

A Review of Past Presence of Debi Chowdhurani and the then Societal Structures of Rangpur, Bangladesh*

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Abstract: Debi Chowdhurani was never a female dacoit as described by the Company rulers, rather a savior to her peasantry though evidences in the form of letters, statements, and petition are rare in support of her existence and activities. Still the collected rare documents from the century-old rare books and records turn the ideas into a working hypothesis in the form of an article – Historical Presence of Debi Chowdhurani. This review takes a look at the acquaintances of Debi Chowdhurani, her contemporary zamindars, namesake blunders, societal structure, revenue systems, nepotism, insurrection, oppression, her strolling places, rumours and the last spell of her life. Evidences include authentic and original letters, statements and documents regarding Debi Chowdhurani. This paper focuses on the history and origin of Manthana estate, its contribution to Rangpur peasants' revolt, its controversial aspects of namesake blunders of Debi Chowdhurani and outcomes of counter-checks and about its probable solutions. This review also focuses on potential research work and thorough survey in the field of social sciences through the records annexed in this article on the assumption that Debi Chowdhurani was not an imaginary figure, but was a real person, and the zamindar of Manthana estate.

Keywords: Debi Chowdhurani, Bhabani Pathak, Rangpur peasantry insurrection, Richard Goodlad, Lieutenant Brenan, Paterson Commission, Rangpur Commission

Introduction

Debi Chowdhurani is undoubtedly a historical figure. Official records and documents give enough evidence of her historical existence. People all over Bengal discard the intentional acts of reports and records of the British rulers to stigmatize the character and life history of Debi Chowdhurani, a stubborn and firm lady of Bengal, though a few records relevant to her zamindari and other affairs are still available, annexed (spelling unchanged) here to draw upon the study of almost all the events about her life. Editor Ven. Walter K. Firminger, M.A., D.D., Lit. B.; Archdeacon of Calcutta; Member, Indian Historical Records Commission reported in brief about the loss of records at the office of the Collector, Rangpur in the introductory part (Page v) of Bengal District Records Rangpur, Vol. II; 1779 – 1782 (Letters Received), Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1920 – “The first impression which may be made on any one inspecting the volumes of records at such a place as Rangpur is that, as no records can be found for certain periods, these records have been inevitably lost. On closer study, however, he will find that the absence of the records may be explained by charges in the Revenue Administration, and so in the years when there was a council of Revenue at Dinajpur, he will at once see that what is missing at the Record room at Rangpur, may perhaps be found in the

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Records of the Provincial Council at Rangpur. Again, as to the Collector's letters, in the local office the researcher may only find poorly kept letter copy-book, while, at the archives of the Board of Revenue, the actual holograph letters of the Collectors may perhaps still be recovered."

Debi Chowdhurani took over the charge of a *zamindari* (estate) during the worst of transitional period when the dynasty of muslim rules were over, Bengal famine ruined almost all the peasants and their family members and the British company people yet to start managing the administration. In this span of time the activities of dacoits were accelerated due to the absence of administrative body and failure of law and order situation, particularly in the remote areas of Rangpur district. Rangpur, covered with dense jungle, was then infested with the bands of dacoits. The then zamindars compromised with the dacoits offering concessions in return getting a share of booty and security of both sides. Regarding such understanding of the landlords with the dacoits, Lieutenant Brenan made the following observations in 1787 –"the principal zamindars in most parts of these districts have always a banditi ready to let loose on such of their unfortunate neighbours as have any property worth seizing, and even the lives of the unhappy sufferers are seldom spared. The zamindars commit these outrages with the most perfect security, as there is no reward offered for their detection, and, from the dependence of the *dakait*s upon them, they cannot be detected without bribery."

Debi Chowdhurani, against all odds of the British rules in her entire tenure as zamindar, was the single standing block who put the tyrant Debi Singh's back to the wall. Debi Singh had an understanding with Warren Hastings, the Governor General appointed by the East India Company to extract more revenue from the peasants. He was notoriously known as leaseholder Raja Debi Singh for his application of the highest degree of torture on the farmers. He not only oppressed the farmers by demanding extra tax, but he physically tortured their children and molested their wives in the presence of all in his *kachari bari* (revenue collection office of the zamindar). The farmers finally gathered together to start a movement in the form of an insurrection. To enquire into this insurrection, two commissions were set to go through the real facts and after getting all proofs against the oppressions of Raja Debi Singh, Lord Cornwallis finally issued orders on behalf of the Government. But Debi Singh escaped scot free by showing his loss of money against the Government's demand of the large outstanding balances. Harram Sen was the head assistant of the leaseholder Debi Singh who was by position, a sub-farmer under his control. Harram used to treat the farmers tyrannically subject to the continual cruelty during collection of tax obeying the direction of landlord Debi Singh. Harram was imprisoned first for one year by the company administration for his rising oppressions and after its expiration Harram was banished from the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. Debi Chowdhurani saved the peasants from the tyranny of beyond description with the cooperation and help rendered by Bhabani Pathak during this period. Ultimately Rangpur had reverted to a land of peace and harmony under the leadership of land-lady Debi Chowdhurani.

During sannyasi revolution, Debi Chowdhurani was closely associated with the well-known dacoit leader, Bhabani Pathak to keep the peace and harmony in the peasant community in and around her estate. Richard Gudlad, collector of Rangpur and Lieutenant Brenan, army commander of British East

India Company feared insurgency and forfeited the Manthana estate from Debi Chowdhurani. During this period Debi Chowdhurani perhaps got involved with the brigandage under Bhabani Pathak levanting herself for few days in order to collect the money and man-power to rescue her zamindari, though all that Lieutenant Brenan stated in his report might not be true. After some days she managed to revive the old zamindari and ruled the estate till 1801. W. W. Hunter in his Statistical Accounts of Bengal – Rangpur (1876) supports such dual role of Debi Chowdhurani and describes her close association with Bhabani Pathak – “In 1787, Lieutenant Brenan was employed in this quarter against a notorious leader of *dakaitis* (gang robbers), named Bhawani Pathak. He despatched a native officer, with twenty-four sepoy, in search of the robbers, who surprised Pathak, with sixty of his followers, in their boats. A fight took place, in which Pathak himself and three of his lieutenants were killed, and eight wounded, besides forty-two taken prisoners. Pathak was a native of Bajpur, and was in league with another noted *dakait*, named Majnu Shah, who made yearly raids from the southern side of the Ganges. We catch a glimpse from the Lieutenant’s report of a female *dakait*, by name Debi Chaudhrani, also in league with Pathak. She lived in boats, had a large force of *barkandazs* in her pay, and committed *dakaitis* on her own account, besides receiving a share of the booty obtained by Pathak. Her title of Chaudhrani would imply that she was a *zamindar*, probably a petty one, else she need not have lived in boats for fear of capture.”

Debi Chowdhurani used to meander far and wide of the Teesta river basin of Rangpur district and almost entire Karla river basin of the present Jalpaiguri district using mainly the water courses of both the rivers. Rangpur was declared a district headquarters on 16 December, 1769; and on 1st January, 1869, greater Rangpur district was broken down into Jalpaiguri district. Debi Chowdhurani rendered her donation and distribution services to the poor peasants inside the Baikunthapur jungle of the present Jalpaiguri district. So, therefore, in Jalpaiguri district, Debi Chowdhurani is remembered in several places in the form of temple name like Debi Chowdhurani Sashaan Kali Mandir near Goshala more adjacent to the present Jalpaiguri town; Bhabani Pathak and Debi Chowdhurani temple at Shikarpur tea garden, near Sannyasikata market; Manthani temple on the Belakoba-Rangdhamali road. Wooden images of Debi Chowdhurani are worshipped in these later two temples.

