CONCLUSION

It will be useful to draw together certain general themes and conclusions arrived at in the preceding chapters. The specific object of my study was the analysis of the agrarian economy of Chotanagpur during the period 1880-1950. This regionalisation implied a certain unity over space and time. At the same time, a major conclusion of my study is that the agrarian economy of the region was not a simple unit, instead it was a differentiated totality. There were levels and hierarchies of regions. We encountered at each step of analysis differential developments within the region. Depending on the level of analysis I delineated sub-regional patterns. Limitations of data in most cases allowed the analysis of patterns till a certain level only, that of districts. But I have repeatedly emphasized that the administrative units of districts were not strictly valid as units of analysis. There was more overlapping than a strict separation.

Two broad regional entities however emerged within Chotanagpur, during our period. An imaginary line drawn from South-West to North-East on the map of Chotanagpur would separate these two regions. To the north-west of that line lay Palamau and most of Hazaribagh, district, contiguous to the South Bihar plains. To the south-east of the line lay rest of Chotanagpur i.e. Manbhum, Singhbhum and Ranchi. Across this line there were significant differences, in the character of production and the agrarian structure. These differences had crystallised to a great extent and shaped the regional pattern by the beginning of the present century. Let me indicate here the constellation of features that characterised these two regions. These are largely drawn from Chapter I to Chapter VI.
To the north-west of that line, the climate was relatively drier; the cropping pattern had a greater similarity with the neighbouring plains of South Bihar than the rest of Chotanagpur. It was characterised also by a lower proportion of rice land in the total cropped area than the rest of Chotanagpur. It was characterised also by a lower proportion of rice land in the total cropped area than the rest of Chotanagpur. It was a region where ahra irrigation prevailed, a necessity for rice cultivation in the drier climate. But it was also the classic landlord country; landlords had control over the choicest rice land and a high proportion of it as bakast, they owned the ahras, and got their land cultivated by mobilising large scale begar labour and in some areas the kamiauti system of bonded labour prevailed. Consequently, the peasantry here was a harried lot, regularly surrendering a high proportion of the gross produce as rent; their hold on the tenancy was insecure and dependent on landlords.(Chapters V and VI). Here the high rate of rent and the large bakast cultivation had put paid to the arable expansion of the late 19th century. The demographic pressure thus led to a vicious involution, as it only drove the rents of the tenancy higher on progressively smaller tenancies. This regressive tendency was associated with virtual absence of cohesive village communities, a great degree of ethnic heterogeneity, and lack of resistance to landlordism.

South-east of the imaginary line things were different. This region was usually endowed with a bountiful monsoon, its cropping pattern was dominated by rice, ethnic homogeneity and a larger proportion of tribal population were associated with spirited resistance to landlords in many areas. Here rents were low, inspite of landlord attempts at enhancing them.
Demographic pressure of the late 19th century was translated into expansion of arable and a stronger tendency towards intensification of cultivation. In Chapter V, we called these two different regional constellations Context I and Context II. They defined broadly the two basic patterns of social relations and character of productive forces (i.e. expansion of arable and expansion of irrigation) at the turn of the century.

There were however further differences, within each context. In Palamau, landlordism was stronger than in Hazaribagh; in the latter pockets of arable expansion and village communities still existed. Similarly in Manbhum, there was far greater development of individual rights compared to Ranchi or Singhbhum. In each case we delineated such differentiation in terms of different criterian.

Despite the substantial differences in sub-regional pattern, the plateau remained an overriding unit primarily by posing limits to human endeavour and providing only a certain range of choices; it imposed a 'collective destiny' on its inhabitants. I called it the 'Ecological Imperative'. (Chapters II and IX). The terrain, with minor differences, was the same everywhere; universally divided into the depressions and ridges (Don and Tanr). The undulations provided only in the troughs opportunity for sustaining an agricultural regime based on wet rice cultivation, since over-drainage and erosion remained the basic problems of agriculture on the slopes. Terracing and ahra irrigation could alter the limits posed by the terrain but only to some extent.

