

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ZAMINDARS OF MALDA : THEIR ROLE IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

The Bengal Zamindars have often been portrayed in literature as well as in the texts as tyrants and oppressors. This parasitic class, it is commonly believed, made a fortune by exploiting the cultivating tenants. The Permanent Settlement made them the proprietors of land, a right they never enjoyed before. However, even a casual observer of rural Bengal will easily notice that the landlord-*raiyyat* relationship in the colonial period did not end in mere collection and payment of rent. It actually spread over nearly every sphere of life. The Bengal Zamindars indeed played a significant role in the vast realm of cultural, social and economic life of the province. The landed gentry, although torch-bearers of feudal sentiments and the existing social structure, played a significant role behind the fantastic blossoming up of the Bengali mind in diverse fields like literature, education and social reform that came about in 19th-20th centuries Bengal¹.

Likewise in Malda a good number of zamindars imbibed paternalistic sentiments and played a vital role in the socio-cultural developments of the district. Sometimes, their motive behind the promotion of art, culture and education was nothing but self-aggrandizement, but inspite of this limitations, the contributions of the zamindar families towards the socio-cultural developments of Malda were formidable.

Among the zamindars of Malda, the Roychadhuris of Chanchal were undoubtedly the most influential. G. E. Lambourn wrote in his Gazetteers, 'Of local residents the Brahmin family of Chanchal, whose ancestors acquired

land in the north of the district, is the most important. The present representative of the family, Raja Sarat Chandra Roy, who received the title of Raja in 1911, resides at Chanchal and is well known for his liberal support of medical and educational institutions for the benefit of his tenantry². The influence of the Raychaudhuris had a very notable bearing in the educational and cultural development of the district.

There are two hypothesis regarding the origin of the Chanchal estate. It is stated that Raja Man Singha, General of Akbar, was impressed by a Brahmin of Jessore when the former was taking rest at Baneres after winning a war. Man Singha donated his landed property at Chanchal and adjacent areas to this Brahmin of Jessore who may be regarded as the founder of the Chanchal Estate³. The other hypothesis states that Ramchandra Roy, a Brahmin priest of Kalighat temple, was a relation of the Sabarna Chaudhuris of Calcutta. He later became engaged in the trade of indigo and came to the indigo factory at Harishchandrapur of Malda. This factory was owned by a British who, before his departure to England, assigned the proprietorship of the *kuthi* to Ramchandra. Later Ramchandra sold the *kuthi* and purchased in auction the zamindari of Malatipur which later became known as the Chanchal Raj Estate⁴.

The contributions of the *zamindars* of Chanchal Estate towards the socio-cultural developments of Malda were formidable. Siddeshwari Debi of Chanchal Raj Estate established a well-equipped hospital in 1875 at Chanchal in memory of his late husband Ishwar Chandra. The hospital – Ishwar Chandra Charitable Dispensary – “was one of the best equipped dispensaries of the district. The private dispensaries at Chanchal is in charge of an assistant surgeon, and medical assistance is afforded to outlying parts

of the Raja's estate by itinerant hospital assistants"⁵. There was accommodation for doctor and other staffs within the hospital compound. The operation theatre was well-equipped with modern instruments imported from England. It provided 12 beds for those who were seriously ill⁶. At the time of the abolition of the zamindari system in 1953, the hospital was situated on a land measuring 1 acre. Later Raja Saratchandra opened a number of free dispensaries at Samsi, Gohila, Srishchandrapur and Koklamari. He also donated a large sum of money to Malda District Hospital and Malda T. B. Hospital⁷.

The zamindars of the Chanchal Raj Estate also took keen interest in the spread of education in their zamindari estate as well as in other parts of the district. They established schools, extended patronage for maintaining the Tols, Chatuspathis, sponsored the establishment of colleges, cultural associations, libraries, dramatic club etc. In the first half of the 19th century, William Marshman and Halliday founded a Tole or Chatuspathi at Chanchal⁸. Later Ishwarchandra of Chanchal Raj Estate extended patronage to the Toll and donated rent free land for its maintenance⁹. Hunter mentioned that the *gurus* of this *Tolls* were mostly Brahmins. They were paid a salary of eleven rupees per month¹⁰. Raja Saratchandra, son of Ishwarchandra, appointed Pandit Bidhusekhar Sastri as the *guru* of this *Toll* who served here for four years. Later he joined the Santiniketan and appointed as Professor of Sanskrit and Pali. After Rabindranath's demise, Bidhusekhar Sastri joined the Calcutta University as Asutosh Professor in the Sanskrit department¹¹. In his early career, Pandit Bidhusekhar was patronized by Raja Saratchandra. When Bidhusekhar Sastri joined Santiniketan, Raja Saratchandra, in memory of his son, renamed the *toll* as *Sibpada Chatuspathi*¹².

