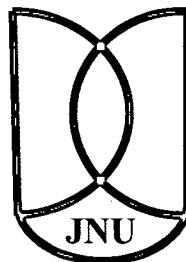


**JUNGLE MAHALS: ASPECTS OF ENVIRONMENT,
SOCIETY AND TRANSITION
c.1760-1793**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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2009



CERTIFICATE

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Abbreviations

BDRM	Bengal District Records Midnapur
CCR	Proceedings of the Controlling Committee of Revenue
CCRM	Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad
PCRB	Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

INTRODUCTION

Bengal, since the pre colonial times occupied an economically dominant position in India. For East India Company which began as a trading body, Bengal offered a lucrative proposition and the period from 1757 to 1765 saw several attempts on their part to gain possession of this area. In 1765 they finally obtained the *Diwani* of Bengal which conferred upon them the supreme revenue collecting rights of this region. The company was also aware of the fact that economic domination without political subjugation was a sham, unless it was for a short period, and therefore despite being from a mercantilist background they endeavored to establish a firm political grip over the area which was so economically valuable for them. However, this first required the consolidation of their territory to have a general idea of the area over which they could exercise their economic domination and also to secure this area from external threat. It was during this attempt at consolidation that Jungle Mahals which formed the south western boundary of Bengal came into picture during the colonial rule.

Jungle Mahals, as the name suggests referred to that portion of south west Bengal which primarily consisted of jungles and was relatively less compared to the rest of Bengal. The distinct topography and environment of the place had rendered its subjugation almost impossible in the pre-British period and the situation was still the same even in the early British period. Its exclusion from an effective central control made its inhabitants rebellious and free spirited and any attempt by dominant central authorities to bring this area under control was met with resistance. Absence of central authority

combined with untamed forest made this region a perfect breeding ground for raiding bands who caused much havoc in the settled parts of Bengal bordering this region.¹ It was a recalcitrant space not only coz its inhabitants committed robberies, but also coz the area provided shelter to the robbers. 28

Thus, be it environment, polity, economy or society, Jungle Mahals occupied a distinct place and marked a break in the otherwise uniform system of government throughout Bengal during the late eighteenth century. The colonial government was aware of the fact that it represented a special case and it is precisely this aspect of Jungle Mahals which provides the basis for research undertaken in the course of writing this dissertation

I

This dissertation seeks to study the situation of the Jungle Mahals during the early years of the British rule and in the process deal with the larger issue of continuity and change. In this context, a brief study of the environmental, political, economic and social conditions of the period before and after the establishment of the British rule has been undertaken. As far as environment is concerned, the attempt has been made to see whether the early period following the establishment of the colonial rule was marked by environmental degradation or not? The establishment of the company rule is often represented as a 'watershed' in the history of India. Whether this representation held true for the Jungle Mahals needs to be examined in pursuit of which attempt has been made first to resolve whether the Jungle Mahals had ceased to be 'stateless' prior to the

¹ Nitin Sinha, Mobility, 'Control and Criminality in Early Colonial India 1760's – 1850's' in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, January-March 2008, vol xlv, no.1, p.28.

establishment of the Company rule or not and second whether the establishment of the British rule brought about a complete disruption of the earlier system? In the economic sphere the Company government was distinguished for its policy of revenue maximization, but could it follow this policy with equal vigor in the Jungle Mahals as was the case in rest of Bengal? The political and economic measures introduced by the British definitely brought about a change in the social conditions of the late eighteenth century Jungle Mahals. Whether this change was typical to the Company government or was it a continuation of the precedent set forth by the former regimes needs to be analyzed. A detailed examination of all the above issues would then help us develop a better understanding of the bigger question of eighteenth century continuity and change in the Jungle Mahals.

II

The issue of continuity and change has been a much debated subject among the scholars of history and the area of Jungle Mahals is not an exception to this. This section primarily focuses on the ways in which different scholars have dealt with some of the important themes related to the topic under study. For clarity in understanding these themes have been divided according to the chapters in this dissertation for clarity in their understanding.

Environment and Ecology: The two major works which has contributed greatly to the understanding of the relation between environment and man are Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha's *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (OUP, Delhi,

1992) and B.B.Chaudhari's *Peasant History of late Pre Colonial and Colonial India* (Pearson Longman, 2008).

Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha's book, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, focuses primarily on the interaction between humans and living resources in different historical period. In this book, they propose to complement the Marxist concept of 'mode of production' with the 'mode of resource use' thereby extending the realm of production to include flora, fauna, water and minerals. Their 'mode of resource use' scheme tries to identify characteristic ideologies that govern different modes and their impact on the availability of natural resources. According to them, the gatherer societies— with their low population densities, low per capita resource demands, cycles of materials closed on limited spatial scales, and a number of practices that promote sustainable resource use— necessarily have a low level of impact upon the environment. Agricultural societies, on the other hand believe in the philosophy of minimizing risk rather than maximizing immediate profit resulting in the restrained use of natural resources having an intermediate impact upon the ecology. The ideological underpinning of the industrial societies, according to them is however based on the total rejection of both the above views. The higher level of economic activity therefore results in the wasteful use of resources. Following a linear history of human progress in resource use—from gathering to industry—intermediated by nomadic pastoralism and settled cultivation, Gadgil and Guha attribute it to this difference in the ideologies of the successive phases that result in the transition from 'prudent' to 'profligate' use of natural resources. They also put forth a concept of 'cultural tradition of prudence' according to which gatherer and agricultural communities followed a collectively recognized set of

restraints in using forest resources to ensure a long term viability of production, thus representing 'conservation from below'. The determinant of the restraints was partly based on religious beliefs, rituals and practices like collective choice of a village site for worship, groves or ponds near temples and protection of certain species as sacred to a variety of deity; and partly the institutional mechanism of caste system and the manner of its organization like ensuring a single caste monopoly over the use of any specific resource from a given locale or 'territorial exclusion' etc.

Based on these paradigms, Gadgil and Guha undertook an ecological study of India and concluded that while the use of resources in pre-colonial times was generally prudent, it tended to be increasingly profligate during colonial rule when it was under the control of an industrially developed Britain.

Refuting Gadgil and Guha, B.B.Chaudhari in his book *Peasant History of late Pre Colonial and Colonial India*, and article entitled 'Adivasi and Aranyaka: Reconsidering Some Characterizations of Their Polity and Economy in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India' (in B.B.Chaudhari and Arun Bandopadhyaya (ed.) *Tribes, Forest And Social Formation*, Delhi, 2004); puts forth a political explanation for resource use arguing that different polities have different needs and accordingly have different impact on the modes of subsistence. However, one must remember that the need of a particular political regime also depends upon its level of technological and industrial development. Thus, Chaudhari does not seem to differ much from Gadgil and Guha as far as the method of resource use is concerned. Yet he differs from them firstly in terms of the level of impact these polities had on resources and secondly in his approach towards resource use where he emphasizes

more on need than ideology. Chaudhari also disagrees with their concept of 'cultural tradition of prudence' and states that "Conservation, protection of living resources did not perhaps influence their use of the resources."² For example: the choice of a village site for worship (grove) had nothing to do with the tribal/peasant attitude to nature and with ecological concerns, and was based simply on the thickness of the tree cluster as a suitable hidden home for god, and meant just an exclusion forever of a specified village space from cultivation and not its prudent use.

As far as the use of resources in different historical periods is concerned, according to Chaudhari, colonial rule wasn't a 'watershed in the ecological history of India', and that, significant signs of alteration in the existing pattern of resources began to appear during the Mughal times. The need for increased revenue led to the reclamation of forests and revenue concession were the chief instruments devised by the Mughal administration. Half of the land included in the *madad-i-maash* (rent free) grants was cultivable waste. Foundation of *zamindari* rights in some cases was forest reclamation. Though the Mughal were keen in preserving the forest where its density obstructed enemy movements, its "security and military needs often led to the destruction of forests"³ by burning, felling of trees etc. A secure control over forests therefore became important for the state. In the pre-British period attempts were made to control the resources by the states as well as other dominant groups leading to a constant tussle between the two forces. The attempts to introduce state control became more frequent

² B.B.Chaudhari, *Peasant History OF Late Pre Colonial And Colonial India*, in D.P.Chattopadhyay (ed.), *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture In Indian Civilization*, Pearson Longman, p.769.

³ *Ibid.*, p.773.

towards the end of the 17th century. As Mughal control collapsed, the ascendancy of successor states caused the growing commoditization of forests for revenue and state needs long before the EIC became a significant power in the land. The process of forest annexation by pre-colonial states frequently involved the forced removal of peasant population and the destruction of pre-existing customary forest utilization arrangements. Thus, the depletion of ecology began in the pre-colonial period and became more pronounced during the colonial period. It was the relatively greater power of the state to enforce its dictum in the colonial period which made a crucial difference.

Chaudhari however, doesn't attribute this depletion to the economic ideology of the colonial government. According to him, the economic teachings did influence the government's attitude to the relatively backward agricultural systems, like shifting cultivation that impeded growth of cultivation and depleted potential agricultural wealth, but it was only partly. The state's dislike for such practices was also partly due to its political philosophy that such practices were detrimental to the stability of a region. Settled cultivation according to the colonial understanding ensured a secure crop and minimized the chances of disorder. However, instead of a sudden change, the government attempted at the gradual replacement of one mode of subsistence by another. Thus, Chaudhari warns against the unnecessary emphasis on the ideological influences of the Colonial state and remarks that "The decisive influence was its needs, which significantly differed from those of the earlier government. Ideology only reinforced its conviction of the worth of the needs."⁴

⁴ Ibid., p.778.

Pre-colonial period: The most important issue concerning this period is that of state formation. Works of S.C.Roy and Surajit Sinha have contributed immensely to the understanding of this subject. Both advocate two distinct views on the nature of evolution of these states and their impact on the society.

S.C.Roy's, *The Mundas and their Country* (Asia Publishing House, 1968) and *The Oraons of Chotanagpur* (Ranchi, 1984) provide an anthropological study of mundas and oraons of Chotanagpur. He argued in favour of an indigenous origin of pre-colonial state, and asserted that it was the need created by the inter-village clashes for a central authority which led to the emergence of kingship. According to him, it was during the co-existence of the Mundas and Oraons that the foster son, Phani Mukut Rai of a Munda patriarch, was elected as the Maharaja of Chotanagpur, who in due course of time established a hereditary 'Nagbanshi' kingdom which came to wield an effective control over this region. The autonomy of the aboriginal village communities of Chotanagpur remained quite undisturbed during the greater part of the medieval India. In the year 1616 A.D., the then raja Durjan Sal was captured by the Mughal forces and was kept in confinement in the Gwalior fort for a period of twelve years. It was then that the Raja came in contact with the world outside Chotanagpur which revolutionized his perception of a court, king, splendor etc. On his return after his release, he assumed the title Maharaja and changed his surname of Rai into 'shah' or 'shahi'. Soon he also gathered around himself a large retinue of Brahmans and Rajput courtiers from outside. The successive Nagbanshi chiefs further promoted the outsiders to overawe the aborigines into submission. According to Roy, the reason why the chosen family preferred to be called 'royal' family was that kingship was then a symbol of central political authority.

The preference was also a device for distancing itself from the *adivasi* society and legitimizing its status as a ruling family. The outsiders brought along with them the concept of rent and other taxes which was soon followed by the growth of landlordism.⁵ He finally concluded that the developments following the establishment of Munda state resulted in the 'disintegration of the ancient land system of Chotanagpur'.

Surajit Sinha, proposed a different approach towards the whole issue of looking at 'state formation' in this region. A brief insight to his understanding on this issue can be found in Bidyanath Saraswati (ed.), *Tribal Thought and Culture: Essays in Honour of Surajit Chandra Sinha* (Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1991). Surajit Sinha adhered to the evolutionary framework of state formation in the tribal regions with the main focus on the Bhumij of Barabhum. According to him, it was the need of the small principalities for larger kingdoms for safety, followed by a similar need of the larger kingdom for small principalities for the preservation of their states in the outlying forest regions, which led to the emergence of kingship. However, this development did not lead to any major break in the earlier system but was gradual and involved the reconstruction of traditional socio-political units of the tribes, modeled on the lines of rajput-kshatriya kingdoms. In the process, these kingdoms transformed as well as conserved the tribal performances. These states acted as a buffer or a mediator between the tribes and also between the tribes and kingdoms. Based on similar lines are the works of K.S.Singh and Hitesranjan Sanyal which form a part of Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities And State Systems In Pre-Colonial Eastern And North Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1987).

⁵S.C. Roy, *The Oraons of Chotanagpur*, Crown Publications, Ranchi, 1984, p.68.

K.S.Singh in his essay 'The Chotanagpur Raj: Mythology, Structure And Ramification' has analysed the myth surrounding the origin of Chotanagpur Raj, and the structure and consequence of state formation. Challenging S.C.Roy's proposition of regional origin of this Raj, Singh suggests of a probability that the state was founded by the Dravidian speaking Nagvansis from the west of Chotanagpur who already had a tradition of formation of kingdom. Similarly, Hitesranjan Sanyal in his essay 'Mallabhum' analyses the different versions of origin of the Mallabhum Raj. Conforming to the evolutionary approach, both Singh and Sanyal believed that these states, while slowly transforming the tribal systems into caste and peasant formations, also conserved the tribal formations to a considerable extent in the relatively isolated regions.

B.B. Chaudhari's work seems to provide a balance between the views held by Roy and Sinha. In his book *Peasant History of late Pre Colonial and Colonial India*, and two articles, 'Adivasi and Aranyaka: Reconsidering Some Characterizations of Their Polity and Economy in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India' and 'Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India, 1757-1920' (in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (ed) *India's Colonial Encounter*. Delhi 2004), which focus primarily on the tribes of Mundas, Oraons and Santals of Chotanagpur, he agrees with Roy's version of 'State Formation', which upholds the rise and growth of a centralized political authority from within the tribal world itself. However, following the line of Surajit Sinha he widely seems to disagree with Roy on the issue of the impact it had on the tribal systems. In both these works he emphasizes that though the process of state formation significantly modified the old tribal village organization, it is misleading to conclude that it had disintegrated even before the Colonial intervention. Chaudhuri has argued that the old order did not

disintegrate, but considerably weakened. This happened because of two things. The village had to divert part of its resources towards the maintenance of the state machinery. Secondly, numerous outsiders connected with the state activities, intruded into the village.⁶ Unlike Sinha, he further states that it was with the Colonial rule that the decisive break with the past occurred. However, the initial British intervention in this part of the tribal world only indirectly and marginally affected the tribal village.

Colonial Period: Binod S. Das in his book *Civil Rebellion in the Frontier Bengal (1760-1805)* (Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1973) has undertaken a comprehensive study of the resistance offered by the people as a reaction to the different political and economic measures introduced by the British government in this region. However, in this book the emphasis is more on the economic aspect as the real cause behind these uprisings. After the assumption of the *zamindari* rights of Midnapore and adjacent parganas, the Company government was confronted with three fold inter connected questions: how effectively the land revenue could be collected, who was the real owner of the soil and what was the relation between the ruler, the proprietor of the soil and the original producers. Thus, according to him, from 1761 to 1793 the history of Jungle Mahals was actually the history of endeavours on the part of the Company to find an answer to these three questions. The government adopted various tactics to achieve its end, from sending military campaigns to introducing farming settlement, all of which had a tendency for over-assessment. This naturally led to the emergence of agrarian disturbances resulting in increased lawlessness in this region. Through his work, Binod S. Das therefore throws

⁶ Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.725.

considerable light on the economic as well as political situation of the late eighteenth century Jungle Mahals.

K.Sivaramakrishnan in his book *Modern Forests Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (OUP, 1999) covers a period of about 180 years that begins at around 1767, soon after the first East India Company officials made tentative forays into the jungles to the west of Midnapore town in southwest Bengal, and ends at around 1947 when India became independent. In this book he not only highlights the ecological and social peculiarities of the region but also shows how the manner in which culture, nature and power, spatially constituted and expressed, influence processes of statemaking. In his section on the early period of British rule in this region he documents the ways in which, through conquest and experiments in government, the East India Company initiated the modes of knowing and disciplining political society. Here he traces the British penetration into the forested areas of Bengal, the stabilization of colonial government in these regions and the development of mechanisms of frontier administration. The early administration of woodland Bengal emerged as a series of exceptions and anomalies within the overarching standardizations undertaken in the land settlement process which made this region a 'zone of anomaly'. In late eighteenth century Bengal, as Company raj expanded and intensified, a specific model of rural governance was conceived and executed in the form of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, and according to Sivaramakrishnan 'zones of anomaly' were geographic spaces in the terrain targeted by the permanent Settlement where its application was thwarted.

Ratnalekha Ray in her book *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society* (Delhi, 1979) seeks to trace the course of change in the agrarian society of Bengal under the rule of East India Company roughly from 1760 to 1850. Her book is divided into three parts and it is the second part where she has tried to explore the local circumstances in Burdwan, Bishnupur and Midnapur that has been of much help in the study for this period. In these case studies she has dealt with their geography, composition of population and the local conditions of tenure before the Permanent Settlement. Dealing with the similar issue of continuity and change is Rajat Datta's *Society, Economy And The Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800* (Delhi, 2000). His study of the commercialization in rural Bengal also brings forth the structural changes in its agricultural economy and rural society thereby facilitating an understanding of these aspects in the context of eighteenth century Jungle Mahals.

III

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, attempt has been made to study the environmental peculiarities of Jungle Mahals which rendered it a distinct character from the rest of Bengal. Since the limits of this region was susceptible to changes for various reasons, therefore, attempt has been made to first mark out the extent of this area from the pre- colonial to the early years of the colonial period and identify the changes if any. The Colonial records describe this area as '...a country with wild forest growth and subject to sudden and extensive inundations...'⁷ In order to

⁷ W.K.Firminger, *Historical Introduction to the Bengal Portion of the "The Fifth Report"*, Indian Studies Past and Present, Calcutta, 1917, p.139.

understand the reason behind the vulnerability of this region to natural calamities, a brief study of the topography, rivers, soil and climate has been undertaken. Despite the hostile environment, Jungle Mahals saw the growth of various social formations which necessitates the study of the ways in which humans adapted themselves to this environment and the effect environment had on polity, economy and society. Simultaneously, the effect human intervention had on the environment has also been examined. Since the environment played such a dominant role in the lives of the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahals they were often characterized as wild. Whether the Colonial government tried to bring about a change in this understanding by trying to civilize the forest people or not, has also been dealt with.

The second chapter endeavors to study the condition of Jungle Mahals during the pre-British period where the main focus is to discover whether the Jungle polities ceased to be stateless prior to the British rule or not. Tendency has been to follow the evolutionary approach and trace the course of development from the tribal polities to forest principalities. The establishment of these principalities brought in its train a number of outsiders and created a ground for interaction between the original inhabitants and migrants, which initiated a process of change and exchange between the two not only in the economic sphere but in the social sphere as well. All this had a great impact in shaping the economy and society that the British first encountered on their entry into the Jungle Mahals which nevertheless led to the gradual weakening of the earlier dominant forms. This chapter also contains a brief study of the relationship between the local polities and the larger central polity represented by the Mughal state, and the approach of

the Mughals and the later Nawabs towards this region which will help form a background for a better understanding of the British approach towards this region.

It should however be noted that this chapter is primarily based on ethnographic materials and works of social anthropology as the sources for the pre-colonial period are scarce. Despite the limitation the available secondary sources have been used to form an overview of the situation of the Jungle Mahals in this period in order to have a better understanding of transition in the subsequent chapter. Archival sources have however been used extensively in the third chapter.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on the situation of Jungle Mahals during the early period of British rule. It includes a detailed study of the measures undertaken by the Company to bring this area under their effective control. Simultaneously, it also looks into the ways in which the people retaliated to these measures. Besides political subjugation, the Company also aimed at bringing about an economic subjugation of this region. Therefore, the study on polity has been followed by a study on economy in which attempt has been made to understand whether these measures were backed by an economic motive for increased revenue collection or were simply an economic means to attain political end. Finally, the chapter concludes with the study of the impact, all these measures had on the society, followed by an assessment of the Company's success in subjugating this area.

CHAPTER 1

ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

Bengal occupied an economically dominant position since the medieval times and despite being described as “a hell full of bread”, was constantly subjected to numerous attempts by various leading powers for its possession. The resulting temptation arising from such a description to imagine Bengal province as a continuous stretch of green carpet was often interrupted by small brown pockets of not very fertile zones which presented quite a different picture in reality. About one third of the total area of Bengal consisted of hilly regions, which occupied three distinct parts of the province: first, a portion of northern Bengal and Sikkim; second, the greatest portion of Chota Nagpur and Orissa; and third, hill Tippera and the eastern portion of the Chittagong division.¹ However, it was the hills of the Chota Nagpur and the Orissa portion which accounted for the irregularity in south western Bengal, not only in terms of its contour but also in terms of its fertility level. This very ‘zone of anomaly’² in terms of physical features, which imparted an uneven look to Bengal was referred to as the Jungle Mahal. Though a major part of the Jungle Mahal comprised the Chotanagpur hills, it also consisted of another branch called the Rajmahal hills which was an isolated range having no geological connection with it.³ According to a nineteenth century description, Chotanagpur was bounded on the north by central India, North-West Provinces and Bihar; on the east by

¹ W.H.Arden Wood, *A Short Geography of Bengal*, George Bill and Sons (London and Bombay), 1895, p.7.

² K.Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.30.

³ Wood, *A Short Geography*, p. 8.

Bihar and Bengal proper; on the south by Orissa and the Central Provinces; on the west by the Central Province and Central India. However, during the eighteenth century there was no division between Bengal and Chotanagpur and the gradually rising continuation of the plains of the western Bengal formed a step leading up to Chotanagpur.

The Chotanagpur hills were a northward and eastward continuation of the highland of Central India and consisted of a multitude of irregular ranges sometimes, crowding together about a culminating height and sometimes opening out to form a wide valley. Peaks of over 2000ft. were numerous, and a good number even exceeded 3000ft., especially in the west of Chotanagpur. Several small ranges rose out of the plains lying between Chotanagpur and the Ganges.

The exact definition of the boundary lines of the Jungle Mahals remained a vexed problem throughout the eighteenth century. By the treaty of 1751 between Alivardi Khan and Raghuji 1, the river Subarnarekha was fixed as a demarcating line between the nawabi and the Maratha territories. The frontier zamindars however owned lands on both sides of the river creating overlapping boundaries.⁴ The Marathas continued to occupy the north-east of the Subarnarekha in parganas Bhograi, Kamardachour, Pataspur, Sahabandar and some villages of Gobibaalavpur thana.⁵ Thus, Mayurbhanj, Pachet, Singhbhoom, and other 'Bhum' ending tracts were not outside but were in the past always included within the Jungle Mahals. Before the British period, Jungle Mahals were neither a part of Midnapur nor were totally administered from Midnapur. However, In 1760 Mir Qasim assigned to the Company the Zamindari right of Midnapur District

⁴ Binod S.Das, *Civil Rebellion in the Frontier Bengal (1760-1805)*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta 1973, p.159.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.25.

which was on the border of the Mayurbhanj state and even included few parganas of Mayurbhanj in the Jungle Mahals.

It was in 1773 that Edward Baber, the Collector of Midnapore, provided the first description of the Jungle Mahals: “the western jungle is an extent of country of about 80 miles in length and 60 miles in breadth. On the east it is bounded by Midnapore, on the west by Singhbhoom, on the north by Pachete, and the south by Mayurbhanj...It has always been annexed to the province of Midnapore but from its situation was never greatly regarded by the Nabob’s government...”⁶ However, in 1778 James Brown came up with a more detailed description of this region. According to this description, the Jungle Terry district was “bounded by the plains of Bauglepore and Colgong, and the Ganges on the north. On the north west by Curruckpore Hills. On the west by Guidore, and the plains of Bahar. On the South and south west by the provinces of Ramgur and Pachete. On the south east by Birboom. On the east, by the Rajamahl Hills. On the north east, by the Ganges, and part of the Rajamahl Hills.”⁷ The Kharagpur hills were a range of hills running generally north-east and terminating at Monghyr. Thus, while the Jungle Mahals were surrounded by plains in the north, west and south-east, it was surrounded by hills in the east and north-west and by the forested countries in the south.

Though Edward Baber had expressed the idea that Jungle Mahals belonged to Midnapur, there was a confusion regarding the position of each and every unit of the region, its relations and affiliations, its fiscal connections with Midnapur not to speak of the size, dimensions and background of each of these different units which constituted the

⁶ W.K.Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records Midnapur*, vol.4, letter no. 163, 6 February 1773, pp.106-107; also see Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.43.

⁷ Major J.Brown, *India Tracts: containing A Discription of the Jungle Terry Districts, Their Revenues, Trade, and the Government: With a Plan for the Improvement of Them*, Logographic Press, 1788, p.1.

Jungle Mahals. Even in their own rank there was much confusion about the identity and position of the Mahals. Fergusson was deputed in March 1767, to make a settlement with the zamindar of Chatna believing the zamindari a part of the Jungle Mahals, whereas, Captain Upton was deputed from Burdwan to make a settlement with the same zamindar under the impression that Chatna lay within the jurisdiction of Burdwan. Thus, even the government was vague regarding the territorial jurisdiction of the various units of the Jungle Mahals.⁸ Besides, the extent of the Jungle Mahals also constantly changed as is evident from the letter to Vansittart from the Council of Revenue, dated 16th August 1774:

The President having appointed Captain Browne to the Command of the Light Infantry in the Room of Capt. Brooke, we have thought proper to nominate him also to the Collectorship of the Jungle Terry Lands of Rajemhaul, Bauglepore, Curruckpore, and Beerbhoom. As we are desirous of ascertaining with exactness the Boundaries of these lands that the President may be enabled to point out...to Capt. Browne the jurisdiction over which his authority is to extend...general idea that where the situation of the land is such as not to admit of their being managed under a Civil Controul [sic.] but require the presence of a Military Force to keep the inhabitants in obedience and subjection and (can) be separated from the Revenue lands without occasioning perplexity in the Accounts, or loss to the Government we would chuse [sic.] that such lands be included within the line of the Jungle Terry.⁹

Besides the ambiguous extent and the irregular contour, another distinguishing feature of the Jungle Mahals was its low level of fertility in comparison to the rest of Bengal. An examination of factors like the availability of water, type of soil, climate etc. which together contribute to the level of fertility, is therefore important in order to understand the reason behind this difference.

RIVER SYSTEM

⁸ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.11.

⁹ West Bengal State Archives, Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan, vol. 2, 7th July-29th August 1774.

The river system of Bengal was the most important feature of its physical geography. It abounded in every type of river, from glacier fed stream to the sluggish deltaic distributaries. The water of all Bengal river was laden with silt to a degree which varied with the season of the year and the special nature of the river. The latter depended on the length of its course, the velocity of its current, and the nature of the country through which it flowed. The presence of harder constituents in the soil set a limit to the southward movement of the channel of the Ganges, and the westward extension of the delta.

The Jungle Mahal was characterized by the presence of numerous Hill rivers. Two important characteristics of the hill rivers were the extreme difference between their volume in the dry season and the rainy season, and the rapidity with which they rose into flood after rain. None of the rivers of the Jungle Mahal were snowfed, and the rainfall of the country they drained was smaller and distributed over fewer months of the year than the rainfall of a great part of the country drained by the gangetic system. Moreover as their drainage area was of much lesser extent, and for most part, hilly, the flow of the river was also rapid. The consequence was that in the dry months these river ran very low, and some became insignificant, especially in their upper courses whereas, when rain fell it usually fell over the whole of the drainage area, and was at once discharged by small mountain feeders into the main streams, which rose with great suddenness immersing a major part of the land in water.¹⁰

The rivers of the Jungle Mahal can broadly be classified into the eastern rivers and the western rivers. Most of the eastern rivers drained in Hooghly. Some of the

¹⁰ Wood, *A Short Geography*, p. 26.

important rivers in the east were the Ajai, Damodar, Dakisor and Kasai. Ajai was situated towards the north and formed a boundary between Birbhum and Burdwan districts before flowing into the Bhagirathi at Katwa. The Damodar rose in Chotanagpur, and flowed west, forming for some distance the boundary between the Burdwan and the Bankura districts. Past Burdwan town it turned sharply south, and joined the Hooghly opposite Falta about thirty miles below Calcutta. South of the Damodar, through the middle of Bankura district, flowed the Dakisor, which like the Damodar took a sharp turn to the south, and eventually joined the Hooghly as the Rupnarain six miles below Damodar. The Kasai flowed through Midnapore district past the town of Midnapore, and after a tortuous course entered the estuary of Hooghly at Haldi.¹¹

The western portion of Jungle Mahal was surrounded by a network of several streams and small rivers which either drained in Sone (in Bihar) towards the north, or in Mahanadi (in Orissa) towards the south. North Koel flowed north through the middle of Palamau (situated to the north west of Chotanagpur) to Sone in Bihar, while the Subarnarekha flowed in the southerly direction through the eastern portion of Singbhum, enters the Balasore district and finally falls into the Bay of Bengal. South Koel and Sankh drained the western part of the Chotanagpur before uniting to form the river Brahmani in the south west. The greater part of the south western Chotanagpur was drained by streams that united to form the river Ib which flowed west before joining the Mahanadi in Orissa. While almost the entire south-western Chotanagpur drained to the Mahanadi, the north-western Chotanagpur drained to the Sone.

