

**THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT
IN ITS IDEOLOGICAL AND EXPERIMENTAL ASPECTS :
SELECT CASE STUDIES FROM BENGAL (1920 – 2000)**

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS, JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

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2017

Certified that the Thesis entitled

THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN ITS IDEOLOGICAL AND EXPERIMENTAL ASPECTS: SELECT CASE STUDIES FROM BENGAL (1920 – 2000) submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Professor Anuradha Roy, Department of History, Jadavpur University. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Anuradha Roy, Department of History, Jadavpur University, for her support and encouragement. She meticulously went through the several drafts of the chapters and gave me important insights into my area of study. I do not hesitate to acknowledge that the work would never have been complete without her guidance.

I would like to put on record my grateful thanks to my teachers in the Department of History, Jadavpur University, Dr. Sudeshna Banerjee and Professors Chittabrata Palit, Amit Bhattacharya, Mahua Sarkar and Ranjan Chakrabarti for their valuable suggestions.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help from the staff of Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development, Bolpur; Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata; Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society; Central Library of Jadavpur University; Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata; Dhalirbati Sevabratī Samabāy Krishi Unnayan Samiti Limited, Canning; Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata; Library of the Department of History, Jadavpur University; National Library, Kolkata; Office of the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies, South 24 Parganas; Rabindra Bhavan Archives and Library, Santiniketan; Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata; Tagore Society for Rural Development, Bolpur and Kolkata; and West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

I deeply acknowledge the help received from Smt. Kakali Pal, Cooperative Development Officer, South 24 Parganas and Shri Rabindranath Mondal, Inspector of Cooperative Societies, Canning I, in conducting my field work in the cooperative societies under Canning I Development Block. I take this opportunity to also thank Shri Ananda Sen and Shri Tapan Ghoshal of Tagore Society for Rural Development for sharing their experiences with Pannalal Dasgupta.

I wish to thank all the members of the cooperative societies and the Self-Help Groups with whom I interacted to understand the essence of the movement at the grass-roots.

I wish to extend my indebtedness to Professor Prasanta Ray, Professor Emeritus, Presidency University, Professor Dikshit Sinha and Professor Prasanta Kumar Ghosh of Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati and Dr. Gouri Shankar Nag, Department of Political Science, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University for helping me to locate certain important sources.

I thank the University Grants Commission for the special study leave of three years under the Faculty Development Programme. Thanks are due to the former Teacher-in-Charge, Smt. Debjani Nag and the present Principal, Dr. Aditi Dey of Shri Shikshayatan College and all my colleagues for their cooperation and encouragement.

My classmates, Dr. Suparna Chatterjee and Dr. Shekhar Bhowmik and my junior friend, Dr. Aparajita Dhar, were always ready to help me and I can never thank them enough.

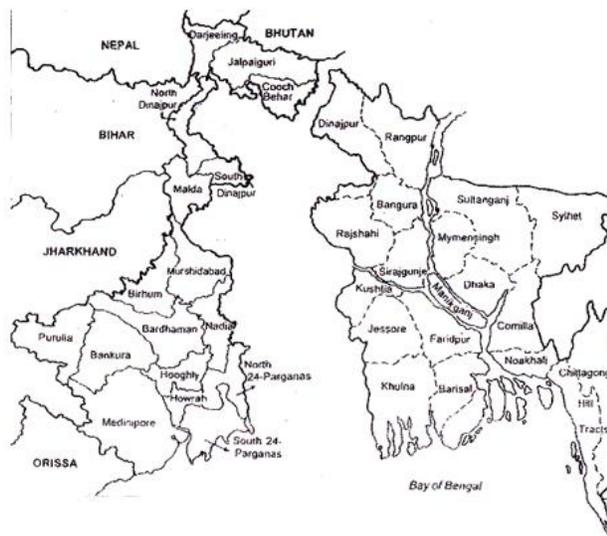
I would like to end this acknowledgement on a personal note. This thesis would never have been complete without the unstinting support and encouragement of my parents, Amitava and Nandita Sinha. My aunt, Krishna Mitra, stood by me in her own silent way. My husband, Dr. Arunabha Sarkar, was always there to lend all kind of help. Special thanks are due to my children, Aditi and Atri, who sportingly shared a major part of their growing up with this thesis and were ever ready to assist their technologically challenged mother.

I dedicate my thesis to my younger cousin (late Dr. Devarati Ghosh), who passed away too early and too suddenly as I was winding up my work.



Map 1: Bengal districts

Bengal before 1947



Bengal after 1947

INTRODUCTION

I. COOPERATION AND CONFLICT, THE TWO FACETS OF HUMAN NATURE

From a sociological viewpoint: Cooperation and discord have shaped history through the ages. Sociologists consider cooperation and conflict as universal elements in human life.¹ In the social world, there is a combination of cooperation and conflict revealed in the relations of individuals and of groups. In the words of Cooley, “conflict and cooperation are not separable things, but phases of one process which always involves something of both.”² He continues to say, “It seems that there must always be an element of conflict in our relations with others, as well as one of mutual aid; the whole plan of life calls for it; our very physiognomy reflects it, and love and strife sit side by side upon the brow of man.”³ Thus cooperation crossed by conflict marks society.⁴ But it is the innate spirit of cooperation which has helped men to live, to overcome impediments, to progress, and of course, to counter the conflicts.

From the sociological point of view, cooperative activities exist by way of the pursuit of harmonious/ similar individualized interests. For example, to take advantage of the division of labour, to pool economic resources in business, to seek favours from a government, or to outdo a harmful competitor. This form of cooperation is evident mostly in economic organizations.⁵ Though perhaps it is part of the very human essence to come together, to translate a sense of oneness into a cooperative activities, sociology stresses that human beings cooperate from a perception of the greater efficacy of cooperative over isolated action.⁶

¹ R.M. Maclver & Charles H. Page, *Society, An Introductory Analysis*, New Delhi, 1950, Pg.64

² C.H. Cooley, *Social Process*, New York, 1918, Pg.39

³ *Ibid*, Pg.56

⁴ R.M. Maclver & Charles H. Page, *Society, An Introductory Analysis*, New Delhi, 1950, Pg.65

⁵ *Ibid*, P 66

⁶ *Ibid*

Sociologists note that the cooperative devotion to a common cause is rooted in an indivisible interest and that one cannot pursue it without pursuing it for all who share the interest. The attitude of cooperation and the interest are inextricably tied together and the sense of this tie can lead to a very strong bonding that goes beyond self-limited interest as in economic organizations, where a kind of individual calculation is involved.⁷ Looked at it more deeply and defining 'interest' broadly too, the interest or the inclination of one to harmonise with those of others determine the cooperative impulse. Thus the tendency to cooperate does not always depend on success. Even defeat or despair might bind the members more closely than success. So two kinds of spirit behind cooperation can be noticed. One the one hand, there is the cooperation between the employers and workers, between competitors, between business partners that lacks spontaneity and needs to be carefully worked out and balanced. A disruption of this balance or harmony makes the situation vulnerable making any kind of discord imminent. This imposed cooperation or rather cooperative attitude is a "consequence of temporary reconciliation of individual considerations".⁸ On the other hand, there is relatively selfless cooperation, though eventually this too perhaps has to do with self-interest – a self that seeks to fulfill itself by uniting with a broader collectivity, thrives on fellow-feeling and finds mutual help quite natural. Social life-patterns of man, both as individuals or as members of certain groups, are characterized by both shared and individualized interests, mutuality and competition, cooperation and conflict.

Sociology also recognizes that local social and cultural conditions to a great extent influence the nature of cooperation and conflict among the members of a particular community. Therefore, the complexity of the problems involved in cooperation and conflict vary accordingly. It has been observed by the sociologists that the manifestations of cooperation and conflict differ in type and detail not only from community to community but also from time to time. This thus

⁷*ibid*

⁸*ibid*

indicates that the social processes as well as the order of society are ever-changing. Cooperation and conflict in every emergent social order are redefined and a community of interests surface anew. And accommodation of cooperation and conflict in the new scenario is a part of an endless historical sequence. Therefore, there is an inherent dynamism in the social processes of cooperation and conflict.⁹ This tends to give every cooperative endeavour an independent tenor.

From the perspective of Deep History/neurohistory: A cutting edge field of historical research that has recently emerged, namely ‘deep history’, confirms the sociologists’ contention and shows how both the traits of cooperation and conflict are vitally present in human history, human culture and more fundamentally in human brain-body chemistry. Deep history pushes the historical enquiry as far back as possible – beyond the history of civilization, Neolithic period and even Palaeolithic period to a very deep past, at least about 1.7 million years ago, when an early member of our genus, Homo, first emerged in east Africa in the form of Homo Ergaster (working man). Methodologically speaking, deep history seeks help from neuro-sciences to understand human history and the innate human tendencies that have propelled this history. It is a grand historical paradigm that seeks to combine Darwin’s theory of blind variations and natural selection governing the slow biological evolution and Lamarck’s theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics governing the rapid and largely conscious cultural evolution. Thus it is by no means biological determinism and actually thinks in terms of biology-culture dialectics. It asserts that while culture is embedded in human biology, at the same time biology is culture-driven, that is, cultural practices can have profound neuro-physiological consequences which can even get transmitted from one generation to the next in an epigenetic process.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid*, Pg.70

¹⁰ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008. Also see Smail, ‘Neurohistory in Action: Hoarding and the Human Past’ in the journal *History of Science Society*, The University of Chicago Press, Volume 105, No. 1, March 2014, pp. 110-122.

When the first hominids descended from the trees trying to rough it out in the Savannah of Africa full of dangers, particularly from wild animals, they not only felt the need to use tools, but very urgently, to cooperate among themselves. And this can also be marked as the beginning of their culture. The concept of mutuality and cooperation has a big role to play in human culture. And this role has persisted till date despite competitions and conflicts alongside. It is under the impact of culture that the hominid developed a huge brain that led to the flattening of his forehead. Such a big brain was not required just for survival. The simultaneous biological and the cultural co-evolution of the hominids made them evolve about 1,40,000 years ago as Homo Sapiens, that is, the species that we are today in terms of both mind and body. Cooperation also helped our Homo Sapiens ancestors to adapt to various environments when they started migrating from Africa about 85,000 to 50,000 years ago. Cooperation saw them through a number of ice ages too.¹¹

Even in the Palaeolithic age, cooperation reigned over competition. As the cultural anthropologist Christopher Boehm has shown, palaeolithic humans were egalitarian in nature.¹² Hierarchical societies emerged only with the onset of the Neolithic Revolution, to be more exact, with the rise of agriculture, about 10,000 years ago. The new economic environment of the Neolithic period – the nature of agricultural work and the agricultural surplus - generated a fierce spirit of competition which in its turn led to the emergence of the domination-subordination module of human civilization that suppressed slaves, peasants and women and tightened political power at the expense of the equally powerful module of cooperation and altruism. The Neolithic Revolution is definitely a big landmark in human history in this respect. Its new economic environment created new neural configurations or altered brain-body states that got further consolidated down the ages.

¹¹ Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behaviour*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1998

¹² Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest : The Evolution of Egalitarian Behaviour*, Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1999

Yet, the urge to cooperate remained strong too. If neuro-transmitters like adrenaline and testosterone associated with anxiety and aggression are naturally there in human body to be stimulated occasionally and hit their receptors in the brain, so do chemicals like oxytocin associated with mutuality and friendship, the wash of which is soothing for the body. And the need of the human body is in tune with the human concern for survival and progress. Thus human beings even in the Neolithic and post-lithic ages had to live by forming communities or societies; and though there was competition between them, within a community or society, however, cooperation was the norm.

Deep history by taking its cue from neurosciences asserts that both conflicting and cooperative attitudes are loosely wired in our brain structure and body chemistry, but not hardwired. Our neural states are plastic and manipulable and thus whether, to what extent and exactly how these attitudes are to be manifested is largely culturally determined. There was a time when some scholars tended to take a rigid evolutionary approach in understanding human history and society, talked about competition only and stressed the adaptive nature of evolution upholding the 'survival of the fittest' theory. Social Darwinists immediately come to our mind in this respect. Their theory has, however, been proved wrong. Evolution does not always follow a strictly adaptive path (for example, there are maladaptations and exaptations), and even if we give primacy to the theory of adaptation, fellow-feeling and altruism can be seen as a part of the adaptive strategy. The mathematical model of Sober and Wilson has shown that population groups that practice altruism will out-compete those that do not.¹³

But challenge to Social Darwinism had come even before the emergence of deep history. In this context, Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin's work, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) deserves mention. Kropotkin wrote this book partly in response to social Darwinism and in particular to Thomas H. Huxley's essay 'The

¹³Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behaviour*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1998

Struggle for Existence' in the British monthly literary magazine *Nineteenth Century*. Through this work, based on his experiences in scientific expeditions in Siberia, Kropotkin tried to uphold the concept of "survival of the fittest" as supporting cooperation rather than competition. After examining the evidence of cooperation in non-human animals, also in pre-feudal societies, medieval cities and in modern times, he observed that cooperation and mutual aid are the most important factors in the evolution of species and the ability to survive. In the said book, Kropotkin set out his analysis leading to the conclusion that the fittest was not necessarily the best at competing individually, but often the community made up of those best at working together. Applying this concept to human society, he presented mutual aid as one of the dominant factors of evolution and concluded that ".....in the practice of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support, not mutual struggle has had the leading part."¹⁴

Taking the cue from Kropotkin, it may be noted that in the course of human civilization, agriculture itself, which is considered as driving a wedge between human beings, called for cooperation, entailing as it did various methods of irrigation. It was a very elementary and small scale irrigation in those early days, which did not require efforts of a mighty state power, but did call for local cooperation. People, instead of fighting among themselves, learnt to cooperate in order to develop agriculture. The ancient Egyptians did this to derive the benefit of the inundation of the river Nile.¹⁵ This happened in ancient India as well. There was a time when historians believed that it was the state-controlled hydraulic machinery (along with the state's urge to control agricultural production and revenue) that had given rise to Oriental Despotism. Today, however, historical evidence indicates that irrigation in that ancient past with its prevailing forms like wells, tanks and river channels did not require state organization. They were concerns of private land-holders and village councils and involved cooperation at

¹⁴ [https:// en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org) – Accessed on 18/9/2016

¹⁵ Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilisation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1989

local level. However, exceptions were there, for example, the Sudarshan Lake dug by the Mauryas in Kathiawar.¹⁶

II. CONNOTATIONS OF COOPERATION AND OF THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN MODERN TIMES

The pre-modern age was marked everywhere by strong communitarian feelings. This was based on networks of kinship, religious and other 'primordial' ties, often with local structures. Modernity brought in a process of individuation. Indeed, individualism is regarded as an important feature of modernity as against collective mentality of the pre-modern period. With the end, or at least, the rude disruption of communitarian feelings, there came a sense of insecurity. Such a situation generated conscious thoughts about mutuality and created an urge for a new type of cooperation. The modern cooperative movement thus emerged. The cooperative movement expressed itself more prominently in the days following the Industrial Revolution. "Each for all and all for each" became the guiding principle of the movement in modern times. The variety of experiments that followed thus harped on the moral and ideological aspects of the movement to arrest the rugged individualism and the divisive tendencies of the contemporary time.

G.D.H. Cole while tracing the history of cooperation during modern times notes that the early capitalism of the 1840s was planless and intensely individualistic where no man knew what his neighbour was doing, nor was in a position to adjust his projects to those of others so as to meet the needs of the market in an orderly manner. The ordinary men hardly knew about the market conditions, except the merchants, who were rather eager to let the scramble among the manufacturers continue, as such imbroglio helped them to buy cheap. Cole has considered the new world of machine production to be a world of prodigious economic fluctuations. In the economic uncertainties of the time, well-established

¹⁶Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1975, Pp.59-60

firms, however, were found to maintain a relative regularity of production and employment and on the whole treated their workers better than the others. They expressed their belief in mutual cooperation in their attitude towards the workers. Cole is aware of the criticisms, like, the bigger firms stood to gain by any law that would compel the lesser firms to pay better wages and work shorter hours, because they would be in less danger of being undercut. Yet, Cole strongly believes that genuine humanity played a part in their attitude too. He argues that employers who felt secure from being crushed by the weight of the competitive struggle were more likely than others to open their eyes to the misery of those whom they employed, and to be ready to treat the workers better, and wanted that their fellow-employers be forced to do the same.¹⁷ The humanity that Cole speaks of at most led to a kind of cooperation between the employers and the employees through some efforts initiated by the former and hence can be called cooperation from above and not from below. Still, in this way, amidst intense, unfeeling and ruthless competition, surfaced the Cooperative Movement in Great Britain.

However, the workers themselves soon started taking the initiative in forging a consumers' cooperative movement resting on a solid foundation of retail trade in the necessities of life. This form of cooperation developed steadily in Great Britain ever since the Rochdale Pioneers opened their Toad Lane Store in the winter of 1844. To the founders of the Rochdale Society, like Charles Howarth, James Smithies, William Cooper and others, mutual store keeping was only one of the number of means of forwarding the cooperative ideal. They considered that the cooperative ideal was the foundation of Cooperative Communities or Villages of Cooperation, in which the members could live together on their own land, work together in their own factories and workshops and escape from the ills of competitive industrialism into a "New Moral World" of mutual help, social equality and brotherhood. This ideal proclaimed by the Rochdale Pioneers in the

¹⁷G.D.H. Cole, *A Century of Cooperation*, Allen & Unwin Ltd. For The Cooperative Union Ltd., Oxford, November, 1944, Chapter-'The Hungry Forties'

original statement of their objects was thereafter preached by Robert Owen to the people of Great Britain and in a different form by Charles Fourier and others to the people of France.¹⁸ To make a cooperative endeavour successful and to realize its ideals and goals, six basic principles of cooperation were outlined by the Rochdale Pioneers : voluntary membership, democratic administration, limited interest on share capital, equitable division of surplus, education and mutual cooperation among the cooperatives. Certain social obligations were spelt out in these principles and they incorporated ideals concerning human relations, like, universality, democracy, liberty, fraternity, unity and self-help. The same principles are still adhered to and strongly recommended to all the cooperatives around the world by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). It may be noted that the Commission on Cooperative Principles appointed by the ICA which met at Belgrade from 3rd to 5th October, 1964 pointed out in its report that the objective of a cooperative is to promote the progress and the welfare of humanity and that it is this aim that makes a cooperative society something different from an ordinary economic enterprise. The emphasis on the moral and social values which elevate human life above the merely material and animal sought to strengthen the ideological aspect of the movement.

However, the ideology of cooperation as it was being enunciated in modern times did not appeal to all in the same way. Paul Hubert Casselman notes that as on one hand, the people across the world developed confidence in the movement, there was also on the other, attitudes of indifference, neutrality and even opposition towards it. Casselman locates indifference and neutrality among the “non-civilised”, the “ignorant” and those who because of their narrow world view did not see the need for any change towards a cooperative order. According to him, the poorer and the underprivileged classes were among these people, who were hardly aware about the benefits they could derive by participating in cooperative activities and who he thought would have gained maximum if they had participated, though he was aware that within their own communities they

¹⁸*Ibid*, Chapter-‘Cooperation Before the Pioneers’

practised a natural form of cooperation. Casselman locates indifference also among certain better off classes, especially in the United States and Canada, who did not find any worthwhile advantage accruing from cooperation.

Hostility and opposition to cooperatives is seen by Casselman broadly among three groups of people. First, those whose personal interests are at stake, for example, the capitalists, financiers, business men and certain professional organizations, like Chambers of Commerce, Tax Equality Association etc. who apprehend that percolation and prevalence of cooperative ideas and practices might pose a threat to their commercial gains.¹⁹

Casselmann's second category comprises of those who ideologically differ with some of the principles and methods of cooperation and this category includes the Syndicalists, Marxists and certain other socialist schools. They believe that the cooperative movement is too slow and too limited in its effects.²⁰

Casselmann identifies a third group which includes those people who have no personal interests involved in the spread of cooperatives, and they hinder the movement on the basis of some ill-conceived notions, like, cooperatives are socialistic, they do not pay taxes or they are against free enterprises.²¹ However, he does not refer to concrete examples from the pages of history to support his theoretical inputs.

Marxist/socialist attitude to cooperation: Casselman's contention of a hostile attitude of the Marxists and the other socialists towards cooperatives and cooperative movement needs attention. It is all the more so because in the modern times Marxism in both its theoretical and experimental aspects has been considered by many as perhaps the boldest attempt to establish a just and equitable society. Thus its relationship – its convergence or divergence – with the cooperative movement has to be understood carefully. To begin with, Robert Dobrohocski in an essay points

¹⁹Paul Hubert Casselman, *The Cooperative Movement and Some of its Problems*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1952, Pp.8-9

²⁰*ibid*

²¹*ibid*, Pg.9

out that the cooperative movement has always had an uneasy relationship with Marxist philosophy and tradition. According to him, Marx on several occasions clearly endorsed the cooperative movement, although skeptical of what he considered, at least in the *Manifesto*, as half measures in addressing systemic problems in capitalism (Marx, Engels, 1848).²² Marx writes that cooperatives are an emergent new form, that while they naturally reproduce defects of the existing system, also lead to a situation where “the opposition between capital and labour is abolished.....even if at first only in the forms that the workers in association become their own capitalists.”²³ Bruno Jossa in writing about Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement argues that when the totality of Marx’s writings are examined, it is clear that orthodox Marxism’s interpretation of cooperatives as an intermediate form between capitalism and socialism as opposed to genuine socialist enterprises is mistaken. He instead maintains that Marxim’s criticisms of cooperatives arose from the difficulties that the cooperative movement had in the late 19th century, Kautsky’s turn to centralized statism and an under-theorising of the economic theory of cooperation.²⁴ But In terms of the domination of labour by capital, Marx did write somewhat in favour of the cooperative movement.....”By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale.....may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and exhortation against the laboring man himself.”²⁵ In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx argues that with the development of cooperatives on the workers’ part, and joint stock companies on the part of the bourgeoisie, the pretext for confusing profit of enterprise with the wages of management was removed, and profit came to

²² Robert Dobrohoczki, *Cooperatives as Spaces of Cultural Resistance and Transformation in Alienated Consumer Society*, www.nodo50.org – Accessed on 30/5/2011

²³ Karl Marx, 1894, *Capital*, Vol.III, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1981

²⁴ Bruno Jossa, *Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol.29, No.1, 2005, Pp.3-18, cje.oxfordjournals.org – Accessed on 2/10/2012

²⁵ Karl Marx, 1894, *Capital*, Vol.III, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1981, Pg.11

appear in practice as what it was in theory, mere surplus value, value for which no equivalent was paid.²⁶

Bruno Jossa sees in the above cited passages, a clear evidence of Marx's belief that a system of cooperative firms is not only feasible, but bound to assert itself in history and would give rise to a new production mode in which wage labour is swept away and the means of production, what the economists term as capital, would no longer be used to enslave workers. According to Jossa, in such a system, workers would not only cease being exploited, but would feel free and happy to work in firms owned by themselves. The system of producer cooperatives envisaged by Marx is a market system where workers become 'their own masters'²⁷ and where owners of capital are deprived of decision-making power concerning production activity. Jossa analyses that this system is "in accord with the behest of modern science" and at the same time efficient, even more efficient than capitalism, because it entails a new production mode arising spontaneously within the older mode and improving on it. The advantage of producer cooperatives (from the perspective of a critic of capitalism) that Jossa locates is to realize economic democracy as an essential component of political democracy. Jossa further writes that in Marxian terms, cooperative production is not an end in itself, but in Marx's words "a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes" and a means of organizing the domestic production system in line with an all-inclusive plan.²⁸ Jossa makes the inference from Marx's observations on the experience of the Paris Commune. In Marx's view, the Paris Commune supplied the Republic with the basis of really democratic institutions and could therefore be looked upon as "the political form, at last discovered, under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour".²⁹ It brought about "the expropriation of expropriators". And Engels added that "the Paris Commune demanded that the workers should manage

²⁶ Ibid, Pp.513-514

²⁷ Mill J.S, 1871, *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. by Ashley, Longmans, Green, London, 1909, Pg.739

²⁸ Bruno Jossa, *Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol.29, No.1, 2005, Pp.3-18, cje.oxfordjournals.org – Accessed on 2/10/2012

²⁹ Karl Marx, 1871, Pg.334

cooperatively the factories closed down by the manufacturers”.³⁰ In this connection Easton argues that Marx “sees cooperatives as the economic corollary of the really democratic institution of the Commune” and that “in his view of the state, he sees cooperative production not as a matter of simple negation of the existing capitalist system, but rather as a dialectical transcendence that negates as it preserves”.³¹

Jossa finally considers that from a Marxian perspective, a system of cooperatives must be rather looked upon as a transitional economic system.³² And in trying to trace the logic behind the Marxist criticisms of cooperatives, he locates some reasons, a few of which are being cited. For example, following the collapse of the Paris Commune, Marx himself ceased to concern himself with the cooperative firms, which Jossa explains with Bernstein’s observation that the cooperative movement experienced difficulties from the 1870s onwards.³³ Jossa following Kautsky’s view, points out that Marxism has always been held to be a form of ‘scientific socialism’, a movement which in lieu of simply ‘preaching’ the advent of communism, theorises it as an inescapable event and thus an unsuccessful movement would hardly be rated a proper vehicle for establishment of communism.³⁴ Kautsky’s observation, that the cooperative production mode may only arise in a sparse and incomplete manner, without ever asserting itself as the dominant form and hence fail to confirm the scientificity of Marxism, is indeed significant in this context.³⁵

Jossa also refers to an early 20th century Italian Marxist, Leone, who endorsed a similar opinion when he argued that for some time Marx had showed confidence in the cooperative firms that workers in association were running as ‘their own

³⁰ Engels, 1886, Pg.389

³¹ L.D. Easton, Marx and Individual Freedom, in *Debating Marx*, New York, Lewiston, 1994, Pg.162

³² Bruno Jossa, *Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol.29, No.1, 2005, Pp.3-18, cje.oxfordjournals.org – Accessed on 2/10/2012

³³ E. Bernstein, 1899, *The Pre-conditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*, Italian Translation, Laterza, Beri, 1969

³⁴ Bruno Jossa, *Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol.29, No.1, 2005, Pp.3-18, cje.oxfordjournals.org – Accessed on 2/10/2012

³⁵ K. Kautsky, 1892, Pg.109, *The Erfurt Programme*, Italian Translation, Samona & Savelli, Rome, 1971

capitalists', and later on lost such confidence and ascribed this loss to the collapse of many producer cooperatives between 1860 and 1870 and to Marx's own reappraisal of the very nature of the transition stage.³⁶ Jossa is more convinced that Kautsky's and Lasalle's turn to statism led to the scant attention paid by the Marxists to the cooperative movement. Thus according to him, the Marxists increasingly equated socialism with the nationalization of production means and when, following the Bolshevik Revolution, a choice was to be made between state enterprises and cooperative firms, they systematically gave priority to the former over the latter.³⁷

Attitude to and assessment of cooperative principle and movement varied widely among Marxists/socialists according to their understandings and experiences. Beatrice Webb's, Rodbertus's and Bernstein's observations are equally meaningful when they rather boldly spelt out that cooperation can at most be equated with a middle way between capitalism and socialism and not with socialism proper.³⁸ Lenin in a 1923 work, during the implementation of New Economic Policy, however, goes so far as to equate cooperation with socialism, not only as a transitional stage to socialism, but arguing that cooperation is socialism. On a number of occasions, Lenin advocates a society of cooperatives, a decidedly more decentralized vision of socialism. Lenin states "On Cooperation" that "(not) all comrades realize how vastly, how infinitely important it is now to organize the population of Russia in cooperative societies". He argues that cooperatives play an important educational role in developing class consciousness or making "civilized cooperators". Lenin goes on to conclude that the "system of civilized cooperators is the system of socialism".³⁹ Lenin further writes that it "is one

³⁶E. Leone, 1902, On the Principle and Cooperation in its Relationship with Socialism, *Critica Sociale*, XII, No.18, Pp.209-211 – cited in Bruno Jossa, *Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol.29, No.1, 2005, Pp.3-18, cje.oxfordjournals.org – Accessed on 2/10/2012

³⁷E.A.Preobrazhensky, 1926, *The New Economics*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1965, Pp.17, 218ff, 238ff – cited in *ibid*

³⁸B. Potter, 1893, *The Cooperative Movement in Great Britain*, London, Swan Sonnenschein; Bernstein, 1899, Pp.154-55 – cited in *ibid*

³⁹V.I. Lenin, "On Cooperation" (1923), *Collected Works*, Vol.XXXIII, Moscow, Progress Publishers – Also cited in Robert Dobrohoczki, *Cooperatives as Spaces of Cultural Resistance and Transformation in Alienated Consumer Society*, www.nodo50.org – Accessed on 30/5/2011

thing to draw out fantastic plans for building socialism through all sorts of workers' associations, and quite another to learn to build socialism in practice in such a way that every small peasant could take part in it."⁴⁰ And he related the cooperative movement to the latter. Analysing Lenin's viewpoints, Dobrohoczki considers that the cooperatives situated between the market and the state have the potential to act as spaces of resistance for communities against dominant modes of production, consumption and coercion.⁴¹

Dobrohoczki in his essay also speaks of another vision of socialism that attributed a large role for cooperatives. This is the vision of "cooperative commonwealth". He points out that cooperators in England theorized the movement's guiding Owenist philosophy more thoroughly as cooperatives developed in the early twentieth century. He cites the Fabian Society Socialists, including such writers as Beatrice Potter (Webb) and Sydney Webb, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, who espoused a vision of socialism with a large role for cooperative enterprises, "a cooperative commonwealth". The cooperative commonwealth held a large role for what he considers to be today's "third sector" or the "social economy", those social enterprises that are neither state, nor profit driven, but have had to shoulder the withdrawal of the welfare state.⁴²

However, as the ideas regarding the role of the state were surfacing in post Second World War period, the Fabian vision of the cooperative commonwealth lost its place. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Canada can be cited as an example. In 1944 in the provincial elections in Saskatchewan, Canada, CCF was elected as the first democratic socialist party in North America. CCF was a party rooted in this vision, but gradually it turned towards statist policies as opposed to cooperative organizations. However, earlier in a 1943 CCF pamphlet, "Socialism and Cooperatives", it was argued that the Socialist considered the cooperative movement as an invaluable safeguard against the too much

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ Robert Dobrohoczki, *Cooperatives as Spaces of Cultural Resistance and Transformation in Alienated Consumer Society*, www.nodo50.org – Accessed on 30/5/2011

⁴² *ibid*

concentration of power in one place and that a widespread vigorous and constantly expanding cooperative movement would be of enormous help.⁴³ Such instances of vacillations regarding adoption of cooperative ideas and often differences between theory and practice told upon the health and the prospects of the movement.

In the post Second World War period, throughout the Cold War, both sides in the global conflict viewed cooperatives as transitional stages towards either a full-fledged market economy or towards a centrally planned economy. Both sides saw cooperatives as “primitive structures”. In the west, the governments were thought to view cooperatives as tools or vehicles of regional economic development in “developing” full-fledged competition and entrepreneurs. In the Soviet bloc, on the other hand, what resembled cooperative ownership gradually decreased year after year to be replaced by state run structures as evidence of an evolution in the march towards real “socialism”.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the significance of the idea of cooperation and of the cooperative movement continued to be recognized by thinkers across different countries. Even within the socialist camp (and even while trying to rethink Marxism) some have pointed out the importance of the good old cooperative principle. The inherent advantage of cooperation is that ideally it is not imposed from above and conforms to a certain basic urge within human beings, and this perhaps makes the movement all the more significant in the context of the defeat of socialism. Indeed, ‘Co-operative Socialism’ has been advocated by some as a nonviolent, non-hierarchical alternative to both forms of capitalism (neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism) and to both forms of totalitarianism (Fascism and State ‘Communism’).⁴⁵ In the Indian context, Amlan Dutta had talked about cooperative socialism many years back. He expressed the hope that a sense of creative

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ ‘Cooperative Socialism: An Occupier’s Perspective’ by John Courtneidge, Webpage of the movement *Occupy London*, which was inspired by Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring, January 22, 2014 – Accessed on 22.11.2016

communion of the individual with his human and natural environment would make the way for integral living under cooperative socialism. In his *The Way to Cooperative Socialism*, Prof. Datta stressed the spiritual aspects of cooperation under the influence of Gandhi and Tagore, as he felt that the crisis in the spirit of man was the greatest crisis of the age. In his opinion, the cooperative approach does not stand merely for forms of enterprise or political institutions. It is rather a social philosophy, which has an ethical-spiritual dimension and therefore he considers it to be an alternative to orthodox liberalism and to the contemporary varieties of cooperativism and communism.⁴⁶ In fact, to Datta, the need for cooperative movement was both spiritual and practical. As an economist he realized that India's rural problem could not be solved without some development of industries and that traditional ideas of cooperation could only offer limited guidance to medium and large scale industries. Therefore, his suggestion was to evolve new forms of organization, whenever necessary, in an attempt to secure the closest possible approximation to the cooperative principles under varied circumstances.

III. MY PROPOSAL IN REGARD TO THE DISSERTATION

The above formulations of the cooperative movement in modern times and certain thrust areas as evident in the thoughts on cooperation have helped me to identify the lines of enquiry in the present study. I undertook this study not just to test the economic efficacy of the cooperative system, but largely influenced by the realization of the intrinsic connection between human nature and cooperation, the emphasis on the moral aspect of the movement and hence also on its participatory nature. The prospect seen by Lenin in the participatory aspect of the movement with his focus on participation from below brings in a new dimension to the formulation of the movement, not quite addressed by the earlier theorists. On the other hand, there is Casselman's stress on indifference and neutrality among the poorer and the underprivileged who because of their ignorance failed

⁴⁶Amlan Datta, *The Way to Cooperative Socialism*, Calcutta, 1958

to grasp the importance of the cooperative movement. My work on the cooperative thought and experiments would express both these positive and negative views borrowed from the concerns of Lenin and Casselman respectively. The positive one will be manifest while examining the ideology, aspiration and success of the movement, and the negative one will reflect on the movement's limitations and highlight the gap between the ideal and the real. Amlan Datta's stress on the spiritual side of the movement particularly in its Indian context seems quite important to me too.

I will conduct my study in a given locale and time frame, with the main focus on participation from below and the related impediments limiting its scope. It is to be borne in mind that amidst the crosscurrents of enthusiasm, indifference and opposition emerged the cooperative movement which was not just a global phenomenon, but also had an area- or locality-specific character, only by probing which we can feel the pulse of popular participation or otherwise. The inspiration sometimes came from certain model cooperative experiments and a few exemplary cooperators widely acclaimed, yet the justification of the movement ultimately lay in its initiation and operation at a local level involving the local people. Thus to understand the essence of these cooperative experiments from below and their underlying ideology, we need to make select case studies in a given locale and time.

The field of the cooperative movement itself is vast and covers different aspects of human activities. The cooperative movement in modern times, especially in India, is categorized into credit and non-credit movements. Though credit remained the basis for the non-credit initiatives too, the latter showed the way for real popular participation and this is what the different chapters of this study would seek to probe. It also needs to be noted that in India, the cooperative movement was an initiative of the government and therefore was launched from above through certain legislations which gave the movement an official and a formal perspective. The course of this aspect of the movement was recorded in the different genres of official documents. But the spirit of cooperation being

innate in man, Indian people on different occasions have experimented with the idea in their own independent ways beyond the official cooperative movement. These small initiatives tried to imbibe the spirit of cooperation as far as possible, but generally remained isolated from each other and the efforts always could not coalesce to develop into an effective movement. Thus it needs to be clarified that though the term 'movement' may not always be justified for these smaller cooperative efforts, but their promise and potential perhaps justifies their place in the broader canvas of the cooperative movement. The participation from below might have been more or less spontaneous in such experiments, but such endeavours being mostly not officially recorded, is rather difficult to explore. Yet, an earnest attempt in that direction has been made with the help of all the relevant sources that could be traced. This work will also show how the official and non-official aspects of the movement developed simultaneously, at times taking parallel courses, but sometimes converging, sometimes overlapping.

Locale and time: Our questions regarding cooperative thoughts and experiments have been addressed and analysed in the context of Bengal during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Bengal in this dissertation denotes a broad geo-political area during the colonial period, which considerably shrank and was reduced to West Bengal with the partition of the country. All my case studies have been selected from the above area – from a number of rural localities of different districts, for both colonial and the post-colonial periods. For the period before 1947, they are districts of undivided Bengal. For the period after 1947, I have confined myself to West Bengal only.

The time frame of this work is from 1920 to 2000, although I have had to trace the background of the movement back to the 19th century, through the passing of the Indian Cooperative Societies Acts of 1904 and 1912. 1920 is taken as the formal starting point with reference to the Reforms Act of 1919 which made cooperation a provincial subject from a central subject. This was followed by the enactment of the Cooperative Societies Act of the different provinces. Bombay was the first to pass the Act in 1925 and Bengal's Act came rather late, in 1940. However, the

Bombay Act tried to give a new direction to the movement and thereby widen its scope. This Act extended the ambit of its intended beneficiaries from agriculturists in need of loan to generally those persons with common economic needs. It looked beyond credit and thought of better living, better business and better methods of production as the aims of cooperation. This Act also sought to classify the societies according to their primary purpose, for example, production, consumption, housing etc. Such an approach might have partly reinforced the non-credit aspect of the movement, which had already found an opening through the Cooperative Societies Act of 1912, which provided for organization of all kinds of societies. These attempts, though absolutely official, might have consciously or unconsciously created a kind of interest among different categories of people. Interestingly, there was a spurt of cooperative experiments at the non-official level from the 1920s largely inspired by an intense spirit of nationalism that characterized the decade. There were several Indian efforts at rural reconstruction both by the officials and the non-officials. The focus of this work would be more on the non-official aspects, but as stated earlier there would be areas of overlap.

The dissertation also locates similar informal and non-official cooperative initiatives in the post-colonial period, from 1947 to 2000. The decades following 1947 were indeed complex. But an attempt has been made to identify such cooperative experiments in the backdrop of the emerging socio-economic and political trends of a newly independent country. To trace the gradual evolution of the movement in its ideological and experimental aspects, a period of about eighty years in total has been considered. Keeping in mind the more recent developments during the closing decades of the twentieth century, for example, the spread of the self-help groups since the late 1980s and the ideas of a neo-liberal globalized economy since the 1990s, this study has been extended till 2000. The year 2000 is not otherwise significant, apart from marking the end of a decade, a century and a millennium. But one sure significance of the year for us is that the cooperative movement was to complete its centenary in four years' time, i.e. in 2004. Thus the time-frame enables me to capture the nature of the movement during both

colonial and post-colonial times, to understand the transition of the movement and thus locate the movement on the eve of its centenary.

IV. REVIEW OF SECONDARY LITERATURE ON COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN INDIA (AND IN BENGAL IN PARTICULAR)

Secondary literature on the cooperative movement in India in general and in Bengal in particular can broadly be divided into those written during the colonial period and those in the post-colonial period. The earliest such work of the colonial period that can be traced is *The Cooperative Movement in India* (1914) by Panchanan Das Mukhopadhyay. Thereafter, a series of writings followed written between 1915 and 1940 which include works by Alakh Dhari, J.W. Petavel, Manindra Chandra Sinha, Henry William Wolff, Hubert Calvert, Claude Francis Strickland, Jamini Mohan Mitra, B.G. Bhatnagar, Bijay Bihari Mukharji, F.L. Brayne, S.S. Talmaki, Malcolm Darling, E.V.S. Maniam, D. Spencer Hatch and Jitendra Prasad Niyogi. Among these works, *The Wealth and the Welfare of the Punjab* (1922) by Hubert Calvert, *An Introduction to Cooperation in India* (1922) by C.F. Strickland and *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (1925) and *The Old Light and the New in the Punjab* (1930) by Malcolm Darling became well known in the 1920s and 1930s. It is to be noted that these authors served as the Registrar of Cooperative Societies (RCS) in the Punjab, where cooperation appeared to have had more success than it did in any other part of India during that time. These works were essentially by the officials of the colonial government who tried to highlight the official aspect and the official direction of the movement. These works tried to trace the cooperative movement as it was being structured by the government, both credit and non-credit branches of cooperative organization, but the thrust was more on agricultural credit. These works did not pay much attention to the non-official participation in the Punjab. F.L. Brayne, who also served as the Registrar of the Cooperative Societies in the Punjab, had convincingly presented in his work, *Socrates in an Indian Village* (1929), the case for bringing women into the movement, but that too at the official level.

Subsequently a woman Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies was appointed in the Punjab in 1940 to be in charge of training women welfare workers for the villages.

The 'Indianisation' of the ICS in the 1920s eventually brought the Indian administrators to the fore as the Registrars of Cooperative Societies (RCS). The RCS in the most inevitable Indian bureaucratic way soon gathered a department about them. The cooperative department formed a fairly typical sample of a vital 'hinge group', the army of Indian officials who made it possible for a few thousand Europeans to rule a sub-continent. In this context, Jamini Mohan Mitra's *Cooperation in Bengal* (1926) deserves special mention. Mitra was the RCS in Bengal and this book is basically the Presidential Address delivered by him at the Chittagong Divisional Conference held at Feni on 12.6.1926 and 13.6.1926. Mitra agreed with the general criticism against the cooperative movement in India that the movement was one-sided and attention was only on the development of the credit branch to the neglect of the other branches. But at the same time, he pointed out that in India, where the vast population was predominantly agricultural, poverty stricken and dependent on traditional rates of interest for supply of capital, credit was naturally the foundation on which other forms of cooperation must be based. Mitra was hopeful that if cooperative credit could bring out the dormant capital of India for productive use, it could introduce banking habits among the masses and provide banking facilities for them, and in this way it could render incalculable service to the country. He highlighted the different facets of the movement in Bengal, acknowledged that the progress of the movement in Bengal was due to the zealous work of the educated people and expressed the hope that restructuring the economic life of the country on a cooperative basis would create a real cooperative commonwealth. Mitra tried to locate the potentialities and limitations of the movement in the context of the contemporary situation and also points out that the contemporary communal tensions were a serious impediment to the movement. His work too voiced the official trend of the movement.

The above mentioned works by the British and Indian officials saw and analysed the movement through an official prism. It is evident from the writings of the British officials that they conceived the cooperative movement as a means of colonization under the garb of welfare measures, but the concept of public welfare was essentially formulated by them and had nothing to do with Indian aspirations. The non-official aspect of the cooperative movement, the role and participation of the masses and other such related issues relevant to any meaningful historical analysis of the movement were palpably absent in these works.

The writings of the Indian officials are also an extended voice of the colonial government, but the understanding of the Indian socio-economic scenario is better reflected in their works. Apart from J.M. Mitra's above mentioned work, there are other writings by Mitra, as also by Tarak Chandra Ray, the Joint Registrar of Cooperative Societies and the famous Gurusaday Dutt, to name a few. These Indian bureaucrats did play a significant role in the execution and implementation of cooperative activities in rural Bengal; but at the same time, looking beyond the official connotation of cooperation, they tried to arouse the latent strength of cooperation among the village populace and thereby inspire them to work towards their country's moral and economic regeneration through cooperative endeavours centering around rural reconstruction. These writings in the contemporary and near contemporary vernacular periodicals have helped me to probe into the areas of overlap between the official and non-official aspects of the movement. A detailed study of this category of literature will follow in the subsequent section on sources as I have used them as a major primary source for my dissertation.

The non-official perception of the movement during the same period was evident in the writings of the nationalist thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi, revolutionaries like Motilal Roy and Sushen Mukherjee, who not only theoretically located the viability of the movement in their respective ways, but also made a variety of cooperative experiments to inculcate a kind of self-prowess or

atmashakti among the people of a colonized country. This category of writings are more charged with the spirits of idealism and nationalism as they see in cooperation a way to 'real freedom' and 'new order' and hope that the spirit of cooperation would promote better human understanding which they considered essential for India at that historical juncture.

The post-colonial scholarship on cooperation included a variety of writings which portrayed the vision and aims of a country recently freed from colonial bondage. This period too saw writings by both officials and non-officials. The works by the non-officials included a number of academic works which sought to find out the gaps between theory and practice of cooperation in India and also to chart a desirable course for the movement.

In 1947 was published Anwar Iqbal Qureshi's *The Future of the Cooperative Movement in India*. Qureshi as the Economic adviser to the state of Hyderabad was an exponent of the thought that the main thrust of the movement should be on economic aspect. The bulk of the post-colonial works see the limitations in the objectives and ideals of the cooperative movement during the colonial times and theoretically visualize the movement as an essential instrument for achieving people's aspirations in order to establish socio-economic equality after India's independence. These work more or less speak in the same language and follow a similar line of thought. They highlight the Five Year Plans which supposedly emphasized the expansion and diversification of the cooperative movement. They believe that a sound cooperative movement would help to solve the rural and the urban problems of the day, like rising prices, man-made scarcity in different spheres of life etc. These works pay a lip service to the principles of cooperation but do not critically interrogate the gaps that already existed and was likely to persist between theory and practice. These works deal with the broad ideological contours of the cooperative movement, but are almost silent on the experimental aspects and the participatory aspect of the movement and the analysis of the movement as a people's movement. The authors, hence, hardly take into account the non-credit and the non-official sides of the movement. This category of work

includes the writings of D.S. Spencer, C.B. Mamoria, R.D. Saxena, G.P. Shukla, A.K. Narayan Ayyar Yegna, G.R. Madan, Vaikunth Lallubhai Mehta, J. Banerjee, A.S.K. Ayyangar, G.P. Srivastava and Ratan Behari Tyagi. A few works of this genre do associate the cooperative movement with community development and village Panchayats, but still do not approach the movement from the small man's perspective. Mention may be made of the works by Biswa Bandhu Chatterjee, Rajeshwar Dayal, S.K. De and C.B. Mamoria.

However, a few academic works attempt to make a critical appraisal of the movement in India by pointing out that in various ways the cooperative practices deviated from the cooperative ideal and there was a tendency to commercialise and to neglect the cooperative principles. Significant in this regard is *The Cooperative Movement in India* (1953) by E.M. Hough where she notes that there was a lack of understanding about the social relevance of the cooperative movement. She quotes the observations of R. Suryanarayana, Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies in Mysore and those of Hansa Mehta who represented India in the United Nations' Committee for the Rights of Man in March, 1946. In the opinion of Smt. Mehta, cooperation was no longer regarded as a philosophy of life, but as a matter of convenience and its spirit had gone out from the people. This explained, according to her, the circumscribed course of the movement which was failing to develop a base among the masses.

Equally important is *Social Aspects of the Cooperative Movement in India – PROEFSCHRIFT* (1957) by G.D.V. Wengen, an academic work conducted with a fellowship from the Netherlands, where the author concludes that in India the institutionalization of the movement makes it difficult for it to take root at all. He, however, finds the solution in making serious efforts on a large scale to instill in the members an understanding of the cooperative ideals and enthusiasm and to create a sense of responsibility for their own societies.

A pioneering work on the cooperative movement was I.J. Catanach's *Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930 : Rural Credit and the Cooperative Movement in*

Bombay Presidency (1970), where he extensively used the unpublished or manuscript material in Bombay Presidency to analyse the socio-economic background of the movement. According to him, an important feature of the cooperative movement in the said period was the perpetual controversy between the officials and the non-officials especially over the application of the principles concerning democratic control. He concludes that the cooperatives were given to the peasants of India and of Bombay in particular not because they asked for it, but because some of the 'guardians' thought it would be good for them. His observation is that the cooperative movement during the said period was one side of the British attempt to revive what some of them imagined to be the village community of the Indian past. Catanach considers the story of the cooperative movement to be a partnership between the Indians and the British in Bombay before 1918, but he points out that in the 1920s due to increase in caste animosities and political activities among Indians, the non-official aspect of the movement eventually became a rather "innocuous appendage".

The cooperative movement remained a much topical issue even in later times, particularly with scholars interested in the contemporary economic trends and it did not miss the attention of the then scholars who tried to relate the movement to the contemporary economic trends. The Registrar of Cooperative Societies of Tamil Nadu, S. Vydhanathan in his book *The Cooperative Movement* (2004-2005) writes that the advent of liberalization and globalization from the 1990s has forced the cooperatives to face multiple challenges of a market-oriented economy.

The completion of hundred years of the cooperative movement in India in 2004 led to a review of the movement in the new economic environment and this was reflected in the writings of the time. Among such writings mention may be made of an article 'Cooperative Centenary in India' in the *New Sector Magazine*, Issue Number 61, April-May, 2004 by Sanjay Kumar Verma of The National Cooperative Union of India. Verma is of the opinion that cooperatives at all levels were making efforts to reorient their functions according to the market demands and

are considered to be an important plank of development. He feels that the government being aware of the inherent advantages of cooperatives in tackling the problems of poverty alleviation, food security and employment generation, keeps trust in the immense potential of the cooperatives to deliver goods and services in areas where both state and political sectors have failed. Verma also emphasizes the necessity to promote the spirit of cooperation among the masses.

A more recent work, *The Cooperative Movement, Globalisation from Below* (2007) by Richard C. Williams, considers cooperation to be more productive than competitive in virtually every conceivable setting and analyses how the cooperative idea using the concepts of micro-finance developed in Bangladesh under the guidance of Mohammed Yunus and has lifted the lowest castes out of abject poverty. Verghese Kurien's experiments with dairy cooperatives in western India made him realize that cooperatives help small and marginal dairy farmers to be self-reliant. In his words "great change takes place through small".⁴⁷ In his Foreword to Kurien's book, Ratan Tata finds that the cooperatives created by Kurien have also become powerful agents of social change in empowering women and in embedding democracy at the grass-roots level in the country.⁴⁸

The gender issue has been touched upon by scholars like Dr. A. Vinayagamoorthy and Dr. Vijay Pithadia in an article in *International journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Volume 2, Issue 1, January, 2012, entitled 'Women Empowerment Through Self-Help Groups : A Case Study In North Tamil Nadu'. F. Tesoriero's article 'Strengthening Communities Through Women's Self-Help Groups in South India' in *Community Development Journal*, Volume 41, No. 3, 2006 and Gopalakrishnan Karunanithi's 'Hopes From A Triadic Model For Women Empowerment And Community Development : Lessons From Indian Experiences For Hungary' in *Cornivus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Volume 4, 2013, consider women empowerment to be the central theme and associate it with community development and self-help groups. In Gursharan Singh Kainth's edited

⁴⁷ Verghese Kurien, *I too had a dream*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2015

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, Foreword by Ratan N. Tata

volume, *India's Rural Cooperatives*, 1998, two chapters have been assigned to women's cooperatives, namely, *Role of Women's Cooperatives in Rural Development* by P.P. Koli and *Rural Women's Dairy Cooperatives in West Bengal : Perspectives and Prospects* by Lotan Singh and J. Chattoraj.

A few works have also traced the development of cooperative societies among the tribals, for example, *Cooperative Movement Among the Tribals* by L.M. Shrikant and *Role of Cooperative Organisations in Developing Tribal Economy* by S. Mahalingam.

Thus a multifaceted approach to the cooperative movement has been made in the context of India and south Asian countries, but the works on the cooperative movement in Bengal are rather fewer in number. Mention may be made of *The Cooperative Movement in Bengal (1940)* by J.P. Niyogi, *Cooperative Movement in West Bengal (1966)* by S.N. Sen, *Problems of Cooperative Development in India with Special Reference to West Bengal (1983)* by Pranab Kumar Chakrabarti. These works have traced the movement, studied the various types of societies and provided statistical data with greater emphasis on the credit side of the movement in rural areas. These works are done essentially within the discipline of Economics.

A historical analysis of the movement in Bengal with the main thrust on participation from below/margins is yet to be made. My study is a humble effort in this direction.

This dissertation has been divided into five main chapters apart from Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter, THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT : OFFICIAL EFFORTS, gives a historical perspective of the cooperative movement. This chapter with a brief background of the cooperative movement in European countries, shows how it inspired the British-Indian government to solve the problem of rural indebtedness through cooperative credit, discusses the introduction of the non-credit societies and their importance vis-à-vis the credit societies during 1920 to 1947.

The second chapter, THE COLONIAL REGIME AND THE INDIGENOUS COOPERATIVE INITIATIVES traces an indigenous root of the movement, the swadeshi urge behind the cooperative efforts of early twentieth century, the adoption of the idea and the subsequent experiments undertaken by certain nationalist thinkers (Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi) and revolutionaries (Motilal Roy and Sushen Mukherjee) in a period of intense nationalism. These non-official efforts often needed financial support through government aids which necessitated their formal registration and thus blurred the clear divide between the official and non-official aspects of the movement. For example, the cooperative experiments of Tagore and the Gandhian social activists, who sought official help and in their turn influenced official efforts, howsoever indirectly.

The third chapter, THE POST-COLONIAL TIMES AND THE COOPERATIVE EXPERIMENTS looks into certain alternative cooperative ideas and experiments against the complexities of the post-colonial times. The chapter highlights the thoughts and experiments of Pannalal Dasgupta and those among the followers of Vinoba Bhave in West Bengal. These ventures were beyond the official contours of the contemporary cooperative movement, but sought official support in terms of expertise, funds etc. to materialize their experiments thereby suggesting that the official and the non-official aspects of the movement were not mutually exclusive. At the same time, though they seemed to align with the mainstream movement, they also sought to carve out an independent space. These efforts were not always economically viable, but tried to show a ray of hope to the people from below and give them moral support, especially when their 'small' aspirations went completely unnoticed and unheeded by those who ruled the country.

The fourth chapter, TOWARDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT : SOME SELECT EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE VENTURE, seeks to bring out the social content of cooperation. Certain village based community development programmes which highlight the human aspects of the cooperative movement have been taken up as case studies. The Better-Living and the Rural Reconstruction Societies of the

colonial period worked towards rural regeneration. In late-colonial and early post-colonial India, welfare of the country was being tried out through development of villages and thus a participatory programme of rural community development based on the values of cooperation was being emphasized, at least theoretically. Three categories of case studies have been taken up in this chapter, namely, Anti-malaria and Public Health Societies, Water Supply and Irrigation Cooperative Societies and Women's Cooperatives. All these experiments combined official and non-official efforts in varying degrees, but could think beyond official parameters. The urge behind these more or less voluntary initiatives and their spontaneity, helped the local communities in the rural areas to regenerate. Some of these projects sought to address specific and urgent problems like malaria and other health hazards and harnessing water for irrigation. A major part of this chapter covers women's cooperatives. It may be noted that the deplorable condition of women too led to undertaking of certain cooperative efforts on their part since the colonial period. And it is through the women's cooperatives that I have tried to connect the thread between the colonial and post-colonial period in this chapter.

The title of the fifth chapter, DANIEL HAMILTON AND HIS COOPERATIVE ENDEAVOURS IN GOSABA, is self-explanatory. The importance of this chapter lies in Hamilton's efforts to highlight the humane element of cooperation and yet the way it became a pointer to some basic problems that cooperative experiments often suffer from.

V. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary source materials have been used for this study. The secondary sources include both books and journals, a select bibliography of which has been given. The primary sources used for this work may be divided into archival material, published documents and contemporary and near contemporary vernacular periodicals. To begin with, the published official documents referred to include Report of the Committee on the Establishment of Cooperative Credit

Societies in India, 1901, the series of Annual Reports on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal from 1919 to 1947, Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, 1928, Report on Cooperative Movement in Punjab, 1939, Bengal District Gazetteers by L.S.S.O' Malley, 1914, Annual Reports on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in West Bengal since 1947, West Bengal Cooperative Manuals, West Bengal District Gazetteers, 1994, Statutory Reports on the Cooperative Movement, Agricultural Credit Department, R.B.I. and the Census Reports. These documents helped me to trace the history of the official aspect of the cooperative movement and procure the relevant data and information.

For reconstruction of the non-official aspect of the movement too, archival materials proved to be extremely useful. Relevant I.B. files at the West Bengal State Archives, Shakespeare Sarani, helped me to look into the cooperative ideas and experiments of the Prabartak Sangha, activities of different societies or *sanghas* during the 1920s and 1930s and especially into Pannalal Dasgupta's ideas on cooperation during his days of imprisonment. Files on Kalimohan Ghosh, Cooperative Bank, Viswa Bharati Central Cooperative Bank at the Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan, helped me to trace the early cooperative experiments in Birbhum under the guidance of Rabindranath Tagore and his associates. Files on Daniel Hamilton which contained the correspondences between him and Tagore were equally useful.

The contemporary and the near contemporary periodicals primarily available at Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata, gave an insight into the variety of cooperative experiments, both official and non-official, which were made during the colonial period. Mention may be made of *Bhandar*, a periodical of the Swadeshi period. It was published for two years and three months, between *Baisakh*, 1312 and *Ashar*, 1314 (B.S), that is 1905 to 1907. It was initially edited by Rabindranath Tagore and then by Pramathanath Chaudhuri. Later the Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society brought out a monthly periodical of the same name and was edited by Tarak Chandra Ray, Taraknath Moitra, Nibaran Chandra Chakrabarti, Charu

Chandra Bhattacharya and Manmatha Ray during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Different issues of *Sonar Bangla*, edited by Bipin Chandra Pal and Gopal Chandra Chatterjee, *Graamer Daak*, edited by Rajendranath Shome, *Bankuralakshmi*, edited by Sasanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Bhumilakshmi*, edited by Phanindranath Basu and Santosh Bihari Basu, *Bangalakshmi*, edited by Kumudini Basu and *Palli Svaraj* edited by Naresh Chandra Sengupta helped to locate a number of cooperative experiments at the micro-level. Transcription of a number of speeches related to cooperation and cooperative practices delivered by ministers, bureaucrats, cooperators and other people from different walks of life on different occasions are also found in these periodicals, which are not otherwise available. These sources have been extensively used not only to understand the experiments and their underlying ideology, but also to grasp the essence of the contemporary movement and response of the people from below, if any.

For the post-colonial period, the later issues of *Bhandar* were used. It may be noted that *Bhandar* is published till date. Different issues of *Compass*, edited and published by Pannalal Dasgupta and later by Tagore Society for Rural Development till 2014 threw light on the cooperative endeavours and ideas of Dasgupta. The Annual Reports of the Tagore Society for Rural Development provided useful information and statistical data about the experiments that it undertook under the guidance and initiative of Dasgupta. Similarly, a fortnightly newsletter, *Bhoodan*, gave primary information about Vinoba Bhave's ideas and experiments. Charu Chandra Bhandari's published diary *Yatrar Pathey* helped me to trace the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* experiments in the remote villages of West Bengal.

Interviews and oral evidences gave information and insights that are not otherwise available in documentary evidence. Oral testimonies proved useful in understanding the early cooperative experiments of Pannalal Dasgupta. His contemporaries and associates who had worked with him spoke at length of Dasgupta's early cooperative ventures in the villages of Birbhum, before the foundation of Tagore Society for Rural Development (TSRD). It was interesting to note how Dasgupta's sincere methods of working had impressed his associates

and even the contemporary government officials alike. The minute details that could be thus acquired helped in the analysis of his ideas on and experiments with cooperation.

Oral evidences were also used to study and understand the women's cooperatives and also the growth and the impact of the Self Help Groups on rural women during the closing decade of the twentieth century. Since this dissertation focuses on a few case studies, two cooperative societies under Canning I Development Block, South 24 Parganas, were selected to study and analyse cooperative initiatives among women in the late twentieth century. The registers maintained by these societies provided some basic information about them. But the societies could not produce the registers recording the minutes of the meetings during its initial years which would have been able to give a glimpse of the early proceedings and viewpoints of the members and other related matters. Thus oral evidences were perhaps the only source to acquire the relevant information.

The selection of the two societies was, however, not random and were chosen to make my study more representative. The agricultural credit society that has been studied was one of the earlier ones established during the post-colonial period which covered a large area of operation and also evolved with the changing times to cater to the interests of the villagers apart from merely providing agricultural credit to them. The women of the villages under the area of operation of this society were interviewed where they candidly recounted their experiences of finding a new essence of their living through the SHGs and how the ideology of cooperation bound them at the primary level. The other society that was studied began its work as a consumers' society and gradually tried to provide the local women with credit facilities. A combination of official and non-official efforts was evident in the activities of this cooperative society as was revealed through the oral evidences.

While working in my area of study, I had to delve into not only history which is my discipline, but also had to borrow insights from other disciplines in order to have a proper understanding of the cooperative movement from its colonial past to the more recent times. In order to understand the relation of the cooperative movement with the contemporary socio-economic structure in a given situation, the movement had to be also analysed with the help of some basics of the disciplines of sociology and economics. This is all the more because in my work both theoretical understanding and empirical study have constantly complemented each other. And among historical methods, apart from the ones I have extensively used oral history techniques. Oral history is an inevitable method of gathering information about contemporary history, particularly when one seeks to understand a history from below. Oral history has its definite limitations, primarily because of the likely subjectivity of its respondents' views. However, this method has been particularly resorted to in order to capture the experience of women with the self-help groups at the micro-level, where no other source was available. The rural women who were interviewed were literate in the sense that they could sign their names but had no diary or any other personal record to offer to acquaint us with their experience. Thus their personal reminiscences to a certain extent helped me to understand their involvement with the movement and their ideas about the same. This was how an attempt was made to trace the history of the movement from below.

It needs to be mentioned, however, that history from below is a type of historical narrative which attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people, rather than the leaders. In such a history, there is an emphasis on the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized, and in the more recent parlance, subaltern groups and forgotten people.⁴⁹ In an attempt to analyse the movement from this perspective, sources became a major problem. The cooperative endeavours by these people largely formed part of the non-official aspect of the movement. But these people from the remote villages,

⁴⁹ en.wikipedia.org – Accessed on 12/11/2016

especially during the colonial times and even thereafter, were mostly not literate and thus could not recount their experiences in writing. The material available were primarily the writings of the people from the upper rungs of the society, either leaders, or observers, or bureaucrats and other such elites. Though these writings had a more or less elitist bias, after all, their authors took a pro-people approach and made an effort to build the movement from below by trying to involve the people lower down the social scale and make them participate in the experiments. There might have been occasions where the small peasants and the small artisans at the primary level quite independently cultivated the spirit of cooperation in their own small way and took small initiatives to work out their experiments in tune with their local needs and with the help of their local resources. But such small endeavours, if any, went unheard, unrecorded and unsung. This area of silence perhaps leaves an unexplored field of the non-official aspect of the movement, particularly during the colonial period. This remains a lacuna of my dissertation and thus I remain dissatisfied despite having put in my best efforts.

CHAPTER -1

THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT : OFFICIAL EFFORTS

I.BACKGROUND : INSPIRATION FROM EUROPE

The formal cooperative movement began in Europe in the 19th century, primarily in Britain and France. The Industrial Revolution brought about a basic change in the system of production and in the manufacturing process, and the socio-economic changes that followed threatened the livelihood of many workers. The 1830s and 1840s were periods of widespread social and economic distress and the condition of large sections of the population was at times very bad, perhaps worse than it had ever been before.¹ The new industrialization brought in poor working conditions for the factory workers, low wages, uncertain employment conditions and unhealthy living conditions which called for labour and working class movements for amelioration of the misery. Against this background the cooperative movement evolved as a criticism of the socio-economic anomalies of the time. Although the ideal of cooperating for mutual benefit was not new, it gained renewed momentum through the theories of Robert Owen. Owen, a Welshman, considered the father of the cooperative movement, envisioned a scheme of social reform that was pacific, constructive, educational and non-political. He advanced the theory to eradicate poverty through the formation of cooperative communities.

In 1799, Owen after establishing himself as a master cotton spinner in Manchester, bought the cotton mills at New Lanark where he tried to put into practice certain social ideals which he had nurtured from his Manchester days. He wanted to give his workers a better environment to enable them to become better workers and better men. Accordingly he set out to make a thorough

¹ Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1965, Pg.241

reformation of the prevailing conditions in the mills at New Lanark. Since he owned the land, factory, houses and almost everything in New Lanark, he had a free hand to implement his plan, though precisely because of this some people considered him a despot.² He built new houses for the workers, improved the old ones, erected new schools, started a shop at which unadulterated goods were sold at low prices, cultivated land for the supply of vegetables, reduced working hours and increased wages of the workers. When the mills faced a crisis and had to be closed due to interruption of trade by an ongoing war, instead of dismissing the workers, he continued to pay their wages. He still made good profits and he solved the problem of running his mills at a profit without reducing his workers to misery and slavery. Owen's principle was that capital must be content with a limited dividend and that all surplus profits should be applied to the benefit of the workers. Two of his partners differed with him on this issue and left and subsequently he was joined by Jeremy Bentham, the reformer and William Allen, the Quaker philanthropist who lent all their support to Owen. In 1816, Owen opened at New Lanark the Institution for the Formation of Character, a pioneering effort in the field of adult and juvenile education. He made no compromise with his principle of limiting the return on the invested capital and opened his schools and other social facilities to the people of New Lanark in general and to his own employees in particular. He opened a shop at New Lanark which, however, was considered not a cooperative store, but a part of the firm's business which was "not an example of industrial democracy, but of benevolent autocracy".³

In 1817, Owen came before the public with a series of addresses at the City of London Tavern in which he put forward the blueprint of his plan for the employment of the poor in the "Villages of Cooperation". This plan contained many features of his New Lanark establishment and at the same time sought to provide a new model for the organization of society and production of wealth.

² G.D.H Cole, *A Century of Cooperation*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., Oxford, 1944, Chapter- 'Cooperation Before the Pioneers'

³ *ibid*

Owen urged that the state and the parish authorities, instead of doling out money or relief in kind to the unemployed sitting idle, should supply capital for the establishment of villages of cooperation in which they would provide for their own needs. According to him, some of these villages were to be industrial like New Lanark, some agricultural based on intensive farming and others a combination of industrial and agricultural. Owen held that there would be no want of markets for disposal of their goods in this scheme because what each settlement would not need to consume, could exchange with other settlements. This scheme was put forward primarily as a means to provide useful employment and the means of living to the unemployed. But Owen wished that in course of time the entire world would be covered by "villages of cooperation", each self-governing in its own affairs and making up in association with other villages such simple government as countries and the world as a whole would need. This was Owen's "New Moral World" based on the principles of cooperation and human fellowship which he believed would supersede the old immoral world of competition and exploitation and usher in a millennium of universal benevolence and content.

These thoughts were considered to be much too idealistic and lacking pragmatism, yet they showed a beacon of light in those days of socio-economic hardship and when threshed out could show a way to the activists in working out their experiments with cooperation. Dr. William King from Brighton, England was also an early supporter of the cooperative movement about this time and he too had founded a cooperative store in Brighton. In 1828, he started a monthly journal called *The Cooperator* where he picked up, promoted and amplified the ideas of Owen. King's articles in this paper sought to educate and unify the otherwise scattered cooperative groups and societies that came up during this time. His writings gave the movement a certain philosophical and practical basis that it had lacked before.

The ideas of Owen and Dr. King formed the ideological basis of the early cooperative movement in Great Britain and there was a spurt in the establishment of cooperative societies during the 1820s and 1830s. These cooperative societies were also inspired by the ideas of the Chartist Movement, the Trade Union Movement and other pro-labour progressive movements of the time. The textile centres like Manchester and Leeds were perhaps the worst affected by the social and economic distress of the time and thus played a prominent role in the contemporary working class activities. In this regard Rochdale was considered to be second to Manchester and Leeds.⁴

Rochdale, a town in Greater Manchester, England, saw the beginning of the organised cooperative movement. 1842 was a bitter year of depression, unemployment and wage reductions when great strikes swept the North including Rochdale. The colliers and textile workers organized a strike, but the pressure of starvation drove them back to work. A weavers' strike broke out in early 1844 which is generally considered to have paved the way for the foundation of the Equitable Pioneers' Society. A small group of people from Rochdale met in 1844 to discuss the crisis and to find a suitable remedy to the distress caused by the strike. The weavers formed the majority in the group as weaving was the most practised occupation of Rochdale, but the important leaders of the group who subsequently guided the Pioneers' Society were from different professions. Of the 28 men who formed the new Rochdale Society, nearly half were Owenite Socialists. The foundation of this new society was partly due to local disillusionment with the nationalist proceedings of the Owenites and partly due to a desire to make a new start on more practical and democratic lines and on a basis of working class self-help. Some practical steps were required to meet the immediate necessities of the weavers and the first step taken was the collective purchase and division out of a bag of meal which was, however, considered to be not much novel. The new thing or what they thought to be novel was the device of "dividend on purchases", i.e. dividing the trading surplus among the

⁴ *Ibid*, Chapter – 'Rochdale'

members in proportion to the amounts of their purchases from the store. According to G.D.H. Cole, apart from the idea of “dividend on purchases”, what really made the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers’ Society novel and unique was the combination of several ideas under the leadership of Howarth. Each individual idea was not new by itself, but when combined together the essence was indeed new.

The essential ideas which, according to Cole, made up Howarth’s notion were democratic control, i.e. one member, one vote, open membership, fixed or limited interest on capital subscribed to the society, distribution of the surplus after the payment of interest and collective charges, dividend to the members in proportion to their purchases, trading strictly on a cash basis, with no credit, selling only pure and unadulterated goods, providing for the education of the members in cooperative principles, mutual trading and political and religious neutrality.⁵ These essential ideas, according to Cole, provided the practical basis for the first rules of the society. The twenty eight members saved one pound each in one year and in 1844 started the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers’ Society registered under the Friendly Society Act. This society was basically a consumers’ store and the objects as laid down in their original rules included the establishment of a “self supporting home colony of united interests or assistance to other societies in establishing such societies”. They adhered to the idea of “home colonization”⁶, but their notions about it were not as ambitious or “grandiose” as those of Owen. This society looked beyond mere distribution of goods and tried to provide for shelter and employment to its members. It gave a final shape to the principles of cooperation which were voluntary and open membership, democratic member participation (one member, one share, one vote), equal and fair investment by the members, independence of government or any other outside power, educating its members and the community about the

⁵ *Ibid* – Chapter- ‘The Rochdale Pioneers Begin’

⁶ Home colonization – A process to locate the unemployed labourers and artisans on the waste land of the country. It is a means of increasing employment and preventing the decline of profits and wages. (Ref. – John Wade, *History and Political Philosophy of the Middle and Working Classes*, William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1842 ; Robert Torrens, *Colonisation of South Australia*, Longman, London, 1835)

nature, principles, values and benefits of the cooperative and encouraging cooperation among the cooperatives. The so far stray experiments thus crystallized into a dynamic movement which spread out in the whole world. It would be significant to mention here that the ideologies of the Rochdale Pioneers were embodied in the cooperative principles adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) in 1995 with the addition of the principle of protecting the environment and contributing to the sustainable development of the community.⁷ In practice the cooperatives around the world basically follow the above principles, sometimes modifying them to suit the local, cultural and other associated conditions and sometimes legal constraints.

In India, however, the initial inspiration of the cooperative movement largely came from Germany, the birthplace of the cooperative credit movement. Similar circumstances of famine, poverty, exploitation and indebtedness necessitated the introduction of the new idea of cooperative credit in Germany in mid 19th century. The two pioneers of the movement, F.W. Raiffeisen and Franz Schulze, made experiments with various methods of relief. Raiffeisen, the burgomaster of the village of Heddesdorf, near Neuweid and Schulze, Mayor of Delitzsch, working independently, embodied their ideas in cooperative organizations at about the same time. Both began with individual effort to relieve distress in their respective districts and both realized that lasting improvement must depend on the people themselves.

Schulze founded a Friendly Society in 1849 to give relief to the ailing people and a shoemakers' association for purchase of raw materials. He formed his loan society in 1850 with ten members who were all artisans and two years later he remodeled it as a self-supporting institution with capital and shares.

Raiffeisen was not wealthy, but he was inspired by a spirit of Christian philanthropy. From the time of the famine of 1848, he experimented with various

⁷ Richard C. Williams, *The Cooperative Movement, Globalisation from Below*, Hampshire, England, 2007, Pg. 12

forms of cooperative association among the villagers and thereby tried to eliminate the middleman and the moneylender. To begin with, he started a cooperative society in 1848 to distribute potatoes and bread among the poor at Weyerbusch (Coblenz) and a loan society in 1849 to help the small farmers. The members of the loan society were rich philanthropists who sold cattle to farmers on easy terms. Around 1862 Raiffeisen established at Anhausen a cooperative credit society in which the borrowing farmers themselves were members. Within two years, the credit society became a model for the other such societies which followed. From about 1879, Raiffeisen's cooperative ideas began to spread quite rapidly in Germany, Italy and the Austrian Empire.

The Raiffeisen societies were basically self-governing associations of borrowers, most of whom subscribed a share of the capital of the society through the combined credit of the members. Their area of operation was limited to a single village as a rule and it was claimed that the members were aware of the vices and virtues of the potential borrowers. Administration by an elected committee was honorary, only the clerical work was paid for. The liability of the members was unlimited and the amount of share capital an individual could hold was usually limited, so as to avoid a "dividend seeking" spirit. Any profits over a certain sum was allocated to a reserve fund and the loans had to be utilized for productive purposes.⁸

Raiffeisen's societies were mainly for the poor peasants, while Schulze's societies were for the artisans and small traders. They wanted the members to help one another by pooling their resources. Raiffeisen emphasized more on the moral aspects of the working of the societies and developed the concepts of self-help, mutual help, social equality, non-profit motive and joint liability not only in commercial and economic terms, but also in moral terms.

⁸ Eleanor Margaret Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India, Before Partition and in Independent India*, Third & Enlarged Edition, 1953, Calcutta, Pg.42 & I.J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930*, California, 1970, Pg.44

II. THE BRITISH – INDIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

The land revenue policy of the British Government in India during 1793-1850, commercialization of agriculture and other ramifications of the imperial rule had made rural indebtedness a pronounced problem in colonial India. It is said that this was aggravated by the decline of communitarian control over rural life and with the emergence of a newly rising rich peasant stratum immensely empowered by the newly introduced concept of private property, the new legal system etc. It is also said that it was one aspect of how British rule radically changed the Indian agrarian structure and stratified it. The British have often been blamed of taking a clear pro-moneylender stance. There is of course the arguments of 'revisionist' historians as against the above 'nationalist' contention, which deny the dominance and oppressiveness of moneylenders in colonial period, for example, those of Charlesworth for Bombay Deccan, Dewy for Punjab and Musgrave for the United Province. They deny that any significant structural change took place during the colonial period and tend to take a functional view of rural credit in a situation of limited capital availability.⁹

However, the fact that rural debt was after all a bane in colonial peasant society was indirectly admitted by the government itself, when it started taking some relief measures in the second half of the 19th century, particularly after the Deccan riots that saw an explosion of the peasants' wrath against the moneylenders. The British now tried to mitigate the peasants' plight vis-à-vis the moneylenders, just as it tried to help the Bengal peasants vis-à-vis the rack-renting zamindars. The impoverished peasants increasingly felt the need for rural credit at low rates of interest. The government adopted certain relief measures and subsequently passed the Deccan Agricultural Relief Act (1879), Land Improvement Loans Act (1883) and Agriculturists' Loans Act (1884). In 1882 Sir William Wedderburn and Justice N. G. Ranade put forward the scheme for

⁹ 'Trends in the Recent Studies in the Agrarian History of Colonial India', Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, in T. Banerjee (ed.), *Historical Research since Independence*, Naya Prakash, Kolkata, 1986

establishing an agricultural bank and this was perhaps the first step towards financing the Indian agriculturist.¹⁰ It did not receive any official favour as a whole, but its essentials were embodied in the Land Improvement and Agriculturists' Loans Acts, Act XIX of 1883 and Act XII of 1884 respectively under which the agriculturist could borrow public money for productive purposes approved by the Government at 3% to 6.25%. According to the provisions of Act XIX of 1883, Government funds could be borrowed for certain improvements like wells and terraces, while the Act XII of 1884 arranged for short term Government funds for purchase of seeds and implements. All such loans were restricted chiefly to land improvement, except in times of emergencies or natural calamities like flood or drought.¹¹ These acts, however, failed to alleviate the problems of the agriculturists. The Bihar and Orissa Banking Enquiry Committee considered that the Agriculturists' Loans Act was unsuitable for use in normal circumstances because it was impossible for the Government to take up the enormous task of direct provision of the agriculturists' loan requirements and that the sporadic attempts to meet a minute portion of that whole were abortive.¹² The main shortcoming of the Land Improvement Loans Act was that it only furnished cheap capital and made no provision for cultivating thrift and self-help.¹³ It was pointed out that the borrower had no interest in the welfare of his fellow-borrowers. Moreover, loans could not be advanced under either Act for redemption of old debts or consolidation of holdings which were considered to be vital for any plan for agricultural improvement. These Acts thus failed in their primary purpose to stimulate agriculture.¹⁴

¹⁰ Stanley Reed & S.T. Sheppard (ed.), *Indian Year Book, 1929: A Statistical and Historical Annual of the Indian Empire, with an Explanation of the Principal Topics of the Day*, Bombay, 1929, Pg. 430

¹¹ *Report of the Bihar and Orissa Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30*, Vol.I, Patna, 1930, Pp.30-31 – cited in Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India, Its Relation to a Sound National Economy*, London, 1932, Pp.52-53

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Stanley Reed & S.T. Sheppard (ed.), *Indian Year Book, 1929: A Statistical and Historical Annual of the Indian Empire, with an Explanation of the Principal Topics of the Day*, Bombay, 1929

¹⁴ E.M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, London, 1932, Pg. 54

Subsequently other plans were conceived and considered to address the problem of indebtedness of the agriculturists. In 1892 The Government of Madras Presidency assigned Mr. Fredrick Nicholson (later Sir Nicholson) to report on the advisability of starting a system of agricultural or land banks in Madras. His exhaustive report in two volumes, submitted in 1895 and 1897, strongly recommended introduction of cooperative credit societies with unlimited liability and concluded the report with the observation "Find Raiffeisen". According to Nicholson, the aim of the cooperative credit societies was to supply "confidence, courage, the spirit of thrift, self-help" to a peasantry that was "enfeebled, suspicious and dispirited".¹⁵ He claimed that the societies would provide "an education in many of the finer social and economic faculties"¹⁶ and that they would not merely "popularize, but democratize credit".¹⁷ Nicholson proposed to transfer such a system from the Rhineland villages to Madras Presidency. Hough notes that Nicholson emphatically did not want to establish state banks, "an unheard of experiment in state socialism". But he wanted to confer similar functions to the cooperative societies which might grant some moderate loans either as working or as mere starting funds.¹⁸

In the meantime Mr. Dupernex in the United provinces, Mr. Maclagan in the Punjab and Mr. Lyon in Bengal organized a few pioneering cooperative undertakings in the form of indigenous *nidhis* or mutual loan associations.¹⁹ Dupernex's "People's Banks for Northern India" were based on certain successful experiments with village banks in the United Provinces.²⁰ A committee meeting in Calcutta in December, 1900 considered the introduction of cooperative credit societies on Raiffeisen lines. A Famine Commission with Sir Fredrick Nicholson as

¹⁵ F.A. Nicholson, *Report Regarding the Possibility of Introducing Land and Agricultural Banks in Madras Presidency*, Vol.I, 1895, Pp.163-164 – cited in Eleanor Margaret Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India, Before Partition and in Independent India*, Third & Enlarged Edition, 1953, Calcutta, Pg.42

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pg. 151

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.150

¹⁸ Eleanor Margaret Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India, Before Partition and in Independent India*, Third & Enlarged Edition, OUP, Calcutta, 1953, Pg.42

¹⁹ J. Banerjee, *Cooperative Movement in India*, J. Banerjee, Calcutta, 1961, Pg.36

²⁰ Eleanor Margaret Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, London, 1932, Pg. 54

one of its members met in May, 1901 which stated that the chief means of preventing famines was to strengthen the morale of the agriculturist and for that formation of mutual credit associations were recommended.²¹ It was perhaps hoped that the cooperative credit societies or associations through their ideology of "Each for all and all for each" would enhance mutual trust and dependence among the agriculturists who were distressed due to natural calamities like the frequent famines. The matter was referred to the Committee on the Establishment of Cooperative Credit Societies in India which assembled at Simla on 1st June, 1901 and dissolved on 10th July of the same year. The committee essentially consisted of imperial officials like Sir E. F. G Law, K.C.M.G. as President, the Hon'ble Mr. F. A. Nicholson, C.I.E., I.C.S., Member of the Board of Revenue in Madras and Additional Member of the Council of the Governor General of India, Mr. J.B. Fuller, C.I.E., I.C.S., Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, the Hon'ble Mr. J. Wilson, I.C.S., Settlement Commissioner in the Punjab and Member of the Punjab Legislative Council, Mr. Reginald Murray, Manager of the Commercial Bank of India, Calcutta and Mr. H. Dupernex, I.C.S., District Judge, Cawnpore. The Committee considered that a system of cooperative credit was capable of affording great benefits to the agricultural community of India since "agricultural banks" based on cooperative credit had been quite successful in European countries. In this regard the Committee had the general support of the opinions expressed in the reports received from the local governments.²² The committee thus worked out the lines on which such societies should function, the privileges which should be accorded to them and the extent to which they should be aided by Government funds and subjected to Government control. The practical form to be assumed by such a society, their working and their supervision were also considered by the said Committee and the result of all the deliberations were embodied in the form of a draft Bill. In framing the proposals for the legislation, the Committee was

²¹ *ibid*

²² Report of the Committee on the Establishment of Cooperative Credit Societies in India, Simla, Government Central Printing Office, 1901, Pg.1

guided by the principles of the English Friendly Societies Act and Industrial and Provident Societies Act.²³

It is learnt from the Committee's report that the Government's efforts were not to be limited to the establishment of purely agricultural societies. The inspiration in this regard came from the Italian cooperative banks which were first started in towns and provided funds for village societies. And thus formation of urban societies on cooperative lines was encouraged which were supposed to have a two fold objective. In the first place, they would meet an existing want in providing a medium somewhat more profitable than the Post Office Savings Bank for the accumulation of savings by clerks and artisans and secondly, would thus serve as a useful and 'much needed' incentive to thrift. Following the results achieved by the Italian urban cooperative banks, it was thought that if urban societies provided funds for village societies, then the necessity for government aid to the rural societies would be diminished. It was hoped that village societies as agents of urban societies would help in acquiring local knowledge which was then the main impediment for the spread of "*mofussil* banking". Therefore the establishment of urban cooperative associations for the collection and distribution of loan either to the members or to village associations within the districts in which they were situated was considered to be desirable. This kind of an urban-rural cooperative structure that was being conceived indicated the rather immature and convoluted thought process of the policy makers who did not definitely define and demarcate the urban areas and the respective rural hinterlands that they sought to cater through the cooperative associations. However, the Committee in formulating the general principles for the cooperative credit societies realized that hard and fast rules throughout India could not be laid down and due regard must be paid to the local conditions and circumstances of the different provinces which differed widely among themselves and from the conditions that prevailed in the European countries. It was thus decided not to follow too closely the lines of any of the various systems which

²³ *ibid*

worked successfully in Italy and Germany and certain general principles for the organization of cooperative societies were enunciated.

Experiments with village banks, cooperative undertakings in the form of indigenous *Nidhis* or loan associations were made in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh by Mr. H. Dupernex, in the Punjab by Mr. Maclagan and in Bengal by Mr. Lyon. Mr. Dupernex noted that the principal object of his experiments was to find out whether "Indian villagers could be got to understand the principles of cooperative association". Dupernex did explain the principles of village banking to "a number of the principal landowners" and discussed the issue with them.²⁴ However, the cooperative movement as it was being introduced and evolving in India was a movement from above in two respects. First, it was essentially a government initiative which was being thrust on the people and secondly, when initiated at the village level, the opinion and the vibe of the village populace at large was not considered. This cooperative movement thus did not have a chance to develop a popular base. It seemed to be exclusively an official construction. Dupernex in working out his experiments realized that the village societies were extremely hampered in their development by the obstacles unintentionally presented by the existing laws to the progress of the cooperative movement in India.²⁵ These experiments made Dupernex understand the lacunae of the prevalent system which failed to satisfy the requirements of the people. Because he himself perhaps thought somewhat differently, the people therefore took interest in his experiments and he found a general consensus of opinion that if any system of agricultural credit could be introduced on a large scale, it would be of enormous benefit to the cultivator.²⁶ His observations suggested that though initially it was the cream of the rural society that was approached with the principles of cooperation, the idea was gradually percolating among a larger section of the rural people who were taking an interest in the same. However,

²⁴ Note on Village Banks in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, H. Dupernex in Report of the Committee on the Establishment of Cooperative Societies in India, Simla, 1901, Pg.58

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*

the term 'people' was not clearly qualified by Dupernex and thus it cannot be ascertained whether he referred to the different cross sections of the society or had in mind a particular section, perhaps the rural landed section, with whom he had initially interacted. Thus the nature of the response of people from below, from the margins cannot be properly felt from the Government reports. The imperial government might or might not have been sensitive to the true reaction, if any, of the village population. The latter also might have been rather ignorant and unable to grasp the legal intricacies of the forthcoming Cooperative Credit Societies Act.

The next move towards institutionalization of the movement was the appointment of a committee by Government of India in 1901 with Sir Edward Law as the President to finally consider the introduction of cooperative societies in India. The committee in its report recommended society on the Raiffeisen lines as best suited to Indian conditions and subsequently a bill was introduced in the Legislative Council by Sir Denzil Ibbetson which was enacted as the Cooperative Credit Societies Act of 1904.

The chief provisions of the Act of 1904 were encouragement of thrift and self-help among the members, to raise funds by deposits from members and loans from non-members, Government and other cooperative societies and to distribute the money thus obtained in loans to members.²⁷ The avowed aim of the Government of India was to lay down the general outlines and to leave the details to be filled in gradually, on lines which the experience of failure or success and the natural development of the institutions might call for as best suited to each part of the country.²⁸ Soon after the enactment of 1904, the local governments for all the Presidencies and major provinces appointed Registrars with full powers to organize, register and supervise cooperative societies.

²⁷ E.M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, London, 1932, Pg.55

²⁸ *The Law and Principles of Cooperation in India*, Calcutta, 1917, Pg.1

The Act of 1904 was considered to be simple and elastic by many - simple as the measure had to deal with a large mass of ignorant agriculturists and elastic as it left sufficient scope for the State Governments to frame rules for control and development of the cooperative movement.²⁹ The State Governments thereafter tried to formulate the movement in consonance with the local conditions and the needs of the people. The movement was thus being constructed by the Imperial Government and its agencies and the priorities in this regard were also exclusively decided by them. The paternalistic and rather authoritarian approach of the colonial government did not conceive the movement from the people's perspective and a supposedly people's movement thus did not get an opportunity to spread its roots among the people from below. The much discussed and allegedly necessary Act therefore, rather unfortunately and surprisingly, could not generate much interest even among the Indian elites and leaders, leave alone the Indian masses.³⁰ In the 1903 session of the Indian National Congress at Madras, certain delegates made an attempt to place before the house a relevant discussion on the provisions of the forthcoming Act of 1904, but the sudden illness of the then President Lalmohan Ghosh put the issue at bay and the distinguished delegates like Pheroze Shah Mehta and Surendranath Banerjee had no other option but to close the matter by acknowledging the Government for its initiative in the aforesaid enactment. Thus it was thought that the cooperative system or arrangement meant for welfare of the people of India at large lost a chance for public discussion thus restricting its acceptability only to a few representatives of the people.³¹ However, it is doubtful that even if the discussion could be worked out fruitfully, how far would it have been able to endorse the people's view, especially of those from the margins, because the Congress during that time did not have a base among the masses. Therefore, it may be said that what was being introduced in India through the different enactments was a

²⁹ J. Banerjee, *Cooperative Movement in India*, J. Banerjee, Calcutta, 1961, Pg.37

³⁰ 'Cooperative Karja Tahabil', Ambika Charan Ukil, in Rabindranath Tagore (ed.), *Bhandar*, Pratham Bhag, Jyaishtya, 1313(B.S), Bishesh Sankhya, Calcutta

³¹ *ibid*

cooperative structure or system and was not ideally a 'movement' which evolved from among the people with their spontaneous participation.

