by Rajmehal. Harwood was of opinion that such exactions should be discontinued and the rate of duty payable by merchants should be publicly authorized. In reply to Harwood's letter the Council at Murshidabad fixed one established rate of duties to be paid by all. Having also consulted Reza Khan on the matter the Council fixed the duties to be levied at Rajmehal as follows:

Table 12: Rate of authorised Syer levied at Rajmehal

Items	To be paid by Muslim merchants	By the 'Gentoo' or Hindu merchants
On raw silk & silk piece goods	3 %	5 %
On white piece goods	3 %	5 %
On Beetlenut	3 %	5 %
On various merchandize	3 %	5%

The Council was forced to give sanction to distinction in duties to be paid by Muslim and Hindu merchants as the Nabob informed them that a resolution to

<sup>479</sup> CCRM, vol.2, p-111.

bring these duties to a level of equality would involve a ‘total innovation in the collection of Duties throughout Bengal.’<sup>480</sup>

The proceedings of January 18<sup>th</sup> 1771, record an *arzee* from a merchant named Mahomed Hady, who complained that notwithstanding his paying the duties at the *Pachotra* from where he obtained a rowannah his boats carrying tobacco had been stopped by the *chowkidar* of Burra Gerreah who made undue exactions on him. To redress the merchant the Council at Murshidabad wrote to W. Harwood the Supervisor of Rajemehal and Boglepore, ordering him to punish the *chowkidar* in order to deter others from committing similar exactions on merchants.<sup>481</sup>

Soon afterwards the Company decided that these inferior *chowkis* where undue exactions were carried out needed to be abolished altogether. In 1772 orders came from the Court of Directors for the abolition of *dustucks* and the withdrawal of all *chokies* ‘except the nine general ones which had been established for collecting the duties payable to the Sircar.’<sup>482</sup> These nine general *chowkis* were to be under the superintendence of Company’s servants like the Supervisors in the different districts who were instructed to keep detailed registers specifying ‘the names of the persons who pay the duties, the number of boats, quality and quantity of the goods, the name of the person to whom they belong, the day of Payment, the time such cargoes are detained and when dispatched.’<sup>483</sup> Ten days after the expiration of each month the Supervisors were supposed to send these Registers to the Board in order to be forwarded to the Comptrolling Committee of Revenue.<sup>484</sup> By this measure the government not only removed obstacles to free trade and commerce but also curtailed the income of the zamindars. By abolishing the *chowkis* the Company tried to bring down prices of different merchandize, for the *chokies* tended to push up prices and also to display its newly acquired political power in the Province.<sup>485</sup> The abolition of the *dastak* meant that the private trade of

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<sup>480</sup> *CCRM*, vol.2, p.126.

<sup>481</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 3, p-57

<sup>482</sup> IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>485</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 203.

the English Company's employees were now subject to paying of duties. Hence the orders from the Court of Directors put forth the proposal 'that for all duties which may be paid by the Company's servants who by their rank had been hitherto been entitled to dustucs, they [the Supervisors of several districts superintending the nine general chokies] are to grant certificates to the owners of having received to such an amount on account of duties of such goods.'

The order for abolition of all *dastaks* in 1772 probably referred to the *dastaks* issued by the English East India Company because the French and Dutch trading companies continued to issue *dastaks*. The Company officials sought to ensure that the French *dastaks* were not used to cover goods of other persons thereby defrauding the Company of its due revenues from customs.<sup>486</sup> In 1773 the French put forth a claim that they enjoyed the privilege of paying duties only at Houghly and therefore no duties should be exacted from them at the custom house of Dacca. The French were ordered by the Company to produce proofs in support of their claims to this privilege.<sup>487</sup> Mr. Halliburton, Collector of the Government Customs at Dacca also pointed out that some officers of the Shahbunder assert that the French and the Dutch before the fall of Siraj-ud-daulah paid a tribute or *peshkash* at Dacca for the privilege of trading duty-free in every article except Salt, Betel-nut and tobacco. The Naib Jessarut Cawn was questioned in this regard but the latter maintained that he was unfamiliar with the existence of any such practice of paying tribute by the French or the Dutch.<sup>488</sup> While the English East India Company complained of the illegal exactions made at the zamindari *chowkis* by the zamindars and their inferior servants the Company's own employees, on occasions, were guilty of doing the same. In 1771 the Dutch chief at Calcapore complained that a boat carrying the Dutch Company's goods proceeding from Buddaul *aurung* to Chinsurah was stopped and detained in the zamindari of the zamindar of Rajeshahy Ranny Bowanny by order of an English person named Mr. Souder. The Company pointed out that the person guilty of the act of the detention of boats named Mr. Souder had not

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<sup>486</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 12<sup>th</sup> October to 27<sup>th</sup> December 1775, vol. 4 Part II, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1775

<sup>487</sup> IOR/G/15/7, Dacca Factory Records, vol. 7, December the 9<sup>th</sup> 1773 to April the 29<sup>th</sup> 1774, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1773

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

acted under the orders of the Company. The Supervisor of Rajeshahy Mr. C.W.B. Rous was therefore instructed to procure the release of the boats and ‘in general observe it as a rule that boats laden with Goods proceeding to the Dutch and French settlements accompanied with the dustics of either of these nations do not suffer any molestation or impediment in your districts as they account for the government’s lawful duty at the custom house of Houghly.’<sup>489</sup>

In 1773 all duties levied upon grain ‘in its transportation from the country’ were abolished. Duties on trade in agricultural produce were henceforth to be collected ‘only at the capital towns whither it is brought for consumption’, and the management of such duties was to be under five customs houses to be established and stationed at Calcutta, Hughli, Murshidabad, Dhaka and Patna. Moreover ‘all road duties [rahdari] whether by land or water exacted antecedent’ to the regulations of 1773 were to be made null and void. All the inferior types of chokies over all types of trade routes were to be dismantled in a phased manner and finally the right of the local merchant to be ‘at liberty to carry his merchandize where ever he thinks proper for sale’ was to be ensured.<sup>490</sup>

However the zamindars and *chowkidars* for a long time continued to flout the regulations of the Company regarding the collection of duties. In 1773 the Board of Customs lamented that the orders for abolishing all inferior *chowkis* in Bengal were in many places not observed and that the *chowkis* still existed ‘to the great grievance of the merchant and contempt of the authority of Government.’<sup>491</sup> In 1774 the Board received several complaints of inland duties being exacted from merchants.<sup>492</sup> In an *arzee* Kishen Prasad, the security for Edrackpore complained that in the *pargana* of Plassey, under the management of Ram Dulal Mitra, chokies had been erected by the latter, and Duties collected from the merchants and *beoparries* either going from, or coming to Edracpore which prevents the *gunges* and *hats* of Edracpore from

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<sup>489</sup> IOR/G/27/2, Factory Records Murshidabad, vol. 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1771 to 18<sup>th</sup> April 1771, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1771.

<sup>490</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 204.

<sup>491</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1773.

<sup>492</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur, 8<sup>th</sup> August to 29<sup>th</sup> December 1774, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1774

being much frequented, and of course is of injury to the Public Revenue.<sup>493</sup> In 1774 again representations were received from several *sanyasi* merchants that despite having paid the regular duties on merchandise to the *Pachotra* at Murshidabad ‘they have been obliged to defray other customs upon the same goods’ at Rajmehal and Boglepoor.<sup>494</sup> In 1775, trader Govindram complained to the Board of Customs that the *gomastahs* and *chowkidars* at several *ghats* in Rajshahi had extorted 100 Sicca Rupees disregarding the rowannahs he had obtained after paying the Government Custom.<sup>495</sup> In 1775, it was reported that one of the under Farmers of Rajshahi named Debu Mitra, had continued to collect *Syer Chelunta* in his Farm. In this case the Board of Customs regretfully noted that ‘that the present instance is but too plain a proof that their orders so frequently repeated are still eluded by the superior Farmers in the Mofussil.’<sup>496</sup> In 1775, one Jogmohun Baboo complained of illegal exactions pointing out that ‘through the way of Mamoudshy there are five Gauts of great robbers and plunderers, that always endeavour to put an end to Trade and to devour the helpless Trader.’<sup>497</sup> As late as 1781, Ramnaut Mundul, complained that illegal exactions were being made upon him at the zamindari Ghats.<sup>498</sup> Frequent complaints of illegal exactions made at different *ghats* and *chowkis* came from the zamindari of Nuddea.<sup>499</sup> In 1781 it was observed by the Company that

Notwithstanding the repeated orders of Government for abolishing all chowkies and Phandeas for the Collections of Rhadarry Duties; in these Provinces, yet there are still some Zamindars so Hardly as to venture at this disregarding the authority of the Rowannahs and extorting money from the Merchants I [or it?] will therefore be necessary for the Honble the Governor

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 12<sup>th</sup> December 1774.

<sup>494</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1774.

<sup>495</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 2<sup>nd</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> April 1775, vol. no. 4, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1775.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1775.

<sup>497</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 2<sup>nd</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> April 1775, vol. no. 4, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1775.

<sup>498</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 22<sup>nd</sup> November to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1781, vol. 10, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1781.

<sup>499</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 22<sup>nd</sup> November to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1781, vol. 10, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1781 ; WBSA, Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue 2<sup>nd</sup> July to 5<sup>th</sup> August 1782, vol. 16, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1782.



General & Council to repeat these orders once more, to the superior authority in each Districts and to inform them; that in future when any complaints are made and proved, the commissioners are empowered not only to oblige the immediate offender to refund the money so extorted, but also, to inflict corporal punishment upon him on the spot, where his exactions were made, and the zamindars, Chowdry, Talookdar and other proprietors of the Pergunnah or portion of Land, where the offence was committed shall be punished by a confiscation of the whole or part of his Lands by the Governor General & Council according to the Degree of the offence; nor will the plea of ignorance in any such case be admitted except in the cases of minors, women or persons otherwise incapable of acting for themselves in which the actual managers shall suffer such punishment as the Governor General & Council shall determine.<sup>500</sup>

The records of the Company are crowded with numerous such instances of ‘illegal’ exactions carried on in zamindari *chowkis* and *ghats*. This showed that while the zamindari *chowkis* were abolished in paper, in practice the zamindars continued to exact duties forbidden by the Company, much to the vexation of the latter. There were always disputes relative to implications of the order abolishing inferior *chokies*. In 1774 the merchants and ryotts of Rokunpore complained that the Farmer of the *pargana*, Bhabani Sircar had taken from them an undue duty. The complaint arose from the fact that while *rahdari* duties which were ‘levied at an intermediate *chowki* between the place of purchase and the place of sale of goods’ had been abolished Gunge duties were still allowed to be collected by the Farmers of Hats and Gunges. The Company pointed out that while they had allowed the Farmers of Gunges to exact a duty on merchandize sold in their *hats* and Gunges these Farmers however take the permission ‘in a more extended sense and they insist upon Duties on all merchandize brought to their Gunge whether sold there or not.’<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> WBSA, Chittagong Records: Letters Received February to September 1781, vol. no. 9.

<sup>501</sup> IOR/G/27/8, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 8, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773 to December 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1774.

The Company initially established ‘one general affixed duty’ of 5 per cent in lieu of the arbitrary impositions made at the zamindari chowkis, for the ease of the merchants. However *Beoparies* who imported grain from Dinagepore, Akbernagur &c. to Bogwangola and Moorshedabad made representations of their inability to continue their trade ‘with advantage to themselves’ from the imposition of the duty of five per cent by the Government in lieu of the sums paid at the zamindary chokies.<sup>502</sup> In another petition the Beoparries bringing grain to Murshidabad complained that previously they had paid only Gunge duties to the Government on the purchase and sale of Grain but had not paid any duties at the chokies ‘except by way of charity, of our free will to the zamindars people’ but ‘at this time the People of the Pachootra demand 2 ½ per cent above the customary and ancient Duties.’ By this means the merchants suffered losses and as a result the Duan reported in 1774 the quantity of grain imported into the city had become less and its price risen.<sup>503</sup> Later on the Board of Customs pointed out that the present government duty was not 5 % but ‘it is only 2 ½, the other 2 ½ per cent being a Gunge duty, which no Grain pays unless it imports at some particular Gunge.’<sup>504</sup> The new regulations therefore initially created complications. By 1787 Government Custom Houses were established in Hooghly, Murshidabad, Patna, Dacca, Chittagong, Chowsa and Calcutta.<sup>505</sup>

Nevertheless there were cases where the merchants benefited from the new Company regulations. Under the old dispensation many arbitrary and undue influence was exercised over the traders. The Company sought to remove such influences. In 1778, Sanderam and Domur Sing Gomastahs of the Pergunnah Bahdore complained that the Aumlah of Nurnagur dependant on Taujipore had stopped merchants from coming with their Boats to purchase grain at Bugwantgunge in their zamindari and asked the Company for redress. The Company officials upheld that ‘the merchants must carry on their Trade

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<sup>502</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 4<sup>th</sup> April-30<sup>th</sup> June 1774, June 20<sup>th</sup> 1774.

<sup>503</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 4<sup>th</sup> July to 26<sup>th</sup> December 1774, vol. 3, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1774.

<sup>504</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 4<sup>th</sup> July to 26<sup>th</sup> December 1774, vol.3, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1774.

<sup>505</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue Proceedings 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> May 1787, vol. no. 15, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1787.

without Force or Impediment’ and therefore instructed the Taujepore *amlah* that no impediments shall put on merchants going to Bugwantgunge.<sup>506</sup>

Cornwallis abolished all restrictions on inland transit in 1788, except for a customhouse in Manjee, on the borders of Bihar for collecting duty on articles coming from Banaras, Awadh and other areas. The Company re-established these in 1801 and imposed tariffs at the rate of 3.5 per cent. Afterwards Regulation IX of 1810 imposed a consolidated duty.<sup>507</sup> In Mughal times transit duties were tolls rather than duties collected according to the distance travelled, in small instalments. This new regulation aggregated all the instalments on goods traveling the greatest distance.<sup>508</sup> Transit Duties were altogether abolished from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1836.<sup>509</sup>

### **C. Administrative Infrastructure: The Police and the Maintenance of Law and Order**

This section looks at the changes in the judicial structure in the period of transition in Bengal from the Nizamat to the Company administration. In the old order much power and responsibility had been given to the zamindars who were also responsible for the maintenance of law and order within their jurisdictions. Under the Company however the task of maintain law and order came to be increasingly centralized and the zamindars’ police establishments were disbanded.

#### The Judicial System under the Nizamat

In the Mughal system there were two parallel channels of administration of justice in each *suba*. The *Naib Nazim* was in charge of the criminal administration while the *Diwan* was in charge of administering civil and revenue matters. Both of them were appointed by the emperor. However since the time of Murshid Quli Khan, the office of the *Diwan* became subservient to

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<sup>506</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 7<sup>th</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> December 1778, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1778.

<sup>507</sup> Trevelyan cited in Tilottoma Mukherjee ‘Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal, New Delhi, 2013, p-255.

<sup>508</sup> N.K. Sinha, see also tarasankar banerjee’s introduction to Trevelyan.

<sup>509</sup> Charles E. Travelyan, *Report Upon the Inland Custom and Town Duties of the Bengal Presidency* ed. By Tarasankar Banerjee, Introduction, p. 39.

that of the *Nazim* and *Nazim* began to appoint the *Diwan*, the *Naib Nazim*, and the *Naib Diwan*.

The *faujdar* was next in rank to the Nazims or military governors of the provinces.<sup>510</sup> He was entrusted with the duty of maintenance of law and order. These *faujdar*s were 'fixed in each Soobahdary or Viceroyalty, according to its extent, and the number of refractory Zamindars or great Landlords in it.'<sup>511</sup> The *faujdar* had bodies of troopers under him. He was to act as a check on the powers of the zamindars and was supposed to subdue the rebellious ones.<sup>512</sup> A second aspect of *faujdar*s duty was to protect the country against bandits and highwaymen.

he was to hunt them down wherever he could discover any of their footsteps, and to put them to the sword as soon as he had seen them...and in case any one of those banditti should assemble in troops, and dare to appear in such bodies as might baffle or elude the exertions of one single Fodjdar, then the neighbouring Fodjdars were, upon his requisition, to join him forthwith, and to fall together upon the malefactors, driving them from post to post, and giving them combat upon combat, and engagement after engagement, until they had extirpated the whole of them.<sup>513</sup>

Bengal too was divided into *faujdaris* and according to the author of the *Seir* there were ten districts in Bengal that had *faujdar*s. These were 'Islamabad-Chatgam, Silhet, Rangpoor, Rangamatty, the Castle of jelal-gur-poorania, Rajmahal-akbarnagar, Radjshahy, Bardwan, Midnipoor, and Bacshybender-hoogly.'<sup>514</sup> By the means of the *faujdar* and his troopers peace and order was maintained. The author of the *Seir* points out that although when the Mughal empire declined and the *Nazims* assumed independence they still did not depart from the Mughal institutions and practices so that Bengal continued to

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<sup>510</sup> Seid Gholam Hossein Khan's *Seir Mutaqherin* tr. Haji Mustafa (Nota Manus), vol.3, Calcutta, 1785, vol. 3, p- 175.

<sup>511</sup> *Seir*, vol. 3, p-175.

