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CHAPTER 1

THE SETTING FOR EMPIRE

Early in the eighteenth century the very diverse areas which now make up three states of contemporary India, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, together with present-day Bangladesh, were loosely welded together under a single Governor to form the eastern wing of the Mughal empire. In 1765 authority over the Mughal provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was formally transferred to the East India Company and by the 1820s these provinces had become the eastern wing of a vast new British empire in India. The chronological span of this volume of the *New Cambridge History of India* has thus been chosen to cover the replacement of Mughal rule by the first British regime in India.

Until fairly recently, such a choice of dates would require little explanation or defence. Contemporary Englishmen sometimes described the changes that took place in the middle of the eighteenth century in Bengal as a 'revolution', and later generations of historians tended to agree with them. The change from Mughal to British rule has commonly been seen as the beginning of a 'modern' era, not only for the peoples of eastern India but for the whole sub-continent. For very good reasons, what happened in Bengal during the early years of British rule has become one of the classic case studies for those concerned with assessing the impact of foreign rule on conquered societies.

In recent years, however, the revolutionary consequences of the establishment of colonial rule have been called into question for many different parts of the world. The ability of Europeans to transform non-European societies, for better or for worse, over relatively short periods of time seems dubious. Assumptions that non-European societies left to themselves generally proved inert or that they changed significantly only under outside impulses are generally discredited. Colonial rule, with its vast detritus of written records easily accessible to historians, and the growth of international trade which usually accompanied it, may look like the most formidable agents of change, but in many cases they can be shown to be only one part of a complex pattern of developments, other processes working at quite

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different speeds but often ultimately with much greater effect. A chronology which is determined by the rise and firm establishment of a colonial regime may thus prove to be a somewhat misleading one.

Such an approach to the modern history of eastern India has much to commend it. Whatever the ultimate significance of their rule, the British were by no means the only bringers of change. Even the configuration of the land was in flux in some areas. It has been said that 'Both geography and history were remade in Bengal as the eighteenth century drew to a close, and . . . not less than six new rivers appeared on the scene, moulding Bengal's economic history'.[1] The region's greatest river, the Ganges, could change its course suddenly, washing away settlements as it ate into its banks with a noise that 'might be compared to the distant rumbling of artillery, or thunder', but in return creating highly fertile new islands of silt.[2] A recent article has put forward a powerful case for arguing that the economy of India in general and especially of regions like Bengal was not an unchanging landscape either, but was undergoing 'important structural changes in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', well before colonial rule.[3] A similar case could no doubt be established for the mental landscape of the peoples of eastern India. For some, mostly a limited elite in Calcutta, close contact with Europeans brought about a profound change after the establishment of British rule; but it does not necessarily follow that language, culture or beliefs were in general resistant to change. Long-term patterns of evolution, which have produced the modern cultural identities of the peoples of the region, clearly go far beyond the colonial period.

In the history of eastern India the fall of the Mughals and the coming of the British are only episodes in a much longer play whose principal actors inevitably remain anonymous: pioneers who settled new lands, merchants who organised handcrafts, Vaishnavite teachers, guardians of Muslim shrines and even the rivers and the *Anopheles* mosquito. Nevertheless, the easily identified actors, the last Nawabs and the British merchants and administrators had roles which are extremely important. The Nawabs, and to a much greater extent the British, had

[1] Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1938), p. 7.
[2] R.H. Colebrooke, 'On the Course of the Ganges through Bengal', *Asiatick Researches*, VII (1801), 15–16.
[3] F. Perlin, 'Proto-industrialization and Pre-colonial South Asia', *Past and Present*, XCVIII (1983), 56.

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at their disposal instruments with a high potential for altering the societies over which they ruled. They operated a system of taxation which tried to extract a large proportion of the resources of the mass of the population and whose workings had a crucial effect on the distribution of local power throughout the provinces. Through British dominance eastern India's role in international trade was greatly developed, with important consequences for merchants, cultivators and artisans.

Later chapters of this book try to chart the effect of Mughal and British rule on the peoples of eastern India. At every point, however, the work of the agents of both the old and the new imperial regime was likely to be guided, modified or even stultified by the human and physical environment within which they had to operate. This chapter attempts to indicate something of that environment and of its own patterns of change, which evolved over a much longer period than the seventy-five years with which this volume is concerned.