The shortcomings of the Act of 1904 which provided only for the organization of credit societies, both rural and urban, made it necessary for the Act to be amended. There was also no provision for establishment of central agencies to coordinate the primary societies, the classification of societies on the basis of zones into rural and urban was found to be extremely unscientific and unconventional and in official terms the prohibition of distribution of profits in rural societies with unlimited liability caused some difficulties to the rural members. But it cannot be ascertained how far were the rural members aware of these flaws and whether they were vocal in the need for any change.

The technical limitations of the Act of 1904 were redressed through the Cooperative Societies Act of 1912 which sought to give a broader base to the cooperative structure by providing for organization of all kinds of societies. The provisions of the new Act sought to reorganize the system of cooperation in India which was supposed to have stimulated the 'cooperative movement'. The initiatives were all taken at the official level and the local Governments from the beginning were charged with the administration of the Acts of 1904 and 1912 through the Registrars and the assistants they provided.³² The promotion of the cooperative movement was a part of the village reconstruction programmes and one of the projects with which the ICS officers were engaged. The Registrars of the Cooperative Societies were mainly drawn from the ICS cadre for sheer economic and administrative necessity. From the 1920s Indian ICS officers were appointed as Registrars and these Registrars perhaps in the almost inevitable Indian bureaucratic way formed the Department of Cooperation, which formed a fairly common sample of a vital 'hinge group', the army of minor Indian officials who made it possible for a few thousand Europeans to administer a sub-

³² Eleanor Margaret Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India - Before Partition and in Independent India*, Third & Enlarged Edition, OUP, Calcutta, 1953, Chapter – 'Factors Conditioning Prosperity'

continent.³³ The idea of looking after the welfare of the Indian villagers was compatible with the general assumption that the 'real' India was to be found in the villages, that the villagers were to be grateful to the district officers for being well looked after and that cooperation and village reconstruction were compatible with the self-image of the civilians as those who knew the country.³⁴ Yet for all these tendencies towards bureaucratization, many senior officials connected with the cooperative movement in Bombay genuinely believed in the need to promote non-official leadership of the movement and after initial hesitation they asserted that the cooperative movement could be used to promote the virtues of democratization, a democratization which might well be a pre-requisite of self-government for the country.³⁵

The Indian bureaucrats associated with the Department of Cooperation in the Presidency of Bengal also shared a similar thought and thus realized that unless voluntary organizations took the initiative in the field of cooperative organization, the far reaching possibilities of the movement for the moral and economic uplift of the people could not be brought within the sphere of accomplishment.³⁶ During the 1920s and 1930s, Jamini Mohan Mitra as the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Tarak Chandra Ray as the Joint Registrar of Cooperative Societies and Gurusaday Dutt as the District Magistrate of Howrah and Bankura and Birbhum, played a key role in the execution and implementation of cooperative activities in the different villages and districts of Bengal. But at the same time they tried to look beyond the official connotation of cooperation and knew that it was actually the latent strength of cooperation which should work most effectively towards

³³ I.J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930 – Rural Credit and the Cooperative Movement in the Bombay Presidency*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1970, Introduction, Pg. 3

³⁴ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.112

³⁵ I.J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930 – Rural Credit and the Cooperative Movement in the Bombay Presidency*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1970, Introduction, Pp.. 3-4

³⁶ Resolution No. 46IT – A.I, Darjeeling, the 16th May, 1925, Agriculture & Industries Dept.(Cooperative), Govt. of Bengal – The Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal for the year ending 30th June, 1924 – Issued by Gurusaday Dutt, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal

rural reconstruction and inspire the village populace to put in their cooperative effort to bring about their country's moral and economic regeneration.³⁷ But according to the official records, the people at large were rather inclined to regard the extension of cooperative institutions largely as a matter of departmental effort.³⁸

The Reforms Act of 1919 made cooperation a provincial subject and subsequently the different provinces passed their respective Cooperative Societies Acts, Bombay in 1925, Madras in 1932, Bihar and Orissa in 1935, Coorg in 1937 and Bengal in 1940. The Bombay Act was significant as it tried to show a new direction to the movement and widen its scope. This Act stated in its preamble that the intended beneficiaries of cooperation were agriculturists and other persons with common economic needs and spoke of better living, better business and better methods of production as the aims of cooperation and it also classified the cooperative societies according to their main purpose, e.g. pooling of resources, production, consumption, housing or general. This new basis of classification might have made the movement somewhat relevant to the members, but their feedback in this regard remain unexplored primarily due to dearth of relevant source material. The legislations of the period indicate a trend in the direction of strengthening the power of the Registrar or in other words the role of the state in the cooperative movement primarily because of a poor and illiterate majority.³⁹ The construction of the movement in legal terms by the Imperial government was thus giving the movement an alien hue which could not have a mass appeal.

Perhaps some kind of a block also worked on the part of the common people in receiving, accepting and internalizing the official connotations of cooperation. One Jatindranath Ghosh in an address at the conference of the Khulna Cooperative

³⁷ Speech delivered by Jatindranath Ghosh at a Session of the Conference of Khulna Cooperative Society in 1919 - in Tarak Chandra Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, 1326(B.S), , Calcutta

³⁸ Resolution No. 46IT – A.I, Darjeeling, the 16th May, 1925, Agriculture & Industries Dept.(Cooperative), Govt. of Bengal – The Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal for the year ending 30th June, 1924 – Issued by Gurusaday Dutt, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal

³⁹ Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India - Before Partition and in Independent India*, Third & Enlarged Edition, OUP, Calcutta, 1953, Pg.51

Societies held sometime in 1919 considered the conservative orientation of the Bengali community to be responsible for the limited success of the cooperative movement when introduced as a policy of the government.⁴⁰ However, the resistance to accept something new should not always be generalized and the reasons might have been different for different groups of people. For example, when the first Central Cooperative Bank or the central cooperative society was established in Raruli in Khulna on 6th February, 1909, the reaction was varied – the peasants of the neighbouring areas thought it to be a mere government institution for lending money at low rates of interest, the local moneylenders or the *mahajans* considered it to be a threat to do away with their business, whereas certain inactive members of the middle-class supposed it to be a conspiracy to motivate the peasants against them.⁴¹ These diverse viewpoints indicated their lack of understanding and trust in the cooperative institution and a very broad reason might have been its introduction through government and legal instruments. The people from the margins also could hardly understand the implication and significance of the Acts and the expression of the ideology of cooperation in legal terms perhaps sapped the essence of cooperation which could have been meaningful to the people from below. Mukunda Behari Mallick, the Minister in Charge, Department of Cooperation in his inaugural speech at the Chittagong Divisional Cooperative Conference held in Comilla on 10th-11th April, 1937 admitted the slow progress of the movement and attributed it to the legislations of 1904 and 1912 which he considered was one of the reasons for the deep rooted popular conviction that the cooperative movement only dealt with matters of financial transaction.⁴² He thus felt the need to amend the laws and make them more people oriented, but he was not specific about the changes to be proposed. While writing on the cooperative movement in India, Eleanor M. Hough too felt that many of the procedures impeded the development of

⁴⁰ 'Khulnaye Samabay', read at the Conference of the Cooperative Societies of Khulna by Jatindranath Ghosh – published in Tarak Chandra Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Ashar-Kartik, 1326(B.S), Calcutta

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Reporting of the Chittagong Divisional Cooperative Conference, Comilla held on 10th-11th April, 1937 in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Jyaishta, 1345(B.S), Calcutta

cooperation as a popular movement in which small groups and communities could function freely and organize their work and activities along cooperative lines.⁴³ She agreed with Sir Horace Plunkett⁴⁴ that the formal cooperative movement in India was not a spontaneous growth, but was initiated, largely nurtured and guided by the government.

The different government appointed committees reviewing the progress of the cooperative movement from time to time asserted its importance and indispensability – e.g. the Maclagan Committee in 1915 advocated that there should be one cooperative for every village and that every village should be covered by a cooperative; the Royal Commission on Agriculture, 1928 gave the verdict “...if cooperation fails, there fails the best hope of rural India.”⁴⁵ The village societies formed the base of the whole movement and the conviction was slowly setting in that the cooperative principles and organization were the best means of popularizing improvements in the methods of cultivation and that no real revival of home industries could be visualized that was not cooperative in character.⁴⁶ So though there were urban societies, the thrust of the movement was on the rural ones with the predominance of the credit societies because historically cooperative effort was first directed in India towards the provision of easy credit facilities for the agriculturist; and according to the government reports, not only was it the simplest to introduce amongst the illiterate people at the outset, but it was also something on which the welfare of a peasant community hinged.⁴⁷ The government was aware of the frequently made criticisms

⁴³ Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, OUP, Bombay, 1959, Preface

⁴⁴ Horace Plunkett (1854-1932) – an Anglo-Irish agricultural reformer, pioneer of agricultural cooperatives. He tried to stay away from party politics and bring together men of all political views for promoting the material prosperity of the Irish people. Around him he saw a troubled economy, racked with dissension, denuded by emigration which impoverished the countryside and made the towns economically dependent. This experience hardened his conviction that the only remedy for socio-economic ills was cooperative self-help. He believed that the Industrial Revolution needed to be redressed by an agricultural revolution through cooperation and proclaimed his ideals under the slogan “Better farming, better business, better living”.

⁴⁵ Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, 1928, Pg.449-450

⁴⁶ Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1922-23, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1924

⁴⁷ *ibid*

of the one-sided development of the cooperative movement in India with the concentrated attention on the credit branch to the neglect of the other branches of cooperative activity. The counter argument of the government authorities was that these criticisms overlooked the particular requirements of the country or the region concerned and that the line of advance most suited to her should be followed. In the Presidency of Bengal, for the year ending on 30th June, 1926, credit societies of all classes formed 89.6% of the total number of societies and the justification of the government was that in India with a vast population predominantly agricultural, mostly illiterate, poverty stricken and dependent on traditionally high rates of interest for obtaining financial accommodation, credit was naturally the foundation on which other forms of cooperation must be based and credit was thus taken as the starting point for the introduction of the cooperative movement in general and agricultural cooperation in particular.⁴⁸

As evident from the official records of the 1920s, the Imperial Government structured the cooperative system in India with the basic premise that it would benefit the 'Illiterate' Indian populace and it was harped time and again perhaps to justify the state/government control over the movement. This might bring to one's mind the idea of "paternalism of the Raj" to put an end to the atrocities of the moneylenders. The statistical details of the contemporary Government Reports take a note of the quantitative horizontal expansion of societies of all kinds with a simultaneous increase in membership and working capital and thereby conclude that the increasing figures indicate that the public realized the importance of the cooperative movement in solving vital problems as agricultural indebtedness, agricultural improvements, revival of cottage industries etc. These records emphasise that public interest had been deepening with a growing appreciation of the increasing effect on the moral, material and economic well being of those brought within the pale of the movement, but do not qualify the term 'public', nor state its composition nor present the response of the public in

⁴⁸Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1925-26, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1927

their own words, thus overlooking and not analyzing the vertical dissemination and acceptance of the ideology of cooperation among different cross-sections of the people. These records as source materials thus remain incomplete and present a partial view of the cooperative movement where the people's voice and people's perspective remain significantly absent. However, a certain paternalistic concern for the people of India was there in the thought of the colonial government and its representatives.

If we go back in time, we will see that from the very beginning the ideologies of the British that helped them formulate their Indian policies were underpinned by the claim that they were doing good to India and hence their rule was justified.⁴⁹ Thus material motivation got combined with moral claim and this mostly took the form of a liberal ideology which was sometimes manifest as the Cornwallis system, sometimes as free traders' campaign and so on.

The related views about India within liberalism varied too and there were also different opinions as to whether to totally deny the Indian past and completely anglicize it or whether to pay some heed to Indian tradition. For some, India had a civilized past, which later degenerated and which was in any case based on despotism. Here we find an echo of Warren Hastings's thoughts. For some like Macaulay, India was absolutely uncivilized. But at least for the sake of pragmatism, even the liberals tried to accommodate Indian tradition more or less. Even despotism was accommodated on the ground that Indians were used to it. Here in India, it had to be liberalism sans democracy. Indians were considered not fit for democracy and this of course justified imperialism. The well being and security of the Indians would be looked after by the British. Indian life was in need of reforms. From Bentinck to Dalhousie, the British gave India an 'age of reform'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Thomas Metcalfe, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1995, Chap.1- Introduction: Britain and India in the 18th century

⁵⁰ *ibid*

There was, however, one strand of thought that quite differed from liberalism, though it was equally imperialistic. Its proponents were the 'romantic generation' of civil servants, like Munro, Malcolm, Elphinstone and Metcalfe working in the 1830s and 1840s. They opined that no abstract universal principle imported from the West will do for India and that what was needed was an Indian-style combination of authoritarian, paternalistic and personal rule run by the British on the basis of a thorough knowledge of Indian countryside. One must know India not from Sanskrit texts, but by intimately studying its village, the 'little republic' in the word of Metcalfe. Things have to be improved, of course, but not through rash innovations, rather by changing the system from within.⁵¹

So these were the two main strands of the ideology of the Raj till the 1850s and perhaps till the end. The cooperative experiments that were launched towards the end of the 19th century seem to have come out of the matrix of the second strand of thought. Indeed, by the mid 19th century liberalism was on the backfoot in England itself. There it was being challenged by socialistic thoughts and soon after it was overtaken by racial theories. With the experiences of Indian Mutiny of 1857 and of the Jamaica Revolt of 1865, liberalism crashed. But the intensified atmosphere of racial hatred was not very propitious even for the theory of the 'romantic generation'. Colonial subjects now seemed degraded, ungrateful and irrational, incapable of improvement. In that ideological atmosphere, the cooperative principle to be worked out involving the Indians themselves, could be formulated only half-heartedly by the officials. The dedication, enthusiasm, courage and the urge to know and improve the Indian village life that had been the characteristic of the 'romantic generation' of civil servants was no longer there.

The cooperative legislations introduced in India during the first few decades of the twentieth century may be considered to be an extension of the numerous reforms and acts of the preceding century through which the colonial government

⁵¹ *Ibid*, Pp.26-27

sought to consolidate its base and tighten its imperial control over India under the garb of welfare measures. But a further evolution within the imperialist thought took place gradually, particularly after the First World War. The colonial authorities and the concerned department dealing with the cooperative societies wanted to launch a positive propaganda in favour of the cooperative movement, which, it was thought, would help the colonial government extend its reach into localities, particularly as its organization was essentially a matter for local bodies and local persons with particular knowledge not only of the needs of the localities, but also of the actual possibilities. The authorities seemed to realise that organization from outside tended to be considerable waste of efforts on lines in which there was actually no real hope of success.⁵² Though the government initiated the movement, subsequently efforts were made to take into consideration local necessities at the micro level to make the movement relevant for the people concerned. The authorities seemingly realized that it was easy to multiply the number of societies, but to make them real cooperative organizations and living village institutions bringing within their fold most of the villages and acting as a lever for rural uplift was a rather difficult task requiring much patient and persistent toil. They also were aware that progress in the above direction depended on the extent to which cooperative principles were assimilated and applied by the members themselves in the solution of their problem.⁵³ For this it was necessary to make the people of the villages aware of the principles of cooperation. Perhaps the Indian personnel of the British-Indian bureaucracy played an important role in such realization.

A number of local conferences, considered to be valuable in spreading knowledge about the aims and possibilities of the movement, were held in the districts from time to time and were becoming an established feature of the movement. The Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society, played an important role in propagating

⁵² Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1923-24, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1924

⁵³ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1930, Govt. of Bengal, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1931

the principles of cooperation through its two regularly published periodicals *The Bengal, Bihar and Orissa Cooperative Journal*, a quarterly in English and *Bhandar*,⁵⁴ a monthly in Bengali. It also published a number of pamphlets and reprints of interesting lectures and under its auspices a few public lectures were arranged in Calcutta, while a number of lectures illustrated by magic lantern slides depicting the benefits of cooperation and cooperative methods of combating disease, ignorance and poverty were delivered in the suburbs and villages. The government apparently realised that mere implementation and execution of the cooperative legislations would not do justice to the cause and therefore felt the necessity to be sensitive to the local needs and local sentiments and tried to enlist the support of the people from below through the awareness programmes especially in the rural areas.

The precise response of the people from the margins, however, cannot be traced primarily because of their inability to record their view point. The people's pulse in this regard could sometimes be fathomed from the comparatively better educated and better privileged of the rural populace who tried to speak on behalf of the rest. In a letter to the editor of *Bhandar* dated 20/11/1919, one Pulin Chandra Raha Ray of Tangail expressed his view about the limited reach and scope of the two above mentioned periodicals. He complained that though the cooperative societies, even the primary societies subscribed them, they hardly reached the members and unfortunately in some cases even the Directors remained unaware of them. Raha Ray felt that more concerted effort should be taken by the government, its agents, the panchayat bodies and the educated local people to percolate the idea of the benefits of cooperation among the rest of the village fraternity who were still behind the veils of ignorance.⁵⁵ Such candid opinions, though very few, tell us about the movement from the perspective of the common people, among whom in the practical field the so called milestones of the movement were not able to make much inroads.

⁵⁴*Bhandar* - This periodical bears the same name as that of the swadeshi journal edited by Rabindranath Tagore and published from Baishakh, 1312 (1905) to Chaitra, 1313 (1906)

⁵⁵Tarak Chandra Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Dwitiyo Bhag, Poush, 1326(B.S), Shashtha Sankhya, Calcutta

Proposals were made to reorganize the Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society (B.C.O.S) to extend its scope and enhance its utility and the new society registered under the Cooperative Societies Act II of 1912 was considered to be a real federation of cooperative societies in the province. As preliminary to the reorganization of the society, divisional boards were intended to be formed which would bring the representatives of the societies in direct touch with activities of this kind and would tend to develop village leadership. And while trying to develop village leadership, the society would afford adequate scope for the activities of the more energetic among the non-officials who might find an active interest in and feel the enthusiasm for the movement and it was hoped that it would enable the realization of self-government within the movement.⁵⁶ For effective percolation of the ideology of cooperation the government thought in terms of village leadership which was perhaps nothing but a decentralized representative organ of the government to work more effectively at the micro level. It may also be questioned whether the idea of leadership of any kind was in consonance with the true spirit of cooperation. It is not really known how hierarchical was this form of leadership or whether the leader was just a guide who would show his fellow villagers the right track till they became self-reliant to work on their own, as envisaged by Tagore (which would be dealt in the subsequent chapter). In fact, throughout the course of the movement, in both its official and non-official aspects, at different junctures of history, the motivation had always come from certain individuals who sought to inculcate the spirit of cooperation among community members to enable them to overcome the immediate difficulties, and their cooperative experiments showed the way to the villagers to develop self-confidence through self-help. The colonial government in order to familiarize the villagers with its cooperative movement and its benefits, tried to reach them through the language and traditions with which they were more acquainted, though its ultimate aim was to use the cooperative movement

⁵⁶Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1924-25, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1925

as its tool or means for colonization. Thus the aid of the non-officials was becoming necessary to meet the official aim of the movement.

The official cooperative movement as it evolved in India thus came to be associated with different types of people and it was used, applied and received by them in their respective ways. The movement therefore developed different connotations and dimensions. To begin with, the European bureaucrats associated with the movement had an official approach indeed, but in the construction of the movement an influence of the imperial ideologies interpreting the concept of cooperation was evident, as stated earlier. The Indian officials in the Presidency of Bengal, though working on behalf of the colonial government did not remain insensitive to the needs of the indigenous people. They, on different occasions, especially at different conferences, emphasised on the ideological aspects of the movement to suit themselves and to instill in the people self-reliance to counter the challenges of colonial rule and bring about socio-economic and moral regeneration of their country.

III. CREDIT SOCIETIES SINCE THE 1920s

Thus the official aspect of the movement evolved with the demand of the time and passed through a crucial period from 1920 to 1947 which witnessed the struggle for freedom from different quarters, in different shades, with different ideologies and most importantly mobilization of the masses through different movements. At the same time this was the period which in the global context saw the aftermath of the First World War, the economic depression of 1930-31, the onset and the impact of the Second World War. The general opinion was that the depression brought a serious set back to the cooperative movement. The prices of the agricultural commodities fell sharply because of the slump and as a result the volume of default and overdue debts rose very high which hit the Cooperative Central Banks hard. In 1931 Central Banking Enquiry Committee was formed to report on the existing state of affairs of cooperative movement and to

suggest ways and means of improvement, and its recommendations led to the establishment of the Reserve Bank of India under the Act of 1934 which is considered to be a landmark in the history of cooperative movement in India. The Agricultural Credit Department of the RBI was set up in April, 1935 and the chief officers of the department took a keen interest in the fostering of the movement, toured different states to visit representative cooperative institutions, to observe their working and to get the members' views at first hand.⁵⁷ These measures tried to feel the pulse of the movement from the people's perspective, but the participation of the ordinary members in the credit societies remained rather restricted and limited.

However, attempts to disburse credit and settle debts through the cooperative credit societies remained in the mind of the imperial government. Sugata Bose in his work *Agrarian Bengal, Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* notes that during the 1930s there were a series of delayed debt legislation by the government which aimed principally at providing relief for the peasant debtor and dampening the anti-moneylender agitations. The first such legislative move was the Bengal Moneylenders Act 1933 which following the Banking Committee's recommendations to stop usurious rates of interest which prevailed during the 1920s, tried to limit compound interest, suggested maximum rates of interest recoverable in courts and made registration compulsory for non-resident moneylenders. Bose further points out that in 1932 a bill was brought before the Legislative Council by an individual member who sought to give relief to the agriculturists by settling the debts through the cooperative credit societies, considered to be a "simple machinery" which according to Bose was an indirect way of popularizing these societies. But the then governor refused to sanction the bill.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, OUP, Bombay, 1959, Pp.303-305

⁵⁸ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal, Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press, Bombay, 1986, Pg.117

The cooperative credit societies were, however, not as simple as assumed. A number of lacunae were being identified in the cooperative credit sector of the time. The credit societies were established to provide easy credit facilities to the common people, particularly to the poor peasants and to put an end to the exactions and atrocities of the moneylenders. In spite of the noble aims of the cooperative movement, the faults and the gaps in its execution were in no way improving the economic condition of the impoverished peasants for whom the movement was primarily meant. The benefits of the movement were confined to a handful which included the affluent members of the respective societies with whose initiative the societies were formed and secondly, a class of self-seeking, opportunist people who were either landless or with marginal holdings, but could manage a place for themselves in the *panchayats* thereby availing the benefit of cooperative credit.⁵⁹ It often so happened that the poor peasant-members as shareholders of the credit societies, in spite of repaying their loan instalments in time, could not borrow further due to the default of the other members and they also had no way to seek justice when the sums sanctioned in their names were misappropriated by the influential members of the *panchayat* committee. The reasons for these anomalies have been located in the structural defects of the credit societies. These poor people from the margins remained the sufferers all through, bearing the brunt of certain crises that a cooperative society might face. They could not find a better alternative to the extortion of the moneylenders in the credit societies. Thus their relationship with the credit societies in most cases could not become deep rooted. The attempt to base and build the movement on a constructed and superimposed relationship could not arrest the internal weaknesses of the Indian agrarian structure and subsequently proved to be detrimental to the progress of the movement.⁶⁰

It is learnt from Bose's work that the cooperative credit societies were one of the main institutions from which the Government could disburse credit, which

⁵⁹'Samabay Pracheshtar Truti', Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, in Charu Chandra Bhattacharya (ed.), *Bhandar*, Kartik, 1338(B.S), Calcutta

⁶⁰ *ibid*

numbered to about 25,000 covering 6% of the rural population and that most of these went into liquidation with the onset of the Depression. A few years later, in April 1939, the governor and his cabinet conceded that the ordinary sources of credit, which, apart from credit societies also included the government's own agricultural loans and land mortgage banks, were inadequate and that the borrowers were not finding facilities for the short term loans which they required to cover the sowing season in many districts. The Cooperative Department then decided to introduce a scheme to inflate rural credit. It involved government guarantees to the Provincial Cooperative Bank to the extent of Rs. 35 lakh which was to be distributed in short term loans through revived or quickly organized societies. A lot of other monetary commitments by the government were also involved in the form of liquid assets and cash credit loan, but no part of the plan ultimately worked out. The Land Mortgage Banks too failed completely. It is known from Bose's work that till 1940 these banks gave a total loan of Rs. 6 lakh, but no loan could be granted which exceeded 50% of the security and the security had to be a piece of land in which the applicant held at least a raiyati right. As a result, "the neediest had no substantial collateral to offer."⁶¹ The economic depression had also made it extremely difficult for the peasants, especially the small peasants to command their resources and credit on strict terms and had to continue smallholding cultivation. The small raiyats in many cases were reduced to the status of '*bhagchashi*' (share-croppers) on their own lands.⁶²

The other debt legislations of the time, the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act of 1936 and the Bengal Moneylenders Act of 1940 were supposed to have enabled both the debtors and the creditors to make use of the debt-settlement facilities. The first Act provided for the establishment of debt settlement boards to scale down debts according to the debtors' ability to pay. Sugata Bose notes that this legislation not only relieved the burden of the debtors, it was also advantageous

⁶¹ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal, Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press, Bombay, 1986, Pp.123-124

⁶² *Ibid*, Pg.131

for the creditors because during the years of economic depression the moneylenders could not collect any interest nor a major part of the capital of their outstanding loans. Amicable conciliation between the debtor and the creditor was aimed and in case it did not work out the boards were empowered to make an award payable in yearly settlements on the basis of reasonable offer from either party.⁶³ The second Act also sought to protect the debtor and its main objects were to register moneylenders and reduce interest rates and it was clearly stated that no debt could exceed twice the original principal and interest ceilings were fixed at 8% on secured loans and 10% on unsecured loans.⁶⁴

As Sugata Bose notes, these legislative measures to a certain extent acted as a deterrent to the activities of the moneylenders in the rural belts especially in east Bengal. During the years of depression, the moneylending groups had almost withdrawn themselves from their business and the rural credit relations did not recover much even after the slump. According to Bose, the prospective creditors became cautious and hesitated to return to the uncertain sphere of rural moneylending even in the conditions of trade and price boom during the Second World War.⁶⁵ Bose points out that in the districts of central and west Bengal, on one hand, there were reports of contraction of money credit, but on the other, the influence of the more powerful moneylending groups over smallholding peasants was extended during the slump.⁶⁶ The overall social and economic scenario which was very complex, determined the equation between the creditor and the debtor and also the nature of the rural credit. Generally speaking, there was a staggering and slow flow of rural credit during this time making the position of rural credit weak. In this scenario, the position of the cooperative credit societies as sources of rural credit remained equally weak. The experience of the small peasants with the primary cooperative credit societies was not quite pleasant as they could neither make any satisfactory arrangement for alternative

⁶³ *ibid*, Pp.117-118

⁶⁴ *ibid*, Pg.124

⁶⁵ *ibid*, Pg.125

⁶⁶ *ibid*, Pp.133-134

source of rural credit nor could they prevent the chief or the more substantial moneylenders from overpowering the small peasants in certain cases. The rural cooperative credit societies and the kind of loans they advanced perhaps could not provide a remedy to the structural debilities of the rural socio-economic structure.

The Maclagan Committee⁶⁷ had earlier recommended that the loan must in no circumstances be for the speculative purpose and should be given only for 'productive' purposes or for necessities which as essentials of daily life could be fairly classed as productive. Commenting on this view, Hubert Calvert⁶⁸ had pointed out that it would be suicidal for societies to place any absolute prohibition on the grant of loans for 'unproductive' purposes and that the society gradually occupying the place previously held by the moneylender must give loans for all purposes for which loans were essential including social expenditure. Thus it was evident that the credit societies were conceived as alternatives to the moneylender, but there was an ideological difference in their approach and objective. The moneylender prospered by exploiting others, whereas the members of the cooperative credit societies at least theoretically cooperated with each other for mutual benefit. The members of the societies were expected to pool their resources in their respective villages to create a common fund from which money would be lent at reasonable rates of interest and the profit accrued would be spent for the general welfare of the village concerned. But in the practical field it was found that the primary credit societies were overburdened with overdues particularly during the years of economic depression, whereas the moneylenders and the other loan giving institutions were better off in this regard.⁶⁹ Lack of a professional and commercial approach has been considered to

⁶⁷ Maclagan Committee – Appointed to review the performance and progress of the cooperative movement and suggest measures for strengthening the movement. The committee submitted its report in 1915.

⁶⁸ Hubert Calvert – Registrar of Cooperative Societies in Punjab, during 1916-1926. He was also a member of the Royal Commission on Agriculture

⁶⁹ 'Samabay Pracheshitar Truti', Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, in Charu Chandra Bhattacharya (ed.), *Bhandar*, Kartik, 1338(B.S), Calcutta

be a reason for this limitation. The credit societies faced a dilemma in this respect. In course of working with the primary credit societies it was felt that profit motive might limit the true essence of cooperation. However, due to lack of profit motive and hence professionalism, mounting overdues might lead to the liquidation of the credit societies which would once again expose the poor peasants to the exploitation and mercy of the moneylenders and other intermediaries thus defeating the primary aim of cooperative credit.

A workable balance, hence, between the ideology and practice was considered desirable in the field of cooperative credit which, however, was becoming difficult to keep to. The emphasis was more on the ideological aspect of the movement and efforts were made to discuss, elaborate and spread the basic principles of cooperation among the people, but no such concerted initiative was taken to address the problems that might arise while putting the ideology into practice. The primary credit societies, for example, were registered under the provisions of the Cooperative Act and the bye-laws and the different articles of the cooperative law were based on the principles of cooperation, but there was no remedy nor any specific punishment in case of violation of the same. The practical side of the movement thus remained neglected. For example, according to the recommendation of the Maclagan Committee, if the money lent out for productive purpose was improperly utilized, it should be immediately be recalled. A number of such instances were identified, but there was no mechanism to recover the money and moreover, there were many objections to the recommendation regarding the productive purpose of the loan. Many such gaps remained between the theoretical formulations and practical implementation of the rules and laws. In fact, there was no appropriate measure to control the indifference, insolence and negligence of the members and sometimes their wilful default in repaying the loan. Vices like misappropriation of funds, predominance of a few dishonest members, procuring loans through impersonation were gradually creeping into the societies thus curbing the true spirit of cooperation. To prevent further worsening of the situation and dire consequences, it was felt

necessary to consolidate the economic base of the primary credit societies by considering them as charitable cooperative *bhandars* or associations and emphasizing less on their banking aspects.⁷⁰ This was hoped to be the best possible way to prevent the collapse of the movement and the credit societies.

I.J. Catanach in making an overall assessment of the cooperative movement in India observed that on the whole it had not provided any decisive challenge to either the professional or the agriculturist moneylender and that the cooperative credit society had often provided not an alternative to the moneylender, but an addition to his dealings.⁷¹ A.G. Chandavarkar in this context noted that one of the major causes of failure of rural cooperative credit in India to compete with the moneylenders was their doctrinaire aversion to provide consumption credit to the cultivators.⁷² So though the thrust of the cooperative movement during this time was on credit, the membership of the cooperative credit societies accounted for barely 5% of the agricultural population in 1938-39 and the increase in the number of societies was not always accompanied by improvements.⁷³

IV. NON-CREDIT SOCIETIES SINCE THE 1920s

During the period under review, i.e. from 1920-1947, the development of other forms of cooperation apart from credit also continued to engage the attention of the Cooperative Department, as evident from the official records. Mr. F. B. Wace in 1939 claimed that the considerable and steadily growing strength of the non-credit side of the movement had not only improved the economic position of the peasant, but added greater stability to the credit side, apart from its educational and moral influence.⁷⁴ The *Statistical Statements* of the Reserve Bank of India

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ I.J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1970, Pp.223-224

⁷² Money and Credit, 1858-1947', A.G. Chandavarkar in Dharma Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History, Vol.II, 1751-1970*, Orient Longman in association with Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1982

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ Report on Cooperative Movement, 1939, Punjab, India, Pg.21

followed a broad division in classifying the primary societies for purposes other than credit - e.g. Purchase and Purchase and Sale, Production, Production and Sale and Other Forms of Cooperation.⁷⁵ Veteran scholars like E. M. Hough has not considered this kind of classification to be very enlightening, but admitted that with the heterogeneous data available with difficulty from the Cooperative Departments of the different provinces, this was perhaps the best that could be done by the Reserve Bank. According to Hough, a logical but somewhat complicated classification of non-credit societies would be according to their main functions – e.g. into marketing societies, purchasing or consumers’ societies, better farming societies, industrial societies, housing societies, transport societies, labour contract societies, better-living societies, societies for women, societies for the depressed classes and others. Better farming societies might also include societies for the consolidation of land holdings, societies for irrigation and land reclamation, societies for cattle and sheep breeding, milk societies, collective-farming societies and cooperative colonies. In the category of better living societies were also placed health societies, education societies, societies with thrift as their main object and arbitration societies. Forest societies were generally associated with labour contract societies. There were sometimes overlapping areas because some societies had almost similar functions – e.g. the purchase and sale unions and the industrial societies which had purchase and sale as their chief cooperative activities and the multipurpose societies.⁷⁶ Many of these societies had credit as their primary function. In fact, many special types of societies were still basically only credit societies under a different form, whether they be sale societies to buy the produce of their members at a provisionally low price or whether they be weaving societies to advance raw materials to individual members. It was believed that special types of societies could generally offer

⁷⁵Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, OUP, Bombay, 1959, Pg. 131

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, Pp.132-133

additional advantages over credit societies in the way of either cheap supply to or advantageous marketing of goods for members.⁷⁷

During the 1920s attention was devoted to the development of other forms of cooperation. There was a rise in the number of agricultural purchase and purchase and sale societies including several societies for the sale of paddy and jute. The number of artisans' societies also increased, especially those among the weavers. However, the numerical increase did not always present the true scenario. The contemporary official sources noticed that the inability of the special types of societies to get together sufficient funds for their purpose posed a great difficulty in the way of their expansion. It was felt that these non-credit societies were not quite able to gain the confidence of the investing public, while the central cooperative banks accustomed to the landed security of credit societies were generally reluctant to finance them.⁷⁸ Special types of central societies known as industrial unions were formed with a view to solving this difficulty, undertaking the joint supply of raw materials to the industrial societies and the joint sale of their products. However, apart from the Bankura and Dacca Industrial Unions, these unions were not able to make much headway. At the official level it was realized that a liberal measure of financial assistance from the Government in the shape of loans was needed for the development of societies of this type, but the existing rules for the grant of loans to the cooperative societies by the Government, which were drawn up by the credit societies, were considered not liberal enough to suit the requirements of the industrial societies.⁷⁹ Proposals were accordingly formulated during the mid 1920s (1924-25) and were submitted to the Government for the amendment of the rules and for the adoption of a system of guarantee by the Government to the financing institutions for a part of the loss that might be incurred by them in providing

⁷⁷ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1923-24, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1924

⁷⁸ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1924-25, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1925

⁷⁹ *ibid*

financial assistance to the industrial societies.⁸⁰ Thus the formulation of the non-credit aspect of the movement too remained primarily in the hands of the officials and the government and thus the participation of the so called small men in these non-credit endeavours was not expected to be spontaneous. The approach of the officials to the non-credit side of the movement remained rather formal emphasizing more on the protocol of the non-credit societies which often remained beyond the comprehension of the ordinary members of the society. The provincial governments realizing the appalling condition of the movement, tried to overcome their indifference through amendments of the prevalent acts and rules, instead of taking an initiative for bringing about development and regeneration of the people concerned through the cooperative programmes which would perhaps have been more effective.⁸¹

All this suggested that a dialogue did not develop between the government backed Department of Cooperation and the people for whom the movement was meant, the former remaining insensitive to the needs and demands of the latter. The voluntary workers sought to fill this gap by trying to draw the attention of the concerned Ministers in charge and the Registrars of Cooperative Societies to sympathetically deal with the cooperative matters and their associated problems. They being actively involved in the cooperative movement at the primary level or the grass-root level felt that ignorance of the common people, their distrust in cooperative associations and to a certain extent the insensitive approach of the government which was often interpreted as its lack of involvement crippled the movement rather early. It was thus felt that the need of the hour was a human mind which would perceive the movement beyond official connotations and would give the members especially those from below a feel of comfort to spontaneously initiate and participate in their own cooperative endeavours, however small or insignificant they might be. Such attempts might not always be economically

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ Lecture delivered by Saral Kumar Ghosh, Chairman, Reception Committee, Rajshahi-Malda Cooperative Conference held on 1st, 2nd April, 1939 – reported in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Baishakh, 1346(B.S), Calcutta

viable but would enable the people to imbibe the spirit of cooperation in their own way not essentially bound by the legal aspects of the cooperative movement. The workers from their practical experience with different kinds of cooperative experiments understood the potentials of the cooperative movement both in its ideological and experimental aspects and realised that cooperative societies of various types should be ideally characterized by democratization. They felt that though financial support and cooperation were necessary from the government from time to time, it was the state control which sapped the essence of the movement and estranged it from the people. In their opinion the term 'state-controlled cooperative' was thus self contradictory.⁸² The necessity was being felt to give an independent identity to the movement by trying to bring about a workable balance between state intervention and non-official initiatives. And the field for working it out was thought to be the non-credit sector.

Indeed, the importance of the non-credit aspect of the movement was gradually being emphasized both from the official and non-official quarters. The distinction between the officials and the non-officials seeks a clarification here. The term 'official' refers to those who served the Department of Cooperation in various capacities. The non-official cooperative movement based on indigenous initiatives, which we will discuss mostly in the next chapter, was gaining strength alongside. But it is important to note here that there were non-official elements even within the official movement and there was an overlap between the official and non-official aspects of the movement. The non-officials associated with the movement covered a wide range which included the nationalist thinkers, the nationalist leaders, the revolutionaries, the social activists, the rural workers, certain Europeans involved with cooperative experiments in India during that time and many more who in their individual capacity became a part of the movement. They conceived the movement in their respective ways imbued with their respective ideologies and their cooperative ventures were set against specific historical context, were in tune with the local needs and sought to utilize the

⁸² *ibid*

local resources in their attempt to give autarky to the people of the region. These non-official efforts could not always thrive on the meager fund at their disposal and needed to consolidate their financial position with government aids which necessitated their registration under the prevalent Cooperative Societies Act. Such steps naturally blurred the clear divide between the official and the non-official aspects of the movement. Again the bureaucrats from Bengal associated with the official movement had a better understanding of the ground reality in the province and in the districts in which they worked and thus remained more sensitive to the needs of the people and the difficulties the movement faced. Mention may be made of Gurusaday Dutt who as a serious nationalist tried to make the cooperative movement a real people's movement, albeit as a government official. Similarly, Jamini Mohan Mitra as the Registrar of Cooperative Societies in Bengal, recognizing the importance and necessity of cooperative credit societies in India, which was predominantly agricultural, poverty stricken and dependent on traditional rates of interest, suggested if cooperative credit could bring out the dormant capital of India for productive use, it could introduce banking habits among the masses and provide some preliminary banking facilities for them. The communal tensions of the time, Mitra felt, were perhaps a serious impediment to the progress of the movement.⁸³ These kinds of understanding by the officials who tried to probe deeper into the root of the difficulties that the movement faced, were often similar to the approach of the non-official voluntary workers who sought to initiate the movement taking into consideration the objective situation. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the necessity of non-official leadership and participation of voluntary organizations was felt by the senior officials themselves to realize the far reaching possibilities of the movement. The mutual influence of official and non-official initiatives at least to some extent seems to be the historical reality.

⁸³ J.M. Mitra, *Cooperation in Bengal* (The Presidential Address at the Chittagong Divisional Conference held at Feni on 12th & 13th June, 1926), Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society, Calcutta, 1926

A holistic and a comprehensive approach to the cooperative movement was indeed necessary where sharp distinctions between credit and non-credit aspects, between official and non-official initiatives might not be strictly adhered to and the primary objective would be to regenerate a locality or a community at the micro level in the best possible way through cooperative efforts by trying to optimally utilize the local resources. Such an orientation was likely to motivate the movement from within. The government authorities too realized that the real aim of the agricultural cooperative movement which was to turn out a self-reliant, contented and thrifty race of peasantry would remain distant until and unless a comprehensive scheme for dealing with the entire economic aspect of the life of a cultivator was seriously taken up. This meant that the cultivator should not be left to his fate or resources after being given credit facilities. He should be made to carry out a definite agricultural programme for improvement of the quality and quantity of the produce, he should be given improved seeds, manure and irrigational facilities where necessary, his health and the sanitation of the village where he lived should be properly looked after, arrangements should be made for his training in small cottage industries, his produce should be taken over and sold in the best possible market and he should be trained in cooperative principles through concrete benefits derived by following such principles. In this way the society concerned would seek to control the total economic aspect of the life of the member-cultivator and the crux of the future cooperative policy would be to deal with the "whole man". The department was hopeful that it was possible to effectively carry out such a scheme by a closer and sympathetic contact with the cultivator.⁸⁴

Attempts were made to eventually overcome the apprehension regarding the supposed limitations of the multidimensional cooperative endeavours in the non-credit sector. It might be pointed out that Jamini Mohan Mitra as the Registrar of Cooperative Societies during the 1920s took the initiative to establish and run

⁸⁴ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1939, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1940

the buying and selling societies as part of the non-credit sector, Sukumar Chatterjee as the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies (ARCS) of the Rajshahi-Maldah division put in all his effort to enrich the jute industry on the principles of cooperation. The ARCS of the Dacca division, Afsar Ali formed the Nilokhi Canal Excavation Committee which took the initiative to dig the 'Arshad Ali Canal' in 1937 which improvised the 'Beel Boyaliya', excavated under the supervision of the former ARCS Anwar Hussain. The Nilokhi khal (canal) in Raipura thana in Dacca district inundated about 5000 bighas of land which was thus made arable.⁸⁵ This instance was considered to pronounce the success of the cooperative endeavours on new lines.⁸⁶ However, once again, the word 'success' is a blanket term and also a relative one which does not quite reveal the extent to which the people from which social category were benefitted and what was their nature of participation. The passing references to the so called successful cooperative projects made in the official records and in the speeches and lectures of those associated with the movement at the official as well as the non-official level miss out the people's voice and rather emphatically appreciate the initiatives of those officials from the Presidency who sought to make the movement people-oriented. The people's response, reaction if any, once again, remain an area of silence.

Even the new strides that the movement took, were under the guidance of a leader, an official or a non-official volunteer. The leaders sometimes came from within the rural society, who formed a heterogeneous group comprising of certain benevolent landlords, educated individuals of the region, activists and other voluntary workers who sympathized with the cause of the movement. Leadership was also sometimes provided by certain bureaucrats who from their experience of working in the villages realized that guidance to a certain extent was required to make the cooperative initiatives effective. The leaders, according to the

⁸⁵ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1937, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1938

⁸⁶ Lecture delivered by Saral Kumar Ghosh, Chairman, Reception Committee, Rajshahi-Malda Cooperative Conference held on 1st, 2nd April, 1939 – reported in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Baishakh, 1346(B.S), Calcutta

circumstances, were sometimes vocal in upholding the necessities of the villagers and sometimes acted as a tool for executing the decisions of the government regarding cooperation. It all depended on the person concerned, his dedication to the movement or otherwise. The pulse of the people from below could be comprehended to a certain extent through these 'leaders' or voluntary workers. For example, in seeking to provide the peasants and the others from the lower rungs of the society with cooperative opportunities apart from credit, it was felt that Cattle Insurance Societies as proposed by the Madras Government could show a way to the primary societies in Bengal as a solution to the problem faced by the small farmers on the sudden death of their cattle. These leaders also tried to uphold before the small farmers of the villages the examples from Russia and other western countries and thereby motivate them to consolidate their small holdings through cooperation and subsequently introduce better farming methods to improve the fertility of land and thus increase the rate of production. The villagers were made aware of the benefits of the cooperative production societies in increasing the agricultural resources and of the viability of such societies even in the remote villages of Bengal.⁸⁷

An instance of the practical guidance by Gurusaday Dutt was seen when he as the Collector of the district of Howrah in 1927 advised the villagers of Raiganj to establish an agricultural society together with a malaria prevention society because if the deforested, reclaimed plots of land be made arable, then the breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes could be prevented. It was hoped that the establishment of two societies would complement each other and would improve both health and economic conditions. Subsequently, a malaria prevention society was established in Raiganj through the initiative of Andul Mouri Rural Welfare Association. The society, though small, cleared the swamps of a few areas and introduced cultivation of turmeric, brinjal, lady's finger, cucumber, gourd, pumpkin, banana and groundnut in those areas. The members actively associated with this work were Jyotishchandra Chakrabarti as the society's

⁸⁷ *ibid*

secretary, Shailendranath Chakrabarti, Nanilal Dutta, Kalipada Koley and others. These plots were all adjacent to the residential areas and so the women of these families were also involved in the supervision of the saplings.⁸⁸ The endeavour, however small, deserve mention as exemplary.

It was being increasingly felt that comprehensive village welfare programmes would not be meaningful without the dedication of committed voluntary workers and that a coordination between the allied departments was equally necessary. The workers by working with the villagers wanted to make them realize the words of Sir Horace Plunkett, "Better farming, better business and better living" and thereby give a meaningful form to the non-credit aspect of the movement in the rural areas.

V. BETTER-LIVING SOCIETIES

The approach of the official authorities regarding the development of the non-credit side of cooperative activity was almost similar and was expected to lead to the improvement of general conditions of the agricultural population. The officials felt that with the better business side of agriculture was intimately connected the question of improvement which would secure better and increased production in those subsidiary rural industries in which agriculturists were already engaged. They further thought in terms of introduction of similar other suitable cottage industries to occupy the spare hours of agriculturists. They realized that if such measures were not taken the great mass in India could not have the means of "better living" which was the real goal of all cooperative efforts and for the attainment of which "better farming" and "better business" were the means. "Better living", according to the official sources, included the physical well-being and intellectual advancement of the rural population together with a more satisfying social life in the countryside.⁸⁹ Better living through physical well being

⁸⁸ Rajendranath Shome (ed.), *Gramer Daak*, Ashar-Sravan, 1334(B.S), Howrah, Pg.34

⁸⁹ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1925-26, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1927

was primarily concerned with the economic improvement of the masses and intellectual advancement of the rural population through cooperation was considered to be a sort of adult education. The cooperative movement sought to offer whatever assistance it could to the educational authorities to promote general and practical schemes of primary education. The contemporary official records took a note of the movement's contribution towards establishment and maintenance of schools at many centres within its sphere of influence.⁹⁰ The demand for universal primary education came almost univocally from both the illiterate members of the village society and the departmental officers and honorary workers. Even the village credit societies scattered throughout the province tried to contribute in their best possible way to the campaign for compulsory primary education. In many instances their desire for education took a practical shape and they tried to achieve this so far as their means allowed.⁹¹ Such prominent endeavours were initially launched in the northern districts of Bengal, e.g. the Naogaon Ganja Cultivators' Cooperative Society in Rajshahi district spent a sum of Rs. 12,381 during the year 1929 on education and subsidized 3 high English schools and 45 primary schools within the area of its operations; the Nawdabhoga Village Society in Bogra district maintained a night school for the children of the poorer people and many other village societies not only established night schools to eradicate illiteracy, but also tried to promote adult education through those schools. These programmes showed a joint initiative of the officials and the non-officials because the officially registered societies provided funds for certain cooperative programmes undertaken by the voluntary workers associated with the movement as non-officials. Among such ventures in districts of Bengal mention may be made of the night schools started by the societies organized by the Rural Reconstruction Department of Rabindranath Tagore's institute at Bolpur; in the Presidency Division, 2 upper primary schools were started at Balia and Mukkia by the societies in the Raruli area of Khulna

⁹⁰ *ibid*

⁹¹ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1927-28, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1929

district; and in the Sadar subdivision of Khulna district, one night school and a free girls' school were started by the Dakhin Chandani Mahal Society, one free lower primary school by the Deara Society and one Middle English School by the Raghunathpur Cooperative Bank.⁹² These initiatives showed a ray of hope to the region concerned at the primary level and were to be seen more as a part of awareness programme which sought to show the members a way to 'better living'.

The objectives of the Better-Living Societies of the villages at the primary level were improvement of sanitation and hygiene, reform of bad customs prevalent among the members, inculcation of thrift and prevention of waste by discouraging extravagant ceremonial expenditure, promotion of education and healthy recreation, cultivation of the sense of self-respect, resistance to corruption, encouragement of self-help and mutual help and overall improvement of physical and moral well-being of the members.⁹³ The aims spelt out touched the basic chords of rural welfare and were in harmony with the rural reconstruction schemes adopted by the Department of Cooperation and other allied government bodies during the 1930s. Societies in the presidency of Bengal with different names like Rural Reconstruction Societies, Relief Societies, Anti-malarial and Public Health Societies worked almost in the same direction and gained popularity in course of time. These were initially composed of middle class people⁹⁴ charged by nationalist sentiment and social sensibility in those heyday of nationalist struggle, which was moreover broadening into a mass movement. Rural reconstruction in particular appeared very important in the nationalist agenda. It is learnt from the Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1936 that towards the close of the said year, a scheme of revitalizing the rural area by a network of rural reconstruction societies conceived entirely on the basis of thrift, self-help and mutual aid was taken up. The

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ Eleanor M. Hough, *The Cooperative Movement in India*, OUP, Bombay, 1959, Pg. 218

⁹⁴ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1936, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1937

authorities in charge of the department too realized that the moral and ethical side of cooperation did not receive proper consideration till then and their immense potentiality for the uplift of the rural masses had almost escaped notice. Thus the Better-Living Societies tried to chart a new line of cooperative activity which intended to teach the villagers how to balance their family budget by increasing their resources through subsidiary occupations, deriving maximum benefit from their existing sources of income, improving local sanitation by concerted action on an economic basis, imparting elementary education and training in weaving, providing for their recreation and arranging by the profitable utilization of their leisure hours for the promotion of welfare through joint action and voluntary labour and a donation in crop according to individual means.⁹⁵

Two conferences of cooperators were held at Dacca and Chittagong in 1938 in which the needs of the movement based on difficulties experienced along with various measures for the improvement of the condition of the societies were discussed and during the same time radio talks were delivered from the Central Broadcasting Station at Calcutta by the officials and non-officials associated with the movement on subjects of general interest and utility relating to various classes of cooperative societies. The then Finance Secretary of Bengal, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar in his address as the Chairperson of the Cooperative Conference of Dacca Division held in Jamalpur (Mymensingh) on 2nd July, 1938 said that the cooperative movement in its completeness remained unexplored in India and that the movement would be justified only when the ideology of cooperation would be adopted in all aspects of life, e.g. improved methods of production, improved sales procedure etc. which would ultimately contribute to 'better living'. He felt the necessity to mobilize and utilize the stray and unorganised manpower of the poorer classes in a cooperative way which would bring to the fore their latent capital or resource. He lamented that this wider ideology of cooperation was not quite clear either to the protagonists or to the workers of the movement, leave

⁹⁵ *ibid*

alone the common mass.⁹⁶ What is really important to note is that N.R. Sarkar in spite of his official responsibilities in the colonial government sought to identify and locate the shortcomings of the cooperative movement as it was being worked out in India under government initiative and thus had his reservations in considering the cooperative activities as 'movement'. He realized that the purpose of the movement would be defeated without the spontaneous and active participation of the people from below for whom the movement was meant and that its success largely depended on their strength of mind, veracity and mental makeup. Reviewing the movement in the contemporary context of Bengal, he pointed out that lack of mutual trust among the common people was perhaps due to their daily hardships under a colonial regime which had also sapped their spirit of cooperation. The primary cooperative credit societies of the time worked like any other financial institution transacting money wherever and whenever necessary but overlooked the basic human factor of cooperation on which they were based and thus could not even inculcate the sense of responsibility of repaying the loans in time among the members. As a result the villagers failed to understand that the success of the cooperative societies also depended on their cooperation and their awareness in this regard. Sarkar tried to address the problems of the primary societies where apart from meeting the need of credit, his main focus was on a set of moral values based on cooperative spirit which would not only enhance the credibility of the members from below but also show them the path to self-help and self-sufficiency and would thus arouse their self-confidence. The villagers, the peasants and other members from the lower rungs of the rural community would thereby learn to work together for rural reconstruction or regeneration and the establishment of the Better Living Societies would initiate them into such programmes which would include education, health, food, clothing, agriculture, cattle rearing, trade and commerce of the rural community. These measures intended to be an attempt to make the movement relevant and meaningful for the villagers and build and consolidate the movement

⁹⁶ Summary of Chairperson Nalini Ranjan Sarkar's address at the Cooperative Conference of Dacca Division – Source - Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Ashar, 1346(B.S), Calcutta

from within by making the villagers from below conscious of the benefits of cooperative endeavours and thus understand the importance of participation. The Better Living Societies therefore sought to address and redress the individual agonies of the villagers and tried to find a solution in a holistic way through the application of cooperative principles.

The officials and the non-officials in introducing Better-Living Societies made a preliminary survey of the village concerned and thought in terms of a society which would enrich the life of the villagers by alleviating their specific difficulties and in this way an effort was made to make the conditions favourable for the development of the cooperative movement.⁹⁷ Efforts were made to establish such societies through which the villagers would be able to directly perceive and feel the betterment of their socio-economic life, improvement in the educational and health conditions and thus imbibe the essentials of the ideology of cooperation.⁹⁸ The response of the villagers in such a situation was considered to be spontaneous as they could experience the process of the movement themselves through participation. It was claimed that every care was taken to formulate the movement in consonance with the needs of the people where the people supposedly did not pay just a lip service to what the government and the officials said. Such strides were in contrast to the earlier moves of the Department when it just imposed a credit society in the village without considering the actual needs of the people there and feeling their pulse.

In Bengal, the Better-Living Societies were initially introduced as Rural Reconstruction Societies. The scheme for rural reconstruction started receiving impetus and the officers-in-charge of audit circles came into more personal contact with the rural people and encouraged them in rural welfare work. In pursuance of a general desire on the part of the co-operators of Bengal, a scheme was drawn up by the Government explaining the aims and objects of

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ 'Bangey Samabay Pallisanashkar', Khan Bahadur A.M. Arshad Ali, in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Jyaishtya, 1345, Calcutta

rural reconstruction on cooperative basis. A programme of work was outlined and followed under three main heads of improvement of the economic condition of the members by adopting subsidiary means of increasing income, spread of primary and vocational education and improvement of public health and sanitation. The scheme was forwarded towards the end of 1936 to all District Officers inviting their cooperation and support, to all Central Cooperative Banks and departmental officers to give effect to it in areas where rural people have evinced sufficient interest and enthusiasm to improve their conditions by working the scheme on the basis of thrift, self-help and mutual aid.⁹⁹

The Government and the official reports concluded from the marked increase in the number of these kinds of societies from 27 to 512 during 1936-37 that the scheme appealed to the imagination of the rural people and also noted that the amount of voluntary donation and subscription received from the members was also "encouraging".¹⁰⁰ Some societies of this category worked for rural development like construction of roads, excavation of irrigation canals and introduction of handloom among the members etc. and made their mark within a short period of time, e.g. Badalpara, Masakhali, Sarishabari, Satkura, Gayghar, Raipur, Narsindi and Kaliganj Rural Reconstruction Societies in Dacca Division, Debidwar, Chandina, Hatia, Dalpa and Narottampur Rural Reconstruction Societies in Chittagong Division, Srikrishnapur, Rajibpur, Birballavpara Rural Reconstruction Societies in Presidency Division, Bandhgora Rural Reconstruction Society of Burdwan Division and Jagatsinghpur, Lakshmikole, Dhanasri, Patulipara and Abulia Rural Reconstruction Societies of Rajshahi Division. Though these expanding figures and words of appreciation do not quite reveal the true version of participation from below, yet what deserves mention is that these figures, observations and reports indicate that some efforts were at least taken to diversify the movement from the late 1920s and make it people-oriented to a certain extent. Everything still functioned under the supervision of the

⁹⁹ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1937, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1938

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

government, but a field was being created by the joint initiative of both the officials and non-officials where the people's perspective did not go completely unheeded. The cooperative movement during this time aimed to overcome the deficits and impediments of socio-economic and moral life of the rural community and thereby contribute to its regeneration in the best possible way. The focus was on consolidation and concentration on a few model societies which would inspire similar societies rather than extension of the movement through multiplication of societies.¹⁰¹ But the reality was that many societies of this kind were handicapped in their activities for want of subsidy from the Government¹⁰² and the dependence on government remained.

VI. COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT – A NEW COURSE ?

A certain change was perceptible in the approach of the Government as years passed by and it tried to structure the movement keeping in mind the demands at the primary level and not merely thrusting a few credit societies on the villages. The Department of Cooperation in Bengal thereby took to a policy of cautious expansion in new directions and of improvement of the existing position by gradually restoring the equilibrium between the financial position of the Provincial Bank or Central Bank at the district level and the Primary Societies, and gaining the confidence of the investing public in these institutions, with the ultimate object to convert these credit institutions at different levels, province, districts or villages, into agencies for short-term loans only for productive purposes and raising of crops, and to leave the field of long term business required by the agriculturists to Cooperative Land Mortgage Banks.¹⁰³ Credit still drew the main attention of the cooperative endeavours of the time and thus changes were evident in that sector too, but together with the technical changes

¹⁰¹ Summary of Chairperson Nalini Ranjan Sarkar's address at the Cooperative Conference of Dacca Division – Source - Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Ashar, 1346(B.S), 1939, Calcutta

¹⁰² Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1938, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1940

¹⁰³ Resolution No. 2513 C.S. issued by Cooperative Credit and Rural Indebtedness Dept., Cooperative Societies, Govt. of Bengal dated the 4th November, 1938

a change was discernible in the thought and the orientation of the authorities which to a certain extent tried to bridge the divide between them and the members from below. It became increasingly clear to the government that the agricultural credit movement in the province had reached a stage where a casual approach would not suffice and that no measure which did not go to the root of the peasants' troubles would help to revive or rehabilitate it.¹⁰⁴ The Bengal Cooperative Societies Act of 1940, the first Provincial Act of undivided Bengal, thereby sought to solve some of its administrative difficulties and enabled the societies more effectively to deal with the recalcitrant members or wilful defaulters and to prevent the repetition of the mistakes committed in the past.¹⁰⁵ It was realized at the official level that in order to alleviate the problems from their roots, a close contact with the cultivators at the grass root level needed to be established which would enable the former to empathise with the difficulties and hardships of the latter and thus work out a solution which would be acceptable to them. It was hoped that the officers of the department and of the Central Cooperative Banks at the district level working jointly in 'proper spirit' at the primary level in the villages could bring about desirable results within a reasonable time.¹⁰⁶ But everything needed to be worked out carefully and cautiously by the officials as their officious attitude would mar the 'proper spirit' and thus defeat the purpose.

Regarding the response from below we have to depend on the official sources which state that the conviction gradually dawned on the villagers that they too had a duty to the societies and they showed more patience, sympathy and forbearance in their dealings with the societies.¹⁰⁷ This became quite evident in the work of the Irrigation Societies especially and in the work of the Anti-malarial

¹⁰⁴ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1941, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1942

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1939, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1940

¹⁰⁷ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1936, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1937

and Public Health Societies. Though the study of these two kinds of societies would be taken up in detail in the subsequent chapter on Towards Community Development : Some Select Examples of Cooperative Venture, it is relevant to mention that the irrigation societies, mainly confined to western Bengal, especially in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan and parts of Midnapore worked successfully mostly with the combined effort of poor and illiterate villagers with no outside help, except that of the organizing staff provided by the Cooperative Department.¹⁰⁸ The Anti-malarial Societies also experienced the major schemes being supplemented by a series of minor schemes in villages promoted through the joint efforts of the villagers themselves.¹⁰⁹ True spirit of cooperation was seen in the working of the local anti-malarial societies near Labpur in the district of Birbhum in collaboration with the Labpur Union Board and this illustrated how the two types of rural organizations could exist side by side and work for a common goal by supplementing the activities and the resources of each other.¹¹⁰ However, the enthusiasm did not last long as was noted by the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies in 1929.¹¹¹ These isolated references do not acquaint us with the general scenario but give a glimpse of the rather less known area of true-to-the spirit cooperative initiatives.

The general course of the cooperative movement followed the tide of time which too left an impact on its progress. The secure financial position, stable credit and regular profits of the central societies at the district level, as units of cooperative administration, gave a general impression of a flourishing state of the movement. However, these assessments were partial and superficial as the condition of the primary societies in the area concerned was not taken into consideration which

¹⁰⁸ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1927-28, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1929

¹⁰⁹ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1933, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1934

¹¹⁰ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1927-28, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1929

¹¹¹ *ibid*

might have totally lacked in the spirit of cooperation.¹¹² The shortcomings of the movement blatantly surfaced during the times of crisis, e.g. the worldwide economic depression of 1930-31 and the second World War from 1939 to 1945.

The adverse economic conditions in Bengal during and following the economic depression of 1930-31 put a severe strain on the movement which prominently brought to the fore its defects and weaknesses. The main shortcoming that was identified was the incompetence and indifference of local management which could even neutralize the efficiency and good management of the central society or of the department. It was apprehended that if such a trend became common and was allowed to persist, it would have a regressive effect on the movement.¹¹³ Remedial measures were accordingly adopted to counter these tendencies and the priority was to improve the orientation of the individual members and the management of the primary societies towards cooperation which would improve their working conditions. The focus was thus to consolidate and rehabilitate the movement rather than to expand it.¹¹⁴ But it was extremely difficult to make much progress in the face of the economic debility of the time. The situation worsened by the heavy floods in July and August, 1931 which almost destroyed the crops in the districts of Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, Dacca, Mymensingh and Faridpur bordering upon the Brahmaputra and the Padma.¹¹⁵ Though these districts were mostly located towards the northern and central parts of Bengal, the vibes of the loss could also be felt in the southern districts. The local deficiencies and disasters were compounded by the economic crisis of the time which disturbed credit conditions in all countries and across all regions in an unprecedented way which also told upon the cooperative movement in an adverse way. The catastrophic fall in the prices of agricultural produce increased the burden of indebtedness and the cultivators were the worst hit as they were

¹¹²Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June,1931, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1931

¹¹³ ibid

¹¹⁴ ibid

¹¹⁵Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June,1932, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1933

the first to feel the fall in prices and were the last to get the benefit of recovery.¹¹⁶ The cultivators of Bengal were harder hit than their counterparts in any other province of India owing to the slump in the price of jute which was virtually a monopoly of the southern districts of Bengal and the high price obtained for it during the preceding decade enabled them to live by a certain standard and to borrow on a scale unknown to the cultivator in any other province.¹¹⁷ Since the cooperative movement was primarily concerned with agricultural finance, the prevailing low prices of agricultural produce seriously affected the repaying capacity of the primary borrowers who generally depended on the sale of jute and paddy for the repayment of their debts. These practical difficulties necessitated a re-examination of the prevalent conditions and it was found that in many areas the members had already taken up the cultivation of other subsidiary crops and were going from one to two crops to overcome their inability to make substantial payment. The officials dealing with the problems of the time suggested that a scheme should be drawn up for every member of a rural society under which “he would scrape together something towards the monthly payment of interest by the exercise of thrift and by adding to his income from the cultivation of subsidiary crops and from subsidiary occupations, e.g. sale of eggs, poultry and vegetable farming”.¹¹⁸ According to the government reports, this system was adopted with encouraging results. It is further learnt from the official reports that the emphasis was to consolidate the movement, improve the bad societies, weed out the defunct ones after all possible attempts at their reconstitution failed and make the best collection possible in the prevalent circumstances.¹¹⁹ These measures tried to address the problem from its roots, thus portraying the moral responsibility of the concerned department and officials and the very thought of alleviating the economic hardships of every individual member suggested a somewhat pro-people approach of the officials.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

This implied change in orientation might be explained in terms of Benjamin Zachariah's argument that a change was discernible in the conventions of imperial discourse from the 1920s and 1930s. He points out that from the 1858 Government of India Act 'for the better Government of India' till the Act of 1935, the Government of India was required to present to Parliament a 'Statement.....exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress of India' where there was no clear separation of its moral and material aspects. Though the material aspect was a more immediate concern leading to stress on statement of accounts and administrative reports, that did not mean that the moral aspect was ignored. Zachariah notes that the format of the reports substantially changed from the 1920s and 1930s when they were written by a single author, the Director of Public Information, Government of India, and contained more continuous narrative and less facts and figures, but the moral tone remained intact with implicit and explicit references to the need for British rule to maintain the moral order.¹²⁰ The new format perhaps facilitated the foregrounding of the moral aspect. This moral 'concern' might have consciously prompted the department and the officials concerned to adopt people oriented measures. It might also be noted that by the 1930s "the single-minded consistency and confident dogmatism" which had characterized official thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was gradually eroding and "serious rethinking" became necessary especially in the face of the Depression, the second World War and tremendous political unrest.¹²¹ But the hangover of the system of governance of the preceding period, whose priorities were "overwhelmingly imperial" continued and as a result the pro-people overtone evident in some of the measures of the Department of Cooperation could seldom make its mark on the overall policy. In certain cases even if the "new ideas" were imbibed in formulating new policies, their

¹²⁰ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.45

¹²¹ *Ibid*, Pg.82-83

implementation remained doubtful,¹²² thereby creating a gap between theory and practice.

However, theoretically at least, the “new ideas” were evident in areas dealing with ‘development’ in India. ‘Development’ in the 1930s incorporated among other themes ‘village uplift’, ‘rural reconstruction’, ‘constructive work’, ‘cooperative farming’, ‘cooperative credit’, ‘self-reliance’ and improvement of the human material constituting the ‘nation’ and ‘nation-building’, which had strong extra-economic connotations.¹²³ A probe into the Annual Reports on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal Presidency reveals the frequent use of these terms and themes, perhaps in an authoritative tone to justify the benevolent aspect of the cooperative movement during the 1930s. For example, the Annual Report for the year ending on 30th June, 1938 stated that though the movement could not yield much positive results, especially in the field of agricultural cooperation, the experience gathered in the process was “so much valuable for nation-building” and that “the real aim of the agricultural cooperative movement was to turn out a self-reliant, contented and thrifty race of peasantry”.¹²⁴ The same report further stated that the crux of the future cooperative policy would be to deal with the “whole man” which not only suggested the moral aspects of the movement but also “the claimed benevolence of development through imperialism”. This kind of thought process might have prompted the promotion of the non-credit side of the movement with the introduction of new categories of societies like Better Living and others from the mid 1930s. Zachariah in his work points out that with the hopes of a soon-to-be-won independence emerging from the 1930s, ‘development’ as improvement or progress was wholeheartedly embraced within a comprehensive framework¹²⁵ but this benevolence was a ‘constrained benevolence’ because everything still worked within the broad

¹²² *ibid*

¹²³ *ibid*, Pg.44

¹²⁴ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1938, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1940

¹²⁵ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.44

parameters of British and colonial interests.¹²⁶ Posited vis-à-vis these official ideological trends was the indigenous construction of the ideology of cooperation which also touched the similar themes as a part of the broad canvas of 'development'. Perhaps the colonial ideology in the late colonial period had an urge for convergence with the nationalist ideology in this regard.

Meanwhile the outbreak of the second World War affected the course and the priorities of the movement. As an immediate consequence of war, there was some rise in the price of crops for a brief spell but the benefit from better price of crops was counterbalanced by the rise in the price of other commodities of daily use; and moreover, the benefit went more to the profiteers than to the actual growers. And the jute cultivators were perhaps the worst hit as most of them had already sold off their stock before the price reached a high level and their difficulties aggravated in the flood affected areas. The cooperative movement was also affected by these stresses and strains and the attention was more on the consolidation of the existing societies, especially the crop loan societies, for supplying seasonal credit to the agriculturists to overcome their immediate difficulties. Wartime conditions, the need for feeding soldiers and other people helping the war efforts perhaps necessitated linking of credit with marketing which marked a new phase of the movement. Efforts were made to develop the resources of the agriculturists and organization of greater number of marketing societies during this time facilitated a more profitable disposal of their produce. Due to uncertain economic conditions during the war, there was a tendency among the people to withhold payment and thus the task of collection became more difficult. This difficulty was the most pronounced in the Chittagong division, one of the worst affected areas, from where nearly half the total arrear crop loans were due.¹²⁷ During these years of crisis the cooperative movement followed a policy of consolidation and cautious expansion. This kind of caution perhaps reflected the accepted notion among the realistic thinkers in Britain that

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.82

¹²⁷ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1942, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1943

India might well be lost to the Empire.¹²⁸ The British Government in India was in a very difficult state itself and thus did not want to take any chance of new experiments with cooperation.

The wartime crisis was further aggravated by the Famine of 1943 when the Government undertook procurement and distribution of certain commodities to meet the prevalent food situation in the Province. Rice and other essential items disappeared from the villages owing to several factors, more particularly, war-time policies like the Denial policy¹²⁹ and speculation in grain trade that encouraged hoarding activities and a sharp rise in prices. This gave an opportunity to a large number of central cooperative banks and the multipurpose societies to act as Government agents for procurement and distribution of commodities and the commission they earned brought them considerable relief and thereby their revenue position improved. The multi-purpose societies during this time earned a substantial profit. They mainly marketed paddy and as its price rose abnormally high, they were able to dispose of their stock in a very advantageous market. The Government often questioned the Agricultural Cooperative Credit and Rural indebtedness Department about cultivators taking advantage of the high prices of food grains in order to liquidate their debts.¹³⁰ Indeed, the fact that certain cooperative societies made profit during the terrible famine, siding with the British government and the wily grain-traders reflects not only on the ghastly man-made character of the famine, but also on the alienation of these societies from the really needy people. The profits accrued remained confined to a handful, hardly benefitting the people from below and the margins. During this period there was also an increasing demand for Cooperative Stores mainly due to wartime necessities. The important Central and Urban Banks and village societies were permitted as an emergent measure to open stores for equitable distribution

¹²⁸Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.83

¹²⁹ Denial Policy – The policy to remove rice and other essential items and boats and bicycles from the inland areas of Bengal in order to prevent Japanese intrusion

¹³⁰ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine, Bengal 1939-45*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2009, Pg.168

of controlled commodities and this was supposed to have checked mushroom growth of stores societies.

It is learnt from the Annual Report of 1943 that jute sale societies were established as an experimental measure at Belakoba in Jalpaiguri and Sarisabari in Mymensingh at the instance of the Indian Central Jute Committee. The speculative business policy was considered to be primarily responsible for the collapse of the old jute sale societies and the new societies were supposed not to have allowed any scope for such speculation. The new societies received the jute produced by the members, graded it and then sold it to the local balers without retaining the stock that was absolutely necessary. The Report notes that the advantage of better price realized on sale of jute by grading went ultimately to the producers who often lost considerably by sale of their produce on "estimation" basis to the dealers.¹³¹ But the scholars working on the famine of 1943 find that this crisis had exposed the monopolistic control of the jute manufacturers over raw jute production and marketing.¹³² It is doubtful whether the benefits of the new arrangement of the cooperative societies reached those cultivators who worked on the fields.

The situation therefore seemed to remain extremely grim for the people from below, both in the rural and urban areas. Famine relief came from both the Government and non-official organizations and gruel kitchens were opened in the affected areas.¹³³ These measures were inadequate compared to the intensity of the crisis and the avenues of livelihood for the common people were gradually being sealed making the situation further gruesome. The village industries were largely destroyed and though there was a general shift towards agricultural occupations with an increased dependence on share-cropping and wage-labour, the agricultural occupations too could not withstand the crisis, leaving the villagers destitute. These ruined and shattered people remained "invisible to the

¹³¹ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1943, Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1945

¹³² Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine, Bengal 1939-45*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2009, Pg.154

¹³³ Barun De (ed.), *West Bengal District Gazetteers, 24 Parganas*, Calcutta, March, 1994

Authority”.¹³⁴ In the throes of such crisis, the people themselves could not think of any cooperative experiment to make their village cottage industries survive and neither did the Imperial Government think of any cooperative endeavour for the rehabilitation of the people at the primary level. The limited horizon and perspective of the cooperative movement as it had been evolving in colonial India thus came to the fore.

Srimanjari in her work *Through War and Famine, Bengal 1939-45*, shows that wartime inflation and famine and particularly a shortage of yarns and looms badly affected the weavers and the spinners of many regions of east Bengal. The situation worsened when the war drew closer and there was a decrease in cotton sales and an increase in the prices of raw cotton. By 1944, the weavers were completely dependent on moneylenders for yarn who took advantage of the illiteracy of the weavers. Srimanjari refers to the regions which were worst hit, for example, Kushtia Sub-division in Nadia, Sidhirganj and Noakhali. She notes that the situation improved after the war, when a cooperative society, the Vikrampur Weavers Cooperative Society formed with 6,660 members managed to raise nearly three lakh rupees as working capital.¹³⁵ But she regrets that such relief and rehabilitation work could not make much headway and that moneylender-traders dominated the marketing of yarn and the weavers faced a severe shortage thereby suggesting that there was no significant improvement in the deplorable condition of the small weavers. In the face of hunger and destitution were lost the subtle human emotions of mutual trust and cooperation. Certain isolated cooperative experiments indicated the rather limited reach and the limited impact of the movement.

Of course, the cooperators wanted to believe in the movement. “The movement may suffer from temporary reverses, but it can never die.....such are its potentialities for doing good to the masses that its latent forces must bring back

¹³⁴Richard Stevenson, *Bengal Tiger and British Lion: An Account of the Bengal Famine of 1943*, I Universe Inc, New York, 2005, Pg.156

¹³⁵ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine, Bengal 1939-45*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2009, Pp.173-174

life and vigour to it” – Opening words of the speech by Nagendranath Mukhopadhyay, Chairperson of the Reception Committee of the Nadia-Murshidabad Divisional Cooperative Conference held on 3rd and 4th February, 1940¹³⁶ sought to voice the trust of the cooperators in the prospects of the movement in India, particularly in Bengal. Similar opinion was spelt out by most of the protagonists of the movement in Bengal when the colonial period was gradually drawing to a close, especially during the years following the provincial autonomy in Bengal in 1937. The ideology of cooperation encompassed the ideas of democracy and egalitarianism which made it more relevant to the people of India whose unity was at stake on different fronts in the build-up to Independence and Partition. To encounter these discords a common apolitical platform was becoming necessary which was hoped to be ideally provided by the cooperative organizations or societies. Though it cannot be said that the hope was satisfactorily fulfilled.

¹³⁶ Source – Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Ekadash Sankhya, Falgun, 1346(B.S), Ekabingsha Barsha, , Calcutta

CHAPTER 2

THE COLONIAL REGIME AND THE INDIGENOUS COOPERATIVE INITIATIVES

The cooperative principle was also evident in different kinds of indigenous socio-economic endeavours which sought to encounter the atrocities of colonial rule in their respective ways. The ideology of cooperation thus expressed itself through a variety of experiments, which might have been sporadic, but developed independently and irrespective of the official and formal formulation of the cooperative movement. Yet there were interesting points of convergence and divergence with the official aspect. Thus what seemed to evolve was an 'other' aspect of the movement which has generally not been highlighted in the study of the cooperative movement. This chapter would seek to trace certain such indigenous cooperative experiments in Bengal.

I. SWADESHI URGE BEHIND INDIGENOUS COOPERATIVE EFFORTS

Tracing the roots of indigenous cooperative efforts, it may be pointed out that Ashwini Kumar Dutta was perhaps the first to initiate the people of Bakhraganj district (Barisal) into constructive work in a rather informal way based on the ideas of self-help, mutual help and cooperation. He established the Brajamohan School and Brajamohan College in 1884 and 1889 respectively, primarily to inculcate in the students the virtues of community service and mutual help from a very early age. To introduce the students to constructive activities he organized societies like 'Little Brothers of the Poor', 'Band of Hope', 'Band of Mercy' and 'Friendly Union' with the cooperation of the teachers and students of the school and college. They worked in the remote areas of the district seeking to instill in the common people and the people from the margins certain moral principles. They worked for the poor, nursed the sick especially in the epidemic prone areas

and lent all kind of help in times of emergency and crises, e.g. extinguishing fire. Through these humanitarian activities Ashwini Kumar Dutta sought to invoke the spirit of patriotism among his students.¹ The involvement and the dedication of the young people even motivated the unlettered villagers in some areas to form small associations and collect funds even in their small way to carry on similar activities. These endeavours tried to bring the rich and the common people together to work for the common cause to help the underprivileged. The essence of cooperation was evident in all these initiatives and they took an independent shape long before the formal cooperative movement tried to chart a course in this direction.

However, Haris Chandra Sinha in an article in 1930-31 claimed that the cooperative movement in Bengal had been pioneered by Ambika Charan Ukil and Rai Parbati Shankar Chaudhuri long before it took actual shape in the rest of India.² We will talk about Ambika Charan Ukil later. Parbati Shankar Chaudhuri, zamindar of Teota of Rajshahi district, formulated a detailed scheme for village grain banks or *dharmagolas* in the late 19th century to fight famine. The initial plan was to secure contributions of grain after a bumper harvest, generally as a charity measure, and to store it up for future use, not only by contributors but also by other villagers, who were, however, to be charged a somewhat a higher rate of interest than the former.³ Gradually these methods were replaced by more up to date principles by which every member, besides paying an annual subscription of 8 annas for membership, deposited as much paddy as he could spare from the year's crop in the bank. This fund was then utilized for distribution amongst the members either for seed, or in years of scarcity for food, every borrower repaying the bank one *maund* for every *maund* borrowed, after harvesting his crop. The contribution of the zamindar to the scheme was a

¹ Unpublished Thesis – Indrajit Sarkar, *Militant Nationalism in Barisal (1908-1938)*, Jadavpur University, 2013

² 'Cooperation in Bengal', Haris Chandra Sinha, in P.C. Mahalanobis (ed.), *The Vishva-Bharati Quarterly, Volume 8, Parts I & II*, 1930-31, Shantiniketan

³ *ibid*

godown at Joyganj and other arrangements for storage elsewhere.⁴ The original idea was to call these grain banks *Lakshmi Golas*, but the name was changed to *Dharma-Gola* so as not to hurt the religious sentiments of the non-Hindus and not to obscure the principle of “each for all and all for each.” The first grain bank was started by Chaudhuri at Joyganj (Thakurgaon subdivision) in the district of Dinajpur as early as 1892.⁵ This institution became very popular among the cultivators and several other *golas* were set up in the Dinajpur circle of the zamindari. The example was also replicated in other states of Teota, notably in Gaulundo in 1902. The contemporary journal *Dawn*, August-September, 1902 published Parbati Sankar Chaudhuri’s scheme at Gaulundo in detail covering 53 points and Surjya Kumar Ghoshal also mentioned it in *Bharate Annakashta*, 1314 (1907). The idea was revived in 1907 and at the initiative of the proprietors of *Bangabasi an Annarakshini Sabha* (Society for Preservation of Grain) was set up for the promotion of grain banks. But when the proposal was raised by Durgadas Lahiri at the Bengal Provincial Conference of the Congress held at Behrampore from 29th to 31st March, 1907, it hardly aroused interest. A formal resolution was subsequently passed without discussion and the scheme seemed to have remained mainly on paper.⁶

In Bengal, the first decade of the 20th century, i.e. the years of extreme nationalism and *swadeshi*, saw the adoption of the ideology of cooperation based on the principle of mutual help and “self-help”, and thus interestingly indigenous experiments in this direction were already in practice when the colonial government passed the Acts of 1904 and 1912. The primary goal of the extremists was *swaraj*, though it had different meanings and interpretations for different leaders. To begin with, for Bepin Chandra Pal, *swaraj* was complete autonomy absolutely free of British control. He felt that required arrangement

⁴ <http://en.banglapedia.org> – accessed on 07/5/2015

⁵ ‘Cooperation in Bengal’, Haris Chandra Sinha, in P.C. Mahalanobis (ed.), *The Vishva-Bharati Quarterly, Vol. 8, Parts I&II*, 1930-31, Shantiniketan

⁶ Haricharan Das (ed. & published), *Swaraj*, 24th Chaitra, 1313 (B.S), , Calcutta

should be made for establishment of self government in the villages⁷ and that village life should be rejuvenated through a variety of concrete self-help efforts.⁸ He realized that there were certain areas like health care, cleaning of roads, excavation and maintenance of drainage and sanitary system and other welfare activities for which cooperative efforts were essential and pragmatic. He felt that in this way the seeds of nationhood could be sowed in the villages. Bepin Pal was all praises for the volunteer community group of Mymensingh that sincerely worked for the country and the local community. This made him realize that if such volunteer corps which were constituted on a temporary basis could be made permanent, they would be able to render certain essential services to both the towns and the village communities, e.g. extinguishing fire, providing security services, providing health care services by constituting Ambulance Corps and Nursing Band, reclamation of wastelands and other allied public utility services, providing basic education to the community by establishing night schools. The students of Barisal had already taken certain initiatives regarding Ambulance Corps and Nursing Band.⁹ Pal had faith in such endeavours which according to him were not lone ventures but were works of cooperation. Such ventures would also instill in the volunteers a kind of courage, self-discipline, mutual trust and tolerance.¹⁰ All this was hoped to contribute to self-empowerment or *atma-shakti*.

It may be pointed out that Sumit Sarkar identifies *atma-shakti* as expressed through constructive swadeshi as one of the four major trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement.¹¹ As a criticism to the policy of 'prayers and petitions' of the early Congress, self-reliance and constructive work became the new slogans in which among other things the need for concrete work at the village level to

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore(ed.), *Bhandar, Pratham bhag, Pratham Sankhya*, Baisakh, 1312(B.S),1905, Calcutta, Pg.43

⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, Pg.283

⁹ 'Amader Volunteerdal', Bepin Chandra Pal in Rabindranath Tagore(ed.), *Bhandar, Jyaishtya*, 1312(B.S), Calcutta, Pp.76-80

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, Chapter-'Trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement'

rejuvenate the socio-economic life of the villages was emphasized. This was to involve initiation of efforts for village self-government, education on national lines, provision of small irrigation works at village level, system of rural credit at low rates of interest, settlement of disputes without resort to the courts of law.¹² These efforts at self-help together with the utilization of traditional popular institutions, like *mela* or fair were felt to be the best methods for drawing the masses into the national movement.¹³ The Indian political leaders looked back to what they considered to be ancient Indo-Aryan political traditions as alternatives to Anglo-Saxon political systems. The Indian tradition was described as more democratic with emphasis on village self-government.

According to Sumit Sarkar, the general trend against the way of the moderates broke up into two currents after 1905 when the scope for a broad political movement was created by the Partition.¹⁴ One current that can be called 'constructive swadeshi' was represented by a rather quiet and non-political tone which emphasized on self-development and the other represented by political extremism, characterized by passive resistance which included among other things boycott of British goods, development of their indigenous alternatives and aimed at immediate independence rather than partial reforms or slow self-regeneration".¹⁵ The political programmes that were being envisaged had a social agenda in which socio-economic resurgence through cooperative methods was harped on. Consequently a number of *samitis* or associations or societies were formed during this period to translate such programmes into practice.

Sumit Sarkar notes that most of the samitis or organizations that were formed had closer connection with politics and could hardly reach beyond the frontiers of the 'Hindu bhadralok community'. However, 'constructive swadeshi', according to him, found more serious and sincere advocates among certain individuals and

¹²Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore, An Interpretation*, Penguin Group, New Delhi, 2011, Pg.94

¹³ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, Chapters – 'Techniques of Mass Contact' & 'Swadeshi Organisation – Associations and Samitis'

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Pg.48

¹⁵ *ibid*

groups,¹⁶ among whom Rabindranath Tagore was the most prominent. Sarkar traces Tagore's plea for *atma-shakti* or self-reliance in his compositions in the mid 1880s, but it became bolder during the Swadeshi movement when he proposed to his countrymen to build up their own strength through constructive economic work and he hoped that such endeavours would eventually bridge the gap between the educated and the masses.