<sup>512</sup> *Seir*, vol.3, p-176

<sup>513</sup> *Seir*, vol.3, p-177

<sup>514</sup> *Seir*, vol. 3, p-179.

remain in peace till the time of Alivardi Khan. Apart from the *Seir*, the *Riyaz-us-salatin* too eulogises the peace and order under the Nizamat at the time of Murshid Quli Khan thus:

During the Nawab's [Murshid Quli's] administration, the names of free-booters, night-marauders, and assassins were blotted out from the annals of the Bengal Satrapy, and the dwellers, both of towns and villages, lived in perfect peace and comfort.

Moreover by the custom of the country, the zamindars in whose zamindari a robbery had been committed was required to make good the loss. Hence it was in the interest of the zamindar to maintain law and order within his jurisdiction. Thus Sraffton elaborating on the customs and usages of Hindostan writes:

And so free is the country from robbers that I doubt there having been an instance of one in the memory of man. The diamond merchants, who generally pass this country, have seldom even a weapon of defence, owing to that admirable regulation, which obliges the Lord of that spot where the robbery is committed, to recover the effects, or make good the value.<sup>515</sup>

While the *faujdar* under the Mughal system of administration was required to maintain law and order he was to do so with the help of the zamindars. Shirin Akhtar has pointed out that the zamindars 'had to perform a host of administrative duties which had an intimate relation to the enforcement of law and order.' The collection of revenues from the ryotts and its safe dispatch to the government treasury was to be ensured by the zamindars. They were also to ensure that trade and commerce was not hindered within their jurisdictions because of insecurity and lawlessness and that the lives and property of the inhabitants of a zamindari were secure. The zamindars perhaps

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<sup>515</sup> Luke Sraffton, *Reflections on the Government of Indostan with a short Sketch of the History of Bengal*, London, MDCCLVIII, p-12.

also acted as judges.<sup>516</sup> They gave constant intelligence to the Nawab through the Rai Rayan, assisted the *faujdar* and executed his orders.<sup>517</sup> The police establishment of the zamindar consisted of:

- 1) The regular police forces
- 2) The spies and *dak* servants
- 3) The village officials including the village watchman
- 4) The personal guards of the zamindar.<sup>518</sup>

In the hilly and jungle areas as we have seen the zamindars power was more absolute. Before 1776, there was no *faujdar* court in the Jungle Terry districts. The zamindars in these remote hilly and forested areas that had never been completely subdued by the Mughal government considered themselves as supreme judges. In these areas the judicial system operated in its primitive form. The accused were often as part of their trial made to face fire. Their innocence was proved if they escaped unhurt.<sup>519</sup>

#### The Judicial System under the English East India Company

The East India Company rose to power in Bengal, following the battles of Plassey and Buxar. In 1765 the grant of *Diwani* to the East India Company by the Mughal Emperor made the Company the *Diwan* of the Province with complete and legitimate control over the civil justice and finances of the Province. The criminal administration on the other hand continued in the hands of the *Nazim*. Reza Khan however was appointed *Naib Diwan* as well as the *Naib Nazim* of Bengal and as *Naib Nazim* it was he who was in actual charge of criminal administration. During these early days of dual

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<sup>516</sup> There is some dispute among scholars as to whether the zamindars possessed judicial authority or not. N. Majumdar for instance, has argued that the judicial powers that the zamindars enjoyed had been usurped when the Mughal government declined. N. Majumdar, *Justice and Police in Bengal 1765-1793: A Study of the Nizamat in Decline*, Calcutta, 1960, pp. 37-38. ] Shirin Akhtar on the other hand argues that the zamindars were the de-facto judge-magistrates of their locality whose status became that of a de jure Judge Magistrate by the year 1765. Shirin Akhtar, *Role of Zamindars*, p. 162.

<sup>517</sup> N. Majumdar, *Justice and Police in Bengal*, p. 51

<sup>518</sup> See Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of zamindars in Bengal*, p-120 and N. Majumdar *Justice and Police in Bengal 1765-1793: A Study of the Nizamat in Decline*, p. 51

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

administration corruption became rampant in the judicial system. The authority of the Nawab enfeebled and his officers did not have the means to enforce their decisions. The Nawab's troops had also been disbanded except for those that were necessary for the maintenance of his dignity.<sup>520</sup> Hence although the Nawab formally retained charge of the criminal jurisdiction yet he barely had the means to have his orders enforced.

It was therefore up to the Company to ensure order. But here the Company lacked due authority because criminal administration formally was under the Nizamat and the Company could not openly disavow the Nawab's authority. It was one of the duties of the English Supervisors to enforce order and justice within their jurisdictions. But the Supervisors had been instructed that they were to pay due regard to the Nawab's officers and were only to recommend necessary regulations. Thus the Supervisors with their insufficient power and inadequate police forces failed to establish law and order.<sup>521</sup> Meanwhile the famine of 1769-70 acted as a major destabilizer wherein the hungry masses swelled the ranks of destitute men forced into committing crimes for the sake of survival.

Again in December 1770 Reza Khan under the direction of the Company authorities issued an order for recalling the faujdars from all districts except Dacca and Hugli where the show of the Nawab's authority had to be kept up 'to hoodwink the foreign nations.' The discharged faujdars and soldiers now joined the lawless elements. Thus during the year 1769-70 the incidence of dacoity and the *sanyasi* and fakir depredations increased to an alarming rate.

After the famine the Company decided to stand forth as Diwan and take over the entire responsibility of the management of the revenues of the province. Reza Khan was removed as Naib Diwan and also as Naib Nazim.<sup>522</sup> Warren Hastings assumed the charge of Company's administration.

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<sup>520</sup> N. Majumdar, *Justice and Police in Bengal*, p. 80

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86

<sup>522</sup> N. Majumdar, p-91.

In 1772 a new plan for organising the judicial system was implemented. By this plan there were to be two Adalats in each district – The *Diwani Adalat* and the *Faujdari Adalat*. The *Diwani Adalat* was to deal with civil cases such as property disputes, marriage and caste issues while the *Faujdari Adalat* was to take into account all criminal offences like murder, robbery, theft, forgery etc. The *Dewani Adalat* in each district was to be presided over by the district Collector assisted by the *Diwan* of the District and other officers of the *kachahri*. The *Faujdari Adalat* was to be presided over by the Qazi and the Mufti of the District and two *Maulavis*. The Collector of the District was to exercise a sort of general superintendence over this court. Moreover two superior courts were established in Calcutta – the *Sadr Diwani Adalat* and the *Sadr Nizamat Adalat*. The *Sadr Diwani Adalat* was presided over by the President and two Council members while the *Sadr Nizamat Adalat* was presided over by the *Darogha-i-Adalat* or the Chief Judge appointed by the Nazim. The proceedings of the *Sadr-Nizamat-Adalat*, however, were to be conducted under the supervision of the Governor and Council at Fort William. By the reforms of 1772 the supreme courts of justice was moved to Calcutta and the administration of civil justice was entirely placed in hands of the Company's servants. Moreover the in *Mufassal Faujdari Adalat* as well as the *Sadr Nizamat Adalat* was also placed under the supervision of the Company. By these means the power of the Company over the judicial system was more firmly established.

Hastings policy was brought to its logical conclusion by Cornwallis. In December 1790, Cornwallis took away the charge of criminal justice from the Nawab. A *Sadr Nizamat Adalat* and four courts of Circuit, were to be filled up by European judges were set up under the direct charge of the Governor-General and Council. In this manner the last vestige of the Nizamat's authority – the control over criminal administration – also ceased. The initial decision of the Company to leave the criminal administration under the *Nizam* may have been influenced by the fact that they did not want to bring about a sudden revolution in the government of Bengal that would 'give umbrage to foreign nations in India and precipitate the interference of the ministers of the Crown in England' But by 1790 English power was secured in Bengal and the other



European trading Companies no longer posed a challenge hence the time was ripe for the final transfer of authority. But even before 1790 and Cornwallis' reforms the Supreme Court as established by the Regulating Act had come to challenge even the outward show of Nawab's sovereignty.

We must now turn our attention to the zamindars and see what role they played while the control over the administrative infrastructure was passing from the Nizamat to the East India Company. The new revenue experiments of the Company adversely affected the police duties of the zamindar. The hereditary landholders who derived profit from the effective management of their estate had found it advantageous to safeguard trade and commerce and the lives of the inhabitants within their zamindaris. But now their lands were given in farm to outsiders. These new farmers were exempted from the performance of police duties so long discharged by zamindars. Even where the zamindars retained their farming rights, there was a partial or full resumption of *chakeran* lands supporting the police establishment. Thus the zamindar did not have the wherewithal to support a police establishment and he also no longer found it profitable to maintain order within his jurisdiction. It might be tentatively speculated here that the Company may have followed a deliberate policy of reducing the police and military forces at the disposal of the zamindar. The zamindars were well known for their infidelity towards the government and the Company unlike the Nizamat was determined to bring these centrifugal forces under control. However although the Company tried to assume the responsibilities of peace-keeping upon itself in this respect it failed completely. The frequent cases of dacoity and the incursions of *sanyasis* and *fakirs* [See Appendix 1 &2] showed that while the Company had uprooted the old structure of enforcing law and order it could not substitute it with a more efficient one.

## Chapter-5

### Subsistence Crisis in Bengal and China: An Eighteenth Century Perspective

The district of Mymensingh at this time, however, was visited by one of the most cruel famines that had ever come upon Bengal. There was no rain during the rainy months, and as a result, the agricultural outlook became menacing. The homes of many families became scenes of terrible suffering, and men and women died by hundreds. First they lived on fruits, next they ate grasses and when these also were scorched by the rays of the sun, they sold their cattle and house-utensils. Next husbands sold wives and wives their children. All convention, all affection and feelings were gone and, men became like lower animals seeking the whole day long for something to live upon. The uncles of Kenaram sold him for five cattahs of rice.

- The ballad 'Kenaram the Robber Chief'<sup>523</sup>

That year, by the cruel dispensation of Providence, a great storm overtook the land. The sea rushed froth, overflowing the banks, and hundreds of houses were carried away. The farmer lost his crop of paddy, and the rich harvest, almost ready for the reaper's scythe, was all destroyed by the flood. The raging waves advanced and swept away men and beasts – no one could swim across the vast waters as no bank or landmark could be seen anywhere in it. The cornfields, with all species of fine rice - *fenabati*, *bijmali*, *balam*, *thinnal*, *girling*, *binni* and others of various names and quality – too many to be mentioned here – were devoured by the flood. Famine overtook the country. The survivors could hardly get means for sustenance. Alas the terrible flood! It spread far and wide and was a scourge to the country. Land and water became, as it were, one clear silvery sheet. What a terrible roar burst forth in the sky, rent by lightning which showed itself like a sharp sword! The boatmen themselves were drowned in the rushing waters. The Moulavi lost his dearly prized Koran and the dealer in betels lost all his goods! Some ascended the roofs of their houses, but no safety even there – water rose higher and higher and overtook them. The cows, the buffaloes, the sheep and other domestic animals died by hundreds. The prices of paddy rose to 5 aris ( 1 ½ mds. ) per rupee. The householders sold their wives, sons and daughters. Many died of cholera, for they lived upon the leaves of trees.

- The ballad 'Nuranneha and the Grave'.<sup>524</sup>

These two ballads from eastern Bengal very graphically describe the horrors of a famine that ensued as a result of a prolonged drought or an accidental flood. Such episodes of drought and flood were common in

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<sup>523</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, ed. *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, vol. 1, Part I, Calcutta, 1923, p. 170.

<sup>524</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, ed. *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, vol. IV, Part I, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 39-40. The setting of the ballad is Chittagong.

eighteenth century Bengal. However the intensity of such natural disasters was either mitigated or accentuated as a result of human action. State initiative by means of which large amount of resources could be mobilized was crucial in times of such crisis. On the other hand lack of initiative on the part of the state could cause such episodes of crisis to assume extreme proportions. In the history of eighteenth century Bengal the famine of 1769-70 stands out as a major episode of human tragedy where a famine caused unprecedented death and destruction. When historians have analyzed the causes of this famine, the East India Company has received much attention and criticism. It is however our argument here that the Company-State was not alone responsible for the large-scale casualties during famines. The Company-State inherited and modified the infrastructure created by the Nizamat-State and neither the Mughal State nor the Nizamat developed an adequate infrastructure to deal with incidents of food shortage. A comparison with eighteenth century China brings out this fact. From a systematic survey of the extent of disaster to providing relief to the disaster-stricken and maintaining granaries for cushioning food shortages – the Chinese state and its bureaucracy showed exemplary efficiency in dealing with situations of subsistence crisis. This is not to suggest that the system functioned without any hindrance or corruption or that situations of crisis were altogether absent. R. Bin Wong<sup>525</sup> for instance has drawn our attention to the food riots in China. But despite such incidents the infrastructure that the Chinese-State built for dealing with food-shortages is indeed praiseworthy. Neither the Mughals, nor their successors in Bengal – the Nizamat or the East India Company managed to systematize famine relief operations. This point will be illustrated in comparing the famine relief measures as practiced in Bengal with those of China.<sup>526</sup>

Such a comparison however does present some methodological problems because Bengal forms a small part of the Indian sub-continent, a

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<sup>525</sup> R. Bin Wong, 'Food Riots in the Qing Dynasty', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 1982), pp. 767-788.

<sup>526</sup> An excellent comparison of famine relief measures in India and China has been made in Paul R. Greenough, 'Comments from a South Asian Perspective: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 1982), pp. 789-797. Greenough's account is however not exhaustive and there is scope for further elaboration on the differences of famine policies of India and China. This chapter has attempted to contribute to this discussion.

province of the Mughal Empire and much smaller in comparison to China in the eighteenth century. However the comparison between Bengal and China here is being made at two levels. In the first case comparison is being made at the level of policy whereby Mughal and Company famine policies is compared with that of the Chinese Emperors and we argue that the Chinese famine policy compared to that of either the Mughals or the Company was more systematic and reliable. Such comparisons of the famine policy of two large neighbouring empires of south-east Asia present no methodological problems. On the other hand it provides us with a new perspective. Most of the discussions on famines in Indian history have revolved around the question of the Company's responsibility in increasing the severity of food shortages. What we try to argue here is that the effects of famines and food shortages were so calamitous in Indian history is because unlike China there was no adequate infrastructure devised by the State to counter episodes of food shortages. Secondly comparison here is being made at the regional level whereby we compare portions of China that had ecological conditions similar to that of Bengal. These were the riverine areas of China whose ecological and economic features were similar to that of Bengal. While portions of China containing the deserts are arid but the eastern portion of China has many rivers flowing through it. The four major rivers of China were the Yellow River, the Yangzi River, the Huai River and the West River. In these fluvial areas particularly in south China the production of rice was predominant as in Bengal while in the relatively drier areas to the north millet was cultivated.<sup>527</sup> Like the rivers of Bengal, the rivers in China provided an effective means of transport. Water transport 'permitted the cheap long-distance carriage of everyday goods in large quantities' and 'and south and central China was soon covered by an intricate web of itineraries along which travelled boats of an astonishing range of sizes and designs beautifully adapted to the different natural circumstances with which they had to contend, and to a multitude of different cargoes.'<sup>528</sup> The rivers emptied themselves into the sea and thus goods from the interior parts of China could be shipped outside. In terms of

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<sup>527</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6, Part II : Agriculture by Francesca Bray, Cambridge, 1984, p. 27.

<sup>528</sup> Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, London, 1973, p. 135.

trade and transport therefore the fluvial regions of China resembled Bengal. The economy of some of these regions like Bengal was also fairly commercialized in the sense that these areas specialized in the production of commercial crops for the market and in turn came to depend increasingly on the market for the supply of their food.<sup>529</sup>

But before we venture into the details of this comparison it is essential to consider the causes that have been ascribed by historians as the factors behind occurrence of famines in eighteenth century Bengal.

#### Historiographical Debates on Famines in Eighteenth Century Bengal

The primary historian of the famine of 1769-70 was W.W. Hunter who gave a most graphic account of the famine in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*.<sup>530</sup> In Hunter's own words:

In the cold weather of 1769 Bengal was visited by a famine whose ravages two generations failed to repair. English historians, treating of Indian history as a series of struggles about the Company's character enlivened with startling military exploits, have naturally little to say regarding an occurrence which involved neither a battle nor a Parliamentary debate...But the disaster which from this distance floats as a faint peak on the horizon of our rule, stands out in the contemporary records in appalling proportions.

According to Hunter, the famine of 1770 was a 'one year's famine caused by the general failure of the December harvest in 1769, and intensified

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<sup>529</sup> For instance Robert B. Marks in his study of the Lingnan ("south of the mountains") region of China consisting of the two Provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi outlines the process of commercialization taking place. In the Pearl River Delta in the province of Guangdong 'the peasant-farmers gave up growing rice in favour of the silk industry.' This commercialization of the Pearl River Delta led to a shortage of food grains in the region and imports of rice had to be made from Guangxi in order to cover deficits in Guangdong. Thus the population in Guangdong came to depend more on the market for the supply of their food. Also much of the region in Guangxi came to be devoted to the cultivation of rice which supplied the need of peasants in the Pearl River Delta. Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>530</sup> W.W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Calcutta, 1965.

by a partial failure of the crops of the previous year and the following spring.’ The English Council in Calcutta did make some efforts at reducing the extent and intensity of the famine. At an early period they issued proclamations against hoarding or monopolizing grain. They also laid an embargo on the exportation on grain and thus endeavoured to make most of the scanty stock of food in the Province.