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¹¹ Ibid., p. 65.

Irrespective of the rivers lying towards the east or west, all these rivers followed a short course and were subjected to rapid rises after rain in the hills.

SOIL

The difference in the soil of the Jungle Mahals from that of the plain country comes out clearly from the description given by Sivaramakrishnan according to which, “Midnapore district straddled a geographical transition zone, where the ‘semi-aquatic rice plain’ of the Ganges delta rose through rolling upland country into the rocky escarpments and gneissic tablelands of the Chotanagpur plateau”.¹² Thus, the geological setup of the Jungle Mahals consisted of hard beds of red laterite which marked the limit of the great alluvial plain of Bengal. As one proceeded west, the land rose and the surface became undulated with only the hollows containing soil suitable for the cultivation of rice. The higher ground was composed of beds of laterite (porous clayey rock, largely impregnated with iron peroxide irregularly distributed throughout the mass) which formed a highly infertile soil. Towards the west, the country merged into the uplands of Chotanagpur and towards the north along the western border there was a steady rise, until in the north of Bankura where there were jungle clad hills upwards of 1000ft. high. The western boundary of the Jungle Mahal was very mountainous.

The characteristic feature of the Jungle Mahal was the Pats. These were hills capped by horizontal strata of rock: true table lands, to which access could only be had through fissures in the overlying strata. The pats, which averaged 3,600ft. in height, were covered with a thin soil, but forest trees grew well and afforded grazing grounds for large

¹² Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.39.

herds of cattle in the hot weather months. Further west were considerable areas of lower lying country, averaging 1,500ft. in elevation which became more and more broken and mountainous towards the western extremity. Even the bordering regions towards the south were of a much lower level.

CLIMATE

Although Bengal lay partly within the tropics, the climate was essentially tropical. The year was divided into three well marked seasons: cold, hot and the rainy; the relative character and extent of which varied in different parts of the provinces. As one moved towards the west, the cold season became colder and longer, the hot season hotter, the rains began later and ended sooner. According to Crawford's letter from Jelldah, dated 16th December 1775 "As these lands are therefore only ridges they require a Constant supply of Rain, which they seldom fail to enjoy from the nature of their situation ..."¹³The scarcity of rain resulted in the prevalence of a drought like situation in this part of the country as is evident from the letter of the Naib of Patcheat, dated 17th November 1775: "The scarcity of Rain prevailed throughout this Province ...The Crop of the Highlands has perished by drought..."¹⁴

Unlike the plains, the climate in the Jungle Mahal was dry. The average rainfall was about 50 inches. The elevation gave it a temperature less by some degrees than that of the neighbouring plains during the rains and cold weather months. It was however, swept by dry west winds in the spring months, and the hot weather temperatures ranged high. In the rainy seasons the climate was comparatively better from that of the plains.

¹³ West Bengal State Archives, Controlling Council of Revenue at Burdwan, vol. 11, 16 December 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. Crawford.

¹⁴ WBSA, PCRB, Vol. 11, 17 November 1775.

ECONOMY

The economy of the Jungle Mahals was characterized by the close integration of cultivation with forest and pasture. According to a nineteenth century description by an English official: "The extreme north-west of Midnapur consists of a tangle of hills rising to a height of 1500ft. or so, arranged on no particular plan, with steep sides and narrow intervening valleys. The slopes are covered with dense low growing jungle... In the valleys are scattered patches of cultivated land laboriously reclaimed by that born pioneer of santal and by elaborate terracing rendered fit for the cultivation of rice and vegetables."¹⁵ Thus there was no distinct demarcation between the agricultural lands and forests and as stated by B.B. Chaudhary, "Forests did include patches of settled cultivation."¹⁶ As early as 1769, Gorge Vansittart, the first Resident at Midnapore to travel through the Jungle areas exclusively, wrote, 'the whole western part of this district is overrun with jungles in which there are scattered some trifling villages interspersed with few cultivated fields'.¹⁷

AGRICULTURE

The agricultural system here was largely characterized by settled plough cultivation, distinguishable from the slash and burn type of farming. Infertility of soil however necessitated short term fallowing. This practice essentially differed from the non utilization of a portion of the arable under the slash and burn type of farming which often resulted from the inefficiency of the technique of irrigation in use. Santals, one of the

¹⁵ A.K.Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey And Settlement Operations In The District of Midnapur*, Calcutta, 1918, p.2.

¹⁶ B.B.Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.765.

¹⁷ Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.43.

most numerous tribe of this region, because of their familiarity with the plough cultivation and irrigation devices, practiced wet, settled agriculture.

There was an insecure water supply as is evident from a description according to which “The rivers and streams flow in deep channels cut in the rocky soil, the smaller ones practically dry in the hot weather when even the Subarnarekha and the Kasai are reduced to mere trickles meandering through wastes of land”¹⁸. The swiftness of the river current in the upland further prevented the deposition of fertilizing alluvium in this region. Even the rain water, on which cultivators were obliged to depend, was not properly stored as a means of irrigation.

The insecure water supply and an inadequate artificial irrigation justified the limited utilization of the available land resources and confined the cultivated land to the hollows between the ridges. Above it lay the dahi, patches scratched out of the waste to a depth of few inches, unembanked and growing coarse vegetables at intervals of three to four years. There was also a preponderance of low value, inferior lands, locally called *Tanr* (uplands) which were incapable of sufficiently keeping moisture and hence produced only the coarse rice and various *rabi* crops. Large parts of *Tanr*, could not be cultivated on a yearly basis and had to be left fallow periodically to recover. However, a better quality land was found in the hollows intervening between the continuous ridges of uplands, called the *Don*. It was this land that retained rainwater, was leveled, embanked

¹⁸ Jameson, *Final Report*, p.2.

and was used exclusively to grow rice.¹⁹ The best rice lands were those, which lay at the bottom of the depression.

On the whole, the agricultural system here was characterized by low productivity with increased dependence on monocropping and chronic uncertainty about output. Failure of rain further tended to reduce to a precariously low point even the small surplus that agriculture could generate.

Crops were generally raised for self consumption and comprised different kinds of small hardy grains which required little water for growth and were not much known in the plain countries. Some of them were; *codo* (a small red grain), *goondley* (a small blackish grain), *borah* (a small kind of white bean), *jenorah* (grain commonly referred to as the Indian corn), *kairree* (another small whitish grain like the cedo) and *murruah* (a small reddish grain). Rice was chiefly grown in the valleys, and in the depression of the table lands, and also to some extent on the terraced hill sides.²⁰

Since a major part of the land was unsuitable for cultivation, it could be used as a grazing ground for the animals. The abundance of grazing ground to cultivated land perhaps motivated the inhabitants to maintain a large stock of domesticated animals like goat, cow and buffalo for food and for performing agricultural activities. Domestic fowls were also reared for their eggs and meat. According to Major Brown “Great number of swine are also bred by the Mountaineers”²¹.

FOREST PRODUCTS

¹⁹ B.B.Chaudhari; Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India 1757-1920' in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (ed) *India's Colonial Encounter*, Manohar, Delhi, 2004, p.110.

²⁰ Browne, *India Tracts*, p.16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.73.

In a place where soil wasn't fertile and water insufficient, agriculture could never become a mainstay for subsistence. Captain Crawford in his letter from Jelldah, dated 16th December 1775 wrote:

*complaints of the great failure of the Crops by a defeciency [sic.] of Rain were preferred from all parts of the Districts under my charge...the state of the northern Division of these District where the loss was represented to be greatest... The Damage they have sustained is really very a great scarce one quarter of the Rice which they had cultivated having come to perfection by which many of the Poorer Inhabitants who depend on the annual produce of their lands, are already driven to live on the Fruits produced in the Jungles...*²²

Again on 11th March 1776 Mr. Hewett wrote from Jelldah that: "...the Zemindars severely feel the want of Grain, while the Ryotts from their Incapacity of purchasing Rice at its increased rate are obliged to traverse the Jungles for their daily Sustenance..."²³ Thus necessity was the compelling factor for the people of this region to look for alternatives in the form of hunting, gathering and fishing. However, there were other cultural factors too which made forests important to the inhabitants of Jungle Mahals. In the month intervening between the harvest and rains, the tribals frequently went to distant jungles, and every year in May a great meet for sport was held in which people of all classes of the neighbourhood and surrounding villages took part.²⁴

The dependence upon the forests was seen by the colonial officials as an attempt to avoid work which they attributed to the lazy and happy go lucky nature of the forest people in general. Various arguments have been put forward against this proposition, the simplest being that they (forest people) were lazy because they were natural. Another approach has been to deny laziness altogether and argue that, though such groups were

²²WBSA,PCRB,vol. 11, 16 December 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. Crawford

²³ Ibid., vol. 13, 11th March 1776. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Mr. Hewett.

²⁴ H.H.Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. Calcutta, 1981, p.326.

less involved in settled agriculture, they were involved heavily in other forms of producing food, and there was a considerable amount of hard work involved in these forms, as well. Besides, to the extent that there was no natural abundance that could be reaped, the notion of 'the tribal' making less effort certainly cannot be sustained.²⁵

According to Price, "the greatest portion of the area of these pergunnahs was covered with jungles..."²⁶ A large portion of the surface was "covered with extensive forests consisting mainly of Sal and Piasal trees interrupted with open park like stretches of uncultivated land dotted with fine trees, tamarinds, mangoes, tree-cotton and Mahua."²⁷ This area also abounded in a tree called coosum, the wood of which was used for the upper parts of the sugar mills.²⁸ Many kinds of animals were also found here like tiger, leopard, bear, hyena, fox, jackal, sambar, spotted deer, barking deer, wild pig and elephants. Various kinds of birds, jungle fowl, pea fowl, grey and black partridge, quail, golden plover were also found.²⁹

The inhabitants of the Jungle Mahal depended heavily upon the jungle products to supplement their source of subsistence. Besides hunting and fishing they also collected food materials and other minor forest produce. They collected all kinds of edible roots, shoots, leaves, flowers and fruits. Edible roots consisted of *haser*, *kulu*, *bawals*, *kundari* etc. Shoots of *kanda*, *karami sag*, *bathua sag* etc.; leaves of *soura*, *maltha*, *purlak*, *dhai*, etc.; flowers of *murup*, *koinar*, *kehanar*, etc.; fruits of *jamun*, *bair*, *kathal*, *amla*, *imali*,

²⁵ Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p.64.

²⁶ J.C.Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.66.

²⁷ Jameson, *Final Report*, p.2.

²⁸ Browne, *India Tracts*, p.20.

²⁹ L.S.S. O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer Midnapore*, p. 17. Also see Jameson, *Final Report*, p.2.

khakhasa, etc.; and mushrooms of different kinds like *morang*, *simdali*, *kanar*, *badho*, *lawa* etc. were also consumed.³⁰

Certain articles produced here were exclusive to this region and were also used for trading purpose, like: mowah, dammah, kutt, tekoor, abruck and tussur. Mowah was a fruit of a large tree, full of a strong sweet intoxicating juice, with a strong smell. The natives ate it both ripe and dried like a raisin. They also distilled a very strong spirit from it. Later the Beoparries from the plains purchased and carried the fruit for the purpose of distillation. Dammah was a species of resin produced from the tree called suckuah. Kutt was eaten with beetle and was procured from a small shrub called kyre, about the size of a babool tree. The branches and body of this shrub were cut in short pieces, and after paring away the bark and the wood, the sap, or pith in the middle, was put into water and boiled for a considerable time, till the water was almost consumed. It then acquired the consistency of glue and became brown in colour. The remaining pieces of pith were removed and the liquor was boilt again till it became thick enough to be formed into cakes, after which it was exposed to the sun and wind till it became hard. Tekoor was made from the root of a jungle huldee or turmerick plant, in which the root was beaten very fine and put into a quantity of water for two or three days. The part that constituted the tekoor subsided to the bottom and the water was then drained and the sediments exposed to the sun till it became a dry fine powder. Abruck was dug out the hills in the jungle terry and was used for making a shiny powder thrown by the Hindus during the Holi.³¹

³⁰ Ajit K. Singh, Gaya Pandey, Prabhat K. Singh, *Forest and Tribals in India*, Classical Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1998, p.97.

³¹ Browne, *India Tracts*, pp.17-19.

Tussur was a coarse species of silk, produced by a kind of silk worm natural to these jungles which ate the leaves of a small tree called assin. As early as 1767, George Vansittart, travelling through the jungles noted the extent of mulberry trees and the possibility for silk trade. Later, on 24th April 1772, the Resident of Midnapur wrote to the Controlling Committee of Commerce about the nature of tussur and the manner in which it was provided:

*This is a species of silk produced from a worm which is found chiefly in the wildest parts of the jungles, and nourished from a tree which grows there, called the assna, ... the tussur is produced at two seasons of the year only- September and November... The worm is nurtured by the inhabitants of these jungles, who are as wild as the woods they inhabit; and the merchants send agents at the two seasons of the year when the tussur is produced to purchase it of these people...procuring of materials produced in these wilds, under the management of their rude inhabitants, must be very precarious.*³²

However, the silk was exceedingly coarse.³³

This region also had diamond mines and iron ore deposits. During the Mughal times Jungle Mahals was known for its diamonds. In *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* there is a reference to Durjan Sal, the Zamindar of Kokhra (Chotanagpur) who paid his tribute in two or three diamonds as an acknowledgement of Mughal suzerainty. However, when Mughals took over the possession of this province, imperial servants were appointed to bring to the court whatever diamond was found.³⁴ Describing the method of procurement the book states that “diamonds of that place are not obtained from the mine, but from a river which in the rainy season comes down in flood from the hills. Before that they dam it up, and when the flood has passed over the dam and there is little water, a number of

³² Price, *History of Midnapore*, p. 174.

³³ Brown, *India Tracts*, p. 19,

³⁴ Henry Beveridge (ed.), *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Reprint, Delhi, 1989, vol. 1, pp. 314-316. Also see Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, Mirza Nathan, Translated by M.I.Borah, Gauhati, 1936, p. 833 .

men who are skilled in this art go into the river bed and bring out the diamonds.”³⁵ It was occasionally that a piece of diamond worth 1,00,000 rupees were found, however, the Mughal believed that if “little pains are taken, it is probable that good diamonds will be found and be placed in the jewel room”³⁶.

This region also had rich deposits of iron ore in many places like the hills of Chotanagpur, Singhbhum, Kharagpur, Birbhum and Ramgarh.³⁷ The ores produced in this region however was of an inferior quality as is evident from the letter of Mr. Matter and Mr. Farguhar according to which:

For amongst the various ores produced in this country, there is one found in Beerbhum and in greatest abundance in Ramghur, which Yield an iron so extremely soft as to be fit for few of the common purposes of life,...The mine consists of one small view, (which) produces the ore known to mineralogists by the name of potters lead ore because, instead of being smelted on account of it is usually sold with greater advantage to those artificers, for the purpose of glazing their ware now, as no ... use of earthen ware than the natives of this Country, and as none are...provided with materials for glazing it...³⁸

Despite the shortcoming, Colonial government realized the importance of this region in terms of its iron ore deposits as is evident from the proposal made to the Government by Indenaran Sermono for acquiring the permission to manufacture iron in Beerbhum in 1774 which ran thus:

On the north side 3 coss on the west 3 coss on the south $\frac{3}{4}$ of a coss on the east 2 coss is...Jungle...this tract of country in many parts of which Iron ore is to be found I request lease of on the following terms.

The lease is to be granted me for a term of...years. For the first year on account of the great expence which I shall incur by cutting the Jungle and

³⁵ Ibid., vol.2, p.22.

³⁶ Ibid., vol.1, p.316.

³⁷ Asha Shukla Choubey, 'Technology and Culture among the Iron Workers of Bihar during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *The Medieval History Journal*, 6, 1 (2003), Sage Publications, Delhi, pp.79-80.

³⁸ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 23, 6 January 1778, Letter to Higginson from Governor General and Council of Revenue containing a copy of the proposal presented by Mr. Matter and Mr. Farguhar.

erecting...dwelling places. I can pay nothing for three following years. I will pay 2000 Rs. per annum and for the remaining years of the lease I will pay 5000 Rs. per annum which shall be in full of all rents or Customs whatever.

I will engage if my Business succeeds to supply Government with what Iron they may want at the Bazar price of the time they may demand it.

I will not force any Ryotts from the Malguzarry lands nor give protection to any who may Desert with arrears of Rent due to the Farmers. The Choars and the Mountaineers ...will themselves engage in the working of the Iron. They gave me assurances of these when I was lately in the country.

I have travelled over the jungle part of the Country... (which are not) either included in the Jumma of any of the present Farmers or your revenue to Government but...if it is hereafter Discovered to contain any (such) lands I will readily pay the highest rent that has been received from it since the beginning... ”³⁹

Thus besides food, and several articles of trade, the jungle also fulfilled several other needs of its inhabitants by providing them with materials for trade, agricultural implements, implements for hunting, gathering, etc. Therefore, most of the requirement of the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahal was supplied by the forest which made them more or less self sufficient and independent with lesser dependence on the neighbouring plain areas.

ENVIRONMENT AND MAN

The official records of the Company provide us with varied contradictory accounts of the Jungle Mahals. Describing the places to which he moved from time to time, Captain Morgan in 1768 wrote: “There is a large extent of country surrounded on all sides by high hills. It is the most beautiful I have ever seen since my arrival in India...”⁴⁰ On the other hand, Lieutenant Goodyar, one of the officers on command in the interiors in 1771 wrote: “...I am now in the worst part of a bad country, where there are but few roads, and those hardly passable, that I am obliged to act by detachments that can

³⁹ West Bengal State Archives, Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan, vol 3 or 4, September 1774.

⁴⁰ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.62.

make their way, for I cannot move the whole...The sepoy's are sickly, they say it is the water, which is here all very bad..."⁴¹. Both these descriptions represent an outsider's perspective towards environment of this region. However for the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahals there was no choice of good or bad but the only option of adapting themselves to the harsh environmental reality. Thus, environment came to play a very important role in each and every aspect of human life.

Though Bengal was under the strong centralized control of the Mughal and later the Nawabs, the environment of the Jungle Mahals defied all their attempts to bring it under one central control. The pre British period saw the emergence of several forest principalities in this region. However, owing to its geographical location, difficult terrain and harsh environment, they could never be consolidated within the pale of mainstream polities which instilled in them a spirit of independence and autonomy. Even the British when they first entered this region proposed a geographical and ecological argument for the unyielding nature of the region, stating that these people not being 'under better subjection after having been reduced so long' was principally due to the nature of the country which from its woods and mountains was rendered almost inaccessible.⁴²

After the British subjection of this region, certain areas of the Jungle Mahals were placed under the authority of the zamindars of the settled region but even then it was difficult to keep them properly subjugated, as is evident from Crawford's letter on Pacheat dated 16th December 1775: "those parts which abound in Hills. The natural source of independence. all the open parts of Pacheat those which form the Pergunnahs

⁴¹ Ibid., p.109.

⁴² Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.44.

have long been held in immediate subjection by the Rajah but it was never in his power to deprive the possessors of these Rugged Parts of a distinct and separate authority...”⁴³ Thus, the geography, climate forest, etc. isolated this region from the rest of Bengal and the absence of a central authority supplemented by the presence of several autonomous political formations in this region (which will be discussed in the following chapter) made this place and its inhabitants chaotic and turbulent. Though the Mughal did not try much to bring this frontier zone under their immediate control, but the Colonial government for various reasons, both political and economic, undertook the herculean task of consolidating their hold over it, and were eventually successful post eighteenth century. The Colonial records have numerous references to this region which tell us a saga of gradual British victory over this region and the difficulty they encountered in accomplishing it.

Jungle Mahals presented a picture of unrest and anarchy throughout the eighteenth century. The Company officials deputed to bring this region under control had a hard time dealing with the inhabitants who “have had such little Connections with any other/It being a maxim with them never to travel/ that they scarce knew the name of Government, or have any conception of those finer and more gentle bonds of which more civilized People are attached to a State...”⁴⁴ this region was under the control of several zamindars locally known as Rajas, and the approach was to settle with the zamindars peaceably, if possible, followed by “a desire of promoting the plan of civilizing and familiarizing the country people to our government, also lessening the despotic sway of the Zamindars by

⁴³ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 11, 16th December 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson from the Capt. Crawford.

⁴⁴ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 8, 10th June 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson.

informing and instructing the ryots that in cases of oppression there was redress...⁴⁵

However, when attempts were actually made to bring them under the central control of the Company they immediately took advantage of their surrounding either by running away and hiding into the almost impregnable jungle or by offering them tough resistance through their well developed technique of guerilla warfare suitable for the region but alien to the British.

The jungles of the Jungle Mahals offered its inhabitants the safest recourse to escape from any unwanted circumstances. In one of the letters to the Governor General, the Provincial Council Of Revenue at Burdwan wrote: "Sum of Rs.2722.. ..9 is due from the Zemindar of Patcoom...this District in General, which is wholly uncivilized and in a great measure uncultivated consisting of Jungles into which the Land Holders retire when pressed for payments of their revenue..."⁴⁶ Several zamindars like those of Jhargram, Suphur, Barabhum, Ambikanagar and Chatna "fled away into the jungles along with his followers at the sight of the Company's troops"⁴⁷. Some zamindars offered tough resistance to the Company like the zamindar of Ghatsila who "posted his troops in all the avenues and inlets into his pergunnah, and was determined not to admit a Firanghi into his country on any account."⁴⁸ Captain Charles Morgan, incharge of the Jungle Mahals in 1768 gives an interesting description of the mode of warfare practiced by the inhabitants of this region in his letter according to which:

⁴⁵ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.56. Letter from Mr. Fergusson to Mr. Vansittart (Resident), dated 26th January 1768.

⁴⁶ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 29, 25th May 1779. Letter to the Governor General and his Council from Marriott, Dawson, Charters, Taylor and Dowall.

⁴⁷ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.38.

⁴⁸ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.42.

*They have not the least idea of fighting; they are like a parcel of wasps: they endeavour to sting you with their arrows and 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 to 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 to keep that gun... which I believe will be of more service than an extraordinary company of sepoy...*⁴⁹

The forest trees and grass provided these people with excellent hideouts making the situation all the more difficult for the Company officials, as it emerges from the description of Barabhum by Mr. Goodyar dated 24th February 1771: “The Chuars, as they escaped, discharged their arrows and match-locks from behind the trees and jungles upon my people without being able to see one of them.”⁵⁰ Besides, the absence of proper roads added to the difficulty of the Military Commanders appointed here as is evident from the letter of Lt. Long from Chattergunge dated 25th February 1779: “all the roads from one little open spot to another being enclosed by Jungles which are impenetrable to any regular Body of peoples where the jungle people hide with the greatest safety”⁵¹. Various methods were employed to interrupt the Company’s march into the Jungle Mahals from breaking the road to barricading all narrow passes by felling the trees.⁵²

In the absence of adequate roads in the wild regions the rivers provided an important means of defence to its inhabitants. In 1768, when Captain Morgan was sent against the rebellious Zamindar of Ghatsila, Jagannath Dhal, he could not pursue him after he crossed the Subarnarekha due to lack of boats.⁵³ The climate of this region was also a big hindrance to the successful Military operations of the Colonial Government which was

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁵¹ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 28, 25th February 1779. Letter to Mr. Hewett from Lt. Richard Long.

⁵² Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.42.

⁵³ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.45.

further worsened by the absence of doctors. On 22nd July, Captain Morgan wrote from one of his stations that: “my poor sepoy's fall sick continually. I have now about sixty men ill of fever. One of my lascars died a day or two ago...Be so good as send me a large quantity of ginger, as I find tea made of it very good for the sick men.”⁵⁴ Few days later he again wrote from Haldipukhar: “...I am obliged to turn doctor myself, and I give Furlington's drops for all kinds of disorders...”⁵⁵ Capt. Briscoe, stationed in Manbhoom also wrote on 3rd July 1775 that: “...My Detachment is still so very sickly notwithstanding all the Care I have taken of them getting worse Every Day. One continued Fever rages through the Camp to a great Degree. I find it will be impossible to remain the Jungles the Rains, without loosing [sic.] a number of people and I purpose (propose) moving for Midnapore in a few days.”⁵⁶ Seasonal changes also restricted these military campaigns. It was difficult to undertake any military expedition during the rainy season because then the grass was long which made it difficult for the Company to march and gave the enemies ample opportunity to “attack with impunity and gall”⁵⁷.

The unfavorable environment of the Jungle Mahals also had a major impact on the economic well being of the inhabitants of the region. The amount of grain produced and the number of cattle owned by the people was the measure of their wealth, which was however nothing more than mere subsistence. Even the agrarian society here was broadly divided into three groups on the basis of the means of production at their disposal, i.e. peasants with land but no stock; peasants with stock but no land; and peasants with neither the land nor stock, that is, different types of seasonal labourers. In a situation

⁵⁴Price, *History of Midnapore*, pp. 60-61

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61

⁵⁶ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 9, 3rd July 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. Briscoe.

⁵⁷Price, *History of Bengal*, p.53.

where the land was in abundance the presence of landlessness seems to be a paradox, but as B.B.Chaudhary states, the “mere availability of land did not therefore necessarily mean effective access to it.”⁵⁸ In the Jungle Mahals agricultural technology was poor, ecological condition unfavourable for stable cultivation and inputs other than land in short supply. The persistent drought and famine like situation arising out of the harsh environment of this place rendered existence very difficult. Therefore, it was the ability to possess or dispossess these factors of production which fulfilled the need as well as determined the strength and power of the people at any given point of time. The disgruntled souls also vented out their ire by destroying these very lifelines of the Jungle Mahals. The cattle and seeds of this peasantry were naturally the first victims of depredations of the zamindars and discharged sardars of the mahals.

Eighteenth century official records have numerous references to the depredations caused by the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahals upon each other for the possession of their effects. A brief idea of the situation can be derived from the letter of Edward Baber (collector of Midnapur dated 6th February 1773: “these zamindars are mere freebooters who plunder their neighbours and one another and their tenants are banditti whom they chiefly employ in these outrages. These depredations keep the zamindars and their tenants continually in arms for after the harvest is gathered in there is scarcely one of them who does not call his ryots to his standard either to defend his own property or attack his neighbours- ...”⁵⁹ again in 1776 Mr. Hewett wrote from Jelldah that:

Their minds from infancy inclind [sic.] to Hostilities, they sought no other employment but that of Arms, by which they gained their Possessions and which

⁵⁸ Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.717

⁵⁹ Firminger (ed.), BDRM, Vol. 4. Letter no. 163, 6th February 1773, also see Sivaramkrishnan, *Modern Forests*, pp.43-44.

was their only resource for retaining them- Night; was a constant Harbinger of Robberies, Murders and Depredations; which reduced Villages and lost Friends, Demanded the Sufferers to stand forth, to redress their Injuries and to retaliate on the Assailants the Wrongs they had received. This was the occupation of the day, Under these circumstances, the Efforts for the promotion of Cultivation were feeble, their duration short, and few were the advantages reaped from them- The Ryott when sowing their Land, was in common attended by an Armed Friend to defend them Against an Assault, and even the Zemindars themselves found security only in the support of their Followers, who were always ready to enter the Fields.⁶⁰

In August 1773, Mangovin and Sundarnarayan, allies of the rebellious Jagannath Dhal plundered the estates of Bicont Dhal of Ghatsila and escaped with money and about 300 heads of cattle.⁶¹

Even the Company officials realized the importance of provisions in this scarcity prone area and used the similar technique of destroying them to bring this area under their subjugation. On December 1774, Captain Briscoe wrote:

on my entering into Burraboom against the Rajah Bibbicknarrain, his people commenced Hostilitie, ...I Marched to one of the Rajah's strongholds in the Hills, where he was, which I stormed but the Rajah made his escape over the Mountains; However I destroyed immense quantities of gram, and several Villages as I passed through the country which must distress all the poor Inhabitants very much, and I expect the Rajah will be obliged to come in very soon...⁶²

According to a letter from the Zemindar of Patcheat:

Some Ryotts deserting from hence took up their Residences on the Burrabhoom Frontiers but lately on account of the Disturbances a foot in that Quarter, returned to Patcheat in consideration of living under the Company's protection. Capt. Briscoe has now sent Sepoys who seize the Cows and Effects of the Ryotts of this Chuckla, indiscriminately with those of the Burrabhoom and burn the villages where the latter had taken up their Residence...⁶³

⁶⁰ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 14, 2nd May 1776. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Mr. Hewett.