Such ideas of Tagore were evident in his *Swadeshi Samaj* address in July, 1904 and at a meeting in Town Hall on 25th August, 1905, where he appealed for all-round efforts to promote self-help in the countryside through the revival of the traditional village community or *samaj*. In 1905 an attempt was made to make the programme of constructive swadeshi more concrete when Byomkesh Mustafi, one of the organizers of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad tried to work out a detailed blue-print for the constitution of a swadeshi samaj by setting up a pilot project in a selected area. Though the area was not specified, it was decided to set up a committee of five, chosen by the inhabitants of each village to promote swadeshi art and crafts, set up schools, dispensaries and gymnasia, undertake drainage, irrigation and road construction projects, to make provision for arbitration courts, model farms and *dharmagolas*. Tagore made repeated pleas for such constructive 'nonpolitical' village work, but could hardly get any support from the political leaders.¹⁷ He thus had to initially confine his efforts to his own zamindari in the districts of Pabna, Rahshahi and Nadia.¹⁸

Though many considered these initial ideas to be utopian, the spirit of self-help and cooperation was already being expressed through different efforts to promote swadeshi sales through exhibitions and shops from the 1890s. Mention may be made of Tagore's Swadeshi Bhandar in 1897, Jogeschandra Chaudhuri's Indian Stores in 1901, Sarala Debi's Lakshmir Bhandar in 1903.¹⁹ The message of self-help in industry and education spread fast and a number of swadeshi schemes

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.344

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Pp.345-347

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Pp.346-347

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Pg.55

were introduced, e.g. textile mills and improved handlooms, river transport concerns, match and soap factories, earthenware and tanneries. The Bengal Chemicals was started in 1893 by Prafullachandra Ray and it may be noted that he was very much concerned about the wellbeing and welfare of the workers in his factory. To inculcate the values of thrift and cooperation in the workers, he in course of time established an employees' cooperative in his factory.²⁰ Constructive swadeshi, keeping itself away from direct political agitation, also found support from personalities like Nilratan Sarkar, Ambikacharan Ukil and Bipradas Palchaudhuri who too focused on industrial and commercial self-help. Ambikacharan Ukil of Dacca, was a dedicated organizer of cooperative ventures in banking and insurance. He was considered to be an inspiring figure in economic practice than in theory.²¹ His constructive enthusiasm for cooperation led to the establishment of the Indian Pioneers' Cooperative Limited in Calcutta in 1893, considered to be the first cooperative society in India of the Rochdale type and the Cooperative Union of India in the same year, the first of its kind being affiliated to the British Cooperative Union and the International Cooperative Alliance of Europe. Other cooperative institutions like the Indian Publication Society Limited which published the quarterly *Cooperative Review* and the Triplicane Cooperative Urban Society established in Madras in 1904 too came up under his guidance. He was also the founder and the first organizer of the Hindustan Cooperative Insurance Society Limited (1907) and Cooperative Hindustan Bank Limited (1908). With a view to social welfare he registered the Dharma Samabay Limited in 1911 with a capital of Rs. 30 crores.²² This institution could not work for long and had to be closed down for a number of reasons and some very serious charges and allegations were brought against it and also against Ambika Charan Ukil. The government appointed E.W. Viney to investigate and report on the affairs of this organization, but the enquiry report was not

²⁰ 'Karmabir Sir Prafullachandra Ray', Phanindranath Basu in Tarakchandra Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Chaitra, 1326 (B.S)/ 1919, Calcutta

²¹ Shib Chandra Dutt, *Conflicting Tendencies in Economic Thought*, Calcutta, 1934, Pg.8

²² Subodh Chandra Sengupta & Anjali Basu (ed.), *Sansad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Vol.II, 5th Edition, Shishu Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, July, 2010

disclosed.²³ There have been many criticisms to Ukil's cooperative ideas and experiments. For example, Benoy Sarkar noted that though Ukil was the mastermind behind so many cooperative ventures, he did not write much on the idea and policy of cooperation.²⁴ Haris Chandra Sinha, on the other hand, acknowledging Ukil to be a pioneer of the cooperative movement in Bengal, felt that the societies started by him were not cooperatives in the strict sense of the term and that only rudiments of cooperative principles and a faint consciousness about them could be traced in those societies.²⁵

Amit Bhattacharyya in his work *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal, 1900-1920*, notes that there was a mushroom growth of cooperative insurance companies in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but most of them functioned for a rather brief period. In a case study of the Hindustan Cooperative Insurance Society, he points out that the finances in Bengal during the first decade of the twentieth century were largely controlled by the foreign banks and insurance companies and a large amount of money was drained out in the form insurance protection and remuneration for financial service. Thus to protect indigenous interests, the Hindustan Cooperative Insurance Society was formed in May, 1907 which proposed to raise funds from the Indians and invest them for the promotion of indigenous commerce and industry. It also sought to provide employment opportunities for the younger people of the country. Ambika Charan Ukil was its main organizer and Surendranath Tagore as its General Secretary formulated its constitution and its financial scheme. The society faced certain problems, for example, the share money received for registration was almost exhausted to meet the preliminary expenses, the running expenses could not be expected to be met from the premium income for some years and the Indian industrialists were not willing to provide funds without any controlling power. To

²³ Amit Bhattacharyya, *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal, 1900-1920*, Calcutta, 1986, Pp.250-251

²⁴ Haridas Mukhopadhyay, *Benoy Sarkarer Baithakey*, Calcutta, 1942, Pp.302-304

²⁵ 'Cooperation in Bengal', Haris Chandra Sinha, *The Vishva-Bharati Quarterly, Volume 8, Parts I & II*, 1930-31, ed. P.C. Mahalanobis, Shantiniketan

overcome these difficulties, the Society adopted the policy of “one-man-one-vote”, the basic principle of any cooperative organization.²⁶

Cooperative principles were adopted by this Society primarily to fulfil its commercial exigencies. It started with a capital of Rs. 1 crore divided into one lakh shares of Rs. 100 each, the persons associated with it were mostly landowners and professionals and worked in the urban area. The basic message of swadeshi inspired this organization, but it essentially catered to the requirements of the wealthier sections and remained beyond the reach of those from the margins. This particular society and also those of its kind thus represented a different tenor of cooperation where the orientation was just like any other business organization. Even Surendranath Tagore, who was a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore and a dedicated volunteer of the rural constructive programme and had established cooperative societies in Shilaidaha for the economic upliftment of the local agricultural labourers, as the General Secretary of the Hindustan Cooperative insurance Society, applied cooperative principles to promote the organization on purely business lines. Thus the pragmatism of the cooperative experiments revealed itself in various fields during the Swadeshi period.

Anyway, the broader social sensibility involved in the ideology of cooperation remained a rallying point and Sumit Sarkar points out that most of the provincial conferences in Bengal adopted resolutions for self-help and sustained constructive work through village associations which, according to him, was perhaps a strategy to keep the Bengal nationalists united even after the Surat split. It was decided at the Pabna Provincial Conference in February, 1908, to set up a permanent committee consisting of Rabindranath Tagore, Surendranath Banerjee, Motilal Ghosh, Jogeshchandra Chaudhuri and Hirendranath Dutta to promote swadeshi industries and agriculture, national education and arbitration courts, cooperative

²⁶ *Ibid*, Pp.242-245

banks, dharmagolas and sanitation measures in the villages.²⁷ However, most of these programmes were not executed.

There were still a few *samitis* or societies that did not carry the nomenclature of cooperative societies but in certain cases imbibed the basic spirit of cooperation. Mention may be made of Suhrid Samiti of Mymensingh which made considerable use of magic-lantern lectures²⁸ and the volunteers attended the local melas or fairs in large numbers, though their main purpose was to enforce boycott. Cooperative ideas were more at work when the Barisal Swadesh Bandhab Samiti organized famine relief work on quite a large scale during the latter half of 1906. The Swadesh Bandhab Samiti functioned with a central organization and local units and branches in the villages, and apart from “practice of swadeshi vow and work” and enforcement of boycott, it also worked for the welfare of the public which included sanitation, physical and moral training, education and prohibition of bad practices.²⁹ These informal indigenous cooperative initiatives worked towards what later came to be known among the official cooperators as ‘better living’, associated with the non-credit aspect of the official cooperative movement of the mid 1930s. It may be noted that these cooperative practices were prevalent at a time when the contemporary state sponsored cooperative movement thought only in terms of credit.

These nationalist cooperative efforts in their very limited way were hoped to bring about the well-being of a village or a locality and its inmates on one hand, and on the other, tried to initiate the people from below into such ventures which would strengthen their morale, their self-reliance and would make them understand the importance of self-help in the context of colonial subjugation. The orientation in this direction was hoped to prepare the common people at the primary level for the ongoing nationalist movement and also in the long run for

²⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, Pg. 343

²⁸ Translation of a Report of the Suhrid Samiti dated 1 June, 1909 covering the years 1307-13, 1900-06 – Home Political Proceedings Deposit, October, 1909, n.1

²⁹ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, PPH, New Delhi, 1973, Pg. 383

an independent country to be established after the termination of colonial rule. In this way efforts were made to arouse the patriotism of the village communities and the patriotic fervor enkindled at a smaller level was hoped to generate similar feelings for bigger entities, one's province and then one's nation.³⁰ It was being conceived as a self-learning process and the leaders perhaps acted more as facilitators upholding before the fellow members the essence of their programmes inspired by the ideology of cooperation.

An issue of the swadeshi periodical *Bhandar* published a discussion initiated by the moderate leader of the Indian National Congress, Surendranath Banerjee on, "What are the ways in which the public organizations could maintain mass contact?", where Shri Nagendranath Ghosh³¹ pointed out that the gap between the upper and the lower levels of the society should be bridged through cooperation and interaction between the two. Shri Hirendranath Dutta³² and Shri Ashutosh Chaudhuri³³ in the same discussion suggested that organization of fairs or *melas* in the villages would provide a common platform for exchange of views and exhibition of the local agricultural and cottage industry products and would be more effective than mass meetings.³⁴ Their ideas were similar to those of Rabindranath Tagore in his *Swadeshi Samaj*. Tagore saw in these village fairs the promise of binding the inner and the outer domains, 'the home and the world' which would give the villagers an opportunity to look and think beyond their

³⁰ 'Swadeshi Andolon', Second part of Rabindranath Tagore's address to the students of Dawn Society – Published in Rabindranath Tagore(ed.), *Bhandar, Pratham bhag, Pratham Sankhya*, Baisakh, 1312(B.S), Calcutta,

³¹ Nagendranath Ghosh – (August,1854 – 3.8.1909) – a renowned journalist and educationist, professor and later Principal of Metropolitan Institution, presently Vidyasagar College, edited two English weeklies *Law Review* and *Indian Nation*, acted as the Commissioner of Calcutta Municipal Corporation and Honorary Judge of Calcutta Police Court, a Moderate in his political affiliations and a supporter of the system of self-government

³² Hirendranath Dutta – (16.1.1868 – 16.9.1942) – an eminent philosopher, Premchand Raichand scholar, was closely associated with Annie Beasant, led most of the important movements in Bengal till 1920, a Moderate, participated in all sessions of the Congress from 1894 - 1920

³³ Ashutosh Chaudhuri – (12.6.1860 – 24.5.1924) – an eminent barrister of Calcutta High Court, associated with a number of welfare organizations, emphasized on self-reliance, took initiative to establish village communities, took a leading role in the foundation of National Council of Education

³⁴ 'Prashnottar'- 'Prashna', Shrijukta Surendranath Banerjee – 'Aajkalkar public udyoggulir shange prakrit sadharaner jogajog rakshar upaye ki?' – Published in Rabindranath Tagore(ed.), *Bhandar, Pratham bhag, Pratham Sankhya*, Baisakh, 1312(B.S), Calcutta,

narrow interests and interact and communicate with an open mind leading to the enrichment of one and all.³⁵ Elements of idealism and utopianism might have overridden such thoughts but the concrete experiments revealed both the pragmatism and the limitations of such ideas. Anyway, as Sumit Sarkar points out, these samitis and voluntary organizations through their constructive activities “anticipated much of later Gandhism and represented the practical counterpart of the theoretical exercises of Rabindranath in his *Swadeshi Samaj* and Aurobindo in the *Doctrine of Passive Resistance*.”³⁶

In spite of all concerted efforts, certain internal weaknesses curbed the progress of the movement and the inability of the movement to develop a base among the masses posed a grave problem. Sumit Sarkar identifies the lack of a peasant programme, the inability to mobilize the peasants on issues and through idioms which could have a direct appeal for them as the main lacunae of the Swadeshi Movement. Eloquent speeches, articles and songs on brotherhood and common devotion to the motherland, however sincere, could not break the apathy of the peasants. Debiprasanna Raychaudhuri, after a long tour in the *mufassil* districts admitted that the majority of the lower orders were utterly indifferent to swadeshi.³⁷ Thus apart from the peasants of Barisal who joined the constructive activities perhaps out of their love and respect for Ashwini Kumar Dutta, Sumit Sarkar could not trace any evidence of direct participation of peasants even as samiti activists.³⁸

Sumit Sarkar also points out that Hindu-Muslim relationship was yet another weak area of the Swadeshi movement. Though the initial phase of the movement depicted some signs of unity between the two communities, the growing tendencies of Muslim separatism followed by the communal riots (1906-07) revealed the failure of the movement to win Muslim support and also the elitist

³⁵ ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, Bhadra, 1311(B.S), *Rabindra Rachanavali*, Vol.XII, Baishakh,1368(B.S), Calcutta, Govt. of West Bengal

³⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal,1903-1908*, New Delhi, 1973, Pg.337

³⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.79

³⁸ *Ibid*,Pg.359

orientation that the movement assumed in course of time.³⁹ The prevailing situation was thus not very congenial for any kind of cooperative endeavour from below. When the political leaders failed to arrest the forces of dissension that were fast creeping in, it was Tagore who connected the communal barrier with the gap between the predominantly Hindu educated elite and the masses. He perhaps rightly realized that “sentimental effusions over the motherland” and flourishing oratory were not enough to bridge the gap, which was the prerequisite for any true national movement.⁴⁰

Tagore thus got disillusioned with the Swadeshi Movement, especially its Hindu character and repudiated it.⁴¹ The alternative that he put forward was “a patient, sustained, unostentatious constructive work in the villages, organizing associations, introducing cooperative techniques in agriculture and handicrafts, instilling a sense of unity and self-reliance among the raiyats, so that national consciousness really reached out to the masses”.⁴² He made a passionate plea for mass contact through constructive work and his appeal to all was to come down into the midst of the people of the country, spread out a network of multifarious welfare activities, expand the scope of their work, broaden it in all directions so that everybody, whether from the higher social rungs or from the lower, could come together combining the minds and the efforts of each other.⁴³ Tagore’s difference from the extremist nationalists in this respect was that the extremists considered mass contact valuable but assumed it to be already achieved or easily attainable through rhetoric, songs and festivals. Sumit Sarkar refers to two periodicals in this connection, Debiprasanna Raychaudhuri’s *Nabyabharat* and Krishnakumar Mitra’s *Sanjibani*. *Nabyabharat* from 1906 was concerned about the weak mass support for swadeshi and *Sanjibani* (February, 1908) called for patient work among

³⁹ *Ibid*, Pp.79-82

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Pp.82-84

⁴¹ ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s Vision of India’, Anuradha Roy in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Rethinking the Cultural Unity of India*, Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 2014

⁴² ‘Sabhapatir Abhibhashan’, Pabna Provincial Conference, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XII, Govt. of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1961, Pp. 805-826

⁴³ ‘Path o Patheo’, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XII, Govt. of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1961, Pp.974-991 & Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, PPH, New Delhi, 1973, Pg.84

the poor, but neither of them were able to clearly understand the link between the communal and social issues as Rabindranath Tagore did.⁴⁴

A series of important essays were written by Tagore during 1907-08 which were considered to be “anti-traditionalist” where there was a decisive rejection of sectarian barriers and the building of a *Mahajati* in India on the basis of broad humanism and this anti traditionalism pervaded practically all his writings thereafter.⁴⁵ Sumit Sarkar while analyzing Tagore’s programme of constructive rural work finds it to be primarily humanitarian where the basic problems of land relations remained unaddressed and opines that though he felt the necessity to bridge the gap between the elite and the masses, his programme could not suggest a pragmatic solution to the problem.⁴⁶

A detailed study of Tagore’s theory and practice of rural reconstruction based on the principles of cooperation will help us to understand the possibilities and the limitations of the cooperative movement as pursued by him.

II. EFFORTS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND HIS ASSOCIATES

Tagore is regarded as one of the pioneers of the cooperative movement in the country.⁴⁷ According to him, a loner could never be a complete person. The basic philosophy of mankind is to cooperate and this cooperation in various spheres brings about human welfare and development.⁴⁸ His idea of cooperation evolved in the context of the socio-economic and political scenario of contemporary India. He felt that India would be rejuvenated and the villages which were the nurseries of Indian civilization could be revitalized if the Indian economy and society

⁴⁴Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, PPH, New Delhi, 1973, Pp.84-85

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.85

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.91

⁴⁷‘Rabindranath and the Cooperative Idea’, Bipasha Raha, in Hiren Chakravarti (ed.), *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol.119, Nos. 228-229, Parts-I&II, January-December,2000, Calcutta & *Living A Dream, Rabindranath Tagore and Rural Resuscitation*, Bipasha Raha, 2014, New Delhi, Pg.69

⁴⁸ ‘Samabayniti’, Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XIII, Calcutta, 1961, Pg.419

adopted the ideology of cooperation.⁴⁹ Tagore in his concern for villages felt that the basic work of development should begin in the villages and to implement such a programme he tried to confer on a few villages the responsibility of their own education, health and financial improvement through cooperative efforts.⁵⁰ Considering India's socio-economic debility Tagore felt that the areas of weakness should be redressed from within and for this he recommended economic cooperation among the Indians themselves at the micro-level and also cooperation with the greater world. He believed if the roots of cooperation extend far and wide in the ground, the base of the movement would be strong and firm.⁵¹ Tagore recommended that the leaders of the nation should think more broadly e.g. in terms of a rural cooperative movement and comprehensively address the totality of the problem.⁵² But narrow economic competition, man's tendency to outdo his fellow mate in wealth and power thwart the essence of cooperation. In the opinion of Rabindranath, accumulation of wealth and power in cooperation with all the members of the community would equitably benefit every member in turn. According to him, the wealth of the affluent does not have the power to alleviate the poverty of the masses. Such alleviation rather springs from the strength of the masses and this strength is nothing but the strength of cooperation. Rabindranath had the confidence that if the acquisitive power of the individuals could be put together then it would prove to be far stronger than the capital of any individual. Tagore realized that man is prone to acquire wealth and this natural desire cannot be artificially throttled. This desire could thus be realized in a wider perspective if every individual of a community step out of his narrow self interest and cooperate with each other in accumulation of wealth or power.⁵³ This in other words is the basic ideology of cooperation – "Each for all and all for each."

⁴⁹ Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan*, Thacker Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1962

⁵⁰ 'Palli Prakriti', Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XIII, Calcutta, 1961, Pg.532

⁵¹ 'Samabayniti', Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XIII, Calcutta, 1961, Pg.419

⁵² Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed. & compiled), *The Mahatma and The Poet, Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1940*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1997, Introduction, Pg.10

⁵³ 'Samabayniti', Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XIII, Calcutta, 1961, Pp.419-421

Rabindranath Tagore had seen in the ideology of cooperation the promise of freedom of mankind as a whole. He felt that when many people together would imbibe the spirit of cooperation they would realize its inner strength and this in turn would lay the foundation of the freedom that he talked of. In his words, if this inner strength could be explored and implemented, then it would save India from abject poverty and misery. The inner strength that Tagore referred to was *atma-shakti* and his call to the people of Bengal in 1905 was to create and build the country from within through *atma-shakti*.⁵⁴ This *atma-shakti*, according to Shankha Ghosh, a well-known Tagore scholar, was a quest for one's emancipated self from all kinds of narrow bindings. This helped him to be associated with the greater world where one's own self could no longer predominate, and therein lay freedom.⁵⁵ Thus the ideology of *atma-shakti* worked simultaneously towards individual freedom, the country's freedom and perhaps universal freedom.⁵⁶ Ultimately perhaps it was an ideal of global cooperation. In the essay '*Bharatbarshiya Samaj*' in 1901, Tagore wrote that the great work of civilization was to unify the diverse elements, the primary focus of which was to bring about unity among the people and which was not possible without the bond of cooperation among them.

It is thus the ideology of cooperation that led to Tagore's experiments with rural reconstruction as the means to inculcate and express *atma-shakti*. Amlan Dutta too noted that Tagore's thoughts on community development or rather rural reconstruction, the term Tagore preferred to use, were based on the concepts of *atma-shakti*, cooperatives and global consciousness. Dutta considered that the formation of cooperative associations were likely to enable the rural communities to overcome their caste based social, cultural and other parochial differences and thereby yearn to be associated with a greater collectivity. This would not only lead to cooperation between man and man but would pave the way for a kind

⁵⁴ 'Satyer Ahawan', Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.XIII, Calcutta, 1961, Pp.291-306

⁵⁵ 'Aami', Shankha Ghosh, *Nirman o Srishti*, Papyrus, Kolkata, 1399(B.S)

⁵⁶ 'Rabindranather Swadesh' Anuradha Roy in Sudhir Chakrabarti (ed.), *Rabindranath, Bakpati Biswamona*, Institute of Developmentl Studies, Calcutta University, Kolkata, 2011

of global consciousness which would help man to step out of his circumscribed arena to think and work for the global community. Dutta has tended to view the process the other way round too. Thus when human consciousness would respond to the needs of the greater world, when human beings would develop global consciousness, then one would think and work for rural reconstruction in the same way as Tagore did, and cooperative endeavours would then flourish.⁵⁷

This was perhaps similar to “globalization from below” which Richard C. Williams talked of much later. In the words of Williams, cooperation should be rooted in a highly democratic, participatory and group directed process and it demands a move away from a mere collaborative attitude within a typical corporate command chain.⁵⁸ The bottomline of cooperatives was to distribute goods and services more equitably among all its members. He further added that though essentially local, cooperatives could form alliances and networks across regions, nations and even globally. They could represent a more ideal, democratic and functional globalization, a kind of ‘globalisation from below’.⁵⁹ Williams has made his study in the context of the contemporary neo-liberal economy and according to him, the goals of the cooperative movement were a challenge in the individualistic and competitive matrix of modern monopoly capitalism.⁶⁰ What Williams recommends as an orientation to empathise with the cooperative movement of the greater world and thereby extend the hands of cooperation wherever and whenever necessary is similar to the global consciousness that Amlan Dutta finds in Tagore’s cooperative ideas and experiments. A probe into Tagore’s programmes of rural reconstruction motivated by the spirit of cooperation would reveal his concern for every human being, both at the primary level and beyond, and he also drew inspiration from cooperative endeavours across the globe.

⁵⁷Rabindranather Pallisangathan Bhabna’, in Amlan Dutta, *Prabandha Sangraha*, Vol.II, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2005

⁵⁸ Richard C. Williams, *The Cooperative Movement, Globalisation From Below*, Hampshire, England, 2007, Introduction

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, Pg.34

⁶⁰ *ibid*

IIA. EXPERIMENTS IN EAST BENGAL

Tagore's cooperative initiatives started taking shape from the 1890s during his tenure in the zamindari estates of Shahajadpur, Rajshahi and Kaligram (with its headquarter in Patisar) in the district of Pabna and Birahimpur (with its headquarter in Shilaidaha) in the district of Nadia, which exposed him to the stark realities and difficulties of rural life. The deprivation of the rural community of the basic necessities of life made him think in terms of rural reconstruction and his subsequent experiments focused on agriculture, education, health facilities, water management and amity between the religious communities. He resorted to the cooperative principle to address these. To begin, with he introduced the *mandali* system which sought to bring about administrative changes in the traditional zamindari structure. This system worked towards local self-government based on decentralization of power. Each *mandali* consisting of a few villages looked after the basic needs of the villagers, worked towards rural welfare and aimed at making the villages self-sufficient by making the villagers jointly work for their own betterment. This system may be considered to be the forerunner of the village panchayat of today.⁶¹ Tagore realized that the initiative for rural reconstruction should come from the villagers themselves, and to involve the villagers in the process, he first organized a few workers in the village of Komorkandi in Shilaidaha into a *bratidal*. The main task of this group of volunteers was eradication of illiteracy, maintenance of health and sanitation, collection of useful information from the neighbouring villages and putting into practice the ideas conceived by Tagore.

Tagore narrated his scheme to Smt. Abala Basu in a letter in 1908.⁶² The Kaligram experiment was highlighted there. Kaligram was an extensive estate covering eight railway stations and the work of reconstruction started with nearly six hundred village communities. To help in the execution of rural reconstruction

⁶¹Rabindranath Pallichintar Prekhapat O Karmasuchi Rupayan', Sukumar Mallick in Supriya Roy (ed.) , *Paschimbanga, Sardhasatabarsha Rabindra Sankhya*, Ministry of Culture & Information, Govt. of West Bengal, Calcutta, 2010

⁶² Letter to Abala Basu from Rabindranath Tagore dated April, 1908, Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipatra*, Vol. VI, Calcutta, May, 1957, Revised Edition – February, 1993, Viswabharati Publication Division, Calcutta

work, Kaligram was divided into three centres of Patisar, Kamta and Ratowal. Hospitals were set up in every centre, free medicines were distributed among the villagers and nearly two hundred lower primary schools were established. After some progress in the promotion of literacy, the villagers were acquainted with the fundamentals of agriculture and infused with a broader sense of nation building. The rural welfare activities also included excavation of wells, digging of ponds, reclamation of wetlands and forests. These works in Patisar were maintained out of a fund to which the Estate contributed Rs. 1250 annually and the ryots paid 6 pies to rupee in their rent.⁶³ Some of these projects were rather expensive and the villagers often put in their physical labour as subscription to compensate for the inadequacy of funds. Tagore had all respects for this kind of 'sramdaan' which helped in making the villagers self-sufficient. These preliminary steps helped to motivate the villagers and thereby involve them in the work of reconstruction of their respective villages. The *Hitaishi Sabha* of Kaligram tried to meet the needs and demands of the villagers through introduction of literacy programmes, weaving, cottage industries, trade in agricultural produce and fish, judicial system at the village level, arrangement for drinking water and setting up of *dharmagolas* or grain banks. These endeavours sought to promote the welfare of the villages and their inmates by trying to address the problems from within in a holistic way. This multi faceted and fundamental approach seemingly appealed to the people from below and they perhaps tried to imbibe it in a spontaneous way. It is important to note here that Tagore in his work was helped by his son Rathindranath Tagore, his son-in-law Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, brother-in-law Nagendranath Chaudhuri, Kalimohan Ghosh, revolutionary Atul Sen, Upendranath Bhadra, Bisweswar Basu and others who wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to the work of rural reconstruction and community development, where they acted as facilitators trying to work hand in hand with the villagers, initiating them into the activities and not imposing the schemes from above.

⁶³ L.S.O'Malley, *Rajshahi District Gazetteer*, 1916

The extreme poverty and the financial distress of the peasants troubled Tagore and he desperately sought to put an end to the atrocities of the moneylenders on the peasants in debt. Thoughts in this direction culminated in the establishment of the Patisar Agricultural Bank in 1905, again based on the principle of cooperation. Initially he borrowed a few thousands of rupees from his acquaintances to open the bank primarily to solve the problem of indebtedness of the poor peasants. Later in 1913 he deposited his Nobel Prize money of about Rs. 1 lakh in the bank to consolidate its resources. Anyone could borrow from the bank and loan at 9% interest was given to the peasants depending on their need for credit. The bank remained in operation for thirty years, made no profit and ultimately collapsed. Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay noted that through this experiment Tagore had tried to teach the peasants in his zamindari the virtues of thrift, self control and the habit of saving.⁶⁴

The success of the rural experiments at Patisar Kaligram, however, received a setback due to the colonial intervention and the subsequent imprisonment of revolutionary Atul Sen, the leader of the Kaligram projects. Some members were also interned. The Kaligram scheme thus faced a crisis and was almost on the brink of collapse. Tagore's determination and spirit to work for villages, however, remained strong and the locale subsequently shifted to Sriniketan in Birbhum. Thus commenced the second phase of his work for rural reconstruction and community development with new vigour and novel schemes.

IIB. EXPERIMENTS IN BIRBHUM

The work in Birbhum commenced with the buying of a house and an adjoining piece of land covering a total area of 60 bighas in the village of Surul purchased from Lord Sinha at a price of Rs. 10,000. The initial work began with the new house as the centre and the Centre for Rural Reconstruction was established in Sriniketan adjacent to Surul on 6th February, 1922. Tagore requested Kalimohan Ghosh to be a part of the project and join Leonard K. Elmhirst in the new

⁶⁴ Prabhat Kumar Mukopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani*, Vol.2, Aswin,1368(B.S), Calcutta, pg.146

venture.⁶⁵ Elmhirst, an Englishman, who had studied History at Cambridge and Agricultural Science at Cornell, was invited by Tagore to help him launch his work of rural reconstruction in Surul. The proposal appealed to Kalimohan Ghosh; and according to his reminiscences, his deep faith in the ideology and methodology of work outlined by Tagore in his lecture 'Palli Samaj' and Elmhirst's modesty, dedication, compassion and respect for the downtrodden villagers did not make him think twice.⁶⁶ In the words of Krishna Kripalani, Elmhirst was a young idealist with the right passion and right scientific thinking which Tagore needed.⁶⁷

Tagore's prime objective in Sriniketan was to justifiably utilize all the available resources for the physical, mental and economic development of the villagers and to regenerate the village communities by arousing their self-respect and self-confidence and these endeavours were to be based on the indigenous agricultural pattern.⁶⁸ At the same time he wanted to look beyond the immediate political horizon and "not to be hemmed in by narrow nationalist ideas that were already out of date."⁶⁹ And thus he had no reservation in collaborating and cooperating with the West to achieve a common understanding.⁷⁰ Elmhirst arrived in Santiniketan in November, 1921. When he started working at Surul, Elmhirst had to overcome a number of initial impediments in the form of ignorance, lethargy, suspicion and social inhibitions. What is important to note is that he tried to go to the root of the problem to find a pragmatic solution. In the words of Elmhirst, ".....we were compelled to examine not merely the soil around us, but the history, social, economic and political which lies behind that condition."⁷¹ In analyzing the causes for pestilence, famine and poverty in the district of Birbhum, Elmhirst opined that community life giving way to competitive life sapped the

⁶⁵ File on Kalimohan Ghosh – Additional Collection – A.C-257(v), Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ L.K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, Visva-Bharati Publication Division, Calcutta, September, 1975 – Foreword by Krishna Kripalani

⁶⁸ File-Serial No.16, File Name-Cooperative Bank, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁶⁹ L.K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, Visva-Bharati Publication Division, Calcutta, September, 1975, Pg.22

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, Pg.20

⁷¹ 'The Robbery of the Soil', L.K. Elmhirst – A lecture delivered under the auspices of the Visva-Bharati Sammilani, as one of a series of extension lectures of Visva-Bharati, at the Rammohan Library, on 28th July, 1922 – Rabindranath Tagore presided and it was printed in *The Modern Review*, October, 1922

lifeline of the erstwhile self sufficient villages of the district making them barren and vulnerable.⁷² Elmhirst saw the remedy in the revival of the old community life on a broader basis and for this he felt that government initiative or any external intervention was not necessary. According to him, the spirit of freedom which was the true spirit of community life emanated from the people themselves and such a spirit could motivate the people to look into the totality of the problem and to find the solution accordingly. Elmhirst realized that the element of mutual trust which was being destroyed must be revived as the basis of all community endeavour. And all community endeavours should be based on the ideology of cooperation with mutual trust and self-help as the cornerstones. He tried to do away with the age-old social divisions even while reviving the old village community and thus the ideology found a broader basis in his plan. His dedication and devotion to work inspired the villagers to imbibe the essence of cooperation and join the project of rural reconstruction. In this way Elmhirst in carrying out Tagore's programme of rural reconstruction tried to involve the villagers by making them participate willingly in rebuilding their own community, their own village. Elmhirst in his personal reminiscences recounted that initially the approach was experimental and he with Kalimohan Ghosh and Dhirananda Roy had to work out with each village its own programme for social, economic and health rehabilitation.⁷³

From the accounts of Kalimohan Ghosh it is learnt that they had to work really hard during the first year to eradicate malaria from Surul and its neighbourhood. Santosh Chandra Majumdar and Gour Gopal Ghosh, the Joint Secretary of Sriniketan had also joined the others in the massive task. They started their experiment of rural reconstruction in the village of Mahidapur, a Muslim dominant village. The Muslims living in one part of the village were comparatively better off with some land holdings than the landless lower caste Hindus like the *Doms* and similar other under-classes who lived in a different part. The latter

⁷² Leonard K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, Visva-Bharati Publication Division, Calcutta, September, 1975, Pg.44

⁷³ *Ibid*, Pg.27

worked in the fields of the Muslim masters, were exploited and turned into weaklings. In contrast, the Muslims were healthy, brave, competent workers, but extremely riotous. There were frequent conflagrations between the two major warring factions of the community. The litigations which followed involved a lot of money, often to the tune of Rs. 2000, which was a lot of money in 1923.⁷⁴ However, no communal tension was hinted at. Kalimohan Ghosh stated that he and his associates tried to resolve the differences within the Muslim community by organizing a group of *bratibalaks* from among the young boys of the two factions and could successfully enlist their support by initially giving them some basic medical facilities. Within a short span of time the boys formed an effective group under the supervision of Dhirananda Ray and took the initiative to establish a night school for the children of the *Harijans* and the workers.⁷⁵ In this way the work of rural reconstruction was pioneered by the young volunteers, who in spite of their internal divides, worked together for a common cause which not only helped them overcome their factional differences but also contributed towards communal harmony as the night school was for the education of the children of the socially and economically underprivileged Hindus of the village. Their cooperative spirit was also evident in their combined effort to clear the jungles, filling up the stagnant ponds, cleaning the lake near the mosque of the village every Sunday, establishing a regular school apart from the night school, and settling the minor differences of the two groups through arbitration with the help of the village panchayat.

It is further known from the notes of Kalimohan Ghosh that subsequently a cooperative credit society and a cooperative rural reconstruction and health society were established. The village was affected by a famine following lack of rainfall in 1928 and an effort was made to overcome the crisis by establishing a *dharmagola*⁷⁶ on a cooperative basis involving members from among the residents

⁷⁴ File on Kalimohan Ghosh – Additional Collection – A.C-257(v), Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ *Dharmagola* – Almost similar to agricultural bank, the major difference being that the agricultural banks were societies with unlimited liability, whereas the cooperative *dharmagolas* were societies with limited

of the neighbouring villages, though majority of them were from Mahidapur. This *dharmagola* took loan from the Central Cooperative Bank of Viswa Bharati to buy paddy which was lent out to the members at a low rate of interest primarily to save the poor peasants from the extortion of the moneylenders of Bolpur who gave loans of rice and paddy at exorbitant rates of interest sometimes as high as 100%.⁷⁷ It may be noted here that while working in the village and subsequently in the adjoining ones with an aim to bring about economic and financial stability, the workers of the Rural Reconstruction Department of Sriniketan realized that official support especially in terms of funds was necessary to give a shape to their informal cooperative efforts.

Indeed, the Viswa Bharati Central Cooperative Bank that was registered on 22nd November, 1927 and started working from January, 1928 covering the villages in the areas of Bolpur, Nanur and Ilambazar⁷⁸ was an instance of convergence of official and non-official efforts of cooperation where one complemented as well as supplemented the other. Jamini Mohan Mitra, the Registrar of Cooperative Societies and Tarak Chandra Ray, the Collector of Birbhum took the initiative to establish it. Tagore's ideology inspired the rural and the urban cooperative societies established under official patronage. In the first annual conference of the bank held in December, 1928 (7th Poush, 1335), it was pointed out that till late the spirit of cooperation had formed the basis of rural community in Bengal where no external help was necessary to sustain their well-being which included health, education and commercial activities, and everything worked well under the supervision and guidance of the veterans who were revered and respected by the

liability, i.e. the member who takes the loan is himself solely responsible for its repayment with no responsibility of the other members. The agricultural banks of Birbhum take loans from the central cooperative bank at the district level to be distributed as loan among the members at the primary level. The central bank gets a supply of its funds from the provincial bank against interest. Thus the interest rate soars high and a part of the burden is to be borne by the debtors at the primary level. In contrast the cooperative *dharmagolas* accumulate the crops of its members only, without any aid in any form from any external agency and thus can lend the crops only to its members at very low rates of interest or at no interest.

⁷⁷ File- Serial No.16, File Name- Cooperative Bank (Viswa Bharati Central Cooperative Bank), Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁷⁸ *ibid*

rest of the community members. But the strains and tensions of the rural communities which surfaced with colonial intervention sapped the natural spirit of cooperation with a subsequent decadence of their old values. The necessity was thus felt to redress these weaknesses from within. It was being realized that measures like establishment of health centres, excavation of a few ponds and establishment of a village school would partly provide a solution, but the need of the hour was to make the villages self-sufficient through cooperative activities and thereby regenerate them by making a holistic approach to the problems. According to the conference proceedings, the Central Cooperative Bank of Viswa Bharati was inspired by this ideology, and it was also pointed out that to reach out to a larger domain, the Rural Reconstruction Department of Viswa Bharati was established.⁷⁹

Kalimohan Ghosh recollected that his scheme of *dharmagola* in the village of Mahidapur initially worked well but within two years the situation deteriorated due to the involvement of the villagers in internal strifes. The ensuing litigations financially overburdened the villagers leading to their inability to repay their overdues. All this debilitated the cooperative endeavours and was disheartening for the dedicated workers. Ghosh tried to probe deeper into the problem to realize that his inexperience itself was one of the major reasons of failure. He understood that the basic plan of setting up a cooperative *dharmagola* with villagers from no less than three villages where mutual distrust was rampant in a single village, was itself erroneous. Criticisms from different quarters, however, did not deter the enthusiasm of Ghosh and his colleagues and henceforth they became more careful in working out their plans. They resolved to set up *dharmagolas* in each of the neighbouring villages keeping in mind the objective situation in each village.⁸⁰ *Dharmagolas* were established in eight such villages and precaution was taken not to repeat the earlier mistakes. However, the *dharmagolas* could not give much relief to the agricultural labourers working in

⁷⁹ A.C. 257(v) – File on Kalimohan Ghosh, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁸⁰ *ibid*

the fields of others. These labourers were paid in kind which needed to be supplemented by borrowing crops from their respective lords which was repaid after every harvest. When the crops were almost exhausted from the *gola* at the end of the year, the farmers had to borrow paddy from the affluent householders at the rate of 14 *seers* for every *maund* which also had to be repaid. Each member deposited half a *maund* of paddy after every harvest in the *gola* which was lent out when needed at the rate of 10 *seers* per *maund*. However, it was decided by the members that in times of severe crisis following a crop failure or a devastating flood, the interest might be waived off. The need during these difficult times was met from the residual paddy crops in a few *golas* but were lent out at very high rates of interest which went against the basic principle of cooperation. This worsened the situation further encircling the poor farmer in a debt trap from which he took three to four years to escape.⁸¹

These experiments of cooperation were tried out through a trial and error method and an effort was made to learn from the mistakes. The involvement and participation of the villagers from below cannot be definitely comprehended, but every effort was evidently taken on the part of the mentors of the rural reconstruction programme to duly respect the sentiments of the villagers and not to insult them by imposing 'help'. Mutual understanding did not initially develop between the villagers and the associates of Tagore directly, till one day when a mock fire was made to break out in Mahidapur and the *bratibalaks* trained in fire fighting demonstrated how to act in such circumstances. The villagers thereafter eagerly wanted to learn the techniques of fire fighting and thus gradually a kind of fraternization began.⁸² Elmhirst approached the villagers personally tending their wounds and these personal touches gradually broke the barrier and a spontaneity was palpable in the response of the villagers. In this context Elmhirst noted that the villagers had immense trust in Kalimohan Ghosh who was considered the contact man with the local villages and Tagore regularly

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan (Tagore's Experiments in Rural Reconstruction)*, Thacker Spink & Co. Private Ltd., Calcutta, August, 1962, Pg.16

discussed the local problems with him.⁸³ But Kalimohan Ghosh had to encounter different kinds of reactions from different villages. Mention may be made of his experience in the village of Lohagora, located about ¼ th mile from Kopai river. It was a Muslim village inhabited by about 150 families, of which 50 families had their own landholdings, while the rest, which formed about 1/3rd of the total village population were '*krishans*' (labourers) working under and in the land of the former. There were no ryots in the village and the *krishans* rendered all other kinds of service to their masters apart from cultivating the fields. In times of special occasions in the household of the master, the service rendered by the *krishans* was known as '*munish*' when they were given only a day's meal with no payment in cash. To make their ends meet they had to borrow paddy from their masters and were under the total subjugation of the latter with no independent choice of occupation. These *krishans* were uneducated and weak and thus could not protest against these wrongs. The landowning sections of the village were mostly jotedars who were on the lookout for every opportunity to legally transfer and thus enjoy greater rights from the zamindars, but were not ready to make even the least compromise with the *krishans*. One such jotedar objected to Kalimohan Ghosh's rural welfare initiatives because he thought that alternative professions like weaving etc. might give the *krishans* some financial stability and thereafter they would not agree to lend their labour at lower wages which would adversely affect the agricultural prospects of the village. Ghosh was threatened by the said jotedar that his intervention in the village was thus not desirable.⁸⁴ Such experiences made Ghosh identify the different types of impediments and oppositions which marred the essence of cooperation in spite of his team's best efforts to inculcate the same among the villagers. He might have realized that without addressing the structural problems, not much betterment was perhaps possible. The structural issues covered a wide range, internal structure of the rural society with caste, communal and class divisions and external factors like

⁸³ Leonard K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, Visva-Bharati Publication Division, Calcutta, September, 1975, Pg.23

⁸⁴ A.C. 257(v) – File on Kalimohan Ghosh, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

colonialism, capitalism, global economic pressure and the like. But considering the magnitude of such a task, he looked for more immediate and practical solutions which made him feel the necessity to address the problems from within by trying to provide every villager with a rather suitable programme taking into consideration the objective situation in every village.

Efforts to base village plans on a realistic appraisal of the village needs, estimated by a rural survey, was subsequently worked out and introduced as early as 1923. There was resistance from the villagers when the survey began in Ballabhpur, 4 miles from the town of Bolpur. The villagers were suspicious and were reluctant to answer any question regarding their own village.⁸⁵ However, the workers could ultimately make an intensive study of village conditions. From the survey report it was noticed that some cooperative practices were already prevalent in the village, e.g. a system of cooperative ploughing called *gata*⁸⁶ and the *shal*⁸⁷ system of cooperation used in sugarcane cultivation. It was noted in the report that cooperative irrigation societies were there in some parts of Birbhum district, but in Ballabhpur internal disputes and differences among the

⁸⁵ Kalimohan Ghosh (ed.), *Rural Survey Report of Ballabhpur, Sriniketan*, Village Welfare Dept., July, 1926 - Preface

⁸⁶ Gata system – Where one cultivator assisted in the ploughing of a neighbour's field could claim in return from the latter a like amount of labour for his own field; if the original recipient of help had no plough and bullocks, he must give 3 days labour without plough in lieu of one day's labour with plough. If he had the use of plough and bullock, only then he would have to give in return 2 days of labour. Similar exchanges would apply to digging, reaping, threshing etc. If in a sudden emergency a cultivator required extra men, he invited his neighbours who rendered him willing assistance with labour and implements in which case all they expected by way of return was a feast.

⁸⁷ Shal system of cooperation in sugarcane cultivation – A leader was selected to direct the operations. The leader hired the press on his own responsibility either at a daily rate or on a contract for the season for 3 months from Magh to Chaitra. Each cultivator was called to supply men or bullocks in proportion to his crop. A shelter was then erected and then according to the directions of the leader, the cane was cut and brought in from the fields. Work went on day and night in shifts arranged by the leader until the entire crop of the village was entirely dealt with, the juice extracted after 24 hours of work absorbed the produce of about 5 *kottas* of land and amounted to 15 *maunds*. It took 6 men and 6 pairs of bullocks to keep a press working for 24 hours, 4 other men were required to feed the press and boil the juice so produced. The boiling pan held about 35 *seers* of juice. 1 man with 1 pair of bullock had to work till 1 pan was full which took about 1-1 ½ hours depending on the strength of the bullocks, 6 men relieved one another in turn. The first man came back after the sixth, each man and pair of bullocks thus working thrice during 24 hours and producing 3 pans of juice. An attempt was made so to arrange the shifts that each cultivator might have to work in proportion to the quantity of his crop. This however did not work out accurately in practice. The leader had to furnish his quota of bullocks, but was exempt from labour which he got free for his crop.

cultivators themselves thwarted any such initiative taken by a section of the enthusiastic cultivators. This suggested that the ideology of cooperation was not alien to the villagers. The report further noted an underlying unity among the several castes⁸⁸ residing in the village in spite of their differences, especially during some festivals when people of all castes got together. Similar isolated instances of spontaneous cooperation among the villagers were also seen in other parts of Birbhum. Mention may be made of the village of Lohagora, where in spite of its earlier mentioned dissensions and supposed apprehensions about rural reconstruction programmes, continued an age-old programme of charity in collaboration with the village mosque which reflected the mutual cooperation of the villagers and adoption and implementation of the cooperative principles. Two charitable funds of the village, the *Qurbani* Fund⁸⁹ and the *Katra* Fund⁹⁰ benefited the Muslims and the Hindus alike⁹¹ thereby suggesting communal harmony through cooperative practices. These cooperative practices were absolutely indigenous beyond the folds of the official cooperative movement and also not introduced by the rural reconstruction programme, but only brought before the public eye through the rural surveys. The prevalence of this cooperative spirit, however limited be its extent, might have helped the rural reconstruction workers find a congenial ground despite the initial resistance from the villagers. The rural workers did not make any attempt to do away with the prevalent practices, but rather took a cue from them to introduce their own schemes of rural welfare

⁸⁸ In the village of Ballabhpur there were 3 untouchable castes, (i.e. water touched by them is unacceptable to other castes), viz. Hadis, Doms & Muchis who lived in their respective localities aloof from the others; there were 5 categories among the touchable castes, viz. Brahmins, tantis (weavers), Tamulis (betel sellers), Napits (barbers), Kumbhakars (potters). During festivals Brahmins go to the house of the touchable caste and vice versa, the latter help in the work of the former as far as possible but from outside.

⁸⁹ Qurbani Fund – In the time of Id every 7 Muslims had to sacrifice a cow, 1/3rd flesh of the sacrificed cow was donated to the poor. The skin of the cow had to be deposited to the mosque. The money got from the sale of the skin remained in the custody of the mosque to help the villagers in distress. The village of Lohagora annually earned about Rs.125 from this fund. The village headman was the custodian of the fund, but misappropriation by a certain headman made the villagers lose their trust in him.

⁹⁰ Katra Fund – In the month of Ramzan every family had to contribute 2 ¾ seers of rice per member to the mosque. The money acquired from the sale of this rice was called the Katra Fund. The annual fund amounted to about Rs.200, a part of which was donated to the maulanas, maulavis and other local religious heads. The Hindus were also not deprived from the same.

⁹¹ A.C. 257(v) – File on Kalimohan Ghosh, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

based on cooperation compatible with the milieu and demand of the respective village.

WORK IN SANTHAL VILLAGES NEARBY : This catholicity was evident when Tagore and his team established centres of rural reconstruction in the cluster of the Santhal villages located between Santiniketan Ashram on one side and Ballabhpur and Surul on the other. The region was barren with extensive stretches of red sandy soil intercepted with green patches around which came up the five Santhal villages of Chumkapara, Jatapara, Balipara, Ballabhpurdanga and Bonerpukur. The inmates of these villages had migrated from the Santhal Parganas in search of livelihood and after settling in this region had made land settlements with the local zamindars and jotedars converting the acquired land into rice growing fields. However, the region being a highland was not productive enough to support the Santhal families which made both the male and the female members supplement their income through wage labour. Tagore sent some students and teachers of his Santiniketan Ashram to these neighbouring Santhal villages around 1910 to be acquainted with their day to day difficulties. Two students, Suhrid Kumar Sen and Narendranath Nandi played a leading role and within a short time they took the initiative to establish a night school. Mention may be made of a young Santhal boy, Shukla Marandi, who under the tutelage of the students of Shantiniketan Ashram, was educated and sent to Calcutta to learn the art of book binding, which became his occupation on his return and thereafter he greatly assisted in the work of rural reconstruction.⁹² This single incident became exemplary for the other members of the Santhal community and demonstrated how one's knowledge could be selflessly shared with the fellow members of the community for its regeneration, and it was the spirit of cooperation which motivated such an endeavour. The other members of the community felt an urge to follow Marandi's example and come out of the pall of poverty and ignorance. The reports of the Rural Welfare Department of Sriniketan speak of this spontaneity

⁹²*Santhal Kendre Palli Sangathan, Prachar Patramala-7, Sriniketan Palli Seva Vibhag, Poila Baisakh, 1345(B.S)*

in the response of the Santhals. In any case, such tribal communities as the Santhals always had a strong tradition of solidarity and mutuality. This must have facilitated the task of Team Tagore.

In 1934 Sriniketan established a centre for rural welfare covering the five Santhal villages. During this time Phanibhushan Ghosh through his dedicated work became a confidant of the poor members of the Santhal community and was able to arouse in them the power of cooperation based on self help. Initially 64 Santhal families joined the Rural Welfare Society which increased to 107 within four years. The basic requirements of the society came from the Santhal members who put in their physical labour and subscribed in cash and kind which was supplemented by the funds from the Rural Welfare Department of Santiniketan and some financial assistance from the Government of Bengal for construction of the school building, buying of books and other associated accessories for the students.⁹³ The pooling of resources from different sources and the involvement of the members by lending their physical labour suggested a basic spirit of cooperation that underlay the activities of the society. For effective functioning of the society, small bodies called the *panchayat sabhas* were formed from among the members of the society which took the responsibilities of departments like health, agriculture, education, small industries etc. under the guidance of experienced persons in their respective fields and a plan of action was made at the beginning of the year. Shukla Marandi was given the responsibility to oversee the work of three adjoining villages. This system proved to be fruitful for the economic and moral development of the villages.

The active involvement and spontaneity of the Santhal villagers became evident in their efforts to make the necessary arrangements for supply of water to the villages. The Santhals generally depended on the stream located in the middle of Khoai for water. Though this water was not bad for health, the provision was not adequate for all their needs. Following the negotiations by the authorities of

⁹³ *ibid*

Santiniketan and Sriniketan, the District Board excavated a well in Chumkapara, which, however, was not enough to meet the needs of the other neighbouring villages. This induced the Santhal villagers to take the responsibility on to themselves and they dug 3 wells in Balipara and 1 in Jatapara. This initiative of the villagers impressed the then District Magistrate of Birbhum, K. L. Mukherjee, on his visit to the village in 1935 and he appealed to the Union Board to give a permanent structure to the wells. The Bolpur Union Board acted accordingly. The villagers of Bonerpukur too took a similar initiative and in this way the villagers through their cooperative efforts tried to solve their problem of scarcity of drinking water. The Santhal villagers also offered free labour to maintain their respective village roads, also cleaned the drains and the ponds of the villages before and after the monsoons.⁹⁴ These endeavours at the primary level were an ideal instance of cooperation which showed the cooperation of mind as well as action. It may be noted that without mental affinity among the members no cooperative idea could be properly translated into action. The cooperation of the mind might not be possible in a larger group, but could be effectively worked out within smaller groups, particularly those traditionally nurturing a spirit of equality and mutuality. The Santhal villages also successfully carried out their scheme of *dharmagola* and the four of these villages established their own *dharmagolas*. The cultivating members of the Santhal community deposited 10 *seers* to $\frac{1}{2}$ *maund* of paddy every year and lent out the accumulated grains at low rates of interest exclusively to its members during times of crisis. The establishment of a cooperative credit society in 1928 in the Santhal villages could save the villagers from the debt trap of the moneylenders. Similarly the establishment of a cooperative grocery, inaugurated by Tagore himself, could protect the villagers from the dishonest shopkeepers of the local market. These spontaneous cooperative ventures worked to make the Santhal villages self sufficient based on self help. These villages might not have achieved economic self sufficiency in the strictest sense of the term, but their awareness about

⁹⁴ *ibid*

cooperation and their adoption of the same in encountering the difficulties of their daily life made their experiments meaningful. These informal ventures received government aid when necessary and the government usually did not interfere in the independent functioning of these villages.

ADDRESSING HEALTH PROBLEMS : The medical relief and anti malarial work on a cooperative basis was another important focus of the Village Welfare Department of Sriniketan and Viswa Bharati. It is learnt from Sriniketan Annual Report of 1927 that Rathindranath Tagore who was elected Sriniketan Sachiva at the beginning of 1927 carried out a complete reorganization of the Viswa Bharati Institute of Rural Reconstruction. The activities of the Village Welfare Department included medical relief and anti-malaria work, cooperative organization, Brati Balak organization, girls' school and adult education. It may be noted that Kalimohan Ghosh was entrusted with the works of medical relief and prevention of malaria.⁹⁵

The health cooperatives as an integral part of Rabindranath Tagore's scheme of rural reconstruction sought an endogenous solution to the problems of rural health. Rathindranath playing a key role in that endeavour, realized that any scheme of medical relief and health improvement must be on a cooperative basis and economically viable to provide sustained benefit to the rural communities. Analysing the objective situation in the villages of Birbhum, Rathindranath noticed that the villagers were mostly reluctant to accept the public health schemes superimposed upon them from outside and thereby cooperate in their execution. This lack of cooperation, according to him, enhanced the cost of the scheme beyond the reach of what the community could afford from its own resources, and therefore the scheme, if not continually bolstered from outside, was bound to fail. He further noted such schemes did not take into consideration the needs and problems of the villagers and thus the solution provided was often found to be unsuitable. Rathindranath sought to go the root of the specific problems of

⁹⁵ Sriniketan Annual Report, 1927, in Surendranath Tagore (ed.) *The Viswa Bharati Quarterly*, April, 1928, , Santiniketan

every individual village and based on them tried to work out an effective scheme for the village concerned. The scheme that he envisaged tried to work out a cooperative equation between the villagers and the health expert. The villagers, though ignorant of medical knowhow, knew best the fundamental needs of the village, and were taken into confidence by the medical personnel and were given a large share of responsibility in guarding the health of the village. He considered that there could be no true responsibility on the part of the village community, if the cost of the medical scheme was not shared by the members. According to Rathindranath, the medical schemes in the villages could neither thrive on charity, nor could totally disregard state aid or aid of private philanthropy. In his opinion, such external aids and institutions would assist in arousing the sanitary and health awareness among the villagers through education, propaganda and suggestions, but the villagers should take the initiative to participate in the active measures whenever and wherever necessary.⁹⁶ Following his father's footsteps, Rathindranath saw promise in such endogenous experiments.

Rathindranath's practical experience of working in the villages of Birbhum, especially in the vicinity of Sriniketan, made him feel that the villagers had started considering health to be largely an economic asset with which were, of course, linked their rate of production, the stability of their income and their mental wellbeing.⁹⁷ With the dawning of such awareness among the people, every careful effort was gradually being taken to devise a scheme of health work which could be maintained by the people themselves. At the suggestion of Rabindranath Tagore, Kalimohan Ghosh, the Superintendent of the Village Welfare Department was sent to study the Rural Health Organisation in Yugoslavia in 1930. At about the same time, Dr. Harry Timbres, who had wide experience of medical and relief work in Russia, was invited to help in the medical work of Sriniketan. Dr. Jitendra Chandra Chakravarty was requested to prepare a scheme of health improvement

⁹⁶'Health Cooperatives', Rathindranath Tagore in *Visva Bharati*, Bulletin No. 25, , Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, July, 1938

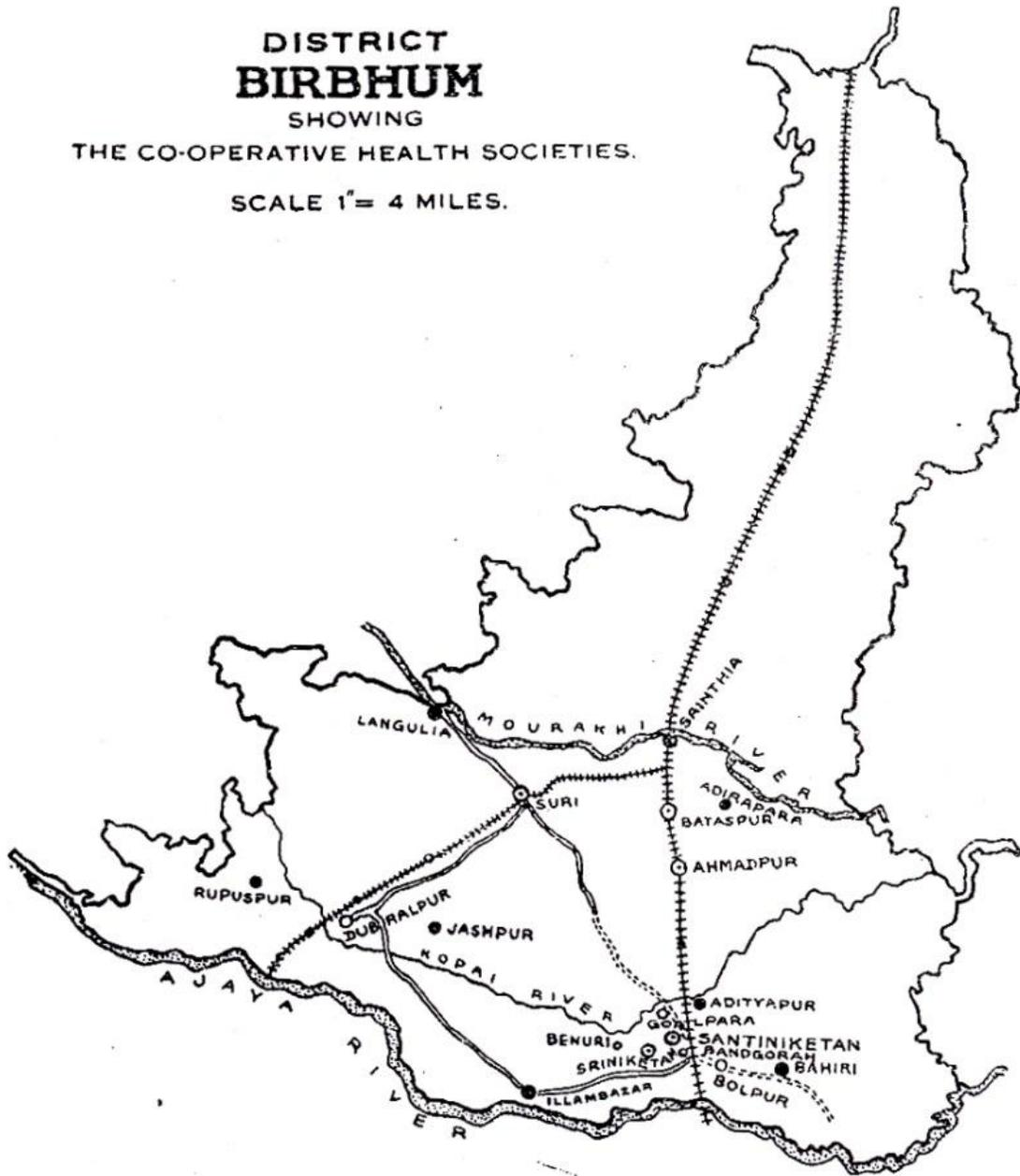
⁹⁷ *ibid*

based on the experiments in Health Cooperative started by Dr. Gavriilo Kojick in Yugoslavia.

The Village Welfare Department of Sriniketan had done the ground work in the villages of Ballavpur, Bandgora and Goalpara, before the establishment of the first three health centres. The Viswa Bharati started the experiment originally with 4 Health Cooperatives at Benuri, Bolpur, Bandgora and Goalpara between December,1932 and January,1934 and Bandgora and Bolpur were combined into one society soon after. Later on in 1936 with help from the Bengal Government, five more cooperatives were organized at Illambazar, Bahiri, Adityapur, Langulia and Adirepara. The success of the work in the first three villages won recognition in no time. In 1935, the Government of Bengal sanctioned a grant of Rs. 11,000/- to start the other five centres in different parts of the district which were organized in 1936. Later on two more centres were established with the surplus of the District Famine Fund and they were all placed under the supervision of Sriniketan. There were thus ten health centres scattered in different parts of the district, taking care of 93 villages with a population more than 30,000.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *ibid*

**DISTRICT
BIRBHUM**
SHOWING
THE CO-OPERATIVE HEALTH SOCIETIES.
SCALE 1" = 4 MILES.



The table below gives us some details of the health cooperatives under Sriniketan :-

NAME OF THE SOCIETY	LOCATION (UNION BOARD)	DATE OF ESTABLISHMENT	NO. OF VILLAGES UNDER THE SOCIETY	NUMBER OF MEMBERS	NO. OF PERSONS COVERED BY MEMBERSHIP
BANDGORA-BOLPUR	BOLPUR	DECEMBER, 1932	3	132	1012
BENURI	RUPPUR	JANUARY, 1934	6	76	385
BAHIRI	BAHIRI	AUGUST, 1936	2	150	747
ADITYAPUR	TALTORE	AUGUST, 1936	6	78	432
ILLAMBAZAR	ILLAMBAZAR	AUGUST, 1936	8	74	527
ADIREPARA	SAINTHIA	DECEMBER, 1936	15	101	515
LANGULIA	KHATANGA	SEPTEMBER, 1936	16	84	455
JASPUR	HETAMPUR	OCTOBER, 1937	20	102	524
RUPASPUR	KHAYRASOLE	OCTOBER, 1937	16	110	968
GOALPARA	TALTORE	1932	1	42	168

(Source – Health Cooperatives, Rathindranath Tagore, Bulletin No.25, Viswa Bharati, July, 1938)

It is learnt from the Health Bulletin that the villagers were thus ready to welcome such organizations and that within a year these centres became self-supporting.⁹⁹ However, the societies that came up later began their work under unfavourable circumstances because the failure of paddy crop that year made it difficult for the members to pay their subscriptions. Moreover, the area in which the work started lacked cohesion because of party factions and unnecessary litigations which demoralized the poor and ignorant villagers. The same bulletin reported that the health centre in the village of Benuria had to be abandoned partly because some of the workers of the Village Welfare Department had emphasized more on charity which throttled the spirit of self-help and prevented the centre from becoming self-supporting.¹⁰⁰ Yet the volunteers tried their best to overcome the adversities to make the situation congenial for the cooperative experiments.

It may be pointed out that though Kalimohan Ghosh, Elmhirst and their team mates encountered some resistance while working among the villagers, their commitment, their pragmatism and their patience to deal with each village according to its own characteristic ways might have made these informal cooperative efforts more acceptable to the villagers in contrast to the official attempts which perhaps did not attempt to address the problems at their root. These workers were better acquainted with the villages and communities. The popular pulse, communal and tribal dynamics etc. could be comprehended by them, which the British imperial officials often missed out.

IDEAS BEHIND TAGOREAN EXPERIMENTS : The institution at Sriniketan provided a base for large scale experimentation of reconstructional ventures and most of the plans of rural community development and welfare in this area that became widespread in post-colonial India had their rudimentary trial in the adjoining

⁹⁹ ibid
¹⁰⁰ ibid

villages.¹⁰¹ And underlying all these ventures was the spirit of cooperation. Tagore was deeply influenced by the Irish poet and idealist George Russell who firmly believed that poverty, pestilence, backwardness of the rural areas could be removed by cooperative efforts. Tagore was equally influenced by the work of Sir Horace Plunkett who pioneered the Irish agricultural cooperation. Tagore felt that the success of the cooperative movement in Ireland could serve as a role model for India because of the similarity in the conditions of the two countries. Tagore met Plunkett in July, 1920 while on tour in England. Plunkett advised Tagore about the necessity of studying the local conditions to find out the real needs of the people.¹⁰² The plan for rural reconstruction which Tagore subsequently prepared drew its inspiration from the experiences of the agricultural scientists working in various fields of social reconstruction of many advanced countries of both the east and the west. Whichever part of the globe he went he tried to study and understand the problems, programmes and methods of working with rural people. He acquired a firsthand knowledge of the Folk High School movement of Scandinavia¹⁰³ and agricultural extension work of the U.S.A. He invited trained farmers from Japan to come and help in his work at Sriniketan, he sought the aid of the experienced extension workers from India and abroad to assist him in his agricultural and welfare activities which he was trying to promote in the villages near Sriniketan and Santiniketan in Birbhum. For rural industrial development he introduced to the villagers the skills of craftsmanship of the Italian workers, Manipuri weavers and artists of Java. Though his programme of rural reconstruction drew its inspiration, its elements from different parts of the world, his plan was essentially Indian, based on the culture of the country

¹⁰¹ Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan (Tagore's Experiments in Rural Reconstruction)*, Thacker Spink & Co. Private Ltd., Calcutta, August, 1962, Preface

¹⁰² 'Rabindranath and Cooperative Idea', Bipasa Raha in Hiren Chakrabarti (ed.), *Bengal Past and Present, Vol.119, Nos.228-229, Parts I-II*, January, 2000,

¹⁰³ Folk High School – In Denmark where Cooperative Agricultural Societies were developed, the Folk High Schools of the country train up their farmers and inspire them with the desire for organizing their economic structures on cooperative principles, these institutions for adult farmers continued to supply fresh stream of rural leaders who were responsible for the agricultural development in Denmark

and carefully considering the needs and aspirations of the people for whom it was meant.¹⁰⁴

Tagore believed that in developing rural community which was the chief aim of Sriniketan, a voluntarist process was more important. In contrast to a charitable, altruistic approach to social work, Tagore in his scheme of rural activities wished to create an atmosphere by continuous village-level work in which the villagers' mind could be aroused so that they themselves could accept the responsibility of their own lives. He therefore recommended to his fellow workers that they must in a subtle way try to involve the villagers so that "a power from within the villagers themselves may be working alongside" of them. In this way he tried to break through the prevailing inertia and create a process by which the villagers would overcome their socio-economic impediments by their own efforts.¹⁰⁵ The workers posted in the villages called Samaj Karmis or social workers and the more senior ones called Kendra Karmis or Centre Workers were warned that they were not to impose their decisions on the people, but to merely act as consultants and guides and to place their estimate of the prevailing problems of the village at the disposal of the villagers and induce them to attend to these by their own organized cooperative effort. These social workers lived in the villages, worked with the people of the area, neither "for them", nor "on behalf of them", but worked to mobilize the villagers to build their own leadership and institutions and to make an effective use of the services provided at the headquarters at Sriniketan for solution of their problems.¹⁰⁶

Tagore's appraisal of the manifold village problems made him realize that the approach to rural reconstruction should be one of integrated and total development and that village problems could not be treated in isolation from each other. And his maximum emphasis lay in recognizing that the development of the human factor was of greatest importance in implementing a village plan.

¹⁰⁴Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan (Tagore's Experiments in Rural Reconstruction)*, Thacker Spink & Co. Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1962, Pg.5-6

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.21

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.34

What Tagore wanted was a creative cooperative movement which was not to be limited to loans and credit alone.¹⁰⁷ According to Sugata Dasgupta, this became particularly evident as Tagore continuously tried to create cooperative organizations so that advanced services could be brought to the villages through the joint effort of the villagers themselves.¹⁰⁸

Achin Chakrabarti in an article notes that the idea of human development could be traced in Tagore's writings long before the publication of the Human Development Report in 1990.¹⁰⁹ Tagore's affinity to what is considered to be human development today can be best understood through Amartya Sen's exposition of the concept of human development. Sen writes,

The perspective of human development incorporates the need to remove the hindrances that people face through the efforts and initiatives of people themselves. The claim is not only that human lives can go very much better and be much richer in terms of well-being and freedom, but also that human agency can deliberately bring about a radical change through improving social organization and commitment.¹¹⁰

The importance of human agency ("efforts and initiatives of people themselves") in bringing about human development stressed by Amartya Sen was also evident in Tagore's writings, particularly in his essay *Swadeshi Samaj*, 1904 and his collection of essays entitled *Atmashakti*, 1914. Whatever be the context of these writings, water crisis in Bengal or prevention of malaria, Tagore emphasized on cooperative initiative based on awareness of one's self-prowess or *atmashakti*. In his essays on cooperative principles, Tagore pointed out the lack of confidence in the people of India which he sought to build through people's participation in the cooperative ventures in their respective villages or communities.

¹⁰⁷ Abhra Ghosh, *Ganatantrer Rabindrik Paradigm O Anyanya*, Calcutta, 2009, Pg.37

¹⁰⁸ Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan*, Calcutta, 1962, Pg.25

¹⁰⁹ 'Manab Unnayan Theke Atmashaktir Rabindranath', Achin Chakrabarti in Sudhir Chakrabarti (ed.), *Rabindranath Bakpati Biswamona*, Institute of Development Studies, Calcutta University, Kolkata, May, 2011

¹¹⁰ Sakido Fukuka-Parr & Shiva Kumar (ed.), *Handbook of Human Development*, OUP, 2009, Foreword by Amartya Sen

Tagore's experiments with cooperatives in Sriniketan covered a wide range – cooperative bank, agricultural credit societies, health cooperatives; primary schools, agricultural activities, animal husbandry and poultry work were done on the basis of cooperation; Brati Balak Sangha had physical, intellectual, social welfare and vocational programmes carrying the basic spirit of cooperation. Most of Tagore's cooperative ventures were perhaps not economically viable, but his thought of addressing the non-credit and non-economic areas through cooperatives especially in a period when credit societies, particularly agricultural credit societies dominated the domain of the official cooperative movement was indeed significant. The legacy of the spirit of cooperation in non-credit and non-economic areas was there in Bengal since the days of early nationalism and Swadeshi movement, but Tagore's concrete experiments in these areas, whatever be their limitations, holds a special place in the history of cooperative movement in Bengal due to the existence of a brilliant mind behind them. To Tagore, cooperation was an ideal, not a mere system and therefore it could give rise to innumerable methods of its application. And in his opinion the manhood of man could be fully honoured by the enunciation of the principle of cooperation.¹¹¹

III. GANDHIAN STYLE OF COOPERATION

The ideology of cooperation loomed equally large in the minds of some other nationalist leaders. Mahatma Gandhi in formulating his ideal of the *Sarvodaya* order, *Swaraj* and *Ahimsa* in the context of colonial India harped on the ideology of cooperation as one of the basic moral values which underlay all human activities. H.M. Vyas in the Preface of the book on Cooperation by M.K. Gandhi noted that to Gandhi the ideal was "the greatest good of all" – Gandhi believed that the ideal he set before himself was capable of being realized only in a stateless democracy based on non violence, a spirit of service and the largest

¹¹¹ *The Cult of the Charkha, Modern Review, 1925* – cited in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (compiled and edited), *The Mahatma and the Poet, Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*, NBT, New Delhi, 1997, Pg.108

amount of individual and local initiative. Gandhi's ideal of the *Sarvodaya* order was based on respect for the individual, equality and love. Decentralization was the foundation on which the superstructure of *Sarvodaya* order was to be built. Self-sufficient small peaceful communities were envisaged in this order and according to Gandhi cooperation was the silken thread that kept all the units together. From the economic point of view Gandhi felt that cooperation struck a golden mean between the private sector with profit motive on one hand and statism with its soulless machinery on the other.¹¹²

To Gandhi centralized power was the root cause of violence and the most glaring example of repressive centralization was the state machinery. To him violence not only meant physical atrocity and bloodshed, to him violence rather meant throttling of an individual's personality or identity. And he felt that such violence could be countered by bringing about self sufficiency at the individual level. But it is not possible for one to be absolutely self sufficient in a human society. To meet the basic needs of survival, mutual interdependence is necessary and for this the alternative system suggested by Gandhi was the adoption of the idea of cooperation at the village level and subsequently setting up cooperative societies. In such a system, none would dominate, none would be dominated, or in other words "Each for all and all for each" would be the beacon light for the community imbibing the spirit of cooperation. Gandhi in his constructive programmes among other things propagated the use of charka or the spinning wheel as a mark of self-help. He thought that charka and similar small industries would enable rural people to evolve activism, discipline, self sufficiency and freedom which were in dire necessity for a country in colonial bondage.

Village was the basic unit of Gandhi's programme of decentralization. His ultimate aim was to motivate the people to establish their own cooperative organizations in a rural ambience. He wanted to establish the village *swaraj* through the village *Panchayats*. This was Gandhi's alternative to the centralized state that was being

¹¹²M.K. Gandhi, *Cooperation*, compiled by H.M.Vyas, Ahmedabad, 1963, Preface by H.M. Vyas

run by the British. Gandhi felt that with the establishment of village *Panchayats*, the cooperative movement would have a vital role to play in the villagers' life and that the success and failure of village *Panchayats* would depend on the working of the cooperative movement.¹¹³ Thus rural reconstruction was the prime focus of Gandhian programme. Gandhi was best known as the leader of the anti-British national movement. But actually his criticism of the British rule was situated at a very fundamental level which made him declare that if such social experiments did not succeed and India achieved political independence without it, this would mean 'English rule without Englishmen'.

This was because Gandhi actually criticized the system of social production on which British imperialism rested. He targeted the infinite desire of ever-increasing production, ever-greater consumption and heartless competition that made the entire system of imperialism going and that made countries like Great Britain seek colonial possessions which could be exploited for economic purposes. He had expounded his social ideal in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 and held unto it all his life, even though he had to make a number of compromises in practice. His *swaraj* was an anti-thesis to modern western civilization, a total social order based on strong moral values. He wanted a very different kind of society that would abjure consumerism and foster a simple way of life.

And in his imagination, the crucial unit of this simple life was to be the village living and developing itself on the basis of cooperation. Gandhi felt that for the greater welfare of mankind every independent individual should voluntarily cooperate and unite to formulate cooperative programme and institutions, and such organizations, according to him were to be non-violent. In the words of Gandhi, non-violent societies were based on egalitarianism and that in such societies the human emotions and values could evolve spontaneously. Thus *swaraj* according to him could completely express itself in a non-violent society.¹¹⁴ This *swaraj* envisaged by Gandhi was an ethical organization based on the principle of

¹¹³ *Ibid*,

¹¹⁴ Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Swarajer Pathey*, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1994, Pg.5

cooperation. However, Gandhi's *swaraj* appeared to be utopian to many. And in putting his thoughts of *swaraj* into practice, the impediments that he encountered were varied. British rule was an impediment on one hand, internal problems like communalism and untouchability also limited the scope of his ventures on the other. The hindrances were indeed difficult to overcome.

Yet some remarkable initiatives inspired by Gandhi's thought and philosophy followed the Non-cooperation movement, the first all-India political movement launched by him. After the withdrawal of the said movement in 1922, the Swaraj Party was launched within the Indian National Congress with the ambition to participate in council politics and to wreck the constitution from within. Arrayed against these "pro-changers" within the Congress were the "no-changers" who preferred to follow the Gandhian ideology of village work. In a few villages in some of the districts of south Bengal certain dedicated Gandhian workers adopted Gandhi's programme of rural reconstruction in their silent and humble way and started working accordingly. They tried to inspire the villagers through the ideology of self-sufficiency and cooperation, tried to create an awareness in them about their rights and thus tried to arouse self-respect among them. Their aim was to arouse the humanity of the distressed, poverty stricken villagers through due care and respect. Their agenda in the work of rural reconstruction included repairing of village roads, promotion of health, agricultural development, revival of khadi and other cottage industries and removal of untouchability.

Another Gandhian ideal that inspired them was fearlessness (*abhay*), which was the motto in the practice of *swaraj*, and Gandhi throughout his life preached this message of fearlessness. His message touched the chords of humanity just like Tagore's 'manhood of man', and thus appealed to and overwhelmed people across different social cross sections, even those from the lowest rung. It is both interesting and surprising that many who imbibed Gandhi's ideology and joined his struggle did not even have a glimpse of their mentor, but felt immensely inspired by the ideology itself.

From 1921-1922, a number of such workers launched their activities under the influence of Gandhi's philosophy. Mention may be made of Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta, Gobinda Prasad Sinha, Prafulla Chandra Sen as dedicated workers whose areas of work were the villages of Manbhum, Bankura and Arambagh respectively. They stayed in the villages, became one with the villagers and worked for the constructive programme of the villages – e.g. extinguishing fire, providing relief during flood, epidemics, protecting the villagers from the atrocities of the police, the moneylender or the landlord. In this way they tried to inculcate the spirit of mutuality in the poor villagers which was perhaps innate in them but was subdued under the oppressive agents of the colonial rule. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal has described their activities in rich details in the book *Swarajer Pathey* (On the Way to Swaraj). He has also shown how the ideology of cooperation not only brought the villagers together but also worked towards the eradication of untouchability and communalism.¹¹⁵

To give just one example in some detail, Srish Chandra Bandyopadhyay was one such dedicated worker whose close association with Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta encouraged him to undertake similar ventures in a rather obscure village of Noyagara, Manbhum (Purulia). Bandyopadhyay was imprisoned in 1930 for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement and while at the Patna Camp Jail he observed that most of the interns were from the areas where constructive programmes and related associations were prevalent. This made him realize that constructive programme was the only way to materialize Gandhiji's objectives and that such work should begin from the village. Bandyopadhyay was acquainted with Gandhi's ideas primarily through a journal '*Mukti*' published by Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta from Purulia's '*shilpashram*'. After his release from the prison he decided to work permanently from the village and finally he chose Noyagara as his area of action and he began his work in late April, 1931. In order to draw the attention of the villagers and to motivate them to participate in the work of

¹¹⁵ Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Swarajer Pathey*, Papurus, Calcutta, 1994, Pp.37-39

rural reconstruction, Bandyopadhyay started with the work of sanitation, working all by himself. Gradually he could enlist the support of some volunteers. An incidence of the epidemic of cholera gave him a greater chance to work in that direction and the support of the volunteers became spontaneous in course of time. As his efforts were taking a concrete shape he constructed a room for his organization, which he called an ashram. The villagers willingly put in their labour to build the same. Even the women contributed from their meagre savings towards the fund for the construction. Bandyopadhyay's other significant contributions included extending the system of well irrigation in the arid areas of Manbhum. The inmates of the village including the children joined their hands to excavate the wells showing the true spirit of cooperation. Well irrigation was introduced in different regions of Manbhum like Manbazar, Barabazar and the comparatively easy availability of water enabled the cultivation of different kinds of crops and vegetables other than paddy which till then was the staple crop of Manbhum. Bandyopadhyay in his attempt to revive the traditional *panchayat* system organized the volunteers who worked for the development of their villages. The self-governed *panchayats* organized by Bandyopadhyay in 1931-32 along with the ones set up under the initiative of Bibhuti Bhusan Dasgupta in Jhalda in 1930 supposedly paved the way for the extensive development of the *panchayat* system during later years.¹¹⁶ In 1946 the Congress at Manbhum organized three thousand village *panchayats* in the subdivisional headquarters. The way these village panchayats worked is said to have made the government administration redundant and unnecessary for some time.¹¹⁷

These small attempts in their small way sought to initiate the ideas of cooperation informally among the common people from the margins. Motivated by individual leaders, these people got a chance to put in their enthusiastic efforts, however limited, to aspire for self sufficiency through self-help and work

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.42

¹¹⁷ *Mukti*, 8th, 15th, 22nd December, 1947 and 5th January, 1948 ; *Mukti* was the mouthpiece of Manbhum District Congress – cited in Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Swarajee Pathey*, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1994

for the development of their community. However, these ventures mostly remained unnoticed and did not get much importance in overall Bengal scenario. The Bengal Congress leadership remained indifferent to them. The main limitation was that these experiments were very sporadic and localised in nature and often the different village organizations which worked towards the cooperative movement remained dissociated from each other. These isolated ventures thus could not crystallize into a movement proper in spite of all the promise they had.

Apart from Hitesh Sanyal, Mario Prayer in his work, *The "Gandhians" of Bengal: Nationalism, Social Reconstruction and Cultural Orientations, 1920-1942*, has extensively dealt with the rural reconstruction programmes in Bengal inspired by "Gandhian" ideology. Prayer has traced a number of institutions for socio-economic reconstruction that were established in Bengal during or after 1921 motivated by the Non-cooperation movement. Their primary objective was the production, distribution and sale of *khadi*, as hand-spinning, according to Gandhi, was the greatest voluntary cooperation.¹¹⁸ Prayer, however, has traced the roots of such efforts in Bengal's very own past. These centres grew up under their respective leaders, most of whom had spent their formative years during the Swadeshi period and were deeply influenced by Vivekananda before they came in contact with Gandhi. The revolutionary ideology of self-sacrifice also left an impact on some but most of them no longer supported the methods of violent terrorism.¹¹⁹ Against this backdrop of myriad thoughts and ideas, Gandhi's message and programme of rural reconstruction appealed to many, in which they found a culmination of their long cherished ideals. Most of these institutions were in tune with Bengal's old experiments with swadeshi *sanghas* and *samitis* which carried the essence of cooperation which was not always spelt out. According to Prayer, the leaders of these institutions sought/found a mediation

¹¹⁸, M.K. Gandhi, , M.K. Gandhi, , M.K. Gandhi, *Cooperation*, compiled by H.M.Vyas, Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1963, Pg.33

¹¹⁹ Mario Prayer, *The 'Gandhians' of Bengal, Nationalism, Social Reconstruction and Cultural Orientations, 1920-42*, Pisa, Roma, 2001, Pg.277

between the legacy of the Bengali Renaissance and the new ideas and programmes of Gandhi.¹²⁰

The Abhay Ashram was one such organization which began its preliminary work, though not under this name, around 1910. Suresh Chandra Banerjee and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh were among the early workers who later emerged as the leaders of Abhay Ashram. Suresh Chandra Banerjee was an efficient organizer and was influenced by Tagore's spirit of social unity and solidarity during the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh was one of the leading workers in the social reconstruction movement in Bengal from the 1920s and he worked in close association with Banerjee. Together they had already emulated the example of the selfless service of the Christian missionaries and in 1913 they organized a band of student volunteers from various institutions in Calcutta to rescue the victims of a flood of the Damodar river in Burdwan and a few months later they also helped the Namasudra community of Brahmanberia after a devastating flood.¹²¹ The organization or the sangha that was coming up under their guidance rejected untouchability at the outset. Some members put in their earnings to hire an apartment in Calcutta which became their meeting point and gave them shelter. There was an underlying tone of cooperation in all their ventures where the leaders with their volunteers looked beyond their immediate interests and horizon and resolved to work for the greater community standing by the motto of "Each for all and all for each". During the initial years of the 1920s, the Abhay Ashram started taking a concrete shape and a suitable site for it was considered at Faridpur. The main points of its programme included training of *desh sevaks* and spread of constructive spirit and national identity through service to the people, which would prepare conditions for attaining independence at a later stage.¹²² Gradually the Ashram opened centres in Dacca, Malikanda, Nababganj, and in its community programme the use and distribution of *khadi*

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, Pg.233

¹²¹ *Ibid*, Pg. 241

¹²² *Ibid*, Pg. 242

(indigenous textile production by the local artisans) remained the prime focus.¹²³ Prayer notes in his work that the relationship between the Abhay Ashram and the local population was extremely cordial and was based on a mutual exchange of benefits.¹²⁴ The ideology of cooperation was never stated as one of the abiding principles of the organization, but it was inherent in its kind of mission. However, as Prayer notes, “a subterranean vein of individualism was at work” and tensions and rivalries over principle and practice surfaced¹²⁵ perhaps to reveal that the ideology of cooperation was not embedded in all the members and was also not consciously inculcated among the community for whom the Ashram worked. Though popular response was hinted at, participation from below cannot be ascertained and it seems that the decisions of the leaders predominated the working of the Ashram.

The minor Gandhian ashrams located by Prayer include Satyashram in Baherak in the district of Dacca, Khadi Mandal at Arambagh in Hooghly district, Khadi Mandir at Diamond Harbour in the district of 24 Parganas and Bidyasram at Banori near Dacca. A number of welfare communities or Kalyan Sanghas and village societies or Palli Samitis also organized the constructive movement in a rather independent way.¹²⁶

Gandhi’s constructive programme encompassed different aspects of social life, especially in rural communities. Though revival of *khadi* and other village industries formed the core of his programme, other important features like removal of untouchability, service to tribal people and other marginalized sections of society, protection of cows, spread of new education, propaganda for Hindu-Muslim unity, upholding the essence of *swadeshi*, following ahimsa as the basic ethical principle, were also equally emphasized. As Prayer observes, these Gandhian organisations tried to prevent factionalism and among other things tried to make the people from below self-sufficient through the practice of Swadeshi in

¹²³ *Ibid*, Pg.248

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, Pg.251

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.253

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, Pp.277-285

the economic domain. He, however, notes that the response of the people of Bengal to them was not homogeneous and it depended on particular conditions of the region where the programme and the experiments were carried out.¹²⁷

In conclusion, Prayer points out that only certain aspects of Gandhi's reconstruction programme were put into practice in Bengal primarily through the initiative of those ashrams, sanghas or associations which had a rather limited impact compared to their counterparts in other provinces. The reasons that he locates are that these associations worked at the grass-root level in urban peripheries and in the countryside, but remained largely outside the domain of politics and anti-government confrontation; secondly, the leaders tried to use their education in scientific and technical disciplines in the service of the marginalized which inaugurated a new phase in the paternalistic approach of the upper and privileged section of the society to the lower strata; and thirdly, they revived the Swadeshi experiences in economic self-sufficiency, but they were not quite clear about their relationship with the political world. On the one hand, political struggles were considered to be an elitist affair totally detached from the real needs of the masses, while on the other hand, such struggles became acceptable under Gandhi's influence or with the aim of supporting the rights of the downtrodden. Prayer finally concludes that vested interests of the British trading and industrial firms in the economy of Bengal and dependence of agricultural production on international markets were the main impediments which defeated the objective of the constructive programme and prevented the development of an alternative independent economy in Bengal based on traditional handicrafts and capable of linking the village and the city on a self-supporting ethical base of solidarity.¹²⁸ Thus no less than a structural change was called for.

The limitations of the constructive programme in Bengal also brought to the fore the problems in the practice of the cooperative principles. Area-specific isolated cooperative ventures at the micro level might have been sometimes successful

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.286

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, Pp.295-296

but often missed public attention and knowledge and could not inspire more such efforts to attain success. There were further problems. The organizations and the samitis at the primary level through their work had sought to inculcate among the people, particularly those from below, the values of cooperation which would enable them to overcome the strains of colonial rule. But often the ideological differences among the leaders of these organizations, disputes and divisions among the villagers themselves and vested interests of the privileged sections of the rural society seeking to converge their interests with those of colonialism narrowed the scope of cooperation. Gandhi himself had felt that lack of awareness regarding cooperation among the masses might have restricted the implementation of cooperative practices and thought perhaps simplistically that this could be eradicated through the propagation of handicrafts and cottage industries on a cooperative basis. He hoped that such measures would help to do away with unemployment, poverty and ignorance and develop among the people a sense of interdependence and community of interests.¹²⁹ The hope remained unfulfilled in most cases.

IV. CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE BETWEEN TAGORE AND GANDHI

The two major icons of the period of the nationalist movement, Tagore and Gandhi, in their respective programmes of rural reconstruction imbibed the ideology of cooperation in their respective ways. There were points of convergence and divergence between them regarding the theory and practice of cooperation. Yet one remained an inspiration to the other. In 1914-15 Gandhi along with the students of his Phoenix School in South Africa visited Tagore's Santiniketan. Gandhi perhaps made these students visit Santiniketan because he saw that something was under way in a remote corner of Bengal which shared

¹²⁹ Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi – The Last Phase, Vol. I*, Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1956, Pp.502-03

some traits with his own endeavour and philosophy.¹³⁰ In fact, that Gandhi not only came to live at Santiniketan, but that he also worked as its *Sarbadhyaksha* for sometime is a comparatively less known fact. Gandhi on analysing the value and durability of Sriniketan's scheme of rural welfare observed that Sriniketan's ideals would attract many even after the demise of Tagore and that competent and efficient functionaries would endow its contribution with a permanent and effective character.¹³¹ Indeed, they continued to have intellectual exchanges regarding cooperative experiments as long as Tagore lived.

But differences cropped up as early as 1921, when Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement. While they continued to enjoy each other's confidence and support, Tagore began to feel uncomfortable about the agenda and practices which the programme of boycott and charkha led to. A series of articles in *Modern Review* and *Young India* reflect their differences in this regard. Apart from feeling that that the politicians were using Mahatma's satyagraha as a stratagem in politics and thereby strengthening bigotry and inertia, and also expressing unhappiness about the call to boycott schools and colleges without providing any alternative education, Tagore sounded skeptical about the charkha and the burning of foreign cloth as the panacea for India's problems. He felt that what cloth to wear was a question of economics and should not be turned into a question of ethics, nor one should turn the charkha into a magical formula. It seems that the hostility to western culture and an almost superstitious kind of Indianness that Gandhi nursed was an anathema to Tagore. This was a big difference between their respective ideologies and rural reconstruction too. But one has to remember that while Tagore was perhaps more open to the outside world in certain respects, Gandhi was an internationalist too. We know that the foundation of Gandhi's philosophy was laid outside India, in his London and South African experiences and through his reading of John Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau.