Other relief measures like remittance of land tax and advances to the cultivator, although constantly urged by the local officials was not put into practice. Hunter observes, ‘In a year when thirty five per cent of the whole population and fifty per cent of the cultivators perished, not five per cent of the land-tax was remitted, and ten per cent was added to it for the ensuing year (1770-1).

While Hunter deplores the condition of Bengal in 1770 his argument is still that the situation under British administration had improved over time. The development of the network of railways was a great boon for these aided the distribution of food.

It is however doubtful to what extent Hunter’s optimism about famines in Bengal was true for in 1943-44 the Province was visited by another disastrous famine.

Another very influential analysis on the occurrence of famines in India was given by R.C. Dutt in his book *Famines and Land Assessment in India* (1900). Dutt blamed ‘over-assessment of agricultural holdings’ that consequently lead to the impoverishment of the peasantry as the chief cause of famines. Dutt’s line of argument was thus:

...while in Bengal and Northern India where cultivators paid rents to private landlords, the rents were comparatively moderate, in Madras, Bombay and the Central Provinces, where the Government assessed the soil, the assessments were excessive and the people were poorer and more resourceless. And...in the famines of 1877, 1897 and 1899,

the parts of India which were over-assessed had suffered most severely.

According to Dutt therefore the primary cause of famines was rack-renting and he held the British Government responsible for this rack-renting of peasants that made them vulnerable to famines. Regarding the famine of 1770, Dutt pointed out, 'Like all famines, it had its immediate cause in the failure of rains; but the intensity of the famine, and the great loss of life it caused, were partly due to the maladministration of the East India Company, and the consequent impoverishment of the people.'<sup>531</sup>

However in a scathing critique of Dutt's proposition Charles W. McMinn argued that the land assessments of the British could not have been responsible for famines in India, for taxation under previous regimes whether under Hindu or Moslem was heavier than that of the British.<sup>532</sup> McMinn argues that officials of the Company in extracting money from the Nawabs did not impoverish the general population but 'they simply spoiled the spoilers'. Regarding Bengal in 1770 McMinn writes: 'It is therefore not clear what could have been done for the thirty millions of Bengal in 1770. Burma was inaccessible, Madras had itself suffered from a scarcity; import from Northern India was tried, but soon prohibited by local Governments; there was no remedy except distribution of what grain could be spared from those parts of Bengal itself which had been less affected by famine. More possibly might have been done in this direction.'<sup>533</sup> McMinn argues that Dutt is wrong in asserting that the Bengali landlord was not oppressive. Among the other causes of famine and scarcity was the fact that the Indian peasant was not a hard-working man, the growth of population, the reluctance of the Indian especially the Bengali 'to move a few miles in order to break up forest or waste land.'<sup>534</sup>

The role of the East India Company had been criticized by scholars on three grounds: 1) Providing inadequate Relief 2)Profiteering during famine

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<sup>531</sup> Romesh C. Dutt, *Famines and Land Assessments in India*, Delhi, 1985 (reprint), p. 1.

<sup>532</sup> Charles W. McMinn, *Famine Truths, Half Truths, Untruths*, Calcutta, 1902, p. 19.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

and 3) Increased burden of taxation. Each of these three accusations against the Company may be discussed separately.

#### Inadequate Relief

Scholars like N.K. Sinha, have criticized the role of the Company-administration in the famine of 1769-70 on the grounds that while the collection of revenue was kept up to its former standard relief measures were highly inadequate. A public charity was instituted at Murshidabad where the Company contributed Rs. 40,000, Nawab Mubarak-ud-Daula Rs. 21,000, Mohammad Reza Khan Rs. 15,250 Roydurlabh Rs. 6000 and Jagat Seth Rs. 5000. This sum proving inadequate a further sum of 65,193 was spent in charity so that the total sum spent was 1,52,443. Small sums in charity were also spent in Purnea, Bhagalpur, Birbhum amounting to Rs.30,839.<sup>535</sup> The Naib Dewan Reza Khan fixed seven places in Murshidabad for the distribution of charity on the part of the Company. Gopi Mandal, merchant of Dinagepore, gave 50,000 rupees in charity during the famine. Again according to Hunter government relief efforts consisted in distribution of 90,000 Rupees among thirty millions of people which meant that roughly 0.75 % of the total revenue collected in 1769-70 was distributed as relief. Therefore the Company's share in the relief measures was distressingly small.

#### Profiteering

In addition to providing inadequate relief the role of the Company-State during the famine of 1769-1770 has been criticized on the ground that the Company officials used their native agents or gomasthas to purchase grain force from the peasants which were sold at famine prices in the towns of Calcutta and Murshidabad. Rajat Datta has however argued that the Company officials were unable to corner a large amount of the province's food stocks because of the 'entrenched power of the grain-merchants.'<sup>536</sup> Datta's work has shown that the indigenous grain-merchant was the key-player in times of

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<sup>535</sup> N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal: From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement*, vol. 2, Calcutta, 1968, p. 56.

<sup>536</sup> Rajat Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History*, 10, 1, n.s., 1994, pp. 81-103.



subsistence crisis.<sup>537</sup> A fuller account of the activities of these merchants and their role in times of subsistence will be given in the following sections when we give a comparative account of the process of commercialization in China and Bengal and what implications such commercialization of the economy had in terms of availability of food to the people in times of subsistence crisis.

The role of Reza Khan during the famine of 1769-70 has also been a matter of controversy. While the author of *Seir* writes that Sitab Roy displayed exceptional energy in bringing grain from Benares which was a surplus area and where grain was relatively cheaper and thus managed to rescue 'immense multitude' 'from the jaws of imminent death' yet on the famine relief measures in Moorshedabad the author of the *Seir* writes:

But in Moorshedabad, such a proceeding [what Sitab Ray did in Patna] never came into any one's head ; and it is reported, that although Mahomed-reza-qhan had been appointed Inspector of that branch of Police, grain was often not to be had at any rate ; for such men as Mir-soloiman-qhan [Mir Sulaiman Khan], and some others like him, who had been appointed overseers of the poor, proved so intent on their own interest, that so far from being able to procure plenty of grain, they were the foremost to use violent methods to engross it. Whenever any loaded boat chanced to come escorted to the market by the Government people, the grain was dragged away with force by some one of the favourites of Mahmed-reza-qhan's, and carried to their own houses. Numbers of them were guilty of such practices, especially Raja Amret-sing, who gave himself all the airs of a sweetheart of his master's and made nothing of wresting a boat-load of grain out of the hands of a number of famished wretches who had thrown themselves upon it. Nor did anyone trouble himself about these practices, or about securing the grain, or getting it sold at a reasonable price; or about executing strict justice against those engrossers ; and matters rose at last to such a height, that this neglect came in the end to cut a considerable figure amongst the articles of accusation urged

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid. Also *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal c. 1760-1800*, Manohar, 2000.

against Mahmed-reza-qhan, by the Committee. But let us drop those matters ; doubtless they are better known to the Almighty Scrutiniser of hearts ....<sup>538</sup>

Similar complaints against Reza Khan were made by some native merchants. Rajat Datta however argues that Reza Khan was in reality trying to maintain a steady supply of provisions to Murshidabad.<sup>539</sup> For this reason he sent his agents to the countryside and they purchased grain from the merchants at prices fixed by the Khan.<sup>540</sup> There was no evidence that the Khan profited from these dealings but his interference in the 'established mechanisms of trade' was resented by the merchants and hence complaints against him were made by merchants. The author of the *Seir* may have made his conclusions from the complaints of the merchants and the light in which they put the situation. However the fact that the underlings of Reza Khan may have misused the power reposed on them remains a possibility but the fact that Raja Amret-sing, 'made nothing of wresting a boat-load of grain out of the hands of a number of famished wretches who had thrown themselves upon it' does not prove that grain was being engrossed by him. The fate of the incoming grain would probably have to be accounted for by officials and hence it was not upto them to distribute it among the destitute.

### Increased Taxation

The third accusation leveled against the Company was increased taxation whereby inspite of the famine the amount of revenue collection was 'violently kept up to its former standard.' However Rajat Datta argues that keeping in mind the assymetrical geographical sweep of the drought of 1769-70 it would incorrect to make such an argument. The drought affected portions of western Bengal while portions of eastern and south-eastern Bengal remained immune from the effects of the famine. The burden of taxation was higher in such areas which had been slightly affected by th famine whereas those areas that were worst hit by the famine paid Rs. 5,53,000 less as revenue in 1769-70 than what they did in 1770-1 which shows 'that the relationship between famine-misery

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<sup>538</sup> Seid Gholam Hossein Khan's, *The Seir Mutaqherin or Review of Modern Times: Being an History of India Containing in General the Reigns of the Seven Last Emperors of Hindostan*, vol. 3, Delhi, 1990 (reprint), pp. 57-59.

<sup>539</sup> Rajat Datta, 'Subsistence Crisis', p-92

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

and taxation was not as direct and certainly more complex than what has been made out to be.<sup>541</sup> The severity of the drought and the steep rise in prices according to Datta were the more potent causes of the famine.<sup>542</sup>

The question here arises that while the East India Company had failed to provide relief during the famine of 1769-70 to what extent was the previous regime successful in averting one? In 1671, a devastating famine occurred in Patna a description of which is given to us by John Marshall the English factor.<sup>543</sup> Regarding the cause of the famine Marshall points out that for the past few years rainfall had been irregular but he says the 'rougery' of the *nawab* was also responsible for the widespread famine.<sup>544</sup> Marshall mentions the famine to have reached Benaras and Rajmahal as well.<sup>545</sup> The onset of the famine was in May 1671 when the entries for 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> May and 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1671 record effects of the scarcity of food in the form of there being 'dead corpse' and the 'sad noise of poor starved people'. Marshall also records that there was a steep rise in prices of food. In May 1671 the price of wheat was two and half rupee per *maund* by August of the same year the price rose to about four rupee per *maund*. From May to July about 100 persons died daily. From July onwards 300 persons died daily. Marshall obtained three estimates of total number of persons dead from the *kotwals chabutara*, the estimates being- 135,400; 103,000; and 90,720. In the case of the last estimate he points out that about 18,144 Muslims were dead and the number of Hindus who died was 72, 576 which together made up a total count of 90,720 people dead. Marshall describes the famine as follows:-

June the 19<sup>th</sup> when came from Pattana to Singee, I see upon one peece of sand, about the middle way betwixt that city and the River, about 32 or 33 persons ly dead within about 10 yards compas from the middle of them, and so many by the river side that could not come on shore but [except] by

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<sup>541</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 259

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>543</sup> *John Marshall in India: Notes and Observations in Bengal 1668-72* ed. Shafaat Ahmed Khan, Oxford, 1927.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*

very many dead corpse; ...The corpse in the river ly with their backs upwards...<sup>546</sup>

In another place he writes,

In the Gaut [ghat, landing place, quay] by our factory which was not four yards round about (as I conceive) lay 50 dead corps which I could tell [count], which were driven tether in about two days time, and Mr. [Valentine] Nurse saith that the day after hee counted 122 dead corps in ditto place. Aboundance are every day drove to the side of the river, though the most persons of quality hire Hollolcores [ halalkhor, sweeper] to carry them into the middle of the river with a string, and carries them into the middle of the river and then cuts the string and so lets them drive down with the streame.<sup>547</sup>

Many people sold themselves as slaves as a result of the famine. It was a strategy of survival as slaves would be provided with food. Marshall writes, 'Great number of slaves to be bought for 4 *annas* and 8 *annas* per peece, and good ones for 1 re per peece; but they are exceedingly lean when bought, and if they eat but very little more than ordinary of rice, or eat any flesh, butter or any strong meat, their faces, hands and feet and codd swell immediately exceedingly; so that it is esteemed to give them at first ½ seer of rice, and those very lean 1/4<sup>th</sup> seer per day to be eaten at twice.'<sup>548</sup>

Marshall's account has no reference to any form of relief organized by the state. This is not to suggest that the Mughals had no famine relief measures. An account of Mughal famine relief measures is given in the sections that follow but like the East India Company the Mughal famine relief policies were not systematic. Prof. Irfan Habib in his account of Mughal famine relief has pointed to the tax remissions given by the state as well as the setting up of *langars* or free kitchens by the state to feed the needy and the

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

destitute.<sup>549</sup> In fact information on these state-sponsored free kitchens is sadly lacking. For instance how many people the *langars* were able to provide with free victuals? What was served in these *langars*? How much did the state spend in setting up langars? These questions lack answers. However Prof. Habib's comment that these *langars* were 'opened more as a gesture of charity, however, than with any ambition of providing substantial relief' suggests that the *langars* did not operate extensively.

While traditional historiography of the famine considered the policies of the East India Company-State as responsible for the increased intensity of the famine on the other hand more recent works by Rajat Datta have seen the famine in the light of the commercialization of the economy of the Province whereby the process of commercialization 'influenced the availability or absence of food for the harvest-sensitive strata in the province.'<sup>550</sup> In the light of such analysis famines resulted not because there was an actual shortage of food but because the people did not have access to that food a process which Amartya Sen labels as 'entitlement-failure.'<sup>551</sup> Datta argues that the Company-State was unable to break through the organized power of the grain-merchants in Bengal who hoarded grain and thus artificially raised its prices so that poor could not purchase food in the market.

Apart from challenging the traditional view of holding the Company-State as responsible for the famine of 1769-70, Datta also explodes some myths related to the famine. For instance the mortality caused by the famine of 1769-70 is generally estimated at 10 million or one-third of the population of Bengal. Datta however argues that the peak period of the famine being six months from January-August 1770, it is impossible to account for 10

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<sup>549</sup> Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, New Delhi, 2008 (reprint), pp. 112-122 and *Man and Environment: The Ecological History of India*, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 83-88 and pp. 116-125.

<sup>550</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 325.

<sup>551</sup> Amartya Sen in his analysis of the great Bengal famine of 1943 regarded the famine not as proceeding from food availability decline (FAD) but the famine was a result of entitlement failure. According to Sen the famine of 1943 did not arise from a simply from a great decline in food availability but certain sections of the society suffered from entitlement failure in the sense that they did not have access to food by losing their purchasing power in the market. By the Entitlement approach Sen explains starvation during famine 'as resulting from a failure to be entitled to a bundle with enough food.' Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Delhi, 1981, p. 45

million deaths in such a short time. Further the view on famine mortality are not based on quantitative evidence which is not available but on ‘descriptions of supposedly vast stretches of land falling out of cultivation (*pateet*) or deserted (*palataka*) or simply lost (*lokshan*) to cultivation (*jote*). However from the report of the Amini Commission Datta points out that ‘barring Birbhum and to some extent Rangpur and Purnea, the arable in most other areas of Bengal where the Amini Commission went was under optimum utilization.’<sup>552</sup>

In this chapter we would like to argue that eighteenth century Bengal did not have an adequate infrastructure to deal with episodes of subsistence crisis. Apart from some measures of market control the Nizamat did not develop any means of coping with food shortages and the Company-State which for the eighteenth century mostly inherited and modified the structure built by its predecessor, did not either develop any means of coping with food shortages as a result of natural calamities. The point made here will be further illustrated by a comparison with famine relief measures in eighteenth century China. The effect of every major drought or flood was mitigated by the active intervention of the Chinese State and bureaucracy who with the assistance of the local gentry was successful in providing relief to the famine-stricken population. The following sections would elaborate how and why China in the eighteenth century was able to counter food shortages better than Bengal where the famine of 1769-70 caused unprecedented mortality.

### **The Character of the State**

First and foremost the ethos of the Chinese-State was altogether different from that of the Nizamat or the Company-State. Although the Chinese called disasters, such as floods and droughts, *tianzai*, or heavenly calamities, they recognized that famines, or *zaihuang*, result from the interaction of human and natural forces. A series of recurrent disasters was seen as a sign that the reigning dynasty no longer possessed the mandate of heaven and therefore the rulers had to do everything in their power to forestall

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<sup>552</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 264.

the decline of their dynasty.<sup>553</sup> This was not the case either in the context of the Nizamat or the Company-State. The Nizamat was the successor to the Mughal state and in Mughal statecraft the inability to furnish relief to the famine-stricken subjects did not challenge the Emperor's right to govern.

So far as the Company-State was concerned during a period of famine crisis it had a contradictory role to perform. On the one hand it was expected to provide relief to the inhabitants in times of scarcity and yet at the same time it was obligated to extract as large an amount of revenue as was possible under the circumstances. This tension between these two opposite claims on the state is brought out by Richard Becher in a letter of 24<sup>th</sup> December 1770 thus:

I must beg leave here to mention the very unfavourable circumstances under which I held the station of Resident. Particularly the last year during which the Province laboured under the most severe calamity, that any country was ever afflicted with, a continued drought for many months, when rain was most wanted which occasioned such a failure in the crops & produced such famine and mortality among the inhabitants, as I believe history does not furnish us with an instance of, but will I hope evince that no endeavours were wanting on my part, nor as far as I am able to judge on the part of the Nabob M.R. Cawn, to realize to the Company as large a revenue as under such circumstances...with due consideration to the preservation and relief of the inhabitants to which essential objects I gave constant and assiduous attention, and large as the balance is of the calculated revenue of last year, I am persuaded had there been the least relaxation either on my part or that of M.R. Cawn the Company would have been much more considerable sufferers.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Lillian M. Li, 'Food, Famine, and the Chinese State', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 1982), p. 689.

