Chapter - VI

CONCLUSION

The settlements of the moribund Gangetic delta show how natural environmental conditions influence settlements and the degree of human adjustments to the dynamics of physical environment; they express the importance of the past in the formation of the present day cultural landscape illustrating the swift changes that modern technology can bring about; they reveal the influence of economy and politics on society and settlements and show how new socio-economic conditions can initiate an adjustment at a higher level.

Settlements initially develop very much with reference to certain favourable natural conditions. The marshy environment of the tract in the early days provided ample opportunities for livelihood of certain classes of people. The fertility of the tract even attracted European settlers and they became enormously interested in the production of silk and indigo right from the sixteenth century. In the early 19th century the area was noted for the cultivation of some valuable crops like mulberry, cotton, hemp (flax), tobacco, sugar, millet, barley and indigo. Recurrent deposits of silt of the rivers enriched the otherwise barren country and production of crop was high.
In the pre-railway era, all the early settlements developed along the river banks. Even the silk and indigo kuthis grew along the rivers. Some notable marts based on river transport came into being during this time. The rivers could supply water for domestic use, for irrigation and could also be used for navigation.

From the early 19th century the rivers of this part of Bengal witnessed continuous human interference modifying the courses of the rivers and misusing the drainage courses. In 1813, the ruin of Kasimbazar was brought about by a change in the course of the river Bhagirathi when its population, estimated to be "one hundred thousand souls", was, according to local tradition, entirely swept away in a period of twelve months.

From the mid-19th century, the region had to face severe catastrophies when the existing embankments were strengthened and railway lines were constructed on new embankments. Construction of embankments and railway lines prevented the flow of flood-flushing water and silt. Consequently, malarial fever broke out and lands became sterilised. Misuse of drainage courses led to such scarcity of water that people were forced to use "any casual collections of waters" that were often "stinking and filthy". The practice of collection of drinking water from these sources often caused cholera.
in an epidemic form. Thus, malaria and cholera went hand in hand. There was a sharp movement of population from this fever-stricken area, particularly in the early-20th century.

Depopulation that resulted from mortality and migration, had its impact on the agrarian setup of the tract, as was observed in the shortage of labour and conversion of some portions of cultivable areas as well as lapsing of settlement sites into jungles. The jungles became so dense that they were inhabited by tigers and the residents were afraid to walk even in daylight. This state of affairs continued right through the dreadful havoc of the 1770 famine.

With the gradual deterioration of the rivers, transport routes and trade centres also lost importance. The railways were introduced in the mid-19th century and the rivers, as highways of commerce, gradually lost importance. This fostered the decay of village economy. These happenings shattered the importance of many settlements that were dependent on rivers. With the gradual decay of the rivers and consequent closure of river traffic for the major part of the year and subsequent development of roads and railways, a realignment of settlements from river banks to road sides took place. This became more noticeable about the time of Indian
independence and partition.

The decay in trade was also brought about by the indifferent attitude of the government. From old records, it is clear that the government attempted only casually to keep the mouths of the rivers open throughout the year for riverine traffic. Steps had not been taken to maintain the rivers in proper regime by constructing sluices and regulators at the heads of the canals which were possibly considered expensive and redundant measures. Side by side irrigation was neglected.

The physiography of the region put limitations on the growth and distribution of population. The extreme northern part of the region experienced alluviation and diluviation due to swinging behaviour of the rivers. Kalantar locality, a lowlying saucer shaped depression and the sandy northern part of the Nadia district restricted human settlements. Exception was the flood plain of the Ganga, which was benefitted by the fresh silt of the river every year and some other areas like Raghunathganj, Beldanga and Nabadwip, where the density of population always remained higher than other areas.

The scene changed after the influx of displaced persons since independence. These people hardly had any purchasing power and they settled wherever they found it convenient. In some cases, the government helped in
resettlement, in other cases, they settled themselves on woodlands, blanks adjoining water bodies, khas lands and so on. This led, in many cases, to small but compact villages attaining higher density than the traditionally old villages. The density is now everywhere more or less uniform.

The urge for survival, the possibility of favourable response from the ecosystem which could be made remunerative with some infrastructural innovations and the stimulation provided by the market value, led to concentration of settlement and higher productivity of land. The deteriorating land and decreasing density was checked.

History contributed much to the geography of settlement. The early settlers and administrators chose water courses for settlement. But the sites were also influenced by dynasties and religions, raids and of administrative requirements. Thus, the settlements of the region can be classified according to dominance of such factors: those related to Pala and Sena dynasties, those originating due to Bargi raids, those established by the Nadia Raj and the Nawabs of Bengal.