An area whose western extremity is a segment of the Gangetic plain that extends across northern India, and whose eastern extremity is in the rain-forested hills along the Burmese border, contains many different physical and human environments. Most of Bengal receives a high level of rainfall and much of it is irrigated by the flooding of its great rivers. So it is primarily a land of rice cultivation. But there were marked differences in the eighteenth century between old areas of often highly concentrated settlement, predominantly in western and central Bengal, and those parts of the north and the east of the province which had been colonised relatively recently. Ecologically most of Bihar is very much part of the north Indian plain and its economic and cultural links were to the westward rather than with deltaic Bengal. It is a drier land than Bengal and its agricultural patterns were more varied, rice being supplemented by other food grains. It too had areas of old concentrated settlement, mostly to the south of the Ganges, and areas of expanding new settlements, mostly to the north. Orissa consisted of deltaic rice plains, fringed, as the whole area was, by uplands in which so-called 'tribal' peoples extracted a living from the forests or by cultivating clearings.

During the period covered by this volume a shift in the balance between western and eastern Bengal, which was to become very apparent by the mid nineteenth century, seems to have been well

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under way. Settlement was expanding in the east and agricultural output was increasing. In parts of the west growth seems to have stopped and decline may even have set in. These changes were a consequence of shifts in the river system. Over a long period the western half of the delta that constitutes much of Bengal was becoming 'moribund', while the eastern half remained 'active'. This difference was caused by the fact that the main volume of the water brought down by the Ganges no longer found its way to the sea down the western arms of the delta, which tended to silt up, but carved out channels ever further to the east, which carried most of the water. This process gathered speed in the later eighteenth century, when the chief sufferer was beginning to be the Hooghly, the river in western Bengal which had apparently become the main channel for the Ganges in the previous century and on which the region's major ports, Calcutta, Chandernagore and Hooghly itself, had been established. The advantages which the Hooghly ports had once enjoyed of easy access both to the sea and to the main course of the Ganges and therefore to upper India, were diminishing in the second half of the eighteenth century. Neither the Bhagirathi nor the Jalangi, the rivers which link the Hooghly to the Ganges, could be relied on to provide sufficient depth of water to enable river boats to use them all the year round. In 1824 Bishop Heber reflected with astonishment that only fifty years before a great warship had been able to get up to Chandernagore, a little above Calcutta; that this was now inconceivable was striking 'proof of the alterations which have taken place in this branch of the Ganges'.[4]

The declining volume of water in its rivers was to have other malign effects on western Bengal. It was 'a well known fact' by 1833 that lands flooded every rainy season by the Hooghly 'preserve their original fertility' because of the silt spread on them, and can be cropped every year. The 'higher soils', however, which were not flooded, are 'gradually and rapidly impoverishing' and certain crops could be raised on them only 'at intervals of three or four years'.[5] The proportion of land in western Bengal which is regularly flooded has diminished in modern times, and it seems likely that the productivity of agriculture was beginning to be adversely affected in the period covered by this volume. Another consequence of the declining flows through the

[4] R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* (2 vols., 1849 edn), I, 63.

[5] H. Piddington, 'On the Fertilising Principle of the Inundations of the Hugli', *Asiatic Researches*, XVIII (1833), 224–5.

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western arms of the Ganges delta also seems to have been making itself felt. As the rivers became more stagnant, malaria-bearing mosquitoes bred more freely. The district of Murshidabad, taking its name from the Nawab's capital on the Bhagirathi river, was once regarded as healthy, but 'a sad reverse' took place early in the nineteenth century; 'almost everywhere there is in that part of the country a severe autumnal epidemic' of 'fever'.[6] However, although the area which they regularly irrigated was declining, the rivers of western Bengal were still capable of sudden flooding, breaking the thousand miles of embankments which the British were thought to have inherited,[7] and inundating vast areas, as in 1801, with catastrophic effects on cultivation and heavy loss of life.[8]