<sup>554</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 2, p. 118.

It was not easy for the Company to resolve the two contradictory claims on it - 'to realize to the Company as large a revenue' with 'due consideration to the preservation and relief of the inhabitants.' This duality and contradiction in the role of the state was not only visible in the higher echelons of Government but also among the inferior employees of the Company. Thus Mahomed Ally Cawn, Phousdar of Purnea, wrote to Richard Becher:

Purnea which was once a plentiful country retains now nothing but the name of its former abundance...The distress of the poor is now beyond description hardly a day passes over with thirty or forty people dying. From the drought of the season such misery is occasioned that multitude already have and continue to perish of hunger. Intent on the prosperity of the country I have not been wanting in my endeavours to preserve the necessary grain for seed. But the Ryotts of many villages for want of rain have been reduced to the necessity of selling their grain for seed and their cattle and utensils in order to support themselves-in so much that they even offer their children for sale- but none can be found to buy them. Such is the distressful state of the ryotts and inhabitants of this place that impoverished [in?] former years' calamities and now reduced to extremities by the failure of their crops-setting aside the payment of their rents they are perishing for want of grain. Never was therein any place before so melancholy a scene often when I contemplated the prevailing misery my compassion and pity are excited. *Nevertheless over ruled by my regard for the welfare of the government appearing blind to their distress and deaf to their lamentations I neglect not the interest of the Sircar.*

In 1770, Richard Becher in a letter to John Cartier, President and Governor of the Select Committee pointed out that from the collections of the



year 1176 (1769-70), the sum of Rs. 8,03,321.93 had been remitted from the Bengal revenues on account of the famine and the sufferings of the inhabitants. On the other hand the total amount of revenue collected from the different districts of Bengal for the year 1176 B.S. or 1769-1770 was 1,19,95,030.81 which means that the amount of revenue remitted was roughly 6 % of the total revenue collected – a highly inadequate sum. But given the ethos of the colonial state and the dual role in which it stood to the inhabitants of the Country the figure is not surprising. In 1774 and 1775 the Company-government granted 750 Rs. for ‘an ancient custom which superstition has rendered sacred amongst the Gentoo Natives and in which they have been indulged for time immemorial by Government of performing some religious or rather superstitious ceremonies upon the appearance of Drought, or any dreadful calamity.’<sup>555</sup>

As described earlier, in the famine of 1769-70 both the government and wealthy individuals privately made efforts to relieve the famine-stricken. But such efforts at relief can at best be described as sporadic and far from systematic. The state had no official policy worked out for famine relief. Those among the rich who had money to spare undertook the task of making charities.

### **Absence of Famine-Relief Infrastructure**

Secondly neither the Nizamat nor the Company-State built an adequate infrastructure to deal with episodes of subsistence crisis. Traditionally the Mughals in India in case of famines gave remissions of revenue and established *langars* or free-kitchens in times of famine. However as Prof. Irfan Habib points out these *langars* were ‘opened more as a gesture of charity, however, than with any ambition of providing substantial relief.’ Market control and control of prices was another feature of Mughal famine relief. In the context of Bengal, David Curley has pointed out that the traditional Mughal famine policy consisted of establishing a “Fair” grain market. When a locality was hit by famine conditions the first step taken was an embargo on

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<sup>555</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 3<sup>rd</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1775, vol. no. 6, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1775.

exports from that locality. This “expressed a strategy of local autarky in bad times.” However “such local embargoes did not apply to shipments of grain to the markets of Murshidabad, provided that they were carried by merchants attached to the Governor’s markets of the City.” The second step of the traditional famine policy was “price-regulation at the central market of a locality.” This step logically implied attempts to supply grain at the centre by compulsory collection of it in the hinterland and the compulsory shipment of it to the centre. By these steps the stock of a famine hit locality was reserved for the use of its own inhabitants at prices regulated by the state.<sup>556</sup>

On the other hand famine-relief measures in China were more systematic and elaborate. A survey was undertaken after a natural calamity had hit a place. The survey consisted of two stages. One was the “survey of damages” (*chazai or kanzai*) that evaluated the material damages done to the cultivated land with the object of determining the amount of tax-exemptions that was needed to be granted. The second stage was the “survey of the aid [needed]” (*chazen*) or “relief survey” ‘which evaluated the economic condition of the population and was concerned with families.’ Each of these surveys could be divided into two sub-stages whereby a preliminary survey was conducted by local officials “sub-county personnel and village chiefs” while the final survey was conducted by “tenured officials” of the state. After the survey, public food relief was provided in villages that were classified as disaster areas in the form of monthly distribution of free foodstuffs to disaster victims classified as “very poor” and “less poor”. Also under the initiative of the local gentry “centers of gruel distribution” (*zhouchang*) that resemble modern soup-kitchens were set up. These soup-kitchens provided relief to the famine-victims before the official aid arrived. Since the official aid came after the survey of the disaster, the role of the soup-kitchen in providing interim relief to the famine-stricken becomes all the more important. Will points out that the ‘principle of the soup kitchens was to bring the starving population together in a special area where gruel was cooked in great kettles then distributed with ladles specially designed to pour out the exact amount

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<sup>556</sup> David L. Curley, ‘Fair Grain Markets and Mughal Famine Policy in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal’, *Calcutta Historical Journal*, vol.2, 1977, pp. 1-26.

planned for each person.’ The state encouraged the setting up of these soup-kitchens by the gentry by rewarding them for their generous efforts. What was distributed in the soup-kitchens was porridge made out of cereals. The most popular one was that made of rice but considerations of economy often made the mixture of ‘cheap cereals’ or other additives necessary. Such experimental add-ons by unscrupulous cooks often resulted in tragedies. Will mentions that by a regulation of 1785, in two large soup-kitchens to be managed by the administration in the provincial capital of Zhejiang it was made mandatory for all the personnel working in soup-kitchens to taste the gruel they made there before serving it to the needy.

Tragedies also occurred at the time of distribution of relief. Many people were trampled to death as crowds gathered to claim relief. For instance the translator of the *Seir*, Nota-Manus, who dedicated his translation of the *Seir* to Hastings, and who may be trusted to have first-hand knowledge of famine-relief measures practiced then, points out in his notes that

There is no nation in the world so defective in common sense, as the Indians, whenever they have a distribution to make to the poor. Look at that man who has to-day proclaimed a distribution of grain and cloth for Tuesday next. This man, by his senseless distribution, will cause twenty murders, and rather more than less... In the famine of 1784 or 85, the Nawab of Lucknow distributed five thousand rupees a day ; that is, killed about fifty impotent people every morning, regularly for three months together, and, in his own words, put an end to the famine—add, by diminishing the number of mouths.<sup>557</sup>

Further the existence of caste taboos would become a great impediment towards providing effective relief to the famine-stricken population. We do not have evidence of this for the pre-colonial period for the relief provided was insubstantial and inadequately documented. But in the colonial period

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<sup>557</sup> Seid-Gholam Hossein-Khan, *The Seir Mutaqherin or Review of Modern Times Being An History of India Containing in General The Reigns of the Seven Last Emperors of Hindostan*, vol. iii, translated from the original Persian by Nota-Manus, Delhi, 1990, (reprint), p. 58.

there is evidence that relief operations might have become extremely cumbersome as those providing relief ‘want to know what is the characteristic occupation of each caste in the distressed area, what is their social status, and from whose hands they can take cooked food or sweetmeats, respectively, without losing caste.’<sup>558</sup> Many people would also refuse to take the aid of relief provided for the fear of losing their caste.<sup>559</sup> Risley points out that there existed ‘in Orissa a caste, called *chattar-khai*, recorded in the lists of 1881, which is made up of people who lost their caste in 1866 for eating in relief-kitchens (*chattras*).’<sup>560</sup> Hence relief operations in times of famine could never attain their desired success because of caste distinctions and social taboos.

### **The Storage of Grain**

With regard to storage of grain, the Nizamat-State made no attempts in this direction but in 1794, the Company-State in Bengal thought of following a policy of buying grain directly from the producers at regulated prices and storing the grain so purchased in ‘public granaries.’<sup>561</sup> However the scheme did not seem to have materialised because as soon as the grain merchants had an inkling of the intentions of the Company officials they bought all the grain available in the market so that they could impose their own terms with the Company officials. This led to an escalation of prices in the markets which was detrimental for the inhabitants.<sup>562</sup> The scheme of storing grain by the state therefore could not be materialized. The Company-State had to bend backwards in the concerted resistance of the merchants.

On the other hand state-sponsored granaries were part and parcel of famine relief in China. The problem of escalation of spot-prices of grain on account of the state’s purchase of grain for famine-relief was a problem that was faced by the Chinese-State as well. Hence increasing reliance was placed on the market for transferring grain from surplus to deficit areas. Also the fact that the Chinese paid a part of their taxes in grain may have helped them in stocking the granaries where in Mughal India taxes were

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<sup>558</sup> H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1892, vol.1, p. viii.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Rajat Datta ‘Subsistence Crises’, p.89.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

necessarily paid in cash. The granaries in China were of three types :- 1) the ever-normal granaries, 2) the community granaries and 3) the charity granaries.

1) Ever-normal Granaries (*changpingcang*) – State-managed “ever-normal” granaries in China had existed since the Han times. These granaries performed three functions. These granaries “would sell grain in the spring when the market price was high and, with the funds accumulated from those sales, purchase grain after the fall harvest when the market price was low, thereby keeping prices moderate for consumers in the spring and supporting prices paid to peasant-producers in the fall.” The principal was to keep the grain prices and granary stocks “ever normal.” This was the first function of the ever-normal granaries. Its second function was ‘to act as a kind of emergency “food bank” that would soften the impact of the most drastic economic reversals by distributing its reserves to the poor free of charge and without any limitation.’ By an edict of 1695, 30% of the stock of ever-normal granaries could be sold while the remaining 70 % was to be reserved for distribution in the times of a crisis. The third function of the ever-normal granaries was to make loans of grain (*jie*).

The ever-normal granaries were self-sufficient so long as they concerned themselves with the buying and selling of grain to keep prices stable, and to making repayable loans. But when a calamity struck and the granaries had to distribute free relief the problem of re-stocking them arose. These granaries were restocked by both private contributions as well as public purchase. Private donors were given honorific titles<sup>563</sup> and other benefits by the state. The grain-tribute may have been another source in the hands of the state for stocking the ever-normal granaries.<sup>564</sup> A part of taxes in China from very early times was paid in grain. This tax-grain was not only needed to provision the imperial household and the army but even government salaries were paid in grain.<sup>565</sup> This tribute grain collected from the eastern and central

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<sup>563</sup> Pierre Etienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China*, translated from the French by Elborg Forster, Stanford, California 1990, p. 190.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>565</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6 Part II: Agriculture by Francesca Bray, p-415.

provinces were for use of the central government and not the population.<sup>566</sup> Most of the tax-grain was carried over rivers in boats hence the maintenance of efficient waterways was a prime concern of the Chinese State.<sup>567</sup> However sometimes the tribute grain was redirected by the state from its usual destination – Beijing – to areas experiencing shortfalls in grain.<sup>568</sup> Will points out that in the eighteenth century ‘there was seemingly almost always some margin between the theoretical volume of grain to be sent to the capital (the provincial tribute quotas) and the amounts actually consumed by the aristocracy, the bureaucracy and the armies of the metropolis’<sup>569</sup> and therefore ‘surpluses were regularly redirected to the local granaries of the provinces where the tribute was levied or to those regions that had easy access to them or were close to the Grand Canal.’<sup>570</sup> Finally provincial officials purchased grain in the market for stocking the ever-normal granaries<sup>571</sup> which resulted in a great increase of spot prices. While such price rises did trouble the state, and proposals made for placing increasing reliance on the market for transferring grain from food-surplus to food-deficit areas, the idea of keeping grain reserves was not abandoned.<sup>572</sup> This is where the Chinese system was more advantageous. The Chinese merchants would not be able to maintain monopolistic control over food reserves and raise prices to an unprecedented degree because the State maintained a parallel stock of food reserves in the granaries.

2) Community Granaries (*shecang*) – The ever-normal granaries were located in the county seat and therefore not available for rural residents unless they managed to go to the towns. Thus community granaries were created in the villages. These were smaller in scale than the ever-normal granaries. Unlike the ever-normal granaries that were financed and stocked by the state the community granaries as well as the charity granaries were ‘usually financed through contributions or surtaxes from landowners and merchants.’ The state provided incentives ‘for contributions from both wealthy and the gentry to

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<sup>566</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 282.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416

<sup>568</sup> Wong, ‘Food Riots in the Qing Dynasty’, p. 769.

<sup>569</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 282.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>572</sup> Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk and Silt*, pp. 246-247.

stock the granaries.<sup>573</sup> These community granaries lent grain in the spring and collected repayments after the autumn harvest.<sup>574</sup> The function of these granaries was limited to providing loans only to “those who worked the fields”. They did not provide reduced price sales or famine relief.<sup>575</sup>

3) Charity Granaries (*yicang*) – The Charity granaries like the community granaries were smaller in scale than ever-normal granaries and like the Community granaries the charity granaries were also managed by local elites and financed by private contributions.

However stores of grain were not just kept by the state but by peasants, landlords and merchants as well. Peasants would generally store grain after the harvest.<sup>576</sup> Well off peasant families may store grain in granaries while those with limited resources would store grain in baskets. For storing grain in the husk baskets called the *thun*, the *lo*, the *thiao*, and the *khuei* were used. The *thun* in northern china were round and made of Artemisia which was not only a common plant in north china but also had the additional quality of repelling insects. In the south the *thun* were made of ‘bamboo wicker-work, or else of coarse bamboo matting rolled into a cylindrical container. The *lo* was a basket with a circular base. The *thiao* and *khuei* were straw or wicker baskets of round and cylindrical form respectively. Another kind of bamboo basket *chung tan* was used for storing seed grain. The basket was ‘shaped like a round jar with a closely woven lid.’ These baskets in which the peasants stored grain were cheap and easy to construct but they were not suitable for storing large quantities nor will the grain remain good for a very long period.<sup>577</sup> Peasant families with granaries intended to store grain for more than one year while those with just baskets probably intended to store grain from one harvest to the next.<sup>578</sup> When the new harvest came the peasant

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<sup>573</sup> Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk and Silt*, p. 229.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> Peasants stored grain after both early and late rice harvests but wheat however was not stored because of the difficulties of storing it ‘in the humid southern climate and the possibility of it molding or even becoming slightly poisonous’ wheat was consumed as soon as it was harvested. Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt*, pp. 240-241

<sup>577</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, vol. 6 Part II : Agriculture by Francesca Bray*, pp. 386-387.

<sup>578</sup> Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt*, p. 240.

sold their old stored grain and restocked themselves from the new harvest. If the current harvest however felt short then the peasant would not be able to sell, but the stored grain would ensure his survival till the next harvest. Marks points out “under this regime, real subsistence problems could arise only if the entire next harvest was wiped out or there were two consecutive years of poor harvests.”

Landlords again had huge granaries that enabled them to store grain for many years. Marks quotes a nineteenth century district magistrate who wrote, “powerful families are permitted to have only a three year supply of rice. If they have more than that, their rice will be sold at a low price and they will be punished.’ Marks points out that ‘the landlords collected rent from the tenants and stored it in granaries’<sup>579</sup> which means that the landlord collected rent in kind. Landlords also sold the grain in their granaries in order ensure fresh stocks. However while the peasants sold their grain immediately after harvest, the landlord waited till the prices were highest in the spring when they sold the stored grain.

Merchants too stored grain in warehouses. In 1790 rice shops in Foshan were each allowed to stock a maximum of 100 *shi* of grain which was ‘a year’s supply for five families of five people each.’<sup>580</sup>

So far as the peasants of Bengal are concerned Colebrooke mentions that some grain was stored in ‘jars of unbaked earth, or in baskets made of twigs or of grass.’<sup>581</sup> But what amount of grain was stored in this manner Colebrooke does not mention, probably because the quantity must be negligible. Colebrooke further remarks that

The practise of storing grain in subterraneous hoards, which is frequent in Benares and in the western provinces, and also in the south of India, is not adapted to the damp climate and moist soil of Bengal. Here grain is hoarded above ground in

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<sup>579</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid, p-245.

<sup>581</sup> H.T. Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1804, p. 37.



round huts, the floor of which is raised a foot or two from the surface.<sup>582</sup>

Again, Colebrooke does not mention who made these hoards and how much grain could be stored in them. The store houses in Bengal were known as a *golahs*. The storehouses were 'made of baked mud on a bamboo frame which was thatched with mats.' A *golah* 40 feet long, 10 feet broad and 20 feet high, with a storage capacity of 1,500 maunds of rice could be constructed at total cost of Rs. 40. In it rice could be retained for 5 years and paddy ten years without damage.<sup>583</sup> These *golahs* were not possessed by the peasant but by the merchant so that principal grain trader was often called the *golahdar*. Given the resource-constrained character of the Bengal peasantry it is doubtful if they would have the wherewithal to erect huts or *golahs* for the purpose of storing grain. The easiest method of storing grain in subterranean pits could not be practiced by the Bengali peasant because of the nature of the Bengal climate.