A cruel logic then took its toll. Wherever the choice to shift to rice cultivation was taken, the frontier of Don land extended above the
natural limits of terrain and consequently the agro-regime became vulnerable to the fluctuations of the monsoon. In a sense there was no viable alternative to rice cultivation, for its higher per acre productivity seemed the only solution to the problem of the expanding of population. Yet by making this historic shift from a diversified cropping pattern of the earlier period to a practically mono-crop regime, the tribal cultivator increased the burden of risk and the consumption levels became subject to violent oscillations. These had serious consequences, for the agrarian economy. It forced a large proportion of marginal farmers with high proportion of precarious Don III land in their holdings to emigrate (Chapter IX).

If only ahra irrigation had kept pace with the extension of rice cultivation, a great degree of stability could have been ensured Ahra however remained trapped within the twin limits of the terrain and social relations of production. Its extension was nowhere commensurate with the desperate pace of expansion of rice cultivation in the late 19th century. Public investment was lackadaisical and limited to half hearted famine works. Private investment on irrigation was also not forthcoming, since there was no institutional arrangement by which costs and risks could be shared. The problem posed by the terrain thus reappeared now imbricated further within the antagonistic conditions of social relations. The revenge of the inert was then complete. A series of famine and a spate of bad harvests in the first forty years of our period were not just due to the quirks of monsoon. They reflected also a paradox, the phenomenon of high growth rate of foodgrain production being associated with high degree of instability. (Chapter IV). Since they were to a large extent
the outcome of successful peasant struggles against the imposing limits of the terrain and the prohibitive institution of landlordism.

The limits of Nature determined a lot but not every aspect of the agrarian regime. Social relations emerged as an autonomous variable along with ecology and demography. Many elements of the production structure were determined by it. The forest, and its extent of destruction was closely associated with the class conflict between landlords and tenants. (Chapter I). It determined also the degree of survival of customary rights against the landlords' assault. Similarly, the results of class conflict was to be seen in the differential level of surplus extraction and the regional pattern of social relations.

Again, not all the factors that shaped the agrarian economy and its concomitant social relations, were entirely internal to the agrarian structure of the region. In spite of its relative isolation for most of the 19th century, the forces of change operating at the supra-local level had begun to make their impact felt. The market and its spearhead, the price-level substantially affected the internal dynamics. As the commercialisation process proceeded it was accompanied by a desperate bid on the part of the landlord to keep their level of income abreast with prices. They depredated the forest first and tried to stamp out customary rights of village users, and imposed new cesses on forests. On arable land they tried to raise the level of rents. Tenants often retaliated by sticking to the customary rents and rights. The rising price level of late 19th century saw an accentuation of class conflict. The landlords aiming at maximising their surplus and to mop off the little windfall income that the peasant producer got from some price booms of the important cash crops like cotton and lac.
In their efforts landlords met with varying degrees of success. In some cases, they failed completely. Their failure to keep their income abreast of prices, further eroded the basis of their power. Rent as a share of the gross value of produce declined everywhere in the 20th century. The market largely adapted to the prevailing social structure. (Chapter VIII). In Palamau and Hazaribagh, the domination of moneylenders/landlord combine over the peasantry often extended to the market for land, commodity and credit. Here we found the prevalence of the phenomena of 'interlocked markets'. But the market also provided new opportunities for a section of the peasantry to accumulate and invest. In Manbhum, the rich peasant buyers constituted the single largest group of buyers in the land market (for both tenures and tenancies). The mortgage market emerged as a strategy of survival in a costly credit market. It also provided a means for expansion of production for a section of the rich peasantry; once the frontiers of arable expansion had been reached (around 1930's). (Chapter VIII).