Bengal's agriculture was dominated by rice growing. A good water supply was crucial for the success and quality of the crop. In low-lying areas assured of abundant flood water the main crop in western Bengal, as elsewhere, was the high yielding *aman* rice which was harvested in the winter to produce fine quality rice. Poorer cultivator grew *aman* rice not for their own consumption but for sale. In higher areas, where prolonged immersion could not be guaranteed, the autumn *aus* rice was the staple. This produced a lower yield of poorer quality grain, which was eaten by 'the lower classes of the inhabitants'. Dry areas, like the northern part of the district of Nadia, were largely dependent on *aus* rice.[9] In favourable conditions the *aus* autumn harvest could often be followed by another crop of winter rice transplanted as seedlings. Good quality land used for *aus* rice would be clear for the winter sowings of crops like cotton and oil seeds, especially mustard, whose oil was used in all cooking, for lighting and for anointing the body. Pulses, such as lentils and peas, an almost universal item of diet, and the coarse grains like millet, the food of the poor and of animals, were either grown interspersed with rice or as another winter-sown crop. Sugar cane took up ground for the best part of the year. Mulberry cuttings could be expected to produce leaves for feeding to silk worms for up to seven years. Those who cultivated mulberry usually reared silk worms as well. Sugar cane and mulberry, like cotton

[6] F. Buchanan, cited in B.B. Chaudhuri, 'Agricultural Growth in Bengal and Bihar, 1770–1860', *Bengal Past and Present*, XCV (1976), 328.
[7] J. Rennell, 'An Account of the Ganges and Burrampooter Rivers', *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* (3rd edn, 1793), p. 350.
[8] There is much historical material on floods in H.L. Harrison, *The Bengal Embankment Manual* (Calcutta, 1875).
[9] IOR, Bengal Board of Revenue: Grain, 3 Nov. 1794, Range 89, vol. 27.

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and the higher quality pulses and oil seeds, needed to be grown on land above the flood level and required laborious cultivation with much watering and manuring; rice was not usually manured at all. A wide variety of vegetables were grown in small garden plots. Ploughing by bullocks was the basic method of cultivation for every crop. The number of bullocks, together with cows and buffaloes kept for their milk, seemed prodigious to the Europeans; one was prepared to guess that there might be 200 million head of cattle in Bengal in the 1790s.[10] The quality of the stock was, however, thought by English observers to be very poor.

Rural society in western Bengal, and indeed in the whole area covered by this volume, can be analysed from two points of view: who was engaged in cultivating the land and who appropriated the portion of the produce of the land that the cultivator was obliged to surrender in the name of the state's taxation. The vast majority of the population cultivated the land and paid tax but most of the wealth and power in rural society came not from direct cultivation but from rights to participate in the taxation system (the 'revenue', as the British called it). These rights gave their holders both a proportion of what was collected and some degree of authority over the cultivators. Holders of revenue rights constituted a very complex hierarchy. At one extreme were great *zamindar*s, who were responsible for levying taxation from hundreds of thousands of cultivators; at the other extreme were village *malik*s in Bihar, who were lords of a small part of a village. The nature of revenue and of the right to collect it are examined in relation to late Mughal and early British rule in Chapters 2 and 4. This chapter is concerned with agriculture and with the people who cultivated the land and made the payments on which the revenue-collecting hierarchy and the empires of the Mughals and the British ultimately depended.

By virtually any definition, those who cultivated the land in eastern India in this period were peasants. The family was the basic unit of production. There is, however, much evidence to suggest that there were many gradations within peasant society from deep poverty to relative affluence. Almost all such evidence comes from the British period and much of it is derived from certain districts of northern Bengal, which may not have been typical. Nevertheless, there are indications which

[10] [H.T. Colebrooke and A. Lambert], *Remarks on the Present State of the Husbandry and Commerce of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1795), p. 141.

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suggest that these divisions between richer and poorer peasants were fairly general throughout Bengal, if less marked in the east, and that they were of long standing, predating British conquest.

At the lowest level were men without any land at all, who made their living by working on the land of others for wages. Such men certainly existed in some numbers: in a district in northern Bengal, called Dinajpur, 18 per cent of the rural population were classed as *krishan*s, or labourers, early in the nineteenth century.[11] But the great majority of the rural population seem to have been cultivators in some degree; the totally landless were the exception. Even in Dinajpur, 'the inhabitants in general' were described as 'settled cultivators and householders'.[12] The main division in rural society was not between the landed and the landless, but between those who were able to cultivate enough land for a living and those who were not.

