Chapter 7
Conclusion

The transition of the rural society and social networks in Bengal through the period of eight hundred years, from the first half of the fifth to the middle of the thirteenth century can be summarised as follows.

The period between the first half of the fifth to the middle of the sixth century was characterised by the social networks based on locality and revolving around the *adhikaranas*. These local networks were bases of the organisation and function of the *adhikaranas*, and reinforced by the working of these organisations. Horizontal networks and solidarity of the dominant section of *kutumbins* and urban dominant groups, and their dominance over lower strata of *kutumbins* and other social groups were crucial in these networks. The interaction between the rural society and the Gupta administration was facilitated by the *adhikaranas*. In this period, the *adhikaranas* wielded authority over the matters related to land purchases and donations. In the later phase of this period, a new form of political authority began to emerge. It was the local kingship and its administrative apparatus constituted by subordinate rulers.

In the period between the middle of the sixth to the eighth century, sub-regions of Bengal showed several parallel social trends. In Vaiga and Râdhâ, the central and western parts of Bengal, the continuance and change of participation by members of the rural society in the process of land purchases and donations were observed. The conspicuous changes were exclusion of *kutumbins* from the process and ascendency of local notables, mainly constituted by land holders including *brâhmanas*. The latter show the increasing differentiation among themselves and the nexus with local clerical groups like *kâyasthas*. In Samatâ, the eastern fringe of Bengal, the social structuring accompanied by settling of large number of *brâhmanas* in the periphery and complexity of land relation with stratified tenures in the
centre were in progress.

A tendency commonly discernible in both sub-regions was the stronger presence of sub-regional kingship and its administrative apparatus including subordinate rulers. The expansion of the last group and their stratification were conspicuous. Some evidence shows possibility that this expansion was facilitated by the incorporation of higher rung of local notables. They may have acquired the position through the association with kingship, while lower rung of these local notables remained to be local landholders and cultivators. It can be considered as a process of differentiation among local notables and the making of two distinct groups from them, namely, intermediaries incorporated into subordinate rulers and local landholders under their domination. The presence of the former was increasing in land grants while the reference to the latter was diminishing.

Another tendency discernible in this period was the emergence of Buddhist monasteries as large scale landholders. It may have been related to their closeness to kingship.

In the period between the middle of the eighth to the end of the eleventh century, Bengal witnessed the establishment of strong dynasties of the Pālas and the Candras, whose territories covered several sub-regions. Under their rule, the political authorities consisting of kingship, its administrative apparatus and subordinate rulers called sāmantas infiltrated into the rural society. With some local variations, the rural society of Bengal experienced major changes, namely, decline of the authority of local notables, sidelining of members of the rural society from local administrative matters, and intensification of the social stratification within. The contemporary literary sources also show the social stratification in the rural society by references to the lower class cultivators called pāmaras, and allude to the incorporation of non-sedentary groups into the rural society, which might have contributed to the social stratification to some extent.

The political authorities intensified their effort of infiltration into the
rural society through several ways. The Pāla kings tried to keep rural settlements under their control through the assessment of villages in terms of their land measurement or productions. The Candra kings tried to infiltrate into the rural society through donations to brāhmanas who had personal connection with the king in the early phase, and installation of the royal tutelary deities and donations to them in the later phase. Another political authority which became prominent was sāmantas. They tried to extend their influence in the rural society through the construction of religious institutions and the petition of land grants to them. This manoeuvres also enabled sāmantas to legitimately encroach upon the authority and power of the king at the same time. Buddhist monasteries and other religious institutions with large scale landholdings and networks became another authority in this period. They had symbiotic and mutually dependent relation with the political authorities including kingship and sāmantas. This nexus of temporal and religious powers facilitated the infiltration into the rural society.

Confronting two problems, namely, the intensified social stratification within and the infiltration of the political and religious authorities, two ways of social reorganisation were attempted by sections of the rural society. One was an attempt to keep cohesion of the rural society, especially among peasant householders. It appeared as the composition of the Kśiparaśa and codification of the image of a homogeneous agrarian society by rural literates. Another was the construction of networks based on common professions. Various groups in the rural society showed inclination towards clearer identity based on their professions. The networking through geographical spread and marriage relations was traceable for brāhmanas and other literate groups. Some places emerged as centres of these groups and seemed to have functioned as nodes of their networks.