Her noble munificence enabled the villagers of the Manthana kingdom estate to survive through the crisis just after a few years of famine of Bengal with a severe consequence of mortality. She became a zamindar at Manthana estate of Rangpur district and managed the estate for about three decades as zamindar. The word ‘zamindar’ feels or looks small to Debi Chowdhurani, it is better to express her stature of dignity as saviour to her peasantry. She had to collect tax from the peasantry in order to pay tax to her (zamindar’s) higher authority i.e. leaseholder on behalf of the British Company Government. With the collected taxes she never made a large palace for enjoying luxurious life styles for herself or for other family members, but she excavated ponds, constructed roads and advanced financial help to her poor starved peasants. For all these reasons, landlady Joy Durga Roy Chowdhury is known to all as Debi Chowdhurani in Bengal. Debi Chowdhurani, alias Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani of Rangpur was the most influential and famous ruler of the Manthana estate. All on a sudden a family-event forced Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani to swear in as a zamindar. Her husband, Narendra Narayan Roy

Chowdhury, son of Raghobendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury of Manthana estate (presently at Pirgacha up-zilla under Rangpur district, Bangladesh) died in 1765 without any legacy. Then Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani had to govern the Manthana estate for about three decades. Debi Chowdhurani is so popular to her peasants and subjects since then, the people named the village, nearby railway station, school, market, bus stop and road after her name. Her wooden images are worshipped in different temples of the Teesta basin of Rangpur and Karla basin of Jalpaiguri district till date.

Acquaintances

Rangpur is a well-known locality with the flavor of culture and heritage marked with rich history. The name Rangpur, in vernacular, particularly in the naive dialect, means the place of recreation and sensual gratification. As a whole, the meaning of Rangpur is the place of beauty where the people enjoy the heavenly happiness or happiness of the highest kind. E. G. Glazier mentions the meaning of Rangpur in his book 'Report on the District of Rangpur' – "The derivation of the name Rungpore is said to be 'Ronggopore' (Rangpur), the place of pleasure or abode of bliss – Bhagadatta having here a country residence on the Ghaghat."

Rangpur is the place where renowned Debi Chowdhurani once lived and governed her zamindari namely Manthana estate for the period from 1765 to 1801. She started ruling Manthana estate since 1765, in that very year East India Company was granted Dewani of the Bengal Suba (province), although Rangpur district did not receive any administrator promptly on behalf of the East India Company Government. The first appointment was assigned to John Grose in the post of a Supervisor of Rangpur in 1769, four years after the achievement of Dewani by the East India Company. The office of the Supervisor, from then on started keeping all records like letters received and issued, statements, appointments, accounts etc. No records are found before then particularly during the previous Mughol period. There were several records including the letters and petitions of Joydurga Chowdhurani during the entire period of her zamindari, but unfortunately most of those papers were either lost, or have no trace at all. The life-sketch of Joydurga Chowdhurani could be drawn if all those records were available to this author. The limitations as a result of unavailability of all such records made inconvenient for W. K. Firminger to follow up in making the draft of the Bengal District Records Rangpur as he expressed the same troubles detailing most of the problems in the editorial part of the introductory portions of the Rangpur Records – "In past years a number of excellent historical sketches of certain districts have been prepared by Collectors from the records in their local record office. It is only necessary to refer to such works as Westland's Jessore, Price's Midnapore, Cotton's Chittagong, Beveridge's Bakarganj, Glazier's Rungpore. These works, although they have served most usefully, were manifestly based on an insufficient survey of the materials. Sir James Westland, for instance, with his attention absorbed by the locally preserved records, took it for granted that until the commencement of the records actually preserved in his Record Room, there was no civil officer of the Company resident at Jessore. A complete mistake! The records published in the present series of Rangpur District Records do not nearly include the wealth of material available." We catch a glimpse of Joydurga Chowdhurani for the first time in the Rangpur records in 1779 in a letter to the Collector of Rangpur written by G. G. Ducarel, Superintendent of Khalsa Records. But we cannot identify the

actual Joydurga Chowdhurani of Manthana estate as there were three other contemporary female zamindars having the same name and title living during her era. The name in the letter denotes an identity of omission, even it does not prove or ascertain to be the same person of historically famous Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani (Letter – 1; Appendix).

Joydurga Chowdhurani was a ruler, with her supremacy in the zamindari of Manthana estate ruling over 183 taluks or villages in her estate. The name of the villages is enlisted in the records of the Board of Revenue (Miscellaneous), 1795. Curshah, the village name of her birth place, belongs to her own zamindari that she obtained in 1765 after the death of her husband Narendranarayan Roy Chowdhury. The present name of the place where her Manthana zamindar bari (house of zamindari) stood has been changed to Pirgachha that too was under her zamindari. The meaning of the word 'Kismut' suffixed in the village names in the list of the zamindari is the village owned by the blessings of the God by the owner and for the 'Opunchooky' is that village where revenue is fixed. There are 92 Kismut, 26 Opunchooky, 2 Khord, 1 Serenjamy (Serenjamy - the village which receives allowances for incident at expenses made to the zamindars or farmers) found in the village-list of the Manthana estate during the period 1795-96.

Namesake Blunders

Bankim Chandra created a problem by carefully using only the title of Debi Chowdhurani (central character) in his well-known famous novel 'Debi Chowdhurani'. Existence of Debi Chowdhurani in different names in Rangpur district makes a serious problem in the peasant insurrection history of Bengal. Several names of Debi Chowdhurani as zamindars in the district of Rangpur simply creates a complexity and confusion in such a manner that even historians get puzzled with the proper identification of real Debi Chowdhurani who was the central character of the novel. Debi Chowdhurani is not a name, but the title of the zamindar's wives. Almost all the zamindars took the title of Roy Chowdhury, whatever were their surnames previously. The then wives of all those zamindars are entitled to the title of Debi Chowdhurani. All the names of the then zamindars in the name of Debi Chowdhurani in the Rangpur district (presently in Bangladesh) are as the following:

Table 1: The names of Debi Chowdhanis and names of the then zamindar husbands in the Rangpur district (presently in Bangladesh)

Sl. No.	Name	Husband's name	Estate
1.	Jaymoni Debi Chowdhurani	Man Mohan Roy Chowdhury	Tepa
2.	Ananga Manjuri Debi Chowdhurani	Ananda Mohan Roy Chowdhury	Tepa
3.	Ganga Sundori Debi Chowdhurani	Tarini Mohan Roy Chowdhury	Tepa
4.	Saradamoyee Debi Chowdhurani		Itakumari
5.	Bijoya Debi Chowdhurani	Kartick Chandra Roy	Bamandanga

		Chowdhury	
6.	Chandi Debi Chowdhurani	Ram Chandra Roy Chowdhury	Bamandanga
7.	Pabitra Debi Chowdhurani	Bhairab Chandra Roy Chowdhury	Bamandanga
8.	Jagadeswari Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani	Krishna Chandra Roy Chowdhury	Bamandanga
9.	Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani	Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury	Manthana
10.	Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani	Gokul Nath Roy	Ghoraghat
11.	Shyam Sundori Debi Chowdhurani	Jayram Sen	Dimla
12.	Bhabatarini Debi Chowdhurani	Jyanendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury	Manthana