¹³⁰Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (compiled and edited), *The Mahatma and the Poet*, Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941, NBT, New Delhi, 1997, Pg.3

¹³¹ Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan, Tagore's Experiments in Rural Reconstruction*, Calcutta, 1962, Preface, Pg.XX

In his cooperative experiments, he did involve a number of foreigners. Indeed, in the course of his debate with Tagore in 1921 he said, “I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.” (‘The Great Sentinel’)

After the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement the debate was suspended. In 1924, Gandhi was released and remained in self-chosen exile from politics declaring that a constructive programme of rural upliftment and economic regeneration through the charkha and removal of untouchability were his priorities. This should have brought the two closer. Indeed, in 1925 Gandhi visited Santiniketan for a second time. The battle of the machine of the West versus the charkha, however, would be fully joined about the same time. Tagore took up the thread of the earlier debate, questioning the economic rationality of the charkha further.¹³² He claimed that the cause of India’s poverty had a broader reason behind it than the ruination of handicrafts, and hence one should think broadly and address the totality of the problem to correct it. The solution he recommended was a rural cooperative movement, and here he was in agreement with Gandhi. But he did not want this rural-level experiment to be narrow-minded turning away its face from the global reality – ‘How long would it be possible to hide ourselves from commerce with the outside world?’ It has already been pointed out that Tagore wanted his experimentation in rural reconstruction to be a kind of ‘globalisation from below’. Gandhi perhaps lacked this openness. But Gandhi replied to Tagore’s criticism by saying that the latter was imagining the excesses of the charkha cult out of sheer ignorance – that he did not want everyone to spin all the time, and that, in fact, besides charkha, he wanted a chain of activities to promote rural reconstruction.

¹³² Tagore published in a Bengali literary journal *Sabuj-Patra* an article ‘Charkha’ which was translated into English under the title ‘The Cult of the Charkha’ in the *Modern Review* in September 1925. In the following month he wrote ‘Swaraj-Sadhan’ in *Sabuj-Patra* and this also appeared in the *Modern Review*. A couple of months later Gandhi wrote a rejoinder to Tagore’s ‘The Cult of the Charkha’ which was published in his journal *Young India* on 5th November 1925. In *Young India* of 11th March 1926 Gandhi wrote a postscript to the controversy between him and Tagore entitled ‘The Poet and the Wheel’.

A related area of difference was their attitudes to science and technology in the task of regenerating the country. Though Tagore lent his support to Gandhi's war against machine so far as it was oppressing the world – his plays *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi*, written in 1922 and 1926 respectively, which were allegories about the prostitution of science and technology for the purpose of exploitation, are sufficient proofs, Tagore also contended that the gifts of modern science and technology must not be judged by criteria which are alien to science. He was enthusiastic to use these gifts in his own experiments of rural reconstruction, as is evident from the fact that he sent his son and son-in-law to the United States of America to study scientific agricultural method. Tagore was actually an inheritor of the temperament of the Enlightenment Era. He saw science as the means of rescuing men from the outrage of nature and liberating men from poverty, while being conscious about its misuse. He wanted to harness science to man's service. Gandhi was more uncompromisingly anti-science in this regard. But perhaps even Gandhi evolved from his position in *Hind Swaraj* in this regard to a more flexible stance in 1921. By then he had accepted technology as a necessary evil and he said he was not for destroying all machinery and mills.

There were subtle differences between Tagore and Gandhi on many other issues like caste and communalism, despite the basic accord in decrying these. But what is more important for us to note is the way they wanted to conduct their educational experiments in their projects of rural reconstruction. Santiniketan and Sabarmati offered many striking parallels in the field of education. Both were educational institutions outside the state-sponsored system, both emphasized primacy of mother-tongue, students' participation, creative and productive activities and above all a cooperative spirit. The Gandhian scheme of Basic Education (the Wardha Scheme) was framed in 1937 with the help of Williams Aryanayakam, Principal of Tagore's village school, Shiksha Satra. But Tagore raised some questions about the Wardha scheme – firstly, it put excessive stress on the market value of the pupil's labour (the teachers' salary was to be funded from the sale of the pupils' products) and secondly, why earmark for the rural poor a

special type of education which destined them to a vocation? Should schooling be different for those who can afford to pay for it and those who cannot? Should education be doled out in insufficient rations to the poor? But Gandhi's primary concern was to make the schools financially viable and independent of government support. Also, for him, productive manual work was the prime means of intellectual training in cooperation and a better world. And above all, he thought that this type of education would be better than no-education, which of course Tagore conceded, declaring 'Gandhiji's genius is essentially practical'.

The issue of education revealed Gandhi's stress on 'self-sufficiency' as against Tagore's advocacy of 'self-reliance'. Amlan Dutta has tried to understand the difference from a broader perspective. Amlan Dutta in his essay on Gandhi and Rabindranath spoke of a striking similarity in their thoughts and experiments which he felt were also complementary to each other. The village was the locale their reconstruction programmes and the ideology of cooperation was their important tool to give a shape to their experiments. Dutta, however, observed that in spite of the broad similarities in their ideas on rural development and reconstruction, the difference could be located in the areas of thrust. Dutta noted a subtle difference between self-reliance and self-sufficiency which their respective constructive programmes sought to bring about. Both Tagore and Gandhi emphasized on self-reliance and self-help, the cornerstones of the cooperative movement; but according to Dutta, there was a difference in their perspectives. Gandhi was more emphatic on economic self-sufficiency at the village level. He did not want the villages to be dependent on other countries for their essential commodities. This autarky, Gandhi hoped, would safeguard the villages from the control of state machinery. Adoption and implementation of cooperative practices would also help to override predominance of the commercial classes. However, Tagore in his programme of rural reconstruction did not aspire for this kind of self-sufficiency and he rather apprehended that self sufficient independent units

might get alienated from the greater world, thus fragmenting human society into smaller parts which would constrict the spirit of cooperation.¹³³

The basic difference between the two visionaries was perhaps that Gandhi was a politician and Tagore, a philosopher. Both wanted the national movement to build the nation from within and thus to be a moral movement, a battle for the mind of the nation, and not merely a series of political activities. There was a commonality at the core of their outlook and each was willing to learn from the other. But when they talked about *swaraj* of the mind, perhaps they had two different visions of it. For Tagore, it was the free exercise of individual intellect alone that could make the attainment of *swaraj* possible. Tagore was more individualistic than Gandhi and a staunch believer in individual freedom. He was against any kind of imposition on the individual for the sake of collective good. Gandhi was, however, a practical politician and it was difficult for him to accommodate Tagore's kind of individualism. At the theoretical level, he claimed that an individual could experience freedom in community life, that there was an essential harmony between the individual and the community. At the practical level, he felt that Tagore's idea of freedom would hamper collective action. For conducting his own experiments, he wanted just faith and discipline from his followers rather than full logical understanding of his philosophy.

Finally, it may also be noted that their respective ideas and experiments of cooperation did not try to present an alternative discourse and a total subversion of the prevailing socio-economic order. They both worked within the broad colonial framework seeking to reinvigorate the morale of the people of a subjugated country in their respective ways. In a sense, this was only practical and the nobility of their projects cannot be questioned. But this perhaps explains the limitations of both the men. The goals that both targeted were not likely to be achieved without big structural changes.

¹³³, Gandhi o Rabindranath', Amlan Dutta, 1986, in Arati Sen & Gourkishore Ghosh (ed.), *Amlan Dutta Prabandha Sangraha*, Ananda, Calcutta, January, 1993

V. REVOLUTIONARIES AND COOPERATIVE EXPERIMENTS

Many revolutionaries had joined the Non-Cooperation movement inspired by Gandhi's promise of 'Swaraj within one year'. After the withdrawal of the movement by Gandhi, there was an atmosphere of despondency, disillusionment with the Gandhian path and search for alternative paths. Many of them went back to their old style of activities, but many leaned towards socialistic constructive work. This was a time when the entire national movement, in fact, was broadening into a socially sensitive movement. Gandhi himself was inclined in this direction and launched rural reconstruction programme. The influence of Bolshevik Revolution was strongly felt about this time as an important part of the international background to Indian national movement. A number of old militants joined the socialist/communist cause, particularly those of the Anushilan Party.

It is important to note that a strong eclecticism marked the political atmosphere of Bengal in the post Non-Cooperation period. Tanika Sarkar in her work *Bengal, 1928-1934, The Politics of Protest* has noted that emotional and even organizational links between different streams of nationalism was a speciality of Bengal politics of that time. And everyone seemed to be enthusiastic about social work, within and outside politics. Numerous youth and student organizations cropped up about this time, from village and district levels onward, all nurturing anti-colonial spirit and doing social work. A number of Gandhians were among them too, along with revolutionaries and even people without any direct political affiliations.¹³⁴ Combining Lenin and Gandhi, Gandhi and Aurobindo and even Gandhi with active militant nationalism, hence, was quite possible. Similarly a few revolutionaries and 'wanted men' of the police joined Tagore in his work of rural reconstruction. Mention may be made of Kalimohan Ghosh who being disillusioned with direct political action during and after the strike of the East Bengal Railway workers stood firmly behind Tagore's long term plans of rural reconstruction, which he felt would be needed by humanity at large, whatever the ups and downs in the

¹³⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal, 1928-1934, The Politics of Protest*, OUP, New Delhi, 1987

immediate political arena.¹³⁵ Some such ideologies were also marked by the idea of spiritual and ascetic self-sacrifice, which was common to both Gandhism and revolutionary terrorism. In certain cases this was combined with the rather materialistic ideology of Bolshevism and the contemporary Russian experiments.

Such a background would enable us to understand the cooperative experiments undertaken by Motilal Roy and Sushen Mukherjee, though they worked independently in their respective areas. It may be noted that both of them were originally active in the stream of militant nationalism and in the period following the Non-cooperation movement they emphasized the social content of nationalism and launched constructive work among the toiling masses to improve the condition of the latter and to redirect the national movement in a more meaningful way.

VA. EXPERIMENTS OF MOTILAL ROY AND PRABARTAK SANGHA

Motilal Roy and his 'Prabartak Sangha' deserve mention as they also undertook similar cooperative ventures, though there may have been some differences between their objectives and those of Tagore and Gandhi. The Prabartak Sangha was established in Chandannagore in the district of Hooghly in 1921. But before the establishment of the Sangha, Motilal Roy had been associated with different social and political activities since the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Tracing the evolution of Roy's ideology, it may be noted that he was inspired by Swami Vivekananda's ideal of social service which eventually led to the establishment of a social welfare society, the Satapathabalambi Sampraday in July, 1905, which may be considered to be a precursor of the Prabartak Sangha. Roy and his associates got actively associated with politics with the onset of the anti-Partition movement in 1905. Roy took up the cause of the revolutionary movement following the visit of Barin Ghosh to Chandannagore in 1906. Thereafter the Satapathabalambi Sampraday turned into a secret society of militant nationalists and was actively involved in various revolutionary activities till 1914. Its social

¹³⁵ Leonard K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, Calcutta, September, 1975, Pg.28

welfare activities also continued unabated. However, the revolutionary activities of this Chandannagore group came to a halt with the restrictions imposed by the British Government in 1917. Henceforth, constructive nationalism became the primary focus of Motilal Roy, which was largely due to his close association with Aurobindo Ghosh.¹³⁶

Earlier in 1915, the fortnightly '*Prabartak*', mouthpiece of the Prabartak Sangha, had come out with a new gospel of 'creative nationalism'. In 1921, the *Prabartak* paid homage to both Gandhi and Lenin and stated that the experiences of mankind had made the members of the Prabartak Sangha realize that gaining state power could not lead to swaraj, nor could it provide a permanent remedy for the sufferings of men and that the members wished to build their own future by their own ascetic efforts.¹³⁷ They stood together for realizing their life's dream – the evolution of a spiritual '*sangha*' – a community of souls fused together as a new nation within the nation with a definite culture, education and economy founded on inner realization. This was considered to be a part of the great movement of neo-Nationalism and Roy's 'sanghahood' was thought to be a kind of 'Divine Communism'. The *sangha* with its living faith in the unity of men recognized no barrier of caste, colour or creed within itself and none was regarded either high or low because of the difference in the mode of life expression.¹³⁸ The members pledged to create a strong and self-confident nation in accordance with the 'Indian' ideal, through expansion of agriculture, industry and commerce and cultivation of knowledge and love. The Sangha soon transcended from the task of 'making bombs to that of making man' and aimed at the moral and spiritual uplift of the nation. Roy's ideas found an explicit expression in the article '*Swabalamban*' where he stated that what he desired was a total change of man's inner self. The basic ideology which underlay Roy's thought was the ideology of cooperation without which his idea of an individual

¹³⁶ Indrajit Sarkar, *Militant Nationalism in Barisal (1908-1938)* - Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Jadavpur university, 2013

¹³⁷ Anuradha Roy, *Bengal Marxism : Early Discourses and Debates*, Samya, Kolkata, 2014, Pg.41

¹³⁸ I.B. File No. 335/22 – Newspaper reporting in *Advance*, dated 1/3/1934, WBSA,

transcending his own interest for the greater interest of the community could never be achieved. And in this task the Sangha found both Gandhi and Marx equally relevant, despite its differences with both these thinkers.¹³⁹

After Gandhi called off the Non-cooperation movement in 1922, Motilal Roy and his Prabartak Sangha tried to give a new direction to those volunteers, especially a section of the extremists, who had deserted their educational institutions, their homes to join Gandhi. This organization emphasized more on the practice of the values it upheld than on the propagation of its activities. It may be noted that Motilal Roy stayed away from active politics during 1916-1917 and around 1918 he came to realise that if the Indians could become human beings in the true sense of the term, then they would never be deprived of their legitimate rights. He did not completely deny the contributions of the Indian National Congress between 1885 – 1918, but at the same time his conviction was that such activities of the Congress could not bring about any change in human character.¹⁴⁰ Roy felt that the Congress led politics was largely an importation of western ideas and institutions and that the lack of unanimity among the leaders in the assessment and implementation of the same would hinder the nation's unity and harmony. Roy rather preferred smaller organizations in the villages of Bengal which would together work towards the development of the nation as a whole.¹⁴¹

Motilal Roy in 1920 with a view to give a pure economic basis to his constructive mission raised a loan of one lakh rupees at an interest of 9% from his countrymen and the capital was invested in various trade and business concerns. The venture was a failure in the hands of inexperienced and untrustworthy people. Roy repaid the loan with full interest through hard labour and effort. His second effort proved more successful when he tried to ensure a

¹³⁹ Anuradha Roy, *Bengal Marxism : Early Discourses and Debates*, Samya, Kolkata, 2014, Pg.41

¹⁴⁰ Motilal Roy, *Karmer Dhara*, Chandannagore, 1328(B.S), Pg.26 – A selection of fourteen articles by Motilal Roy on organization published in *Prabartak* between 1915 and 1921 were compiled in the form of a book '*Karmer Dhara*' in 1921 and published from Chandannagore

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, Pg.27

firm footing to all his business concerns by registering them under the Indian Companies Act. In the words of Roy, the inner purpose in creating the economic institutions was not only to make his mission practically self supporting but also to try to provide a solution to the problem of unemployment in the country. According to, him his educational and economic activities were a sure though indirect means to convert a growing number of youths from a destructive to constructive path and to enable them to restart their career on a new and stable footing based on truth, non-violence and practical self-reliance.¹⁴²

The constructive projects of the Prabartak Sangha covered a wide range – education, economy and social service. For example, Prabartak Trust Limited, Prabartak Furnishers Limited, Prabartak Bank Limited, Prabartak Agriculture Department, Prabartak Khadi Bibhag, Prabartak Kutir Shilpa and a variety of other such Prabartak concerns; Prabartak College of Culture, Prabartak Vidyarthi Bhawan, Prabartak Nari Mandir, Prabartak Mahila Sadan etc. at Chandernagore, Prabartak Bidyapith, Prabartak Library, Prabartak Sisu Sadan at Chittagong, Prabartak Vidyarthi Bhawan at Mymensingh and similar other institutions at Burdwan, Hooghly and 24 Parganas.¹⁴³ The most notable features of these concerns were that their profits were not appropriated by the management, but were invested in developing and expanding them. Though a religious body, the Prabartak Sangha was wedded to the healthy cult of promoting the economic welfare of the people.¹⁴⁴

These concerns of the Prabartak Sangha were registered under the Indian Companies Act and not under the Cooperative Societies Act. This perhaps suggests that this organization was more commercially oriented which helped to generate self-sufficiency. Without going into the legal intricacies and the provisions of the two acts what is important to note is the basic ideology of cooperation which underlay the organizations associated with Prabartak Sangha.

¹⁴² I.B. File No. 335/22- Letter written by Motilal Roy to the DIG, Police, I.B., Calcutta, received on 6th February, 1935, WBSA,

¹⁴³ I.B. File No. 335/22, WBSA,

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid* – Newspaper reporting in *Hindustan Standard*, dated 9/12/1945

The Sangha through its various activities made an attempt to mould the moral character of the people, inculcate in them the ethical values of humanity and mutuality and then they were given the responsibility of the economic and social programmes of their organization. Thus the motto of “Each for all and all for each” -though not always pronounced - was embraced by the members who willingly participated in the ventures of the Sangha.

A newspaper reporting on the Chittagong branch of the Prabartak Sangha stated that the members through a gospel of ‘creative spirituality’ attempted to be self-reliant in regard to the necessities of life from the very beginning and that for the realization of this aim they evolved a law of communal economy too. Their attempt to transcend the ‘desire-self’ led them to the abdication of individual ownership of wealth and property. All their earnings went to a common purse and all their needs were administered from a common centre.¹⁴⁵ This philosophy indeed carried the traits of cooperation and communism which are somewhat related too.

Amiya Ghosh working extensively on the Prabartak Sangha tries to locate apparent similarities between Tagore’s ideas of reconstruction, Gandhi’s constructive endeavours and the programmes of Prabartak Sangha – they all wanted to give expression to ‘*atmashakti*’ through their ideas and programmes; they all realized that termination of colonial rule was not the ultimate aim, an alternative Indian social structure was the need of the hour; and thus each of them formulated a constructive programme based on the ideology of cooperation which they all tried to put into practice. However, they differed in their respective means to achieve their goal.¹⁴⁶

VB. SUSHEN MUKHERJEE AND THE BEGINNING OF AMAR KUTIR

The I.B. files reported that Sushen Mukherjee was a suspect revolutionary, an active member and organiser of the Communist League of India

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, Newspaper reporting in *Advance* dated 1/4/1934

¹⁴⁶ Amiya Ghosh, *Bangalir Bastumukhi Atmasadhana O Prabartak Sangha*, Calcutta, January, 2000, Pg.112

(CLI).¹⁴⁷ In his early life he was associated with the Ramkrishna Mission and several other organizations and travelled to different parts of India and then to Tibet in quest for a satisfactory answer to the purpose of life. He gradually realized the importance of freedom from colonial bondage and got involved in the ongoing freedom movement being inspired by the prominent leaders of the time, Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Ballavbhai Patel, to name a few. He was imprisoned as a political prisoner in 1922 and following his release in 1923, he came to Santiniketan to seek advice from Tagore and Gandhi on village development through cottage industries. Though this plan did not immediately work out, he did not give up. This was all the more because his experience as a freedom fighter made him realize that a refuge for the fugitives in a remote area was necessary where he wished not only to provide a hide-out for them but also to make some preliminary arrangements for their livelihood through certain cottage industries. Mukherjee's initial work began in 1926-1927 when he purchased a plot of land in village Ballabhpur, on the banks of river Kopai in the district of Birbhum where he constructed a factory under the style of calico printing works, generally known as 'Amar Kutir'.¹⁴⁸ But he was again imprisoned in 1930 by the British Government bringing the activities of Amar Kutir practically to a halt.

Sushen Mukherjee returned to Amar Kutir in January, 1938 after his release from Presidency Jail. While in prison he had met Moni Ganguly, Santosh Dutta, Anil De, Kalipada Bashishtha and others who subsequently joined him in Amar Kutir. He met Pannalal Dasgupta during his years of internment in Kalimpong who too joined Amar Kutir as a constructive worker in 1938. Amar Kutir took the initiative to develop village handicrafts, leather work, poultry farming and agricultural activities to provide for the revolutionaries who had taken refuge in Amar Kutir. Rural reconstruction was a strong motive as well. These revolutionaries in their hide out also organized night schools, peasant organizations, workers'

¹⁴⁷ I.B. File No. 176/16, Subject – Sushen Kumar Mukherjee @ Khoka s/o Late Hem Chandra of Amar Kutir, Ballavpur, Bolpur, Birbhum, WBSA

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*

organizations in the neighbouring villages of Ruppur, Ballabhpur, Jadavpur, Islampur, Lohagarh, Binuria, Surul, Kasba, Darpashila under Bolpur Police Station.

In the mean time, Sushen Mukherjee set up different kinds of commercial enterprises in Calcutta, Bombay and elsewhere primarily to give financial support to the ongoing freedom movement.¹⁴⁹ He as a security prisoner in an interview to the Inspector, I.B. on 6/02/1945 emphatically stated that he had wholly devoted himself to the economic upliftment of the country which he felt was the first step to lead the country towards independence and that he was never concerned with any subversive activity as alleged. He further stated that for this he had established industrial organizations throughout the country among which Amar Kutir Leather Factory and Agricultural Firm, Bolpur, Birbhum, M/S. S.S. Stores and Agency, 108/1A, Cornwallis Street, Calcutta and M/S. Bengal Stores And Agency, Samlava Chambers, Sir Pheroze Shah Mehta Road, Bombay were notified by him in a letter to the Home Department in 1944 requesting his release from Presidency Jail.¹⁵⁰ In the same year he stated that Amar Kutir was an institution for social and industrial development.¹⁵¹ It is also evident from these reports that he worked among the *kisans* for the betterment of their conditions and to make them conscious of their position by giving them proper education and saving them from exploitation by zamindars.

It may be noted that Sushen Mukherjee through his different commercial enterprises tried to provide employment for the unemployed youth of the neighbouring villages of Ballabhpur, make them self-reliant by giving them practical training in the art of dyeing and textile business so that the money that was spent in importing foreign textile cloth and yarn could be spent at home to produce similar commodities.¹⁵² Mukherjee thus talked of economic independence,

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*

¹⁵⁰ I.B.Sl. No. – 67/1916; I.B. File No. – 176/16; Subject – Sushen Kumar Mukherjee @ Khoka s/o Late Hem Chandra of Amar Kutir, Ballavpur, Bolpur, Birbhum, Letter written by Sushen Mukherjee to the Deputy Secretary, Govt. of Bengal, Home Dept.(Jails) through the D.C.S.B, WBSA

¹⁵¹ *Ibid* - Report of an interview with Sushen Mukherjee in the Presidency Jail on 30/5/1944 by Mohitosh K. Mukherjee, Inspector, I.B.

¹⁵² *ibid*

promotion of country-made goods and thus in his own small way looked for a constructive alternative to the 'lopsided' colonial economy especially in the villages. He did not talk of the ideology of cooperation or the cooperative movement directly. But such an ideology was suggestive in the kind of enterprises that he established as there was no competitive spirit nor any pronounced profit motive in these organizations.

Copy of a report dated 3/5/1939 of a D.I.B officer stated that correspondences between Sushen Mukherjee and his associates including Pannalal Dasgupta were intercepted and on the basis of those it was stated that they preached communism among the low class people.¹⁵³ This suggested that they envisaged a kind of socio-economic order based on egalitarianism. The ideologies of communism, socialism and cooperation basically talk of human and social welfare with prime emphasis on equality. The contexts in which these ideologies developed, their connotations, their implications, their ramifications are sometimes nuanced, sometimes palpably different. Yet they all touch the chord of humanity and it is here that all such ideologies share a common plane. The basic spirit of cooperation with voluntarism, democracy, self-help and mutual help, no profit motive and equality as the key principles were evident even in the commercial endeavours of Sushen Mukherjee.

What is important to note is that Amar Kutir could never be identified with any particular political ideology and workers from different anti-imperialist groups and parties worked together in Amar Kutir in spite of their ideological differences. The spirit of cooperation was the true essence of the endeavours of Amar Kutir during the days of colonial rule and narrow political interests could never mar these experiments.

¹⁵³ ibid

VI. SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The ideas and ventures of cooperation, discussed in this chapter, started taking shape from the opening years of the twentieth century, especially before and during the Swadeshi / anti-Partition movement. The days of Swadeshi saw the early expressions of cooperation, but the experiments became more prominent during the period following the Government of India Act of 1919 when many Indians moved beyond the idea of self-government within the colonial empire and now their new goal was *swaraj*. *Swaraj* had different connotations for different people with different ideologies. In their endeavour to give a shape to their *swaraj* in their own way they conceived constructive programmes with the village as the locale of their work. Village organizations were formed to cater to the myriad problems of the villages which tried to address the problems of the poor, illiterate villagers from within by making them participate and even initiate the programme that was necessary for them. The motivation came from a few key persons who did not act as leaders, at least theoretically, but went and lived in the villages to become one with them and work with them in the projects of reconstruction. The spontaneous response of the villagers was noticeable too, at least in a number of cases. Through such work the people understood the value of self-help and the importance of working in cooperation and all this indeed helped them at least to some extent to be self-reliant or attain *atma-shakti*. This self-reliance also perhaps created a general awareness which helped the common people to face and understand the crisis of their motherland under colonial subjugation. The cooperative ventures of their villages made them somehow feel the importance of autarky and enabled them to focus on certain areas of development in a period of great uncertainties. These small steps were neither a part of the mainstream freedom movement nor the mainstream cooperative movement. The cooperative movement initiated by the government included both credit and non-credit societies, though the emphasis was more on credit since this seemed to be the most urgent need. The Indians associated with the freedom struggle in its various streams imbibed the basic ideology of cooperation

and made experiments with cooperative organizations which did not always follow the norms of the structured cooperative societies. This was the 'non-official' aspect of the cooperative movement which had its own forms, characters and agendas and which was independent of the state sponsored cooperative movement. The trajectories of these two aspects of the movement, i.e. official and non-official, were sometimes parallel, sometimes convergent or overlapping. The ideology of the official aspect of the movement when in hands of the Indians, did not essentially differ from the ideology of the nationalist leaders, extremists or revolutionaries who thought in terms of cooperation from the non-official quarter. Yet on the whole there was a big difference.

The state-sponsored cooperative movement in particular with its legal intricacies kept the movement away from the people at large and though the officials working from above sometimes put in considerable effort to initiate the movement, to motivate the masses, yet a gap remained. The non-official aspect of the movement on the other hand, especially in the hands of considerate motivators, tried to bridge the above gap by consciously giving the feel to the villagers that the movement was not being initiated by the leaders and emphasizing on active participation of those for whom the movement was. An initial guidance was felt necessary to awaken the consciousness of the masses in this regard. It was hoped that subsequently the realization of the importance of the ideology of cooperation would enable the masses to spontaneously imbibe the essence of cooperation and put it into practice.

Generally speaking, the non-official cooperative movements run by Indians were more deeply grounded in Indian reality than the official efforts. But the question is how exactly did the Indian cooperators view and address Indian reality. It seems more often than not they had a fascination for the traditional Indian village life. The romantic Oriental concept of 'Village Republic'/ 'Little Republic' had considerable influence on Indian mind. They often imagined it as characterized by self-sufficiency, inclusiveness, accommodative spirit, ingenious

modes of give and take and so on. Tagore's 'Swadeshi Samaj', his advocacy of the use of some of its features like *mela* for contemporary social and political movements is a well known example. Gandhi believed that Panchayat Raj was the age-old tradition of India till she faced the challenge of relentless colonial economy and aggressive political authority of an alien rule. He wanted India to go back to the social organization that she had already founded in her past.

Regarding the fascination for Indian tradition, it can be argued though that ultimately both Tagore and Gandhi advocated cooperative projects of rural reconstruction not in the name of Indian tradition, but because of their intrinsic moral worth and hence universal and timeless ahistoricity. Gandhi said that true principles of morality were universal, unchanging and stood outside history. To Tagore, the urge for mutuality and unity among all sorts of diversity was actually a feature of human civilization, which was manifest in India too.¹⁵⁴ Though both of them sometimes evoked exemplary things from their reading of Indian history, they also gradually developed reservation for certain other things of Indian past, for example, the caste system and untouchability in particular.

Anyway, close experiences perhaps made the Indian cooperators gradually feel that the Indian reality was not very pleasant. It is not only that long years of British rule had made a lot difference by eroding mutuality and nurturing selfishness, divisions among the Indians themselves on the basis of caste, religion etc. were found to be a big problem. Sometimes perhaps it was the rural culture of factionalism and petty conflicts within a community. It seems Tagore's team tried to understand and address such problems, whereas the Gandhians perhaps had a tendency to impose the collective on the individual by eschewing the real problems. Perhaps right from the days of Robert Owen, cooperative movements always nurtured a possibility of belittling the individual, sometimes even of 'despotism'.

¹⁵⁴ 'Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of India', Anuradha Roy in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Rethinking the Cultural Unity of India*, Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 2014

The main difficulty in studying the non-official aspect of the movement (just as the official aspect) is the material available. The peasants and the other people in the villages from the lower rungs of the society were not literate and thus there is hardly any record of their own experiences. Most of the material available for the study are therefore penned by the people of upper strata, either leaders or observers or the police. However, through such sources an attempt has been made to feel the pulse of these people from the margins. The small peasants and small artisans at the primary level might often have imbibed the spirit of cooperation in their own small way, they might have organized their small associations or 'samitis' in tune with their local needs to counter the challenges of colonialism, western capitalism and their agencies. But such small initiatives, if any, went unheard, unrecorded, unsung. This area of silence perhaps leaves an unexplored field of the non-official aspect of the cooperative movement during the colonial period.

The cooperative movement in the colonial context thus unfolded itself in different forms, in different shades, in different layers. Initially it was introduced by the government to take care of the problem of rural indebtedness with the emphasis on credit. Non-credit societies were introduced later. Alongside, an indigenous root of the concept of cooperation could be traced in the constructive endeavours of the period of early nationalism, certainly in the Swadeshi Movement and even further back. The credit and the non-credit movement took a structure in the hands of the officials and colonial government, while the non-official and not so structured movement harped on self-reliance and self-help to counter the challenges of colonialism and western capitalism.

However, without addressing the issue of structural inequalities and exploitation, these cooperative efforts could attain very limited success. Both the official and non-official aspects of the movement were born in the most part out of the matrix of the liberal and democratic thought of the first few decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, a more radical ideology that inclined

towards communism and thought in terms of big structural changes in society, did not seriously experiment with the cooperative principle. Hence, with the exception of Sushen Mukherjee, an organizer of the Communist League of India, no communist has featured in the present chapter. Even in the case of Mukherjee, communism seems to have taken a back seat and what was foregrounded was commercial enterprises, albeit conducted on a cooperative basis. The Communist Party of India that became the main communist formation by the middle of the 1930s, never paid due attention to the ideology of cooperation. So far as we know, it was only to meet the desperate situation caused by the Bengal Famine of 1943-44, that the communist relief workers sponsored cooperative enterprises like *dharmagola* and *gantay khata* among the famine-stricken villagers. This did not, however, become a sustained effort.

CHAPTER - 3

THE POST-COLONIAL TIMES AND THE COOPERATIVE EXPERIMENTS

I. A NEW NATION, A NEW MISSION

The termination of the colonial rule and the “transfer of power” on 15th August, 1947 paved the way for the emergence of a ‘new’ India. There were continuities and discontinuities between colonial and post-colonial India which shaped India in the years following 1947. India’s post independence existence commenced with a multiplicity of heritages and legacies which influenced its subsequent history in complex ways.¹ At the same time India’s independence represented for its people at large the beginning of a new journey with a new mission. The new journey began with a promise of the redressal of the malaise of the yester years, especially on the socio-economic front. The agenda of the newly formed government included among other things efforts and policies to overcome economic underdevelopment, gross poverty, illiteracy, wide prevalence of disease and blatant social inequality, discrimination and injustice. And at the root of everything lay preservation of India’s unity. The task was indeed mammoth considering India’s plurality in terms of geographical regions, religious denominations, languages, classes, castes, communities etc.

Francine R. Frankel in her work *India’s Political Economy, 1947-2004*, observes that the possibility of a complete social transformation through democratic processes of government was rather remote mainly because a substantial part of the old religious convictions, cultural patterns and social structures needed to be done away with before introduction of any kind of economic development.² The subversion of the traditional framework thus called for use of compulsion which

¹Paul R. Brass, *The New Cambridge History of India, The Politics of India since Independence*, New Delhi, 1990, Pg.1

² Francine R. Frankel, *India’s Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Preface

was against the spirit of democracy. This suggests that certain basic dilemma confronted India in the wake of her freedom. The variety and complexity of the Indian sub-continent generated contradictory forces³ and a new born nation was in a fix to find out the right path to “a gradual revolution which would enlarge the possibilities of human development for even the poorest people without a violent social upheaval.”⁴ Scholars working in this area of study suggest that the nationalist leaders perhaps assumed that the introduction of political democracy would offer an alternative to revolutionary class struggle in bringing about equality in society and that the economic and political development strategies were devised accordingly.⁵ Elections to Jawaharlal Nehru was an important strategy to “overcome mass inertia and build mass consciousness.”⁶ It was hoped that political democracy would be followed by economic democracy and Nehru sought to introduce institutional changes at the village level to encourage the organization of the deprived and downtrodden people in different political and other associations. The political economy which Nehru was trying to carve out tried to accommodate the opposing ideologies of capitalism and communism. This became yet another paradoxical area which gave rise to further contradictions and dilemma. Though he harped on democratic social transformation as an integral part of India’s economic strategy and tried to work out a suitable ‘third way’ taking the best from the Russian, American and other systems, the optimism did not last long.⁷

The programmes of economic development during the early years of independent India had intended to have a social face apart from its primary objective to maximize growth. It is rather interesting to note that the leaders of the time were strongly influenced by the religious morality of Mahatma Gandhi and the

³ Lloyd I. Rudolph & Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi, The Political Economy of the Indian State*, , Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1987, Preface

⁴ Francine R. Frankel, *India’s Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Preface

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.3

materialist philosophy of Marx which was considered to be an “unlikely blend”,⁸ but above all, by the idea of a Western-style development based on industrialization. Following Gandhian ideology, one of India’s mission after independence was to restore and rebuild the villages, reestablish the traditional handicraft industries and to root out the typical social evils like untouchability, illiteracy, ignorance about diseases and overconsumption of alcohol. Cooperative patterns as envisaged by Gandhi were also being adhered to. But at the same time the leaders felt that total commitment to the Gandhian socio-economic structure and philosophy would impede the emergence of a “modern industrial state”. Nehru and his colleagues were not really persuaded by Gandhi’s social blueprint and Gandhi’s social vision was rejected to a large extent. At the same time, it is to be noticed that the intellectuals from the 1930s were fast being drawn towards Marxism and its social ideals. Socialism became a buzzword and there was a Socialist Party even within the Congress. Varieties of socialism, more or less inspired by Marx’s doctrine, were envisioning an independent India that would be a just and equitable society. Considering the orientation of the Gandhian wing of the Congress on one hand, and the mental make up of the secular minded ‘modern’ intelligentsia on the other, a combination of the “traditional” values of Gandhi and the “modern” ethical precepts in theoretical Marxism was hoped to provide the right plane for amicable understanding and collaboration between the two divergent groups. Though there had been further divisive trends, this approach was not only adopted during the late colonial days, but also influenced the framework of India’s planning in post-colonial times.

The affinity of the two ideologies lay in their ethical aspects. Both agreed that the objective of the economic policy of independent India would be to do away with all kinds of social inequalities which would put an end to all shades of class distinctions. The Gandhians and the Socialists felt alike the necessity to curb the acquisitive tendencies in Indian economic life and thereby inculcate the cooperative spirit among the Indian people. They thus agreed that only

⁸ *Ibid*, Pg.8

institutional changes should be introduced to enable the replacement of the prevailing system based on private enterprise by cooperative principles of economic organization.⁹ Though the two groups agreed on these broad principles, they differed on certain fundamental issues, like the desirability of industrial development in post-colonial India. In spite of these differences, attempts were made to come to some kind a consensus. In 1940 Gandhi himself had written that he did not exclude industries as long as they did not smother the villages and village life and that industrialization in the state of the future would subserve the villages and their crafts instead of destroying them.¹⁰ In course of time, the Gandhians too accepted the need for certain basic industries and agreed with the socialists that they should be developed primarily in the public sector rather than in the private sector.¹¹ The socialists too realized that a blind imitation of the Soviet model in India would not quite work out, especially in dealing with human problems of psychological distress and alienation caused by modernization and industrialization. The Indian socialists accordingly made a few revisions to suit the Indian milieu and psyche. They sought to decentralize all economic activity to the extent to which it could be made compatible with overall central planning and direction of the economy and to retain the village as the primary unit of social organization. They tried to give the modern society in India a humane face based on the foundation of group values and institutions that still survived.¹² Nehru felt that though the village had decayed as a cohesive social unit during the British rule, it would not be difficult to revive the age-old traditions and to build up communal and cooperative concerns in land and in small industry.¹³

F. R. Frankel points out that these speculations and hopes contributed to the formulation of the "Indian" variety of socialism, a unique social pattern which could reconcile the modern goals of economic development with the traditional

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *Socialism of My Conception*, Bombay, 1957, Pg.127

¹¹ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.16

¹² *ibid*, Pg.17

¹³ J.L.Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, New York, 1946, Pg.512

community values of small-scale agrarian societies. The broad political objectives and economic programme of independent India were defined by the All India Congress Committee in November, 1947. This was considered to be the first official statement by the leaders of the nation or the “third way” in economic development. The constitution, the parliament, the ruling Congress party and the Planning Commission of the new nation under Nehru’s guidance formally sought to abide by the egalitarian, secular and socialist goals of national policy which established a consensus at the level of principle on the aim of constructing a “socialistic pattern of society”.¹⁴ However, this apparent consensus could not overcome the inherent paradoxes and dilemma that characterized the social, political and economic scenario of India at the time of her independence.

To begin with, the emphasis on the social goals of planning led to the rejection of capitalist economic growth models because it would have kept the majority of the peasant population away from the benefits of development. But, as Frankel points out, the economic means and the social goals of India’s development effort got confused. If the majority of the landless and land-poor peasantry were to be provided with the opportunity of improving their productivity, income and consumption within the village economy, then economic strategies had to provide for the prior or simultaneous reduction of disparities, particularly redistribution of land.¹⁵ This necessitated the formulation of certain agricultural policies around participation of small farmers and modification in agrarian reorganization from individual to cooperative patterns of economic activity. But such changes called for structural changes in the prevalent village society. The government tried to bring about peaceful reform through the democratic political institutions, but the goals of social transformation were kept outside the scope of polity.¹⁶ The institutional foundations of traditional, social, economic and political hierarchies came under criticism and wishes were expressed to create a new consciousness among the peasantry regarding the inequalities that engulfed the socio-economic

¹⁴ Francine R. Frankel, *India’s Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.25

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.19

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.25

and political structures. The next wish was to establish new institutions at the village level which could be ultimately used by the conscious peasantry to mobilize public opinion and organize effective pressure from below for enforcing radical social reforms within the democratic political system.¹⁷ These wishes lacked pragmatism and that there was very little possibility that every person from below could be made aware about the prevalent inequalities. The attempt of the conscious peasantry to mobilize public opinion might lead to creation of new hierarchical social equations even among the peasants from below. The paradoxes in this way created the scope for further contradictions to surface, especially between the theory and practice of the new policies of the nation. In fact, during the days immediately preceding and succeeding independence, when Nehru was at least trying to work out his conciliatory policy, the dilemmas and the paradoxes started coming to the fore.

It may be pointed out that till 1945 Nehru was not quite convinced of the workability of a social revolution by a non-violent approach. In the election manifesto of the Congress approved by Nehru in 1946, his conciliatory approach was discernible when he called for outright abolition of the zamindari system with a promised equitable compensation to the zamindars. Nehru's dilemma was also seen in his vacillation in adopting Gandhi's ideas and strategy. Though Nehru departed from Gandhi's economic policy, he kept faith in Gandhi's core socio-political teachings.¹⁸ But the paradox in this regard became gradually evident and a departure from Gandhi's strategy was inevitable.

IA. THE CONGRESS AGRARIAN REFORMS COMMITTEE

The Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee published in July, 1949, was considered to be the first major product of socialist-Gandhian collaboration on a public issue after independence. The committee was headed by the Gandhian economist J. C. Kumarappa. Two members of the committee with substantial landholdings, N. G. Ranga and O. P. Ramaswamy Reddiar, argued

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Pp. 25-26

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Pp.67-68

against virtually all recommendations of Kumarappa to restrict private ownership rights in land and were particularly critical of the recommendations for compulsory cooperative farming. It is learnt from Frankel that the roots of such criticism perhaps lay in Ranga's disillusionment with the communists when he was the President of the All-India Kisan Sabha.¹⁹ Indeed, this was a time when there existed a total opposition between the mainstream Indian polity and the main Indian state on the one hand and the Communist Party of India on the other. The C.P.I had rejected Independence as a deal struck with imperialism by Indian bourgeoisie and got banned by the government. Anyway, certain standards were set down by the committee to determine the government's agricultural policy. The report conceded that a capitalist agrarian structure would maximize efficiency in production, but this was rejected since it would also aggravate exploitation of one class by another. It was apprehended that full protection of private property rights in land would encourage larger owners to mechanise production which would ultimately deprive the smaller producers turning them into wage-earners. The process and the means of food production would thereby be in capitalist control. On the other hand, collective farming, though it might improve efficiency in production without economic exploitation, was considered unsuitable as it would make the individual peasant subservient to the bureaucrats and their associates at different levels. Thus to work out a balance and to safeguard the interests of both the individual and the community, the committee proposed the formation of village-based cooperative associations.

Two types of farming were recommended by the committee. First, the joint cooperative farms would be formed by amalgamating the uneconomic farms with holdings below the minimal size which could not provide complete employment and a reasonable standard of living to a family with an average of five members. The joint cooperative farms would pool land, bullocks and draught animals with only minimal returns to ownership. The other type of farming recommended by the committee was family farming for holdings between minimal and optimal size.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Pg.68-Footnotes

Among other stipulations for such farming, it was also stated that all farmers must obtain their credit, sell their produce and buy their supplies from the village multipurpose service cooperative. These arrangements were considered to be temporary and the report expressed the hope that all land in the village would ultimately come under joint cooperative management. The need to fix a minimum wage for the agricultural labourers was also noted in the report which would not only benefit the landless labourers but would also motivate the small farms and the small holders to form cooperative farms.²⁰ But the most difficult task would be perhaps to convince the innumerable small holders of divergent castes, groups, religious denominations, interests etc. and make them spontaneously accept the new agrarian cooperative pattern. The authors of the report also felt that some measure of compulsion might be needed to introduce it and a passage of the report read, "of course, the scheme of compulsory joint farming would involve an amount of coercion. But we must also consider that by the judicious exercise of coercion by persons of proper perspective, the edge of unpleasantness involved in coercion is greatly taken off."²¹ But coercion of any kind, in any form contradicts the true spirit of cooperation. And the government and the ruling party wished to use the cooperative method as a tool for the consensus that they were trying to build up in India during the days immediately following India's independence. It may be noted that there was no spontaneity in this implementation of the cooperative principle and was essentially being imposed on the people as a part of the nation's new agrarian policy.

Frankel observes that by 1949, the government-initiated 'social reform' in the rural sector to a certain extent threatened the economic interests of the landowning and of the propertied classes. And that the people from below, the mass of illiterate tenant farmers and landless labourers, were perhaps faintly aware of the exact recommendations for changes in the land tenure system, and hoped that the new government after independence might bring about a major

²⁰ *Ibid*, Pg.70

²¹ Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, Indian National Congress, AICC, , Pg.16 – cited in F. R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005

improvement in their deplorable condition.²² However, the people from the margins remained mere experimental puppets in the hands of the policy makers. The initial days of independence did not see any significant role of these people in the cooperative experiments that were being envisaged. The cooperative movement in the rural sector remained an official construction as in pre-colonial times. This might raise a few questions, like, whether the cooperative movement of the post-colonial times was an extension of the movement in colonial times, old wine in new bottle, and whether the cooperative movement worked primarily under government initiative with hardly any popular participation was making the movement somewhat authoritarian.

An attempt to look for a reasonable answer to the first question might be made with the help of Benjamin Zachariah's observation that the conventions of imperialist arguments underwent a change during the closing years of the colonial rule in India. Zachariah points out that the British gradually gave up the strongly held claims to an expertise in superior governance and that a new and a less objectionable justification for imperialism had to be found in which claims to proper respect for Indian national sentiment and 'legitimate demands' were to play an important role. In the formulation of the new imperial arguments, certain aspects of nationalist demands were selectively admitted to be acceptable as long as they were not that 'extreme' or revolutionary. The conventions of imperialist arguments began to shift towards a more apparently nationalist rhetoric, particularly during the Second World War, which subsequently dissolved into a rhetoric of the partnership of free nations within a mutually beneficial Commonwealth.²³ As a result, the thrust areas of the arguments, imperialist and nationalist, centralization or decentralization, socialist or capitalist, seemed to

²² Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg. 70

²³ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp.292-293

share a common plane, but were pieced together into divergent, and often antagonistic arguments.²⁴

Zachariah does not find this sharing of terminology very surprising. For instance, moral and material progress were bound together in nationalist thought in the same way as in imperial discourse.²⁵ It has already been pointed out in the earlier chapters, how the moral and the material aspects got entwined in the different cooperative endeavours of the colonial regime, whether they be the initiatives of the imperial government or be of the nationalist thinkers including certain revolutionaries. Zachariah points out that there were certain terms which were common to the political and discursive framework in which protagonists of the different schools of thought operated and that they made a permutation and combination of those common terms to build their respective arguments.²⁶ The same was true for the ideology behind the cooperative experiments. As a result of these similarities, the common claim is that imperialism and nationalism were almost equivalent, and consequently a “seamless continuity between empire and nation” is usually located and postulated. Zachariah feels that it is necessary to understand that the shared or common terms were necessary conventions of legitimate politics. And in the absence of such an understanding it becomes difficult to distinguish between the different positions and they appear to be the same and are likely to be read as actually being the same.²⁷

Anyway, the idea of cooperation got comfortably associated with the development programmes of the new nation. However, the divergent perspectives of development became evident in the agenda of the different nationalist groups. In spite of the general agreement that the nationalists were the legitimate agents of development and progress, the internal differences remained embedded. Zachariah observes that the strategy to camouflage the political divides was to appeal to the ‘technical criteria’. For example, though the Planning Commission in the 1950s

²⁴ *Ibid*, Pg.294

²⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.295

²⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.296

²⁷ *Ibid*, Pp.296-297

was claimed to be an apolitical body, a body representing technical expertise, it, according to Partha Chatterjee, was being 'used as an instrument of politics'.²⁸ But as Zachariah argues, the claims to technical expertise could only operate as legitimate within a consensus which regarded socialism and national discipline as the legitimate desired goals of the new nation, where politics had no role to play.²⁹ For instance, the claim that socialism could not be achieved without the required disciplined behaviour of the Indian people, or the claim that the extreme and excessive forms of socialism were incongruous with disciplined national life and the claim that extreme socialism was not 'Indian'. According to Zachariah, this called for a kind of professional approach to make decisions for the country as a whole, to determine her social and political goals, to set her cultural standards etc.

This implied an expertise which went beyond just technical matters and sought to encompass both the moral and material aspects of 'nation building'. The onus was obviously on the elite. He points out that formal politics remained the domain and concern of the urban middle-class intelligentsia both as politicians and otherwise. In this entire process, the 'masses' remained passive onlookers who were projected as "somewhat abstract beneficiary, whose interests were claimed to be represented by various socialist parties or even the capitalists, in an obligatory populist rhetoric, but whose active participation was hardly envisaged, except in the limited sense of producing the required effort and success of 'development'." This is located by Zachariah to be one of the gross ambiguities of nation-building in India.³⁰ And herein lies the answer to the second question that was raised, that whether the cooperative movement worked primarily under government initiative with hardly any popular participation thus making the movement somewhat authoritarian.

²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, Pg.205

²⁹ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.298

³⁰ *Ibid*, Pp.298-299

The decision makers of early post-colonial India conceived and structured the different kinds of cooperative societies, organizations and arrangements as instruments for forging the nation, but were “unacquainted with the human material available to them” through the cooperative societies. Thus theoretically a people’s movement, the cooperative movement failed to develop a base among the masses. The masses too might not have been able to conform to the norms of ‘modernity’ as defined by their leaders which might have placed them beyond the pale or prompted to teach them the correct modes of behavior. And Zachariah finds these efforts often not quite away from the civilizing mission of the colonial-paternalists.³¹ The authoritarian overtone thus remained in the cooperative programmes of the post-colonial times which seems to have tainted the true spirit of cooperation. Such dilemmas, paradoxes and ambiguities remained in the very structure of the emergent new India, though, at least theoretically, the aspirations of the newly independent country was to carefully work out democracy and civil liberties.

Yet the end of British rule made a realignment of politics necessary which was conducted with a set of ideas and a language of legitimacy which was not just the legacy of an era of direct imperialism.³² Divisions within the Congress itself became more pronounced. Till the transfer of power, the Congress in spite of its internal dissensions, served as the main platform to fight imperialism. As learnt from the scholars writing on this area, the right wing of the Congress was not quite comfortable with the Congress Socialist Party within it. Differences of opinion surfaced on the lines of earlier differences on groups within the Congress and took the form of a debate as to whether the Congress should be a party or a platform. Eventually these debates led to the expulsion of the Hindu Mahasabha, a sectarian organization whose ideas went against the avowed creed of the Congress. After independence, Gandhi himself had talked of disbanding the Congress. Indecisions persisted and one point of view was to transfer the power

³¹ *Ibid*, Pg.299

³² *Ibid*, Pg.263

to the Congress since no other party was adept to shoulder the responsibility. It was around this time that the socialists seceded from the Congress.³³

IB. THE CONSTITUTION AND THE PLANNING

Democratic social transformation with the thrust on development formed the major agenda of the different political parties of independent India. But the parameters of development were still to be definitely decided. Frankel identifies two contradictory tendencies inside the Congress party with the national party executive endorsing socialist principles of state ownership, regulation and control over key sectors of the economy on the one hand, and the national Congress government pursuing liberal economic policies and incentives to private investment on the other. The phenomenon, according to her, reflected a serious attrition in the strength of the socialist and Gandhian intelligentsia at all levels of the party organization.³⁴ The Socialist Party prescribed for the 'transition period' a Constitution which would provide, through the creation of statutory bodies such as Economic Councils and Planning Commissions, for the reorganization and development of economic life on the basis of social ownership and control of the means of production and a strong federal centre.³⁵ A framework of constitutional arrangements for carrying out democratic social reform became the priority which culminated in the adoption of the constitution by the Constituent Assembly on 26th November, 1949. The constitution provided for a parliamentary form of government at the centre and in the states. The constitutive powers of the parliament was to carry out social and economic reforms through measures that were consistent with the fundamental rights of individuals guaranteed by the constitution. However, the Directive Principles of State Policy formed the most egalitarian parts of the Constitution. These principles were supposed to guide the "economic and social pattern to be attained through planning". Nehru too was able to win the approval of the Cabinet for a national programme of planned

³³ *Ibid*, Pp.260-263

³⁴ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg. 71

³⁵ Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-50*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.261

development. The final draft of the Cabinet resolution established the Planning Commission on 15th March, 1950. The Draft Outline of the Plan endorsed goals of social and institutional transformation, but all programmes included in the plan were justified by the economic goal of increasing production.

The Draft Outline assigned highest priority to agriculture, rural development, irrigation and power. The planners pointed out that the great majority of India's farmers cultivated uneconomic holdings and could not invest in improved practices. They thus sought the solution to the central problem of increasing production by changing the character of Indian agriculture from subsistence farming to economic farming. This required certain changes in the agricultural organization which would introduce a substantial measure of efficiency in farming operations and enable the low income farmers to increase their returns. The planners believed that among other changes, it would also be required to reorganize agriculture into larger units of management and production than the existing holdings. The ultimate objective was described as cooperative village management, under which all the land in the village was to be regarded as a single farm and in the interim the small holders would be encouraged and assisted to group themselves into Cooperative Farming Societies.³⁶ However, in practice, institutional reform was given secondary importance in the programme for increasing agricultural production. The planners ruled out nationalization of land for collective cultivation on the grounds of "a tradition of free peasant ownership."³⁷ The greatest emphasis in agricultural programmes was placed on the adoption of improved technological practices, particularly the introduction of irrigation and the application of chemical fertilizer.

The final version of the First Five Year Plan was published in December, 1952. The Draft Outline did not offer much practical programmes to dissolve the apparent contradiction between the economic and social aims of planning. It had

³⁶ First Five Year Plan, A Draft Outline, Planning Commission, Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1951, Pp.94, 98, 104

³⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.99

emphasized on incentives to greater private investment on modern inputs and concentration of resources in the irrigated areas having the highest production potential. According to Frankel, such an approach might have yielded maximum gains in output, but at the cost of widening the gap between large landowners and the mass of subsistence farmers on one hand, and the most advantaged and the impoverished regions on the other. The final version of the First Plan paved the way for the reconciliation of growth and equity goals by reformulating the problem of agricultural development in terms of eliminating exploitative social and economic relations that inhibited more efficient use of existing labour intensive practices to increase output.³⁸ It also ruled out the undiluted capitalist pattern of agrarian reorganization and thus adopted alternative proposals for land reform that made significant redistribution of land and some extent of change from individual to cooperative patterns of economic activity as an integral part of the programme for agricultural development. The most striking departure was seen in the recommendation of ceilings where the planners announced that they were in favour of the principle that there should be an upper limit to the amount of land that an individual might hold, in contrast to the rejection of the proposal to place a ceiling on existing holdings in order to redistribute land to subsistence farmers in the Draft Outline. These recommendations were expected to alleviate but not totally do away with the miseries of the landless labourers.

The Planning Commission as in the Draft Outline, recommended that small and middle farmers were to be assisted to group themselves voluntarily into cooperative farming societies and the ultimate goal was defined as cooperative village management. However, the Commission suggested a modest element of compulsion this time. Frankel finds that the Planning Commission's projection of an extended time perspective for the organization of cooperative farms of small and middle farmers strengthened the impression of a moderate land policy compatible with the practice of accommodative politics. The planners did not fix any target, both in terms of number and time, for achieving the ultimate goal of

³⁸Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.95

cooperative village management.³⁹ Recommendations for ceilings on landownership and the formation of cooperative farms were endorsed by the Cabinet, the Lok Sabha and the Congress Party as part of their overall approval of the Plan. These steps were supposed to have paved the way for the evolution of a socialist pattern which would redefine distribution norms and which in the long run would legitimize resistance to extreme inequalities in economic power.

The 'new approach' to agricultural development also incorporated a set of proposals for organizational changes at the village level that carried the potentiality for mobilizing effective public opinion as a sanction in enforcing plan policies of agrarian reform. The core of the approach was the recommendation for a Community Development Programme. This programme was designed to stimulate popular pressures for social reform from below that would facilitate institutional changes. At the centre of the programme was a plan to establish cooperative and panchayat institutions which aimed at reconstructing the whole village as the primary unit of economic and political action. The ideological aspect of the proposal to use cooperatives as the major instrument of rural economic development appealed to the socialist and the Gandhian planners in the same way as it sought to arrest the tendencies towards individualism and class division and revive and strengthen community values and interests.⁴⁰ But at the same time, the planners were aware that considering the diverse elements of the village community in terms of class, caste, religious denominations etc., it would rather be difficult to converge the ideological and experimental aspects of the cooperative movement. Even Tarlok Singh,⁴¹ the most influential advocate of the community approach among the members of the Planning Commission, knew that

³⁹ *Ibid*, Pg. 101

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Pg.103

⁴¹ Tarlok Singh – A civil servant and a member of the Planning Commission of India from its inception till his retirement in 1967. He wrote India's First Five Year Plan. He was the first Private Secretary to J.L.Nehru and also served as the Director General of Rehabilitation in the Punjab and the UNICEF Deputy Executive Director (Planning). His important works include *Poverty and Social Change*, *Land Settlement Manual for Displaced Persons*, *The Planning Process* and *India's Development Experience*.

there were very few values which were common to the whole community and there was no common purpose which inspired all sections equally.⁴²

In spite of these known limitations, the relevance of the Community Development Programme and the cooperative institutions lay in their emphasis on “nonpolitical” organizational approach to social reform, which seemed to coordinate well with the aspiration of the new nation to bring about complete social transformation through a democratic process. The ideological aspect of these programmes was harped on to motivate the people of the village community to come together, to inculcate in them a common desire to improve their general standard of life by pooling local resources and work for mutual benefit. And the micro institutions like the cooperatives and *panchayats* were thought to be the best means to make inroads into the village community. The traditional group oriented values were hoped to be revived through these institutions. All agriculturist families of every village, even the uneconomic cultivators, were expected to become members of the village multipurpose cooperative society. The Planning Commission suggested that moral character rather than financial security should be the most important factor in determining the eligibility of members for agricultural loans. The cooperatives were subsequently supposed to take up supervision and control of all areas of agricultural life, including credit, marketing, distribution and cooperative farm management. The planners argued that by reducing interest rates on loans, eliminating the fees of middlemen, organizing efficient units of production, the cooperative societies would increase and consolidate the income and surpluses from agriculture of the small farmers steeped in poverty. In this way the planners expected the values of egalitarianism and cooperation to be inculcated in the rural social structure.⁴³ But all these suppositions could not overcome the basic dilemma between compulsion and democracy, which was perhaps inherent in the socio-economic and political structure that was evolving in India. The cooperative

⁴² Tarlok Singh, *Towards an Integrated Society*, Bombay, 1969, Pg.165

⁴³ *Ibid*, Pg.104

arrangements indeed came from the government and the policy makers; and though intended to motivate people's participation from below, they did not think in terms of intensive spread of the movement. A rather huge target of bringing about 1,20,000 villages under the scheme of Community Development Programme was set in the First Five-Year Plan where "the principle of selective and intensive development was completely abandoned". The village community based on cooperation was taken as the basic unit of social action. This decentralized unit was conceived against the centralized structure that was emerging in India, thus bringing to the fore another set of dichotomy.

As Paul R. Brass points out, the dilemma was at the heart of Indian politics, which surrounded the problems of building and maintaining a stable structure of national power. Under Nehru's leadership, the Government of India adopted a system of centralized economic planning which required centralized decision making and uniform national policies for optimal implementation.⁴⁴ Perhaps this centralization was thought desirable to unite a culturally diverse and socially fragmented society, to assert India's sovereign presence in the world and to carry on the development policy effectively. Moreover, there was increasing drive for over-centralisation, particularly in the post-Nehru period. Brass notes that under Indira Gandhi's leadership, the struggle for political power at the Centre became primary and centralized economic development planning, increasingly subordinated to political goals, began to disintegrate. Plans and schemes such as anti-poverty programmes, however noble their intentions, were integrated more into designs for centralized political control than into a design for a new national economic order.⁴⁵ It was difficult for the cooperatives to fit into this scheme of things.

The social situation was also not conducive to the cooperative system. This was partly a reaction to the centralizing drive of the state. The increasing centralization produced a contrary effect on society which saw more and more

⁴⁴ Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1990, Pg. 344

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, Pp.344-345

localism, factionalism and particularism. There were growing demands from various assertive groups facilitated by a democratic system. The tussle between the 'command polity' of the state and the 'demand polity' of society, in the words of Rudolph and Rudolph, led to a conflicting situation. The principle of cooperation was perhaps caught between the two. A number of scholars have observed that the phenomenon of the failure of the state and society in post-independence India to converge properly led to a 'systemic crisis'.⁴⁶ To solve this incompatibility between state and society, there emerged an increasingly powerful political society woven around political parties, initially around the Congress, followed by other parties from the mid-1960s. This meant an overpoliticisation of polity. This was based on vicious competition, mostly among local land-controlling people and generated a lot of corruption. The cooperative societies also got entangled in this political fray.

IC. FROM PLANNING TO POLICY MAKING TO ATTEMPTS AT IMPLEMENTATION

The contradictions became more evident after 1955 when the Planning Commission became an extension of the Prime Minister's authority in the area of economic policy thereby significantly increasing its status and power. The originally decided demarcation between the advisory functions of the Planning Commission and the decision making responsibilities of the central government grew blurred. A combination of political influence, superior expertise, and control over formulas for central financial assistance to the states ensured that the economic and social priorities set down by the Planning Commission were adopted in the state Plans. Frankel considers the unique position of Nehru in the government and the Congress party to be central to this transformation.⁴⁷ Nehru outlined and settled the new principles and directions of social and economic

⁴⁶ See Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom : Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*, OUP, Delhi, 1998, 'Introduction' & also Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India*, OUP Paperbacks, Delhi, 1999, 'Introduction'

⁴⁷ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pg.113

policy by late 1954. The cooperative principles and policy too were framed as parts of the broad social and economic policy.

In a speech to the National Development Council on November, 1954, Nehru placed the broad questions of economic approach and social policy before the chief ministers of the states where he emphasized the establishment of a socialistic pattern of society with the principal means of production to be under social ownership or control.⁴⁸ This objective and the other related economic development strategy formulated by Nehru were endorsed by both the government and the Congress party and they expected that all this would accelerate to the maximum extent possible, the pace of economic activity in general and industrial development in particular. The Prime Minister and the members of the Planning Commission were aware that the new emphasis on rapid industrialization and expansion of the public sector had far-reaching implications for plan policies in agriculture. Nehru knew that the entire programme of industrial development depended on achieving adequate increases in agricultural production. But since most of the available resources were invested in the rather expensive modern technologies for the large industrial schemes, the small peasants could not be provided with capital intensive production inputs (e.g. mechanized irrigation, farm machinery, chemical fertilizer) to increase agricultural output. The alternative was to increase productivity by optimum and efficient use of available land and resources within the rural sector. All this convinced Nehru that cooperative farming and Community Development Programme supported by the services of village multipurpose cooperative societies would raise food production through mobilization of local resources and manpower. He considered that cooperative farming to be essential from the economic and social point of view.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Planning and Development*, "Speech delivered to the National Development Council," November 9, 1954, Pp.15-16 – cited in *ibid*, Pg.117

⁴⁹ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp.118-119

But once again, the emerging contradiction between requirements of the industrialization strategy and those of peaceful social transformation were not directly dealt by Nehru nor the other members of the Planning Commission. The approach of economic development got entwined with the strategy of peaceful social transformation in the first three five-year plans. In the rural sector, the Planning Commission proposed to establish village cooperatives and village councils or panchayats as the major instruments of agricultural development to involve the majority of the small peasants in labour-intensive development schemes and community action projects. It was assumed that during the long drawn period of nonviolent social transformation, the newly acquired rights of the new nation, like education, popular suffrage, would be able to create a well-informed and united peasantry capable of generating its own leadership at the local level to demand for agrarian reform through the village institutions. As stated earlier, the First Plan concentrated on extension of village cooperatives and such other institutions in terms of numbers, but did not think about vertical dissemination of such institutions across different social cross sections. The popular response to and the acceptance of these institutions perhaps never remained a concern of the planners and policy makers. Thus on the eve of the Second Plan it was found that the vast majority of the rural population still remained outside the organized economic and political sectors. The traditional communal, caste and factional divisions were still very much ingrained in them thus impeding social cohesion.

It may be noted that the rural scenario was also not much congenial for trying out the cooperative experiments in the true sense of the term. To keep pace with rapid speed of industrialization and agrarian reorganization, social mobilization in the rural sector was also to be geared up. But the reality was a dearth of mentors and leaders to organize the peasants from below and to make them aware about the advantages of the cooperative pattern and practices. The block officials and the village level workers were mere spokesmen of the government and the ministry. The dominant landed classes were not ready to

cooperate and “accept the challenge of the projected cooperative institutions to their hegemony over agricultural credit, marketing, distribution and productive land”. These difficulties needed to be overcome to give a rational shape to the cooperative movement.

All-India Rural Credit Survey of the Reserve Bank published in 1955, made an exhaustive study of the condition of the cooperative movement which revealed the appalling condition of the movement. It is learnt from the survey that 10% of all cultivating families belonged to one of the approximately 100,000 agricultural credit societies in the country. Most of the societies were dormant or functioned in an unsatisfactory way and less than 20% of the societies were considered to be economically viable. It was estimated that less than 3% of the cultivators’ total annual credit requirements were met by the cooperatives. The reasons for the failure cited by the survey were small size of credit cooperatives organized on the principle of one village one society, insistence on land as security for most loans, a low turnover of funds, inadequate supervision of recovery and a large proportion of overdue loans.⁵⁰ However, the hope was not lost and efforts were made not only to overcome the identified limitations, but to also restructure them on the lines of the cooperative organizations in China which might facilitate government regulation and control over agricultural savings and surpluses. All this went to show that the movement remained trapped within the government policies and the think tanks conceived it as a development strategy.

These cooperative policies could not leave much positive impact on the rural populace. The cooperative policies were formulated and introduced from above, the implications of which often could not be comprehended by the people from below. The influential people of the rural areas, especially those associated with the local party organizations, were also very much disturbed by the central role assigned to the cooperatives in the economic organization of the rural areas.

⁵⁰ *All India Rural Credit Survey, II, The General Report*, Reserve Bank of India, Bombay, 1954

They apprehended that adoption of cooperative principles and practices would show a way to an egalitarian and democratic order which would eventually curb their economic interests. Therefore neither were the dominant landed classes eager to part with their landholdings because of the introduction of land ceilings, nor were the larger producers ready to sacrifice their profits because of implementation of controlled and lower-than-market prices of food grains by the government. But what needs to be taken note of is an implied tone of coercion in the proposals of the Second Plan which aimed at "taking such essential steps as will provide sound foundations for the development of cooperative farming so that over a period of 10 years or so a substantial proportion of agricultural lands are cultivated on cooperative lines."⁵¹ The indefinite time period mentioned in the First Plan for resource mobilization and agrarian reorganization on the principles of cooperation was suddenly bound by a fixed timeframe. P. C. Mahalanobis wanted the completion of the fixation of ceilings on landownership and the redistribution of surplus land by 1958. The planners envisaged that all economic activities in the rural sector would be reorganized on cooperative lines within a period of ten to fifteen years.⁵² And yet no effective mechanism was introduced to democratize the rural society from within and infuse it with egalitarian values. The mode of progression of the movement thus indicated elements of compulsion and lack of spontaneity, which contradicted its true spirit. The dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions referred to thus thwarted a complete expression of the cooperative movement. The ideology of the movement was compromised to a great extent. The basic benefits of cooperation hardly percolated to the 'small men', the ones from the margins.

⁵¹ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp. 127-128

⁵² *Ibid*, Pg.128

II. FURTHER PROGRAMMES COUPLED WITH PERSISTING DISINTEREST AND DISCREPANCIES

The next important milestone in the course of the cooperative movement was the Nagpur Resolution on Agrarian Organisational Pattern. In January, 1959, Nehru, the Working Committee of the Nagpur session of the Congress, other allied committees and the open session of the Congress unanimously approved an agricultural programme that called for an immediate transformation of the agrarian structure. The resolution categorically stated that the organization of the village should be based on village panchayats and village cooperatives, which were expected to become the spearheads of developmental activities in the villages. The preliminary step would be to set up service cooperatives to be followed by cooperative joint farming, in which the land would be pooled for joint cultivation, the farmers continuing to retain their rights and getting a share from their net produce in proportion to their land. Further, those who actually cultivated the land, whether they owned it or not, would get a share in proportion to the work put in by them on the joint farm.⁵³ Bitter debates surfaced within the Congress on the issue of cooperative farming. The main criticism was that the joint cooperative farming as proposed in the Nagpur resolution would pave the way for forced collectivization. Nehru countered this contention, stood firm on his belief in the correctness of the cooperative pattern and wished to educate the peasantry and make them aware in this regard. But by this time Nehru himself had understood that without the support and consent of the peasantry it would be difficult to implement the programme of joint farming.

The organizational effort to organize the service cooperatives was also difficult. According to the Nagpur resolution, service cooperatives should be established in every village in India by 1962. To meet this target, it was necessary to set up about six thousand new cooperatives every month for a period of three years

⁵³ *Ibid*, Pg.162

and to train about 70,000 workers annually.⁵⁴ The workers were primarily drawn from within the Congress which tended to politicize the cooperative movement and the societies. On the whole, the response from the Congressmen seemed rather bleak which perhaps reflected their disinterest in the movement. Thus the work of implementation too became quite arduous.

By the time of the Third Plan, efforts were made to diversify the movement, though the primary responsibility remained arranging for credit and supplies. The primary agricultural societies were expected to provide short-term production loans which amounted to more than double of what had been achieved by the end of the Second Plan. Credit, considered to be “the beginning of cooperation”, was to be linked to marketing and the village societies were expected to serve as channels for disposal of the agricultural surplus. The objective of this plan was to extend cooperation from credit to a number of other activities in the village including cooperative farming till it covered all aspects of rural life.⁵⁵ But certain vital questions like, a timetable for land reforms, the organization of cooperatives remained unanswered. Many questions were left for negotiation between the state chief ministers and the Planning Commission in the discussions on the state plans that followed the publication of the Draft Outline of the Third Plan.

The final version of the Third Plan revealed that the Planning Commission had not been successful in convincing the state leaders to accept an accelerated pace of agrarian reorganization. Though the state chief ministers did not openly oppose the new agrarian policies in principle, they wanted to be cautious in implementing them. They cited a number of administrative and organizational difficulties in the way of immediate application of ceilings and formation of cooperative farms. They apprehended that drastic implementation of the agrarian policies might alienate the landed classes leading to their large-scale defections from the Congress party on the eve of the forthcoming general elections. This indicated that contradictions between the Plan policies and programmes in the

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Pg.169

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.183

rural sector not only continued, but deepened in course of time. The state leaders did not quite recognize the land reforms as a positive programme of development and an integral part of the community-based effort to increase agricultural production. They just endorsed proposals for a programme of comprehensive rural work which would require very little government support. The programme envisaged only limited wage employment, amounting to subsistence payments in cash or kind for particular projects. The mobilization of idle manpower remained a voluntary programme under the Third Plan.⁵⁶

Discrepancies also occurred in the provisions for organization of cooperatives. Though the Planning Commission emphasized on the involvement of all families in the village, especially those engaged in cultivation, in the agricultural effort through the village cooperatives, the actual membership targets were substantially lower than the food and agricultural ministry's figure of 74% cited in the Draft Outline. After consulting with the states, the Planning Commission accepted the membership target of 37 million cultivators in primary cooperatives by 1965-66, which covered only 60% of the agricultural population. Another major contradiction that could be identified was that in spite of slowing down the pace of agricultural organization on new lines, a greater burden was placed on cooperatives for financing agricultural production. The political compulsion of conciliating the big farmers and traders narrowed the scope and possibility of institutional change. The likelihood of mobilizing the additional rural resources through cooperatives experiments, considered necessary to consolidate planned financial outlays, also seemed grim. All this were thought to have questioned the basic rationale of national development planning. In this context, the hope of rapid progress toward a self-reliant economy, the aims of reducing social inequalities and improving the standard of living of the majority of the peasant population could hardly be realized by the Third Plan.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.184

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Pp.184-185

In such circumstances, the cooperative societies, expected to function as strong “people’s institutions”, could not hold much promise for the people from below. The bureaucrats and other subordinate officials remained responsible for working out the official and legal structure of the movement at different levels of administration, blocks, districts, divisions etc. State acts gave the Registrar and the other officials of the Department of Cooperation extensive regulatory and executive authority over the whole range of operations of cooperative societies. The state was empowered to bring financial sanctions against recalcitrant societies. These powers were supposed to have provided the right options as well as checks for the implementation of the Planning Commission’s policy of linking credit to an approved production plan and repayment in kind through crop deliveries to a cooperative marketing society.⁵⁸ But unfortunately, the hierarchical power structure of the local environments in which the Department of Cooperation functioned was not always sympathetic to the egalitarian goals and principles of cooperation and rather sought to promote their own interests through the cooperative societies. The ‘big people’ of the villages mostly controlled the working of the cooperative societies. With a few exceptions, the cooperative societies generally followed the conservative banking principles which required land, jewellery etc. as security for all kinds of loans. Thus crop loans which formed an important part of the government’s plan to organize production programmes around the participation of the small cultivators, became rarely available. The small peasants with very small landholdings, especially the tenant cultivators, thus could hardly join the cooperative societies. To them the cooperative societies appeared like any other financial institution which did not offer anything to alleviate their miseries. Therefore they also found no interest and no reason to join the cooperative societies. The reins of the cooperative movement were generally controlled by the leaders of the political parties thus distancing the common people further. And it was found that in carrying out the cooperative experiments, the ideology of cooperation was lost in most cases.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, Pg. 196

III. PROSPECTS OF THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN WEST BENGAL

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to the creation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and the Indian state of West Bengal from the erstwhile province of Bengal. This division disturbed the distribution of the existing cooperative societies as most of them were concentrated towards the east which fell in East Pakistan. The structure of the official cooperative movement was thus supposed to have been weakened and statistical records state that West Bengal had only 13,000 cooperative societies to begin with.⁵⁹ These societies were not financially stable either. The activities of the cooperative societies in independent India were still legally bound by the Bengal Cooperative Societies Act of 1940 till its replacement by the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act in 1973. S. N. Sen in his book (1966) reviewing the cooperative movement in West Bengal between 1951-52 and 1962-63, does not find much promise in the movement. He notes that it did not occupy any significant position in the state's financial organization. In a comparative statistical study on the coverage of the rural population by the primary credit societies in different Indian states in 1962-63 he shows that the position of West Bengal was extremely unsatisfactory in comparison to most states of India. Sen's study reveals that the situation was equally deplorable for other types of agricultural cooperatives too. He thus tries to probe into and thereby locate the reasons for the debility of the cooperative movement in West Bengal. According to him, credit still formed the dominant theme of the cooperative movement both in West Bengal and in other Indian states. He observes that in contrast to West Bengal, the cooperative movement has been able to solve the rural credit problem in Maharashtra, Madras, Gujrat and Punjab. However, he locates dynamism in certain other sectors of the cooperative movement in West Bengal, for example, non-agricultural credit societies, consumers' societies, primary housing societies etc.⁶⁰ But it may be noted that all these organizations were urban organizations run by middle income and educated groups. The scenario still

⁵⁹ Anil Bhumali, *Rural Cooperative and Economic Development*, New Delhi, 2003, Pg.48

⁶⁰ S.N. Sen, *Cooperative Movement in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1966, Pp.1-9

remained grim in the rural areas. Sen points out that in spite of efforts to consolidate the cooperative movement in rural West Bengal during 1959-60 to 1962-63, the inherent weaknesses could not be overcome. The period saw a significant decline in the number of both agricultural credit and non-credit societies at the primary level, i.e. in the villages.

Ashoke Sen too locates the limited scope of the cooperative movement, especially in the credit sector, in post-colonial West Bengal. He in an article in 1970 refers to the confession made by the then Minister of Cooperation, Kanai Bhowmik. The Minister in a radio talk on 2nd January, 1970 clearly pointed out that the movement was rather failing to address the problems of the day. For example, in the rural areas, the movement could not offer a sound alternative to the moneylending activities, neither could it create adequate opportunities to assist in increasing agricultural productivity, nor could it consolidate itself to draw and combine small sources of fund and capital to establish stable institutions which would provide commodities for the common people at a fair price and thereby safeguard them from the profiteering motives of the traders. The Minister also noted that in the face of severe employment crisis, the movement could not create employment opportunities through the expansion of small and cottage industries. A. Sen agrees with the Minister and probes into the problem further to unearth that the outstanding and unrecovered loans of the primary agricultural cooperative societies posed to be a grave problem. The primary agricultural societies of the villages were associated with their respective district (central) Cooperative Banks, which in turn received funds from the Reserve Bank and the state Government, to be distributed as loans to the primary societies, to be further distributed among their members. In such circumstances, Sen notes that the gross deficiency of the movement in West Bengal was that the legacy of popular participation as in the leftist political trends did not develop. As a result, in most cases the central banks in the districts and the primary societies in the villages could not look beyond the reactionary and vested interests of certain privileged sections of the society. The sense of responsibility and veracity were

palpably lacking among those in charge of these institutions, which curbed the ideology of the movement.⁶¹

Sen estimates that in 1968-69, the overdue amounted to about 69% of the total loan disbursed. Unfortunately, in many cases, the defaulters were the ones who were financially better off. Sen argues that narrow political manipulations and interventions also often restricted the scope of the movement. The difficulty was that there was no appropriate legal instrument to restrict the evasive tendencies of the jotedars or the mahajans, who were incidentally also the local political magnates and generally monopolized the key positions of the societies at all levels. Sen finds the legal aspects of the movement to be rather weak and incomplete. The implementation of the same thus left certain serious loopholes making it difficult for the government to take punitive measures against the recalcitrant members. This necessitated the reform and amendment of the prevalent Act and a committee to this effect was constituted by the West Bengal Government in June, 1968. The recommendations of the committee were to be placed before the Legislative Assembly and Cooperative Ordinances were adopted as interim measures thereby empowering the State Government to control the cooperative societies. These legal measures, according to Sen, were only a few preliminary steps to keep a leash on the arbitrary course that the movement was taking. He feels that apart from the particular laws concerning the diversification, expansion and organizational consolidation of the movement, the rest should either seek to check the pursuit of vested interests or should provide securities against bureaucratic perils. He realized that unless the people from below, the poor and those with limited means, could not be made to participate in the movement in large numbers, the future of the movement was bleak. In his opinion, the means to break the vicious nexus of vested interests that was

⁶¹'Samabay O Grameen Reen Byabastha', Ashoke Sen, in Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *Compass*, 7th February, 1970, , Calcutta

surfacing in the districts in the name of the cooperative movement, lay in the democratic spread and in the inherent cohesive power of the movement.⁶²

Ashoke Sen in the said article tries to identify the reasons for the limited reach of the credit facilities to the people from below and from the margins. Analysing the prevalent rules and regulations for the establishment and constitution of the primary cooperative credit societies, he finds that the societies formed with members owning less than 5 acres of land, had uncertain prospects. With such stipulations nearly 60% of the agricultural families of West Bengal including the agricultural labourers would not be able to avail of the cooperative credit facilities. The basic objective of the credit movement, i.e. to provide security to the poor peasants against the atrocious moneylenders, would thus be defeated.⁶³

It may be pointed that West Bengal witnessed an unbroken Congress rule from 1952 to 1966. After independence, though the Congress support base was generally thought to be widely dispersed throughout the state and quite evenly balanced between the urban and rural areas, certain major potential support bases remained largely alienated. For example, the nature of politics within the Congress, the policies of the Congress government in West Bengal and the socio-economic conditions that these policies gave rise to could not appeal to the students and the youth, the industrial workers and the peasants. The Congress rule in West Bengal could not generate much special enthusiasm among the students and youth, especially in the face of huge refugee influx, shrinking job opportunities and widely alleged corrupt practices among certain politicians and administrators. The Congress also could not leave a significant influence on the industrial workers. And lastly, the question of organizing the small peasants and agricultural labourers in West Bengal was never in the agenda of the Congress party. Since independence, the Congress government talked about redistribution of land in rural areas and emphasized on development of agriculture. But practically nothing was done towards redistribution of land. There were major loopholes in

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ *ibid*

the relevant acts that subsequently came about. A study conducted by the Directorate of Land Record and Surveys in 1971 revealed that only 9.5% of the total arable land actually vested with the government under the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 against the ideal target of 37.3%. Scholars working on this area have found that under different pretexts, the main policy of the Congress government not only till 1966, but also thereafter was to protect the interests of the large landowners.⁶⁴ This government was evidently not keen to improve the condition of the poor.

The potentialities that the cooperative movement had, therefore could not be harnessed in the poverty-stricken rural areas of West Bengal. Trying to delineate the reasons for the staggering pace of the movement, S. N. Sen considers the lack of non-official support to be a major area of weakness. The cue to the following discussion is taken from here. The rest of the chapter is an attempt to bring to the fore a few non-official efforts in post-colonial West Bengal, especially in the rural belts, which sought to rejuvenate the fading ideology of cooperation and thereby give the movement a new direction. The subsequent part of the chapter would deal with the cooperative thoughts and experiments of Pannalal Dasgupta and Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan-Gramdan movement in West Bengal.

IV. BACKGROUND TO THE NON-OFFICIAL EXPERIMENTS IN WEST BENGAL

Before taking up the two specific areas of study, it should be borne in mind that the broader socio-economic and political context of India in general and West Bengal in particular and also the overall global thought processes in their respective ways influenced these 'other' trends of cooperative ideology and experiments. Though these cooperative initiatives are being called the 'other', as they were beyond the official contours of the contemporary cooperative movement, it should be noted that they sought official support in terms of

⁶⁴ Rakhahari Chatterjee (ed.), *Politics in West Bengal, Institutions, Processes and Problems*, The World Press Private Limited, Calcutta, 1985, Introduction

expertise, funds etc. to materialize their cooperative experiments. Thus the non-official cooperative endeavours and their official counterparts were not mutually exclusive. They at times shared a common plane, yet the non-official efforts sought to carve out an independent space. These efforts were rather the less known and less highlighted aspects of the cooperative movement and thus can be considered the 'other' as against the general course of the movement.

The political scenario in West Bengal in the years following 1947 was not quite congenial for the pursuit of the cooperative movement. The new national government was led by the Congress, but it became difficult for the Congress to deal with its own heterogeneity, to emerge as a disciplined political party and to provide a stable government to run the country. There were deep-rooted ideological differences within the Congress and the people were gradually losing their faith in this party. The economy during this time was also in a dismal state.⁶⁵ The Finance Minister Nalini Ranjan Sarkar admitted that as an aftermath of Partition, the economy functioned in a poor way at all levels with a rise in population and a fall in production below the pre-war level. The rising tide of inflation worsened the situation, and in the words of the Finance Minister, the main problem of the economy was the scarcity of indigenous capital.⁶⁶ To overcome this financial turbulence and to restore "the buoyancy in the economy" the Finance minister sought to provide tax incentives to private business. And in his opinion 'social consciousness' was the 'most potent corrective' for vices like black marketeering and tax evasion because it was 'ultimately the problem of improving the basic human raw material.'⁶⁷ There was a severe criticism to such seemingly ideological statements and the criticism mainly came from the backbenchers of the Congress. It was felt that nothing concrete was being done to improve the plight of the poor and that the policies of the Congress reflected only the interests of the rich in the country. The critics also felt that there was a deliberate disregard for Gandhi's idea of a non-exploitative classless society as

⁶⁵ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia*, New Delhi, 2009, Chapter 3

⁶⁶ *ibid*, Pg.89

⁶⁷ *ibid*

expressed through his idea of '*krishak-praja mazdoor-raj*'. The critics appealed to the Finance Minister to reconsider those taxes which particularly affected the poor people.⁶⁸ It was around the same time, i.e. the 1950s that Prime Minister Nehru and the Congress Working Committee talked of 'a Welfare State' and the newly elected Congress President Purushottamdas Tandon wanted the new nation to be built on the basis of Gandhi's ideals with an emphasis on service to humanity and development of the village economy.⁶⁹

The contemporary situation has been extensively dealt with by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his work *Decolonisation in South Asia, Meanings of Freedom in West Bengal, 1947-52*, where he points out that the ideological divide within the Congress became pronounced in West Bengal during the years following 1947, especially in the different proceedings of the Legislative Assembly. According to him, the chasm was between those in charge of the government in West Bengal who were in favour of capitalist development and free private enterprise and those dissident members of the Congress who thought of an indigenous path of development. The latter tried to bring about a 'classless society' to be achieved through non-violent methods 'avoiding both industrial capitalism of the Western model and the class struggle of the Soviet variety.' According to Bandyopadhyay, the term 'Gandhian way' possibly stood as a metaphor for an indigenous or a non-modern way of perceiving or achieving freedom in post-colonial times as opposed to the foreign or imported ideologies of liberation like communism.⁷⁰ This yearning for a non-western or indigenous structure as an alternative to the prevailing systems was becoming evident in the thought process of some people who tried to think differently and independently especially in the face of the uncertainties and crises brewing up in West Bengal following independence and Partition. It was realized that the concept of freedom needed to be expanded

⁶⁸ Ibid, Pg. 90

⁶⁹ *The Statesman*, 13, 20 September, 3 October, 1950 – cited in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia*, New Delhi, 2009

⁷⁰ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia, Meanings of Freedom in Post-independence West Bengal*, New Delhi, 2009, , Chap. 3

from its political manifestation to its social and economic expectations.⁷¹ Eminent litterateur Annada Shankar Roy opined that the invisible presence of Gandhi reminded everyone that with political freedom, social and economic freedom was equally desired and that it was felt that effort should be put in to attain this.⁷² The Gandhian leader Ajoy Mukherjee told his countrymen on the eve of independence that the real '*swaraj*' would come only when the Gandhian ideal of the rule of the peasants, tenants and workers, i.e. '*krishak-praja-mazdoor raj*' would be realized in this country.⁷³

There were other strands of such alternative thought which emanated from the different leftist groups. The diverse groups included the CPI (Communist Party of India), RCPI (Revolutionary Communist Party of India), Bolshevik Party of India, Bolshevik Leninist Party (Trotskyite group), Forward Bloc, RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party) and Bengal Volunteer Group. In the words of a CPI intellectual Gopal Haldar, with the progress of the freedom struggle the meaning of the term '*swaraj*' had deeply changed over the years and that at the conjuncture of Indian independence it did not merely mean Home Rule or just taking control of the administrative machinery, but empowerment of the people and a revolutionary change of social and economic forces.⁷⁴ The CPI, however, became isolated from Indian polity due to its adoption of an ultra-leftist line based on the slogan '*Ye azadi jhuta hai*' (This is a sham independence).

Bandyopadhyay notes that almost from the beginning of independence there were attempts to form a united non-communist leftist front as a pan-Indian alternative to the Indian National Congress with an indigenous face of Socialism. The initiative was taken by Swami Sahajananda Saraswati of the All India Kisan Sabha, Soumendranath Tagore of RCPI and others. In a meeting held on 6th July, 1948 at the Indian Association Hall in Calcutta Swami Sahajananda appealed to all leftist

⁷¹*ibid*, Pg. 12

⁷² Annada Shankar Roy, *Jukta Banger Smriti*, Pp. 112-113, 118, 123

⁷³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia*, New Delhi, 2009, Pg. 12

⁷⁴ Gopal Haldar, '*Bhumika*' in A. Pal, *Bharater Muktisangram*, Calcutta, n.d. 1947, Pp. iii-iv, Cited in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia*

parties to unite in order to convert political freedom into social and economic freedom.⁷⁵ However, the divide within the left became more pronounced in course of time. The alternative socio-economic structures as envisaged by various groups could not coalesce, nor could get a ground and thus generally faded into oblivion in course of time.