⁶¹ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.64.

⁶² WBSA, PCRB, vol. 5, 14th December 1774.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, vol. 6. April 1775.

In 1776 Captain Briscoe wrote: "...Lieutenant and Ensign, with a Detachment of two Company's Seapoys,...arrived with his Detachment in Gatseela, he soon put a stop, to the incursion of the Choars, Drove them back into the Hills, and did them all the mischief in his power by laying waste the Country, burning the villages and destroying everything, that came in his way..."⁶⁴

Even the enemy retaliated in the same way. In March 1767, Mr. Fergusson had to suspend his chase for the absconding Ghatsila zamindar primarily due to insufficient provisions. When the Company reached the Ghatsila fort the people abandoned it by the backdoor and set fire on the reserved ammunition and foodstuffs to starve the Company's troops. Mr. Fergusson writing on 22nd March 1767 from Ghatsila stated that: "notwithstanding that the fire had destroyed the most valuable things, of which there must have been an immense quantity, yet we arrived time enough to save a great quantity of grain, which gives me great satisfaction, as otherwise we should have been in distress soon for want of provisions..."⁶⁵

Poor yield of the soil bred gang robbery and a spirit of independence among the people. There was a section of people whose main occupation was plundering as is evident from the description of one Indenaran Sermono of Beerbhoom according to which "In the province of Beerbhoom there is a considerable tract of mountainous country overrun with Jungles and which in its present uncultivated state serves us no other purpose than that of a Harbour for Choars, who live upon plundering the Inhabitants of the Cultivated lands."⁶⁶ 'Chuar' (robber) was a term used for the people

⁶⁴ Ibid., vol. 15, 3rd June 1776.

⁶⁵ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.48.

⁶⁶ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 3, 1st September- 24th October 1774.

inhabiting the mountains of this unsettled tract like the Bhumijis, and their various outbreaks were called 'chuaris'.⁶⁷ Even the santhals are reported to have lived by hunting and raiding lowland fanners. Grain, salt, tobacco, cattle, and goats, were generally taken in these raids.⁶⁸ According to W.W.Hunter, until 1790, the santals were the pests of the adjacent lowlands. Every winter, as soon as they had gathered in their rice crop, the whole nation moved down upon the plains, hunting in the forests and plundering the open country on the line of march. After three months of excellent sport they returned laden with booty to celebrate the February festival in their own villages.⁶⁹ Later, especially under the British rule, the term "chuar" was used as an expression to refer to the zamindar's men who practiced robbery in other districts and not in their own, as is evident from the letter of the Collector of Midnapur written in 1781: "The inhabitants of these zamindarries, being chuars, are bred up as much for pillaging as cultivating, and pay a quit rent from the profits of both occupations..."⁷⁰

There are numerous references to the raids committed by these chuars during the late eighteenth century. In a letter to Verelst dated 20 December 1769 Vansittart wrote: "A great number of Chuars...inhabiting the hills in our western jungles having in conjunction with considerable bodies from the adjacent districts (Pachet, Patkum and Singbhoom), invaded the pergunnas of Burraboom and Gatseela."⁷¹ According to a letter from the Supervisor of Beerbhoom Mr. Dumbleton, dated 1st February 1771:

Captain Carter who is employed on a Survey in these Western Provinces has applied to me for a Reinforcement of one or two Companies of Sepoys, as a Large

⁶⁷ Riskey, *Tribes and Castes*, p.118.

⁶⁸ Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.83

⁶⁹ W.W.Hunter; *Annals of Rural Bengal*, Calcutta 1965, p.219.

⁷⁰ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.67.

⁷¹ Firminger (ed.), BDRM, vol 2, p.130.

*Body of Chouars in the Borders of the (Hill) District have opposed his passing thro' that Country in his way to Boglepore etc. this District is inhabited by a sett [sic.] of independent Chouars who pay no revenue to the Company, but are very troublesome Neighbours, as they make frequent incursions into the Border of Beerbhoom and carry of large quantities of Cattle and grain...*⁷²

In December 1774, Ram Chuna Bose, Naib of Patcheat wrote: "In the time of harvest the Chouars from the Jungles raise Disturbances, prevent the Ryotts from reaping and destroy the crop."⁷³ Again in March 1776 he wrote that: "The Chowars of Manbhoom Burrabhoom and...arriving to a considerable number on the Frontiers of Patcheat have ... plundered the Effects Bullocks and of the Inhabitants and burnt the Houses..."⁷⁴

The political and economic instability also encouraged free booters like Damodar Singh to carry on the depredations on the neighbouring tracts, who retired to the jungles when the Company's troops came in search of them.⁷⁵ According to a letter from Mr. Harwood, incharge of Boglepore dated 24th January 1772 : "Omed and Omer Sing two notorious thieves who reside in the Pergunnah Curruckpore under your management had Hardiness a few days since to come to the Tuppeh Dacillconge in this District and to carry off...buffalos after having killed 4 or 5 of the Inhabitants..."⁷⁶

The precarious environment of the Jungle Mahals made it very difficult for the people here to maintain their existence. Hence the population here was very low which is also brought out in the colonial documents. According to the description given by Mr. Vansittart in 1769, "...western jungles were of very considerable extent, but abounding in

⁷² WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, vol. 1, 1February 1771. Letter from the supervisor of Beerbhoom Mr. Dumbleton.

⁷³WBSA, PCRB, vol. 9, 12 December 1774. Letter from Ram Chuna Bose- Naib of Patcheat.

⁷⁴Ibid.,vol. 13, 8th March 1776. Letter from Ramchunder Bose- Naib of Patcheat.

⁷⁵ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.38.

⁷⁶WBSA, Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, vol. 8, Letter from Mr. Harwood dated at Boglepore the 24th January 1772 to Mr. Nath Bateman.

hills and spacious woods. The inhabitants were very few...”⁷⁷ Similarly, a letter from Berrut Sikar, the Zemindar from Patcheat dated 23rd January 1775 stated that: “This Country is wild and ill peopled...”⁷⁸ The near isolation of the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahals and their anonymity to external society and polity resulted in the development of a close affinity and bond amongst the members of different groups resulting in the emergence of a close knit social structure.

Initially this place was inhabited by several tribes, most prominent being Munda, Oraon and Santal. Tribe refers to a ‘constellation of somewhat reformed aspects of primitive life, generally constituting a homogenous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular geographical area, lacking in scientific knowledge and modern technology, and having a social structure based on kinship.’⁷⁹ What bound them together was probably more cultural than political like language, custom, ritual, social organization, and religious belief etc. Tribes formed a close-knit community under a defined leader, chief, or ruling council where the leadership was neither formalized nor permanent. The villages in this region grew out of the agricultural settlements, which initially, were mostly in the form of cutting the forests and making the reclaimed area fit for cultivation. The wandering tribe then settled in a place and when the signs looked auspicious, stayed on there for a fairly long time. This was how the village was founded.

The village social organization was the most important instrument for sustaining the cultivation and for ensuring its security. Within the limits of the village thus

⁷⁷ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.63.

⁷⁸ WBSA, PCR, vol. 5, 23rd January 1775. Letter from the Zamindar of Patcheat- Berrut Sikar.

⁷⁹ Bidyanath Saraswati (ed.), *Tribal Thought and Culture: Essays in Honour of Surajit Chandra Sinha*, Concept Publishing House, Delhi, 1991, p.13

demarcated, all the land cultivable or waste, all the hills, jungles, streams, etc. became the common property of the village family. Since the resources in the jungle were scarce, these societies developed various ways and means for the limited and effective utilization of the available resources which led to a hierarchical division within this otherwise egalitarian society. The primary function of the village organization was to ensure control of the group founding the village over its resources. The villages were called Hatu, known as the Khuntkatti Hatu in case of the Mundas and Bhuinhari lands in case of the Oraons, both denoting a village of the family of the original settlers. The claim over the village resources was primarily confined to the descendants on the father's side all having rights, joint ownership, common worship, and a graveyard, the setting up of which represented the claim of the village family to ownership of the soil against all others.⁸⁰ However, this did not mean communal ownership, for the land was divided into several portions through mutual agreement with an individual families looking after the cultivation of the portion received. One or more bits of jungles were specifically reserved for the village gods and were called the Sarnas. Differences were also seen within the founding group of the village regarding the ownership of land. The headman and the priest, because of their special services enjoyed a superior position within the village community and were allowed to own land of a superior quality. Population in a tribal village did include settlers other than the 'descent' and the 'kinship' groups and most of them played a vital role in the village economy, however, they had little access to the village resources.

⁸⁰ Chaudhary, *Peasant History*, p.716.

A knowledge of a superior agricultural technique also brought about a change in the social composition of this region and ensured its possessor better chances of survival. According to S.C.Roy, when the Oraons reached Chotanagpur, Mundas were already in possession of the country. Initially they co-existed with the Mundas but gradually because of their better knowledge of agriculture, and their rapid multiplication due perhaps to the better food secured through agriculture, they became gradually predominant in the north-west and central part of the plateau pushing the Mundas to the southern and eastern parts of the plateau. The entry of several agricultural castes in the later period also had similar results whereby they displaced the original inhabitants from the centre to the peripheries of the Jungle Mahals.

In course of time, several forest principalities emerged in this region mostly based on caste affiliations. When attempts were made by the Mughals and later the British to subjugate them, these chiefs locally referred to as Rajas drew upon their caste linkages, strengthened by the geographical, environmental and political isolation, offering them a tough resistance. The absence of a central authority and the prevalent chaotic condition of the region further boosted the caste ties and enabled the Rajas to rule like despots. According to a letter to Edward Stephenson from one of the officials posted in the Jungle Mahals, dated 10th June 1775:

...In Mountaneous Conquests where there principal resource is Concealment it is only possible to Compel the Chiefs to submit by making the Inhabitants who may fall into your possession prisoners and resting their being released on the submission of their Chiefs...as these are relations to the people Confined... The Division of the Country under my Charge...In some Districts I found the authority

*and influence of the Zemindars so great that, whatever alteration happened it must principally effect him...*⁸¹

Lt. Richard Long, referring to the zamindar of Bogri wrote:

*...I have every reason to think that Jadoo Sing is determined not to surrender to Government ...and had beyond doubt assembled his dependents to a man from all quarters of his Zemindarry who are represented to me to be vastly numerous but of whose numbers I can form no idea as all the Jungle people here have joined him and notwithstanding every endeavors on my part I cannot get a single inhabitant of this Country to come in to me or give me the smallest information all seeming at present determined to follow there [sic.] masters fortune...*⁸²

Beside the caste affiliations, the threat from a common enemy and a fear of losing their long maintained autonomy in this unyielding tract also acted a unifying force for all the inhabitants of this region. According to a letter from Captain Briscoe, stationed at Manbhoom: "Her Narrain Zemindar of Monbhoom, has long excited, and been one of the Principal promoters of the Rebellion in the jungles, I was sent to put a stop to...all the Chiefs of the Several Districts in the Jungles being in arms, as one, and all connected and...engaged in supporting this open Rebellion..."⁸³

Hence, it is important to acknowledge the important role of environment in shaping up the polity, economy and society of the Jungle Mahals without which the study of Jungle Mahals would be incomplete.

MAN AND ENVIRONMENT

Having undertaken a study of the effect of environment on various aspects of human life, it is also important to understand the impact, man had on the environment of the Jungle Mahals. Human beings form a very active part of the environment and more

⁸¹ WBSA, PCRB, vol.8, 10th June 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson.

⁸² Ibid., vol. 28, 25th February 1779. Letter from Mr. Hewett to Lt. Richard Long.

⁸³ Ibid., vol. 9, 3rd July 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. Briscoe.

than any other species have developed the ability to modify their environment. In fact, they have created a new “biome” or ecological formation, i.e. “man altered landscape”⁸⁴ which has indirectly or directly affected all other living organisms. The method in which the available resources are appropriated often depends upon the ideologies and philosophies prevalent among the societies using it. However, the ideologies of societies also undergo change according to their needs and demands of time, which might even negate the ideological differences between them, putting them together on equal footing in pursuit of their goals. This was precisely the case in Jungle Mahals as far as resource use is concerned.

The Jungle Mahals of the late eighteenth century was inhabited by the tribals who were still very much dependent upon the produce of the jungles, as well as the settled cultivators. Hence it represented a transitory phase between the society of Gatherers and the society of Settled Cultivators. Gadgil and Guha have dealt extensively with the ideologies prevalent among different societies. According to them, Gatherers are totally dependent on nature for their survival—ideologically— they regard humans as merely part of a community of beings that includes living as well as non living elements of nature.⁸⁵ This ideology of nature worship along with specific social practices orient societies in the gathering mode towards a prudent use of nature. Agricultural societies, on the other hand, though still being subjected to nature’s caprices, successfully establish a substantial control over natural processes. Hence, ideologically, they continue (in part) to perceive man as being one among a community of beings; but simultaneously, the

⁸⁴ Shashinungla, *Environment Preservation: A Philosophical Critique*, Decent Books, Delhi, 2005, p.22.

⁸⁵ Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p.20.

image of man as a steward of natural resources also acquires influence resulting in the restrained use of natural resources. The ecological impact of peasant mode may, therefore, be characterized as intermediate. With the march of agriculture towards what has remained uncultivated land, a significant portion of virgin land begins to be converted into artificial grasslands or crop fields, which replace forests, marshes or natural grasslands. The cumulative impact of these interventions is a striking change in the landscape.⁸⁶ The late eighteenth century saw the colonial government making inroads into the jungle Mahals and who were also the representative of industrial societies. According to Gadgil and Guha, Industrial societies assert that man is separate from nature, and that they have the right to exploit natural resources to further his own well being. Nature is now desacralized.⁸⁷ Thus, the ecological impact of industrially advanced countries is characterized by a behavioral discrepancy between prudence at home and profligacy abroad.

However, it would be unreasonable to study the environmental condition of Jungle Mahals during the transition period solely on the basis of these ideologies. Refuting Gadgil and Guha, B.B.Chaudhari opines that, the modes of subsistence of different groups seldom remained fixed for long, leading to movements from one mode to another – for instance from shifting cultivation and pastoral occupation to settled cultivation. This accounted for the absence of any fixed boundaries between them.⁸⁸ According to Hunter “the Santal was at no distant period an agriculturist. When driven from the open lowlands, he wrings in existence from the forest; but he carries with him a

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.39.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.45.

⁸⁸ Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.766.

taste for agriculture...”⁸⁹ Even ‘settled cultivation’ did not mean that cultivators did not move out of their original settlements. The declining fertility of the cropped land through the continuous cultivation, harassing fiscal demands, abundant forest lands were some of the reasons for peasant mobility. Changes from one occupation to another were also common. The use of the forest resources by forest dwellers was also far from being non-competitive, but the nature of changes here from one subsistence mode to another differed. For example, changes from settled cultivation to shifting cultivation generally resulted from the intrusion of more resourceful and generally high caste agriculturists who succeeded in pushing out the earlier settlers. Far more common was the gradual replacement of shifting cultivators tied to an inferior farming technique by migrants skilled in the more productive technique of farming. For example: when the Oraons reached Chotanagpur they found that the Mundas were already in possession of the country. Initially they co-existed with the Mundas but gradually because of their superior equipment for the struggle for existence, their comparatively better intelligence, better knowledge of agriculture, and their rapid multiplication due perhaps to the better food secured through agriculture displace the Mundas. The conservative Mundas retreated to the southern and eastern parts of the plateau. The victory of the Oraons was not a victory of arms or of physical strength but of improved tools and of qualities like patience, industry and perseverance which have survival value in the struggle for material existence.⁹⁰

Even the ‘cultural tradition’, did not have the kind of ecological implication that Gadgil and Guha supposed. Choice of one grove rather than other in the village was

⁸⁹ Hunter, *Annals*, p.214.

⁹⁰ S.C.Roy, *The Oraons*, p.27.

presumably arbitrary depending upon, perhaps, the thickness of the tree cluster as a suitable hidden home of gods. It just meant exclusion forever of a specified village space from cultivation and not its prudent use from time to time. Besides, apart from the purely religious origins of the reverence for the sacred village site, peasant or tribal villages, while keen on increasing cultivation, had no recognizable means of knowing if going beyond a limit could in the long run damage the locality's eco-system. 'Conservation', 'protection' of living resources did not perhaps influence their use of the resources.

It was during the late eighteenth century that the Company had come to acquire the rights over Bengal and subsequently over the Jungle Mahals, and the unfamiliarity with the situation that the Colonists encountered here automatically imposed a restraint over the exploitation of the natural resources. It was also the time when the Company was cautious enough not play with the established norms and sentiments of the inhabitants (certain trees etc. were considered sacred by the tribals of the Jungle Mahal) and refrain from using certain resources despite its economic value. Therefore the way in which the resources of the Jungle Mahal were utilized by the Colonial government during the late eighteenth century is far from being described as profligate.

Therefore, the practice with respect to the resource use can be better understood by following a three pronged approach of prudence, expansion and extraction. So long as these societies were confined within their own settlement they tried to utilize the resources judiciously resulting in the prudent use of resources. After a certain point of time a need was felt for expansion which led to the colonization or acquisition of unsettled areas leading to an ecological transformation to some extent but not its exploitation per se. In case of gatherers and agriculturists, there was an internal

colonization of the areas in the near vicinity, however in case of Colonial government it led to an external colonization. Expansion was followed by forceful extraction of resources in the form of raids (which directly resulted in the immense destruction of the natural resources) or excessive taxation (which indirectly compelled others to exploit resources) either to supplement their subsistence or to display political authority or simply to meet the demands of these raids and taxation or for commercial purpose, which resulted in the exploitation of the natural resources.

Therefore, there were several processes at work as far as the use of resources are concerned which can be better understood by classifying them under these three heads. These are the three aspects which form a conceptual parameter to understand the relationship between man and environment which will be examined variably in the subsequent chapters.

CIVILIZING MISSION

The categorization of the indigenous inhabitants, especially of the forest areas as uncivilized in need of civilization has a longer history than the colonial period. According to Hunter, in Bengal the population consisted of two races; Aboriginal and Aryan. With the coming of Aryans in Bengal, the aboriginal tribes like Santals were pushed into the highlands of Beerbhoom, and the mountains were fixed as landmarks to demarcate their respective territories.⁹¹ However, the forest of the Jungle Mahals also provided shelter to other wandering tribes like the Mundas and Oraons, but the physical demarcation between Aryans and the non-aryans was never breached. Sanskrit literature referred to

⁹¹ Hunter, *Annals*, pp.88-89.

these aborigines as Dasyans. There were primarily four things which made the Aryans superior to the aboriginals. First was language. Aboriginal language was “of a broken, imperfect type”, but from the “lips of the Aryan flowed a language instinct with tenderness and power, a language equipped with the richest inflections and a whole phalanx of grammatical forms...which from the beginning of recorded time stands forth in one form or other as the vehicle of his highest intellect efforts”⁹². Second was the difference in their skin colour; the invaders came of a northern stock, and deeply felt that repugnance which the white man everywhere entertains to the black⁹³. A third source of detestation on the part of the Aryan for the aborigines was their repulsive habit of eating. According to Hunter, “they made use of animal food to a degree which shocked the nicer sensibilities of the Aryan”⁹⁴. The last source of deep and abiding aversion was the paganism of the Dasyans. The Aryan brought with him highly developed beliefs, and a stately array of religious rites. The aborigines seemed to the Aryan to possess no conception of God at all. Thus the idea of Aryan invasion and the first contact between the non Aryans and the Aryans in the first century A.D. had a great impact on the British understanding of the forest people and their culture as is evident from words of Hunter, “...the unequal degree of enlightenment possessed by the aboriginal and the Aryan races, ...affords the true explanation of those cruel social distinctions which divide the existing population of India”⁹⁵.

Despite the physical barrier, the “two races cannot live with each other without affecting each other. The superior may force the inferior into its own moulds, but it

⁹² Ibid., p. 113.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

cannot help being itself influenced in turn...”⁹⁶ Thus, the features which distinguished the two races came to be diluted over a period of time, which will be dealt at length in the second chapter. The subsequent period saw an increased migration of Hindus into this tribal area where the Brahmanical values gradually acquired legitimacy resulting in the exclusion and subordination of tribals. There was a mutual exchange of religion and culture between the two. Thus by the time the British came into this region the former basis of distinction between the Aryans and the Non Aryans though applicable theoretically was no longer practical. Thus there emerged a new colonial understanding of the term ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’.

Colonial records contain several references which give us an insight into the colonial understanding and perception of the Jungle Mahals and its inhabitants. In 1775, one of the officials in charge of the Jungle Mahals wrote: “...The Division of the Country under my Charge... scarce knew the name of Government, or have any conception of those finer and more gentle bonds of which more civilized People are attached to a State.”⁹⁷ According to a letter written by one Mr. Matter and Mr. Farguhar concerning the province of Ramgur: “tribe and people found there and in the neighbouring provinces called kolls who at present live in the jungles almost in the state of nature...unacquainted with the conveniencies [sic.] and comforts of a settled and civilized state of life ...”⁹⁸. In one of the letters to the Governor General, the members of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan wrote: “...Patcoom... which is wholly

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

⁹⁷ WBSA, PCR, vol. 8, 10 June 1775. Letter to Edward Stephenson.

⁹⁸ Ibid., vol. 23, 6 January 1778. Containing a copy of a proposal presented by Mr. Matter and Farguhar.

uncivilized and in a great measure uncultivated consisting of Jungles...”⁹⁹ Thus, the colonial government was quite clear in their understanding of the uncivilized people. Anything and anybody that inhabited the forest and depended heavily upon it for various needs; did not practice settled cultivation on a large scale leaving a vast tract of land uncultivated; and lived in a state of independence outside the purview of a central government was, according to them, uncivilized.

British colonialism from the beginning had increasingly legitimated itself as an imperialism of improvement, as one that would bring the barbarian and savage into the circle of the civilized. Now, the question that can be asked is whether the civilizing mission meant the erasure of the wildness of the colonized or not?¹⁰⁰ According to scholars, colonialism was based on the premise of ‘rule of difference’, i.e. the idea that the colonized were fundamentally different from the colonizers¹⁰¹. In this context, the difference between the plains and the forests or the communities that lived in them was not, for the British, one between the civilized and the wild; it was rather about different form of wildness. The tribes were wild because they were ‘primitive’, anachronistic in the sense that they were from a time before civilization, a time that had been left behind by more evolved societies. It was not as though the castes were in the same time as western or European societies- it was only that they were in a more advanced time than the tribes and in this sense less wild than tribes.¹⁰² If the difference between the colonizers and the colonized was erased, so was the justification for the colonial presence. According to Skaria, the civilizing mission therefore “never could be about

⁹⁹ Ibid., vol. 29, 25 May 1779. Letter to Governor General and his Council from Marriot, Dawson, Charters, Taylor and Dowall.

¹⁰⁰ Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, p.193.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.193. A phrase used by Partha Chatterjee.

¹⁰² Ibid. 194.

erasing wildness: it always had to be about subordinating the wild, construing the colonized as wild, and sustaining that construction".¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Ibid. 193.

CHAPTER 2

POLITY, SOCIETY AND FISCAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE JUNGLE MAHALS

Jungle Mahals prior to the British rule was marked by several pre-state political formations established by different tribes inhabiting this region. The three most dominant tribes of Jungle Mahals were those of *Mundas*, *Oraons* and the *Santals*.

There are various traditions prevalent among the *Mundas* regarding their place of origin. According to one tradition, the *Mundas* migrated into India from the now submerged hypothetical continent of *Lemuria* which was supposed to have once connected India with Madagascar and Africa. Another tradition believes that the *Mundas* originated out of a mixture of colonists from eastern Tibet or western China across the Himalayas with the Australo-Dravidians to the south of that range and entered India from the north east. *Mundas* themselves assert to be the indigenous native of the Indian soil. But, there is hardly any evidence to substantiate these traditions.¹ However, there is a better understanding of the movement of the *Mundas* after their arrival in India. After the *Mundas* entered India they originally lived in the hilly regions along the Aravalli and Vindhyan ranges and gradually spread further to the north and occupied the valleys of the mighty rivers of northern India. With the Aryan invasion the *Mundas* migrated southwards to modern Bundelkhand and central India, thence across eastern Rajputana back again to north western India and then through modern Rohilkhand to Oudh to Bihar

¹ S.C.Roy, *The Mundas And Their Country*, Asia Publishing House, 1968, p. 6.

and finally to *Chotanagpur*.² Here they cleared the jungles of this forest country and established their primitive *Kol* villages, and in the course of time spread entirely over this region. Till about the 16th century, the *Mundas* were walled off from the outside world by chains of hills and forests.

A few centuries later, a Dravidian tribe found their way into the jungles inhabited by the *Mundas*. They were the *Kurukhs* better known as the *Uraons/Oraons*. Before finally settling in the *Chotanagpur* region, *Oraons* also wandered from place to place and after many wanderings in northern India, they at length went to what is now the Shahabad district in Bihar. Here they settled down as agriculturists and land owners. However, when some other tribe became pre-dominant in this region, the *Oraons* appear to have taken shelter on the Rohtas plateau. Thereupon the *Oraons* split up in two branches: one branch still known as the Male proceeded northwards up the valley of the Ganges and established themselves on the *Rajmahal* hills, the other branch, the ancestor of the *Kurukhs* went down the Son and up the north *Koel* south-eastwards through *Palamau* into the *Chotanagpur*.

Another group of people quite numerous in the Jungle Mahals were the *Santals*. The *Santals* inhabited the whole of the western frontier of lower Bengal, from within the few miles of the sea to the hills of Bhagalpur. There is no definite idea regarding their place of origin but going by their tradition as understood by W.W.Hunter, their mountain home was in the Himalayas from where they came to the higher valleys of Brahmaputra. From there they migrated westwards and reached Sikar in the Damodar valley and further moved westwards towards Nagpur (*Chotanagpur*), being gradually pushed on from the

² Roy, *The Mundas*, p. 37.

open country to the mountains, as the Hindu population advanced.³ However, unlike the *Mundas* and *Oraons*, the *Santal* world was marked by the absence of any centralized political authority before the coming of the Colonial state.

In course of time, these tribal societies underwent pre-state formations like the *Manki* system and the *Parha* federation. In *Munda* villages there was a creation of a 'Patti' system according to which, villages by batches generally of twelve came to be grouped together as a Patti with the strongest and most influential amongst the headmen as the *Manki* or Patti Chief. The remaining village headmen swore allegiance to the elected *Manki*. Military service was the sole condition of this system, but in course of time it also became a relationship of tribute in which each village headman of the *patti* made periodical presents to the *Manki*. Later these voluntary presents came to be regarded as rightful dues. *Manki* like the *Munda* was looked upon as a chief among equals and his office also gradually became hereditary.⁴ Similarly, the *Oraon* villages saw the establishment of a *Parha* system, according to which, a *Parha* was a federation of seven, twelve, twenty one or twenty two villages, over which there was a raja, who was the headman of one of the villages of the group, while the headman of other villages acted as the different office bearers of the *Parha* association.⁵ Over a period of time, these *Mankis* and the *Rajas* became very powerful.

These pre-state formations were followed by the actual state formations in this region like the *Chotanagpur* Raj, *Malla* Raj etc.

