INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I wish to study aspects of the agrarian economy of Chotanagpur from 1880 to 1950. Chotanagpur here refers to the administrative Division consisting of five districts of Ranchi, Manbhum, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh and Palamau in the erstwhile province of Bihar. Himalayan movements during Tertiary times created the three distinct erosion surfaces which resulted in the typical features of the Chotanagpur landscape; its bold relief pattern of alternating ridges and interfluvial channels.

These topographical features of the plateau contrasted sharply with the flat monotony of the alluvial plains. The rejuvenation of the ancient peneplain deeply affected all aspects of the society of Chotanagpur. Its settlement patterns followed the contours of the topography. Its agriculture had to adapt to the universal division of the arable surface into depressions and ridges, locally known as Don and Tanr. The plateau and its ecology, as Braudel says, imposes a "collective destiny" on its inhabitants.

Chotanagpur was the homeland of some of the major tribes found in Central India viz. the Mundas, Oraons, Santhals, Hos and Kharias besides numerous other smaller tribes and what the colonial officials called semi-aboriginal peoples. Sheltered in the relative isolation of the plateau and its forests the tribal people developed their own distinctive cultural patterns, institutional setting and economic organisations.
The plateau and the people, thus, gave the region its distinctive identity. The changing relationship between the forests and the agrarian economy forms a major concern of my study.

A third aspect of regional unity of Chotanagpur, was its distinctive demographic pattern which differed considerably from the neighbouring regions. This is a subject which merits more detailed consideration, than I am able to devote to it in my study. I shall, here, only outline some of its most distinctive features. The first distinction of the demographic pattern of the region lay in its high rate of growth, precisely during the period when there was infact stagnation of population all over the country. Between 1881 to 1931 when the rate of population growth all over India was only 0.69% and in neighbouring Bihar, a mere 0.3 % per annum, the Chotanagpur population had grown phenomenally by 57 % (from 42 lakhs to 60 lakhs), at a rate of 1.14% per annum. This remarkable demographic vitality was sustained even with continuous population loss throughout this period owing to large scale immigration. The consequences of this buoyant demographic growth on the agrarian economy forms another concern of my study.

Another aspect which is important is the character of the colonial state intervention in this region. Chotanagpur was for a long time a non-regulation district, where the ordinary regulation were not applied. Its landed estates were not subject to sale for outstanding revenue arrears; the ordinary tenancy laws enacted from time to time for Bengal and Bihar were not applied in Chotanagpur.
Instead, separate legislations were always enacted specifically for Chotanagpur. Was not this a recognition of the regional specificity of Chotanagpur by the colonial state? The colonial state intervened in the form of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1909. This was a unique piece of legislation, which had no precedent in the Bengal or Bihar legislations. The effect and consequences of the special character of colonial state intervention on the development of the agrarian economy of the region, is another concern of my study.

All these aspects point to the essential regional unity of Chotanagpur. We must not, however, over-emphasize it. The plateau was not a unified and homogenous entity. Inspite of sharp and obvious differences with other regions, the plateau itself was internally differentiated. First, there were three different levels of the plateau. Ranchi district and a small portion of Hazaribagh occupied the higher reaches at 2000 to 2500 feet level. This constituted the central core of the plateau, which was surrounded on 3 sides by another level of 1000 to 1500 feet. The lowest plateau at the 500 feet level was occupied by Manbhun, Palamau and a portion of Singhbhum. Dalton wrote in 1872: "... the five districts are as different from each other as though they were five nations."¹ Allowing for a certain exaggeration in this statement, one must however, consider the serious structural differences within the region. Delineating sub-regional patterns of the agrarian economy is one of the most important objects of this thesis.

¹ ARAC 1872-73, P.5.
In 1903, Bradley Birt called Chotanagpur a 'little known Province' of British India. One could say the same thing as regards the state of the agrarian history of this region. Very little is known of the dynamic and character of the agrarian production of the region. This study aims at filling in this glaring lacunae in the agrarian history of this region, to some extent.

It might be useful to locate my study within the broader context of agrarian studies of Eastern India. There has been a shift away from the earlier preoccupation with the revenue policy of the colonial Government. In fact the actions and policies of the colonial state are increasingly being seen as operating within the structural limits of the agrarian society, influencing it; but also being influenced by it. The questions of agricultural production, its conditions and determinants, the social classes and their differential responses to various conjunctures of economic forces and market relations are demanding increasing attention of the agrarian historian. There is a relative shift away from generalised macro-studies and increased focus on inter-regional and sub-regional patterns, and hitherto neglected aspects such as the variety of ecological conditions under which colonial agriculture was practiced. The picture of the colonial class structure has also become complex.