While the landlords in China stored grain in a big way in Bengal it was very unlikely that the landlords kept stocks of grain. The peasant in Bengal could take out *pattas* for payment in cash, or in kind, but it is probable that when the peasants paid in kind the landlord could sell the produce obtained from the peasant in the market. The fact remains that there is no mention in our sources of landlords in Bengal keeping stores of grain and since the discussion on zamindars or landlords in Bengal has been quite an extensive one it is plausible that if the zamindars kept stocks of grain for the lean season our sources would have mentioned it. The zamindars undoubtedly possessed vast resources but these resources must have been in terms of men and money than the possession of large amounts of grain.

It was the merchant in Bengal who possessed and hoarded grain in large quantities. Cultivation was begun by the peasants of Bengal with advance loans from merchants. The harvest therefore was appropriated by the merchants in repayment of these loans thus depriving the peasants direct

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid., p. 37(fn.)

<sup>583</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 326.

access to the merchants. Perhaps it would not be wrong to suggest therefore that after paying the landlord and merchant the peasant did not have enough resources laid aside to provide him with sustenance should the coming harvest fail. This is quite evident from Orme's remark. Speaking of the famine at Muxadavad, [Murshidabad] in 1752 Orme observes that in the famine, 'rice became six times dearer than the usual price the consequence of which, in a country where nine-tenths of the people daily spend what they daily earn, may be easily conceived.'<sup>584</sup>

### **Famine and Landlordism**

The policy of the Chinese-State was to integrate the gentry into its famine relief measures by giving them incentives. [Table: 1] The Community and the charity granaries depended on contribution from the gentry and so did the soup-kitchens. Nevertheless problems of hoarding by the wealthy still persisted leading to food riots. In making charitable donations therefore the gentry on the one hand secured honours and titles from state and secondly protected themselves from being rendered targets of food riots. For instance an interesting anecdote of 1849 points out that the magistrate faced with food riots punished the principal among the rioters but he also called upon the gentry to contribute towards relief. Those who did would receive honours while those who did not will have an inscription stating "so-and -so a rich man devoid of altruism" affixed to his door. Further the most generous contributors were also entitled to protection from the state. Since no wanted to have the inscription "devoid of altruism" affixed to his door in times of crises, the gentry liberally contributed and in return they also received protection from the state. Two centuries earlier in 1617, the magistrate of Huoqiu, Wang Shiyin followed a similar policy whereby those who possessed food reserves and agreed to sell a part of their reserves to the state "would be permitted to keep them in their storehouses until they were needed; in return they would get an official seal indicating to the population that their house contained property belonging to the state and looting would be punished by death."<sup>585</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire*, London, 1805, p. 405.

<sup>585</sup> Will, *Famine and Bureaucracy*, p. 61.

Thus the state offered incentives and its symbolic protection to those among the gentry who contributed towards famine relief.

The class of landlords or zamindars in Bengal was a very influential class. While the Nizamat stood at the helm of all political affairs actual power over the countryside was in hands of these zamindars or landlords. So long as they paid their dues to the state the Nizamat did not interfere in their affairs. It was the zamindars who were in charge of embanking so that the riverine areas were not flooded. In times of a drought they would excavate tanks. Thus the larger zamindars played a crucial role in protecting the Bengal countryside from drought and floods. However the fiscal policies of the Company-State put increasing pressure on this class of landlords which limited their capacity to provide aid in times of scarcity. The zamindars were also responsible for making loans to the cultivators called *takavi* for them to begin cultivation because the ryotts were usually too resource-constrained to begin cultivation. However the zamindars themselves were so impoverished that it soon became difficult for them to make these loans to the ryotts even if a natural calamity had left the ryotts resourceless. In May 1770, Jacob Rider the Supervisor of Nadia wrote that the ryotts of Nadia were in dire need for *takavi* but the Nadia Raja was so much in arrears that they could not expect him to grant them this indulgence. In another letter of May 1770 Rider pointed out, ‘...inevitable ruin will await the ryotts unless instant advances are made to enable them to make fresh purchases of grain for cultivation, as it is beyond a doubt that they have been driven to the necessity of consuming, that, which had the last season been more favourable they would have reserved for the above purpose.’

### **Famine and the Commercialization of the Economy**

More recent historiography on the famine of 1769-70 in Bengal has situated the famine not in the light of increased taxation by the Company but as a result of the process of the commercialization of the economy of Bengal.<sup>586</sup> In times of famines and scarcity the key player in the Bengal countryside was the

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<sup>586</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800*, New Delhi 2000; Rajat Datta ‘Subsistence crisis, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal’ *Studies in History*, 10,1, 1994, pp. 81-103.

grain-merchant. In late eighteenth century Bengal the grain merchants had organized power the sources of which were firstly their ownership of *golahs* and means of transportation. The *golahs* were for purposes of storage of grain and these enabled the grain merchants to hoard and store grain and sell them only when prices rose. Secondly, the grain merchants were ‘socially cohesive’ and followed ‘common occupational strategies’. They were organized into tightly knit groups or *dala*. Leading merchants like Thakurdas Nondi, Bhoj Raj and Kishan Mangal ‘were situated at the head of an organized network of trading activities, hierarchically arranged and spread over a wide catchment area. This enabled effective trading; it also made it possible for traders to disseminate information and to quickly forestall competition, particularly from the state.’<sup>587</sup> The third and the most important reason was the ‘advanced hypothecation’ of the peasant’s crop by the merchant.<sup>588</sup> The ryot of Bengal was too poor to begin cultivation without advances from the merchant to buy seed. This was the reason why the ryotts were compelled to sell their grain to the merchants in order to repay the advances made to them, instead of selling it at the market. The hoarding of grain by merchants leading to an escalation of prices creating a shortage of food was a marked feature of the famines in Bengal. During the drought of 1775 it was reported that the merchants who were bringing grain to Murshidabad had ‘ordered their Boats to be detained in the Jellingee to see if the weather will hold fair for any time longer.’ The easy access that the merchants had to the peasant’s produce coupled with the fact that they were the only section with a reserve stock of grain in times of food shortage made the merchants indispensable.

It must be pointed out here that China too had a fairly commercialized economy in the eighteenth century whereby responding to demands of export, commercial crops came to be increasingly cultivated and the people of such areas where commercial crops were cultivated came to depend increasingly on the market for the supply of their food.<sup>589</sup> Regarding the impact of

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<sup>587</sup> Rajat Datta, ‘Subsistence Crises,’ p.102

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Robert B. Marks in his study of the Lingnan area of China consisting of the two provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi charts the process of commercialization taking place in the region. In the Pearl River Delta, in the province of Guangdong, ‘the peasant-farmers gave up growing rice in favour of the silk industry’ owing demands of export. This commercialization

commercialization on the availability of food in times of subsistence crises in China there is difference of opinion. Robert B. Marks in his study of the Lingnan area of China has argued that while the interference of the state in the market in terms of buying grain for storing in the granaries had led to wide fluctuations in market prices, by depending on the market on the other hand for transferring supplies from surplus to deficit areas such price fluctuations could be avoided.<sup>590</sup> Marks however does not say as to what happens to the efficiency of the market when grain is hoarded as was in Bengal so that the normal functioning of the market (whereby the surplus is conveyed to deficit areas) is hampered. Wong on the other hand has given instance of several such cases of hoarding of grain by the wealthy who instead of selling their grain in times of scarcity at reduced prices often exported the grain by selling it to merchants from outside the locality. This often resulted in food riots whereby the destitute tried to stop the exportation of grain from the area. In such cases the state reserves of grain stored in the state-sponsored granaries came to the aid of the population. So long these state-sponsored granaries functioned well the state could control the food riots. The eighteenth century however was the high-point of these granary institutions from the nineteenth century these state sponsored granaries began to decline. But the existence of these granaries is what made the crucial difference between the fates of the Chinese and inhabitants of Bengal. The existence of the custom of 'grain-tribute' allowed Chinese State to stockpile grain in local granaries once the needs of the state had been catered to. According to Will there was a margin of about 500,000

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of the Pearl River Delta led to a shortage of food grains in the region and imports of rice had to be made from Guangxi in order to cover deficits in Guangdong. Thus the population in Guangdong came to depend more on the market for the supply of their food. Also much of the region in Guangxi came to be devoted to the cultivation of rice which supplied the need of peasants in the Pearl River Delta. This led to an emergence of an integrated market in the Lingnan area. Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>590</sup>The emergence of an integrated market in Lingnan became crucial in times of food shortages. While the interference of the state in terms of buying grain for storing in the granaries had led to wide fluctuations in market prices, by depending on the market on the other hand for transferring supplies from surplus to deficit areas such price fluctuations could be avoided. Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*, Cambridge, 1998.

*shi* between ‘the annual needs of the capital and the maximum yield of the tribute.’<sup>591</sup>

On the other hand under Mughal administration ‘apart from such isolated territories as Kashmir and Orissa, or the desolate portions of Rajasthan, the cash nexus was firmly established in almost every part of the Empire.’<sup>592</sup> In Bengal under the Mughal administration peasants too paid their revenues in cash except perhaps in Sylhet however where according to Jahangir it was a practice of the peasants to offer their children as eunuchs in lieu of revenue because there existed a great market for these eunuchs they being employed in the harems of the aristocrats.<sup>593</sup> Therefore when a large-scale scarcity arose the Nizamat-State or the Company-State, before coming to the aid of the population had to see to the needs of its own officials and the army. The first reaction of the Company when the drought of 1769-70 began was to stockpile food to feed its garrisons for the coming six months.<sup>594</sup> This put additional stress on the limited resources within the Province. Reza Khan too had to do all in his power to ensure that Murshidabad was supplied with grain.<sup>595</sup> Therefore in Bengal before the state could proceed to help the famine-stricken population they had ensure that food supplies were adequate for the state officials. Further any surplus from the grain tribute was used to fill the granaries whereas the only option left to the Company officials if they intended to maintain a state-sponsored grain reserve was to resort to the market where all their efforts were vitiated by the activities of the grain-merchant.

### **Food Riots and Famine: Response of the Poorer Classes to Subsistence-Crisis**

In Bengal so far as the peasantry were concerned their first reactions to a food shortage was flight or desertion. Thus Nobkishwaur *amil* of Bishenpore wrote to Becher that ‘The Ryotts...disappointed in their produce of rice and unable to support themselves under the present famine and answer the demands and

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<sup>591</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 283.

<sup>592</sup> Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p-279.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid*, p. 279.

<sup>594</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market*, p. 287.

<sup>595</sup> Datta, ‘Subsistence Crisis’, pp. 89-93

exactions of Government are running away- and all my endeavours to assure and encourage them are vain.’<sup>596</sup> Ujagger Mull, *amil* of Jessore wrote to Becher that ‘Many of the ryotts are daily running away and vain are all my endeavours to detain them by encouragement.’<sup>597</sup> Sudder-ul-huc Khan, *faujdar* of Bhagalpur reported that ‘most of the ryotts have fled to those places where they hear of grain.’<sup>598</sup> In the absence of grain the poor people also took recourse to consuming edible roots and plants that were generally not consumed. For instance it was reported that since neither rice nor paddy was to be had in most parts of the *mofussil*, the wretched Inhabitants subsisted solely on roots gathered in the *juls*.<sup>599</sup>

Datta has pointed out that, the fact that not all parts of Bengal were equally affected by floods and droughts encouraged the migration of the peasantry. For instance in the famine of 1769-70 eastern Bengal was very little affected hence peasants from the areas where the drought was more severe migrated to eastern Bengal. But in flood-induced famine of 1787-8 eastern Bengal was very severely affected while parts of northern Bengal were not as much affected as eastern Bengal hence there was a movement of people from eastern to northern Bengal.<sup>600</sup>

However the worst affected strata of society by the famine were the non-agricultural population- the artisans and craftsmen- among whom mortality was the highest. The non-agricultural population consisted primarily of salt-petre boilers, *chunam* workers, boatmen- *majhis* and *dandis*, cultivators of mulberry. In 1770, the Naib Diwan represented that in the present year only a small quantity of salt-petre was boiled, owing to the extremity of the famine and the mortality amongst the boilers.<sup>601</sup> The Consultations of December 13<sup>th</sup> 1770 point out a letter from the Supervisor of Houghly to Richard Becher mentioning that the loss of *dandies* by the late famine ‘has rendered every expedient for the transportation of the salt to the *Bunder* more or less

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<sup>596</sup> NAI, Select Committee Proceedings, 28 January to 21 June 1770, no. 31, 26 May 1770.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid.

<sup>599</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings 9<sup>th</sup> May to 16<sup>th</sup> May 1788, vol. no. 40 Part I, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1788.

<sup>600</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 268-271.

<sup>601</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 1, p. 249.

ineffectual.’<sup>602</sup> On February 24<sup>th</sup> 1771, Alex. Higginson pointed out in a letter to Samuel Middleton and the Council of Revenue at Murshidabad that in Beerbhoom formerly a great deal of *chunam* was made but in the famine last year all the people perished excepting 6 or 7 men.<sup>603</sup> In 1770, on the subject of the Provision of the Cossimbazar Investment the Naib Duan pointed out, ‘...from the calamity of the season and extraordinary famine, many of the Ryots are dead for want of subsistence, many houses depopulated & the inhabitants remaining are utterly incapable of industry or exerting themselves towards cultivation- From these reasons less of the mulberry plant has been cultivated than in former years...’<sup>604</sup> These people like the peasants would also consider migration as a strategy for survival.

The Chinese-State was against the movement of the destitute in times of crisis because ‘aside from being a threat to order and security, the peasants who abandoned their farms left dangerous gaps on what one might call the production front.’ Flight of a large number of peasants resulted in the lands remaining untilled and unworked so that even when the calamity was over the harvest prospect would not look good and the vagrants would be unwilling to return home. The Chinese government gave travel money and subsidies to induce the wandering people to return home but paradoxically such measures accelerated migration. Will points out that almost the famine relief measures was connected to the state’s perceived threat of an ‘aimlessly wandering peasantry.’ The State encouraged the peasants to remain at their habitations by distributing relief, sometimes forcing them to stay by blocking their escape routes and sending back to their villages those who had managed to migrate.<sup>605</sup> Nevertheless disturbances did occur and these took the form of food riots. In China, the participants of food riots generally targeted wealthy households and their large stores of grain. In times of scarcity, "rich households" (*fuhu*), or simply "rich people" (*fumin*), who failed to sell or lend their grain locally were likely targets of protest. According to a 1751 report on food riots in Zhejiang, "Many cases of food rioting begin when the rich hoard

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<sup>602</sup> *CCRM* vol. 2, pp. 55.

<sup>603</sup> *CCRM*, vol. 4, p. 42

<sup>604</sup> *CCRM*, vol.1, p. 230.

<sup>605</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 49.



their grain and refuse to sell."<sup>606</sup> The wealthy in their turn in order to avoid such situations and tried to move the grain out of the province which again was resisted by the rioters.<sup>607</sup> Apart from the rich households, granaries were a second major target of food riots.<sup>608</sup> But while in China food riots were common when there was a scarcity and the rich hoarded grain, in Bengal food riots in the form of looting the hoarded grain of the rich was conspicuously absent. Famine violence did occur<sup>609</sup> but the evidence for these are few and none of them targeted the hoarded grain of the merchants. The reasons for this difference in the occurrence of food-riots in India and China may be explored here.

In the first place it is necessary to understand why food-rights occur. E.P. Thompson in his celebrated work on the 'Moral Economy of the English Crowd'<sup>610</sup> argued that food riots were not spontaneous outbursts on the part of the poor in response to acute hunger in times of scarcity; on the other hand food riots were occasioned when the poor felt that their legitimate rights were being denied. Thompson writes,

it is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded

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<sup>606</sup> Wong, 'Food Riots', p. 770.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> After the famine of 1769-70 was over, on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1771, J. Rider the supervisor of Nuddea wrote to James Alexander Chief and the Council of Revenue that 'Our goal is now loaded with criminals most of whom had suffered long imprisonment. Many are accused of capital crimes, many of repeated misdemeanours, which makes it dangerous to dismiss them, Yet sufficient proofs cannot be had to condemn them, or to justify longer confinement... I beg leave Gentlemen to submit it to your judgment and request your sentiments in what manner I am to dispose of these poor people. Their guilt seems to have been chiefly the result of hard necessity in the time of the famine when one village rose up against its neighbour and fought for provisions to preserve themselves from starving. In these struggles some might have been slain by accident but there seems to have been no premeditated malice...<sup>609</sup> Again On 19<sup>th</sup> April 1771, the Supervisor of Rajeshahy C.W. Boughton Rous in the context of checking dacoity within the Province under his charge observed that 'Numbers of ryotts who had hitherto borne the fairest characters amongst their neighbours, pursue this last desperate resource [of dacoity], to procure themselves a subsistence.'<sup>609</sup>

<sup>610</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, No. 50 (Feb., 1971), pp. 76-136.

upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.<sup>611</sup>

For Thompson therefore food riots were a manifestation of the poor's discontent in seeing their 'moral assumptions' and what they considered their legitimate rights being encroached upon. The concept of the 'moral economy' of the poor was put in the context of south-east Asia by James C. Scott.<sup>612</sup> Scott asserts that 'the moral economy of the peasant' consists of 'the shared conviction... that subsistence is an absolute right, a duty enforceable on local and national elites who must foster their dependents in times of need as "the minimal obligation they owe to those from whom they claim labor and grain."' <sup>613</sup> The failure of the elites to honour this obligation leads in turn to their loss of legitimacy and the occurrence of rebellion and riots.