³ Hunter, *Annals*, p.155.

⁴ Roy, *The Mundas*, p. 73.

⁵ Roy, *The Oraons*, p. 30.

There are various versions of the origin of the *Chotanagpur* Raj. Nagvanshavali, a mid nineteenth century account by Veni Ram, presents a *Brahmanical* account of the origin of the *Chotanagpur* Raj according to which, the first king Phani Mukut was the son of a certain Pundarika Nag who took the shape of a Brahman but disappeared before the birth of his son and eventually the son was raised by a *Munda* named Madra who was the raja of twelve villages who later appointed him the king after a discussion with the village *panchayat*.⁶ *Mundas* and *Oraons* have their own account of the indigenous origin of the Raj, which have been systematically formulated by S.C Roy. According to these traditions, Phani Mukut is projected as the son of a daughter of a *Munda* chief who had an affair with a stranger, most probably a Brahman, who later on with the mutual consent of the *Mundas* and *Oraons* became the first king of the *Chotanagpur* Raj.⁷ K.S.Singh following the line of Surajit Sinha that “none of the principalities operated in political vacuum”⁸, has placed the whole phenomenon of the establishment of the Raj in the historical perspective of a larger ecological and cultural region generally called the *Nag Khanda* or *Nag Disum* (the *Chattisgarh-Vidarbha* region) and has suggested a probability that the state was founded by the Dravidian speaking *Nagvanshis* from the west of *Chotanagpur* who already had a tradition of formation of kingdom.⁹ According to K.S.Singh, two Naga kingdoms flourished in *Bastar* and *Kawardha* in the early medieval period. The *Kawardha Nagbanshis* were overthrown by the *Gonds* in the 14th century and it is likely that one of the scions fled to *Chotanagpur* and founded the *Nagbanshis* who

⁶ K.S.Singh. ‘The Chotanagpur Raj: Mythology, Structure And Ramification’ in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities*, pp 52-56.

⁷ Roy, *The Oraons*, p. 31.

⁸ Surajit Sinha, *Tribal Polities And State Systems In Pre-Colonial Eastern And North Eastern India*, K.P.Bagchi And Company, Calcutta, 1987, p.xix.

⁹ Singh, ‘The Chotanagpur Raj’, p.62.

had as their emblem the hooded serpent (*phani*) which was also the emblem of the *Chotanagpur* Raj whose first ruler bore the name Phanimukut.¹⁰ Whatever the basis of origin, the establishment of the Chhotanagpur Raj marked the transition from the clan based *parhas* to territorial kingship.

Similarly, the origin of the *Malla* dynasty of *Mallabhum* (located in the south western fringe of Bengal) is also shrouded in mystery. According to the chronicles, the founder of the *Malla* dynasty, Adi Malla, was the son of a *Rajput Kshatriya* raja from northern India, who was born in a forest in *Mallabhum* where he grew up under a Brahmin. When he grew up in age, he came in contact with the aboriginal princes nearby and with their help succeeded in carving out a principality in the forest territory. The descendants of Adi Malla expanded the boundaries of *Malla* principality by annexing the territories of the neighbouring princes and finally carving out a region called *Mallabhum* spread between the hilly and rolling uplands on the eastern end of the *Chotanagpur* plateau and the western fringe of the great alluvial plains of Bengal. One of Adi Malla's descendants later made Bishnupur the capital.¹¹ Other versions of the chronicle highlight the *Bagdi* association of the *Malla* Rajas. *Bagdis* were "a cultivating, fishing, and menial caste of Central and Western Bengal, who appear from their features to be of a Dravidian descent, and closely akin to the tribes whom...we may call aboriginal."¹² According to a myth prevalent among the *Bagdis*, Adi Malla was the first *Bagdi* begotten by Siva and Parvati. Some believe that the *Malla* raja originated from a semi- aboriginal group like

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Mallabhum' in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.77.

¹² Risley, *The Tribes*, p.37.

the *Bagdis* and assumed Kshatriya status at a later date by dint of their achievements as warriors and independent rulers.¹³

Likewise, there are numerous accounts about the origin of Kingship in different places within this geographical region. However, an important thing to note in almost all these accounts is that the claim to a higher caste descent was insufficient to establish the legitimacy of these dynasties, for even the *Brahmanical* accounts do not completely rule out the tribal connection in their establishment, whereby, the founders of the dynasties are mostly projected as having been brought up by the tribal or lower caste chiefs and eventually deriving the authority from the support of these chiefs, who made them Raja on their own accord.¹⁴ It is difficult to ascertain whether these theories were fabricated to cover up the aboriginal origin of the founders of these dynasties or to rationalize the usurpation of authority by high caste migrant adventurers, for there is a possibility of both.¹⁵ Nevertheless, these stories point towards a situation where both the heritage of the indigenous social and cultural forces as represented by the tribals and the lower castes and the influence of the organized and systematized social order represented by Brahmanism had strong relevance which made it imperative for the *Malla* rajas to strike out a balance between their relationship with the two different forces; the endogenous tribal and peasant society and the larger state system. The juxtaposition of these two social forces and the inevitable interaction between them was therefore crucial in the evolution of the political, social and cultural formations of these kingdoms.¹⁶

¹³ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.79.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.77

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.80.

By the early medieval period, this so called Jungle Terry region of the eighteenth century consisted of a number of chiefdoms under the control of leaders like the *sardars*, the *mankis* of the *mundas* or the *ditiya* rajas and the rajas of *Sirguja*, *Patkum*, *Panchampur*, *Padampur* and *Jotbihar* who occur in the myths relating to the origin of the *Nagbanshi* dynasty of *Chotanagpur*, *Sikhara* dynasty of *Sikharabhum* and the *Malla* Dynasty of *Mallabhum*.¹⁷ They were periodically engaged in warfare with the neighbouring chieftains or princes and were also involved in marital relationship with some of them. Under such a situation, small scale participatory tribal polities consisting of a small number of neighbouring villages needed support of larger polities, for protecting themselves from the pressures of large scale political kingdoms. Similarly, the large-scale forest principalities like *Panchakot* and *Bishnupur* allowed the development and persistence of several smaller forest kingdoms as vassals surrounding the central regions of their relatively large scale polities.¹⁸

The external intervention by the Mughal and the Marathas put an end to the relative isolation of Jungle Mahals. In course of their conquest of Bengal and the consolidation of their power in the province between the end of the 16th century and the early decades of the 17th century, the Mughal had subdued a number of powerful forest principalities like *Kokrah* (*Chotanagpur*), *Pachet* (*Panchakot*) and *Bishnupur* (*Mallabhum*); and absorbed them in the imperial administrative system by granting their rulers the status of *Peshkash* paying vassals designated as *Ghair amli zamindar*. The Mughlas needed powerful allies in different hill forest terrains which were notionally

¹⁷ Ibid., p.75.

¹⁸ Saraswati (ed.), *Tribal Thought*, p.44. also see Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities*, p. xix.

included within their empire. According to *Akbarnamah* and *Tuzuk i Jahangiri*¹⁹, it was in 1585A.D. that the raja of *Chotanagpur* was first reduced to the position of a *Malguzar* (tributary) of the Mughal emperor. *Chotanagpur* became part of the Bihar *subah* and the chief was recognized as a *zamindar* though he was for all practical purposes an autonomous chief, oscillating between submission and independence as the circumstances warranted. In the reign of Jahangir, the Governor of Bihar frequently sent detachments to *Kokrah* of which the then ruling chief was Durjan Sal, and was generally satisfied with a tribute of two or three diamonds. Given the impenetrable terrain of this region the raja was quite irregular in the payment of his tribute and consequently, under Jahangir's instructions, in the year 1616 A.D., the Raja was defeated, deprived of his family diamonds and 23 elephants and was captured and kept in confinement in the Gwalior fort for a period of twelve years.²⁰

Akbarnama also refers to Dhar Hambir, the raja of *Bishnupur*, who had joined the forces of the Mughal general Man Singh in the expedition against the *Pathans* in north Orissa. According to the family chronicle of the *Mallas*, Dhar Hambir was the 48th ruler between 1586 and 1596 who acknowledged the Mughal suzerainty and was accorded the position of a *khillat zamindar*, i.e., autonomous tributary vassal having the right to build forts. However, his son Bir Hambir, tried to assert his independence later and so in 1608 Islam Khan the governor of Bengal sent an expedition against him and the rajas of *Sikharbhum*, *Birbhum* and *Hijli*. Bir Hambir, who was at *Panchakot* (Pachet) then submitted to the Mughal and helped them in their campaigns against *Birbhum*. After this the *Mallas* never defied the Mughal. The Mughal accorded the Malla rajas the position of

¹⁹ Beveridge (ed.), *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, vol.1, pp.314-316.

²⁰ Roy, *The Mundas*, p.96.

Ghair Amlī zamindars who, by imperial decree enjoyed the right of ruling their territory hereditarily as autonomous landlords paying fixed amount of money by way of tribute. But protected by dense forests and large rivers the Malla rajas appear to have operated as semi independent rulers rather than as autonomous *zamindars*. They did not pay tribute regularly and often disregarded the permits, grants or summons issued by the Mughal *subahdar* (governor).²¹

From about the end of the seventeenth century the Mughals tried to control these autonomous chiefs by boosting up the power of the big official *zamindars* located in their neighbourhood, namely, the *zamindari* of Burdwan, held by an upcountry immigrant *Khatri* family.²² Between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century the Burdwan *zamindari* rapidly spread both on the north and on the south either by grants made by the Mughal or by forcibly occupying the *zamindaris* of the neighbouring territories which they invariably got confirmed by the Mughals. Finally the estates of the Burdwan *zamindari* spread from Senbhum on the north to Brahmanbhum on the south and incorporated *Gopbhum* and *Chitua-Barda* on the east. Thus by the first half of the eighteenth century the eastern part of the Jungle Mahals had come to be surrounded by the territories controlled by the big official *zamindars* under the Mughals.²³

Early 18th century also saw the disappearance of most of the *peshkash* paying *zamindars* because of the conversion of their territory into revenue paying *amli zamindaris* subjected to the assessment by the imperial authority. For example; the then governor of Bengal, Murshid Quli issued title deeds to the Rajas granting them the right

²¹ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.81.

²² Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society c.1760-1850*, Manohar, Delhi, 1979, p.90.

²³ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.88.

to possess their territories by virtue of office rather than hereditary right as in the case of the ordinary *amli zamindars* and included them in the regular fiscal divisions. By doing so he sought to erode the status of the Rajas as tributary vassals. However, he did not assess these kingdoms nor did he convert the demand into revenue and the Raja continued to pay *peshkash* as before. Besides, he also allowed them to continue to enjoy the privilege of exemption from personal appearance in the court of the governor.²⁴

However, in case of Bishnupur, Murshid Quli Khan never attempted to bring it under full subjugation because of the inaccessible nature of the territory and also because it's cost of direct administration would have far exceeded the revenue of the country, which was poor in produce.²⁵ Though initially, Murshid Quli had included *Mallabhum* in the *chakla* Burdwan, in 1728 it was dissociated from it and entered as a separate *ithiman zamindari*, i.e., a large *zamindari* created by imperial *farman* and liable to lumpsum annual payment.²⁶ Thus the Bishnupur Raj continued to exist under the Mughal empire and represented a truly ancient *zamindari* as compared to Burdwan during the British rule.

POLITY

The Jungle *Rajs* represented a 'centralized' state which subsequently became 'decentralized' and adversely affected the King's ability to control his subjects. "The forest principalities represented an intermediate level between the segmentary structure of the tribal polity in the uplands, particularly on the west and the apparently highly organized and centralized land revenue and military administration of the Mughals on the

²⁴ Ibid., p.87.

²⁵ Ray, *Change in Bengal*, p.111.

²⁶ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.87.

east.”²⁷ The situation remained unchanged even at the time of British takeover; hence, it is logical to undertake a study of the administrative apparatus of both: the forest principality and the village polity. In the absence of individual accounts, a brief description of the polity of *Mallabhum* would give an idea about the polity of the forest principalities of the Jungle Mahals in general.

At the apex of the political apparatus stood the Maharaja who exercised his suzerainty over the *samantas* who were recognized as rajas. The Maharaja got his political and administrative authority validated by the imperial recognition of his position as a *ghair amli killajat zamindar* or the *peshkash* paying *killajat zamindar*.²⁸ However, in the local political set up, irrespective of their position vis a vis the Mughals they were more or less autonomous. Though the Mughal *nawabs* had exerted pressure on them for reducing their power and status, they were never able to interfere with the internal affairs of the principality.

According to Surajit Sinha; “In none of the kingdoms or states, economic and political dominance alone was adequate for firmly establishing political control of the Head. The kings, princes or chiefs had to present themselves as heads of polity, society religion and culture. They had to combine the economic role of surplus extraction and exploitation with redistribution of wealth for public good.”²⁹ This was true even for the forest principalities where “Political and administrative and military powers were not sufficient to ensure the authority of the raja. It was imperative for the raja to validate his position in society by the common consent of the people at large, so that he could emerge

²⁷ Ibid.,p.97.

²⁸ Ibid., p.104.

²⁹ Sinha. *Tribal Polities*, p.xxiii.

as the promoter and defender of social order as well as of the cultural norms.”³⁰ Therefore, here the attempt of the forest rajas was to get rid of the tribal ancestry which according to the *Brahmanical* tradition was low and unclean for legitimately ruling over a country; and strive for an upper caste recognition either with the Brahmins or the *Kshatriyas*. For instance, the *Malla* rajas of *Mallabhum* often claimed to belong to the *surya vamsa*, the solar lineage of the *Kshatriya varna* and to the respectable *Chauhan* clan of the *Rajputs*.³¹ In the process, they also adopted *brahmanical* gods and goddesses but never became exclusively sectarian and also accepted the tribal deities.³²

The raja was the principal source of social service and cultural activities. They had an elaborate machinery for surplus extraction at their disposal and beside spending a considerable portion of the surplus on civil and military administration, they also used it for religious and social purpose. Since the raja was assessed at a very small *peshkash* under the Mughals, it enabled them to lay by considerable sums of money from the revenues for religious purposes.³³ They granted a very large quantity of land entirely rent free or on quit rent as *debottar*, *vaishnavottar*, *brahmottar* and for the construction of temples and other centres of religious activities. The religious grants like *brahmottar* etc. were apparently meant for the maintenance of the Brahmins who performed certain kinds of services for the community like the priest or the teacher, for which they did not receive any remuneration from the villagers and hence required grants for their maintenance. Prominent persons belonging to the non Brahmin castes including the employees of the

³⁰ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.104.

³¹ Ibid., p.105.

³² Ibid., p.107.

³³ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization In Rural Bengal c.1760-1800*, Delhi, 2000, p.148.

raja were given the *Mahatran* grants. Renowned poets and singers also received *brahmottar* or *mahatran* lands as rewards for their achievements.³⁴ Before 1765, the amount of lands granted for charitable and religious purpose (*Baz-i-Zamin*) in *Bishnupur* amounted to 93,130.86 *bighas*.³⁵

All these actions bolstered the king's reputation as a benevolent and paternal figure and subtly established his social and political authority on the local forces in the villages.

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

Mallabhum was primarily divided into four administrative divisions, namely, the *samanta* territories, the *talukdari* area, the *ghatwali* area and the *khalsa* area. In the local tradition of *Mallabhum* the subordinate chieftaincies were known as *samantas*. The exact terms on which the *samantas* held their territories is not known, but as subordinate chieftains they might have paid tribute to the Malla Rajas as a token of the nominal allegiance and helped them with militia and provisions when necessary.³⁶

The *talukdari* area were held by the *talukdars* whose rent receiving rights of the *talukdari* tenures might have originated from the grants made by the raja. Alternatively the raja might have created the tenures by selling the intermediate right. But in either case the holder of the tenure was required to pay the raja a stipulated amount of rent annually. The *talukdars* held the tenures hereditarily and usually dealt with the tenants on their own

³⁴ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p. 102.

³⁵ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.149.

³⁶ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p. 89.

terms. But in certain cases the raja is known to have interfered with the internal matters of the *Talukdars*.³⁷

The *Ghatwali* areas were held by the *sardar ghatwals* and were mostly spread over the densely forested tracts. According to Major Brown, incharge of the Jungle Mahals in the 1770's "all these Jungle Terry Gautwalls, were...subject to the several rajahs, to whose territories their Gautwallis belonged; they paid a slight tribute in token of feudal obedience, and were bound to oppose all invasions, (principally from the south) to attend their Rajahs when summoned, with all their followers in arms, and to be responsible for every violence and irregularity committed in their respective boundaries"³⁸ A *sardar ghatwal* also known as *digwar* was assisted by subordinate *ghatwals* known as *sadials* and *tabedars* who formed a militia under the *sardar*. In most cases the influential local leaders were appointed as *sardars* or *digwars* when they submitted to the raja and agreed to serve him. In some places the *ghatwals* performed police duties in maintaining law and order within specified areas.

Following Jameson's understanding of *paiks*, it is important to note here that like *paiks* even the *ghatwals* are often referred to loosely and inaccurately as holding on a feudal tenure. Jameson argues that, it may fit in with the popular notion of the feudal system as one in which the tenants of the lord of the manor were liable to be called out at any moment to follow him to battle under the conditions of the tenure, but legally the position of the *paiks* (also *ghatwals*) was entirely different from that of the feudal tenants. There is a clear distinction between a grant of land burdened with the performance of certain duties and the grant of an office the service of which are remunerated by the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Brown, *India Tracts*, p.22.

office being allowed to hold land free of rent or at a reduced rent. Feudal tenures proper come within the former category, while *paiks* and *ghatwals* were primarily servants and therefore their tenures belong to the latter class.³⁹

The administration of the *khalsa* area was directly managed by the employees of the raj. But for the purpose of revenue administration, *ghatwali* and the *khalsa* areas formed a consolidated territory which was divided into several parts called *taraf*. Each *taraf* was placed under a *tarafdar* who was responsible for the collection of rent from the different categories of payers.⁴⁰ Subordinate revenue officials of the Raj collected rents and levies from the villages. However, in some cases, lands were farmed out to the *ijaradars* i.e. rent farmers.⁴¹

Police administration was controlled by the centre. *Teynaut faujdari* was the central police establishment. The *thanadars* were the subordinate police officials in the outlying areas controlled by the *sadar kachari*. The raja was the final authority in all judicial matters. He presided over the *des bichar*, i.e., the highest court of the des, the territory of *Mallabhum*.⁴²

In a situation where there were frequent tussles between the neighbouring principalities and constant threat of the Maratha raiders, it was important to have a proper military organization. Though the *Ghatwalis* were adequate for fighting the small principalities in the neighbourhood, they were no match against the armies of the raja of Burdwan etc. who possessed artillery of some strength. Even within their own principality the Malla rajas had the problem of containing a large number of *sardar*

³⁹ Jameson, *Final Report*, p.102.

⁴⁰ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.92.

⁴² *Ibid.*,p.95.

ghatwals who possessed firearms and commanded militia and the turbulent ethnic groups who were proficient in the use of arms. Therefore it became necessary for the Malla rajas to maintain a regular central army at *Bishnupur*. The army consisted of foot soldiers carrying bows and arrows and muskets, cavalry and heavy artillery. The commanders of the army usually came from the *kayastha* and *gop* castes but the rank and file of the army were recruited from the tribal groups like the *Santal* and the lower castes of *Bagdi*, *Bauri*, *Dom*, *Mete*, *Layek*, *Hari* and *Majhi* and the intermediate castes of the *Gop* and *Teli*.⁴³ Apart from the army there was a paramilitary force of the *Mahalberya* recruited from the *Bagdi* and the *Majhi* castes for guarding the *Bishnupur* fort and the residences of the raja within the fort and outside of the capital.⁴⁴

Arms were manufactured mostly in the *Bishnupur* city. Raja Bir Hambir is known to have brought in expert iron smelters and steel manufacturers belonging to the Angara subcaste of the *Lohar* caste from *Manbhum* and highly proficient arms-manufacturing *Karmakars* belonging to the *Biralai* subcaste from Burdwan. Different varieties of firearms including muskets, matchlocks, pistols and cannons of varying sizes were used, but a variety of small cannons called *genthya* and large cannons had made the *Malla* artillery particularly strong. There was a large workshop called *kamandhala* on the southern edge of the *Bishnupur* fort for manufacturing cannons. Trained *mirdahas* (gunners) are said to have been brought by the rajas from Dhaka and Delhi. The *Madars*, an *Antyaj* caste, specialized in making gun powder.⁴⁵

Fortification was another important mechanism for defence. According to Hunter, “the country contained many strongholds in possession of the *zamindars*, which

⁴³ Sanyal, ‘Mallabhum’, p. 96.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.96-97.

were dignified by the name of forts. A place of strength in which to retreat on the occasion of the incursions of the Mahrattas or their jungle neighbours, who were always liable to attack."⁴⁶ These forts represented a very unique architecture and was almost impenetrable as is evident from the eighteenth century description of the Ghatsila fort by an English official –

It is situated on a plain surrounded with jungle; its area nearly 1,150 sq. feet. It has a rampart of a very bad earth, or rather gravel, and of course a bad rampart, as the gravel does not stick; but the ditch is excellent, being forty two feet wide and 18 feet high to the level without. The principal gate is on the north side, neart the north east angle; for there is no bastion, and there is a small gate in the same manner near the south-west angle. The bridge over the ditch to both these gates is a set of trees laid horizontally and covered with earth. Without the principal ditch it is a very large esplanade, in which was the bazaar and several dwelling houses, and this again was surrounded by ditch about seven feet wide and four deep. Within, in the very centre of the fort was the Zamindar's particular dwelling house, surrounded by a very high and thick wall, being to the north and south 228 by 240 feet to the east and west, esplanade and all. There are only three paltry draw wells, but to the north-west without the limits of the lesser ditch two large tanks.⁴⁷

VILLAGE POLITY

Villages occupied the lowest rung in the administrative apparatus of the forest principalities. The villages in the Jungle Mahals can broadly be classified into the tribal and the non tribal villages. The administrative apparatus of both these villages were different from each other.

TRIBAL POLITY

⁴⁶ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Delhi, 1973, p.20.

⁴⁷ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.51.

In a tribal polity, the head of the village was known by different names among different tribes. For example; the head of a *Munda* village was called *Munda*, that of an *Oraon* village was called Raja and that of a *Santal* village was called *Manjhi Hanan*. All these men were looked upon as the chief among the equals. Here the village officials were broadly classified into two groups: secular and religious. The village chief was undoubtedly the secular head of a village and was the representative of the village both in its external and internal administration. He was assisted by the village community as a whole represented by the village elders as '*panch*' federation and the tribunal thus constituted arbitrated in all disputes amongst the villagers. Custom was the recognized law and offences were punished with fines and in extreme cases with expulsion from the village community.⁴⁸ The *Santal* village was marked by a hierarchy of village officials whereby, the *Manjhi* was assisted by a sub headman called a *Paramanik*, who in turn was assisted by *Jog Manjhi* and his assistant called *Jog Paramanik* who were the superintendants of the juvenile community of the village. Lowest rank among the village officials was occupied by the watchman.⁴⁹

Rituals occupied a very important place in the tribal world and every village had a village priest whose presence was indispensable. The *Mundas* called them *Baiga*, *Oraons* called them *Pahan* and *Santals* called them *Naeke*; and their assistants were known as *Pujar*, *Panbhara* and *Kudam Naeke* respectively. The function of the village priest was to propitiate the village deities, and of the assistant to help him at the public religious festivals. In most villages the priests was elected once in three years.

⁴⁸ Roy, *The Oraons*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Hunter, *Annals*, p.217.

Though the tribal groups formed a strong component of the Jungle principalities, they usually lived in seclusion of their relatively self sufficient and autonomous social organizations.

NON-TRIBAL POLITY

In a non-tribal village polity, headman called the *mandal* managed the internal affairs of the villages and stood between the raja and the villagers. They were 'a kind of civil superior elected by the tribe over whom they respectively preside'.⁵⁰ In the *Ghatwali* and the *Khalsa* areas the political, economic and social power at the local level were held by the *sardar* ghatwals, the *mandals* and the *Mukhyas*. The definition of the *Mandal* according to the report of the Rent Law Commission of 1883 is as follows;

*The Zamindars granted a tract of waste land to a substantial raiyat termed as abadkar, who undertook to bring it under cultivation, paying the Zamindar a stipulated lump sum as rent. This abadkar, partly by the labour of his own family and dependants, and partly by inducing other raiyats to settle under him, gradually reclaimed a greater part of the grant and established a village upon it, to which he usually gave his name and as the head of the settlement was called the mandal or headman. The Zamindar, and the mandal from time to time readjusted the terms of their bargain, but the Zamindar never interfered between the mandal and his under-tenants... Mandals exist only in those areas where the aboriginal and semi-aboriginal tribes of Santals, Bhumij, Mahatos, etc. are or were until recently, the bulk of population, and among these tribes the patriarchal village community is the regime under which they lived when the Mandali system was evolved.*⁵¹

In some cases even the Bengali *Mahajans* from the plains settled down in these villages to make a profit of the 'thriftlessness' of the local *raiya* and became a *mandal* to obtain a firmer grip over their debtors than from a desire to embark on dealings in land.⁵²

⁵⁰ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.102.

⁵¹ Jameson, *Final Report*, p.40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.37.

The power to dismiss the *mandals* rested with the villagers and with the king. The latter also had the right to confirm or reject the villagers' choice of the *mandals* who had to pay a fixed tribute to the *zamindar* to acquire the necessary confirmation. The *mandal* was governed by the rules of the community and his position might or might not have been hereditary, but certainly it was not transferable at the will of the *mandal* himself, nor probably was it divisible. The function of a *mandal* was to assist the villagers in their day to day affairs and also to attend civil ceremonies for which he received a stipulated fee.⁵³ Apart from all this, the *mandal* also had to ensure the peaceful coexistence of the members of the different castes in which he was assisted by a *mukhya* who was the caste headman⁵⁴. Each caste in a particular locality was headed by a *mukhya* in all social matters both within the community and in relation to the other groups. The *mandals* and the *mukhyas* were the custodians of the relative autonomy that the villages and the caste enjoyed. It was due to their knowledge of the local situation and their control on the local society that the rajas tried to involve them in the administration as subordinate revenue and police officials, such as, *sikdar*, *patwari*, *thanadar*, rent farmers etc.⁵⁵

Their involvement in administrative apparatus added to the power and influence of these local officials who utilized it in two ways. On one hand they extended patronage to the people below them by taking initiative in settling various castes under their influence, giving land grants etc.⁵⁶ This also provided them with an opportunity to promote their efforts for upward social mobility by enabling them to make *devottar* and *brahmottar* grants and strengthening their links with the influential Brahmin community.

⁵³ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.102.

⁵⁴ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.99.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.100.

All this was usually done with the Raja's permission but sometimes even without his permission. On the other hand, their power and influence also gave them an opportunity to exploit the very people they patronized. Often these *mandals* and *muhkyas*, as employees of the Raj got lands in lieu of their services or a part of the collection in case of the rent farmers.⁵⁷ But in the absence of a complete rent roll they got an opportunity to extract more from the tenants, besides levying and appropriating numerous *abwabs* under various heads. In the absence of an actual measurement of land they even extended the area of their holding without paying any rent.⁵⁸

Though the position and knowledge of these local powers forced the state to grant them a certain degree of autonomy, the central organization of the Raj was designed to keep the autonomous forces in the outlying areas under check. The raja could always assert his authority on the local forces by dint of the superior army in the capital and the elaborate machinery for revenue and police administration which extended from the capital down to the village level.⁵⁹ However, it was only in extreme cases that the army was actually employed against these local forces. The *sikdars*, *patwaris* and *thanadars* held their offices at the pleasure of the king. The village-level employees operated under the superior officers, such as, the *tarafdars* to whom they were accountable.⁶⁰ Similar restraints applied even for the *Ghatwals*. Their tenures were neither hereditary nor transferable and were scattered over a number of villages intertwining with the *khalsa* lands.⁶¹ The Raja also retained the right to farm out the products of the *Ghatwali* jungles

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.101.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.103.

as well as to reclaim parts of these forests and establish new villages on the reclaimed lands.⁶²

The most important institutional form of asserting the right of the raja on the autonomous forces was the provision of *Panchak* or quit rent. Though initially the lands were granted free of rent, subsequently such grants came to be considered as an infringement on the economic and political authority of the Raja. The raja therefore, imposed a tax on the balance between the proceeds of the lands concerned and the amount due to the *sardar ghatwal* by way of remuneration and the expenses of *ghatwali* expenses. Similarly, all the *jagir* and *chakaran* grants and a substantial portion of the *debottar*, *brahmottar* and *mahatran* lands were given on the condition of the *panchak* payment. The *panchak* demanded by the raja was an additional measure of control on the employees of the Raj and a means to establish a direct control on the grantees who were not in the service of the raj.⁶³

The multiple policies evolved by the rajas helped them to accommodate and keep in check the different social and political forces within their political and administrative system. However, with time these measures proved to be ineffective and the rajas lost direct contact with the social organization at the grass root level, which raised the local forces to an advantageous position. The basic sources of income and of political and social power at the village level remained beyond the direct control and immediate knowledge of the raja. The social services instituted by the rajas and the grants made by

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

him could not effectively bridge the gap between the raja and the people. Thus raja became a distant and somewhat 'alien'⁶⁴ figure to the common people in the villages.