That very many of the rural population of Bengal were not able to cultivate enough land to support themselves does not seem to have been due either to any absolute shortage of land or to an excessive pressure of numbers on the land. In 1753 Robert Orme wrote that every part of Bengal, 'if duly cultivated, would produce exceedingly more than its occasions', but he thought that 'no part of the province is cultivated in proportion to the wants of the inhabitants who reside on it'.[13] Francis Buchanan, by far the most persistent and perceptive of early inquirers, reported some sixty years later that, even in heavily populated districts with many very small holdings, 'a very large portion of excellent land is unoccupied'.[14] What seems to have determined the size of a man's holding was not the availability of land but his ability to command the wherewithal to clear and cultivate it, that is the extent of what Europeans called his 'stock'. Bullocks for ploughing were the main item of stock. A pair of oxen could normally keep between three and six acres under cultivation.[15] A poor cultivator, able to command only one or two pairs of bullocks, would thus be most unlikely to be able to grow enough to sustain his family and pay

[11] S. Taniguchi, 'The Structure of Agrarian Society in Northern Bengal', Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Calcutta University, 1977, p. 249.
[12] Cited in Taniguchi, 'Agrarian Society', pp. 220–1.
[13] R. Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire* (1805), pp. 404–5.
[14] On Rangpur, in M. Martin, *History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India* (3 vols., 1838), III, 482.
[15] See estimates by Buchanan, ibid., by G. Harris, Evidence, 21 May 1830, *PP*, 1830, VI, 307; and by W. Ward, *Account of the Writings, Religion and Manners of the Hindoos* (4 vols., Serampore, 1811), IV, 81.

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his taxes. He and his family would almost certainly have to supplement their income by working for wages. He might be able to work for a share of the crop on the land of others (sharecropping seems to have been very widely practised) or to work for wages in cash or kind, especially at harvest time. His wife might earn wages from spinning cotton or husking rice. In addition the poorer cultivator would almost certainly have to borrow. Borrowing could take the form of cash advances, for the purpose of purchasing oxen or paying tax demands, or, very commonly, of receiving grain either for seed corn or for feeding one's family between harvests. For making repayments the poorer cultivator had no assets except his future labour or his future crops. Both might be mortgaged almost permanently.[16] It was commonly said that for each measure of grain borrowed at sowing or before the harvest, a measure-and-a-half would have to be paid back after the harvest. In Nadia repayment of loans of seed corn was said to be 'generally double the amount of the advance'.[17] A well-documented case near Calcutta in 1770 showed that those who advanced money to cultivators to be repaid at harvest expected a return of 100 to 150 per cent.[18] Once cultivators had got into debt they were likely to become 'the mere servants of the corn-merchants', surrendering their crop to them every harvest time in return for enough to keep their families alive and to pay their taxes.[19]

By the beginning of the nineteenth century it was thought that 'the great body of the Bengal farmers' had been reduced to the state of being 'servants' of grain dealers. More precise estimates, based on surveys of parts of northern Bengal by Buchanan and others, suggest that 'more than half of the peasantry' were 'lacking in sufficient agricultural stocks to cultivate the minimum size of agricultural holding'. The earliest survey, one for a village in Rangpur in 1770, showed 70 per cent to be below self-sufficiency.[20]

The 'middling farmer', at least in northern Bengal, was said to be one who could keep three, four or five ploughs at work, presumably with his own family and some hired labour.[21] 'Rich and respectable

[16] Buchanan described how a cultivator who borrowed Rs. 6 in Rangpur would be required to work for a year to pay off the principal and to do additional months for the interest (Survey of 'Ronggopur', IOL, MS Eur.D.75, book IV, p. 112).
[17] IOR, Bengal Board of Revenue: Grain, 3 Nov. 1794, Range 89, vol. 27.
[18] Calcutta High Court Records, Mayor's Court, Young *v.* Gopaul Sircar.
[19] Ward, *Account of the Hindoos*, IV, 80.
[20] Taniguchi, 'Agrarian Society', pp. 241–50.
[21] Buchanan in Martin, *Eastern India*, II, 904.