Paul Greenough has however disputed Scott's argument that the 'moral economy' of the Asian peasant was coloured by his twin concern of 'risk-aversion' and 'subsistence anxiety' and that the peasants considered it the duty of their superiors to supply them with subsistence in times of crisis. Citing the case of Bengal, Greenough points out that compared to other countries afflicted with a famine situation there were fewer food riots in Bengal. This is true both in the case of the famine of 1770 and that of 1943. How does one explain this absence of rioting in Bengal? Greenough points out that the Bengali peasant's perception of prosperity was dependant on mainly the two factors of 'Indulgence' and 'Abundance'.<sup>614</sup> Abundance here refers to the possession of stocks of paddy and indulgence refers to the process by which the socially superior were in normal circumstances to share their

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>612</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in South-east Asia*, New Haven, 1976.

<sup>613</sup> Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, cited in Paul R. Greenough, 'Indulgence and Abundance as Asian Peasant Values: A Bengali Case in Point', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Aug., 1983), p. 831.

<sup>614</sup> Paul R. Greenough, 'Indulgence and Abundance', p. 837

resources and food with their dependants. Greenough points out that there existed the ideology of the *annadata* 'or destined provider of subsistence' in Bengal. At the higher levels of hierarchy God or the king was regarded as *annadata*. At lowest level the head of a family was an *annadata* to the rest of the dependants. Finally at the intermediate level the landlord was the *annadata* to his dependants. In times of crises, the *annadata* initially takes care of his dependants. But during extended periods of crisis such patron-client ties were severed. Yet the breakdown of these ties did not mean the end of such ties in the Bengal countryside. Such ties came into existence anew when famine conditions were over. Neither did the dependents harbour any grievance against their abandonment which they viewed as only necessary for the survival of the remaining. According to Greenough such patron-client ties were responsible for the absence of food riots in Bengal in times of famine crisis because the clients looked upon their abandonment as legitimate.<sup>615</sup> Greenough however cautions that the indulgence which the peasants expected from their superiors cannot be said to constitute a 'moral economy' for the Bengali peasant because essential to the concept of moral economy as propounded by Scott is the notion that the peasants possessed a 'right' to subsistence and that it was the 'duty' of his superiors to provide him with subsistence for their relations were based on a norm of reciprocity. In case of the Bengali peasant however no such rigid notions of 'right' and 'duty' exist. The indulgences that are shown towards the poor are customary and not binding. Nevertheless Greenough argues that 'the moral-economic traditions of Bengal' can be derived from locally generated values of 'abundance' and 'indulgence' rather than from an 'allegedly universal set of values arising from subsistence woes.' Greenough's analysis therefore seems to suggest that there was no notion of a 'moral economy' in Bengal and the aid and assistance which the poor expected in times of crisis was not considered as their right but as customary indulgences from those with superior resources.

Datta too has argued for the absence of a notion of 'moral economy' in eighteenth century Bengal. Moral-economy in the sense of

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<sup>615</sup> Paul R. Greenough, 'Indian Famines and Peasant Victims: the Case of Bengal in 1943-44', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1980), pp. 205-235.

‘shared-poverty and mutual assistance’ in a society prone to subsistence crisis, leading to the formation of ‘elaborate patron-client relationships and village hierarchies which are ... mutually self-sustaining’ was absent in Bengal. The capacity of the landholder to provide relief was limited. Further such help as was provided ‘should not be seen as an extension of traditional ties of patronage and dependence.’ Rather the assistance given to the peasant ‘was designed by the zamindars to tie the cultivators in the grip of extended indebtedness’ with the ultimate purpose of gaining ‘unrestricted access to their produce or to prevent subsequent desertions.’<sup>616</sup> Devoid of any concrete claims of assistance either from the State or from the local authorities, the only viable option left in the hands of the Bengali peasant was migration towards areas that were comparatively less affected by a natural crisis.

The situation is however is different in China where the reigning dynasty was supposed to have lost the mandate of heaven if it was unable to prevent recurrent scarcities. Lillian Li writes, ‘the idea that the state should and did play a critical role in population growth, land use, and food supply should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Chinese culture and history. From ancient times, the promotion of the welfare of the people was regarded as a major function of the Chinese state.’<sup>617</sup> Will points out that famine prevention and relief operations were ‘among the classic tasks of the Chinese bureaucracy, an integral part of the paternalistic conception of power that informed the Confucian ethic: to “feed” the people, to better “educate” them.’<sup>618</sup> Of course the state had to function in conjunction with local power holders who often withheld grain resulting in food riots. Perhaps the knowledge of the Chinese that it was part of the ethics of the State to feed them led to these food riots as the rioters often targeted the granaries maintained by the State. Further they also understood that withholding grain in times of crisis was unethical and hence the rich hoarding grain became targets of food riots. Here the socio-religious ethic which was the basis of the Chinese State may be said to have been the cause of food-riots. Further the State seems to have reinforced the ‘expectations’ of the populace for relief. Since the State

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<sup>616</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 311.

<sup>617</sup> Lillian M. Li, ‘Introduction: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State’, p. 689.

<sup>618</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 4.

was successful in the past to provide relief it was expected that it would continue to do so and any disappointment of the people in this regard led to food riots. Wong thus points out:

Officials reinforced popular expectations that the rich should sell grain cheaply at the same time that they arrested participants in the riots.... Beyond merely upholding popular expectations, eighteenth-century officials must have raised these expectations to new levels through the expansion of a large-scale granary system designed to relieve scarcities.... Conflicts took place because demands for grain were not met. Behind these demands were expectations based on customary practice and often supported by official policies.<sup>619</sup>

Greenough points out that by arguing thus Wong 'sets out a view parallel to that expressed by E. P. Thompson.'<sup>620</sup> What we have tried to argue here is that the prospect of aid from the State and the gentry in times of crisis had always been very limited in Bengal. The peasants received aids from the State and zamindars but these were not regular and these they did not consider as their rights. Rebellion was therefore largely absent because the people did not consider the lack of aid as a violation of their rights, instead they sought to migrate to places that had been less affected by a crisis. However in case of China since the state was traditionally responsible for feeding the population any breach of that commitment led to food-riots.

While the hoarding of grain by merchants in Bengal led to many starvation deaths in China the state managed to successfully intervene in such situations as it had a sufficient reserve of grain stored in its granaries. In 1743 Jiangxi food riots granaries lent or sold at reduced prices 550,000 *shi* of grain throughout the province. Wong points out that without the distribution of granary reserves, it was likely that the number of riots that took place in the

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<sup>619</sup>Wong cited in Paul R. Greenough, 'Comments from a South Asian Perspective: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 1982), p. 794.

<sup>620</sup> Paul R. Greenough, *Ibid.*

spring of 1743 would have been far greater than the 160 that actually occurred.<sup>621</sup> In the following year, 200,000 *shi* were lent or sold at reduced prices; in 1745 only 9,700 *shi* were sold at reduced prices because good harvests reduced the need for state intervention to stabilize seasonal fluctuations in prices. In 1746, 37,000 *shi* were sold at reduced prices and an additional 26,000 *shi* lent.<sup>622</sup> Wong points out that ‘the flexible use of ever-normal granary stocks demonstrates the state’s ability to respond to harvest scarcities and affect food-supply availability.’<sup>623</sup> So long as these granaries continued to function effectively the state managed to effectively intervene in times of food shortages. Despite the hoarding of grain by the rich the state managed to provide grain to the destitute from its own reserves. *This was the crucial difference between the famine situations in China and Bengal.* The Chinese-State had adequate grain-reserves for times of scarcity by virtue of collection of the grain-tribute, private contribution and public purchase.

However the eighteenth century was the high point so far as the functioning of these granaries were concerned. Wong observes that by the early 1830s the granary reserves in Hunan seemed to have depleted so that ‘no mention of these reserves, either as a source of grain or as a target for riots, appears in accounts of the food riots in this area.’<sup>624</sup> Will points out that the closer we come to 1850, ‘the more the decadence of the ever-normal granaries becomes a recognized and in the end practically irreversible fact.’<sup>625</sup> Lillian Li points out, ‘as famines increased in scale and frequency and the need for large-scale coordinated campaigns mounted, the capacity of the central government declined dramatically.’<sup>626</sup> China also began its population explosion in the eighteenth century, when its population doubled from 150 to 300 million people.<sup>627</sup> This too might have put increasing pressure on the state’s ability to successfully intervene in food crisis.

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<sup>621</sup> Wong, ‘Food Riots’, p. 773

<sup>622</sup> Ibid.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., p. 777.

<sup>625</sup> Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, p. 276.

<sup>626</sup> Lillian M. Li, ‘Introduction: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State’, p. 700.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid., p. 687. It has also been suggested that in China the state’s capacity to successfully intervene in times of food crises and prevent large scale mortality led to the increase in China’s population in the eighteenth century.

## Conclusion

This work has attempted to accomplish two objectives: it has tried to highlight the ecological dimension to the history of eighteenth century Bengal and also look at the nature of our interaction with the environment in the past. The discussions in the first and the third chapters have shown that commerce and agriculture in Bengal was crucially dependant on the fluvial ecology of the province. The Ganga-Brahmaputra river system was the life-line of the region which together with its networks of tributaries and distributaries sustained agriculture and commerce within the region. The silt that the rivers deposited made the region fertile, and hence the author of *Riyaz* considers Bengal *jannat-ul-bilad* or paradise among provinces. Rice was the dominant article in agricultural production in Bengal as the plant was suited to the ecology of the region. Grandpre thus mentions Bengal to be 'the granary of rice to all India.'<sup>628</sup>

The rivers of Bengal not only led to surplus agricultural production but also aided in the movement of the surplus so produced from one part of the province to another. A myriad variety of boats sailed in the rivers of Bengal. This mode of travelling by the river was not only quick and efficient but it was also ecologically sustainable. The railways did revolutionize the mode of transport in Bengal in terms of speed, security in travelling, etc. but it also seriously upset the water regime in the Province. Decline in agricultural productivity, floods were the result of the construction of miles and miles of embankments upon which the railways lines were made. Due to existence of an efficient system of transport the eighteenth century is characterised by a great movement of people, goods and information. The network of riverine transport sustained commercial transactions and was therefore vital to the functioning of the economy of the region.

The availability of ready food grains and textiles in Bengal soon became magnets that drew the traders from all over India and a littler later, the

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<sup>628</sup> Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and to Bengal*, vol.2, p. 51.

Portuguese as well as other colonial powers.’<sup>629</sup> Surplus agricultural production, an efficient network of transporting surplus made Bengal a region ideal for trade and commerce. The French, the Dutch and English East India Companies opened their trading houses in Bengal and finally in the second half of the eighteenth century, one of these European powers – the English East India Company – emerged as the rulers of the Province.

The transition of power to the East India Company had far-reaching political, social and economic consequences. The Company-State was far more intrusive than any previous regime. While the Nizamat had left local governance in the hands of the zamindars the Company was intent on concentrating all powers within its own hands and leaving very little authority in the hands of the local power-holders. While in the plain areas of Bengal the Company could do so easily in the hilly and forested areas beyond the plains of Bengal the process of subordination proved to be extremely difficult and protracted. This was because the terrain over which the hill and jungle zamindars ruled was inhospitable. The military operations of the Company in these areas were not smooth. These areas were also economically unremunerative. The Nazims had generally followed a policy of non-intervention with regard to these far-flung areas but the Company for the purpose of creating a strong state chose to interfere in these areas. But the process was extremely long drawn. For instance by the 60s of the nineteenth century the *khasia* hill men had been completely subjugated and the Company had managed to even make the hill men pay taxes. But it had taken the Company upwards of 80 years [since 1774 when Captain Ellerker made the first offensive operations against the Jaintia Raja] to bring the hill men under the firm control of a centralizing state.

In deltaic Bengal again the Company’s authority was initially thwarted by the activities of the Magh pirates. The Company, having a good naval strength managed to meet the Magh threat and the annexation of Burma put an end to Magh piracy. But piracy continued to plague southern Bengal. These pirates were often inhabitants of Bengal themselves. As late as 1917,

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<sup>629</sup> Jawhar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal? The Role of Popular Cults*, Calcutta, 2005, p. 31.



the frequent river-dacoities committed by the Nulchar-Tulatolly gang were noted in a report by the Deputy Superintendent of Police. The Report noted that the activities of this gang of dacoits were along the Meghna and its tributaries in the districts of Dacca, Mymensingh and Tipperah. Nalchar was in fact *char* land of the river Meghna surrounded on all sides by the river and its tributaries. These *chars* were sandy and uncultivable. But about the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century settlers came to this *char* who maintained themselves principally by river-piracy. These settlers inter-married with the inhabitants of Tulataly, a place nearby and committed river dacoities jointly whereby the gang acquired its name.<sup>630</sup> It was impossible to police these distant isolated chars from where the dacoits emerged hence such incidents of river dacoity continued to occur.

But inspite of the limitations imposed on centralization by the ecology of Bengal the Company's presence in the province was far stronger than any of its predecessors. The Company had managed to usurp most of the local authority of the zamindars of the plains. Embanking, an important task in riverine Bengal, which was so long performed under the sole authority of the zamindars now came to be supervised by the State. The Company also disbanded the zamindar's militia and their power to levy duties on goods passing through their territories. The increasing revenue burdens as well as restrictions on levying customary imposts and duties on trade and commerce reduced the income and consequently the power of the zamindars. Law and order became a function of the state. By these means the Company completely subverted the authority of zamindars over the Bengal countryside. But the subversion of the zamindar's authority involved the Company in a new set of problems. The zamindar's authority to maintain law and order being dismantled, the Bengal countryside was plagued by incidents of dacoities and the incursions of the *sanyasi-fakirs*. Further the supplanting of the traditional zamindar by the new revenue farmers was particularly resented by the Bengal peasantry. The old class of zamindars had patrimonial ties with the peasantry but the new revenue farmers did not. The resentment of the peasants for the new order found expression in the Rangpur *dhing*. The *Jager Gan* clearly

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<sup>630</sup> IOR/V/27/161/12, Report on the Nalchar- Tulatolly Gang of Dacca and Tippera with a view to bring it under the Operations of the Criminal Tribes Act (III of 1911).

illustrates that the peasants had their sympathies for the old class of landholders.

The recurrent occurrences of famine and dearth were a major destabilizing factor in the Bengal countryside. In the absence of adequate famine relief structures in the form of state-sponsored storage of grain and its distribution in times of scarcity, the poor peasants as well as a large part of the non-agricultural population of Bengal (boatmen, salt-workers, artisans) ultimately depended on the market for the supply of their food even in times of scarcity. The hoarding and artificial raising of prices therefore deprived the peasants and artisans of their subsistence in times of crisis leading to large scale mortality. The Company did not make any innovation in famine relief infrastructure until the introduction of the railways. Neither could it prevent the merchants from hoarding and deal directly with the peasants. The peasants undertook cultivation on a system of advances from the merchants as a result of which the peasants could not market their produce for the grain merchants ensured 'the advance hypothecation of the product prior to the completion of the production cycle.'<sup>631</sup>

This concluding discussion and the discussions in the preceding chapters have shown that the ecological dimension to the history of eighteenth century Bengal should not be under-estimated. We have tried our best here to highlight the role of ecology in shaping the historical developments within the Province and we have also tried to show the interaction between the state and the environment through institutional and infrastructural developments. It was through its institutions and infrastructure that the state interacted with the environment in attempting to control and manage it. A change in authority meant a transfer of institutional and infrastructural control to the new regime which in its turn introduced modifications to the existing system. All this meant that the existing relationships between the state and the environment were re-configured. From this respect the eighteenth century transition becomes additionally significant and the implications of the change have been outlined in the preceding chapters. Our study on the ecology, infrastructure

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<sup>631</sup> Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 25.

and institutions of eighteenth century Bengal is however by no means exhaustive. There is scope for further research on the region's ecological history which may help us better understand the historical processes unfolding in the region in course of the eighteenth century.

## APPENDIX - 1

### The Sanyasi and Fakir Incursions

The historiography of the *sanyasi* and the fakir incursions presents a polarised picture. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882) that served as an inspiration to freedom fighters contained an account of the *sanyasis* in the wake of the famine of 1769-70 where they were portrayed as patriots. On the other hand Rai Sahib Jamini Mohan Ghosh<sup>632</sup> considered the Sanyasis and Fakirs as lawless elements responsible for disturbing the peace of the province of Bengal. Atis K. Dasgupta<sup>633</sup> on the other hand considered the sanyasis as leaders of a peasant resistance against colonial exploitation. Secularist historians have seen the movement as a glorious example of Hindu-Muslim unity against the colonial rulers. More recently Ananda Bhattacharya has criticized the views of Atis Dasgupta in regarding the *sanyasi* uprising as a peasant war and he also challenges the characterization of the occasional joint fights of the *sanyasi* and the Fakirs against the British as an example of united Hindu-Muslim opposition to colonial rule. Bhattacharya argues that 'the conflict between the sanyasis and the Company was inevitable because the character of the State had undergone a radical change in the latter half of the eighteenth century and existence of social groups like sanyasis with their erstwhile roles was a major stumbling block for establishing the kind of 'order' envisaged by the Company.'<sup>634</sup> This difference of perception with regard to the *sanyasi* and Fakir incursions is not just among modern historians but even the contemporary perception of the incursions were diametrically opposite. For instance *Majnur Kabita* composed by Panchanan Das in B.S. 1220 or 1813 portrays Fakir Majnu Shah in a very unfavourable light. The author compares Majnu Shah with *yama* or the God of death.<sup>635</sup> But another Bengali verse titled *Majnu Shaher Hakikat* composed by Jamiruddin Dafadar, a local poet Birbhum in 1873 relates that the Fakir Majnu was perturbed by the famine-stricken people of Bengal and in rage and anguish over the injustice

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<sup>632</sup> Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1930.