ECONOMY

Though the Jungle Mahals didn't seem to enjoy god's favour in terms of soil, climate, water resources etc., agriculture still formed the basis of the economy. Cultivation primarily took place on two types of lands locally known as *Tanr* and *Don*. *Tanr* lands were the low value inferior lands, incapable of retaining sufficient moisture and capable of producing only coarse rice and various *rabi* crops. The *Don* lands occupied the hollows intervening between the continuous ridges of uplands, retained rainwater, contained normally superior soil and was exclusively used to grow rice. The best rice lands were those, which lay at the bottom of the depression.⁶⁵ The most important source of irrigation was, notably, wells, which did not require any elaborate device for storing rain water. Dams were also constructed across the mouth of a depression to collect water which eventually formed a pond or a small lake locally known as *Bandh*, from which the water was led to the fields by channels.⁶⁶ This region was used exclusively to grow the Aus paddy (spring rice) because there was no sufficient water for the more remunerative *Aman* (winter rice) variety. In *aus* rice, the proportion of straw to grain is higher than in *aman*, but the straw is brittle and of little use except for fodder while the grain is coarse. The land was ploughed three or four times as soon as the storms of March and April rendered it sufficiently soft, immediately followed by sowing. The crop required little attention and a single weeding was all that was given to it as a rule.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.120.

⁶⁵ Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.715.

⁶⁶ Jameson, *Final Report*, p.28.

Harvesting began in September.⁶⁷ Such an economy could generate a very meager surplus and the predominance of the subsistence sector was the natural expression of this.

The unit of agricultural organization was an individual family utilizing the available family labour, made all the more striking by the absence of any caste ban on the employment of females in the process of cultivation.⁶⁸ In the absence of any form of land measurement, the size and the extent of these holdings remains uncertain. Before the establishment of the forest principalities, agriculture was undertaken by the *tribals* of this region. Infact agriculture was the governing force behind every aspect of tribal life. Their social organization grew out of the agricultural settlements, which initially, were mostly in the form of cutting the forests and making the reclaimed area fit for cultivation. Some of the tribes like the *Santals* were known for their skills in clearing the forest and bringing the area under cultivation.⁶⁹ They had crops of their own, implements of their own, their own system of cultivation etc. Rice became the national crop of *santals* around which they created a whole set of ceremonies to celebrate the various stages of cultivation. They rejoiced and sacrificed to their gods when they committed the rice seed to the ground (*Ero Sim* festival), when the green blade sprouted (*Harian Sim*), when the ear had formed (the *Horo*). The gathering of the rice crop formed the occasion of the crowning festival of the year known as *Sohorai*.⁷⁰ The *Munda- Oraon* agricultural system was also largely based on settled cultivation. However, infertility of soil did preclude in many places continuous cropping, necessitating short term fallowing.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.29.

⁶⁸ Chaudhari, 'Tribal Society', p. 108.

⁶⁹ Chaudhary, *Peasant History*, p.712.

⁷⁰ Hunter, *Annals*, p.215.

⁷¹ Chaudhari, 'Tribal Society', p. 108.

Ownership meant a joint ownership by the family or by a group of paternal descendants. Each family selected a particular jungle area suitable for clearance and cultivation which came to be called the *Hatu*, later known as the *Khuntkatti Hatu* in case of the *Mundas* and *Bhuinhari* lands in case of the *Oraons*, both denoting a village of the family of the original settlers.⁷² Within the limits of the village thus demarcated all the land, cultivable or waste, all the hills, jungles, streams, etc. became the common property of the village family.⁷³ Separate fields were cultivated by the individual families for their own subsistence; however, the proprietary right to each field belonged to the corporate body of the villagers, and the consent of all the joint owners had to be obtained for the transfer of any land. Thus, the idea of private property had already developed amongst them before the coming of the outsiders. Private ownership however did not lead to any stratification within the tribal economy except the distinction between the original residents of the village known as *Khuntkattidars* (among *Mundas*) and *Bhuinhars* (among *Oraons*) and the non residents of the village or outsiders known as '*Eta haturenko*' i.e. men of other villages. However the village officials like the headman and *Pahan* because of their special services to the village community were allowed to own land of a superior quality.⁷⁴

The process of state formation in this area brought in its train a number of outsiders who later on went on to play a very important role in the tribal economy. The peasant castes like *Gops*, *Telis* and *Sunris* who came in from adjoining areas and introduced advanced techniques of irrigation and agriculture which enabled them to bring

⁷² Roy, *The Mundas*, p.70

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

more lands under cultivation. According to Bayly, the movement of peasant cultivators also pushed forward the 'degradation' of the forests. Under the pressure of the heavy land revenue levied on the better soils, farmers moved up into the hills or on the poorer soils and cleared the forest as they went. The consequence was an acceleration of felling on the higher lands. Even though aggregate population growth was slow, there had been a significant expansion of the cultivated acreage.⁷⁵

Non agricultural production was also introduced by these migrants of which there is however little evidence. Even before the outsiders came into this region, the inhabitants did practice various non agricultural productions though on a small scale. However, an important change that occurred with the new development was the slow transformation of these village artisans into small scale commodity producers. This has been illustrated in detail by Asha Shukla Choubey in her study of the iron smelters of the *Chotanagpur* region. Iron smelting was a craft that was primarily undertaken by the tribes of this region like the *Lohars* of *Chotanagpur*, the *Agaria*, *Lohra* and *Asura* tribes of *Lohardaga* and eastern portion of *Sarguja*. It was basically undertaken as a family enterprise. The village blacksmiths and the peasants were closely integrated by a system of economic as well as customary interdependence. In the *Chotanagpur* villages, the settled agriculturists like the *Oraons* and the *Mundas* depended upon the *bom loha* (heavy iron) which was indigenously manufactured at the *bhatti* or the iron smelting furnace of the *Asurs* and *Agarias*. The *Asurs* also acted as the village blacksmiths and manufactured as well as mended agricultural tools, implements and household fittings required by the peasants. According to Buchanan these iron smelters worked for only five months in a year,

⁷⁵ C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Orient Longman, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.139.

spending the rest of the time on farming, gathering of wild fruits etc. They produced about five ser of iron per day which they exchanged for seven and a half ser of rice⁷⁶This network of economic security gave the village craftsmen a stable base that often outweighed fluctuating economic incentives.⁷⁷ However, by the end of eighteenth century peasants in iron rich areas were engaged for five months in a year in the mining of ore, production of charcoal and the smelting of ore in primitive furnaces. The ore which was of a low quality was usually delivered to the merchant in exchange for grain. Gradually a part of the peasants became professional smelters who engaged in the trade twenty days a month throughout the year. Thus, the blacksmiths combined their customary service obligation to the village community with production for market also.⁷⁸

In *Mallabhum*, the artisan and the trading castes were concentrated in the manufacturing and trading centres of *Bishnupur*, *Rajagram*, *Lakshmisagar*, *Birsinghpur-Rajhat*, *Sonamukhi*, *Barjora*, *Patrasayer* and *Raybaghini*. Fine silk fabrics, *tasar* cloth, cotton textile, lac dye and shellac, sugar, brass, bell metal and stone wares, different varieties of conchshell ornaments and cotton textile produced in *Mallabhum* were much in demand outside. The finest products of *Mallabhum* namely, lac, wax, resin, *tasar*, honey and charcoal had a ready market in the places across the eastern border.⁷⁹

The coming of these outsiders was also an inevitable result of the gradual consolidation of these political authorities, which necessitated the creating of a usual apparatus of power: the army, the police and the bureaucracy. This necessitated the diversion of a portion of the tribal village resources. The emulation by the Raj family of

⁷⁶ Choubey, 'Technology and Culture', p.84.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp.93-94.

⁷⁸ Ibid. pp.94-95.

⁷⁹ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.83.

the culture of pomp and orientation also resulted in the rise in the cost of its living which inevitably increased the scale of this diversion. It is difficult to estimate how much its various activities cost the state, but we do know that the state income was spent.⁸⁰

According to B.B.Chaudhari, the diversion had four major forms: tribute; payment in cash or kind, predominantly in cash in the later year; *begar* or forced labour occasionally claimed by the state to meet primarily the 'state' needs; and *jagir* grants to members of the royal family as means of livelihood and to persons connected with the administration by way of payment for their services.⁸¹ The diversion in the form of 'tribute' or 'rent' did not necessarily limit tribal access to such resources, as the tribals continued to control their use parting with only a portion of their produce. The villages where this practice prevailed were called *Rajhaus*. The villages where the diversion meant a loss of this control and consequently impinged on the tribal economy were called *Manjhihaus*. However, the size of the *Manjhihaus* land is not known.⁸² The royal family and the outsiders also occasionally requisitioned, without payment, labour of tribals. '*Beth Begari*', as the practice was called, was then evidently only partly connected with the cultivation of *Manjhihaus* lands. In general, the royal family or its local representatives demanded *begari* on distinctly 'state occasions' when they badly needed it, for instance, during the movement of army when heavy baggage had to be carried from place to place. Demand for *begari* was also connected with purely personal needs.⁸³ As the demands of the outsiders increased, the balance required to meet them was made up

⁸⁰ Chaudhari, *Peasant History*, p.723.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.725.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Chaudhari, 'Tribal Society', p.135.

by the subscription or the *chandās* from among the *Khuntkattidars* themselves which in course of time became fixed.⁸⁴

Thus, by the time of the Mughals, the concept of revenue was well established in this region with some of these tributary states being converted into revenue paying *zamindaries*. Under the payment of ever increasing revenues of the *Nawab* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the rajas became increasingly concerned with extraction of surplus from the indigenous tribals and peasants. They also took the initiative to settle peasants, artisans and traders from outside to enhance their earnings. From their role of indigenous leaders of people, as the heads of the tribal and caste associations and of nearly autonomous polity, society and culture of the sacred geography of their *Rajya* (territory), they became more and more exploitative as collectors of rents and corvee labour from the tenants.⁸⁵ The forest states therefore had to develop a proper apparatus for land revenue administration.

LAND REVENUE ADMINISTRATION

The forest principalities had set up an elaborate machinery for land revenue administration and had developed a highly centralized machinery for managing the resources, more or less similar to the system established in the plains. In *Mallabhum*, the *sadar kachari* or central office headed by the *naib dewan*, was divided into a number of *daftars* or departments each headed by a *diwan*. Numerous people were employed at the different *daftars*. For an effective land revenue administration, the entire lands within the Raj were divided into different fiscal units called the *tarafs* (except the *samanta* areas).

⁸⁴ Roy, *The Mundas*, p. 104.

⁸⁵ Sinha, *Tribal Polities*, p.xx.

Each *taraf* consisted of 24 *dihis* and each *dihi* consisted of 24 villages. While a *tarafdar* was in charge of the collections from a *taraf*, the *sikdar* or *gomasta* collected the rent from the villages where he was assisted by a *patwari* (village accountant). In the central revenue office there were a host of officials *kanungo*, *karkun* etc. for the settlement, collection, accounting and supervision of revenue.⁸⁶ However, the lands were never measured, surveyed or assessed, hence, the administration was never aware of the total amount of land under its control.⁸⁷ Rents were not regulated by the actual amount of land held by the peasant or by an estimation of the annual yield of the lands concerned. The rent payable by a peasant was determined upon an estimate of the quantity of land held by him which was assessed in proportion to the total rent of the village concerned. The revenue office also did not possess a complete rent roll. All this resulted in a depleted revenue collection in these principalities.⁸⁸

This well structured arrangement for revenue administration also retained certain vestiges of the tribal social system. Much of the revenue administration at the lower levels was run informally on the basis of the prevalent customs and of a trust which envisaged an immediate relationship between the peasants and their superiors. This explains why *patta* was not issued to all the peasants and only a small fraction of the *pattas* issued referred to the quantity of land concerned. The method of fixing rent was also reminiscent of tribal heritage.⁸⁹

The *samanta* lands lay outside the purview of the fiscal administration of these forest principalities. *Samantas* had a tributary relation with the kings but the amount of

⁸⁶ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p. 95.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.117.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.119.

tribute paid by them is not known. Given the terms of autonomous chieftaincy on which the *samantas* held their territories the amount could not have been much.⁹⁰

The Raja, as an economic head of the state was the biggest appropriator of revenue. The lands within the Jungle mahals can broadly be divided into three groups: *khalsa*, *talukdari* lands and the *ghatwali* lands. Out of them, the taxes and levies collected from the *khalsa* area constituted the major source of income for the forest rajas. The *khalsa* lands included the more fertile lands which were better cultivated and more densely populated.⁹¹ These lands were used for a variety of purpose. They were often granted to the employees of the Raj (like the *mandals* and the *mukhyas*) and of the raja's private establishments by way of salary and were known as *jagir* or *chakaran* lands, but on the condition of paying a . According to the estimates of 1770, in Bishnupur, out of the total land of 1,55,681.96 *bighas*, the militia held 96,987.90 *bighas* and other officials held 58, 694.06 *bighas*.⁹² The *devottar* and *vaishnavottar* (endowments for the service of the *devatas* i.e. deities) endowments and the *brahmottar* (for the maintenance of the Brahmins) and *mahataran* (given as allowance or token of honour to non Brahman) grants were also made from the *khalsa*. They were partly rent free and partly paying.⁹³ Since all these grants were made verbally without *sanads*, no clear estimates of such grants exist. Part of the *khalsa* land was also kept aside as a *bhitarjot mahal*. *Bhitarjot* was meant for the maintenance of the raja's family and dependants. Apart from the lands, the *bhitarjot mahals* included the proceeds of the *kaletya mahal* which involved fees for granting permission to excavate tanks and to plant orchards as well as the fines for the

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.89.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.91.

⁹² Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.151.

⁹³ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.92.

social offences and the fees on the marriage ceremonies of the lower castes.⁹⁴ Besides land rent, the rajas imposed several direct and indirect *abwabs* or levies on their subjects, like *gram taki* which might be an assessment of Rs.1 on a village, *chattaki* or *chopar* which was levied on houses at the rate of Rs.1 per roof etc.⁹⁵

According to the estimate of land grants resumed in Pachet during the Decennial settlement of 1790, out of 1280 villages, 49 villages were held by the Raja in *Khas Khamar*, 388 villages were *brahmottar* rent free grants, 2 *Bhatottara* rent free grants, 2 *Mahataran* rent free grants and 180 *Jagirs* held on quit rents and variously described as *Moghuli*, *Talabi* or *Panchaki*. 58 villages were set aside for 'digwars' as service grants free of rent and 129 more villages were assigned to various other rent free holders.⁹⁶

Besides land revenue, forest products, such as timber, lac, resin, tasar, wax, honey, firewood and charcoal also formed a considerable source of revenue for these *Rajs*. Since this region also fell in the trade route to certain markets, *chalanta sair* or transit duties were also collected. Interestingly, it was determined not according to the value of the goods concerned but according to the number of beats carrying the goods. However, the tax per caravan did not exceed one and a half of rupees.⁹⁷

Talluqdars referred to a holder or possessor of a dependency and it consisted of two major types: 'huzuri' and 'mazkuri'. The *huzuri Talluqdars* held their rights under, and paid the revenue directly to the state, whereas the *mazkuri* held their rights tenure under a *zamindar* to whom they paid their rents. The Jungle Mahals were however graced

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.93.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.94.

⁹⁶ *West Bengal District Gazetteer: Puruliya*, Bengal Secretarial Press, Calcutta, 1985, p.294.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

by the presence of only the second type who either bought the *taluqdari* rights from the raja or received it in the form of a grant. He was required to pay the raja a stipulated amount of rent annually and held the tenures hereditarily. Sometimes even the grantees of large grants leased out their lands on permanently fixed rents to the *Talluqdars*.⁹⁸

The *sardar ghatwals* were assigned lands either on (fixed quit rent), or be (entirely free from the money rent), for performing their duties.⁹⁹ The *sardars* retained a portion, usually the finest lands, as his *khas* or private lands, and distributed the rest among his subordinate *ghatwals* or settled on terms of tenancy. In some places like Birbhum these *ghatwali* assignments were hereditary, however the heir was required to get a fresh appointment to the office held by his predecessor. It was due to this assurance of continuity within the same family that the *sardar ghatwals* could afford to distribute lands on terms of tenancy and even to give lands for the maintenance of Brahmans, artisans and other service castes. They even granted *mokrari* (fixed rent) and *maurasi* (hereditary leases). However, the *ghatwali* tenures in *Mallabhum* were neither hereditary nor transferable and the Malla rajas retained the right to resume these lands. The amount of paid by the *sardar ghatwals* under the *Mallas* was about Rs. 10,000.¹⁰⁰

With the passage of time, even in the economic sphere (as in the political sphere) the rajas somewhere lost contact with the people who constituted the very basis of economy i.e., the peasants, which put the local forces and intermediaries like the *mandals*, *mukhyas*, *ghatwals*, holders of various forms of land grants, etc. in a position of advantage. These were the very people who went on to constitute a body of landed elites

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.89.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.90.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.92.

in this region. According to Rajat Datta, “The rural elites were those who enjoyed an intrinsically superior status in rural society by virtue of the lands personally held by them and their right to collect revenue on behalf of the state, a part of which they retained for themselves. They also supplanted their income through the sale of the produce of their lands. They also claimed a share in the produce of the peasants”¹⁰¹.

In the lands granted to the *Brahmins*, *Vaishnavas* or employees of the Raj as *jagir* or *chakran* the grantees formed the intermediary between the raja and the people. They collected rents and *abwabs* from the tenants. If the grants were large, they even leased out the lands on permanently fixed rents to the *mokraridars* or *talukdars*. They formed another rung of intermediary between the raja and his subjects. Some of the grantees cultivated their lands by hired labourers, but most of the grantees gave their lands to the actual cultivators under the terms of two different kinds of produce rent, namely, *sanja* and *khamar*. *Sanja* involved fixed rent with the quantity of grain payable by the tenant annually specified. The *khamar* lands had no settled tenant and were cultivated by contract for one or more seasons. But the rent varied between one third to one-half of the produce.¹⁰²

In *Mallabhum*, the appointment of police personnel in the outlying places constituted another means of appropriation from the villagers. There was no provision for paying the *thanadar* either in cash or by grants of land. Paradoxically each candidate for this post of rural police official paid to the raja a fee of Rs.3000 and more called *thanadar* salami for getting an appointment for one year.¹⁰³ Apparently the *thanadars* extracted

¹⁰¹ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.133.

¹⁰² Sanyal, ‘Mallabhum’, pp.119-120.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

enough money and materials from the people from within their beats so as to make their job lucrative even after paying such a large amount. The rural *chowkidars* were the lowest police personnel. Some of them received *chakran* lands. But others were paid by the villagers of their beats in cash or in kind or by grants of land.¹⁰⁴ There also emerged another class of men denominated as *Paiks* who were a body of paid fighting men employed for making or repelling incursions, and who enjoyed grants of land either free of rent or burdened with a small quit rent or *Peshcash*. During intervals of peace they maintained the internal order. Most of the *paiks* were from the *Bhumij* tribe.

Thus, a whole range of intermediaries the number of whom had increased with the expansion of the central administration stretched between the raja and the common mass of peasants and artisans.

The indirect relation between the raja and the people further tended to become remote because of the very heavy appropriations that the raja made for the administrative, cultural and private purposes, none of which had any direct relevance to the life of the people in the village. Besides, a very large amount of the annual assets of these states were set apart for the maintenance of the royal family. These rajas lived in magnificence with a very large number of servants in attendance. Thus, the raja, no doubt was the principal source of social service and cultural activities, but the amount appropriated by the rajas for private purposes or for the central was much greater than they spent for social services or cultural activities.¹⁰⁵

SOCIETY

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.121.

Formation of states in the Jungle Mahals played a historic role of generating multi-ethnic local or regional cultures, synthesizing and universalizing the tribe and caste customs. They played a double role of buffers and mediators between the tribesmen and state systems, and civilization of the plains, and in the process transformed as well as conserved the tribal traditions.¹⁰⁶ Most importantly, they started a process of evolution which slowly transformed the tribal systems into caste and peasant formations.

The establishment of the state system in *Chotanagpur* brought about an efflorescence of regional culture there. *Nagpuria* became the language of the court, *farmans*, etc., and it emerged as the lingua franca of *Chotangpur*, as the medium of communication between the tribals and the non tribals. The *nagbanshis* adopted the *shakta cult*, *chintamani devi* became the family deity. They also adopted the *Jagannath* cult from Orissa which not only sent out Brahmins to settle in different parts of *Chotanagpur* but also artisans who built temples. The *Sanskritization* of local traditions was not a one-way traffic: elements of local culture also influenced the great traditions.¹⁰⁷

Initially, this region was inhabited only by the tribals. However, the establishment of the State system was followed by the migration of people belonging to various castes. According to Sanyal, the establishment of the *Malla Raj* was followed by the migration of a considerable number of members of the *Uchchjatis* i.e., the *Brahmin*, *Baidya*, and *Kayastha*; and of the *Nabasakh* castes ranking below the *Uchchjatis* during the period between the 16th and the 18th century.¹⁰⁸ It was then that many tribal groups were absorbed as the members of the *Antyaj* caste forming the lowest rung of the Hindu

¹⁰⁶ Sinha, *Tribal Politics*, p.xxiii

¹⁰⁷ Singh, 'The Chotanagpur Raj', p.66.

¹⁰⁸ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.82.

society. According to H.H.Risley, the process of “the gradual Brahmanising of the aborigines, non-Aryan, or casteless tribes”, by no means maintained a uniform character throughout its sphere of action and included in Bengal four distinct processes, which may be analysed as follows.¹⁰⁹

1. The leading men of an aboriginal tribe, becoming independent landed proprietors, managed to enroll themselves in one of the leading castes. They set up as *Rajputs*; their first step being to start a Brahman priest, who invented for them a mythical ancestor, and discovered that they belonged to some hitherto unheard of clan of the great *Rajput* community. Then they got their daughters married if not with the pure *Rajputs*, at least with a superior order of ‘manufactured *Rajputs*’ resulting in a real change of blood. Gradually the tribal name withered away, and with it all the possibility of accurately separating them from the Hindus of purer blood. Henceforth, they were locally accepted as high caste Hindus.
2. A number of aborigines embraced the tenets of a Hindu religion sect, losing thereby their tribal name and becoming *Vaishnabs*, *Ramayats*, etc. Whether there was any mixture of blood or not depended upon the local circumstances and the rules of the sect regarding intermarriage. Anyhow the identity of the converts as aborigines was usually, though not invariably, lost, and this also may therefore be regarded as a case of true absorption.
3. A whole tribe of aborigines, or large section of a tribe, enrolled themselves in the ranks of Hinduism under the style of a new caste, which, though claiming an origin of remote antiquity, was readily indistinguishable by its name from any of the standard and recognized castes.

¹⁰⁹ Risley, *The Tribes*, pp.xv-xviii.

4. A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section of a tribe, became gradually converted to Hinduism without abandoning their tribal designation. They worshipped Hindu gods in addition to their own, and the more advanced among them employed Brahmans as family priests. Though they retained some tribal features initially, but soon they abandoned it. The tribe then became a caste. After this transformation into a caste, the people became more strictly endogamous than they were as a tribe, and even less likely to modify their physical type by intermarriage with other races.

In majority of cases the admission of a tribe into the Hindu community resulted after a generation or two in the practical disappearance of the tribe as such. The tribe itself, after its promotion to a rank of a caste, broke up into a number of endogamous groups, each of which formed a separate caste.

The constant interaction between the upper and the lower rungs of the society also resulted in the religious syncretism between the tribal and the non tribal cultures. While on one hand, the desire of the tribals and lower castes to raise their position in the caste hierarchy made them adopt certain *Brahmanical* beliefs and practices; on the other hand, the need of the upper castes to absorb these tribals and lower castes within their political, economic and cultural system and get their help both in war and peace made them adopt, their gods and goddesses and socio religious customs and practices.¹¹⁰ Initially the *Mallas* are known to have been devotees of Siva (god of the lower caste) but later they switched over to the cult of *Sakti* and finally became *Vaishnava* by adopting *Gauriya Vaishnavism*.¹¹¹ The Malla Rajas later accepted *Durga* as the benefactor of their family as well as of the people of *Mallabhum*. She came to be known as *Mrinmayee*. It is possible

¹¹⁰ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.111.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.107.

that the cult of *Mrinmayee* was built around an earlier tribal or folk deity venerated by the tribals and the *Antyaj* castes living in the forest. Though the daily services of *Mrinmayee* and the annual *Durgapuja* were conducted by the raja's priests, but it did incorporate certain features which may be identified as tribal in origin.¹¹²

Indupuja or *Indra puja* was one of the major festivals in the southwestern peripheries of Bengal and in the adjacent areas in Bihar and Orissa in which there was an annual ceremony of raising *Indra's* umbrella on the pole by the Raja in the presence of a congregation of the tribals and the people belonging to the *Antyaj* castes which indicated the recognition by these people in general of the suzerainty and the authority of the raja. The most important annual festival of Siva was *Chotaparab* or *gajan*. Although the upper caste people took part in *gajan* the majority of the participants belonged to the lower castes who still preserved much of their original tribal practices and custom. It was the dominance of the lower castes which determined the character of *gajan*.¹¹³

In the forest territories, caste society was in the process of expansion primarily among the lower rungs of the population. In course of time, a large section of the caste population belonging to the *Antyaj* caste increased because of the process of *Brahmanization* of tribes who added to this caste which was already numerous in comparison to others. For example, in Bankura, majority of the people belonged to the *Antyaj* castes like the *Bauri, Khaira, Dom, Bagdi, Majhi, Mal, Hari and Lohar* who are believed to have been originally tribals.¹¹⁴ These hinduized tribal groups were closer to the tribals than the upper castes and preserved much of the tribal beliefs, faiths, manners, customs, and practices.

¹¹² Ibid., pp.109-110.

¹¹³ Ibid., p.107.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.82.

Above them, were the members of the higher castes, like *Gops* who were relatively prosperous and influential, and the powerful *Chhatris* who claimed the designation of *kshatriyas*, but might have been originally tribals. Then there were the occupationally organized artisan and trading castes, most of whom enjoyed the respectable *Nabasakh* rank. Above all were the *Uchchjatis* who epitomized the culture of Brahmanism. Some of the groups such as the *Uchchajatis* were more powerful economically, politically and socially than the rest of the people.¹¹⁵

Another trend quite noticeable during this time was the aspiration among people to climb up the ladder of social hierarchy irrespective of their castes, and even the people belonging to the *Antyaj* castes were no exception to this. *Brahmanical* patterns of social and cultural behavior were considered to be the highest mark of socio cultural development for which all the lower castes aspired. In this context the higher castes enjoyed a certain definite advantages over the rest of the people. The advantages of the upper castes, particularly the Brahmins in the forest principalities may have been much greater than what they enjoyed in a settled caste society because of the predominance of the lower castes.¹¹⁶ The superiority of the upper castes was further strengthened by the high positions they held in the administrative and religious establishments of these principalities and the extensive grants of good lands they held at quit rent or entirely rent free. The presence of such *Uchchjati* and the intermediate ranking artisan and the trading groups like the *Tanti*, *Sankhabanik*, *Subrnabanik*, *Tambulibanik* and the *Gandhabanik* and the influential professional caste of the *Kayastha*, accentuated the natural desire among the entire range of the peasant castes for increasing *Brahmanisation* of their social

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.84.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.85.

and cultural life, and as in the cases of the landholding *Chhatris*, *Gops* and *Telis*, for upward mobility along the caste hierarchy.¹¹⁷

The local leaders within the forest principalities mostly belonged to the *Antyaj* castes of the *Bagdi*, *Bauri*, *Lohar* or to the intermediate peasant castes of the *Gop*, *Teli* or *Sunri* or to the *Chhatri* caste all of whom were trying to raise their position in the caste hierarchy. The position that the *sardar* ghatwals, *mandals* and the *mukhyas* enjoyed in the villages offered them an opportunity to promote their efforts for upward social mobility by making *devottar* and *brahmottar* grants and establishing links with the influential Brahmin community. The migration of these people was made possible and facilitated by the establishment of jungle principalities which absorbed them as lower level officials in the state machinery. However, some of these people later went on to establish their own independent *zamindaris*; like the *Sadgops* and *Khairas* of Midnapur.