However, certain isolated, lone efforts sought to configurate an alternative socio-economic system amid the cross currents of the time. Pannalal Dasgupta was one of them. Some such alternative quests were also located among the followers of Vinoba Bhave in West Bengal. These non-official cooperative efforts, though not much highlighted and perhaps not always economically viable, tried to show a ray of hope to the people from below and give them an ideological and moral support, especially when their 'small' aspirations were being overlooked by the so called 'big'.

V. PANNALAL DASGUPTA, HIS THOUGHTS AND EXPERIMENTS

VA. DASGUPTA'S BACKGROUND AND THE EVOLUTION OF HIS THOUGHTS

The legacy of Gandhi's and Tagore's ideas on cooperation continued in the thought and experiments of Pannalal Dasgupta. Dasgupta's long life (1907 – 1999) made him see India at different historical junctures. His experiences as a militant nationalist, as an organizer of mass movements and as a communist moulded his ideas on cooperation. Niren Dasgupta analyzing the course of Pannalal Dasgupta's life, divided it into roughly three phases.⁷⁶ The first phase, according to the author, was Pannalal Dasgupta's life as a student when he was associated with the revolutionary group, Anushilan Samiti. In 1929 ideological differences surfaced between the leaders of the Anushilan and the Jugantar Parties on the issue of anti-imperialist struggle. A number of young members including Pannalal Dasgupta withdrew from their respective parties to join a separate organization, the

⁷⁵ Ibid, Pg. 137

⁷⁶ Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, *Purbabhash* (Preface), Pp.7-8

Revolutionary Group formed under the communist leader Niranjan Sengupta. Dasgupta was accused and imprisoned in 1929 for his involvement in the Mechuabazar Bomb Case. While in prison he started reading Marx. This was the introductory phase, a phase of learning. But it may be noted that from the beginning a basic cooperative spirit might have worked in his sub-conscious which perhaps prompted him to acquaint and share the works and ideas of Marx with his fellow prisoners while in Hijli Jail.

Dasgupta was released in 1937. But the British government to keep a check on his militant activities kept him interned in Khoyrasole in Birbhum for some time. But nothing could deter his activities and after being freed, he joined Sushen Mukherjee to work for 'Amar Kutir'. The different correspondences in the I.B files suggest a close association between Mukherjee and Dasgupta. During his stay in Birbhum, Dasgupta joined the Communist League of India⁷⁷ and in 1939, he became the President of The Birbhum District Krishak Committee and exhorted the CLI members to prepare for a revolution.⁷⁸ Niren Dasgupta considered the association with the CLI to have marked the beginning of the second phase of Pannalal Dasgupta's life.⁷⁹ During this time Pannalal Dasgupta and his fellow members of Amar Kutir organized a peasant movement in the village of Darpathila in Bolpur. He also played a leading role in the other contemporary anti-zamindari, anti-imperialist and such other movements initiated in Birbhum. Marxist ideology inspired him and henceforth his sole objective was to establish a non-exploitative society. The quest for an appropriate path often made him transcend the established Marxist structure and try out new experiments to achieve his goal. His pro-active role in acquainting the common people of

⁷⁷CLI – In 1934, Soumyendranath Tagore broke away from the Communist Party of India to form the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). During 1934-1938, the name of the party was Communist League of India (CLI).

⁷⁸ I.B. Sl. No.- 125/28; I.B.File No.- 316/28; Subject – Pannalal Dasgupta; WBSA

⁷⁹ *ibid*

Birbhum with revolutionary ideas and his constructive ventures alarmed the British government and he was externed from Birbhum on 15th July, 1940⁸⁰.

He thereafter came to Calcutta and joined the armed forces in disguise, perhaps with the ultimate motive of striking a revolt and in this way hoped to enlist the support of the aggrieved peasants and labourers of India. This was the time when his indomitable revolutionary spirit combined with his commitment to communism looked for newer avenues to express his ideas and organize the people in that direction. These were the formative years of the R.C.P.I and it was organizationally rather weak and small to initiate a mass movement and thus he might have looked for such a platform in the army. However, his political motives could not be veiled for long and he was arrested by the military police. He escaped while being transferred and absconded.

He escaped to Calcutta and got actively involved in the Quit India Movement of 1942. During this time, he was one of the six members of the Central Directorate which was formed to organize this all India movement. Dasgupta was among those who were entrusted to direct the movement in the eastern region which included Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam. Since he led the movement in disguise not revealing his identity, his name did not feature in the contemporary newspapers reporting on the Quit India movement.⁸¹ His next significant leadership was seen during the days preceding the onset of the Famine of 1943. Protesting against the imperial policy of hoarding of grains, particularly paddy, he organized the people of Birbhum and his clarion call was “*Jaan debo tabu dhaan debo na*” (Give up life rather than giving up paddy). Dasgupta not only tried to prevent the outflow of paddy from the district, his dedicated involvement was also seen in providing relief and rehabilitation to the affected people⁸² in association with the Bengal Relief Committee.⁸³

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, Pg.13

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ Ananda Sen, *Amar Dekha Pannalal Dasgupta*, Sriniketan, August, 2004, Pg.7

It is important to note that narrow political bindings did not restrict Dasgupta's vision and programme and thus he did not hesitate to collaborate and work with people of divergent political ideologies as long as their ultimate goal of dismantling colonial rule remained the same. In this way he sought to build up an atmosphere of tolerance, understanding and empathy which he believed would help the people to come to a consensus, in spite of their differences. This, according to him, would be true democracy. This may be considered to be the gestation period of his thoughts on cooperation when nothing was specifically spelt out, but bore every possibility of giving a shape to his later ideas and experiments on cooperation. As noted by Niren Dasgupta and Ananda Sen, the days of turmoil and the direct experience of the Quit India Movement made Pannalal Dasgupta realize that to strengthen the ongoing freedom movement it was necessary to set up *panchayats* on the model of communes and soviets.⁸⁴ He and his associates in course of time sought to organize *panchayats* of the belligerent peasant-labourers and even of the sailors and the soldiers in different parts of the state and of the country, for example in Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Howrah, Burdwan, Jessore, Asansol, Khulna, Jharia, Tatanagar, Dibrugarh, Shivsagar, Goalpara, Guwahati, Marghareita, Ahmedabad, Bombay and in Gujrat. The *panchayats* of the workers of the Tata Company, of the Murlidihi coal mine, of the Layabad coal mine and of the Dumdum Jessop workshop deserve special mention. It may be noted here that such *panchayats* were primarily local bodies or councils at the basic level comprising the peasants and the workers from below and might have been constituted to make them aware of their basic rights and to ensure their participation in different struggles.

Though this phase of Dasgupta's life was mainly characterized by a series of rather impulsive revolutionary actions, his ultimate aim was independence of India. However, the struggle for independence was not just termination of colonial rule for him and through this struggle he sought to confer on the people

⁸⁴Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, *Amar Dekha Pannalal Dasgupta*, Ananda Sen, Sriniketan, August, 2004

from below their basic rights and make them aware of the same. And his endeavour to set up *panchayats* can thus be correlated with his later writings where he talks of two essentials required for the awakening of a nation. One was consciousness about one's rights and the other was the motivation to struggle for the consolidation of such rights. And according to Dasgupta, all this gave man the power to encounter different adversities thus making him morally strong. But his regret was that neither of these were clearly expressed in the agenda of India's freedom movement. He felt that the leaders talked of consolidation of rights, but did not delve into the basic parameters and connotations of rights. Thus many of the basic questions regarding rights remained unanswered, for example, the rights of different categories of peasants over land, the rights of the workers over factories and machines. He thus identified the limitations of the contemporary social movements which he felt had been initiated without making any concerted effort to understand the composition and the respective demands of the different social cross-sections. The affluent, educated and privileged were socially and economically better equipped to put forward their demands and fight for their rights, whereas such demands of the people from the margins often went unheeded and unheard. He felt that the grievances of the privileged section could be redressed through *satyagraha* or such passive policies, but without structural changes in the society it was difficult to achieve what the people from below aspired for.⁸⁵ It was during the turbulent years of the 1940s, that he might have seen the necessity to build certain micro organizations to make the marginal people aware of the rights that they were entitled to, so that they could structure their movement in their own way based on their own demands. These preliminary strides showed a direction to his later ideas on *panchayat* and *gram-swaraj* when he thought in terms of democracy in action through village *panchayats* based on mutual cooperation.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Pannalal Dasgupta, *Rachana Sangraha*, Calcutta, 1998, Pg.17

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, Pp.213-217

With India's independence in 1947, Dasgupta plunged into "armed insurrection to usher in a Revolution".⁸⁷ His aim was that through armed mass struggle the so long exploited people would take over the administration of their newly independent country. With this in view on 26th February, 1949 he reorganized the Revolutionary Communist Party of India and conducted an armed uprising in Dum Dum Basirhat. The uprising proved to be abortive and he went underground. Dasgupta, the rebel leader of R.C.P.I, who had been absconding since 1942, was finally arrested by the I.B. officers on 2nd July, 1951 in Park Circus area.⁸⁸ The general impression was that Dasgupta through the revolutionary mass uprisings had been trying to establish a classless society in the country.⁸⁹ As is evident from his later writings that he sought to work it out by inculcating the values of cooperation and mutuality among the masses. According to Niren Dasgupta, the period from his association with the C.L.I till his arrest in 1951 might be considered the second phase of his life.⁹⁰

Dasgupta's days in prison were his days of introspection when he sought to look for an alternative path of revolution. By this time, Pannalal Dasgupta had realized that the attempt to take over regional power would not work out in an extensive country like India with a powerful central government and a standing army. This made him think in terms of organizing the people at the primary level, in the villages, arousing their self-confidence and self-prowess and thus enabling and empowering them to bring about a social change. This may be considered to be an extension of his earlier idea of setting up of *panchayats* on the model of communes within different organizations. Such thoughts might have initiated him into reading Gandhi.⁹¹ It was during these days that Gandhi's philosophy and his idea of constructive programme appealed to Dasgupta which he felt also influenced the whole of India and touched all aspects of people's

⁸⁷ I.B. Sl. No.- 125/28; I.B. File No.- 316/28; Subject – Pannalal Dasgupta – File No.:1476/51/For. WBSA

⁸⁸ I.B. Sl. No.- 125/28; I.B. File No.- 316/28; Subject – Pannalal Dasgupta; 2181.24 Pgns. WBSA

⁸⁹ Letter to the Editor from Anima Dastidar, Secretary, Dakshin Kolikata Mahila Pratishthan in *Satyayug*, 26/8/1951 – newspaper cutting in I.B. Sl. No.- 125/28; I.B. File No.316/28; WBSA

⁹⁰ Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, *Purbabhash* (Preface), Pp.7-8

⁹¹ *ibid*

lives⁹². While studying Gandhi, Dasgupta realised that the actual power of the people could not have been generated if the energy behind the upsurge of mass action during the freedom movement had not been channelized through various constructive activities and that Gandhi had shown in a striking way that service to the people was an excellent way of organizing the masses.⁹³ Dasgupta considered this Gandhian technique to be highly meaningful and his deep probe into Gandhi's works and ideas and his own thoughts regarding the same found expression in his draft of *Gandhi Gabeshana*, written sometime in 1954-55, while being imprisoned in Alipore Central Jail. This work and a booklet "*Gram deshe kaaj kora*" written under the pseudonym A. Meghvan just before his release contained the blueprint of his subsequent work and experiments.

The third phase of his life, according to Niren Dasgupta, commenced from 1962, the period following his release, when he completely dedicated himself to constructive programmes through which he sought to inculcate the ideas of self-reliance and reconstruction among the village populace.⁹⁴ Dasgupta adopted the Gandhian technique in his own way and made an "imaginative application" of it in his experiments. This made many suppose that Dasgupta had become a Gandhian.

Dasgupta in his work *Gandhi Gabesana* made an attempt to analyse and interpret Gandhi's thought, his series of activities and programmes from the Marxist point of view. Dasgupta was well acquainted with the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and even Che Guevara and he had had the experience of implementing their theories into practice. At the same time his long association with India's freedom movement gave him an exposure to the Gandhian movements.⁹⁵ Lastly, his long years of imprisonment made him probe deeper into the isms and ideologies of the time. He felt that as Gandhi could be

⁹²Pannalal Dasgupta, *Revolutionary Gandhi*, (English translation of *Gandhi Gabesana* by K.V.Subrahmonyan), Calcutta, 2011, Pg.147

⁹³ *Ibid*, Pg.141

⁹⁴ Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, *Purbabhash* (Preface), Pp.7-8

⁹⁵Pannalal Dasgupta, *Gandhi Gabesana*, !986, Kolkata, Introduction

seen through the Marxian eye, similarly Marx's theory and practice could also have a Gandhian interpretation. He also felt that there was no contradiction between the two ideologies, but that the basic problem lay in the fact that neither the Marxists in India had tried to properly understand Gandhi, nor had the Gandhians made an attempt to understand Marxism. Thus Dasgupta felt that it was his responsibility to acquaint the different political groups with the ideologies of two significant thinkers of the time, Marx and Gandhi. Without such an approach, the scope for a simultaneous understanding of the two thinkers would not develop and certain blind convictions and dogma would stand in the way of a rational understanding of the two.⁹⁶ Such a realization, such an open-mindedness made Dasgupta appreciate and adopt Gandhian ideas and programmes in spite of his leftist affiliations. Dasgupta felt that the historical context should be given due importance while studying Gandhi and he also made an attempt to understand and analyse contemporary history through Gandhi's ideas and programmes.⁹⁷

Dasgupta became particularly interested in the economic thought of Gandhi and this was evident in his correspondences as an under-trial prisoner with Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose. It is evident from the letters between the two that he wanted to probe deeper into the economic thought of Gandhi and sought academic guidance from Prof. Bose in this regard. He requested him to send relevant books and expressed his interest in going through the proceedings and reports of AIVIA (All India Village Industries Association), AISA (All India Spinners' Association), and other institutions like Gandhi Seva Sangh, Goseva Sangh, Sarva Seva Sangh which would familiarize him with their experiments and programme of reconstruction. Dasgupta seemed to be equally interested in the *All India Congress Committee Economic Review*.⁹⁸ He also thoroughly read the works of Dr.

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Pg. 349

⁹⁸ Letter from Pannalal Dasgupta to Nirmal Kumar Bose, written from Presidency Jail dated 29/12/1952, I.B. Sl. No. 69/28; I.B. File No. 316/28; WBSA

J.C. Kumarappa during this time and all these works showed him the way to the theoretical formulation of the alternative that he was looking for.

Having gone through a number of phases of militant nationalism and communist activism in his political life, he now tried to think afresh. He asserted that the struggle he sought to launch was not for his own self, it was rather a struggle for the cause of all, with the aid of all.⁹⁹ A kind of collective spirit indeed motivated him and this carried the essence of cooperation. And thus cooperation as an ideology was sometimes suggestive, sometimes pronounced but always there in some form or the other in his thought and experiments.

Following Dasgupta's release on 15th August, 1962, he and his associates toured India for some time to see, to know and to comprehend contemporary India. He realized that the political leaders of the time had hardly done anything for the Indian villages and the villagers. He considered it to be the right time to work out his programme with the villages and to bring about a "constructive revolution"¹⁰⁰ from below. His agenda was thus a constructive programme, or in his words a "constructive front". He wanted that this tentative and experimental front to be honestly and spontaneously worked out and did not wish to impose it on any party or any individual. Such an idea occurred to him when he was seeking the best way to reorient his and his colleagues' political life on the basis of the motto "serve the people" and not make a career out of it and "boss over the masses". Through such ventures he sought to find out practical socialist measures which would be able to clear everyone of their bourgeois vices and also of all those vices which were corroding the very basis of the leftist organizations. In the words of Dasgupta, he was rather looking for a field where one could not only preach socialism but "live it too". This quest gradually took the form of constructive front, which, according to Dasgupta, was to be a permanent front working in all conditions of political activities, whether he went for direct struggle or for democratic movements. Dasgupta observed that in

⁹⁹ Pannalal Dasgupta, *Bitarko, Bikalpo o Biplab*, 1398 (1991), Kolkata, introduction

¹⁰⁰ Niren Dasgupta, *Bishay:Pannalal Dasgupta*, Calcutta, November, 2000, Pg. 38

contemporary India and the world, especially in the days following the second World War and the independence of India, the situation had changed much when direct clash and all out struggle were nowhere engineered by the communists. For the revolutionary urge which could not be suppressed, Dasgupta felt that the constructive front could open a channel in such a situation. According to him, the constructive front would aim at gradual seizure of economic and social power in the context of the ever increasing and deepening capitalist crisis which would make the next political step much easy. He hoped that it would open prospects for larger scope and vision and would also open a flood gate of positive socialist consciousness.¹⁰¹ Thus the ultimate aim of Dasgupta of bringing about a non-exploitative classless society remained the same. The means and the way to achieve it changed when he gave up the path of revolutionary upsurge and was inspired by Gandhi to work from below with the people from below.

Dasgupta took the cue from Gandhi's idea of constructive programme and his experiments with cottage industries, animal husbandry, development of the Harijans, charkha etc. through which Gandhi had tried to restrict the encroachment of capitalist and other forms of exploitation. Dasgupta hoped that an integral approach and mutual cooperation among the villagers would consolidate the economic foundation of India in future.¹⁰² He tried to conceive his programme in his own way. He wanted the villagers to provide for themselves by optimum utilization of their own resources without any possible aid from the government. He hoped that such endeavours would morally empower the villagers by instilling in them self prowess, self confidence and self dependence.¹⁰³

For all this, Dasgupta wished to have a democracy in the true sense of the term which should not be restricted to just elections at regular intervals. In view of the limitations of electoral politics in West Bengal, Dasgupta wanted to think

¹⁰¹ Letter written by Pannalal Dasgupta, RCPI leader from Jail to Haren Kalita, C.C. Secretary, RCPI – I.B. Sl.No.- 125/28; I.B.File No.316/28 - WBSA

¹⁰² Pannalal Dasgupta, *Bitarko, Bikalpo o Biplab*, 1398 (1991), Kolkata, introduction, Pg.121

¹⁰³ Pannalal Dasgupta, *Rachana Sangraha*, Kolkata, 1999, Chapter – *Gramdeshe kaaj kora*, Pg.211

beyond and considered the people of the country not as mere voters, but as complete individuals with their independent thought processes, who would not yield to and be moulded by any form of political pressure. He suggested that every village should have a Five Year Plan which would be prepared by the villagers themselves, based on their needs and their power. His regret was that though official initiatives had been taken to introduce *Gram Raj*, *Panchayat Raj* etc. there was no such venture to make the villagers themselves formulate the Plan for their respective villages. According to him, if the process of planning could be simultaneously initiated both from above and below, then the people at all levels could be made to play an active role.¹⁰⁴ In this way he tried to bring about a different version of *gram swaraj*. This necessitated the formation of village panchayats of a different kind, which would function as units of self government.

Dasgupta's writings reveal that he was overwhelmed by Gandhian ideas of working with people where no power equation was involved.¹⁰⁵ He was aware that the archaic approach of Gandhi in certain areas had made many critical of Gandhi, but according to him, since Gandhi could keep pace with time by addressing a problem at its root with a human touch, Gandhi always remained relevant. Thus being inspired by Gandhi, he too wanted to keep politics away from his programmes. For this he suggested that the political parties should look beyond their sectarian interests and work for a common programme or an area of agreement for every village and that cooperation should replace competition among them. He in fact wanted to emphasise more on non-political organizations which would carry the essence of cooperation e.g. different kinds of cooperative societies to carry on the work of agriculture and cottage industries at the village level. Dasgupta wanted to make these apolitical popular organizations self sufficient enough so as to give the required support to the people when necessary. Such cooperative organizations would thus give a foothold to the

¹⁰⁴Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *Compass*, 15th May, 1965, Editorial

¹⁰⁵Pannalal Dasgupta, *Gandhi Gabesana*, Kolkata, 1986, Pg.131

people and in such situations, the role of political parties would be redundant. He hoped that developments in that direction might subsequently lead to the withering away of the state and the parties, but the people at the same time would find a forum in the apolitical bodies.¹⁰⁶

We, however, find a dichotomy in Dasgupta in this regard. Basically perhaps he wanted to keep his cooperative experiments independent of the state and the governments and also free from the influence of party politics. But he could not fully stick to this principle. Indeed, even at the level of thought, there were overlaps between the cooperative schemes of the government and those of his own. With the passing of days, he did shed his rigidity about keeping his distance from the government and went for collaborative programmes, particularly as the Secretary of the Tagore Society for Rural Development founded in 1969. We will see that in 1968 he even contested in the state legislative assembly election as an independent candidate supported by the United Front.

The roots of this perhaps go back to a much earlier period. The basic traits of the system of cooperative farming as envisaged by the Nehru government and the Planning Commission could be clearly traced in the schemes of Pannalal Dasgupta. Dasgupta might have been partly influenced by the concept of cooperative farming at the government level and he might have made an attempt to try it out in his own way. It may be pointed out here that Dasgupta as an under trial, corresponded with Nehru in 1951, seeking to meet him to discuss a few matters about “the shape of the things to come in near and distant future” and to place before him the idea of constructive programme which he wanted to work out with the support of all.¹⁰⁷ The details of the constructive programme, however, were not spelt out. What may be noted is that the letter was written soon after his arrest in July, 1951 and he wanted Nehru to peruse the proposed programme. The tone of the letter reflected Dasgupta’s confidence in Nehru in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, and Pannalal Dasgupta, *Rachana Sangraha*, Kolkata, 1999, Pg. 226

¹⁰⁷ Letter written to J.L. Nehru by Pannalal Dasgupta as U.T. Prisoner on 11/7/1951 – I.B Sl.No.-125/28; I.B File No.-316/28; Subject – Pannalal Dasgupta; WBSA

political and economic matters. This was indeed in sharp contrast to Dasgupta's anti-establishment views as evident from his correspondences with Prof. Nirmal Bose during 1952-53. By that time, of course, he had been influenced by the Gandhian ideology of rural reconstruction. These vacillations of Dasgupta generated some contradictions in his thoughts and ideas which were also evident to a certain extent in his constructive programme taken up later. In fact, he himself was somewhat confused and indecisive about the course of his action. His dedication, his hard work and his concern for the people from below cannot be questioned, but as a product of the period he fell an easy prey to the paradoxes and the dilemmas of the early post-colonial times. Thus at times he wanted to chart out an independent course where idealism was more pronounced, whereas at other times, he did not hesitate to collaborate with the establishment to accomplish his mission. The police authorities on reviewing the letters between Dasgupta and Professor Nirmal Bose noted that Dasgupta tried to approach the government machinery, particularly Shri S. K. Dey, I.C.S, Development Commissioner.¹⁰⁸ His quest for a suitable alternative might have made him waver between pro- and anti-establishment thoughts leading to contradictions within himself. Of course, it may be argued that through Professor Bose he tried to propagate his new method of constructive programme and that the letter to Nehru might have been a "citizen's" wish seeking to justify his political standpoint, in which, there was no political "negotiation". It may also be argued that considering the fragmented landholdings of the small farmers in the villages, cooperative farming was perhaps the best solution which both the established authorities and even individuals like Dasgupta could think of.

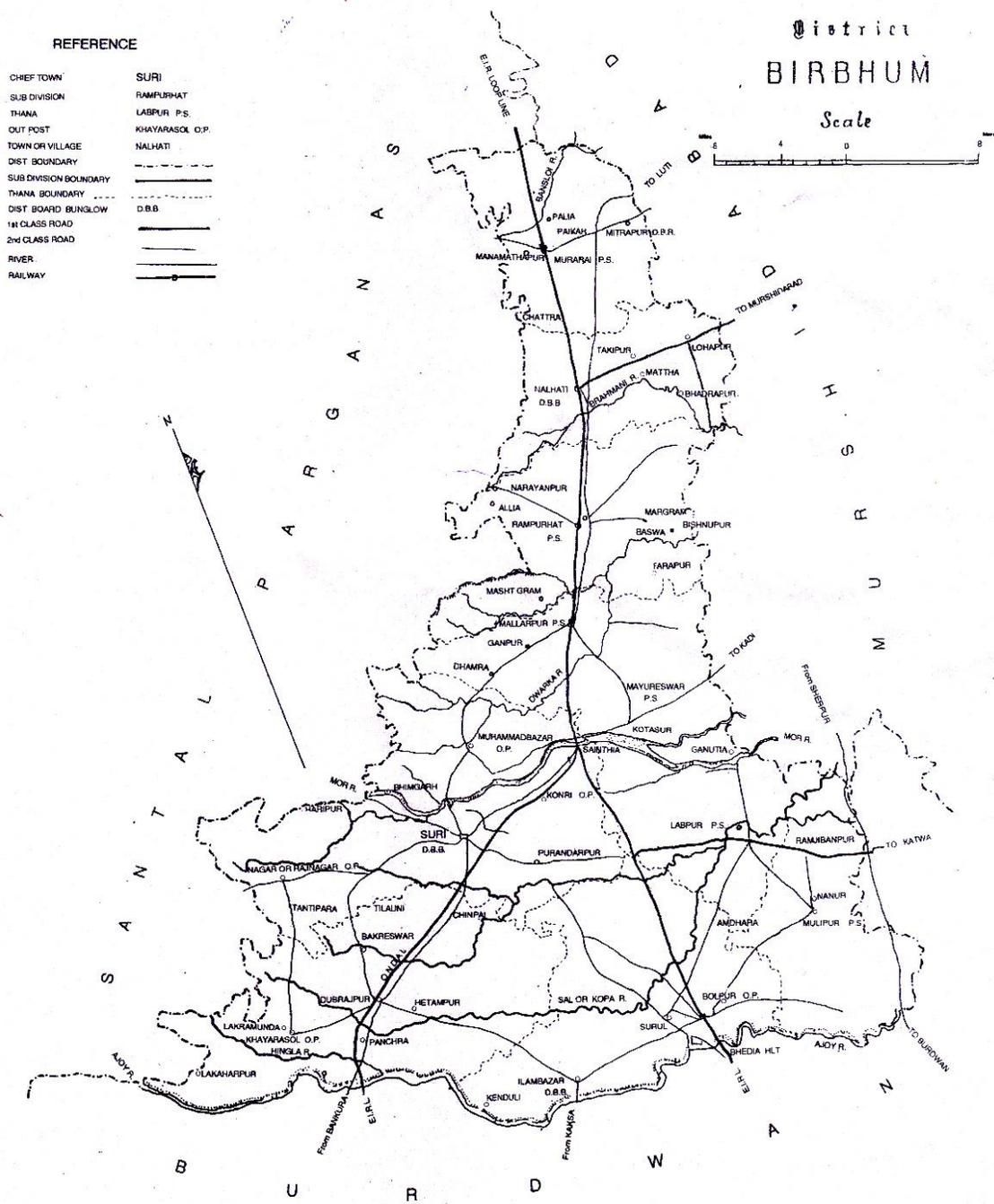
It seems Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose had some role in tempering the rigidity of Dasgupta about not taking any help from the state or the government in his ventures. Dasgupta initially thought that if cooperative power and spirit of the masses could be put into practice in a revolutionary economic organization then

¹⁰⁸Memo No. 357/WB dt. 4.11.54, Supdt. Alipore Central Jail, Note by D.I.G dt. 8.11.54 – I.B Sl.No.-125/28; I.B File No.-316/28; Subject – Pannalal Dasgupta; WBSA

it would lead to the ultimate dissolution of the state as a representative of capitalism.¹⁰⁹ Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose through his correspondences with Dasgupta tried to make him aware of the practical difficulties of such extreme measures and thus mould his thoughts. In Prof. Bose's opinion, total dissociation with the government or the state might alienate it and then the latter might thwart the independent economic endeavours of the constructive workers. Prof. Bose cited Prof. D.R. Gadgil's views to make Dasgupta understand that at least initial and partial help from the government was necessary and that changes in the agrarian structure of the country solely on the basis of popular initiative were neither feasible nor workable. As Prof. Bose told Dasgupta, Gadgil felt that as an upper land ceiling was being fixed by the government, similarly a lower ceiling depending on the productivity of land was also to be determined. He was not quite in favour of Vinoba Bhave's idea of land distribution to the landless. According to him, the surplus land which would be acquired after implementation of the ceilings, should go either to the government or should be consolidated under cooperative societies. He rather considered that from the economic view point, the aim would be to engage a greater number of people in agriculture. Gadgil further added that it would be beneficial if certain agriculture associated activities, like crop threshing and oil processing, were assigned by the government solely to the cooperative societies and the cooperative societies in turn determined the prices of the necessary items on the basis of local demand without any profit motive. He presumed that if agriculture and such related industries could be organized on a cooperative basis and received support from the government in the form of better seeds, better fertilizers, credit facilities, brisk movement of goods, then people from all strata of the society including those from the margins would spontaneously be attracted towards the cooperative system.

¹⁰⁹ I.B. Serial No.- 69/28; I.B. File No.- 316/28; Subject – Correspondence between Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose and Pannalal Dasgupta – Letter dated 12th January, 1953 from Prof. Bose to P. Dasgupta; WBSA

VB. PRACTICAL EXPERIMENTS OF DASGUPTA



Pannalal Dasgupta's initial experiments were carried out in Birbhum

The initial experiments of Dasgupta's constructive programme through apolitical organisations started in the district of Birbhum with which he had a long association since his days at Amar Kutir. The details of his preliminary work in

Birbhum of which there are hardly any record have been gathered from Ananda Sen, a co-worker and an associate of Dasgupta since 1962. It is learnt from an interview with Ananda Sen that Dasgupta started working with the villages along Ajay river where water was a major problem. His preliminary work began in the villages of Dhanyasarai, Chhoto-Simulia, Uparkhara, Itanda, Ikkudhara, Ghughulandi, Bardiha, Jashra and Gheedaha under the panchayats of Shian-Muluk, Bahiriri-Panchosowa and Singhee in Bolpur-Sriniketan Development Block. These villages had no canal system for irrigation and the big farmers in possession of bigger plots of land could only make some arrangements for minor irrigation. Dasgupta realized irrigational facility could not be individually availed by a smaller farmer with a small plot of land. Thus the only solution was to combine the adjacent plots of land of the small farmers in the form of a cooperative and to sink a shallow tube well in the mid-point of the common area. The organisation of an irrigation society on a cooperative basis would have been an ideal solution. But the failure of the Illambazar Cooperative Rice Mill and malfunctioning of the Amodpur Sugar Mill had made the local people lose their trust in the cooperative system and practices. Yet when something needed to be worked out on cooperative basis, Dasgupta's innovative method of combining the official and non-official aspects of cooperation showed a way. He took the initiative to form groups of villagers in the nine villages mentioned earlier. Common areas each measuring about 4 ½ to 5 acres were thus demarcated and shallow tube wells were sunk in order to extend irrigational facilities to those whose land had been pooled. It is important to note that the individual farmers who agreed to pool their land did not lose their respective ownership and thus could cultivate their plots in their individual capacity. The irrigational facilities were for common use of the members. The pumps used for irrigation were mostly electrically operated as diesel run pumps and gadgets proved to be more expensive. The electricity bill that was thus generated was shared by every member of the group according to the ratio of the area of the member's irrigated land. Since no cooperative society was officially formed, the bill was generated in the name of that member in

whose plot the shallow point lay. It seemed that Dasgupta's idea worked. It is learnt from Sen that the small peasants also spontaneously responded to Dasgupta's project as they found a dependable leader in him and the banks too trusted him and decided to lend all possible help. In order to get financial assistance from the banks, registered deeds were made for every 5 acres of land that could form a common area for the respective groups. The registered deeds contained the names of the individual members of the group, and the loans, though sanctioned against the total land area of each group, were given in individual names according to the ratio of the individual holding to the total holding of the group.¹¹⁰ No cooperative society was officially formed for the purpose, but the members of the group came together, gave their consent to the scheme and tried to work it out non-officially through mutual cooperation. Yet, the bank proceedings brought it under some kind of official binding. This was indeed a novel attempt to combine the official and non-official aspects of the cooperative endeavours.

Unfortunately, things did not work out in a smooth way for Dasgupta. Problems started cropping up regarding distribution and usage of irrigational facilities, for example, more water was required for irrigating the fields under potato cultivation, whereas water consumption was less for cultivating mustard. Consumption of electricity depended on consumption of water and consequently disputes surfaced regarding the cost of sharing the electricity bill.¹¹¹ Though the disputes could be settled apparently through arbitration by the local committee, it is not definitely known whether any such attempt was actually made. Dasgupta's dedication and effort were unstinting, but he might not have foreseen the troubles associated with the other parameters, like the type of crop, the area of land under cultivation of a particular crop etc. while calculating the share of every member's electricity bill. His enthusiasm might have overshadowed his

¹¹⁰ Interview of Ananda Sen – taken at his residence on 10/6/2015

¹¹¹ Interview of Ananda Sen – taken at his residence on 10/6/2015

pragmatism and thus his concept of 'practical idealism' could not maintain an ideal balance.

However, his experiments ultimately culminated in the establishment of the Tagore Society for Rural Development in 1969. He co-founded this organization with Jayprakash Narayan who had arranged for a loan of Rs. 25,000/- from Bihar Relief Committee of which he was the President. However, certain significant changes could be identified in the orientation of Dasgupta between 1962 and 1969, before he actually started working with his constructive programme through TSRD. Bolpur had had bitter experiences with the United Front supported candidates in the past who had proved to be unethical to the extreme.¹¹² The people of Bolpur found a trustworthy candidate in Dasgupta, personally met him and persuaded him to contest as a United Front supported independent candidate from Bolpur for the elections of the Legislative Assembly in 1969.¹¹³ Considering the distress of the people and the sorry state of things in Bolpur, he agreed to contest and was unanimously elected.¹¹⁴ This was indeed in sharp contrast to his earlier views on severing all ties with the state and electoral politics. He consciously justified his present stand by saying that since the democratic traditions, the democratic rights were at stake in contemporary India, it was his primary duty to shoulder the responsibility that was being offered to him. He perhaps felt that fulfilling this responsibility would show the way to a better future. This, according to him, was the main purpose of contesting for the elections despite being aware of the limited scope of electoral politics. He considered his candidature to be the first stride towards an alternative leadership which was needed to be built in West Bengal.¹¹⁵ His victory indicated the confidence that the common people of Bolpur had in him. Support also came

¹¹² The first United Front government was formed in West Bengal in February 1967, through the joining together of a number of leftist and rightist parties under the United Left Front and the People's United Front respectively. Ajoy Mukherjee, the leader of the Bangla Congress became its Chief Minister and Jyoti Basu of the CPI(M) its Deputy Chief Minister. It lasted for nine months.

¹¹³ A mid-term poll brought a second United Front government to power in February, 1969. It lasted for thirteen months.

¹¹⁴ Editorial, in Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *Compass*, 5th Year, dated 7th September, 1968, Calcutta

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

from the intellectuals of the day, for example, Sugata Dasgupta of Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi, hoped that Pannalal Dasgupta would introduce a constructive agenda for the state and thereby facilitate and expedite West Bengal's long desired social upliftment. This was expected to fulfil the long awaited wish of the people.¹¹⁶

We have already seen that gradually Dasgupta shed his rigidity about keeping away from the government and hence the politics behind it. Nirmal Bose's suggestion to Dasgupta as early as 1953 was that Gandhian idea of decentralization and constructive programme should be reformed in tune with the changed time and context, or else, the efforts towards the making of the new nation with the popular initiative and participation from below would be in vain. This perhaps made Dasgupta reconsider his earlier ideas. After his release in 1962 when he actually started working out his constructive programme in the practical field, he might have realized that a platform was required to promote and pursue his scheme. This might have induced him to contest for the elections. But there was hardly any compromise with his ultimate objective of making the villages self-sufficient mainly through improved agriculture.

The aims and objects of TSRD were based on Tagore's idea of rural development. The main programme of the Society was to provide specially to the small and marginal farmers and landless labourers an access to the means of production including infrastructural facilities, inputs, credit and technical know-how. The Society also proposed to organise the villagers for preparation of production plan and its implementation and for community ownership and maintenance of the common facilities.¹¹⁷ From the beginning the Society adopted an area approach and tried to motivate the villagers from the margins to work in a cooperative set-up. The Society attempted to mobilize all resources, human and material available in the area, Government and bank finance and assistance from

¹¹⁶, *Chithipatra* (Letters to the Editor) – Letter by Sugata Dasgupta, Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi, in Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *Compass*, 22nd February, 1969, Calcutta

¹¹⁷ A Report on Ten Years of its working, Tagore Society for Rural Development, Pg.3

philanthropic organizations and individuals and to utilize them for accelerating the development of the rural poor by providing them with productive employment programme. Dasgupta's practical experience as the Secretary of the Society during this time made him realize that nothing would really work out without financial assistance from external agencies and also without some kind of professional expertise to prepare the project reports.

The Report on Ten Years of working of the Society noted that detailed resource survey was generally conducted by the local people with the assistance of the Society, but some kind of professional assistance was required to prepare the detailed project reports, for example, assistance from the experts of Rural Development Consortium. The Report stated that the initial years were not always marked by success. But not compromising with the basic objective of working with and for the poor and the downtrodden in the rural areas, the Society had to change its approaches and strategy very often. Thus the early years were years of continuous experiments for evolving a suitable model of an integrated self-reliant rural society with the poorest and most backward sections of the community as the vanguard.¹¹⁸ In fact, Dasgupta himself later admitted that experiments were conducted in small pockets to find out suitable ways for the entire country because creation of a few oases was not his real dream and would also not make such endeavours sustainable.¹¹⁹ This suggested that he wanted to carry the message of self-help, cooperative spirit and solidarity across the length and breadth of rural India. His activities were not exclusively economic in approach, but his intention was to explore a new path which was to build with people's own initiative their own organization parallel to the sphere of state-led and market-dependent activities.

Dasgupta tried to explore the ethical and the humanitarian aspect of the cooperative movement to socio-economically empower the people from the 'grass-

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ 'Naton Jibaner Janya Andolan', Pannalal Dasgupta in *Compass*, Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), 20th June, 1987, Calcutta

roots' through his constructive programme and cooperative initiatives. This was indeed in contrast to the state-sponsored cooperative movement of the 1950s and 1960s whose thrust was mainly on the credit aspect of the movement. The government reports between 1948 and 1959 noted the statistical details of the quantitative multiplication of the number of societies, membership and total working capital.¹²⁰ These reports also noted the significance of the qualitative progress of the movement and specified that from a predominantly credit movement in 1947, there had been a gradual diversification and expansion of the movement in all directions serving the community in various sphere of its social and economic life.¹²¹ These blanket statements made in the report, however, did not analyse the depth and nature of diversification and expansion of the movement and particularly how they worked towards community development, the specifications of the community, the mode of their operation, involvement and participation of the masses in these ventures and other such minute details. These state-sponsored cooperative measures did not visualize the movement from the people's perspective, neither did moral nor humanitarian concerns feature in them.

In this regard, Pannalal Dasgupta's initiatives and propositions carved out an alternative path for the cooperative movement which was novel, different from the beaten track of the cooperative movement. Dasgupta's suggested to utilize the idle time of the villagers by forming cooperatives centred around the *dharmagolah*, develop a cooperative relationship between such village programmes and the factory workers' cooperatives and cooperative initiatives in the cities. He thus wanted to lay the foundation of work-based cooperation between workers and peasants, and between towns and villages, provided there was the necessary organization and true cooperative spirit on both sides.¹²² Such programmes appear not to be viable in the ordinary man's eye, yet Dasgupta did not consider such

¹²⁰ Report of the Cooperative Movement in West Bengal, 1959, Government of West Bengal, Cooperation Department, Pg.1

¹²¹ *ibid*

¹²² Pannalal Dasgupta, *Production by the Masses, Search for an alternative*, July, 1983, Kolkata, Pg. 51

propositions to be impracticable, though he realised that all this would call for new types of consciousness, sense of social responsibility and patriotism.¹²³ Limitations might be many, but the way he thought of the empowerment and emancipation of the masses of a new born nation at the micro level and at the critical juncture of the country's history made his cooperative ideology and efforts unique.

Dasgupta wanted to find an endogenous solution to the economic debility of the rural areas during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He had reservations about the state government's promises and economic policies to rehabilitate the people from below. For example, he considered that the declaration of Birbhum as a district with buffer stock was both erroneous and ironical because majority of the rural populace could not avail of the benefits and remained steeped in poverty. According to him, introduction of wonder seeds like IR 8 and the agricultural revolution that was likely to follow were not the right markers of development because these did not entail a basic change in the deplorable condition of the agricultural labourers, nor did their hard work involved in the process get due recognition. Dasgupta apprehended that deposition of the buffer stock at any central organisation might not be subsequently distributed equitably. Thus his suggestion to the villages was to retain their respective buffer stocks and thereby arrange for a minimum provision for every village. In this way he hoped to provide for the rural poor in times of dire necessity. The earlier experiences of misappropriation of grains from the *dharmagolas* by certain notorious individuals made Dasgupta think of an alternative. He thus proposed to set up *dharmagolas* or grain banks for the poor villagers managed by themselves. But he felt that it would be easier to work out the scheme with some financial assistance from the Government. He wanted it to be a joint venture of the officials and the non-officials.¹²⁴ As he sought to translate his ideas into practice, he realized nothing would work out without funds. So though he might have been critical of

¹²³ Ibid, Pg. 52

¹²⁴ Editorial, Pannalal Dasgupta (ed.), *Compass*, 5th Year, 23rd November, 1968, Calcutta,

Government policies and measures, he did not hesitate to collaborate with the government or any other allied agency or organization in financial matters.

Dasgupta identified three kinds of property relations in the countryside – collective sector, cooperative sector and private sector. He saw great promise in the cooperative sector as it tried to strike a balance between the other two by making a collective use of individual property and involving no coercion in the process. This was the area where he sought to harmonise the forces of decentralization and those of centralization. He thought in terms of cooperative agriculture, cooperative cottage industries, cooperative buying and selling societies, cooperative banks, cooperative cattle rearing, labour cooperatives, mutual aid societies etc. which would work towards a socialistic pattern. He knew that the private sector of the village economy had a wider field than the collective and the cooperative sectors, but their foundation was weak and degenerating. Private sector, according to him, was successful in regions of affluence which was represented by the landlords, moneylenders and businessmen of the villages who were on the decline in terms of strength and number in the villages during that time. He thought that the different categories of cooperative societies had the potential to overpower the small capitalists (landlords, moneylenders, traders etc.) of the time. For example, with the abolition of the zamindari system the power of the landlords was on the wane; the predominance of the jotedars could be checked through ceilings on landholdings; the availability of credit at low rates of interest through the cooperative banks would put a leash on the atrocities of the moneylenders; and the cooperative buying and selling societies could put an end to the nexus of coercive and dishonest traders. Dasgupta hoped to get a spontaneous support and participation from the poor and landless farmers in these cooperative and socialistic ventures.

During its formative years, 1969-74, the TSRD experimented with various programmes and strategies for rural development. Even in this early period it could develop some models which were accepted by the State Government and

adopted as programmes for rural development. The first of such programmes was rural electrification. When the TSRD was formed in 1969, use of electricity in agriculture was not so common in West Bengal. Cost of operating irrigation pumps was beyond the reach of the poor farmers as a farmer had to deposit Rs. 2000/- with the State Electricity Board. The TSRD took the initiative to make for a suitable arrangement. It negotiated with the Government to reduce the deposit sum to Rs. 600/- for a group of six pumps fitted in a group of six shallow tube wells and then arranged for loans from nationalized banks to cover the amount. It is learnt from the Society's report that the Government subsequently took larger programmes of operating tube wells in the same way.¹²⁵

The general problem in most villages of south Bengal was that the rich farmers owned the shallow tube wells and supplied water for irrigation to the poor peasants at exorbitant rates. The latter thus could not utilize adequate water required for irrigation. This adversely affected agricultural production and the opportunity of providing some additional employment to the landless labourers was also thwarted. Following Dasgupta's experiments with shallow tube wells in the villages of Bolpur, TSRD under his careful supervision took similar, and in fact, more concrete initiatives in different districts. It organized small and marginal farmers to form groups to sink and operate shallow tube wells with the help of bank loans to be sanctioned in the name of the respective groups. This programme was thereafter adopted by the State Government and banks for intensifying small irrigation projects and assisting the rural poor.¹²⁶ The first phase of the programme was undertaken in the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad. Tube wells and shallow tube wells were sunk in the villages of Baranberia, Srirampore and Dattapulia in Nadia and in the villages of Mahula, Binkar, Gangapur, Kaya and Ramanathpur in Murshidabad district. While working in the district of Murshidabad, the Society noticed that large amount of water was stored in Bhandardah Beel which could be utilized for irrigation. It collaborated

¹²⁵ A Report on Ten Years of its Working, TSRD, Pg.5

¹²⁶ Ibid, Pg. 8

with the Government and 60 lift irrigation pumps were installed by the government for optimum utilization of the stored water for irrigation. The construction of embankment for prevention of flood along the river Ajoy was another joint venture of TSRD and the State Government worked out by Dasgupta. This project was completed by 1972. In the 9 earlier mentioned villages of Bolpur-Sriniketan Block, 160 shallow tube wells were installed and 70% of the beneficiaries were small and marginal farmers. The cost of electrification of the tube wells was borne by the Society with the help of loans arranged by the Bolpur branch of the United Bank of India.¹²⁷ It is learnt from Ananda Sen that of the 160 tube wells all did not initially function successfully. But after the initial hiccups the ground was laid for further extension of such facilities which in course of time was extended to five times of the initial outlay.¹²⁸

The TSRD's programme of electrification of shallow tube wells and the cluster programme were adopted by the State Government to promote irrigated agriculture which was supposed to have increased the production of wheat and *bodo* paddy to a certain extent.¹²⁹ But, the supposed solidarity of the clusters was soon at stake which revealed the basic limitations of such programmes. A cluster or group was formed by including all the farmers of an area of the village irrespective of their total land holdings. The big farmers or landowners were reluctant to work in cooperation with the small farmers. They either tried to take over the tube wells through their local influence or intended to defeat the purpose of the project by not utilizing the water for raising the second or the third crop on their land. There was no appropriate mechanism to arrest these malpractices by certain privileged members of the group. This showed that since the class composition of the group was not homogeneous, a hierarchy was inherent in the approach of the bigger farmers which sapped the basic spirit of cooperation. Dasgupta being motivated by his "practical idealism" had worked on the basic premise that mutual trust and empathy among the members in spite of

¹²⁷ Ibid, Pg.7

¹²⁸ Interview of Ananda Sen – taken at his residence on 10/6/2015

¹²⁹ A Report on Ten Years of its Working, TSRD, Pg.7

their heterogeneity would contribute to the success of the project. But the practical considerations were once again overridden by his idealism thereby limiting the success and viability of these cooperative programmes.

The impediments and the deterring factors made Dasgupta think about other alternatives to materialize his constructive programme. By this time he might have well realised that certain positions in government institutions would enable him to reach his goal and thus he had no objection to being nominated in the State Planning Board. Thus with the passage of time and with his practical experience, his earlier convictions were getting moulded perhaps to suit the needs of time and situation. When he found that it was rather becoming difficult to appeal to the consciousness of all the villagers to work on the basis of mutual cooperation and that piecemeal projects could not work out the constructive programme in a holistic way, he as a member of the State Planning Board, structured the Comprehensive Area Development Programme. The C.A.D.P, a new strategy for development, sought to apply improved technology in agriculture and to construct and effectively run *dharmagolas* or grain banks to prevent the marginal farmers from being compelled to opt for distress sale in conditions of extreme poverty. Dasgupta's idea of *dharmagola* was thus taking shape and its primary objective was to provide the marginal farmers and the agricultural labourers with an apolitical, non-government organization, where they would be able to store their cultivated crops, take crop loans in times of need and deposit their crops at the time of harvest. Through such *dharmagolas* Dasgupta also tried to conduct other activities on a cooperative basis, like poultry farming, organizing non-conventional education centres, clearing stagnant ponds, setting up fisheries etc.

Through the C.A.D.P, the TSRD under Pannalal Dasgupta's guidance introduced the Integrated Rural Development for the all round development of the village communities. A number of major development programmes were undertaken by the Society during the first ten years. From 1972-73, the Society, received

financial assistance from Bread for the World, a West German organization. During the first decade of the Society's work, the projects in the districts of south Bengal that deserve mention are Chhoto Simulia Project (Birbhum), Integrated Programme for Bolpur (Birbhum), Simulpur Project (Gaighata Block, 24 Parganas), Rangabelia Project of Sundarban (24 Parganas), Area Development Programme in 40 villages of Tapan Block (West Dinajpur), Small Irrigation Project in Kotulpur and Jaypur Blocks (Bankura), Amadpur Project (Burdwan) and Dakshin Mechagram Project (Midnapore). These projects, especially those at Birbhum were the outcome of Dasgupta's long time efforts to rehabilitate the remote villages through participatory programmes and make the villagers self-reliant.

Dasgupta took the initiative to set up the first experimental agricultural farm of TSRD in Chhoto Simulia in Bolpur block of Birbhum. It was basically a seed-production-cum-demonstration farm. Two tractors were provided to be rented out to the farmers at nominal rates, an agro-service centre was set up at Itanda for assisting in the works of tillage, plant protection, threshing, warehousing etc. The tribal people of the region were provided with improved seeds and a sericulture programme was specially introduced for them. The Society set up a number of night schools for the children of the poor who could not attend day schools as they had to work for their livelihood during day time. A detailed project report for the development of Bolpur Block was prepared by AVARD (Association of Voluntary Agency for Rural Development), the West Bengal State Planning Board in collaboration with Government official of Irrigation, Agriculture and other concerned departments. The Government officials who came in contact with Dasgupta too appreciated his progressive ideas and found his ideas to be relevant in the days of uncertainty. It is learnt from a Government engineer, Abdul Ghani, that he was a witness to Dasgupta's commitment to reconstruct the villages in the district of Birbhum and to work out a suitable solution for water crisis in Illambazar and Ghidaha in 1972.¹³⁰ He recounts that Dasgupta sought to make

¹³⁰ Interview of Abdul Ghani, Engineer of Govt. of West Bengal – taken on 13.1.2015 at 14, Khudiram Bose Street, Calcutta-700006

the Chhoto Simulia farm “sustainable” and thus he negotiated with the Ministers and the Government Officials and arranged for funds to give a stable infrastructure to these projects.

The Bolpur Block with 170 mauzas had a cropped area of 62,000 acres, but 80% of the population were landless labourers, marginal and small farmers. The work in this project started in 1975, and as is evident from the Report on Ten Years of Working of TSRD, different kinds of irrigational facilities were arranged for with assistance from and collaboration with the Government, Banks and other bodies like Minor Irrigation Corporation and Mayurakshi Command Area Development Authority. Credit for supply of inputs was met mainly through bank loans. Decentralized customs service centres were set up for hiring out irrigation pump sets, sprayers and for supply of fertilizers and insecticides. About 50 dharmagolas or grain banks with one in Chhoto Simulia too were set up and alternative sources of income through poultry farming, dairy farming, fishery etc. were arranged for the landless families.¹³¹ The Society with Dasgupta as the Secretary made an attempt in Chhoto Simulia and Bolpur Block to form micro-level committees of the target population, i.e the landless, marginal and small farmers and to involve them in decision making from the detailed planning stage till implementation of the programme. In the first ten years such village committees were formed in about fifty villages. The landless families that received land from the Government were organized to take up collective farming. Two such collective farms were set up in the villages of Sangri Mahula and Uttar Harirampur. The first village inhabited by 32 tribal families was allotted about 13.33 acres of waste land, while the second village with 15 Scheduled Caste families was given about 5 acres of waste land.¹³²

Dasgupta also took the initiative to set up cooperative cold storage for potatoes. The small and marginal farmers of Bolpur cultivated considerable quantity of potato, but had to sell the produce at cheap prices as there was no arrangement

¹³¹ A Report on Ten Years of its Working, TSRD, Pp.9-12

¹³² Ibid, Pg.12

for storage and preservation. The Society arranged for some initial loan towards share capital contribution with which the Uttar Ajay Cooperative Cold Storage was set up which helped the potato cultivators to a great extent and the cooperative functioned as a sister organization of TSRD. Another such sister organization is Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development. Amar Kutir was founded by Sushen Mukherjee in pre-colonial times. Dasgupta was associated with it since the late 1930s. It aimed to reorganize and rejuvenate local cottage and rural industries in handicrafts based on the ideology of self-help. The inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, like Ballabhpur, Ruppur, Monoharpur, Bhangapara were engaged in these industries and the products were marketed by Amar Kutir. The leather crafts unit engaged the women from the adjoining villages. Training programmes in pisciculture, sericulture and poultry development for the poor farmers were carried on in the area of Amar Kutir. The Central Agro-Service Centre of TSRD and a powerloom unit known as Lokabastra Project are also located in the area of Amar Kutir. The Lokabastra Project was managed by the Institute for Motivating Self Employment. Dasgupta was instrumental in registering it as Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development in 1978 to enable its activities follow a definite course.¹³³ As a self supported non-government organization, it was committed to encourage local craftsmen to develop and market their products to enhance their economic capacity. It also funds from its own profits, programmes in health education and environmental awareness to strengthen the society in a holistic way. Amar Kutir sought to promote and expand the vision of a cooperative society engaged in sustainable agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and rural handicrafts. Though not registered under the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act, and thus not a cooperative society in official terms, this organization was based on the ideology of cooperation and its experiments were carried on accordingly. Its registration under West Bengal Societies Act, 1961 added a kind of official connotation to its experiments, but it

¹³³ Prafulla Kumar Gupta, *Amar Kutirer Katha*, Sriniketan, Birbhum, 1971; Ananda Sen, *Amar Dekha Pannalal Dasgupta*, , Bolpur, 2004

charted out an independent course beyond the aegis of the structured cooperative society. Amar Kutir functions quite successfully even today.

The Rangabelia Project in the Sunderban region of South 24 Parganas (erstwhile 24 Parganas) covered five villages including Rangabelia and covering about 5000 acres of cultivated land. But majority of the families were either landless or marginal or small farmers. A nominal number of families (about 2.3%) owned more than 10 acres each. The project was designed to improve the social and economic condition of the poorer sections of the area. Tushar Kanjilal and Bina Kanjilal had long been associated with the local people of the region. Their efforts to build people's organization and a women's organization made them work in cooperation with the TSRD and the project was formally started in 1975. The work of the project begun in a very humble way with the support of Pannalal Dasgupta. The prime aim of the project was to mobilize the people of the villages and make them participate in the processes of planning and implementation. The project emphasized on agriculture, weaving, animal husbandry, irrigation. A consumers' cooperative stores, a fishermen's cooperative society and Rangabelia Women's industrial Cooperative Society were registered which served as the main arteries for distribution of commodities. In this way an attempt was made to give a shape to a self-reliant society in Rangabelia. The initial funds were tried to be recycled in the villages and their neighbourhood. Financial support later came from the donor agency, Bread for the World, and funds were allotted for further extension of the work. The focus of this project was to develop Rangabelia into a model centre of activities with full cooperation and active participation of the entire village community. The micro-level committees called the para committees not only played an active role in planning and in implementing the programmes, but also in solving other problems including village disputes and social inequities. The project worked out cooperation at different levels, between the people of the village community, between them and the voluntary workers of TSRD, between the men and women

of the villages and of course between TSRD and different external agencies including government.

These projects portrayed that human welfare remained the prime concern of Dasgupta all through. But as he went into the practical field of experimenting with the ideas he had nurtured for long, he realized that certain compromises were to be made considering the demand of the situation. Experiences of working in the remote villages made him understand that the economically weak areas could not generate their own funds, as he had initially desired, and thus needed financial assistance to make the projects thrive. Later, he had no reservation in arranging for financial resources even from the foreign agencies because he felt they were basic essentials.¹³⁴ Thus the endogenous cooperative movement that he had envisaged could not be realized. Keeping in mind, the much too idealistic and utopian aspects of Dasgupta's ideas, Arthur Bonner in his work, has named the chapter on Dasgupta "A Civilisation that doesn't work". Dasgupta in his interview to Bonner as late as 1986-87 expressed that he still wished people to do things themselves by reducing their needs.¹³⁵ He himself led a very simple life devoid of any kind of consumerism and he wanted to instill the same through his constructive programme. Dasgupta was perhaps caught between "a civilization that doesn't work" and a civilization that he wished to work out.

Amidst these pulls and strains, Dasgupta tried to give a definite shape to his thoughts on cooperation. During the 1970s and 1980s, his writings in *Compass*, a Bengali periodical edited by him, emphasized on the need of creating a productivity-oriented cooperative village society. Considering the meagre means of the small and marginal peasants, who he knew were not credit-worthy, he thought of organizing them for group loan. He thus insisted on setting up small

¹³⁴ Tapan Ghoshal, associated with TSRD, had accompanied P. Dasgupta in many villages – he recounted it in a speech delivered on 11.1.2016 in a memorial meeting observing the death anniversary of Dasgupta at Pannalal Dasgupta Bhavan

¹³⁵ Arthur Bonner, *Averting the Apocalypse : Social Movements in India Today*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1990, Pg.272

groups, cooperative societies, *swabalamban samitis* or self-reliant groups. In this way, he tried to organize the weaker sections of the rural population for cooperative programmes with specific targets, like sinking tube wells etc. But in course of time he realized and also admitted that the cooperative venture was weak in West Bengal and that because of erroneous and corrupt practices, people had developed a resistance to formal cooperatives.¹³⁶ During the late 1980s Dasgupta developed an attraction for the idea of natural farming¹³⁷ under the intellectual influence of Masanobu Fukuoka¹³⁸, an advocate of natural farming. Experiments with natural farming were done in the project areas of TSRD, for example in the farm of Chhoto Simulia. Dasgupta had hoped that this kind of farming, if properly organized, would provide a full fledged alternative to the market. But the concept failed to enthuse the peasants from below as it required a lot of patience and time. So natural farming did not materialise and was thus not tried out in other projects.

Analysing Dasgupta's ideology and his subsequent experiments many feel that he wanted to create a new socialism which was neither communism nor Gandhism and that he carefully avoided any sort of class struggle in his new thesis in order to make it attractive to the people who were anti-communist and anti-government.¹³⁹ Even Dasgupta himself felt that some saw in his constructive programme social pacifism and class collaboration, some saw in it utopia, Gandhism, Owenism, while others even found seeds of right deviation in it.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ 'Financing Agriculture', Pannalal Dasgupta, *Comprehensive Area Development in West Bengal, Annual No.1975*, Pg.26

¹³⁷ Natural farming – is an ecological farming approach established by Masanobu Fukuoka. It is related to fertility farming, organic farming, sustainable agriculture, agroforestry, ecoagriculture, but should be distinguished from biodynamic agriculture

¹³⁸ Masanobu Fukuoka (1913-2008) – was a Japanese farmer and philosopher famous for his natural farming and re-vegetation of desertified land. He was a proponent of no-till, no-herbicide grain cultivation farming methods, traditional to many indigenous cultures. From all this he created a particular method of farming, commonly known as Natural Farming or Do-nothing Farming. His influences went beyond farming to inspire individuals within the natural food and lifestyle movements. He was an advocate of the value of observing nature's principles

¹³⁹ Note given by DIG, IB on 8/1/1953 in response to a received note from Presidency Jail on 6/1/1953 – IB Sl. No.- 69/28 ; IB File No.-316/28 ; WBSA

¹⁴⁰ Letter written by Pannalal Dasgupta, RCPI leader from Jail to Haren Kalita, C.C. Secretary, RCPI – IB Sl. No.- 125/28 ; IB File No.- 316/28 ; WBSA

However, the humanitarian aspect of the cooperative movement as envisaged and practised by Dasgupta deserve mention. His immense faith in human values was reflected in his later writings where he said that moral resources innate in human beings would enable them to encounter all challenges and ultimately succeed.¹⁴¹ Though not always specified, it was suggestive that Dasgupta considered the ideology of cooperation to be one of the key moral values in bringing about the moral upliftment of the human mind. Such an ethical imperative gave Dasgupta's cooperative experiments a distinctive perspective, often found lacking in the contemporary state-sponsored cooperative movement.

VI. VINOBA BHAVE, HIS THOUGHTS AND EXPERIMENTS

VIA. VINOBA BHAVE AS THE PIONEER OF THE BHOODAN-GRAMDAN MOVEMENT

Another facet of the ideology of cooperation in the context of 'new' India was seen in the endeavours of Vinoba Bhave, a close associate of Gandhi and an advocate of human rights. As David Hardiman points out, the new Indian state assumed increasingly authoritarian powers rather than facilitating any Gandhian-style devolution of power. According to him, though Gandhian ideals of equitable social and economic relationships in rural areas became the stated desire of many contemporary political leaders, they only paid lip service to them.¹⁴² But there were some Gandhian social workers who remained committed to the ideology. It seems that the Gandhian ideologies of *Sarvodaya* (commitment to the welfare of all)¹⁴³, *Swaraj* (self-government) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) were not entirely lost and that the Gandhian mission of rejuvenation of Indian villages by promoting voluntary cooperation and self-sufficiency continued to inspire some people. Vinoba Bhave picked up the thread almost from where Gandhi left it.

¹⁴¹ Pannalal Dasgupta, *Bitarko, Bikalpo O Biplab*, Kolkata, Bhadra, 1398(B.S), Pg.184

¹⁴² David Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Times And Ours*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003, Pg.198

¹⁴³ The term '*Sarvodaya*' was first used by Gandhi as the title of his translation into Gujrati of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* – M.K. Gandhi, *Sarvodaya*, 1954

Vinoba Bhave (1895 – 1982) was a Maharashtrian Brahman brought up in Gujrat. He joined Gandhi in 1916 and was more active in constructive work than in political work. He was initially a rather unknown figure within the Gandhian movement.

Immediately after independence there was a strong feeling among the Gandhian constructive workers that the Congress Party was ignoring the Constructive Programme of Gandhi. The workers thus wanted to form a separate organization through which political power could be used to further the goal of a social order based on Gandhian moral values by trying to place themselves in both the central and state governments. This idea was opposed by Gandhi because he felt that the moment these values assumed political power, it would contradict itself and become contaminated. He suggested that the role of constructive workers was to guide political power and to mould the politics of the country without assuming power themselves. Gandhi felt the need to reorganize the activities of his Constructive Programme.¹⁴⁴ The day before his assassination, Gandhi had proposed that the Congress be disbanded and a Lok Sevak Sangh (Association for the Service of the People) be established in its place. This was rejected by the Congress high command on the ground that its dissolution would create a political void. Considering the uncertainties of the day, it felt that it was rather necessary to maintain a cohesive political party.¹⁴⁵ Following the death of Gandhi, a joint conference of the Gandhian constructive workers across the country was held in March, 1948, at Sevagram, Wardha, where after much discussions and deliberations, two organizations came into existence for a smooth continuation of Gandhi's constructive work and spread of his ideas, namely, Sarva Seva Sangh and Sarvodaya Samaj. Vinoba Bhave took the charge of the Sarvodaya Samaj. He conceived it as an alternative organization, a loose non-political body, through which he sought to develop and apply Gandhi's ideas of *Sarvodaya* to changed circumstances.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, Pg.5

¹⁴⁵ David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, 2003, Delhi, Pg.203

Bhave is considered to be the 'spiritual heir' of Gandhi who wanted to give a new impetus and shape to the Gandhian constructive movement. He realized that in India as well as in other Asian countries, the peasants held the key to social revolutions. The post-colonial years saw the communists getting strong support in rural areas with powerful peasant movements in regions like Telengana, Bengal and Thana district of Maharashtra. The peasant movement in Telengana was crushed by the Indian army and the landlords in many cases were given back their land which had been seized from them by the communists. Bhave, a strong anti-communist, toured the region and tried to find a Gandhian way to alleviate the problems of the rural poor. In April 1951, a certain landlord in Telengana donated 100 acres of land to him to distribute among the landless Dalits. This was a kind of an eye-opener for him and he tried to persuade other landlords to make gifts of land to be similarly redistributed. The formal initiation of the *Bhoodan* Movement was thus marked by the said land-gift made on 18th April, 1951 at Pochampalli in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh.¹⁴⁶

Bhoodan was seen as a revitalization of the Gandhian movement and as a new addition to the list in Gandhi's Constructive Programme. It soon attracted attention and wide publicity. It was basically a campaign to persuade landowners to donate voluntarily a proportion of their lands to be redistributed to the landless labourers who constituted the poorest fifth of India's rural population. Describing the aim of the campaign, Bhave said, "In a just and equitable order of society, land must belong to all. That is why we do not beg for gift but demand a share to which the poor are rightly entitled. The main objective is to propagate the right thought by which social and economic maladjustments can be corrected without serious conflicts".¹⁴⁷ *Bhoodan* was to be the first step in arousing the conscience of the people, the beginning of inculcation of values of mutuality which was designed to lead ultimately to the establishment of a new social order based on *Sarvodaya* ideals. This was underlined by Bhave's willingness sometimes

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in *India 1964*, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1964, Pg. 64

to accept land donations even from those owning a few acres of land or less. In his view there were no 'have-nots' and the movement was one of giving and sharing in which every individual should participate. His aim was to bring about a three fold revolution – to change people's heart (*hridaya-parivartan*), to create a change in their lives and to change the social structure.

Vinoba Bhave went from village to village on foot carrying the message of *Bhoodan*. The movement spread rapidly, enthusiasm mounted and the initial target figures were exceeded. Within a span of four years, the campaign for *Bhoodan* widened into *Gramdan* (gift of the village). In *Gramdan* the call was for complete surrender of property rights in land by all the land-owners of a village in favour of the village community as against donations of a proportion of the individual landowner's land in *Bhoodan*. *Gramdan* had been implicit in the concept of *Bhoodan*. But there were some significant and fundamental differences between the two and the change from *Bhoodan* to *Gramdan* represented a move from a basically individualist to a basically socialist and community based programme.¹⁴⁸

Looking into the origin of the *Gramdan* movement, we find that 'over-subscription' of land by landowners of a village under the scheme of *Bhoodan* naturally led to the concept of *Gramdan*. In the *Bhoodan* campaign the movement initially asked landowners to donate one-sixth of their land for redistribution to landless labourers. In May 1952, Mangroth in Uttar Pradesh was the first village to 'oversubscribe' to such an extent as to change *Bhoodan* into *Gramdan*. The largest landowner, the headman of the village, Diwan Shatrughana Singh decided to donate all his land in *Bhoodan*. This inspired the other landowners in the village to do likewise, except one small holder. The land thus given was vested in the village community and was subsequently distributed among the villagers according to the capacity and need of every family. Diwan Singh, who had given 100 acres of land received 40 acres after redistribution of

¹⁴⁸G.Ostergaard & M. Currell, *The Gentle Anarchists, A Study of the Leaders of the Sarvodaya Movement for Non-violent Revolution in India*, London, 1971, Pg.10

land and joined with 32 Harijan families out of 105 families of various castes in the village to form a cooperative farm. The remaining families continued farming as separate units.¹⁴⁹ This was indeed a bright example of imbibing and experimenting with the ideology of cooperation.

The example of the village of Mangroth set the pattern for other villages. However, in the initial years of the campaign for *Gramdan* there was no clear definition of the constitution of a *Gramdan* village. An ideal *Gramdan* village was conceived as one in which all the landowners had agreed to pool the ownership of their lands in the village community in such a way that the villagers as a whole, whether the landless or the erstwhile landowners would become the collective proprietors and also collective farmers. But the proportions of lands given and owners participating often varied considerably and the landowners living outside a village frequently refused to participate. The balance could, however, be best maintained in the tribal villages. A good example would be the tribal villages of the Koraput district of Orissa. In West Bengal, reference may be made of a few tribal *Gramdan* villages around the Balarampur area in the district of Medinipur.

Through the movement of *Gramdan*, Vinoba Bhave tried to uphold the essence of Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* and hoped to bring about a total revolution in the country through a non-violent process. As Gandhi through his programme of *Sarvodaya* had appealed to the people to unite and surrender their properties to the community, similarly, through the *Gramdan* movement, Vinoba Bhave sought to transform the same idea into a definite and practical reality. He started with land as the basic means of production and he hoped that once *Gramdan* succeeded in abolishing individual as well as state ownership of land, ownership in all other fields would also fade away easily.¹⁵⁰ The *Sarvodaya* movement with *Gramdan* as its spearhead thereby sought to wipe out inequalities, generate people's self-

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, Pg. 52

¹⁵⁰ Vinoba Bhave & Jayaprakash Narayan, *Gramdan for Gram Swaraj*, 1967, Varanasi (Translated By Suresh Ram), Preface

reliant power and transform personal virtues like non-possession and non-violence into social forces through the process of persuasion, consent and conversion in which non-cooperation with forces of injustice and oppression was implied.¹⁵¹ The movement thus proposed to bring about a revolution from below which would pave the way for a new society marked by economic equality and social justice. The prime emphasis was on human values and the movement was hoped to usher in “a new age of real brotherhood of Man and Fatherhood of Truth”.¹⁵²

In the new system of *Gramdan*, the *Gram-Sabha* or the village community was entrusted with all rights and privileges of land ownership. In this system, the rights of inheritance and cultivation were not affected and remained with the original owners, but what was forgone was their right to sell or mortgage the land. Yet the provision was there that if one still wished to sell his land, it had to be sold within the village itself with the approval of the *Gram-Sabha*. This was done to enable the people of the village to frame a complete plan for the village. In this way Vinoba Bhave tried to make the people of the village participate in constructive programmes of the village to fight against the problems of inflation, scarcity and unemployment hovering over India during the 1950s and the 1960s. He thus tried to show the way how the rights of the people should spontaneously develop from below, instead of being imposed from above through legislation.¹⁵³

Vinoba Bhave on analyzing the hard pressed condition of the people in the Indian villages observed that the life of the villagers fluctuated with the fluctuation of the price of the food grains which he felt was a marker of the people’s total and helpless dependence on the state. He apprehended that such dependence would make the official power more highhanded thereby making India’s ‘infant’ democracy vulnerable. In his opinion, the tendency on the part of the people to

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

¹⁵² *ibid*

¹⁵³ *ibid*, Pg.5

entrust everything to the representatives of the government was likely to make the former “indolent, careless, indiscreet and inactive”.¹⁵⁴ Thus he felt that the need of the hour was to build up people’s power or *Lok-shakti* to make India’s newly acquired freedom and democracy survive. In his words, “*Gramdan* is a positive programme which provides collective inspiration to stir us all to action and participate in the noble venture of nation building.”¹⁵⁵ According to him, the performance of all functions of the village by the people themselves irrespective of their caste, creed, language etc. would strengthen the power of the villages as “the bastions of democracy”.¹⁵⁶ The village, he hoped, should be the master of its own destiny and the programme of *Gramdan* would save the villages and thus India from impending economic onslaughts. He felt that time had come to work on “the basis of people’s power and people’s approval”. Therefore, he argued that the village must work to be self-sufficient in production through cottage industries based on local resources. Basic and essential items like food, clothing, milk for children, medicine for the sick etc. must be produced within the village itself. In this way he wanted to give a popular base to the constructive work in the villages and tried to initiate the process of nation building from the micro-level. His ultimate goal was to bring about *Gram-Swaraj*. In his view *Gram-Swaraj* through *Gramdan* was the only way to overcome India’s insecurity from within and this would ensure real freedom to the villages.¹⁵⁷

Bhave did not have much faith in the official village *Panchayats* which he felt as politically elected bodies and representatives of the state, had only limited rights conferred from above, and he believed that they aggravated feuds, dissensions and groupings in the villages which adversely affected the harmony and cooperation among the villagers. He was rather in favour of the *Gram-Sabha* or the village community formed by every adult member of the village which as an apolitical body would take the responsibility of the village concerned. Jayprakash

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Pg.9

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Pg. 60

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, Pg. 10

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.39

Narayan, his compatriot in the movement, had also emphasized the view that India had to be built by the dint of the people's initiative, their own strength, their own might and organization.¹⁵⁸ According to Jayprakash Narayan, this movement was not one of merely distributing land among the landless, but of fellow-feeling and sharing among the Indians, thus touching the inner human chord.¹⁵⁹ JP established the *Gram Nirman Mandal* (Village Development Society) in 1954 in the district of Gaya in Bihar. In the 8th *Sarvodaya Sammelan* held between 27th and 29th May 1956, at Kanchipuram, Tamil Nad, Bhave added to the programme of *Bhoodan* other activities like village enterprises, e.g. khadi and other village crafts, eradication of caste discrimination and *nai talim*.¹⁶⁰ He felt that as huge measures of land had been acquired in some states and many villages had also volunteered for *Gramdan*, so the next step in those areas should be to reconstruct the village to make the dream of *Gram-swaraj* come true.¹⁶¹ The activities mentioned would work towards making the villages self-sufficient and the villagers good human beings.

Vinoba Bhave through his Sarvodaya Samaj, an all India confederation of constructive workers, set out to organize a network of *bhoodan* workers to walk from village to village and to canvass for a whole series of *dans* or gifts apart from *Bhoodan-Gramdan*, for example, *sampattidan* (money), *shramdan* (labour), *buddhidan* (intelligence) and even *jiwandan* (a pledge for lifelong dedication to *bhoodan* work). Bhave's call was not only to the nation or to the *Sarvodaya* community, but was to the entire world and he hoped that by 1957 his endeavours would enable to establish a non-violent society across the world.¹⁶² Bhave apprehended that if the programme of *Bhoodan* was not successful, then

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, Pg. 66

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, Pg.68

¹⁶⁰ *Nai talim* – is a spiritual principle which states that knowledge and work are not separate. Gandhi promoted an educational curriculum with the same name based on this pedagogical principle. The three pillars of Gandhi's pedagogy were its focus on the lifelong character of education, its social character and its form as a holistic process. It can be translated as "basic education for all". In the words of Gandhi, "the principle idea is to impart the whole education of the body, mind and soul through the handicraft that is taught to the children".

¹⁶¹ Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Bhoodan Yagna Ki o Keno*, Kolkata, 1st Edition – 1953, Later Edition, Pg. 52

¹⁶² Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Yatrar Pathey*, Kolkata, April, 1958, Pp. 65

the mission of *sarvodaya* would be at stake. And according to him, the success of the movement depended on the dedication of the workers.¹⁶³

A special meeting of the Sarva Seva Sangh was held on 16th, 17th December, 1955 at Vijaywada in Andhra Pradesh, which was followed by a conference on *sampattidan* on 18th, 19th December. On 21st and 22nd September 1957, a conference of the Sarva Seva Sangh was held at Yelwal in the state of Mysore. It was attended by dignitaries like Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime minister of India, several Union Ministers, other representatives of the Union and State Governments, leaders of the Congress, Communist and Socialist leaders and other noted persons. In a unanimous statement issued at the end of the Conference, *Gramdan* was welcomed as a movement which deserved every kind of help and encouragement and an appeal was made to the people to make it successful. The Government representatives clearly stated that they saw *Gramdan* as complementary to the official schemes of land reform which would seek to abolish intermediary interests, put limitations on holdings and promote cooperative farming. It was further hoped that *Gramdan* movement would enable the complete development of a cooperative way of life in the villages. The officials also recognized that “the closest cooperation” was desirable between the government-sponsored Community Development and the *Gramdan* movements.¹⁶⁴ The conference on the whole recognized the *Gramdan* movement as characterized by non-violence and voluntarism, trying to bring about a synthesis between the ethical and the practical aspects of life and seeking to establish a new social order based on cooperation and self-sufficiency. The *Sarvodaya* community hailed the Yelwal conference as an epoch-making event marking the widespread acceptance of the idea of *Gramdan*.

The Planning Commission set up a working group to review the legal, organizational and administrative issues arising from *Gramdan* and drafted a

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, Pg.59

¹⁶⁴ Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Bhoodan Ki o Keno*, Kolkata, 1st Edition-1953, Later Edition, Pp. 56-57 ; Geoffrey Ostergaard, *Nonviolent Revolution in India*, New Delhi, 1985, Pp.19-20 ; Suresh Ram, *Vinoba and His mission*, Kashi, 1964, Pg.114

model *Gramdan* Bill to provide a legal framework for the constitution and management of *Gramdan* villages. Using the model, most State Governments went on to pass Gramdan Bills (or modify the existing Bhoodan Acts). In West Bengal, Bhoodan Yagna Act was passed in 1962 (West Bengal Act XVIII of 1962) and Gramdan Act in 1964 (West Bengal Act XXVII of 1964). The officials in most of the states did not take much interest in promoting the movement. The only exception was Madras where the Community Development officials cooperated effectively with the *Gramdan* workers. Anyway, the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement which Bhave sought to build from below through the spontaneous participation of the people deviated from its original ideology when it was introduced through Government enactments. The promise of an ideal working cooperation between the Community Development officials and the *Gramdan* workers made at the Yelwal conference failed to work out thus limiting the scope of the movement.

It seems that the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement was charged more with idealism and thus lacked viability. Vinoba Bhave himself was also aware of the limitations of the programme and his answer was that “virtue lay in taking up only an impossible programme”.¹⁶⁵ However, idealism overshadowed whatever pragmatism he had and contradictions surfaced between his theory and practice. The practical outcome of the idea of *Gramdan* proved rather disappointing, despite its apparently wide acceptance. Our study of the movement in West Bengal would reveal its weaknesses more clearly.

VIB. CHARU CHANDRA BHANDARI, PROTAGONIST OF THE MOVEMENT IN WEST BENGAL

In West Bengal, the *Bhoodan* and the *Gramdan* campaigns were largely carried on by Charu Chandra Bhandari.¹⁶⁶ In May 1952, the *Bhoodan* Movement was

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, Pg. 19

¹⁶⁶ Charu Chandra Bhandari (1896 – 1985) - He was a dedicated worker of the Congress, a veteran Gandhian and a leader of the Sarvodaya Movement. He was closely associated with the organizational and Constructive Programmes of Gandhi. In the early 1920s he founded the Khadi Mandir at Diamond Harbour in the district of 24 Parganas. He had given up his legal practice at the time of Non-cooperation Movement and joined Satis Dasgupta's scheme for clothes self-sufficiency (*bastre swabalamban*) and opened branches of the Khadi Mandir in the nearby

officially introduced in Bengal in the village of Hotuganj near Diamond Harbour in the district of 24 Parganas. Thereafter, Bhandari extensively toured the different districts of West Bengal, e.g. Bankura, Medinipur, Burdwan, 24 Parganas, on foot carrying the message of Bhoodan and Gramdan. In fact, in 1955-56, he was the first to acquaint many people of the areas under the Police stations of Joynagar, Baruipur and Canning in the district of 24 Parganas with Bhave's ideas of *Bhoodan and Gramdan*. The response was rather low and mild. Very few people showed genuine interest in the programme and the influential and the affluent hardly came forward. Many doubted its feasibility and pointed out that the concept of voluntary donation of land was not pragmatic. However, the more he toured the poverty-stricken villages of West Bengal, the more he realized the need of spreading the message of *Bhoodan-Gramdan* as a means of eradication of poverty and his experiences were not entirely negative.

Bhandari while touring the different districts tried to understand the different reasons for the deplorable plight of the village populace. While in Bishnupur in the district of Bankura in March, 1954, he came across two poor women who had to walk miles to work in the rice mill. This made him realize that introduction of rice mills had destroyed the paddy-husking devices (*dhenki*), thus sealing the employment opportunities of the local women who were perhaps forced to work to supplement the meager income of their families. This made him think that if these women and their families had cultivable land, then things would not have been so grim. Thus he felt the need to uphold the cause of *bhoodan* there. He had such experiences in other areas as well, which motivated him to arrange for mass meetings to introduce the idea of *bhoodan yagna*. Bhandari and his co-workers also tried to popularize the concept of *bhoodan*

villages. He also worked with Dasgupta in the service of Harijans under the Bengal branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. His Khadi Mandir organized the *dhenki* hand-husking of rice and its sale in Calcutta. Ref.- Subodh Chandra Sengupta & Anjali Basu (ed.), *Sansad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Vol.1, 3rd Edition, July, 1994 & Mario Prayer, *The Gandhians of Bengal. Nationalism, Social Reconstruction and Cultural Orientations, 1920-1942*, Pisa, Rome, 2001, Pg. 284

through songs and booklets which genuinely appealed to a section of the rural populace.

Bhandari in his diary *Yatrar Pathey* remembers that on 30th March, 1954, while walking on foot from Shaltora to Jorhira in Bankura, he heard a *bhoodan* song from a young boy of 16 – 17 years, who was singing it while weaving a basket. He realized that it was the impact of the meeting held at Shaltora the day before. The promise of the speeches and the songs had given a ray of hope to those poverty stricken people. Bhandari learnt from the boy and his elderly relative that they were from a marginal community (*dom*), pursuing menial occupations like making basket, cigars etc and having hardly a square meal a day, and that therefore they would be fortunate enough to get some land for cultivation. They lamented that earlier they used to cultivate about 4-5 acres of land as sharecroppers which had then been lost and since they knew farming, they hoped that their condition would improve if they received land through *bhoodan*. The people from below were thus gradually taking to the idea and were eagerly waiting for their turn to be blessed with some land. However, Bhandari could not make any necessary arrangement apart from asking them to keep faith in the movement.

Bhandari recounted another experience in the district of Nadia in January of the same year when he was at the village of Bethiadahari in Nakashipara Police Station. A meeting was held in the local high school which was attended by the local elites as well as the poor people, both Hindus and Muslims. The meeting was apparently a success and the majority of the audience seemed to be enthralled by the idea of *Bhoodanyagna*. But no one agreed or did make any effort to donate even a cottah of land. The political parties too remained inert and the biggest jotedar of the village who happened to be the local leader of a particular political party too showed no interest. Such experiences made Bhandari realize that the richer sections in possession of land were not ready to donate even the minimum and this man-made dearth of land pained him. Bhave's idea

was that those who were reluctant to donate, should be inspired and motivated in such a way that even a miser would reconsider his earlier decision. But such thoughts lacked pragmatism and the objective situation was just the contrary. Bhandari learnt from a villager in Jorhira in Bankura that the landed people of the village were extortionists to the core who would make the poor people work fourfold even after charging exorbitant rates of interest for a loan. They would not hesitate to torture the poor people if they failed to repay even a sum of four annas. Thus they could not be least expected from to donate land.

The affluent landed sections of the village communities mostly could not look beyond their vested interests and were not generous enough to part even with a small portion of their land for the welfare of the greater community. Bhandari found that it was rather the people with limited resources who volunteered. One Jatindranath Paria, a resident of Agar, Bankura, with no regular income, had spontaneously agreed to donate one anna. Similar responses came from four other extremely poor wage labourers who too agreed to donate one anna every month from their paltry income. Bhandari learnt that being inspired by the message of *Bhoodan-Gramdan*, they wanted to be part of the movement in whatever small way they could, since they had no land to donate. Considering their financial debility, they were advised to give free labour (*sramdan*) instead. What was thus coming to the fore was that the poor and those with limited means were perhaps more eager to cooperate and participate for the cause. Such instances were many. Those from below perhaps empathized with each other's distress and hoped that the programme might partly alleviate their miseries. Also, there was no competition among them regarding land acquisition.

Bhandari also noticed that the enthusiasm of the downtrodden for the movement could stand up to the indifference of the influential locals and even the hostility of the political parties to it. It is known from his reminiscences that during his *padayatra* in 24 Parganas, for example in Diamond Harbour, Mograhat, Mathurapur, Joynagar, Baruipur and Canning, he found that the local people did

not have any idea about *Bhoodan-Gramdan* and there was no constructive worker in the region. Bhandari was a newcomer there and neither did anybody take notice of his visit nor did he get any cooperation from the local magnates, except in Canning. Though a few influential persons in a few places made some basic arrangements, they did not play a significant role in upholding the cause of *bhoodan*. Bhandari wondered how the privileged could remain so blind to the distress of the poor and the stark reality of rural Bengal. He also realised that political alignments had a negative role to play. He recounted that in Pratapnagar under Sonarpur Police Station, he had put up in the house of an affluent Congress worker who owned land and was also a service holder. This person was the President of the local Union Board too. The situation was riddled by factionalism, political and otherwise. Bhandari learnt that the members of the Communist Party had dissuaded the villagers from attending the *bhoodan* meeting as it was arranged by a member of the Congress Party and to divert the crowd, the Communists had also arranged for a parallel meeting scheduled for that very day. Bhandari and his co-workers also apprehended that a local fair (*goshter mela*) might also keep away the villagers from their meeting. They, therefore, campaigned for the meeting in the best possible way and it was ultimately well attended. The crowd intently listened to Bhandari's speech and he noticed that it seemed as if they could locate an oasis in the midst of a desert. What surprised him more was that he saw the same reaction in the villages under Communist influence. This made him realize that the people lower down the social scale could associate themselves with the movement, whatever be their political affiliations. He noticed that his words had a special appeal for the poor and the downtrodden. In a few cases, those in possession of small plots were rather ready to donate the entire land or a part of it. What needs to be noted here is that even though the amount of land acquired was paltry, they were all fertile rice producing plots of land.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Yatrar Pathey*, Kolkata, April, 1958, Pg. 65-71

Bhandari was wary not only of communist hostility, but also of the lukewarm attitude of the Congress. In his opinion, though the situation in Bengal was in general conducive to the movement, the progress of the movement was impeded by the lack of support which had been promised by the Congress.¹⁶⁸ It is true that Vinoba Bhave had reservations about the Congress workers' direct participation in the movement and conversely about the constructive workers' maintenance of ties with the Congress. It may be noted here that Shriman Narayan, the General Secretary, AICC, had claimed that there was no fundamental difference between the ideologies of the Congress, Socialism and *Sarvodaya*.¹⁶⁹ The AICC urged the active members to resume constructive work as a regular part of party activity. Congressmen were encouraged to work for *bhoodan*, to take an active role in organizing village industries, *panchayats*, cooperatives and schools and to engage in social welfare work, especially among the Scheduled Castes. Subsequently, some Congressmen did work for *bhoodan* and the *Sarvodaya Samaj* strengthened its informal ties with the Congress party. But following Vinoba Bhave's instructions, the bulk of constructive workers remained outside the political process.¹⁷⁰ Bhandari recalled that Bhave at the end of a prayer meeting in Balarampur Ashram in West Bengal in January, 1955, had declared that those who were associated with politics always thought in terms of political outcome. He thus felt that they were not adept to bring about the great social revolution that he envisaged. According to him, the Congress being the largest political party of the country was not a welfare organization in the true sense of the term and its focus was primarily on elections. Acknowledging that the constructive programme taken up by the political workers was noble, Bhave still gave them a call to give up political work and devote their wholehearted attention to the work of *bhoodan*.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Pg.59

¹⁶⁹ Shriman Narayan Agarwal, *Constructive Programme for Congressmen*, New Delhi, 1953, Pg.3

¹⁷⁰ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 2nd Edition, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp. 106-107

¹⁷¹ Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Yatrar Pathay*, Kolkata, April, 1958, Pg. 60

Anyway, Bhandari had a rather encouraging experience in his tour in the district of Purulia, when he visited the village of Tentla under Manbazar Police Station, where a '*Gramswaraj*' conference had been convened, sometime in 1957. He recounted in his reminiscences that there he had met Banku Bihari Mahato, a noted worker of the *Bhoodan* Movement, who together with 12 families out of a total of 50 families of Tentla had formed a *Sarvodaya* family. Mahato regretted that *Gramdan* could not work out in the village due to difference of opinion among the villagers. The 12 interested families, hence, pooled in their resources to work for their economic self-sufficiency. The plots of land of these families were combined and then divided equally among the 12 families with 61 members. It was decided that they would cultivate the land together, the produce would be stored together and every family would take the produce according to its requirement. Bhandari learnt that the total land of the 12 families measured about 100 bighas of which 40 bighas were in the highlands and 60 bighas were located in the low lying areas. Most of the land originally belonged to Mahato and the rest of the families gave whatever small holdings they had. Paddy was the main crop to be cultivated and the other necessary crops and vegetables were cultivated according to an estimated requirement of the families. About 30 acres of land which was not suitable for cultivation was cultivated every three years and crops like maize, cotton, *arhar* pulses and *bidi* leaves were grown on these plots. In order to improve the fertility of all kinds of soil, compost fertilizer was made by the members of the volunteer families and better agrarian techniques were also resorted to. The entire produce was not initially divided, but stored in the houses of the *Sarvodaya* families according to the space available, thereby turning every house into a '*dharmagola*'. Every month a person from any of the families volunteered to act as the manager who divided the provisions required by every family depending on the number of members of each family. In case a family required anything extra, that was provided according to the need. Some of the produce including paddy had to be sold to pay for the revenue due on all the plots of land that were combined.