Researchers were sometimes puzzled to see that so many Lady Zamindars ruled for years in the same name 'Debi Chowdhurani' in Rangpur district even in the eighteenth century. Out of twelve such 'Debi Chowdhurani', the three nearest contestants with the same name are Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani of Manthana estate, Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani of Ghoraghat and Jagadeswari Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani of Bamandanga zamindari for entitling as the leader of peasantry movement of Rangpur in 1783. Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani took charge of Manthana estate (Pirgacha) in 1765 and Jagadeswari Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani ruled Bamandanga zamindari since 1779. Another Joydurga managed the Ghoraghat (Bardhankot) zamindari on behalf of her mentally sick husband Gokulnath Roy and later for her minor son, Goloknath after the death of her husband. Their same name 'Joydurga' and more or less same ruling tenure puzzle the historians and create complexity on sorting out the name of the correct one. With this problematical confusion, the content of the song of Ratiram Das, a Rajbangshi, an inhabitant of Itakumari of Rangpur district, a centre of the revolt, solved this namesake problem. He composed in his song – "With all the zamindars arriving at Sivachandra's palace, Itakumari was filled with elephants, horses and soldiers. Also arrived the ruler of Pirgacha, Joydurga Devi. One by one, they were seated in the conference hall adjoining the temple. The raiyats (tenants) kept standing, hands folded and tears rolling down chests." This was the preparatory stage in 1783 when the peasants in Rangpur rose in rebellion under the leadership of Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani, zamindar of Manthana estate (Pirgacha) and Sivachandra Roy, zamindar of Itakumari. Further, Ratiram Das wrote in his *jaager gaan* –Sivachandra Roy lost his temper and spoke again: "since the Rajput robber (Devi Singh) is a scoundrel, you should all drive him out." At this stage mother Joy Durga, ruler of Pirgacha, flared up: "Are you not men – aren't you strong? Though I am born a woman, I can seize him and cut him to pieces with a sword. Nobody would be required to do anything; everything will be done by the subjects." All these words proved Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani of the Manthana estate (Pirgacha) is the real Debi Chowdhurani who openly led the peasants' movement and is the central character of Bankim's novel – Debi Chowdhurani.

Joydurga was born at Curshah Bamanpara of Shib-Konthiram village under Kaunia police station of Rangpur district. Her father's name was Brajo Kishor Chowdhury. Her father came of a zamindar family as reflected by his title Chowdhury and perhaps that zamindari declined day by day during his

father's regime. Kaunia is only 10 to 12 miles away from Manthana estate where Joydurga was married to the zamindar of that estate, Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, son of Raghabendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury. Manthana estate was named after gaining this zamindari with payment of only *du-aana* paisa by one of his ancestors Anantaram Roy Chowdhury. Joydurga's ancestral home is situated at Curshah village on the bank of river Teesta.

Hence, Debi Chowdhurani is a historical character. A few evidences support this fact like – Debi Chowdhurani's Manthana estate (zamindari) was forfeited by dual treachery of both Rangpur collector and the Board of Revenue and this was reflected in the list of cancelled zamindari where the name of Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani was enlisted. Further, recently found two *pattas* namely Pirpal and Muskali Chukani were issued in 1769 and 1791 respectively by the then ruling zamindar of Manthana estate, Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani. All these prove that Debi Chowdhurani is an historical character and reigned at her Manthana estate during the period from 1765 to 1801. Further, Lieutenant Brenan reported that she was associated with Bhabani Pathak and Sivachandra Roy, zamindar of Itakumari to make the peasants' movement a great success. Summing it up, it may be concluded that Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani (1765 – 1801) of Manthana estate (Pirgacha of Rangpur district) is the unanimously accepted leader of Rangpur peasants' insurgence and is the central character of the novel, Debi Chowdhurani written by the great novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Society

Manthana estate was one of the 75 zamindaries enlisted in the office of the Collector of Rangpur. The entire area of the Manthana estate containing 183 villages was populated by 12, 146 people, out of which the number of men were 4,643, women 4,287 and children 3,216 with admixture of the Hindu and Mohammedans.

Estimates of the members of persons, men, women, and children in the district composing the Collectorship of Rungpore, 28th August, 1789

Pergunnahs	No. of men	No. of women	No. of children	Total inhabitants
Mantannah	4,643	4,287	3,216	12,146

A Report on the District of Rungpore (1873) by E. G. Glazier

Decennial and permanent settlement caused the most disastrous depopulation of the village in the zamindari of Rangpur as per remarks made by E. G. Glazier - "The effects of the stringency exercised subsequent to the decennial settlement in the realization of the revenue have been partly pointed out. Edrakpore collapsed early; Carzeehat suffered much, with the exception of the two anna shares, the Tooshvanda zemindary, the remaining four shares became much reduced by sales. Kankina remained whole, and the Futtehpor and Coondy estates, as a rule, weathered the breakers. The generally disastrous period for years preceding the permanent settlement had depopulated the country. The Zemindars of Munthona, Chakla Futtehpor, on whose estate the town of Rungpore stands, represented in 1790 that large tracts had become depopulated and overrun with jungle, in

which there were tigers, buffaloes, deer, and wild beasts of all sorts.” - A Report on the District of Rungpore (1873) by E. G. Glazier (p. 41)

The Collector of Rangpur was most embarrassed off and on in controlling the female zamindars as reported by E. G. Glazier (Report – 1; Appendix). The society was exposed to the acts of lawlessness during the transitional period between the end of Mohammedan rule and the beginning of the British Company rule. The entire area was infested with dacoits. Among them Narayan and Beerbal dacoits were the most notorious as reported in a letter by the Collector of Rangpur. The Collector of Rangpur wrote to the Chief of the Provincial Council of Purnea for his cooperation to arrest Beerbal dacoit who took shelter in the Purnea district of Bihar (Letter 2; Appendix). The Chief of the Provincial Council of Purnea not only helped the Collector of Rangpur at his best, but he even circulated letters among the zamindars seeking full cooperation by giving immediate information related to the location of the dacoits mentioned in the letter of the Collector (Letter 3; Appendix). Beerbal was captured and confined in the custody of the Rangpur Collector. The Collector of Rangpur informed this success of capture to the chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue (Letter 4; Appendix). The Collector of Rangpur wrote to his higher authority for providing him with a large force of burkundaz for strong security of his collectorship. The Board of Revenue disapproved his proposal after a long discussion in their meeting (Letter 5; Appendix).

During the disturbed time of lawlessnesses, people were very corrupted, immoral. Most of the employees, even the peace-keeper sepoy were involved in snatching money and costly belongings from the common people (Letter 6; Appendix). Lieutenant Brenan informed the Collector of Rangpur about the lurking of dacoits near Gobindaganj who plundered all the goods and money from the boat of the tobacco merchants as reported by those merchants through a petition which was forwarded to the Collector for necessary and immediate action. The Lieutenant had already detached a party including 18 sepoy, one havildar and one naik for the arrest of that dacoit (Letter 7; Appendix). Surprisingly, the tobacco merchants described Bhabani Pathak a desperate man, as a dacoit in their petition sent to Lieutenant Brenan (Petition 1; Appendix). Lieutenant Brenan, in his public letter, stated his inability for providing the Collector enough force as required from his end because of the security personnel needed as guards for several prisoners in confinement. A concealed letter was perhaps sent along with this public letter addressed to the Rangpur Collector which was famously known as Lieutenant Brenan's report which is very important for searching the history of Rangpur because it contains the news of death of Bhabani Pathak as well as the name of Debi Chowdhurani as a female dacoit mentioned by E. G. Glazier (Letter 8; Appendix).