At that time there was no high school at Chanchal. Students had to go to Mathurapur B.S.S. High School for study. Raja Saratchandra felt the necessity of establishing a high school at Chanchal. In 1888, the Chanchal Siddheswari Institution was established as a High English School by Raja Saratchandra in memory of his mother, Rani Siddheswari Debi Chaudhurani¹³. The entire capital and recurring costs for the school used to be borne by the Raj estate of Chanchal. The school was recognized by the Calcutta University in the year 1899. It was granted permission to teach science in 1947. It was upgraded into a Higher Secondary School with Humanities, Science and Technical courses from 1959¹⁴.

Kamakhya Charan Nag, Principal of Daulatpur college, was appointed as the Headmaster of the school by Raja Saratchandra. The Raja turned out to be very sincere and took keen interest in the school's activities. The school became very famous and produced worthy alumni. Among them were Sibram Chakraborty, the famous literateur, and also Charuchandra Bandyopadhyaya, a close associate of Rabindranath Tagore and the famous author of '*Rabi Rashmi*'¹⁵. He taught at the Calcutta University and edited the famous journal '*Bharati*' as well. Sibram Chakraborty was a relative of Raja Saratchandra. When studying at the Siddheswari Institution, Sibram began to publish a periodical '*Murali*'. He wrote several poems and short stories in this periodical. Later he became involved in the Non-Cooperation Movement and organized a strike at the Siddheswari Institution. His association with Chanchal Raj Estate was reflected in his two novels – '*Chhelebayase*' and '*Zamidarer Rath*'¹⁶.

Raja Saratchandra also took keen interest in the national education movement started after the Partition of Bengal in 1905. In 1905, the anti-Partition agitation broke out in Bengal. The nationalist minded people took

part in it and boycotted government institutions. A large section of the Bengali student community and educationists became interested to build up a new and parallel system of education under the guidance of the National Council of Education. The spirit of *Swadeshi* education had stirred Raja Saratchandra greatly. He became deeply associated with the national education movement and in 1907 he donated Rs. 3 lakhs to Benoy Kumar Sarkar to establish the National School in Malda and in other parts of Bengal¹⁷. This instance shows that the nationalist movement in the country had an influence on the Chanchal Zamindars.

Raja Saratchandra's deep sense of nationalism was reflected in other instances as well. On 28 January 1916, Nabinchandra Bose, the Headmaster of Malda Zilla School was stabbed to death by a group of revolutionaries¹⁸. The revolutionaries thought that Nabibdrachandra Bose had tipped off the police from time to time about the political activities of his students¹⁹. The police arrested Mahendranath Das of Gajol on the charge of assassination. After a trial of six months Mahendranath was sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to the penal settlement of Andaman. To meet the expenses of trial, Das's family fell in heavy debt. In his *memoirs*, Mahendranath Das stated that the Raja of Chanchal, Saratchandra Roychoudhury sanctioned a loan of Rs. 32,000 to the Das family which remained unpaid for several years²⁰. Sibram Chakraborty, the noted author, mentioned in his autobiography that Chittaranjan Das had recognized the financial contribution of the Raja of Chanchal to the Congress fund. Benoy Kumar Sarkar had informed Chittranjan of the Raja's secret help to the revolutionaries²¹.

The Raja of Chanchal was connected with other utilitarian activities both in and outside Malda. He donated Rs. 1 lakh to the Deaf and Dumb School of

Calcutta²². He contributed regular monetary assistance to Jadavpur Engineering College²³. The B. R. Sen Public Library of Malda used to get regular monetary assistance from Raja Saratchandra²⁴. The A. C. Institution of Malda also received regular monetary assistance from the Raja. In 1944, Saratchandra donated Rs. 20,000 to the newly established Malda College for the construction of its own building²⁵. In 1926, Raja Saratchandra founded Kumar Sibpada Memorial Institute at Chanchal. A stage was built to perform drama and other cultural activities. In 1925, he founded the Chanchal Raj Cooperative Bank to provide relief to the *raiyats* from *mahajani* debt²⁶.

The importance of the zamindars in the spread of education and cultural activities in Bengal lies in the fact that they, to a great extent, directed and influenced the forces released by British government in this regard. The Chanchal Zamindars provided a shining example. But there were many other instances. The notables among them were the zamindars of Singhabad, Bulbulchandi estates and the Choudhury estate of Englishbazar.

The original home of the Choudhuries of Malda was a small hamlet in the vicinity of Beneres. The founder of this family came from this original home in the up-country and settled in Tanda, the then capital of Bengal, in the middle of the 16th century²⁷. They became engaged in silk trade and acted as the *Banyan* of the East India Company. They lent money to the Englishbazar firm of the East India Company who granted *hundis* on certain Calcutta firms. This was the climax of their fortune²⁸.

The most prominent among the zamindars of the Chaudhuri Estate were Krishnalal Chaudhury, Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Chaudhuri. This Chaudhuri family of Englishbazar contributed towards creating a healthy and

modern cultural atmosphere which, it may not be an exaggeration to say, helped to influence the social milieu of the town of Malda.

Krishnalal Choudhury was the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality at its inception and the town owes much of its improvement to Krishnalal Choudhuri²⁹. He was a member of the Red Cross Committee. Krishnalal was the founder and the President of the Maldaha Association³⁰.