The mutual understanding among the members was so deep that there was a consensus among them that they would have only what they would be able to produce and grow except for salt, which was the only item bought from the market. For example, they used sesame oil instead of mustard oil as mustard could not be grown in their land. They also had their self-owned, self-serviced oil mills. Similarly they also did not have cumin and black pepper as spices as these could not be grown on their land. In this way an attempt was made to build up a self-sufficient economy at the basic level by a remote village. Regarding their clothings they, however, could not attain self-sufficiency. Still their effort in this regard remained undaunted and they worked with 15/16 *charkhas* and one handloom. Even social obligations like getting daughters married remained the responsibility of all the members of the *Sarvodaya* community and not the sole responsibility of the concerned parents. The children of the community attended the formal village schools, but the literate members of the community worked towards educating the illiterate adult and women fellow members.

The prime initiative for such a venture came from Mahato who worked and lived with the community like the other members, in spite of the opposition from the other villagers who did not join his programme and suspected him of promoting his vested interests. Bhandari learnt from Mahato that in the 12 member group that was formed, one particular member being influenced by external influence, was not quite satisfied with the arrangement. Yet, Mahato was optimistic about its permanence and was assured by Bhandari that his selfless sacrifice would be subsequently recognized by those who were hesitant about his objectives. In this endogenous experiment of rural reconstruction, the volunteers did neither want nor look for any external help. The only support that they desired to have was from a dedicated person who would take the responsibility of educating the children of the remote village of Tentla on the new lines of *nai talim* as against the state sponsored foundational institutions (*sarkari buniyadi vidyalaya*).¹⁷² In this way the selfless ideologies of cooperation, sharing and fellow-feeling were hoped

¹⁷² Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Yatrar Pathy*, Kolkata, April, 1958, Pp.92-97

to be inculcated among the children who would work towards an egalitarian social order in future.

This spontaneous and sincere experiment at Tentla sought to begin the constructive programme from below with every member of the community participating and trying to bring about self sufficiency. But its effort remained an isolated one, and though an example or a model worthy of being followed, the endeavour was not much publicized. Yet such small, honest efforts carried a ray of hope for all those willing to take a plunge.

Vinoba Bhave in the course of his *padayatra* in Bengal in January 1955 said that even if an insignificant measure of land was donated, what really mattered was the feeling with which the donation was made. The very concept of voluntary donation of land in *Bhoodan*, according to him, sought to bring about a basic change in the prevalent ideas. Bhandari noticed an unprecedented spontaneity in the response of the people when Bhave visited Shaltora in the district of Bankura in January 1955.¹⁷³ Bhave believed that ultimately social change would largely depend on the extensive propagation of such ideas. Till 1955 Bengal did not show much promise in imbibing the idea of *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan*. In contrast to the adjacent state of Bihar, which had made a rather massive donation of 23 lakh acres of land, Bengal's contribution was quite insignificant. When Charu Chandra Bhandari expressed his concern about the uncertainty of the *Bhoodan* movement in West Bengal, Bhave asked him to put in more zeal and efforts to propagate the main idea of *Bhoodan* in the state. He was hopeful that once the people of West Bengal understood and imbibed the concept and the objective of *Bhoodan*, they would naturally overcome their initial block in making land donations and would then assume the responsibility of acquisition and redistribution of land.¹⁷⁴ In this way, he wanted to initiate the people in the movement and make them spontaneously participate in the same.

¹⁷³ Charu Chandra Bhandari *Bhoodan Yagna Ki o Keno*, Kolkata, 1953, Pg. 49

¹⁷⁴ Vinoba Bhave, *Premmoy Bangla*, Translated by Paramesh Basu, Kolkata, 1957, Pp.- 3-4

VIC. CIRCUMSCRIBED COURSE OF THE MOVEMENT IN WEST BENGAL

The movement, however, failed to make a deep impression on the minds of most people. It was unfortunate to note that very often lands under litigation and uncultivable fallow lands were donated which marred the true spirit and ideology of Bhoodan and Gramdan. Bikram Sarkar, a retired IAS officer, recounted that he had had the opportunity of joining Vinoba Bhave in his walk or *padayatra* in a number of villages of Tehatta II Development Block in Nadia district in West Bengal in January, 1963. In an open meeting of Vinoba Bhave in the village of Palashipara, a resident of the village named Murari Ghosh offered an acre of agricultural land in Bhoodan. From his interaction with the donor, Bikram Sarkar learnt that the land in question was under litigation with one of his cousins and that there was hardly any prospect of Ghosh's winning the civil litigation and thus the gift would not affect him materially.¹⁷⁵ This indicated nothing but the defeat of the ideology of Bhave and the failure on the part of the people to imbibe the values of cooperation and compassion through the movements of Bhoodan and Gramdan.

These movements, on the whole, though comparatively successful in some states, could neither make a deep imprint nor leave much impact on the people of West Bengal. Bhandari, the protagonist of the movements in Bengal, noted that till March 1961, West Bengal counted for only 26 *Gramdans* out of a total of 4752 made in India.¹⁷⁶ His direct experience¹⁷⁶ of working in the state with the people at the primary level prompted him to analyse and locate the reasons for the restricted progress of the movement there. He felt that the main impediment in the spread of the movement was that even the egalitarian per capita redistribution of land under the scheme of *Bhoodan-Gramdan* was not adequate to meet the needs of the families at the grass root level.

¹⁷⁵ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India, Theory & Practice: A Study of Legal Aspects of Land Reform Movements*, Calcutta, Pg. 98

¹⁷⁶ Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Bhoodan Ki o Keno*, Kolkata, 1953, Pg.82

According to his estimation, the cultivated and cultivable land in West Bengal measured around 1 crore, 46 lakh acres which needed to be redistributed among a population of 3 crores or more. Thus every family with an average strength of five members could not receive even 5 acres of land to sustain them. So they needed to supplement their income from the village handicrafts which were to be organized on a cooperative basis. Adhering to the ideology of cooperation, these initiatives, however small they might be, sought to work towards economic self-sufficiency at the micro-level. Vinoba Bhave had hoped that if the villagers took to such cooperative endeavours, a change would come about in their attitude and the entire moral plane of their living would also change. He said that if there was no cooperation among the people and if a reform was thrust on them through legislation, then it would fail to achieve its objective. He added that there was place for legislation only when a reform was voluntarily adopted by a number of individuals and if that voluntary action prepared the public mind for the change, then the residual work could be achieved through the process of law.¹⁷⁷

But voluntarism was something that seemed missing from the movement as it took shape under the leadership of Bhave. The West Bengal Bhoodan Yagna Ordinance, 1962 (West Bengal Ordinance No. VII of 1962) was promulgated by the Governor on 18th September, 1962¹⁷⁸ and was enforced in all areas of the State except the transferred territories of Bihar on 21/9/1962. The timing of promulgation was so selected in order to synchronise it with the arrival of Vinoba Bhave in West Bengal in September, 1962. The expectation was that his visit would give a fillip to the movement.¹⁷⁹ However, complications arose due to inconsistencies and contradictions between the method followed by Bhave in redistributing land among the landless and the policy of the *Bhoodan* Ordinance of the State. The Ordinance provided for the constitution of a Bhoodan Yagna

¹⁷⁷ Vinoba Bhave, *Revolutionary Sarvodaya (Philosophy for the Remaking of Man)*, Compiled & Translated by Vasant Nargolkar, Bombay, 1964, Pp. 38-39

¹⁷⁸ Published in the Calcutta Gazette (Extraordinary) 18/9/1962, Pp.2785-2787

¹⁷⁹ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India, Theory & Practice: A Study of Legal Aspects of Land Reform Movements*, Calcutta, Pp.97-98

Board which would have the power to scrutinize the proprietary right of the given land. The members of the Board would be nominated by Bhave himself. The justification of the proprietary right would be followed by the registration of the transfer of the land. However, Bhave did not abide by the provisions of the Ordinance and distributed land among those people who were approved by the donors, thereby overriding the Board. This was in contradiction to the spirit of the Ordinance and the Government apprehended that a section of the people might take advantage of the situation and might attempt to evict the bargadars from their lands.¹⁸⁰ Such a turn of events would jeopardize the interests of the landless peasants at the grass-root thus taking away the movement from the people of the margins.

Discussions followed between Bhave and the Land and Land Revenue Minister, Shyamadas Bhattacharya. Bhave agreed to take help from the government in case of Gramdan, but refused to go by the Government norms in case of Bhoodan.¹⁸¹ However, after much deliberations and to avoid undesirable consequences, Section 3 of the West Bengal Bhoodan Yagna Act, 1962 provided for establishment and incorporation of the Bhoodan Yagna Board, a majority of whose members would be nominated by Bhave. The Board, according to the Act, had the power to acquire, hold and dispose of property, both movable and immovable, and to enter into contracts and to do all acts necessary and consistent with the purposes of the Act. The Board was originally constituted with the Chief Minister of West Bengal as the Chairman, Secretary, Board of Revenue, West Bengal as a member and the nominees of Bhave were Charu Chandra Bhandari, Durga Charan Dutta and Naba Krishna Chaudhuri. The Board held its first meeting on 17th December, 1963 and subsequently the Minister of Land and Land Revenue Department replaced the Chief Minister as the Chairman. These legalities made the movement a tool in the hands of the Government where there was no scope

¹⁸⁰ *Yugantar*, 24th September, 1962

¹⁸¹ *ibid*

for the people from below to participate or to put forward their opinion regarding the developments taking place.

According to the records available with the Board of Revenue, West Bengal, a total measure of 13,742,072 acres of land were donated in pursuance of Bhoodan yagna In West Bengal by 1966.¹⁸² But the decisions regarding the allotment of the Bhoodan land among the landless was entirely a decision of the Board and depended on the recommendations of the members. Thus the movement, which Bhava had sought to build from below to bring about an egalitarian social order and which stressed on participation, cooperation and compassion, was handicapped to a great extent by the legal intricacies and official discretion. It no longer remained a people's movement in the true sense of the term and the meshes of official and legal bindings throttled the essence of cooperation which the movement had initially promised to uphold.

The *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement became a farce in course of time because there was a tendency to donate only lands under litigation. In many cases the land donated was rather poor in quality and the cost of reclamation was quite considerable. In the district of Purulia out of 10,717 acres of land donated, about 4233 acres were waste land where no reclamation was economically viable. The remaining 6,484 acres of donated land was scattered all over the district and out of it only an area of 52.74 acres covered by 18 valid '*danpatras*' could be distributed. Initially 373 *Bhoodanpatras* were filed under the Bihar Bhoodan Act in the district, out of which 203 cases were disposed of till March 1965. The 18 cases mentioned above were confirmed and the remaining 185 cases covering an approximate area of 2111.66 acres of land were cancelled. The rest 170 cases

¹⁸²Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India, Theory & Practice: A Study of Legal Aspects of Land Reform Movements*, Pg. 101

were yet to be taken up for enquiry under the provisions of the West Bengal Bhoodan Yagna Act, 1962.¹⁸³

The message of the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement could hardly percolate among the people of Bengal, except for a few instances, and could not generate interest among the people and thus could not be sustained. It was unfortunate that in most cases the prospective beneficiaries did not play any active role in trying to imbibe the essence of the movements and just waited for their turns to receive the land that was being donated. The spontaneous urge to donate land was also palpably lacking among those who had land much above the ceiling because they tried to resort to all kinds of atrocious methods to retain as much land as they could.¹⁸⁴ Thus the promise with which the movement had started was belied and the merits of the movement in the domains of economy, culture, morality and spirituality as envisioned by Bhave¹⁸⁵ could not be realized. The Bhoodan Yagna Board also made very insignificant progress, and in the scheme of *Gramdan* only 13 villages were received by the Board in the district of 24 Parganas till about the mid 1970s. The Board last met in October, 1977 and finally lapsed in September, 1979 due to non-revival.

The *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement in West Bengal was effective only in a limited area, especially where Charu Chandra Bhandari could directly work with the people to inspire them to voluntarily join the movement. In other places the movement failed to take a root. Discrepancies between theory and implementation restricted the success of the movement to a certain extent. Though Bhave was the main protagonist, the movement was actually in the institutional grip of the Sarva Seva Sangh from the beginning. Bhandari being a part of the movement wondered whether any social revolution was really possible in the way the *Bhoodan* movement was being carried out. Bhave himself realized

¹⁸³ Letter No. 548/Z dated 29th March, 1965 from the Deputy commissioner, Purulia to the land and land Reforms Dept., Govt. of West Bengal – cited in Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India, Theory & Practice: A Study of Legal Aspects of Land Reform Movements*, Calcutta, 1989

¹⁸⁴ Bikram Sarkar *Land Reforms in india, Theory & Practice*, Calcutta, 1989, Pg. 103

¹⁸⁵ Charu Chandra Bhandari, *Bhoodan Yagna Ki o Keno*, Calcutta, 1953, Pg.82

that institutionalization of any revolutionary movement would thwart the source of the revolution in due course. He, therefore, felt that the need of the hour was to sever all institutional ties and transform it into a mass movement which would then make a real revolution possible. Bhandari was deeply concerned about creating a base of the movement among the masses. And he realised that the basic impediment lay in the funding of the movement. In his opinion, as long as any central institution (Gandhi Smarak Nidhi through the Sarva Seva Sangh) funded the movement, it was neither possible for nor expected from the populace to take over the reins of the movement. Therefore, to give it the form of a people's movement, the preliminary step would be to make the people bear its expenses and arrange for the resources accordingly. Bhandari learnt that it was for the same reason that Bhave wanted to extend *sampattidan* and thereby confer the responsibility of the movement on the people. Bhave's theoretical assumption was that the people themselves would acquire land and following the regulations of land distribution, would themselves redistribute the same among those in need of land. But Bhandari understood that what was theoretically conceivable was not easy to be put into practice. Such an endeavour required the untiring effort of innumerable idealist, sincere, honest and dedicated workers, which would create a congenial environment for the movement. It was expected that the right milieu would arouse the right consciousness to give the right form to the thoughts of Bhave. Bhandari was aware of the ground reality in contemporary Bengal and thus realized that with a real dearth of committed workers, the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement could hardly become a mass movement there.¹⁸⁶

The movement ultimately became a Government initiative of bringing about land reform where the people's voice was completely lost. Vinoba Bhave's call to the people to make '*premdan*' if they could not donate land could not reach far.¹⁸⁷ The movement might have been much too idealist in its approach and

¹⁸⁶ Chandra Bhandari, *Yatrar Pathey*, Charu Kolkata, April, 1958, Pp. 78-79

¹⁸⁷ *Yugantar*, 28th September, 1962

orientation, and thought more in terms of extension of the movement than in terms of intensive penetration among small groups of people. At least in Bengal, constructive work did not accompany the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* projects, though Tentla was a brilliant exception. Another such encouraging endeavour could be traced in a few Gramdan villages near Balarampur in the district of Medinipur, namely, Banpasna, Metsa, Atasani, Shobdahar, Kasba, Raghunathpur, Rakhalgadia, Saraswatipur, Jharia, Nagora and Agarpada. These villages were mostly inhabited by Santhals, other Scheduled Tribes and Harijans who formed about 72% of the village population. It is learnt that about 300 families in these villages formed a service cooperative under the supervision of the Abhay Ashram at Balarampur. The said society was able to safeguard the villagers from the atrocities of the moneylenders and a sense of belonging generated by the gramdan seemed to gradually change the pattern of social fabric.¹⁸⁸ But in general, the truncated and fragmented vision of the movement could not create a consolidated base among the people from below.

The movement tried to effectively propagate the idea of “nonviolent social revolution”, but was noticeably weak in implementing it.¹⁸⁹ The movement was felt to be out of the mainstream, was particularly weak in West Bengal, and even in the broader context of India, people’s participation in the programmes of the movement was not forthcoming. Nor was there any appreciable impact on the socio-economic life of the people.¹⁹⁰ The suitable atmosphere for the programme could not be developed and the village communities could also not be properly organized due to lack of cooperative spirit. In the *Gramdan* villages, the *Gram Sabhas*, the basic institution for participatory democracy and the main source of people’s power, could not be effectively established.¹⁹¹ One of the reasons located for this lacuna was that the class and the caste forces of the village society together with the party politics operating there paralysed the *gram sabhas*

¹⁸⁸ Radhakrishna, Rajghat (ed.), *Bhoodan Newsletter*, February 1, 1965, Varanasi

¹⁸⁹ G.Ostergaard, *Nonviolent Revolution in India*, New Delhi, 1985, Pg. 27

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, Pg. 31

¹⁹¹ Ibid, Pg. 39

and made them inoperative.¹⁹² These realities crippled the objective and limited the scope of the movement.

VII. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The decades of the 1950s and 60s saw the quest for alternatives to institutionalized structures and organizations. The period of transition during the years after 1947 brought to the fore a number of failed promises and frustrations for the people from the margins who gradually realized that their “distinctive visions of free India” were being sidelined by a new dominant model of statecraft that was emerging in post-colonial India.¹⁹³ The new state took recourse to the colonial legacy of coercion and this revealed the contradictions of the new socio-political system where on one hand constitutional democracy was established, while on the other, popular protest raised its head which was not welcomed.¹⁹⁴ These contradictions let loose certain cross currents which made the situation rather volatile and vulnerable. Voices of discontent with the new system, with its institutions and organizations were discernible and this led to conflicts at various levels, in various shades; e.g. in rural society, among the working classes, among the middle classes and also among the intelligentsia. These conflicts posed new threats to India and her newly acquired freedom. On the one hand, the state and government tried to counter the dissident elements through coercive measures, on the other hand, there were a few lone independent voices who through their alternative programmes and measures sought to alleviate the surfacing discontents and arrest the forces of dissension. In the ideology of these alternative programmes, the spirit of cooperation acted as a binder, at least theoretically trying to bridge the gaps, which of course, once again had different dimensions. Pannalal Dasgupta and Vinoba Bhave in their own respective ways tried to find such alternatives to the established order of the day.

¹⁹² *People's Action*, December, 1971

¹⁹³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonisation in South Asia, Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947-52*, New Delhi, 2009, Pg. 184

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

These alternative voices had their limitations, but at the same time were not completely irrelevant to the context in which they spoke. These voices in the words of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay “visualized the future of a new born nation in divergent ways.” These voices were never wholly lost and Dasgupta’s Tagore Society for Rural Development still works towards community development in the different districts of West Bengal. The “yearning for an indigenous model” of the colonial days was never completely abandoned. Dasgupta and Vinoba Bhave through their “indigenous models” sought to make the people play a participatory role in their ‘*swaraj*’. This ‘other’ aspect, or the non-official aspect of the cooperative movement developed a character of its own, which took a parallel course to the state-sponsored cooperative movement. The endeavours of this ‘other’ course tried to uphold the true spirit of cooperation and to give the people from below a foothold, a moral strength when they were groping in the darkness and wilderness of uncertainties in the days following India’s Independence and Partition. But there remained a gap between their ideals and practical activities. Moreover, the commitment that was there in Dasgupta and Vinoba Bhave was often found lacking in their successors, which further limited the scope of these programmes. For example, the commitment with which Dasgupta had started was in course of time tainted by corruption and insincerity of certain workers who became associated with TSRD. As a protest to all these wrong practices, Dasgupta went on a hunger strike at the agricultural farm of TSRD at Chhoto Simulia from 23rd April, 1982. It is known from Ananda Sen that the hunger strike was a symbolic protest against the degeneration that was setting in. It was a gesture through which Dasgupta sought to appeal to the good senses of the masses and arouse their morality. In a written manifesto Dasgupta notified that he could not claim that the entire country would abide by his words, his regret was that hardly anybody went through his writings, not even his associates and he was perhaps aware that his form of protest would hardly create any difference for anybody. Yet he felt it necessary to voice his protest.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵Ananda Sen, *Amar Dekha Pannalal Dasgupta*, Bolpur, 2004, Pg.28

In spite of all the limitations of the cooperative experiments, the ideology of cooperation remained the guiding light for many people steeped in darkness. Different programmes of community development based on cooperative values would speak for its viability at different junctures of history.

CHAPTER - 4

TOWARDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: SOME SELECT EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE VENTURE

I. INTRODUCTION

The village based community development programmes, whether official or non-official, highlighted the human aspects of the cooperative movement. The Better-Living and the Rural Reconstruction Societies of the colonial period took strides towards rural regeneration, certain nationalist leaders through their constructive programmes worked in a similar direction and a few imperial officials had also introduced some village welfare and upliftment experiments largely through individual initiatives, for example, F. L. Brayne¹ in Gurgaon, D. S. Hatch² in Martandam. The latter's paternalistic approach made them feel that with their scientific knowledge and their more varied experience they could help the Indians to help themselves – help them to improve the health and comfort of their homes, the sanitation of their villages, the education of their children and cultivation of their fields.³ Similar ventures were also undertaken by missionary and quasi-missionary societies like YMCA, Ramkrishna Mission, Indian Village Service and by a few princes like those of Travancore and Baroda. Parallel to

¹ F. L. Brayne – Backwardness, poverty and misery of the people of India prompted him to start a rural upliftment programme in Gurgaon district of the Punjab in 1927, where he was the Deputy Commissioner. A village guide was appointed to advise and communicate to the villagers the knowledge of improved seeds, implements and methods of cultivation. The village guides were not technical men and the project could not create much impact on the villagers. The work gathered momentum after 1933 when Brayne was appointed as the Commissioner of Rural Reconstruction in the Punjab

² Duane Spencer Hatch (1888-1963) – An American agricultural expert and a pioneer in rural reconstruction and community development. In 1916, he visited India and Mesopotamia to serve the British and the Indian troops during the First World War under the auspices of the Indian National Council and the YMCA. He later returned to India with his wife to begin his long career in rural reconstruction under the support of the YMCA of India. He started a project in Marthandam in Travancore in 1921. The aim of the project was to bring about a three-fold development of the villagers: socio-economic, physical and mental-spiritual

³C.F. Strickland, *Review of Rural Welfare Activities in India*, London, 1932, Preface by Francis Younghusband,

these endeavours, a public urge for community development could also be traced from the late 1920s. These endeavours sought to substantiate Paul Hubert Casselman's definition of cooperation as an economic system with a social content. According to Casselman, the idealism of cooperation has both economic and social elements. The economic ideals affect the business aspect, its methods and operations, while the social ideals have a direct bearing on the association of persons comprising the society as they affect the membership and personnel relations.⁴ He further added that to develop the movement and to make it flourish, it was necessary for the people to prepare themselves for the movement. For this, was required a new orientation⁵, an awareness which would motivate them to undertake cooperative experiments. Casselman realized that it was an evolutionary process which could not be brought about by a series of legislations.⁶ The cooperative experiments at the primary level could be an ideal way to arouse the spirit of cooperation latent in every person.

In late-colonial and early post-colonial India, it was increasingly being felt that the welfare of the "nation" largely depended on the development of the condition of the villages. To empower the country or the nascent 'nation', the villagers from below should be empowered first. But it was apprehended that dependence on external agencies, government or non-government, might delay the process which was not desirable. Considering the deplorable condition of the villages, it was being realized that the motivation for developing or reconstructing the villages should come from the villagers themselves regardless of any help they did or did not receive from outside. Thus hypothetically at least, a participatory programme of rural community development based on the values of cooperation was being worked out.

⁴ Paul Hubert Casselman, *The Cooperative Movement and Some of its Problems*, New York, 1952, Pg. 1

⁵ *Ibid*, Pg. 159

⁶ *Ibid*, Pg. 159

II. RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN COLONIAL TIMES

Gurusaday Dutt as a protagonist of rural reconstruction, in a lecture in the Mikano Club in Kolkata in 1924 pointed out that the organizations, i.e. the *sanghas* and *samitis*, which were necessary for village work could be divided into three categories. First, the rural administrative machineries which included the Union Boards. Second, the societies voluntarily formed by the villagers, i.e. the village societies. And third, the societies formed according to certain rules and acts and whose members lend their voluntary service following the legal provisions. The formal cooperative societies represented the third category. In the opinion of Dutt, however, all the three categories of societies should cooperate with each other, complement and supplement each other's activities to help the villagers in all possible ways.⁷ However, the villagers in general had certain reservations regarding the rural administrative machineries, the reasons for which were many. Dutt realised that the contemporary administrative system based on the Union Boards thus needed to be immediately amended by the experts to suit the conditions and the time and thereby protect the villagers from imminent crises.

It may be pointed out that the Union Boards were established in accordance with the provisions of the Bengal Self-Government Act of 1919. The Union Board was a mixed body of elected and nominated members and their powers and duties were regulated by the above mentioned Act. The primary duty of the Board was to arrange for and supervise the activities of the *dafadars* and the *chowkidars* in the villages. Its other responsibilities included maintenance of public health, development of cottage industries, supply of water, improvement, repair and maintenance of public utility services like village roads, waterways, bridges, introduction of small irrigation schemes, establishment of primary schools and health centres and settlement of minor legal matters with the help of the Union

⁷ 'Pallisanaskar o Sangathan', Gurusaday Dutt – Reported in Naresh Chandra Sengupta (ed.), *Palli Swaraj*, Jyaishtya, 1336(B.S), , Calcutta

Court and the Union Bench. To meet its expenses, the Board could impose taxes under every head of its activities. But the tax under each head was not to exceed Rs. 84. Though the establishment of the Union Boards was recommended for better administration of the villages, it was basically a measure of the British Government to preserve and stabilize its political control over the rural areas. According to the provisions of the Self-Government Act, the Districts Boards and the Local Boards were entrusted to supervise the activities of the Union Boards, but the real power of control lay with the District Magistrate and Divisional Commissioner. The nationalist leaders soon realized that the government controlled Union Boards would prove a deterrent to their nationalist interest.⁸

Following the provisions of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919, the Union Board was established in the district of Medinipur in 1921. The common people initially expected that their pressing daily problems, like water scarcity, litigations etc. would be resolved through the Union Board. This made them take an initial interest in this organization and thus depend on it. But Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal making an extensive study of the nationalist movements in the region of Midnapore notes that a new leadership emerged from the *jotedars*, moneylenders and trading classes who were eager to seize the opportunities opened up by the establishment of Union Boards to secure government patronage and increase their political power. The Union Boards after being established in Medinipur increased the *Chowkidari Tax* by 50%. Still it was found that after bearing the salaries of the *chowkidars*, *dafadars* and the other employees of the Board and the miscellaneous expenditures, it was almost impossible for the Union Board to undertake any welfare measure in the villages with the paltry sum left. The common villagers thus lost their trust in the Union Board and it was beyond their means to bear the brunt of increased taxation, especially in the face of the prevailing economic debility following the First World War. The growing discontent with the Union Boards found a vent in the mass movements of the early 1920s.

⁸ See Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919 for more details of Union Board

It is learnt from Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal that the agitation was severe in Tamluk and in the villages under Ramnagar Police Station in the sub-division of Kanthi. Sanyal finds that wherever the Congress workers tried to build a base among the masses, the Union Boards became the prime target of mass resistance. He notes that almost everywhere the mass movements began with their protest against the Union Boards, for example, in Bankura, Arambagh in Hooghly, Nadia, Mahishbathan in 24 Parganas and Bandbila in the district of Jessore.⁹

The general opinion was that the Union Boards had failed to emerge as centres of rural development and rejuvenate the declining villages. The Bengal Union Board Development Bureau was formed in 1929 primarily to redress the wrongs of the Union Boards. The members of the Bureau were aware of the serious defects of the contemporary statutory village institutions and sought to remove them by enlightening those who would man the institutions like the Union Boards. This would inculcate a sense of responsibility in them and they would work to reorganize the village life which would help in the building of the nation.¹⁰ An old President of a Union Board pointed out that the development of the Union Boards was necessary to introduce a feeling of local patriotism and local public spirit among the masses without which no local self-government could be successful. He recognized that funds proved to be a major problem for the Union Boards and felt the immediate need to relieve the rural people from bearing the entire burden of the *Chowkidari Tax*.¹¹ These practical difficulties needed to be resolved to bring about development of the rural community through the Union Boards.

Gurusaday Dutt despite being a government officer himself, however, found that the village societies and the cooperative societies were more instrumental in

⁹ Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Swarejer Pathey*, Calcutta, 1994, Chapter – *Jatitabadi Andolon*

¹⁰ 'Building the Nation' in Naresh Chandra Sengupta (ed.), *Palli Svaraj*, Vol.II, Magh 1338(B.S), February, 1332, No.7, , Calcutta

¹¹ 'Developing Union Boards:Some Suggestions', by an Old President in Naresh Chandra Sengupta (ed.), *Palli Svaraj*, Vol.II, Magh 1338(B.S), February, 1332, No.7, Calcutta

bringing about development of the village community, for example, the Anti-Malaria Cooperative Societies, the Water Supply Cooperative Societies in Bankura and Birbhum, the Village Welfare Associations, the Sriniketan project of Rabindranath Tagore etc.. According to Dutt, these endeavours were bright examples of mutual cooperation and cohesion among the villagers, even if they received partial or no aid from the government.¹² Union Boards could never act as a vehicle of community development. Rather anti-Union Board agitations promoted communitarian cohesion and generated possibilities of constructive work on the basis of this solidarity. Sometimes Union Boards were formally involved in cooperative projects, but this was felt to be a deterrant rather than a facilitator.

III. RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN POST-COLONIAL TIMES

After independence, India pledged to the values of socialism and democracy, sought to realize them through a planned economy. It was expected, at least theoretically, that in such an economy, cooperation should become progressively the principal basis of organization in different branches of economic life, notably in agriculture and minor irrigation, small industry and processing, marketing, distribution, supplies, rural electrification, housing and construction and the provision of essential amenities for local communities.

To begin with, in 1948, a government-sponsored pilot community development project was launched through the Etawah Project in Uttar Pradesh where Albert Meyers, an American engineer and town planner, made experiments with agricultural improvement in rural areas. This was supposed to be the starting point of community development programmes in post-colonial-India patterned after the American extension services.¹³ The success of these experiments created

¹² 'Pallisanaskar o Sangathan', Gurusaday Dutt – Reported in Naresh Chandra Sengupta (ed.), *Palli Swaraj*, Jyaishthya, 1336(B.S), , Calcutta

¹³ American Extension Services – Extension is a peculiarly American concept. It connotes a system of service and education designed to help people to meet their needs. It makes available to the people in the remote parts of the country, information about new technique and can also help the worker in

a field for adoption of similar strategies for bringing about quick rural development.¹⁴ At the same time the Ford Foundation came forward with an offer of financial assistance for setting up certain pilot projects. A proper Community Project scheme conceived by the Planning Commission was to follow soon. It is both interesting and significant to note that the post-independence rural development policies seem to have been influenced and shaped by the British, the socialist, the Gandhian and the American ideas at the same time.¹⁵ The Government's community project was also seen as a prototype of Tagore's idea in *Swadeshi Samaj*.¹⁶

In 1952, the Planning Commission introduced the Community Development Programme for initiating a process of transformation in the rural areas and the first Community Project Blocks were initiated under provisions of Indo - U.S. Operational Agreement. At first, 55 Community projects were set up in different parts of India and by 1953, 300 Community Development Blocks had been set up where intensive development work was undertaken. The authorities felt that extension work should expand quickly so that it could be converted into a real nationwide movement. The scheme which evolved thereafter came to be known as the National Extension Service (NES) Block. A revised policy was thus adopted for creating the new Comprehensive Development Project (CDP) Blocks.

In Chapter XV of the First Five Year Plan, the Planning Commission claimed that the Community Development is the method and Rural Extension is the agency

formulating schemes for tackling their problems. Another important feature of the system is that it reaches services to the door of the people. It is a two way process - information from research sources concerning different problems confronting the villagers flows through it to them and similarly, it works as a medium for bringing the problems of the villagers to the attention of agencies of the state. It is considered a handy medium for reaching service from the headquarters to the door of the villagers. (Ref. – The Community Project, Govt. of West Bengal – Paper read at the IIT, Kharagpur by Shri Hiranmay Banerjee, on 17th February, 1957, Published by Development Dept., Printed at WB Govt. Press, Alipore)

¹⁴ The Community Project, Govt. of West Bengal – Paper read at the IIT, Kharagpur by Shri Hiranmay Banerjee, on 17th February, 1957, Published by Development Dept., Printed at WB Govt. Press, Alipore, Pg.4

¹⁵ Shashi Ranjan Pandey, *Community Action for Social Justice, Grassroots Organisations in India*, New Delhi, 1991, Pg.34

¹⁶ Bhabatosh Dutta, *Arthanitir Pathey*, Calcutta, 1977, Pg.68

through which the First Five Year Plan sought to initiate a process of transformation of social and economic life of the villagers.¹⁷ It was realized that different aspects of the community life were so intricately connected that one problem could hardly be tackled in isolation. The programme for community development was thus based on the realization of this fundamental need. The list of physical targets were prepared in order of priority of different items, for example, improvement in agriculture, communication, education, health and sanitation, cottage industries, housing, employment etc. The plan envisaged that the initiative in implementing these measures should come from the villagers themselves. It was stated that they should be made to realize that a better state of things was possible for them if they shook off their indifference and actively participated in the implementation of the programme. It was realized that for this social education was necessary to inculcate in the villagers community consciousness, that is, in securing the welfare of the community, individual welfare was also ensured.¹⁸ This is, of course, in consonance with the essence of the basic principle of cooperation, "Each for all and all for each". Thus to foster the cooperative spirit and to promote the sense of 'we' feeling, voluntary participation of the members of the rural community was encouraged and a close coordination was sought in the activities of the different development departments, for example, Health, Education, Cooperation etc. Hiranmay Banerjee¹⁹ while making an appraisal of the achievements made in West Bengal through Community Projects till 1957 preferred to take a note of the degree of

¹⁷ planningcommission.nic.in – First Five Year Plan, Chap. 15 – Community Development and Rural Extension – accessed on 1/8/2016

¹⁸ The Community Project, Govt. of West Bengal – Paper read at the IIT, Kharagpur by Shri Hiranmay Banerjee, on 17th February, 1957, Published by Development Dept., Printed at WB Govt. Press, Alipore, Pp. 6-8

¹⁹ Hiranmay Banerjee – Development Commissioner, Government of West Bengal. Was deeply involved in the Community Development Programme introduced by the Planning Commission in India in 1952. His long experience in field work convinced him that, granted proper conditions, results could be achieved. But at the same time he realized that proper conditions were a rare combination of circumstances and if passively waited for, the programme was difficult to materialize and its effectiveness would be considerably reduced. (Ref. – Hiranmay Banerjee, *Experiments in Rural Reconstruction*, November, 1966, Visva Bharati, Calcutta, Foreword)

enthusiasm aroused, the extent of people's participation in these programmes rather than probing into their statistical nitty-gritty.²⁰

This Community Development Programme was presumed to be a new approach to rural development incorporating a set of proposals for organizational changes at the village level. However, this programme was not a complete deviation from the earlier Constructive Programme and was designed to stimulate popular pressures for social reform from below that would ultimately make institutional change inevitable.²¹ Though the rural Community Development Programme was meant to be essentially a people's movement, the lead had to come from Government.²² . During that time, rural community formed more than 82% of the people of India. The rural community was rather isolated and the new government of independent India at least theoretically sought to bring about simultaneous horizontal and vertical development in all features of village life.²³ Thus the different government-sponsored rural development programmes called for a new level of reciprocity between rural life and rural community and also between the members of the community themselves. The reciprocity was hoped to express itself through democracy and cooperation. The cooperative form of organization had the merit of combining individual initiative with the advantages of bigger enterprise and was supposed to be the most effective tool for economic decentralization. Cooperative enterprise was considered to be the sheet anchor on which democracy could grow and endure.²⁴ With a view to this, in November, 1958, the National Development Council adopted a resolution which said that responsibility and initiative for social and economic development at the village level should be placed on the village cooperative and village panchayat.

²⁰ The Community Project, Govt. of West Bengal – Paper read at the IIT, Kharagpur by Shri Hiranmay Banerjee, on 17th February, 1957, Published by Development Dept., Printed at WB Govt. Press, Alipore, Pg. 12

²¹ Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy. 1947-2004*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp. 101-102

²² Hiranmay Banerjee, *Experiments in Rural Reconstruction*, Calcutta, November, 1966, Pg. 9

²³ S.K. Dey, *Community Development Through Sahakari Samaj*, Ministry of Community Development & Cooperation, Govt. of India, Faridabad, January, 1962, Pg. 2

²⁴ *ibid*

The Ministry of Community Development was strengthened by the creation of a new Department of Cooperation envisaging the growth of cooperatives from the village to the national level.²⁵

Panchayati Raj, Sahakari Samaj and *Samuhik Vikas* came to be considered the three pillars of democracy, still a tender sapling that demanded care.²⁶ Panchayati Raj was decentralization of administration consistent with democracy, but it was being realized that it could not work without corresponding decentralization in the economy. This was because it was thought that such an economy could offer balance and reciprocity in life below and the continual flow of democratic leadership growing from the grass-roots. The Department of Cooperation was yoked to the Department of Community Development.²⁷ And the aim of the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation was to bring about 'samuhik vikas' through the agency of *Panchayati Raj* and the creation of a *Sahakari Samaj*.

IIIA. THE CASE OF WEST BENGAL

In West Bengal, 11 areas were initially selected for intensive development as Community Development Programme (CDP) Blocks. By 1957, 14 CDP Blocks and 29 National Extension Service (NES) Blocks were in operation in West Bengal.²⁸

However, the Congress government was not quite eager to substantially alter the material conditions of the vast majority of sharecroppers and increasing number of agricultural labourers.²⁹ And the programmes adopted for the improvement of rural conditions, like the Community Development Projects, were executed

²⁵S.K. Dey, *Sahakari Samaj, The Cooperative Commonwealth*, Bombay, 1967, Pg.5

²⁶*Ibid*

²⁷*Community Development Through Sahakari Samaj*, S.K. Dey, Ministry of Community Development & Cooperation, Govt. of India, Faridabad, January, 1962, Pg. 15

²⁸The Community Project, Govt. of West Bengal – Paper read at the IIT, Kharagpur by Shri Hiranmay Banerjee, on 17th February, 1957, Published by Development Dept., Printed at WB Govt. Press, Alipore, Pp. 4-5

²⁹"Causes of Sharp Increase in Agricultural Labourers, 1961-71" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 31, 1977

through the bureaucracy where the rural populace had no role to play. Thus the participatory aspect of the community development programmes did not get the scope to evolve in West Bengal. But a change was discernible after 1966, as the year 1967 is considered to be a watershed in the field of leftist parties and politics in West Bengal.

The legacy of leftist politics in West Bengal or in the erstwhile Presidency of Bengal could be traced back to the early 1920s when she played a leading role in the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Subsequently the state also became the birth-place and the principal area of activity of a number of smaller leftist parties with distinct identities. During the initial years after Independence, the CPI got engaged in a serious conflict regarding strategies and tactics to be adopted by the Party in independent India. The issue came up for the first time in the Second Congress of the Party held in Calcutta in 1948 which revealed different strands of opinion within the Party. The ultra-leftists took control of the Party, which for a couple of years followed a sectarian line. The differences between the hard-liners and the soft-liners aggravated in course of time and a divide was becoming imminent within the supposedly monolithic structure of the CPI which finally led to the split in 1964. At the Party Congress held in Calcutta in October, 1964³⁰, the split was formalized through the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI(M). In West Bengal, the erstwhile left faction formed the core of the CPI(M) and significantly contributed to its organizational strength. It may be noted that prior to the split in 1964, the undivided CPI had taken initiative to bring together diverse Marxist and left parties and groups in the state. After the split, the rival Communist

³⁰ "The Left In West Bengal", Amitabha Ray, in Rakhahari Chatterjee (ed.), *Politics in West Bengal, Institutions, Processes and Problems*, The World Press Private Limited, Calcutta, 1985

Parties also made efforts, sometimes jointly, sometimes separately, to build a leftist alternative to the Congress.³¹

In the fourth general elections held in 1967, the Indian National Congress failed to win majority in a number of states including West Bengal. In West Bengal, the Congress secured 127 seats. Of the two non-Congress fronts, the People's united Left Front, an eight-party combination led by the CPI got 70 seats, while the six-party combination led by the CPI(M) naming itself the United Left Front secured 63 seats. The electoral verdict compelled the leaders of the two fronts to combine to form a coalition government in West Bengal and to make further inroads into the diversified social bases of the state. The emergence of the United Front, a combination of fourteen political parties thus represented a broad ideological spectrum. There was a significant departure in the orientation of this government from that of its predecessor.

The new government set itself on the tasks of meeting the primary needs of the people in respect of food, clothing, housing, health services and employment opportunities, fighting corruption in the official and non-official spheres and giving special attention to the acute problems faced by the poor peasants, share-croppers, agricultural labourers and all sections of the distressed tillers. The United Front government also promised special attention to the rehabilitation of the displaced persons from East Pakistan. It sought to reorient the executive and the police in a way consistent with the democratic aspirations of the people and resolved not to suppress the democratic and legitimate struggles of the people. This United Front government lasted for only nine months and was brought down in November, 1967 by defection from within and intervention of the Union Government. There were indeed tensions within the UF and multiple factors were responsible for it. President's rule was imposed on the state for the time being.

³¹ "The Left in West Bengal : Government and Movement, 1967-1982", Apurba Mukhopadhyay in Rakhahari Chatterjee (ed.), *Politics in West Bengal, Institutions, Processes and Problems*, The World Press Private Limited, Calcutta, 1985

The apprehension of intervention by the Union government made the partners of the United Front come to a temporary rapprochement and they agreed to contest the mid-term poll in 1969 as a single unit on the basis of a common political programme. The strategy proved effective and the United Front increased its strength dramatically securing 214 of the 280 State Assembly seats. This government too promised action in the fields of land reform, industrialization, unemployment, education, social inequalities and administrative efficiency, proposed to help the peasants in their struggle for detection, recovery, acquisition and distribution of '*benami*' land and realization of other legitimate democratic demands.³² It may be noted that the United Front government in its brief spell of thirteen months till March, 1970, could recover about 300,000 acres of surplus land and distribute the same among the landless and the poor peasants and introduced certain other revisions which were beneficial for the labourers and the working class.³³

This pro-people approach of the United Front was also reflected in the course that was envisaged for the cooperative movement took during this time. This was evident in the West Bengal Cooperative Manual of 1969 which states that cooperation has the merit of combining freedom and opportunity for the small man with benefits of large-scale management and organization as well goodwill and support from the community. This therefore indicates that a rapidly growing cooperative sector, with special emphasis on the needs of the peasant, the worker and the consumer is a vital factor for social stability, for expansion of employment opportunities and for rapid economic development. The influence of cooperation on the community as a whole is considered to extend far beyond the particular activities organized on cooperative lines and gives to the social structure and the national economy, balance, direction and a sense of values.³⁴

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ West Bengal Cooperative Manual, Vol.I, Superintendent, Government Printing, West Bengal Press, Alipore, West Bengal, 1969

It is stated in the manual that in a country whose economic structure has its roots in the villages, cooperation seeks to evolve a scheme of cooperative community organization which touches upon all aspects of life. For example, programmes of land reform and those for village and small industries, development of panchayats and the fundamental emphasis in community development on the obligations and functions of the community are all based on cooperation. It is expected that in due course as the agricultural base would be strengthened and efforts to diversify the occupational structure of rural areas would be intensified, an increasing number of cooperative activities would call for organization for larger areas. Once the processes of social and economic change gather force and the rural community attains higher level of skill and productivity, cooperation has to meet larger and more complex demands. Diverse forms of cooperative organization will continue to develop in tune with new needs and possibilities.³⁵

The manual reiterates the complementary role of the Panchayati Raj institutions and the cooperative organizations which would seek to create a climate of community effort and social responsibility, vital for the successful functioning of cooperatives at all levels. It is mentioned that regulatory powers for cooperative organizations may continue to remain with the Government, but some of them can be delegated progressively to federal cooperative organizations. It was hoped that in this way a self-regulatory character of the movement could be developed and local leadership could be promoted.³⁶ The recognition of cooperation as a people's movement in the manual suggested that theoretically the new leftist government intended to reach out to the people and encourage their participation through federal organizations. As these organizations would grow in strength, more power could be delegated to them and the departmental machinery might limit its activities to the minimum statutory duties of

³⁵ *ibid*
³⁶ *ibid*

registration, audit, arbitration and inspection. This therefore suggested that emphasis on the non-official aspect of the movement alongside its official aspect would enable it to attain a popular perspective. In fact, it was expected that a pragmatic balance between the official and non-official aspects of cooperation would make the ventures effective.

Too much official involvement in and control of cooperative experiments (even under a leftist regime) is likely to be detrimental to community development along a popular participatory line. Still it is not easy to brush aside the official aspect of the cooperative movement, either historically or practically. Prof. Amlan Datta observed certain ambiguities in the prevalent ideas of community development and reconsidering them, suggested two ways to bring about rural reconstruction. The first was through government aid and initiative and the second would be to an attempt to bring about rural reconstruction by associating it with the idea of *gram-swaraj*. According to him, the two paths could be complementary to each other but were not the same. Ultimately, however, he wanted a self-reliant cooperative movement largely independent of the state. Datta located a clear and a rather surprising similarity in the views of Gandhi and Tagore where both thought that overdependence of the society on the state led to an overbearing bureaucracy and the consequent debility of the society.³⁷ Datta felt the necessity to salvage the society from the centralised state power and thus thought that it was necessary to reconstruct the society from below with the village as the primary social unit, as the overdependence of the urban people on the state could not make them think of any alternative. According to him, the panacea for the various socio-economic ailments of the time lay in the reconstruction of self-sufficient village or rural community through cooperative efforts.³⁸ These experiments of community development or rural reconstruction

³⁷ 'Swanirbhar Pallinirman Parikalpana Ki Abastab Swapna?' in Arati Sen, Gautam Bhattacharya (ed.), *Prabandha Sangraha Vol.2*, Essays by Amlan Datta, Kolkata, 2005

³⁸ *ibid*

would be in tune with the needs and the demands of the locale, the time and the context and thus the efforts would not be impractical.

This chapter, as the title suggests, will be an attempt to focus on some cooperative experiments, of both the colonial and post-colonial period, which sought to work towards community development in the villages by trying to make the people from below participate, as envisaged by Datta. All of these were combinations of official and non-official endeavours in varying proportions, but could think beyond official parameters. The spontaneity in the initiative and urge behind them, that is, their more or less voluntary basis, helped the local communities in the rural areas to regenerate. Some of these projects were meant to address specific and urgent problems like malaria and other health hazards and harnessing water for irrigation. The deplorable condition of women too led to certain special cooperative efforts on their part since the colonial period. A major part of this chapter will be devoted to women's cooperatives. Indeed, it is women's cooperatives that will serve as a connecting thread between the colonial and the post-colonial period in this chapter.

For the colonial period, we will confine ourselves to some experiments carried out in the 1920s. The decade is important so far as cooperative experiments are concerned. The spirit of the decade was an intense spirit of nationalism, largely inspired by Gandhi's social ideology, his vision of a total social order based on strong moral values and centering on the idea of a self-sufficient rural life. On the one hand, there were several Indian efforts at rural reconstruction, and on the other, there was a strong resistance to the project of rural reconstruction that the British rulers were trying to carry out through the newly introduced Union Boards. As we have noted, the Union Boards were nothing but a ploy to tighten the government's stranglehold on rural areas and the anti-Union Board resistance formed an important part of the Gandhian nationalist movement.

After the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation Movement in early 1922, Gandhi's arrest and the emergence of a renewed enthusiasm for Council politics, his social

ideology seemed to have been dropped from the agenda of nationalist movement, but its influence lingered in the minds of many people. Among them were not only the Gandhian 'no-changers', who humbly and quietly launched their work of reconstruction in different parts of the country, but also many other Indians, some of them even serving the British administration and yet trying to implement the ideal of rural reconstruction from their own respective positions.

Indeed, an enthusiasm for rural reconstruction could be felt about this time, irrespective of Gandhi and even in disillusionment with Gandhism. The national movement was acquiring a strong social dimension for various reasons. The impact of the First World War and the intrusion of some radical currents of thought at the international level tended to turn the national movement into a socially sensitive movement. Even a number of militant nationalists and, of course, the socialists who were more or less inspired by the Soviet experiments realized that the national movement would be more meaningful only if given a social dimension. In Bengal, the inspiration of Tagore's rural reconstruction programme was also quite strong.

The following two sections of the chapter would seek to look into some select cooperative endeavours of the long decade of the 1920s which sought to address the contemporary problems of the rural areas, thereby make the rural community aware about the same and motivate the villagers to participate in the programmes. Such efforts were expected to regenerate the respective rural communities in whatever small ways they could.

The last section of the chapter deals with certain select cooperative experiments among women at different points of time.

IV. ANTI-MALARIA AND PUBLIC HEALTH SOCIETIES

Disease and pestilence crippled the villages of colonial Bengal for long. Malaria, cholera, influenza and kala-azar were rampant in rural Bengal. The colonial

government's efforts in this regard did not yield quite fruitful results. Speaking of public health during colonial times, Chittabrata Palit points out that the medical intervention of the imperial government was feeble and that the actual responsibility was left to the initiative of the local administrative units since 1881, for example, to municipalities in larger towns and District Boards in the rural and semi-urban areas. These organizations were required to raise their own resources and provide for drainage, water supply, general sanitation, maintenance of hospitals and dispensaries, in addition to other development activities.³⁹ Sanitary Boards were set up in each province between 1888 and 1893 to primarily give technical advice to the local bodies on sanitary works which would be backed by the financial contributions of the provincial government. Legislative measures of the Imperial Government like the Epidemic Diseases Act (1897) sought to deal with the health issues and the Government appointed committees and commissions, for example, the Indian Plague Commission, Drainage Committee etc. tried to find the root causes of the epidemics and suggest preventive measures. Yet, the public health machinery remained structurally weak both in its investigative and executive aspects.⁴⁰

Arabinda Samanta notes that Bengal was the largest tract of the country overrun by malaria during the entire colonial period and that the number of casualties every year was around 80,000. He points out that the Government's measures in eradicating malaria were not that effective primarily due to the extent of the area and the huge number of people affected.⁴¹ In his opinion, the inadequacy of governmental measures prompted certain "public spirited" persons like Dr. Gopal Chandra Chatterjee to introduce anti-malarial cooperative societies in the malaria

³⁹ 'Popular Response to Epidemics in Colonial Bengal', Chittabrata Palit, in Amulya Bag (ed.), *Indian Journal of History of Science*, Vol.43, Issue 2, (2008), Pp.277-283, New Delhi

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ Arabinda Samanta, *Help Fight malaria in Bengal : A Study in the Intervention of Rockefeller Foundation*, 2011 – www.rockarch.org – accessed on 25/02/2016 & Arabinda Samanta, *Malarial Fever in Colonial Bengal, 1820-1939*, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. , Calcutta, 2002

stricken villages of Bengal.⁴² Jack Shaffer in the *Historical Dictionary of the Cooperative Movement* points out that the health care cooperatives became a common phenomenon of the twentieth century with the establishment of the first association of Cooperative Sanatoria in Denmark in 1904 and that health oriented cooperatives were introduced in India with the establishment of the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria society in 1919 by Dr. Chatterjee.⁴³

It may be pointed out that Sir Ronald Ross while working on malaria categorized the disease according to the areas in which it broke out, namely, malaria in the cities, malaria in the lands under cultivation and malaria in the villages.⁴⁴ Ross considered that the focus of the anti-malaria measures should be more on the villages since majority of the people lived in the villages. He appreciated the endeavours of the anti-malaria cooperative societies and emphasized on the participation of the villagers in such efforts in their respective villages. According to Ross, the role of the government in the malaria eradication programmes was confined to certain financial aids and arrangements, but the onus lay largely on the village populace to keep their villages clean and improve sanitary conditions to prevent breeding of malarial mosquitoes. He was hopeful that since the reason for the disease had been diagnosed and the remedial drug had also been identified, the involvement of every villager in the anti-malarial drives initiated by the said societies would contribute towards total eradication of the disease.⁴⁵ The anti-malaria societies sought to create an awareness in this regard among the villagers and Dr. C. A. Bentley, Director of Public Health, also took a note of the commitment of these cooperative societies under the guidance of Dr. G. C.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Jack Shaffer, *Historical Dictionary of the Cooperative Movement*, The Scarecrow Press, Maryland, USA, 1999, Pg.75

⁴⁴ Sir Ronald Ross's address at a conference of the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria Society held on 11th January, 1927 at Albert Hall, Calcutta – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & Gopal Chandra Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Sonar Bangla*, Magh, 1333(B.S.), January, 1927, Calcutta

⁴⁵ *ibid*

Chatterjee.⁴⁶ These cooperative practices based on self-help and mutual help worked towards participatory community development from below.

The voluntary anti-malaria work began with the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria Society, a non-official organization founded by Dr. G. C. Chatterjee, Assistant Bacteriologist to the Bengal Government. Chatterjee began his work around 1908 with occasional lantern lectures and demonstrations in Calcutta and its suburbs to make the common people aware about sanitation and cleanliness and to guide them to adopt preventive measures with local resources. To mobilize and to encourage the people for such work, Chatterjee with the help of Dr. Sarasi Lal Sarkar and Chittasukh Sanyal organized the Bengal Anti-Malaria League in 1912 at Calcutta. This was followed by the organization of two anti-malaria societies by Dr. Chatterjee at his native village, Sukchar and its neighbouring village, Panihati. Dr. Chatterjee's practical experience of working in the villages made him realize that cooperation of the local people was extremely necessary to make the anti-malaria programmes work out.⁴⁷ In 1918, the anti-malaria societies at Sukchar and Panihati were registered under the Cooperative Societies Act. On 8th April, 1919, the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria Society was founded with Kailash Chandra Bose as the President and was registered under the Cooperative Societies Act.⁴⁸ The object of the Central Society was to create a network of anti-malaria and public health societies in different parts of Bengal by combined efforts and resources of the people for preventing the outbreak of malaria and other local epidemic diseases.⁴⁹

The Royal Commission on Agriculture in India had put a few questions to Dr. Chatterjee on 3rd December, 1926, on the objectives and workability of the anti-

⁴⁶ Dr. Bentley's response to the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India in 1926 – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & Gopal Chandra Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Sonar Bangla*, Magh, 1333(B.S.), January, 1927, Calcutta

⁴⁷ Kabita Ray, *History of Public Health, Colonial Bengal, 1921-1947*, K. P. Bagchi & Co., Kolkata, 1998, Pg.114

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *ibid*

malaria societies. Dr. Chatterjee's answers not only revealed the purpose of the organizations, but also suggested the ways in which he sought to initiate the village populace to work for their respective communities. True to the nationalist spirit of the period, Chatterjee through his anti-malaria societies also sought to arouse the latent patriotism in every individual. He believed that such feeling or concern might not always be expressed for the country as a whole, but should be evident for one's native village to which the individual could relate more. He understood that such natural desire in every villager to work for the upliftment of his respective village was sometimes thwarted by certain administrative constraints. For example, the villagers could not prevent the excavation of trenches for laying railway lines and of unused canals which were potential breeding areas of mosquitoes. Chatterjee pointed out that it might have so happened that the affected villagers might have made an application to the District Magistrate to stall such work. The D. M. in turn might have referred the matter to the Engineer, who in turn might have sent it to an official of the Agricultural Department. The entire process thus became long drawn with no result to show for. Chatterjee's regret was that lack of autonomy in matters of rural public health affected the villagers, for example, he was aware that the civilians under whom he had to work were hardly conversant with the rural milieu and thus introduction of certain measures from above could hardly percolate among the people below. To overcome such difficulties, he felt that intermediary organizations like Rural Reconstruction Boards and their like might help the villagers to find out a solution to their immediate problems. Chatterjee understood that instead of following the British structure of autonomous government, it would be rather judicious to work out an indigenous way. And considering the sentiments and the affiliations of the common people of India, he realized that the preliminary work should begin from the villages. He tried to enable the villagers to overcome their inhibitions regarding the different health programmes and maintain public health in the rural belts through the joint venture of the local municipality, the rural health societies and the other

municipal bodies. In this way, Chatterjee tried to introduce the work from below, and the small efforts, he believed, would in course of time combine to take greater strides.⁵⁰

In response to the Commission's query whether he had been able to inculcate in the villagers any kind of scientific rationality, Chatterjee referred to his own village of Sukchar where cholera took a heavy toll every year. He pointed out that arrangement for supply of purified water in the village was almost able to wipe out the water-borne disease which made the villagers develop a trust in the experiments of the health society. The societies at Sukchar and Panihati, as mentioned earlier, were registered under the Cooperative Societies Act, followed the Cooperative Rules and the bye-laws of the respective societies were sent to the Registrar. But it was rather categorically mentioned by Dr. Chatterjee that these cooperative societies and the ones that followed sought to have an independent identity irrespective of its official ties with the Department of Cooperation.⁵¹ The category of anti-malaria cooperative societies inspired by Dr. Chatterjee was an exemplary joint venture of non-official and official initiatives. And what is more important to note is that these anti-malaria societies not only sought to eradicate malaria, but also to prevent the outbreak of all the common diseases which often took the form of epidemics in rural Bengal and thereby initiate the villagers to work for their respective communities.

In his conversation with the Royal Commission, Dr. Chatterjee mentioned that the oldest societies which were working for about a decade were the most advanced and they had undertaken greater responsibilities, like arranging for supply of purified water. If more funds could be arranged for, they would be able to introduce improved and better farming methods and would subsequently be able

⁵⁰ Summary of conversation between Dr. G.C. Chatterjee and Royal Commission on Agriculture in India on 3rd December, 1926 – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Falgun, 1333-B.S), February, 1927, , Calcutta

⁵¹ *ibid*

to establish the Home Crofters' Association.⁵² The issue of funds brought forth the question of collection of capital for the anti-malaria societies and Dr. Chatterjee pointed out that the capital was collected in form of shares from the members. The societies initially began with paltry sums, but the contributions increased when they showed signs of success.⁵³ This indicated that when the villagers themselves witnessed the process and the progress of the movement, they developed a trust in it and thus did not hesitate to become members of the societies as shareholders. The Royal Commission further learnt from Dr. Chatterjee that the financial assistance that every village society received from the respective District Board or the Union Boards depended on the collection it made. Thus the funding from external organizations varied from society to society.⁵⁴ This gave an incentive to the village societies to put in their earnest effort in raising funds from the members and the village populace in this way were initiated into working for their respective societies. A number of anti-malaria societies in the villages of Bengal had worked in that way for the past few years. A few such instances from the periodical *Sonar Bangla* edited by Gopal Chandra Chatterjee and Bipin Chandra Pal are cited below.

The village of Debanandapur under Sadar Police Station in the district of Hooghly was so severely affected by malaria during the monsoon months of 1923 that no villager was spared from its repeated attacks. The grim situation induced the volunteers of the local village society to put in their combined effort for the first time to eradicate malaria. This culminated in the foundation of an independent wing for malaria eradication of the said society sometime in January, 1924. It is learnt that thirteen members of the society specially contributed for the new department and the volunteers utilized this fund in clearing jungles, cleaning ponds and disinfecting stagnant water with kerosene on a regular basis. These

⁵² Summary of conversation between Dr. G.C. Chatterjee and Royal Commission on Agriculture in India on 3rd December, 1926 – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Chaitra, 1333-B.S), March, 1927, Calcutta

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ *ibid*

preventive measures saved about two third of the villagers from malaria in the following year. These practical methods of working in cooperation developed confidence among the members and the volunteers in the cooperative system. On 20th May, 1925, the anti-malaria department of the village society made an application through the Secretary of G. C. Chatterjee's Central Anti-Malaria Society to the Registrar of Cooperative Societies for registration. It may be noted that the formal work of the Debanandapur Anti-Malaria and General Health Cooperative Society Limited commenced on 1st June, 1925. The society not only worked to prevent breeding of mosquitoes, it also arranged for supply of purified drinking water, cleared and improved the drainage system of the village, supervised intake of quinine by the malaria patients and nursed the ailing patients whenever required. The resources of the society being limited, the major works for sanitation and drainage as part of the anti-malaria drive were funded by external agencies, like the local union board and Central Anti-Malaria Society under the initiative of Dr. G. C. Chatterjee. The Secretary of the Debanandapur Society, Dwijendranath Dutta was particularly grateful to Dr. Chatterjee for the interest free loan that he arranged for digging deep tube wells in the village. The society also took initiative to set up a charitable kala-azar centre to arrange for the treatment of the growing number of kala-azar patients in the locality. Arrangements were made for chicken pox vaccination and the sudden outbreak of cholera in a certain area of the village could also be dealt with the help of the rather expensive cholera injection supplied by the Central Society. The Secretary of the society realized that without the help of the village health cooperative of which the anti-malaria society was a part, adequate measures could not have been taken to prevent the said diseases from taking a violent form. The role of the local volunteers and the members of the Boy Scouts in undertaking the mammoth task was also acknowledged by the Secretary. It was being realized that it would be difficult for the society with a small membership of only thirty and a lean monthly income of Rs. 13/-, to do justice to the work of malaria prevention in an isolated and an extensive village like Debanandapur. An earnest

appeal was thus made to all villagers, irrespective of their caste, creed, religion etc., to join the society as members with a monthly contribution of 4 *annas* and actively participate in the different reconstruction programmes to rejuvenate their ailing village. It may be noted that there was a nationalist fervor in such calls whereby an attempt was made to sensitise the villagers and initiate them into different projects of rural development. It was expected that the villagers from below would spontaneously respond and work in mutual cooperation for development of their village and the village community. The Debanandapur Anti-Malaria and General Health Cooperative Society in its programme included measures to arrest unhealthy conditions, to resolve problems regarding water scarcity, to dig new ponds and reclaim the old ones, to clear the jungles, to set up panchayats and to establish village cooperative banks to enable the villagers avail loans at nominal rates of interest.⁵⁵ Such activities were thought to contribute towards welfare of the village community.

Similar initiatives were taken by a number of primary health and anti-malaria societies which apart from addressing the malaria and other health related issues, worked for the general well being of the concerned village community. Dr. G. C. Chatterjee reported to the Royal Commission on Agriculture that more than thousand such societies had been formed of which about three hundred had been registered.⁵⁶ It is important to note that Dr. Chatterjee's emphasis was more on the ideological aspects of cooperation than on its legal aspects. He admitted before the Royal Commission that his objective was also to improve the mental health of both the villagers and the local institutions through the health cooperatives as he was aware that the other kinds of cooperative societies, especially the credit societies would not be able to work in that direction.⁵⁷ These were instances of his concrete efforts to create an awareness regarding

⁵⁵Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Agrahayan,1333-B.S), November, 1926, , Calcutta

⁵⁶Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Falgun,1333-B.S), February, 1927, , Calcutta

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, (Baishakh,1334-B.S), April, 1927

public health and the benefits of cooperative practices among the villagers from below. However, the path ahead was not easy.

Initiatives of certain primary health cooperatives to implement Dr. Chatterjee's ideas faced opposition from different quarters. For example, when the Marghurali-Fingagachhi Anti-Malaria Society under Bargachhia Police Station in the district of Howrah started its initial work with 20 members and a share capital of Rs. 15 collected from monthly subscriptions, the villagers perhaps under the instructions of the local leaders expressed their reservations for the malaria drugs like quinine and cinchona that were being distributed by the said society. But the dedication of the volunteers, the deputed Health Officer and the medical practitioner of the District Board who attended the patients twice a week, made the villagers develop confidence in the treatment offered by the society. Those villagers who availed of the medical facilities from the said society were made to clean the drains of their respective residential localities and a plan was made for cleaning the other drains from whatever fund the society had.⁵⁸ In this way the villagers were involved in the activities of the society which gradually made them realize their importance. But several other hurdles affected the smooth functioning of the societies.

Financial constraints often impeded the prospects of the health cooperatives. Formal registration of the societies under the Cooperative Societies Act made them eligible for grants from the District and the Union Boards which made them financially stable to a certain extent. Otherwise it became difficult for every society to initiate its work with its own limited resources. For example, the anti-malaria and public health cooperative society of the remote village of Khandakhosh in the district of Burdwan within a year of its establishment in 1925, found it extremely difficult to maintain with its meagre resources, proper cleanliness in the rather extensive village with about 250 ponds and stagnant pools which needed to be cleaned at least twice or thrice a year to prevent the

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, (Kartik, 1333-B.S), November, 1926

dense growth of water hyacinth and water wort. The members of the society realized that without a well organized sewerage system, it would be difficult to make the village disease free. Since the resources were inadequate for such a massive task, an application was made to the District Magistrate of Burdwan in January, 1926 to make requisite arrangement for digging a 2 ½ mile canal for water drainage to the south of the village. Though an initial investigation was made by the Departments of Public Health and of Agriculture and a survey was also conducted by the Irrigation Department, there was no further communication from the government till the end of the year. The members of the society hoped that the government would take adequate measures to arrange for proper drainage and thereby save the dying village. The Secretary of the society, Arun Chandra Sinha, stated in the report of the society that the poor villagers, in spite of their best efforts, ultimately failed to arrange for proper drainage of water because it was beyond their means to bear the expenses of excavating the said canal without any financial aid from the government.⁵⁹ Even in these abortive attempts could be traced the villagers' involvement and commitment to work for village upliftment. Instances of such efforts towards community development by the villagers themselves could also be found in other villages. But they remained dissociated from each other and often the societies of the contiguous villages did not mutually cooperate and collaborate which would otherwise have been more effective.

Lack of steady financial support was indeed a grave problem. The imperial government had certain reservations regarding giving endless funds to the fledgling societies. It was apprehended that many societies might not be able to optimally utilize their initial grants thereby aggravating their financial debility further and also that the societies which hoped to survive solely on external funds would collapse when funds would stop flowing in. Such past experiences made the government amend its earlier regulation whereby it was decided

⁵⁹*Ibid*, (Poush, 1333-B.S), December, 1926

around 1925-26 that every society would receive from the government or the District Board thrice the amount collected by the concerned society in cash or kind. The new method of funding was supposed to be an incentive for the societies which were working well and might inspire more new societies to be formed.⁶⁰ Dr. Chatterjee, however, located certain ambiguities in these rather stringent regulations. He was aware that the imperial government was perhaps reluctant to shoulder the responsibility of malaria eradication and wanted the villagers to work for it through self-help and with the help of the union boards wherever and whenever necessary. The government preferred to give the required financial aid to the union boards which were to be redistributed among the eligible health cooperatives under them and intended to keep a vigil on the activities of both the union boards and the societies. Dr. Chatterjee pointed out that the government did not precisely state how the funds were to be disbursed by the union boards to the respective societies under them. It was nor clarified whether the societies under those union boards which did not avail of financial aid from the government, were entitled to any grant from the government. In fact, Dr. Chatterjee felt that the amended rules and regulations to a certain extent had been a deterrent to the interests and initiatives of the anti-malaria societies working at the primary level.⁶¹

Dr. Chatterjee also located certain ambiguities in the status of the union boards. He pointed out that the basic objective of malaria eradication of both the anti-malaria societies and the union boards were almost similar and that both aimed to inculcate among the villagers the principle of self-sufficiency. But, according to him, the problem lay in the fact that though the members of the union boards were private individuals, the said bodies were largely influenced by the government officials, especially in their election procedure, and were generally considered as government institutions. The union boards, in his opinion, were

⁶⁰ 'Palli Samitir Prati', Gopal Chandra Chattopadhyay in *ibid*

⁶¹ *ibid*

much too preoccupied with keeping a strict vigil on the societies under them rather than making themselves conversant with or taking a keen interest in public health and the related issues. He felt that such narrow official orientation of the union boards needed to be tuned more towards the non-official domain⁶² which would perhaps widen their perspective of the health cooperative movement. It also needs to be noted that since the stimulus for the formation of the union boards came essentially from the government, there was a palpable lack of spontaneity among the members about eradicating malaria. They were also not quite eager to shoulder and share the responsibility for other related tasks for the welfare and development of the village community. The limited vision of the union boards failed to grasp the spirit of the anti-malaria societies.

It was evident from Dr. Chatterjee's conversation with the Royal Commission that he was trying to identify the other impediments as well. When asked on the precise relationship between these primary societies and the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria Society founded by him, he said that in spite of the best attempt always made to maintain a cordial relationship with all such societies, justice could be done to only those which were located in the neighbouring districts of Calcutta. He further pointed out that there was no intermediary society between the apex society and the primary societies to bridge the gaps and differences.⁶³ This implied that the problems of the primary societies in the remote areas often remained unheard and unaddressed, but there was no relaxation in their legal bindings. This might have partly throttled the spontaneity of the villagers who felt alienated in the web of legal intricacies. This perhaps explains Dr. Chatterjee's contention that the villagers gradually felt more affiliated to the health department and to the cluster of local institutions, like the District Boards, Union

⁶² Summary of conversation between Dr. G.C. Chatterjee and Royal Commission on Agriculture in India on 3rd December, 1926 – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Chaitra, 1333-B.S), March, 1927, , Calcutta

⁶³ *ibid*

Boards and the Municipalities, than to the Department of Cooperation.⁶⁴ In his opinion, the financial over-dependence of the primary societies on the local bodies made the former almost subservient to the dictates of the latter thus making the concepts of self-sufficiency and mutual responsibility a distant dream for the villagers. In fact, Dr. Chatterjee realized that the entire process appeared to be a vicious circle, but at the same time it was not possible to cater to the health problems at the micro level through independent cooperative efforts alone.⁶⁵ A dichotomy between the ideology and the experiments of cooperation surfaced which perhaps took a toll on the spread of the health cooperative movement and also the community development that it sought to bring about.

Lack of clear distribution of the other responsibilities between the primary health societies and the local official institutions, to which the former were affiliated, further complicated the total state of affairs. And the essence of cooperation often lost its significance in the strain of these pulls and pressures. Dr. Chatterjee had also pointed out to the Royal Commission that the government-nominated representatives in the local institutions, who formed one third of the members, were often not the right persons as they did not have any basic idea about public health. They thus failed to coordinate with the rest two third members who were elected by the local residents and were more aware about the immediate problems of public health. The government had turned a deaf ear to Chatterjee's appeal to nominate those who would take a due interest in the same.⁶⁶ In this way a number of difficulties cropped up which ailed the health societies. This portrayed nothing but the lack of sensibility of the imperial government about the indigenous people and their exclusive indigenous problems. Though Dr. Chatterjee acknowledged that the Public Health Department had lent help in all possible ways, the Department of Cooperation did not give the

⁶⁴ibid

⁶⁵ibid

⁶⁶ Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Baishakh,1334-B.S), April, 1927, Calcutta

required support to the health cooperatives as it had done to the cooperative credit societies, for example, the money that the credit societies received for propagation of the movement was not received by the anti-malaria societies. When he had placed the matter before the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, the latter considered the health cooperatives to be independent as they were under the Central Cooperative Anti-Malaria Society which had its own Board of Directors and which collected its own subscriptions to help the primary societies when required. The RCS therefore did not want to interfere with the independent functioning of the Central Society and those societies under it. This also created an abyss between the Department of Cooperation and the health societies, even though many of them were registered under the Cooperative Societies Act. No definite effort was made on the part of the imperial government to resolve these differences and ambiguities and these posed a practical problem in the daily working of the health societies. The instances cited below indicate the gravity of the problem.

The village of Bali located to the north of Jagatballavpur in the district of Howrah had a population of only 151 in 1924, of whom 73 were Hindus and 78 were Muslims. It was reported that malaria took a heavy toll on the village population reducing it to almost one third of what it was twenty five years back. Though the exact reasons for the outbreak of malaria could not be located, the supposed reason was the drying up of the channel of Kana-Damodar which traversed through the region. The channel might have dried partly due to natural reasons and partly due to ill maintenance by the local people. The different officials of the district tried to uphold before the villagers the advantages of establishing an anti-malaria cooperative society in the village. Considering the limited extent and population of the villages of the region, the then Sub-Divisional Magistrate proposed to set up a common society for the villages of Telihati, Bali, Ruppur and Jhingra. But the inhabitants of the latter two villages did not agree to work in collaboration with the other villages and set up their independent society. Subsequently, the village of Telihati also set up its own society in November,

1924. It was then thought that an anti-malaria society would not quite work out in Bali, a sparsely populated village dwelt by a few farmer families. However, the initiative for setting up an independent society in the village came from a member of the local Union Board, Ananta Nath Chakraborti, the members of the Telihati Society and the dedication of a local resident, Nani Lal Ghoshal. This finally led to the foundation of the society in Bali. The number of members was only 16 and they were all Hindus. The villagers from the Muslim community neither showed any interest in the activities of the society, nor tried to understand the benefits of such efforts. The financial resources of the society were extremely meager with a monthly subscription of Rs. 8/- and a grant of Rs. 10/- from the Howrah District Board after its registration in February, 1926. The work ahead was thus very arduous. However, what is important to note is that the spirit of the members remained undaunted and during the first year of their work, they were able to clear half of the forested areas of the village twice and they cleaned 17 out of the 26 stagnant pools of the village before the onset of the monsoons and kerosene was sprinkled in them to prevent breeding of mosquitoes. But nothing could be done to reclaim the southern part of the village mainly due to financial constraints and non-cooperation by Muslim community. The society also took the initiative to set up a deep tube well and to dig a 2000 feet long drain. The work for another such drain remained incomplete as objection was raised by a local resident of the neighbouring Jhingra village who claimed the passage of the drain to be his property. The ensuing dispute and litigation brought the matter under the jurisdiction of the concerned union boards and the district board. The delayed progress of work was likely to affect the general health of the people as the main drainage passage of the village was being affected. It was learnt from the report of the society that it was even ready to offer a fair price for the controversial land to the alleged claimant, but funds posed to be a grave problem. It thus had no other alternative, but to depend on the district and the union boards for resolving the matter. Things

were more at stake for the society when the district board reduced the grant from Rs. 10/- to Rs. 5/-, though the reasons for it could not be ascertained.⁶⁷

The Secretary of the society, Nani Lal Ghoshal stated in the report of the society that in the face of such adversities, all the small societies collected money from their respective members in an independent way and thereby bore the responsibility of the pending work. The Secretary felt that these small efforts with the paltry sum that could be collected often went unnoticed, but he could not but appreciate the undaunted spirit and commitment of the villagers. According to him, working for the development of one's village community was perhaps the best way to bring about the development of the nation and thus it was everyone's duty to carefully nurture these indigenous endeavours. He acknowledged that the establishment of the innumerable anti-malaria cooperatives in Bengal over the past few years would never have been possible without the support from the district boards and so its sudden withdrawal of support would adversely affect many such societies. The Secretary resented the decision of the government taken on 27th September, 1926 vide Circular 227T – PH of the Health Department, that the grant for the anti-malaria societies were henceforth to be disbursed through the union boards. In his opinion, all union boards did not cooperate with the anti-malaria societies in the same way and thus preferred such disbursement of funds through the district boards. This tussle between the union and the district boards and the divided trust of the people between the two categories of local institutions limited the scope of cooperation and thereby the promise of the movement.

However, C. A. Bentley, Director of Public Health, as the President of the first Annual General Meeting of the Bali Anti-Malaria Cooperative Society, appreciated the hard work, sincerity and the drive of the villagers which improved the condition of Kana-Damodar and pointed out the importance of the health movement which was initiated during a period of transition for the better.

⁶⁷ ibid

Bentley hoped that the efforts, though small, would combine to bring about the desirable changes and that the support of the Muslim villagers could be enlisted in due course. He encouraged the villagers to establish anti-malaria societies in every village along both the banks of the Kana Damodar and to convince the union boards to assist them in the reclamation of Kana Damodar.⁶⁸

The objective situation was often far from what was theoretically conceived and the unending shift of responsibilities between the district and the union boards hampered the progress of the work. In fact, what was called for was proper cooperation and coordination at different levels, for example, among the villagers themselves, between the society concerned and its apex body and the other government or semi-government institutions to which the society was affiliated, between the local institutions and so on. In this complex matrix a proper balance could not be always maintained which naturally told upon the ideology of cooperation. But the urge to salvage and regenerate the village was the most among the villagers, who had to daily struggle with disease and pestilence. Dr. Chatterjee hoped that patience, tolerance and mutual cooperation of the villagers with the help of the volunteers might reap benefits in the long run and take the societies towards self-sufficiency.⁶⁹

V. WATER SUPPLY AND IRRIGATION COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES

The innumerable rivers, streams and canals that crisscross Bengal have been a life-line for the inhabitants of the adjoining villages. Thus a natural sentiment developed among the villagers for the respective water channel that traversed through the region. Every such channel had a character of its own and the experiences of the respective villagers centering around such streams or rivers

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ Summary of conversation between Dr. G.C. Chatterjee and Royal Commission on Agriculture in India on 3rd December, 1926 – Reported in Bipin Chandra Pal & G.C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Sonar Bangla, Nabaparjay*, (Jyaishtya, 1334-B.S), May, 1927, Calcutta

were also myriad. Since the rivers and streams formed an integral part of their life, two things naturally followed. First, to optimally utilize the water resources and make the best effort to preserve them so that they remain a boon to the neighbourhood. And secondly, to adopt preventive measures to keep a leash on the menacing aspects of the rivers.

The colonial period saw the adoption of cooperative principles for irrigation, which was considered one of the important means to bring about agricultural development. And thus followed the attempts to organize irrigation and water supply societies on a cooperative basis. The possibilities of these societies in solving the pressing problem of agricultural deterioration in the districts of western Bengal were considered to be great by the government. The Registrar of Cooperative Societies roughly estimated that in many areas, production could be increased by 100% by means of adequate irrigation.⁷⁰ When other forms of cooperation, apart from credit, engaged the attention of the Department of Cooperation, the cooperative irrigation movement made much headway. Even the Royal Commission on Agriculture referred to the irrigation societies in Bengal as one of the few examples of successful organization of non-credit societies.⁷¹ The Khelar Irrigation Society in Midnapore, initiated in 1916, was the pioneer society of its kind in the province of Bengal.

While working out the irrigation societies, the imperial government identified certain ways to facilitate water supply and irrigation in Bengal. First, conservation of either rain water or river water for irrigation purpose. Secondly, undertaking measures for protecting tracts of land from floods, particularly by controlling discharge of large volumes of water flowing down rivers. The measures in this category included embankments for flood protection and construction of reservoirs in the higher reaches of rivers which discharge large volumes of water, after

⁷⁰ Resolution No. 46IT – AI, Agriculture & Industries Dept., Cooperative, Govt. Of Bengal, Darjeeling, 16th May, 1925

⁷¹ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1927-28, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1929

comparatively short courses. Such reservoirs not only controlled floods but also ensured a constant supply of water to irrigation projects. Thirdly, construction of embankments in the tracts of Sunderbans where land was still below high water level to prevent ingress of salt water which was unfavourable to the growth of crops. And lastly, drainage schemes for the improvement of agriculture and sanitary condition of stagnated areas for flushing these areas with silt laden water.⁷²

This categorization of the different methods of irrigation made the imperial government realize that cooperative irrigation societies could only take up very small schemes covering limited areas where there was some cohesion among the members.⁷³ It was neither feasible nor possible for the irrigation societies at the primary level to undertake works like embankments for flood protection and construction of reservoirs in the higher reaches of rivers. It had also not been possible to organize any cooperative society for the construction of embankments to prevent ingress of salt water in the Sunderban tracts of Khulna and the 24 Parganas. However, after due consideration by the Department of Cooperation, one small-scale irrigation society was formed in the Kaliganj Police Station of Khulna district during 1925-26. Further organization of such societies depended on the experience which might be gained from its working. No cooperative society was formed to undertake drainage schemes for the improvement of agriculture and sanitary condition of stagnated areas. The cooperative irrigation societies which made considerable progress till the mid 1920s primarily dealt with small irrigation works, like conservation of water, whether rain water or water flowing down streams, in the districts of Burdwan Division where such works were most needed.⁷⁴

⁷²Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1925-26, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1927

⁷³ ibid

⁷⁴ ibid

The Annual Reports on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal during the 1920s and 1930s record a number of irrigation societies especially in the districts of Bankura and Birbhum in Burdwan Division where minor irrigation works were most needed. The official reports state that the annual rainfall in the Burdwan Division, particularly in the districts of Bankura and Birbhum, though comparatively small, was sufficient for the needs of the division. But the distribution was extremely variable and superfluity of rains during the early monsoon was often followed by severe drought. The physical configuration of the area to a certain extent facilitated the construction of *bunds* and embankments for the storage of water for irrigation purposes. A number of small streams traverse through the region, which not only gather water during their course, but are also fed by sub-soil streams. Scattered remnants of half-dried irrigation tanks, channels and embankments have been found in different districts of Burdwan Division suggesting that the importance of making proper provision for irrigation was fully recognized in the past. It is surmised that frequent change of ownership of lands might have adversely affected their maintenance and they subsequently fell into a state of total disrepair. It was always a common practice to put *kutchra* earthen dams across perennial streams to conserve water and by means of irrigation channels to lead the water to the fields. However, these earthen dams had the disadvantage of being washed away every year and thus the people looked for something more stable and permanent. This motivated the common people to excavate and re-excavate tanks, erect irrigation embankments for the storage of water flowing down from the higher levels and to construct masonry weirs across small perennial streams to conserve the water for irrigation.⁷⁵

The imperial government realized that such works were within the domain of private effort. The imperial officials recognised that the best chance of success lay in grouping persons interested in irrigation work into cooperative societies

⁷⁵ibid

because the control of the cooperative societies through the Registrar would be easier than the control of a non-descript collection of persons by a local body. They considered the cooperative society as a corporate body with legal rights. And thus it was supposed that there was less likelihood of civil suits within the body as the signature of all the members to the bye-laws of the society bound them to accept the decision of the general meeting.⁷⁶ These societies were believed to have stood out by themselves as an example of self-help, and that the government was ready to extend all kind of support for their development.⁷⁷ It is evident from the different official records that the irrigation societies of the time dealt with different schemes, for example, stream or weir schemes, tank schemes, which apart from providing irrigational facilities catered to other requirements as well. Mention may be made of the tank schemes which indirectly served the purpose of anti-malarial societies. The government reports noted that some of the irrigation societies were also successful in preventing the loss of crops.⁷⁸ These societies were considered to be the most successful till about 1924 and it was hoped that with the increased departmental staff for the irrigation societies sanctioned by the Legislative Council, the development of cooperative irrigation movement would be substantially accelerated.⁷⁹

At the same time, the common people looked to the government or to the affluent zamindars for requisite arrangement for irrigation and supply of water. There had been certain isolated cases, both in Bankura and Birbhum, where the concerned District Boards on behalf of the government gave monetary aid for construction of dams during the time of drought. A few benevolent zamindars had also taken similar initiatives, for example, a permanent dam was constructed by the *Maharajadhiraj* of Burdwan on Harinmuri canal, the *Raja Bahadur* of

⁷⁶Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1925-26, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1927

⁷⁷Resolution – No. 1375 Coop, Agriculture & Industries Dept., Govt. of Bengal, Calcutta, 18th March, 1924

⁷⁸Resolution – No. 1375 Coop, Agriculture & Industries Dept., Govt. of Bengal, Calcutta, 18th March, 1924

⁷⁹Resolution No. 461T – AI, Agriculture & Industries Dept., Cooperative, Govt. Of Bengal, Darjeeling, 16th May, 1925

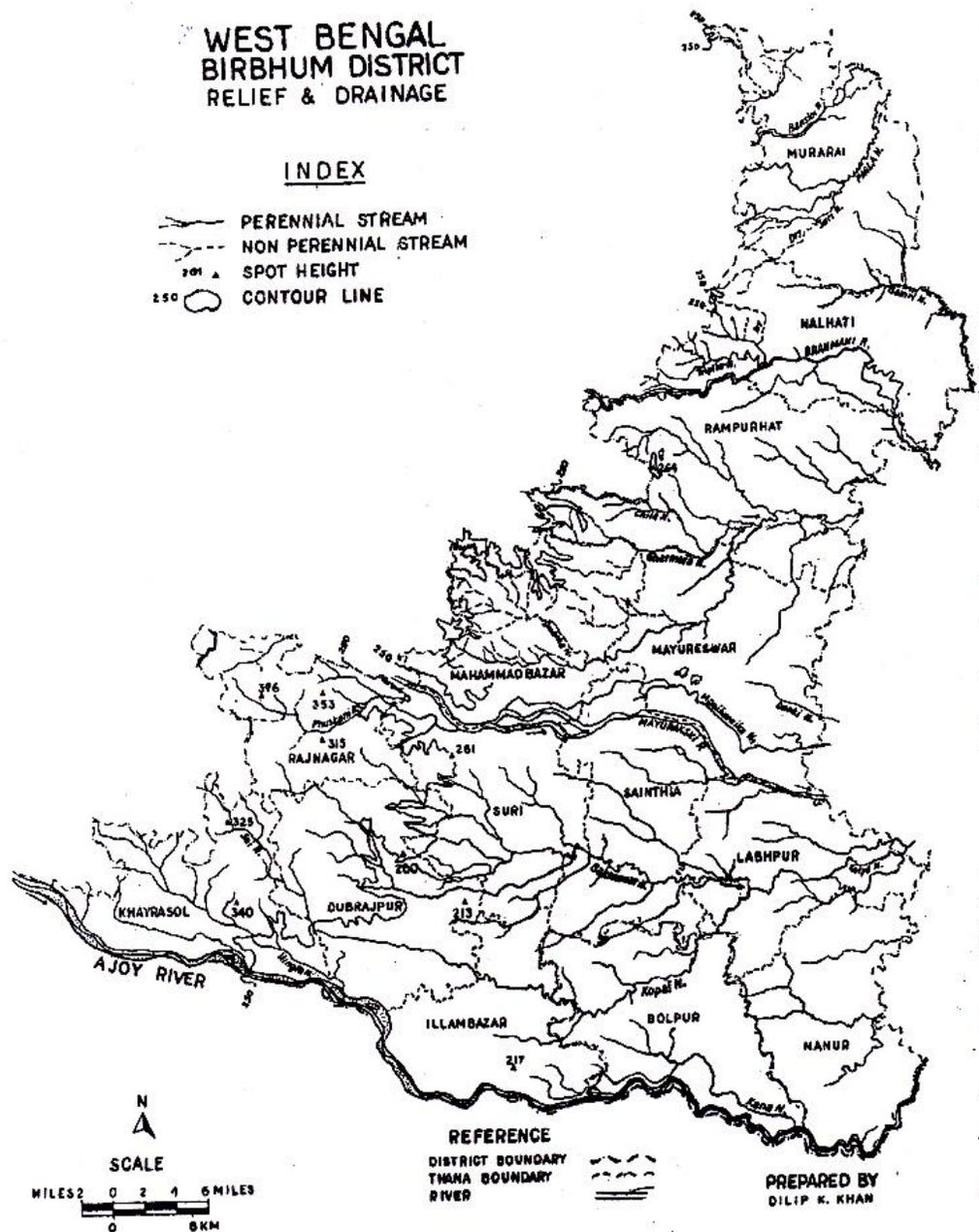
Simplipal constructed a dam in his own estate and a certain affluent individual from Raipur constructed a dam over Banskhal.

