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Mandali Tenures of Midnapore District: Analysis of their Socio-economic Condition during Colonial Period

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Abstract

Medinipur, the most populous and second largest district of South-West Bengal. This district was a diverse district. On one hand, the geographical and natural environment and on the other hand, the presence of fertile land and several rivers had made this district particularly prosperous in terms of agricultural work. Except some parts of the north-western region of the district, the land of the entire district is particularly conducive to agricultural work. Like agricultural production, the presence of various land tenures could be observed in the land settlement of the district. The description of Babu Kali Prasanna Roy Chowdhury, the Deputy Collector of the district in 1873, told about the various types of land settlement in the district. One of the land settlements that was observed in this district is the Mandali system or land ownership. This system or land settlement was mainly observed in the north-western, that is, forest-dominated areas of this district. This practice was prevalent in the forest-dwelling areas of the district, mainly in Parganas Chiara, Jhargram and Kalyanpur. Therefore, the subject of this article is what the Mandali system was and how did the Mandali land system emerge in Medinipur district and what was the socio-economic status of the landowners.

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Introduction

Midnapore, the southernmost district of the Burdwan division was the second largest and second most populous district in the state of West Bengal. In the entire sub-continent of India the district of Midnapore had the distinction of occupying the third position in this respect. ^[1] On the north Midnapore was bounded by the district of Bankura and on the east the river Hooghly and its tributary the Rupnarayan separated it from the 24-prganas, Howrah and Hooghly. Its southern boundary was the coast line of the Bay of Bengal, while on the west the Boundary marches with the Balasore district and the Mayurbhanj state in Orisha, and with the Singham Singhbhum and manbhum district of chota Nagpur. Geographically Midnapore was one of the most varied district in Bengal. The north and North West embraced a portion of the eastern fringe of the chota Nagpur plateau, and consisted

of a hard lateritic formation. On the south-west and south the country, which was geographically part of Orissa, was a maritime tract, subject to tidal waves and to the inroads of the sea. ^[2] The district of Midnapore was pre-eminently an agricultural district and agriculture forms the major industry of the district. Most of the workers of this district were engaged in agricultural pursuits. A little more than three-fourths of its workers were engaged in the agricultural sector either as a cultivator or an agricultural labourer. In the State of West Bengal, as a whole, only 54 per cent of the total working population were engaged in agriculture against the district's percentage of 76. Various land settlement systems were observed in this district. In 1873 the district's Deputy Collector, Babu Kali Prasanna Roy Chaudhuri's report provided information on different types of land settlements. One of the notable systems was the Mandal system. ^[3]

Mandali Tenures

Definition of the Mandali Tenures

In the more jungly tracts there was a special class of tenure-holders termed mandals. They were originally substantial ryots, called abadkars, who undertook to bring tract of waste land under cultivation paying the zamindar a stipulated sum as rent. These abadkars then reclaimed the land, either themselves or with the help of other ryots, whom they induced to settle with them; established a village, to which they usually gave their name; and being heads of the settlements, were called mandals, or headmen.^[4]

The usual definition of the Mandal as he existed in Midnāpur was that given in the Report of the Rent Law Commission of 1883 which ran as followed: "In parts of Midnāpur bordering on the Jungle Mahals there is a class of persons termed mandals who came into existence in the following manner the Zemindar granted a tract of waste land to a substantial rāiyat, termed as badkar, who undertook to bring it under cultivation, paying the Zemindar a stipulated lump sum as rent. This abadkrs, partly by the labour of his own family and dependants, and partly by inducing other raiyats to settle under him, gradually reclaimed the greater part of the grant and established a village upon it, to which he usually gave his name and as the head of the settlement he was called mandal or headman. The Zemindar and the mandal from time to time re-adjusted the terms of their bargain, but the Zemindar never interfered between the mandal and his under tenants. In settlement proceedings of 1839 these mandals were declared to have only the rights of athani of khudkdakt raiyats and not to be entitled to any profit; but though not exactly recognized as talukdars, they gradually acquired rights superior to those of ordinary khudkasht raiyate; and as they were left to make their own terms with the raiyats settled by them, they must have had a very considerable profit besides what they obtained from any land cultivated by themselves. Their mandali right became transferable by custom".^[5]

Origin of the Mandali System

Mandali was a tenure which seemed to be the product of an unwritten custom. It was supposed to have originated from the practice which prevailed in the District in old times of leasing lands to the head-men of villages, called mandals, on liberal rates of rents, for the purpose of clearing jungle and cultivating waste lands, on the understanding ordinarily that they should thus reclaim the lands themselves or through cultivators under them. The tenure was similar in character to aimas. The name Mandli appeared to have arisen from the lease being granted to mandals. Leases of this kind are granted by proprietors of estates in perpetuity at fixed rates, or for a term of years only. The former practice was more in vogue in old times than now-a-days. Tenures of the kind in question are chiefly to be met with in Parganas Chiara, Jhargaon, Kalyanpur, etc., in the jungle tracts. Those jot mandlis which had been granted in perpetuity at rents fixed for ever, had always been looked upon as transferable tenures. Government, however, repudiates the rights of the proprietors to hold their land at unalterable rates of rent. The total number of these tenures in Midnapur District was not ascertainable.^[6] A.K. Jameson was the Settlement Officer of this district from 1911 to 1917. He gave a detailed account of the origin of the Mandali system in the District Settlement Report. It was known from his report that, -Mandals exist only in those areas where the aboriginal and semi-aboriginal tribes of Santals, Bhumijis, Mahatos, etc. were until recently, the bulk of the population, and among these tribes the patriarchal village