Love for education, literature and music was the hallmark of the zamindars of Choudhury Estate of Malda. The fourth session of the North Bengal Literary Conference was held at Malda in 1911³¹. On that occasion, eminent men like Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay and Charuchandra Mitra visited Malda. To make the Conference successful, a Reception Committee, presided over by Krishnalal Choudhury, was formed. He was one of the chief patrons of this Conference³². The Conference decided to form a committee which would carry out historical and archaeological researches. The members of this committee were Krishnalal Choudhury, Radhesh Chandra Seth, Abid Ali Khan and Maulavi Abdul Gani³³. Krishnalal's love for historical researches and literary activities was manifested in other instances as well. In 1907 Rajanikanta Chakraborty, the scholarly Sanskrit teacher of Malda Zilla School wrote the first volume of his famous '*Gourer Itihas*'. The entire expenses for the publication of this celebrated book was borne by Krishnalal Choudhury³⁴.

This kind of tradition in the Choudhury family continued in later periods also. Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury of the Choudhury Estate were associated with different educational institutions and other utilitarian activities. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, diseases like malaria and cholera were very common in Malda³⁵. Ashutosh Choudhury and

Jadunandan Choudhury founded the cholera ward in the local charitable dispensary to commemorate the memory of Brindamani, the wife of their grandfather Doman Choudhury³⁶. They contributed a substantial sum towards the construction of Akurmani H. E. School hostel. To educate their tenantry, they made substantial contributions to the educational institutions within the estate area. Golapganj M. E. School was named after the name of Ashutosh's father as Harish Chandra Memorial M. E. School³⁷.

Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury played a leading role in the establishment of Malda College in 1944³⁸. Prior to 1944, there was no college in Malda. Students of the district had to go either to Rajshahi College or Berhampore K. N. College for higher education. Realising the need for the establishment of a college in Malda, Ashutosh and Jadunandan began to raise funds. They donated Rs. 25,000 for this purpose. Due to their initiative the Malda Mango Improvement Committee donated Rs. 1 *lakh* to the fund of the proposed college³⁹. Jyotirmohan Misra, zamindar of Harishchandrapur, also extended his help for the establishment of a college in Malda⁴⁰. It was due to their efforts, Malda college was established in the year 1944. Later in 1949 Ashutosh and Jadunandan donated a land measuring 2 acre for the establishment of new building of the college⁴¹.

The zamindars of the Chaudhury Estate were also noted for their patronage to classical music. Ashutosh and Jadunandan were fond of Hindusthani songs. Ashutosh himself used to practice the instrument *tabla* and *mridanga*. He was taught by *Ustad* Jogen Ghosh, who at that time was known as '*Adi Talguru of Malda*'. The famous classical singer *Ustad* Mohabeab Ahmed Khan, who belonged to Oudh *gharana* and a relative of Wazid Ali Shah, closely associated himself with the *darbar* of Jadunandan Choudhury⁴². Jadunandan

had learnt dhrupad from him. The practice of inviting and entertaining the reputed singers and arranging *majlish* full of grandeur for musical demonstration gradually became very popular at the time of Jadunandan Choudhury and Ashutosh Choudhury. Among the famous artists who came to Malda to perform their songs on the invitation of the Choudhuris, mention may be made of Kale Khan, Gyanendraprasad Goswami, Chhote Faiaz Khan, Gaharjan etc. Ashutosh and Jadunandan used to arrange these functions in their residence Choudhury Lodge. For this reason the name of Choudhury Lodge became popular as '*Rangmahal*' and the name of the lane standing beside the building became Rangmahal Lane⁴³.

Apart from the zamindars of Choudhury family, Bhairabbendra Narayan Roy, the zamindar of Singhabad was also a patron of classical music. He was also fond of poetry and drama. Many classical singers, poets got his patronage. Bhairabendra Narayan himself was a very good *tabla* and *pakwas* player. Bhairabendra Narayan also invited renowned singers of classical music to perform at his residence of Singhabad⁴⁴.

Beside music, the Singhabad Zamindars played a significant role in the promotion of education in the district. Bhairabendra Narayan Roy established a number of primary schools and a charitable dispensary at Singhabad. They donated land and money for the establishment of Tilasan High School⁴⁵. Rajendra Narayan Roy, the Bulbulchandi Zamindar, established two primary schools in his estate. Bulbulchandi High School was established and patronized by the zamindars of this estate. Amarendra Narayan Roy founded Rajendra Narayan Vidya Niketan in memory of his father. Anilbaran Roy established Girija Sundari Vidyamandir in memory of his mother. He also set up a charitable dispensary at Bulbulchandi⁴⁶.

On the whole, the Malda zamindars played a positive role behind the promotion of culture and education in the district during our period of study. There was dichotomy in their efforts but that was natural. It sprang out from Bengal's socio-political reality after 1793. The Malda zamindars indeed contributed towards creating a healthy and modern cultural atmosphere which, it may not be an exaggeration to say, helped to influence the socio-cultural milieu of the Malda district.

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