The title Debi Chowdhurani was only once recorded in the report of Lieutenant Brenan in 1787 where the fight with Bhabani Pathak with the sepoy of Company force and his death thereon were communicated to the Collector of Rangpur. Debi Chowdhurani was described as a female dacoit and she was associated with Bhabani Pathak as stated in the report of Lieutenant Brenan. Lieutenant Brenan stated Debi Chowdhurani as a petty zamindar without mentioning her full name.

“In 1787, Lieutenant Brenan was employed against a noted dacoit leader named Bhowani Pattuck; in this quarter. He dispatched a Havildar with twenty four Sepoys in search of the robbers, and they surprised Pattuck with sixty of his followers in their boats. Pattuck’s chief man, a Pathan, Pattuck himself, and two other headmen, were killed, and eight were wounded, besides forty-two taken prisoners. Of the attacking party, two sepoy only were wounded. Seven boats, with arms, accoutrements, and ammunition, as the Lieutenant expresses it, were taken. Pattuck’s force consisted wholly of up-country men; he himself was a native of Budgepur, and he was in league with another noted dacoit, Majnoo Shaha, who made yearly raids from the southern side of the Ganges. We just catch a glimpse from the Lieutenant’s report of a female decoit, by name Devi Chaudhranee, also in league with Pattuck, who lived in boats, had a large force of burkundazes in her pay, and committed dacoities on her own account, besides getting a share of the booty obtained by Pattuck. Her title of Chaudhranee would imply that she was a zemindar, probably a petty one, else she need not have lived in boats for fear of capture.” - A Report on the District of Rungpore (1873) by E. G. Glazier (p. 41). Jadunath Sarkar wrote about Bhabani Pathak in the ‘Historical Introduction’ to B. Bandyopadhyay and S. Das centenary edition of the novel (p.1) - “The real Bhabani Pathak was a Bihari Brahmin, a Bhojpuri (Glazier’s Bazpur) from the Ara district.”

Nitish Kumar Sengupta noted regarding the decision to arrest of Debi Chowdhurani by the Collector of Rangpur after getting the report from Lieutenant Brenan in his book “Land of two rivers: A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib” (p. 222) - “In 1787, Lt. Brenan led an expedition against Bhabani Pathak, the notorious dacoit. Twenty four sepoy led by an Indian officer were sent and they attacked Bhabani Pathak and his 60 followers who were in their boats. There was a naval fight which ended in the death of Bhabani Pathak and three of his men, injuries to eight others and the capture of 42 men. Lt. Brenan’s report discloses that Bhabani Pathak had contact with a female dacoit by the name of Debi Chowdhurani who lived in a boat and used to be accompanied by a host of paid fighters. She would take part in the raids herself and was allotted a share of the plunder of the Pathak’s gang. From the surname, Chaudhurani, it appears that she was a zamindar. On receipt of the Lt. Brenan’s report, the Collector wrote to him (12th July, 1787) informing him that it was not necessary to arrest Debi Chowdhurani just then and necessary directions would be given on receipt of further information regarding her.”

A few zamindars of Rangpur reportedly had the knack of attachment with the dacoits. They took the share of booty from those dacoits for their cooperation. The Company rulers mentioned zamindars’ involvement with the dacoits in the Rangpur records, though the regulations of 1783 was there regarding prohibition of such unusual incidents of attachment of the zamindars with those notorious dacoit gangs. The Collector of Rangpur, E. G. Glazier lamented over the non-application of that regulation of 1783. He commented – “The regulations of 1783 contained the following rule, which, it seems, was never carried out.”

The Regulations of 1783 for the zamindars

“That whenever a zemindar is proved guilty of having abetted, practiced, or connived at robberies or murder, none of his family be permitted to succeed to the zemindary without the express permission of the Board.”

Julius J Lipner who translated the novel ‘Debi Chowdhurani’ from Bengali stated that the content of the novel as mythical, not historical happenings - “The name of Debi Chaudhurani, Bhabani Pathak, Mr. Goodlad, and Lieutenant Brenan are historical, as indeed are the few facts that Debi lived in a boat, and she had ‘fighter’ and armies etc. But that is all. If the reader would be so kind as not to consider ‘Debi Chaudhurani’ a ‘historical novel’ (*aitihasik uponyas*), I’d be most obliged.” - Debi Chaudhurani by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, or The Wife Who Came Home – translated Julius J Lipner.

Insurrection

Tax rebellion at Rangpur is the first organized insurgence of peasants in the soil of Bengal. The villain of this insurgence is the then Collector of Rangpur, Mr. Richard Goodlad along with the direct assistance of leaseholder Debi Singh and his assistant Harram Sen. The Rangpur Collector Richard Goodlad, by nature, a treacherous character, directed Debi Singh and his assistant to collect tax from the zamindars and farmers by any means, just or unjust. This Collector Richard Goodlad started his career as an Assistant Collector of Rangpur as stated by E. G. Glazier in his book ‘Report on the District of Rangpur’ (p. 45) – ‘George Bogle died early in 1781, and Goodlad, who had been assistant here for two years, was appointed Collector and Judge; while the native officers of Goodlad foudjar and tannadar were abolished. Goodlad remained until 1784, when he was succeeded by Moore. He was for a year the Collector of Ghoraghat, and then we lose sight of him.’ The villain of Rangpur insurrection Richard Goodlad was nominated to his most pleasurable post as the Collector of Rangpur on April 14, 1781 against the vacant post of Mr. George Bogle who died early in 1781 (Letter – 9; Appendix). From the beginning of his collectorship, Mr. Richard Goodlad took the utmost help from leaseholder Debi Singh and his assistant Harram Sen for the collection of tax all over Rangpur. Debi Singh and Harram Sen are known as a deliberate scoundrel and a rascal respectively to the peasants of Rangpur. The arch villain Richard Goodlad plotting together with them for the evil purpose of collection of tax through torture and tyranny, operated in harmony with the zamindars which is reflected in his letter to the zamindars (Letter – 10; Appendix). Rangpur Zamindars, realizing the smell of conspiracy of those three Goodlad, Debi Singh and Harram, who combined openly for this unlawful purpose, replied in response to the letter sent by the Collector of Rangpur without any delay. The draft of this letter-in-reply to the Collector was written by Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani in consultation with the other Zamindars of Rangpur (Letter – 11; Appendix). Insurrection was caused due to the constant overall distress faced by the *ryots* (peasants) economically for over-taxation followed by cruel corporal punishment as a consequence of non-payment of the tax. Still the peasants prayed for justice to Richard Goodlad by requesting the abolition of different tax laying burden over them (Petition - 2; Appendix). E. G. Glazier (1873) clearly expresses the statements of the then peasants with their own words (Report - 2; Appendix).