Such selections of sites have led to the domination of Muslims in the northern part, while in the southern part, the Hindus form the majority. Nadia is the single district in West Bengal which has experienced
highest percentage of immigration. On the other hand, there was considerable emigration of the Muslim from this district to East Pakistan.

Tradition has been helpful in the evolution of the transport system. Rule by the Nawabs, Nadia Raj and the British led to road development in short spells. After independence, importance of maintaining communication between the district headquarters and the areas adjoining the international border imperative and this led to the rapid development of roads.

The region is essentially rural: 79% of the population live in villages. Farming is still the major occupation of the people. There have been considerable changes in economic situation of the region.

In the agricultural sector land tenure system has undergone a metamorphosis. Utbandi tenure system was common in many parts of the area. Under this system, the tenant paid rent only for the land which he cultivated each year but could not acquire occupancy rights unless he tilled the same land for twelve consecutive years, which in fact, he rarely did. Meanwhile, the landlord could raise the rent at his pleasure and if the tenant refused to pay, he would be ejected. Naturally, this tenure deprived the tenant of any incentive to improve the land and at the same time it encouraged rack-renting.
This system, along with poor sandy soil, were at the root of poor agrarian condition. There were floods and droughts too often which adversely affected production.

In the pre-independence days, instances have been noted when seasonal migration of population as well as emigration used to be of a high order. Some cultivable areas were turned into jungles for want of use. Sometimes, landlords encouraged tenants to settle in their lands and with this purpose provided them with some facilities.

After independence, the jungles were quickly cleared by the displaced immigrant settlers. They started cultivating low lands - the flood prone areas which were previously left fallow - with a variety of paddy adopted to the flood conditions. They also started reclaiming cultivable waste land, so that the net sown area increased appreciably.

Implementation of the zemindary abolition act in 1954-55 gave the raiyat a permanent possession over the land. In the sixties, agricultural infrastructures like high yielding seeds, fertilisers and irrigation were made available through the Block Development Offices. In the seventies, some agricultural institutions like C.A.D.C., S.F.D.A. and Co-operative land development banks came to help the farmers. The effects were immediately felt in the improvement of production, assurance of agric-
agricultural output and high intensity of cropping. Moreover, due to cultivation of multiple crops, farmers could remain engaged in jobs more or less throughout the year and emigration from the villages sharply dropped. The settlements reflected these changes.

In the economy of the country, mulberry (silk) and cotton played important roles since early times. An old saying in Murshidabad, 'Ja na kare pute, ta kare tute,' reminds us of the high value of such products. Nadia and Murshidabad districts had a special reputation for the manufacture of various kinds of cotton and silk clothes. Due to decline in silk industry, persons depending on that economy left the locality of Raghunathganj. An application from a spinner of Santipur shows how that caste had been hard hit by the imported cotton threads and clothes. The decline in local cotton and silk products was due to new trade policy of the British administrators who patronised their own home products at the cost of native products.

While this was the state of affairs, the British Raj introduced indigo cultivation at the cost of food

1. Tut or silk is even a greater source of happiness and comfort to one than one's son.

2. Samachar Chandrika, dated 22nd Pous, 1234 B.S., 5th January, 1928.
crops, which ultimately led to clash between the planters and paikas, resulting in a sharp decline of its cultivation.

Since independence, mulberry production has seen some revival. Jute now occupies the status of an important cash crop. Wheat as a food crop has acquired popularity. The establishment of some sugar mills and collection centres has introduced a new element in the economy. High profits are responsible for expansion of sugarcane cultivation. Settlement geography of the study area reflects these changes.

In the past the villages were self-supporting units. Most of the products were locally consumed. "The greater part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself". Before the coming of the British, production of various goods were carried on by different caste groups. In fact, function was the foundation upon which the whole caste system of India was built up. With the destruction of traditional skills, techniques, designs, the people were obliged to take to vocations other than which were traditionally their own. Caste-based occupations, as a result, are still followed only by some castes, viz., Goala, Tanti, Jelia, Barui and Muchi. Government help in kind or cash have strengthened the economic base

of the first two communities. Improvement in agricultural activities has brought about some stability in the economy of the villages and the people, irrespective of their castes. Supplying milk to the milk-collection centre, sugarcane to cane-collection centre have changed the caste complexion and economy to some extent. These in turn have been expressed in the patterns and densities of settlements.

The longing for literacy and the desire for new skills has led to a rapid expansion of schools and of more educational centres. Schools are taking a nodal place in the landscape. Rural health centres, too, have played an important role. Provision for pure drinking water has been implemented in a few places. 

The only way to understand settlements is to understand the region in the totality of its physical and cultural environment. A regional approach is therefore necessary. Settlements respond very closely to regional physiography, to the interplay of social and economic forces of the region. The study area is an example of this response.