The homeland of the agricultural *Sadgops*, who were originally part of the pastoral *Gop* caste, was *Gopbhum* in Burdwan district. A section of the caste which adopted agriculture became in course of time a separate and ritually purer caste (*Sadgop*= pure *Gop*) which spread out from *Gopbhum* to a region stretching from the south western part of *Bankura* to the western half of Midnapur. This region was inhabited by jungle tribes like *Santals* and *Mahatos*. The *Sadgops* imposed themselves over the aboriginals as the dominant agricultural caste and in the course of this colonization seized the jungle Rajs held by tribal chieftains in the areas, such as the Midnapur and Narayangarh *zamindaris*, and became *zamindars*. The new *Sadgop* Rajas, surrounded by *Sadgop* agriculturists who settled around their forts, ruled over much of western Midnapur, the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.82.

basis of their power being the caste identity between the usurping Rajas and the colonizing agriculturists.¹¹⁸

A portion of the *zamindari* of Midnapur also formed a feudatory state under the king of Orissa. The ruler of this feudatory state, Raja Surat Singh (commonly called *Khaira* Raja, *khaira* being a jungle caste) ruled over most of Midnapur and the whole of *Narayangarh*, *Balrampur*, *Kedar*, and *Kharagpur* which lay in the Jungle Mahals. He was slain in a conspiracy and after him his deputies divided the kingdom among themselves. The *diwan* and commander in chief, Laksman Singh, became the founder of the Midnapur Raj. The *garh sardar* seized *Balarampur*, *Kedar* and *Kharagpur* while his deputy made himself raja of *Narayangarh*. The *zamindari* of Midnapur underwent considerable expansion during the time of Ajit Singh, who seized pargana *Bhanjbhum* from the ruling *Bhanjas* of the *pargana*, a subdivision of the ruling race of *Bhumij*. He died in 1755 and was succeeded by his widow, Rani Shiromani who settled for Midnapur at the time of the decennial settlement.¹¹⁹

Despite a constant interaction between the tribal and the caste societies, some tribes were still able to retain their original identities, untouched from any outside influence. In *Bankura*, the *Santals* still constituted the largest tribal group and organized reclamation of forest lands and cultivation in the reclaimed lands under their autonomous chiefs called *majhis*, with whom the superior authority settled the terms of tenancy. Usually peace loving and socially withdrawn, the *Santals* maintained minimum interrelation with the rest of the society.¹²⁰ Also, sometimes it was also difficult for them

¹¹⁸ Ray, *Change in Bengal*, p.133.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.141-142.

¹²⁰ Sanyal, 'Mallabhum', p.83.

to be accepted by the non tribals because of which the *Santal* settlement usually took place outside the periphery of caste Hindu concentration. So strong was the aversion of caste Hindus to any kind of social intercourse with the *Santals* that the latter were not even permitted to work the cow. The aversions however seldom caused avert hostilities between the Hindus and *Santals*. The Hindus were not to antagonize the *Santals*, believed to be 'powerful in witchcraft'.¹²¹ Therefore, despite living in close proximity with the forest principalities they still retained their political and administrative structure in pure form. The first centralized political authority that the *Santals* encountered was the colonial state.

Some of the tribes inhabiting this region were also not able to take these changes positively which resulted in the migrations of the outsiders being countered by the emigration of the tribals. According to S.C.Roy, the establishment of the new *Chotanagpur* State could not suppress the democratic instincts of the *Mundas* for long and after some time they marched across the Subarnarekha leaving the *Oraons* in occupation of southern *Chotanagpur*. Hence, this region also came to be known as *Kokrah* derived from the *Kurukhs* who formed the bulk of population here. Some went southwards and established a village named Khunti. Towards the east the *Mundas* occupied the *Panch Parganas* consisting of *Silli, Branda, Rahr, Bundu* and *Tamar*. Several other bands moved further eastwards beyond the Subarnarekha and at one time occupied the *parganas* of *Jhalda, Bygonkudar, Bagmari* and *Patkum*.¹²² This branch of *Mundas* who spread eastwards, mingled with the Hindus, and for most part severed their

¹²¹ Chaudhari, 'Tribal Society', p.113.

¹²² Roy, *The Mundas*, p.88.

connection with the parent tribe came to be known as the *Bhumijis*.¹²³ They even went ahead to claim the status of *Rajputs* and *Kshatriyas*.

The largest migration of the *Mundas* took place towards the Panch *Parganas*, which was outside the limit of Nagpur and formed a part of the dominion of the Mayurbhanj raja. Initially the *Mundas* lived on the lines established by their ancestors but in due course of time some of them became ambitious of rising in the social order and of assuming great power. Some of these elected chiefs became Hinduised and formed marital connections with the families long recognized as Hindu *Rajputs* and *Kshatriyas*. They now called themselves *Rajas* or *Thakurs* or *Tikaits*. In these places, the *Mundas* founded new villages which came to pay a certain nominal contribution called 'chanda' or subscription to the Maharaja through their chiefs. Beyond this, the *Mundas* of the south and east had practically little or no concern with the *Chotanagpur* Raj.¹²⁴

¹²³ Risley, *The Tribes*, p.117.

¹²⁴ Roy, *The Mundas*, p.31.

CHAPTER 3

BRITISH INTERVENTION AND THE TRANSITION IN THE JUNGLE MAHALS

It was the cession of Burdwan and Midnapore in 1760 which brought the Jungle Mahals under British occupation. However, the association of the Jungle Mahals with the British started a little before this. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the position of the Jungle *zamindars* was on the decline. They found little favor with Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and his successors who not only reduced their status but also increased *peshkash* demanded from them. The ultimate blow came with the Maratha raids starting from 1740 onwards which left the entire Jungle Mahals devastated. Maratha horsemen had made *Bishnupur* their base of operations from where they ravaged the entire territory between Birbhum and Midnapur. Due to the havoc caused by the Marathas, a large number of people fled from their homes and migrated towards the east.¹ The rise of the East India Company amidst all this turmoil provided these Jungle *Zamindars* with an opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of central control. Therefore, the rajas of *Bishnupur*, *Birbhum* and *Burdwan* agreed to support Ali Gauhar (later Emperor Shah Alam) and the Marathas who were trying to capture Bengal. Henry Vansittart wrote in late 1760 that the rajas of *Bishnupur*, *Ramgarh*, “and other countries, bordering upon the mountains, were ready to shake of their dependence, and had offered

¹ Sanyal, ‘Mallabhum’, p.122.

considerable supplies” to the *Birbhum* raja who was planning to attack Murshidabad.² Had those rajas and the Marathas acted in concert and committed their armies to help Ali Gauhar, they might have seriously tested the military strength of Nawab Mir Jafar and the East India Company, which was being paid to protect the *Nawab*. However they did not give the Shahzada significant support and the prince retreated without fighting.³ In 1760, Mir Qasim ceded the districts of Burdwan, Midnapur, and Chittagong to the Company.⁴ This automatically brought the Jungle Mahals under the jurisdiction of the British government since most of the *parganas* were located within the districts of Midnapur, like, “Brahmanbhum, Bagri, Bhanjabhum, Bahadurpur, Dharinda, Diparoi, Chiara, Kalyanpur, Silda or Jhatibani, Rohini Mabhandar, Dipa Kiarchand, Lalgarh or Sankaulia and Ramgarh.”⁵

From 1760 to 1765, the Company was preoccupied in repelling the Maratha incursions and no effective administrative measure could be taken with regard to the Jungle Mahals. In May 1751, the *nawab* of Bengal Alivardi Khan had made peace with the Maratha government of Nagpur by surrendering the revenues of southern Orissa and by agreeing to an annual payment of Rs. 12 lakhs as *chauth*.⁶ Therefore, even after Burdwan and Midnapur were ceded to the Company, the Marathas continued to commit depredations in the south west Bengal and claim *chauth* from the respective *zamindars*. However, the new government was confident of putting a check on these raids as is evident from the letter of Mr, Johnston which states: “Through the will of God, the

² H.Vansittart, *Narrative of the Transactions of Bengal*, London, 1766, p.69.

³ J.R.Mclane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.184.

⁵ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer*, p.47.

⁶ John R. Mclane, *Land and Local Kingship in eighteenth century Bengal*, CUP, 1993, p.165.

greatness of His Excellency, and the bravery of his (Mr. Johnson) troops, the Marhattas will be destroyed and consumed by the fire of the cannon as lighted straw.”⁷ On 17 March 1761 the Maratha chief Sheo Bhat was told that the *Nawab* had given the *chaklah* of Midnapur to the English for their military expences, and that he should be content with his own possessions,⁸ yet he continued to claim the *chauth* of Midnapur⁹ and threatened to invade Bengal if the *chauth* was not forwarded to him.¹⁰ The issue remained unsolved and taking advantage of the geography and unsettled environment of the Jungle Mahals the Marathas continued to harass the English forces throughout the eighteenth century. All this chaos rendered the subjugation of this frontier region all the more necessary. In 1765, the English East India Company received the diwani of Bengal and thenceforth, what followed was a tireless effort on the part of the Company to bring it under its subjugation.

By the time of the British takeover of this region, some of the border Jungle principalities like *Bishnupur* and *Pacheat* had already acquired the features of the plain countries. Despite having a humble origin, the claim of the *Bishnupur* Rajas to a *kshatriya* status was well established over a period of time. The basis of their power had shifted from chieftaincy over tribals to *kshatriya* kingship over a settled agricultural castes where personal ties characteristic of a tribal situation could not survive.¹¹ This resulted in the expansion of the settled zone further pushing back the boundary of the jungle territory. Even the Company in its treatment did not distinguish between such

⁷ Calender of Persian Correspondence, vol.1, Selection no.884, letter from Mr. Johnstone to Nawab Mir Qasim, 5 February 1761.

⁸ Ibid., selection 1024.

⁹ Ibid., selection 1082.

¹⁰ Ibid., selection 1099.

¹¹ Ray, *Change in Bengal*, p.115.

forest *zamindaris* and plain *zamindaris* and treated both on a similar footing. The opening up of these regions brought the Company closer to the new frontiers of the Jungle Mahals. However, the inner forest principalities still retained the indigenous political and economic systems and social relations, and combined with the people in resisting the British expansion. Defying the general perception of *zamindars* belonging to the higher castes, the jungle *zamindars* were more like tribal chieftains belonging to the so called 'lower castes' like *Kaivarta*, *Bagdi*, *Tili*, and *Sadgop*; ruling over the aboriginal tribes with whom their ethnic and ritual association was close. The rajas of these principalities emerged as the natural leaders of the people because they symbolized the indigenous system in which the people in the jungle territories had lived for centuries. The primary concern of the Company here was therefore to curb the freedom of their rival Jungle chiefs and restrain their authority over the landscape. Economic concern went hand in hand with the political acquisitions. Both the political and economic changes had important bearing upon the society of the jungle mahals.

SUBJUGATION

When the Colonial Government began their forays into the Jungle Mahals, the biggest problem before them was not only to bring this area under their subjugation but also to keep it subjugated by constantly keeping the inhabitants in awe of the Company's forces. *Zamindars* were the 'all in all' of this region and commanded a considerable military force in the form of *Gautwals* and *paiks*, and thus, were seen as the most formidable opponents to the realization of their goal. The approach throughout was to settle with the *zamindars* in a peaceful manner. However, if the *zamindars* refused to submit, the officers in charge were instructed to "proceed against in a hostile

manner...and endeavor to expel them from their dominions... giving the personal property and possession of people upto plunder...and by destroying as much as possible their refuge and strongholds.”¹² Equipped with these instructions, Ensign (later Lieutenant) Fergusson, along with a company of three or four sepoys and one or two European sergeants finally set out for the Jungle Mahals in January 1767.

For the people who had very little “Connections with any other” and who “scarce knew the name of Government”,¹³ the presence of army was bound to create unwanted curiosity and fear, leaving them with two options: either to take shelter in the almost impenetrable jungle, or, to put up a brave front before the Company troops. Flight into the jungles was a more widely followed option and the eighteenth century Colonial records contain several references of such incidents. In 1774 Capt. Crawford, stationed at *Silda* wrote: “I informed you of the flight of several of the Neighbouring Zamindars...”¹⁴ In 1775, Edward Stephenson, Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan, received a letter on the similar issue from one of the commanders posted in the Jungle Mahals which read: “Having fixed my Camp in the Jemindary of Jelda, the most Central [sic.] ...and drawn the Zemindars and Inhabitants from the Hills to which they had fled on the approach of the Troops...”¹⁵ Sometimes, the *zamindars* “though disposed to surrender, fled away into the jungles along with his followers at the sight of the Company’s troops”¹⁶. The method in which the Company dealt with such cases can be

¹² Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.35.

¹³ WBSA,PCRB, vol. 8, 10th June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson (Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 5th August 1774, letter from Capt. Crawford.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, 10th June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

¹⁶ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.38.

understood from the instruction given to Mr. Fergusson regarding the absconding *zamindar* of *Jhargram*, in which Fergusson was directed to,

*write him a letter...to convince him, however, that your original intentions were only to enforce his submission and obedience to his proper government, you still invite him to return in full security and protection, provided he is disposed to execute reasonable terms for the rents of his country and his future good conduct...you will allow him a limited time (suppose 24 hours), after which space, if he still stands out, that measure will unquestionably be taken for his total expulsion from his zemindari, and no subsequent advances on his part will be received or listened to...*¹⁷

The effectiveness of this method was proved on 6th March 1767, when the runaway *zamindars* of *Jhargram*, *Suphur*, *Barabhum*, *Ambikanagar* and *Chatna* concluded a settlement with Fergusson. The officer nevertheless took the necessary precaution of stationing a force there to keep the *zamindars* in awe of the government.

However, the future course was not as easy as it seems so far, for there were a considerable number of *zamindars* who drew upon their caste and familial support base and subscribed to their mastered guerilla technique of warfare to resist British entry into their *zamindaries* and hence became quite a nightmare for the government. Thus, military operation went side by side with an overt conciliatory approach¹⁸. The *zamindar* of *Ghatsila* or the Raja of *Dhalbhum* as he was called proved to be the most obstinate and refractory of them all who "...posted his troops in all the avenues and inlets into his *pergunnah*, and was determined not to admit a *Firanghi* into his country on any account."¹⁹ Going by the earlier procedure, Fergusson sent him an ultimatum to submit, but his *harcaras* or peons were stopped on the way by about 150 bow men. Later, the

¹⁷ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p. 41, Letter to Mr. Fergusson from Mr. Graham (Resident of Midnapur); 4th February 1767.

¹⁸ Nitin Sinha, 'Mobility, Control and Criminality in Early Colonial India, 1760's-1850's' in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, January-March 2008, vol.xlx, no.1, p.27.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.42.

zamindar sent his *vakeel* who according to Fergusson's letter was "empowered to give Rs.5,000 to buy me and my army off from proceeding any further."²⁰ Finally, the raja was deposed and the settlement was concluded with his nephew. On 6th April 1767, 'Kundali', (Kanu Daloi) a near relation of the deposed chief arrived at 'Narsingur' (*Nrisinghar*) and Fergusson invested him with the name 'Jagernat Dol' (Jagannath Dhal) and settled the annual revenue with him, little realizing that later he would become the rallying point behind various acts of resistance.

From 1768 to 1776, Jagannath Dhal remained in a state of defiance causing disturbances in the western jungles and plundering *Ghatsila*, in which he was supported by other rebel leaders of *Dompara*, *Holdypooker*, *Silda* etc. who provided him with men and money. The situation is best described by the *arzee* from Bicont Dhal, the then *Zamindar* of *Ghatsila* in which he stated:

It would be endless task to describe to you the desolation of my District and the Disturbances raised by Jagernaot Doll the Dismissed Zemindar who is supported by Jugunaut Potter the Sardar of Dompara. He dispeoples my Districts and deprives me of the means of paying my Revenue. I was...carried to Midnapore by a Jemautdar and peons and confined there 3 months in the meantime Jagernot Doll seized the opportunity of plundering the Ryots. I obtained my release only 15 days ago...I have not prevailed upon a Ryot to return...²¹

The government soon realized that "unless Jagannath Dhal is subdued the Hon'ble Company can never receive an anna from this side of the Subarnarekha...unless he is made Raja he will never cease destroying this country with fire and sword"²². Finally, on October 1776, Mr. Higginson, Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Burdwan,

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.48.

²¹ WBSA, PCR, vol. 1, 26TH May 1774, Arzee from the Zamindar of Gatsela Bicont Doll.

²² Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.64.

reinstated Jagannath Dhal as the *zamindar* of *Ghatsila* at an assessment of Rs.4,267/- while Bicont Dhal was compensated with a grant of some *Jagirs*.

Apart from *Ghatsila*, there were several other places where similar fate awaited the Company. In 1774, Capt. Crawford stationed at *Silda* wrote: "That country sensible of its predicament hath ever since my arrival in this parts been in Arms ready to oppose my Force wherever it would appear..."²³ In December 1774, Mr. Briscoe wrote: "on my entering into Burraboom against the Rajah Bibbicknarrain, his people commenced Hostilities, by Firing upon me, and they opposed me at every Gaut, and strong hold as I passd [sic.]; which deterred me to March with all expedition against the Capital Ruddanagur..."²⁴ These refractory *zamindars* also forced other *zamindars* to join them, as is evident from the *arzee* of the *Zemindar* of *Roypore*, *Simplapaul* and *Jungbhoom*: "Our Revenue being annexed to Buggry We presented Petition to the Council representing the oppression of the Zemindars of that Pergunnah... The Zemindar Continually revolting from Government Presses us to join him and repeatedly on our refusal has laid waste our country..."²⁵ They were also the main perpetrators of *Chuar* disturbances as has been pointed out by Capt. Briscoe in his letter to Edward Stephenson:

*the Choar's of Monbhoom, have been the principal Aggressors, in the late Murders and Robberies, committed in Patcheat, they have inveigled other Neighbouring Choar's to join with them, and it will ever be the case, so long as the Old Rajah of Monbhoom remains in the Zemindarry, as he encourages, and is the Chief Promoter, of all the irregularities throughout the western Jungles...*²⁶

²³ WBSA, PCRB, vol 2. 30th July 1774, Letter from Capt. Crawford, Camp at Silda.

²⁴ *ibid.*, vol. 5, 14th December 1774, Letter to John Bathoe (Chief of Burdwan and Midnapore) from H. Briscoe.

²⁵ *ibid.*, vol. 15, 13 June 1776, Arzee from Durgen Sing Deeb Zemindar of Roypore, Bulram Chowdry and Mohun Dass Chowdry Zemindars of Simlapaul and the two Sundernains Zemindars of Jungbhoom.

²⁶ *ibid.*, vol. 14, 22 April 1776, Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. Briscoe.

In all these cases the Company had to use military force to restore order and tranquility in this region.

The Company also resorted to other methods of bringing these *zamindars* to obedience. The method used for compelling the Chief of *Patcoom* to submit was by “making the Inhabitants who may fall into ... possession prisoners and resting their being released on the submission of their Chiefs...as these are relations to the people Confined...In pursuance of this system” the military Commander “Collected near there (three) hundred Prisoners before the Chiefs of Patcoom came in...”²⁷ However, in order to prevent the *Zamindars* of *Jelda*, *Joypore*, *Bycund Codar* and *Bagmory* from breaking into rebellion, the Commander “drew together the Chiefs and soldiers of those districts and forming them into a Corps to which the Chiefs were appointed officers...carried them...into Patcoom, ... and ...when the Contest was no longer doubtfull [sic.], they were dismissed from their attendance...”²⁸ Attempts were also made at distributing numerous presents amongst the leading men to reduce them to subjugation which automatically ensured the obedience of their followers. In places where the community in general had obtained unlimited independence, there the officers in charge “made use of the Chiefs to bring them within bounds.”²⁹ However, “in either case Considerable danger attended their assisting to fix the shackles of subordination, on those who had formerly held them in subjection”³⁰. In such circumstances, the Commanders took “Hostages from the Zemindar as well as every petty Chief ... until” they were “convinced of their attachment to Government, and obedience after the troops were withdrawn from the

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 8, 10th June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Quarter.”³¹ According to Capt. Briscoe: “The Zemindar of Monbhoom has long behaved exceedingly ill...the Zemindar of Manbhooms son was received by me as a Hostage from the Father for future good behavior when I settled the Country of Monbhoom and reinstated him in the Zemindarry...It was an act...absolutely necessary in the Jungles, or they will ever be in Rebellion if you have not this power and security over them...”³²

Besides Zamindari uprisings, this period was also remarkable for the increase in the number of depredations caused by the *chuars* within the Jungle Mahals. The problem of *chuars* was not a new phenomenon in the late eighteenth century. The establishment of the Company rule and their constantly increasing demand for rents followed by the resumption of service tenures like *paikan* lands etc., added to the misery of these people who were already distressed by low productivity and natural calamities. Even the Board realized that “the resumption of a Large quantity of Chackeran Lands to the Governments Revenue (increased) within these few years which has in some measure contributed to the great Decay ... and the Evil...”³³ .

In order to tame these disgruntled people and simultaneously use their restless spirit for the benefit of the Company, on 25th February 1770, John Cartier instructed Vansittart to raise new recruits from the bewildered *paiks*. Pearce, the Resident directed Goodyar to extort *muchalcas* and money from the rajas of *Barabhum*, *Ambikanagar* and *Ghatsila* to meet the expenses of raising the *paik* militia to quell recent disturbances.³⁴ These *paiks* were thus turned into loyal and efficient army, who now fought for the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., vol. 13, 17 February 1776, Letter to Stephenson from Briscoe.

³³ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 8, 30 June 1775, Letter to Hastings (Governor General and Council of Revenue) from the Board.

³⁴ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.49.

Company to consolidate their position in the Jungle Mahals³⁵. However, even these newly recruited *paik* militia could not keep strict discipline and began to trouble the innocent inhabitants of the region. Finally, in 1775 the Board recommended the revival of the ancient police system under the superintendency of,

*a member of the Board to prevent every Collusion between the officers of the Buxey Daftar and the Decoets Choars etc. which is but too frequently practiced and he should also hear and determine all Causes of Robbery particularly to decide how far the Zemindars should become responsible for the Demands made by Complainants who should prove their charges before him, and the Goods and Robbers when taken should be immediately produced to him.*³⁶

The Superintendent was also directed to form and lay before the Board a plan for the proper distribution of the *chakran* lands, and recommend any other regulations, which he might think would be of service.

Despite these measures there was no respite from the depredations caused by the dissatisfied elements of the Jungle Mahals. In 1780 one Rudra Bauri with the *Dhalbhum* people plundered the inhabitants of *Bishnupur*. Disturbances also broke out in *Balarampur* and *Karnagarh*.³⁷ Even the *zamindar* of *Panchet* was exposed to daily depredations from the *mahals* of *Jhalda*. The *paik* rebellion also took place in south *Panchet* and the configuration spread to *Bogri pargana*. The situation remained unchanged till the end of the eighteenth century.

All this necessitated the permanent stationing of *sepoys* in the Jungle Mahals. In 1775, the battalion under Capt. Crawford was allotted to protect the Provinces of *Beerbhoom*, *Burdwan*, *Bishenpore* and *Patcheat* for which he proposed to station his

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

³⁶ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 8, 30 June 1775, Letter to Hastings (Governor General and Council of Revenue) from the Board.

³⁷ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.79.

troops in the “mountaneous part of Pacheat which falls up the chosen betwixt the Ramgur, Midnapur and Curreckdea Countries. By this Measure the Frontier would be completely covered and the Troops at that station be to support those at any of the other Three.”³⁸ In 1776, Mr. Hewett from *Jelda* wrote: “The neighbouring inhabitants of the independent Districts of Tamar and Singbhoom have frequently made incursions into the interior parts of that Division, where they laid waste all before them till Capt. Crawford stationed a Company of his Seapoys at that place to overawe the Freebooters upon his recall from this station.”³⁹ In the petty *mahals* of *Patcheat*, the collection of revenue was made possible primarily due to “the support of an Internal Force in each Division.”⁴⁰

But, even the stationing of the forces did not completely solve the problem of law and order. In fact, in some places complaints began to pour in against the unlawful acts of these *Sepoys*. In April 1775, the Zamindar of *Patcheat* complained against the *sepoys* sent by Capt. Briscoe to quell the disturbances in *Burrabhoom*, who also seized the “Cows and Effects of the Ryotts of this Chuckla, indiscriminately with those of the Burrabhoom”.⁴¹ Later the *Zamindar* of *Manbhoom* in his petition wrote:

*The army or Emblem of Victory stationed towards Burrabhoom have fix'd their high Road near my Dwelling from which I have retreated to some Distances, from the Dread and Injustice of the Gentlemen, my Naib attends on the Captain of the Troops furnishes him with Provisions and obeys his further Commands Notwithstanding which 1100 Bullocks 30 Buffaloes and five hundred Maunds of Rice have been plundered by the Troops from my Ryotts...*⁴²

The maintenance of troops in the Jungle Mahals was quite a burden on the Company. Acknowledging the hardship these *sepoys* faced, Vansittart in 1769 requested

³⁸ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 8, 10th June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

³⁹ Ibid., vol. 13, 11th March 1776, Letter to Edward Stephenson from Mr. Hewett at Jelldah.

⁴⁰ Ibid., vol. 13, 4th March 1776, Letter To Hewett from Crawford, Camp at Patcheat.

⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 6, 3 April 1775, Letter from the Zemindar and Farmer of Patcheat.

⁴² Ibid., vol. 8, 14th June 1775, Petition from the Zemindar of Maanbhoom.

the government to grant them additional *battas*, as is evident from his letter to Mr. Verelst, dated 4th September 1769:

*in the Western Junguls dependant on Midnapore provisions are in general so dear that it will sometimes be impossible for the Seapoys on that service to subsist without their Batta unless by contribution from the Zemindars, which would open a door for many irregularities and unavoidably occasion a loss in the Revenue; at the same time the extreme unhealthiness of the 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 expence would scarcely be more than that of clothing. I beg leave also to submit it to your consideration whether the long standing and old services of this Battalion be not a plea in its behalf to prevent it from being put upon the same footing with those which have been lately raised expressly for the Pergunna Service.*⁴³

However, the government replied: “As the inconveniences for making a distinction in the pay of any troops from that of the Corps, to which they belong have been frequently experienced We are determined not to permit any precedent that may possibly bring upon us the like trouble; therefore the late orders for cutting off a batta from the Pergunnah Seapoys are strictly and universally to be observed.”⁴⁴ But simultaneously the government also allowed the Resident to make “some equivalent in the contingency” and therefore Vansittart decided to allow “half batta to be drawn among the contingencies for the Seapoys ... amongst our Jungul hills, but not any of those who are at fixed stations...”⁴⁵ All these measures proved to be quite taxing on the Company’s treasury, therefore whenever possible, attempt was made to withdraw the troops and make the *zamindars* responsible for the maintenance of security. In his letter to Lt. Nun, Vansittart wrote:

⁴³ Firminger (ed.), BDRM, vol 2, p.152, selection no. 475. Letter to Verelst from Vansittart, 4 September 1769.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.153, selection no.477. Letter to Vansittart, 14 September 1769.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.167, selction no. 504. Letter to Claud Russell from Vansittart, 3 June 1770.