Richard Goodlad wanted to restrain the insurrection through terrible and dreadful means of firing over the rebels and in order to fulfil his objective, he wrote to the Commandant to send more and more force to enrich his army force (Letter – 12; Appendix). In response to the several letters written by Mr. Goodlad to the Board of Revenue updating the situation of insurrection, the member of the Board managed to send the force to tackle the inconceivable situation at the earliest. The members of the Hon'ble Board of Revenue wrote to the Collector about the dispatch of more than 200 sepoys from Calcutta to Rangpur. They directed Mr. Goodlad to cooperate with Mr. Paterson whom the Board of Revenue sent with fullest authority to give orders etc for laying hold of insurrection (Letter – 13; Appendix). The Board of Revenue set a Commission for searching all the reasons for the insurrection with Mr. Paterson as its Chairperson. To make its full success, Mr. Goodlad was directed to share every information and facts of the peasants' insurrection of Rangpur (Letter – 14; Appendix). The Rangpur peasants' insurrection comes to an end after a huge defeat and death in the battle of Patgram between sepoy party led by Lt. Macdonald and the peasants who fought against the English Company-Government resisting its burden for levying tax. It was an uneven war as the rebels bore only indigenous arms like bows and arrows, lances, spears etc, against the arms like guns on of the government party. The fight took place without any din and bustle as the sepoy troop were in disguise covering themselves with white cloths obeying the advice of Lt. Macdonald and fired about 3 rounds from their guns coming nearer to the rebels. Sixty rebels died, 56 were wounded without getting any chance of resistance against the joint troops of Lt. Macdonald and Mirza Mohammad Tuckey's burkundases force. Rest of the rebels were imprisoned. The report adds that one wounded rebel died on the way to Rangpur. The Lieutenant reported that the entire incident happened near Patgram detailing the rebels' origin of residence from Bihar and Bengal (Letter – 15; Appendix).

The tyranny and torture upon the farmers by the Rangpur Collector Richard Goodlad, the leaseholder Debi Singh and his assistant, Harram Sen resulted in the insurrection as a consequence. The degree of torture even upon the zamindars is beyond description, the incidents of which is reflected in the Jaager gaan composed of Ratiram Das – the translated form (translated by Amiya Bose) of which is available in the book 'Bangladesh Readers: History, Culture, Politics' by Editors, Meghna Guhathakurta & Williem van Schendel (Appendix).

Mr. Richard Goodlad, Collector of Rangpur tried utmost to put down the insurrection, but to no effect as it was not an easy task. Mr. Richard Goodlad, by nature, is a traitor, betraying the farmers upon the issue of deductions of tax that he initially promised to them. But treacherously he did not remove the rate of tax, and that's why the insurrection broke out again. Ultimately the insurrection was stopped with the interference, assistance and help rendered by his higher authority, Board of Revenue of Fort William, Calcutta. They supplied a large army force from Calcutta and Purnea and the peasantry insurrection came to an end at last after a huge loss of life. Warren Hastings, Governor General and Richard Goodlad had had the same vested interest to earn money from the farmers and zamindars through collection of tax and in order to fulfil their goal they took the assistance of the leaseholder

Debi Singh of same character as they had. The description of the one sided gun-firing over the starved peasants as a “battle” in his letter is the reflection of his character. Mr. Richard Goodlad was showcaused by his higher authority for the incident of Rangpur insurrection and Mr. Richard Goodlad communicated his answer to his higher authority with a delay of about a month seeking another chance to repair insurgence-disturbed Rangpur (Letter – 16; Appendix).

The Paterson Commission started its full-fledged functioning at Rangpur, although Mr. Richard Goodlad, Collector was transferred in 1784 from Rangpur by his higher authority. So the members of the Paterson Commission wrote to the Acting Collector to send Dherajnarayan – one of the leaders and accused in the insurrection for taking him in their custody for relevant questioning (Letter – 17; Appendix). Paterson Commission members further communicated with the Acting Collector of Rangpur to send the Officer-in-Charge of the Police Station as an important attestation of the insurrection (Letter – 18; Appendix). The search of Paterson Commission ended on the 21st May, 1785. The members of the Paterson Commission, which was commenced on the 31st March, 1783, declared the closure of their search and communicated to the Acting Collector directing him to send Debi Singh to the President with proper security as available at his collectorate (Letter – 19; Appendix).

The report of the Paterson Commission is brought to light in 1785 and the Commission's Report accuses Mr. Richard Goodlad, the then Collector of Rangpur and the leaseholder Debi Singh. The higher authority refused the facts of the overall Report and sat another Commission namely Rangpur Commission. Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani was questioned several times during the progress of this Commission (Report - 3; Appendix). Several important questions, facts and query were put before Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani, the Zamindar of Manthana estate by the members of the Rangpur Commission (Report - 4; Appendix). Final orders were given ultimately in 1789 during the Governor Generalship of Lord Cornwallis after a gap of 6 years from the commencement of Rangpur revolt. The order and judgment have not satisfied the inhabitants of Rangpur (Report - 5; Appendix).

Oppression

The British East India Company rulers oppressed Joydurga Chowdhurani severely and unjustly as she not only supported the peasants of the Rangpur revolt, but led peasants' insurgence in 1783. Joydurga even had to go in hiding and living incognito and had suffered hardship during her tenure of zamindari. British company rulers started exerting pressure by enhancing the rate of taxation but the zamindars could not pay the tax. We have found the name of Manthana estate, in a letter written by Acting Collector of Rangpur who reported against Joydurga Chowdhurani of the non-payment of tax to the Governor General, Warren Hastings (Letter – 20; Appendix). Zamindars had to pay tax in due time to the Collector's treasury. Joydurga Chowdhurani went into hiding and living incognito away from her subjects from 1778 as she being a zamindar, was unable to pay the tax which was forcefully

claimed from them by the British Company rulers. Due to non-payment of tax on behalf of the zamindar, the Acting Collector forced sending a sezawal (Company-rulers appointed tax collector) to collect tax in the Manthana estate subject to the approval of appointment from the end of the Governor General in Council.

The Acting Collector in his letter further reported that Joydurga was absent from her zamindari and secluded to Batoriah. The zamindar herself went in hiding, the Gomastah died, so the management on the zamindari was not properly going on including collection of tax (Letter – 21; Appendix). Charles Purling, Collector of Rangpur reported the same in his letter dated 17th September, 1779 as good as the Acting Collector had communicated as on the 24th July, 1779. He prayed for the approval of the appointment of the sezawal till that period of either returning of the zamindar herself or appointing a Gomastah for her zamindari in the post vacated by the death of her former Gomastah. Concealment of Joydurga Chowdhurani from her zamindari continued from 1778 (Letter – 22; Appendix). Warren Hastings was very strict particularly on collection of tax and therefore he directed the Collector of Rangpur to apply the general orders regulated as on the 14th October, 1777 by confinement of the zamindars who did not pay tax and they would be confined up to the date of repayment of arrears as due from them. Further, Warren Hastings approved the post of sezawal appointed for the collection of tax in the absence of Joydurga Chowdhurani from 1778 (Letter – 23; Appendix).