community was the regime under which they lived when the Origin of the Mandali system. Mandali system was evolved, though it had now broken down to a large extent. According to that the village was the unit and the individual had no existence except as a member of the community. The head of the community for the time being was its representative and spokesman in all its dealings with the outside world and business can be conducted only with him. Thus when through increase of population the lands of one, village became insufficient for the entire community, a group of the younger men would go off to find a new one on the same lines as the old under the leadership of one of their number as headman. Having found a suitable spot for reclamation the headman would approach the landlord and arrange the terms on which the community were allowed to clear the land and settle on it; the contracting parties were thus the Zemindar on the one hand and the entire community on the other, the latter occupying the position of a single individual and the headman being merely the spokesman and the person from whom the Zemindar received the rent payable by the community as a whole. This having been done the community proceeded to arrange itself on the lines to which it had been accustomed, that is to say the land was parcelled out among the individuals, subject no doubt, as in other such groups all over the world, to periodical re-distribution, the village officials temporal and spiritual chosen and remunerated with grants of land free of rent, but in its relations with the Zemindar it remained an individual. The terms of the bargain with the landlord had of course to be easy; there were vast, tracts of unreclaimed land and it did not matter to the group of pioneers where they settled so that if the landlord tried to exact too much from them it was a simple matter to move elsewhere and get more favourable terms from another. Hence the land allotted was somewhat vaguely specified without actual measurement, the rent was merely nominal and originally must have consisted of produce, within the area assigned the community had full rights to reclaim as much or as little as they liked and the left portions unreclaimed to employ the jungle and its products in any way they chose, while within the community the headman was in no way different from the other members except in so far as his superior social position allowed him to retain a larger area in his own possession.^[7]

Jameson also said that, traces of this primitive states of affairs existed down to comparatively recent times in the Ramgarh estate. In 1887-88 rents of some villages consisted in providing a certain amount of fodder for the Raja's horses and elephants and rice and ghee for ceremonies, but there was also a money contribution of Re. 1-4-0 or so per village. In that year the rents were commuted to mixed cash and sanja (a kind of produce rent) and the lands were classified, but the proprietor was debarred from settling any land within the village with anyone but the Mandal who had to pay rent according to the rates fixed for the different classes for all land brought under cultivation, the Mandal in turn got them cultivated by other members of the community who paid at the fixed rates so that he made no profit off them but he was allowed to hold a small quantity rent-free. This system still existed to a certain extent. Similarly in Jambani according to a patta of 1261 in which money rents were fixed, the Mandal was allowed a deduction of Re. 1 from his own rent as profit but was expressly forbidden to realize from the other members more than the fixed assessment. In Lalgarh according to a solenama of the year 1887 a further development was observed. the Mandal was entitled to

dispose of all lands cultivated and uncultivated within the village paying rent according to fixed rates only for the cultivated portion, but if he left any portion uncultivated for a long time, then the proprietor was at liberty to settle that portion with someone else.^[8]

Condition of the Mandali and their Allied Rights in 20th Century First Half

The Jameson report revealed that, originally no doubt the position of headman or Mandal the nature of an office in the village community organization and having no special connection with landed property as such, was governed by the rules of the community and might or might not be hereditary, certainly it was not transferable at the will of the Mandal himself. The stages by which the Mandali right had been transformed into what it now were not traceable. Probably the causes came largely from within the community and were similar to those which have led to the breakup of such communities in other parts of the world. Not himself who ceased simply to portion out the rent due to the proprietor among the other members and began to make a profit for himself by assessing them at higher rates and pocketing the difference, That the position should become hereditary is natural in view of the universal tendency in that direction noticeable through India in respect of all offices, but when the doctrine of transferability arose it does retained many of them still in social matters. But however they came about there is no doubt that these were now-a-days incidents of the Mandali tenure. Something, too, must be attributed to the action of the proprietors. As reclamation went on and the land became progressively more valuable they tried to secure for themselves a larger share in the profits. Thus measurements became more frequent, rates were raised, the zemindar claimed that waste lands were not included in the Mandal's agreement but were their own personal property which they could settle out with anybody on the best terms they could obtain, and above all they tried to reserve the unreclaimed forest lands for themselves and to deny the Mandals and the tenants any rights in them at all. All this meant, in short, the substitution of rigidly defined contracts for more or less vague arrangements based on custom and it was bound to react on the position of the Mandal. As his terms were raised by the proprietor so he in turn raised those of the other members of the community whom now he came to regard as occupying a subordinate position to himself as his tenants and not his co-riayats until finally he became simply an ordinary tenure-holder. The process however, had not gone on equally throughout the area in which the system prevailed, so that all varieties of conditions were met with, making it difficult to define exactly what the Mandali right connotes. Thus in Ramgarh as was noticed above the Mandal is still to all intents and purposes a raiyat though no doubt in practice he derives profit from his fellow raiyats and he still retained his rights to settle reclaimed land and to enjoy the jungle, while in Lalgargh he has a modified right to reclaim, but in both the proprietor has the right to measure and assess all such reclaimed land. In the area over which the Midnapore Zemindari Company holds sway in parganas Silda, Bagri, Bhanjabhum and Bahadurpur the process has gone much further. The mahajan made his appearance there and having got many of the aboriginal and semi-aboriginal Mandals into his clutches proceeded to oust them and occupy their position of course when this happened an entirely foreign element was introduced into the village community and the newcomer in no sense took the place of the old Mandal, but was a tenure-

