CHAPTER VII
LANDED ARISTOCRACY AND PEASANTRY

The Land Revenue Policy introduced by the British in India brought in its train several innovations in the existing land system and "grafted new ties and property right into the existing frame work of production." 1 It had put an end to the feudal legacy. The hitherto fallow lands were brought under cultivation and thus ushered in a tremendous and far-reaching effect in the urban and rural economy. 2 As a result the homogeneity of the Indian society started to be strangled which resulted in the birth and growth of a pluralist or class oriented society. 3 Prior to the eighteenth century, there were three distinct groups who used to share the product of the land. These were cultivators who actually tilled the soil, the controller of cultivators and the state. These three were in constant conflict and the legal right over the land was almost irrelevant. 4


2. Bhattacharyee, J.B.; Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, Delhi, 1977, p. 244.


4. Frykenberg, Robert Eric (edited); Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History, New Delhi, 1979, Cohn, S. Bernard, in his paper 'Structural Change in Indian Rural Society' (1596-1885), p. 54.
When the British first established their power they did not understand the character of the traditional agrarian system with its complex customary rights. They viewed Indian rural society through their pre-conception and applied British agrarian terminology to the Indian scene. As soon as the settlement of a particular area was completed, the British revenue officers engaged themselves in their search for rightful proprietors of the soil. Gradually, the complexities of ancient customary rights were removed and was replaced by an orderly system with precise legal definitions. The old irregularities of tenure were also abolished. The reformation had its important implications in the economy of the rural areas.5

The ownership of the land was now reduced to the status of a private commodity. Land became the best means of security for the money-lender’s credit. Money lenders, traders, feudal land lords took advantage for seizing peasant’s land by taking mortgage of it on the plea of helping them. Thus, the independent peasants were forced to become just tenant ‘burdened with crippling rents’. In the rural area it had its far-reaching effects. There now appeared distinct groups like Zamindars, intermediaries and money-lenders in the rural society. The emergence of such type of land-owning peasants widened the gulf of differences in the society. In the urban

5. Ibid., Metcalfe, Thomas, R., p. 143.
sector too it led to the birth of a distinct class i.e. the capitalist class.6

The emergence of townships offered facilities for trade, commerce and employment. The frequent transfers of the agricultural lands converted a section of the cultivators into landless peasants and forced them to be wage-earners. Gradually many agriculturists preferred to live in towns for the education of their children. Again, once educated and brought up in the atmosphere of the town they preferred to live there than in the rural areas. The people whose traditional occupation was agriculture, had now to live with tea plantation workers in the tea-estates and traders and the babus in the towns. The agrarian community found new sources of earning and their young generation secured employment in the Government and private sectors. The hitherto agricultural tract thus achieved a mixed economy.7

It may be recalled that in pre-colonial Cachar during the Heramba regime all land belonged to the Raja. The authority of the Raja over land was only theoretical in as much as it was non-operative because the land was held by the people in several guides.8 Since the annexation of Cachar the British Government

7. Bhattacharjee, J.B., n 2, p. 244.
superseded the communal holding encouraging thereby private ownership of land. The system under which the cultivators in Cachar had been allowed to hold waste-land at low rates favoured the growth of a tenant class. The system under which the cultivators in Cachar had been allowed to hold waste-land at low rates favoured the growth of a tenant class. These tenants of Cachar may be divided into two sections — Raiyat and Paikavastha. A Raiyat was a tenant who was entirely dependent on his landlord and who had a bari, in his possession. The Paikavastha, however, had a bari of his own and was not dependent on his landlord for his living. The difference between the Raiyat and the Paikavastha was based on economic considerations. The Raiyat could only make a living after the rent was paid whereas the Paikavastha could make a profit. Very often the landlords were seen willing to sacrifice some amount of rent to secure permanent tenants so as to utilise their service in personal affairs. There was no tenancy law in force in the district and the relation between the landlord and tenant was governed solely by contract. The rent was fixed by the landholders at his will and no standard measurement was in vogue. As a result, the tenants had to suffer untold miseries. It was evident from the report of Captain Verner, that property of the Raiyate was one of the greatest drawbacks towards the

11. Ibid.
prosperity of the district of Cachar. As there were enough jungle lands in Cachar many people preferred to occupy such lands for their living than to live at the mercy of the landlords as a Rajvat. 12

Another noteworthy feature of the society in the days of the Dimasa Raj was the prevalence of the Mirasdars. One who possessed land (Miras) was known as Mirasdar, who belonged to the privileged section of the then society of Cachar. Although with the introduction of the British rule some changes took place in the stratum of the social order in the Barak valley, it could not shake off its traditional features. The Mirasdars by virtue of their age-old status continued to occupy a privileged social status in the Barak valley.