<sup>633</sup> Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, Calcutta, 1992.

<sup>634</sup> Ananda Bhattacharya, 'The Peripatetic Sanyasis: A Challenge to Peasant Stability and Colonial Rule?' *Indian Historical Review*, 41(1), New Delhi, 2014, p.49.

<sup>635</sup> Panchanan Das's, *Majnur Kabita* reproduced in the Appendix of Jamini Mohan Ghosh's, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*.

done to the people by the Company's agents and *paiks* he gave the call for a revolt against the English.<sup>636</sup> When contemporary perceptions differ so widely, it becomes difficult for the historian to characterise these incursions. However, we think Bhattacharya's assessment of the *sanyasi* uprising is more nearer to truth. The Nizamat-State was characterized by a greater fluidity than the Company-State. The Company was intent at creating a strong state with centralized control and for doing this they were trying to wrest control from intermediaries like the zamindars. Armed bodies of groups of sanyasis travelling across the country jeopardized the absolute power and authority that the Company-State.

The Sanyasis belonged to the Dasnami orders that were organized by Shankaracharya and his disciples. The order was called Dasnamis, literally Ten Names, from the ten words that formed the suffixes to the names taken by the monks of these orders after their initiation. These words were -Giri (hill), Puri (city), Bharati (learning), Ban (wood), Aranya (forest), Parbat (mountain), Sagar (ocean), Tirtha (temple), Ashram (hermitage) and Saraswati (perfect knowledge).<sup>637</sup>

But the Sanyasis were not recluses who had withdrawn themselves from worldly affairs. They rendered military services to many regional powers.<sup>638</sup> At the battles of Panchpahari and Buxar the Sannyasis fought against the English East India Company forces.<sup>639</sup> Though the Company obtained victory at Buxar they were made familiar with the military prowess of these wandering mendicants. It is not surprising therefore that when the Company came into power in Bengal they sought to regulate the activities of these armed bodies of Sanyasis.

The Sanyasis had extensive trading concerns that came into conflict with Company policies. In Bengal the Sanyasis held rent-free land

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<sup>636</sup> Portions of the *Hakikat* translated and cited by Atis K. Dasgupta in *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, pp. 61-63; pp. 90-91.

<sup>637</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of Dasnami Naga Sanyasis*, Allahabad, [No date of publication], p. 54

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>639</sup> Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, pp. 20-21.

tenures in Mymensing, Dinajpur, Malda and Rangpur.<sup>640</sup> But the Company-State for the sake of maximization of revenue had started looking into the possibilities of resumption of these rent-free tenures. This brought a collision of interests between the Sanyasis and the Company-State.<sup>641</sup> Further the resident sanyasis practiced usury. Mr. John Eliot in a report to the Board in September 1789 gave a very unfavourable account of the money-lending practices of the Sanyasis thus:

Three years' residence in these districts has given me opportunities of hearing many things of the conduct of these Sanyasies, which I take the liberty of stating to your Board. They call themselves fakers, merchants and ryotts, but their real profession is that of usury, and having the command of cash, they let it out at interest, some in the most artful manner to escape the law. They give a sum, suppose Rs.40, which is put into the borrower's hands in the presence of witnesses, and a note taken at the rate of 12 per cent per annum payable in a month but prior to this, the party wanting the money agrees to give a ducour for lending the money: this is generally one quarter of the sum, viz., Rs.10. He also keeps in pay a peon or burkundaz at the rate of Rs 8 or 6 per month, to see that he does not run away; so that in the end the man only gets one-half of the sums he borrows. Others let out their money from one to six and half per cent per mensem, but this is a trifle, considering the consequences. The man shortly after may go and pay the money borrowed, when behold, he has a further charge for the drawing of the note, ducour to the mohurir, short weight, batta, shroffing, and takoor baree charge: a new note is drawn out for all these additional charges, so that it becomes a debt of eternity from father to son. At the stated times the interest is demanded. If he has no cash, his child is confined

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<sup>640</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

to oblige him to pay the money, and sometimes sold... The petty Sanyasis who cannot oppose a zamindar or a *gomastah*, assemble apart, and take an opportunity to carry him or both on the water, and there confine them till payment is made in part, and security given for the rest; and also until the expense of the people who were assisting in their confinement is defrayed. Some zamindars on these occasions give up a part of their zamindari to these usurers....Complaints of the daring acts and cruelties of these Sanyasis must have frequently reached the Collectors of these districts, if these people had not contrived by arts, threatenings, and severities to suppress them. The complainants themselves told me, in excuse for not applying for justice and relief, that the Collector's distance was too great for them to bear the expense....<sup>642</sup>

The money-lending activities of the Sanyasis created great confusion in the Bengal countryside. In 1776, the *ijaradar* of pargana Mymensingh and Jaffershy complained that the *sanyasis* had come into the *cutcherry* of pargana Pockreah and had beaten one Ramprasad *vakil*. They also wounded with a sword two seapoys who were sent to quell the disturbance.<sup>643</sup> The Company authorities pointed out that disputes of this nature with *sanyasis* arose because of 'the demands of exorbitant interest that are made by these people the payments of which they exact themselves.'<sup>644</sup> The Company therefore issued a decree affixed to the *cutcherry* Mymensingh forbidding the *sanyasis* of those parts 'from taking more than two p cent p mensem and that any sums but upon a higher rate of interest shall be forfeited to the Government.'<sup>645</sup>

Besides the resident *sanyasis* roving bands of *sanyasis* travelled over the Bengal countryside levying contributions over the inhabitants of the village through which they passed. In April 1770 John Grose mentions the

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<sup>642</sup> Extract from Mr. John Eliot's report to the Board respecting Sanyasis, in E. G. Glazier, *A Report on the District of Rungpore*, Calcutta, 1873, p. 89.

<sup>643</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue, Dacca, 7<sup>th</sup> October to 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1776 (Sectt. Series) vol. 13, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1776.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*

'return of two bodies of Sonassie Facqueers' to Dinajpur. The first of these bodies numbered around 100.<sup>646</sup> On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1770, the Supervisor of Dinajpur H. Cottrell, wrote to Richard Becher, that a body of *fakirs* of about 2000 in number had entered the Dinajpur Province by way of Purnea and that 'besides personal arms they have four camels loaded with rockets.'<sup>647</sup> The Supervisor also reported that these Fakirs levied contributions as they passed.<sup>648</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> February 1771, the Supervisor of Dacca Thomas Kelsall pointed out in a letter to Samuel Middleton and the Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, that

The northern parts of this Province and the adjacent parts of Radshy are inhabited by great numbers of Sinasses: It is well known that these people make their peregrinations annually during the fair season, they travel it is said upon religious purposes yet they go in large bodies and mostly armed. Last year they levied pretty considerable sums from different districts and as they were not opposed we are not surprised that they should make their appearance again- I have intelligence that they have assembled to the number of fifteen hundred and have raised contributions in Jaffieroye to the amount of three thousand rupees & further that they have sent to demand a sum of five thousand from the zamindar of Alep Sing.'<sup>649</sup>

Apart from the *sanyasis* roving bands of Muslim *fakirs* too went about levying contributions over the Bengal countryside. On 10<sup>th</sup> February 1771 Capt. Rennell wrote the following letter from Beleuchy, in the pargana of Bhur Bauzzoo, to Samuel Middleton,

I think it my duty to inform you that there is now in this part of the country a large body of Fakeers who are laying all the principal towns under contribution. They were yesterday at

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<sup>646</sup> Firminger ed. *Letter Copy Books of the Resident*, p. 1.

<sup>647</sup> CCRM, vol.2, p.74.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

<sup>649</sup> CCRM, vol.3, p. 155.



Lutchinumpore 4 coss from this place and after receiving 200 Rs. from the Gunge darogah marched northwards into the Puckaryah districts. By the accounts I have from an intelligent person whom I sent to watch their motions, they are about a thousand in number and tolerably well-armed. They came from the western Provinces about a month ago and traversed the Dinagepore and Goragaut districts in their way. As there is no force in this part of the country I imagine they will continue in it, until they have plundered all the principal places. I have met several of their detached parties, which are indeed scattered over the whole Province of Radshy and Goragaut. I have enclosed a route to this place and a sketch of the country in case you may think proper to send any force after these miscreants. The country hereabouts is so entirely intersected by Rivers and Nullas that there is scarce any possibility of travelling with guns.<sup>650</sup>

As a consequence of this letter two companies of seapoys were dispatched to join Captain Rennell and expel the banditti. Boughton Rous the Supervisor of Rajshahi was also instructed to assist Captain Rennell, if necessary, in repelling the armed *fakirs*.<sup>651</sup> The Supervisor of Rungpore John Grose was also ordered to collect a party of at least two Companies of Seapoys and detach them under the command of an officer to Goragaut 'with a view to intercept those marauders.'<sup>652</sup>

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 1771, Capt. Rennell wrote from Seebgunge to Samuel Middleton that the party of *fakirs* after a short skirmish have been defeated and dispersed and some of them taken prisoners. Their chief Shaikh Majnu fled on horseback to Mustangarh (a *dargah*).<sup>653</sup> This *dargah* at Mustangarh was strategically significant. Rennell thus drew the attention of the Company authorities to the strategic location of the Mustangarh *dargah*. Rennell wrote:

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<sup>650</sup> CCRM, vol.3, p. 164.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> CCRM, vol. 4, p.58.

Having examined the hill & dirgah of Mustan Ghurr, I think it my duty to inform you that its natural strength together with a small portion of labour in the side of the Fakeers, will make it at any time, tenable against a strong Detachment, the hill being in many places extremely steep and skirted with thick woods. The Dirgah there affords a pretence to the faqueers to assemble and at the Fair which is held in December they are furnished with arms of all kinds and commonly sally forth from thence 2000 strong. This in particular has been the case this year.<sup>654</sup>

In consequence of Capt. Rennell's report it was decided to post continually a party of Seapoys in Mustangarh in order to prevent the 'banditti' 'from making it there rendezvous in future.'<sup>655</sup> On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1771 John Grose the supervisor of Rungpore pointed out that Lieut. Feltham had 'attacked and defeated Shaikh Majnu, with about 1000 followers on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> at a place called Cojee parrack about 6 coss from Govin Gunge where they were encamped between two Jills...<sup>656</sup>. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1772, the Supervisor of Rajshahi C.W.B. Rous however pointed out that a body of *fakirs* under the leadership of Majnu 'who had been defeated last year [probably referring to Lieut. Feltham's campaign] are now assembling between this Province and Dinagepore, that their number is already 2,000 and that more are expected to join them.'<sup>657</sup> While in Rajshahi Majnu wrote a letter to the Rani Bowanny where he set forth his grievances. The *fakir* complained thus:

We have for a long time begged and been entertained in Bengal and we have long continued to worship [in] the several shrines and altars without ever once abusing or oppressing anyone. Nevertheless last year 150 Fakeers were without any cause put to death. They had begged in countries

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>657</sup> IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to Murshidabad the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1772.

and the Cloaths and victuals which they had with them were lost. The merit which is derived and reputation which is procured from the murder of helpless indigents, need not be declared. Formerly the Fakeers begged in separate and detached parties and now we are all collected and beg together. Displeased at this method they obstruct us in visiting the shrines and other sacred places...You are the Ruler of the country We are Fakeers who pray always for your welfare. We are full of hopes.<sup>658</sup>

It is significant here that Majnu's petition is addressed not to the Company but to Rani Bowanny the zamindar addressing her as the 'ruler of the country' for whose welfare are the *fakirs* prayers. The Company appears in the petition as an unreasonable intruder against whom the *Fakirs* were seeking redress from the legitimate 'ruler of the country.' On 26<sup>th</sup> March 1776 we again hear of Shaikh Majnu and his party of *fakirs* from Francis Gladwin as levying contributions and entering the zamindari of Ranny Bowanny where 'they plunder all who come in their way.'<sup>659</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> June 1776 Gladwin reported that 'Shah Mujenoo, with a large body of armed Fuckeers, arrived this morning at Mustangarh, and I am informed that he expects daily reinforcements.'<sup>660</sup> It was expected that Majnu would subject the country to contribution and in so doing make the Ryotts desert the pargana. Gladwin therefore asked for force sufficient to expel the *fakirs*.<sup>661</sup> On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1786 J. Elliot the Acting Collector wrote from Silberis, to George Hatch the Collector of Dinajpur that, Majnu Shah, the traveling *fakir* was in the neighbourhood of that place and he thought it proper to inform Hatch so that measures could be taken for securing the man who had caused much trouble in the Company's territories.<sup>662</sup> On 6<sup>th</sup> November 1786, J. Eliott, the Acting

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<sup>658</sup> Translation of a letter from Shah Mudjenoo, IOR/G/27/6, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 6, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1772 to the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1772, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1772.

<sup>659</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 16<sup>th</sup> January to 25<sup>th</sup> June 1776, vol. 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1776.

<sup>660</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur 16<sup>th</sup> January to 25<sup>th</sup> June 1776, vol. 5, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1776.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

<sup>662</sup> W.K. Firminger ed. *Dinajpur District Records* (henceforth DDR), vol.1: 1787-1789, Shillong, 1914, p.17.

Collector, informed George Hatch that Lieut. Brenan will march against Majnu.<sup>663</sup> The Company was therefore involved in a protracted struggle with Shah Majnu. According to Panchanan Das's poem the *fakir* moved about the Bengal countryside with the paraphernalia of an independent ruler. Majnu and his followers went about armed with horses, elephants and their standard.<sup>664</sup>

Apart from Majnu Shah another Fakir named Shah Musa gave the Company great trouble. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1787, we hear of the representations of the *Naib* of Messudah regarding the depredations committed by the *fakir* Shah Musa and his followers in that quarter.<sup>665</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> September 1787, M. Dawson, Collector wrote from Murshidabad to George Hatch, Collector of Dinajpur, the following: 'I am much obliged to you for the assistance afforded by the force sent against Shaw Musa. I have now sent a force consisting of one Jemadar, and 30 Seapoys, with a number of Burgundosses against him. If you will cause a force to move from Dinajpur, I hope we shall completely finish this trade of plundering under the pretence of charity by making an example of Shaw Musa and his followers.'<sup>666</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1787, E.Hay, Secretary to the Government directed George Hatch, 'to employ spies at a monthly sum not exceeding 60 Rs. In the most private and disguised manner to follow him [*fakir* Majnu Shah], ascertain his haunts, his ryotts, and the mode in which he levies then, with a view to ascertain the possibility of apprehending him and his principal attendants...'<sup>667</sup> On 12<sup>th</sup> February 1788 it was reported that Musa Shah with a body of armed men had entered the districts of Bodah and Bykuntpor.

To add to the troubles of the Company the dacoits and the sanyasis often joined hands. On 8<sup>th</sup> April 1771, John Grose the supervisor of Rungpur pointed out that some of the *sanyasis-fakirs* were in league with noted dacoits

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>664</sup> Panchanan Das's, *Majnur Kabita* reproduced in the Appendix of Jamini Mohan Ghosh's, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

and encouraged them to continue their evil practices.<sup>668</sup> The noted dacoit Bhwani Pathak was in league with Majnu.<sup>669</sup>

A question that arises in this context is what role the zamindars played to counteract the *sanyasi* incursions? The old zamindars of Bengal used to give to the sanyasis rent free grants of land 'with a view to retaining their armed assistance in the event of aggression from other rival zamindars.'<sup>670</sup> The *fakirs* similarly received such charitable grants of rent free lands. Hence the *sanyasis* and *fakirs* were well disposed towards the older gentry. In case of disputes between old and new zamindars the *sanyasis* supported the old zamindars. Dasgupta cites an instance of such collaboration with the old gentry. After the dismemberment of the old Rajshahi zamindari of the Natore family, *pargana* Pukhuria was purchased by the Zamindar of Putia. But the Natore Raj claimed some villages known as Baje Taluk which belonged to Tara Devi the daughter of Maharani Bowanny. The *sanyasis* of Madhupur helped the Natore Raj in maintaining possession of the *taluk* against the claims of the zamindar of Putia.<sup>671</sup>

But sometimes the zamindars were victims of the *sanyasi* incursions. Sometimes they borrowed money from the sanyasis who lent it at a high rate of interest and if the zamindars could not repay the loan the sanyasis attacked them and they had to seek redress from the Company. In 1779 the zamindars of the 12 Anna and 4 Annas division of Aleph Singh complained that they owed money to the Sanyasis and being unable to repay they have had to flee with their families.<sup>672</sup> But the indebtedness of the Bengal zamindar was partially because of the high revenue demands placed upon them by the Company. Therefore in many cases the zamindars remained silent spectators to the confrontation between the Company and the *sanyasis*. The zamindars were no longer responsible for law and order as they had been previously and the Company had taken away many of their privileges. On 30<sup>th</sup> September

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<sup>668</sup> CCRM, vol. 5, p. 71.