The so-called kaivartta rebellion, which occurred towards the end of the eleventh century, can be interpreted as the culmination of these
tendencies observed in this period.

In the period between the beginning of the twelfth century to the middle of the thirteenth century, brahmanas enhanced their presence and established their authority in the rural society. Under their influence, the tendencies witnessed in the previous period, that is, infiltration of the political and religious authorities into the rural society and two forms of the social reorganisation, took another turn.

The political authorities made efforts of further infiltration into the rural society. Especially remarkable in this count was the effort of the Senas to implement a uniform standard for land measurement and a system of the assessment of annual production in terms of a uniform currency unit. While the standardisation of land measurement could not be established due to local variations, the system of the assessment of production in terms of a currency unit counted on cowrie shells was thoroughly implemented and enabled the Senas to overcome the difference of standards of land measurement and to further infiltrate into the rural society. On the other hand, the presence and activity of sāmantas were less prominent under the Senas, while they showed strong presence in the last phase of the Pāla rule.

The authority of brāhmaṇas was established both in courts and the rural society. In courts, kingship made closer association with highly qualified brāhmaṇas and appropriated particular Brahmanical norms. This appropriation manifested as patronage to eminent brāhmaṇa scholars and authors of Dharmanibandhas. It also manifested as the performance of a particular kind of Brahmanical rituals, especially mahādānas and sāntis, and grants of land and village as rewards for ritual service. In the rural society, brāhmaṇas showed their growing presence. Especially, highly qualified brāhmaṇas settled down in the rural society and emerged as large scale landholders.

In the rural society, a complicated land relation which contained at least four levels of rights and powers was observable in this period.
Landholders and cultivators under them constituted the third and the fourth levels and were seen to have constructed some forms of horizontal networks, through collective landholdings in case of the former, and by collective cultivations in case of the latter. Social stratification of agrarian groups was discernible in this case. Apart from that, the infiltration of monetary system and transaction into the rural society was implied by the fact that landholdings could be purchased and accumulated by a *brahmana* through sales deeds. The presence of hereditary occupational groups perceivable as *jātis* was indicated by the narrative of *Varnasamkara* in the *Bṛhadārāma Purāṇa*.

The attempt at social reorganisation under the authority of *brahmanas* was discernible in the *Purāṇas* composed in this period. Their efforts for the maintenance of social cohesion appeared as prescriptions of festivals, especially the autumn goddess festival in month Āśvina. *Bṛahmanas* tried to incorporate and regulate these festivals with popular elements, which may have functioned as occasions for reconfirming solidarity and cohesion of the rural society, in a way which enabled them to keep their authority and control over them. Their effort of comprehension and systematisation of the stratified and variegated social reality were detectable in the narrative of *Varnasamkara* in the *Bṛhadārāma Purāṇa*. What were conspicuous in this narrative were their intention to comprehend various social groups and impose a social hierarchy according to Brahmanical social view, claim of authority over other members, and cautious approach to the influential groups in the rural society, especially literate groups with alternative knowledge. These attempts can be considered as first steps which would be followed by the other attempts in the later period.

The transition summarised above contain many strands with the involvement of multiple agencies. In terms of the social networks of agrarian
groups, it was the process in which their autonomy and authority over other groups wielded through the organisation of *adhikaranas* were first shifted to the local notables ascending from themselves and then lost to the political authorities infiltrating into the rural society. It was also the process of social stratification within the rural society and the formation of *jātis* through the identity making and networking based on professions. In terms of the political authorities, it was the process of the intensification of their infiltration into and control over the rural society through the establishment of sub-regional and then regional kingship, and their nexus with religious authorities. It also contained the process of negotiations among the political authorities, especially between kingship and *sāmantas*. In terms of Brahmanisation, it was the process of the establishment of authority and distinctive identity of *brāhmanas* and attempts at social organisation under their influence.

The end result of the transition, and the starting point which would be followed by another transition in the later period, was the attempt at social cohesion based on Brahmanical norms and *jātis*. However, it should be noted that it was a result of complicated interactions of the multiple strands and agencies involved with the rural society. It defies the application of any simplistic model or the attribution to any single cause. This understanding may contribute to our better understanding of the transitions in early medieval South Asia.