The economic historians of nineteenth century India had probed the reasons for the socio-economic backwardness of India which brought the crisis in the agrarian economy in the twentieth century. It is held that the colonial rule of the Company and, after 1857, of the British Crown succeeded in restoring law and order in India. The British also brought about reforms in the revenue and general administration, which paved the way for modernisation in India's socio-economic life. The attempts at change in the traditional socio-economic value system provoked resistance from the traditional peasant societies in India, since they could not anticipate the dynamics of change in their life-style.

Some economic historians believed that the decline of the agrarian economy was due to inadequate capital investment in both agrarian and industrial sectors, which ultimately led to the underdeveloped economy. To them, this was inevitable in order to perpetuate the capitalist colonial rule of the British Government, which consequently suppressed the natural aspirations of the people to catch up with the main trend of modernisation taking place all the world over. The typical examples are the United States of America and Japan. In the nineteenth century both the countries could modernise their life-style and industrialise their economies only because of political freedom. In India political freedom was non-existent and hence her economic backwardness remained.
The present author, from the vast mass of historical literature, could not find any attempt by scholars to probe into the problem of proverbial poverty in the social, economic and intellectual planning of the two districts of south-west Bengal, namely, Midnapore and Bankura. Paucity of historical research in this particular field has prompted the present scholar to make an attempt, as a case study, to explain the economic and social backwardness of this region when parts of Bengal as well as India demonstrated signs of socio-economic development by the processes of urbanisation, mining activities and industrial developments.

There were constraints to the growth of middle peasant leadership in this area, while the traditional leadership provided by the landed proprietors failed to respond to the changing situation, in the wake of Pax Britannica. To some historians, the policy of laissez faire, adopted by the British government, added fuel to the fire, which further distorted the socio-economic development of these two districts of south-west Bengal.

This study is primarily based on materials available from the local collectorate records and the data collected from individual house holds at the grass roots level as well as from the vernacular literature of this region, all which seems to have not been adequately utilised by the social historians. It will be misleading to conclude from these materials that British
colonial rule was the cause of backwardness of the socio-economic set-up of this region in the nineteenth century. The crisis in the last century was the symptom of her decline in the agrarian economy. This process of decline had started from the beginning of Muslim rule and was further accelerated by the economic anarchy of Maratha rule in the eighteenth century in parts of Midnapore. The British colonial rule drew the final curtain on the drama in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, the administrative and modernisation measures adopted by the British rulers could not quite check the steady decline of agrarian economy in terms of decline of salt, cotton and silk textile, sugar and other village crafts and loss of social vitality. Nevertheless, it had some indirect blessings in creating a microscopic elite middle class out of the middle peasantry in the agrarian society. They controlled the steering wheel in the closing phase of the nineteenth century in the socio-economic scene but failed to provide economic nationalism, a condition precedent to the twentieth century freedom movement. The very undeveloped economy was due to restrictions on supply position arising out of demand limitations. It has been explained how the imbalance in agricultural and industrial sectors further
aggravated the position arising out of the lack of supply of agricultural raw materials to the industrial sector and how the demand constraint for the finished goods in the agrarian rural society led to a climate of inhibition for capital formation for an industrial breakthrough. This finally created the crisis in middle class leadership. The phenomena of lack of formation of social leadership and socio-economic constraints for a upward surge rolled in a vicious circle affecting one another for an inevitable downward trend and thereby aggravating the situation. The study reveals that, in south-west Bengal, subsistence economy prevailed and could not pave the way for commercial agriculture or cash crop production, which could be found in east Bengal.

The British rule had both beneficial and injurious effects on the socio-economic life of the nineteenth century south-west Bengal. It was injurious, as the exploitative capitalist colonial rule stunted socio-economic development and created a crisis in the traditional leadership. It was beneficial, as the alien rulers adopted modernisation measures within their colonial framework for socio-economic regeneration and built up a new class of relatively affluent middle peasantry in these two districts. It also helped in creating a congenial environment for spreading English education, which paved the way for the emergence of an elite middle class having close contact with the rural economy who played a pivotal role in spreading national consciousness in this region in
the twentieth century. This elite section excelled in the
field of literature and provided leadership under constraints
for the development of socio-political awakening in the
closing years of the last century which may be termed as
Renaissance. But the concept of a non-peasant urban middle
class had no relevance in south-west Bengal, because the elite
middle class mainly originated from the middle peasantry and
never could shed their rural background. The rural-urban
dichotomy, to explain the origin of the middle class elite
section, is not possible, unlike in north and east Bengal.

In the nineteenth century in east Bengal, the majority of
the Hindu Bhadraloks were absentee land-holders, who tended
to acquire non-peasant interests round Calcutta. But that
was not true in the case of these two districts under study.

The above hypotheses have been tested in the work,
stretching over five chapters and dealing with the various
aspects of British rule within a period of about hundred
years. The most intriguing problem, which haunted the mind
of the scholar, is why there could not be a sustained economic
growth despite the modernisation measures adopted by the
British Raj. The modernisation measures in the early colonial
rule in this region, in the form of revenue and rent extortions,
proved disastrous leading to Chuar and other peasant revolts
and accelerated the process of pauperisation contributing to a
great extent to her underdeveloped economy.
As already explained, the advent of British rule heralded a sea-change in the fields of revenue and general administration. It restored law and order out of chaos left behind them by the Muslim rulers, rearranged the police and judicial administration, established the rule of law and systematised the feuzdari administration. They enacted regulations to levy customs and excise duties for import of consumer goods and export of salt, opium, rice and other products.