<sup>669</sup> Glazier Rungpore, pp-41-43, in Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, p. 73.

<sup>670</sup> Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, p. 46.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid.

<sup>672</sup> WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1779 to 30<sup>th</sup> July 1779, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1779.

1788, G hatch wrote to John Fendall, acting collector of Murshidabad that the zamindars of pergunnahs Jangueepore, and Museeda were called upon to assist in counteracting the depredations committed by the Fakeers in the district. Hatch however pointed out that regarding the zamindar that often times ‘the irregularity of the call for their aid furnishes them with a plea to decline giving it.’<sup>673</sup> Hatch moreover pointed out, ‘...I much fear that these marauders meet with an asylum from the zamindars, otherwise it is difficult to account for the frequency and regularity of their incursions.’<sup>674</sup>

Thus the incidents of dacoity and *sanyasi* and *fakir* incursions became serious obstacles to the maintaining of peace and order within the country. The Company successfully managed to wrest infrastructural control from the local zamindars in order to create a stronger state in terms of control over resources and their mobilization. However the displacement of the zamindars authority in the countryside involved the Company in a new set of law and order problems. The presence of a nebulous outer frontier consisting of hills and jungles in the north, east and west and a network of river channels towards the south made it easier for the culprits to retreat into places where the Company’s troops would not be able to follow them. The following is an account of Captain Thomas’ encounter with the sanyasis:

Captain Thomas....pursued them (the Sannyasis) in a jungle where the sepoy expended all their ammunitions without doing the least execution; when they perceived the ammunition spent, the Sinassies (Sanyasis) rushed in upon them in very large bodies from every quarter and surrounded them.....<sup>675</sup>

Again in December 1786 Lieut. Brenan with 59 sepoy marched from Bogra in pursuit of Majnu Shah to Calleswar where he found the fakir with another five hundred armed men. The Lieutenant attacked and dispersed them but the country was so much under water and the river so deep that it was impossible

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<sup>673</sup> DDR, vol.1, p. 147.

<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

<sup>675</sup> Atis Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprisings*, p. 4.

to pursue the rebels any further.<sup>676</sup> The *sanyasis* and Fakirs also went out of the reach of the Company's forces through the jungles of Nepal Terai and beyond the foothills of Bhutan.<sup>677</sup> The Madhupur jungle in Mymensing was another shelter for the rebels.<sup>678</sup> In January 1783, Majnu and his followers pushed on through the impenetrable jungles of Madhupur when pressed on from all sides.<sup>679</sup> The *sanyasis* were a mobile group of people who had excellent knowledge of the geography of the Province and mastery over the lesser known routes through forests and mountains. On the appearance of a force whose strength was more than theirs

they (the *Sinasees*) either retire rapidly to their fastness in the hills or separate to elude observation and again assemble and ravage a more defenceless quarter of the country.<sup>680</sup>

The presence of the imperfectly subdued outer frontier also encouraged incidents of dacoity. For instance in a letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> April 1771, the Supervisor of Rungpore, John Grose pointed out that the province of Rungpore being joined to the territory of Kuch Bihar and the other independent Rajahs who were the noted protectors of dacoits was more prone to incidents of dacoity. Three dacoits who were brought in from Boda 'acknowledged to have been entertained by Rajah Durrup Do to whom they paid *malguzarry* as do some to Rajendahnarain, Rajah of Behar and they give an account of near 300 men who infest these Districts and are protected by the above Rajahs.'<sup>681</sup>

The act of making the zamindar responsible for robberies within his locality forced the zamindar to maintain order within his jurisdiction. What the Company-State did was to uproot the authority of the zamindar over the Bengal countryside and the discontented zamindars connived with the lawless

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<sup>676</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Judicial Department (Criminal), Original Consultations, No. 14, dated 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1794 cited in Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>681</sup> IOR/G/27/3, Factory Records Murshidabad vol. 3, Murshidabad 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1771 to 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1771, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1771.

elements. As a result the Bengal countryside remained in a very distracted state throughout the eighteenth century.



## APPENDIX - 2

### Dacoity in Bengal

From 1769-1770 begin the numerous reports of dacoities and *sanyasi* and *fakir* depredations from all over the Bengal countryside. Some of the dacoities were occasioned by the acute distress of the famine.<sup>682</sup> Yet the other frequent cases of dacoity were a result of the breakdown of law and order. The double government in the Province failed to establish law and order. Criminal administration was in the hands of the Nawab who did not have enough forces to enforce his authority while the Supervisors had neither adequate authority nor adequate police forces to check the disorder. The zamindars who were responsible for local justice no longer had the means to check disorder. The famine of 1769-70 had impoverished the larger zamindars. Hence reports of dacoity came from every part of the Bengal countryside. In many cases the Supervisors found that the zamindars or the zamindari servants connived with the dacoits. Supervisor Robert Wilmot reported that the zamindars furnished the thieves with exact intelligence of his movements and activities.<sup>683</sup>

The following table will give an account of the incidence of dacoity in the Bengal Province during the years 1770-1771. It has been compiled from letters of the several Supervisors in the different districts of Bengal complaining of the frequent occurrences of theft and robbery within the Province. We see from the table that such complaints were reported from every part of Bengal and that the Supervisors were put to considerable difficulty in suppressing these.

Table: 13 A Catalogue of Letters from Supervisors of the different districts of Bengal regarding the Occurrence of Dacoity between the Years 1770-1771

Letter dated	Letter of	Remarks of the Supervisor with regard to the Decoity
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<sup>682</sup> CCRM , vol.6, p. 57 ; CCRM, vol.5, p. 63.

<sup>683</sup> W.K. Firminger ed. *Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Durbar*, p. 169.

<b>31<sup>st</sup> October 1770</b>	Supervisor John Grose from Rungpore	‘As the zamindars, Boustneas, & Munduls of villages, whose duty it is from their station to apprehend the Dekoits, and to protect their Ryotts from Oppression, have been the chief Encouragers of them from a lucrative motive, I think an Example among them equally necessary...’ [CCRM, vol.1, pp. 194-95.]
<b>February 18<sup>th</sup> 1771</b>	Supervisor Ducarel from Purnea	‘There have bee[n] lately apprehended by a Party sent for that Purpose [.....] Sirdar and 6 more of a principal Gang of Thieves who Lived in a large Jungle about 14 Coss from hence and greatly infested all the country thereabouts. I now transmit to you their Confession...which they m[ade] publickly and is to this Purpose. <u>That their Proffes[sion] was Robbery.</u> ’ [CCRM, vol.4, pp. 19-20, emphasis in text itself]
<b>1771</b>	Supervisor of Nuddea	‘I have ever made it my care to detect, and to bring to justice those disturbers of peace, who nevertheless increase both in numbers and Hardiness, baffling all pursuit. Their depredations are not confined to land only: they sail in large Companies and go ashore as opportunity of plundering and destroying offers. 9 out of gang about six and twenty were three days ago brought in prisoners; They had fixed their route from Radshie- First: they were to invade this province, then proceed to the city from whence they were finally to depart for Calcutta-there to renew their iniquitous trade- This done they intended to return home render an account of their ill-gotten spoil to Nundullol Roy, the Raja of Radshie’s Duan (in whose employ they appear to be) and to make a division accordingly.’ [CCRM, vol. 5, p. 62]
<b>September 1770</b>	Supervisor Alexander Higginson from Beerbhoom	‘It is with concern I acquaint you of the continual complaints and proofs I daily receive of the depredations made in different parts of the country by parties of Dekoits in some places 2 or 300 in a body.’ [W.K. Firminger ed. <i>Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Durbar at Murshidabad 1769-1770</i> , Calcutta, 1919, p. 165].
<b>1770</b>	Supervisor Robert Wilmot,	‘I am sorry to inform you that I now despair effecting the removal of the Bands of Robbers infesting the Pergunnahs for the zamindars both to forgo the Emoluments they have

	from Jessore	ever derived from thence, have leagued against me, & furnish the Sardar Thieves with exact intelligence of all my motions- so that whilst they are counselling me to attempt the seizure of a fellow, through them he receives the most punctual information which not only defeats the capture, but also exposes the Seapoys to his Machinations- This conduct is strongly suspected in the zamindarry people of Issoufpoore when it is confirmed I will send them to you, to inflict condign punishment unless I have orders to the contrary. I believe was you to menace the zamindar, with dismissal from his zamindarry, if he did not deliver up to me the thieves of this district in five days, he would go near to accomplish it even in that short space of time.' [ <i>Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Durbar</i> , p. 169.]
<b>28<sup>th</sup> January 1771</b>	Supervisor William Rooke from Jessore	<p>'several of the pergunnahs dependant on Issoufpoore and the Mahmoudshahy district are so much infested with robbers, who travel in large parties from 3 to 400 in number, that many of the inhabitants of the different villages, where they have resorted have left their houses and fled to other parts of the country for their more immediate security. These banditti have committed great slaughter among the poor wretches in this province, and after plundering their habitations have set fire to them and marched to the next town which they had treated in the same manner, not to mention the authority they assumed in making collections in the pergunnahs they passed through, which they have done to a very considerable amount.'" Rooke points out that in consequence of these outrages he had sent out parties of Sepoys who managed to capture twenty of these decoits. [CCRM,vol. 3, p.110.]</p> <p>On the strength of the decoits infesting the province Rooke adds, 'there is one man [decoit] not far from hence who has a sufficient force with him to encounter a whole Company of Sepoys.' [CCRM,vol. 3, p.110.]</p>
<b>On April 1771</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup></b> Supervisor William Lushington from Hougly	"there is an universal outcry in all parts of this side of Bengal against the dacoits whose attacks are so sudden and made with such numbers that a merchant or <i>sheraf</i> , with their common escorts of Burgundasses and Peons cannot make the least stand against them. The ill-effects that such

formidable bands of robbers, pervading every part of the country must have upon everything that contributes to the preservation of a due intercourse of trade, and to the ease and tranquility of the inhabitants, are so alarming that to discover the retreats of these people has naturally become an object of my attention and enquiry. But I have not yet been able to trace them. However it is generally remarked to me that they come from the Easterly parts of Hisnagur, and from that part of Jessore which lays contiguous with them. I therefore submit to your consideration whether the Gentlemen Supervisors of those districts should not be directed carefully to watch the conduct of those persons whom their enquiries may point out as suspicious characters, and to pursue every other possible method for breaking a gang of robbers that infest the country so much to the molestation of its inhabitants.”(CCRM, vol. 5, p. 27)

**Sources:** W.K. Firminger ed. *Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad*, vols. 1-12, Calcutta, 1919-1924 and *The Letter Copy Books of the Resident of the Durbar at Murshidabad 1769-1770*, Calcutta, 1919.

While the period following the famine of 1769-70 was the period when incidents of dacoity came to be reported from all parts of Bengal it should not be supposed that the occurrence of gang robbery and dacoity was a problem for these few years only. While the confusion arising out of administrative diarchy may be held responsible for the dacoities of the period 1769-1771, yet even after the East India Company had assumed the charge of the *Diwani* and Hastings had made his judicial reforms of 1772 that dacoity continued to occur unabated. In 1777 it was reported that one Narain dacoit whose residence was in Rungpore had with a number of people made incursions into Purnea and plundered several villages in the Tuppah of Luckerpur, murdered a ryott by name Mahomed Shuffic and robbed several others. This event had scared most of the ryotts in that neighbourhood who were leaving their homes

out of fear.<sup>684</sup> Such instances of dacoity continued to occur because the Company while they dismantled the system of maintaining law and order by means of the zamindars police troops could not replace it with an adequate and efficient system of policing. Hence incidents of dacoity continued to occur.

Dacoity remained an endemic problem in the Bengal countryside even till the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>685</sup> Stories of such Dacoits and their daring exploits became a part of the folklore of Bengal countryside.<sup>686</sup> The dacoits in fact had become so bold that they would give prior notice of their raids to their victims.<sup>687</sup> The novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay glorified the raids of Bhavani Pathak and Devi Chaudhurani as rebels against British domination and economic exploitation. Stories from the Bengal countryside also speak of one infamous Raghu Dacoit who in a Robin Hood like fashion looted the rich and gave it as charity to the poor people.<sup>688</sup> But the dacoits were a source of great menace to the common people hence it would perhaps be more appropriate to see them as products of unsettled times rather than as nationalists.

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<sup>684</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinagpore 1<sup>st</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> May 1777, vol. 7, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1777.

<sup>685</sup> Iftikhar-ul-Awwal, 'Extent and Nature of Dacoity in Bengal Countryside 1837-1863', The Dhaka University Studies, Part A, vol. 47, No. 2, December 1990, pp. 51-69.

<sup>686</sup> Maharanee Sunity Devee of Cooch Behar, *Bengal Dacoits and Tigers*, Calcutta, 1916.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-27; pp. 28-31.

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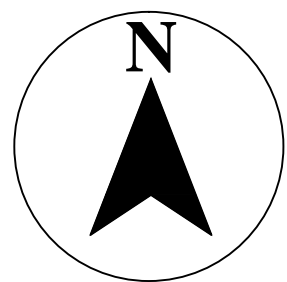
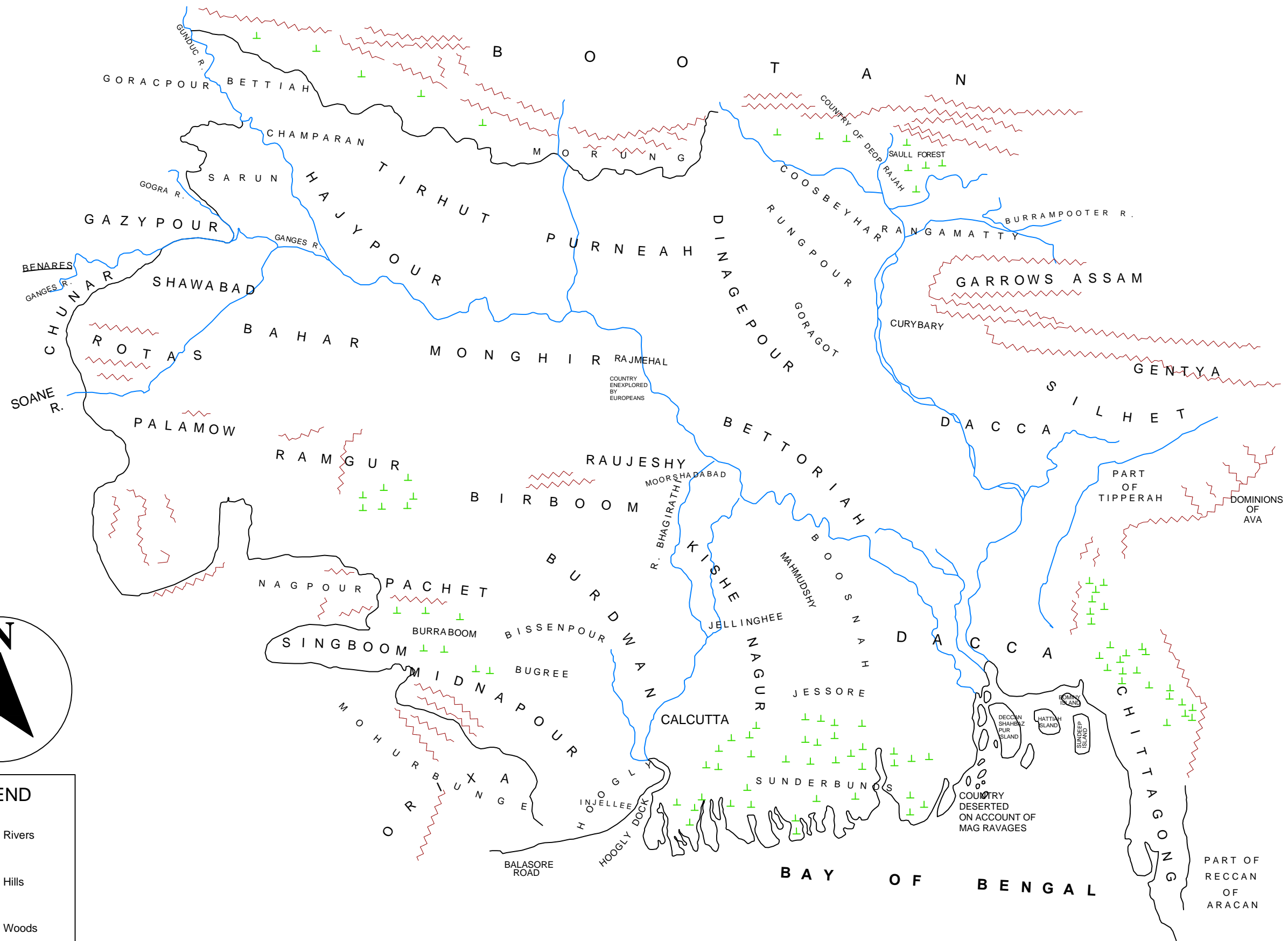
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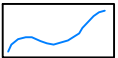
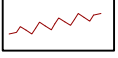

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# MAP OF BENGAL & BIHAR

## ADAPTED FROM RENNELL'S MAP 1776 PUBLISHED BY A. DURY



**LEGEND**

-  Rivers
-  Hills
-  Woods