During the rule of the British East India Company, the settlement of the zamindari had to be renewed every year as per terms settled by the Board of Revenue at Fort William, Calcutta. All those temporary appointments made by the local administrators were subject to the approval by the higher authority. Collector of Rangpur sent letter to the Governor General for the approval of appointment of the sezawal for the Manthana estate. Rangpur Collector mentioned in his letter the reason behind the concealment of Joydurga Chowdhurani having absconded from the dread of a warrant (Letter – 24; Appendix). Non-payment of tax fixed from the Government side led to the sale of the portion of the zamindari at a nominal price. The Manthana estate zamindari faced such crisis for non-payment of tax to the Collector's treasury (Letter – 25; Appendix).

The then Gomastahs were very powerful employees in the zamindari and the post was almost hereditary. Having such back grounds, gomastah sometimes did not abide by the orders of the Company rulers. That's why the Board of Revenue empowered the Collector of Rangpur for the approval or rejection of the appointment of gomastah of any such zamindari (Letter – 26; Appendix).

Surprisingly we cannot find any documents in the form of letters, statements, notice etc. regarding the management of her or her zamindari from April, 1781 to April, 1787. Joydurga Chowdhurani was still in living incognito. The members of the Board of Revenue ordered the Collector for the engagement of the zamindari, if the gomastah was empowered by her zamindar or if the Ranny (Joydurga Chowdhurani) returned to her zamindari being summoned by the public advertisement in the mean time or any other expedient way of solution, but the peasants of her zamindari were allowed to

cultivate their land. The British Company rulers knew that no tax would be collected from the farmers if they were not allowed farming. The zamindar of Manthana Joydurga Chowdhurani remained absent from her zamindari from 1778 to 1787 as reflected in the letters of the Board of Revenue, although she managed her zamindari keeping herself in hiding (Letter – 27; Appendix).

Due to over-taxation, the Manthana zamindari could not pay the entire amount of Rs. 34,379 fixed for the year 1787 and for that reason, the Manthana zamindar prayed for the deduction of Rs. 3000. The Collector disagreed to that proposal and suggested to appoint a sezawal who promised to collect the proposed amount for the next 10 years (1778 – 1787). The sezawal was appointed at Manthana zamindari only due to the absence of the zamindar or her gomastah from her zamindari. But in the year 1788, the Collector proposed the appointment of sezawal for the collection of the total amount of tax fixed for the coming year of 1788. From this fact and content found in this letter of the Rangpur Collector dated 7th May, 1788; one could consider that Joydurga Chowdhurani returned to her zamindari in 1788 after 10 years of her living incognito (Letter – 28; Appendix). In other letter, Rangpur Collector informed about the tax due for flood at Manthana estate amounted to Rs. 4204 (Letter – 29; Appendix). Members of the Board of Revenue did not approve the remission of the sanctioned tax for the last year in favour of Manthana zamindari due to non-availability of any valid reason (Letter – 30; Appendix). The information regarding zamindar's refusal of the government proposal at first to pay extra tax of Rs. 2000 induced to decline the management of the zamindari of Rangpur district (Letter – 31; Appendix). Joydurga Chowdhurani ultimately agreed to the proposal of increased tax of Rs. 2000 and she sent her second gomastah to the office of the Collector to put his signature on the modified agreement on behalf of Joydurga Chowdhurani (Letter – 32; Appendix).

Board of Revenue becomes increasingly greedy to go for greater income from the farmers and zamindars of Bengal. Here in this letter the Board of Revenue members directed the Collector to carry on collection of tax from the zamindars (Letter – 33; Appendix). In 1790, the Board of Revenue formulated such a law by which the minor and female zamindars were disqualified as landholders. This is another oppression over Joydurga Chowdhurani by disqualifying her as zamindar from the Manthana zamindari where she has been managing her estate since 1765 after her husband's death. Collector of Rangpur sent a letter to the Board of Revenue giving details about the disqualified minor and female zamindars adding such list as an annexure to his letter.

The statement of the Collector bears important information about Joydurga Chowdhurani that she is about 47 years of age in 1790 (Letter – 34; Appendix).

It is really splendid to see in black and white that one of the British Company rulers praised Joydurga Chowdhurani, zamindar of the Manthana estate. In their statement, she is one of the most worthy zamindars of Rangpur, she is capable of writing, reading and quite up and doing for managing her own concerns. The Board of Revenue thus has withdrawn the order of disqualification from her and she is then exempted from the General Regulations and able to appoint the gomastah according to her will (Letter – 35; Appendix). The Collector of Rangpur recommends and seeks the approval of the

Board of Revenue for some exemplary punishment levying upon the zamindars because of their negligence in providing documents as directed by the Collector. The name of Joydurga Chowdhurani is seen enlisted among those punished zamindars in the top of the list (Letter – 36; Appendix).

Revenues

The British East India Company planned a lot after achieving dewani of Bengal, but collection of revenue and tax turned into a headache for them. Ignorance of the local language by the British people and no knowledge of English among the inhabitants of Bengal are the prime reasons of inconveniences for the fixation of revenues as well as collection of tax. They left this business in the hands of the local clever people who preferred this type of job and had similar kind of experience before the establishment of the administration by Company rules. Likewise, Madangopal collected tax and maintained accounts for Rangpur followed by Mirza Hossain Reza during that period. Gradually the company rulers understood the local languages and learnt about the fixation of tax. They started to exert pressure by increasing taxes over the inhabitants of Rangpur every year. Such burden of over-taxation causes the tax rebellion in 1783 at Rangpur after 18 years of achieving Dewani by the East India Company in Bengal.

The name of the zamindar, Manthana estate is seen for the first time in the records of the statement of 1777 in an account of deduction favouring the zamindar of Manthana estate; the recommendation of which is sent to the Governor General, Warren Hastings for its approval. The deduction favoured accountability of the Manthana estate by Charles Purling, Collector of Rangpur is Rs. 3,119, Annas 7, Gundah 9 for the session 1776 (Letter – 37; Appendix).

Appointment of Debi Singh, Gangaprasad and Hurram Sen as Dewans of Rangpur in three consecutive years was tendered to the Collector of Rangpur by the Board of Revenue at Fort William, Calcutta. Though Hurram was temporarily appointed as Dewan of Rangpur, he ultimately became the assistant to leaseholder Debi Singh subsequently. Debi Singh and Hurram were marked as the noted villains of the Rangpur insurrection and were accused thereon by the Paterson Commission (Letters – 38 & 39 and Report - 6; Appendix). Hon'ble members of the Board of Revenue ultimately decided to remove the leaseholder Debi Singh from the post of Dewan of Rangpur at the end of the insurrection for his acts of tyranny and torture (Letter – 40; Appendix). Warren Hastings, the Governor General, dissolved the Provincial Council of Revenue that showed no sign of improvement of revenue in the province for which reason the Council was set up (Letter – 41; Appendix).

The statement of accounts reflected the name of Joydurga as the zamindar of Futtehpur 2 Annas Manthana estate for the first time in the records of Rangpur mentioning the amount of deposition and subscription scheduled for her estate by the Rangpur Collector (Statements of Accounts - 1; Appendix).

Joydurga Chowdhurani, disqualified as a zamindar for being a female in terms of the regulations under Company act, was paid monthly allowances (Mashohaara) as a landholder. Revenue of that estate was then collected by the agent appointed by the Collector of Rangpur. The gomastah was

asked several questions related to the ratio of cultivated land and jungle areas, improvement of agricultural lands and increase of revenue thereon after being called to the office (Statements of Accounts - 2; Appendix).