The Charter Acts by abolishing the Company's trade monopoly, of 1813 and 1833, had a significant role in bringing about a change in the nature of the sources of income. The British Government had to depend, to a large extent, on the income from land revenue. The revenue paying landed proprietors were heavily dependent on the rent-paying permanent tenure-holders who, in turn, had to depend on occupancy ryots and temporary lease hold tenure holders. Thus, to ensure maximum collection of revenue, the government thought it necessary to protect the interest of the rent-paying relatively affluent permanent tenure holder middle peasantry as well as the numerous class of temporary lease-hold tenure holders through legislation. This consideration to protect the interests of permanent tenure-holders as well as of the occupancy ryots, as already discussed in the second chapter, ultimately led the
Government to enact the Rent Act X of 1859 and Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which succeeded in protecting the interests of primary producers to some extent. The Rent Act of 1859 and the B.T. Act of 1885 could not, however, protect fully the interests of occupancy ryots, which ultimately led to the amendments of the B.T. Act in 1928 and 1938. However, the Government also undertook many beneficial measures to maximise the production in the agricultural sector in order to increase the revenue-paying capability of the zamindars and rent-paying capacity of the primary producers. The Raj undertook to excavate canals and improve communications to market the produced goods. The most important factor was the beginning of commercial crops in the early nineteenth century, which required ready money available from the money-lenders, a new phenomenon of nineteenth century Bengal which was conspicuous by its absence in south-west Bengal. The prevalence of subsistence traditional peasant economy, together with the inputs in cultivation expansion, accelerated the process of property-making by an emergent relatively affluent middle peasantry. But this process of cultivation expansion and land alienation from the hands of poor peasantry was responsible for the pauperisation of the peasantry. The most important feature of the nineteenth century socio-economic history was the development of a land market and the limited scope of cash crop cultivation in south-west Bengal, which ultimately made land alienation a regular event. But that did not lead to the process of depeasantisation, as was evident in east Bengal. Due to constant balance in the land-man
ratio, cultivation expansion by deforestation of forest lands in
Bankura and north Midnapore and conversion of jalpai lands in
the nimak mahals through land market, there had been alienation
of land-holdings but no depeasantisation, since the migratory
movements of primary producers only accelerated the process
of cultivation expansion at the periphery of villages.

It may be argued as to whether the works of public utility
like irrigation, construction of embankments, development of
means of communication including railways and conservation of
forests were carried out with a missionary zeal for the
welfare of the subjects the Raj ruled. While the zeal was
certainly there, the British Raj also carefully calculated the
debit and credit sides of their investment for yielding better
revenue, in absence of an infrastructure for the industrial
development of the area.

It is a fact that, despite modernisation measures like
canals, embankment construction, health care, sanitation
measures and educational development, the decline of her
economic and social fabric could not be arrested. All these
measures frustrated the possibility of a regeneration, leading
to sporadic peasant unrest in the early nineteenth century.
The failure of the government machinery to raise the saving
capacity and purchasing power of the people was partly due to
the government policy of non-interference. In the absence of
a proper environment to activate the capacity of the native
entrepreneurial middle peasantry through individual enterprise, as was evident in contemporary Japan, the modernisation process proved to be a failure.

During this period in south-west Bengal, the peasants had no organisation like the zamindars, viz., the Zamindary Association 1837, the Land Holders' Society 1838 and the British Indian Association 1851. However, the British Indian Association to some extent tried to ventilate the miserable condition of the peasants till the birth of the Indian Association in 1876. At that time, in Midnapore and Bankura, there was no particular public organisation or agency of publishing newspapers or periodicals to ventilate the grievances of the peasants. District Collector H. V. Bayley himself took the initiative in publishing a bi-lingual journal, called 'the Midnapore and Hijli Guardian', in 1851-52 from Midnapore, which was suspended due to the apathy of the so-called educated leaders. Before the reform movement of Vidyasagar and Rajnarain, the ideas of Ram Mohan Roy did not have any impact upon the general population.

In conclusion, the present scholar would present the limitation under which he undertook the work of micro-studies of two districts. The emergence of periodical journals impelled him to rely on the printed reports and unprinted records, written in English as well as in Bengali. Moreover, the
scarcity of statistical data precluded the author from preparing the statistical tables, which could be derived only from the official reports. Naturally, the available data from the grass roots level through random sampling without ensuring the total size of the available data became the only source for analysis of socio-economic phenomena. Moreover, through the collected data he had to cover twentieth century developments only to show how far the socio-economic phenomena of the nineteenth century coloured the twentieth century developments.

It is also difficult to demarcate the starting point of degeneration and regeneration of a socio-cultural system of a particular community, as societal change is a continuous flow of development. It is neither possible to draw a line between the starting point of an era within a period of socio-economic transition nor to demonstrate its point of termination. As such, in many cases, crossing the limits of the present time-frame of this study, socio-economic data of the 20th century have been utilised to explore the socio-economic contents of the freedom movement of the present century. Still the scholar will feel that his studies and hard labour have been amply rewarded, if in future some others ask the questions of agrarian decline and rise of the middle class in the backdrop of a colonial economy which the present scholar has tried to answer within his limited ability.