The cooperators of the day, however, increasingly felt the necessity to bring about a change in the orientation of the common people and encourage them to become self-sufficient and united to solve the problem of water scarcity through mutual cooperation. According to them, the task was not mammoth and reclamation of older ponds, construction of dams on dried river channels by working together would solve half the problem.⁸⁰ Through such cooperative endeavours, an attempt would be made to awaken the latent nationalism of the rural mass and thereby engage them in the ongoing programme of rural reconstruction. These self-learning and practical efforts in this way were expected to inculcate the feelings of sharing, empathy and fellow feeling among the members of the rural community and thus make them conscious of the welfare of their respective village community as well as of their nation. The earliest cooperative endeavour of water management by the common people can be traced to 1919 by the contemporary cooperators who were engaged in similar work in the districts of Bengal.⁸¹

⁸⁰ 'Jol O Samabay' in Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Sraban, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

⁸¹ 'Bankura Jal Sarbaraha Samiti', Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay, in Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Poush, 1330(B.S), Calcutta

VA. EXPERIMENTS IN BIRBHUM



In 1919 a district wide movement to reclaim the old water bodies of Birbhum was initiated by the Agricultural Association of Birbhum being assisted by its branch societies. The then District Magistrate/Collector of Birbhum, Gurusaday Dutt, played a significant role in arousing popular interest and enthusiasm about water supply and irrigation on a cooperative basis. He sought to contextualize the

problem of water scarcity against the general weaknesses which ailed the village communities of Bengal during that time, for example, fatalistic approach towards life and lack of integrity among the villagers themselves. These lacunae, according to him, had made the villagers easily susceptible to the dictates of the colonial power.

The distress was further aggravated by famine, poverty, disease, pestilence etc. In many villages, the zest for life was almost sapped which made the villagers indifferent and negligent towards their own well being as well as the well being of their village community. Dutt considered the resultant inertia of the village populace to be responsible for the lack of maintenance of the water bodies of the districts, especially of Birbhum and Bankura. He took the onus to make the villagers from below aware about the benefits of cooperative methods in solving the problems of water scarcity and allied matters. To reach out to the villagers, often illiterate and ignorant, Dutt sought to communicate with them in the language with which they were more comfortable and conversant. Thus instead of introducing the concept of water supply and irrigation cooperative societies in official connotations, he composed simple poems in Bengali through which he sought to disseminate the same. One such composition was -

পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সেচন সমস্যা

পূর্বপুরুষগণ করিয়া যতন

সেচনের সুবিধান করিল রচন।।

সারি সারি পুকুর আর বাঁধ দিল গড়ি

জলাভাবে শস্য যেন নাহি যায় মরি।।

পুকুরেতে ছেড়ে দিলো মৎস্য অসীম

করিত বিনাশ তারা মশকের ডিম।।

যে সব পুকুর আর বাঁধ গেল মজে

ম্যালেরিয়া তাই আজ মশা হতে গজে।।

জমিদার ও প্রজা হয়ে জ্ঞান হতে ব্রষ্ট
শুকনো পুকুর বাঁধ চষে করে নষ্ট।।
বাড়ে জমি মরে জল তাই অনাবৃষ্টি
হলেই দেশেতে হয় হাহাকার সৃষ্টি।।
যে দেশেতে হতো আগে মাঠভরা শস্য
সে দেশের অজন্মার এই ক্রীড়া রহস্য।।
সমিতি গড়িয়া খোঁড় পুকুর আর বাঁধ
থাকে না তাহাতে যেন মশকের ফাঁদ।।
খাল ডোবা যাতে নাই মাছের নিবাস
মশক জন্মায়ে করে মানুষের নাশ।।
শস্য ফলাও মাঠে পুকুরেতে মৎস্য
নাশে জলে ঘাস পানা - বংশ বীভৎস।।
বর্ষার জল ধরে বাঁধ কর সৃষ্টি
মরে না ফসল যেন হয়ে অনাবৃষ্টি।।
প্রতি গ্রামে গড়ে তুলি কর্মীর সংঘ
ব্যাদিহীন কর পুনঃ সোনার এ বঙ্গ।।

(গ্রামের ডাক, চতুর্থ বর্ষ, পঞ্চম সংখ্যা, ফাল্গুন চৈত্র 1337 , সম্পাদনা : রাজেন্দ্রনাথ সোম, হাওড়া)

(THE PROBLEM OF IRRIGATION IN WEST BENGAL)

(Our forefathers/ancestors had laid down the rules for irrigation with great care. A series of ponds had been dug and embankments had been constructed to prevent the crops from being destroyed due to scarcity of water. Plenty of fish were reared in the ponds to kill the mosquito larvae. But in course of time, malaria began to spread from mosquitoes that bred in the stagnant ponds and embankments. Some ignorant zamindars and their subjects tilled the bed of the dry ponds and embankments and thereby destroyed them. Thus water dried up,

area of parched land extended resulting in drought which caused havoc in the country. Such is the mystery behind the barren lands which were once fertile. Let us now dig such ponds and construct embankments to prevent breeding of mosquitoes. Water bodies with no fish are where the killer mosquitoes thrive. Grow more crops and rear more fish to curb the alarming growth and extent of marshes. Erect dams and store rain water to save the crops in times of drought. Form workers' societies in every village to revive our healthy golden Bengal.)

(Source – *Gramer Daak*, Falgun-Chaitra, 1337 (B.S), edited by Rajendranath Shome, Howrah)

Herein lay Dutt's credit of trying to popularize the ideas by thinking beyond his official parameters and this humane touch to the movement might have widely appealed to the villagers, as the general trend of the movement suggests. Dutt also considered it his pride and privilege to be a part of the movement.⁸² He was followed by J.R. Blackwood as the District magistrate who had given an equal support to the movement. The non-official leadership of the movement was also successful and significant. Mention may be made of Rai Abinash Chandra Banarji Bahadur who as the Secretary of the Agricultural Association of Birbhum and the then Chairman of Bengal Cooperative Organisation Society, organized the village societies to reclaim a number of stagnated and silted water bodies of the district at a cost of about Rs. 2 lakhs. As a recognition to Gurusaday Dutt's guidance and cooperation, Banarji named the first such society after Dutt.⁸³

As learnt from the Annual Reports, there was a striking development of the activity of the irrigation societies during 1922-23. Of the 114 societies recorded during the year, 66 were in Bankura, 45 in Birbhum, 1 in Midnapore, 1 in Burdwan and 1 in the Rajbari subdivision of Faridpur district. However, such a

⁸² An essay on 'Bangiya Pallisamajer Jiban Maran Samasya' read by Gurusaday Dutt at a meeting organized by Bengal Organisation Society at Overtoon Hall on 19th July, 1922- Translated version of the essay in Bengali published in Tarak Chandra Ray & Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Bhadra-Ashvin, 1329 (B.S), Calcutta,

⁸³ *ibid*

rapid expansion was possible primarily due to the appointment of an Agricultural Engineer, A. G. Chatterjee and under the orders of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Chatterjee was assisted by one inspector who was an overseer in the Irrigation Department.⁸⁴ The 45 irrigation societies in Birbhum were all organized during the year mentioned. The majority of the schemes in the area were tank schemes. Of the larger schemes, mention may be made of the Kundola project, which was to irrigate about 500 bighas of land with water from river Mayurakshi by placing a sluice gate on the bank of the river. The bulk cost of the project was borne by a local zamindar. Another similar project was the Jamrud Hingh Society, while the Salchapra Society proposed to construct a *pucca* cross dam over a canal (*kandar*) to irrigate about 1000 bighas of land.⁸⁵ These larger irrigation projects required a lot of technical know-how, funds and government support and thus could not be undertaken by the common people. In Birbhum, scarcity of labour posed to be a serious problem for such major projects. Another major problem centred around the distribution of administrative and financial powers between the Department of Cooperation and that of Irrigation. The arrangement of the Cooperative Department having the administrative control, and the Irrigation Department retaining the financial control, was considered not much satisfactory by the government itself.⁸⁶ However, the necessity was felt to develop closer relations and greater collaboration between the two departments, for example, the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies of Birbhum suggested that in order to facilitate the initiation and execution of stream schemes through cooperative organizations, the departmental staff should include an officer with engineering qualifications from the Irrigation Department.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1922-23, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1924

⁸⁵ *ibid*

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1925-26, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1927

In Birbhum, where the movement was supposed to have made a "steady progress", the number of societies rose from 168 with a membership of 4745 and a total irrigable area of 20,060 bighas during 1925-26 to 194 with a membership of 5630 and a total irrigable area of 23,170 bighas in the following year.⁸⁸ The existence of a number of streamlets, mostly perennial, in Birbhum gave the district the advantage and the opportunity to profitably utilize the available water for irrigation. During the year 1926-27, six stream schemes were taken up in Birbhum. But most of them either had a difficult start or had to be abandoned and the concerned society dissolved. For example, the Salachapra society could not begin its work due to certain political factions, the details of which could not be traced, while the Mashina Ramkany scheme did not work out and the society had to be cancelled. But there were positive stories too with the successful completion of the projects like, Kundola, Dadpur-Dowki, Bahira-Mriganayana and Jamrudh.⁸⁹ The weirs constructed by the first three societies across their respective streams proved useful in the following years, especially when the crops of the members of the said societies could be protected during 1927-28, when crops failed over most parts of the district.⁹⁰ The construction of the weir across Jamrud-Hinglow could be completed, but the people could not get any benefit from it. The reasons, however, could not be definitely identified.

The Dadpur-Dowki scheme is considered to be a successful venture. The society was established in 1924 with cooperation and self-help as its prime objectives. However, the roots of this scheme can be traced thirty years back when the villagers of 30 villages around the river Dowki, for example, Dadpur, Konchna, Sejna, Bhagabatipur to name a few, covering an area of 3000 bighas, were unable to grow crops almost every year primarily due to scarcity of water. The vast extent of land thus remained fallow aggravating the distress of the villagers.

⁸⁸ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1926-27, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1928

⁸⁹ *ibid*

⁹⁰ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1927-28, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1929

Pained by this misery, a certain Vaishnavite named Gopinath Das, took the initiative to build a temporary (*kutchha*) dam over the river Dowki. This enabled the villagers to irrigate and thus cultivate their lands. It is learnt from the Annual Report of the society that the villagers maintained the dam, but had to reconstruct it from time to time. The difficulties faced by them made them realize the necessity of a permanent construction across the river. It took nearly two years to give a final shape to their preliminary ideas. The residents of those 30 villages combined to form the Dadpur-Dowki Water Supply Cooperative Society.⁹¹ The motivation for this cooperative endeavour came from the concerned villagers whose practical experiences might have helped them to understand the importance of cooperation in matters of water supply and irrigation. To abide by certain norms and also perhaps to make the society eligible for grants and loans, it was officially registered as a cooperative society.

The society began with a capital of Rs. 10,000/- and 2500 bighas of land covering 28 villages were initially irrigated. The capital and the irrigated area increased in course of time. What is important to note is that residents of 22-24 more adjoining villages who were still not a part of the society were also among the beneficiaries. These non-members were thus neither shareholders nor did have to pay any tax for availing of the benefits of irrigation. And the essence of cooperation was evident when there was no resentment among the members for co-sharing the benefits with certain needy non-member neighbours. This cooperative society was considered to have genuinely worked for the welfare of the poor. This society first constructed a permanent dam over the Dowki river and thereby was able to channelize the inundated water through its branches and canals into the cultivable lands. Such arrangements saved the crops in conditions of drought and were also able to make those plots of land arable which had no water supply till then. The cost incurred was also minimal

⁹¹Annual Report of Dadpur-Dowki Jol Sarbaraha Samabay Samiti' – Published in Phanindranath Basu & Santosh Bihari Basu (ed.), *Bhumilakshmi (Nabaparjyay)*, Poush, 1331(B.S), Shantiniketan

amounting to less than Rs. 2 for every acre of land irrigated. Thereafter the society undertook bigger schemes. A six mile long canal was dug which connected the Mayurakshi river with the Dowki which enabled the excess water of the Mayurakshi to be diverted to the Dowki. This facilitated the supply of irrigational water to 28 more villages covering an area of 18,000 bighas and the cost incurred was Rs.1. The society was able to salvage 44 neighbouring villages and 28 villages of Kandi region from dearth of water and drought.⁹²

The neighbouring villages had also set up their subsidiary water supply cooperative societies which were linked to the Dowki scheme. For example, a few villages under Mayureshwar Police Station had set up such a society. Each member of this society too annually contributed Rs. 1/- for every bigha of land and at the end of four years with a total subscription of Rs. 4/-, every member could be benefited from the dam over the Dowki. The total cost of construction was Rs. 10,000/- which was difficult to be borne even by the wealthier subjects. Thus this exemplary venture of cooperation could successfully extend the benefits of water supply and irrigation to even the poor villagers at an affordable minimal cost. A certain amount of loan was initially taken from Rampurhat Central Cooperative Bank which was to be subsequently repaid from the subscriptions collected.⁹³

The true spirit of cooperation of the members of the society was seen when they spontaneously lent their wage-free labour to dig three miles of the six mile canal connecting Mayurakshi and Dowki. It is also learnt that Irrigation Department had made an estimate of Rs. 25,000/- for the construction of the Ghordaha sluice gate. The spend-thrift approach of the members was evident when they were able to construct it at a cost below Rs. 10,000/-.⁹⁴ Though the

⁹² Banglay Samabay-Dadpur-Dowki Samabay Jol Sarbaraha Samiti', in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Baishakh, 1345(B.S), , Calcutta

⁹³ Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Jyaishtya, 1331(B.S), Calcutta

⁹⁴ Banglay Samabay-Dadpur-Dowki Samabay Jol Sarbaraha Samiti', in Manmatha Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Baishakh, 1345(B.S), Calcutta

precise methods resorted to for curtailing the cost are not known, the venture itself seems to have become exemplary for all cooperative workers.

Mention may also be made of the Bahira-Mrignayana Water Supply Cooperative Society in the village of Bahira in Birbhum. The dam constructed under the initiative of the society was formally inaugurated on 13th February, 1925. The Secretary of the society in his speech on the occasion of the inauguration said that the villagers of Bahira Nijuri and three/four other villages had constructed an earthen dam over the canal Nolia and had been annually irrigating about 425 bighas of land for several generations. But they had to encounter a number of problems, for example, the dam being washed out by the early floods (during the month of *Ashar*) even before the crops could be cultivated, adversely affected the level of production, or when the farmers failed to avail of the last stretch of irrigational water due to the demolition of the dam by the late monsoon floods (in the months of *Ashwin-Kartik*) which destroyed the harvest. Moreover, difficulties like the recurrent expenditure for maintaining the temporary dam which needed to be rebuilt almost every year and lack of unity among the villagers themselves, adversely affected the construction of the dam in proper time.⁹⁵ The practical difficulties had perhaps made the villagers realize that they needed to cooperate and work in unison, in spite of their differences, for the well being of the village community as a whole. Construction of a concrete dam after three years' effort enabled the villagers to overcome the prevalent problems. The cost incurred was Rs. 2600/- of which Rs. 1000/- was donated by Abinash Chandra Bandyopadhyay, the former Chairman of Birbhum District Board. To commemorate his benevolence, the society was named after his wife Mriganayani.⁹⁶ Such kind gestures encouraged the villagers to volunteer and participate in the cooperative endeavours of the village.

⁹⁵ 'Jolabhab O Samabay', in Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Sravan, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

⁹⁶ *ibid*

The utility of the irrigation cooperative societies was easily understood by the people of the neighbourhood and each successful society aroused their eagerness to provide themselves with irrigational facilities on a cooperative basis. Even the poor farmers of those parts of the district were rather easily able to improve their condition where such cooperative practices were adopted.⁹⁷ But a few difficulties stood in the way of organizing such societies. For example, the plots of land to be subsequently benefited were often owned by people who were not local residents and thus it was often difficult to get their consent and support for formation of the cooperative societies. Even among those who lived or were available, there were a few who were reluctant to volunteer and a few others who could only be convinced after a lot of persuasion.⁹⁸ Despite the best efforts to promote harmony and cooperation among the villagers through these irrigational schemes, the process of desilting the water bodies created the scope for dissension among the various socio-economic classes. For example, it was apprehended that those engaged in cultivation of fish in a certain water body would resist the diversion of water for irrigation by the farmers. But at the same time it was presumed that since scarcity of water was the root of all problem, clearing the deposited silt and mud from the tanks would increase the quantity of water which would thereby reduce the scope for such disputes. In the context of factionalism being rampant in Birbhum, this kind of cooperative movement was hoped to regenerate the village community from narrow divisiveness and thereby bring about its moral enrichment.⁹⁹ But those who were actively involved in the cooperative experiments of the district realized that though there had been some positive response in some villages, it was always not easy to inculcate the ideologies of cooperation and self-sufficiency among the illiterate farmers steeped in poverty. They thus earnestly appealed to the privileged section of the society

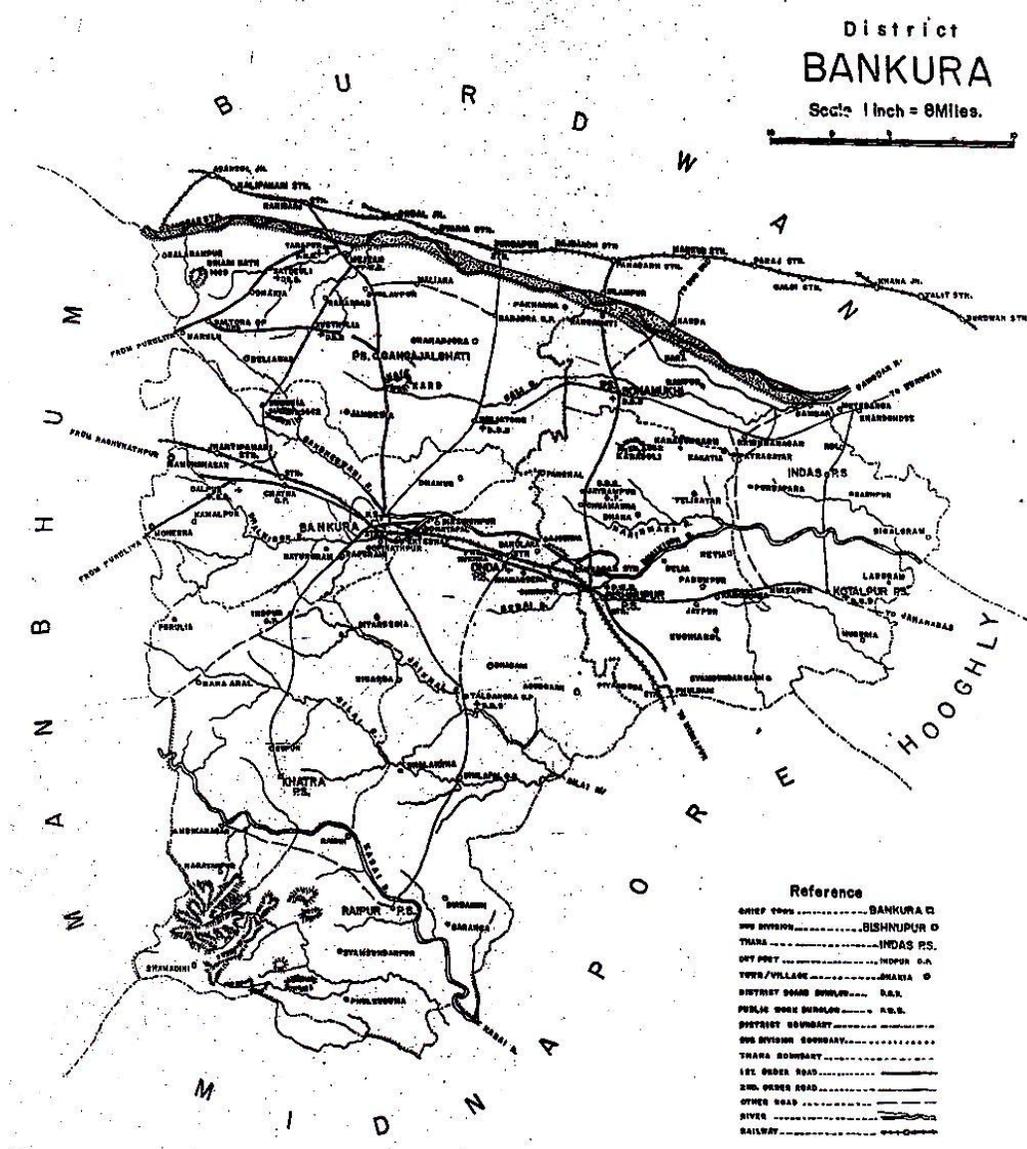
⁹⁷ 'Birbhume Jol Sechan', Sukumar Chattopadhyay, in Phanindra Nath Basu, Santosh Bihari Basu (ed.), *Bhumilakshmi*, Poush, 1331(B.S), , Shantiniketan

⁹⁸ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1926-27, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1928

⁹⁹ 'Birbhume Jol Sechan', Sukumar Chattopadhyay, in Phanindra Nath Basu, Santosh Bihari Basu (ed.), *Bhumilakshmi*, Poush, 1331(B.S), Shantiniketan

to join the movement to enable the diffusion and percolation of the ideologies across different social strata.¹⁰⁰

V.B. EXPERIMENTS IN BANKURA



Major water channels and drainage system in Bankura

It was around 1920 that the Department of Cooperation took the initiative to set up the first water supply cooperative society in Bankura. Two similar societies

¹⁰⁰ ibid

came up in the same year. Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay, the Inspector of Cooperative Societies, was entrusted with their execution. Three more such societies were organized in the following year and there were further plans to set up two to three societies of the kind. A Central Cooperative Bank was established in Bishnupur which facilitated the cooperative societies to avail of loans. However, till then there was no significant effort to organize irrigation societies. The common people were still ignorant about the benefits of irrigation on a cooperative basis.¹⁰¹ It was rather difficult to convince and organize them to form societies.

Gurusaday Dutt as the District Magistrate of Bankura since 1921 played a key role in reaching out to the villagers with the ideas and benefits of water supply and irrigation through cooperation. Lack of rainfall and consequent failure of crops every year had aggravated the economic crises of the district. Dutt identified four primary reasons for Bankura's poverty and subsequent degeneration, namely, disputes and litigations among the villagers, lack of unity among them, erroneous methods of cultivation, drought and famine. In his opinion, the colonial intervention had pulled the villagers into an unequal competition, which he felt, could be countered by resorting to cooperative principles and practices in all kinds of economic activities. According to him, organization of cooperative societies in the villages would help the villagers to eliminate the predominance of the intermediaries and their atrocities. He expected that such measures might enable the villagers to overcome their internal differences, unite and mutually cooperate. This in turn would help the villagers to reclaim the water bodies themselves at a reasonable cost without depending on the government or the zamindars. Dutt felt that the water supply and irrigation cooperative societies could be a means to revitalize the waning

¹⁰¹ An essay on 'Bangiya Pallisamajer Jiban Maran Samasya' read by Gurusaday Dutt at a meeting organized by Bengal Organisation Society at Overtoon Hall on 19th July, 1922- Translated version of the essay in Bengali published in Tarak Chandra Ray & Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Bhadra-Ashvin, 1329, Calcutta

cooperative spirit and thereby regenerate the village community.¹⁰² In this way an attempt was made to create among the villagers an awareness for the development of the village community, for example, exhibitions were held from time to time. In February, 1922, in a general meeting summoned on the occasion of an exhibition on health and prosperity held in Bankura, a District Development Association was established. This organization worked in collaboration with the District Agricultural and Welfare Association to work out solutions for some immediate problems, like, water scarcity and drought. Moreover, they tried to improve agriculture and cottage industries of the villages through cooperative efforts, make the villagers acquainted with such practices and thereby bring about an overall development of the village.¹⁰³ It might have been expected that this induced development would in course of time make the villagers spontaneously adopt similar development measures.

The then Commissioner of Burdwan Division, G. N. Gupta, took every care to propagate the success of the water supply and irrigational cooperative experiments in Birbhum to the other sub-divisions. Inspired by these endeavours, the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Bishnupur, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, being supported and assisted by Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay, the Inspector of Cooperative Societies, organized a few agricultural societies in Bankura on a similar structure. These societies sought to reclaim the water bodies, dams and embankments by collecting subscriptions from the subjects in proportion to the land they owned. It was evident from the published agenda of work of these societies that the subject-members tried to solve the problem of water scarcity through their own cooperative efforts without taking any aid from the zamindars.¹⁰⁴ But perhaps they had no reservation in taking requisite help and guidance from the more approachable officials with whom they had a day to day interaction regarding formation of cooperative societies. The joint efforts of the

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ *ibid*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

Department of Cooperation, District Agricultural and Welfare Association and the local officials led to the formation and registration of 69 Water Supply Cooperative Societies in the district by 1923, of which 51 were in Sadar Subdivision and 18 in Bishnupur Subdivision. More such societies were in the course of being registered. In these societies one share was equivalent to one bigha of land and the average cost of each share was Rs. 6/- which could be paid over an average period of 5 years thus supposedly not creating much burden on the poor villagers and cultivators. These early societies of Bankura irrigated 18,480 bighas of land and enlisted about 2072 members. However, chronic poverty of the villagers could not make the societies financially self-sufficient. Thus to exclusively fund these societies the Bankura Central Cooperative Irrigation and Financing Bank was established sometime in 1922.¹⁰⁵

The water supply and irrigational societies in Bankura became joint endeavours of both the officials and non-officials. Among the non-officials, constant and encouraging support also came from the elites of the society, for example, the zamindars, the lawyers and other professionals. The dedication and the hard work of the volunteer workers indeed inspired the rural populace and gradually a motivation could be traced among the people for the formation of such societies. The water supply and irrigational societies in Bankura were broadly of two categories – the aim of one category was to construct new dams, embankments or to dig new ponds, whereas the other category sought to reclaim the older water bodies. The cost for all this varied between Rs. 5000/- to Rs. 40,000/- or more, and the area irrigated was between 500 to 5000 or more bighas of land. The larger societies were formed with representatives from 500 to 600 families covering 20 to 30 villages. Among the few such larger societies established in Bankura, the Shalbandh Water Supply Society deserves mention.

¹⁰⁵ 'Bankura Jol Sarbaraha Samiti', Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay, in Tarak Nath Maitra (ed.), *Bhandar*, Poush, 1330, Calcutta

In the sub-division of Bishnupur is located the village of Radhanagar and along its north-west frontier flows the canal, *Harinmurir Jod*. It was believed that the canal was dug by the indigo cultivators to facilitate cultivation. After their departure, the villagers used the canal water. It was estimated that water from this canal could be supplied to about 8000 bighas of reclaimed land. Construction of dams and digging of ponds became a necessity in the dry years when the rainfall was not adequate for cultivation. The people of the region unfortunately experienced insufficient rainfall during the early years of the 1920s which made them realize the importance of alternative means of water supply by building a dam across the Harinmurir Jod and digging canals to supply water to land covering nearly 27 *maujas*. Earlier attempts had been made to erect earthen dams with the soil from the neighbouring fallow lands. The time of construction of these dams depended on the condition of the sky and the estimated time for the arrival of the monsoons. The villagers' participation was noted in their sending labourers on a daily basis to the site of work. The number of labourers sent was either in proportion to the bighas of land to be irrigated or in proportion to the number of times the fields were to be ploughed.¹⁰⁶ However, the mode of payment to these labourers is not known. It may be presumed that the comparatively wealthy villagers might have hired labourers to be sent for the construction of the dams etc., while the poorer villagers might have lent their own physical labour.

The government reports often appreciated the concerted efforts of the poor and illiterate cultivators in the success of the irrigational schemes and the societies, particularly as there was no help from outside, except that of the organizing staff provided by the Department of Cooperation.¹⁰⁷ But certain questions remain unanswered from the statements of the reports, for example, did the cultivators

¹⁰⁶'Shalbandh', in Shashanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bankuralakshmi*, Pratham Barsha, Pratham o Dwitiyo Sankhya, 1329, Bankura

¹⁰⁷ Annual Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, For the Year 1927-28, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1929

only put in their physical labour or could they persuade the local zamindar or any other local magnate to undertake such schemes for the wellbeing of the village community or whether these projects were the joint initiatives of both the cultivators and the rural elite. The government reports do not reflect the voice of the people from below and thus it becomes difficult to determine the true nature of their participation. In fact, the available source materials help us in no way to probe into the realm of those from the margins to understand their role in such development or reconstruction schemes of the village community.

Coming back to the process of construction of temporary earthen dams, we find that after completion of the construction, it generally took 10 – 12 days for the water to reach the fields through the canals. But the risk factor of being washed out always remained. In fact, the temporary structure of Shalbandh happened to be washed out within 10 – 15 days of its construction, even before the water could reach the plots to be irrigated. Thus it needed to be reconstructed which meant further expenditure and indeed uncertainty. There were some practical difficulties too, for example, adequate water could not accumulate as the earthen structures could not be made much high. Those villagers of Radhanagar whose land might have received water at the first spell often disagreed to participate in the reconstruction of the dam after being washed out. Lack of cohesion and mutual understanding among the villagers were major impediments in rebuilding and maintaining the dams. Sympathising with the growing miseries of the villagers, a few well wishers of the village had appealed to the government for the construction of a permanent structure. Nothing worked out primarily due to lack of funds and unwillingness of the government to spend a rather large sum for a few villages. The intervention of the Inspector of Cooperative Societies, Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay, at that point came as a boon to the villagers.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸'Shalbandh', in Shashanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bankuralakshmi*, Pratham Barsha, Pratham o Dwitiyo Sankhya, 1329, Bankura

Gangopadhyay sought to find a solution to the impending problems with the formation of a cooperative society by collecting the required capital by selling shares to the members. He presented his plan to the then Sub-divisional Magistrate, Prafulla Kumar Ghosh, with the hope that the fund raised would assist in the construction of a permanent concrete dam. Ghosh's consent and whole hearted support made Gangopadhyay approach the concerned villagers and explain to them the details of his plan of action. He, on behalf of the government officials, assured all possible assistance and advice to the villagers. Some enthusiastic villagers took a keen interest in the scheme, but deep rooted illiteracy, ignorance and inhibitions of the other villagers prevented them from taking the initiative. Every effort was taken to make the villagers understand the way to arrange for the funds. The District Engineer estimated that the construction of a permanent dam over the canal would be able to irrigate about 8000 bighas of land. But from practical experience it was found that the irrigable water could not reach beyond 5000 bighas of land. Thus to optimally utilize the available water, the cooperative society needed to be prudently organized. Considering every half bigha of land as one share, the total area of 5000 bighas was equivalent to 10,000 shares. The cost of each share being fixed at Rs. 5, the price of 10,000 shares was worth Rs. 50,000/-. Since it was difficult to collect the entire sum of Rs. 50,000/- at one go, it was decided to distribute it over five years, that is, Rs. 1/- for every share was to be paid annually for five years. This was supposed to create not much burden on the villagers and thus their anxiety for the same could be partially lessened. In its first attempt a sum of Rs. 7400/- could be collected by the **Shalbandh Society** and the number of members was recorded to be 560. The members convened a meeting where 13 members from among themselves were elected to form the Board of Directors. The Sub-divisional Magistrate of Bishnupur and the Sub-Manager of the Burdwan estate were appointed as ex-officio members of the Board and were assigned the posts of Manager and Deputy manager of the society respectively. According to the prevalent rules and regulations of the cooperative societies, the registration of a

society by the Registrar was a mere formality after it had been actually formed and an application for registration had been made to the Registrar of Cooperative Societies. And if the society in its initial meeting was able to collect 1/3rd of its shared capital, then the government, in certain special cases, undertook to disburse the rest of the sum without interest for a brief period and subsequently with interest. The Shalbandh Society had collected Rs. 7400/- and the deficit was made up by the contributions from certain affluent individuals of the village, for example, Bibhuti Bhusan Mukhopadhyay, a resident of Joykrishnapur contributed Rs. 2000/- and Satish Chandra Chattopadhyay made a deposit of Rs. 1000/-. The Executive Engineer and other allied officials from Calcutta visited the site to draw out the blueprint/plan of the dam and the cost estimated was around Rs. 40,000/-. In such circumstances, the directors of the society appealed to the government for the rest of the money as loan. The government agreed to give Rs. 20,000/- as interest free loan for one year and with interest for the rest of the term. More incentive came from the Minister, Syed Nawab Ali Chaudhuri Khan Bahadur, who on the occasion of laying the foundations of Shalbandh, assured to give Rs. 10,000/- on similar conditions as stated earlier.¹⁰⁹

The principal amount thus collected enabled the directors to proceed with the work of the dam. In a general meeting it was decided to give the contract for construction of the dam to Bijay Gopal Dutta, a contractor from Bankura. It was hoped that construction of the dam would make the irrigational water available to the cultivators and thereby help them to reap a better harvest. It was thus expected to be easy for them to pay the second instalment of their share capital. Therefore, by paying Rs. 2/- for every bigha of land (since cost of every share, i.e. half a bigha was Rs. 1/-), the villagers were assured a regular supply of water for irrigation. In this way the required sum could be collected by the villagers themselves without depending much either on the government or on any other authority. It is to be borne in mind that the conditional financial support came

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

from the government or the minister only after a certain amount was collected from the villagers. The credited amount had to be repaid from the members' subscriptions as parts of their remaining instalments of the share capital. Of course, the waiving of interest for a certain period were measures to ensure popular participation. The Shalbandh Society was considered to be an ideal example of self-sufficiency and a joint venture of the non-officials (like Bibhuti Bhusan Mukhopadhyay, Satish Chandra Chattopadhyay, Hemchandra Biswas, Sachhidananda Sengupta and Kaviraj Bhabatosh Bhattacharya), officials (like the former District Magistrate, S. N. Ray, the then District Magistrate, Gurusaday Dutt who arranged for easy credit facilities from the government and the Cooperative Inspector, Suresh Chandra Gangopadhyay) and of course the local villagers.¹¹⁰ The apparent stories of success, however, do not reveal the plight of the landless farmers and other menial labourers and whether the benefits of this project percolated down to them in any way.

Among other such societies in Bankura, though not as large as Shalbandh, mention may also be made of the **Gurusaday Water Supply Cooperative Society** located in the isolated and remote village of Panchmura under Taldangra Police Station in Sadar Sub-division of Bankura. Sukumar Chatterjee, the Sub-divisional Officer, introduced the cooperative movement in Panchmura. The ideas of unity and cooperation were not new to the villagers, but they realized that self seeking interests of certain individuals sapped their essence. The formation of water supply or irrigation cooperative in the village included people from different religious denominations, economic backgrounds and with different kinds of values and virtues. It needs to be noted this particular society not only sought to bring together the Hindus and the Muslims, or the rich and the poor, but also the honest and the dishonest.¹¹¹ These experiments thus, on one hand tried to ameliorate the differences between the various categories of the people, and, on

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ 'Gurusaday Jol Sarbaraha Samiti Limited' in Shashanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bankuralakshmi*, Pratham Barsha, Tritiyo o Chaturtha Sankhya, 1329(B.S), Bankura

the other hand, made a humble attempt perhaps to bring the delinquents into the mainstream. These small efforts to bring about the moral development of the village community, apart from extending material benefits, often went unnoticed. Such endeavours, however limited be their scope and reach, tried to capture the true spirit of cooperation. Membership of this society varied from time to time, covering 3 to 4 villages to even 25-30 villages. This cooperative society was considered to be a miniscule representation of the village community. In 1922, the number of members was 165 and the water supply provided by the society covered an area of 2000 bighas. The total cost incurred was Rs. 16,600/-. One bigha of land was considered to be one share and its price was fixed at Rs. 10/- which was to be collected at an annual rate of Rs. 2/- for 5 years. Considering the expenses, though the society was hesitant to undertake construction of dam, it was aware that such measure would ultimately facilitate irrigation over extensive areas. And in its ideological aspect, the experiment at Panchmura was hoped to encourage the society and thereby show a way out from the complexities and pettiness to which it often fell a victim.¹¹²

Certain other officials too being inspired by Gurusaday Dutt, took every care to arrest the erosion of the basic human values and to uphold before the ignorant villagers the basic tenets of cooperation in an informal way. For example, the Sub-divisional Officer of Bishnupur, Krishna Gopal Ghosh, considered the cooperative principles to be the panacea for the reclamation of the moribund **Jamuna Bandh** or reservoir. This reservoir, in the past, supplied water to nearly 2000 bighas of land, thus providing for the livelihood of many. Bishnupur, being reputed for its quality of jute fabric, depended a lot on the water from Jamuna which was supposed to give a bright hue to the jute fibre. Moreover, the reservoir was the main source of drinking water for Bishnupur. Unfortunately its ill-maintenance over the years, irregular fragmentation of the land through which the canals from Jamuna fed the fields and several other allied factors led to its

¹¹² ibid

degeneration. Considering the bleak chances of getting financial support from different quarters, like the royal family of Bishnupur, the government, the District Board, or individuals like Bipin Khandigar who had taken a temporary lease of the reservoir, the SDO in a general meeting appealed to the villagers of Atpara and Egaropara to take the responsibility of reclaiming and subsequently maintaining the Jamuna *Bandh* through cooperative methods. By citing the example of cultivation by the system of *gaanta*, with which the villagers were acquainted, he tried to familiarize them with the cooperative ideas and practices, which indeed were nothing new. He hoped that if the disputes between the two villages could be resolved through mutual cooperation, then the task of reclamation would not be that arduous. Ghosh at the same time realized that it was indeed difficult to implement what could be conceptualised rather easily. To begin the work, a sum of about Rs. 20,000/- needed to be collected from the members of the society to be formed. He assured the villagers that the government would only assist them in their endeavour with least interference and that organization of a cooperative society would both ease the process of collection as well as their work of reclamation. He emphasized on the communal ownership of the reservoir and thereby urged the villagers to purchase the lease from Bipin Khandigar with the subscribed sum. He further advised them that the financial and other responsibilities for the maintenance of the said reservoir could be handed over to the local municipality by the cooperative society if the members so wished. In that case the condition would be that in lieu of the funds handed over by the society, the municipality would supply unlimited amount of water to the member-villagers without levying any kind of tax on them. Ghosh felt that on similar conditions the society could also give the lease for fisheries to the concerned municipality and the profit thus accrued could be utilized by the society for development of the village.¹¹³ These efforts and

¹¹³Speech delivered by the Chairperson (SDO, Bishnupur) at a General Meeting of Atpara & Egaropara for the reclamation of Jamuna Bandh in Bishnupur – Reported in Tarak Chandra Ray (ed.), *Bhandar*, Pancham Bhag, Pratham Sankhya, Sravan, 1329(B.S), Calcutta

suggestions sought to foster among the villagers the spirit of cooperation and enable them to work for the village community. But the collaboration with the municipality, as suggested by him, was likely to give these ventures a more official connotation, something from which the villagers wished to stay away. Gaps between theory and practice remained and the pulse of popular response could not always be traced. Thus in spite of the best efforts of the officials to introduce the movement to the people in an informal way, justice could not always be done. However, the overlap between the official and non-official domains of cooperation created the possibility of cooperative experiments on a communitarian basis. The water supply and irrigation cooperative societies formed an area of such experiments.

Convergence of official and non-official initiatives was seen in the organization of the **Gangajalghati and Borjoray Water Supply Cooperative Society**. It was a joint venture of a few persons. A certain life member of the District Association, Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay, gave the required financial support, and the necessary official guidance came from the local cooperative officials, like the Supervisor, the Circle Officer and the Cooperative Inspector, Suresh Gangopadhyay, to form about 18-19 cooperative societies in the villages under Gangajalghati-Borjoray Police Station in Sadar Sub-division. These societies helped to reclaim the silted reservoirs and the dedication of both the officials and the non-officials was evident in the short span in which they could work out the scheme. Among the primary societies formed 11 had been registered and the rest were to be registered shortly.¹¹⁴

There were also a few, perhaps very few instances which showed the spontaneous popular response. The reservoir of Boropukur in the village of Badra near Bankura town was not cleaned for long and thus became a stagnant pond. It is learnt from the letter of a local villager, Nakul Chandra Ray, that several

¹¹⁴ 'Gangajalghati-Borjoray Jol Samabay Samiti' in Shasanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bankuralakshmi*, Baishakh, 1330(B.S), , Bankura

attempts by the villagers to reclaim the pond had been abortive. This made them think of alternative means of reclamation. Around early 1328 (B.S), a few villagers including Nakul Ray became better acquainted with the ideas of cooperation at an exhibition on health and prosperity held in Bankura. This made them think afresh and after discussions with the other villagers, they all agreed to sell the fish from the pond and the trees around its bank. The money from the sale proceeds was the initial capital to begin with. A loan of Rs. 608/- was taken (the source, however, is not known) and with a total sum of Rs. 1032/- the restoration work started. Nakul Ray provided a detailed account of the expenses from which it is learnt that there was a certain income from selling the vegetables grown along the bank of the pond. The expenditure included the salary of a gardener and an instalment of the loan was also repaid. The total expenditure did not exceed the income suggesting a profit. What is really significant to note is that the villagers did not go into the official bindings of a cooperative society, but imbibed the essence of cooperation and worked in their own way without any kind of help from the government officials or any other specialist in this field.¹¹⁵ Such endeavours were expected to similarly motivate the other villagers of the neighbourhood.

Towards the closing years of the 1920s there was a general feeling to deofficialise the movement. However, that did not mean a complete termination of all ties with the government. It was gradually being felt that the movement would lose its relevance without active popular initiative and participation. Assistance could be taken from the government wherever and whenever required, but the dependence on the government needed to be reduced to reap the best results of cooperation.¹¹⁶ The different non-official experiments made attempts to give the movement a popular perspective and create field for participation in different regions and across different social cross sections. Unfortunately, the

¹¹⁵Shasanka Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bankuralakshmi*, Baishakh, 1330(B.S), Bankura

¹¹⁶ 'Banglaye Samabay Cheshta' in Naresh Chandra Sengupta (ed.), *Palli Swaraj*, Jyaishtya, 1326(B.S), June, 1929, , Calcutta

number of such spontaneous ventures were too few in the broader canvas of the cooperative movement.

VC. EXPERIMENTS IN OTHER PARTS OF BENGAL

Though water supply and irrigation societies were a special feature in the districts of Bankura and Birbhum, there was a gradual demand for the formation of similar societies in the districts of Howrah, Malda, Burdwan and Midnapore as the years passed by. In the district of Howrah, quite a few canal restoration cooperative societies came up under the initiative of the Howrah District Agricultural and Welfare Association. This organization, in order to improve rural health and agriculture, prepared a blueprint of the stagnant canals of the district and tried to motivate the village populace to form cooperative societies for restoration of these canals. The Department of Cooperation designated the Cooperative Inspector, Nibaran Chandra Chakrabarti to assist the district association in all possible ways. It is indeed significant to note that the villagers of quite a few areas grouped themselves to form cooperative societies. The canals and the ponds of these areas were surveyed for restoration by the surveyor appointed by the Agricultural and Welfare Association.¹¹⁷ A number of new canals were also excavated. Practical difficulties faced by the villages perhaps made them realize the importance of restoring the canals and stagnant pools through cooperative methods. Sometimes certain incentives provided by the local magnates encouraged the villagers to volunteer. For example, the landlord of Panchla, in the district of Howrah, waived off the payable revenue (*Khajna*) from the lands through which passed the canal to be dug. But the scenario was not the same everywhere.

The ideology of cooperation did not always motivate the villagers from below in the same way. Local factionalism and lack of mutual trust often did not offer a

¹¹⁷ 'Samabay Samiti Sangathaner Dwara Khaal Sanaskar' in Rajendranath Shome (ed.), *Gramer Daak*, Dwitiyo Barsha, Pratham Sankhya, Ashar-Sravan, 1335(B.S), Howrah

congenial environ for implementation of the cooperative ideas and principles. In fact, the problem to a large extent lay with the ignorant villagers. The restoration of the Naoda Canal in the district of Howrah is a case in point. The Naoda canal with its eight branch canals, located between the police stations of Bagnan and Shyampur, was once navigable facilitating trade and commerce of the adjoining villages. But the gradual drying up and shrinking of the channel debilitated the local trade thus impoverishing the villages which in turn adversely affected their health and general well-being. Though from time to time, a few individuals with the support of the Union and District Boards took the initiative to reclaim the main canal, the lack of maintenance of the branch canals led to its deterioration. The then Circle Officer, Nagendranath Das, on inspection of the silted canal advised the villagers to form a cooperative society for its complete restoration and maintenance. Things worked out in a successful way and Das lent all aid and support for the registration and subsequent development of the society. However, it is evident from the Secretary's report that the ignorant and the rather stubborn villagers were not much keen in imbibing the ideas of cooperation with which they were not quite familiar.¹¹⁸ The cooperative experiment in restoring the Naoda canal could hardly motivate them to take similar strides for the betterment of the village as a whole.

The attempt to improve the conditions of the village community through cooperative experiments largely depended on local factors. The permeation of the ideas also depended on the initiative of certain key persons committed to the cause. It is rather difficult to come to general conclusions from the cooperative experiments seeking to bring about community development.

¹¹⁸ 'Naoda Khaal Sanaskar', Rasiklal Das in Rajendranath Shome, *Gramer Daak*, Dwitiyo Barsha, Shashtha Sankhya, Baisakh-Jyaishtya, 1336(B.S), Howrah

VI. WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES

Women's cooperative initiatives, both official and non-official, cover a very wide range. In this section, some select cooperative experiments are being highlighted which might have helped the women in the rural areas and the suburbs to stand up against gender related discrimination and poverty. Tracing the roots of such endeavours, it may be pointed out that the anti-colonial struggle had made the women more aware about their status, rights and power which might have motivated them to organize their own associations.¹¹⁹ The first among such associations in Bengal was Swarnakumari Devi's *Sakhi Samiti* established in 1885. The primary aim of this organization was to bring about a good understanding among women and to educate widows and unmarried girls.¹²⁰ Though not spelt out, the underlying spirit of this samiti was mutual cooperation because without it a good understanding between the members could not be achieved. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a number of women's organizations which sought to encourage women's education in Bengal, for example, *Nari Siksha Samiti* founded by Abala Bose in 1919 and Bengal Women's Education League in 1928.

The concern for the women at the grass-root level was, however, first seen in Basanti Devi¹²¹ who gave priority to Gandhi's idea of reviving the village economy and cottage industries which would also restore to women some of their lost economic strength.¹²² Basanti Devi's sister-in-law and her close political associate, Urmila Devi set up the *Nari Karma Mandir* in 1921 to popularize spinning and weaving among women. She was assisted by Hemaprabha Majumdar to run the organization. Urmila Devi's failing health led to the closure of the organization

¹¹⁹'The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness', Bharati Ray, in Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History*, New Delhi, 1995

¹²⁰ Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, Rajshahi, 1995, Pp.95-96

¹²¹ Basanti Devi – (1880-1974) – Following her husband, Chittaranjan Das, she took part in Civil Disobedience Movement, Khilafat Movement and the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in 1920. She along with her sisters-in-law established the Nari Karma Mandir, a training centre for women activists

¹²²'The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness', Bharati Ray, in Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History*, New Delhi, 1995

and thereafter Hemprabha Majumdar organized the *Mahila Karmi Sansad* in 1922. This body had both political and social objectives. Apart from preaching nationalism, it gave vocational training to women and ran a home to give shelter to the destitute women. These organizations were not cooperative societies in official terms, but were indeed based on the basic ideology of cooperation, "Each for all and all for each". Similar spirit was seen in Ashalata Sen's *Gandaria Mahila Samiti* in Dacca which sought to spread the message of Gandhi to local women. The members of the Samiti carried *Khadi* on their shoulders from door to door and organized annual fairs to promote *swadeshi* goods.¹²³ She also established the *Shilpashram* or an Institute for Teaching Crafts in Dacca and built it up as a well-knit unit for encouraging self-employment among women. As is evident from the writings in contemporary periodicals like *Bangalakshmi*, there was no positive formulation of a demand for women's gainful employment in the public sphere till the late 1920s.¹²⁴ Most of the suggestions were about how could women earn a little money while working within the house.¹²⁵ To make such small beginnings even within home, empathy and cooperation of the other members of the family were very much required. The women members of a family could have mutually cooperated to form an informal organization enabling them to have an independent source of income. From the sources referred, we, however, do not have any reference of any such cooperative endeavour within the family.

Bharati Ray locates the importance of these early twentieth century women's organizations in enabling the women in taking up the reins of leadership, in addressing the topical issues and matters from the women's perspective and in making the women aware of their responsibility to regenerate the fellow members of their community. This comprehension, according to Ray, created a

¹²³ *ibid*

¹²⁴ *ibid* – Footnote-Pp.206-207

¹²⁵ 'Meyeder Parivartane Desher Parivartan' in Hemlata Devi (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Vol.5, No.12, Calcutta, 1929

bonding between women.¹²⁶ This bonding that Ray talks of was embedded the spirit of cooperation. These organizations were run on the basis of cooperative principle, especially those which were associated with welfare activities. But she points out that the basic limitation of these organizations was their urban middle class character and their inability to involve the vast majority of women living in rural Bengal. According to her, apart from a few stray experiments, the needs of the poor women, both rural and urban, remained largely unaddressed.¹²⁷

In the words of Geraldine Forbes, the women's organizations and associations helped the women to define their interests, propose solutions and take action accordingly. Though geographically limited, these organisations tried to bring the women together to discuss women's issues and their women leaders in a limited way tried to understand many of the problems shared by all women. But Forbes points out that these leaders did not share the same economic base as the women they claimed to represent. Thus she feels that their perception of the viability of certain options was limited to women like themselves. They set up girls' schools, shelters for widows and handicraft training centres to help women from their own class. Handicrafts, particularly sewing and embroidery, according to Forbes, enabled only some high-caste women to earn a living because they had access to a clientele, also had homes they could live in and space to work.¹²⁸ The rural poor remained marginalized and even if some of them favoured female education were not able to send their daughters to school.¹²⁹ Forbes finally observes that these organizations primarily served some of the unfortunate women of the higher castes and affluent sections, but also a few others.¹³⁰ She does not specify who formed the "few others". The subsequent

¹²⁶ 'The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness', Bharati Ray, in Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History*, New Delhi, 1995

¹²⁷ *ibid*

¹²⁸ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1998, Pp.70-72

¹²⁹ *ibid*

¹³⁰ *ibid*

part of the chapter would be an attempt to find out who constituted the “few others” and how were they benefited.

It may be noted that Geraldine Forbes in seeking the answer to who benefited from the women’s organizations (especially the national women’s organizations created after the First World War), considers that the maximum beneficiaries were the large number of middle-class women who gained experience in working with organizational structures. As the organizations centralized in course of time, many women felt dissatisfied and left to work with more marginal groups.¹³¹ Though there is no specification about these “marginal groups”, the following part of the chapter would also seek to focus on certain less known women’s organizations in the rural areas and in the suburbs, which, in spite of their limited scope, could help the women from the periphery to aspire for an independent socio-economic existence.

To begin with, a reference may be made to the women’s organisations in Tagore’s Sriniketan. Health remained the priority of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction and thus a maternity and child welfare centre was established under a qualified woman health visitor. This was considered to have enabled a systematic organization of welfare work among women in the adjoining villages. A whole-time lady teacher was also appointed for training the rural women in needle work, domestic economy and other allied matters.¹³² This was followed by organization of *mahila samitis* in Surul, Bandgora and Bandgora Bazar. Women workers of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction regularly visited these samitis and gave practical training in cutting, sewing and embroidery. The local rural women were also made aware about hygiene, maternity and child welfare. The women

¹³¹ *Ibid*, Pg.91

¹³² Bipasha Raha, *Living A Dream, Rabindranath Tagore and Rural Resusciation*, New Delhi, 2014, Pp.231-233

associated with these welfare activities were Nanibala Roy, Charubala Ghosh, Mrinmoyee Sarkar and Pratima Devi.¹³³

VIA. EXPERIMENTS INSPIRED BY SAROJ NALINI DUTT

Generally speaking, however, women being an integral part of the village community, did not feature much prominently in the cooperative experiments we have already discussed. Gurusaday Dutt upholding the cause of rural reconstruction felt that the palpable absence of women in the important affairs of the village, limited the scope of the rural development projects. He thus felt the necessity of educating and organizing the women to bring about development of the community in the true sense of the term. He felt that the conventional paths needed to be abandoned to adopt new ones.¹³⁴ The new way was explored by his wife Saroj Nalini Dutt who used to accompany him to the different districts of Bengal. She realized that lone efforts of men in bringing about development of women were not really effective. These efforts needed to be complemented by the initiatives taken by the women themselves. She said that women should come together, cooperate among themselves and also with men to overcome the major social impediments of superstition and narrowness. Saroj Nalini realized that as long as the women themselves were not motivated to the cause, it was difficult for the others to make them understand the importance of lifting the pall of ignorance. While working among the rural women she found that the older female generation in almost every family, the mother-in-law or the grandmother, posed to be a major hurdle which prevented the younger generation in the family from stepping out of their homes to participate in the various social welfare programmes envisaged by Saroj Nalini. She realized that to remove the age-old inhibitions and blocks, it was necessary to organize the women on a common platform. Thus she emphasized on the organization of women's associations or *mahila samitis* to arouse the latent power in women

¹³³ *ibid*

¹³⁴ 'Goraye Galad', Gurusaday Dutt in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

through the spread of education. In this way she sought to inculcate in the women self-confidence, self-reliance, self-restraint, discipline and tolerance and thereby empower them. What is important to note is that together with regular education, she also sought to promote vocational education, especially for the widows and the destitute women. Saroj Nalini realized that no improvement of the rural masses was possible without joint effort. This made her think in terms of a Central Mahila Samiti in Calcutta “to unite the whole womanhood of Bengal into a corporate life”¹³⁵ and organization of such a body became her mission.

Though Saroj Nalini had organized several Mahila Samitis in various parts of Bengal since 1913, she often found that after her departure from these places, the activities of most of these organization came to a halt due to lack of coordination and guidance. Thus she had been pondering with the idea of a Central Organisation for long, but the idea started taking a definite shape following her visit to England in 1921. Gurusaday Dutt recounts that while in London they paid a visit to office of the Village Clubs Association, in Iddesleigh House, Westminster where they met its Chief Organising Officer, J. N. Harris. On his advice, Saroj Nalini also went to the office of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes of England and Wales and talked with its office bearers like the General Secretary, the Chief Organiser and the Organising Secretary. It seemed to be a rewarding experience for her as she located striking similarities between these organizations and her Mahila Samitis in Bengal. The constitution and the activities of the National Federation not only impressed her, but also significantly motivated her to establish a similar central organization in Calcutta for coordinating and guiding the work of the rural mahila samitis in Bengal.¹³⁶ She categorically believed that there could be no real improvement in the country unless the women in the smaller towns and villages were educated and their ideas widened and that a central organization in Calcutta was required to

¹³⁵ Gurusaday Dutt, *A Woman in India, Being the Life of Saroj Nalini, Founder of Women’s Institute Movement in India*, 1941, First Indian Edition, 1998, Calcutta, Chapter XII – ‘A Central Organisation’

¹³⁶ *ibid*

help the smaller organizations in the districts.¹³⁷ Such was the objective behind the foundation of the *Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti* as the apex body sometime in 1924.¹³⁸ Though she passed away soon after, in January, 1925, her contribution lay in her attempt to show the direction to the unexplored path through which she tried to make the women economically independent. This economic independence was expected to rejuvenate the women and make them bold enough to encounter and overcome the adversities.

Abala Basu recounted that Saroj Nalini on her return to Calcutta from the districts sometime in early 1924, had wished to organize a central or an apex society which would assist the primary *mahila samitis* in all possible ways. Saroj Nalini wanted Abala Basu to join her in the endeavour. Since Basu was already preoccupied with her *Nari Shiksha Samiti*, she rather asked Saroj Nalini to join her organization to realize her objectives in her own independent way. She had readily agreed to the proposal and was given the complete charge of the Vidyasagar Widows' Home within the organisation.¹³⁹ She made extensive provisions for the vocational teaching of the inmates of the Home. During this time she had also begun to consult with Kali Mohan Ghosh of Sriniketan to prepare a scheme for imparting instructions in health and sanitation to the rural women through the Institute of Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan.

The societies or the *samitis* that Saroj Nalini built sought to provide a common plane for the women to enable them to come together for a common cause and subsequently realize it through joint effort and mutual cooperation. The primary and the apex societies that Saroj Nalini worked with were not registered as cooperative societies. Though the ideology of cooperation was not spelt out in legal terms, it was inherent in the experiments that these societies undertook,

¹³⁷ *ibid*

¹³⁸ 'Nari Shakti Jagorane Saroj Nalini', Chunilal Basu in ed. by Kumudini Basu, *Bangalakhmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

¹³⁹ 'Saroj Nalini', Abala Basu, in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakhmi*, Chaitra, 1332(B.S), Calcutta & *A Woman in India, Being the Life of Saroj Nalini, Founder of Women's Institute Movement in India*, Gurusaday Dutt, 1941, First Indian Edition, 1998, Calcutta, Chapter XI – 'Life in Calcutta'

especially in the fields of women's education, art and crafts, maternal and child welfare. Gradually it was being felt that registration of the *mahila samitis* as cooperatives might help them to develop and prosper on more sound lines.¹⁴⁰

Looking into the history of the *mahila samitis* established by Saroj Nalini, the first one came up in Pabna in 1913. The object of this Samiti was to develop friendly cooperation among the "*pardah* women" or the women in seclusion, to create an interest in them to work outside their domestic circles, to arrange lectures on practical subjects, like domestic hygiene and domestic economy, and to train women, especially widows to help them to become self-supporting. A Mahila Samiti established in Sultanpur in 1917 and the Rampurhat Mahila Samiti formed in 1918, were among the earlier societies of Birbhum. The Birbhum Mahila Samiti was established by her in 1919 when Gurusaday Dutt was the District Magistrate of Birbhum. It is learnt from Gurusaday Dutt that this organization under the supervision of Saroj Nalini played a significant role during the First world War and its vibe reached almost every household.¹⁴¹ The main activity of this Samiti was to teach the women domestic science. To encourage the teaching of domestic science in local schools, the Samiti awarded prizes at the local school. The members of the Samiti tested the proficiency of the girl-students in the subject, special classes were arranged for the illiterate women behind the *pardah* and useful magazines and journals were circulated among the members of the Samiti to increase their knowledge in the subject. The members also visited the local hospitals, made different kinds of donations for the comfort of the patients, raised funds for the troops at the warfront and the members sewed garments for the troops in Mesopotamia. These welfare activities of the Samiti would never have worked out without compassion and mutual cooperation of the members, though they were never consciously emphasized these virtues in the agenda. A Mahila Samiti in Bankura established by her in 1921 also did some commendable

¹⁴⁰ 'Sampadakiyo' (Editorial), in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Falgun, 1332(B.S), , Calcutta

¹⁴¹ Gurusaday Dutt, *A Woman in India, Being the Life of Saroj Nalini, Founder of Women's Institute Movement in India*, 1941, First Indian Edition, 1998, Calcutta, Chapter-X (Mahila Samitis)

work in helping the local hospitals and the girls' schools, organizing classes for its members, training midwives and establishing a maternity home. However, in spite of all the care and the best efforts of Saroj Nalini, most of these societies, particularly the Rampurhat Mahila Samiti, became defunct after sometime. Disinterest of the men in such matters and lack of awareness and involvement among the women were primarily responsible for the deplorable condition of the samitis. This naturally limited the success of the women welfare programmes that the societies sought to undertake. The *Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti* after its establishment took upon itself the task of reinvigorating the Rampurhat Samiti. The Secretary of the society, Indumati Devi, in a letter acknowledged the help and support from the apex society, but regretted that the inert and closed mindset of the members of the community made them negligent about its development. The 25 to 30 members of the society made their regular subscription, but took no initiative to keep it alive. On the other hand, there were certain villagers who were willing to join the society, but could not because of their inability to bear the subscription. Thus the society lacked vitality and the Secretary realized the difficulty of working with such indifferent members.¹⁴² It was unfortunate that most of the women welfare programmes of the samitis had to be carried out in such adverse situations.

However, the picture was always not so grim. The **Barasat Mahila Samiti** was formed in February, 1924 with about 20-25 members. Its beginning can be traced in an exhibition of indigenous fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products held in the ground of the sub-divisional court on the occasion of an old event of "Atheletic Sport" in early 1924. This year marked a difference with the earlier years as there were a greater number of exhibits of charkha and charkha-made thread. Moreover, volunteers from Calcutta had come to demonstrate the techniques of working with charkha and weaving thread. The then Sub-divisional

¹⁴² 'Letter of Indumati Devi' – quoted in a report on Rampurhat Mahila Samiti by Kumudini Basu – Source - Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

Officer had also taken special interest in arranging for film shows with the help of the volunteers of the Child Welfare and Anti-malaria Societies in Calcutta. It was around the same time that Rajendranath De, the Assistant Secretary of Saroj Nalini Dutt Nari Mangal Samiti came all the way from Calcutta to the villages of the sub-division and requested the women to visit the exhibition. He even arranged for their transport. These efforts sought to bring the women out from their homes and make them aware about certain topical problems and their solutions. At the site of the Barasat exhibition, arrangements were made for their free entry and other representatives from the Nari Mangal Samiti advised and encouraged the village women to join and participate in similar societies at the village level. The visitors were warmly welcomed by Pramoda Devi, wife of the SDO of Barasat, who upheld before them examples of village societies that she had organized with the local women in other parts of Bengal. She particularly referred to the society in a village under Rampurhat Sub-division. This exposure motivated some, though not all, and one of the women requested Pramoda Devi to visit their village. She kept her word and the meeting was arranged in the residence of Sarat Kumari Devi¹⁴³, who later took over as the Secretary of the society that was formed. The initial centre of the samiti was in the residential complex of Shankar Chakrabarti, the defeated general of Maharaja Pratapaditya and the female members of the family formed the majority in the samiti. The weekly meetings of the samiti were later held in the residence of Sarat Kumari Devi.

Pramoda Devi did her best to make the rural women of Barasat understand the necessity and the advantages of such organizations and appealed to them to actively participate in such initiatives. In the meetings, discussions were held on mother and child welfare, rearing children, character building, health care and value education and relevant writings from the contemporary journals were read and discussed. These awareness programmes tried to make the women

¹⁴³ Sarat Kumari Devi – Widow of Taraprasad Chattopadhyay, Deputy Collector of Barasat

understand the benefits of joint and cooperative ventures, though not always in legal terms. The initial activity of the samiti was to collect old clothes which were distributed among the needy women to be used in their post-natal days. In this way the women were being sensitized to the needs of the fellow members of the village community. A few widows of the samiti used the charkha to weave thread which was sent to Hooghly for making the cloth as the samiti did not have its own loom. Understanding this practical difficulty, Surendranath Mallick, the Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti, promised to gift a loom to the samiti. Similar help came from other quarters too, both in cash and kind, for example, Tarak Nath Ray, the then SDO and Surendranath Mallick volunteered to bear the cost of buying sewing machine and weaving loom for the samiti. The apex society, that is the Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti, bore the cost to send an instructress to teach the members tailoring and stitching.¹⁴⁴ These gestures encouraged the members to engage themselves in such work and thereby find a way to economic independence. The members made different types of garments and under- garments and they began with a capital of just Rs. 10. But within a short span of two years they were not only able to repay their debt but could show an earning of Rs. 40 in the account of the society. The women workers were paid a sum from the sale proceeds. The sum might have been very little compared to the effort and labour of the member-workers. This might not have been able to make them economically self-sufficient, but might have initiated them to look for better prospects and think beyond their own interests for the well-being of the greater community. The members and the patrons of the society gradually realized that a sound financial basis was necessary to realize the objectives of the society. The society had already been affiliated to the Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti and was subsequently registered as a cooperative society. It might have been expected that legalization under the Cooperative Societies Act would have made the samiti

¹⁴⁴ Report on Barasat Mahila Samiti, Sarat Kumari Devi in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), , Calcutta

eligible for funds to make it financially stable. This society was not only the first registered women's cooperative in Bengal, but perhaps the first in India too.¹⁴⁵ Thereafter, the main focus of the samiti was on expansion of funds. After saving some money from the sewing machine based works, the members resolved to work on other domestic crafts. In this way the society sought to expand its business and remained specially grateful and indebted to its apex society that is the Saroj Nalini Nari Mangal Samiti for its support to alleviate the ignorance and miseries of the women in the remote corners of Bengal and thereby contribute to the overall well-being of the community and the country.¹⁴⁶ These small experiments were indeed very small ways to make the ordinary village women aware and responsible for the development of their community.

Among other such organizations, mention may be made of the **Deepali Sangha** of Dhaka, which was not a registered cooperative society. But its objective remained similar as it sought to rejuvenate the ignorant, unemployed and depressed women of the rural areas. The society was formed around 1923 when twelve friends came together to begin their work in a very small way. The initial years were uncertain with limited resources and limited support. But within a short span of time, the society could create a base among the common women of Dhaka. The membership increased to over 100 and its horizontal extension was evident in the establishment of four more branches in different parts of Dhaka. The society tried to impart vocational training, lessons on art and craft and on family welfare to the women.¹⁴⁷ In this way the women were guided to be a part of the benevolent endeavours and to participate in them for the general well-being of the community concerned.

¹⁴⁵ Sampadakiyo (Editorial) in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

¹⁴⁶ Report on Barasat Mahila Samiti, Sarat Kumari Devi in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), , Calcutta

¹⁴⁷ Report on Dhaka Deepali Sangha, Lila Nag in ed. by Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

Two important features of the Deepali Sangha were the *Deepali Pradarshani* and the *Deepali Bhandar*. The Society held an annual exhibition before the Pujas to showcase and to sell the merchandise made exclusively by women. The exhibition drew a big crowd and the sale proceeds increased as the years passed by. The branch societies too participated in the event and received the share of the profit from the sale of their items. However, it is not known the ratio of the proceeds that reached the primary manufacturers. The *Deepali Bhandar* was opened with a capital of Rs. 200/- from the main fund of the Sangha. It was basically a cooperative store which enabled the women to buy and sell all necessary goods. The items manufactured by the women were also kept in the store for sale. It was hoped that the store would thus open an avenue for the women to earn their livelihood. It was decided to spend a part of the profit in welfare work.¹⁴⁸ The economic viability of these schemes might have been limited. Nevertheless, they enabled the women to gather first hand knowledge and experience of working together from a common platform and thereby co-share both their fortunes and misfortunes. Such practical lessons might have been expected to harness their latent power and make them stronger members of the community to which they belonged. As stronger members, their contribution to the community was hoped to be more positive.

The main objective of these primary societies formed under the initiative of the apex body of Saroj Nalini Dutt Nari Mangal Samiti, was to enable the women to earn their living by working on the simpler arts and crafts during their leisure hours. But unfortunately, the market price of the well-made products was not proportional to the time and labour that were put in. This was because there were very few buyers in the market who could offer the fair price for the fine and delicate pieces of handicraft. Thus it was important for the artisans to

¹⁴⁸ Report on Dhaka Deepali Sangha, Lila Nag in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Poush, 1332(B.S), , Calcutta

manufacture things according to the need, taste and affordability of the buyers and at par with similar objects available in the market. Most of these women's societies were located in the villages and thus the artisans were hardly aware of these market forces and factors. They also lacked the professional expertise required to make the goods attractive to the buyers of the bigger city markets. The apex body realized that these practical difficulties needed to be addressed.

It approached the problem in two ways. First, it took the initiative to open a tailoring school for the women in Calcutta. Similar facilities were expected to be extended to the women in the villages and remote areas in two ways, by arranging for a boarding of the outstation trainees or by deputing a trainer for the interested women of an area who needed to assemble at a common place. The specialized training would give the products the professional touch it lacked. Secondly, the apex body tried its best to establish an exclusively women's cooperative store or *bhandar*. The main work of the store would be to arrange for the sale of the products made by the mahila samitis and to take the responsibility of supplying the necessary goods to the mahila samitis which would give the rural women an access to all such important items available only in Calcutta. The initial capital required would be acquired by mainly selling the shares of the cooperative store to the members of the Nari Mangal Samiti and to the mahila samitis. It was proposed that the major part of the profit accrued at the end of the year would be primarily divided among the members and the member-samitis. If the store prospered in due course of time, then a part of the profit could be used for women's education and development. This task proved to be difficult indeed. Everything needed to be worked out with great caution and economic prudence. It was being understood that the store needed to be run at low cost, since the funds would be limited. Initially it would not be possible to procure enough goods for sale and thus it would not be economical to rent a premise for the store or to keep salaried employees to run the store. Instead door to door selling of goods was considered to be wiser. It was supposed that if the cooperative store could be worked out successfully, it would

benefit the primary mahila samitis which in turn would contribute to the welfare and development of the woman community.¹⁴⁹

VIB. WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE INITIATIVES SINCE 1947

The cooperative endeavours among the women in post-colonial India need to be contextualized. The Constitution of India provides for equal rights and privileges for men and women and also makes special provision for women. For example, the Articles 14, 16, and 15(3) of the Fundamental Rights relate to women and children specifically. Adult suffrage added women to the electoral roles and political parties pledged their commitment to women's issues. The new state developed a bureaucratic structure designed to meet the specific needs of women. This included creating the National Social Welfare Board, which assigned special duties to the Block Development Officers and the Department of Health and Welfare were asked to prepare a specific plan with women in mind. In the documents of the new Indian state, the women were no longer subordinate to men.¹⁵⁰

However, as Geraldine Forbes notes that following Independence, the immediate concerns of the people were not so much constitutional rights as the political reality. She points out that the partition of British India into India and Pakistan affected innumerable men and women as they fled both countries.¹⁵¹ Forbes cites the argument of Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin that the entire episode of 1947 is "a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of realignment of family, community and national identities as people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered

¹⁴⁹ 'Samabay Mahila Bhandar', Akshay Kumar Basu in Kumudini Basu (ed.), *Bangalakshmi*, Falgun, 1332(B.S), Calcutta

¹⁵⁰ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1998, Pg.224

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

reality that now prevailed".¹⁵² The redefinition of the social units in the changed geo-political and social circumstances called for newer kinds of community concerns. On the one hand, were the women from the upper and middle classes of the society, who had participated in the social reforms of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, now quite pleased with the constitutional provisions and legal reforms and were somewhat confident to become the beneficiaries of new opportunities. The government asked the premier women's organizations to help them in formulating the five-year plans. These women agreed with the government that economic growth was the need of the hour and shared the assumption that women would gain from expected prosperity. The leading women's organizations became institutionalized and they designed and administered programmes to cater to the various needs of the women, for example, day-care centres, hostels for working women, educational centres and medical dispensaries. Their welfarist approach was not much different from that of the government. These women's organizations have been criticized for not preparing women for new responsibilities.¹⁵³

The Communist women, on the other hand, were very critical about the constitutional provisions, five-year plans and government and party promises. In 1954, the women members of the CPI organized a national conference to address the women's issues. At this conference they founded the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) to emphasise on women's struggle for equal rights and responsibilities in all spheres of life and for improvement in their living conditions. According to them, the contemporary political forces tried to reduce the role of women's organizations to charitable work and passing resolutions from time to time. Geraldine Forbes notes that they also found their male colleagues in the CPI to be indifferent to women's issues and were rather reluctant to

¹⁵² Ritu Menon & Kamala Bhasin, "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance : Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition", *EPW*, 28, No.17, April 24, 1993 – Cited in *Women in Modern India*, Geraldine Forbes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.,1998, Pg.224

¹⁵³ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.,1998, Pg.225

include women in the working committees. Thus according to Forbes, the leftist women had to counter “feudal ideas” on two fronts, within their parties and in society.¹⁵⁴

Yet another trend was seen among the close followers of Gandhi, who considered economic and social change to be more important than legal and constitutional rights. They too were dissatisfied with bureaucracies and centralized government planning and many individuals among them believed in voluntarism and focused their attention on grass-roots projects. Though they could not change the direction of the major programmes, they tried to make small inroads into the system through their projects. These sporadic criticisms, however, could not seriously challenge Indian government’s commitment to equality till the publication of a report on the status of women, *Toward Equality*, in 1974.

Tracing the roots of this report, it may be noted that in 1973, Herta Kusinin, the then President of the Women’s International Democratic Foundation of the United Nations decided to observe the year 1975 as the 30th anniversary of the defeat of fascism and as the International Women’s Year upholding the cause of ‘equality, development, peace’. The stated aim was ‘to right a historical wrong’. The first UN conference for women was held at Mexico in 1975 where it was pointed out that it was rather difficult to do justice to the set objective in a single year. It was, therefore, decided that the entire decade from 1976 to 1985 would be observed as the International Decade of Women. Earlier in 1973, the UN circulated a detailed questionnaire on the conditions of women to all member nations and asked for detailed answers to this questionnaire before 1975. The Indian government during the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi set up a broad-based Status of Women Committee, chaired by Phulrenu Guha. The report submitted by the committee to the Government of India in 1974 was entitled *Toward Equality*. This report for the first time challenged the assumption that any rise in the general standard of living in the country would benefit all sections of

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Pp.225-226

society and that any rise in the income level of any family would benefit all members of the family including women and children. The status report challenging this 'trickle down theory' showed in great details how the female members remained second class citizens even over two decades after independence with less access to nutrition, education and healthcare and were virtually unrepresented in most of the decision making processes of the state, community and family.¹⁵⁵

In West Bengal, the NFIC, AIWC and Women's Congress Committee together set up a non-official committee for observing International Women's Year. The non-official committee mainly popularized the aims and objectives of the International Women's Year and the contents of the proposed UN Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The National Plan of Action proposed by the Status of Women Committee was approved by the central government and a working group was set up during 1977-78 to make recommendations about women's employment. The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) for the first time included a separate section on women's development. During the prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi, a National Perspective Plan for Women's Development (1986-2000) was prepared in 1987 to formulate steps to realize the programme advocated in the strategies adopted at the end of the International Women's Decade at Nairobi in 1985. The National Perspective Plan for Women created a number of administrative agencies for implementing programmes for women's development till the year 2000. The government also proposed two amendments to the Constitution of India for one-third representation in local self-government bodies at panchayat and municipal levels, Amendments 73 and 74. Quite a few state governments including West Bengal, opposed these amendments when first proposed mainly because local self-government, according to the Constitution, was a state subject and not a responsibility of the centre.

¹⁵⁵ 'Political Participation', Vidya Munshi in Jasodhara Bagchi (ed.), *The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal, 1970-2000*, New Delhi, 2005

However, the West Bengal government subsequently passed its own amendment to the panchayat law by which one-third seats were reserved for women, including SC/ST at all levels of the panchayati system. The first elections with such reservations were held in 1993.¹⁵⁶

Before 1993 and the passing of the 73rd Amendment, women were viewed only as targets or beneficiaries of development and not as its active agents. This was evident in the Balawantrao Committee's recommendations and the election of the first generation generation panchayats in independent India. Based on the Ashok Mehta Committee report, the second generation panchayats formed in 1977 had some reservation for women in a few states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Punjab. But the women elected were from the affluent sections of the rural population who were hardly aware about the needs of the greater majority of the rural women. In rural West Bengal, the women representation in the panchayats was lower than the national average in 1993. These women had to fight patriarchy within the family and the rural society.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, most of the rural women also had to fight against poverty. The struggle was indeed difficult.

Measures had been adopted by the government from time to time to alleviate these difficulties. Development of the rural women has also been one of the abiding concerns of the successive five year plans. The Five Year Plans have consistently placed special emphasis on providing minimum health facilities integrated with family welfare and nutrition for women and children, acceleration of women's education, their increase in the labour force and welfare services for women in need. As pointed out, women had been the target group in these programmes, rather being the agents of change. This was evident in the community development programme in the early 1950s which helped to establish a network of basic extension and development services in the villages thereby

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*

creating awareness in the rural community of the potential means of development. Partha Chatterjee notes that gradually there was a shift from the strategy of 'community development' to that of distributing 'poverty removal' packages directly to select target groups among the underprivileged sections.¹⁵⁸ The women also formed a part of the select target groups. It may be pointed out that from the mid 1960s there was the creation of essential physical and institutional infrastructure of socio-economic development in many rural areas. This was followed by programmes specifically designed for the development of the small and marginal farmers and the landless and agricultural labourers in the early 1970s, for example, the Small Farmers' Development Agencies were introduced in 1971. A self-employment programme for poverty alleviation, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was introduced in 1978 to raise the income generation capacity of target groups among the poor.

The programme for development of women and children in rural areas or DWCRA aimed to strengthen the gender component of IRDP. It was started in 1982-83 on a pilot basis in 50 districts and was later extended to all the districts of the country. The main strategy adopted under this programme was to facilitate access for poor women to employment, skill upgradation, training, credit and other support services so that the DWCRA women as a group could take up income generating activities for supplementing their incomes. It sought to encourage collective action in the form of group activities which were considered to be more viable and sustainable than the individual effort. It encouraged the habit of thrift and credit among the poor rural women to make them self-reliant. The programme also envisaged that the target group would be the focus for convergence of other services, like family welfare, health care, nutrition, education, child care, safe drinking water, sanitation and shelter to improve the welfare and quality of life of the family and the community. Though not spelt

¹⁵⁸Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Essential Writings, 1985-2005*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2010, Chapter - Development Planning and the Indian State (1994)

out, the underlying spirit of these programmes was cooperation. The implementation of these schemes was entrusted to the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development and surprisingly the Department of Cooperation had no role to play. This indicated that as a matter of policy there was a bifurcation of responsibilities of the Department of Rural Development and that of Cooperation.

The cooperatives and the *Panchayats* which were considered to be preferred organization for economic and political organization by the First Five year Plan (1951-1956) were being segregated in due course of time. It may be noted that in January, 1966, the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation was merged with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to form a Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Community Development and Cooperation. In 1971 it was renamed Ministry of Agriculture with four departments, namely Food, Agriculture, Community Development And Cooperation. Thereafter, the Departments of Community Development and Cooperation became separate. The Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-1974) sought to weld the *Panchayati Raj* and community development. The thrust of the Department of Cooperation was more on the credit aspect of the movement and the major works of rural development and poverty alleviation programmes according to the provisions of the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-1979) were undertaken by the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development. This theoretically implied that the official cooperative endeavours no longer formed an integral part of comprehensive rural development. The path ahead of the cooperative movement thus became circumscribed. Once again the construction of the movement in formal and official terms was putting a leash on its development as a people's movement. In such a scenario, the women's cooperative initiatives did not get much opportunity to express themselves. However, there were a few experiments which in spite of the official structure and bindings of the cooperative movement sought to think beyond.

It may be mentioned that a special nutrition programme was started in 1970-71 to provide nutritional supplements to the pregnant and nursing mothers and

children of the age group of 0 to 5 years.¹⁵⁹ A women's consumer cooperative in Canning I Development Block of erstwhile 24 Parganas took the initiative to make such arrangements for the local women. The **CANNING MAHILA COOPERATIVE CONSUMERS' STORES LIMITED** was officially registered in 1975-76 primarily under the initiative of Smt. Kalpana Ghosh, the founder Secretary of the society. Through the store she arranged for the sale of baby food, control cloth, *Janata Saree* and *markin* cloth mainly for the women from the lower middle class and below. In this way she tried to arrange for the supply of the daily necessities among the women and thereby prevent the local market from an arbitrary escalation of prices. It was through this stores that she arranged for the distribution of bulgur¹⁶⁰ among the expecting mothers. She procured the allotment of bulga for the years 1975, 1976 and 1977. Though a stores, it became a platform for the local women to assemble and thus in a very preliminary way they were being acquainted with the idea of mutual cooperation. To draw the local women, Ghosh arranged for a *Kali Puja* during this time. During the early 1980s the government took over the direct distribution of bulgur and thereafter the stores mainly sold palmoline oil and the merchandise collected from its apex body, Jadavpur Wholesale Consumers' Cooperative Society. To inculcate the idea of thrift among the local women, it was through the stores that she introduced a daily collection of Rs. 2/- from among the local women around 1982. Deposit books were issued in name of those women-members who subscribed and the sum was deposited in the local branch of the West Bengal State Cooperative Bank. Opposition came from the local magnates who assumed that some sort of a chit fund business was in practice and threatened her of adopting requisite measures to stop the same. Kalpana Ghosh's spirit remained undaunted and it was her mission to take up the cause of the local women and introduce among them the habits of thrift and savings to economically empower

¹⁵⁹ planning commission.nic.in – accessed on 1/6/2016

¹⁶⁰ Bulgur – It is a kind of dried cracked wheat, most common in European, Middle Eastern and Indian cuisine. It is also known as 'dalia' in North India. Compared to unenriched white rice, bulgur has more fibre and protein and higher levels of most vitamins and minerals.

them in a very small way perhaps. She approached the then Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Smt. Meera Pandey, I.A.S through the then Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies, South 24 Parganas, Shri Prabir Panda for their advice and an approval for her experiments. The officials did not give any written permission for Ghosh's rather novel experiments with thrift and savings through a consumers' stores, nor did they take any prohibitory measure. All that happened was that the visit of the bureaucrats in the remote area created an awe in the local magnates who thereafter did not question Ghosh's objectives and her course of action. What is important to note is that the local women started developing a trust in her and were aware that there was no possibility of their deposits being misappropriated. Most of the local women had no earnings of their own and contributed the little that they could save from the meager allowance they received from their fathers or husbands.

Kalpana Ghosh worked absolutely in an informal way to make the local women conscious about the importance of thrift and savings. All she had in mind was to establish a primary credit society for the women of the locality and these trials marked its small beginning. For a formal registration of a credit society, a sum of Rs. one lakh was required in the suspense account and membership of five hundred women. The money required needed to be collected from the women of the villages under the development block of Canning I. The confidence and the trust she had been able to create in their minds during the past few years made them offer their membership and subscribe for the suspense account of the nascent society, still not formally registered. It was during 1994-1996 that she was ably assisted by her daughter Smt. Swagata Ghosh Das and one Achma Haldar, who later took over as the Chief Manager of the credit society which was subsequently formed. They visited every household of the villages of Bahirsona, Dhalirbati, Marehaldi, Dighirpar I, Bahirbena, Tangrakhali, Amraberia, Mithakhali, Rajarlat, High School Para, Ghoshpara, Kumarsa, Rammoham Palli, Raibagini, Satmukhihat, all under Canning I Development Block to enlist the support of the female members. The consumers' stores remained as it was and the Canning

Mahila Cooperative Credit Society was formally registered on 28th November, 1996 and was inaugurated in January, 1997. Ghosh had perhaps understood that the credit was the beginning to show the women the way to economic self-sufficiency. Easy availability of credit at an interest rate of 18%, not higher than the rate offered by the State Cooperative Bank, was welcomed by the rural women of the area. The women availed of the credit facilities not only for their own needs, but also to meet the needs of their families, for example, children's education, marriage or illness of family members and a variety of other related causes. It could not be apparently understood how far did these women borrowers had their independent say in availing of the loans. It was learnt that these cooperative initiatives faced a rather tough competition from other schemes made available to the same group of women through the panchayats, like the DWCRA and other minor credit schemes. It may be pointed out that the subsidies that were made available to the schemes under the *panchayats* were not made available to the primary credit cooperative societies.¹⁶¹ This rather discriminatory policy of the government tended to lessen the importance of the cooperatives in matters of rural development. It was learnt that certain primary borrowers of the Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society who might have availed of the credit for agricultural purposes, though there was no documentation for the purpose of the loan, were unable to repay their loans due to natural calamities like *Aila* (2009). They often failed to believe that the said society did not receive any

¹⁶¹ For a study and a reconstruction of the history of the Canning Mahila Cooperative Consumers' Stores Limited and the Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society Limited and the initiative of a local woman cooperator Smt. Kalpana Ghosh, the researcher had to entirely depend on oral sources. The dates of registration, registration numbers were available from the records of the said societies. The other records maintained are the accounts which are not much historically significant. The older meeting registers recording the minutes of the meetings held were also not available which could have given an insight into Kalpana Ghosh's thoughts and experiments on cooperation. She passed away on 23rd January, 2016 and during the last few years of her life she was not mentally alert to narrate her experiences. Thus the researcher had to gather the relevant information she could from her daughter Swagata Ghosh Das who is the present Chairman of the credit society and Ghosh's other associates like Achma Haldar, Malati Mandal and others. The researcher personally visited the society on 25th May, 2016 and the narrative is based on the information gathered from their interviews and recountings of their experiences. However, the researcher had the opportunity of interacting with Smt. Ghosh during 1994-95 when the former was posted as the Inspector of Cooperative Societies, Canning I. The researcher was a witness to the beginnings of Ghosh's experiments with credit through the Consumers' Stores.

subsidy when other institutions including the primary agricultural credit societies had received the same from the government. This particular society did not receive the subsidy as the credit was not exclusively for agricultural purposes. Thus official stipulations and intricacies tended to thwart the spontaneous response of the rural women towards such cooperative institutions.¹⁶²

The Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society in spite of these adverse experiences was able to extend its area of operation. Initially from Canning I, it was extended to include Canning II development block and at present it caters to the villages under Canning, Baruipur and Sonarpur Police Stations. With its head office in Canning Town, it has opened six branches within its operational area in Satmukhihat, Ghutiari Sharif, Piyali, Baruipur and Ramgopalpur. As a result, credit can easily reach the doors of the women in the remote villages. Since the terms and conditions are not as stringent as the apex institutions like the West Bengal State Cooperative Bank, the time taken for the loan to be sanctioned is less. However, the present Chairman of the Society, Smt. Swagata Ghosh Das, is rather apprehensive of the uncertain prospects of the society in future. She feels that since the matters of the cooperative societies are completely dissociated from the panchayat's concerns with rural development which are very much reflected in the government's policies, the scope of the cooperative movement in improving the condition of the rural women and assisting them to become self-sufficient becomes limited. She regrets that the ideological aspects of the movement often fails to influence them.¹⁶³ Yet amidst such despair, it is still hoped that perhaps the comparatively easy and ready availability of credit would open the way for the non-credit aspect of the cooperative movement by motivating the women to mutually cooperate for the betterment of their community. Mutual cooperation based on mutual trust would develop the community not only in material terms but also morally. It may be mentioned that Kalpana Ghosh through her

¹⁶² *ibid*

¹⁶³ *ibid*

experiment tried in a very preliminary way to bring the local women out from the mould of 'beneficiaries of development' and motivate them to become the 'active agents of development'.