Thus, market forces, even when operative in the context defined by ecology and social relations, tended to alter it. Prices no longer varied so widely between regions. The booms and crash of the world market now came to affect the remotest interior of the region. The response to prices also changed. Ensuring subsistence remained a major concern of the peasant, so we found him extending his rice cultivation even when economic calculations should have made him go in for other crops. Yet the market was also taken into account. Thus the peasant responded positively to the price signals and that emanated from the centres of world economy.
(e.g. lac market, Chapter VIII). Market calculation could coexist with the overwhelming concern for ensuring subsistence.

But progressively resort to the market became more important. The trend of declining per capita food production from 1920 onwards, made it an imperative for small peasants and agricultural labour. With the noticeable decline in the level of fluctuations in the harvest after 1920, a phase of low level equilibrium was reached. And with it, market came to play an ever larger role in the agrarian economy, and 'subsistence strategy' a lesser role.

I must indicate here the levels of temporality and breaks and disjunctions in it that the analysis of the previous chapters have demonstrated. Within the period under study, 1880-1950, there were different levels of temporality, some determined by the structure of the economy and others by factors external to it.

The most immediate of these was the seasonal cycle governed by the time of sowing and harvesting. Immediately before the harvest was the lean season, when levels of consumption dropped from the peak attained after the harvest. (Chapter IV). It is often in this season that the trivial cultivator resorted to the forest for food. (Chapter I). The bhadoi harvest which filled the time between the sowing and transplanting of rice (in August and September) and the harvest of the aghani crop, was a crucial buffer to help tide over the lean season. As the bhadoi harvest, in which the summer rice (gora) and other foodgrains like
millet and maize declined in importance and the lean season became more prolonged. (Chapter III). Between 1938-47, the difference in the levels of consumption between the lean season and the post-harvest season was about 900 calories per consumption unit per day in the rural areas of Chotanagpur. (Chapter IV). The distinctive pattern of lean and post-harvest season, affected not only the consumption level; the seasonality of debts were often transported on it. The pattern of seasonal borrowings remained a feature of the credit market right till the end of our period. (Chapter VIII).

Above the cycle of seasons, was the all important annual cycle of harvests; the alternation of good years and bad years was the major determinant of the level of economic activity in the region. In fact, the harvest determined practically all aspects of the agrarian economy. It regulated the annual level of borrowing; the number of mortgages fluctuated with the harvest. (Chapter VIII). The level of emigration in the early phase was also determined by it. (Chapter IX). Rent and interest burdens became onerous in a bad year and lighter in a good year. More people died if the harvest dipped, and more babies were born in the year following a good harvest. To the peasant the price level was secondary to the level of harvest, since it was the harvest which determined the fluctuations in price. (Chapter VII). In short the average income level fluctuated more with the harvest than with the price. Between 1880 to 1920, the crucial hathiya rains failed more often and fluctuated more wildly than the next 30 years. (Chapter II). This
capricious behaviour of the rainfall triggered off a series of bad years and famines. In the period when rainfall was less capricious, famines had become rare. Similarly, there were often long periods of exceptional harvest like between 1920-28 or the period 1900-1910. These favourable conjunctures were as important as the annual fluctuations.

Prices, specially of a crop like lac followed a cyclical pattern that had no relation with the temporalities internal to the agrarian economy. Here good prices during boom periods meant higher income for the peasant producer, and often eased the onerous risks of annual fluctuations of harvest. But had price of lac in a bad year of harvest spelt disaster. Similarly the trend of general price level (as indicated by the price of rice) was largely independent of the situation internal to the agrarian economy. In its own way the trend of prices became an important determinant of the changes in the agrarian structure. By determining the real rates of return from land, the price level generally and more specifically the increasing gap between land prices and the general price level, kept the professional moneylender away from the land market. In this I am certain that it had a more important role to play than the whole series of protective legislation of the colonial state. (Chapter VIII).