A careful study of the rural areas of Cachar revealed that Cachar had witnessed two types of landed aristocracy—one self-made Mirasdars and the other Mirasdars created by the colonial administration.*

The first attempt ever made was through blockwise level like Sonai, Udharband, Hailakandi, Kanakpur, Barkhola,

* The scholar had visited almost all the corners of the rural areas of Cachar during field investigation and found that the occupation of new lands brought with it an important change in the rural areas. By virtue of their economic position their the 'age-old' Mirasdars had developed a new character with power and prestige.
Lakhipur and adjacent areas. From conversation with the elderly people of the locality of Sonai block it was found that Ashu Mia, one of the forefathers of Moinul Haque Choudhury* and another personality of Hailakandi Pargana named Sri Hari Charan Sharma were the two influential persons. Mention may be made here that, in the sixties of the last century Cachar had to face severe inroads of the Lushais. 13
In order to save people from the raids of the Lushai-Kuki tribe, a company of the Sylhet Light Infantry, was posted at Sonabarighat in Sonai Pargana and Nagdigram in Banraj Parganas. 14 Within its purview there was a paltan of the British soldiers at Sayedpur (Part IV) well known as Garod tila. The British sought Hari Charan Sharma and Ashu Mia's assistance against the Lushai raiders. As a reward for their services both Ashu Mia and Hari Charan Sharma (Thakur) were granted large plots of land which could be ascertained from the extract of a letter 15 which runs as follows:

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* Late Moinul Haque Choudhury, an indigenous Muslim of Sonabari ghat (Sonai block), Cachar district, was an eminent political leader of India.

13. Interview with Monir Uddin Mazumdar and Sonahar Ali Mazumdar of Sonabari ghat (Sonai block), Cachar district, Part I, aged about 70 years.


15. Guha, U.C. and Sharma, A.K.; Bangabir Hari Charan Sharma, Dacca, 1325, B.S., p. 65, Extract from letter No. 147, 21st April, 1869 from P.B. Simeon Esqr. Officiating Commissioner of Dacca to A. Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal.
"I would also permit the Deputy Commissioner to give Apa Mia* and Baboo Hari Thakur some Farms or Talooks on easy terms especially as marks of approbation for services on this occasion. Baboo Hari Thakur's services were really very valuable. He seems to have exercised on the Dulosary side somewhat the same active influence which Apamea employed on the Soonay............' 

On some other occasions the British appointed some influential Mirasdars as 'Anjuman'** Secretary, 'Sarpanch' etc. i.e., the peoples representative. For example, Nasib Ali Mazumdar, a man of great standing was made Anjuman Secretary by the British at Sonabarighat. British officials used to meet him in their own interest and parties were often arranged in English fashion in such meetings. It signifies clearly the feudal mentality of the Mirasdars. Again, the showmanship of such personalities created a sense of social differentiation with the ordinary raiyats.16

Besides such Mirasdars, there was another type of Mirasdars in the rural areas of Cachar who had achieved their position and status by dint of hard labour and courage. From an interview with an elderly person of a village in

* Wrongly pronounced Asu Mia.
** Anjuman—is a Persian word equivalent to Sabha, Majlis, Committee, Council or Mahfil.
Cachar, the scholar has come to know that one Anjab Ali was a man of that type who was so courageous as to challenge a high British official. A comparative study of these two types of Mirasdars showed clearly that the Mirasdars had developed some sort of aristocratic complex in course of time around their localities. By the seventies of the nineteenth century, the middle class in the urban community began to consolidate its position in the social milieu of Cachar or Barak valley while the condition of the ordinary raiyate was beyond comprehension.

Statistics of sub-tenancy recorded in the Cachar Resettlement Report of 1900, showed that in the Sadar Tehsil 13 percent of the land under cultivation was held by the tenants, in the Hailakandi Tehsil 18 percent and in Katigora Tehsil 20 percent. The tenants were proportionately most numerous in Banraj, Lakhipur and Chatlahaor Parganas in the Silchar Tehsil. The figures recorded in the census of 1901 gave a fairly correct idea of rural society in the district. 17

Basically, with the enhanced assessment of the land-revenue unrest among the peasantry started and social tensions in the rural areas became a constant feature. 18

With the *pattahs* of lands being granted for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years on lease, the rate of land revenue went on increasing with every land survey; the alien rulers used to increase the rate of land-tax without caring or considering the low productivity of land. As the peasants could not pay their dues at such high rates, their arrears went on increasing which had paved the way for the growth of rural indebtedness. It is obvious that the non-realisation of taxes forced the *raiyats* to sell their lands at a cheaper rate, and even household utensils were sold out. In case of a family marriage or any ritual to be performed as a social obligation, one had to run to the *Zamindar* or *Pouzadar* or money-lenders. Of course it is even now a common feature all over the country.  

As soon as the agrarian policy of the colonial rulers rooted firmly, the feudal gentry and other influential village personalities were placed either as *Pouzadars* or *Choudhuries* or *Gaan Burah* (Village headman). On the one-hand, such persons tried to snatch away the *raiyat's* last resort i.e. land in the name of helping him at the lowest rate; on the other hand they became the ally of the colonial rulers, and were not interested in involving themselves with the lot of the peasantry.  

20. Ibid., p. 197.
Katigora Tahsil of the district of Cachar showed that in the said Tahsil, a good number of people had to suffer from large amount of debt. Money was borrowed sometimes, to meet urgent needs which had its far reaching effects in the economic condition of the villagers. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the amount of indebtedness in the district of Cachar was evident from the following table.\(^{21}\):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Percentage of indebtedness to total families in the sample</th>
<th>Average debt per family in Rs.</th>
<th>Average debt per indebted family in Rs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noticed in the proceeding chapter a large number of agricultural population lived in the villages. Cachar was thus essentially a rural area. It was a land of peasants and the land-lord class was numerically a small one. The agricultural population in general led a peaceful life in their rural surroundings. Notwithstanding, natural calamities like flood, epidemics etc., the people were contented with what nature had given them. There was hardly unemployed peasant

labourers in the rural areas, famine in the strictest sense was not known in Cachar. However, various factors of modernisation during the colonial rule brought about great changes in the urban and rural life of Cachar which became glaring since the beginning of the present century which is not within the purview of our present study.