5. S. Bose (1986).
The trend towards disaggregation, greater regionalisation and search for patterns can be seen in some of the recent agrarian studies on Eastern India. Partha Chatterjee, Sugata Bose and B.B. Chaudhuri have found significant differences in the character of social relations, agricultural production related to the types of ecological conditions prevailing within Bengal.  

One can now delineate pockets of growth where demographic expansion and expanding market relations combined with favourable ecological conditions led to expansion of production. There were other regions where unfavourable ecology and regressive social relations led to arable stagnation. The undeniable dynamism displayed by small peasant production within the given technological limits does not fit in with the image of a uniformly impoverished and exploited peasantry at the hands of 'jotedar - moneylender' combine.

As regards market and the process of commercialisation, the emphasis has shifted from typical colonial cash crops like opium and indigo cultivated under force and unfree conditions, to other crops, like jute and cotton in which free peasant production and considerable positive response to market is noticed. It is now recognised that responses of different classes within the peasantry to the same market conditions were varied.

The period of my study (1880-1950) constitutes a specific temporal conjuncture in the history of Chotanagpur. This period is partly chosen because most of the statistical information are available only from 1880 onwards. Besides, this period marks the first major intervention by the colonial government in the form of Bhuinhari Surveys and the Chotanagpur Tenancy Procedures Act. We shall see in the course of this period, that class struggle intensifies in various areas of Chotanagpur, around forests, customary rights and rents etc. The 'Sardari Larai' and the 'Birsait Movement' mark its high points. Also, this period witnessed unprecedented large scale emigration from Chotanagpur to the Assam tea gardens and the Jharia Coalfields. My study focuses on two distinct temporal segments (1880-1920 and 1920-1950) which are characterised by distinct differences in several arenas of the agrarian economy.

In the first four chapters of this thesis, I take up issues of agricultural production, in the changing ecological and institutional complex of the region. One major concern will be to find out how the agrarian economy responded to the demographic and institutional pressures. The emphasis will be on looking for the different regional patterns within the overall unit of the agro-regime of Chotanagpur. I then proceed to estimate the trends in agricultural production, productivity and consumption levels. I have considerably modified and corrected the existing official estimates of agricultural production.

In chapters V & VI, I try to relate the different developments in the structure and dynamic of production to the prevailing institutional relations.
Finally, in the last three chapters, I take up the question of expansion of market and the ways in which the economy responded to it. In case of the commodity market I discuss the contrasting developments in the market structures of rice, lac and cotton. In the next chapter, developments in the land and credit markets during different economic conjunctures are discussed. Finally I take up the labour market and particularly the phenomenon of large scale labour migration from Chotanagpur.

Finally, a word about the sources. Apart from the usual Government published reports and archival material there are two new types of sources which I have used in the study. The first is the Bhuinhar records and registers. The former are in particularly deplorable state. They, however, are an invaluable source of information about the agrarian society of the region in the mid 19th century. They usually consist of claims and counter-claims filed by the Bhuinhar and the landlords. Apart from these, they provide information about the decisions and the judgments of the Bhuinhar Commission. Sometimes, even the jamabandis and rent rolls of a claimant zamindar could be chanced upon. The information regarding credit, forests, and other aspects of land rights are also to be found in them. But, it is difficult to get through more than a few villages individually. Only a collective research project could perhaps rescue these valuable documents from inevitable decay. A second set of registers which are in far better condition are to be found in the district record room of Ranchi. They are the records of each Bhuinhar plot of the village. Apart from names of the owners, the area recorded for each plot is also to be found in them.
I have tried to use these records particularly for the study of land alienation.

The village khatian provides valuable information on the land rights and structure of land holdings in the village. They also provide information on mortgages, various tenurial rights as well as in some Mundari khutkatti villages, genealogical tables (kursinama). These records have been used for the first time in a historical study of the region in this thesis.

Very often, the lack of information has been cited as the cause for relative absence of detailed studies of landholding rights in the permanently settled regions. But settlement reports are a valuable source of information regarding agrarian society. Very little use has been made of these reports and the statistics contained in them in the regional studies. One of the major concern in this study has been to develop a consistent and accurate estimate of agrarian production. I have made extensive use of the settlement statistics for this purpose.