I am very glad that the disturbances at Burraboom are at length almost brought to a conclusion...The expence of your detachment is considerable, and, in the present scarce season, I apprehend you must find it a difficult matter to procure provisions. If, therefore, the Bulrampore Tannadar and the Zemindar of Burraboom are of opinion that so large a force is no longer necessary for the security of the country, you will be pleased to take a Mutchulca from the Zemindar that he will be answerable for any disturbances, and, then, leaving Jummadars Party for his assistance at Burraboom, you will return with the rest of your detachment at Midnapore.⁴⁶

However, unstable situation of the Jungle Mahals necessitated the stationing of the Company troops throughout the eighteenth century. according to Hunter “After a great deal of trouble, these people were brought to some degree of subordination, ... However, for long afterwards, disturbances constantly occurred, and it is recorded that the cost of keeping them in order often exceeded the sum realized from them as revenue or tribute.”⁴⁷

ADMINISTRATION

By the end of the 1770's, the British government seemed to have lost all faith in the local systems of administration established by the *zamindars* of this region, as is evident from their perception of the *zamindars* who according to them were “rude and illiterate, thereby incapable of comprehending anything but the simplest and the easiest regulations, while possessed of a character that made them ‘ignorant, savage, vicious, selfish and corrupt.’”⁴⁸ Thus, in 1778, in compliance to the orders of Warren Hastings, to form and send him a description of the Jungle Mahals, with respect to its natural and political state, Major James Brown made the most ‘effectual plan’ for the subjection and future government of the Jungle Mahals. His basic suggestion was to “correct the bad,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.182, selection no.532. letter to Lt. Nun from Vansittart, 31 March 1770.

⁴⁷ Hunter, *A Statistical Account*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*, p.51.

and improve the good parts of the present system, rather than overturn the whole to erect a new one.”⁴⁹

Beside retaining the *zamindari* troops and stationing the Company *sepoys*, Brown proposed the division of the frontier into three military commands: first, including all the “frontiers of Midnapoor, viz. Mohurbunge, Singboom, Dolboom, Burraboom and Mauboom”; second including “all that of Pacheit, viz. Tomar and Patcoom and the Jungle Terry lying behind it, viz. of Pacheit, Bierboom, Corruckdea, Chackye and Curruckpoor”; and the third, including all that of “Nagpoor, Ramghur and Palamow, viz. Nagpoor, Toory Burwah Sheerganty, Palamow, Ramgur”.⁵⁰ Though these three commands were made independent of each other, they were to keep up constant communication and intelligence, and join together in case of an emergency where the senior most officer would take over the command of all the three forces.⁵¹

Suggestion was also made for repairing old forts and posts and constructing new ones at strategic places for defence against the foreign enemies. Accordingly, a fort was erected near *Gommah* in *Curruckdea*, another repaired at *Deopoor*, towards *Ramgur*. Temporary forts of stones and coarse *chunam* were erected across the principal passes, with strong gates; and some of them were mounted with old cannons which added to the strength of these forts and rendered them almost impregnable.⁵²

Jungle Mahals also had a large population of aboriginals or tribals existing beyond the authority of the jungle *zamindars*. Thus it was also necessary for the Company to strike a deal with them for the overall ‘good’ of this region. Thus, on

⁴⁹ Brown, *India Tracts*, p.26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.71.

Brown's suggestion, the Colonial government decided to restore the successors of several *Sirdar Mangees* of the different villages by granting them *sanads* in the name of government instead of holding from the *zamindar*. In return the *Mangees* were asked to give *muchalkas* to the government, specifying the services they were to perform, and the penalties in case of failure in the performance. Similarly, the inferior *Mangees* also gave *muchalkas*, to their *Sirdar Mangee*, for all purposes specified in this *sunnud*. Henceforth, all transactions with them were carried on through their *Sirdar Mangees*. If the *Mangees* refused to comply with the establishment, they were treated as enemies.⁵³

For security purpose, there was a plan for re-establishing the *Chokeys*. Attempts were made to immediately fill the vacant *Gauts* with a proper force. The famine of 1769-70 had also laid waste the cultivable lands which were earlier granted as *jagirs* to the *chokeydars* for their maintenance, hence, they were retained on a monthly pay till the lands could be recultivated. However, the monthly pay to the *chokeydars* were to be made not from the treasury of the Company but from *jagirs* and allowances of the *zamindars*, In case the resources proved insufficient for the expence of re-establishing the *chokey bundy*, provision was also made to pay the remainder out of the Jungle Terry revenues, till the *chokeydary jagirs* could be restored to a state of cultivation. In case of the unreliable *zamindars*, officers were appointed on the part of the government. All these *chokeydars* were responsible to the *Thanadars* appointed over them, who had to see to it that the *chokeydars* were never absent from their posts, and also repel the attempts of the forest people forcing their way through the *chokeys* and thereby bring the offenders to justice. The *chokeydars* were to report to him all intelligence and occurrences and pay

⁵³ Ibid., p.78.

him complete obedience. Above these *thanadars* were appointed two *Sezawals*, who received weekly reports from the several *Thanadars*, who then reported to the commanding officer, who in turn reported to officer in charge of the Jungle Terry, thus completing the chain of hierarchy. Though the *thanadars* and *sezawils* could take small decisions for the better management of the *Chokeybundy*, the discretion of making important decisions vested in the officer in charge of the entire region. A sufficient number of *Bundwarries* (people of the low country, who having learnt the local language, were employed in all transactions with them) were attached to each *Sezawal*, to keep up the necessary intercourse between him and the *Mangees*.⁵⁴

Letters constituted the only means of communication for the Company officials situated in various places. The helplessness experienced by the Officers stationed in Jungle Mahals due to their inability to send letters can be understood from the letter of Capt. Briscoe, stationed at *Burrahoom*, dated 14th December 1774: "I have no conveyance for letters, as the Mountaineers will not suffer anything to pass the Roads, and they have stopped up the Gauts, and are very obstinate, I send my letter with a Guard of Seapoys about 15 Course, or they wou'd be intercepted...I am badly situated having no European Surgeon to Dress the wounded..."⁵⁵ Thus the safety of public *Dawks* was an object of great importance. For this there were appointed several petty chiefs under a chief. Each of these chiefs, was bound to safely conduct the *Dawks* through his boundary, for which purpose, a proper number of his people were stationed at the *Dawk* stations. Besides providing men to these *dawk chowkies*, the chief also gave a *muchalka* and took

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.79-83.

⁵⁵ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 5, 14 December 1774, Letter to John Bathoe (Chief of Burdwan and Midnapore) from H. Briscoe.

an oath, to protect and forward the *Dawks* with the greatest expedience; to provide the inhabitants employed with the *Dawks* with a brass plate fixed on their belt, inscribed with the name of the place at which they were stationed to signify their being servants of the Company and prevent any person from stopping or pressing them for coolies; and also to provide these hill people with gifts of turban once every year. In return, the chief however received a monthly allowance from the Government.⁵⁶

In the field of justice, the Company completely divested the local power of their right to adjudicate. Though, the *zamindary* courts were allowed the power of adjusting all little matters either civil or criminal, subject however to appeal, in the former cases to the commander, and in the latter, to the *Faujdar* court of the district; no case of considerable importance could be decided upon by the *Zemindars*, but referred solely to the commander of the district, who in civil cases, decided according to his instructions from the Board, and in all criminal ones, laid them before the *Faujdaar Adowlat*.⁵⁷

Despite all these measures, the Jungle Mahals was never brought under complete subjugation. In the middle of 1785, fresh disturbances occurred in *Panchet* and *Pertabhum*. On the representation of the collector of Midnapur a guard was ordered to be stationed for the protection of the *Zamindars* and *ryots* of *Pertabhum*. Disturbances cropped up again in the *Bogri pargana*. Simultaneously vigorous measures were adopted to root out the causes of disturbances by violent means. In 1792, news reached Midnapore from the Collector of *Ramgarh* regarding the refractory conduct of the people of *Tomar*. *Patkum*, *Panchet*, *Jhalda* and *Barabhum* were again in turmoil. The disturbed

⁵⁶ Brown, *India Tracts*, p. 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.68.

conditions thus prevented the introduction of Permanent Settlement in these areas till 1795.

AGRARIAN ECONOMY

As has been stated in the second chapter, agriculture was the basis of the economy in the Jungle Mahals. However, by the time of British entry there had occurred an increase in the area of cultivation within this relatively infertile zone and there are various reasons which can be ascribed for this.

A detailed study of the emergence of *zamindaris* in the Jungle Mahals show that almost all of them were created from below, i.e. when the individuals became *zamindars* either by reclaiming or purchasing land. In such a case what obviously occurred, according to Rajat Datta was “the extension of agricultural land”.⁵⁸ The *zamindari* patronage also allowed an extension of cultivation and the formation of another kind of landed property.⁵⁹ The Jungle *Zamindars* partly in order to gain power and prestige and partly in order to gain acceptance into the higher social order of the Hindu hierarchical society made a number of religious and secular land grants which sometimes paid small quit rents to the *zamindar*. They also granted lands to the *ghatwals*, *paiks*, *mandals* and other *zamindari* officers again in return for a nominal rent.⁶⁰ During the eighteenth century, when most of these *zamindaris* entered a stage of crisis, the Rajas, in order to strengthen their authority as well as to extend social communication with the people, again resorted to land grants. Besides, even the grantees made several land grants for various purposes. At a later stage, the *zamindars* were unable to check the alienations of

⁵⁸ Rajat, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.137.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.138.

⁶⁰ Ray, *Change in Bengal*, p.115.

revenue paying lands by the officials and the *mandals* and so they themselves resorted to the device of increasing the family lands (*bhitarjote mahals*) as a security. In eighteenth century, the state also took active interest in expanding the area of cultivation and embarked upon the creation of *Jangal-bari zamindars* who were given *sanads* on condition that within the Boundaries the jungles should be cleared, embankments and water courses made, inhabitants brought from other places and land put in to a state of cultivation.⁶¹ All this resulted in the expansion of agricultural land. However, this did not jeopardize the extent of the jungle as is evident from the letter of Edward Baber to the President of the Council, Mr. Hastings written in 1771 that: “there is very little land cultivated in this whole extent, and a very disproportionate part of it capable of cultivation; the soil is very rocky, and the country is mountainous and overspread with thick woods which render it in many places utterly impassable...”⁶²

Economically, the agrarian society can be divided into three groups: those with lands and stocks like the *zamindars*; those with lands but no stocks, mostly tenure holders; and those with neither lands nor stocks consisting mainly of landless peasants including day and seasonal wage earners.

Scholars like Ratnalekha Ray and John R. McLane often make a distinction between a “landed magnate” and a “territorial magnate” whereby they confine a *zamindar*’s role merely to the collection of revenue. According to them, instead of having control over large tracts of land, the zamindar basically held rights over most of the inhabitants of the territory assigned to their management. Thus, it was not the land but the

⁶¹ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.157.

⁶² Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.115.

rights that they held which distinguished them from the landed magnates. Now, the question that arises is whether it is possible to separate a landed magnate from a territorial magnate, especially in case of the Jungle Mahals where most of the *zamindars* originated from tribes or lower agricultural castes? Beside, the fact that they received the revenue, no matter how nominal, established them as the masters of the land. They also reserved the best of lands for themselves which was of utmost importance, especially in a place where the soil was less fertile and the crisis of subsistence predominant. They derived their income from a variety of sources beside agricultural revenue, like, various *abwabs* that were levied, sale of forest trees and products, etc. Thus it would be wrong to distinguish between the landed and the territorial magnate because the *zamindars* represented an amalgamation of both.

The second group, consisting of the privileged class was also actively involved in the process of agricultural production. However, sometimes the members of the higher caste like the *Bankura Brahmans* refrained from holding the plough,⁶³ and sometimes even the *Ghatwals* and other *chakran* holders due to their other preoccupations could not engage in agriculture themselves. The assistance then was provided by the people of the third group consisting mostly of tribals and those from the lower castes like *Bagdis and Bauris*.⁶⁴ This landless peasantry often cultivated land with the stock of the owners of the soil for half share of the produce.

For the Company which primarily took over Bengal as revenue collectors, Jungle Mahals did not offer a very lucrative proposition. However, according to the Board's

⁶³ Ray, *Change in Bengal*, p.111.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

declaration of 1776, the primary objective behind subjugating this region, was, 'not to effect an aggrandizement of the revenue, but the settlement of an easy peshkash or quit rent, as an acknowledgement merely of the Company's sovereignty.'⁶⁵ Thus, economic subjugation was used as a tool to bring about the political subjugation of the region.

Binod S.Das has identified three distinct phases of Company's rule in the Jungle Mahals from 1761 to 1786. The first phase terminating in the great famine of the early 1770's was the period of expansion and hesitation when no systematic policy could be formulated towards the ruled. The second phase beginning with the regulating act of 1773 was a period of experiments that saw the introduction of farming system which ultimately ended disastrously in the early 80's of the century. After the departure of Hasting's in 1785 the third phase, i.e., the period of determination came into picture when attempts were made to reach a permanent solution to the problem of land settlement and the consequent consolidation of the British grip over this wild region. This process reached its culmination in the permanent settlement of 1793.⁶⁶

In the beginning, the military commanders deputed to bring this area under political subjugation were also commanded to settle the revenue with the *zamindars* as is evident from the instruction to Lt. Fergusson to 'adjust the revenue with the zamindars'.⁶⁷ Later, the Military commanders of the three Military divisions, established by the suggestion of Major Browne, were entrusted with the responsibility of collecting the tribute from the *zamindars* of their divisions, and appropriate and account for it, in part of the disbursement of their corps. Since the collection from these areas was minimal, such

⁶⁵ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.67.

⁶⁶ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.34.

an arrangement also enabled the Company government to do away with the necessity of employing civil servants particularly for this purpose, thereby minimizing the Company's expenses.⁶⁸ In the 80's, Collectors were appointed in every district for revenue collection.

When Lt. Fergusson reached the Jungle Mahals, he soon found that the amount initially paid by the Jungle *zamindars* was by no means commensurate with the extent of their *parganas*, for example, Rs.30/- in case of the *Kalianpur zamindar*, and so he increased their amount of tribute. Sundernarayan, the *zamindar* of *Phulkusuma* wanted to pay Rs.300 but he was asked to pay Rs.500 annually. Similarly, he also increased the amount of other *parganas* which are as follows⁶⁹:

Parganas	Paid Formerly	New Settlement
Ramgarh	A.S. Rs. 126.37	A.S. Rs. 616
Sankacoolia		A.S. Rs. 879.70
Jambuni	A.S. Rs. 84.96	A.S. Rs. 516
Jathbhumi		A.S. Rs. 703
Jhargram	A.S. Rs. 238.73	A.S. Rs. 400.68
Total		Rs. 3115.39

Fergusson was also successful in concluding a settlement with the five *zamindars* who initially absconded and also resisted Fergusson's attempt at reducing them to subordination. The settlement concluded with them was as follows⁷⁰:

Parganas	Annual revenue
Supher	A.S. Rs. 54
Aymenagar	A.S. Rs. 311
Barabhumi	A.S. Rs. 441
Manbhumi	A.S. Rs. 316
Chatna	A.S. Rs. 879.68
Total	A.S. Rs. 2101.68

⁶⁸ Browne, *India Tracts*, p.70.

⁶⁹ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.37.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38, also see Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.99.

When Mr. Vansittart (Resident of Midnapur) made a tour of the provinces, he found “the former settlement so near the real value of the lands that he raised the Rents only by a few hundred Rupees-except in the Western Jungalls [sic.]”⁷¹ However, as the Jungles had not been sufficiently reduced, the annual expence of sending troops to reduce the unruly inhabitants to obedience was, as remarked by Baber “as great as their annual rents.”⁷² Therefore, need was always felt to increase the revenue demand from these *zamindars*. In *Ghatsila* the Company even levied a new tax of one *anna* on every rupee the people paid to the Raja to compensate the loss, arising out of its disturbed state which had already occasioned a deficiency in the rents to the extent of *Sicca* Rs.721-5-11.⁷³ Disturbances apart, sometimes even the subdued *zamindars* tried to evade payment of revenue as is evident from the letter of Edward Baber written in 1771: “...As soon as the harvest is gathered in they carry their grain to the top of the hills, or lodge it in another fastness that are impregnable; so that whenever they are pursued by a superior force they retire to these places, where they are quite secure, and bid defiance to any attack that can be made against them,..”⁷⁴

The economic problem of the Jungle Mahals was worsened by the famine of 1770. For the first time in centuries the Jungle Mahals remained severely underpopulated for two generations⁷⁵. According to Hunter, the distress of the inhabitants not only proceeded from scarcity of provisions and want of rain to cultivate their lands, but also

⁷¹ WBSA, CCR, vol.2, 30 July 1771, Letter to Claud Russel (Collector General) from Edward Baber.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.45.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.115.

⁷⁵ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.51.

from the shortage of drinking water⁷⁶. The rural communities in the plains relinquished their hamlets and drew closer towards the centre of the district which resulted in the expansion of the *jungly* uninhabited land frequented by the wild beasts. Describing the situation in *Beerbhoom*, Hunter states that: “In vain the Company offered a reward for each tiger’s head, sufficient to maintain a peasant’s family in comfort for three months; and item of expenditure it deemed so necessary that when, under extraordinary pressure, it had to suspend all payments, the tiger money and...were the sole exceptions.”⁷⁷ On 12th July 1775, the Controlling Council of Revenue at Burdwan ordered that a publication be made at the *Cutcherry* of Burdwan that “a Reward of 10Rs. will be given for the Head of each Tiger that may be produced at the Sudder”.⁷⁸ The *Tannadars* and the *Naibs* were also informed about this and were directed to “promote as much as possible the end of which for which it is intended”⁷⁹. There was also an increase in the ravages committed by the wild elephants as the jungle absorbed the cultivated land after the famine⁸⁰.

Given the precarious environment, famines and droughts were a regular feature in the Jungle Mahals. Even after the 1770 famine, there were several instances when the crops were spoilt due to want of rain. In 1774, the Controlling Council of Revenue at Burdwan received a petition from the *Ryots* of *Singhbhoom* stating that: “our grain is withered from the want of rain in so much that we have turned our cows into our Fields to graze upon it ...”⁸¹ However, despite such crop failures attempt was made to realize as

⁷⁶ Hunter, *Annals*, p.64.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁸ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 9, 12 July 1775.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Hunter, *Annals*, p. 68.

⁸¹ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 2, 22 August 1774, Petition from the Ryots of Sunghbloom.

much revenue as possible as is evident from the letter of Captain Crawford from *Jelda*, dated 16th December 1775 wrote that:

*complaints of the great failure of the Crops by a deficiency of Rain were preferred from all parts of the Districts under my charge...the state of the northern Division of these District where the loss was represented to be greatest...These Zemindaries however from their vicinity to the Lower Countries have been accustomed to Cultivate those Grains which require less water and being earnest to avoid the imputation of disobedience after having experienced so much (severity) last year on account of their ready submission they are determined to pay with alacrity as great a share of their Rents as the sale of those lesser Crops will Produce...*⁸²

However, it would be wrong to project the colonial government as completely unsympathetic towards the grievances of its subjects, for there are instances when the government did allow a remissions during unfavorable situations. When Mr. Hewett informed the government about the failure of crops in *Jelda* occasioned by the scarcity of rain, the government permitted a total remission of the revenue for two months, as is evident from the letter of Stephenson to Hewett:

*on the apparent absolute necessity of granting two Month's total Remission from the Original estimate Collection of Rs 34,841 and that such measure will be attended with immediate as well as future Salutary Consequences to the Districts in Your Charge, we authorize You to remit such demand, but with positive Assurance to the Zemindars that such indulgence will not be carried into a precedent, and that we expect the most punctual execution of their future Engagements...*⁸³

The introduction of the Farming Settlement in 1772 heralded the beginning of the second phase of the Company's rule. It was the need of the Company for greater revenue and their desire to ascertain the real value of land which motivated them to undertake this experiment. It was also seen as an effective measure to subject the inhabitants to a more

⁸² Ibid., vol. 11, 16 December 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson from Crawford, Camp at *Jelda*.

⁸³ WBSA, PCR, vol.13, 13 May 1776. Letter to Hewett from Stephenson.

civilized form of government, as is evident from the letter of Mr. Barwell and Mr. Graham regarding *Patcheat* and *Bissenpore*: "...This is a frontier Province which was only within these few Years reduced to the Subjection of our Government and has hitherto been considered rather as a Tributary than in any other Light...the lands being put in the possession of Farmers will be of the greatest assistance... to subject the Inhabitants to the more regular and civilized form of Government..."⁸⁴

Attempt was made to conclude the Farming Settlement with the *Zamindars*. Unlike in the plains, the Jungle Mahals consisted of numerous petty *zamindaris* and several tenure holders, and therefore, the Company had to make settlements with each one of them separately. The mode of settlement undertaken by the Company officials here is evident from the letter of Capt. James Browne, stationed at *Surreah*, dated 27th September 1775:

*agreeable to your orders, I send the Bundabust and Kistbundy of the Beerbhoom Jungle Terry under my inspection, for the Bengal Year 1182...In the Bundabust, you will observe I neither mention Farmers nor Securities, this is owing to my having receiv'd orders from the Hon'ble Board to settle with each Gutwall or petty Zemindar separately on a frugal Plan, this was accordingly and their being man a hundred of them I did not imagine it would be requisite to insert the Names of them in Bundabust. As to Securities, there is no Man who would be security for these Jungle Zemindars in any times, the only Permanency they possess, arise from the Easiness of the Rents themselves and the Presence of Troops, to enforce obedience...*⁸⁵

Some *zamindars* like those of *Jeypore*, *Jelda* and *Bycont Codar*, refused to accept the management of their *zamindaris* on the terms proposed by the Company and fled away thinking that "...the whole must fall into anarchy, which would produce the restoration of

⁸⁴ WBSA, CCR, vol. 1, 27 May 1771, Letter to the Comptrolling Committee of Revenue from Barwell and Graham, Murshidabad.

⁸⁵ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 10, 27 September 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson from Capt. James Browne, Camp at Surriah.

the Country into their hands on their own Terms...⁸⁶ Such lands were then converted to *Khass*. In course of time these *zamindars* according to the Company “became thoroughly sensible of their folly and declared themselves ready to undertake the management of them on whatever Terms might be Prescribed...⁸⁷ who were then conferred with the management of their Districts. The most recalcitrant amongst them, like the *Zamindar* of *Jelda* was however, “by way of example” kept in banishment, and was “granted a small Pillame (village) from his Country to prevent his being compelled through the necessity to plunder those parts of the District which had submitted to Government”, with the assurance that “the Government did not wish to deprive them to a Comfortable subsistence equal to their stations, and requested that such a proportion of lands as might be deem’d adequate to that Promise might be granted them for their maintainance, and that they would deliver over every other part of their Zemindaries into the hands of Government...⁸⁸

Thus, the farming settlement reduced the *Zamindars* of the Jungle Mahals into farmers and collectors of rent who held their farm “as Hereditary Possessors unless they forfeit their Rights by disobedience or Rebellion...⁸⁹ Like in the rest of Bengal, they were converted into the intermediaries of the government forming an intermediate link between the government and the cultivators. In some places, however, instead of collecting the rent directly from the cultivators, the *Zamindars* also appointed *talluqdars* as is evident from the *arzee* of Jadoosing Mahopator, *Zemindar* of *Buggry*, dated 4th August 1775: “The Tallokdars of the Jungly Mehal of Roypore the Malguzary where of

⁸⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, 10 June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

⁸⁷ Ibid., vol. 11, 20 October 1775, Letter from Capt. James Crawford.

⁸⁸ Ibid., vol. 8, 10 June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

⁸⁹ Ibid., vol. 13, 4 March 1776, Letter to Hewett from Crawford, Camp at Patcheat.

amounts to 4000Rs. ... are continually raising Disturbances in Payment of their Rents which hath been the Reason for the present Deficiency in the Dispatch...”⁹⁰ To protect the *ryots* it was decided to acquaint them “with the exact sum of the Zemmindars authority and of the Rent he is to Pay to Government for stated Quantities of every different sort of Produce, by which means they will know when they are injured and by having it in the Power, to obtain immediate redress be led to look upon themselves as subjects of this state not as slaves of their Zemindars.”⁹¹

The biggest problem before the government while forming the settlement with the jungle *zamindars*, as stated by Mr. Hewett stationed at *Jellda* was: “The land in these Parts never having been measured it cannot be ascertained with any exactness what quantity of cultivated or waste ground is in each District this entirely prevents the Revenue being levied by the Bega or any of the fixed modes adapted in the low Countries...”⁹² As early as 1770 Alexander Higginson had suggested that: “...province should be properly surveyed, by which means alone its true extent to quantity of land will be ascertained, which...will be of great service...in the prosecution of the general plan for the Improvement of the Revenues...”⁹³ The Company did try to determine the exact size of the revenue paying lands by deputing *aumeens* in some of the districts like *Jeypore*, *Jelda* and *Bycont Codar*,⁹⁴ but on the whole the measure was ineffective. The dishonesty of the *aumeens* and his agents further worsened the situation. In 1775, describing the situation of petty *mahals* of *Patcheat*, Capt. James Crawford wrote:

⁹⁰ Ibid., vol. 9, 4 August 1775, Arzee from the Zemindar of Buggry, Jadoosing Mahopator.

⁹¹ Ibid., vol. 8, 10 June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

⁹² Ibid., vol. 24, 28 March 1778, Letter from Hewett to Higginson, Jellda.

⁹³ WBSA, CCRM, vol. 2, 12 November 1770, Letter to Becher from Higginson, Patcheat.

⁹⁴ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 8, 10 June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

When I first entered them their accounts were kept by knots on Pieces of Card there is now scarce one man of Business in the Southern Division and few of the Zemindars or Cheets can write their names- under such circumstances must appear requisite...that there should be a person on the spot to prevent those in whose hands the Mofussil Collections are entrusted from oppressing the ryot...⁹⁵

All this resulted in the over assessment of lands of which the zamindars were at the receiving end.

In 1776, fixed settlements were finally made with the Jungle Zamindars of Midnapore which were as follows⁹⁶.

Names of the Zemindarries under Balrampore Tanna	Total of the Fixed Jumma Per Annum	Names of the Zemindarries under Johnpore Tanna	Total of the Fixed Jumma Per Annum
Pergunnah Ramgur	672.23	Pergunnah Baileburra	866.34
Sunkeercooly	855.90	Nya Bysaun	5175.81
Jauntboony	744.28	Chairah	285.30
Soopore	1798.94	Kear Chudeepy	50.00
Amyanagar	636.43	Jargong	256.09
Burrahboom	829.98	Kella Burrajeet	994.08
Maumbhoom(Manbhoom)	1595.71	Dugpurrae	126.55
Chatna	2288.09		
Kismut Jamboony	670.47		
Total	10092.07	Total	77554.04

(* Amount calculated to the nearest Rupee)

The total collection from the two *tannahs* amounted to Rs.87646.11. A comparison between the settlement concluded by Mr. Fergusson in the 1760's and the one concluded in 1776, clearly shows that there was an increase in the assessed revenue.

According to the terms of settlement, beside paying the "Establish'd Kistbundy" to the *tahsildar* stationed at the *Tannahs*, the *Zamindars* also undertook to support the march of English troops through their *Zemindarries* by providing them with guides and articles of provisions; to refrain from plundering the "Frontier Pergunnahs adjoining to

⁹⁵ Ibid., vol. 11, 20 October 1775, Letter from Capt. James Crawford.