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husbandmen' in the twenty-four Parganas near Calcutta 'employ from four to ten servants or labourers from time to time as necessary, and cultivate the land in the proper season'.[22] The poor were largely limited to growing rice or coarse grains, since they could not afford the outlay on potentially profitable crops. Only the more affluent could afford to plant cash crops. In Burdwan in the west, those who grew sugar cane 'being rich, can generally afford to bestow proper labour and manure on their cane grounds, so as to return them constantly an abundant crop'.[23] Above the 'respectable' farmers were the positively rich who might cultivate a hundred acres or more. The interests of such men were likely to extend far beyond the profits which they derived from their own farming to include profits from lending out stock and money to many poorer cultivators who virtually worked for them, either as formal sharecroppers or by handing over the greater part of their harvest as repayment for loans. Many large farmers were also money lenders and dealers in grain. Their power was often bolstered by holding offices such as that of *mandal*, or headman of the village, and they often crossed the line between cultivators of the land and those who profited from the collection of the revenue, becoming under-collectors for their villages.

At least in the west and the north then, Bengal society seems to have been divided between a broad base consisting of some landless labourers and a very large number of poor cultivators, most of whom were probably also engaged in sharecropping or wage labour, and a narrower apex of clearly self-sufficient or prosperous peasants. The extent to which caste reinforced economic divisions in Bengal at this period is uncertain. 'Dominant' cultivating castes have been identified for parts of western Bengal as being the Kaivartas, the Sadgops or the Aguris.[24] Low caste Hindus or 'tribal' peoples from the western hills occupied the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of the cultivators or the landless in the same areas.[25]

The rural population of western Bengal in this period also included many artisans: men who processed sugar cane or oil seeds, potters, smiths and metal workers, spinners of cotton yarn and silk winders,

[22] Radha Kanta Deva, 'An Account of the Agriculture of the 24 Parganas', *Transactions of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India*, I (1829), 50.
[23] [J. Prinsep], *Bengal Sugar* (1794), p. 82.
[24] R. Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760–1850* (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 52–3.
[25] R.K. Gupta, *Economic Life of a Bengal District: Birbhum 1770–1856* (Burdwan, 1984), pp. 282–4, 288–90.

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weavers and those engaged in other crafts associated with making cloth. For instance, in one large village near Calcutta, a survey of the inhabitants according to caste for 1788–9 produced the following figures for artisan castes and their families: out of 3,018 Hindu men, women and children, there were 19 coppersmiths, 66 carpenters, 40 silversmiths, 41 oilmen and 180 weavers.[26] A large proportion of what many rural artisans made must have been intended for strictly local consumption. For instance, smiths are described as being scattered throughout the villages of Bengal in ones or twos, making the agricultural implements or fish hooks required by their neighbours.[27] The extent to which artisans in Bengal were tied to the service of cultivators in return for rewards in kind or allocations of land, a system which has come to be known as *jajmani*, is unclear. Some village craftsmen were said to give 'without reward a portion of their labour for the benefit of the public or the service of their superiors'.[28]

In parts of the countryside of western Bengal, however, artisans were concentrated in numbers far beyond any strictly local needs. They were working for distant markets, either in Bengal itself, or in other parts of India, or overseas. They dealt not with local patrons but with the representatives of merchants from the towns or with professional brokers. Iron ore deposits, for instance, in the western district of Birbhum had led to a concentration there of mining operations and small forges.[29] The production of salt took place on a very large scale on the coastal belt from the mouth of the Hooghly to the border of Orissa and also in the Sundarbans area. During the salt-making season several thousand boilers were employed either by merchants or by local *zamindar*s in an elaborate process of evaporating sea water. The manufacture of silk was concentrated in certain areas where mulberries were grown. Silk worms of the highest quality were thought to be available around Kasimbazar, close to Murshidabad, and they were also reared in other parts of western Bengal. The cultivators of mulberry either reeled silk from their own cocoons or sold the cocoons to be reeled by professional silk winders called *nacaud*s, who worked in their own houses but increasingly by the end of the period in large workshops.

[26] 'Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the Village of Seebpore', IOL, MS Eur.F.95, fo. 64. [27] Ward, *Account of the Hindoos*, IV, 107–8.
[28] [Colebrooke and Lambert], *Remarks on Bengal*, pp. 46–7.
[29] R.K. Gupta, 'Iron Manufacturing Industry of Birbhum', *Journal of Indian History*, LVIII (1980), 93–108.

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