Contemporary

Joydurga Chowdhurani was the most popular zamindar for her forceful personality among all of her contemporary zamindars. Ranny Bhabani, the zamindar of Natore under collectorship of Rangpur, was also contemporary to Joydurga Chowdhurani. Ranny Bhabani managed her zamindari up to 1795. She died in 1795. Shiv Chandra Roy was not only a contemporary zamindar to Joydurga Chowdhurani, but a fan and follower of her. Shiv Chandra liked Joydurga Chowdhurani for her sagacious leadership. There are three contemporary zamindars bearing the same name of Joydurga Chowdhurani. One of them was her neighbour, the zamindar of Bamandanga, namely Jagadeswari Joydurga Chowdhurani. She died early in 1790. The last one zamindar bearing the same name of Joydurga Chowdhurani was the caretaker zamindar of Ghoraghat (Bardhankot) for her mentally disabled husband for the first time and later for her under aged minor son. There are several affairs of those zamindars during that period.

Shiv Chandra Roy, a contemporary zamindar to Joydurga Chowdhurani and one of the most noted leaders of the Rangpur insurgence, made a petition to the Collector for accurate calculation of tax in terms of the fixation of the settlement made between the zamindars and the Collector. The Collector of Rangpur forwarded the petition to the Board of Revenue for its approval (Letter & Petition – 42; Appendix).

The Bamandanga zamindar having the same name of her contemporary zamindar Joydurga Chowdhurani of the Manthana estate died in 1790. The Board of Revenue permitted her adopted son Bhairab Chandra Chowdhury, aged about 21 years, the possession of the Bamandanga zamindari left by her adoptive mother Jagadeswari Joydurga Chowdhurani. Death of Jugdeswari Chowdhurani, Zemindar of Bamandangah, leaving an adopted son by name of Bhyrub Chandr of 21 years of age, is reported by the Collector. Board directed Roy Royan to call on the Sudder Canoongoes for a statement of the farming of the deceased (Letter – 43; Appendix).

Nepotism

The Bamandanga zamindar Joydurga Chowdhurani had done with an appeasable incident of unusual daily attendance of two peons at her cutchery (office of the zamindar) through a written petition to the Collector of Rangpur. The Collector of Rangpur, after being confused with the movement of two peons, wrote all about to the Governor General and other members of the Council. Mr. Warren Hastings directed to the Collector of Rangpur to take those fake peons in his custody and must seek to show the warrant from the peons in presence of witness in the office of the Collector, Rangpur (Letter 44; Appendix).

A contradictory decision was taken by the Collector of Rangpur through appointing a 'Aumeem' in a land-debate issue between the zamindars of Baharbund and Bhetarbund, where Ranny Bhabani of Natore took appropriate steps for remedial solution of that issue with the request of those two zamindars. The Board of Revenue wanted a query about this legal matter seeking the reasons for the interference by the Collector of Rangpur in this issue as stated by Ranny Bhabani in her petition (Letter 45; Appendix). Rapid changing scenario of Mr. Peter Moore from poverty to affluence within the period of only 18 months of his collectorship set a series of examples of immortality to his native European fellows. William Hichey, once his European neighbour, recalled those early days and included in the Extract from the memoirs of William Hichey, Vol. III, pages 163-164, (Hurst and Blackett Ltd.), reprinted for insertion in Volume IV of the Rangpur District Records: Bengal District Records Rangpur, Vol. IV; 1779-1785 (Letters Received), Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1921 (Statement – 3; Appendix).

Mr. Peter Moore was appointed on the 15th April, 1784 as the Collector of Rangpur and served for 18 months in this post before his departure for Europe for ever (Letter 46; Appendix).

After being informed by the Acting Collector of Rangpur, the members of the Board of Revenue were all surprised on the incident that Mr. Peter Moore had not left the letters and documents of public correspondence during his tenure of his collectorship. When the members of the Board came to know Mr. Moore had already sailed for Europe. The Board assigned the Acting Collector to recover those documents through the Attorneys of Mr. Moore. They smelled something fishy about this mysterious conduct of Mr. Peter Moore (Letter 47; Appendix).

Preparer of the Report of the Revenue Department requested the Collector of Rangpur to issue a summon to Indranarayan Bose, Naib of Manthana for his personal attendance at the office of the Collector requiring interrogations regarding illicit receipt of money against the Rangpur Commissioner. The Governor General in Council communicated such irregularities heard about the Rangpur Commissioner and directed to PRRD for an early investigation regarding this matter (Letter 48; Appendix).

Hearsay

Debi Chowdhurani was the ruler of Manthana estate. After the death of her husband, Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, she managed the said Manthana zamindari for more than three decades. Manthana was never a name of a village or of a mouza. Establishment of a zamindari by extradition of the land through extraction from others i.e. 'Manthan' in Bengali - that's why the zamindari is nomenclatured as "Manthana". Debi played a leading role in the Rangpur peasants' insurgence in 1783, and became a symbol of resistance to the arrogant revenue rule of the British East India Company. Debi Chowdhurani organized an army to defend peasants of Rangpur when the peasantry insurrection broke out, she joined the rebels. She led her soldiers in full warrior regalia, fought bravely and determinedly, but was killed in the battle on 18th April, 1783 in the field of Napai Chandir Math,

about a mile away from her zamindari palace of Pargachha, Rangpur. Those rebels who were alive after that battle cremated the deceased body of Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani, her younger brother, Kesto Kishor Roy Chowdhury Itakumari zamindar, Shib Chandra Roy and other rebels inside the forest surrounded by the river Aalaikuri and nomenclatured the place as 'Pabitra-jhaar'. The date of death of Debi Chowdhurani falls on the first Thursday of the month of Baishakh and the local people pay respect in her memory by holding a village fair thereon i.e. at Napai Chandir Math every year on that day. Her unquenchable spirit, courage, and self respect gave the British sleepless nights. The story of the guts and sacrifice of this 18th century warrior queen is truly an inspiration for all Bengalee.

Debi Chowdhurani exists on a foundation of believability. It was rumoured about her defeat and death in the battle of Napai Chandir Math. None witnessed that incident and no historian, surveyor, administrator or gazetteer writer recorded her death in black and white in a fight against the British armies, although the death of Bhabani Pathak in the fight against the armies of the British rulers is clearly visible at the Lieutenant Brenan's report followed by almost all the books and gazetteers about Rangpur during the British era. The incident of Debi's death had not been composed in the song (*Jager gaan*) of Ratiram Das, a member of Rajbangshi community, who lived in the village of Itakumari, a centre of revolt. It's a common belief that the spirit of self-sacrifice of anybody else for the sake of country either for patriotism or for any revolt would become a more hit song than those of only praise or bravery in the traditional folk lore or folk-song. But Ratiram Das's tears were a witness to sincerity, wisdom and sagacity to Debi Chowdhurani, not for her dire consequence faced ultimately as a leader of peasants' insurrection.