holder pure and simple from the beginning, concerned only to make the maximum of profit and caring little or nothing for the ancient rights of the community. Many of the original Mandals were also rejected and new men installed in their places on new terms and conditions. The process was practically completed in the other parganas mentioned above before settlement operations started and in Silda it had proceeded to far that in the operations under section 112 Bengal Tenancy Act which were set on foot there effect had to be given to most of the innovations. Generally speaking the Mandals may be said to have permanent, hereditary and transferable rights in the area included within their Mandali and that they make a profit out of the lands sublet to tenants. But the questions is "what is the area included in their Mandali" which had aroused the greatest conflict between them and the Zemindars. They maintained that the entire srea originally devised to the community was included with all jungle, waste and unreclaimed land and the homesteads, that they have an absolute right to reclaim all land within those limits and settle it with whom they will and that homesteads are free of rent and uplands also until they are converted into rice land, when they become liable to assessment. The Company on the other and when this included only the land in their own or their tenants' cultivating possession and all outside of that, jungle, waste and homestead, was the property of the land-lord, could be reclaimed only with his permission and when reclaimed was not included in the Mandali unless the Zemindar after measurement and assessment of rent on it chose to allow it to be included, and that uplands and homesteads were liable to rent. On the whole the fight, as might be expected, has gone against the Mandals. Jungle was everywhere recognized as being the exclusive property of the Zemindar, subject to certain limited rights of easement which will be noticed later. In Bhanjabhum there wer decrees of the Civil Court declaring the right of Mandals to reclaim freely within the limits of the original village, but in Silda a decree of the Sub-Jungle in 1910 declared all outside the cultivated area to belong to the Company. In any case both up-lands and homesteads were now regarded as liable to rent. The further claim was advanced by the Mandals to hold the entire area at the rent originally fixed without liability to enhance-ment or assessment on excess area had everywhere been defeated. In Bagri, however, it had been found that at successive re-measurements the original rent had been kept intact and assessment made on excess cultivated area at rates which remained the same on each occassion; elsewhere the original rent had been enhanced as well as increased for increased area.^[9]

In Pargana Jambani, which is not now under the Midnapur Zemindari Company although they were ijardars of it for a time, the conditions were similar though homesteads were found to be included in the Mandal's agreements and not to be the property of the landlord. In 1906-07 the status of the mandals in pargana Kalyanpur and the allowance to be given to them were decided during the re-settlement of that pargana. Those mandals who were found to be middlemen were given an allowance of 20 per cent to be distributed between them and the subordinate tenure-holders (if any), but the allowance was raised to 30 and 35 per cent in cases in which the tenure-holder had been treated more or less as a ryot at the last settlement.^[10]

Conclusion

The Mandali system was one of the oldest traditional systems in the forest-dominated areas of the north-western part of the

Midnapore district. Through this system, an inseparable social relationship was developed between the village head and the common farmers in that region. As a result, agriculture was expanded by clearing the vast forest lands of that region, resulting in the spread of agriculture. The agreements between the landowners and the Mandali changed from time to time, and various changes were introduced in this system over time. Further south in Thana Gopiballabhpur the course of events was different. There the Mandals, who were known locally as Pradhans, had almost disappeared. Down to 1886 Amlis they existed in the Nayagrām Estate and were the intermediaries for the collection of rent, being allowed a profit of two annas per bigha on all cultivated land, uplands and homesteads being held rent-free. But in that year the Court of Wards abolished them altogether and added the two annas profit on to the rents of the tenants which thereafter were collected direct. In 1899 uplands and homesteads were all measured and assessed to rent. In the Estate of the Mohant of Gopiballabhpur Pradhans still exist but are regarded as mere rent collectors being allowed a profit of two annas in the rupee and issuing rent receipts in their own names, but the landlord deals direct with the tenants in matters of mutation and settlement of new lands and the Pradhan was not allowed to interfere in any way between them and the landlord. In fact the Mohant wanted us to treat them as mere servants paid by commission on their collections and liable to removal at any moment; they were found, however, to have been treated in their kabulyats as tenure-holders and although nominally on temporary leases had in practice been allowed to hold on sometimes for several generations. In other estates Pradhan where he existed is an ordinary tenure-holder, the right of reclamation had disappeared and all lands were assessable to rent.^[11]

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