These different temporalities sketched out above must be located within two broad time frames. The line of demarcation can be drawn only imprecisely since the temporal disjunctions differed depending on the aspect we choose to look at. One way of demarcation is from the date of colonial state of intervention in the form of Survey and Settlement
operations and the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908. This often was also the official viewpoint. But the efficacy of colonial state intervention should not be overstated. In case of the forests, and deforestation, I have argued against the official viewpoint that the rate of deforestation increased massively after the Survey and Settlement operations. (Chapter IX). Even when colonial state intervention did mark a real point of departure, as in case of arable expansion in the intensive margin in Hazaribagh and Palamau, it did not hold good for the region as a whole. I have shown that there was considerable expansion of arable in late 19th century in Manbhum, Singhbhum and Ranchi. (Chapter III).

A more specific determination of the temporal phases could be traced to the trends in agricultural production. I have shown that there were definite breaks in trend as well as in the level of fluctuations around the middle of 1920s. This break in trend could be seen in case of many other aspects of agrarian economy with minor variations. The trends analysed in the land market definitely turn a little before the depression. (Chapter VIII). Prices of both lac and rice show a trend break from mid 1920s. (Chapter VII). The pattern of emigration also shows a definite change from 1920s. (Chapter IX). The period 1920-30, thus marks a decisive shift in the nature of the agrarian economy of the region. Let me indicate the constellation of features which mark this changeover. Around this period, the limits of plough agriculture was definitely reached all over Chotanagpur. (Chapter II). Agrarian production till this period shows a high rate of growth but is accompanied by a great degree of instability. After that, a low level
equilibrium characterised the nature of agrarian production. Stagnation of total production and a perceptible decline of per capita foodgrain production is marked by a great deal of stability. The coefficient of variation in foodgrain production is half the figure of the earlier period. (Chapter IV). Before this period fluctuations in the harvest determined every aspect of the agrarian economy. After this period, it no longer plays the determining role, one by one the major indicators of the economy slip away from the control of the harvest. Fluctuations in prices are no longer determined by it. The total income generated in the economy now fluctuates with the price rather than the harvest. Mortgages and sales of land follow the price curve more closely than that of the harvest. Emigration which earlier fluctuated inversely with the level of harvest stick to the price curve rather than the fickle harvest.

These distinctive features suggest a certain temporal disjunction in the character of the agrarian regime. In the pre 1920-30 period agrarian economy was dominated by fluctuations of the harvest and the factors that played the greatest role were ecology and demography. I suggest that the decline of determination by the harvest implied a transition from regime dominated by ecology and demography to a regime where market forces had a greater role to play. Cash needs became important apart from subsistence requirements. The transition was not always dramatic; many aspects of agrarian economy had already changed before (e.g. response to lac price) and many others persisted without much change throughout our period. A more sophisticated analysis is required to establish the structural disjunction implied by the transition. Yet, its features are clear and demand recognition
The transition between the two phases of our period was part of a much longer span of transition from the 19th century to the 1940's. The most definite of these was the final transition from an economy based on shifting cultivation to a completely settled agriculture based on wet rice cultivation. This historic shift began much earlier than our period; what we witness in our period was the last stage of it. Till 1870s a large portion of agricultural activity and considerable part of the agricultural population was involved in shifting cultivation (Hos of Singhbhum, Porahat Mundas and cotton cultivation in Palamau). At the end of our period shifting cultivation had become completely marginalised, existing in pockets amongst a few tribal groups only. Alongside a host of institutional factor like colonial state intervention, reservation of forests, and emergence of individual property, there was the 'march of rice', as O.H.K. Spate called it, which put paid to the last vestiges of swidden agriculture in the region.

The final victory of rice based settled cultivation over that of swidden agriculture was however short-lived. Because, by the end of our period, already the agrarian economy had reached the ceiling of its expansion and a whole way of life was being gradually superseded and subjected by a powerful industrial economy. But that is another story.