The seal of order issued by Debi Chowdhurani are the splendid and powerful evidences of the time span of ruling the Manthana estate during the period from 1765 to 1801. One such *firman* or *patta* is Pirpal seal of order issued by Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani on *Magh* 5, 1176 *Bangabdo* (1769 - 1770) and another one is Mushkali Chukani *patta* issued by Debi on *Kartik* 25, 1197 *Bangabdo* (1790 - 1791). Abdul Goffur of Pargachha collected both these seal of orders issued by Debi Chowdhurani and the publications of those are visible in print at the magazine 'Unnayan', vol. 5 no. 7 (Rangpur: Rangpur District Council) edited by Nurul Islam. The date and year mentioned on both these seal of orders issued by Debi finally prove that she did not die at Napai Chandir Math on April 18, 1783. Perhaps she hid herself under the bush hide-away and her appearance was revealed again sometimes during 1787 at her zamindari ruling with full dignity after the end of Rangpur peasantry insurrection. These facts lay hidden for a long time. And again, more facts will be brought to light which are hidden in the womb of future singing the song again for the old times' sake.

Debi Chowdhurani was the savior to peasantry as she led them well in all possible ways. She had been considered as goddess *Chandi* in the entire Rangpur areas and all her peasants called her mother Joydurga, her original name (Debi Chowdhurani is just a title to any wife of the then zamindar). She supported the peasants' insurrection straightway from the zamindars' conference held at Itakumari by stimulating and energizing both the zamindars and the peasants by her bold

presentation. Almost all the situations and happenings are perhaps debatable and imaginary as described by Ratiram Das in his song. Though the fact comes out that in the second and final phase of insurrection, peasants were not accompanied by Debi Chowdhurani and the justice had gone against the leaseholder Debi Singh and his associates when the Englishmen held the court after the end of the peasants' insurgency. After being freed from all disturbances, Debi Chowdhurani managed and governed her zamindari peacefully and independently up to 1801 as evidenced by the seal of order issued by her available at Rangpur District Council Publication.

Debi Chowdhurani is an exceptional character ornamented with all Excellencies in the history of Rangpur, although she was described by the British Company rulers as a dacoit queen and an associate of Bhabani Pathak. She lived in a *bazra* and used to take part in the raids led by Bhabani Pathak. Debi Chowdhurani was accompanied by her paid armies and carried off a share as booty from Bhabani Pathak. Bhabani Pathak, described as gang leader by the British army, was killed in 1787 in an encounter with the armies sent by Lieutenant Brenan. Debi Chowdhurani was then absconding. Hiding away for years Debi Chowdhurani returned to her zamindari with all dignities. Lieutenant Brenan reported everything including her arrival to the Rangpur Collector. On receipt of Lieutenant Brenan's report, the collector of Rangpur wrote to him (12th July, 1787) informing him that it was not necessary to arrest Debi Chowdhurani just then and necessary directions would be given on receipt of further information regarding her (Land of two rivers: A history of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib by Nitish K Sengupta, p.222).

Departure

Joy Durga Debi Chowdhurani never bid valedictory or farewell address to her obedient subjects of her Manthanah estate zamindari. She had to face trouble during the period of her exit and had to tender petition to the Board of Revenue praying for permission to pay revenue of her estate direct into the treasury without the interference of Rajendra Narayan Chowdhury, her adopted son, who, she asserts, has no hand in the management of her zamindari. She knew nothing about the submission of petition to the Collector in her own name and issuance of order by the Collector allowing Rajendranarayan to pay revenue for Manthana zamindari (Petition – 8; Appendix).

Board's Order – Ordered that a copy of the above petition be transmitted to the Collector of Rungpore for his report.

Board of Revenue sent the petition of Joy Durga Chowdhurani, zamindar of Pergunnah Manthanah, protesting against the interference of Rajender Narayan Chowdhury, her adopted son, in the management of her estate to the Collector of Rangpur for his report. The report of Alex Wright, Collector of Rangpur, to the Board of Revenue on the 4th November, 1801 then came to the head quarters in Calcutta (Letter – 49; Appendix).

Then the petition sent by Rajendranarayan, the original one, is as following. The content in his petition, either true or false, is only to fulfill that fact that he deserves the transfer of the Manthana zamindari from her adoptive mother without spoiling any more time (Petition – 9; Appendix). Collector directed to ask Joydurga for an earlier reply against the petition of her adopted son.

Ordered that Mussamaat Jey Durga Chowdraine be advised of the above requisition and that a copy be furnished her Gomastah, and an answer be required from her.

Dated 25th February, 1801
A true translate
(Signed) Alex Wright, Collector

The content of the petition by Joydurga Chowdhurani looks doubtful. An iron lady like Joydurga who fought several fights against the British would never submit herself before the Collector writing that her name may be annulled and the name of her adopted son may be registered in the intermediate mutation in the records of zamindari. If this petition is supposed to be genuine and the draft written in her own words, she never complained about this petition before the Board of Revenue accusing its authenticity. She did not hand over the charge of her property and other liabilities of the Manthana estate, but only bequeathed the gift of property by deed to her adopted son (Petition – 10).

The petition of Joydurga Chowdhurani was submitted before the Collector of Rangpur by Gouri Kanta Chowdhury, the then gomastah of Manthana estate. During hearing, when the Collector asked about the authenticity of the signature of the petition, the petition bearer gomastah declared that Joydurga Chowdhurani signed at the end of the petition. The Collector took cooperation from another gomastahs like Ramkanta Roy (former gomastah of Manthana estate) and Bholanath Roy (agent of Coondy pargana) for the identification and verification of the signature of the petition. The question arises – the presence of the gomastah of the Manthana estate, the petition bearer, is sufficient for identification and authenticity of the petition, still other gomastahs attended the hearing. Was this hearing pre-planned? The answer of the query is smoky and the originality of the signature of Joydurga Chowdhurani in the submitted petition is not beyond suspicion. If the signature of Joydurga Chowdhurani in that petition is really a genuine one, the author should be the most obliged. Then order of the Collector was issued (Order – 1; Appendix) and was followed by the Board's order.

Ordered that the Collector of Rungpore be informed that the Board are satisfied with the explanation contained in his letter, and do not consider the petition of Mossamaat Jey Dourga entitled to any further consideration from them.

Thus, the Board of Revenue finally rejected the petition of Joydurga Chowdhurani, Zemindar of Pergunnah Manthanah, asking permission to pay the revenues of her estate direct into the treasury without the interference of Rajendra Narayan Chowdhury, her adopted son, keeping status quo of the order of the Collector of Rangpur on the 20th November, 1801.

The story of transmittance of charge hand over of the Zamindari began a few months back where Alex Wright, Collector of Rangpur co-operated with Rajendra Narayan Chowdhury whole-heartedly, where the gomastah Gouri Kanta Chowdhury was the main traitor.

Conclusion

Debi Chowdhurani (Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani; Zamindari of Manthana estate, Pirgachha, Rangpur, Bangladesh), famous for her love and noble services towards peasantry, led the public rebellion and freed the people of Rangpur from leaseholder Debi Singh's torture. Except Bhabani Pathak, Debi Chowdhurani took help and cooperation from another zamindar namely Shib Chandra Roy, elder son of landlord Raja Ray for leading the public rebellion. Shib Chandra Roy, elder son of landlord Raja Ray, was the founder of Itakumari landlord house. Itakumari landlord house is popularly known as the Shiv Chandra's Jamindar Bari. The trio – Joydurga Debi Chowdhurani (Debi Chowdhurani), Shib Chandra Roy and Bhabani Pathak freed the peasants from the burden of tax of greater Rangpur (including present Jalpaiguri) from the tyranny and torture of leaseholder Debi Singha as reflected in all the records inserted in this article.

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