INTRODUCTION

The present work is a study in local history, of a period (1785-1835) very important for the British administration taking a final shape in the country. But the facts provided here have importance not only in local history, they fit in well with the general history of the country, illustrate and confirm some accepted generalisations and extend knowledge of many other aspects of the history of Bengal during the period.

Repeated Maratha incursions in Nadia led to the desolation of village after village. People had left their hearths and homes in sheer fear of the approaching raiders. But after the passing of the blast, people returned to their old habitations perhaps because of the great influence of Maharaja Krishna Chandra Roy (1728-1782), the 'Raja' of Nadia. His proverbial munificence also attracted to the district the upper caste Hindus, then migrating to Northern and Eastern Bengal from the Western bank of the Bhagirathi. Krishna Chandra's liberal land grants led to expansion of cultivation. The prospect for cultural and economic development was bright and Nadia appeared to be recovering from the calamitous effects of the Maratha raids when suddenly the district, along with the rest of the country, was overtaken by the unprecedented Famine of 1770.
It is an open question whether the district would have settled down had there been no administrative and economic interference by the British after the Famine. British administrative interference aggravated the distress of the people. The poverty of the 'ancient' Zamindars and the misery of their tenantry on the eve of the Decennial Settlement have been well described in a book published a few years ago. What is, however, less known is a comprehensive account of the story, and the present work has sought to make such a detailed study of one of the 'Capital' Zamindars of the country. Again, the effects of the operation of the Permanent Settlement have formed the subject matter of many text books. Efforts have been made in this work to give an analytical account of the administration of the revenue laws and the difficulties involved in the process with concrete examples. The withering of the Nadia Zamindary, year by year, leading to its almost total liquidation in 1813, the part played by the Calcutta banians in this respect, and other consequences of the Government's attempt to simplify the complex revenue administration in the country have been focussed in course of the narrative.

The nearness to the seat of Government had made Nadia a very important district, and the experience and experiments in Nadia were utilized by the Company to reform the Dewany and Nizamati administrations. The Farming Settlement in Nadia of 1772 was designed to be a model for the rest of the province.
Numerous taxes collected by the Zamindar of Nadia first revealed to the Government the abuses of abwabs and sairs in Bengal, leading to their total abolition in 1790. The detailed account of the sairs in the district brought together from the contemporary records and the imposition of taxes by the British in their place since 1790 are a study in contrast. Admittedly, the Zamindary impositions had crippled the economic life of the people and the abolition of sairs in 1790 was a welcome relief. But the taxes subsequently imposed were a greater burden to a people already rack-rented and distressed by the ruin of indigenous industries.

The Mughals had no well-formulated Abkari policy. Consumption of liquor in Mughal India depended upon the attitude of the local officials and the Zamindars. Under Krishna Chandra's influence, drinking of liquor was almost unknown in Nadia at the beginning of the British rule. But half a century of British administration led to a great increase in consumption of intoxicants. The chapter on Abkari administration will, it is hoped, contribute much to our knowledge about a controversial aspect of our history — hitherto lacking in any study based on documentary evidence.

The chapters on industries — salt, indigo, and cotton and silk emphasise not only local peculiarities but focus attention on certain aspects of the problems so long neglected or not sufficiently discussed. To the queries of the Court of Directors, Sir Henry Strachey had stated in 1813: "In the salt department a shameless system of cheating and severity was universally practised. Many thousands of men were compelled to work, and
allowed a most scanty subsistence. Some hundreds were pressed every year into this service. They were, in some instance, bound hand and foot, and sent off to the most unhealthy parts of Sunderbans, to manufacture salt for the Company’s monopoly. Though the distress of the salt-workers in the Sunderbans is generally known, not many concrete facts are available in print about the condition of work in the Sunderbans excepting the reference made to the subject in Mr. J. Westland’s "Report on the District of Jessore", published in 1871. "The Salt-workers of Nadia" is an attempt to fill this gap in our knowledge. The account covers the period up to 1795, for after that date the salt manufacture in the district had passed under the administration in the 24 Parganahs.

The cotton manufacture at Santipur ended on a sorrowful note. The end came at a time when the industry had attained a very high degree of perfection and the cost of production was brought to the lowest. Investment at Santipur was stopped in 1818. The Santipur weavers continued their struggle for survival for about a decade more. In some other aurangs of the province, the weavers, with the suspension of Company’s investment had already turned "Sunnasies", 'Byraggees', and "Coolies". Investment in raw silk amounting to more than rupees ten lakhs in some years kept Santipur’s life busy for sometime but brought no permanent relief to the district, sericulture having failed to thrive in Nadia.

In tracing the history of the Indigo plantation, the writer has availed himself of a very valuable series of manuscripts in the record room of the Nadia Collectorate, viz, the Judicial...
correspondence series, especially the letters written by the planters to the District Judge and Magistrate. The planters had furnished the Judge with the copies of contracts with their ryots for indigo cultivation which enable us to study the nature of the early contracts, and to apportion the responsibility for future disquiet. The beneficiaries of the indigo plantation and the part played by the middle class intelligentsia in upholding the cause of indigo have been fully assessed.

The history of the early British rule in Bengal shows some striking similarities with the history of the colonisation in North America and West Indies. In Bengal numerous Europeans tried to invest money in Sugar, Coffee and Indigo plantations. Large scale sugar plantations failed in Nadia from the very beginning because of unfertile nature of the land, and very heavy initial outlay required on plantation and equipment; coffee plantation continued for about fifty years without achieving any great success while the indigo resulted in phenomenal growth. Sukhsagur was the place where the first attempt at colonisation on the West Indies scale was made in India. The growth of Sukhsagur, otherwise known as the 'Chota Calcutta' of the East, was exceedingly rapid, the decline was far more so. The story of Sukhsagur is illustrative of the economic forces prevalent at the time.
The present work is concerned with the immediate objectives of the British administration in the period under review and the difficulties involved in implementing decisions of policy. No attempt has been made to find out ideological basis of British rule or the influence of theoretical attitudes in day-to-day administration.
NOTES

1. See Appendix

2. The Economic History of Bengal, vol. II
   by N.K. Sinha (1962)

3. Quoted in "The Economic History of India under
   Early British Rule" - by Romesh Dutt - p. 317

4. Board of Trade - Proceedings dt. 29th June, 1827

5. "Private British Investment in Eighteenth Century
   Bengal" - by P.J. Marshall in BENGAL: PAST AND
   PRESENT - Diamond Jubilee Number, 1967 - p. 63