⁹⁶ Ibid., vol. 17, 26 November 1776.

our several Zemindarries” and delivering the guilty *Choars* to the *tahsildar*; to “bind ourselves and Heirs solely and truly to submit to the Decision of the Established to the Decision of the Established Moffussil Courts of awdawlut with a Right to Appeal to the Honble Governor General and Council of Calcutta”; not to assist “Jaggernaut Doll or any of the Rebellious Zemindars or Enemies of the English Government under Penalty of being dismissed from our Zemindarries”⁹⁷. In return the *zamindars* received “an Ammilnama or Deed of Possession and Encouragement, that on Condition of his duly executing the above agreement the Rights and privileges of his Zemindarry are confirmed by the English Company to Himself and Heirs forever on the present fixed Jumma without being subjected to any Increase...”⁹⁸

Though the *jumma* had been fixed, the Company continued to encounter numerous difficulties (climatic, political and economic) in realizing the amount which is best portrayed by the letter of Mr. Hewitt:

*Bagmoory Division ...The scarcity of Rain which prevailed in the season of 1775 almost utterly destroyed the Crops of the Year its Produced a Famine which carried off a great number of inhabitants by Deaths and the general Revolt in the adjoining country of Ramghurr induced a number of them to join the Plunder ... grain ... procured for the Cultivation must have been drawn from the low Countries at a dearer rate then usual Exclusive of the additional Expencc incurred by the bringing of their Houses the number of Ryotts lost in the famine together with those who joined in the Ramghurr Revolutions make a very considerable total which beyond a Doubt must have prevented the Zemindar from cultivating their usual quantity of Ground.*⁹⁹

The amount of balance due to the government gradually began to rise which again reminded the Company of the real motive of subjugating the Jungle Mahals as is evident from the letter of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Burdwan; dated 25th May 1779:

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., vol. 20, 7 July 1777, Letter to Alexander Higginson from Hewitt.

*The Balance due from the Patcheat Petty Mhals is Sicca Rs.4464, out of which the Sum of Rs.2722.. ..9 is due from the Zemindar of Patcoom ...This being a frontier District and the Inhabitants being of a turbulent disposition we have in our general Instructions to the Collector recommended the preservation of peace and Tranquility not considering so small a revenue as that District could at any rate pay as a matter of so much moment as preserving the Inhabitants in a good disposition towards Government...*¹⁰⁰

The resumption of the *Chakran* lands also led to an increase in the revenue of the Jungle Mahals. According to Capt. Crawford: “Encrease [sic.] of Revenue which has been made since they were put under my charge arises principally from the Resumption of the lands which the Zemindars when their authority were decisive in their respective Districts had distributed...”¹⁰¹ The governmental aversion to such grants can very well be gauged from the letter to Edward Stephenson in which the official incharge of the Jungle Mahals writes: “I judged it fruitless to grant the necessary Donations of lands, to the native Jageerdars and in whom I could repose no confidence, I therefore only made Most leading Persons such allowances as to prevent their being drove into Violent Measures through disputes...”¹⁰² However as early as July 1775, when Capt. Camac and Capt. Crawford were instructed to prepare and transmit an account of the *Chakran* lands in their districts, it was discovered that “whatever increase...has been imposed hath therefore principally arisen from the Resumption of the unnecessary part of the military tenures...”¹⁰³. The *Chakran* lands and other land tenures over a period of time had come to assume distinct feature of private property and it was difficult both for the state and the *zamindar*, to dispossess such people from their grants. Upon careful scrutiny, Capt. Crawford, incharge of the petty *Zamindaris* of *Patcheat* found that the Grants of every

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., vol .29, 25 May 1779, Letter to Governor General and his Council from Marriott, Dawson, Charters, Taylor, Dowall.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., vol. 13, 4 March 1776, Letter to Hewett from Crawford, Camp at Patcheat.

¹⁰² Ibid., vol. 8, 10 June 1775, Letter to Edward Stephenson.

¹⁰³ Ibid., vol. 11, 20 October 1775, Letter from Capt. James Crawford.

Denomination had been made by the sole authority of the Zemindar” and were confined to their own family, family priests and persons responsible for the immediate defence of their districts. Since “These Districts never having before Submitted to Foreign Scrutiny or authority” Capt. Crawford “judged it eligible to Indulge their Chiefs in having their allowances blended with such as might be granted them being in reality to their Household...”¹⁰⁴ The continuation of such financial privileges despite the state’s disapproval would appear to be in contravention to its attempt to enforce rigorous collections of revenue. This indicates the importance of such properties in the agrarian milieu of the late eighteenth century.¹⁰⁵

During the early 1780’s the revenue administration in the jungles was in a mess. In 1781, the jungle *zamindars* expressing their inability to pay the increased revenue and described their country as:

*it is a jungle, that their rents are a kind of quit rent collected from their paiks and chuars; that they are surrounded likewise by jungle zamindars, on the east by Bogree and Bishnupur; on the north by Patchet; on the west by Singbhoom; on the south Damudar Bhanja, the Moharbhanj Rajah; that all these are more mighty than they and from whom they frequently suffer depredation,*¹⁰⁶

Internal disturbances also raised its head from time to time as is evident from the letter of the Collector of *Ramghur*: “...the Rajhs [sic.] of Ramgur and Nagpore have availed themselves of the absence of the troops to withhold the payment of their Revenue; the disturbances in Palamow... have prevented me from making the settlement of that country...”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., vol. 11, 20 October 1775, Letter from Capt. James Crawford.

¹⁰⁵ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p.165.

¹⁰⁶ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.67.

¹⁰⁷ WBSA, Committee of Revenue, Vol. 9, 19 November 1781, Letter from the Collector of Ramghur.

In 1780, the Provincial Councils of Revenue were abolished and Controllers were appointed in each district. Committee of Revenue was placed in full control, thus marking the completion of the process of centralization. The *Zamindars* were encouraged to pay their revenue directly to the *Khalsa*.¹⁰⁸ This resulted in great inconvenience for the Collector who stated: “It is absolutely necessary a strict hand and short account be kept with them; whereas they are now left to themselves, and at full liberty to act as they please, no person at present having charge at them...”¹⁰⁹

Period of centralization gave way to the period of determination and fixed settlements were concluded with the remaining *zamindari*s as well. The *Kistbundy* of the District of *Ramghur* etc. for the Year 1786-87 as concluded by Mathew Leslie, the Collector was as follows¹¹⁰:

Districts	Amount of Khurreef	Amount of Rubby
Ramghur	24001	16000
Palamow	10001	5000
Naugpore	7001	8000
Kendy	1801	1200
Chackye	3444.89	492.5
Currikdea	12233	2823.51
Sonaut Sicca Rs.	58481.89	33515.83

(* Amount calculated to the nearest Rupee)

Similarly, the Settlement and *Kistbundy* of *Pacheat*, *Jelda* etc. for the Bengal Year 1786-87 as concluded by Mathew Leslie was as follows¹¹¹:

¹⁰⁸ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.70.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.67.

¹¹⁰ Miscellaneous Records, Board of Revenue, Registers etc. relating to Land and Land Revenue. Revenue account of the account of settlement, i.e., register containing Settlement *Kistbundy*; general *Jama Wasil Baki* accounts etc. Ramgarh 1786-1787. Vol. 406.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Name of the Districts	Settlement for the year 1193	Name of the Districts	Settlement for the year 1193
Pachet	56489	Toorang	200
Jelda	2440.29	Jerria	2300
Begunkooder	1200	Cuttras	1167.41
Jeypoor	1661	Nouagur	1200
Mokunpoor	150	Toory	2309.25
Bogmoory	2100	Khass Mahals	400
Heesla	400	Patcoom	3045

The total revenue amounted to *Sicca* Rupees 75061.95.¹¹² The *Bundobust of Pergunnah Boggrey* for the same year amounted to Rupees 49166.¹¹³

During this period several demands were made for the revision of assessment. The *zamindars* could have been granted redress by granting them a deduction in *jumma*. But the Government was unsympathetic towards such demands. Though the land revenues were fixed for ever, the avenues for imposing extra imposts were closed. Incidence of taxation therefore naturally fell on the original producers. The condition of peasantry deteriorated day by day. In the Jungle Mahals the produce rent played a major part in enabling the ryots to pay their dues to the proprietor of the soil as is evident from the letter of Alexander Higginson which stated that: "It was a custom for the Ryots to give paddy for the rents of the ground they cultivated."¹¹⁴ However, the Company insisted on the collection of money rent, an evidence of which can be found in the letter of Capt. James Browne stationed at a Camp in *Curruckpore*; dated 29th January 1776: "The Dryness of the season has almost utterly destroyed the Crops of Saurhet Deogur and Belputtah...this Year's Revenue as cannot be collected in ready Money without greatly

¹¹² Miscellaneous Records, Board of Revenue, Registers etc. relating to Land and Land Revenue. Revenue account of the account of settlement, i.e., register containing Settlement Kistbundy; general Jama Wasil Baki accounts etc. Ramgarh 1786-1787. Vol. 406.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ WBSA, CCRM, vol. 4, 22nd February 1771. Letter to Samuel Middleton from Alexander Higginson, Beerbhoom.

distressing them...”¹¹⁵. In answer the Council stated “...we must leave it to you therefore to exert yourself for the purpose of realizing the Balances in specie due from the Zemindars...”¹¹⁶ Though this relative role of produce and money rent was one of the cause of the decline of independent peasantry, it was not obviously the sole cause. The factors like gradual rise in prices of daily necessities of life such as salt, greater quantity of currency in circulation and relatively little scope of marketability of *ryot's* produce also indirectly played a considerable part in this tragic drama.¹¹⁷

TRADE:

Besides agriculture, trade was an important constituent of the revenue of Jungle Mahals as is evident from the letter of the *Zamindar of Patcheat, Berrut Sikar*, which stated: “This Country is wild and ill peopled so that the Revenue principally arises from the Duties levied on its produce”.¹¹⁸ Major Browne in his ‘India Tracts’ has referred to various articles of trade like *tussur, mowah, dammah, kutt, tekoor* and *abruck*, exclusive to this region, which have already been described at length in the first chapter. However, the amount at which they were priced does not seem to correspond to their exclusivity, for they were sold very at a very cheap rate in the plains. *Tussur* sold for two rupees eight *annas* per *Kahan* of one thousand two hundred and eighty cocoons;¹¹⁹ *mowah* for five *annas* per *maund*; *dammah* for three *annas* per *maund*; *kutt* for two rupees eight *annas* per *maund*; *tekoor* for two rupees eight *annas* per *maund* and *abruck* for one rupee per

¹¹⁵ WBSA,PCRB, vol. 11, 29 January 1776, Letter from Capt. James Browne to Edward Stephenson, Camp at Curruckpore.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, p.91.

¹¹⁸ WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 23 January 1775, Letter from the Zemindar of Patcheat, Berrut Sikar.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *India Tracts*, p.19.

maund. Woods of certain trees like '*coosum*' were sold for eight *annas* per stick, two of which were a load for a small bullock.¹²⁰

Despite these commodities being produced in the Jungle Mahals, it wasn't the local population, but the merchants from Bengal and Bihar who brought them for sale in the market in the plains. Thus, it is important to discuss the method of procurement undertaken by these merchants to make these commodities available in the market. The usual method was to fix the residence of one of the family member, at one of the capital villages in the jungle terry, who inspected the preparation of the goods while the rest of the family lived at their proper residence, either in Bengal or in Bihar, where they purchased the goods wanted by the jungle people like cloth, oil, salt, tobacco, beetle nut and leaf, pepper, garlic, asafetida, opium and all the common spices, *turmerick*, wheat, *dal*, flour, etc. They then drove their own bullocks to the place where the goods were kept ready by their relation, and the cargo was bartered to the advantage of the merchant. The jungle commodities thus received were then carried to Bihar or Bengal where they were again bartered for a second investment for the same market, or sold at a considerable profit for ready money. This double profit unburdened of any charges, was quite advantageous for these small traders.¹²¹ These merchants also sold the hardy grains produced in this region like *Codo* for five rupees a mound; *goondley*, four *maunds* for a rupee; *borah* two *maunds* and a half for a rupees; *jenorah*, four *maunds* for a rupee; *kairee*, four *maunds* for a rupee; *murruah* four *maunds* for a rupee etc.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.20.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp.20-21

¹²² Ibid., p.16.

According to Bayly, the “partnership between the Company and the moneylender-trader which had facilitated the subjugation of India now proceeded in the conquest of India’s internal frontiers”.¹²³ Monied settlers trickled into the tribal zone and colonial administrators, solicitous for the stability of revenue, conferred on them proprietary rights and legitimized their bonds through the colonial courts. Unequal economic relations between the forests dwellers and those of the plains had existed before colonial rule, but ‘debt bondage’ and ‘agrarian servitude’ now became more widespread. Traders from the plains bartered rice, salt and coarse cloth for tribal supplies of wood, honey, wax and ginger. The indigent tribals only received a tiny proportion of the real value of these commodities from the Hindu traders, and consequently fell into debt.¹²⁴

During his military campaigns, Mr. Fergusson discovered that the country was rich in iron.¹²⁵ However as stated in the first chapter, the ore produced in this region was of an inferior quality. But, coming from a technologically advanced country, the British knew that despite the inferior quality, the ores produced in these mines could be used for “almost every work in cast iron and particularly for the fabrication of cannon”. Besides, the remarkably cheap fuel in *Ramghur* could also be used to extract silver from the lead ores which could become a source of generating “Employment for a tribe and people found there and in the neighbouring provinces called kolls who at present live in the jungles almost in the state of nature”¹²⁶

¹²³ Bayly, *Indian Society*, p.14.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p. 43.

¹²⁶ WBSA, PCR, vol. 23, 6 January 1778, Letter to Higginson from Governor General and Council of Revenue containing a copy of the proposal presented by Mr. Matter and Mr. Farguhar.

Bearing all these things in mind, Mr. Matter and Mr. Farguhar proposed to open up iron works at “the pergunnah called Jerreah lying between the rivers Dummodar and Burraker in the province of Patcheat” facilitated by the navigability of the river Damodar in that place. Some of the important demands put forth in the proposal were as follows - a “sufficient quantity of land in the pergunnah Jerreah in Patcheat or in any other province, if appearing more advantageously situated for the purpose be assigned us for erecting the iron furnaces and ware houses and for the habitation of the workmen and labourers”; “exclusive privilege of working Iron and Steel” within any part of the Company’s possessions lying towards the west of Burdwan and “of selling the produce of such manufacture freely from the duty in any place under the Presidency of Fort William for the term of nineteen Years...likewise the exclusive right of working the mines of whatever ores or mineral ore not at present wrought by the country people within the aforesaid limits for the same number of years”; immunity from the “control of the Burdwan Council or of any of the Company’s Servants resident in the provinces within the above mentioned limits”; permission to employ Europeans in their works which was of private nature in contrast to the Regulating Act of 1773; and, payment of one twentieth part of the profits after the expiration of two years from the time of opening the mine.¹²⁷

After receiving the proposal, the government ordered for an enquiry to be made regarding the appropriateness of establishing a mine in this region. Following a close examination Mr. Hewett, then incharge of this region found that this region was mostly “covered with Jungle or uncultivated, ... this cleared would in all probability be the best

¹²⁷ Ibid.

situation for the works of Mr. Motte and Farguhar...”¹²⁸ Finally, necessary orders were issued putting Mr. Farguhar in possession of the iron mines of *Patcheat*.

Thus, as far as trade is concerned, almost two thirds of the traffic consisted of exchange of jungles produce for other necessities of life.¹²⁹ Besides, there was a disproportion between the amount coming into the Jungle Mahals and the amount going out of it. There was almost no influx of money to the Jungle Mahals from trade. On top of that the Company demanded its money only in cash. All this implied a lot of hardship upon the zamindars who were soon obliged to borrow at high rate of interest to pay their rents.¹³⁰ Unsuccessful attempts were however made by the British officials to convince the inhabitants that, by trading in these articles and by tilling the lands they would benefit themselves more and lead a happier life.¹³¹ But instead of entering into a settlement, most jungle *zamindars* just withdrew into the remote and dense jungles of their *parganas*.¹³² Thus, the jungle Mahals contributed only a small amount to the overall revenue of Bengal.

SOCIETY:

The society within the Jungle Mahals can be broadly divided into three groups; that of *Zamindars*, tenure holders and cultivators. The political and economic changes following the establishment of the Company rule also affected the condition of these social orders in this region.

¹²⁸ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 25, 20 March 1778, Letter from Hewett to Higginson, Jellda.

¹²⁹ Brown, *India Tracts*, p.15.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Price, *History of Midnapore*, p.43.

¹³² BDRM, vol. 1, 14 February 1767, Letter number 124.

The people most drastically affected by the new political regime were the *Zamindars*. Before the British extended their sway into this region, these Rajas, as they were locally called, were more or less autonomous. Their autonomy was however seen as the biggest obstacle to the British desire of attaining territorial consolidation. Thus, attempt was made to bring about their political subjugation followed by a series of regulations to ensure their obedience. However, the task of reducing them to submission, in a situation where they commanded a considerable force, and where the social and familial ties were strong, it was never easy. So the Company had to resort to coercion to militarily bring them under their control. This was a big blow to the prestige of these *zamindars* who had so far reserved the right to exercise coercion exclusively to themselves. Besides, it also led to the weakening of the social bonds which united them, and made them more opportunist. The British policy of divide and rule, whereby they appointed the near relations to manage the *zamindari* of the absconding or unyielding *zamindars*, further accelerated this process. The prestige of the *zamindars* further suffered a set back when the English took away their right to impart justice among their people by positioning the military commanders over them in case of civil disputes and *faujdary adalats* in case of criminal cases.

To further subdue the *zamindars* and make them aware of the real governing body, the Company even took over the right to confirm their possession and accession to their *zamindaries*, as is evident from the letter of the Council of revenue, dated 20th September 1774:

We shall confirm the succession of Persanaut Sing the son of the Rajah Teje Sing to the Zamindarry of Ramgur as a Measure consistent with our former Resolution in favour of his father, but as Persanaut Sing has been greatly wanting in his attention

*to seem to know none but that of Capt. Camac and further as he is told the Zamindarry of a frontier District, We think it highly expedient that he should repair to Calcutta in person to acknowledge his allegiance to the Government, and receive his Investiture from the Hands of our President after settling the usual Peshcush to be paid to the Sircar. We have accordingly desired the President to issue the Perwannah summoning Persaunat Sing to Calcutta.*¹³³

Their political subjugation convinced the people that there was an authority over and above the *zamindars*.

Economic changes further deteriorated the position of the *zamindars* by converting them from tributary chiefs to revenue paying *zamindars* whose very position depended on their ability to pay regular taxes. They became a part of the Company's revenue collecting machinery and their position was reduced to that of mere collectors of rent forming an intermediate link between the government and the cultivators. For people who were already distressed by the over-assessment of their *zamindaris*, the additional burden of maintaining the forces and being responsible for robberies, thefts etc. was too much. The constant depredations caused by their neighbours and *chuars* further added to their misery. However, the Company seemed to be unmoved by their situation. In reply to one of the complaints of the *Zamindar of Patcheat* the Council replied: "within the Bounds of his District it is the duty as Zamindar and also his Interest as farmer to take care to repel every attempt of the Chouars to invade his country ... no such pleas will be admitted in excuse for his withholding his Rents or to entitle him to any Deductions at the end of the year."¹³⁴ These economic limitations had a serious effect on their ability to make land grants for religious or secular purpose or to give employment to their subjects which directly had a negative impact on their image as a patrimonial and benevolent figure.

¹³³ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 3, 20 September 1774, Letter to Vansittart from the Council of Revenue.

¹³⁴ WBSA, PCRB, vol. 4, 12 December 1774, Letter from Ram Chuna Bose, Naib of Patcheat.

In case of the tenure holders, especially the *gautwalls* and *paiks*, the effect was moderate, for the Company could not afford to disband these constituents of the *Zamindari* militias completely. Given the strategic location of the Jungle Mahals, it was understood by the Company that disbanding these forces would expose this whole frontier to the Marathas who were the natural enemies of this state and for whom a 'prodigious force' would be necessary to guard the principal passes.¹³⁵ Beside, keeping in mind the unfriendly nature of the climate and terrain of this region, it was only the natives of the country who could exist there.¹³⁶ Because, of their usefulness to the Company, this group did not suffer as drastically as the *zamindars*. However, instead of the *Zamindar*, they were now placed under the charge of one of the Board members appointed by the Company. The Board member was further ordered to prepare a "a list of all Chackeran lands ...with the servants attached to them ... and ... specify the purpose to which they are at present appropriated ... and lay before the Board a plan for the proper distribution of the above mentioned lands..."¹³⁷ Though the economic condition of these tenure holders remained unchanged, the increased vigilance restricted their ability to make charity grants and also provide employment to other groups.

The last group which was the worst sufferer of the existing disorder was that of the peasants who mostly depended upon the above two classes for employment. This group was located at the bottom of the three tiered social structure and had to bear the brunt of all the above social groups including that of the Company.

¹³⁵ Brown, India Tracts, p.25.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p.25.

¹³⁷ WBSA, PCR, vol.8, 14 June 1775, Letter to Hastings from the Board.

Prior to the establishment of the Company rule “It was a custom for the Ryots to give paddy for the rents of the ground they cultivated...”¹³⁸ Thus, the imposition of a regular rent demanded in specie was bound to have a negative impact upon this group. According to James Browne : “...The Zemindars of the Jungle Terry are, or affect to be, So poor, that they never have paid nor ever will pay their Rents to Government, till they have first Collected them from their Riots. This cannot be done till the Crops are ripe and the first Crop is called Bhadowee, from its being cut in Bhaddon and from this crop they usually pay 4 annas: 10 from the crop called Khariel and 2 from that called Rubbee.”¹³⁹ Thus, an increase in the revenue also led to a simultaneous increase in the amount demanded from the peasants.

Besides the burden of revenue, the peasants were also the worst sufferers of the existing lawlessness in this region. The cattle and the seed of the peasantry were usually the first victims of the depredations occasioned by the *zamindars* and the discharged *sardars* of the *mahals*. The peasantry spent most of its time fleeing into the jungles or neighbouring territories to save their lives,¹⁴⁰ which adversely affected cultivation in this region. With the decline of the *zamindars* and the tenure holders the cultivators could look upto nobody for protection. Even the *sepoys* stationed for their protection often harassed them and deprived them of their wealth as is evident from the petition of the *Zamindar of Manbhoom* in which he stated that “1100 Bullocks 30 Buffaloes and five hundred Maunds of Rice have been plundered by the Troops from my Ryotts.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ WBSA, CCRM, vol.4, 22 February 1771, Letter to Samuel Middleton from Alexander Higginson, Beerbhoom.

¹³⁹ WBSA, PCR, vol. 10, 27 September 1775, Letter to Stephenson from Capt. James Browne, Camp at Surriah.

¹⁴⁰ Das, *Civil Rebellion*, pp.92-93.

¹⁴¹ WBSA, PCR, vol. 8, 14 June 1775, petition from the Zemindar of Maanbhoom.

This political, economic and social dislocation, arising out of the measures introduced by the British, bred anarchy and discord within the Jungle Mahals. The common grievances of the people acted as a unifying force for the different sections of the society and increased the occurrences of revolt, plunder and other anti social activities. The caste and familial ties enabled these people to find support even under contradictory circumstances. Half hearted measures of the government to ensure order by maintaining some inadequate police-stations under *thanadars* also proved ineffective. Thus, during the late eighteenth century, the social order within Jungle Mahals was not only affected by the political and economic changes but also contributed to the anarchy arising out of these changes.

CONCLUSION

The geographical and environmental distinctiveness of the Jungle Mahals always accorded it a unique place in history. These features not only imparted it with a unique physical character but also contributed to the political, economic and social formation of this region. Since the Mughal times the government had a problem determining the exact boundary of this frontier zone which persisted even during the second half of the eighteenth century. However, despite the vagueness, the British made an attempt to consolidate it within their empire, unlike the Mughals. The political isolation arising out of its geographical set up and distance from the political centre made its people free spirited and defiant towards any external authority, making it a place of chaos and anarchy. The absence of a clear cut demarcation between the unsettled and settled zones, which was almost wiped out during natural calamities, often resulted in the spilling over of this lawlessness into the surrounding settled regions. The precarious environment also rendered the economy very unstable, with droughts and crop failures becoming a regular feature. However, the same environment was also responsible for the development of closely knit social structures which provided its inhabitants with a sense of political and economic security in this hostile and uncertain situation.

With the passage of time, this secluded region also saw the entry of various outside elements who gradually brought about a change in the physical scenario of the Jungle Mahals. However, this change was not the result of any particular ideology or philosophy of resource use endorsed by the society inhabiting the region; but was the mere outcome of their needs and demands of time. Even the Company rule during the late

eighteenth century was far from being branded as 'profligate', as far as resource use is concerned. Thus, the situation even by the end of the eighteenth century did not change much as is evident from the study of Price, the colonial historian of Midnapore who wrote: "even in 1800 nearly two-thirds of the district consists of jungle the greater part of which was uninhabited and inaccessible. Where it was otherwise, and the soil fit for culture the want of water, the want of bunds, the extreme disinclination of the lower orders of the natives to settle in the jungles and of the higher orders to engage in any undertaking attended with expense and risk for remote advantage seemed insuperable obstacles to any great progress in clearing the jungle".¹

Politically, the Jungle Mahals underwent a major change during the 16th century marked by the emergence of several forest principalities in this region. However, this did not signify a break from the past since these principalities were preceded by pre-state tribal formations like the Manki system and the Parha Confederacy. Despite the new developments, these two different political systems co-existed for some time but in due course the latter took precedence over the former pushing it to the periphery of the Jungle Mahals. The new political formations complete with a revenue collecting machinery and organized army ushered in an era whereby the Jungle Mahals ceased to be stateless. This was followed by the influx of outsiders who due to their association with the state enjoyed a better economic position and were also considered socially superior to the tribals or the original inhabitants of the region. This kindled among the tribals a desire to achieve the same position, thereby, initiating a process of their peasantization and rajputization, and resulting in their gradual assimilation into the Hindu social order.

¹ J.C.Price...

Unlike in the past, these forest principalities could not maintain an indifferent attitude towards a superior, highly organized and centralized polity represented by the Mughals, who in the process of consolidation, subdued a number of powerful forest principalities like Kokrah , Pachet and Bishnupur; and absorbed them in the imperial administrative system by reducing the jungle rajas to a position of peshkashi zamindars. However, this did not mean an end of lawlessness in this region, which was infact aggravated due to increased competition for resources generated by the plurality of forest principalities. Though these small polities had been made to acknowledge the superiority of the Mughal authority, they were never actually brought within an effective Mughal control. Thus, under the Mughal, Jungle Mahals represented an inner frontier that was within the ambit but beyond the effective governance of a large centralized state.

The situation took a different turn with the beginning of the eighteenth century. The very attempt to create a centralized state by the forest rajas, contained within it, an inbuilt tendency for the development of autonomous forces which gradually weakened his hold over his subjects. In the course of time, the rajas as well the autonomous forces, devised various ways and means to fulfill their needs by economically exploiting the weaker sections of the society. Meanwhile, the governors of Bengal also tried to extend their authority over this area more effectively. Murshid Quli Khan by issuing title deeds to the Rajas eroded their hereditary right over their territories and converted them into ordinary zamindars of the state, and even included it in the regular fiscal division. However, owing to the difficult terrain he never subjected these kingdoms to any regular assessment, and even exempted the Rajas from making personal appearance in his court. This was the situation that the British government inherited when Mir Qasim ceded them

the districts of Burdwan and Midnapur in 1760; but, it was only after the Company acquired the Diwani of Bengal that the Colonial Government took active measures to bring this unruly area under their control.

The establishment of the Colonial rule did not mark break from the past. For the Jungle Zamindars, the Colonial government represented just another distant central power, not much different from the Mughal, but more determined to bring them under the ambit of one central administration. The strategic location of the place and the refusal of the Company to share its rightful revenue from this place with their enemy- the Marathas, necessitated not just the subjugation of this region, which had already been done several times in the past, but also demanded a firm grip over this region, which could be achieved only by restoring peace and order in this region. The government devised various methods to fulfill this demand- by concluding a fixed settlement with the zamindars, dispossessing the most recalcitrant ones, stationing the Company sepoy, etc. However, amidst several complaints of over assessment of revenue, it would be wrong to say that all these measures were completely devoid of Company's basic motive of revenue maximization. But, unlike in the rest of Bengal, where the economic motive was the main force behind the several administrative experiments, in the Jungle Mahals it was the political motive which was the main thrust behind these economic measures.

Thus, the establishment of the British rule within the Jungle Mahals in the late eighteenth century was not marked by a break from the past. It was just a continuation of a process which had already been started before their entry into this region. With the change in the central power, something new was introduced in this region every time and Colonial government was no exception to this. Infact, these changes were the markers of

the distinctiveness of each successive regimes which should be seen as a progression from the past, rather than a break. Similarly, colonial intervention should be seen as an attempt to tame the inner frontier, to bringing it under control, to finally complete the growth of large centralized states, and to complete the task of subordinating communities. Hence it was regime of continuity as well as change.

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