VIC. WOMEN SELF-HELP GROUPS

Almost four decades after independence, the problems related to poverty, illiteracy, health care etc. persisted quite prominently in rural areas. During the Seventh Plan (1985-90), a parliamentary committee headed by Ela Bhatt, leader of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) was set up to study the problems of self-employed women and women workers in the unorganized sector. During this time, a new strategy was being worked out for those problems which could not be satisfactorily addressed individually, but could be better solved through group efforts. The post-liberal Indian economy since the 1990-91 saw the emergence of Self-Help Groups or SHGs which became the vehicle of change for the poor and the marginalized.¹⁶⁴ The SHG method was and is used by the Government, Non-Government Organisations and others all over the world. The SHGs are informal voluntary organizations of the poor and the deprived social sections who collect their savings and deposit them in the local banks and in return they receive easy access to loans with a small rate of interest to start their micro unit enterprise.

The Government of West Bengal took a policy decision to set up SHG as a major poverty alleviation initiative with a view to ensuring a robust economic growth that would be labour intensive and equitable combined with development of the vulnerable social sections. Various programmes administered by the different departments of the Union and State Governments, like the SHG Bank Linkage Programme initiated by NABARD and the social intermediation programme followed by NGOs have accelerated the process of organizing the poor especially the women into SHGs.¹⁶⁵ Since 1992, the National Bank for Agricultural and Rural

¹⁶⁴ planningcommission.gov.in – accessed on 30/5/2016

¹⁶⁵ wbprd.gov.in- accessed on 30/5/2016

Development (NABARD) has extended financial services to the deprived sections through formation of informal self-help groups. The scheme of DWCRA merged with the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) since April, 1999. It may be noted that the SGSY was launched to assist the families living below poverty line to form self-help groups with a focus on rural women.

The Department of Cooperation in West Bengal introduced the SHGs as extended arms of the Primary Agricultural Societies (PACS) and reckoned them as cooperatives within cooperatives. These informal groups were formed with 5-20 persons of similar weak economic background belonging to the same village or locality. The basic Cooperative Principles of open and voluntary membership, democratic control of members, participation of members in economic activities of the group, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation amongst different groups and concern for the community, are adhered to. Since SHGs are unregistered informal groups, the PACS could not initially finance them. Following the power conferred upon it under Section 69(1)(d) of the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act, 1983¹⁶⁶, the PACS were permitted to enroll the SHGs as members of the PACS under two notifications dated 2/5/1995. It may be mentioned that the Agricultural Credit Review Committee (Khusru Committee), 1989 had envisaged that the plan for every deposit, credit and trading activity of the PACS should have two groups, individual members and SHGs.¹⁶⁷ Subsequently the NABARD sponsored SHG programme acted as a booster and the SHGs under the Department of Cooperation in West Bengal assumed the shape of a movement.¹⁶⁸ Through periodical meetings, equal doses of savings at the end of every week, fortnight or month, rotation of leadership, united fight against the evils in the family and the community, a kind

¹⁶⁶ Section 69(1)(d) of the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act, 1983 – Subject to the rules and the by-laws, the following persons shall be eligible for membership of a cooperative society – subject to the approval of the State Government by general or special order, any association or body of persons (whether incorporated or not) or any financial bank

¹⁶⁷ The Agricultural Credit Review Committee, Khusru Committee, 1989, RBI, GOI

¹⁶⁸ coopwb.org – accessed on 27/5/2016

of group dynamism was expected to develop amongst the SHG members. These groups after being formed go through a period of trial to establish their credibility and then they become eligible for credit linkage through the PACS which organize and nurture them. The Central Cooperative Banks act as the facilitators and the State Cooperative Banks as the coordinator.

Thus two categories of SHGs function in West Bengal, those under the Departments of Panchayats and Rural Development and those under the Department of Cooperation. But the spirit of cooperation is the basic ideology behind all SHGs, whichever department they belong to. It may be said that the formation of SHGs is an attempt by the Government to take the cooperative movement to the people at the grass root in an informal way, not enmeshed by the legal intricacies which had tended to distance it from the masses so long. But certain basic norms are observed which are not imposed on the members, but the latter are gradually sensitized about their advantages and viability. The organization of the informal unregistered SHGs within the formal structure of the PACS carries the same rationale as that of the bureaucrats of the colonial regime, especially the Indians, that the official movement would never succeed without the active support of the 'non-officials'. In fact, the earlier chapters sought to trace the development of the non-official aspect of the cooperative movement which was sometimes parallel to, sometimes overlapped or converged with the official or the more formal and structured cooperative movement. This added a new or the 'other' dimension to the cooperative movement. The SHGs may be considered to be yet another expression of this 'other' aspect where the non-official aspect was developing within the formal official structure. Thus what comes to the fore is the fact that the officials associated with the cooperative endeavours across all times and locales felt that without the dedication and support of the non-officials, the humanitarian goals of the movement could not be realized. A personal interaction between the members of the SHGs and the local representatives of the cooperative institutions and volunteers who may be called the 'non-officials' helps in the dissemination of the cooperative ideas, and

a reciprocal spontaneous response from the poor and marginalized villagers speaks for the movement getting a popular dimension to a certain extent.

This spontaneity was seen when the members of the SHGs of a certain Primary Agricultural Society in a rather remote village in the South 24 Parganas shared their experiences with me when I visited the society. While talking to them, I had a questionnaire in hand, but soon I realized that the experiences that they wanted to speak about could not be contained within certain questions. About sixty members of different SHGs had assembled in the society premises which also houses a bank. The PACS being referred is the Dhalirbati Sevabrati Samabay Krishi Unnayan Samiti (SKUS) in the gram panchayat of Matla II in Canning I, registered in December, 1956. Under the scheme of strengthening of PACS aimed to diversify the business of PACS, it officially began its banking sector in February, 1992. From 1997-98, the society took the initiative to form women's self-help groups in the villages within its area of operation, for example in the villages of Bahirbena, Thumkathi, Kultali, Dhalirbati, Mithekhali, Bahirsona, Amraberia. Dhalirbati Sevabrati was one of the older societies in the block, though not the oldest. Though most of the PACS of the area were not financially much stable with mounting overdues, the said society was comparatively better off. It was learnt from the assembled group of women that they had gradually developed a confidence in the way this society worked. They kept great trust and faith in those who were employed staff of the society, especially the Manager, Madan Mohan Mondal and the Accountant, Gopal Chandra Haldar. The women whom I talked to expressed their deep indebtedness to these persons whom they felt were not mere employees of the society, but were totally dedicated to the cause of cooperation, which they tried to propagate and popularize among the local rural women through the SHGs.

The society has been able to motivate about 476 women in the area of the society's operation to form about 91 SHGs under the Dhalirbati Sevabrati SKUS. This figure was obtained during my visit to the society in June, 2016. If we take

a note of the Census of 2011, Matla (Census Town or Non-Municipal Town), in which this society is located, recorded a total female population of 15,672 in a total population of 31,920.¹⁶⁹ Thus the number of women organized into SHGs by this society was not meager. It was learnt that most of the women of the SHGs were not shareholders of the SKUS and thus were not its members. But this did not prevent them from joining the SHGs organized by the society. This relaxation of rules in the period of post-liberalisation indeed gave the cooperative movement a chance to develop from below. I could talk to the members of twelve such SHGs. Each group had its own name giving it an independent identity, for example, Maitreyee, Shilpi Sarat, Ma Durga, Ma Shitala, Biplabi Khudiram, Baba Taraknath, Binapani, Rupali, Ma Saraswati, Ma Kali, Alo, Nirmla, Agamoni and others. Among these groups, Maitreyee was the oldest, formed around 1997-98. It was interesting to learn that they were engaged in different kinds of work like tailoring, soft toy making, *bidi* binding, chikan work, batik, making jam, jelly, running grocery shops, stationery shop, vegetable vending, maintaining goatery, poultry and even agricultural activities. These women had no hesitation in supplementing their husband's incomes from their earnings and savings through the SHGs. They felt that these groups had given them a new lease of life and they not only look forward to the periodical meetings of their respective groups, but also to the meetings of all the groups at the society premises when they get an opportunity to come out of the confines of their household chores and duties and to interact with each other. Initial opposition had come from certain local political elements. Also undue interference by certain male members of the families from which these women came even tried to impede the course of action of these SHGs. Attempts had also been made by a few male members to misappropriate the funds. However, these problems could not assume a greater magnitude, though they persist in a rather patriarchal social set up. The women to whom I spoke said that the SHGs provide a common

¹⁶⁹ Census of India, West Bengal, Series 20, Part XII-B, District Census Handbook, South 24 Parganas, Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal, 2011

platform to them and have helped them to become more aware in a still male-dominated society and have made them united against the vices of the male members. It seemed that the women were being made more aware about their savings for future. They thought that economic self-sufficiency would make them more confident and secure in future. They pointed out that the formation and the workability of a SHG depended on security, both financial and moral, service and behavior of the members. The values that these women emphasized on were almost analogous to the enunciated principles of cooperation.

The communal harmony of these SHGs also deserves mention. It was learnt that religious denomination was never a determining factor and even in small groups of five to six members, a single member from a separate religion was equally comfortable with the others. For example, in the SHG named Rupali of six members, Nasima Purkait, a Hindu, is always at ease with the other members who happen to be Muslims, as they are equally cooperative as neighbours in small hamlets.

These grass-root level experiments and experiences show that the rudiments of cooperative philosophy and principles percolate deep down the social strata. It is difficult to derive general conclusions from singular case studies, but the underlying mutual trust and faith in the grass-root level cooperators and cooperation among the members themselves are indeed exemplary. Very important is their realization that cooperative ethics make them thrive and survive. The members of the SHGs of Dhalirbati Society emphatically pointed out that they have not opted for the SGSY through the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, primarily because of their comfort with and trust in the society.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ A field visit was made to Dhalirbati Sevabrati SKUS on 7/6/2016. The persons interviewed were members of different SHGs, namely, Maitreyi Halder, Brihaspati Halder, Aparna Biswas, Rina Naskar, Sujata Khatua, Nasima Purkait, Deepali Halder, Swapna Deyashi Halder. The Manager and the Accountant of the Society were also interviewed.

It needs to be mentioned that the SHGs are considered to play an important role in the effort to build “economic capital”, but also “social capital”. “Social capital”¹⁷¹ has become a popular concept in social science since the 1990s. From the above discussion, it follows that the SHGS are local forms of association based on trust, norms of reciprocity and networks. In the SHGs a strong social bond is created among the community members through regular participation in meetings and training programmes. The rotational leadership among the group members, the ability to manage group funds and conflict resolution through mutual trust by the members of the SHGs and cooperatives leads to strengthening of social capital even in a fragmented community. They also develop collective consciousness against forms of oppression that prevails in developing societies.¹⁷² Support can make personalized trust stronger when members help each other in times of crisis and emergency. SHGs are an attempt to build a form of informal organization through trust within peer groups. There can be no trust if there is no mutual cooperation and vice versa. The key feature of SHG is reciprocity and believe in collective will. Social capital gets increased in community through these institutions and they develop quasi professional helping skills among group members to empower the marginalized community members.¹⁷³

VII. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

This chapter focused on three different aspects of the cooperative movement, which developed in their own respective and isolated ways, at different locales,

¹⁷¹ Social Capital – The term was in intermittent use from 1890, but widely used in late 1990s. The definitions range from social energy, community spirit, social bonds, civic virtue, community networks, social ozone, extended friendships, community life, social resources, informal and formal networks, good neighbourliness and social glue. In 1998, Portes suggested that social capital is nothing new in sociological terms.

¹⁷² ‘Social Capital, Microfinance & the Politics of Development’, K.N. Rankin, in *Feminist Economics*, Vol.8, Issue1 2002 – Published online 20th June, 2011

¹⁷³ Role of Formal Institutions in Social Capital : Evidences from SHGs in India, Sudeshna Saha & Neelmani Jayaswal – Paper presented at Economic Sociology Conference on ‘Trust in Transactions’, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, 16th – 18th November, 2015

at different points of time. The efforts were very small indeed, all at the micro-level, which hardly left an imprint on the broad canvas of history. Yet, the local impact was deep enough to enthuse the adjoining areas to undertake similar ventures. The primary aim of the experiments was to ultimately bring about the regeneration of the rural communities through the assigned work, whether it be prevention of malaria or supplying water or providing for irrigational facilities or meeting the consumer needs and providing micro-credit facilities for women. It was hoped that regeneration would lead to improvement of the prevalent conditions and thereby contribute to the community's well-being and thus development. This development might not always be in material terms, but sought to morally strengthen the members of the respective communities, especially from below, by creating an overall awareness in them and making them participate in those endeavours. These less known initiatives were often the joint ventures of the officials and non-officials which tried to inculcate among the members of the rural community an awareness about being self-sufficient and independent, in more than economic terms. These villagers had no idea about the community, nation, nation-state or any other such socio-political constructs. But their experiences through the aforesaid experiments helped them imbibe the spirit of mutual cooperation and derive the benefits of communitarian life.

CHAPTER - 5

DANIEL HAMILTON AND HIS COOPERATIVE ENDEAVOURS IN GOSABA

I.HAMILTON'S EXPERIMENTS

Sir Daniel Hamilton (1860 – 1939) initiated the cooperative movement in Gosaba, a remote island in the Sunderban region in the district of 24 Parganas in south Bengal. Hamilton, an aristocrat from Scotland, was sent to Bombay in 1880 on family business primarily to look after the Mackinon Mackenzie branch there. He took over as the Chief of the company in Calcutta during the early years of the twentieth century. In 1903, he took a lease of about 9000 acres of land in Gosaba and reclaimed the rather isolated island by clearing the forests and raising embankment on the river banks.

Gosaba was densely forested, marshy and intersected with innumerable canals and creeks. Deposition of briny silt on either side of the rivers of the region had made the area unsuitable for cultivation. So to begin with, it was necessary to embank the whole area against the tides and then allow the monsoon rains of at least two or three seasons to wash out the saline soil from the ground. Acute shortage of labour was the biggest problem in initiating the work of reclamation mainly because of the uncongenial living conditions. However, the work began with some landless labourers who were brought from up country to construct the embankments. They settled as tenants and began to clear and cultivate the land.¹ The basic amenities had to be arranged for the settlers and accordingly a powerful distilling plant for drinking water was set up. Arrangements were also made to collect drinking water from a person's tank in the nearby settlement of

¹ 'Practical cooperation – Sir Daniel Hamilton's Farm in the Sunderbans', A.P. Blair, in Ramananda Chatterjee (ed.), *Modern Review*, Vol.LXI, Nos. 1- 6, January – June, 1937, Calcutta, Pg. 395

Masjidbati in exchange of 50 bighas of land. Subsequently drinking water tanks were dug in the villages.²

The nature of the soil of the Sunderban area was the biggest impediment and work could be done only in the dry months. Dams were built to prevent the saline water from inundating the lands. Thus the reclamation had to be done with great caution and care and the entire process of reclamation became time consuming. 1000 to 1500 acres of land could be worked with at a time.³ A belt of about 120 feet of jungle had to be cleared and earth dykes were constructed and subsequently the creeks and canals were embanked which took about five years to be completed. The reclaimed land initially did not grow much paddy, but with the monsoon washings for some years, the harvest improved. When the first stage of reconstruction was nearly complete, a devastating flood in 1907 washed away everything. Thus everything needed to be redone. Mr. Locaine, a Professor of the London Missionary Society, was in charge of the project during these early years and he resigned just before the onset of the natural calamity of 1907. Hamilton then decided to bring in Indian experts for supervision and in 1908 Nalin Chandra Mitra was appointed the manager of the project. In 1910 Sudhangshu Bhusan Majumdar joined as the assistant manager. Thus began Hamilton's programme of comprehensive rural reconstruction in his island estate of Gosaba.

The beginning was indeed not easy as he had to encounter adversities both from nature and also from the inmates of Gosaba which lingered even years after. Moreover, the land was totally unknown to him as were its inhabitants and their difficult way of life. The people of Gosaba were steeped in ignorance, indebtedness and oppression by the local landlords and moneylenders almost throttled their existence. And their continuous struggle with the vagaries of nature left them practically worn out, their self-confidence shattered and there

² 'Daniel Hamilton: The Cooperative at Gosaba', Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal, Vol. XXVIII, No.1, January – June, 2008*, Calcutta

³ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Gosaba, S.24 Parganas, 2003*, Introduction

was an aversion and suspicion for anything that was new. So when Hamilton started his work of reclamation followed by the programme of rural reconstruction, he could hardly win the basic trust of the people, more so as he was a white man. Yet his work continued against all odds and through the ideology of cooperation he sought to resolve the differences and bridge the gaps wherever and whenever necessary. Hamilton agreed with the Statutory Commission that the cooperative movement not only released the people from debt and developed in them thrift and foresight, it provided a common platform which cut across class and social customs and thus solved the communal problems and problems of the depressed classes.⁴ He believed that all men could unite on this 'common platform' to lend India a helping hand and he was aware that if the Statutory Commission failed to realize this aspect of the cooperative movement then all its efforts would be in vain.⁵ His experiments with cooperatives, rural banks, institutional lendings, *dharmagolas* or grain banks, model farms and self government were motivated by this ideology. These endeavours were to a certain extent similar to the rural reconstruction programmes of the nationalists, partly resembled Dr. D. S. Hatch's⁶ and F. L. Brayne's⁷ philanthropic missions in India and also bore an affinity to what came to be labelled as 'Community Development' in the post-colonial years. Hamilton

⁴ Daniel M. Hamilton, 'New India and How to Get There',— The speeches and writings of Hamilton compiled by Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal in *The Philosopher's Stone*, Sir Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003

⁵ Closing Address by Sir Daniel Hamilton at the Burdwan Divisional Cooperative Conference held at Bolpur on 9th, 10th & 11th February, 1929 in *ibid*, Pg.98

⁶ Duane Spencer Hatch (1888-1963) – An American agricultural expert and a pioneer in rural reconstruction and community development. In 1916, he went to India and Mesopotamia to serve the British and the Indian troops during the First World War under the auspices of the Indian National Council and the YMCA. He later returned to India with his wife to begin his long career in rural reconstruction under the support of the YMCA of India. He started a project in Marthandam in Travancore in 1921. The aim of the project was to bring about a three-fold development of the villagers, socio-economic, physical and mental-spiritual.

⁷ F. L. Brayne – Backwardness, poverty and misery of the people of India prompted him to start a rural upliftment programme in Gurgaon district of the Punjab in 1927, where he was the Deputy Commissioner. A village guide was appointed to advise and communicate to the villagers the knowledge of improved seeds, implements and methods of cultivation. The village guides were not technical men and the project could not create much impact on the villagers who would continue to work in the absence of the village guides. The work gathered momentum after 1933 when Brayne was appointed as the Commissioner of Rural Reconstruction in the Punjab.

considered cooperation to be the panacea for all maladies and the only way to India's regeneration.⁸ But the reality was rather stark and the goals set forth were hardly realized during the early years. The work of reclamation incurred a huge expenditure of about Rs. 24 per acre, but since no income could be generated, there was not any significant change in their economic condition either. And even a decade after his arrival, the spontaneous response of the people to these projects remained a distant dream.

Hamilton tried to feel the pulse of the people and his direct experience of working in Gosaba made him identify the areas of weakness which needed to be addressed to overcome the impediments. He considered the raiyat to be India's key man who he knew was bankrupt and was devastated by the atrocities and exactions of the local moneylenders or *mahajans* and was thus powerless. He sought to free the raiyat from the money shackles as well as from the colonial bindings. And for this he needed to build up the raiyats strong in body and soul, individually and collectively, by the unifying power of the cooperative movement.⁹ Hamilton following the trend of the cooperative movement of the time initiated his experiments with credit societies, as it was the simplest way to introduce among the ignorant people and also because it was on credit that the welfare of the peasant community depended.¹⁰ He knew that India was starving for money and so without solving the money problem, all other problems would remain unresolved.¹¹ He understood that unemployment and economic debility of the people of India at large were to a great extent due to the absence of judicious operations of banking at the popular level. So when he talked of cooperative credit as an alternative to the manipulations of the local moneylender, he also

⁸ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, A Note on the Title of the Book

⁹ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *New India and How to Get There*, Sir Daniel Hamilton in *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Introduction, Pg.50

¹⁰ Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1922 – 23, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1924, Pg.7

¹¹ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *New India and How to Get There*, Sir Daniel Hamilton in *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, , Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.93

emphasized on the ideological aspect of the term 'credit' apart from its usual economic connotations. In his words, 'credit' meant belief and to believe in a man was to trust him and the form of money known as credit was just trust recorded on paper. He further stated that the volume of credit available for rebuilding India into a strong *swaraj* depended on the trust available.¹² Trust was faith and faith, he believed, was the power which would remove India's debt, ignorance, ill-health and usher in a healthy *swaraj*. His conviction was that honest labour and faith combined together would enrich India morally, materially, spiritually and politically.¹³ It is, however, not known what was his precise concept of *swaraj*. Did Hamilton think in the same vein as the nationalists and thus sought to materialise their kind of *swaraj* or self-rule for the inhabitants of Gosaba, or was it his exclusive kind of *swaraj*, where he tried to work out his own idea of cooperative commonwealth? It might have been that he used the term *swaraj* as a strategy to reach out to the common people and use it as a rallying point.

Hamilton's every experiment had a strong ethical content through which he sought to develop the latent strength of the villagers. He was aware of the turbulent time, especially the period following the First World War and its aftermath, characterized by conflict, disintegration and death which demoralized the common man, the small man, in some way or the other.¹⁴ He had complete faith in the man from below, the raiyat, and hoped that if the raiyat was given the status of a man, he would give India a promising future. For that it was necessary to strengthen and join the links on which a country thrived¹⁵ and that was nothing but the endeavours of cooperation. He considered that the cooperative movement was the only movement which would at the same time

¹² Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *New India and How to Get There*, Sir Daniel Hamilton in *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.78-79

¹³ *Ibid*, Pg. 81

¹⁴ Sir Daniel Hamilton, 'The Cooperative State and How to Reach It', & Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Preface & Pg.168

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.129

unify India, organize the masses and abolish unemployment among the classes.¹⁶ All these ideas of Hamilton indeed portrayed his apparent benevolence, his concern to take up the cause of the downtrodden of a remote village of Bengal. Hamilton's prime objective was to give a shape to his Cooperative Commonwealth in Gosaba and he knew that it would not work out without the physical and moral support of the inmates of Gosaba and thus he needed to arouse their self-confidence.

In 1912, when Hamilton was in Gosaba, he learnt from the villagers that they were being ousted by the local moneylenders from their lands on the pretext that they were unable to repay their debts, though they had paid the interest of the loan through the preceding years.¹⁷ It was then that Hamilton took the first step towards working with the idea of cooperation. An old tenant of Gosaba told Hamilton that he had borrowed Rs. 50 from a *mahajan* at an exorbitant rate of interest and as he was unable to pay the interest, he had to renew his bond for Rs. 100 and then for Rs. 500, ultimately pledging half the produce of his 25 acres of land. It was calculated that the *mahajan* had thus received about Rs. 300 a year clear profit from the original loan of Rs.50. Hamilton forced the *mahajan* to exempt the poor tenant from the unfair loan deal in lieu of a cash payment of Rs. 500. On further enquiry he came to know that 25% was the lowest rate of interest at which the cultivator could borrow to purchase seed in July and repay in December after the harvest. He realized that it was almost impossible for the tenants to disentangle themselves from the vicious trap of indebtedness. Hamilton thus settled all the impending debts with the *mahajans*, repaid them at an interest of 12 ½% per annum and expelled the *mahajans* from his estate. This marked the beginning of Hamilton's experiments with cooperation and in 1915 the first Gosaba Bank was started. This bank took over from the estate the responsibility to disburse loans among the tenants. It gradually expanded into a

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.142-143

¹⁷ Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, 'Daniel Hamilton: The Cooperative at Gosaba', in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol.XXVIII, No.1, January – June, 2008, Calcutta, & Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans, Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2010, Chapter – Development of the Port at Canning and Gosaba Cooperative

system of rural credit societies which numbered around 19 and federated in a central union known as the Gosaba Central Cooperative Bank in 1924.¹⁸ New rural branches came up which numbered to around 19 by the end of June 1933 with 682 members and an accumulated reserve fund of Rs. 11,830.¹⁹ Short-term loans were preferred to long-term loans. The short-term loans were generally issued five times a year, during the months of May to September, primarily for cultivation, purchase of cattle, maintenance and other unavoidable circumstances. Such loans were recovered more in kind from the crops than in actual cash.²⁰ In this way arrangement was made for the farmers to get interest-free loans for the estate and the practice of usury could thereby be controlled.

Hamilton realized that just supply of credit to the agriculturists would not be enough to meet their needs and he proposed to link credit with marketing in order to improve the lot of the agriculturists.²¹ Thus as a parallel development, in 1918 a Consumers' Cooperative Stores or Society was also opened and the way in which the entire economic activities of the tenants were being integrated within the cooperative framework of the bank and the stores was indeed noteworthy and significant. Rice being the principal crop of the region, a Cooperative Paddy Sale Society was established in 1923 which subsequently set up a rice mill known as the Gosaba Jamini Rice Mill in 1927 and also owned a fleet of boats to carry the finished rice to the Central Cooperative Selling Depot in Calcutta. In this way attempt was made to do away with the intervention of the middlemen. The cultivator could borrow from his village society the advances required for sowing and after the harvest he took the crop to the Paddy Society. The society through the Central Bank credited to the account of the cultivator the current market value of the paddy which he harvested. The bank also

¹⁸ Practical Cooperation – Sir Daniel Hamilton's Farm in the Sunderbans', A.P. Blair in Ramananda Chatterjee (ed.), *Modern Review*, Vol.LXI, Nos.1-6, Jan.to June, 1937, Calcutta

¹⁹ 'Sir Daniel Hamilton o Tanr Samabay Bhabna', Anjali Bikash Mondal in Santosh Burman (ed.), *Sir Daniel Hamilton o Gosaba*, Calcutta, November, 2012

²⁰ Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of 24 Parganas for the period 1924-1933, Anil Chandra Lahiri, Deputy Collector and Assistant Settlement Officer, Pg.145 – cited in Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone*, Gosaba, 2003, Introduction

²¹ *Cooperative Experiments in West Bengal*, Dept. of Cooperation, Govt. of West Bengal, January, 1954

deducted the rent due from tenant to the estate and adjusted the advances made to him earlier in the year and the balance was credited to his account with his village society. The Paddy Society stored and milled the paddy, shipped the finished rice in its own boats to Calcutta and credited the cultivator with the difference between what he had already received for his paddy and what the society had received for the finished rice, less the costs incurred by the Society for milling and sale. The Society's boats brought back the purchases of the Cooperative Stores at a nominal charge which the Stores was able to sell to its members at practically wholesale prices.²² Thus in Hamilton's cooperative experiment, the Credit Society supplied finance for production of crop, the Stores supplied requirements of the members and the Sale Society disposed of their produce. In this way an attempt was made to build up a network of cooperatives where each worked as a complement to the other and all worked towards a common goal of setting up a small cooperative commonwealth. The Board of Directors of the Gosaba cooperative banks looked after the welfare of the villages of Gosaba, governed them and also acted as courts of justice. There was a panchayat in every village which settled all disputes, provided common amenities and formed a valuable link between the village and the landlord. Apparently there was no civil and criminal case in the estate for over thirty years.²³

The Gosaba Paddy Society started with only 25 members and a share capital of Rs. 275. The by-laws of the society provided that the members would be paid for their paddy at the market rate at the time when they would bring in their crops, the paddy would then be sold to the best advantage and the sale proceeds would after deducting incidental expenses be distributed pro rata as bonus to the members.²⁴ The Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal for the year ending on 30th June, 1923 noted that the Gosaba Society in its initial

²² *Ibid* & 'Practical Cooperation – Sir Daniel Hamilton's Farm in the Sunderbans', A.P.Blair, in Ramananda Chatterjee (ed.), *Modern Review, Vol.LXI, Nos.1 to 6, January to June, 1937*, , Calcutta

²³ 'Daniel Hamilton:The Cooperative at Gosaba', Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.),*The Calcutta Historical Journal, Vol.XXVIII, No.1, January – June, 2008*, Calcutta

²⁴ Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1922-23, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1924, Pg.10

year purchased paddy worth Rs.6000 from its members, but was not able to bring the stock to the market owing to the low price of paddy. The Report further stated that the members were very often likely to lose sight of the fact that unless they were prepared to merge their interests with those of the society, the society was not likely to succeed.²⁵ This suggested that on the practical side, the ideology of cooperation was yet to percolate among the tenants and cultivators from below. Hamilton's ideological formulation of cooperation thus had a pragmatic approach and at least theoretically he conceived the movement from the people's perspective. But it is rather difficult to say the extent to which such ideology could be translated into practice. It is not known for certain who really were included in the inclusive scheme of Hamilton's cooperative experiments, nor can we surmise the spontaneous response of the people from below, however limited that be, primarily because the voice of this category of members did not have a chance of being taken note of. They were not yet literate to pen their thoughts. The sources available are the official documents of the Managers of Gosaba Estate, government publications and other writings of the similar category. Thus a gap remains in any analysis of the experiments from the perspective of the people from below.

The yearly report of 1922-23 on the working of the cooperative societies in the Presidency of Bengal considered that the Gosaba Society should be in a position to have some command over the members' crops. To ensure this object it was proposed that members of a credit society in the area of operations of a sale society should arrange to hand over the produce to the sale society and get credit for its value at the market rate in the accounts of their own society, any loss or profit accruing from the transaction being also entered in their account. The opinion from the official or the government quarter was that it would then no longer be necessary for members to sell their produce at a time when they might not get a good price for it in order to repay their loan instalments or *kists*. The credit society would also not incur any risk against the possibility of

²⁵ *ibid*

default and would at the same time give the members a chance to make a profit on the transaction.²⁶

A few presumptions may be made from the above yearly report. For example, the active participation of the members was not hinted at and the decisions regarding the sale and sale proceeds of the members' crops were sought to be in the hands of the society's manager and office bearers. This might have been due to the ignorance of the larger section of the members, but at the same time it is not known whether any effort was made by Hamilton and his men to involve the men from below in the experiments of cooperation and gradually transfer the responsibilities and decision making power to them. However, the report suggests that the commercial prudence of Hamilton helped the villagers of Gosaba estate to overcome their debt and poverty. After incurring some loss in the first year, the society made up the previous loss in the following year, i.e. the year ending on 30th June, 1924 and earned a profit of Rs. 1700 and declared a dividend of 12 ¼% and distributed a bonus of Rs. 2-8 per *kahan* (13 *maunds*). During the next year, i.e. the year ending on 30th June, 1925, the profits rose to Rs. 5300. The society purchased about 15,850 *maunds* of paddy at a cost of Rs. 53,340 and sold about 13,559 *maunds* during the year. According to the report, the society was able to obtain better price for the grower and the success was attributed to the hard work and initiative of the Manager of Hamilton's estate in Gosaba, Sudhangshu Bhusan Mazumdar.²⁷ The report for the year ending on 30th June, 1926 recorded an increase in membership during the year. During the year the society purchased 13,676 *maunds* of paddy for Rs. 52,566, sold 9633 *maunds* in Calcutta, lost 351 *maunds* of paddy worth Rs. 1200 through the sinking of a boat while on its way from Gosaba to Calcutta and 3692 *maunds* of paddy were in stock. In spite of the loss caused by the sinking of the boat and the unsteady nature of the paddy market, the society worked at a profit though the amount

²⁶ Report on the Working of the Cooperative Societies in Bengal, 1922-23, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1924, Pg.10

²⁷ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, 1924-25, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925, Pg.11

of it was smaller, Rs. 1035 compared to Rs. 5300 in the preceding year. The society during the short time of its existence accumulated a reserve fund of Rs. 4000. The rice mill was constructed during this time which was the first of its kind in the province.²⁸ The official records and the statistical details of the subsequent years also noted the prosperity of the Gosaba Society. However, this prosperity does not reveal the exact economic condition of the different cross sections of the members. The records also do not reveal the composition of the members and thus it cannot be ascertained whether the profit, dividend and bonus referred to in the records were equitably distributed among all members including the ones from the margins. As a result a problem remains in determining the exact relief the peasants got from the moneylenders and the intermediaries and the extent to which they became self-sufficient. The ideological and experimental aspects of Hamilton's cooperative programme perhaps could not always converge. However, these limitations should not always be overemphasized keeping in mind the constraints of the context and the time to which the protagonist belonged.

After his initial cooperative experiments with credit and marketing, Hamilton thought of new plans for reviving agriculture and cottage industries to bring about rural reconstruction in the broader sense of the term. He started a central model farm in 1919 to experiment with vegetables and fruits and also to research on paddy and demonstrate the results with branch model farms attached to schools in every village. The then Bengal Government offered the services of an officer to run the model farm. The experiments carried out were indeed novel as they took into consideration the local conditions and sought to explore the variety and strain of crop which would benefit the villagers of the region in every possible way. For example, at Gosaba a distinct variety of paddy known as Gosaba 23 Patnai was developed from a good ordinary Patnai strain, secured from the Calcutta Chetla market. The Rice Research Department of the

²⁸ Annual Report on the Working of Cooperative Societies in the Presidency of Bengal, 1925-26, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1927, Pg.10

Government of Bengal carried out a test where the particular strain was the first to be yielded which bore the distinct characteristics of withstanding drought and disease.²⁹ This experiment proved to be an achievement as it brought about a significant change in the financial position of the farmers of the estate, as the new strain yielded an average of 10 *maunds* per *bigha*, while the earlier yield never exceeded 6 maunds. This particular strain of rice was also sold well in the outside market and was hence grown in most of the paddy tracts at Gosaba. Another strain known as Gosaba 198 was also being experimented with and the experts testing it felt that it also had immense possibilities. Other varieties of Burma paddy were also being experimented with.³⁰

Apart from introducing improved varieties of rice, the estate also distributed successful vegetables free to the cultivators every year. Thus winter crops including vegetables and both *Rabi* and *Kharif* crops were grown by all the people. Long-staple cotton was grown in the higher areas and the cultivation of fodder crops like Guinea and Napier Grass were introduced. As an incentive for better production an annual competitive exhibition of agricultural products was held and rewards in terms of money were given to the best producers of any crop. The first such exhibition was held in February, 1928.

There was also a simultaneous attempt to improve the livestock. However, the results were uneven. The estate imported large herds of Montgomery, Nellore and Ayrshire bulls and cows on the recommendation of the Bengal Veterinary Department and tried to raise a herd therefrom and to diffuse the breeds by selling the cattle at nominal prices among the peasantry. The scheme failed due to lack of experience and more because the climate was not suitable for such

²⁹ Estate Farming in India, Gosaba', S. B. Majumdar in *Indian Farming*, Vol.III, No.II, November, 1942 – cited in Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, 'Daniel Hamilton: The Cooperative at Gosaba', in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol.XXVIII, No.1, January – June, 2008, Calcutta

³⁰ *ibid*

breeds. Because of the moist climate of the Sunderban area, improved chicken breeding did not quite work out but the marshes proved to be ideal for ducks.³¹

The other experiments with cooperation included organization of a weaving society on cooperative lines by the inhabitants of the villages. A Central Weaving Institute was started in 1928 with its branches in all the 23 village schools of the estate for imparting training in spinning, weaving, bleaching, dyeing and mixing of colours. Weaving became thus a profitable cottage industry of the region and their silk and wool products were of a better quality. To provide an impetus to the weavers, the estate declared a subsidy of 3 paise per yard of goods woven by them. Through these cooperative initiatives Hamilton sought to reconstruct the rural community of Gosaba and to make them self-sufficient. It needs to be stated here that most of the villagers as members of the cooperative societies were socially and economically marginalized to whom just dry words of the ideological aspects of cooperation hardly had any significance. Their inertia was to be overcome by making the people feel the pulse of the positive aspects of the cooperative experiments and the incentives perhaps aided to motivate them and make them participate in the programmes. But the extent of participation, the spontaneous response of the villagers, their precise role still remain fuzzy areas.

Nevertheless, Hamilton's cooperative experiments touched every aspect of rural life and through it he sought to reconstruct the rural community in every possible way. To put an end to the ignorance and illiteracy of the villagers, the literacy programme went on in full swing. Free primary schools were established in most villages and arrangements were made to open night schools to educate the adults. The night schools were opened in the premises of every primary school and the teachers of the primary schools took charge of running the night schools as well. The cost of kerosene and other necessary items were provided from the estate fund. Circulating libraries were also established to promote

³¹ *ibid*

literacy.³² Each primary school teacher was allotted 3.5 bighas of land adjacent to the school which were to be used to provide agricultural training to the students. The teachers were also granted ex-officio ownership of 10 bighas of land. A supervisor from St. Margaret School of Calcutta was brought to supervise the overall functioning of the schools. A weaving school equipped with both Indian and English looms was also established. Teachers from Serampore Weaving School were appointed to train students and weaving was gradually included in the curriculum.³³

In 1934, the Rural Reconstruction Institute was established. Its basic aim was to train rural youths in the ways and means for self employment. In its senior course of two years, training was imparted in both practical and theoretical agriculture, cooperation, weaving, accountancy, dairy and poultry farming. In the junior course of four years students prepared for the University matriculation examination and got training in agriculture and allied subjects. The emphasis was more on the practical side and all these initiatives of Hamilton were similar to both the official and non-official programmes of rural reconstruction initiated in India in the 1920s and 1930s.

Hamilton's next important measure was to establish cooperative store houses or grain banks or *dharmagolas* in every village. The estate put in the same quantity of rice crop as was collectively put in by the villagers in their respective storehouses. These were to work as a sort of insurance against possible emergencies. Peasants could also borrow rice from these store houses in times of need. The amount taken as loan was to be repaid after the sale of harvest with one-fourth of the profit made. These *dharmagolas* continued even after Hamilton's death in December, 1939 and gave support to many villagers in Gosaba during the famine of 1943.³⁴ It is learnt from one of the speeches of Hamilton that Parbati Shankar Chaudhuri, the zamindar of Teota, who had

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

pioneered the concept of *dharmagola*, in his interaction with Hamilton supported his similar cooperative endeavour and emphasized on the moral aspect of the movement, the spirit of *Dharma*, which Chaudhuri felt showed an understanding of the people and their problems but was not understood by the Europeans in India.³⁵

Hamilton's most important experiment was the introduction of one rupee notes at Gosaba in 1936. The Retrenchment Committee³⁶ to save a printers' bill had abolished the one rupee note. It was a deadly blow at the development of India because this unwise decision of the British Government of India retarded the development of deposit banking leaving the people of India without a credit system which could be expanded according to the needs of the people. Hamilton felt that India's banking system must be framed to suit the needs of the people and thus sought to reintroduce the one rupee note at the earliest opportunity.³⁷ Hamilton had in his mind a similar history of Scotland, where £1 notes were issued by the banks and cash credits were granted to the farmers in the face of a severe economic crisis in the first half of the 18th century. These £1 notes did not supercede or displace any previous existing money, but were an addition, which provided the people of the country a fund of capital with which they could buy, sell and realize a profit on their transactions. The farmers thus made their purchases, paid wages with them and barren plots of land were converted into cornfields.³⁸

³⁵ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *New India and How to Get There*, Sir Daniel Hamilton in *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.86

³⁶ Retrenchment Committee of the Government of Bombay, 1931 – This Committee was appointed in accordance with the announcement of the Hon'ble Finance Minister in the Legislative Council made on 2nd March, 1931 and it submitted its *ad interim* report to the Govt. on 22nd July. The object of this report was to suggest as early as possible means of retrenchment which could be realized in the current year in order to meet the deficit estimated about Rs.60 lakhs in the current budget. Certain permanent retrenchments were proposed which would render balancing of future budgets.

³⁷ 'New India and How to Get There', Sir Daniel Hamilton in Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.66 & 149

³⁸ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Introduction

Hamilton introduced a similar scheme in Gosaba. The raiyats required loans mostly at the beginning of the crop season in May. Arrangements were made to repay the loan within six months and a part of it was spent in Gosaba for buying seeds from the stores or paying for extra labour. The Gosaba Bank issued a part of the loan in silver coins and a part in Hamilton's notes which were used for almost every transaction in Gosaba. Thus to cater to the needs of the people, Hamilton created a "simple and sound" system of finance which was available when needed and liquidated when not. In an open letter to the Provincial Ministers of Finance, Hamilton wrote that in order to set India on her feet, it was necessary to expand the currency system into a capital fund which would enrich both the people and the sovereign power by employing all her labour, spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical in constructive and productive work which would rebuild all India. In this way he wanted to make Gosaba an example in all respects that would show the way out of the stagnation which the village life of Bengal was steeped in.³⁹

To give a practical shape to his ideas and to show how village life could be revived and illiteracy removed while reducing taxation, in 1938 Hamilton appealed to the then Finance Minister of Bengal, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, to obtain from the Reserve Bank or the Board of Inland Revenue a sum of Rs. 60,000 in ten, five or one rupee notes to be drawn in twelve monthly instalments and the money would represent part of Gosaba's education bill. He hoped to either reduce the Gosaba revenue or income by the same amount, or spend the money otherwise for the benefit of the people, thereby trying to show how land revenue might be reduced where too high, without loss to the Government and with profit to the people. Hamilton's hypothesis was that the above experiment would show how the Reserve Bank acting on behalf of Government, could manufacture all the

³⁹ Open letter to the Provincial Ministers Of Finance from Daniel Hamilton dated 10th February, 1938 – Source - Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.268-269

money required for national uplift by reducing taxation and he wished that salt tax would be one of the first taxes to be done away with.⁴⁰

Hamilton further hoped that the currency reserve could be expanded similarly into a Capital Fund which would finance the cooperative societies when the people had been so organized and the money lent would return in due time, enriching both the people and the sovereign and thereby stabilizing the internal and external exchanges. He assumed that the Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue, Sir James Grigg, would not object to sanction “the small amount required for an initial experiment which was full of promise”. Hamilton expected that all budgets would thus improve, especially that of the raiyats.⁴¹ These later thoughts of Hamilton were laden with ideological suppositions but he did not find time to put them into practice as he left for his country soon after, in February, 1938. And he never came back to Gosaba to experiment with them. Thus the feasibility of these ideas could not be tested.

The official sources noted the success of the experiments in the Gosaba estate. Hamilton took the initiative to settle the labourers, whom he had initially brought in, as tenants in his estate and the limit of the holding granted to each tenant was fixed so as to avoid concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few. Arrangements were made to make finance readily and easily available to the cultivators. The Central Cooperative Bank made advances at the beginning of the crop season being supplemented by funds from Hamilton whenever necessary. The villagers of Gosaba became a part of the experiments and imbibed the spirit of cooperation, especially regarding purchase from stores and sale of paddy. The surrounding became comparatively healthy with less water logging and marshes being cleared. The ideology of cooperation was considered to have supported the people of Gosaba in every possible way, from village reconstruction to availability

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Pg.270

⁴¹ *Ibid*, Pg.271

of finance, thus taking all, the producers and the consumers alike, towards the path of self-reliance.⁴²

The message of self-reliance and self-help through cooperative experiments and the emphasis on the ideological aspects of cooperation brought Hamilton into dialogue with Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi. Hamilton in consultation with Lord Irwin, Viceroy of India and Sir George Schuster, the Finance Minister submitted a scheme for the more rapid development of the movement where he suggested the establishment of a training institute to train large number of young men for service in the Cooperative Department of the Government. Hamilton proposed the establishment of the Institute in Bolpur supposing that Tagore's influence would be an additional inspiration for the trainees. This was later followed by a visit of Sir and Lady Schuster to Gosaba and it was suggested by Sir Schuster that in the event of the Government of India funding the money for the Cooperative Training Institute, Gosaba could be linked to Bolpur. Hamilton was accordingly asked to draw out a scheme for the same and was assured a financial assistance from the Central Government. Hamilton conceived the idea of the Bolpur-Gosaba Cooperative Training Institute where about a hundred trainees selected by the Cooperative Department of the Government in conjunction with the Bengal Cooperative organization Society would be at the Institute at Bolpur for six months and at Gosaba for the next six months. They would be trained in the principles and practice of cooperation, agricultural knowhow including ploughing, sowing and reaping, spinning and handloom weaving and anything else that was required for the work of rural reconstruction.⁴³ Tagore was intimated in this regard and in a letter to Hamilton written sometime in 1930, Tagore heartily welcomed the suggestion of Hamilton in establishing the proposed Training Institute with a centre at Santiniketan conceding that there was no basic ideological difference in their approach towards the cooperative method of

⁴² 'Daniel Hamilton: The Cooperative at Gosaba', Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol. XXVIII, No.1, January – June, 2008, Calcutta

⁴³ 'The Bolpur-Gosaba Cooperative Training Institute' – Source - Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.219-223

production and distribution of wealth as the only means of effecting the economic salvation of India. But Tagore was apprehensive that financial support from the Government would perhaps make the Institute subservient to Government control which would limit and cripple its usefulness and value. Since Tagore's main focus was on Viswa-Bharati at that time, he sought to make the proposed Institute an integral part of it and felt that as long as the Government did not hamper and interfere with the freedom of its administration, he had no hesitation in cooperating with the Government.⁴⁴ So though the objective of Tagore and Hamilton regarding cooperation were similar, a disjunction was noticed between their respective means to achieve it. Tagore's nationalist fervor might have prompted him to express his distrust in bureaucratic association and this was supposed to be in consonance with his idea of self-reliance expressed in his essay *Swadeshi Samaj* during the anti-partition agitation.⁴⁵ Whereas, Hamilton might have thought it to be pragmatic to collaborate with the Imperial Government in all possible ways to further the cause and the prospects of the Cooperative Movement which would widen the opportunities for rural reconstruction in Gosaba.

II. THE PHILOSOPHY UNDERLYING HIS EXPERIMENTS

Considering India's traditions and the contemporary context, the latter being characterized by "discord and debt"⁴⁶, Hamilton felt the necessity to revive her ancient village group life in which lay dormant the potentials of a new form of statecraft infinitely superior to the 'isms' which divide man from man and nation from nation.⁴⁷ He wanted the smaller groups to be organized cooperatively into larger groups and those groups into still larger groups, each grade being given power to deal with respective village or district or provincial matters and thus

⁴⁴ Letter from Tagore to Hamilton, 1930, File-Sir Daniel Hamilton, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁴⁵ Benoyendranath Banerjee Papers, File-Sir Daniel Hamilton, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

⁴⁶ 'Federation and Cooperation', Daniel Hamilton - in Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.289

⁴⁷ 'The India Act of 1935 and The Cooperative Movement', Daniel Hamilton, Gosaba, 20th February, 1939 – *ibid*, Pg. 292

being integrated into one great whole of cooperative commonwealth. He hoped that the labour of small and great, organized and monetized cooperatively, would build a new India, where there would be “room for all men of good will, Hindu, Moslem, Christian, touchable and untouchable”.⁴⁸ The cooperative commonwealth which he envisaged was theoretically catholic in outlook and was at the same time a commonwealth of organized individuals in which every man would receive the due reward of his labour, whether physical or mental, and the whole would be financed by the organized credit of the people.⁴⁹ To him, the cooperative movement was not only about money and it was a new form of social and political structure which was coming up in India.⁵⁰ This form of statecraft, he hoped, would give India both unity and money, the two essentials which would help her to achieve independence both inside and outside the Empire.⁵¹ He wished to establish a few model villages which would give the Government and the world an example of the power of honest money based on the labour of honest men.⁵² In his address at the second Presidency Divisional Cooperative Conference held at Jiaganj, Murshidabad on 26th and 27th January, 1929, he stated that the cooperative system of the government should be built from the base rather than from the roof, and the main duty of the government was to guard the people and help them to work cooperatively.⁵³ He felt that self-government should begin at the foundation, which was the village, and suggested that if the village credit society was given the power to deal with local affairs, then the base of self-government for India would be laid.⁵⁴ He found that the cooperative societies had proved their worth in uplifting the people and their reliability in refunding the money borrowed from The Reserve Bank. Thus he wished to transfer the vote to elect the representatives of self-government to the

⁴⁸ Paper read by Sir Daniel Hamilton to the students of Calcutta University on 23rd January, 1930 – *ibid*, Pg.134

⁴⁹ ‘New India and How to Get There’, Sir Daniel Hamilton, *ibid*, Pg.88

⁵⁰ *ibid*, Pg.98

⁵¹ ‘The Road to Independence’, Sir Daniel Hamilton – in *ibid*, Pg.226

⁵² *ibid*, Pg.95

⁵³ *ibid*, pg.87

⁵⁴ *ibid*, Pg.99

responsible *Panchayat* chosen by the people of all castes and creeds. He hoped that the people would choose the men most trusted, whatever be their caste or creed. The *Panchayat*, according to Hamilton, would be the “Aristocracy of Democracy” which would make the way for a genuine responsible government. He felt that in this way the old village-based cooperative form of government would be revived and made up to date which would help in solving communal problem and possibly the federal problem and India would thus present to the world a form of statecraft “better than any to be found in the West with its warring parties and ruthless dictators”.⁵⁵

Hamilton in his several writings and speeches on the theoretical formulation of the cooperative movement took every care to harmonise the big and the small in the society to reap the best results of cooperation. For example, he trusted that every man of good will from His Excellency the Viceroy downwards would do his best to break the chains of the *mahajans* of the East and the West that bound India and set the people free to work out their own salvation.⁵⁶ To convey these ideas to the ignorant, not so literate villagers, he used such idioms and examples which were not alien to them but rooted in the tradition and history of their country. When he talked of cooperation between the small and the great, between the ruled and the ruler, he cited Emperor Asoka’s pronouncement of “Let small and great exert themselves” which according to him, was a blending of heaven and earth, a cooperative system linking up the people with the king.⁵⁷

Alapan Bandopadhyay in the Preface of his compilation, *The Philosopher’s Stone*, suggests that Hamilton’s island estate at Gosaba was an alternative thesis on comprehensive rural reconstruction which excited his contemporaries. Bandopadhyay raises certain questions, keeping the matter open for debate : whether Hamilton presented a third model, distinguished from the Raj as well as

⁵⁵ ‘The Road to Independence’, Sir Daniel Hamilton – in Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher’s Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Pg.239

⁵⁶ ‘New India and How to Get There’, Sir Daniel Hamilton in *ibid*, Pg.94-95

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Pg.82-84

from the new nationalist project, or whether it was just a redefined venture of the empire, another civilizing mission of the white man, old wine in a new bottle, . Bandopadhyay considers Hamilton to be highly unique and extraordinary in one respect as there was a strong current of Scottish nationalism in his writings and his critique of colonialism in India was often a Scotman's rejection of an English project. According to him, Hamilton being preoccupied with the history of Scotland sought to find Scottish solutions for India's problems.⁵⁸ Thomas Crosby in assessing the political philosophy of Hamilton speaks almost in a similar vein that Hamilton tried to mirror in Bengal the capitalist process that brought prosperity to Scotland.⁵⁹ Indeed Hamilton in his address to the students of Scottish Church College on 13th January, 1917, cited the instance of Scotland's poverty that had prevailed there two hundred years ago and thereby tried to show that how cooperative banking raised the country from a condition of poverty to plenty. Hamilton's eloquence on cooperation did not miss Gandhi's observation, but the latter did not like Hamilton's stress on credit. In a paper written in 1917 Gandhi opined that Hamilton's notion of the Cooperative Movement as a welding hammer being offered by the British Government to weld India into one and to enable her to take a rightful place in the world, was nothing but an enthusiast's exaggeration. Gandhi found Hamilton's thoughts to be confused especially when the latter tried to equate credit with trust and faith. Gandhi's earlier experiences of dealing with banks in South Africa perhaps made him realize that credit was essentially the money power of the world which had very little moral basis and was thus not a synonym for trust or faith. Speaking of the moral aspect of the Cooperative Movement, which to a large extent dealt with credit, Gandhi felt that cooperation should be confined to men who wished to be morally right, and he felt that cooperative credit facilities at fair rates as alternatives to the *mahajans* would not make immoral men moral. So according to him, the onus of the concerned estate or the philanthropist would be to help

⁵⁸ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Preface

⁵⁹ Thomas Crosby, 'An Assessment of Sir Daniel Hamilton's Political Philosophy: The Panacea of Scottish Capitalism and Utilitarianism', October 7, 2015 – www.scots-tagore.org – Accessed on 14/3/2016

those struggling to be good on their onward path.⁶⁰ Hamilton's estate at Gosaba through its cooperative endeavours perhaps tried to inculcate some moral values among men who tried to be good. But evidently Hamilton was not very successful in this regard, because the Manager in charge of his estate had no hesitation in misappropriating the funds of the members soon after his departure and more after his demise.

Bandopadhyay's co-editor Anup Matilal in the Introduction of the same book considers Hamilton to be a utilitarian in his philosophy who through his cooperative experiments tried to ameliorate the sufferings of the maximum number of the poverty stricken people of the estate of Gosaba in the best possible way. To Matilal, Hamilton's approach to the rehabilitation of Gosaba was that of an "astute businessman" and thus he tried alleviate the maladies from their root and though he followed the ideology of cooperation, he tried to yield the maximum profit from his ventures and to roll the profit further and the official records thereby noted the success of these endeavours.⁶¹ This commercial orientation of cooperation was also appreciated by Tagore in his correspondence with Hamilton.⁶² According to Matilal, Hamilton was a benevolent zamindar with a zeal to reform the rural economy and being ultimately a representative of the British Raj, he imbibed the ideologies of the Raj which included Evangelicalism, Orientalism and Paternalism.

Hamilton came to India as a part of a business enterprise and was perhaps on the lookout for more favourable fortunes. It was then that Hamilton got leases for three blocks of land, e.g. island of Gosaba (approximately 830 acres in area), lot 143 (approximately 3200 acres in area) and lot 149 (approximately 4850 acres in area). In 1909 these grants were supplemented by the lease of lot 148, an

⁶⁰ 'The Moral Basis of Cooperation', M.K.Gandhi, A paper contributed to the Bombay Provincial Cooperative Conference held on 17th September, 1917 – Source – M.K.Gandhi, *Cooperation*, compiled by H.M.Vyas, Ahmedabad, 1963

⁶¹ Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003, Introduction

⁶² Letter from Rabindranath Tagore to Daniel Hamilton written from Dartington Hall, Totnes on 20.6.1930 – Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan

extensive adjacent block exceeding 14,000 acres in area, at a sale price of Rs. 14,226 and an ultimate revenue of Rs. 8069. To reclaim the land of the area, he had to bring in labourers from outside, he made them settle as tenant-cultivators, but he remained the lord of the estate. To make the best of the adversities of Gosaba, Hamilton found the cooperative policy to be the best option to ideologically bring together the diverse and sometimes recalcitrant elements and his cooperative experiments linking different aspects of economic activities, not just restricting to credit indeed gave a new dimension to the kind of cooperative movement that was then prevalent. He thereby sought to give a holistic approach to cater to the needs of his estate and the community there, and thus consolidate the base of the rural economy. If we ask whether Hamilton's initiatives worked towards community development, it is difficult to answer the question. The connotation, the classification and the character of the community at Gosaba during that time cannot be ascertained. He was an alien to this country but he worked with and for the indigenous people. However, we have no definite evidence of his effort to build the cooperative movement from below, to empower the villagers to enable them to take the responsibility of their cooperative societies. All his cooperative practices remained essentially part of his estate. To what extent was the basic idea of cooperation "Each for all and all for each" adhered to cannot be substantiated from the official records. The ideology of cooperation was perhaps Hamilton's pragmatic means to consolidate his island estate. He carried with him the history and the convictions of the country from which he hailed and at the same time in his attempt to introduce reforms he indeed kept in mind the frame of mind and the material needs of the people whom he was working for. To make the indigenous people comfortable with his schemes and ideas, he cited examples from the pages of Indian history and tradition. In this respect he might have tried to tread a new path, a third path or an 'other' path, different from the conventional ones of the day. His path was one of an amalgam of the indigenous and the imperial conventions. The historical context of Scotland, its problems and the subsequent

solutions to the same loomed large in his mind and he was prone to visualize the problems in Gosaba from the perspective of his native country and thus he sought to look for similar solutions though the context, locale were different. In the words of Thomas Crosby, Hamilton's experiments were the 'Scottish' brand of compassionate cooperative capitalism.⁶³

III. LIMITATIONS OF HAMILTON'S IDEAS AND EXPERIMENTS

Hamilton's ideas on cooperation were rather short-lived and gradually thinned out soon after his departure. This perhaps suggested the limitations of his approach. Parts of the Inspection Book and the Panchayat Minute Book of the Gosaba estate were extensively analysed by Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar to identify the difficulties and the reasons for the ultimate failure of the cooperative movement in Gosaba. In the article based on these findings, Chatterjee Sarkar points out that the panchayat meetings mostly dealt with the problems of disbursement of agricultural loans from the bank and servicing of such debts by the members. She notices a tendency among the members including the Secretary of the Society to default even in times of good harvests. Rescheduling of payments, complete or partial liquidation of debts, selling domesticated animals of the willful defaulters to repay the loans were some of the measures adopted to arrest spiraling overdues, but none proved to be quite effective. The problems persisted and the number of defaulters increased aggravating the crises further. As a result the central cooperative banks of the district were reluctant to sanction loans for the Society. The lack of commitment of the members to the ideology of cooperation was evident in their disrespect for the particular purposes for which the loans were sanctioned. Chatterjee Sarkar finds that the allocated funds were often misused and there was neither any appropriate punitive nor any remedial measure to check the anomalies. The cooperative practices in Gosaba also could not bring about any structural changes in the villages. The menace of the

⁶³Thomas Crosby, 'An Assessment of Sir Daniel Hamilton's Political Philosophy: The Panacea of Scottish Capitalism and Utilitarianism', October 7, 2015 – www.scots-tagore.org – Accessed on 14/3/2016

moneylenders continued. In fact, the situation worsened and the defaulter ryots had no other alternative but to fall back on the moneylenders to repay their outstanding overdues from the cooperative society and bank. This completely defeated the basic premise of cooperative credit and indicated that the essence of the cooperative ideology could not be grasped by the people from below. Chatterjee Sarkar shows that the degeneration of the basic cooperative spirit among the villagers was evident from the incidents of petty thefts, pilferage, violence, factionalism etc. which became rather rampant in Gosaba between 1920 and 1946.⁶⁴

In identifying the reasons for the failure of the cooperative movement, Chatterjee Sarkar also points out that the departure of Hamilton from Gosaba slackened the cooperative system thereby suggesting that the ideology of cooperation could not really create much impact on the villagers.⁶⁵ The movement as it evolved in Gosaba was almost synonymous with the name of Hamilton, who was not only the protagonist, the inspiration, but the soul of the movement. He steered the movement in his own way, but could neither leave a legacy, nor could uphold before the people of Gosaba the inherent strength of the movement which would inspire them even in his absence. The managers of the estate were often incompetent and even dishonest and the cooperative enterprise at Gosaba thereafter functioned like any other commercial concern where there was hardly any trace of the cooperative ideology.

It is true that Hamilton's cooperative commonwealth was a part of his commercial projects in India, but narrow interests always did not block his broader vision. In an address given to the students of Scottish Church College, Calcutta on 15th December, 1930, Hamilton said that he had applied to the Government of Bengal for a block of land in the Sunderbans on which he wished to create a zamindari of 30,000 bighas or 10,000 acres with the help of the

⁶⁴Daniel Hamilton: 'The Cooperative at Gosaba', Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, in Arun Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol. XXVIII, No.1, January-June, 2008, Calcutta

⁶⁵ *ibid*

bhadralok, the raiyat and the Government of India and hand it over to the Government of Bengal free of cost.⁶⁶ To develop it, he applied to the Government of India for a loan of the people's credit which amounted to about Rs. 2 lakhs and would be drawn by instalments of Rs. 1000 at a time. Hamilton hoped that the money could be utilized in cultivating the rice-land and thus create its own security as it would bring in a fair income.⁶⁷ He knew that a huge sum would ultimately be required for the financing of rural Bengal, but at the same time, he was pragmatic to experiment in a few districts in order to gain experience, before any large programme of reconstruction was begun.⁶⁸ To work out his projects, he had conceived the cooperative movement in India with some basic assumptions, one of which was his faith in the raiyats, the men from below. In spite of his best efforts to strike a balance between his imperial and commercial interests on one hand, and his altruism on the other, a gap might have remained between the theoretical formulation and the virtual execution of the movement.

The mass of the villagers being ignorant and illiterate, some members of the educated middle class assisted Hamilton in the work of his estate, sometimes as managers. They were perhaps more eager to pursue their own vested interests than the ideology of cooperation. Their predominance might have kept the other villagers, the less privileged ones, at a distance from the movement. And the latter did not seek entry into the cooperative programmes. The movement perhaps remained an unknown and an unexplored area for them. Perhaps there was also a problem on the part of these villagers in perceiving and accepting Hamilton's programmes and ideas. Though Hamilton played a significant role in reconstructing the island, he perhaps remained an outsider to a large section of

⁶⁶Address given by Sir Daniel Hamilton to the students of Scottish Church College, Calcutta, on 15th December, 1930 – Source - Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ 'Rural Bengal', Daniel Hamilton – Source- Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003

the villagers and thus there was probably a natural resistance on their part in accepting him and his schemes. Contrarily, the one man show of Hamilton's experiments might have also made them over-dependent on him, and thus as Chatterjee Sarkar points out, no sense of initiative or responsibility for these projects developed in them and that the absence of grass root participation left the entire state of affairs in the hands of some middle-class people in their managerial capacities.⁶⁹

This brings to the fore the fact that the cooperative experiments irrespective of time and locale were initiated by certain key persons who might have tried to create a cooperative milieu among the people, but a similar commitment and vision were often lacking among their assistants and thus the ideology of cooperation could not ideally diffuse. As a result, participation from below could not be satisfactorily achieved in most cases. The distorted version of the cooperative experiments, as in the case of Gosaba after Hamilton, marred the ideology. And the experiments could not thrive for long when the spirit was gone. Yet, Hamilton's cooperative commonwealth, albeit its shortfalls, is still remembered. To Hamilton, the emergent cooperative state formed a constitution greater than any built on "Partyism, or Fascism, or Communism" as it rested on honest united labour and on faith in God and man.⁷⁰ He definitely tried to highlight the humane element of cooperation and thus remained a source of inspiration for those who wanted to follow a similar path.

⁶⁹ 'Daniel Hamilton: The Cooperative at Gosaba', Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, in Arun Bandtopadhyay (ed.), *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, January-June, 2008, Calcutta

⁷⁰ 'The Cooperative State - I', Daniel Hamilton - Source - Alapan Bandyopadhyay & Anup Matilal (ed.), *The Philosopher's Stone, Speeches & Writings of Sir Daniel Hamilton*, Daniel Hamilton Estate Trust, Gosaba, 2003

CONCLUSION

In this study, an effort has been made to analyse the cooperative movement in its ideological and experimental aspects through certain case studies in Bengal between 1920 and 2000. As has been noted, the spirit of cooperation is innate in man, but with the passage of time and particularly with the emergence of socio-political and economic constructs of the modern times, individualism and competition seemed to overshadow cooperation. This created a feeling of insecurity among the people at large. In Bengal, the locale of our study, a self-aggrandizing foreign rule along with different kinds of oppression inherent in the traditional social structure made people, particularly those residing in the countryside, feel quite helpless. And the situation in rural India did not quite improve in the days of great uncertainties and innumerable complexities following India's independence. Cooperative experiments were tried as attempts to redeem the situation in both colonial and post-colonial periods.

This study has tried to analyse the cooperative movement beyond its official parameters and to locate it as a people's movement with a focus on participation from below. The movement has therefore been traced in two parallel courses, official and non-official, indeed with areas of overlap. The non-official endeavours emphasized more on the moral and humane aspects of the movement. The introduction of the cooperative movement in India by the imperial government might have been a means of consolidation of its rule. But in due course of time, its representatives in India too realized the need to reach out to the masses to make their cooperative efforts work out in India. This perhaps necessitated the introduction of the non-credit societies and also the incorporation of the aid of the non-officials. The non-credit societies, theoretically at least, sought to create a new field with "new ideas" dealing with 'development' in India, which in the 1930s among other themes also incorporated improvement of the human material. But "the claimed benevolence of development through imperialism" was

a 'constrained benevolence' because everything still worked within the broad parameters of British and colonial interests.

However, it is not possible to dismiss the official initiatives while writing a history of the Cooperative Movement in India. As the first chapter has shown that the official ideology of the Raj had many strands and did not remain static. On the one hand, there was a liberal ideology. The related views about India within liberalism also varied. But at least for the sake of pragmatism, even the liberals tried to accommodate Indian tradition more or less. In India, it had to be liberalism sans democracy. Indians were considered not fit for democracy and this of course justified imperialism. The well being and security of the Indians would be looked after by the British. On the other hand, there was a second strand of thought that quite differed from liberalism, though it was equally imperialistic. Its protagonists were the 'romantic generation' of civil servants working in the 1830s and 1840s who realized that any abstract universal principle imported from the West would not work for India. In their opinion what was needed was an Indian-style combination of authoritarian, paternalistic and personal rule run by the British on the basis of a thorough knowledge of the countryside. The cooperative experiments that were launched towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century seem to have come out of the matrix of the second strand of thought.

Gradually it was through the non-credit societies, for example, through the Better-Living Societies, Anti-Malarial and Public Health Societies etc., a field was being created by the joint initiative of the officials and the non-officials where the people's perspective did not go completely unheeded. The aims spelt out by the Better-Living Societies at the primary level, like sanitation and hygiene, reform of bad customs among the members, inculcation of thrift, prevention of wastage, promotion of education and healthy recreation, inculcation of self-respect in the members, resistance to corruption, encouragement of self-help and mutual help and overall improvement of physical and moral well-being of the members, seem to have touched the chords of rural welfare to some extent. The Indian

bureaucrats serving the British were more aware of the ground reality. Gurusaday Dutt, in particular, was very much charged by a nationalist vision of a better and ethical life in rural India and came forward with practical guidance.

Posited vis-à-vis these official ideological trends was the indigenous construction of the ideology of cooperation which also touched similar themes as a part of the broad canvas of 'development'. And the cooperative movement as a people's movement owed mostly to the nationalist sensibility of Indians themselves. The cause of nationalism had been urging at least some people to take initiatives in this regard since the 19th century, independent of and indeed in opposition to the official policies. Aswini Kumar Dutta is an example worth mentioning and the Swadeshi Movement of the early 20th century certainly intensified and widened this urge. There were quite a few *samitis* or societies that did not carry the nomenclature of cooperative societies, but imbibed the basic spirit of cooperation, for example, Suhrid Samiti of Mymensingh, Swadesh Bandhab Samiti of Barishal and others. Their informal indigenous cooperative initiatives worked towards what later came to be known as 'better living' when the contemporary state-sponsored cooperative movement thought only in terms of credit. From the 1920s and '30s, when nationalism was gradually broadening into a mass movement, a number of societies initially composed of middle-class people charged by nationalist sentiment and related social sensibility made their appearance in Bengal. Societies with different names, like Rural Reconstruction Societies, Relief Societies, Anti-malaria and Public Health Societies worked almost in the same direction. Rural reconstruction was very important on the nationalist agenda.

In the colonial period, both Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi advocated cooperative projects of rural reconstruction, primarily because of their timeless ethical value, and our dissertation has tried to give them their due. The efforts of Tagore and his associates helped the movement to acquire a popular dimension and encourage participation from below. For example, when Tagore established the Centre for Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan, Birbhum in 1922, much emphasis was given on the work of survey and interaction with the villagers,

which was primarily entrusted to Kalimohan Ghosh, Dhirananda Roy and Leonard K. Elmhirst. The prime objective of Tagore was to justifiably utilize all the available resources for the physical, mental and economic development of the villagers and to regenerate the village communities by arousing their self-respect and self-confidence. Tagore wanted that the indigenous agricultural pattern was not to be overlooked in these endeavours.¹

The work of rural survey initiated by Tagore had begun as early as 1923 in the village of Ballabhpur. In spite of much resistance, suspicion and reluctance of the villagers, an intensive survey could be made which revealed that some indigenous cooperative practices were already prevalent in the village, namely, *gata* or cooperative ploughing and *shal* system of cooperation used in sugarcane cultivation. The survey report also brought to the fore certain other interesting details, for example, some conscious efforts made by people from higher castes to overcome their caste differences and work in cooperation with the lower castes. The former visited the house of the latter during festivals and both cooperated to help each other, but keeping a certain distance, as they could not completely overcome the caste prejudices. However, even these limited gestures of breaking the caste barriers was generally unthinkable in the 1920s.

Kalimohan Ghosh's experience in the village of Lohagora was also equally enlightening. He found in the village an age-old programme of charity in collaboration with the village mosque which reflected the mutual cooperation of the villagers. The Qurbani Fund and the Katra Fund were two charitable funds of the villages, benefitting the Muslims and the Hindus alike. This example of communal harmony through cooperative practices was absolutely indigenous beyond the folds of the official cooperative movement, which were brought before the public eye through the rural surveys. From these instances, however small and preliminary they might be, it can be inferred that the cooperative organizations provided a common plane which helped man to rise over their self-created divisions of caste and religion.

¹Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan, File-Serial No.16, File Name- Cooperative Bank

Gandhi in formulating his ideal of the *Sarvodaya* order, *Swaraj* and *Ahimsa* harped on the ideology of cooperation as one of the basic moral values which underlay all human activities. Micro-level constructive programmes by Gandhian workers, sometimes individually and mostly through the initiative of ashrams, sanghas or associations, for example, Abhay Ashram, Satyashram in Baherak in Dacca, Khadi Mandal at Arambagh in Hooghly, Khadi Mandir at Diamond Harbour in 24 Parganas and others - not only tried to inculcate the spirit of mutuality in the poor villagers, but also worked towards eradication of untouchability and communalism. However, in Bengal, the impact was limited.²

Convergence and divergence between Tagore and Gandhi regarding their thoughts and experiments on cooperation have also been dealt with, which revealed that the basic difference between the two visionaries was perhaps that Gandhi was a politician and Tagore, a philosopher. Tagore was more individualistic than Gandhi and a believer in individual freedom. Gandhi was, however, a practical politician and it was difficult for him to accommodate Tagore's kind of individualism.

This study has also tried to bring out the social content of nationalism as expressed in the cooperative experiments of certain revolutionaries, for example, Motilal Roy and Sushen Mukherjee. Both Roy and Mukherjee had undertaken constructive work through their respective organizations, namely, Prabartak Sangha and Amar Kutir, to improve the condition of the toiling masses and to redirect the national movement in a more meaningful way. Their cooperative efforts were indeed sincere, but were isolated and sporadic which could not coalesce into a movement posing a definite challenge to the atrocities of colonial rule. These small measures were neither a part of the mainstream national movement, nor a part of the mainstream cooperative movement. But the way they tried to reach out to the masses definitely added a new facet to both the movements. This also highlights an interesting aspect of the national movement, where intellectual, emotional and even organizational links between different nationalist streams,

² Mario Prayer, *The 'Gandhians' of Bengal, Nationalism, Social Reconstruction and Cultural Orientations, 1920-42*, Pisa, Roma, 2001

otherwise opposed to each other (The Gandhian and the revolutionary streams, for example), could be forged on the site of the cooperative movement. These non-official efforts often needed financial support through government aids which necessitated their formal registration and thus blurred the clear divide between the official and non-official aspects of the movement too.

The general course of the movement during the colonial period followed the tide of time and the major global phenomena. The economic depression of 1930-31, the Second World War and the Bengal Famine put severe strain on the movement. However, the trust in the movement was not totally lost. The cooperators, the nationalist leaders, the Indian bureaucrats, the revolutionary activists among others sought to uphold before the subjugated people of a colonized country the ideology of cooperation and thereby instill in them the ideal of *atma-shakti* or self-prowess through cooperative experiments based on the ideas of democracy and egalitarianism.

Similar informal and non-official cooperative initiatives were also undertaken in the post-colonial period, from 1947 to 2000, alongside the ideas and projects generated through the official planning. I have particularly looked for certain alternative cooperative ideas and experiments vis-a-vis the complexities of the post-colonial times. An attempt has been made to identify such cooperative experiments in the backdrop of the emerging socio-economic and political trends of a newly independent country. The third chapter of the dissertation highlights the cooperative thoughts and experiments of Pannalal Dasgupta and those among the followers of Vinoba Bhave in West Bengal in the years after Independence. Both of them were carrying the Tagorean and Gandhian legacy of the colonial period in this regard. Their ventures were beyond the official contours of the contemporary cooperative movement, but sought official support in terms of expertise, funds etc. to materialize their experiments, thereby suggesting once again that the official and the non-official aspects of the cooperative movement were not mutually exclusive. Though they seemed to align with the mainstream movement, they also sought to carve out an independent space. But the

incompatibility and even conflicts between their own ideology of cooperation on the one hand and the governmental involvement and control on the other are also historically true.

These efforts were always not economically viable, but tried to show a ray of hope to the people from below and give them moral support, especially when their 'small' aspirations went completely unnoticed and unheeded by the government. A remarkable example has been provided by Charu Chandra Bhandari, protagonist of the *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* movement in West Bengal, who had an encouraging experience in the village of Tentla under Manbazar Police Station in the district of Purulia where he had come across a *Sarvodaya* family, which sincerely strove to begin the constructive programme from below with every member of the community participating. In this endogenous experiment, the volunteers did neither want nor look for any external help. The selfless ideologies of cooperation were hoped to be inculcated even among the children who would work towards an egalitarian social order.

These alternative voices, however, had their limitations. As is evident from the course of their work, gaps remained between their ideals and practical activities. A tendency towards institutionalization was noticed both in Dasgupta and Bhave which partly marred the true essence of cooperation. Furthermore, the commitment and sincerity of the protagonists were found lacking in their successors. Vested interests of a few self-seeking persons took precedence over communitarian interests which told upon the health of cooperative ethics and the subsequent efforts were thus tainted. This brought to the fore the inherent tussle between the two facets of human nature, cooperation and selfishness. The ideology of cooperation became more meaningful when it was nurtured by people who went beyond their self-interests to work for the greater community. But needless to say, such selfless people are rare among the human species. Moreover, such people were required to play a leadership role to carry out cooperative experiments – a role that may not be natural for every such man (or woman).

There could not develop a successive line of leadership that could motivate the people from below in a similar manner. The reasons for this might have been that the cooperators, discussed in this work, might have guided the movement in such an over-caring way that the people from below did not know how to take up the reins of the movement in the absence of the former. Or, it might have been that the small men from the margins with their very small resources had to fight so hard against different kinds of socio-economic malaise that they could not afford to think and dream beyond their basic necessities. They perhaps wanted to be a part of the movement, imbibe its ideology in their own small way, but could not come forward to bear the torch of the movement. We cannot, however, give a generalized answer to the question – what really stood in the way of the legacy being sustained and continued. The reasons varied from case to case. The next chapter makes some case studies to understand the success and failure of the movement.

The chapter, TOWARDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT : SOME SELECT EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE VENTURE, focuses on the social content of cooperation. Certain village-based community development programmes which highlight the human aspects of the cooperative movement have been taken up as case studies. The Better-Living and the Rural Reconstruction Societies of the colonial period worked towards rural regeneration. In late-colonial and early post-colonial India, welfare of the country was being tried out through development of villages and thus a participatory programme of rural community development based on the values of cooperation was being emphasized, at least theoretically. Three categories of case studies have been taken up in this chapter, namely, 1)Anti-malaria and Public Health Societies, 2)Water Supply and Irrigation Cooperative Societies, addressing two vital concerns of rural life during the colonial period and 3)Women's Cooperatives. All these experiments combined official and non-official efforts in varying degrees, but could think beyond official connotations. The urge behind these more or less voluntary initiatives and their spontaneity, helped the local communities in the rural areas to be rejuvenated, for example, the establishment

of the Dadpur-Dowki Water Supply Cooperative Society in Birbhum in 1924. But the path to such cooperative initiatives especially at the primary level was not easy. Many a time there was a general inertia among the people from below. It may be noted that when in 1924, an Anti-Malarial Society was being organized in the village of Bali in the district of Howrah, no Muslim villager out of a total population of 78 showed any interest. Only 16 out of 73 Hindu villagers volunteered to take up the cause. The reason was not communal differences, but the lack of awareness and motivation among the villagers in general. These impediments which stood in the way of spontaneous participation from below needed to be overcome through the selfless humane aspects of the movement.

A major part of this chapter covers women's cooperative undertakings that sought to ameliorate their deplorable condition and lead to self-empowerment. And it is through the women's cooperatives that I have tried to thread the colonial and post-colonial period in this chapter. The women's cooperative endeavours that have been studied for both the colonial and post-colonial years are some of the less known micro-level initiatives, but are significant as they tried to morally strengthen the women and develop collective consciousness in them against not only patriarchal oppression, but against different forms of structural oppression. It is through the women's cooperatives that an attempt has been made to show that the legacy of the cooperative endeavours at the primary level during the colonial period continued in a way in the Self-Help Groups which emerged in the closing decade of the preceding century. There was no basic difference in their ideology. The women cooperators' efforts during the colonial period were non-official to a large extent, but were made more formal and official in course of time. The case studies have shown this transition. It may be pointed out that financial debility of the non-official ventures often compelled them to seek government aid and thus fall in line with the mainstream movement. Thus the overlap between official and non-official aspects of the movement remained all through. It is this non-official area which I have tried to highlight in my dissertation calling it the 'other'. This 'other' aspect of the

cooperative movement expressed itself in different forms, at different layers, among different groups of people. And it in this aspect that the ethical and the humane facets of cooperation become more evident.

However, all the above movements that I have studied remained isolated and did not try to bring about structural changes to alleviate the deeply embedded socio-economic inequalities and exploitations. Without such structural changes perhaps the movement was not likely to proceed far. It often happened that the more prosperous and influential people of a locality derived the maximum benefits of a particular cooperative effort, depriving those who needed it most. This was more evident in cases of cooperative credit.³ Thus many cooperative experiments which had begun with a lot of promise had to be abandoned. The movement lost its moral essence in the absence of the key persons, who acted as an ideal bridge between the formal and popular aspects. And to the people from below, the movement boiled down to a set of formalities and legislations formulated by some elites, which distanced them from the movement. Daniel Hamilton's cooperative endeavours were particularly studied to analyse the reasons for the discontinuation and the distortion of his efforts. For example, certain managers of Hamilton's Gosaba estate were not only incompetent, but highly dishonest. The ideology of cooperation was totally marred in their hands, particularly after the departure of Hamilton from Gosaba. But whatever humane and practical elements of cooperation were there in his movement were not totally lost and still continue to inspire people who wish to take a similar path.

This study was an attempt to reveal some rather unknown cooperative experiments beyond the institutionalized course during a period when the successful endeavours of Verghese Kurien and Mohammed Yunus strikingly enriched the cooperative movement in the subcontinent. It may be noted that soon after India's independence Kurien started working with a small cooperative which was trying to bring economic independence to the dairy farmers in the

³ Samabay Pracheshitar Truti', Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, *Bhandar*, Kartik, 1338(B.S), ed. by Charu Chandra Bhattacharya, Calcutta

Kaira (Kheda) district of Gujrat. The once small cooperative came a long way and the Kaira District Cooperative Milk Producers Union was formed. He recognized that great change takes place through small, sometimes invisible steps and thus to make his mission successful, he moved gradually with cautious steps.⁴ Kurien recounts that he grew with the cooperative and learnt that within every challenge there was an opportunity.⁵ He considered the cooperatives to be people's institutions and he had great faith in the people's power. Though he was betrayed by some whom he trusted, he continued to get support from unexpected quarters.⁶

Trust and mutuality are the core values of any cooperative endeavour. The potential of these ethics was also underlined by Mohammed Yunus while experimenting with micro-credit since the mid 1970s. His long association with the poverty stricken people made him realize the immense possibility latent in every human being to cooperate, to help and thereby to influence not only the lives of his fellow mates, but also the entire human race. According to Yunus, the congenial environment needs to be created to arouse these innate potentials and he sought to do it by providing micro-credit to the people with the least means.⁷

The same humane aspect was also important in some of the experiments we have studied. Even the efforts of the imperial government did involve different degrees of humanitarian consciousness. The aims and ideologies of the nationalist leaders, including those of the revolutionaries, though very much different, shared a common plane in terms of their humanitarian approach through their cooperative endeavours. The man-made divides and differences in terms of politics, religion, communities etc. remained, but it was due to the presence of a broad humanitarian spirit that these did not take a violent shape in the micro-level cooperative initiatives. As has been shown in the course of this work,

⁴ Verghese Kurien, *I too had a Dream*, New Delhi, 2005, Pp.229-231

⁵ *Ibid*, Pg.29

⁶ *Ibid*, Pg.236

⁷ Mohammed Yunus, (Translated by Ila Lahiri & Jayanta Lahiri), *Grammen Bank o Amar Jiban*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1997

members from different religious denominations did not hesitate to become members of the same society, or even the same Self-Help Group. Such instances might have been small and isolated, but were promising and indeed inspiring for those willing to think in a similar direction. And I strongly feel that it is because of the presence of the humane element that the divides between official and non-official aspects of the movement, between credit and non-credit societies got blurred, that even the deep-rooted social divides more often than not based on 'primordial' ties became immaterial. And thus the endeavours, however small they might be, have helped man, especially the 'small man' to survive in many cases. Herein lies the strength of cooperation as an ideology despite all its limitations and failures in history. It indeed seems to have the potential of leading to a better and equitable world. Maybe in the absence of deep structural changes and removal of the basic social inequalities, cooperative practices are not likely to succeed much; but cooperative efforts themselves can surely contribute towards the making of better human beings who can rise above social inequalities and think in terms of a better world based on mutuality, interdependence and equality.

GLOSSARY

- 1) *ahimsa* - non-violence
- 2) *atmashakti* - self-reliance
- 3) *benami* - held in another's name
- 4) *bhadralok* - gentleman
- 5) *bhagchashi* - share cropper
- 6) *bhandar* - store
- 7) *bhoodan* - gift of land
- 8) *bigha* - Indian unit of land measurement
- 9) *boro* - the rice cultivated between November to May with the help irrigation
- 10) *bratibalak* - young volunteer
- 11) *bratidal* - group of volunteers
- 12) *buddhidan* - imparting knowledge
- 13) *chowkidar* - watchman
- 14) *dafadar* - non-commissioned officer in the former Indian army or police
- 15) *danpatra* - gift deed
- 16) *dhan* - paddy
- 17) *dharma* - religion / justice
- 18) *dharmagola* - village grain bank
- 19) *dhenki* - indigenous paddy husking device
- 20) *dom* - lower Hindu caste
- 21) *gaantay khata* - cooperative ploughing
- 22) *ganja* - cannabis or marijuana
- 23) *goshther mela* - local fair
- 24) *gramdan* - gift of village
- 25) *gram swaraj* - village autonomy / village self-government
- 26) *harijan* - lower caste

27) <i>hitaishi sabha</i> -	welfare association
28) <i>jaan</i> -	life
29) <i>janata saree</i> -	coarse quality saree
30) <i>jiwandan</i> -	pledge for lifelong dedication to some work, to bhoodan work in this study
31) <i>khadi</i> -	indigenous hand spun cloth by local artisans
32) <i>khajna</i> -	rent
33) <i>khal</i> -	canal
34) <i>kharif</i> crop -	summer crop harvested in rainy season
35) <i>kisan</i> -	farmer
36) <i>kist</i> -	instalment
37) <i>krishan</i> -	labourer
38) <i>lok-shakti</i> -	people's power
39) <i>mahajan</i> -	moneylender
40) <i>mahajati</i> -	nation
41) <i>mahila samiti</i> -	women's association
42) <i>mandali</i> -	circle, community
43) <i>markin</i> -	inferior quality fabric
44) <i>maund</i> -	Indian unit of weight
45) <i>mela</i> -	fair
46) <i>mofussil</i> -	suburban or rural area
47) <i>nari shiksha samiti</i> -	association for women's education
48) <i>nidhi</i> -	mutual loan association
49) <i>padayatra</i> -	tour on foot
50) <i>panchayat</i> -	village council
51) <i>pucca</i> -	concrete
52) <i>purdah</i> -	veil
53) <i>rabi</i> crop -	crop sown in winter and harvested in spring
54) <i>raiyyat</i> -	peasant, tenant farmer
55) <i>samabay</i> -	cooperative

56) <i>samiti</i> -	association or society
57) <i>sampattidan</i> -	gift of property or money
58) <i>sangha</i> -	association
59) <i>santhal</i> -	a scheduled tribe of India
60) <i>sarbadhyaksha</i> -	chief principal
61) <i>sarvodaya</i> -	commitment to the welfare of all
62) <i>satyagraha</i> -	holding onto truth, a particular form of non-violent resistance
63) <i>shilpashram</i> -	workshop for handicrafts
64) <i>sramdaan</i> -	gift of labour
65) <i>swadeshi</i> -	of one's own country
66) <i>swaraj</i> -	self-government / self-rule

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- 2) Interview of Abdul Ghani, Engineer, Government of West Bengal, taken on 13/i/2015 at 14, Khudiram Bose Street, Kolkata – 700006, residence of Pannalal Dasgupta
- 3) Speech delivered by Tapan Ghoshal, associated with the Tagore Society for Rural Development, an associate of Pannalal Dasgupta during his later years, at a memorial meeting observing the death anniversary of Pannalal Dasgupta on 11/1/2016 at Pannalal Dasgupta Bhavan, Kolkata
- 4) Interview of Swagata Ghosh Das, Chairman, Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society on 25/5/2016
- 5) Interview of Achma Haldar, Chief Manager, Canning Mahila Cooperative Credit Society on 25/5/2016
- 6) Interview of a few members of the above society taken on 25/5/2016 – Sandhya Ghosh, Malati Mondal, Angurjan Bibi, Fatema Bibi, Pritilata Saha, Gita Basu Sarkar, Ajma Khatun

- 7) Interview of Gopal Chandra Haldar, Accountant cum Assistant Manager of Dhalirbati Sevabrati Samabay Krishi Unnayan Samiti, taken on 1/6/2016
- 8) Interview of Madan Mohan Mondal, Manager of Dhalirbati Sevabrati S.K.U.S, taken on 1/6/2016
- 9) Interview of the members of the Self Help Groups under the above Society taken on 1/6/2016 – Maitreyi Haldar, Brihaspati Haldar, Aparna Biswas, Rina Naskar, Sujata Khatua, Nasima Purkait, Deepali Haldar, Swapna Deyashi

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